

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE Enterprise, Planning & Infrastructure

DATE 31 May 2012

DIRECTOR Gordon McIntosh

TITLE OF REPORT Sustainable Urban Fringes (SURF) Project Update

REPORT NUMBER: EPI/12/091

1. PURPOSE OF REPORT

The purpose of this report is to provide Elected Members with a progress update on the SURF (Sustainable Urban Fringes) project that Aberdeen City Council (ACC) is Lead Beneficiary for, to seek member representation at the SURF 2012 final conference in Aberdeen and for members to support, in principal the SURF position paper.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Committee:

1. Notes the positive progress to date of the SURF project, with specific acknowledgement of the intention of the partnership to extend the project by a further 6 months
2. Approves the attendance of the Convener and Vice Convener of the Enterprise Planning and Infrastructure Committee to represent the Council at the SURF Output Dissemination Conference in Aberdeen, on Thursday 28th June 2012.
3. Supports in principal the SURF position paper to be presented to the EU Commission as an output of the Sustainable Urban Fringes Project.

3. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

The SURF Project is a three year European project that is part funded through the North Sea Region Interreg IVB programme European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). ACC is the Lead Beneficiary for the SURF Project, and leads two of the four workpackages; being Project Management and Communications. In addition, ACC is a project partner within SURF and is running a project to improve the River Don urban fringe corridor.

As Lead Beneficiary, ACC is committed to hosting the SURF final conference, with associated costs being covered by existing budgets from within the project. There will be no cost for Elected Member attending the conference.

SURF Lead Beneficiary Costs – Breakdown

As Lead Beneficiary ACC charges a management fee, this is charged at 10% of the total project budget over three years.

The SURF Project's Total budget - 4,376,396 Euro (£3,583,232) - which is dispersed to partners.

ACC receives from this a Total Management Fee - 437,639 Euro (£358,317).

SURF Aberdeen Project – Budget

The SURF Aberdeen project consists of a 50% contribution to the total budget from ACC with the additional 50% from ERDF funding.

- Total Budget – 419,336 Euro (£343,000)

SURF Extension

The SURF partnership has requested a project extension of an additional 6 months. ACC have received verbal approval of this from the secretariat and should receive official endorsement in the coming weeks. This extension will be delivered within the existing project budget and management fee.

4. OTHER IMPLICATIONS

ACC has and will continue to benefit from the SURF project through improved spatial planning guidelines and the exchange of transnational learning with the SURF project partners.

The project has had a positive impact for the city particularly the development of the Draft 'River Don Corridor Framework' which will be adopted as Supplementary Planning Guidance within the Aberdeen Local Development Plan. This will lead to the improvement of the quality of life for many Aberdeen residents along the River Don through a more accessible green environment.

Through the project, Aberdeen City has enhanced its reputation within Europe and opens the opportunity to attract new funding streams to deliver environmental and low carbon projects for the city.

This project supports the Council's commitment to sustainable development with an emphasis on improved land use opportunities in the developing sustainable urban fringes and delivering more efficient Council services for the residents of Aberdeen.

5. BACKGROUND/MAIN ISSUES

5.1 SURF Project Background

Aberdeen City Council is leading 13 partners from 5 European North Sea Region countries (Belgium, Germany, Sweden, The Netherlands, and The UK) to analyse management approaches for the urban fringe that strengthen the link between the opportunities provided by these areas (e.g. green infrastructure, connectivity between urban and green spaces and access to health & lifestyle activities) and city region competitiveness.

The project has analysed and tested innovative applications of new policy and governance tools and has identified good practice for dissemination to other regions. In addition, a toolkit for effective urban fringe management is in development.

The project has also put sustainable urban fringe development higher on the political agenda in all partner regions, the national and regional governments and at EU policy level. Activities are being derived to assist partners with local and national lobbying for new urban fringe policy and ACC is leading on the activities required to generate interest at the European level and follow up with a position statement requesting new flexible urban fringe policy for Europe.

The position paper is attached for member support in principal and the members will be updated as this paper progresses throughout relevant European organisations in consultation (therefore please note that this paper will be subject to minor amendments throughout this process). The proposed result for this paper is that the European Commission adopts it in principle and forwards it to the European Parliament for new policy creation.

5.2 SURF Project – Management

The Council is leading Work Package (WP) 1 Project Management and WP2 Communications & Publicity. An officer from the Partnerships & Funding team manages the financial element of the project. WP1 also has responsibility for managing the other external work package leaders. Significant progress has been made throughout the project and SURF is now at the stage of collating the analytical data and translating it into the project outcomes which are:

- A toolkit for effective urban fringe management
- A final report highlighting the project learning including:
 - Policy recommendations
 - Effective approaches to the development and management of urban fringe areas
 - Governance insights and scenarios
- European policy paper to lobby for new urban fringe policy to be created at EU level

5.3 SURF Aberdeen Project – River Don Corridor

As well as having the lead beneficiary role for the overall SURF project, ACC is running a local 'demonstration' project; SURF- Aberdeen. The project aims to develop and promote new methods for assessing and managing open

spaces along the River Don corridor, for the benefit of the local economy, environment and communities.

The project focused on the 'River Don Corridor' – the urban fringe area made up of the River Don and surrounding open spaces. The area is under pressure from development and likely to undergo significant change in the years ahead through developments identified in Aberdeen Local Development Plan.

The *project's objectives* are to:

1. Develop an accessible Geographical Information Systems (GIS) tool to assist with spatial planning of open space;
2. Conduct a participative programme of community engagement activities, using GIS, to improve local decision making;
3. Develop a spatial plan, in collaboration with the community, to guide development & direct improvements to open space;
4. Access funding and work with communities to implement several improvements to open spaces in line with the spatial plan;
5. Work collaboratively with transnational partners to meet the aim and objectives of the parent SURF project.

This project has brought together residents, communities and organisations together and has led to the development of a more collective approach to the planning & management of open spaces along the River Don corridor.

SURF Aberdeen - Achievements

The SURF project has assisted the Council to design and undertake the City's Open Space Audit. The Audit assessed the different types of open spaces across Aberdeen, including the urban fringes in the SURF Aberdeen project area. This information was used to inform the City's Open Space Strategy and the audit information is available on the Council's corporate GIS. This has helped to establish a valuable baseline to inform open space policy, planning and management locally.

The project has taken several approaches to engaging with stakeholders in the River Don area. These have included;

- A Strategic Steering Group - A focused group of ten key stakeholders that help direct the project and monitor progress;
- River Don Communities Network - A network of invited representatives from stakeholder groups for two-way communication on decisions / plans;
- Outreach Sessions - Meetings with a range of stakeholder groups, by invite, to outline the project and obtain their input;
- New Media (River Don facebook page) – An forum open to the general public to participate in the 'conversation'.

The project has received overwhelmingly positive feedback about our engagement at all levels and has clearly made stakeholders feel they can have an influence on the decisions being made within the River Don area.

The project has delivered the draft 'River Don Corridor Framework', following a process of local community engagement and full statutory public consultation. This is the first Framework of its type in Aberdeen; setting out the required 'soft' infrastructure associated with City development in this area.

The aim is to adopt the Framework as formal Planning Guidance for Aberdeen, making it a material consideration for developers to include in their plans when carrying out any development in the project area – many of which are due in the coming years.

An Implementation Plan is being developed to complement the Framework. The plan has identified a range of short and medium-term items that could be delivered, or scheduled, over the time-scale of this project. Short-term items are being delivered by a mix of quick responses from Council services, or through volunteer community action events in the area. These have all had a very good response.

Medium-term and long-term projects are being prepared and will be delivered through collaboration with partner organisations, beyond the time-scale of this project and through major developments in the area

The SURF Aberdeen project has benefited from good collaboration between public sector agencies and positive public engagement activities, including input from the private sector. All these factors combined have allowed us to produce good quality outputs which, in part, help to set the framework that, in time, should deliver positive change for the River Don Corridor's environment.

SURF Conference

The Final Conference for SURF will take place on 27-29 June 2012 in Aberdeen.

Elected Members are invited to attend the main conference day of the 28th June where the project outputs will be showcased and where the conference guests will see first hand the work completed on the River Don project area.

The conference will be for three days and will involve the following:

27th June - Day 1 is the day for project partners where the partnership will present on the progress made within their projects and the plans they have during the SURF extension period. The partnership will also hear about the future programmes for Interreg and be able to start a process of new project application development.

28th June - Day 2 is the main conference day with invited guests and speakers. SURF is in the process of inviting a senior Scottish politician as key note speaker to present on the Scottish Cities strategy. Already confirmed as guest speakers include:

- Reinhard Henke from the PURPLE organisation, which is a European based group lobbying the European Commission for policy development and policy change to take into account the green environment in urban and rural planning.
- Alister Scott, who is a member of a national wide project RELU. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme (RELU) aims to advance understanding of the challenges rural areas face, using interdisciplinary research to inform future policy and practice.
- Sabrina Lucatelli, from the European Commission, Sabrina works for DG REGIO and is a Directorate for Policy conception and coordination.

29th June - Day 3 will provide the opportunity for the partnership to compare and contrast the River Don corridor with the River Dee corridor with an optional morning excursion and allow Aberdeen to showcase the beautiful countryside on the city doorstep.

The SURF outputs will also be showcased with a facilitated discussion group from the SURF workpackage leaders to provide an open exchange on how the findings from the project were achieved and what the next steps are for improving recognition and management of the urban fringe in Europe.

6. IMPACT

The SURF project facilitates Aberdeen's City's Vision, to be "a city which is vibrant, dynamic, forward looking – an even better place to live and work, where people can expect high-quality services that meet their needs".

This project supports the City's Community Plan and the priority Outcomes within the City's Single Outcome agreement. In particular Outcome 12 "we value and enjoy our built and natural environment and enhance it for future generations".

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

Economic Development Sub-Committee Minutes, 23rd February 2009,
Approval of Aberdeen City Council to lead the SURF project

<http://committees.aberdeencity.gov.uk/CeListDocuments.aspx?Committeed=323&MeetingId=702&DF=23/02/2009&Ver=2>

River Don Corridor Framework – Report reference EPI/12/110 – also submitted to this committee

9. REPORT AUTHOR DETAILS

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Sustainable
URBAN FRINGES
S U R F

“Competitive advantage for city regions – the need to create new urban fringe policy”

Summary

A key to creating competitive advantage for European Cities and Regions is to recognise the opportunities and value that the urban fringe area presents through making smarter use of space to enhance sustainable urban development.

With a focus on either urban or rural policy, current European policy does not consider the importance that the urban fringe connection has to the success of cities and regions in Europe.

The Sustainable Urban Fringes (SURF) project recognises that there is an opportunity for the European Union to bridge the gap between urban and rural policy and create new policy which can specifically benefit the development urban fringe areas. Complimenting existing urban and rural policy, this would recognise the characteristics and contribution of these areas to the sustainability and competitiveness of Europe's Cities and Regions.

The SURF project therefore supports the European Union Regional Policy 'Cities of Tomorrow'¹ report which states that "a coherent approach to smart, inclusive and green strategies must be adopted so that conflicts and contradictions between these different objectives can be overcome and accomplishment of one objective is not detrimental to meeting others".

The report continues to stress the importance of "a harmonious development of the city with its surrounding area"

SURF recognises the importance of green spaces to cities and green infrastructure in enabling connectivity and enhancing sustainable urban planning. It is becoming more evident that Europe would benefit from further recognition the level in which cities rely on the ecological services that the surrounding fringe area provide.

In order to advance the Europe 2020 aim for sustainable growth in particular, the Flagship initiative for a 'Resource efficient Europe', the SURF Project has identified significant opportunities for cities and regions offered by the urban fringe area, which if recognised could contribute to a higher quality of life in the EU and a more globally competitive European community.

SURF calls upon the Commission to ensure that future policy proposals and Directives unlock possibilities to secure the **economic, environmental and societal** future of these areas.

THE SUSTAINABLE URBAN FRINGE (SURF) PROJECT

¹ 1. "Cities of Tomorrow – Challenges, Visions, Ways Forward" report – October 2011

The Sustainable Urban Fringe (SURF - www.sustainablefringes.eu) project is part of the Interreg IVB North Sea Programme. The project has revealed examples of opportunities that the urban fringe area can provide to create competitive advantage while positively contributing to the resilience and sustainability of the cities and regions they connect with. The project, which runs from 2009 to 2013, comprises of 13 partners from five countries, involving local and regional authorities, municipalities and universities.

The urban fringe can be described as 'the zone between urban and rural areas, where urban and rural functions and qualities meet and interact. This interaction between urban and rural functions and qualities can have both positive results; (synergy between the functions and qualities and added quality) and negative results; (negative interference; loss of quality because of the interaction between different functions).'

SURF has identified that the urban fringe suffers from consistent obstacles, such as identifying ownership of land, issues with connectivity, lack of identity, fragmentation and encroachment.

The benefits of the urban fringe area encompass the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social aspects), which is at the heart of European policy. Through the SURF partnership, practical examples of sustainable development have been analysed, providing a greater understanding of the tools and approaches used to effectively develop and manage urban fringe areas and the obstacles that many urban fringe areas have to overcome.

The key to the competitive advantage offered by the urban fringe lies in their unique structure, flexible possibilities and multi-functional opportunities offered by these areas that can compliment the ambitions of city regions. SURF has analysed examples of cities creating economic opportunities for entrepreneurs, engaging and collaborating with stakeholders to enable projects through community engagement and providing access to the green environment through enhanced connectivity to the city.

SURF has also found that urban fringe development can advance the priority for 'Inclusive growth - a high employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion.' through providing opportunities for communities to make positive impacts on their own environments, create local employment, provide access to nature & recreation and support biodiversity. This compliments SURF's findings relating to the success within the project partnership of collaborative activities to enable urban fringe projects through 'soft' governance approaches.

EUROPE 2020

Europe 2020¹ calls for smart, sustainable, inclusive growth. Effective urban fringe management and development can directly advance all three priorities through the efficient use and management of the urban fringe to meet the needs of today's cities but not at the cost of future generations.

The recognition of opportunities presented by urban fringe areas has been discussed at European level for many years: The **European Spatial Development Perspective**² highlighted the necessity to integrate the surrounding countryside in the spatial development strategies of urban areas to improve the efficiency of land use planning.

More recently, **Janez Potocnik**, European Commissioner for the Environment has said: “There are many urban challenges... local authorities... have a key role to play: in the protection of the urban environment; in making a better quality of life for growing urban populations; and in ensuring good urban planning for the cities of tomorrow. Economic growth and urban, green revitalisation are now more important than ever for cities – especially when we all have to look carefully at our finances.”³ In terms of the economic climate and the timing of this proposal, it seems that we cannot ignore the opportunity to make the most of the natural resources already at our fingertips when we see the benefits they could bring.

SURF also notes that within The European Commission Sustainable Urban Development Cohesion Policy 2014 – 2020, the wider significance of the environment as a conduit to urban success is highlighted. It states that “the various dimensions of urban life – environmental, economic, social and cultural – are interwoven and success in urban development can only be achieved through an integrated approach. Measures concerning physical urban renewal must be combined with measures promoting education, economic development, social inclusion and environmental protection.”

Finally, **Dacian Ciolos**, Commissioner for Agriculture and Rural Affairs has added that “Above all, we need to get the research out of folders and into fields... Put very simply, Nature works in integrated ways. We now have to learn to do the same. We need an integrated approach to sustainability and resource efficiency.”⁴

Therefore the timely conclusion to the SURF project comes at a crucial time in the new and ever challenging economic climate of Europe to provide a flexible solution to increasing the competitiveness of Europe in the global market and providing a route to sustainable cities and regions.

CONCLUSION

The SURF Project has revealed that the opportunities presented by the urban fringe area are multi-functional, flexible to meet the demands of the cities and regions they connect with and offer opportunities for sustainable living for generations to come. SURF therefore stresses the importance of greater recognition in European policy planning of these areas.

² European Spatial Development Perspective, 1999 Agreed at the Informal Council of Ministers responsible for Spatial Planning

³ Janez Potocnik, European Commissioner for the Environment, Foreword of the Best Practice Catalogue – Award Cycle 2010 & 2011, European Green Capital Award

⁴ Dacian Ciolos, European Commissioner responsible for Agriculture and Rural Development, speech made at the Koli Forum, Joensuu, Finland, 15 Sept 2011

The SURF findings prove that in urban fringe areas the environment can be an asset not only for environmental reasoning but can also be a conduit to both economic and social prosperity. Effective guidance to its management can be an enabler for social cohesion, economic growth and sustainable development.

The SURF partnership, consisting of 13 partners from 5 countries calls for:

- Further recognition of the role urban fringe areas can play in the sustainable development of Europe's city regions through enhancing economic development, enabling social cohesion and monitoring environmental sustainability.
- Commitment from the Commission to integrate the role of urban fringes within future urban policy.
- The development of specific urban fringe policy to support this.



The Sustainable Urban Fringes (SURF) Project is part of the Interreg IVB North Sea Region Programme and is partly funded by the European Regional Development Fund.