



Rural mental health and wellbeing - the recording and outputs from the 2021vSRP Session on 18th March 2021

Session curated by the [Scottish Rural Mental Health Forum](#) and chaired by **Jim Hume**, SRMHF Convener.

Drawing on emerging Scottish research, this session debated action to promote mental health and wellbeing in rural and island communities with a particular focus on reaching out to and including marginalised groups. It was attended by 63 participants.

As Jim reminded us in his opening remarks, this year has seen the topic of mental health rise up the agenda. The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on people's mental health in different ways, some positive and some negative, with learning captured by academic institutions and diverse organisations. Now it is time to use that learning to identify action that will underpin mental wellbeing.

Summary of Presentations

Generation Scotland's **Ali Forbes** presented findings from two seminal surveys. [TeenCovidLife](#) launched in May 2020 and asked ~5,500 volunteers aged 12-17 from across Scotland a series of questions about how Covid-19 measures had affected them. [RuralCovidLife](#) launched in October 2020 and asked similar questions of ~3,000 rural Scottish volunteers, aged 16 and over. Findings from the surveys include:

- In RCL, 32% of those aged 18-29 said they felt lonely most or all of the time compared to 8% across all age groups. 57% of those aged 16-19 felt nervous, anxious or on edge' nearly every day.
- In TCL, 21% of rural and 17% of non-rural young people felt lonely most or all of the time. 19% of rural young people felt stressed all or most of the time.
- Factors affecting young people's mental health included school closures, isolation from friends and job losses.

Dr Rebecca Crowther of the Equality Network discussed themes from the [Further Out](#) research project which sought to understand the experiences of LGBT+ individuals living in rural and remote Scotland. Findings included:

- 62% of research participants believe that LGBT people outside of Scotland's big cities face more inequality than those who live within.
- 51% of LGBT people living in rural areas have personally experienced prejudice or discrimination for being LGBT. Of those, 81% had experienced LGBT+ phobic comments and attitudes and 55% experienced verbal abuse.
- Spatial isolation and social inequality (discrimination, lack of inclusive spaces, lack of anonymity, lack of access to services) leads directly to minority stress and poor wellbeing and mental health.

Becky suggested that Covid-19 lockdown measures which resulted in urban populations experiencing spatial isolation similar to remote rural residents had created opportunities for improved mutual understanding which could, at policy level, lead to positive action. Additional research should focus on intersectional minority stress but on the back of the Further Out findings, the Equality Network has secured Scottish Government funding to develop a [Rural LGBTI Visibility Project](#).

Finally, **Gemma MacKinnon** from [Caraidean Uibhist](#) (Uist Befriending) and [Penumbra](#) offered a personal and professional perspective on mental health provision in a remote island setting. Her presentation identified the 'fishbowl' effect in small, close knit communities - everyone knowing you (or thinking they know you!) – as being a significant barrier to seeking help. Conversely, 'community' is also a resilience factor and community-based activities, including befriending networks, serve to connect people and promote mental wellbeing.

Gemma suggested people need options as to where they go for support and what that support should look like. Improving people's access to appropriate support necessitates addressing the 'statutory/third sector divide', building collaboration and giving equal footing in terms of income (funding) security to community-led projects and social enterprises. It also necessitates involving local communities in open and frank discussion around mental wellbeing and what good approaches look like.

Discussion Points and Closing Remarks

The discussion points were summarised by **Rachel Cackett**, Executive Director of [Samaritans Scotland](#).

- The '**rural idyll**' narrative which promotes false stereotypes of rural life being healthier, less complicated and less stressful than urban life is prevalent and pervasive. It fundamentally shapes social attitudes and national policy around mental wellbeing. We need to develop a **solid evidence base** around rural stressors and resilience factors to tackle these stereotypes. Research should not only seek to capture the views of experts-by-experience but involve them directly in designing and delivering research methodologies.
- Mental wellbeing, especially young people's wellbeing, should be viewed **holistically** with due regard to everything that may be stressors in their lives. In rural communities some stressors

may be felt more acutely including the higher cost of living, digital exclusion, lack of housing, transport, employment and educational opportunities.

- **Minority stress** negatively impacts on the wellbeing of groups, including those with protected characteristics and carers, who do not see themselves directly involved or represented in community life. Abuse and discrimination experienced by these groups is under-reported and underestimated in rural communities. **Visibility projects** have the potential to create spaces which normalise, value and celebrate everyone's potential to shape their community. Visibility projects work with minority groups to elevate their voices and become more visible while at the same time challenge non-minority groups to become more visible in their **allyship**.
- Mental ill health **prevention** in rural communities is supported by a wide range of community development initiatives that offer recreational spaces such as gardens and skateboard parks, learning and leisure opportunities and chances to socialise and become involved through volunteering. Community bodies such as Development Trusts and other Anchor Organisations are becoming more ambitious about making provisions for wellbeing in their Development Plans or Place Plans.
- **Early intervention** services are delivered, in the main, by community-rooted third sector organisations which have developed creative approaches to ensuring service users' **anonymity** is protected.
- Both prevention and early intervention initiatives are vulnerable to **funding cuts**, to a large part due to the fact that their impact is not formally evaluated. Waiting list pressures on crisis-driven statutory services are resulting in increased numbers of complex cases being supported by third sector early intervention projects. This is having a deep impact on the **wellbeing of staff and volunteers**, compounded by the deep impact and uncertainty created by funding uncertainties.
- **Better integration of statutory and third sector provision** with both sectors being resourced is key. A particular barrier to integration is that the health system only recognises 'mental health' after a medical diagnosis. The social prescribing movement appears effective in building bridges between the statutory and third sector but it is only one approach. Others should be tested.
- There is a positive trend in **rural businesses** and enterprises becoming active in promoting wellbeing in their workforces.

Other documents and initiatives mentioned during session:

- Understanding the response to Covid-19: exploring options for a resilient social and economic recovery in Scotland's rural and island communities. A James Hutton Institute and SRUC collaboration:
file:///C:/Users/artem/AppData/Local/Temp/Rural%20Covid%2019%20research%20-%20summary%20report%20FINAL%20March%202021_1.pdf
- The Royal Literary Fund (RLF) have set up an online reading group called 'Reading Round' which offers people a fun, supportive and stimulating weekly activity. More info at the link:
<https://www.ruralnetwork.scot/news-and-events/news/reading-round-keeps-people-connected-during-pandemic>

- Mental well-being in a Forest School project called Wild About Well-being
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14733285.2020.1811955?fbclid=IwAR15uVHZdHMEEnUDa8IcgPXLcYxksyB9nePlqx7jHuX0K1eT9huzaXOivrw8&>
- The Marshfield Mental Health First Aid Initiative:
<https://www.fmhsconsulting.co.uk/marshfield---proud-to-support-mental-health.html>
- Dementia Friendly Neighbourhood Toolkit:
<https://www.lifechangestrust.org.uk/sites/default/files/publication/files/DFCs%20Toolkit%20WEB%20VERSION.pdf>
- The Farmwell Initiative: <https://farmwell-h2020.eu/about-farmwell/>
- Highlands and Islands Connections Report <https://ruralwellbeing.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Highlands-Islands-Connections-booklet-2020-Email-version.pdf>