Rural Communities Survey on COVID-19 – Response and Recovery
Round 2 – July/August 2020

SRA's survey captures the views of a wide constituency of rural residents, the purpose being to better understand response and recovery from a whole-community perspective rather than through a particular demographic or sectoral lens.

This Report covers the second round of the survey undertaken over July and August 2020. The first round completed at the end of May 2020 and a third and final round is planned in late Autumn to capture changing trends as the pandemic progresses.

ROUND 1 – MAY 2020

❖ 504 respondents

❖ Every local authority area in Scotland with a rural population is represented in the responses

❖ 49% of respondents self-identified as living on the rural mainland, 14% on the remote rural mainland and 22% on an island. 13% live in a town and the remainder 2% in a city.

ROUND 2 – JULY & AUGUST 2020

❖ 349 respondents

❖ Every local authority area in Scotland with a rural population is represented in the responses.

❖ 51% of respondents self-identified as living on the rural mainland, 19% on the remote rural mainland and 14% on an island. 15% live in a town and the remainder 1% in a city.

❖ 39% of respondents were over the age of 65. Information on respondents' age was not sought in the first round.

Insights & recommendations

Findings from SRA's July/August survey reinforce those from our previous survey. The call for devolution of power to community level is growing stronger with almost 70% of respondents demanding more control over decisions about local priorities. Local approaches to planning and delivery are seen to bring people together. They build capacity and are highly responsive to need but to be sustainable they require trust and resourcing from all levels of government.

Two weeks after Phase 3 of Scotland's Route Map was introduced, our survey found trust and resourcing at a low ebb. Lack of clarity around funding of local response initiatives, combined with little meaningful involvement of rural communities in national and regional recovery planning was causing anxiety. 35% of respondents reported that things were not as good with respect to 'government listening to communities' as they were earlier in the year.

Respondents' sense of anxiety was compounded by feelings of volunteer burnout, by the anticipation of a second wave and by the real impact of personal hardships - health related and economic - with 13% stating they would like to speak to someone about how they are feeling.

Across the survey, respondents emphasised the co-dependency between government and communities to deliver long-term outcomes. Centralised responses are required to ensure political and economic stability at national level, to improve infrastructure such as transport and broadband and to allocate resources to rural job creation and initiatives that will lift people out of poverty and improve their wellbeing. It should be, however, for communities to shape how those resources are deployed and maximised at local level.

Recommendations

❖ Research is required into rural communities' pandemic governance and decision-making processes, including those communities that struggled to self-organise, to ensure learning shapes the community empowerment and local governance agendas. Within this, burnout amongst volunteers carrying out community functions should be examined.

❖ Funders should progressively shift from response to recovery programmes. Funding priorities should include activities that bring people together and long-term investment in initiatives to promote community coordination and capacity building. An assessment of long-term funding and resourcing available for rural communities is required to address gaps and identify opportunities for improving access and take-up.

❖ A strategic approach to improve rural community mental health should be developed. This approach must go beyond building personal resilience and providing expert support for individuals (though this is certainly a priority) to identifying ways of building community resilience including interventions for community groups or whole communities who are experiencing high levels of crisis or conflict.

❖ A place-and-sector understanding of the rural economy and its resilience factors should inform jobs creation and wider recovery initiatives. Re-focused effort by the Scottish Government and external partners is required to align rural economic outputs to wellbeing rather than growth and translate this model into a framework that can meaningfully shape policy making.

Summary of main findings

On July 10th 2020 Phase 3 of Scotland's Route Map began. Daily new confirmed cases averaged in single digits and there were an estimated 700 infectious people in Scotland. As noted by the Scottish Government in its COVID-19 Update from July 30th, "this provided a solid platform for further, careful easing of restrictions, consistent with our approach to mitigating the overall harm from the crisis – to our health, economy and society more broadly".

Round 2 of SRA's survey launched on July 24th and closed on 14th August. It found Scotland's rural communities under enormous strain delivering a crisis response in a rapidly-changing environment whilst at the same time trying to map out their immediate and future recovery.

The strain was evident in respondents' calls for all levels of government to deliver political stability and a clear plan for social and economic recovery. As well as placing expectations on government, respondents offered a range of positive actions which they felt their local community could take forward unaided or with modest support. The drive by respondents to highlight locally-driven solutions underpinned an urgent demand for communities to be given the resources and power to manage their own affairs.

1. **COVID-19 has shone a light on barriers to rural resilience and recovery.** Mirroring the first round of the survey, poor broadband, lack of clear guidance on restrictions and inadequate mechanisms for identifying vulnerable residents were cited as barriers to effective local responses to COVID-19. Respondents noted the pandemic had shone a light on pre-existing financial, health and social issues whilst also exacerbating them. It was felt that the time for charity – free food, free fuel etc. – was over and that communities should be given resources to develop long-term solutions to these issues.

2. **Lack of clarity over recovery resourcing is causing anxiety.** Compared to the first round of the survey where funding was the 'good news' story and most communities felt they had access to sufficient financial resources, the second round evidenced a high degree of anxiety around the future of funding for community-driven COVID-19 response and recovery initiatives. Funding was requested for activities, including cultural and sporting activities, to bring people together in a safe way and tackle social isolation. There was also a clear need for clarity around longer term private sector and community enterprise recovery, and for the ongoing coordination of local partnerships delivering the re-invigoration of their community.

3. **The focus on re-invigoration had a deeply personal dimension**. The majority of respondents identified long-term changes they intended to make to their own lives because of their experiences, positive and negative, during lockdown. A renewed focus on family, climate action and volunteering were amongst the most frequently-cited personal commitments. Personal resilience factors also appeared relatively strong with a significant proportion of respondents noting their ability to spend quality time with family and friends or on leisure pursuits "were about the same" or "even better" since the last survey.

4. **Personal resilience cannot mask the level of hardship many respondents are facing**. This includes those who remain deeply fearful for their health or the health of loved ones, those who have been made redundant and those whose businesses are struggling, especially when they also have responsibilities towards staff. 13% of survey respondents disclosed they would like to speak to someone about how they are feeling, and a high proportion called for the roll-out of mental health first aid training or similar initiatives across communities.

5. **Community resilience factors appear to remain strong.** This includes a strong "sense of community" and "organisations working together". The COVID-19 community movement which is at the heart of strengthening resilience is, however, growing 'tired and frayed'. Volunteer burnout, lack of funding for community coordination and inadequate or non-existent places and spaces where people may gather and meet were perceived to be eroding these factors.

6. **There is a need for government to listen more and to listen better.** 35% of respondents reported that things were not as good with respect to 'government listening to communities.' This is the most striking negative assessment across the listed community resilience factors and applied to all levels of government - UK and Scottish Governments as well as of local authorities. Respondents noted concerns around the perceived lack of a cohesive recovery plan, mixed and unclear guidance on restrictions and tokenistic approaches to community consultation, in particular around the reintroduction of tourism.

7. **Rural attitudes towards tourism are thawing.** The second round of the survey evidenced a thawing of attitudes towards tourists from Scotland. Over 65% of respondents suggested their communities would welcome Scottish visitors in August 2020 compared to 38% who stated the same in the first round. There was no significant change in attitudes towards UK and international tourists. Tourism infrastructure is noted as poor across the majority of rural Scotland and ill-equipped to deal with rising trends - wild camping and motorhome use.

8. **Rural communities want greater local resourcing and power, and have clear asks of government**:
   - **deliver political and economic stability**
   - **continue supporting those most affected financially by the pandemic**
   - **focus on job creation**
   - **improve broadband infrastructure, transport networks and housing**
   - **increase provision for mental health**

The call for local power is contextualised across the whole survey in a narrative that emphasises the co-dependency between government and communities to deliver long-term outcomes. Survey respondents were clear on the things that communities can do alone or with modest resourcing to support neighbours, to strengthen their economy and their response to climate change. They are also clear on the things that government needs to lead on delivering.

Q3. What, if anything, could strengthen your community's response to COVID-19 at the present time? (Please tick all that apply)
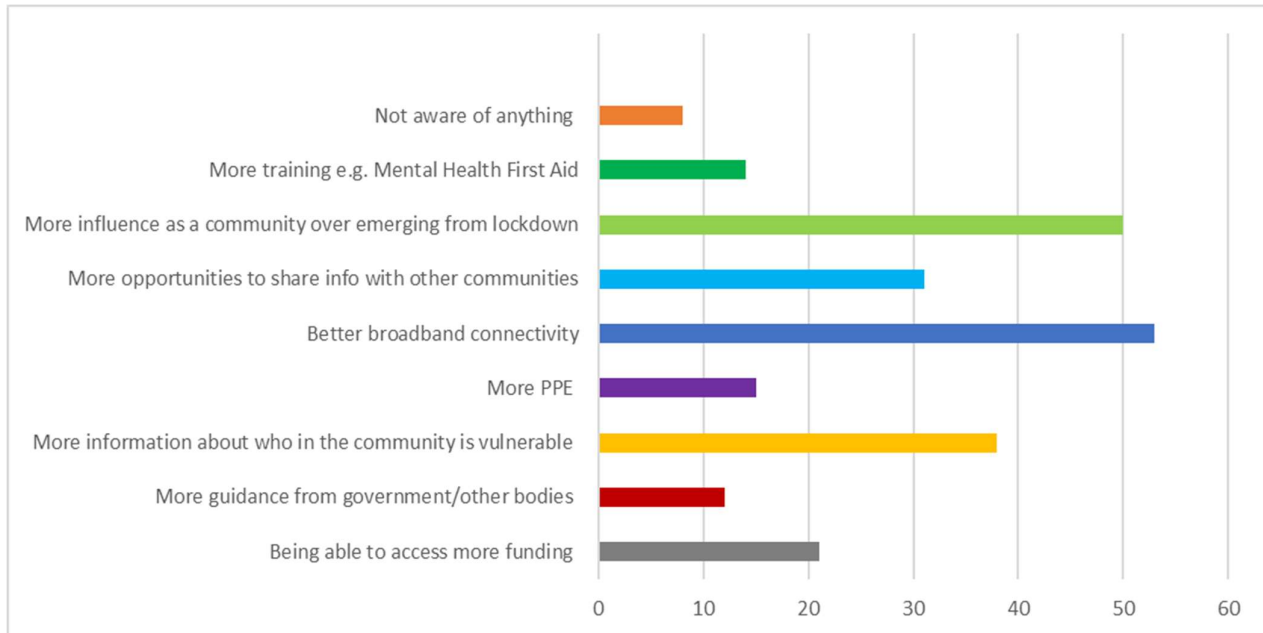
- In the first round of the survey carried out in May 2020, 42% of respondents identified better broadband connection as being critical to improving their local response to COVID-19. In the second round, **broadband connectivity** remains a pressing concern for a high proportion (53%) of respondents:

  ...beyond my house, going north, it is difficult to use the internet meaningfully unless you are using expensive satellite broadband…some homes don't even get a signal from that…

  Being a single parent has been hard without social contact. We need better rural broadband to support business and leisure in remote areas.

- This was followed by a call for local influence over how communities emerge from lockdown (50%). 30% of the free text answers elaborated on this position, some referring to the need for a '*community-by-community*' assessment of the risks of tourism while others expressing a more generalised view on **the need to devolve decision-making powers to communities**:

  Decisions which affect the local community pay no attention whatsoever to the local conditions. Our Council HQ is 140 miles away from us.... it may as well be on the moon for all the consideration they give to local conditions.

  All rural communities should have more say about how they emerge from lockdown and in future be given choice about their community priorities and be informed and funded. Local and national government should engage more closely with community groups who have been

active and responsive in their support to the community during lockdown.

- Compared to the first round where respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with the COVID-19 funding programmes made available to communities, the second round evidenced **a growing concern around the future of funding programmes** most of which were closed to applications in July 2020. 21% of respondents noted their community's response would be strengthened by additional funding and over 35% of the free text answers commented on aspects of this issue. A small number of answers highlighted emerging problems with existing funding programmes:

  Our community was slow to set up response and recovery initiatives, and consequently was too late to apply to some of funding. Also, funding has to be channelled through a local development company, which I believe HIE appointed. Their response has been appalling - they appeared to sit on the money for 6-8 weeks, and only built on a couple of existing projects which only reached a limited number of people.

  The vast majority however focused on the need for **continued funding for response-phase projects or new funding to support communities** '*develop a local recovery route map.'* With the future in mind, respondents noted the importance of resourcing community anchors and other established organisations:

  A desperate need exists to find ways of supporting the finances of those 'anchor organisations' that have taken on themselves so much of the work of ameliorating the worst social consequences of Covid19 and have done it very successfully after diverting resources from their planned programmes.

  There is also a place in some communities for networks of small, informal groups acting as the drivers for change:

  Funding is needed for smaller, less formal community groups who are doing good things and have plans on what will work in their community in longer term (not just as crisis response) but do not fit easily with existing (pre-covid) funding systems.

  A considerable number of free text responses made specific mention of the **lack of support for the creative sector**, noting that arts and culture as well as sport are important resilience factors with the potential to strengthen mental wellbeing in the face of '*very real hardship that is coming down the line*.'

  Funding to revive arts and culture with music being so important to this region. We would benefit from technological help to set up drive through screens and provide equipment as well as custom gazebos to allow artists, musicians and creatives to function and perform outdoors.

- Four months after lockdown was introduced and 40% of survey respondents still note that **more information on those who are shielding or vulnerable** in their communities would be helpful. Though only two or three free text responses elaborated on this matter, the high

proportion of respondents choosing this option suggests a prevalent concern that people are falling through the gaps. About 15% of free text answers called for **more training on Mental Health First Aid** or '*something like the Samaritan's introductory course*' which will help people '*understand signs of distress*' and better support their friends, families and neighbours.

- While only 14% of respondents felt that **more/better government guidance** would be helpful, at least 45% of free text responses focused on this issue with guidance sought on everything from car sharing, to re-opening businesses or community facilities, to working with people with learning disabilities and to managing the behaviour of tourists.

  We are struggling to know how / when we can open our village hall. What is sufficient in terms of cleaning; how we classify ourselves i.e. can the squash court open first if we restrict access to the toilets.

Q4. As Scotland emerges from lockdown, which activities do you think your community should prioritise?
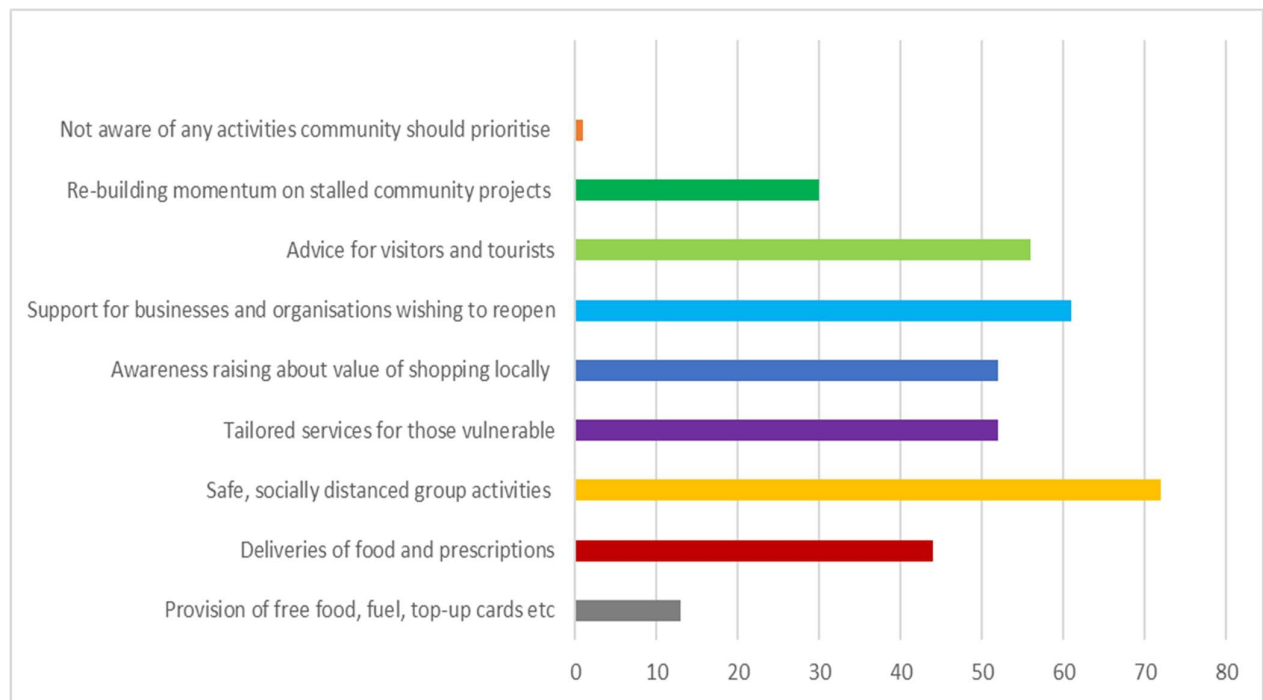
- Mirroring the high proportion of respondents (73%) who noted the need for **safe, socially distanced activities to bring people together and alleviate loneliness** - *'people want to sit and have a cuppa and a chat'* - the re-opening of community halls and sports facilities as well as the re-introduction of creative sector activities – music, films, plays – featured prominently in respondents' free text answers.

  Arts and creative activities have a really important role to play in small communities -

benefiting mental and physical health, encouraging social engagement, reducing loneliness, building confidence, generating fresh thinking, empathy and optimism in a changing world.

As winter approaches it will become increasingly important to promote active travel for people of all ages…partly to help us all to have a greater resilience against this and future outbreaks.

The re-opening of facilities, though a welcome development on the horizon, was perceived to brings its challenges:

We would like to get our village hall reopened and whole community events for social benefit. Our main issue is local volunteers already clean our hall and extra pressure of cleaning for covid makes opening hall more difficult as we can't ask people to do any more than they already do.

In many cases respondents also noted historic issues with their community spaces (or their lack of community spaces) and reflected on how this would negatively impact on the ability of local residents to meet and re-kindle relationships (build social capital):

We have limited space in our community centre - an old school - still divided into classrooms connected by a very narrow corridor. It would be lovely to be able to bring very small groups into the place to see each other again and support our isolated residents but trying to do this at 2m socially distancing would be very limiting.

We have not got indoor spaces for community to meet, especially during colder part of the year.

Please support our small rural school that is under threat of closure by our local authority. It brings the community together and would also keep our rural pupils safe by social distancing from other schools and prevent transportation of our pupils on public transport vehicles.

- Only 12% of respondents cited the provision of free food and fuel as a priority. Based on the free text answers, this does not necessarily indicate a reduction in poverty or need. Instead it may reflect **a desire to move away from crisis-driven charity** which is perceived to be disempowering:

Free food etc encourages dependency and shouldn't be a long term measure. We need to make sure no one ever needs to go through the indignity of having to access free food…

Several respondents made the link between addressing poverty and inequality and the need for a *'national universal basic income.'* This was acknowledged to be a decision for the UK and Scottish Governments rather than a community priority. Indeed, **community priorities were primarily focused on introducing measures to re-build the local economy** through, for example, the safe re-opening of businesses, the re-introduction of tourism and the development of local supply chains:

Helping potential day visitors to feel safe and welcome to help sustain our local economy and jobs. This involves developing local guidance to retailers and food outlets as well as to the community at large.

More focus on how we help farmers with their crops through community networks which are easy to tap into…even a few hours from each of us helping could bring the crops home, as many farms struggle if don't have a paid workforce. Selling produce locally would also help.

- Emerging from the free text answers, the **re-design of transport** was a major theme amongst both island and mainland residents and one which was perceived to sit squarely with the Scottish Government, local authorities and transport companies**:**

Top priority should be full restoration of all public transport. I am too disabled to drive so I am absolutely dependent on public transport but many rural bus routes have been withdrawn.

Reduced timetables and capacity are causing real problems now people are returning to work. Many of the most vulnerable people depend on public transport, particularly for things like getting to hospital appointments, visiting friends and shopping.

Ensuring that Islanders can travel to the mainland when they need to whilst following government guidelines - not just to visit family but for things like MOTs, optician appointments, dentist appointments, etc

The advent of electric bikes has been great for many less-fit visitors in this hilly domain. I think that is a great boon for many, and a potentially great form of transport for the future. As someone who used to regularly cycle to work in Edinburgh, it gets quite wearing and slow and more widespread use of electric bikes would be great.

Implement improvements in ferry provision in line with the recommendations made by the Scottish Government's Advisory Committee on the Ferries Industry. It is essential that lower carbon footprint, more modern, higher capacity vessels be built. Designs for these Catamaran ferries already exist, and they are operated by Pentland Ferries which was not subsidised and had no extra funding during the Covid Emergency. Modern Ferries are widely used in Norway where the policy is to replace all vessels after 20 years of use. Subsidies should be awarded more selectively to encourage the use of modern vessels. If Scottish ship builders do not have the required expertise, this could be dealt with by buying in expertise from overseas.

- Re-kindling momentum on stalled community projects such as house-building was considered a priority by 30% of respondents but there was no elaboration of this in the free text answers. Instead, the free-text answers suggest that respondents are focusing on immediate and pressing issues – businesses trying to re-open, tourism getting back on track, food deliveries still to be coordinated – before focus shifts to pre-COVID-19 community projects.

Q5. People who responded to our first survey had different views about the right time to welcome tourists again. We would like to ask the same question again to see if people's views have shifted. When do you think it would be the right time to welcome:
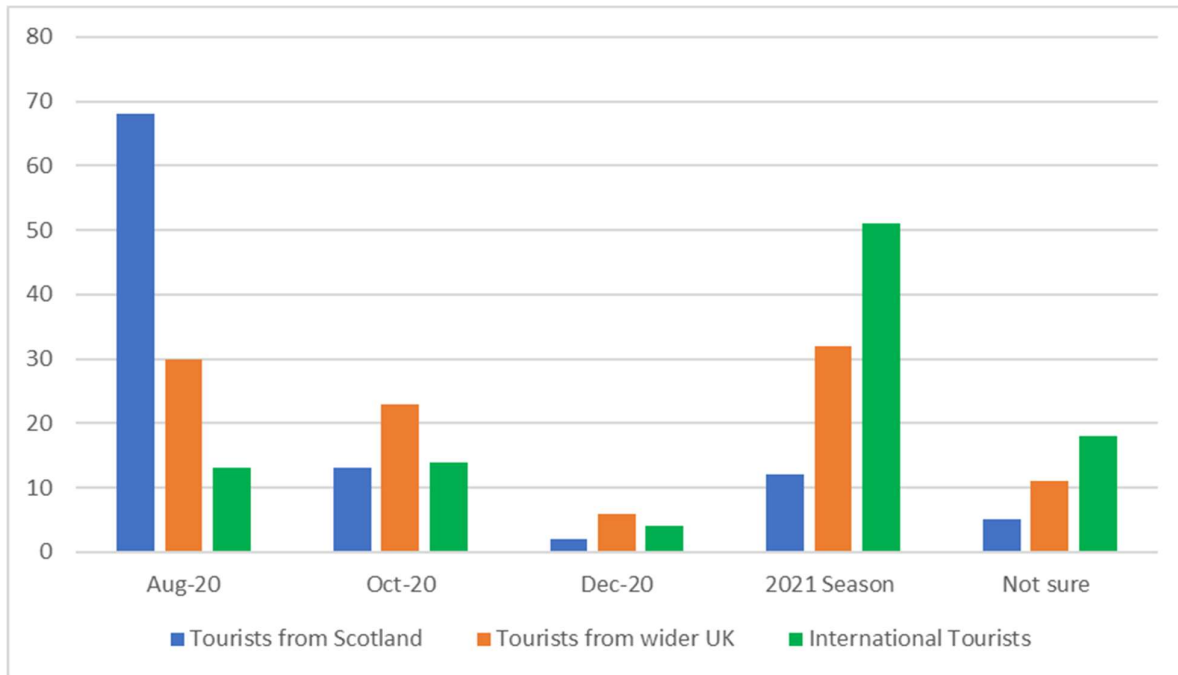
- Compared to the first round of the survey where just under 40% of respondents identified August 2020 as the right time for their community to welcome tourists from Scotland, the second round evidenced a significant shift in attitudes with 68% of respondents suggesting August 2020 would be the right time.

- There was no meaningful shift in attitudes around the timescale of opening up to UK tourists (evenly distributed between August 2020, October 2020 and the 2021 season) and to international tourists (mainly 2021 season).

  …foreign tourists should be completely banned until 2023. The Spanish flu pandemic lasted 2 years from January 1918 to January 1920 so we should expect the present pandemic to also last 2 years…so no foreign tourists should be allowed in for at least 2 years.

- Unsurprisingly, a significant number of free text answers across the whole survey reflected on the return of tourists to rural areas. Problems were highlighted including, for example, the continued closure or historic **lack of local infrastructure (parking toilets, bins, transport)** and the **perceived lack of care by tourists for the environment**.

  The Scottish Outdoor Access Code was never was intended to include Motorhome users!

  Wild camping should not be allowed in the current climate. Many public toilets remain closed. They have nowhere to dispose of their bodily waste. In the last week we have noticed that

almost every lay-by and beauty spot has a caravan, Motorhome, tent or travelling folk camp in place. Whilst their custom is vital to boost the economy the infrastructure is simply not there.

- Some respondents noted these **problems are giving rise to confrontations and conflict**:

  There have already been reports in the press of aggressive behaviour by anxious residents towards visitors, which although forgivable is potentially very damaging to the image of the traditional Highland welcome

- While others focused on **solutions, both community and government driven**:

  Community Council/Development Trusts to have support creating a National Standard Message (like Iceland and CalMac Ferries. 'Welcome to Scotland' please observe......) Let's take this as an opportunity to implement responsible tourism and one National cogent message.

  We (the Highlands as a whole) need a strong response and we need to be supported in this. One way forward would be to make the 'book ahead' message clearer: could the electronic noticeboards on the main roads be used to display this?

Q6. People who responded to our first survey said that they noticed some positive things happening in their community as a result of the pandemic including a stronger sense of community, people able to spend more time with close family and less pollution. Compared to a month ago, how have these aspects of lockdown been affected?
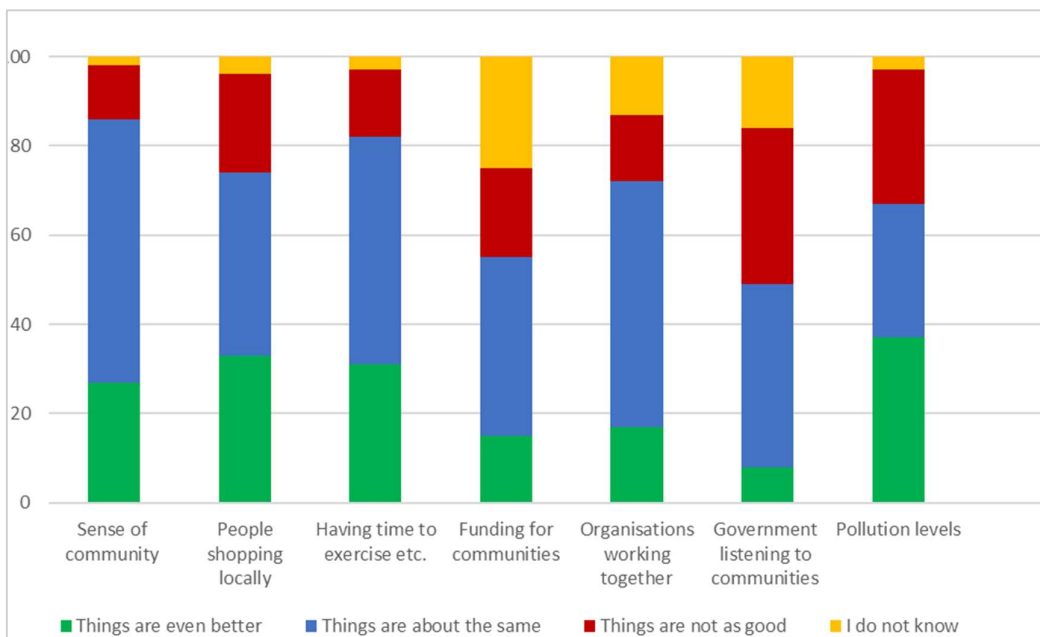
- Q6 sought to explore respondents' perceptions of personal and community resilience factors, many of which contribute to **building social capital**, and whether they have been strengthened or eroded since the beginning of lockdown. The responses indicated that **community resilience factors such as 'a sense of community' and 'organisations working together' appear to have strengthened or remained strong**. In the free text answers, some respondents reflected on particular examples of positive recognition, partnership and local networks of support:

  A letter from our local Lord Lieutenant, The Duke of Buccleuch, recognising and appreciating the great effort that our community volunteers have made. This was published on our community Facebook page and really lifted our community.

  Biggar Community Action Group undertaking an amazing amount of work with vision for the future.

  Community led responses to COVID have been helped by experience gained from several decades of community led local development programmes such as LEADER. This process for developing skills and experience within communities should be welded to our future governance system.

  Free text answers noting barriers to community cohesion and partnership cited volunteer fatigue *'we the people leading this effort are now getting very tired and frayed'* and community organisations or businesses '*running around doing things off their own bat*' sometimes due to lack of coordination and sometimes due to self-interest:

  There is very little community cohesion in my particular area. There are a plethora of community organisations and quite a lot of well-meaning people, but efforts are fragmented and unfocussed. We lack strategy, direction and resources and this is eroding community spirit, especially when we lack social interactions.

  Some local businesses (a) are being innovative for the benefit of their customers and the whole community, whilst others (b) are simply trying to get the most out of it for themselves (lack customer and community focus). We need to identify the former (a) and help them. Also it is clear that there is a lot of duplication in terms of delivery (esp. food and goods) - we need to help develop networks of micro businesses.

- Two community resilience factors **– 'people shopping locally' and 'pollution levels' – were polarised in respondents' assessment** with similar proportions feeling things had got better compared to those who believe things were worse. The free-text answers focused mainly on negative changes:

  As a food producer we felt really valued through the pandemic which was very different to normal. Folk were relying on us to keep food in local shops. This was really good. Now unfortunately folk are drifting back to the supermarkets again.

As we ease from lockdown, there's an increase in air/noise pollution, discarded rubbish and anti-social behaviour.

- 35% of respondents reported that **things were not as good with respect to 'government listening to communities.'** This is the most striking negative assessment across the listed resilience factors though balanced somewhat by 8% reporting things were better and 41% feeling things were about the same. The free text answers on this topic included criticisms of the UK and Scottish Governments as well as of local authorities, reasons for the relationship erosion being '*government and council not listening to people's concerns re the influx of tourists*', mixed and unclear guidance on various subjects - '*goodwill is sorely tried by the inconsistent advice out there'* and lack of communication around a cohesive recovery plan that takes account of rural communities' views - '*their methodology of issuing emails and Facebook information is not consultation*.'

Free text answers also included positive examples of where government has stepped up to the mark, keeping rural communities informed and resourcing projects:

I thank Nicola Sturgeon for the manner in which she has dealt with this by keeping us informed and politics out of it!

Our local authority has been sending out twice weekly news bulletins focusing on help in all aspects of local community life Which has been very helpful to keep us up to date with available resources.

There is an encouragement for some of the projects in my local community that started during lockdown to continue in some form. The local council has helped facilitate one of the projects, the Sharing SHED, to continue and improve. This acts partly as a micro-foodbank for the village and district. But it also has a role in sharing other items that folk would find beneficial (e.g. books, games, plants etc).

- **Personal resilience factors including 'having time to exercise' and 'spending time with family and friends' (not included in graph above) followed a positive trend** with the majority of respondents suggesting things were improved or remained about the same.

My own mental health and resilience are much improved by having to attend fewer meetings.

We see a lot of folk of all ages enjoying walking around the farm, getting fit and spending time outdoors which is a big plus.

Q7. Are you considering implementing any of the following long-term changes to your life because of your experiences during lockdown?
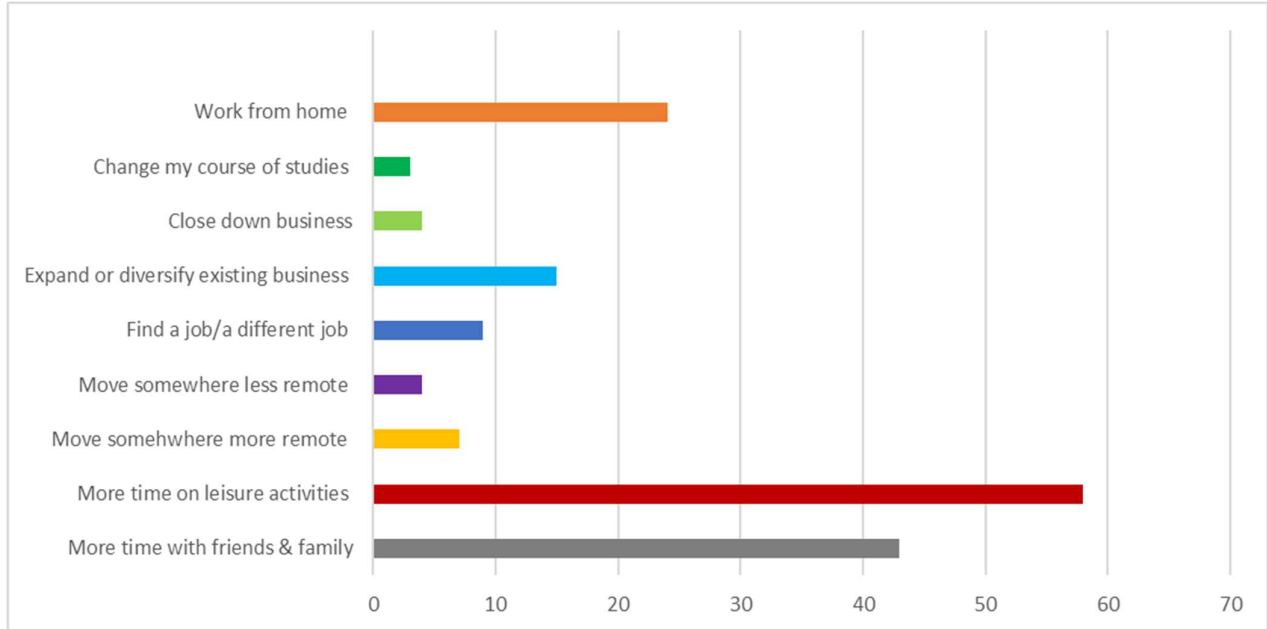
- The most popular responses were spending more time on leisure activities (57%), spending more time with family and friends (43%) and continuing to work from home (24%).

- From the free text answers, it was clear that the pandemic has allowed some respondents to **enjoy a new quality of life** by improving their health and '*making each day count'*. There was appreciation for home, family and the good fortune of living in a rural setting - '*I am retired and live in the sticks, how much better than that can you get?*' Conversely, many felt their mental health (from social isolation) was in jeopardy and couldn't wait to get back to normal as they found it difficult to separate work and leisure time and were missing regular activities. Some felt it impossible to consider any long term plans or to know how best to proceed when faced with an '*uncertain and unstable future*' while other **were concerned about their health and personal safety** and planned to protect it by '*staying away from everyone, keep the full 2 metre distance regardless of any government advice and wear face masks and gloves up and until a vaccine is ready.'*

- **A few responses from retailers demonstrated they felt the only way forward was to restrict opening times** which would inevitably lead to a loss of income. They were concerned for their health and the health of their staff with the perceived influx of national and international tourists. People called for local shopping to be contactless as they feared handling cash and felt that if this option could not be made available, they would '*move to on-line purchases'*.

- There were several comments around the **desire to be more self-sufficient** by '*growing as much food as possible*', buying an additional freezer to store home grown produce and

gathering and storing a good stock of locally found heating materials. People aspired to a simpler way of life by taking more time off, '*spending less money and/or working shorter hours*' and some had noticed that they had '*saved a lot since lockdown'*. They enjoyed '*not living in such a rat race'*, '*not worrying about things other folk have or are doing like foreign holidays and fancy houses*' and felt their focus had changed as they '*valued friends and family more*.'

Respondents' commitment to a simpler way of life also linked **to increased consciousness about their effect on the environment** with many pledging to '*reducing the carbon footprint'* by cutting down on car use, travelling time, virtual working and reducing waste. For some, the time spent in lockdown heightened their environmental concerns and they have taken the decision to '*come out of retirement to work on promoting climate action*' or to increase their '*efforts for environmental protection and improvements.'*

- Views about **volunteering** appeared more polarised with some suggesting they would be '*less involved in community groups and volunteering*' and others would devote more time to their community:

  Continue to work in my community to enhance community spirit and engagement and help ensure our community is resilient, healthy, diverse and fit for the future.

  Some felt they would develop a '*stronger involvement in rural politics to argue for progressive policies and better health outcomes'* or campaign for '*local governance with a budget that meets the community needs*'.

- **Travel** was a popular topic with many respondents deciding to '*go away less and stay home more'* and take more UK holidays. Some thought the continued restrictions around travel and free movement would make them experience an even '*deeper depression*' and some were torn by having family '*100's of miles way*' and considered '*moving home to be nearer.*' Indeed, moving home was the subject of several free text answers:

  At present living away from my home as continuing to support a family member with a learning disability who has had all support removed. When able to return home I will have to sell my house due to the financial impact of being unable to work due to caring. I will be encouraging family member to move into a town to get more support. I will be very sad to leave the village I am in at present.

- It was acknowledged that the pandemic has made many redundant and there are **fears for people's financial future**:

  My husband has been made redundant due to Covid as are thousands of oil related workers. Many of them need help retraining and need to be given support and advice as Covid has had a really bad impact on the work situation in the Highland's.
  Respondents asked for help to access new work opportunities and requested support, advice and training. Self-employed respondents noted that their businesses had '*completely tanked*'

and small organisations had suffered '*loss of business due to Covid-19'*. There was a prevalent sense that the future of respondents' enterprise was '*in grave doubt*'.

- Planned changes included seeking employment in community-based roles as these were perceived to be most needed, new work patterns '*to allow me to work and keep the children out of childcare before and after school*' and '*changing the course of business plans'*. Some wished to **reduce their working hours** to spend quality time with family '*but bills need paid and working to pay them is a priority'* or they can't afford to do so on their pension plans.

- Creative Industries felt they would continue to '*move work online'* (i.e. teaching music remotely, organising socially distanced classes) and need help to '*understand how to monetise performance skills on the web'.* Craft workers noted that their businesses '*depend on being able to sell craft goods at local markets and events, but none of these have taken place since the end of last winter'* and were looking at starting to sell online with one shielding worker worried about entering a post office to post orders.

Q8. What would make a positive difference to your own sense of wellbeing at the present time?
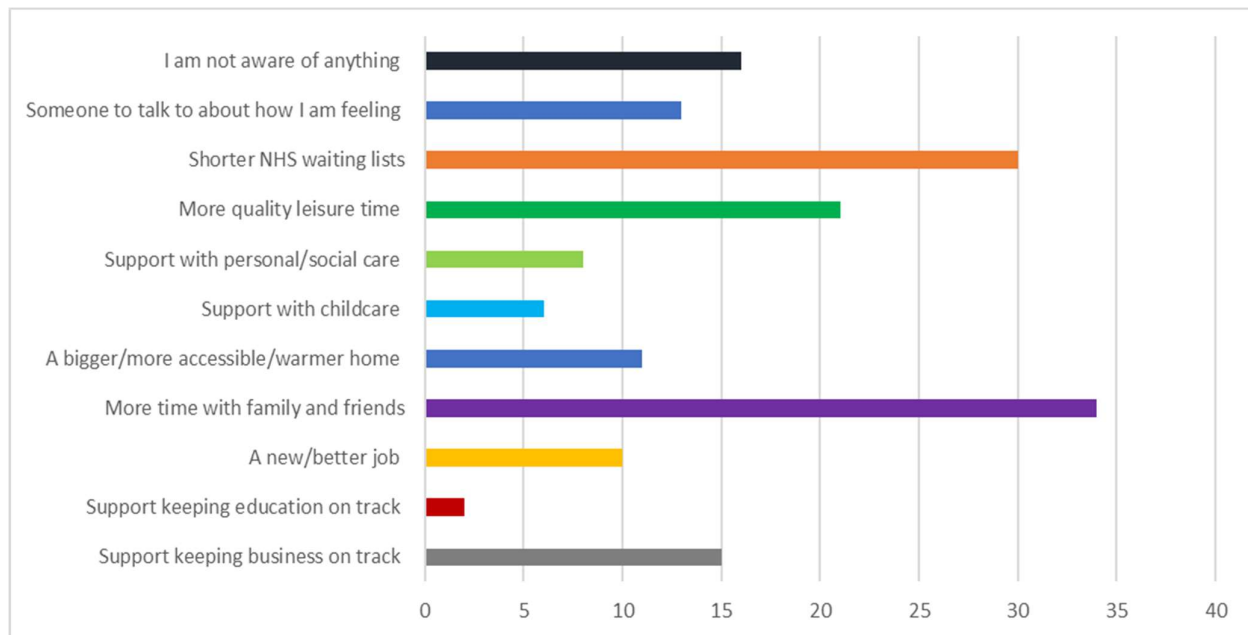
- The most popular responses were more time spent with family and friends (34%) or involved in leisure pursuits (21%) and shorter NHS waiting lists (30%), the latter perhaps reflecting the older age group of respondents. 15% of respondents wanted support to keep their business on track while **13% wanting to talk to someone about how they are feeling** though this was not elaborated on in the free text answers.

- In the free text answers, a significant number of respondents want **a return to 'normal life'** – being able to see friends, return to work and the gym, travel and attend face-to-face GP appointments again. Parents would like to '*stop worrying about the future for their children*' return to predicable schooling and have hopes that their children will be able to continue with their tertiary education.

  Job security; better outlook for my kids, currently in tertiary education but with bleak outlooks and mounting debts.

  Some were '*looking forward to never having to home school again!*' Grandparents were excited to '*spend overnight time with grandchildren on the mainland*'.

- **Better broadband/mobile coverage and improved tourism management** also featured prominently in the free text answers with respondents suggesting that they are now '*more anxious*' about going about their daily lives and that limits should be placed on the amount of tourism in a given area relative to the population and local facilities:

  …local holiday park for static caravans exceeds the local immediate community it is situated in by more than five times…

- Several respondents directly linked their sense of wellbeing to **government action around multiple policy areas, including around the pandemic response (broadband, tourism, guidance and '*a clear strategy for a second wave*'), community empowerment and welfare:**

  A better sense of wellbeing may be obtained if we had confidence that UK government had a strategy and we were well prepared for the second wave.

  A hope that our government and local authority would really consider seriously devolving responsibilities down to local areas Local work for local people. Local problems to be solved by local people.

  Government taking a serious look at the welfare system and how to build up people and communities, not force them to rely on charity and foodbanks.

  There were calls for Scottish independence but overall, the main call was for stability - '*the last thing we need is another Scottish independence or EU referendum'.* Indeed, **political and economic stability was a prominent theme**. People felt the need for a '*prolonged period of calm*' ('*businesses have been operating in uncertainty for about 8 years now*').

- **Support for employment and businesses was also a prominent theme**, with many respondents seeking assurances about the future. Farming sector workers, for example, worried about Brexit and a second wave of COVID-19 and self-employed would like

'*assistance through business grants'*, support and online courses (digital media and marketing). Particular anxieties were expressed by business owners who employed others:

Less anxiety about keeping a micro-business afloat and supporting a further 15 full or part time staff, plus many freelancers, and local businesses that rely on our venue for their own income.

We at present employee 2 people and are worried for the future prospects in the short and long term. COVID has had a major impact on our ability to carry out work in the field. Our real worry is not only the effect of the virus but Brexit and all the uncertainty that is now a real danger to our client base.

An extension (possibly sector specific) to the job retention scheme - recognising that arts, hospitality and tourism have particular challenges over the next 12 months.

- Several free text answers captured respondents' need to feel confident Scotland was *'putting its weight'* behind **tackling climate change**. There were calls to plan a *'similar massive response'* as shown throughout the Covid-19 pandemic to the imminent threat of global warming. Some believed that by placing more value on environmental resources, *'making radical, positive and immediate steps'* (green investment, local supply chains, large scale rewilding) and learning from the changes that took place during lockdown a crisis could be averted.

- Along with **a call for a vaccine**, there were many remarks about the limited **access to GP surgeries, hospitals (though some were '***not keen to visit a hospital anytime soon'***) A&E, outpatients and dentists** and hoped that these could be quickly phased back in *'rather than being diagnosed over the phone'*. People would like to see clear waiting times being announced for planned treatments as *'people are suffering from more than the virus'*. Others felt the reopening of day services, support groups for young mothers and social care services *'would allow those who had been looking after relatives to return to their own homes'* and provide practical and emotional support to the wider community.

Q9. People who responded to our first survey listed several things that the UK and Scottish Governments can do to help rural communities recover from COVID-19. Amongst the most pressing priorities were to keep businesses and third sector organisations afloat, to prevent people from falling into poverty and to improve broadband connectivity. Are there other things the UK and Scottish Governments can do to help your community recover from COVID-19?
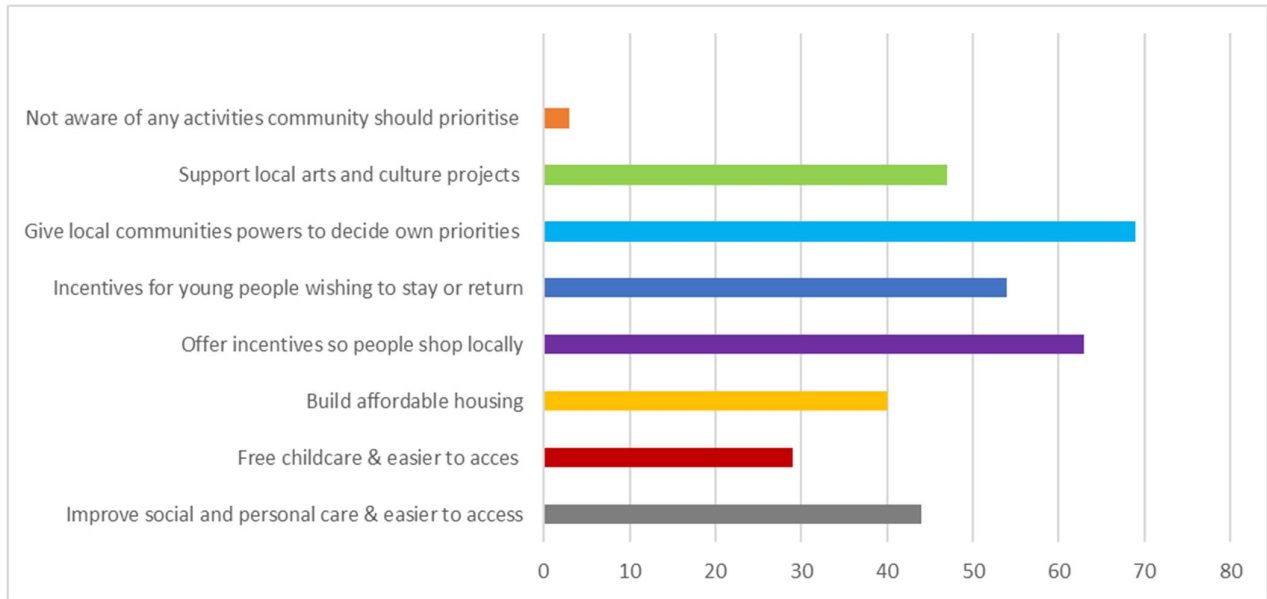
- The most popular responses were to give local communities powers to decide their own priorities (69%), to offer incentives to encourage people to shop locally (62%) and to resource young people wishing to stay or return to rural communities (54%).

- From the free-text answers, respondents felt an immediate priority for governments across all levels was to **work together on a clear route-map** to deal with the fallout of the pandemic and the challenges of climate change and Brexit. The need for political and economic stability was mentioned multiple times:

  The uncertainty that everyone faces at the moment is massive, we just cannot be asked to deal with even more. No more referendums for the next decade until we try and recover with some kind of certainty as to what the future might be like, and the politicians of all parties and at all levels to prove they have what it takes to re-build the UK…

- For national government, the specific priorities included improving **broadband** in rural areas (*'the knock-on effect of this could transform our community'*) and dealing comprehensively with the **rural dimensions of poverty and inequality**:

  '*RAISE WAGES FOR RURAL NHS AND CARE WORKERS. THEY ARE STRUGGLING AND NEED MORE THAN CLAPPING*'

Fuel poverty was highlighted and there were suggestions to mitigate this through '*installation of solar panels on all homes*' and *'converting heating systems away from oil to more environmentally friendly technologies'.*

There were also calls for improved provision within rural communities including tailored sign-posting (fuel poverty, domestic violence, mental health, sexual health and benefits), more flexible personal or social care ('*we are crying out for services that actually meet peoples and families needs'*), increased availability of '*childcare for under 3's and out of school'* and of mental health services:

A vast improvement in Mental Health Services is going to be the biggest requirement in the recovery of every community as Mental Health will be one of the largest long term effects of this pandemic.

- For the Scottish Government and local government, the clearest priority was to *'devolve power and restart meaningful local democracy'*. It was recognised that **communities have certain powers in relation to setting local priorities, but these may not go far enough**:

Communities already have the power to discuss their aspirations. In practice this is blocked at a local level by politically motivated individuals. This needs to change.

Disband Highland Council as unfit for purpose.... return Skye and Lochalsh to a separate local mini-council to make our own decisions.

It is also recognised that **communities require resources and the support to build the skills, capacity and structures necessary for meaningful participation** in a democratic and an economic context:

Empowering community groups and enterprises with money and with coaching and guidance on how to work effectively.

…it should not be expected that volunteers and community councils are handed over the responsibilities of doing it all themselves. Most community councils are run by volunteers and many of them also work or have family commitments.

Not leaving the running of our communities to the largesse of volunteers. Paid jobs needed or universal basic income to ensure people can contribute without compromising their own financial wellbeing…

- National and local government were also encouraged to work together on a **comprehensive programme of investment in private and community led enterprise**:

So many community and social enterprises have to jump through ridiculous bureaucratic hoops to get off the ground and the qualification criteria for funding is often a very poor fit with the actual needs - the need has to be squashed into the frame required by the funding body.

Many micro businesses fell through the 'crack' in terms of support during Covid (e.g. new start-ups that were self-employed). Whilst we can't turn the clock back but perhaps going forward they should be identified and helped as they do make a contribution to the economy and can help with resilience.

It was suggested that programmes of local enterprise investment need to align with efforts to improve local supply chains and to encourage people to *'shop local'*.

The council needs to stop allowing large retailers i.e. Tesco Coop Asda etc building at the edge of towns and concentrate on keep the town centres alive - our local village is nearing a ghost town due to this being allowed to happen.

Look at the cost of getting food, fuel and materials to the islands. It's prohibitive. We had to BEG suppliers to continue to bring supplies here when ferry timetables changed – it is that fragile.

Not necessarily 'incentives' to shop locally but promoting ways of doing so. Can we make it easier for fishermen or crofters/farmers to sell produce locally? Or make it easier for people to see who locally might be selling online?

- There were warnings against rural communities putting all their '*eggs in one basket'* and calls to diversify local economies rather than leave them dependent on '*the success or failure of tourism or the service industries.'* Some respondents however acknowledged a move away from tourism would be very difficult:

As a community we are dependent on the hospitality and it is difficult to see how some of the businesses may survive to next year. All this talk of diversification will not materialise quickly enough and will see financial ruin for a lot of people here.

- **Job creation** was perceived to be an important mechanism for economic recovery in particular areas, frequently linked to the green recovery agenda:

Jobs and apprenticeships for young people in foundational sectors such as health, care, local food production and housing provision. Also in local industrial hubs that help address the climate crisis such as renewables, home retrofit, circular economy and transport innovation.

Relocate a part of the Scottish government or Highland Council to a remote rural area such as NW Sutherland. This would bring families, jobs, create secondary jobs and wealth.

- Whilst most communities would like to retain **young people** within their communities there were calls for incentives to be made available to allow *'young people to spread their wings'* and experience other ways of life which would in turn, foster new ideas, ambition, vision and entrepreneurship.

- **Increasing affordable housing stock** was mentioned in over 20% of free text answers linked to rural repopulation by the young and not so young:

There are jobs available here but local housing shortage curtails community sustainability so much ....

Affordable housing or having a way to reduce the number of vacant second homes would benefit younger people in the communities which would strengthen them in the long term.

I would extend the support to young people returning to a community to others looking to move back to an area - lots of people feel they are 'from' a place but might struggle to afford to move back there (given current house prices): not just the young.

- **Childcare** was also mentioned in the context of repopulation – '*providing wraparound care for early years and primary pupils to allow parents to live in rural areas and travel to work would mean the repopulation of remote rural areas*' – as was the need for government to encourage businesses and third sector organisations to adopt more **sensitive family policies** (maternity, paternity and adoption – '*If they exist, they are the bare minimum*. *How do people afford to have children?*'

Travel itself emerged as a major theme, both in terms of making rural living more viable (e.g. recommendations around cheaper and better rail, bus and ferry networks) but also greener and more conductive to supporting rural social capital:

…we would like investment to support the purchase of electric vehicles for rural transport to bring isolated people to larger community centres and halls so that they have the same opportunities for social interaction as their urban counterparts.