



Rural Communities Survey on COVID-19 – Response and Recovery

Round 1 - May 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 first round of the survey undertaken in May 2020. Two further rounds are planned, one in June 2020 and one in July 2020, which will help map trends as Scotland emerges from lockdown.

- ❖ 504 individuals completed round 1 of the survey
- ❖ 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.

HEADLINES

The survey evidences the power, efficacy and responsiveness of localism. Resourced, enabled local organisations, which were trusted to respond directly to local needs, were able to act in a targeted and dynamic way. A similar approach, building capacity at a very local level, is required to maintain resilience and deliver positive impact into the future.

- Rural responses to COVID-19 are a collective, whole-community effort involving Community Councils, Development Trusts, local businesses, third and statutory sector organisations. The types of organisation leading in the response differs across areas. There is no one-size fits all model.
- COVID-19 community funding programmes are generally perceived as a success story, giving rural people reassurance and rural communities agency, ambition and reach.
- Support is reaching a lot of people but with the best will in the world, it is not the right kind of support for everyone. Financial support for individuals and businesses still leaves people falling through the gaps. There is an ongoing and desperate need for specialist support for younger people, carers, those with dementia, learning disabilities and others.

- Connectivity issues (broadband or mobile network coverage) and inadequate data on house numbers/residents were noted to hamper community responses alongside lack of PPE and conflicting or confusing guidance coming from the UK and Scottish Governments and statutory authorities.
- Many people have enjoyed aspects of lockdown and the things they have enjoyed – more exercise, more involvement in volunteering, healthier eating, spending time with close family – are not ‘lifestyle choices’ but resilience factors, strengthening individuals’ ability to cope with trauma.
- Respondents see a lot of trauma on the horizon, including financial hardship, the impact of having to wait for essential healthcare and the ongoing impact of social isolation on peoples’ mental health.
- Greater community cohesion was one of the positives to come out of the pandemic response. It is also perceived to be fragile. The tension between those in the community who wish tourism to be encouraged and those who see tourism as a threat is one factor which may erode it.
- In addition to continued financial support for business and individuals, rural communities’ most univocal request was that Government trusts and resources them to plan their recovery and revival, just as they were trusted and resourced to plan their response to COVID-19.

Section 1: Response – Executive Summary and Recommendations

Findings in this section capture learning from the first two months of lockdown. They inform deliberations around how best to coordinate, resource and deliver future resilience responses in rural Scotland.

- Local businesses have been fundamental to the delivery of rural community responses to COVID-19, many going above and beyond to diversify and adapt their services to meet peoples' needs. There is a demand for local businesses to have recognition for their social focus/lifeline status and be considered as equal partners in future response/recovery/resilience planning and implementation.
- Across the survey, Community Councils were the most frequently cited community sector bodies active in rural responses to COVID-19. Though they are by no means active across the whole of rural Scotland, they have proved in many areas to be an effective vehicle for galvanising and coordinating support for local residents. Learning from Community Councils' role in shaping the rural pandemic response may help re-frame and reinvigorate ongoing debate around models of local democracy and governance.
- COVID-19 funding programmes for communities were generally acknowledged to be pivotal to the positive impact of local responses. Criticism focused on the difficulties communities faced navigating the 'bureaucracy' and the unfamiliar language. The concept of a 'community anchor organisation' (CAO) should be explored with rural communities to ensure the definition fits with communities' perceptions and funders' expectations. The concept of a CAO should also be examined in the context of rural civil society and the role of Community Councils.
- Having a dedicated and salaried individual who could take on a coordinating role (applying for funding, managing communications and volunteers, liaising with other communities to share practice) helped communities hit the ground running during the response phase. Several survey respondents recommended that every community should benefit from a local Development Officer or Response Coordinator and have a resourced Response/ Recovery/ Resilience Plan.
- Where funding and a Coordinator were acknowledged to have strengthened communities' early response to COVID-19, poor broadband connectivity, limited technology, inadequate mapping of house numbers in rural areas and lack of PPE was felt to hamper it. There is expectation that ongoing issues, including improving broadband infrastructure, will be explicitly addressed within any Government roadmap towards national recovery and resilience.
- While 60% of survey respondents felt confident that support was being extended to everyone in their community who needs it as a result of COVID-19, there was acknowledgement that people are experiencing multiple hardships and anxieties and that

there is a limit to what volunteer-led community projects can achieve, especially under lockdown conditions. For many, there was no doubt that people were falling through the gaps, especially those people who benefit from more specific or specialist approaches e.g. younger people, seasonal workers for whom English is not a first language, the elderly, those suffering dementia or mental health issues and individuals with disabilities including learning disabilities. Organisations that supported these groups before COVID-19 are frequently under-resourced and under-funded and closed or drastically reduced delivery during lockdown. An assessment of how these organisations could have sustained and indeed, increased the capacity of their delivery during lockdown, is perhaps a helpful exercise that could be undertaken as part of a community's future response, recovery and resilience planning processes.

Section 2: Recovery – Executive Summary and Recommendations

Findings in this section capture rural residents' perceptions on how best to move forwards from lockdown – what are the positives changes communities wish to build on and what are the needs that require to be addressed? This will inform the UK and Scottish Governments' and others' deliberations on how best to support Scotland's rural communities during the next phases of the pandemic.

- Though the pandemic has caused incalculable trauma and harm, the majority of respondents wrote of positives associated with lockdown including a greater sense of community solidarity, more money and the power to design services devolved to community level, more organisations and people interacting online and paving the way for increased numbers of home workers and remote learners, less traffic and more people exercising, spending time with family and shopping locally. Underlying all the positives was an acknowledgement of their fragility. There needs to be commitment at all levels – community and government – to understanding how positives changes can be safeguarded and built upon. The first step to doing this is to understand them not simply as 'gains' but in line with a trauma-informed approach and wider discourse on the wellbeing economy, as personal and community resilience factors.
- The level and rapidity of funding invested locally during the pandemic gave communities enormous ambition and agency. The initiatives supported through the COVID-19 specific funds were not just responses to the pandemic, they also helped address long-standing needs – the need for better community coordination, for up-to-date technology and software, for a micro foodbank, for a befriending project etc. Many of these initiatives will remain invaluable after lockdown ends and respondents were clear they hoped Government and other funders would be willing to listen to communities and continue to support those initiatives that were identified as being crucial to their wellbeing and sustainability.
- The financial hardship suffered by businesses and individuals was highlighted by the majority of respondents as the single most important issue that the UK and Scottish Government must address. COVID-19 funding/investment/rescue packages for businesses

were perceived to be required beyond 2021 especially for the tourism and food & drink sector. Specific groups of individuals were identified as still falling through the gaps and several respondents suggested universal approaches to financial support for individuals and families, such as increasing child benefit or introducing a universal basic income, would transform the lives of rural residents and communities.

- Tourism was the most contentious theme with an almost equal split between respondents whose primary concern was that tourists might bring the virus to their community and respondents whose primary concern was that the tourism sector might not survive the pandemic. A significant number of survey respondents voiced concern that trying to find a balance between these competing interests could lead to conflict and the erosion of community solidarity. It could also lead to hardened attitudes towards tourists and second homeowners. Government policy on tourism has to be sensitive to this conflict which is more likely to impact on island and remote rural communities as well as communities where overtourism has been a long-standing issue. Some respondents felt this was an opportunity to shift the sector (or attitudes towards the sector) by promoting a more socially and environmentally conscious model of tourism catering for staycations and slow travel.

Section 1 - Response

Q2. Which organisations or groups are involved in your local community's response to COVID?

The highest proportion of respondents (79%) identified **local businesses** as being active in their community's response (only 5% said they are not active and 15% were not aware of whether they are active or not). This is unsurprising given what we know about the pivotal role of local shops and pharmacies in distributing necessities and medicine. Local businesses have garnered praise for diversifying, often at a loss, in ways that have helped build community resilience, e.g. by introducing online ordering and home deliveries, creating food parcel schemes, or producing face masks and hand sanitiser.

77% of respondents identified **volunteer-led response or resilience groups** as being active. 5% said they were not active and 18% of respondents were not aware. Volunteer-led groups arose across much of rural Scotland as an immediate response to lockdown. Many of these were initiated by Community Councils, local third sector organisations or businesses but an equally significant number grew entirely from the grassroots - neighbours looking out for one another. It is likely that many grassroots groups have since been assimilated into 'formal' response structures, e.g. Together Skye & Raasay, an online initiative started up by a small group of Portree residents has been re-directed now to Skye Community Response.

Survey results also show that **Community Councils** (67% of respondents confirmed their involvement) and **community organisations** such as village halls, Development Trusts etc. (63% confirmed their involvement) are perceived to play an important role in local community responses followed by faith groups (49% confirmed involvement) and **other third sector organisations** such as Citizens Advice (37% confirmed involvement).

Local authorities and statutory services, including GP practices, were prominent in the free text answers to this question. A diverse range of businesses, third sector organisations and faith groups were listed along with respondents in some areas noting that it is '*just normal local people*' involved. In other areas, respondents had not seen or heard from anyone.

Q3. Which organisations or groups are the most active in your community's response?

- ❖ 40% of responses mentioned Community Councils
- ❖ 23% mentioned Development Trusts
- ❖ 22% mentioned various third sector organisations including TSIs, CAB or the Salvation Army
- ❖ 19% mentioned businesses including shops, stores and Calmac
- ❖ 19% mentioned other community organisations including associations, land trusts etc.
- ❖ 14% mentioned Resilience Groups
- ❖ 9% mentioned faith organisations
- ❖ 8% mentioned a statutory service or the NHS

Though the small number of respondents limits the survey's external validity, distinct

geographical variations in responses were mapped. Respondents from DG postcodes, for example, were more likely to cite their Community Council as being the most active organisation, compared to respondents from AB postcodes who noted instead different organisations including Development Trusts, the TSI and the local authority.

Q4. In your community, can all those who need support due to COVID-19 easily access support?

In the tick-box response, the majority (60%) of respondents felt everyone in their community could access support. Only 8% of respondents were emphatic that some people were unable to access support while a significant minority (32%) were not sure. These findings, though positive, must be treated with some caution as they could obscure the fact that in close-knit communities the barriers and stigma attached to seeking support can lead to a false perception that people are okay.

From the free-text responses:

- **Digital exclusion was the main concern**, particularly for elderly and shielding individuals. Many are unable to access information due to a limited broadband connection or no technology, likewise with mobile phones.

People who don't have a computer or a smartphone (large number in this area, mostly elderly) - they don't know whether support is available or how to contact.

- Several respondents noted that there was a limit to how inclusive a volunteer-led, lockdown-constrained, hastily designed project could be even if the intention was there to ensure it was as inclusive as possible. Groups such as **younger people** and **seasonal workers for whom English is not a first language** were noted by some respondents not to be engaging with local support, most likely because support was not perceived to be accessible or meeting their needs.

There is ...very limited support we can offer for young people, particularly the 16 - 35 age group who may be worried about schooling, jobs, careers, exams, young families, mortgages, rent etc., but the research shows that this group is suffering most stress and mental ill health. Unfortunately rural mental health services, particularly those for young people have been almost non-existent for years.

Some respondents commented that services delivered through the NHS and other bodies were not doing enough to adapt their approaches to accommodate the specific needs of different groups including blind and deaf people.

All organisations, including GPs and NHS are ignoring the fact that deaf people cannot participate in consultations by telephone.

- There was also recognition that the COVID-19 support projects could not replace the large number of essential and sometimes specialist services which were curbed or halted entirely due to the pandemic. Their closure was noted to be having a detrimental effect on the wellbeing of the most vulnerable groups including **the elderly, single parents, young carers, those suffering mental ill health, dementia or individuals with learning disabilities.**

Adults with learning disabilities, disabled and/or mental health issues. They have had all support taken away from them and are not always able to ask for help or understand the pandemic. I have had to move in with my daughter as she had all support withdrawn. My requests for support have been ignored-we are struggling.

For these groups, loneliness in particular but also the lack of help with care, transport, budgeting, health, dental care and home schooling were all mentioned as particular issues. The thought that people could be 'falling through the net' was distressing for some and it was pointed out that many people who would normally turn to their GP for help and advice, feel reticent to do so in case they were perceived to be burdening the NHS.

...access to podiatrists for foot care is impossible as only emergencies being seen and anyone who usually attends a podiatrist on regular basis for toe nail clipping etc now has tallons. Been unable to resolve this. This is a necessary area of personal care that has been totally forgotten about.

Those who normally rely on school buses to get to shops. For them the withdrawal of school buses has been a devastating blow.

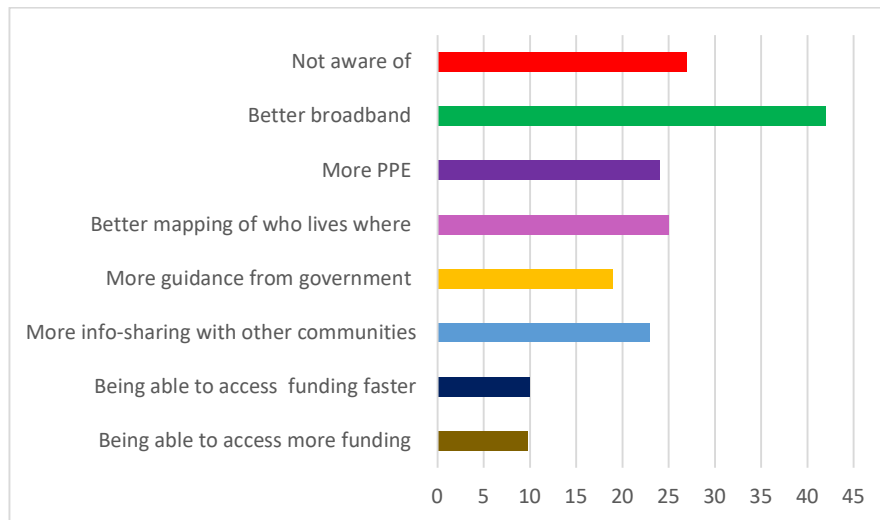
- Some individuals, such as the self-employed, and specific businesses were also identified as falling through the net:

Businesses on NDR over £51k have little financial support. Their 'mothball' costs are thousands each month and it is likely that we will see several go bust with subsequent knock on for local employment.

Micro businesses, small b&b and seasonal workers doing changeovers and paid in cash to subsidise family outgoings and children at school/uni.

Small croft based food producing businesses are totally ignored by govt funding schemes.

Q5. What could have strengthened your community's response to COVID-19 at an earlier stage?



- Better broadband (42%), mapping of who lives where (26%) and more information sharing between communities (25%) were the most popular responses, followed by more PPE (24%).
- In the free text answers, many respondents commented that a swifter and more coordinated national and local government response to the pandemic, enforcing lockdown at an earlier date and having the capacity to resource essential response services, would have made a difference to communities.

Our local authority has only just getting their food hubs organised 12 weeks too late

- More and/or faster funding was ticked by a minority of respondents indicating that the level and speed of financial support did not, in most cases, hinder the development of community responses to COVID-19. Indeed, the free-text responses to Q5 **demonstrate a generally positive perception of the funding available**.

Community was proactive and a Resilience Group was in place. Solutions were created to bring supplies to the community rather than individuals all travelling a distance to do a shop. Funding was promptly applied for through the Development Trust. I think the processes in place have been excellent ensuring no individual is isolated.

Nevertheless, for some it felt a challenge having to match particular needs to particular funding streams especially for those '*not used to doing it*'. People, businesses and organisations were not always successful in getting support. There was also confusion around the term 'anchor organisation' as being unfamiliar or difficult to 'fit' to community organisations.

In the Scottish Borders it is the Community Councils that meet the definition of community anchor...since the introduction of Community Resilience Guidance by the SG in 2013, the Scottish Borders Council has been pro-active in setting up resilience volunteers to meet with any community emergency...

Even now there is too much reliance on volunteers in the community - funds have been allocated to the community trust as an 'umbrella organisation' although prior to this as far as I am aware they were not active in any kind of resilience effort.

- **Communication raised many concerns** particularly around identifying and reaching out to those at risk or shielding. Attempts to respond to individuals' needs were perceived to be hampered by **lack of universal broadband coverage**, the need to adhere to **GDPR guidelines** and **inadequate mapping of house numbers and residents** in rural areas.

We did not have a list of those who were Shielding in our area so had to rely on them contacting the Resilience Group rather than the group being able to be pro-active. There was also an attempt by a social worker to connect us with her clients in the village vulnerable due to dementia. Both situations had issues with confidentiality so this made it difficult to know if the group had been able to help early enough.

In some areas it was noted that multiple organisations provided services but lack of communication and pooling of resources (shopping for a group rather than one individual, different services doubling up) became an issue.

- Respondents felt **guidance from Government, the local authority and other bodies** on matters around volunteering and service delivery **was overwhelming, confusing and sometimes conflicting**. Government guidance appeared to be more pertinent for cities and large towns than rural communities. People would have preferred local information on infection rates and guidance relevant to their area or situation rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.

The PPE provided to NHS staff and carers was not fit for purpose and muddled guidelines throughout.

More localised information published regularly as to infection rates, death numbers, local hub locations etc, Difficult to gauge the relevance of info over such a large disparate geographical area, especially in lockdown.

- **Community emergency and resilience planning skills and provision were not always adequate to cope with everyone's needs from the beginning of lockdown**. There were gaps in knowledge with little help to bridge them (keeping foods at correct temperatures, PPE, supply chains, access to supermarket deliveries, how to fill in a funding application) and many commented on the 'steep learning curve' their community faced.

Some guidance on processes for setting up these groups, and technical support with things like setting up an 0800 number and cashless transactions (we still haven't cracked that one).

Respondents noted that in future, communities should be supported and resourced to have clear strategies in place (risk assessments, clear communication structures, maps, lists of support structures, a salaried individual such as a Development Officer or Resilience Coordinator).

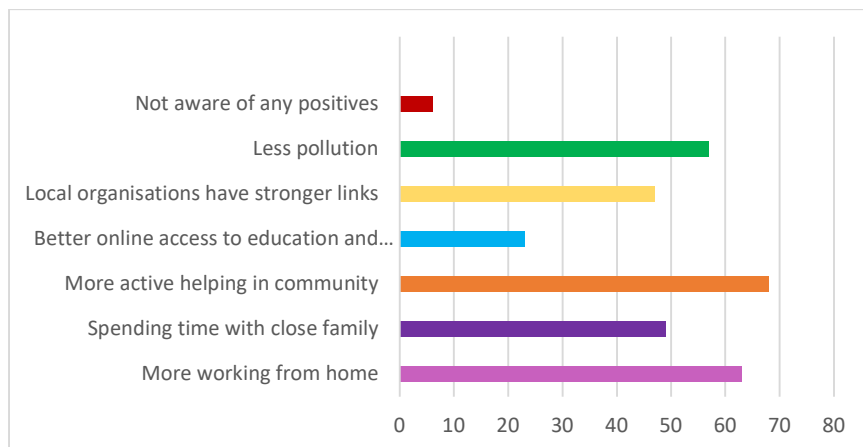
- **Public transport services, especially ferry companies**, were raised in a number of responses, with several respondents praising ferry companies while others noting ongoing issues:

Better response by ferry connection...limiting travel sooner; not combining 3 islands each day. Not shortening time available on mainland so significantly - which has caused real life problems for those who HAVE to travel for medical reasons and in terms of the haulier moving goods / livestock off / on the island. It hasn't been thought through.

- **Island communities** faced particular problems with accessing health care on the mainland and some respondents suggested this might be alleviated through **virtual GP consultations**. They also experienced **local price increases on goods** due to reduced crossings and expressed difficulties in working from home due to poor or intermittent broadband infrastructure.

Section 2 - Recovery

Q6. What positive changes have taken place in your local community as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic?



Most respondents felt that lockdown had given rise to positive changes. In the free-text answers, responses tended to be tempered by a recognition that many people and organisations were going through enormous hardships, yet there was clear optimism around several themes:

- A **stronger sense of community** was the most frequently-mentioned positive (34% of free text responses) – people getting to know each other, supporting each other and generally becoming active agents in promoting community wellbeing. Several respondents noted they felt people were more understanding of the issues facing the more vulnerable members of their communities.

We had a strong community before the lockdown but feel this has strengthened our community support for one another and an understanding to the challenges to some people in our society

- **Funding and service design being devolved to communities, more volunteers and more volunteer-led projects** (e.g. micro-foodbanks, meal distribution, mental health first aid helplines, befriending) received the next highest mention. People having time to volunteer, communities having more control over how services are delivered and the joy of seeing things make a difference were highlighted. Indeed, many respondents noted that some of the COVID-19 projects, like the meals, the befriending and the overall community coordination/development (e.g. salary costs for local Development Officers), were desperately needed before the pandemic and would still be needed afterwards.

Scottish Government, Council, National Lottery, SRA, SCVO, DTAS, National Park and other organisations have all provided easily accessible advice, support and fairly straightforward approaches to funding which has enabled community support actions.

For the first time funding has reached right down to community level rather than being kept at regional level as previously services/funding rarely reach our remote community. This has allowed the local community to be encouraged and appreciated for what many do voluntarily all year.

- A strong theme (24% of free-text responses) was the perception of **less traffic on the roads, more cycling, 'peace and quiet' and a lot less pollution**. Many respondents drew a link between a cleaner, quieter environment and the reduction in tourists and second home owners visiting their area.

We have major issues in our town with speeding and limited space for cyclists and pedestrians, during the lock down this has greatly improved and many of us have had the confidence to let our children cycle through town and build their cycle confidence.

- **Rethinking personal priorities** – “*an increasing awareness of what's important in life*” - exercising more, volunteering more, cooking healthier meals, spending time with family and taking up gardening - was an equally strong theme and linked to people saying they felt calmer and more relaxed as a result.

I am still working (NHS) but many people have taken advantage of lockdown to sort out their houses and gardens and to improve their health, fitness all of which has given their lives a chance to pause, reflect and regroup.

- The increase in **local consumers supporting local businesses** (16% of free-text responses) was highlighted as a driver of immediate local economic resilience and sustainable long-term recovery though these positive responses tended to be heavily caveated with a statement around the ongoing need for financial support of local businesses especially in the hospitality, retail and food & drink sectors.

People are really beginning to realise that buying local is safer, much better for the environment and traceable. I hope this will have a significant impact on British farming and agriculture. It is so important we value this industry especially as we are negotiating Brexit

- Lastly, several respondents described how **home working and home study** had become more viable as increasing numbers of people were motivated to learn how to use Zoom and other communication applications. A small number of respondents noted that the technological revolution was making everything from virtual medical appointments to public meetings more accessible.

It's booted some foosty organisations into the 21st century in terms of communications. It's booted most people too!

Q7. As Scotland moves towards relaxing lockdown, what is your community worried or concerned about?

In the tick-box response, findings point to the following hierarchy of concerns:

1. Increasing numbers of people suffering financially (72% extremely or very worried)
2. Local businesses closing down due to loss of income (70% extremely or very worried)
3. Tourism bringing the virus to our community (60% extremely or very worried)
4. The health and wellbeing of vulnerable and shielding members of the community (47% extremely or very worried)
5. Local community organisations closing down (43% extremely or very worried)
6. Organisations running out of funding for PPE, fuel, food etc. (41% extremely or very worried)
7. A reduction in the number of seasonal workers able to support farms and other businesses (41% extremely or very worried)
8. The quality of education for children and young people (41% extremely or very worried)
9. Increasing pollution (33% extremely or very worried)

The free-text responses are weighted heavily towards tourism and mental health being the

most immediate concerns, followed by financial hardship and the loss of 'gains' in community spirit and community projects, personal priorities and tackling pollution. Underlying this all is a fear of a second surge without the protection of a vaccine or adequate testing. This fear is compounded by the uncertainties around the impact of Brexit on communities' ability to recover financially from the pandemic.

- **Tourism arose as a complex theme** (38% of free text responses). There was an equal split between respondents whose focus was the worry tourists may bring COVID-19 to the community and those whose focus was the long-term sustainability of the tourism sector. Many respondents acknowledged that communities need support (guidance, financial support) and autonomy (community self-determination, not one size fits all) to find a balance between these competing concerns. Without such a balance, respondents warned that conflict would be inevitable and would erode the sense of solidarity and mutuality that has developed through lockdown. Concern was voiced that conflict may result in hardened attitudes towards tourists and second home owners.

I worry that our community will be subsumed by the needs & desires of our nearest, larger neighbouring island, which is also our link to the mainland. I am worried that the need to minimise tourism for this season will not allow for the more critical movement of people on and off island such as youngsters accessing mainland high school education, movement of labour for construction sites, accessing family support via visits by them (from mainland) or to them on mainland.

- **Mental health was also a complex theme** (31% of free text responses). Many respondents highlighted that the longer lockdown lasts, the more this will impact on social isolation and loneliness and exacerbate anxiety and depression especially for the elderly and the shielding who may be 'left behind'.

As I work in health and social care, I'm worried about an avalanche of mental health problems, the waiting lists for key procedures (like knee operations) which hugely affect quality of life and lead to drug dependencies if left too long.

Young people in particular missing their friends and social activities and it affecting their mental health. We have a heavy dependency on tourism but people coming in could be a source of tension. Lack of work/income may drive even more young people away.

Financial hardship was predicted to become more acutely felt by rural communities, especially by those working in the tourism/hospitality industry, by single parents and by young people (23% of free text responses). Others referred to the personal health gains (more exercise, more family time) many had made and noted that as people returned to their busy and stressful lives, these gains would be lost with a likely impact on their mental health. A small number of respondents described the strain of balancing their lives in the 'new normal' – home schooling, work, caring responsibilities – and expressed dismay about the lack of support and infrastructure to make this as easy as possible.

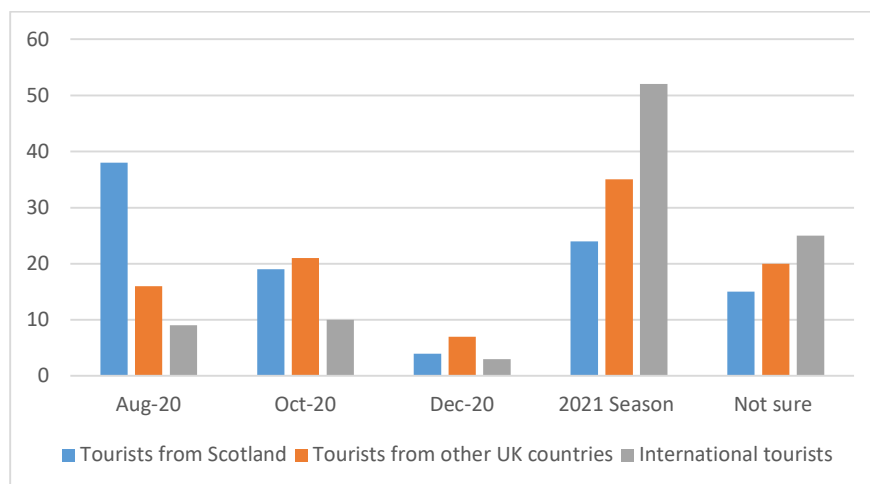
How can children and teachers work effectively from home without proper access to the internet and without (for the rural poor) the equipment to do so? There have been too many assumptions made that the necessary infrastructure exists when it clearly does not.

- **The future of community facilities was a particular concern** (21% of free-text responses) with respondents noting that lifeline projects for the elderly, for dementia sufferers, for individuals with learning disabilities and their carers had been disrupted by lock-down and there was great uncertainty about their continued operation. Many respondents also noted that new capacity building (Development Officers) and volunteer-driven projects funded through COVID-19 programmes were needed before lockdown (their need exacerbated by lockdown) and it would therefore be 'detrimental' if funding was ended when the pandemic ended.

I'm worried about whether there will be funding available for after the outbreak ends as there will no doubt be people who will continue to look up to the groups for support....

- Relatively few individuals commented on **the future of local businesses** but it must be noted that this was the second most pressing concern in the tick-box section of this question (70% of respondents ticking that they are extremely worried or very worried). In the free text section there were a number of pleas for protection of a named local pub, high street shops, a specific café etc. A small number of respondents expressed concern that Calmac might permanently run on a reduced timetable.
- Many free-text responses referred to the need for clear government guidance, for **more extensive testing and tracking**, for more **concrete reassurance around the economy and Brexit** and for **a concerted national effort to learn from what has happened** and keep sight of the positive gains around community self-determination, the environment and personal wellbeing.

Q8. When do you think your community might feel it is time to welcome tourists again?



The responses indicate significant divergence in opinion regarding the timescale of permitting tourism from within Scotland. There is greater agreement around the timescales of permitting tourism from other UK countries or from abroad. The response to this question is likely to change between survey rounds.

Q9. What, if anything, can the UK and Scottish Government do to help your community recover from the impact of COVID-19?

Over 250 individuals completed this free-text question. An analysis of this question demonstrates respondents expect the UK and Scottish Government to provide clear guidance on a route-map out of lockdown but feel communities should be given autonomy on dictating the pace especially with regards to opening up to tourism. Similarly, respondents felt the UK and Scottish Government should provide funding and investment in local economies but that communities should be actively involved in agreeing how this investment is used to underpin the recovery phase at local level.

The message is – you trusted us to lead on the response phase and you must trust us to lead on recovery.

Responses have been organised under the following themes, the highest weighted noted first:

1. Continue commitment to tailored packages for businesses in different sectors.

Respondents advised that rescue packages, especially for the tourism and food & drink sectors, should be available on a long-term, needs-led basis. Assumptions about the tourism sector's viability on the islands, for example, should not be made based on the viability of the sector in the central belt.

Provide financial support to tourism businesses, their staff and self-employed owners until May 2021 and then provide bounce back loans to help them invest in their businesses after such a long period of down time. It's hard for business owners and

staff to stay motivated and so having some ray of hope at the end of the tunnel in the form of investment in business ideas (when they have lived off their savings and borrowed money and so have nothing left to invest themselves).

Guidance (e.g. on PPE and social distancing), investment and grants should also be available to enable business to diversify and to adapt to the new normal and a digital world. Many standard digital sales mechanisms do not work well in rural areas, partly due to connectivity issues and partly due to the cost of rural distribution and commission costs.

There is a perceived opportunity for Government to introduce incentives for consumers to continue supporting local businesses once lock-down eases rather than heading to big supermarkets.

There is also a perceived need for the Scottish Government to promote Scottish tourism so the sector's profile is safeguarded. Suggestions were put forward around creating a COVID-19 "safe tourism" image which encourages staycations and slow tourism models that are rooted in a socially and environmentally conscious ethos (linked to green recovery). Farmers need support to mitigate for the loss of seasonal workers.

2. **Continue commitment to lifting people out of poverty** through the provision of grants, tax breaks, benefits and employment and training opportunities. Responses shone a spotlight onto groups that may be particularly disadvantaged – the elderly, the young, the self-employed, zero-hours contractors, those who are shielding, survivors of domestic abuse and single parent households. There were several requests for a review of the current benefits system and the suggestion that universal entitlements – child benefit and universal basic income type approaches – would transform the lives of rural residents experiencing financial hardship. Increases in education bursaries/grants and reduction in council tax bills and student loans (not council tax or loan breaks) were also suggested.
3. **Inform communities about progress tackling COVID-19, consult with communities on a national approach but devolve decision-making about the recovery phase, as much as possible, to local communities.** Many respondents simply wrote "*tell us if there are cases in our community*" or "*ask us what we need*" but a significant number elaborated in their replies, citing the fact that communities had successfully delivered a response to COVID-19 (and still are) and should be empowered to build on this.

Respondents suggested that Community Councils, Anchor Organisations and Resilience Groups should be recognised for their work and supported to lead on developing resourced roadmaps outlining what communities require to underpin their sustainability during the recovery phase and beyond. In some areas, support with capacity building is needed before communities can begin coordinating a response to recovery:

We don't have a community development trust so we feel like we're being overlooked in terms of funding and support. We need help to work strategically, to learn about how to bring the community with us but at a good pace, how to secure funds to do that as we're doing this on a volunteer and spread out basis. If we ever needed a pragmatic community action plan, it's now. But we don't have years, we need action in weeks.

Projects and initiatives funded through the COVID-19 programmes should be reviewed and those that are of continued value to the community should be supported to become sustainable.

Increase communication with communities and the organisations that have supported them during the Coronavirus, ensure future funding meets the needs of the communities and the organisations that support them - there has been many funds available to support a short term response but the long term future for many groups is fragile.

- 4. Restrict travel and movement for the immediate future.** Mirroring concerns expressed in previous questions of this survey, several respondents strongly urged the Government to prevent people from travelling to rural areas until such time that there is no risk from COVID-19 or until testing becomes widely available and tracking is implemented effectively.

Very few respondents asked for restrictions to be lifted and those that did, asked in the context of defined activities, for example in order to permit people to worship in their church again. Flexibility was suggested for example around self-catering cottages in very remote areas where visitors could stay without interacting with the local community.

- 5. Invest in rural infrastructure.** This theme covers a range of responses, most prominent of which was the demand that broadband connectivity is improved.

Upgrade internet links, or boost 4G in the region. It has historically been very good, but with the number of users rocketing, the speed has crashed. As the rest of the world adjusts and starts to phase towards a normal of working from home, we need to have a community that can work from home effectively too.

Within this theme of infrastructure, transport featured a number of times (timetables that better suit communities) as did capital investment in road and cycle lane improvements, house building and renewables. Infrastructure supporting tourism was also cited a number of times – better parking, more toilet facilities etc.

- 6. The green recovery** did not get many specific mentions but environmental concerns and sustainability underpinned a significant number of responses that have been noted in the themes above, from more socially/environmentally conscious tourism, to communities planning a sustainable roadmap to support recovery and the need for investment in renewable energy infrastructure.

- 7. Improving national mental health and wellbeing** was another theme which did not garner many specific mentions but it nevertheless underpins the demand for essential services to be continued, for businesses and people to be supported financially and for Government to explore ways of ensuring that opportunities exist for people to build on the positive life-changes they made during lockdown.

Take a lead from New Zealand. Look at home working (seriously!) and implement a four-day working week.