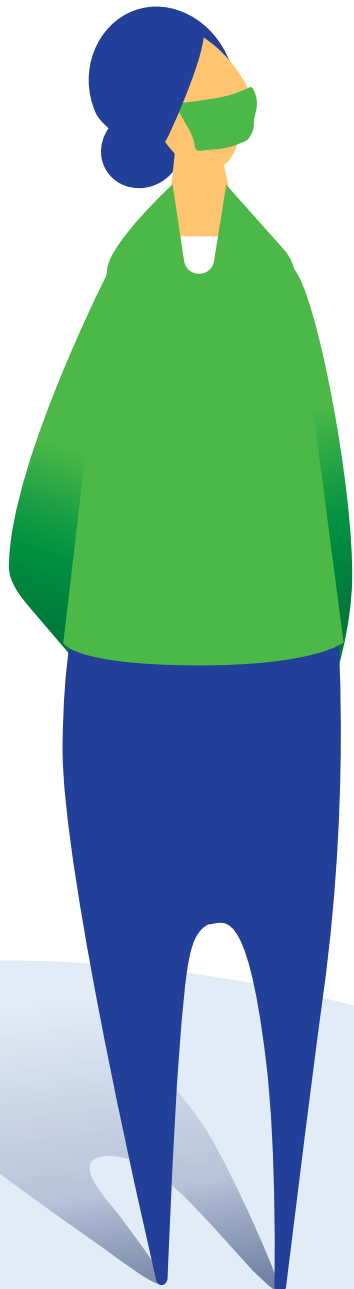


COVID 19

RURAL REFERENCE GROUP

INSIGHTS





INTRODUCTION

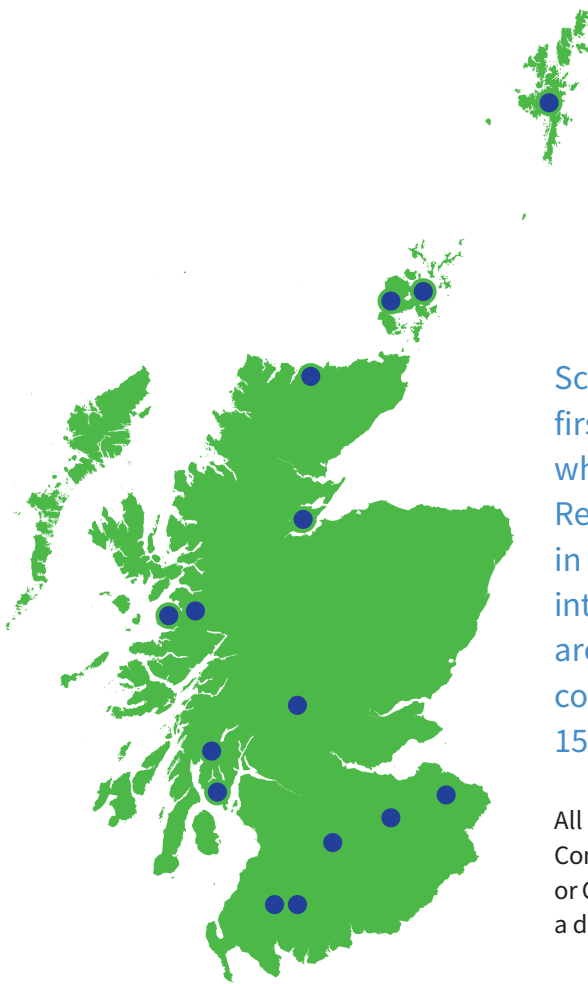
Scottish Rural Action conducted two surveys during the first national lockdown. We asked our survey respondents whether they would be interested in joining a Local Reference Group to discuss some of the survey findings in greater detail. In October and November 2020, we interviewed fifteen people from all over rural Scotland, 27% are from the islands and 73% from the mainland. The communities they represent ranged from approx. 250 to 15,000 people.

All the participants were active members of their community, some were Community Councillors, some were Trustees of their local Development Trust or Community Trust and others were involved in less formal ways, but all had a detailed knowledge of their local area.

The overwhelming reasons the participants gave for taking part was because they saw it as an opportunity to share their experiences and learn from others. They also expressed a desire to have greater input into the decisions being made that directly affect them.

Each participant chose how they engaged with the Group, either through completing another survey, an interview over the phone or an online group discussion. Whilst some of these opinions are the individual's own, others have taken the questions back to their community and returned with a collective response.

What follows are the reflections of how fifteen rural communities, building on existing resilience skills, came together to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all their members in the face of the advancing pandemic. They offer up examples of good practice, share learning, and suggest ways in which their communities might recover from this. Their efforts during the first lockdown have resulted in several positive outcomes; an increased sense of community, a better awareness of different individual needs, a determination to lead the recovery in their community and a greater appreciation of the areas in which they live.



ORDNANCE SURVEY
(OS LICENCE NUMBER 100024655)



COMMUNITY RESPONSE

There was no 'one size fits all' approach when the first lockdown came but each community had the same priorities:



A small number of the communities already had Resilience Groups and so were quick to galvanise community members/volunteers. Some communities took a little longer to get a more structured response in place but whilst that was happening informal resilience groups sprang up, using platforms like WhatsApp and Facebook to make collective decisions as to their community's priorities.

All but two of the communities in this study reported having an active Community Council that was key to co-ordinating their response. In some cases, this was done in parallel with other local organisations such as the local Development or Community Trust and three participants said their local church was part of this collective response.

A few participants, in different parts of the country noted that their Community Councils were hampered in their emergency response by the need to adhere to strict protocols around the way they organise and deliver meetings and manage their finances. It was suggested that Parish and Town Councils received better centralised support and more consistent messaging around their role from the English and Welsh governments and institutions.

Just two participants identified a local anchor organisation as being integral to their community's response. Both these organisations were well established within their respective communities long before the pandemic hit. Based in a central location within the community, such as the local hall, offering a range of services, including a food delivery scheme for vulnerable people, they were well positioned to extend their services and co-ordinate the community's effort.

Another participant reported that their community was inspired to create a local anchor organisation during the first lockdown. Although this area had an active Community Council and Community Trust, the community voted to set up a separate organisation to co-ordinate the promotion and development of projects that best serve the community.



RESILIENCE

We asked our participants for examples of what worked well within their community. These examples utilised the resources that were available to them at the time, whether it was funding, volunteers, or surplus supplies:



VOLUNTEERS

Cited by most of the participants, a network of volunteers appeared to be vital to the different response systems working. Many of the communities reported having an older volunteer population - some of this may be due to the community being older in general - but traditionally volunteers have tended to be older residents because they have more time to offer. When the pandemic hit and restrictions were imposed, a number of these communities saw their volunteer numbers drop as many were asked to shield, considered 'at risk' because of their age. However, participants reported a surge in new volunteers. Most of these were people who had lost their jobs, been furloughed or were unable to continue with their studies. Although grateful for the increase, the participants were not surprised, referring to a collective sense of responsibility that was felt amongst their community.

A couple of participants were heartened by bonds that developed between the community members who were shielding and the volunteers assisting them with their shopping.

COMMUNITY LARDERS AND MEAL DELIVERY SERVICES

In trying to minimise the impact of reduced incomes and it being harder to access to shops, many of the communities established a communal space where food, toys, jigsaws, etc were donated. Whilst some of these projects were either being mooted or had been set up prior to the lockdown, they were adapted or extended to offer a wider selection of goods. A few made use of Covid-19 funding to purchase additional fridges and freezers for such use. These were given different names such as The Sentry Box, Community Larder, Sharing Shed and Community Shed.

To speed up the process and reduce the time it took to distribute the food or vouchers to those in need, some of these projects were offered to all members of the communities regardless of financial status. Although these initiatives differed slightly from community to community, all offered the same thing, food and supplies to whoever needed them, no questions asked. Three communities appear to have used a food voucher or food box scheme and with some additional funding, food delivery schemes, traditionally for older community members, were created or extended to include those being told to shield or struggling financially.

LOCAL BUSINESSES

Food and drink businesses including local shops were praised for reacting very quickly to the pandemic. One local shop auctioned off products that were going out of date and donated that money to the local food bank to buy certain supplies in bulk and a distillery produced hand sanitiser for their local community. The distribution of essential supplies such as food and prescriptions were only possible because there were community volunteers to make these deliveries.

FUNDERS

Two participants felt that the speed with which financial assistance was made available helped their efforts. One praised the support of funders such as the Scottish Government, National Lottery and The Robertson Trust in helping their community's response. This participant acknowledged that perhaps a pre-existing relationship with these funders helped but appreciated the offer of quick additional funds and minimal red tape.

COMMUNICATION

Communication was vital in the success of each communities' response to Covid-19 and there was a variety of methods used to ensure that everyone was kept informed:

Online communication platforms such as Zoom, Skype and Microsoft Teams were praised for their effectiveness in getting information and updates out quickly. However, several participants wanted to highlight that connectivity remains an issue within their community too.

Local Radio proved invaluable over lockdown for two island communities, in different parts of Scotland.

Community Newspapers were mentioned by two participants as the best way to reach and inform all members of the community - additional funds were allocated so that enough copies of the paper could be printed for every resident and these were then delivered by volunteers.

Word of mouth was referred to as a form of back-up method of communication too. Volunteers would pass on updates to shielding residents when dropping off food or prescriptions.

Letters to neighbours was a strategy that one community used as an additional form of communication. Inspired by an idea generated in another part of the UK. They encouraged their residents to write letters to their neighbours, offering up contact details in the hopes that everyone had someone they could call on locally should the need arise. This highlights the resourcefulness of these communities and willingness to be open to alternative ideas.

PAID CO-ORDINATORS

Two communities in this study praised the efforts of local co-ordinators. One oversaw the efforts of the community's Resilience Group and was the main point of contact for volunteers. They were considered integral to the success of a co-ordinated volunteer response. The other person, a Development Co-ordinator, was hired prior to the lockdown and helped boost the morale of the community by suggesting activities and competitions.

COLLECTIVE SOCIAL ACTIVITIES

Most of the communities found plenty of ways to reduce isolation and feed people's creativity. There were examples of art and gardening competitions, socially distanced sporting activities and community quizzes. One participant has been involved in a writing group which has produced a volume of writing inspired by the lockdown whilst another community is creating a Lockdown Quilt.

INCREASED SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Several felt that the lockdown had both strengthened existing relationships and created new ones. Most of the participants referred to an increased sense of community but this was not entirely surprising to them either. One person reflected that this was just a natural consequence of living remotely; looking out for one another and helping when needed. That said, many participants felt it was important to stress the work and support that friends, neighbours and relatives had done throughout this period.

INDIVIDUAL NEEDS WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

The old and infirm are generally considered the most vulnerable but the pandemic exposed another group of people and many participants expressed concern for residents whose income had been drastically reduced or lost because of the lockdown. It was felt that foodbanks only mitigated one of the problems this group now faced.

One participant believed that their GP had made referrals to the meal delivery scheme for people who would not normally have been considered vulnerable. And two people felt that the involvement of their local GP in their community's response to Covid-19 had helped to reduce the likelihood that some people's needs were being overlooked. Another participant believed that not having access to who was deemed medically vulnerable meant they could not be sure that some residents had been missed. As well as GPs providing important information, one person felt the local Minister brought knowledge of vulnerable groups that they had not been aware of.

Other participants felt that the relationships formed or strengthened through the lockdown, either through volunteering or the formation of social bubbles, helped reduce the likelihood that someone went unnoticed.

One of the anchor organisations that took part in this study knew they were not reaching all members of their community prior to the pandemic. Through lockdown they connected with more young people and one parent families. As a result, they are now reviewing their services with the intention of engaging more meaningfully with these groups and have already recruited a Marketing Officer to assist them with this.

Despite all these efforts, none of the participants could confidently say that no resident had been overlooked. One conclusion that was offered was that there remains a stigma to seeking help or admitting poverty.

ACCOMMODATING DIFFERING NEEDS

Moving forward, a few participants reported that they are looking at ways to combat isolation with talks between the key community organisations already taking place. One of the local anchor organisations has also written 'combatting isolation' into their business plan.

A variety of other suggestions have been made, such as a designated 'buddy' bench in the village, covered meeting areas, the purchasing of IT equipment and digital access training to residents as well as communal working spaces for those working from home.

One community believes 'Social Prescribing' to be a meaningful way of addressing the differing needs within their community. They had been considering it prior to the lockdown and feel more certain of its benefits now. Social Prescribing acknowledges that 'a one size fits all' approach to care is not sufficient. By using Link Workers who have a knowledge of the local area, social prescribing aims to support individuals by assessing their situations and connecting them with the right groups and services that will help them overcome their issues and/or achieve their goals.

One participant was impressed by the capabilities of online platforms in engaging with the younger people in their community and so reports that their community has plans to continue using these.

Most people feel that there is still much hardship to endure from this pandemic and so almost all the participants who had a Community Larder during lockdown have spoken about this carrying on well after the restrictions are lifted.



VOLUNTEER BURNOUT

Concern around volunteer burnout and community fatigue had been raised in our Covid-19 surveys, so we were interested to see if this was an issue within the communities in this study and whether they had found ways to combat these feelings.

A couple of participants sensed that their volunteers were experiencing low level burnout, but most people did not feel that this was an area of concern in their community. The main explanation given was that so many people came out to volunteer which meant no one felt over-burdened with responsibilities. One person reported there being not enough for their community volunteers to do, such were the numbers.

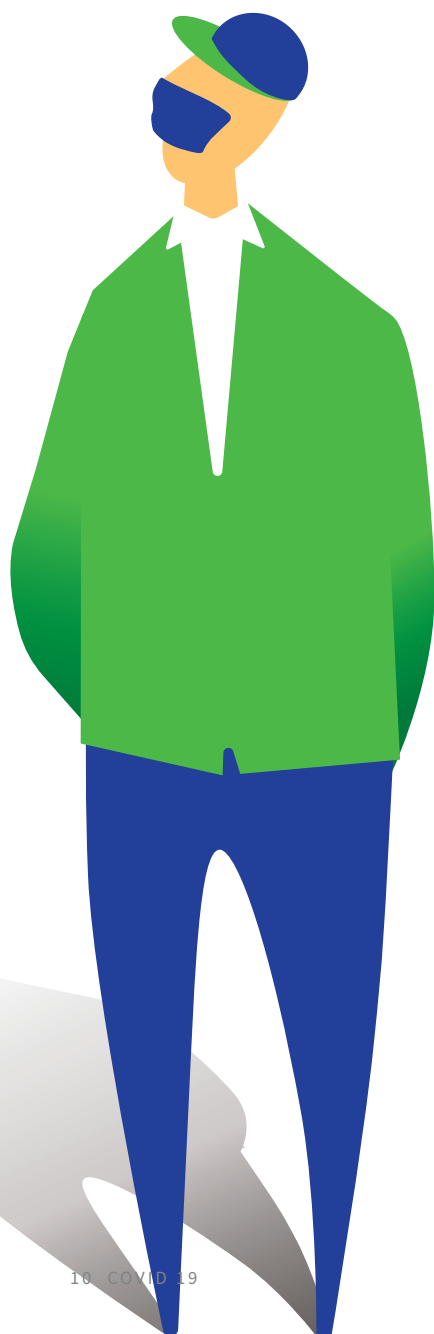
When the restrictions started to ease, one participant observed a slight decline in compassion although they were quick to point out that the community continued to help regardless of a subtle shift in attitude.

By late summer, most communities saw a reduction in volunteer numbers, but this appears to have been down to people returning to work or students going back to college. A couple of participants have mentioned recent volunteer recruitment drives which have been successful showing that the willingness to help within the community remains.

WAYS TO ALLEVIATE THESE FEELINGS OF BURNOUT

Although burnout does not appear to be a specific issue for the communities that have been consulted, some suggested that any issues with resentment or fatigue in their community were mitigated through peer supervision. Giving people the space and opportunity to talk helped alleviate the build-up of negative feelings and perhaps alert those around them of potential issues.

One participant also felt that matching the right volunteer to the right task had been a factor in reducing the likelihood of burnout. Consequently, their community is considering the recruitment of a volunteer co-ordinator or development worker, observing that it is easier to attract volunteers but much more difficult to manage them. They feel that the value this post would add outweighs the minimal funding it would require. This was echoed in another community that already had a Co-ordinator, volunteers knew who to approach if they had any issues and this person was also responsible for checking on volunteers too.



LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND DECISION MAKING

When asked about how involved communities should be in local decision making and ways to strengthen relationships with local government, almost all the participants felt that local people had a lot of offer; knowledge of their area and the issues that are important to the people that live there, and so should be consulted on any decisions that affect them.

A term used by one participant was ‘subsidiarity’ – decision-making and tasks carried out at the most appropriate local level. They felt this was a way of accommodating the differing needs of rural communities and would allow for the varying levels of engagement and experience in these areas.

Three participants felt that rural communities should be given greater trust and recognition when it came to local decision making. Each used the same example of grant funding as evidence of this, lots of rural communities have a wealth of experience in applying for, managing, and reporting on substantial amounts of restricted money.

Several people empathised with their local councils and recognised the need to prioritise projects, services, and areas in the face of diminishing resources. There were a small number who felt disconnected from their local council though, and a couple of these responses, but not all, came from the Highland Council region which covers the largest area in Scotland. Smaller council areas were recommended as a way of making people feel that their opinions and feelings held more weight.

Community empowerment was suggested as a way of improving local governance with one person stating that people should be encouraged to achieve as much as they can at a local level. One community group suggested a partnership approach between Community Councils and local government as a way of finding solutions to local issues. They felt that there were resources within communities that could be utilised if local people were brought into the decision-making process more. This might start with smaller issues, working up to larger projects once these partnerships were fully established.

A review of Community Councils and their remit was also a proposal that was put forward. Some of these comments, but not all, came from the participants whose Community Councils had struggled to convey the wishes of their community during lockdown.

One request was a reduction of red tape as well as clear consultation around local services. This response was in relation to getting local services, like the village hall, opened again after the lockdown.

Only two participants cautioned against decision making going too local, reasoning that the breadth of knowledge and expertise required on certain issues may be lacking in some places. And whilst this was echoed by other participants, the majority still felt that local people should be involved in decisions that involve them.



LOCAL RECOVERY ROUTE MAP

Recovery meant different things to different participants.

RETURN OF LOCAL SERVICES

For some, a return of local services such as regular public transport, re-opening the local hall and social activities resuming, as well as the easing of other social distancing measures, would indicate recovery.

MENTAL WELLBEING

The pandemic has had an adverse effect on people's mental health and a few participants felt that if members of their community were no longer feeling the negative impact of the virus and the restrictions mentally, then that would be a sign that things were starting to improve.

THE SURVIVAL OF LOCAL BUSINESSES

Some expressed concern for local businesses and tradespeople and wanted to know that these people will be supported and that their services will be available once the pandemic is over. A couple of participants felt recovery might be local people not having to leave the community to find alternative employment.

TOURISM

This was a worry for our survey respondents in the summer and clearly remains so. Some of the participants are anxious about what lies ahead because their experience last summer was that tourists travelled around Scotland in motorhomes and campervans and did not spend the money they would normally have done in hotels, pubs and restaurants. Two participants mentioned that hotels in their community are currently for sale. One person expressed concern as to how some people would manage because they had not been able to earn money over the summer months, through tourism, that would normally cover their costs over winter.

Other participants feel that the infrastructure, like toilets and roads, is not sufficient to deal with increased numbers. Sadly, not all visitors to rural Scotland last summer left it as they had found it which frustrated a few of the participants. These feelings were heightened because many rural communities had been successful in keeping Covid-19 at bay and fear such reckless behaviour threatened that.



CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

Scotland is renowned for its food, music and arts scene and a few participants felt the loss of the different cultural festivals that would normally take place around Scotland this year. Moving forward, some festivals will be able to adapt and utilise online capabilities, but others will not. There was concern expressed for those working in the creative industries in Scotland, not just the artists but all the technicians and behind the scenes roles that go unnoticed in normal times.

RE-POPULATION

As a result of the pandemic, the idea of rural living has drawn greater appeal with stories of estate agents being inundated with interested people currently residing elsewhere in the UK. One participant is enthused by the idea that long vacant houses in their community might soon be filled with younger people and families moving to the area. This potential rejuvenation caused another participant to reflect on how renewed interest might affect the housing needs of local people who will now have to compete with higher earners from other parts of the UK.

HOSPITAL TRANSPORT

It was widely reported in the press that people were going undiagnosed or missing vital treatment as hospitals scaled back their services to focus their resources on dealing with Covid-19. In normal times, people who do not drive would normally rely on public transport or a lift from a friend or relative, but these options are not currently open to them and so whilst the services are opening back up, people are struggling to get to these appointments.

RE-VISIONING

For one rural community, recovery includes consulting its members on what their visions for the area are. And, with increased local engagement brought about by the pandemic, there are now the people to drive these new projects forward.

A few people could not identify what recovery looked like, but they felt they would know it when it began to happen. The one thing that all participants felt was that, collectively, we are not on the road to recovery yet.

WHAT ASSISTANCE IS NEEDED?

Broadband came up again when talking about assistance. A few participants felt it was an important factor when incentivising people to either stay or move to their community. For the area looking at creating a shared space for residents who are working from home but looking to reduce feelings of loneliness, good connectivity will be vital to that enterprise succeeding. One person described Broadband as a basic utility and was concerned about people becoming disenfranchised by limited or no access to it.

Some participants felt the government should be offering financial support to the people and businesses in their community that are struggling although one person felt that this should have a more targeted approach than the blanket support being offered presently.

A few people felt that there should be continued investment into rural communities. This investment should be guided by local, knowledgeable people but in partnership with people/organisations that are genuinely keen to be involved.

THE BIGGER PICTURE

Prior to the pandemic, Scotland was facing two significant challenges, the Climate emergency and Brexit so we wanted to find out whether the pandemic had changed their community's attitude to these issues.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The overall feeling was that Covid-19 has not changed communities' approach to Climate Change. Some already employ a Climate Change Officer and several the communities already have environmental projects running, such as electric bike hires schemes, organised litter picks and composting public toilets. One participant expressed frustration that a project funded by the Climate Challenge fund is being derailed by lockdown in a few different ways. Work has been delayed and there has been difficulty in sourcing local tradespeople. This frustration is mixed with concern too, that local tradespeople will disappear without further financial support from the government. Their project will then need to use tradespeople from as far away as Edinburgh or Aberdeen which has a greater impact on the environment.

There were a few comments on local campaigning with communities 'doing their bit' for the environment although there was also a sense that this is of little significance given the size of the climate emergency.

A couple of participants felt there needed to be greater alignment between government funding, its priorities and individual community needs. The Scottish Government's commitment to environmental projects, such as electric bikes and cars, was commended but greater support for local issues was requested too - an example given was community groups having to source funding, build and manage public toilets. This was felt more keenly over the lockdown when many people were travelling through rural Scotland and unable to use conveniences.

Although the general assumption was that the lockdown had had a positive effect on the environment because people were not using transport, one island participant involved in beach cleaning, observed that the marine debris had not decreased during this time.

One person felt that the restrictions introduced because of Covid-19 had benefitted their community and expressed a desire to build on this. They hoped to enhance their community further so that people got their social, cultural, and economic entitlement locally.





BREXIT

Most of the communities in this study are dependent on the fishing or farming industries and so know people whose livelihoods are affected by Brexit. One participant spoke of local farmers having to diversify to stay in business whilst another one mentioned a dairy farmer selling their herd. This family have been farming for several generations but cannot see a future following Brexit.

Due to lack of clarity on what will happen when the UK leaves the EU, there was genuine concern from a few participants as to about what might be coming, specifically around food prices. Some of the smaller islands or coastal villages are already finding food prices prohibitive and worry what will happen to these costs next year.

A couple of responses were focussed on what community funding might be available after Brexit. There was an appreciation that some decisions were being delayed due to Covid-19 but as the end of the year draws closer, this is turning to frustration, as communities look to their recovery.

One participant expressed sadness at the end of the LEADER scheme which many rural communities have benefitted from. To this person, this closure meant more than the loss of a potential revenue stream, gone is the opportunity to forge pan-European connections and chances to share learning with similar projects within the EU.

The caveat to all the responses was that the lack of information around the coming changes makes it hard to campaign for or against it. One participant concluded that the community spirit that helped them through lockdown will prevail once the realities of Brexit are known.



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SRA would like to thank the participants of the Covid-19 Local Reference Group for their time and for sharing their experiences.