



Scotland's Regeneration Forum

Alliance For Action

Key Learnings From
SURF's Place-based
Regeneration
Programme

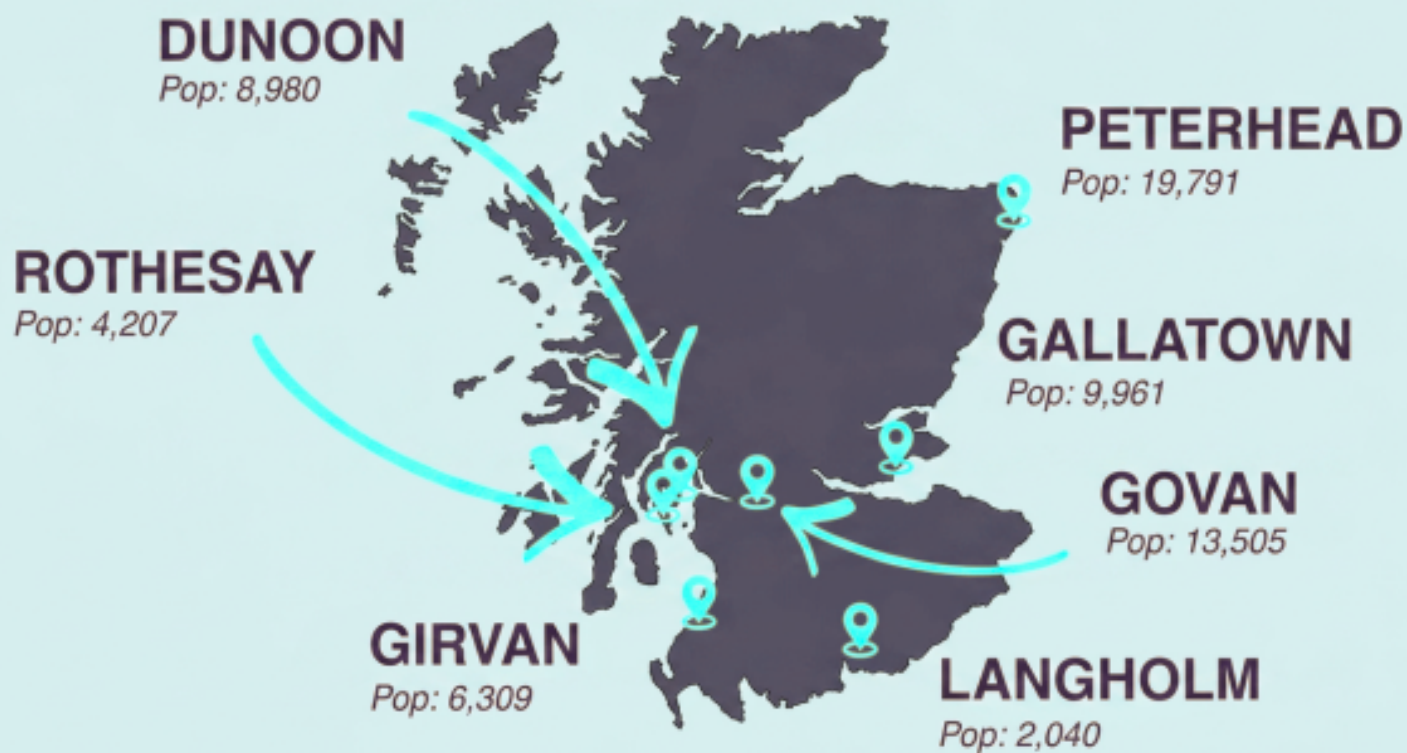


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13 Years of Alliance for Action

SURF's Alliance for Action programme was initially set up in 2013, and has run across a variety of communities throughout Scotland. These include, most recently, Peterhead and Girvan; before that Langholm, Dunoon, Govan, Gallatown, and Rothesay.

From urban to island and post-industrial to rural, these sites represent a wide cross-section of Scotland – all of which show that the same approach can have immense value no matter how – or where – it is applied. In a way, early Alliance for Action projects showcased the potential of the Place Principle in practice well before it was adopted by COSLA and Scottish Government in 2019.

The twin purpose of the Alliance for Action Programme was to:

- Support better outcomes in strategically selected disadvantaged communities
- Enhance our shared understanding of successful cross-sector community regeneration

Over the years, Alliance for Action has provided a valuable bridge between SURF's policy work and regeneration in practice. It has enabled innovative community partnerships and approaches, and shown how just one funded enabling role can have a measurable impact for the aspirations of places, no matter what its context, culture, or geography. This report will aim to highlight some of the key successes and challenges from the final two Alliance for Action sites to consolidate learnings from the programme.

Headline Research Findings



79% of respondents across Girvan and Peterhead rated the programme as 'Excellent' in meeting its primary aim to strengthen community resilience and promote practical regeneration outcomes.



91% of respondents in Girvan and 75% in Peterhead felt that the Alliance for Action Programme had raised the profile of regeneration in the local area.



75% of Peterhead respondents and 82% in Girvan felt that Alliance for Action had helped increase collaboration across stakeholders.



Across both programmes, 89% felt that Alliance for Action activity had produced benefits for their organisation.



95% felt that Alliance for action had produced benefits for the wider community.

5 Key Lessons from the Programme

Place-based coordination roles have a real impact on regeneration outcomes.

Small funding pots make a big difference.

Local knowledge counts double.

Real change takes time (and funding).

Change must be visible for it to matter.

Research Aims & Methodology

This research provides an analysis of the final two Alliance for Action sites in Peterhead and Girvan. Both sites have had facilitators in place since they were selected as sites in 2023, and both have approached community regeneration in their own place-based manner. This research builds on the methodology used in a 2021 report produced by iconic consulting which evaluated progress and key outcomes for the Langholm and Dunoon sites from 2018 to 2020. This report can be read [here](#).

The research incorporates both qualitative and quantitative data, collected via survey from key partner organisations working across both sites. The research was disseminated by SURF's local Alliance for Action Facilitators, who were also interviewed separately about their experiences and reflections on their three years in post.

The survey asked the following questions:

- Overall, how do you rate the Alliance for Action programme in meeting its aim to strengthen community resilience and promote practical regeneration outcomes in Girvan / Peterhead?
- Has SURF's Alliance for Action activity in Girvan / Peterhead produced benefits for your organisation?
- Has SURF's Alliance for Action activity increased co-operation between organisations in Girvan / Peterhead?
- Has SURF's Alliance for Action activity produced benefits for the community in Girvan / Peterhead?
- Has SURF's Alliance for Action activity raised the profile of regeneration in Girvan / Peterhead?

The report will also briefly compare results from Girvan and Peterhead with the previous report's findings in Dunoon and Langholm.

Section 1: Context

A Brief Introduction to Peterhead

Peterhead is the largest town in Aberdeenshire. As a coastal town and port, much of its history has revolved around the sea. Fishing has always been a key industry in Peterhead, but since the 1970s, the town has also established itself as a North Sea Oil and Gas service hub. In recent years, the transition to Net Zero has become a key theme locally, with inward investment from both UK and Scottish Governments seeking to ensure a just transition. Peterhead looks set to change significantly over the next decade as the energy transition accelerates and governments seek to meet their climate targets.

Peterhead will also receive £20 million of Pride in Place funding from the UK Government over the next decade. This funding news occurred midway through the first year of SURF's Alliance for Action programme, which led to the Alliance for Action Facilitator helping to set up the Town Board, which will support governance throughout the Pride in Place programme.

Additional investment into Peterhead includes SSEN transmission projects, offshore wind, and associated community benefit funds. In a [recent report](#), BiGGAR economics suggests that Peterhead could become a 'leading energy hub with the capacity to host a cluster of renewable and low-carbon energy projects and infrastructure to support Scotland's journey to Net Zero.' Despite this promise and potential, there remains uncertainty about how much investment will be committed, where, and how it will be targeted.

Peterhead has higher levels of deprivation than many other areas in Aberdeenshire. Despite the challenges it faces, Peterhead has a thriving community sector, with around 80 diverse groups estimated to be operating in the area.

An overview of key Alliance for Action projects in Peterhead is available on the [SURE website](#).

A Brief Introduction to Girvan

Girvan is a harbour town in South Ayrshire. It is the largest coastal settlement between Ayr (to the North) and Stranraer (to the South). Traditional industries include fishing and weaving, but Girvan also developed into a popular Victorian resort destination after the completion of the railway line in 1860, bringing resources and tourists to the area. As local tourism declined over the course of the 20th century, industry became more important to the town, with factories opened by William Grant & Sons and Nestle, among others.

Girvan currently struggles with economic inactivity and a lack of stable, local jobs. Rural isolation and poor access to key services – many of which can only be found in Ayr, for example – compound many of the challenges around deprivation and poverty.

Unlike in Peterhead, the Alliance for Action programme in Girvan was supported by additional, external place-based regeneration funding by the William Grant Foundation, the charitable arm of William Grant & Sons, which operates a distillery locally and is a major employer in the area.

SURF received William Grant Foundation funding for the duration of Alliance for Action in Girvan. This amounted to £55,000 over three years, with 60% available as a flexible funding pot to support a range of local community led regeneration initiatives. This included direct funding support for the below projects:

- Refurbishing the Girvan Academy Auditorium.
- The development of a Stage 2 grant application for the Girvan's Story Project, which led to securing a £5.2 million funding settlement for the project.
- Refurbishing the Girvan Station Coffee Kiosk.
- Development support for the Girvan Bandstand regeneration project – which has now received significant funding from Carrick Futures, William Grant Foundation, RCGF, Historic Environment Scotland, and the National Lottery Heritage Fund.
- Helping to set up and support the South Project to purchase the South Parish Church and Halls to renovate it into a bunkhouse, a commercial kitchen, and events space, specifically with Stage 1 and Stage 2 applications to the Scottish Land Fund.
- Supporting AYE Girvan around funding and future planning.
- Supporting Duff St Kitchen with financial and governance matters.

An overview of Alliance for Action projects in Girvan is available on the [SURF website](#).

Section 2: Stakeholder Survey Results

This section of the report presents the key findings from the stakeholder survey results. This includes both qualitative and quantitative data. All findings are presented anonymously.

Impact on Community Regeneration & Resilience

The primary objective of the Alliance for Action programme is to facilitate community-led regeneration outcomes across selected sites. The below table shows survey responses around this metric, highlighting the positive reception of the work in both communities.

Table 1. Responses to survey question – Overall, how do you rate the Alliance for Action programme in meeting its aim to strengthen community resilience and promote practical regeneration outcomes in Girvan / Peterhead?

	Excellent	Good	Okay	Poor	Terrible	Total
Girvan	9	2	0	0	0	11
Peterhead	6	1	1	0	0	8

In both Girvan and Peterhead, survey respondents noted the ability of Alliance for Action Facilitators to adopt a birds-eye view of community activity while providing development and capacity-building support. Making active connections between organisations and funding opportunities, in particular, was highlighted as extremely valuable – and in several instances this led to significant funding bids being submitted and subsequently secured. ‘Enabling’ was a word that was used several times by respondents, which reflects comments from previous Alliance for Action sites in Dunoon and Langholm. 91% of respondents in Girvan and 88% of respondents in Peterhead stated that SURF’s Alliance for Action had created tangible benefits for their organisation.

Projects specifically mentioned by stakeholders in Girvan include the Girvan BandStand which, over the course of the Alliance for Action programme received regeneration funding from, amongst others, South Ayrshire Council, Historic Environment Scotland, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Carrick Futures, Architectural Heritage Fund and the William Grant Foundation, and the Stumpy Jail – which also received National Lottery Heritage Funding. Both projects are now set for significant regeneration investment and have seen high levels of community support and engagement.

The below responses highlight how the BandStand project was received by the wider community and key partners:

['The Facillitator's] involvement in the BandStand Project has ensured success in terms of funding commitments for the redevelopment of this important heritage building. When I was involved in gathering interest in the project in the very early days, there was almost 100% local support for the idea of regeneration. Now with SURF involvement, the project is on track to success.'

'A strong example is the ongoing work around the Girvan Bandstand project. Through regular engagement with partners, strategic guidance on the asset transfer process, and assistance in developing a phased funding approach, the programme has helped move the project from early ambition to a well-structured and deliverable regeneration initiative. Practical support has included input to funding applications, development planning, and communications with the wider community.'

Local events were also mentioned as invaluable and were seen to contribute significantly to the profile of both the local area and regeneration projects more broadly. In Peterhead, Alliance for Action supported the delivery of an event that brought tens of thousands of visitors into the town centre, 'showcasing local businesses, groups, and charities.' Taste of Buchan – a free community food and drink event organised by Peterhead Academy pupils – has since launching 'become a staple of the local community calendar,' with the Alliance for Action Facilitator supporting pupils throughout the event, making relevant 'business connections,' and offering 'logistical support.' In Peterhead, Alliance for Action was noted as a 'valuable platform for local groups to share ideas and access to support for community projects,' for example by identifying 'opportunities for sports facilities improvement,' along with funding applications 'to provide each of the Buchan schools with Parking Buddies to prevent dangerous and inconsiderate parking near schools, reducing near misses and road traffic collisions.'

In particular, SeaFest was mentioned repeatedly by stakeholders in Peterhead as a flagship project. One response noted:

'SURF's involvement in SeaFest, a major seafood and heritage festival, significantly boosted awareness of regeneration activity. The event attracted large numbers of visitors, generated positive local and national media coverage, and showcased the town's assets and ongoing regeneration efforts. The scale and success of SeaFest as well as the work on Peterhead Town Board demonstrates the impact of coordinated regeneration activity, helping to put Peterhead's community-led work in the spotlight.'

Others highlighted the fact that SeaFest was both family friendly and free as particularly crucial, helping to ensure that events did not come at a cost and were accessible to all. This also helped the festival grow year on year, and it is now established as a key event in the Peterhead calendar.

Some respondents acknowledged that events and projects may not have occurred without the Alliance for Action Facilitators being in place. Nevertheless, the above successes also helped 'foster a crucial "can do"' feeling amongst local people, galvanising future activity. Regeneration support was always community-led, which led to a refreshing diversity amongst projects which differed between Girvan and Peterhead – reflecting a true place-based approach that was built around emerging local priorities. Beneficiaries of funding support, for example, ranged from schools to a variety of community groups, reflecting the diverse local community context in each town.

The expertise and local understanding of the SURF facilitators was also mentioned by several respondents. It is worth stressing that both facilitators lived locally and therefore understood the local context. Not only does this provide legitimacy and credibility with the wider community, but it meant that Facilitators could connect with local priorities, issues, and dynamics.

A focus on the 'practical,' along with how 'approachable' facilitators were, was seen as a particular strength of the programme, which engaged responsively with the local context without being restricted to set objectives. This also supports the widespread consensus around flexible funding that is not ring-fenced around national policy objectives, but instead can be adapted locally in a place-based way. Crucially, the development support made no distinction between large and small projects, something that survey respondents also picked up on.

The impact of smaller initiatives, although perhaps less immediately appealing for larger funders, were seen as providing tangible benefits for the community, supporting the theory that regeneration need not always be a multi-million investment package, and that a little goes a long way. This was especially true in Girvan, where the additional development pot – through the William Grant Foundation funding – led to the Alliance for Action Facilitator being able to disperse funding quickly and responsively. And although this grant funding was never conditional on a possible return, in most instances it delivered tangible – often financial, through funding – results, with some match-funding eventually going on to secure long-term capital investment. Other instances of Alliance for Action support led to local organisations being able to hire more, which meets wider employment objectives and multiplies organisational capacity. This snowball effect is little understood or studied, but the implications are significant – especially for funders. It suggests that the community return on investment for many of these projects is likely underreported and sometimes overshadowed by easy-to-measure, high-level indicators.

The Importance of Visibility

Time and again, respondents raised the importance of visible projects and initiatives that helped the community see tangible outcomes. In a world of deepening mistrust in both politics and the possible solutions that politicians – especially at a national scale – offer, hyperlocal, place-based improvements can be understood as the perfect antidote to political apathy and the place-based resentment it often instils in local residents.

The previously mentioned local events were particularly helpful in this regard, as they provided a clear focal point that the community could coalesce around. It is something that community organisations can point to as a tangible, local achievement which is directly aimed at residents. More often than not, communities are not disenchanted by what is happening, but by how – or if – it is communicated and shared. This is important and not to be underestimated, and sometimes community groups – who are often stretched beyond capacity – forget that communicating what is happening can be just as important as the activity itself. To those involved, day in day out, in delivering for their communities, this can feel somewhat shallow – even performative at times – but it remains a crucial part of community led activity. Real change and real regeneration only happens when it ripples outwards throughout the community and becomes visible. In Girvan, the Bandstand Project was highlighted as particularly visible, and one that received significant community support as a result. This is undoubtedly also due to the underused nature of the BandStand site, its social and historic significance, and the perceptions that both the building and the area as a whole was not fulfilling its potential.

This also offers a useful opportunity for community groups: a visible eyesore can easily become a visible success, and high-impact projects can unlock community appetite for more.

In a community-facing role, being both visible and accessible to the community is often seen as a good in and of itself. This not only builds trust but can compare favourably with other services which often feel more detached from communities and local residents. Visibility not only enables the community to feel like something is being done; it humanises those responsible for doing it, and thus shapes key relationships that are often more durable as a result. This is particularly empowering when the person responsible is a local resident and therefore embodies the community-led approach. It also removes the technocratic and top-down approaches that most communities feel lacks authenticity and local understanding. A respondent in Peterhead summed it up as follows: 'The Alliance for Action approach has been particularly valuable in creating a consistent, on-the-ground presence in Peterhead,' which has 'helped make regeneration feel more accessible and relevant to local groups.' This is not to say that good community work or regeneration cannot be driven by those with an outside perspective, but it often requires more trust-building and community buy-in than when that change is driven through empowered local residents who not only understand their community, but share in its successes and failures.

Benefits for Local Organisations and the Community

Respondents from both Girvan and Peterhead largely felt that Alliance for Action had produced benefits for both organisations working locally and the wider community. Across both programmes, 89% of respondents felt that Alliance for Action activity had produced benefits for their organisation, while 95% of respondents felt that Alliance for action had produced benefits for the wider community.

The below tables summarise the responses to these questions.

Table 2. Responses to Survey Question - Has SURF's Alliance for Action activity produced benefits for your organisation?

	Yes	No	Other *	Total
Girvan	10	1	0	11
Peterhead	7	0	1	8

**respondents were able to respond via text to this question, which means some did not provide a yes or no answer.*

Table 3. Responses to Survey Question - Has SURF's Alliance for Action activity produced benefits for the community?

	Yes	No	Other *	Total
Girvan	11	0	0	11
Peterhead	7	0	1	8

In Girvan, funding was consistently mentioned as particularly beneficial. As mentioned, this was due to the Alliance for Action Facilitator having access to a small pot of development and capacity building funding from the William Grant Foundation. This small-scale, flexible funding pot enabled the Alliance for Action programme to develop capacity at pace and support community led regeneration activity where there was both a community need and a platform for action. One respondent mentioned that this allowed their organisation 'to purchase event insurance, enabling us to hold a very successful community engagement event,' alongside match funding for a stage 1 SLF funding application.

Another organisation 'received £2500 to commission community enterprise to write a business plan to help with planning an Arts Production Space,' while another organisation received funding to 'promote our community-led tourism service, promoting our support for local craftspeople and advertising the free-to-access Litter Picking Station.' The additional value that small amounts of flexible funding creates is significant, and is a key difference between the Girvan and Peterhead sites, highlighting that both capacity and funding are ideally needed for community led regeneration work to flourish meaningfully.

However, beyond funding, capacity building and practical support were mentioned as well in Girvan. Several respondents mentioned that capacity was often stretched thinly considering that many involved were volunteers. The hands on and involved approach taken by the Alliance for Action Facilitator is captured well by the below response:

'[They] facilitated a workshop for committee members of Girvan Tourist Information and Craft Shop to consider options regarding charitable status or alternative models for our service. [They] produced a comprehensive report on the findings of this workshop and a detailed paper on short/medium/long term priorities which will feed into our Business Plan update. The whole experience was appreciated by all who took part.'

In Peterhead, support with community engagement and wider connections was also flagged – an element of place-based working that, while important, can be challenging, especially when communities grapple with new ideas and competing visions. This ensures that, beyond support with delivering projects – which on its own is valuable – the Facilitators were instrumental in 'helping [organisations] plan for future growth and participation initiatives' along with the importance of creating community 'connections' both of which should be seen as intangible outcomes of the Alliance for Action programme.

In both Peterhead and Girvan, the Facilitators became an integral part of the organisations they support, helping to shape how they position themselves financially and from a governance perspective – often overlooked aspects of running a charity. Their involvement was largely driven by the needs of the community organisations. Indeed, a response from Girvan noted that 'there have been times where our Board has hit road blocks and had to pivot projects,' but that the Alliance for Action input 'not only helped alleviate the stresses of these times, but produced creative solutions.' Although there are various national support organisations in place throughout Scotland, this shows that place-based, local support rooted around time spent in communities was seen as particularly valuable to participants. Similar successes were noted in Peterhead:

'SURF's Local Facilitator has supported the development of multiple community-driven projects aligned with local priorities such as town centre improvement, environmental quality, and community wellbeing. This includes capacity-building support for groups like Peterhead Area Community Trust. The Alliance for Action played a central role in delivering SeaFest, a major seafood and heritage festival held in September 2023. SURF convened the steering group, coordinated stakeholders, and handled key operational elements. The event attracted hundreds of visitors, boosted tourism, celebrated local heritage, and generated positive press coverage demonstrating clear economic and social benefits for the community. SURF has worked with Aberdeenshire Council on the creation of the Peterhead Town Board, which will oversee the UK Government's planned £20 million regeneration investment over the next decade. This involvement strengthens local partnership working and ensures community voices feed into long-term regeneration planning.'

A project worth highlighting in Girvan is the Girvan Station Kiosk, where both funding, but also 'hands on support' and an 'infectious drive' was lauded as 'invaluable.' Much of the work on the kiosk was done either directly by the Facilitator or by a network of volunteers, with input from local young people. This highlights just how galvanising a funded, place-based role can have on the existing community landscape – especially where the person in that role is willing to be actively involved – and how much it is appreciated and recognised by others.

The flagship Girvan Bandstand re-development was also mentioned as a key project in answers to these questions, as shown by the below response:

'The most significant example is the progress made with the Girvan Bandstand project. Through the support of the SURF development worker, our organisation has benefited from strategic guidance, practical assistance, and dedicated time to help move the project forward. This has included support with engagement with South Ayrshire Council officers, developing a phased funding strategy, and strengthening funding applications.'

'This support directly contributed to securing development funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund, enabling essential preparatory work such as condition surveys, cost planning, and design development. It has significantly strengthened our capacity to deliver a complex community asset project.'

‘Overall, the Alliance for Action programme has provided both practical and strategic support that has helped turn a community aspiration into a realistic and deliverable regeneration opportunity for Girvan.’

Other key projects in Girvan that were identified as successes include the Tourist Information Point – which ‘provides volunteering opportunities for up to 25 people, thus offering the chance for people to develop skills, combat loneliness and have a sense of pride in the Girvan community’ – the beginning of the Dalrymple Street Project, and the Community Asset Transfer of the Town House. With Girvan’s long, storied, and sometimes problematic legacy of tourism, work has also taken place to make Girvan a more attractive place for visitors, with ‘badly needed visitor bunkhouse accommodation’ a key part of the South Parish Church and Halls renovation, which will provide both jobs and a stable community income, rather than benefitting only visitors.

The Importance of Heritage, Culture, and the Arts

Heritage, culture, and the arts were highlighted as central to regeneration in both Peterhead and Girvan. Local landmarks and cultural events play a crucial role in instilling local pride and connection, which then often acted as a catalyst for change. In Peterhead, this manifests clearly in new events – such as SeaFest – which revolve around Peterhead’s heritage and history, but also around discussions with community groups around how community assets should be best used. The Carnegie Building, for example, was widely seen as a unique opportunity to develop a community space for arts and culture, with ‘a lot of consultations, and exhibitions of plans of the development of the Carnegie Building (ex library and museum).’ Historic, often underused buildings and spaces often have great significance; regenerating these for modern, community uses not only helps trace the lineage of a place, but also ensures that residents feel that visible decline can – and will, with the right funding – be reversed in ways that empower local people and put their needs front and centre.

In Girvan, the Bandstand and Girvan’s Story also fall into this category. Where the latter delivers ‘a heritage-led regeneration programme focused on key historic buildings and the town centre,’ the Bandstand and ‘other landmark buildings and heritage assets’ were noted by one respondent as ‘helping to build local pride, create learning and training opportunities, and strengthen Girvan’s long-term economic and social resilience.’ And even new regeneration projects – such as the Theatre at Girvan academy – had arts and culture at their core, highlighting its centrality to regeneration efforts. Ultimately, these heritage and cultural assets provide focal points that communities can coalesce around.

Key funders in the space which were mentioned by respondents include Historic Environment Scotland, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, and the Architectural Heritage Fund.

Shared Learning

The theme of shared learning – both from within the community and from other, often similar places – was also raised as a key aspect of the Alliance for Action programme. In Girvan, respondents noted the value of ‘arranging visits to Glasgow to view initiatives such as the Govan Shopfront Scheme’ and a ‘trip to Dunbar 2 years ago to look at regeneration projects there which involved a cohort of community members from different groups in the town.’ This process of shared learning is fundamentally valuable for all involved, and one of the core purposes of the annual SURF awards. It helps communities think about how place-based work might evolve and be contextualised in different locations, and also helps successful communities share the impact of their work more widely.

Beyond learning from other communities outwith Girvan and Peterhead, both communities also invested heavily in shared learning and capacity building locally. The Alliance for Action programme should therefore not be seen as a unidirectional flow of support, but a cascading system of support where community organisations utilise new skills, knowledge, and capacity in ways that then go on to benefit other organisations. One respondent in Peterhead mentioned that this has ‘allowed us to signpost organisations to further support, helping them apply for funding and take the next steps in developing their group.’ This suggests a way of working that is ultimately more collaborative, more place-based, and less competitive than before, with siloes making way for interconnected webs of coordinated regeneration activity. Although this can – and often does – happen organically, it can be difficult to embed fully, as it is often seen as a nice-to-have, rather than a vital component of community development.

Impact on Community Collaboration

One of the key outcomes of the programme was not just to support individual organisations, but to help strengthen an ecosystem of self-supporting and collaborating organisations that coalesce around shared regeneration goals. It should be noted that in both Girvan and Peterhead, such an ecosystem already existed and, in many cases, had a long track-record of engaging with and delivering for the community.

However, participants noted that Alliance for Action played a key role in further strengthening this regeneration ecosystem and helped promote deeper collaboration between organisations, with 75% of respondents in Peterhead and 82% of those surveyed in Girvan reporting that Alliance for Action had helped increase collaboration across stakeholders.

In Peterhead, the impact of key events was noted as crucial in ‘bringing organisations together, particularly through initiatives such as the SeaFest Peterhead steering group,’ which ‘included representatives from community organisations, businesses, stakeholders, and public partners, all working collaboratively to deliver a major community event.’ Another example mentioned was the Peterhead Development Partnership, ‘a forum managing multiple regeneration initiatives’ which led to ‘enhanced cooperation between sectors.’ Collaboration between schools, local businesses, sports clubs, Aberdeenshire council, and VisitAberdeenshire were also highlighted in responses. Additionally, Peterhead is particularly interesting from a regeneration and partnership perspective as it was one of recipients of the UK Government Pride in Place funding, which represents a £20 million regeneration investment over a ten-year period. With the funding announcement arriving swiftly on the back of the appointment of the Alliance for Action Facilitator in Peterhead in 2023, this represented a unique opportunity for the facilitator to ‘[support] the creation of the Peterhead Town Board in collaboration with Aberdeenshire Council,’ with its ‘formation [demonstrating] strengthened joint working between local partners, community representatives, and statutory bodies. Although coincidental – and rather fortuitous – having a flexible role that could rapidly adapt to this new reality demonstrates that a community anchor and support role can be critical in situations where government grants land unexpectedly in communities.

These funds often represent significant opportunities, but they can also create new administrative and governance pressures for communities. These funds spark new conversations about what regeneration means to different communities, and which priorities and needs are ultimately prioritised. The Alliance for Action Facilitator’s flexible remit enabled them to re-deploy time, focus, and support to ensure that other organisations felt enabled to participate in these conversations. It also meant that initial community mapping done by the Facilitator could be leveraged into the wider Pride in Place governance and engagement processes. In a scenario where stakeholders – from the local authority to businesses to localised support organisations – often have their own narrow focus of interest, a role that can comfortably (and impartially) sit between them all has real merit and can add significant value to the process. In Pride in Place funding areas where this central coordinating role did not already exist, it has, at times, been more challenging to ensure this collective bargaining and engagement happens in an equitable and fully transparent manner. This is a risk with any top-down funding streams

that seek to embed a bottom-up approach; at times, these two forces can contradict one another, creating tensions and confusion. While these community tensions are inherent to (good) community work, and SURF would always argue that a community led approach creates the best regeneration outcomes, they should nevertheless be acknowledged as a key challenge, and one communities continue to grapple with. Transparent and locally led community conversations around key regeneration priorities cannot be conducted overnight, and need time to gather legitimacy and attract buy-in.

In Girvan, respondents noted that the Alliance for Action Facilitator had '[kept] groups informed of what other groups are doing, facilitating cross support between groups, introducing groups to each other so they can support each other when needed.' These active and ongoing connections led to, for example, the sharing of information and knowledge around funding, and the creation of a 'neutral and supportive space where community groups, public agencies, and local stakeholders can come together to share ideas, develop partnerships, and align regeneration efforts.' This included 'networking events and regular engagement,' with the Girvan Story Project highlighted as a particularly noteworthy example of good collaboration. This project 'brought together a range of partners including community organisations, heritage bodies, and South Ayrshire Council,' and went on to receive significant support and funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic Environment Scotland. It is worth stressing that this increased partnership working has helped break down the much-lamented competitive atmosphere that often exists between community groups who often apply for similar – if not the same – funding pots. This builds trust and can also reduce duplication, thus maximising community impact while breaking down siloes. One participants noted that 'historically, in Girvan, working in competition or without communication was a problem.'

To counteract this dynamic, the Girvan Facilitator also made a concerted effort to connect both projects and groups with community stakeholders who otherwise would not have engaged. For example, the Girvan Academy Theatre – which was extensively refurbished with support from the Facilitator and William Grant Foundation funding – now sits more centrally within the wider Girvan community, with the ambition that the remodelled space becomes a key community venue, with events organised by local creative groups, rather than merely a physical asset that sits within the school. As a result, a respondent noted that the Alliance for Action Facilitator 'has promoted the school and theatre as being in the heart of the community and available for all to use.' This represents true place-based partnership working, with key actors able to recognise community spaces and services as shared assets. Another respondent noted that the programme 'has helped build stronger relationships and greater shared purpose,' with another adding that the Facilitator, through local knowledge, 'encourages groups to link and share resource and skills.'

This sense of shared purpose is particularly difficult to instil, but it helps shape a community ecosystem which transcends traditional organisational responsibilities and remits, and begins to think about wider, shared goals which reflect a whole place, and not just a narrow slice of it. This subtle but strategic difference may be one of the most durable legacies of the Alliance for Action programme.

Involving Young People in Regeneration

An interesting element of work across both sites was the involvement, active engagement, and foregrounding of young people in regeneration work. Both facilitators in Peterhead and Girvan were involved with schools and projects that directly included and benefitted children. This was seen not just as a way to instil a sense of ownership in projects amongst younger people, but also helped foster long-term engagement with place. In a context of rising youth unemployment, housing shortages, and increased intergenerational inequalities, this sense of connection and empowerment ensures that young people have a voice in local places, and more importantly, feel empowered to drive change that benefits them directly, and therefore the wider community.

In Girvan, youth outreach and involvement led to engagement with the Girvan Youth Trust and Girvan Academy, to name a few. One respondent highlighted the 'Girvan Youth Trust's partnership with Community Rail Partnership to reinstate the former cafe as a social enterprise Kiosk at Girvan Station,' which a different respondent mentioned 'would not have gone ahead without SURF's support.' As mentioned previously, the school theatre was also 'promoted as a community space,' helping to take a place-based approach to community assets. The 'setting up of a pay-what-you-can after school club' not only provided a useful service that benefits local children, but it has also 'opened up job opportunities for those with children.' Again, these projects all revolve around highly localised priorities.

In Peterhead, the secondary school was also engaged with repeatedly and often central to events and activity. One survey respondent mentioned 'increased positive engagement between the local community and the school,' along with 'increased opportunities for partnership working between the school and local business.' Together, these were seen to '[enhance] the school's ability to deliver meaningful contextualised learning for our pupils to develop their skills for work.' Another response highlighted that increased collaboration with the council 'strengthened networks across local organisations, leading to better coordination of youth sports and community activities,' which in turn 'has improved opportunities for young people and promoted inclusive participation.'

Similarly, enabling Peterhead Academy to play a leading role in the ‘planning and implementation of Taste of Buchan,’ both ‘celebrates what the local area has to offer’ and places young people at the centre of regeneration activity. This response noted that ‘community feedback on the event has been massively positive.’

For both communities, the answer to the age-old question – who is regeneration for? – seems clear: young people. For communities, especially in fragile, remote, under-resourced, or deprived places, young people provide a dynamism and a sense of future that is crucial to maintaining demographic balance, drawing inward investment, and improving outcomes. But it also remains true that for young people to feel part of a community – and valued – they must be properly involved, and must feel like the community is focussed on alleviating key issues that young people will increasingly face: the ramifications of climate change, a rapidly changing and destabilising job market, unaffordable and non-existent housing – to name just a few. In towns, rural areas, and remote places increasingly at risk of depopulation, engagement with young people of all ages will be key to ensuring the resilience and longevity of places.

The Profile of Regeneration

91% of respondents from Girvan felt that the Alliance for Action Programme had raised the profile of regeneration in the local area; in Peterhead, the figure was 75%. Visible and high-profile projects mentioned by Girvan stakeholders included Girvan’s Story and the Bandstand, which were both described as ‘major’ and ‘important’ regeneration projects. Their profile and visibility was also noted, and Alliance for Action was seen as a catalyst for ‘[building] momentum’ and helping ‘Girvan’s community see that investment in the town is needed.’

Significant funding news has also elevated the town’s profile, as seen in the below response:

‘A strong example is the growing visibility of the Girvan Story heritage regeneration initiative, which has secured support from The National Lottery Heritage Fund and Historic Environment Scotland. Projects such as the Girvan Bandstand have become part of a wider narrative about the town’s heritage, culture, and future development.’

A further response noted that this had not only raised the profile of regeneration in Girvan itself, but nationally as well. It was felt that Alliance for Action ‘increased awareness among public agencies, funders, and policymakers, while also building confidence within the local community that meaningful change is possible.’

However, some respondents did comment that these successes cannot be attributed solely to the Alliance for Action Programme, and – perhaps more interestingly – that the projects themselves (i.e. the Bandstand) were more visible than the groups coordinating them (i.e. the Alliance for Action programme or SURF). One participant noted that they were unsure ‘how many of the general public would be aware of the SURF Alliance for Action programme but may have heard about the restoration of the bandstand through social media,’ reflecting that the community places both value and priority not so much on who is involved in projects, but rather the project in and of itself. Although complex community dynamics are often highly localised – and can, in some instances, also include tensions and disagreements over projects – this nonetheless affirms again the importance of community-facing communications and messaging about regeneration in order to generate traction and visibility.

This is also reflected in Peterhead. While one response noted that Alliance for Action has ‘been one of the driving forces for the regeneration’ locally, another said that, despite its successes, a ‘majority of residents are totally unaware of the huge changes that will be happening in and around [the] surrounding countryside with the infrastructure being built by SSEN.’ This points to wider challenges around engaging the community with opportunities around, for example, community benefit payments resulting from renewable energy schemes.

In Peterhead, it was nonetheless felt that ‘the programme has highlighted the value of community-led initiatives, making regeneration a visible priority for residents, local businesses, and decision-makers alike.’ In particular, events such as SeaFest and Taste of Buchan were listed as high-profile events which were received well from within the community. Both events now run on an annual basis, reflecting how valuable they have become to the local community. And although these events were targeted primarily to local residents and businesses, they were often reported on in both regional and national news outlets, and bring people from outside Peterhead into the town.

Section 3: Comparisons with Dunoon and Langholm

The results from the Girvan and Peterhead sites are consistent with the data collected from Dunoon and Langholm in 2021.

Results from Dunoon and Langholm also stress the importance of the local Facilitator, and their knowledge and input, with a Langholm stakeholder attributing the success of the programme not to Alliance for Action more broadly, but to the Facilitator specifically. This reaffirms the importance of the right person, with the right skills, and the right connections adding significant value to the regeneration landscape. While funding may (and often does) come from a national or regional level, work must happen locally – and be led by local people – for it to matter. Indeed, the 2021 independent report on Alliance for Action noted that ‘achieving buy-in from both the public and the third sectors should not be underestimated and is a reflection of the skills, knowledge and “can do” attitude of the Local Facilitators in both Dunoon and Langholm.’ Key public sector agencies also stand to benefit from this work, but – crucially – often lack the community legitimacy, visibility, and profile to be able to conduct this work themselves. Embedding the role within the community has been shown to be successful in all of the diverse places that made up the programme. The 2021 report about Dunoon and Langholm noted the following, an observation which could easily have been made about Girvan and Peterhead as well:

‘Both Dunoon and Langholm have a history of competing community interests which could have been detrimental to buy-in if the Facilitators had been too closely associated with one of the local organisations. Similarly, independence from the local authority was important as it helped achieve buy-in and trust among the community and voluntary sector.’

Rather than acting as a critique of local authority engagement with the community, this should be seen as an acknowledgement that this function is best placed within the community, and seen to be shaped directly by local aspirations and needs, rather than influenced by wider council priorities. In practice, however, co-location within local authority services can have significant benefits, as seen in Dunoon, but also in Peterhead, where the local Facilitator also worked part-time for Aberdeenshire Council, which helped strengthen community links within the council.

Again, it is clear that approaches will differ in each place, but it is important that stakeholders are aware of the pitfalls of local facilitation being perceived as a top-down mechanism, rather than a local, more grassroots process which begins primarily with community organisations.

The importance of networking, identifying funding, and supporting organisational development was also raised across both Dunoon and Langholm, which strongly mirrors results from Girvan and Peterhead. Partnership working has always been a focal point of Alliance for Action, and to see it raised so significantly across all sites is a key success of the programme, but more importantly, the tenacity of local Facilitators in bridging organisational siloes and making new connections. Again, this was stressed across the entirety of the Alliance for Action programme, with a large majority of respondents identifying a key role for Alliance for Action in bridging gaps to fully reflect a place-based regeneration approach.

Responses across all four sites reveal that a relatively small investment in local community facilitation and development roles (ideally matched with a small pot of grant funding to distribute amongst community groups) can have a big – often disproportionate – impact. The community and social value, investment, and local engagement far outweighs the cost of such a role. Evidence from all four Alliance for Action sites also suggests that when we think about place – as both UK and Scottish Governments are increasingly focussed on doing – we need to think also about place facilitation. As policy increasingly shifts towards place-based approaches, funding must increasingly be used as a way to leverage existing partnerships.

Section 4: Research Limitations

It should be noted that a limitation of the research is that it does not actively survey resident or local opinion beyond key stakeholders. Such insight may reveal the extent to which Alliance for Action activity transcends the local organisational ecosystem and actually shapes regeneration outcomes for local residents. Given the 3-year length of the programme, however, this remains a challenge – and long-term regeneration will often need significantly more funding (and time, crucially) to deliver the kind of impact that can be meaningfully felt by large sections of the population. Nevertheless, the breadth of organisations surveyed during this research, and the strong and direct linkages many have with communities, means that their survey responses hopefully represent more than just an organisational viewpoint, but instead draw upon the views of local people on the ground as well.

This research also represents a specific snapshot of community activity, sentiment, and opinion, which can be reductive given the long timescales of community development and nuances around engagement. Things change, and often do without warning, which means that communities are almost always responding dynamically to ever-evolving circumstances, rather than working with predictable, linear models of change. It would be both more interesting – and more representative of the longitudinal nature of community led regeneration – to stretch the time horizons of this research, but unfortunately this requires significantly more capacity and resources to undertake. It is also clear that it is impossible to attribute positive community sentiment or change to any one organisation, as regeneration is always the result of complex community processes and collaboration, and often takes years to bear fruition. The fact that we have seen such quick and tangible outcomes in this last tranche of Alliance for Action sites does not, unfortunately, guarantee that such progress will continue, or that all projects will proceed without delays or issues. Community work – and research that attempts to dissect it and draw learnings from it – remains fundamentally complex. Although getting it right remains challenging – and different in each and every area – we hope this research nevertheless outlines several crucial guiding principles and ways of working that transcend each site, and can be instructive to communities and funders across Scotland.

Section 5: Conclusion

The Value (and Challenges) of Place-Based Work

SURF's 2026 Manifesto for Regeneration highlighted the importance of local, place-based roles that can sit between local communities and local authorities. In many ways, the Alliance for Action programme provides clear and concrete evidence for why such an approach can be successful, and how it can help drive wider regeneration outcomes. Survey responses indicate that, despite some challenges, the overwhelming sentiment within communities towards both the work and the facilitators has been positive. Quite a few responses highlighted uncertainty around how work will continue and expressed a desire for the programme to continue beyond 2026.

It is also clear that the Alliance for Action Programme – and place-based community facilitation roles more generally – align strongly with new Community Wealth Building aspirations. In both Peterhead and Girvan, collaboration increased and shared learning led to better regeneration outcomes. In Girvan, it explicitly led to the creation of new roles, another tangible socioeconomic output. In Peterhead, locally-led events also reflect a community wealth building approach, and drive local spend, investment, and business growth. Both sites leveraged inward investment and funding which will bolster community aspirations and help both towns address key poverty and deprivation challenges.

However, challenges remain, and remain significant. Despite the clear benefits of the programme across all areas, it remains difficult to fund this work on an ongoing basis. Funding for the Facilitator role itself has often come directly from SURF, although in Girvan, funding was a combination of SURF and William Grant Foundation funding. This links to wider issues around the importance of revenue funding – especially given the prioritisation of capital grants at both UK and Scottish Government levels – which has been cited frequently as a barrier to supporting organisational capacity by SURF members and the wider sector. Although capital funding is crucial, it cannot be the only answer, and revenue funding can sometimes have a more considerable impact on poverty alleviation than capital projects alone. Employability projects are a key example of this – and an area which is increasingly under funding pressures.

Finally, the importance of the Facilitators in delivering the work in both Peterhead and Girvan cannot be understated. Both Facilitators were locally based, understood the landscape, and had a degree of knowledge about the communities they worked in. Despite this, retaining talented, committed, and locally-rooted staff is challenging even without the potential insecurity that such a role can bring. Community work can be rewarding, but also complex and slow, and often involves long hours and a degree of exposure in small communities that can take its toll. Burnout in such role is common, although not something that was mentioned explicitly in the current tranche of Alliance for Action sites. There is also a risk that valuable knowledge and connections disappear over time, or as people leave roles. Several of the participants across both Girvan and Peterhead felt that the discontinuation of Alliance for Action was a loss for the community, and that they hoped a similar initiative would be launched in future. Ultimately, progress made over the three years of the programme can be swiftly lost, especially in a context of public sector reform, reduced funding, and wider economic challenges.

Despite this uncertainty, it appears that there will likely be a concrete, long-term legacy in both Peterhead and Girvan. In Peterhead, much of the work around Pride in Place governance matters – such as support establishing the Town Board – will drive further regeneration change over the next decade, along with the many events that are now firmly fixed in the local calendar. In Girvan, the Facilitator secured a role as Lead Project Officer for the Girvan Story Regeneration Project at South Ayrshire Council, ensuring that institutional knowledge and connections remain in place, albeit in a slightly different form. This project builds on many of the smaller projects that took shape during Alliance for Action.

About SURF

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

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

Our Work

Although the Alliance for Action Programme has now ended, SURF continues its long tradition of supporting and advocating for community led regeneration. Our work includes:

- The Annual SURF Awards, which has been recognising best practice in community led regeneration for nearly 30 years.
- Policy work and research to build an evidence base of best-practice that can inform government policy.
- Advocacy work to ensure that the voice of communities is heard in Scotland, especially those most vulnerable and most in need of support.
- A suite of events and forums, such as our regular People in Place Practice Network and Shared Learning events.

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