



# SURF

Scotland's Regeneration Forum

# Empowering People Places Policy &

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**A SURF Manifesto  
for Regeneration**

# Empowering People, Places, and Policy

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SURF's expertise in community led regeneration spans multiple sectors and disciplines, knowledge drawn from our Awards. Every year, the nominees are community stars against an often darker, colder background. They demonstrate the Place Principle in action, bridging the gap between abstract policy and rigorous practice.

Despite these successes, four major barriers continue to block aspiration, cutting across all aspects of community led regeneration. Addressing these will substantially improve health and economic outcomes, reduce inequalities, and save money by reducing demand on public services.

The Scottish Parliament must act to create a more equal and prosperous Scotland that places the wellbeing of our most disadvantaged communities front and centre. Here is how.



# Our Priorities

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## Resource Local Democracy

Invest in community councils and introduce a Community Action Plan Fund.

Mainstream the Community Wealth Building Approach.

Fund a network of Community Led Development Officers that provide a bridge between communities and local government.

## Deliver Affordable Homes

Deliver the 15,693 social and affordable homes per year target, increasing the AHSP budget to at least £8.2 billion.

Resource and embed the Living Well Locally principle within the planning, design, and delivery of all housing.

Empower local communities to introduce a short-term let registrations cap or freeze in their area.

## Commit to Fair Funding

Commit to Fair Funding and mainstream long-term, stable core funding.

Plan a 10-year, place-based regeneration funding programme for 10 places.

Streamline and simplify grant and compliance processes by producing a new Scottish Funding Framework.

## Invest in Public Transport

Fund public, not private transport & embed this principle throughout transport policy.

Support Local Authorities with ambitions to municipalise buses or explore franchise models.

Invest more in bus services, bus infrastructure, and community transport.

# Resource Local Democracy

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Local communities must be at the heart of decision making. Scotland currently has a highly centralised system and more must be done to devolve decision-making powers and resources to the most local level to actively facilitate subsidiarity, inclusivity, and engagement.

SURF's work through the [Alliance for Action](#) supports this and has shown that community empowerment and local decision-making is fundamental to ensuring that the Place Principle delivers in practice throughout Scotland.

## POLICY PROPOSALS

- **Strengthen and resource community councils** – as per the [2019 SCDC and What Works Scotland Report](#) – to fulfil their role as the foundational layer of Scotland's democracy. This includes opportunities offered by Community Action Plans, which should be seen as the overarching expression of the community. CAPs should incorporate Local Place Plans and be delivered by the Community Planning Partnership so that they act as a material consideration for key stakeholders going forward. Additionally, support should be offered to (re)establish community councils where they do not exist.
- As part of the above, the Scottish Government should **introduce a specific Community Action Plan Fund** to empower the least resourced communities to create a CAP.
- **Mainstream the Community Wealth Building approach** into wider policy and provide specific funding to local or regional stakeholders to build on the CWB pilots, with a focus on implementation. Concrete outputs and action are important to build both trust and momentum, as [SRUC's research on the CWB pilots](#) identifies a lack of funding and statutory obligations as reasons it is both financially and politically difficult to prioritise CWB work.

## Resource Local Democracy (cont.)

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- **Specific funding for a network of Community Led Development Officers that operate at a local, community level**, and provide a bridge between communities and local government, prioritising areas that are least resourced. This network would also play a crucial role in sharing and putting into practice key learning on how to nurture fully deliberative and participative methods of democratic decision-making at a local level.
- **A renewed, joint COSLA and SG commitment to mainstreaming Participatory Budgeting, with a view to doubling the current target to 2%** of all spending and strengthening accessibility and participation, especially amongst the underrepresented. This must come paired with additional funding for Local Authorities to implement and resource this, with funding and the lack of a dedicated PB function within local authorities often cited as the principal barrier to implementing PB successfully in Scotland.

# Deliver Affordable Homes

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A secure and affordable home is a fundamental human need, an anchor that enables people and communities to thrive. The current system too often disadvantages the most vulnerable in society, raising issues around equity, distribution, and ownership. Ultimately, the Housing Emergency requires a bold, national response to complex questions about what property – in a broad sense – is for, and which needs or uses are prioritised.

The Scottish Government's overarching priority should be to increase the total housing stock, especially social housing, and to ramp up completions significantly.

## POLICY PROPOSALS

- **Deliver the 15,693 social and affordable homes per year target** outlined in recent research by SFHA, CIH, and Shelter Scotland. This requires an increase in the current projected AHSP budget and would cost at least £8.2 billion (and possibly up to £9.2 billion) in total over the course of the next parliament.
- Despite the importance of specific targets, it remains crucial that we **build communities, not just homes**, and that new developments are also seen as an opportunity to improve existing places. This requires fully implementing and resourcing the Living Well Locally policy of National Planning Framework 4, ensuring new homes are connected to growing spaces, public transport, health and education facilities.
- **Make better use of existing social stock** by funding rightsizing initiatives that support and fund tenants to move to smaller homes in their preferred areas or where it meets accessibility needs, as has been done in Glasgow. Although social homes offer people security for life, people's needs and lives change over time. Finding proactive ways to help people do this is one way of maximising the use and value of social housing. This also has a way of regenerating communities, with families able to move into larger properties that are currently under-used.
- The Scottish Government should **adopt a statutory definition of affordable housing** to minimise potential misuse of the term. A review of the definition and its impact on housing conditions should take place regularly. This was a previous commitment in the Housing to 2040 Strategy. This definition should build on recent work conducted by the Housing Affordability Working Group, with rent and service charges no more than 30% of net monthly income, and a residual income that guarantees people are not pushed into poverty as a result of unaffordable housing.

# Deliver Affordable Homes (cont.)

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- **Local Housing Allowances (LHA) must be revised** to account for current cost-of-living pressures and previous LHA rate freezes. As this is a reserved matter, we call on the Scottish Government to raise again – as a matter of urgency – the revision of LHA thresholds with UK Government. A 2023 study by the Chartered Institute of Housing suggests that just 8 percent of properties in the 2022-2023 financial year were classed as ‘affordable’ – in that there was no shortfall between LHA rates and advertised rents. These affordability issues are likely to persist as rates are frequently refrozen, often for years. LHA is also used to calculate Housing Benefit and the Universal Credit Housing Element, with inaccurate and outdated figures exacerbating wider inequalities in ways that are not always addressed by the benefits system. Re-establishing the 30th percentile – and maintaining this year-on-year – should be the minimum commitment; increasing this to the 50th percentile is likely to have a greater effect on reducing poverty.
- **Commit more national funding to Town Centre Living, along with Buy Back and Acquisition schemes** so that Local Authorities can increase social housing supply, especially where empty properties can be brought back into use. This can help reinvigorate existing places.
- **Introduce new legislation enabling local communities to propose a cap or freeze on short-term let registrations in their area.** This approach recognises that issues around the overprovision of holiday accommodation and pressures this places on local housing needs can often be highly localised (i.e. an island, a town, a rural community, a neighbourhood). Although some Local Authorities have introduced control zones and have proactively consulted communities, this relies on Local Authorities having time, resources, and political will to engage communities directly. Additionally, control zones usually involve a planning application – which come to already overburdened planning authorities. A simple freeze or cap limits short term let license registrations more directly, while empowering communities to balance business and tourist needs with people’s fundamental right to adequate housing. Community councils would be best placed to propose such plans, which can also facilitate better dialogue and engagement between community councils and Local Authorities, helping communities shape the use of housing assets directly. For such a policy work in practice, new legislation will need to be introduced to enable Local Authorities to implement license caps or freezes, which could compliment the aforementioned control zones. A future freeze or a cap should not affect currently registered short term, and could be reviewed on an ongoing basis.

# Deliver Affordable Homes (cont.)

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- **Invest in and support Community Led Housing** to deliver affordable homes for Scotland's communities most in need.
- **Explore planning flexibilities** for rural areas, islands, and dense town centres, which can face frustrating and specific challenges that delay the provision of new housing.
- The Open Market Shared Equity Scheme has the potential to offer access to the housing market, while ensuring that properties are used exclusively as residences. To improve its impact SURF recommends:
  - **A pilot in rural areas to explore flexible OMSE thresholds**, ensuring that housing is safeguarded for local communities while meeting local housing needs. Many rural areas have average house prices that far exceed the median thresholds used in these areas, and the scheme therefore does not deliver equally across Scotland. Such a pilot could also be administered in partnership with local housing organisations such as development trusts or housing associations.
  - SURF welcomes that social renters are seen as a priority group for the Open Market Shared Equity Scheme, but this must be accompanied by **targeted and funded outreach** to outline the opportunity, eligibility, and to support them through the process. This should be done in collaboration with Housing Associations and Local Authorities, with funding provided.

# Commit to Fair Funding

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SURF supports the SCVO's Fair Funding campaign. An incoming Scottish Government must ensure that funding is multi-year, flexible, sustainable, accessible, and transparent. There is strong will within communities for regeneration investment – especially in town centres and rural areas struggling with depopulation and economic stagnation – and there is evidence of ‘shovel ready’ projects that communities are ready to deliver, but unable to proceed without long term funding plans. Continued access and equity across key funding streams – such as the Regeneration Capital Grant Fund, Investing in Communities Fund, Community Led Local Development, Scottish Land Fund, and the Rural and Islands Housing Fund – is crucial, ensuring that CWB is resourced appropriately.

## POLICY PROPOSALS

- In line with the Fair Funding campaign, SURF believes there should be a **focus on long-term, stable core funding**. Specifically, the Scottish Government should roll out 5-year funding more broadly, and protect this in future. Providing clarity around funding decisions as soon as possible will help break the cycle of last-minute funding decisions and month-to-month uncertainties so that organisations can deliver for their communities, and help play a vital role in meeting key government priorities.
- Beyond Fair Funding, the Scottish Government should **plan for ten 10-year, place-based funding settlements** that enable a longitudinal and strategic approach to regeneration. Areas should be selected collaboratively and reflect Scotland's diverse communities, while also incorporating best-practice and key learnings from previous regeneration schemes.
- There must be a greater linkup of funding streams in Scotland and a move towards simplifying grant processes. To achieve this, the Scottish Government should conduct a review of current funding arrangements and produce – in collaboration with other funders and stakeholders – a **Funding Framework with central guidance that funders operating in Scotland should follow**. This should include streamlined reporting and compliance requirements – highlighted as a particular concern by SURF members.
- Any capital investment project – particularly those relying on smaller community actors – should include a specific and additional **operational budget to deliver and maintain capital projects and investments**, at least in the short to medium term.

# Invest in Public Transport

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Scotland has a transport system that locks in inequities, forcing the poorest in society to rely on poor services or costly and carbon-intensive forms of transport. While the scrapping of peak fares for rail travel is welcomed, this does little to address transport poverty. Those on lower incomes are 18 times more likely to take the bus, which is now less affordable, less reliable, and less frequent. Bus fares have risen 26% above inflation between 2010 and 2020, with transport costs now a significant driver of broader poverty. All while bus journeys accounted for 74% of all public transport journeys across all income groups in 2023-2024, highlighting the key role buses play in the transition to a more sustainable transport system.

Any long-term transport targets must also come paired with poverty-reducing measures, ensuring a just transition to a more equitable transport system for everyone, but especially those who need it most. A better transport system can fundamentally alleviate poverty.

## POLICY PROPOSALS

- **Fund public, not private transport** and embed this principle throughout transport policy. This also means redirecting support and subsidies for private transport – including loans for the purchase of Electric Vehicles – into public transport, with a priority placed on bus services. An Infrastructure First approach must see public transport embedded firmly into any major development going forward.
- Implement the recommendations from the Mind the Gap report to **improve equity, participation, access, and safety across public transport**, ensuring it serves everyone in Scotland.
- **Invest in Community Transport**, which delivers in areas not serviced by commercial or public operators and guarantee that Community Transport Operators can participate in proposed franchising models.
- **Support Local Authorities where there are ambitions to municipalise bus services** and build on models – such as franchising – that work to deliver affordable, municipally owned and led transport, as in Edinburgh with Lothian Buses. Funding for initial capital outlays should be prioritised.

## Invest in Public Transport (cont.)

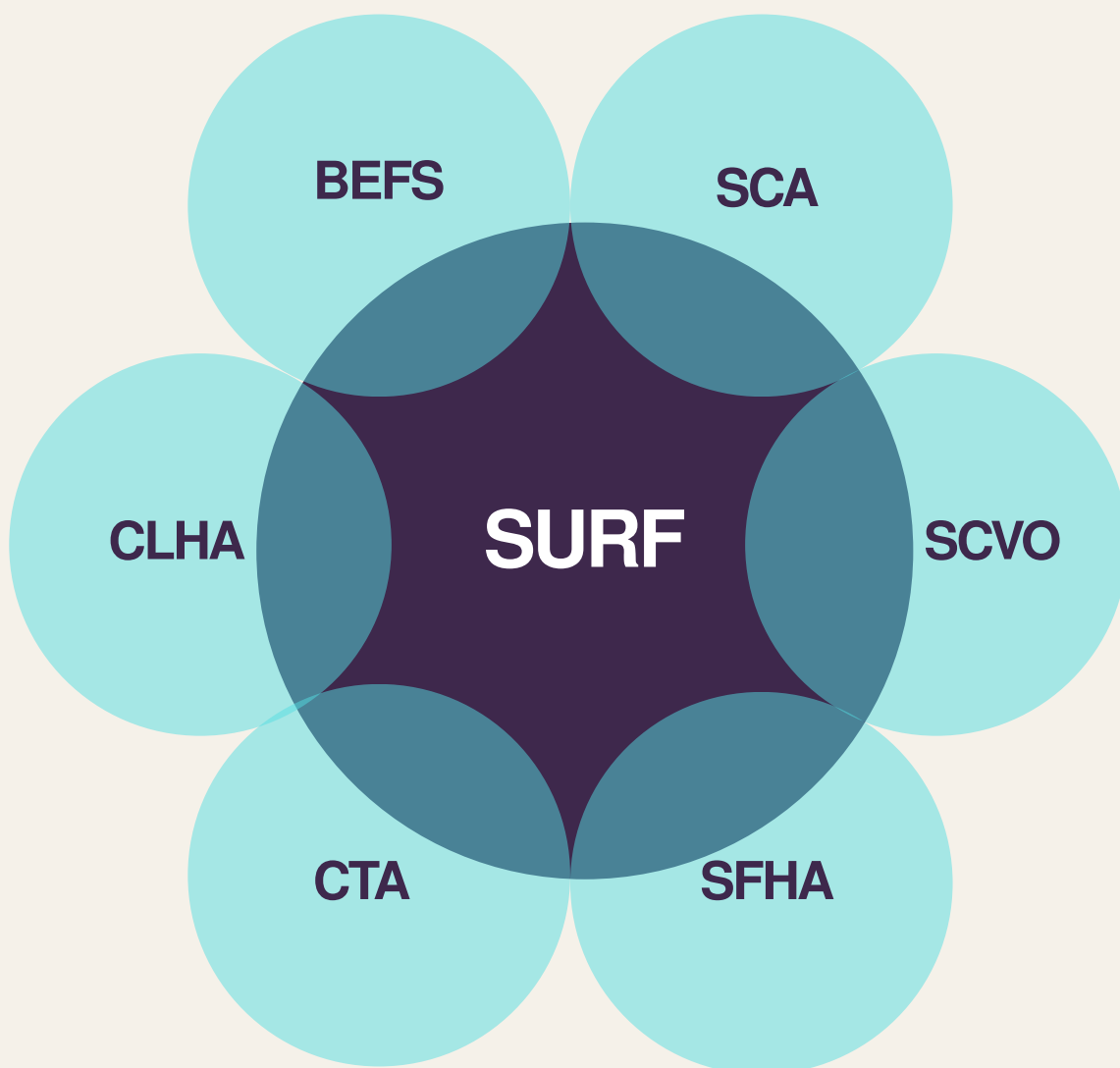
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- Explore regulatory options to **address escalating bus fares**.
- Commit to a **flat-fare bus pilot** in both rural and urban areas.
- **Expand and increase the £20 million Bus Infrastructure Fund**, and specifically include requirements for community participation. Integrated ticketing measures should be added as a priority action for eligible bus infrastructure – this should be the crucial first step in the journey to a wider multi-modal ticketing system.
- Transport poverty often overlaps with digital exclusion. **Improving digital connectivity** not only mitigates transport poverty but acknowledges that there are still too many communities in Scotland that remain disconnected or poorly connected. This acts as a barrier to community and labour participation, prevents entrepreneurial activity, and stifles local economic growth. SURF recommends more frontline funding for libraries and community centres offering digital inclusion support, especially in remote and rural locations.

# Policy Synergies

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The SURF manifesto was informed and shaped by best-practice and expertise from across the sector. Our work over the course of the next parliament will involve working collaboratively across the sector to deliver proactive policy change.



BEFS - Built Environment Forum Scotland  
CLHA - Community-Led Housing Alliance  
CTA - Community Transport Association

SCA - Scottish Community Alliance  
SCVO - Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations  
SFHA - Scottish Federation of Housing Associations

# About SURF

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SURF – Scotland’s Regeneration Forum – has advocated two fundamental principles since 1992:

- Successful and sustainable regeneration is only achievable when all aspects of physical, social, economic and cultural regeneration are addressed in a holistic approach.
- The people who are the intended beneficiaries of any regeneration effort must be meaningfully involved in the process if it is to be successful in planning, implementation and maintenance.

## Monitoring Progress

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This Manifesto was developed through extensive engagement with our membership and network. Each of our four priorities includes a series of specific proposals, balancing bold, strategic, and broad-ranging visions with smaller, implementable actions that an incoming Scottish Government can deliver. It has been cross-referenced with other manifestos across a variety of sectors, highlighting the need for a collaborative approach at all levels.

From 2026 to 2031 SURF will be asking Members of the Scottish Parliament how they are delivering on these priorities to create a more equal and prosperous Scotland. Our policy work will continue to focus on these four themes, which should be the overarching priority of any incoming government.

## Get in touch

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