



THE SURF AWARDS: LEARNING FROM SUCCESS

An outcomes report from a series of SURF workshops held in 2026

SURF and the Scottish Government deliver the annual SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration to identify and share examples of high impact in addressing social and economic problems in Scottish places.

In May of 2026, SURF arranged a series of in-person [shared learning workshop events](#) with representatives of the from the [2025 process](#). The goal of these events was to explore, in some depth, what transferable lessons these projects can offer to regeneration practitioners working in other sectors and geographies.

This report presents a summary of the main outcomes from the four online SURF Awards workshop events, and their respective themes:

- Removing barriers to employability;
- Housing led regeneration initiatives;
- Place-based regeneration approaches; and
- Taking a creative approach to regeneration.

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Introduction

The annual SURF Awards for Best Practice in Community Regeneration process is widely recognised as being the most prestigious awards in the broad regeneration scene in Scotland.

The purpose of the SURF Awards process is:

- To recognise and reward best practice;
- To promote and disseminate best practice across Scotland as means of sharing knowledge and experience and enhancing policy and practice;
- To highlight the role that regeneration projects and initiatives have in improving the wellbeing of individuals and communities.

2025 was the 27th year of the SURF Awards, and the 22nd year that it has been delivered in partnership with the Scottish Government. Nominations to the 2025 SURF Awards were assessed by an independent panel of 20 expert judges drawn from national regeneration related organisations and community groups in Scotland. Working in teams, the judging panel members agreed category shortlists, made site visits to these shortlisted projects, and collaboratively selected winning projects.

The five category winning projects for the 2025 SURF Awards were:

- **Creative Regeneration:** [A Creative Approach to Revitalising Lochside](#)
- **Removing Barriers to Employability:** [What I Need In Life \(WIN\)](#)
- **Community Led Regeneration:** [Scottish Men's Sheds](#)
- **Improving Scotland's Places:** [Ardrossan South Beach Community Space](#)
- **Housing and Regeneration:** [The Standard, Midsteeple Quarter](#)

These winning projects were announced at a SURF Awards Presentation Dinner event in the Voco Grand Central Hotel in Glasgow on the 4th December. SURF invited colleagues in all five winning projects to participate in a series of SURF Awards shared learning workshop events with regeneration practitioners from the SURF network. You can read about all of the 2025 SURF Award projects in the [SURF Awards Publication](#).

The events were designed to explore and highlight the main factors that led to the success of the 2025 SURF Award winning initiatives that could potentially help initiatives in other contexts and places.

The following sections of this report highlight the main areas of discussion and outcomes from the following three themed events in the series:

- **Removing barriers to employability** What I Need In Life (WIN), Fife Gingerbread – Family Approach, ng homes, and Working Rite. Held on 7 May 2026 in the Storytelling Centre, Edinburgh.
- **Housing led regeneration initiatives** The Standard Midsteeple Quarter, Buccleuch Street Dalkeith, The Y Centre, Scottish Procurement Alliance, Scottish Federation of Housing Associations (SFHA), and Scotland’s Housing Network. Held on 14 May 2026 in the Grassmarket Community Project, Edinburgh.
- **Place-based regeneration approaches** with Scottish Men’s Sheds, Two Towns Big Ideas – Banff and Macduff, Scotland’s Towns Partnership, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, South of Scotland Enterprise, and Scottish Government. Held on 21 May 2026 in the Pearce Institute, Govan.
- **Taking a creative approach to regeneration** with a Creative Approach to Revitalising Lochside, Alloway Railway Tunnel, Galoshans Festival, Creative Scotland, and Creative Lives. Held on 28 May 2026 in Civic House, Glasgow.

SURF is grateful to the [Scottish Government](#) for supporting the SURF Awards process, including these workshop events. The 2025 SURF Awards process also benefited from the support of the following additional partners in the delivery of thematic categories: [Creative Scotland](#), [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#), [Scotland’s Towns Partnership](#), [Scottish Procurement Alliance](#) and [South of Scotland Enterprise Agency](#).

Transferable Lessons

1) Removing barriers to employability

With introductory presentations from SURF Award winning and shortlisted projects:

What I Need In Life (WIN) and Fife Gingerbread - Family Approach.

Additional input was provided by SURF partners [ng homes](#) and [Working Rite](#).

The third finalist, [Macmillan Skills Hub](#), was not in attendance as the project had ceased operation due to a catastrophic loss in funding.

About the event

The first workshop in the series highlighted the 2025 SURF Award Winner and a Highly Commended project in the 'Removing Barriers to Employability' category.

The projects featured are all using techniques to support dis-engaged people into employment, training and further education.

First Presentation Summary: [What I Need In Life \(WIN\)](#)

Presenter: Nicola Mcnaughtan, Deputy Chief Executive, Routes to Work South

Routes to Work South (RTWS) is a registered charity established in 2005, working across South Lanarkshire to support people affected by unemployment and wider disadvantage. The organisation is South Lanarkshire's employment champion, delivering locally embedded, person-centred employability support across all four localities, including rural communities. They operate as a small to medium-sized organisation with 45 staff, the majority of whom live within the local authority area, giving the team strong community insight and connection.

Employability has become extremely complex with increases in both economic inactivity and in those who are disengaged and hard to reach. This is increasing alongside enhanced system issues, such as a decrease in available funding, which impacts on longer-term planning. There is a clear need for multi-year funding.

RTWS is providing services with depth; it is not just about numbers. Everyone has unique circumstances and therefore needs tailored support. They are working with individuals who are facing multiple and complex barriers. Many have fallen through the cracks and are not engaging with traditional employability support services. The team works to bridge gaps between systems, services, and individuals.

They had traditionally focused on those ready for the labour market but had to adapt post-Covid and are now working with those disengaged and hardest to reach at different stages of the employability pipeline.

RTWS provides client-centred, flexible support shaped around individual need. There is no fixed pathway, and progression is guided by the person. There is a focus on barrier removal, not just employment outcomes.

Close collaboration with local services, employers and agencies is key to the success of their work. It provides joined-up support to reduce fragmentation. RTWS acts as an honest broker to connect people to the right support.

The main focus is on rebuilding engagement and trust with services whilst addressing underlying barriers to progression and supporting sustainable pathways into employment, training or education. Over the past 20 years, RTWS has supported 26,000 residents and 17,000 people into employment.

There has been an increase in welfare spending and economic inactivity, which is now at its highest since 2004, with a predicted spend of £100bn by 2030. People who have disengaged from services for longer than 12 months only have a 1 in 23 chance of ever returning to the labour market. This leads to reduced pathways, poverty, and increased inequality. There is a clear need for early intervention and tailored support.



Policies have a wide-ranging impact on who can receive support. This can be a driver but also a constraint, as you need to fit into boxes. WIN is a self-funded programme, bringing a tailored approach rather than asking individuals to fit the system.

It started as a pilot in 2024 and initially focused on two areas of high deprivation, Rutherglen and Blantyre. It aims to enable meaningful participation, building trust and support. With an established network of partners, it is delivered by Community Wellbeing Advisors (CWAs) who provide non-clinical support.

The CWAs act as a conduit between the individual and wider networks of support to ensure that they access the right support at the right time. It takes a needs-led approach, with a whole-person view. It is not just addressing one issue but tackling the root cause. No two journeys are the same, so there is a need for fluid, flexible support.

From participants surveyed, the following barriers were reported:

- 72% reported they felt socially isolated.
- 68% reported low confidence and a lack of self-belief.
- 61% reported financial insecurity.
- 12% had experienced homelessness.
- 78% keen to develop new skills.
- 69% have a long-term goal of moving into further education, training or employment.

The pilot supported 130 individuals. The barriers presented weren't anything the team hadn't seen before, but they identified that a high proportion of participants fell into a lost cohort of economic inactivity who were not engaging with services. This highlights the need for a tailored person-centred approach.

Despite barriers, many are still keen to learn new skills and need a realistic, achievable, joined-up pathway. Some of the participants commented:

"Because of WIN everything changed for the better – it has changed my life." Alexandra

"The building confidence course helped me speak openly for the first time in 5 years." Joseph

"For the first time in a long time, I actually feel supported." Chloe

"My confidence has grown, my mental health is better and I'm gaining new skills." Chris

"WIN has exceeded all my expectations – I feel comfortable, supported, and positive about the future." Ryan

The programme was developed using a jigsaw metaphor due to the interconnected nature of the challenges faced. When joined together, they form a complete package of support. A lot of clients felt lost and helpless. But as demonstrated in the testimonials above, behind every statistic is a story of reconnection and support, and you can't put a price on that. WIN starts not with employment but with life.

The programme is now attracting national attention, with the Scottish Government visiting to explore WIN's impact. It has been recognised as an innovative response to rising economic inactivity.

The model works because it takes a wellbeing person-centred approach and reaches people who are not engaging with services. There is a clear focus on removing the barriers to engagement and creating strong local partnerships that allow for flexible delivery.

Sustainability was queried by the RTWS Board, but the management team is addressing that. Future funding has now been secured through the local authority; winning the SURF Award was instrumental to that. This will allow them to expand delivery across the local authority region.

[View presentation slides](#)

Open Discussion

Some of the main comments and areas of discussion are listed below. These varied views and opinions do not necessarily represent the views of SURF or all of the people and organisations present at the workshop.

- *One delegate asked about clients that are outside of the system and how they connect with them.*

Nicola replied that it comes down to boots on the ground, engaging in places like community centres with parent's groups etc. It is hard work. During the first six months they focused on engagement, which was a huge piece of work. Word of mouth is now spreading to other areas. You need to go to where they are and remove the barriers.

- *A delegate asked how many staff are working on the WIN programme.*

Nicola replied that at the pilot stage there were two Community Wellbeing Advisors (CWAs), but they will be increasing to eight going forward. The programme is supported by other teams within RTWS.

- *Another delegate asked if the CWAs are starting at stages one and two of the employability pipeline and if the participants get passed elsewhere.*

Nicola responded that for at least the first six months they stay with WIN. At this stage there is no employability focus; it is person-led. CWAs are non-clinical but link with partners such as the NHS etc. regarding things such as health issues. Then they start to look at employability, but there are no predetermined outcomes, and it fits around the person's needs. RTWS provides ongoing support.

- *The next question asked about how WIN is funded.*

Nicola replied that they now have buy-in from the local authority, but they had to demonstrate impact via the pilot. They were initially reluctant, as they were looking at it from a data perspective, related to inactivity. RTWS demonstrated the impact, and the local authority recognised and invested following the Award win.

Stephen from RTWS added that there is a lot of lost potential. Money going into job-ready clients isn't always the best idea. You need to look at long-term preventative measures. The Scottish Government came out to visit the project and recognised the approach can be scaled up to other local authority areas. Getting the Scottish Government to move to a preventative approach is always a challenge but more money needs to be spent.

- *A delegate asked what goals and objectives were set out for the Board to convince them.*

Nicola said that the Board is risk averse but keen to understand local needs and how RTWS supports those. The management team presented data and changes in the landscape post-Covid. They were convinced it would give a steady flow of people. Their articles set out alleviating poverty as a key aim. It was a small amount of money asked for, and they got a big return, and it opened doors.

- *An attendee noted that a slide stated that 80% of services are for people with convictions and asked how closely they are working with community justice services.*

Nicola replied that they do some work with them, but it could be better. They are seen as a secondary service when people are released from prison rather than being involved in pre-release meetings to discuss skills development etc. It really depends who you deal with at the ground level. It is the same with social work services.

- *A delegate asked if the Scottish Government were to look to scale up the programme, would it lose the person-centred approach to make it easy to apply and what principles would they insist needed to be kept.*

Nicola said that retaining partnership working would be essential. There are good examples, but real partnership working relies on people coming round the table with shared objectives. There are a lot of skills and expertise within the third sector that are often overlooked for bigger services, where people have to wait four months for an appointment. The third sector is more agile to respond.

- *The next question asked about the person-centred approach and what barriers are the hardest to address.*

Nicola responded that the most significant are mental health and physical health, such as disability and long-term conditions. You need to focus on what they can do rather than what they can't.

- *There was a follow up question from the same delegate regarding childcare being a barrier.*

Nicola replied that it absolutely is not. They have done prior work on this with peer support groups. Flexibility of childcare is one of the main issues, but peer support groups have helped. Issues are often around shift timings.

Euan mentioned the [SURF Manifesto](#) interviews and discussions on childcare. There was an East/West split. The West's approach is more informal. Job markets are different in different areas.

- *The final question asked about the age range of their clients.*

Nicola said that participants range from 18 up to 65. They are not precious about it. They are introducing more targeted approaches for different groups.

Second Presentation Summary: [Fife Gingerbread – Family Approach](#)

Presenters: Angela Campbell, Service Delivery Manager and Ruairidh Gough, Support Worker, Fife Gingerbread

Fife Gingerbread works with predominantly lone parents and families in need in Fife. The Family Approach programme was developed as a way of addressing what they were seeing across communities with the highest levels of poverty. Families are facing multiple barriers and often don't fit into statutory services. The programme aligns with Scottish Government policy, including [addressing child poverty](#) and [No One Left Behind](#).

The programme started in 2023 with four support workers, but it has been down to three in the last 6 months. It aims to improve the life chances of both parents and children by supporting families to progress towards employment, education or volunteering.

It focuses on the [six child poverty priority groups](#). Participants need to fit within one of the following groups:

- Lone parent
- Child under 1
- Parent under 25
- 3 or more children
- Ethnic minority
- Disabled adult or child

The programme is delivered in areas of Fife with the highest levels of poverty: Methil, Buckhaven and Wemyss; Kirkcaldy East and Central; and Benarty, Lochgelly and Cardenden.

If foundations are strong, then employment will be sustainable. The Job Centre's approach is often to support people into employment as quickly as possible, whereas Fife Gingerbread's approach places greater emphasis on understanding the individual's circumstances, needs and aspirations. They work using an engage, support, and progress model. They utilise a traffic light system, where most families are starting at red.

Families within the red band are provided with support, such as managing universal credit, understanding housing and money, and benefits and debt advice. Working with [Citizens Advice and Rights Fife](#), whose team only works with Fife Gingerbread families.

The amber stage focuses on health advocacy, family learning and education advocacy, and wellbeing and peer support groups. This includes advocating for support within schools where needed. The final green stage includes volunteering and training opportunities, including the Fife Gingerbread [PSA training support programme](#), which is popular, as it allows parents to work the same hours as school times. This stage also provides support with employability and in-work challenges. It goes beyond getting into a job. There are out-of-hours workers to provide support.

Some participants at the pre-pathway/stage one level feel like they are just a parent, as they have no skills etc. Employability is the last thing that happens, as they need to get the foundations right. This is done through group work and engagement.

Children with additional support needs have a big effect on people getting back into work. Childcare etc. can be trickier, and often the children are sent home from school. Building flexibility into training is key. The programme consists of a 26-week block, but it makes allowances for school holidays etc. Participants can bring their kids in with them. They have great partners, including the

NHS, [Greener Kirkcaldy](#), the local authority etc. This allows them to fit with the individuals' circumstances.

The presenters showed a [short film](#) that demonstrated the impact of the programme on participants.

Fife Gingerbread receives funding from [No One Left Behind](#) to deliver the programme. They also provide a range of group activities, family events, and opportunities for children and families to participate in outings and experiences, helping to reduce social isolation and promote wellbeing. At Christmas the team provides a crisis support programme. These additional services are all delivered through fundraising. This helps people to feel part of a community.

The project has demonstrated strong outcomes for parents and families, particularly those facing



complex challenges. Ruairidh gave a case study example about a family with a child who is neurodiverse. The mum wanted to get back into work. She had left her relationship and received support. She is now in a peer support group a year on. She has had two jobs. The first was impacted by a disability in her arm. She got support to get into another job and help to put benefits in place. This job was impacted by her child's needs. She had been battling with the school, and it resulted in her leaving that job. She has now managed to get the school to step up before moving to a better school. She now advocates for other families

in a similar position and is hopefully coming back to do a traineeship.

It is not a linear journey, which can be an issue with some employability funding. They are lucky to partner with Citizens Advice and Rights Fife. Through the programme they have supported 138 parents and 261 children. They have found that figures around barriers are higher in reality, as people initially don't disclose health issues and neurodiversity issues are often not diagnosed in children, which causes challenges.

They have delivered 26 job outcomes in the past year, and others have gone back into volunteering or training. The Family Approach programme demonstrates that investing in parents is not just a social intervention but a regeneration strategy: strengthening families, increasing economic participation, and supporting more resilient, inclusive communities.

[View presentation slides](#)

Open Discussion

Some of the main comments and areas of discussion are listed below. These varied views and opinions do not necessarily represent the views of SURF or all of the people and organisations present at the workshop.

- *John, who had been on the judging panel, reflected on the judging process, noting the emotional and incredible work of Fife Gingerbread. He asked about the future of the programme.*

Angela replied that they have secured further funding for eight support workers, starting the following week. They will be extending the programme into two more areas in Fife. They are being supported by the local authority. Angela reflected that the work is similar to WIN in many ways, but they are slightly more niche as they solely focus on families.

Euan mentioned policy agendas not reflecting everywhere and the need for flexibility. Funders need to think about that. Organisations should decide how money is spent, especially around prevention.

Policy Discussion

A wider policy discussion was held and included input from John Devine, Chief Executive at [ng homes](#), and Graham Robertson, CEO at [Working Rite](#).

Euan asked both speakers in advance what hopes they had for commitment to, and investment in, employability for the next Parliament.

Euan reflected that employability lies at the local authority level more than ever but asked how that is working a year on. Noting that economic inactivity needs addressed.

John noted that [ng homes](#) is a £34m group with 5.5k homes, operating in areas that fall within the SIMD lowest 5%. He had previously worked in local development, helping to establish the Glasgow Fort's employability and community benefit programme. ng homes want to be about more than just housing.

He noted that we are still talking about the same things and that it is always centred around money. ng homes sets aside ½ million every year for local development. He mentioned their new entrepreneur centre that is currently in development.

You need to be careful how you put money in locally, not into community planning but instead into local organisations. The Scottish Government should be coming to people who have a track record of delivery. Money going straight to people at the coal face. Funding needs to be for a parliamentary term, 5 years, not on a yearly basis. He suggested using the SURF Awards as a means of demonstrating a track record. He noted that politicians change but civil servants don't.

Every area is different, and organisations are operating in a different landscape. There is a need to make more money available. Employability funding has dropped by more than 20%. Invest at the grassroots and you get more bang for your buck.

ng homes setup a pre-employment subsidiary in 2011, former SURF Award winning [ng2](#). The organisation links ng homes tenants to employment. It started with six employees and now has over 100. You need to look at employability from a common-sense approach. Come up with something fresh.

Euan mentioned that this has been a consistent message and that it is time to act.

Graham started by introducing [Working Rite](#), who are a national organisation in the employability space. They take a community led approach and are embedded in the communities they work in. They started with one project in Leith, working with young people where the system doesn't work for them. They grew the model for young people aged 16+ and introduced a school age programme for kids that have low attainment/attendance. They also now offer a mentoring programme to help with other challenges beyond just getting jobs. Led by the young person's needs, background etc. The team offer support to the family as well as the young person. The model is now used in five local authority areas. He reflected that the landscape is different in each area.

There is not a massive amount wrong with policies. There are positive aspects of having funding delivered by local authorities, but the main challenges are around commissioning and decision-making being different in each local authority area. There is not a constant approach across the

board. Even when providing feedback, it isn't getting through. It makes programmes more complex to deliver.

Working Rite's programmes are built around partnership working. They work with a range of partners, including housing associations, third sector organisations, schools etc.

Questions

- *Euan noted that SURF want communities to be at the heart of decision making. [Pride in Place](#) funding is currently available and the Scottish Government might do something similar. Money is coming to communities through anchor organisations. With funding such as the [Investing in Communities Fund](#) (ICF), SURF's stance is that future funding should be continued to the existing cohort of organisations, where need is still there, and it should be provided for the length of a parliamentary term. This would stop the feeling of an impending cliff edge. He asked if this approach stifles innovation and what happens to places without anchor organisations, asking about balance.*

John noted the rural vs urban approach. [Levelling Up](#) and [Pride in Place](#) are both providing funding for capital projects. The [Regeneration Capital Grand Fund](#) looks at capital and then revenue. There needs to be a consistent approach across the board for delivering funding, rather than differing approaches across local authorities. Funders need to understand the landscape and who is out there. ng homes offer organisations in the area support. Cash gets to the front line for things such as space, premises etc. Possilpark has a negative reputation, which ng homes is trying to change with an approach around the creative industries. Providing free access to young people to training and resources that they otherwise wouldn't be able to experience. They want to break the stigma. It has been done in Easterhouse with The Fort approach, which brought investment. Scottish Government need to prime and deliver strategic issues.

- *Euan asked about the impacts of the funding shift to local authorities.*

Nicola said that it has been difficult. There is a place to put funding through local authorities, but the downside is that they are delivering a lot in-house and funding is not going out to the grassroots organisations. There is additional red tape and bureaucracy through this approach for the individuals who need support, introducing additional barriers to individuals further removed. There are no boots on the ground. You need to maintain a good relationship with the local authority to get a piece of the pie, and you are often having to chase funding as it is spread thinly. They get funding as an [ALEO](#), but that is reducing. There needs to be multi-year funding, and funders need to get the right people round the table to hear what is happening. They need to see it first-hand to see how things can be done differently. A better balance is needed, with some funding going through the local authority but from an open pot.

Angela added that they have a great relationship with Fife Council's Employability Team. They are very transparent. She noted that there are always winners and losers in funding. They meet regularly to share opportunities for skills training etc. and they share a database. The process is good.

An attendee from East Lothian said that most of the local authority staff in the team are on temporary contracts due to annual funding. 50 staff, some permanent, but most are temps. Contracts are extended every six months.

Graham noted that they got an extension from ICF for their Glasgow project but that they heard three weeks before the funding was due to end, putting staff at risk. Other organisations let staff

go and closed down. They also receive [Social Innovation Challenge Fund](#) money, which is rolling every year. With this model, how do you be financially sustainable.

John added that whichever government gets in, they are all talking about [Quangos](#) and massive savings to be made. ng homes are also a funder and can commit money to projects. They can use this as leverage to help them to scale up. If their core business of housing doesn't run well, then it can't happen. They need to work with tenants and invest in the community.

Euan mentioned the housing award and housing associations working with tenants being essential. Multi-year funding is in the [SURF Manifesto](#), and this also reaches to local authority work, with staff on temporary contracts due to funding cycles. All of the party manifestos say words around multi-year funding. Some Quangos do already deliver multi-year funding, such as [Historic Environment Scotland](#) and [Creative Scotland](#), but it is caveated with regard to their own budget and funding from the Scottish Government. Having to do the process every year opens up a period of not knowing, which creates a problematic dynamic. He mentioned ICF had set aside £8-9m for the one-year extension to cover a fund that was initially £12m per year. There would be natural wastage of projects that have closed due to having served their purpose or being time limited. Creative Scotland funding has increased. More organisations got funding but many got less than what they asked for, spreading the jam thinly. Some communities need more than others.

- *Euan asked the room, as cuts are inevitable, what the Scottish Government should stop doing or re-direct, in terms of employability. With an impending fiscal cliff edge, do we wait for it to happen or try and pre-empt it.*

John mentioned [Scotland Excel](#) for Scottish Government procurement when organisations are looking at doing procurement processes. The government needs to stop duplicating things. They need to give money to people.

Stephen from RTWS answered that we now have an outcome-based funding system and that it didn't start like that. Funders need to move away from outcome-based funding, as it is not about jobs. You will get jobs, but it shouldn't be the primary starting point. Don't predict people's needs. It is not all about job outcomes. The third sector was forced into employability, as it is where the funding is, and then they have to focus on job outcomes. [No One Left Behind](#) is more than just a slogan. Organisations are having to use reserves to prop up services.

2) Housing led regeneration initiatives

With introductory presentations from SURF Award winning and shortlisted:

The Standard Midsteeples Quarter, Buccleuch St Dalkeith and The Y Centre.

Additional input was provided by SURF partner [Scottish Procurement Alliance](#), and [Scottish Federation of Housing Associations \(SFHA\)](#) and [Scotland's Housing Network](#).

About the event

The second workshop in the series highlighted the 2025 SURF Awards Winner and Highly Commended projects in the 'Housing and Regeneration' category.

The projects featured all used housing-led regeneration approaches to improve the communities in which they work.

First Presentation Summary: [The Standard, Midsteeples Quarter](#)

Presenters:

- *Mike Staples, Chief Executive, South of Scotland Community Housing (SOSCH)*
- *Tim Cowen, Executive Director, Midsteeples Quarter*

Tim opened by describing the [Midsteeples Quarter](#) as a Community Benefit Society where the community takes the lead. The organisation originated from the work of [The Stove Network](#), an artist-led community development trust that formed in 2012. The work is founded on three key principles:

- The local community taking the lead on redevelopment.
- Repopulating the town centre by creating high-quality affordable housing on upper floors.
- Dynamic, engaging street-level activity supporting a mixed and vibrant local economy.

This Standard building lay empty for 10 years, and the development was not a quick process, with the construction itself taking three years and completing in 2024. The building now consists of a mix of housing on the upper levels and enterprise space on the lower. It is part of the wider regeneration masterplan for the high street.

There are a lot of empty and unused, derelict properties on the high street, which they have now purchased through a mix of funding.

The properties that they currently own include:

- 109 High Street/51 Bank Street, which has planning permission for four more residential flats on the upper floors and is currently being used as a meanwhile retail space on the ground floor.
- 11 High Street (Flourish) which is currently in meanwhile use for retail space on the ground floor and a social enterprise office space on the first floor.
- 117-119 High Street (The Press/Printworks) is also in meanwhile use for retail and pop-up events.
- 113-115 High Street (The Smithy) is another meanwhile use space for retail.
- 135-139 High Street (The Standard) which was completed in November 2024, consists of seven homes for mid-market rent, plus a mix of enterprise, community, meeting, event, and office space.

They want to bring the properties back into use for community and enterprise space. To provide opportunities for local traders.

Tim showed a short [video clip](#).

Mike described [SOSCH](#) as a community led housing enabler. They help to support and evidence local housing need. The vast majority of their work is in rural areas. They provide long-term support to the planning and delivery of locally affordable community led housing and regeneration projects. They help to unlock community asset ownership and support community place planning. They have a focus on housing innovation and using community led housing as a catalyst for regeneration in town centres, particularly around long-term vacant and derelict buildings.

SOSCH have been involved in the work at the Midsteeple Quarter since 2017. Supporting aspects of the community consultation and acquisition strategy, helping to liaise with key stakeholders, supporting the development of a business plan, and inputting into the overall consideration of a housing model. They spoke to The Stove at the beginning of the project, who were keen for SOSCH to come in and do the housing element of the development. Asking if their model could be transferrable to Dumfries town centre. Supporting with technical issues and helping to showcase the need.



They were involved in the early-stage development of proposals in support of the [community asset transfer](#) of the Bakers-Oven and the co-design of the Housing Strategy, which aligned with community asset ownership. They carried out the assessment of the [Housing Need and Demand Assessment](#) within Dumfries town centre, with a focus on urban repopulation. A key deliverable is that the building has been retained in the ownership of the community. They are now working in partnership to look at future properties.

SOSCH has developed a [community led alliance](#) across Scotland, creating a common voice and an agreed position in advance of the election. This has been part of their [Manifesto](#), delivered with partners including the [Development Trusts Association Scotland](#). The main asks in the Manifesto are related to money, as there is currently only the [Rural Housing Fund](#) available.

They have created a map which depicts community development trusts who are currently doing or have delivered housing projects. It is a way of showing how many housing units are in the future pipeline. Almost none are in urban areas. Due to market failure the community is feeling the need to step in with solutions.

Tim came back in and added that the tenants moved in during the defect period, so it was not the smoothest of journeys. It was a complicated design and is located within a conservation area. The project was designed pre-Covid and built post. All of which added to the cost.

This project has been a catalyst for other developments in the areas, with [Wheatley Group](#) now developing a site. It is about housing and people. A need to have people living back on the high street. There is a challenge around scaling up as it requires critical mass. It is important that the scale of the response meets the scale of the challenge.

They have developed a relationship with [Homes for Good](#), who have been able to provide support around being a new tenant landlord. They have an event space for hire and a youth initiative based within the lower units, both bringing life back into the high street. Having people back living and using spaces on the high street has also made the area feel safer, challenging the psychology of the area.

Midsteeples Quarter is employing a small staff team and has regular volunteers, bringing new employment and volunteering opportunities to the area.

Challenges

- Still in the snagging and defect period, although this is almost resolved.
- Challenges around heating as they changed the heating source part way through. They have opted for an air source heat pump, which has very specific equipment, and maintenance costs are high. There are pressures from funders to be innovative, but that comes with financial impacts and added risk. It is easier to go with something safe.
- They have now become a landlord, which comes with added costs, and they don't have huge reserves. They had to buy furnishings for the flats, which was not covered by funding.
- The project was more challenging at the earlier stages, but someone needs to take the risk.
- Revenue vs capital – can get capital grants but not revenue for staff to do the work. The Town Board excluded revenue costs, which means a limited budget. They need to fundraise for a role to maintain the buildings.
- There is a requirement for four quotes for anything over £4k, which can be challenging.
- Break-even vs profit and high costs of insurance and business rates.
- Managing expectations. Regeneration is a slow process, so people don't realise how much work goes on behind the scenes. They have certain expectations and can become impatient. There has been an impact from the bigger stores closing.
- Funder fatigue as funders move on after having already invested.

What's next?

- They are currently consulting on the middle three buildings.
- Looking to consolidate the core staff team.
- Carrying out a feasibility study for other properties, 111,113-15, 117-9 High Street.
- High street repairs and medium-term improvements are to be carried out.
- Repairing the external fabric/roof of 109 High Street/51 Bank Street.
- Have planning permission for four more flats.
- Looking to re-engage with their membership.
- Need to explore funding/partnership models for future housing.
- Looking at a key worker housing model.
- Disseminate the learning and act as a catalyst for future regeneration.

[View presentation slides](#)

Second Presentation Summary: [Buccleuch St, Dalkeith](#)

Presenter: Eugene Mullan, Architect, Urban Designer and Director, Smith Scott Mullan

The project was delivered for Midlothian Council. It is located in the centre of Dalkeith and was part of a wider Masterplan by [Smith Scott Mullan](#) for the council. The development consists of a mix of refurbishment of existing older buildings and new build, which was challenging. There were some retail units on the lower floor of the existing properties, but these were not currently in use.

The development saw the refurbishment of an existing two-storey building with four residential units and two commercial ones. With an additional six new-build flats, located to the rear of the existing building, which were designed and accredited to the [Passivhaus standard](#). The site was designed to feel complementary to the existing fabric and to the wider town centre. Enhancing the existing route to the local primary school was very important to local residents.

Improvements were made to the stonework of the refurbished building, whilst retaining reference to its history through the signage. There was a challenge establishing an appropriate front entrance to the residential properties, and careful design of the access and some open space was required. Ease of access is a trade-off for town centre living. Some of the stonework from an original demolished building was reused in other areas of the development.



There was a focus on creating a place that the community would take pride in. The development has been named after David Robert Smith, who was known locally as 'Mr Dalkeith'. A percentage of the construction contract was ring-fenced for public art installations. This element was designed and led by [Dalkeith Arts](#).

A reality of refurbishment is that it requires high levels of insulation, and if it is not done properly, it can create more problems long-term. The new build property was designed to Passivhaus requirements, which involves high levels of insulation, good airtightness, mechanical ventilation, and heat recovery technology. Midlothian Council was one of the first local authority to do a Passivhaus project for affordable housing. It is still a niche concept, which means niche contractors are needed. It is tricky as the design and construction industries are currently on a steep learning curve with this approach. Tenants were provided with a manual to assist them in running the house effectively.

Lessons

- Scale was challenging. It was a small project with a lot of different elements.
- Town centre locations can be challenging. With things such as balancing retail access with residential access, ensuring the new-build properties complemented the existing built environment etc.
- Construction works in tight town centre sites need to be planned in detail.
- The mixed tenure of the project was challenging.
- Finding a contractor to do both the refurbishment element alongside the Passivhaus requirements was difficult.
- Passivhaus will take a while to bed into the industry.
- You don't want to create problems for the future, so you have to ensure that the design, detailing, and construction of retrofit projects are done properly first time.

[View presentation slides](#)

Third Presentation Summary: [The Y Centre](#)

Presenter: Jill McGrath, CEO, YMCA Tayside

This was the first time that the team had completed a housing project, and it was a massive learning curve. The St. Andrews and St. Stephen's Church had fallen into disrepair. The YMCA Tayside bought it in 2000 from the Church of Scotland but, due to the level of disrepair, had to move out in 2010. The team spent several years exploring various options for the building and was even granted consent for demolition.

Over this time period times changed, the funding landscape changed, and priorities around climate changed. They held a conference with their young people to explain and explore what they could do with the building. This generated lots of ideas, and they left with a vision for going forward.

The team had limited expertise, so they reached out to experts, as they were doing the project on their own. In 2019, they reached out to The [Gannochy](#) Trust and showed them the list of what they wanted the building to be. They pledged £1m, which helped to get match funding. They eventually moved back into the building in 2024.

They got a design team together, who had been involved in other projects, at the start, but this was now a very different project from when they had started. On reflection, they should have taken more time to decide who to use.

The young people were embedded in the whole project, which the funders liked. A construction academy was set up, which allowed the young people to learn new skills, some of which were unique to the heritage sector, such as restoring leaded glass windows.

There was a real need to be brave to keep the project moving forward but also an element of 'ignorance is bliss.' The original plan for the renovation was to put two floors across the upper level, preventing you from seeing right up into the church, but this was changed, and steel was added in to allow you to see all the way to the top.

The Gannochy Room was created on the top floor. It consists of space for a gym, dance classes, and a quiet area. It can also be rented out to help generate income. It was a challenge at first as everyone wanted to book the space, but they didn't have a staff member to manage bookings, furniture etc.

The lower level is now a drop-in space, designed by the young people. A local business refurbished and designed the courtyard area for free. A digital suite for activities, such as gaming, was created, and a workshop for stone engraving and furniture building, which again allows the young people to gain new skills.



In terms of the housing offer, seven transition flats for young people were created, as there weren't any available in Perth. There was supported accommodation but not an 'in-between.' There is an agreement on tenancy of the flats. The young person has to either go to college or engage in support for employability/training through YMCA Tayside.

Lessons

- Importance of robust real community engagement from the beginning.
- Have a clear vision and keep to it, where possible.
- Does the team understand and appreciate your needs, and are they equipped and have the capacity to do the job?
- Active communication with all partners is key, including funders, as you may need to call on them again. Create a relationship.

Achievements

- They have brought back to life a listed 140-year-old vacant and derelict church building, located on a prominent street within a conservation area in central Perth.
- Created a youth-designed, multi-functional Y Centre and community hub.
- Purchased and repaired the adjacent tenement, which was on the dangerous building register.
- Created seven transition flats for young people, including care leavers.
- Generating an ongoing income for the charity, making it more financially stable.
- Brought significant regeneration activity to the city centre.

- Left a lasting legacy for generations to come.

Completing this project now allows them to do a lot more than they could before and has left them with new skills for taking on future projects.

[View presentation slides](#)

Open Discussion

Some of the main comments and areas of discussion are listed below. These varied views and opinions do not necessarily represent the views of SURF or all of the people and organisations present at the workshop.

- *Euan asked the Y Centre about the criteria for the flats.*

Jill replied that a new group was established with partners who look at the names and circumstances of those in need of accommodation. There isn't a time limit on how long they can stay. Two have just moved out. With one, their engagement levels had dropped, and the other is now working and going to college.

- *A delegate commented that they were delighted to see three town centre living projects presenting. Asking about the impacts on place and those living in the accommodation.*

Tim responded that tenants have now been in for just over one year. Other housing is now in the works by [Wheatley Group](#) and they are now connecting with them regarding funding. It has been a mixed bag with the tenants. Some are still having snagging issues, and some are really happy. Some have adapted better to town centre living than others. There was a pressure to move in too early. Seagulls are an issue, so there are practical challenges. How do we evaluate this? What are people's perceptions of the high street? What are the views of independent traders etc.? Local traders are saying trade is down 25%, but is that a wider economic issue rather than a localised one?

Jill added that their current tenants are fairly new. The building was previously on a dangerous building list, so the community is really happy to see it safe and in use. There have been no complaints about the young people either. The tenants are in a desperate position, so this provides opportunities. The area had become a space that people wouldn't even park in due to the danger of collapse.

Tim noted that there is a chronic shortage of housing at mid-market rent for young professionals, so they had no problem filling the flats.

Eugene said that evaluation is difficult, as it is so nuanced. Every time you take away something negative for a positive, it creates a chain. The local authority is doing post-occupancy evaluation. There are six projects designed to different build standards. With [Passivhaus](#) there are usually lots of questions for the first six months from tenants, but these tenants have been quiet. The project has helped with public realm improvements.

- *Euan asked about critical mass. There is a challenge around putting people into housing when there is not the local infrastructure to support it. For example, the retail offer is too expensive, no green space etc. How do you manage this at scale? It needs supported until the economy becomes self-sufficient.*

Mike said that evaluation in Dumfries will take time. There were literally no people living there before. There are good levels of footfall during the day, but it dies at night, which has an impact.

Wheatley is moving in, but they still need grants as development costs are so high. We need to keep going to future phases. Dumfries and Galloway Council have now produced [a study](#).

An attendee added that there are 400 new flats planned. Zero to 400 will have a huge impact.

Tim highlighted their events space; it is not just housing in isolation. This is creating night-time activity within the building, which has a positive impact on safety.

Eugene added that it is much more expensive. It is a big issue in terms of practicality, and a case needs to be built.

An attendee said that you need to demonstrate additional benefits of putting housing in a town centre. It is not quantified at present.

Euan mentioned Haddington introducing charges for car parking while new out-of-town retail has none, negatively impacting footfall in the town centre.

- *An attendee reflected on perceptions of Dalkeith.*

The Dalkeith man who the flats are named after was a champion for housing standards in Dalkeith. He was instrumental in new housing standards. The good work is overshadowed by the bigger picture of what is happening, or not happening, in Dalkeith. The Chamber building, for example. Only one retail shop has been let in the development, which is a shame. There has been a lot of praise from tenants in the new and refurbished flats. Parking is an issue though, with electric cars rather than public transport being first choice. The art sculpture of a pear tree is linked to the area's heritage, and residents are disappointed that a planter has been put in front of it. There has been a definite increase in pride.

Euan mentioned long timelines and the difficulties around making communities stay with you. He mentioned [Pride in Place](#) money providing quick wins, whilst other elements will take a long time. Derelict buildings and absentee landlords are a real challenge for town centres. The timescale for community-driven projects is also long, as they get caught up in the process. There is a need to be careful.

- *A question was asked about 'meanwhile use' for retail in the middle buildings in the Midsteple Quarter and if this could be a long-term solution instead.*

Tim answered that parts of the buildings are in use but that the upper floors and the areas at the back are vacant. This is a medium-term temporary use solution. It is about looking at what we can do in the meantime. Make the buildings wind and watertight and do some improvements. It cost £30k out of reserves to fix the roof. The spaces are very cold.

Mike added that you need to also take into account the timeframes for doing engagement with the community. Concentrating on bringing in capital funding etc. Meanwhile use allows for continued engagement and vibrancy.

Tim said that they are recruiting for a community engagement role. Taking a twin approach of housing and something else.

- *An attendee noted that all three projects involved a listed building, conservation area etc. and enquired as to whether heritage funding was used, and if so what was their experience of that and what needed to change.*

Eugene replied that the project was funded solely by the local authority.

- *There was a follow up question asking if things would have been done differently if there was.*

Eugene said no, as it was a good refurbishment of the existing building, and the council was up for spending money on that.

Tim said that, in relation to The Standard, they retained the front façade and demolished the back. They have [CARS funding](#) for another building. Other funders are more interested in the end use/housing. There needs to be a coherent message. Having to meet all of the different funder's needs can be difficult and time consuming. There is a need for investment at the beginning to keep the buildings wind and watertight.

Mike added that the next phase needs heritage funding, as it is an important heritage asset.

Jill responded that they had considerable heritage funding for the Y Centre and that phase two with the housing development required heritage experts. They had a great design team and local authority investment, but heritage expertise is different, and they were grateful to have that.

Euan said that heritage money has remained static for a very long time. There is a need for more. Cultural value, but costs are higher, which some funders won't meet.

Policy Discussion

A wider policy discussion was held and included input from Annabel Pidgeon, Policy Lead at [Scottish Federation of Housing Associations \(SFHA\)](#), Heather O'Donnell, Senior Technical Support Manager at [Scottish Procurement Alliance](#), and Brenda Tonner, Service Improvement Manager at [Scotland's Housing Network](#).

Euan asked the speakers in advance to think about what they hope to see the next government delivering for housing.

Brenda started by saying that [Scotland's Housing Network](#) is a membership organisation for local authorities and housing associations. They deal with all housing-related issues. The biggest concerns in the sector are the lack of progress with legislation and the, already acknowledged, housing crisis with a need for more housing. Each political party manifesto had slightly different ways to tackle that. There have been lots of meetings etc. but nothing has moved forward.

Within the private sector there are huge issues equalised with the social sector around expectations. There has been a change in the make-up of the sector, with private sector landlords. There has been a reduction in temporary accommodation for the homeless by local authorities, which is down to a reduction in available private sector housing.

We need a whole sector approach, not just social housing. Manifestos between leading parties are different. The SNP have been elected, but they require the support of another party for a majority.

The Greens have noted issues around rent controls. It is an issue that has already been dealt with, so we need to move on. Plus, they want to tackle homelessness by 2040. Liberal Democrats want to invest in 10k key worker homes; Reform wants to reinstate local councils, and the Conservatives oppose rent controls and want to reduce costs.

We need to have national engagement from the sector, including builders, landlords etc. A lot has already been agreed, so we need to move forward. There is a need for clarity and affordability, and we need agreement on what that is. Everything is interlinked. Set four or five priorities and move forward quickly.

Heather agreed that it is time to deliver. Although it is a similar government makeup to before, there will be changes, and they won't meet everyone's needs. How long will the period of negotiation be

before we get a full picture? All of the parties have different principles and different housing targets. Delivering huge numbers may result in lower standards around energy efficiency etc. Projects take a long time. We need to keep going but also build new homes. There has to be a balance.

Annabel added that the SNP want to build 110k affordable homes. £4.5bn allocated spend over 4 years with 15,700 new homes a year. What about the quality of the homes and the type? Manifestos are silent on that. Only the numbers are focused on.

A new housing body is being set up – [More Homes Scotland](#). SFHA's focus is on ensuring supply matches up to the types needed and where. They need to consider the impact on energy efficiency etc. The new agency has a significant opportunity to make a difference. Plans need to reflect a place-based and partnership approach.

There are a number of new MSPs coming in, which gives an opportunity to educate. Housing seemed to sit 4th and 5th on party priorities. It needs to be more than just tinkering around the edges. There is a need for change.

Euan mentioned [Architecture & Design Scotland](#) potentially becoming part of the new More Homes agency. He highlighted the [SURF Manifesto](#), noting the need for high numbers of housing but also the other bits. Energy efficiency and town centre living are part of this, but they are costly. Euan mentioned Tony Cain's thoughts on poor people in society being the most experimented on in terms of housing, such as new technology.

He asked the panel for their reflections on innovative approaches and the impact on organisations.

Brenda said that innovation is great and pilot projects do need to be tested. She gave the example of [Passivhaus](#) coming in before we were ready. There are issues around cultural aspects, with some communities refusing Passivhaus because they are electric. It is very much on the shoulders of social housing providers to save the planet. There is not the same pressure on the private sector. It is the same with addressing fuel poverty. The average build cost is now over £300k for one social unit. We need to make it easier to upgrade existing homes with things such as loan schemes etc. Fuel poverty is a more meaningful headline than net-zero to people.

Euan mentioned the term 'affordable warmth'.

Brenda added that if the More Homes agency is a success and they focus on the infrastructure around development and large-scale sites, then great, but we still need to focus on older and heritage projects. Would this be for the local authorities to focus on? It all comes down to funding.

Heather said that until there is a need to do it, developers will find a way around it. Budget restrictions have a huge impact on trialling innovative approaches. Developers won't do it as standard until they are made to. There always has to be a trade-off, six units to three. So much is outwith house building, such as insurance, maintenance etc. The industry is not ready to be there; there is not enough money, and they don't have the skills. We have got to be realistic. There were 4000 homes delivered last year and 3000 more signed off, but we need to get to 150,000 in six years. We need to put people at the forefront.

Annabel replied that she agreed with the comments on using types of housing or people as a pilot. Funding needs to be in place to deliver more, and we should not be telling tenants to cover the costs of things such as retrofit etc. We need a public commitment to try something different. There is a reason for things to be tested and brought into the mainstream, and this needs to be supported.

Euan mentioned tenants seeing Passivhaus housing as difficult to run. It is good that this wasn't the case in Dalkeith. Perceptions are changing.

Questions

- *An attendee noted that it is easier in the mid-market rent sector to use tech as the tenants fall into a different demographic. It can be down to tenure.*

Brenda agreed that demographics have a huge impact. There is a higher percentage of over 65s in the population. The private sector has been slow to make housing accessible. Building standards need to address all provision within basic standards.

- *An attendee raised the topic of intergenerational housing being popular in Scandinavia.*

Brenda responded that it comes down to funding. You can plan, but funding could be a blockage. There have been attempts to do it, but not in the same way as other parts of Europe.

- *A delegate from the [Retail Trust](#) mentioned their retirement housing in Newton Mearns. Residents can come in from 66 years upwards but the oldest resident is 104. They have a community café and community rooms to facilitate a mix of older and younger retirees. It is a home for the rest of their life, like a village. Depends what it means by intergenerational.*

Euan mentioned about Scandinavian research on students renting from older people, but we have moved away from that model.

- *An attendee asked if the proposition is as simple as 'if you build/refurb more homes it positively effects on affordability' and if so why is it not communicated.*

Brenda answered yes, but it is also about people living in appropriate housing. You can't force people to downsize, so apart from building new, it is looking at people living in the right homes. Where is the money for adaptations? It is about getting individuals to make the right decision. Legislation around short-term lets is problematic. Also, implications of tax issues. There is new [tenement legislation](#) coming in that is not yet public but could have huge implications. A huge impact on demand and supply.

Euan mentioned the tenement legislation changes around mandatory checks for owners' associations. This will impact house valuations. It is not unreasonable for people to think about effects on pensions.

Annabel mentioned live conversations around the numbers of people needing homes vs empty homes. It is not about just building homes but a need to accrue social benefits and housing services. Can't focus on this due to the changing priorities and landscape not being shaped to the time it takes to build and the different types of housing.

Heather added that it is a lengthy process with hoops to jump through, such as planning, cost changes, design changes, having to re-tender etc. but we are still seeing a good number of units being built and retrofitted/ brought into use. People don't see the timeline of work being done in the background, so it looks like nothing is being done. We need to look at bottlenecks. What does the More Homes agency look like, and how will it get things moving quicker?

Brenda said that there have been innovative construction firms set up that have collapsed. What is the reason – cost, timing etc.

Annabel added that the types of tech didn't relate or were not transferable to housing types, climate etc.

- *Euan asked Mike for his perspective and about the campaign around chasing pots of money, and if he sees anything changing in this parliament.*

Mike said that the new agency provides an opportunity. The [Rural Housing Fund](#) could operate successfully on a wider scale with some small changes. It is about scale and aggregation, but it is difficult to achieve in practice, particularly with rural housing where communities are only building three or four units. It is not just about housing money but a wider systems change. He mentioned the [South of Scotland Housing Action Plan](#). Innovative but can't afford this through traditional routes to build.

3) Place-based regeneration approaches

With introductory presentations from SURF Award projects:

Scottish Men's Sheds and Two Towns Big Ideas – Banff and Macduff.

Additional input was provided by SURF Award partners [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#), [South of Scotland Enterprise](#), [Scotland's Towns Partnership](#) and [Scottish Government](#).

[Kenmore and District Community Council](#) were due to present but were unable to on the day. They have provided a [slide presentation](#).

About the event

The third workshop in the series highlighted the 2025 SURF Award Winner in the 'Community Led Regeneration' category and a Highly Commended finalist in the 'Improving Scotland's Places' category.

The organisations featured at the workshop were both supporting projects who are using place-based approaches to regenerate their communities.

First Presentation Summary: [Scottish Men's Sheds](#)

Presenter: Dr Jason Schroeder, Chief Executive, Scottish Men's Sheds Association

Men's Sheds are the largest global health movement for men. The Shed movement started in Australia in 1993 to provide a space for craftwork and social interaction to improve the health and wellbeing of older men and veterans. Across the globe, there are now 3,000+ open or developing Men's Sheds groups across 16 countries.

Often the workplace is seen as a place of connection, and when no longer working, there is no support. The UK Men's Sheds Association started in London but didn't go beyond Newcastle, so the Scottish Men's Sheds Association (SMSA) was formed. Since 2013, when the first Scottish Men's Shed opened in Aberdeenshire, there are now over 200 open sheds across Scotland, engaging with over 12,000 men across the country. SMSA has three development officers working part-time, two days per week in the East, West, and Highlands and Islands. 24 new sheds opened last year.

Their focus is on men aged 18+. Ex-military veterans struggle to reconnect. For older men, life isn't exciting anymore. After 18 months of retirement they are looking for new challenges as they feel they have done everything they wanted to do when retired. Sheds provide a safe, protected environment. Sheds are not run by SMSA; they are grassroots, bottom-up charities in their own right, and they govern themselves. SMSA provides support.

The Award judges came to visit Stonehaven Shed, which is a wooden shed that would have been lost to the community otherwise. It is local authority owned. The men are using their skills to maintain and adapt the building, including re-roofing the shed, adding solar panels etc. In a lot of villages there are no sheds.

Jason showed a short film that included testimonials from men who regularly engage with the shed movement.

The '[Silent No More](#)' campaign was developed in response to Scotland being the only country not to have a men's and boys' mental health policy. The campaign is challenging this. They are asking the Scottish Government to bring something new to the table.

Sheds are run as stand-alone charities, and this creates responsibility, ownership, and self-determination, which is often missing in men's lives who have 'time on their hands.' For sheds to be sustainable in membership and finances, they need the community's support. It is from the local communities that their voluntary membership is drawn from. Depending on the wide variety of skills in a shed, the community supports the shed with projects, which gives the men purpose and the finances to run the shed.

Jason showed a second film.

Benefits

- Increases social contact and confidence.
- Allows for the development of meaningful 'shoulder-to-shoulder' friendships.
- A safe space for fun, respite, relaxation, and/or escape.
- Nurtures the feeling of being valued and respected.
- Provides a sense of purpose, belonging, trust, and kindness.
- Men can learn new or utilise existing skills.
- Provides an opportunity to mentor others on skills and experience.
- Improves physical health and wellbeing.
- Savings to the government and health authorities through preventative solutions.
- Enhances regeneration activity and promotes a recycle, reuse, and reclaim ethos.
- Sustains traditional skills that otherwise might be lost.
- Tackles social isolation/loneliness and depression/anxiety, which are now the biggest killers of men in the West of Scotland.
- Helps to tackle the increasing suicide rate amongst men.
- Works to prevent the breakdown of the family unit.

Good and Bad

[Community asset transfer](#) is a formal process where a public authority transfers the ownership, lease, or management of land or buildings to a community organisation. It allows eligible local groups to take over facilities at a discount to deliver long-term social, economic, or environmental benefits.



Community asset transfer is governed by the [Community Empowerment \(Scotland\) Act 2015](#). This act legally requires local authorities and other public bodies to assess transfer requests and agree to it, unless they have reasonable grounds to refuse. This has helped get premises for sheds, but the process isn't as simple as it could be. If the local authority says no, the legislation now allows the government to overturn decisions. Some local authorities are pro sheds, and some are not.

There is no standard community asset transfer process and all local authorities have created their own, so they differ in each area. Some local authorities are supportive, while others are not and want to charge commercial rates for leasing or create a difficult process, hoping the community group will give up and they can try to sell the buildings. Some buildings have been empty for 30 years, and the local authority has to pay council tax on those empty buildings, but if a charity takes on the building, they are immediately saving that tax.

Another major issue with the Community Empowerment Bill and the Community Asset Transfer process is if ownership is chosen rather than a long-term lease. If this happens, the charity's

constitution has to be amended, as it states that for ownership to be achieved, the SCIO is required to have 20 members, and it must be written into their constitution.

There are issues around land transfer that the Scottish Government is not addressing. Men's Sheds are aimed at a portion of the community and therefore not acknowledged as a benefit to the whole community, which results in land not being transferred. The legislation needs to be changed.

To even make a transfer or right-to-buy request, a group must be officially recognised. The criteria state your organisation must:

- Be incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee, a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO), or a Community Benefit Society.
- Have a written constitution that defines the specific geographic community or community of interest.
- Ensure membership is open to anyone within that community and that local residents make up the voting majority and hold control over the board.

Men's Sheds are not for the whole community to attend, and they are being forced to become 'community' sheds as a hobby shop rather than a men's health engagement movement with protected characteristics.

SMSA took part in a [four-year research project](#) with Glasgow Caledonian University. They hoped it would give Ministers confidence in the movement, as they were previously told other countries' research wasn't Scotland-specific.

There are issues around funding. SMSA is currently operating with three months' running costs and might not survive next year.

Unlike other community organisations, Men's Sheds are informal gendered initiatives, created 'by men for men,' that can be tailored to the specific health and social needs of local people. In particular, sheds have been found to benefit vulnerable and marginalised men who may be viewed as harder to reach by primary health and social care services.

[View presentation slides](#)

Second Presentation Summary: [Two Towns Big Ideas – Banff and Macduff](#)

Presenter: David McCubbin, Project Officer – Town Centres, Aberdeenshire Council

The need for action was identified 10 years ago in the individual Banff and Macduff Development Partnership Action Plans 2016–2021. The towns are adjacent, but they didn't want a joint plan. This grant fund was developed by Aberdeenshire Council to stimulate creativity, innovation, and community led regeneration. Supporting local activity and activating vacant properties in the towns, as a community survey highlighted vacant buildings as a concern for residents. They aimed to encourage collaboration, pride of place, and long-term town centre vitality.

£30k was made available for both towns to invest in projects, with grants offered between £500 and £5k. It was not a large budget, but a small amount of money made a big difference. Town Centre Health Checks are carried out each year, alongside footfall data. It highlighted the challenge, as things are not getting better. They also received feedback from the community and local businesses, with the main issues being around vacant premises, some for years. Many are in a bad state of repair, but those in a better condition were easier for people to get into and fit out.

Aberdeenshire Council was not deciding what to spend money on; it was down to the community. They wanted to challenge the ‘top-down’ narrative. They carried out a lot of public engagement, both in-person and online. The team took the consultation to the schools and events and into local venues like the aquarium and leisure centres. The sessions were informal and a good way of gathering feedback. The results were used to shape the grant fund criteria.



They didn’t want to fund projects that wouldn’t be successful. Council Officers were involved, but the balance was weighed towards the community. They had 20 expressions of interest, and eight applications were received. In the end, six were eligible and received funding. They originally planned to have a public vote, in the form of [Participatory Budgeting](#), if the applications exceeded the total value of available funding, but it wasn’t needed in the end.

The process has raised awareness of the two towns and brought people together. Being a SURF Award finalist has made people proud, and they have been invited to speak about the fund.

Successes

- A successful two-month online/in-person community engagement process was used to shape the grant fund and eligibility criteria.
- The pop-up engagement in various locations increased footfall.
- A representative Community Steering Group was created.
- Decisions were made collaboratively to ensure fairness and local ownership.
- It was a simple, transparent application process to encourage participation.
- Eight applications were received; six were eligible and received funding.
- SURF Award 2025 Finalist.
- Early engagement is essential for building trust and participation.
- Small grants can deliver meaningful local impact.
- Ongoing support post-funding strengthens long-term outcomes.

The **six projects funded** included the following:

- Banffshire Highland Festival – a weekend event to increase footfall;
- A bicentenary exhibition of General Jose De San Martin;
- Cattleskate Academy CIC is now open to all ages, and they have expanded the skatepark offering;
- Mission Connect successfully promoted the tourism offer and events;
- Macduff and Banff Youth Hub was created as there wasn’t anything for young people to do. It was co-created by young people. They are now looking for a permanent home; and
- The Forge, which is an outdoor space, was renovated and brought into use. Money is going back into regenerating the building.

Challenges

- The pre-Christmas timing for launching the fund in December was not ideal, and they would not do this again for future rounds.
- There was competition from the [Coastal Communities Challenge Fund](#), where there was a larger maximum grant award on offer.
- There was difficulty in contacting absent property owners/landlords, and there was a lack of interest from contactable property owners to support the programme. This stopped some applications from progressing.

- The eligible projects' value was below the total grant budget; a public vote did not take place.

Policy

Aberdeenshire Council adopted a [Town Centre First Policy](#) approach in 2016. This means that they will put the health of town centres at the heart of proportionate and best value decision-making, seeking to deliver the best local outcomes regarding investment and de-investment decisions, alignment of policies, targeting of available resources to priority town centre sites, and encouraging vibrancy, equality, and diversity. They commit to a collaborative approach that understands and underpins the long-term plan for each town centre.

Outputs

The projects had to record outputs under different headings to demonstrate what was achieved, both individually and collectively. In terms of the economy, five new jobs were created and two new enterprises were started. 63 events and 15 consultation sessions were held in total, with 3890 participants involved. Two local buildings were improved, and one training place was created.

Legacy

- All six funded projects are still active and delivering two years after the grant funding.
- Community networks have been strengthened, and there is increased confidence in local action.
- New groups were established and are continuing beyond the initial funding.
- There are visible improvements to shared spaces and increased local pride.
- A model has been created for future participatory funding approaches.
- There has been continued collaboration between the Banff and Macduff communities.
- There is ongoing economic development activity in Banff & Macduff town centres.

Aberdeenshire Council is now running the grant fund again but this time in Fraserburgh, as Banff and Macduff don't require further support. The second round of the fund launched on the 11th May. They have taken lessons from the previous round. This time the only focus is on premises, rather than events, and they are not working with the schools this time on delivery, but they did feed into the consultation. At the time of the workshop, they had 15-16 expressions of interest from local projects.

As it is only focused on one town, the grant fund has been reduced to £25k, so there is a chance it may have to go to a public vote. They are looking to tackle town centre footfall decline in Fraserburgh and to decrease the town centre vacancy rate. There are currently 18 vacant premises.

[View presentation slides](#)

Open Discussion

Some of the main comments and areas of discussion are listed below. These varied views and opinions do not necessarily represent the views of SURF or all of the people and organisations present at the workshop.

- *Euan mentioned that Fraserburgh had been a [former SURF Award winner](#) but noted a desire for more community autonomy.*

David responded that people don't see how money is being spent.

- *A delegate referred to Jason mentioning opportunities for [community asset transfer](#). They noted the linear development of Men's Sheds and that it is presumably not get a shed first then needing men but the other way around, asking if premises are a barrier and challenge.*

Jason answered that the men see issues within their community and want to fix them. He gave the example of Burntisland having a building but couldn't get men to join. You need to get the men first. SMSA will support groups to find men. To do an asset transfer, you need three people: a Chair, Secretary and Treasurer. SMSA takes the group through the process step by step, but they don't tell them the full process upfront, or it would put them off. The process itself helps men bond and create friendships, so that in itself is a win.

He added that Helensburgh Men's Shed is starting again, which had previously collapsed and restarted. It has been a 10-year journey to get a shed, and they are finally at that point. The men have forged relationships throughout the process. It is a challenge amongst men to keep them on track throughout the process; egos etc. get in the way at times. Going through the steps gives them a purpose and focus; it changes lives. Trying to change the educational model.

- *Euan mentioned democratic activities and [citizen's assemblies](#). He asked Jason how big a thing it is to get a physical shed.*

Jason answered that it is huge. The local authority gave and took away from Helensburgh. Banff and Macduff are hugely successful with support from the local authority. SMSA were interviewed by four groups of girls aged 12-13 years as part of a campaign, and they had chosen Men's Sheds as the topic.

- *An attendee referred to Jason's reference to charities and asked if sheds need to be a SCIO or can they use another model?*

Jason said that they can become CICs or use other models, but SMSA suggests the SCIO model as it protects trustees if it all goes pear-shaped. SMSA has a set constitution that fits all sheds, as the aims and objectives are the same, as there is a fundamental base, so the constitution is already agreed upon by [OSCR](#), which helps streamline the process. It is currently taking 60-90 days to approve applications.

- *David was asked about the Banff and Macduff projects not coming back for additional funding and how they have been sustained.*

David replied that they have been monitored and supported through ongoing conversations. The council are still working with them and signposting them to other funding etc. for new activities. Some of the projects have changed what they offer, so they are now generating their own income. They are relatively small projects, which helps.

- *Another delegate asked David why the focus in Fraserburgh is solely on properties, given the variety of projects that came from Banff and Macduff.*

David said that they tried to be broad to begin with. There was a challenge around working with schools, as they are not set up to deliver grant funded projects. In Fraserburgh, there has been a steep decline in town centre footfall post-Covid, and it is not going back up. Feedback from businesses etc. meant the focus needed to be solely on the vacant premises. Elected members were not keen on the event side of things. The team started work at the beginning of the year to reach out to property owners early, taking a different approach this time. It was a challenge in Banff and Macduff. Another challenge in Banff and Macduff was that there is no development trust or business group.

- *Euan asked about community councils in Banff and Macduff.*

David said that they are really supportive, and representatives sat on the steering group. It is the same in Fraserburgh.

- *A delegate referred to their work in town centre regeneration in Govan and that there are similarities despite the urban vs rural context. They have the same issues with vacancy and absentee landlords.*

David said that it is a challenge. A lot of owners have just got one asset on the roster in the area and often didn't even know they owned a building there. It has been a long-term issue, plus there are not a lot of national stores in the area. There is a cost to maintain the buildings. In Fraserburgh, premises could be brought back into use, as there is not as much work needed. It is a losing battle in Banff and Macduff. The properties are not being marketed. There is an auction every month but no interest. There are much bigger issues, and the fund wouldn't touch the sides.

Euan mentioned the wider permanent problem of absentee owners.

Jason added that even if buildings are empty, the owner needs to pay rates, but putting a charity in gets them rates relief. He gave the example of an old building where a shed put tents in for their use and saved the owner money. It is a win financially. A charity can get grants to do the building up etc.

Euan mentioned [Hammond Associates](#) using spaces for temporary arts uses, but the building needs to be wind and watertight.

- *David was asked about no longer working with schools in Fraserburgh. Projects were put forward by young people previously which shows an appetite from them. They wanted to know if there are still mechanisms for young people to get involved.*

David replied that they are working with youth groups and that they went into schools during the engagement phase. The decision around schools was to do with their ability to deliver projects, down to timescales etc. The money goes out during the school holidays. The feedback from schools on their capacity was that they need longer lead in times.

- *The final question to David was with regard to support for projects during the application process.*

David said that they did everything they could to make the form as straightforward as possible, but projects probably wouldn't agree. It is public money, so you need to do due diligence. They held workshops on completing forms, and projects could submit draft versions and have a chat before final submission. It didn't stop anyone from applying. They were happy that they didn't have to go through the [Participatory Budgeting](#) process but don't know what will happen in Fraserburgh yet.

Policy Discussion

A wider policy discussion was held and included input from Kimberley Guthrie, CEO at [Scotland's Towns Partnership](#) (STP), Murray Allan, Senior Development Manager at [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#) (HIE), Rob Davidson, Strategy Manager Community Wealth Building at [South of Scotland Enterprise](#) (SOSE), and David Cowan, Head of Regeneration, Architecture and Place Division at [Scottish Government](#).

Euan asked the speakers in advance to think about the fiscal constraints facing this parliamentary period and how place based funding will be prioritised.

Rob opened by noting that [SOSE](#) is the smallest enterprise agency and has been established for only five years. Their work covers Dumfries and Galloway and the Scottish Borders. Thinking about the next five years, they will be working on embedding and supporting [Community Wealth Building](#) (CWB). The [CWB Bill](#) came in at the end of the last session, and with [Tom Arthur's](#) new role within Parliament, it should still have a huge focus.

Their region has grown into CWB. It provides a helpful and practical framework. Communities work with the public and private sectors to create wealth.

Murray said that [HIE](#) has been around for 61 years but is still dealing with the same issues. The financial landscape will decide how they operate. He expects more encouragement for the public sector to work in collaboration. You can't make transformational changes without money, and it is not as readily available as it once was, so you need to start thinking differently. There is around £100bn of external investment coming into the HIE region over the next 15 years through regional transformational opportunities, which will create a whole range of jobs and other economic and social benefits. CWB is about not doing things to communities but working alongside and investing with them.

Offshore and onshore wind, marine technology etc. provides opportunities and is bringing a lot of money in. There is a danger that income will be lost to local communities and the local economy. The Scottish Government is encouraging an [inclusive economy](#), collaboration, and partnership working.

Euan mentioned Peterhead, which is subject to lots of money, but engagement is difficult at a local level. In a different example, Girvan had small pots of money, and it was easier to engage. Money needs to have its impact and benefits felt by the community.

Murray added that [shared ownership](#) and [community ownership](#) are important to HIE, not just an add-on. Community led organisations are underpinning the economy by providing jobs, training etc. Regeneration is a cycle. CWB gives opportunities to support building capacity, to be part of the supply chain, and to bring economic benefits to communities.

Kimberley said that [STP](#) focuses on all things towns. They have a bank of expertise and play an active role in supporting the transformation of towns, but they need a commitment to take things forward with more vigour. Partnership and place partnership opportunities are key. You need to fund particular projects and look at it from a place partnership lens. Aberdeenshire is a great example of how [Town Centre First](#) gets embedded in everything they do; others need to do this. Ask how it takes a place forward. The [Place Principle](#) helps to give you a true picture of a place. 53% of people live in towns. A lot of STP's remit is to provide solutions and tools to support town centre regeneration. CWB is about making conscious decisions about your place.

Euan asked David who he thinks the new Cabinet Secretary and Minister will be for regeneration.

David confirmed that [Stephen Flynn](#) is the Cabinet Secretary and it will possibly be Tom Arthur as the Minister. Don't assume this government is the same as the last government. John Swinney has his own mandate and is not finishing Nicola Sturgeon's this time. [Public Sector Reform](#), [child poverty](#), and public sector finances will all be a focus. He expects more on the economy as a solution to tackling child poverty. [Ivan McKee](#) as Cabinet Secretary for Public Sector Reform sends a strong message, so expect change. It will be an interesting five years. Collaboration and working together will be really important. A focus on regional space and planning.

Euan mentioned the Place Principle being a holistic approach to how we work and invest in places. He asked the panel how they feel about that going forward. Regional lens? He asked them if they felt it would remain a strong focus at a local level.

David said that John Swinney expects people to get on with it. The regeneration focus will still be looking at the Place Principle. Shape investment and test it. Taking a place-based approach. It has been embraced in the real world.

Euan asked if it will still be a focus for the enterprise agencies.

Murray responded that community is key to the Place Principle and key to the future of a [wellbeing economy](#). Working in collaboration and working with communities as a key partner. There is a place element to that, but you need to get the balance right. HIE is also looking at what opportunities are around. Communities are a key partner.

Rob added that place is fundamental to everything they do. Every place has its own identity and civic pride. We need to support economic development and regeneration, but you can't abandon the place focus. Town Centre First is important as communities grapple with the future. He gave the example of [Midsteeples Quarter](#), where there was 50-60 years of not looking at the town centre, but they are now turning that around. SOSE operates in a region with no big cities; it is made up entirely of towns.

Kimberley said that where we can manipulate policy well is where it lands well on the ground, and local leadership is key to change. Local authorities are custodians of place, but they can't do it without community involvement; community is key. It needs to be embedded in more than just language. The Place Principle has a central place in the local agenda. It is critical to use the Place Principle to drive forward the places we live/work.

Questions

- *A delegate asked how the panel see communities being supported in decision making processes, such as community empowerment for example.*

Murray responded that economic and community development agencies are not the only organisations that provide support. Some communities are very capable, and it is sometimes down to the skills of the individuals who are involved. This can be a key driver. In other areas where that is less prevalent, disadvantaged for a range of reasons, there is no acting community there. HIE is doing work on Uist but relies on partners. Working with partners to provide a solution around support. We need to assess which communities need support and which don't. HIE does help communities build capacity, but they are only one provider.

- *Euan asked about the [Investing in Communities Fund](#) (ICF).*

David said that the Scottish Government asks, 'how is the community involved?' They work with partners on what communities they can support. On ICF, the government chose to extend it for a transition year. It is a good fund, but it is a decision for the government to make, not a single team to make. Thinks Ivan McKee may want to do something.

Euan mentioned the [Local Governance Review](#) and [Democracy Matters](#) and that there is a partnership group looking at that. The reform of community councils is part of that discussion. Is that a viable route? He mentioned student research that SURF is working on around the absence of community councils in areas of deprivation.

- *A delegate commented that that we have moved away from the community council model. A collaboration of anchor organisations would be ideal. Community councils could be part of*

that but there may not be one and they are restricted in powers. Gave the example of Garnett Valley.

Euan mentioned choosing where investment goes and deciding on priorities.

Kimberley said that Our Garnett Valley is a great example. How do we drive new partnership working to get community voice, as this is critical? The [Possilpark BID](#) has community voice embedded in it. It gives a different perspective on that area of Glasgow. The model is proven to make a difference.

Rob said that peer learning and peer support are important factors. He gave the example of offshore wind investment. Where do communities involved go for information? They should go to communities that have gone through the process and have learning.

Euan said this is a good example of being involved in network organisations.

Rob said things should be delivered by partners who have a track record. It is important, as you are not coming in cold, and it provides meaningful and helpful advice.

4) Taking a Creative approach to regeneration

With introductory presentations from SURF Award winning projects:

A Creative Approach to Revitalising Lochside, Alloway Railway Tunnel and the Galoshans Festival.

Additional input was provided by SURF Award partner [Creative Scotland](#), and [Creative Lives](#).

About the event

The final workshop in the series highlighted the 2025 SURF Award winning and highly commended projects in the 'Creative Regeneration' category.

The projects featured are all using creativity and artistic approaches to engage with and support members of their local community.

First Presentation Summary: [A Creative Approach to Revitalising Lochside](#)

Presenter: Angela Gilmour, Managing Director, LIFT D&G

This presentation was delivered as a chat between Euan and Angela.

Euan asked about the background and what activities they run for the community.

Angela replied that they do a lot of youth work and that they run two community shops, where the profits are reinvested in the community. They have the Art Cabin, which is their base for working with artists in the community. Their D&D youth group started with eight neurodivergent young people, and they now have 72 taking part. It is like a family, where those who were marginalised are now involved in other activities. They host events at Easter and Christmas etc. They run the Christmas Gift from LIFT programme, where you can nominate local people who are struggling, and they receive a parcel. The NANA (Nature and Nurture Area) programme, based on the 'nana knows best' saying, provides opportunities for people to get involved in workshops and artist-led activities.



They held a community consultation with the people living in the surrounding flats, and they wanted a garden. So, they created a community garden that provides food and activities. There is an orchard, herbs, and a space to grow food. A women's woodwork project is also held there. The whole community has access to it. The four local primary schools all come and take part. It is particularly good for those who struggle at school. They are also involved in a community payback scheme, providing outdoor work opportunities. One man wasn't meeting the criteria for his payback until he came to them. This intervention stopped him going back to jail.

Euan asked about funding.

Angela said that they get wee pockets of funding that make up the big picture. They really struggle with writing applications, with the length etc. It is a real barrier.

Euan asked about her experience when she started.

Angela replied that she had no experience when she started. She was just a local mum who wanted to change the stigma of Lochside. Now people come in from other places for the activities.

Euan asked about the wider masterplan for the area and their involvement.

Angela said that they do community consultation. Her colleague Morgan leads on this. They work with the local authority, [Wheatley Group](#), and local people. £130m can't be spent on just houses; there needs to be infrastructure and parks etc.

Euan asked if it is hard.

Angela said that it was very top-down at the start, but they were vocal and are now being heard. The money can't be spent on things that are just cosmetic; it needs to be deeper. It needs to address the underlying problems in the area.

Euan asked about working with the artists.

Angela said that they work with a range of different types of artists. Alice is the lead artist. They offer micro-residencies that run for at least a year, with about 25 artists taking part. People had never engaged with artists before. They now offer opportunities to be involved in blacksmithing, woodworking, 'zine making, and projects such as litter picking turned into art. They also get their 'queenagers' (women over 50) involved. They were involved in a project where they took photos and transferred them onto plates, celebrating the heritage of the area. Their initial pop-up tent turned into an Art Cabin. A storage unit which was reconstructed inside to be fit for purpose. They ran a project to design community wallpaper, which was installed inside the Cabin. Artists have so many varied skills; it was beyond their expectations.

Euan asked about wider plans.

Angela responded that they are working with [South of Scotland Enterprise](#) on securing permanent premises. LIFT is homeless; they have an office within the YMCA, but they need a headquarters at the Cabin to be seen. It is their location. They need support to get this done. They have money and are looking for an architect etc.

Euan asked about barriers.

Angela said that they struggle with skills for certain types of jobs, such as completing funding applications. Capacity is also an issue. They started as a Burns Supper in 2016, with a community litter pick and lantern making. The community then wanted more and were chapping at her door. There are only two members of the team line managing everything, such as the shop etc. They have 26 full-time volunteers and 75 on a list for wider activities. They currently have 10 staff members.

Euan asked about plans for the summer.

Angela said that they want to do lots of 'go sees' over the summer to go and visit other projects, such as [RIG Arts](#). They want to take people from the community to build their aspirations.

They have their Carnival Row event in place of the annual Gala on the 11th July. They are starting a new [Culture Collective](#) project with [Outpost Arts](#). It will be planned over the summer to be embedded within the next 18 months.

They will also be running their usual activities and have their annual Phoenix Festival, where they burn negative experiences inside the phoenix and positive ones come back out.

Second Presentation Summary: [Alloway Railway Tunnel](#)

Presenter: Shelagh McLachlan, Trustee, Alloway Railway Tunnel (ART) SCIO

Alloway is located in South Ayrshire and is famous for being the birth place of Robbie Burns. It is an idyllic village with lots of visitors to the Burns Cottage, but right in the middle was a horrible tunnel

dating back to 1906, which had closed in the 60s. The community wanted to change it into something to be proud of.

The group has regenerated the tunnel working with rural artists. It has taken three years to get to this point, and they are currently working on the ceiling. They also cleared and improved the pathway. With a total length of 300m, it will be one of the largest murals in Scotland.

Shelagh previously had a job at Ayrshire College, so she had access to students to get work experience, such as history research, art students etc.

Over 35 mural art workshops have taken place, and another three will be delivered soon. These have involved local groups, schools, and local people. The first batch had 10,000 people engage. They have also taken workshops into care homes. They have been interviewing local people and produced 45 blogs and 30 short documentary films, working with the college. There is a QR code on parts of the mural, which allows visitors to find out more about the history of the images.



Some of the tasks needed certain skills and experience, such as the horticultural work. They received funding from [Walking Scotland](#), which covered making a plan, procuring plants, carrying out the planting, and maintenance.

The mural has allowed for a number of educational projects to take place. They worked with Girvan Primary on a project to tell the story of Ailsa Craig. 350 pupils took part in a 7-week project, which resulted in a film. They visited Ailsa Craig to see the curling stones being made. From one idea a lot of community education was able to happen. This has been made into a school's pack to help share learning.

The team reinstated a cycle path to promote walking and cycling. Volunteers were involved in the cleaning and preparation of the surface for the paintwork. A website has been developed by a local business to help tell their story. They engaged with a restorative justice programme that provided an opportunity to help undercoat and varnish the mural. They also ran a project to get people in residential care homes out to visit the mural. There have even been ceilidhs held in the tunnel.

Impact

- It has created a new life for the tunnel.
- There have been increased opportunities for training and education.
- Inspired achievements, such as providing a photography student with the opportunity to create a portfolio and link with the community.
- Increased local pride, as it is now a much nicer place to live.
- An opportunity to link with the Burns Museum. Sending people between sites has helped to boost the local economy.

The mural is made of different sections of artwork. This includes community art, artist designed images, and illustrations of Burns poems with QR codes to recite the poetry and to get more information. The college art students worked on art to tell some of Tam O'Shanter. There are also some local portraits included. One half looks at local Ayrshire history through working with schools who are doing residences. Each group works on one wee bit, and then it all comes together like a jigsaw when you see it as a whole.

Challenges

- Awareness and credibility of a new charity led by five retired people.
- They had an aspirational funding goal. South Ayrshire Council send a funding bulletin, which is very useful. [Sustrans \(now Walk Wheel Cycle\)](#) provided a start-up grant of £5k.
- They were naïve about the amount of work, but they had an end goal. They will be happy to be finished by September.

Benefits of Entering the SURF Awards

- Provides an opportunity to self-evaluate.
- Category questions help you reflect on your project from different perspectives.
- Helps to plan for the future – can't walk away now.
- Provides an opportunity to celebrate success.
- An opportunity for local, regional, and national recognition. It is more than just community recognition.
- They weren't going to apply as a small project. but are so glad they did.

[View presentation slides](#)

Third Presentation Summary: [Galoshans Festival](#)

Presenter: Karen Orr, CEO, RIG Arts

Karen opened by showing a [film of festival highlights](#).

The festival's main focus is on widening access, breaking down barriers and getting people involved. RIG works with community partners, and the festival is delivered through co-creation, participation, and community consultation. They offer residencies and bursaries to give artists an opportunity to link with the community.

The main focus of the Awards bid was the 2024 Galoshans Festival, which was the 10th anniversary of the event. It saw 1,215 people from the community participate, alongside 254 freelance creatives, to an audience of just under 4,000 people.

It is site-specific to Inverclyde and linked to an 18th century play performed by men and boys. Its focal point is the five giants, which are based on local myths and legends. It originated from work by the [Inverclyde Place Partnership](#), which at the time had involvement from Rikki Payne, who was inspired by a local teacher who was horrified that kids in Inverclyde didn't know about Galoshans history. Greenock took the festival to heart. and it was restarted in 2014.

When it looked like the local authority wouldn't keep it going in 2017, RIG stepped in to take it on. It was not being their usual type of work, so they went out to the community for help, to local groups and cultural organisations. A consortium of local partners was created to keep the festival going.

Successes

- They are revitalising Galoshans traditions for future generations. The festival is helping to preserve and reimagine the language, folklore and traditions of Galoshans, ensuring they remain relevant, accessible and creatively alive for future generations to continue and reinterpret.
- Developing the Galoshans Consortium. The consortium model has proven successful, fostering a growing culture of programming around Galoshans.

- An opportunity to engage with producers. Since partnering with [FERAL](#) in 2022, the festival has benefitted from sustained producing expertise with a deepening understanding of Galoshans' identity and what works.
- Being able to provide artist bursaries and residencies. The festival supports artists through fairly paid opportunities to experiment, create new work, and make new networks.
- The Galoshans Festival has become a major highlight of Inverclyde's cultural calendar, bringing together communities, artists and audiences through ambitious and accessible cultural programming. It is an authentic community rooted festival.
- Provides an opportunity to celebrate Inverclyde through culture. The festival strengthens social cohesion and fosters community pride by celebrating Inverclyde's people, places and cultural identity through shared creative experiences and inclusive participation.
- It is growing audiences and increasing footfall. The festival is steadily attracting a growing number of visitors from outwith Inverclyde, contributing to increased footfall and raising the area's profile in a positive way.



They managed to keep it going even through Covid. They started with a budget of £12k and are now up to £120k. Generations of kids now know about their heritage and can reinterpret and keep it going.

The consortium has grown, and the festival is now a core part of RIG's work. It was built from the grassroots, as their expertise lies there, but they didn't have expertise in the fancier stuff, so they brought in producers. They get to be

more ambitious and bring people into the area. It is not a huge festival, but it is grassroots and growing.

Challenges

- Local authority bureaucracy and increasing costs are major challenges. Everything gets more expensive each year, with new licences added etc. The budget for 2025 was up £2k, which was not expected. There is a lot of red tape. They are feeding into meetings, but it is not working.
- Bridging the gap between teamwork and community. Sometimes bringing things in can make the community feel uncomfortable. RIG do community engagement around the themes and try and break down barriers.
- The negative perception of Inverclyde. There is a stigma presented in the press. They focus on the wrong things. This is not the community they see, with creativity, scenery etc. It is vibrant and friendly. There is an importance of events, such as the Galoshans Festival, in reshaping perceptions and showcasing Inverclyde at its very best.
- The weather at Halloween can be unpredictable. They have buildings they can pivot to. They had to take the street party indoors in 2025. They had underestimated the number of people attending.
- A key challenge remains balancing the development of local audiences whilst also attracting visitors.

Policy

Policy has not directly shaped the design or direction of Galoshans. The festival has developed organically year on year through collaboration with communities, partners, and artists. It is fundamentally led and driven by the consortium's commitment to quality, ambition, widening access and inclusivity.

The Galoshans Festival aligns strongly with key strategic frameworks:

- [A Culture Strategy for Scotland](#)
 - Strengthening culture;
 - Transforming through culture; and
 - Empowering communities through culture.
- [The Place Principle](#)
 - Promoting joined-up, place-based working; and
 - Rooted in Inverclyde's identity, geography, and communities.
- [Inverclyde Arts Creativity Action Plan](#)
 - Increases visibility and value of arts and culture across Inverclyde;
 - Builds confidence and participation in creative activity;
 - Strengthens connectivity and communication between artists, organisations, and communities;
 - Supports creative health and wellbeing, including mental health and social connection;
 - Contributes to regeneration, revitalising public spaces, tourism, and festival growth; and
 - Builds social cohesion and community pride.

Policy language has helped to communicate the impact of the festival in a way that funders and stakeholders can easily understand and support, providing a shared framework for demonstrating how it aligns with wider strategic priorities. They have played a big part in shaping Inverclyde's Creative Action Plan. They were doing co-creation before they knew what it meant.

[View presentation slides](#)

Open Discussion

Some of the main comments and areas of discussion are listed below. These varied views and opinions do not necessarily represent the views of SURF or all of the people and organisations present at the workshop.

- *The first delegate asked about the community park and garden and how they got people to take ownership of the space.*

Angela replied that they opened it to the whole community. They have been working with schools, which has had a ripple effect. They do work with the children, who tell their families, and they then come along. The flats overlook the garden, which encourages tenants to also come in. They have signs with instructions throughout the garden. The team donates excess vegetables to the community and local groups. There is no ownership; it is open to everyone.

- *The next question asked, in light of the struggle to keep heads above water, how the projects demonstrate economic impact.*

Karen said that they see the impact and benefits and that they would like to do an impact study but don't know where to start. They deliver soft outcomes.

Shelagh answered that at the beginning of the project they developed a monitoring tool. They need to be able to generate new income. It is a simple spreadsheet to monitor things, such as event numbers, and then use it as a way to generate income. They are looking at writing up the impact, but sometimes that is not feasible, so they are working with contacts. When the Award

judges came, one was from [Public Health Scotland](#) and asked about getting the health board down to visit. They hadn't thought of this but have now found the right person to help with that; there is a huge impact there. They are now recording impact, which helps when applying for funding and awards. You have got to prove that you have made a difference.

Karen added that they have always wanted to do an [SROI study](#).

Angela said that they promote a [circular economy model](#) through the shops. They receive donations, and then social workers come to them for goods, which saves them money. They also provide support to kinship carers and are working with families on the breadline. They provide opportunities for respite breaks and remove the barriers for taking part, such as travel and providing clothes and activities like books etc. from the shop.

Euan mentioned the employability projects and the workshop discussion around proving impact. You need to translate for someone else to understand. He mentioned '[felt experience](#)' coming into government. You need 'real' as well as data.

- *An attendee asked about the 'go sees' and mentioned the importance of collaboration.*

Angela said that these visits are very important. The community had views on what artists were until they met artists and got involved. You need to go and see other projects and take people out of their space; it is so beneficial.

Karen replied that they had done visits through their [Culture Collective](#) project and had people come to them. It is important to share experiences and see similarities. We need to share what works and what doesn't. What works can be place-specific though.

- *The next question focussed on barriers around positive experiences of local authority working.*

Karen mentioned their community arts space for their Culture Collective project in Paisley and the local authority in Renfrewshire being very supportive. They were much more involved, and they trusted them to get on with running events. On the other side, their own local authority in Inverclyde is smaller, but they get there in the end, and they are supportive of culture, but it is harder. There is no cohesion.

Angela said that in Dumfries they have ward workers. Their worker is instrumental in helping with legal things like licences etc. but the department changes for running events, and this area is full of red tape, despite their experience in running events.

Karen added that their local authority is risk averse. She mentioned their community garden that they got up and running without local authority involvement. It was easy with no red tape around tiny decisions.

Euan mentioned legal issues being a reason for being risk averse.

Shelagh said that their situation is a bit different as the tunnel belongs to South Ayrshire Council (SAC) and the pathway to the Roads Alliance; therefore, they have to say to people who want to hold events that they have to speak to SAC. It can be tricky getting the right people in different departments. They are now working with [Destination South Ayrshire](#). The funding department in SAC is really helpful and supportive. You need to get awareness in different departments. Their experience, though, has been all positive.

Euan added that the private sector complains about similar challenges with local authorities.

- *A delegate noted that all three have the same commonality and are close to the countryside. They asked about reaching out to rural communities.*

Shelagh said that they link through working with the schools and then making approaches to groups/people. It is about finding the right people and making the pitch relatable. You need to sell your project. Find an aspect that resonates with their local community plans and highlight opportunities to make links. Create a ripple effect. Creative thinking is needed.

Karen said that they are not located in the countryside, but they do mobile outreach via their mobile arts bus. Within Inverclyde they have a great relationship with park rangers and look to use outdoor spaces. They take people to the countryside. She noted that some funders do see Gourock as rural.

Angela also noted that they are not seen as rural. Her family is embedded in the community. They work with local people.

- *The final point was to SURF and focussed on the need for behaviour change within local and national government around this sort of work.*

Euan mentioned challenges around middle management who don't work on the ground but have fiscal responsibility. They have legal requirements, so they tend to be risk averse. People who work closer to communities feel the frustration of red tape. He mentioned the work of [Touch Community Garden](#).

Policy Discussion

A wider policy discussion was held and included input from Karen Dick, Head of Place, Partnerships & Communities at [Creative Scotland](#), Esme Leitch, Place, Partnerships and Communities Officer at Creative Scotland, and Dan Brown, Place Director/Scotland Director at [Creative Lives](#).

Euan asked the speakers in advance to think about what they hoped to see the next government delivering for community-based creativity.

Dan opened by saying that [Creative Lives](#) represent everyday creative activity. Their focus is on voluntary groups that come together to be creative and who are not necessarily funded. They work across the UK and Ireland, advocating for those groups and escalating needs and challenges. Reports show that 'being creative can extend your life,' a message that they champion. They want the government to champion projects like those in attendance at the workshop, which are helping to support positive mental health and wellbeing.

The [SNP Manifesto's](#) support for culture is welcome, with mention of elements such as a Culture and Arts Bill and minimum artist income. However, they recognise a lot is for culture consumption and professional artists, not everyday activity. The creation of the Bill should include consultation with grassroots groups, not just bigger organisations within the sector. There is potential for a great opportunity with the [Cabinet Secretary](#) linking to education and Gaelic. This will help to put culture through other areas, such as regeneration. Short-term funding is great for new ideas, but sustaining projects is needed for community cohesion.

Euan mentioned the [Regenerative Futures Fund](#). £15m revenue funding for community projects for 10 years.

Karen described [Creative Scotland](#) as the national agency for arts, screen, and creative industries. They are funded by the Scottish Government and the National Lottery. They fund everything from

individual artists to the Edinburgh Festival and have screen as part of that remit. They are not the only funder of culture but are for individual artists.

She mentioned their [Place Partnership Programme](#) with local authorities helping to support planning for what needs to happen in place.

Their team also manages [Culture Collective](#), which is a fund that supports artists, organisations and communities to work together to shape their own lives. Through this programme, they aim to change the way applications work, moving away from being outcomes-focused. They don't hold back money and give as much as they can upfront. There is also a shared learning element between recipients. It supports training for people to encourage the value of place and engagement. It will run for up to 18 months, although they are already extending that to allow people to plan. The Scottish Government has supported the value of the fund, but it needs to be available next year.

Esme added that trust is key. They embody that thinking, but they have to work within a structure. Hoping for trust to trickle down and to be responsive.

Karen said that they provide personalised briefings to Ministers on the benefits of culture. This includes generating £5.4 billion for the economy. It is primarily high level stats followed by a briefing tailored to the region, showcasing projects and what it means to their area. There have been changes to the ministerial portfolios; their previous Ministers have now left government. There are two Ministers within the Cabinet Secretary's portfolio focused on culture.

Euan spoke about [new Ministerial portfolios](#). SURF's areas of interest sit across a few portfolios but the main Minister for regeneration will be [Tom Arthur](#), who SURF have a previous relationship with.

Karen said that they want to go back to national and local government working together. She mentioned a national and local government delivery group and Creative Scotland's involvement with that, alongside organisations like [Historic Environment Scotland](#) and [COSLA](#). The group advocates for support for culture at both national and local government levels. Hoping for the group to reform with the new Ministers.

Euan asked Dan where he thinks cuts will land and how we should manage local authority cuts.

Dan replied that partnership working will be vital, especially within creativity and healthcare. Local authorities working alongside local people to deliver regeneration projects. There will be less capacity, so we need to pool energy and resources.

Karen mentioned [Public Service Reform](#) and/or [Public Sector Reform](#). It is not about reform but about cuts, doing 20% more by yourself. Creative Scotland has additional funding but needs to reduce their headcount and costs. This will increase the chance of burnout. We need to do more with less. Within the public sector we will need to think about how we deal with that. Within some departments there is not much left to cut, such as within social services etc.

Euan said someone has to make a decision on what not to fund. People are reluctant to say that because it is a political decision, but is that a fair decision?

Questions

- *An attendee said that there has been a shift in thinking around language from funding to investment. £5.4bn doesn't include social benefits and [Community Wealth Building](#) (CWB). We are measuring old fashioned economic output but how can we shift thinking to investment and the return on that.*

Karen said that in 2010 Creative Scotland tried to use the term 'investment' to include time, resource etc. but was told it was an economic term. They don't just give money; they invest time, hope etc. Public funding should be well intentioned and funders should be the stewards of that.

Dan mentioned the need for a framework to report back on cultural activity, including elements such as social cohesion etc. There are positive economic outputs in stopping people from going to hospital etc. We need a framework or tool to demonstrate that and show cost savings elsewhere, such as to the NHS etc. They have a funding application in to look at creating a funding tool.

Katharine Wheeler from [The Stove Network](#) added that they have a researcher who will be embedded for two years looking at that and that it would be good to connect.

Euan mentioned [North Edinburgh Arts](#) doing something similar around CWB.

Esme added that other organisations are working on assigning value to things like volunteering. She noted that she thinks we will see more of this with CWB.

Karen mentioned their [CWB Toolkit](#). You need to make this alive and practical; it is not just there to sit on a shelf. She gave the example of the [Midsteeple Quarter](#), using it as a tool for funding. A different case needs to be made now, it is not just about the economy but CWB.

Euan said it requires long-term political commitment, not short-term impact. He mentioned the [Fair Work](#) messaging within the [Investing in Communities Fund](#) extension and that instead funders should be focusing on investing in communities. The Scottish Government should carry on supporting revenue funding in places where it is still needed.

End of paper

Emma Scott, Awards and Communications Manager

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SURF – Scotland's Regeneration Forum

Unit 15, Six Harmony Row, Glasgow, G51 3BA Tel: 0141 445 4268 / Email: info@surf.scot / Website: www.surf.scot

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