

Ariane Burgess MSP
Convener, Local Government, Housing and Planning Committee
The Scottish Parliament
Edinburgh EH99 1SP

27 July 2021

Dear Ariane,

Stakeholder Views on Committee Priorities

Congratulations on your recent appointment as Convener of the Committee for Local Government, Housing and Planning.

As a network of more than 300 cross-sector member organisations that are concerned with the regeneration of Scotland's poorer communities, SURF has been a regulator contributor to Committee business in its previous incarnations, most recently as Local Government and Communities. We look forward to continuing to engage with its work in the current Parliament.

In response to the current call for stakeholder views, the Committee may be interested to learn of some key SURF network priorities for the current Parliament, in the topics under the Committee's remit. These are drawn from two sources:

The SURF 2021 Manifesto for Community Regeneration: based on an extensive consultation process including more than 60 interviews with cross-sector regeneration practitioners from the SURF network, our Manifesto recommendations set out the reality of contemporary regeneration context and what SURF members want the Scottish Government to do differently in response to perceived problems and opportunities.

Lessons from the Frontline and Building Community Resilience: Two linked SURF reports showcasing more than 150 positive examples of responding to challenges and demonstrating resilience by community groups and partner organisations during the pandemic, and exploring how policy-makers can connect with, learn from and sustain these frontline examples of cooperative action in place-based communities over the longer term.

Participants in the above initiatives reported that they would like to see change in the following areas:

Climate Change

Adaptation: The failure of Scotland's infrastructure to adapt quickly enough to the impacts of climate change will have a disproportionate impact on poorer people and places. Greater public sector project investment is needed to address this, locally, regionally and nationally.

Green Jobs: There is an opportunity to jointly resolve two urgent challenges – climate change and COVID-19 impacts on employment prospects for young people – through the creation of a substantial ‘Green New Deal’ style job creation programme.

Community Empowerment

Asset Leasing: Persistent problems with capacity, liability and funding around the transfer of land and buildings into community ownership in poorer places could be alleviated by encouraging long-term leasing arrangements, in which public bodies manage asset maintenance and community groups manage usage and activities.

Flexible Funding: Community groups reported to SURF that the flexibility and relaxing of normal bureaucratic processes demonstrated by funders during the pandemic crisis period successfully promoted agency, autonomy and reciprocal trust. In addition, SURF has long argued that the community empowerment agenda requires longer-term, place-oriented funding packages, rather than the present situation in which short-term, project-based funding awards are more common.

Collaboration & Partnership Working: A majority of SURF network organisations have benefited during lockdown from new, extended, adapted or otherwise enhanced forms of partnership working across different sectors. Those involved in these new and successful collaborations, want them to continue on other issues beyond COVID – and believe this can be supported and encouraged through national policy and operationalisation of the Place Principle.

Housing

Retrofitting: Retrofitting is the most widely effective approach to regeneration. Greater investment should be directed towards refurbishment, rebuilding and retrofitting to improve the energy efficiency of older housing and civic buildings, thereby supporting reductions in fuel poverty and carbon emissions, and improvements in health and wellbeing.

Empty Homes: SURF Manifesto interviewees would like to see more housing created by converting vacant buildings in towns and cities, including retail and office premises and domestic homes, and scaling up the work of the Scottish Empty Homes Partnership.

Planning

20 Minute Neighbourhoods: With Scottish Government support, SURF is operating a 20 Minute Neighbourhood Practice Network. SURF is using this initiative to work with stakeholders to understand how aspirations for more communities in which residents can meet most of their essential needs within comfortable walking distance can be practically implemented in poorer places. We would be pleased to share learning outcomes with the Committee as they emerge.

Brownfield First Development: A determined shift from building new developments on edge-of-town greenfield sites, to brownfield ones, would produce wellbeing, climate and urban connectivity benefits. More land remediation investments would reduce the higher development costs and the complexities of post-industrial infrastructure and contamination legacies present in many brownfield sites, and open up possibilities for new green spaces and walking/cycling routes in support of net zero and 20 Minute Neighbourhood aspirations.

Recovery from COVID-19

Online Scotland: The pandemic forcefully highlighted the serious and pre-existing difficulties faced by those without digital access, either because of poverty, lack of confidence or knowledge, or poor connectivity in some, especially rural, areas. The difficulties included heightened isolation, knowledge and information deficits, and loss of opportunity.

New Regeneration Strategy: The SURF network believes the 2011 National Regeneration Strategy needs to be updated. A new strategy should: take account of the COVID-19 lessons; simplify a complex regeneration policy and practice landscape; articulate a sustainable balance of roles, resources and responsibilities; and focus on tackling poverty and facilitating longer-term place-based regeneration collaborations for inclusive growth.

Whole Place Investments: The Scottish Government's Place Principle is widely viewed as valuable and helpful, but practice is generally not aligning with expectations. SURF believes the Scottish Government should directly fund a suite of exemplar large-scale, long-term Place Principle oriented collaborations, in the country's most deprived places.

My SURF colleagues and I hope this information is helpful to the Committee as it considers its priorities. We would be readily willing to elaborate further on any particular policy interests at the Committee's request, and to share relevant background and supporting documents.

Yours sincerely,

Euan Leitch
Chief Executive