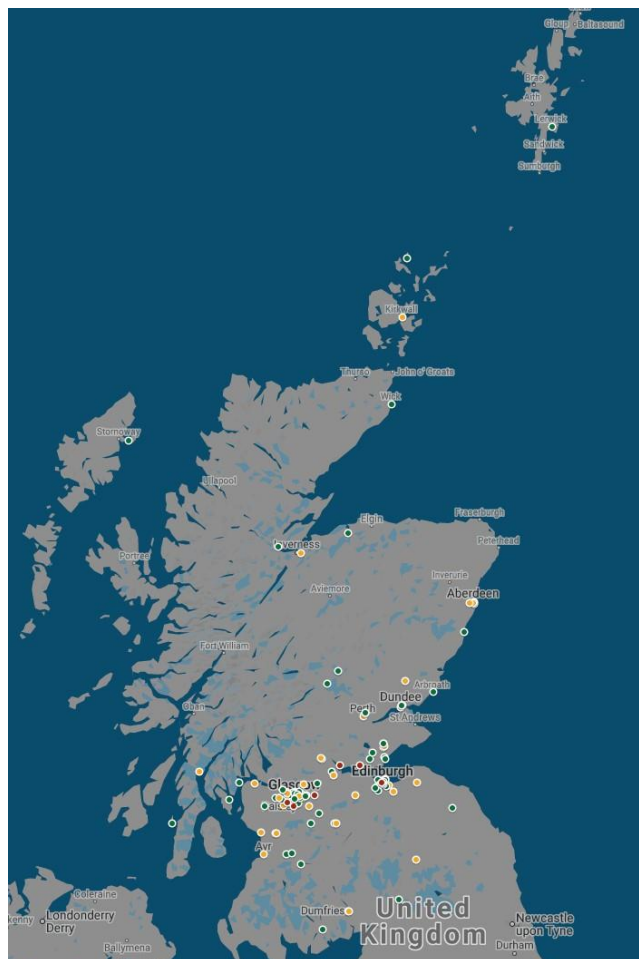# SURF COVID 19

BUILDING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

If wealth is the greatest shield from infection and serious illness[1], then disadvantaged communities are the most exposed

SHOWCASING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

The full interactive version of SURF's map can be found here:
https://www.surf.scot/projects/building-back-better/showcasing-community-resilience/

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[1] Devi Sridhar (18.5.2020) Advisor to Scottish Government on COVID 19 and Professor and Chair of Global Public Health at Edinburgh University. Interview, Daily Telegraph.

Contents

Introduction

This report is a follow up to SURF's well-received first COVID 19 report - *Lessons from the Frontline.* That original report was based on analysis of more than 150 responses from SURF's extensive network of organisations delivering frontline services, and cross sector agencies which support them across Scotland.

Lessons from the Frontline identified ten common themes (*see* Appendix) and lessons learned from those activities. This practice based learning from SURF's active network, was promptly shared to help Scottish Government, and other key regeneration partners, to connect with, learn from and sustain these frontline examples of cooperative resilient action in place based communities.

This second report, ***Building Community Resilience,*** focuses on three of those ten themes:
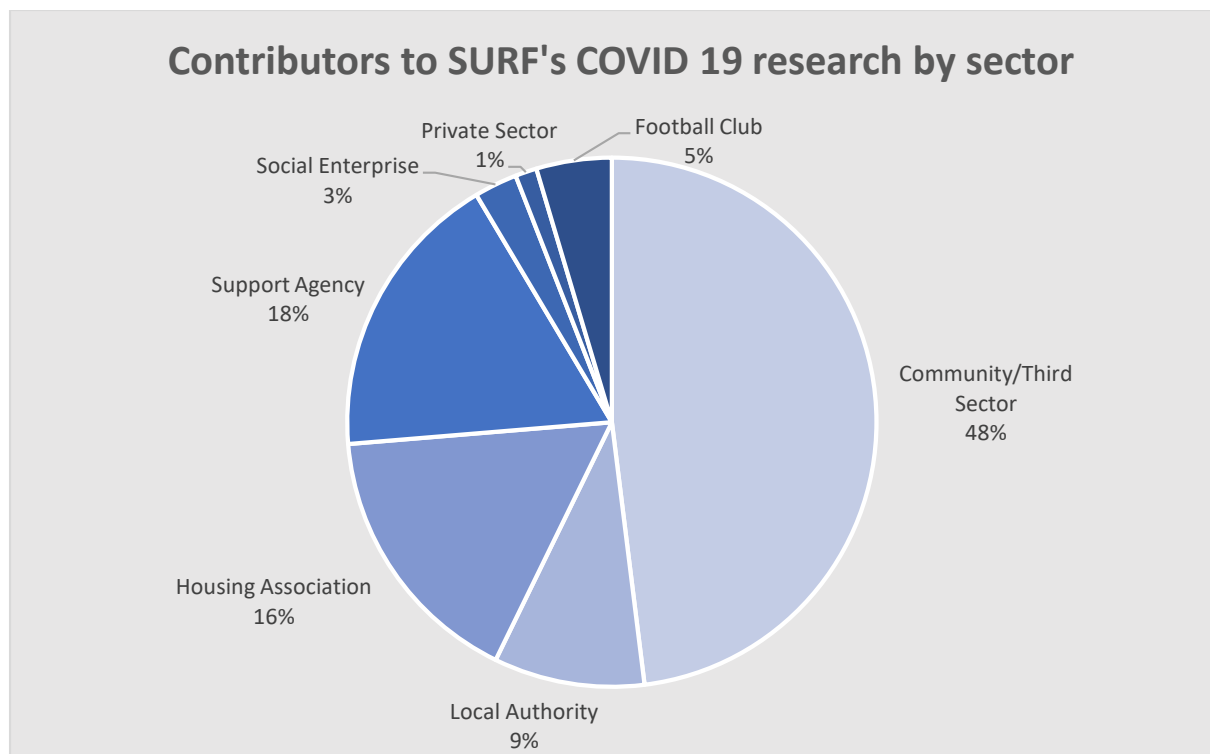- Mutual support - Collaboration/partnership working
- Relaxation of rules - Flexible funding
- Online Scotland - Digital access

Based on SURF's earlier research, these three were selected as offering the greatest potential for positive, sustainable change and as reflecting the interests of SURF's broad network and its role as Scotland's regeneration forum. SURF fully recognises the importance of challenges around other issues, including food insecurity and volunteer support, and will continue to work with partners in those areas.

Contributors to *Lessons from the Frontline* were asked to provide more detail of how the three prioritised themes impacted on their work – and, crucially, invited them to suggest changes in process, policy and targeting of funding and resources which would support sustainable improvement. They were also invited to offer any more general insights into how best to rebuild for the future. The contributors included representatives of housing associations, local authorities, grass root frontline community organisations and funders.

The findings reflect the conclusions of a number of other agencies, which have been part of the COVID response in Scotland or have been commissioned to target specific aspects of COVID's impact on communities. SURF's research is unusual in that is based on the experience of our unique cross sector network. It has been enhanced and indeed, made possible, by a relationship of trust and shared understanding between SURF and partners, built over many years.

This *Building Community Resilience* report, is, as was SURF's first COVID report, informed by SURF's network, offering insight into the practice-based aspirations and practical responses of those who have been delivering services throughout the pandemic. In doing so, it again underlines SURF's belief that essential knowledge and expertise on regenerating resilient and sustainable communities, lies within the communities themselves. What they generally lack is adequately productive connections, to and investment from, external agencies and resources.

Contributors to SURF's COVID 19 research by sector

- Private Sector 1%
- Football Club 5%
- Social Enterprise 3%
- Support Agency 18%
- Community/Third Sector 48%
- Housing Association 16%
- Local Authority 9%

Summary of Learning

COVID 19 has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities across the board. Nonetheless, the crisis has generated inspiring stories and valuable lessons learned from the speedy and effective ways that frontline delivery organisations rose to the challenges of communities dealing with the crisis and its related impacts.

Contributors to this research have responded in some detail on their experience of the three selected themes during the COVID lockdown. While that recent experience has informed their views on what needs to change to rebuild resilient and sustainable communities, the aspirations and proposed practical changes are not new to anyone working in regeneration. Many of them apply equally across the three topics of focus in this report – and across the original ten themes identified in SURF's first COVID 19 frontline report.

For many, COVID 19 provided a taste of what it would be like to work differently. Circumstances encouraged decentralisation, mutual trust, more collaboration, less inflexible 'policing', a relaxation of bureaucracy and so on. It should be noted that many of these issues have already previously been identified by legislators and policymakers in Scotland. Where relevant, the report notes existing or pending policy developments which reflect those national concerns.

The core themes which have emerged; building trust, promoting autonomy and the provision of secure and targeted funding and resources, are those which SURF, on behalf of its network, has long promoted. The COVID 19 crisis may have pushed some issues up the national regeneration policy agenda but these challenges are not new. COVID has underlined what was already known.

Mutual Support - Collaboration/Partnership Working

Coping with the COVID crisis: A majority of organisations have benefited during lockdown from new, extended, adapted or otherwise enhanced forms of partnership working across different sectors. Some have said they could not have delivered frontline services without the 'new' partnership support. A minority expressed concerns about behaviours of 'dominant' partners. Those involved in these new and successful collaborations, want them to continue on other issues beyond COVID.

Next steps: Sustaining successful collaborations requires:
- digital engagement to be fully resourced and encouraged
- Community Planning Partnership (CPP) policy frameworks and outcomes should include building partnerships/collaborations and community resilience

- mutually respectful links between third sector, CPPs and local authorities (It is worth noting that concerns about lack of trust, are just as likely to come from the public sector as the third sector)
- lifting local authority recruitment freeze
- building on mutual trust and increased autonomy

Relaxing the Rules – Flexible Funding

Coping with the COVID crisis: A majority of organisations acknowledged and welcomed changes in process from funders, which allowed for the repurposing and adapting of existing programmes to meet demand. Speedy responses, respect for bottom-up decision making, and adaptable criteria all contributed towards efficient husbanding and targeting of resources. Given the success and 'freedom' created by this new way of working, there is a call for a review of processes with the aim of conserving the obvious benefits that have been realised during the crisis.

Next steps: Sustaining successful funding relationships requires:
- simpler, streamlined application processes, across different funding bodies
- anchor organisations having new leadership role
- more relaxed bureaucracy
- faster responses, transparent timescales
- more interest free loans
- support for core costs, overheads, admin, not just programmes
- light touch reporting
- funding what works and an end to demands for renaming and reinventing the wheel
- decentralise decision making to the lowest practical level (subsidiarity)
- rolling funding to reduce insecurity

Online Scotland - Digital Access

Coping with the COVID crisis: Digital access transformed the ability of most organisations to continue to deliver services and programmes; enabled staff and volunteers to adapt to working at home; and, in some cases, brought people on board who had previously been unable to participate in community activities and collaboration.
It also 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 increased learning difficulties and pressures for families trying to home school.
Immediate crisis responses included printing and hand delivering leaflets, 'home visiting', organised telephone trees and scheduled direct telephone calls.

Next steps: Addressing the digital divide requires:
- acknowledgement that while the numbers of those without digital access may be reducing, those who are still without it remain the most vulnerable
- the provision of consistent Scotland-wide wifi connectivity/broadband capacity
- education in digital skills for vulnerable individuals
- staff and volunteer training in better/increased use of videoconferences, zoom meetings etc
- programme of digital devices distribution
- free broadband access

Reflections on Policy

Given the challenges which have been highlighted by COVID 19, some have argued that national and local government policy changes on these issues have been too little and too slow in development, to successfully meet the needs of those in crisis.

However, there are several sets of policy legislation, some still being developed, which have already set out to meet many of the issues raised by SURF's network.

The Scottish Government's promotion of the place principle, community empowerment and planning reforms [2] are all intended to support greater collaboration, cross-sector engagement and broader public engagement in place-based regeneration.

Likewise the 2020/21 Programme for Government [3] references a desire for simplified and more accessible regeneration funding over longer periods of time, which helped to create the Investing in Communities Fund.[4]

On digital access, the Scottish Government committed to delivering 100% superfast broadband across Scotland by 2021[5]. The *Connecting Scotland* initiative[6] has been set up in direct response to concerns about the digital divide. Scottish Government is funding the programme, but it is being developed in collaboration with local authorities and public and third sector organisations are already working in this area and have welcomed the initiative.[7]

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[2] https://www.gov.scot/publications/place-principle-introduction/, https://www.gov.scot/publications/community-empowerment-scotland-act-summary/, https://www.gov.scot/policies/planning-architecture/reforming-planning-system/

[3] https://www.gov.scot/publications/protecting-scotland-renewing-scotland-governments-programme-scotland-2020-2021/

[4] https://www.gov.scot/policies/community-empowerment/empowering-communities-fund/#ICF

[5] https://www.gov.scot/publications/fairer-scotland-action-plan/

[6] https://connecting.scot/

[7] https://www.surf.scot/scotregen/the-digital-divide-disconnection-in-a-virtual-world-kyle-scott-july-2020/

Several national funding organisations, including Creative Scotland, the National Lottery Community Fund and the Robertson Trust have been name-checked as among those many funders who demonstrated flexibility, trust and understanding in their responses to the changing needs of frontline organisations during the COVID crisis. SURF's partnership working with those and other funding bodies, suggests that there is a willingness to review and change their processes, with a view to developing longer term positive change.

In Their Own Words

SURF's original research, as we have stated, is based on analysis of direct input by our network and their lived experience of their response to the COVID crisis.

Here are some of the stories and ideas, as they were shared:

Mutual Support - Collaboration/Partnership Working

"We have forged new partnerships quickly and easily during Covid. It's actually brought local organisations together more. The willingness to work together has always been present and talked about, but many organisations feel they are pushed enough for time and capacity to start involving other organisations. Covid has shown that partnership working can be simple and effective for all."   **Castle Douglas Development Forum**

"We very quickly realised that individuals would not come up with all the good ideas and working together enabled us to develop ideas on a joint working basis to deliver better results.
A high level of trust built up between national funding agencies and local actors allowed funds to flow quickly to where it was needed, with local intelligence enabling the most effective deployment of resources."   **Working Together for Avondale**

We had a strong local partnership structure which worked well with the delivery of a feed prep and delivery service for families we identified as most in need. The only national partner we had was FareShare. We now have built up an even stronger relationship with FareShare and have a dedicated DRC depot which serves the most vulnerable in the community free groceries on a weekly basis.

DRC Youth Project

"Close working with NHS was critical to supporting the shielded group of people. Working with local community groups to support vulnerable families and individuals, provide food and information was also critical, particularly in the early stages of the pandemic when some supermarkets ceased food deliveries in rural communities.
Supermarkets supplying food to foodbanks allowed us to mitigate the impact of lockdown and furloughing to ensure those most in need received food and benefits advice. Work with Police Scotland ensured we kept our most vulnerable children and families safe. Working alongside PKAVS the 3rs sector interface allowed us to ensure grant funding went to the groups who would provide the biggest impact in their communities."

Perth and Kinross Council

Relaxing the Rules – Flexible Funding

"It seems that many funders are placing more trust in us to know our community and for us to tell them what's needed rather than us fitting ourselves into their boxes and criteria. More relaxed reporting expectations are very welcome as well. But the biggest one is feeling like funders trust us."

WHALE Arts

"A revised project fund, Open Fund: Sustaining Creative Development, has now launched. This Fund provides flexibility to help individuals and organisations working in the cultural sector to continue creating work, and to adapt where needed. Our Creative Scotland and Screen Scotland Bridging Bursary programmes are now closed, these were designed to provide emergency funding for those in the most immediate financial need."

Creative Scotland

"The longer term lessons to be learnt from the Covid-19 crisis, and the third sector's response to it, are that we can trust, grow and invest in hyper local organisations. Work to set aside a one size fits all, risk averse, centralised approach to recognise each local context, with its own network, assets, culture and connections. Trust needs to grow from other sectors to the third sector in light of the agility, nimbleness, and outcome focus fiercely demonstrated by organisations of all scales and types across the last three months. Risk cannot be removed with bureaucracy and over reporting, rather we need to try things out starting with mutual trust, and build them as they work. A national framework could be developed to harness, not stifle, the effects of the bespoke, the messy, the local. Relationships and connections need to be at a human scale. Building from the Place Standard Toolkit, ensure a recognised set of assets are in place to enable neighbourhood to thrive, established over the long term."   **North Edinburgh Arts**

"The prompt response of many local and national funders was crucial to the survival of some of our members, enabling them to access funds and deliver activity in a different format."   **Glasgow Canal Co-op**

"The reduction in red tape and increased flexibility was absolutely crucial for us in reaching our community very quickly and responding with a service which was in high demand."   **Spire View Housing Association**

Online Scotland - Digital Access

"There are those that can afford it but don't have it and need support to get set up if they want it - and then there are those that have really struggled financially.
Significant numbers of young people in particular are data deprived which means they are restricted to engaging in the wider world on their terms."

"Moving to Zoom and Teams and messenger and online video meetings platforms is an efficient use of time and better than phone calls, but doesn't really replace the effectiveness of meeting face to face. It does fill a gap though, so its efficient though not wholly effective. Having poor broadband or non-resilient broadband is a real frustration, as its the only real team based communication resource available and much of it isn't accessible due to weak signal or unreliable infrastructure. Vastly improved access, particularly in rural areas, is very much needed.**"**   **A Heart for Duns**

"Our staff were able to work from home, but our digital equipment was not up to this challenge. Thanks to support from the National Lottery, we were able to set staff up with the necessary IT equipment to facilitate working from home which enabled us to continue to offer support and services to our community. Due to the age and socio-economic make up of our members and wider community, not all have access to internet or equipment to enable them to access virtual services, so we have had to rely on phone calls in the main to ensure contact with everyone who needs it. We have loaned out some laptops to members to enable them to take part in virtual group meetings but this is very limited resource for us
Larkhall and District Volunteer Group

"Electronic devices to facilitate digital access were purchased for local citizens using Connecting Scotland funding. Changes have been proposed to The Scheme for the Establishment of Community Councils in our region, which will provide greater clarity regarding the use of virtual meetings and of electronic methods. It is hoped this will offer greater flexibility to Community Councils and attract wider participation and engagement with Community Council business."   **Dumfries and Galloway Council**

"One thing that has become abundantly clear to us in recent weeks is, that even in 2020, not everyone in society has the means or the skills to instantly transition to a world of remote working, learning and living. Technology has become front and centre of how we will navigate these unchartered waters."   **WISE Group**

SURF: where next?

One of SURF's roles as Scotland's Regeneration Forum is to ensure that our learning is shared to as wide an audience as possible – always with a view to supporting the practical application of that knowledge to supporting vulnerable communities and individuals.

The two SURF COVID reports *Lessons from the Frontline* and *Building Back Resilience* will be promoted through our website and across our broad multi-sector network, but also used to inform SURF's expanded Sector Connector programme.

The original pre-COVID initiative was a successful local government officer network with regular themed stakeholder meetings and facilitated site visits to support policy understanding and shared learning. SURF's expanded Connector service will feature regeneration practitioners in community, voluntary, academic and private sectors and other public bodies including Health Boards and national agencies.

Next month (October, 2020) will see the start of a series of five geographically defined, online events which will focus on the three themes of collaboration, red tape relaxation and digital access. These interactive events will explore challenges, responses and solutions to support socially and economically challenged communities towards sustained resilience. Details of the events will be available through social media and on SURF's website (www.surf.scot).

Elaine Cooper, SURF, September, 2020

APPENDIX
LEARNING POINTS FROM SURF'S FIRST COVID REPORT, *LESSONS FROM THE FRONTLINE*

1. **Volunteers** form the life-blood of almost all the practical activities
2. **Mutual support** – there have been powerful outcomes from newly formed collaborative partnerships
3. **Relaxing the rules** – funder flexibility and the repurposing and adapting of existing programmes to meet demand, has encouraged agency, autonomy and reciprocal trust
4. **Extraordinary efforts** have been made to meet an ongoing and increasing demand for imaginative, nourishing and fast responses to food insecurity. Literally **millions of meals** have been distributed across Scotland.
5. The **smallest of actions** – posting a letter, a weekly telephone call – have the potential to be life-changing
6. **Pre-existing community based, assets, services, networks** and interconnectivity have been crucial in setting up signposting and advice hubs
7. **Successful agencies are listening** to what communities are asking for and are adapting their processes and priorities quickly to meet the demand.
8. **Scotland is not online.** The impact of the digital divide in intensifying isolation and blocking knowledge exchange has been heightened
9. **Creativity has flourished** – not only in terms of the benefits of 'artistic' approaches but in the imaginative and innovative processes which have been developed to resolve problems
10. **Heightened awareness** of the potential mental health and wellbeing pressures exacerbated by the lockdown, has informed intelligent pre-emptive mitigating action