

SURF Conference Policy Workshops

At the SURF Conference on the 12th of March 2026, we hosted a workshop for attendees to discuss our Manifesto policy proposals.

We hosted roundtable discussions on Local Democracy, Fair Funding, and Affordable Housing, with the aim of understanding participants' feedback on our proposals, but also elements that they considered to be missing or underexplored in our manifesto.

The below summary provides an overview of some of the key conversations and considerations from the day.

Resource Local Democracy

There was a general consensus amongst workshop participants around the importance of better resourcing and empowering community councils. More generally, this was part of several wider discussions on the day, with many agreeing that community councils represent a missed opportunity to empower communities directly. Participants also agreed that community led development is vital, and this is an area where further resourcing can have noticeable impacts.

There was an interesting discussion about Community Wealth Building (CWB) which, due to the fairly recent passing of the Bill, is an area of considerable potential, but there are still questions as to how it will be implemented and, crucially, resourced. Community Action Plans were considered crucial in order to mainstream CWB. The lack of local structures currently in place to facilitate CWB effectively is a challenge, and developing these at pace – in line with new statutory requirements for anchor organisations – represents a host of uncertainties. A better understanding of regional stakeholders involved in CWB is also needed to help clarify how networks will operate locally. CWB has the potential to keep money in communities – which was seen as synergistic with SURF's ongoing plans around local democracy.

Participants also acknowledged that we need a better hierarchy of plans (CAPs, LPPs, etc.), and a better understanding around how these ultimately ensure that a

community's vision and needs are best translated into existing democratic and planning processes. This may also require a rationalisation of the current plan landscape to simplify existing structures and make them more accessible. And while much has been made of the statutory footing of Local Place Plans, how they interact with other plans remains ambiguous. Participants also noted that there was no mention of a resource for Local Place Plans, in addition to Community Action Plans, in the SURF manifesto.

Regarding Participatory Budgeting (PB), some felt that there is a risk PB may develop into a cosmetic measure, rather than one that actively facilitates local democracy, as it does not always function the way it is intended in all areas. Focussing on a high-level (and perhaps simplistic) goal of doubling the budgetary target might miss the wider point that there are still structural improvements that can enable Participatory Budgeting to work more effectively and be taken up more broadly by communities.

Commit to Fair Funding

There was broad agreement from workshop participants about the importance of Fair Funding, not just for organisational stability, but for Scotland's wider anti-poverty agenda. Communities were highlighted as being on the front-line of delivery, but often asked, time and time again, to do more with less. Crucial work is often discontinued or feels like it is not valued as it should be.

There were interesting discussions around data and reporting which echoed SURF's push for a simplified Funding Framework and standardised guidance around what communities are expected to measure, and how best to communicate impact. There was a feeling that, in some instances, data is rarely referred to by funders, and that it often sits in a vacuum, with communities unsure how it meaningfully shapes policy and future funding programmes.

Unsurprisingly, the importance of funders visiting was raised. As with the SURF Awards – which include site visits as part of the judging process – it is clear that impact cannot be monitored solely by forms. It must be witnessed, experienced, and seen first-hand. This also helps build trust and transparency, and helps facilitate learning – all key to ensuring that funding programmes are constantly improved.

The design of funding programmes was raised as a particular area where key improvements must be made. Currently, communities are often forced to bend their work and programmes into different shapes so that it matches what funders want to see. This is both time consuming but also leads to a constant – and often

unnecessary – cycle of reinvention, where communities are essentially rewarded for doing something new or innovative. Very rarely are successful projects given continuity funding without needing to promise additional work or further pushing the envelope of what is possible – all in an effort to remain competitive. There was a strong sense that projects that are demonstrably successful should be supported on an ongoing basis, rather than facing precarity. Long-term funding is a key ambition, and there was an awareness that this may come at a cost to the number of programmes that can be funded. It also may lead to less pilot projects. Rather than shy away from these difficult decisions, it was felt that Government should set a strategic course and commit to sustainable, long-term funding as a priority.

Additionally, funding currently seems to favour projects which paint a bleak picture, rather than highlighting things that are going well. Telling a positive story, it was felt, is often not rewarded, with a bias towards highlighting community deficiency rather than assets. Participants also noted that there should be an ongoing dialogue about *how* grant processes should be simplified, and what they want to communicate. The overarching thread throughout all of this seemed to be that communities are not homogenous; funding therefore cannot adopt a simplistic one-size fits all approach.

The human toll of insecure funding was also raised – and cannot be understated. Workshop participants noted that the current model negatively affects women and young people in particular. Short-term contracts not only stifle career progression, but it places organisations and key staff in a toxic cycle of insecurity that can leave communities behind and fails to deliver long-term employment benefits – often one of the key outcomes of regeneration programmes.

Innovative and trust-based ways of working – often developed during the pandemic – have largely disappeared, which participants noted was a missed opportunity. During the pandemic, communities stepped in to fill crucial gaps, and funding parameters were loosened as a result – which we know helped shape an effective, grassroots response to an unprecedented crisis.

Participants also noted that Local Authorities were not mentioned enough throughout this policy priority, as they play a key role in both delivery (as funders), and as partners, especially through governance. If SURF's proposed 10-year place-based funding models are to be implemented meaningfully, Local Authorities will play a key role in achieving that. Another omission relates to the interplay between Fair Funding and Community Wealth Building, which is mentioned extensively in the Resource Local Democracy priority. It was felt that CWB had a key role to play in ensuring funding works for communities. As anchor organisations look to embed CWB within

their work, we also anticipate that Fair Funding principles will become more and more common.

There was also cause for optimism and a clear vision for how things could be improved. There already exists in Scotland a general consensus about how grant-making and reporting could be done better. The [IVAR principles](#), for example, were raised as a particular example. Produced in partnership with funders, they can help frame a collective funding framework that works for all. Positively, this appreciation also exists within Scottish Government – although challenges remain around how to align the many different siloes in a way that creates meaningful change.

Understanding the institutional and cultural factors that enable siloes is also important, and a wider challenge for all Governments. Linkages between UK and Scottish Governments, for example, were also noted as either non-existent or ineffective. This leads to various overlapping governance structures, funding models, reporting mechanisms, and ways of working that places additional burdens on communities.

Workshop participants were positive about some of the flexible funding already in place, with the National Lottery mentioned as a noteworthy example. Best practice already exists – including the ICF, which participants felt embodied many of the key principles around better funding, with its discontinuation therefore feeling to many as a step backwards – and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. This will also require a shift in language, and a move from talking about ‘spend’ to ‘investment.’ This is a perennial issue, along with the aforementioned culture of trust.

Deliver Affordable Housing

Participants noted the ongoing uncertainty around the newly announced National Housing Agency, which was confirmed after the SURF manifesto was launched. There is real hope that the agency can add value long-term, but participants felt there was also a risk that it could become ‘another mouth to feed,’ one which absorbs, rather than creates resources. However, given the importance of a whole housing ecosystem approach, there is real scope for More Homes Scotland to facilitate a better understanding of the appropriate size, type, and location of housing. With much of this work happening at a local level through Housing Needs & Demand Analyses, there’s an opportunity here to pull together local housing needs and insights into something strategic, holistic, and national.

Challenges around the development costs for housing were mentioned as particularly prohibitive. This, along with the planning challenges outlined in SURF’s

manifesto, creates barriers which stifle new developments. The costs of developing affordable housing were highlighted as well, often the result of increasingly tight margins in funding settlements. Key housing stakeholders often warn that balancing rent controls and the construction of new affordable housing effectively is the only way to safeguard new supply – a key ask in both SURF and other manifestos. This tightrope is one that requires a deep understanding of the underlying economics of housebuilding in an affordable context – something that More Homes, again, can usefully lead on, along with ongoing work around the development of a statutory definition of affordable housing.

In terms of regulation, participants felt that rent controls and further regulatory tools – such as council tax increases on second homes, which seem to be having a noticeable impact in some areas – were underexplored. While SURF’s manifesto is focussed primarily on ramping up completions, there is, of course, a key role for regulation in ensuring that existing assets can contribute to solving the housing emergency. Although this was not explicitly mentioned during the workshop session, this is of particular relevance to the Private Rented Sector.

Regarding short-term let licensing and enabling communities to propose freezes or caps, there was an acknowledgement that this is also part of wider trends, such as hotels closing down and the emphasis this places on self-catering accommodation.

In terms of town centre regeneration, the importance of VAT exemptions for regeneration projects was mentioned as a particular barrier, and one that SURF and others have stressed could, if changed, create quick regeneration wins.