

Rural Policy Centre



Rural Community Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic

March 2021

Working paper



Leading the way in Agriculture and Rural Research, Education and Consulting

Rural Community Experiences of the Covid-19 Pandemic

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March 2021

Research Deliverable 3.4.4 in the Scottish Government Strategic Research
Programme (2016-2021)



Executive Summary

Research context

This work represents the third phase of a research project conducted by SRUC and the James Hutton Institute on the impacts of, and responses to, the Covid-19 pandemic on rural Scotland and the prospects for a rural recovery. The previous phases of work incorporated stakeholder interviews to explore factors that promoted or hindered a resilient community response (Phase 1), and spatial analysis to identify areas with lower or higher underlying capacity to be resilient (Phase 2). The Phase 2 mapping was also used to identify the paired case studies used for this report (Phase 3). The case studies explore the role and relevance of enabling factors for rural community resilience in relation to how communities have experienced and responded to the pandemic and lockdown measures. This included assessing: i) socio-economic impacts; ii) how communities responded and the importance of resilience and underlying capacity; iii) opportunities for longer term rural recovery and support needs; and iv) whether impacts and responses varied between communities.

Research Methods

Based on the Phase 2 spatial analysis of local resilience factors, two case study regions were selected (local authority areas with contrasting geographic, socio-economic and demographic characteristics) and specific rural localities/communities were identified within these regions for use as paired case studies. A pair of contrasting communities was selected in the Western Isles (South Uist and the wider Stornoway area) and in Fife (Burntisland and Elie and Surrounds). The communities in each pair represent examples (based on the Phase 2 analysis) of communities which exhibit characteristics which are indicative of lower or higher underlying resilience. The selection of pairs of communities from within the same local authority area allowed for a comparison based on localised and community-specific factors, set within an understanding of the regional context within which both communities sit. In total, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted, with 3-5 interviews at regional level in each case (with council or other regional organisational representatives) to explore regional issues

and responses and 3-5 in each selected community (with community council representatives, community trusts, local businesses and local community groups).

Impacts of the Pandemic in the case study areas

The key impacts identified within the communities and regions related to the pandemic and lockdowns are summarised below.

Economic impacts

The most severe economic impacts have been specific to key sectors (including tourism, transport, fisheries and creative industries), as well as having disproportionately affected those on lower incomes. These impacts have been exacerbated by wider factors such as Brexit (e.g. impacts on fisheries, supply chain delays etc.) and parallel impacts (e.g. the loss of the sub-sea electricity transmission cable to the Western Isles and a projected decline in financial support (e.g. LEADER funding, local authority funding etc.) for communities from mid-2021).

Organisational, services and supply chain disruption

Disruption to organisations and services, including statutory and community/voluntary services and in particular the NHS, have been key impacts in all case studies. Home schooling has also resulted in stress and anxiety for many households. Disruption to transport services has been widespread, exacerbated by underlying issues with high public transport costs in Fife, which have increased the economic impacts and isolation effects for those on lower incomes without access to a private vehicle during the lockdowns. In contrast, challenges with maintaining supply chains for certain sectors (particularly construction) has been a greater concern in the islands, reflecting the challenges of peripherality and effects compounded by Brexit. Additionally, in some cases sustained travel disruption had resulted in some people moving away from the islands to sustain their employment.

Social isolation effects (and reduced community services)

The loss of community services, community hubs and face-to-face engagement (and related connectivity) has affected both regions and all four communities, with knock on impacts in terms of isolation and well-being effects. The case studies appear to show that geographic peripherality is not the over-riding factor in relation to isolation and loneliness effects, with social isolation effects also clearly evident in Fife (linked to high public transports costs, see below). Some groups (e.g. teenagers) have also received less focus due to the emphasis on caring for the elderly. Nevertheless, concerns relating to vulnerability and a sense of being cut off geographically were apparent in South Uist, reflecting the peripheral character of this community, with the cultural impacts of not being able to attend funerals also widely felt.

Uncertainty of recovery timescales

Widespread concern was evident that the timescales for recovery remain uncertain, linked to uncertainty around the scale of impacts once support measures are removed and potential ongoing risk-aversion (i.e. due to concerns around Covid-19 transmission). Furthermore, concerns about repeated increased visitor pressure on local services and infrastructure and the potential for inbound viral transmission (in both regions) suggest the potential for future tourism-related conflicts.

Ongoing challenges in the case study areas

Many identified impacts have exacerbated underlying long-term issues or capacity gaps – as opposed to representing new impacts resulting solely from the pandemic and lockdowns. These ongoing challenges have constrained the resilience of the community response to the pandemic in real terms. These issues and related ongoing challenges are summarised below.

Population demographics, dependency rates and deprivation

Challenges relating to demographic vulnerabilities and an ageing population were emphasized, particularly in the Western Isles case studies. The resulting high dependency rates have increased the need for social care and a rapid community response to mitigate isolation effects during lockdowns. The lockdowns have also increased deprivation, with these aspects apparent from the increased demand on food banks (in both regions) and the sudden increased need for social care following the first lockdown.

Housing demand

Concerns relating to retiree in-migration and affordable housing pressures were particularly evident in the Western Isles (perceived as having increased in 2020). This was described as potentially having been exacerbated by the apparent ‘urban exodus’ during and post-lockdowns. Increased housing demand driven by retiree in-migration was predicted as worsening in the future in remote regions, with these factors directly linked with potentially reducing opportunities for younger people in terms of employment and housing.

Peripherality and transport costs

In the Western Isles, the region’s peripherality was recognised as a constraint in relation to transport costs, retaining access to supply chains and potential dependency on the mainland/visitors for income and resources. However, reduced connectivity during lockdowns and high transport costs in the Fife case studies have also resulted in social isolation and economic impacts for those on lower incomes.

Limited economic diversification

A reliance on tourism was recognised in both regions as having exacerbated wider economic impacts, with the arts and cultural/recreational industries also severely impacted in both regions. A wider dependency on a relatively narrow range of economic sectors and comparatively high levels of self-employed workers, were also identified as representing economic vulnerabilities in the Western Isles communities. Limitations on existing and potential future employment opportunities (due to low economic diversification) were also seen as reducing the potential for future in-migration to these areas.

Perceived ineffectiveness of local authority leadership and communication

Criticisms of the local authority were evident in both regions and in all four community case studies. These were largely related to the perceived slowness of the local authority response, ineffective communication and coordination between the local authority and communities and, in some cases, a perceived lack of effective leadership from the local authority. This has resulted in some community organisations feeling isolated and unsupported.

Variation in impacts and challenges between regions and communities

The impacts were often broadly consistent, both within and between regions, with variability in relation to some sectoral economic impacts and economic dependencies, with the higher numbers of small businesses (with limited reserves) and self-employed workers in the Western Isles potentially exacerbating short and long-term economic impacts.

The community case studies reinforced regional findings, while also highlighting within-region variability in relation to certain factors (e.g. distance to services), although this was less evident in the Fife case studies (potentially due to higher fine-scale socio-economic variability). Supply chain barriers, particularly in relation to fisheries and construction, have represented greater challenges in the island communities, although high public transport costs have also represented a challenge for connectivity in Fife. Some peripherality effects have been offset by high levels of community cohesion and volunteering, with high levels of compliance in the Western Isles also contributing to minimising case rates. Nevertheless, the negative cultural impacts of the loss of creative industries, community engagement and reduced attendance at funerals were particularly emphasized in the Western Isles case studies.

A further point of emphasis (particularly in the Western Isles) related to how sectoral economic impacts have had community-wide effects, with business closures having considerable knock-on social and economic implications for families in small remote communities. Additionally, concerns relating to affordable housing pressures and ongoing retiree in-migration were predominantly evident in the Western Isles. In relation to the policy responses to the pandemic, specific response measures were not always effectively 'island proofed' and/or suitable for small businesses or self-employed people with multiple job roles. Additionally, while the tiering system facilitated the islands to be moved to lower levels of restrictions, this did not result in a rapid economic bounce back – largely due to the continued lack of visitors from the mainland (and the reduced levels of business support available in lower tiers).

Factors enabling a resilient response

Rapid and collective action by agencies and voluntary organisations has represented the cornerstone of the response to the pandemic across the case studies in both regions, with the aim of maintaining services and community well-being and supporting businesses. Five main themes relating to enabling factors are summarised below.

Community cohesion and inbuilt resilience

The case studies have demonstrated that existing high levels of community cohesion (a factor in both regions but particularly in the Western Isles) represents a major asset during a sustained emergency such as a pandemic. This trait engendered a sense of community responsibility and belonging, which (to an extent) effectively counteracted some of the potentially more severe impacts of lockdowns relating to Covid-19 transmission (through compliance) and social isolation (through volunteer activity). This includes a wide range of community initiatives, such as prescription deliveries, neighbour well-being checks, food deliveries for elderly residents and food banks, often taken forward by volunteer community bodies such as Resilient Uist (see Box 6 in the main report).

Strategic partnerships and responsive services delivery

A coordinated approach by organisations and the development of new strategic partnerships between community groups and other stakeholders has represented a key aspect of responding to challenges. This includes examples focused on enhancing well-being (e.g. a Psychological Well-Being Hub in the Western Isles - see Box 1) and providing support for isolated housing tenants (see Box 2). Emergency response groups (see Boxes 7-9) have also played an important role in coordinating delivery of support across communities

The role and responsiveness of community anchor organisations

Findings in all case studies demonstrate that local community bodies, and particularly financially resourced (and staffed) anchor organisations, have played a critical role during the pandemic in relation to coordinating volunteers, re-tasking staff to community support roles, providing support to other community groups and utilising their networks to target available support to where it was most needed. This includes examples of a community land trust coordinating responses across volunteer bodies (see Box 3) and re-tasking a community energy trust as a community first responder during the lockdowns (Box 4). These organisations and smaller-scale charities demonstrated an ability to respond relatively rapidly and in a flexible manner, particularly in relation to obtaining and distributing available support/funding.

Responsive local businesses

The existence of local businesses and services (including post offices, shops and GPs) has been a further factor in ensuring continued service availability during lockdowns, with community infrastructure widely recognised for its increased functionality and value during the pandemic. Many smaller local businesses in the island communities were recognised as having demonstrated adaptive capacity, with some businesses (e.g. grocers, butchers) in both regions also benefitting from an emphasis on local shopping during the pandemic.

Connectivity and up-scaling online systems

One of the most defining responses to the pandemic has been the rapid shift to working, socialising and obtaining support online. Existing high-quality broadband networks in most parts of both regions facilitated this shift, with related issues of lack of access to a computer or tablet addressed in many cases through provision of these by the local authority, agencies, community organisations or individuals. Connectivity and previously tested systems (e.g. home working, E-Scoil and online events - see Box 5) represented a major factor in how the case study communities have responded to the pandemic. In a number of cases, the potential additional benefits of inclusivity (e.g. online counselling, attending meetings from a distance etc.) have been recognised and some community hubs have been set up online (see Box 10).

Variation in factors enabling a resilient response

The key factors which have enabled a resilient community response thus far were similar between the two regions and within case study pairs, with an emphasis on the strength of the volunteer/community response evident in all case studies. Notably, the social isolation effects have been (to some extent) countered by a rapid rise in volunteering levels and community cohesion, with this factor particularly prevalent in the Western Isles. This was attributed to the existence of 'cultural resilience' among island residents, fostered through previous challenges and the geographic isolation of the region. In addition, the region's low population density and

peripherality reduced the potential for viral transmission, which (when combined with high compliance) resulted in very low case rates and comparative internal freedom (for the Western Isles) at various points during 2020. A further important aspect of economic resilience in the Western Isles related to a relatively high level of public sector employment, perceived as providing a degree of job stability during 2020.

The rural recovery and implications for offering effective community support in the future

Interviewees collectively agreed that the full effects of the pandemic were yet to be felt, with financial pressures likely to increase during 2021 and beyond. The case studies demonstrate the importance of fostering community resilience in relation to both emergency response planning and preparedness *and* strengthening underlying capacity across a range of areas (e.g. anchor organisations, demographics, housing etc.) to enhance ‘everyday’ resilience and community capacity over the longer term¹. This is particularly critical given the concerns evident in relation to the uncertainty around recovery timescales and wider recognition of the disproportionate impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns in rural regions². The key factors and policy responses which are most critical for supporting the rural recovery and promoting resilience are summarised below.

1. Building on new partnerships and supporting anchor organisations

Building on existing and new partnerships between the third sector, public sector and private sector is critical to ensuring a coordinated approach to addressing longer-term challenges, including community development, tourism recovery and visitor management. Community anchor organisations are key to ensuring communities are sufficiently empowered and effectively structured to coordinate community responses and engage with challenges in collaboration with other organisations. From a policy perspective, approaches which support shared service delivery models, joint (and novel) funding mechanisms and the development of strategic partnerships to address systemic challenges (e.g. affordable housing) offer considerable future potential. In addition, enhancing local leadership (including from local authorities) and communication remains a key challenge for building effective coalitions for enhancing services.

2. Capitalising on community spirit

Maintaining and building on the widespread community response during the pandemic represents an opportunity for community organisations *and* the public sector. Working at home and the furlough support scheme increased the free time of many community members, resulting in a widespread increase in volunteering. While this is likely to decline as more people return to work, continued work at home opportunities and the community spirit ‘footprint’ of the pandemic offers scope for re-energising community bodies and engaging with the community development agenda across Scottish communities. Opportunities exist from a policy perspective in relation to supporting flexible working patterns and job-sharing arrangements and the longer term potential for assessing the potential impacts of a four day week on health and well-being.

¹ For an in-depth exploration of key underlying factors affecting community resilience see previous output from this research: <https://sefari.scot/research/objectives/local-assets-local-decisions-and-community-resilience>

² For example see data summarised by the Fraser of Allander Institute on regional impacts of the pandemic [here](#).

3. Retaining and enhancing digital connectivity opportunities

The pandemic has rapidly resulted in a wide range of new and more widely applied applications of digital tools, in education, health, social care, entertainment and wider community activity. These offer scope to support a 'levelling up' in service delivery in peripheral regions of Scotland, including in relation to delivery of the curriculum and a re-configuring of services delivery, with potential knock-on benefits in relation to reducing emissions. Critically, post-pandemic, this will require an emphasis on effective 'blended' approaches, particularly in relation to online working and health care and assessment of the potential benefits and impacts of different models of services delivery.

4. Supporting adaptable local businesses

The value and adaptability of local businesses in increasing local 'self-sufficiency' has been effectively demonstrated throughout the pandemic. Building on this going forward requires a specific policy emphasis on supporting local procurement by larger organisations (e.g. local authorities and agencies) and a focus on supporting local, place-based, private and social enterprises which add value to local produce.

5. Supporting working at home and de-centralisation opportunities for remote rural areas

The continued (partial) adoption of the work at home model offers opportunities, both in relation to attracting self-employed people to more remote parts of Scotland (where populations are declining) and for further de-centralisation of the employment hubs of larger businesses and organisations. This offers scope for capitalising on the urban exodus phenomenon in ways which are more likely to benefit rural communities and economies in relation to increasing employment in the local area and addressing the demographic imbalance of regions like the Western Isles. From a policy perspective, specific opportunities include decentralising (or partly decentralising) the offices and staff for specific (relevant) agencies and government departments to sparsely populated areas, creating incentives (or strategic partnerships) to support businesses in to establishing hubs in remoter regions.

6. Addressing long-term structural capacity gaps

As evident from the Western Isles case study in particular (but also in relation to public transport provision in Fife) a number of infrastructural challenges (e.g. connectivity, housing) remain which potentially constrain the capacity of communities to be resilient during periods of change. These more systemic challenges are a key dimension of the relative resilience of a local community or region to both gradual (e.g. demographic decline) and rapid (unpredictable) impacts. In addition to ensuring sufficient connectivity of the island regions, affordable housing remains a growing challenge in many peripheral regions (as demonstrated in the Western Isles case study). Addressing this challenge is recognised as requiring novel, place specific approaches developed through strategic partnership approaches (e.g. between housing providers and asset owning community anchor organisations). In combination with a de-centralisation and local-enterprise agenda, addressing affordable housing demand represents a critical opportunity for remote regions to ensure long term community retention.

7. Retaining a flexible, targeted and responsive approach to financial support

A range of examples from the case studies have demonstrated the importance and usefulness of a responsive and more targeted approach to providing support to enterprise and communities. In addition, measures which foster the development of social enterprise and new income streams offer particular relevance going forward given ongoing economic pressures (e.g. seed funding). As highlighted by the island case studies, policy responses are also

required which reflect the specificity of different regions (e.g. island proofing) and their unique socio-economic characteristics (e.g. high numbers of SMEs) and consider the impacts of wider (national level policy e.g. the tiering system) on island regions.

8. Enhancing the knowledge base on local-regional vulnerabilities

As evidenced from the case studies in both regions, knowledge gaps exist in relation to local-level understanding of care needs and specific vulnerabilities across communities. While embedded local organisations can coordinate measures to identify and respond to needs relatively rapidly, there remains a requirement for ensuring these vulnerabilities are understood before emergencies occur – to ensure community-level responses can be effectively coordinated and targeted rapidly. Future research also offers scope for assessing the views of younger people across Scotland in relation to where they see themselves living and working in the future and the related opportunities and pressures for rural areas.

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1 Project Background

1.1 Research context

This working paper presents the findings of research carried out in two paired case studies in rural Scotland. This forms the third phase of research conducted by SRUC and the James Hutton Institute on the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns on rural Scotland and the prospects for a rural recovery. The research was designed to be in three phases. Phase one research, led by the James Hutton Institute, included interviews with multiple rural stakeholders across Scotland and intended to represent key rural sectors. During Phase 1, conducted during the summer of 2020, stakeholders identified factors that promoted or hindered a resilient response in rural communities during the pandemic. In phase 2, the James Hutton Institute and SRUC conducted a spatial analysis to identify places in rural Scotland which were expected to be stronger or weaker in terms of their underlying capacity to be resilient. The map produced as part of phase 2 was used to identify paired case study areas (i.e. two sets of two communities, where the communities within a pair occur within the same region/local authority area). These case studies, which formed Phase 3 of the research were intended to represent the experiences of different rural places the pandemic. Phase three work was conducted by SRUC and involved semi-structured interviews being conducted within the broader region and within each of the selected paired communities within that region.

The work considers the role of enabling factors for community resilience in relation to the challenges and responses evident at regional and community levels during the pandemic and lockdowns. The research builds on earlier work within the 'Local Assets, Local Decisions and Community Resilience' research theme of the Scottish Government's Strategic Research programme, which utilised a Delphi panel approach to develop a set of enabling factors for rural community resilience in Scotland³. Specifically, the case studies explore the role and relevance of enabling factors for rural community resilience (e.g. community capacity and

³ See the final report of the Delphi Panel on rural community resilience:
<https://sefari.scot/research/objectives/local-assets-local-decisions-and-community-resilience>

participation; community assets, infrastructure and enterprise; and demographics, health and wellbeing and the environment) in relation to how communities have experienced and responded to the pandemic and lockdown measures to date.

1.2 Research aims and objectives

The aims of the case studies are to understand:

- *The lived experiences in rural communities of the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns;*
- *The variability in impacts and responses between communities and the underlying reasons for any differences; and*
- *Ongoing and future support required in different communities and regions.*

To address these aims, the research has three objectives:

- i. To determine the key socio-economic impacts experienced as a result of the pandemic and resulting lockdown measures and key sectors and groups impacted;
- ii. To identify and explore how rural communities responded to challenges related to the pandemic and the role and importance of community resilience and internal and external capacity factors in enabling or constraining responses;
- iii. To examine perceived opportunities/potential positive outcomes relating to longer term rural recovery from the community perspective;
- iv. To identify through the paired approach and overall comparison between community cases studies the relative variability in how challenges and opportunities were experienced and responses developed.

Through the paired approach and consideration of wider regional factors, the above objectives are addressed in relation to impacts and interviewees' experiences, both at the local community and wider regional levels (within which the relevant case study pair sits).

This allows for consideration of the importance of internal community capacity as well as wider (regional/national) networks and their role in addressing relevant challenges. An important wider aim of the case studies research is to ground the previous research (Phases 1 and 2) within real community examples, which can be discussed in relation to and in comparison with the challenges and responses identified through the stakeholder interviews conducted in the summer of 2020.



2 Research method

2.1 Case study selection

Phase 1 included key-informant interviews with stakeholders from across Scotland. Interviewees were asked some general questions about how those living in their local areas were impacted and responded to the pandemic and initial lockdown in spring 2020. These interviews were analysed and used to develop a series of resilience indicators in Phase 2.

Phase 2 provided an effective spatial analysis for identifying potential case study regions (local authority areas) and specific rural localities/communities within these regions for use as paired case studies. This approach utilised a range of datasets as a basis for identifying communities with contrasting characteristics and circumstances relating to indicators of capacity and resilience, including:

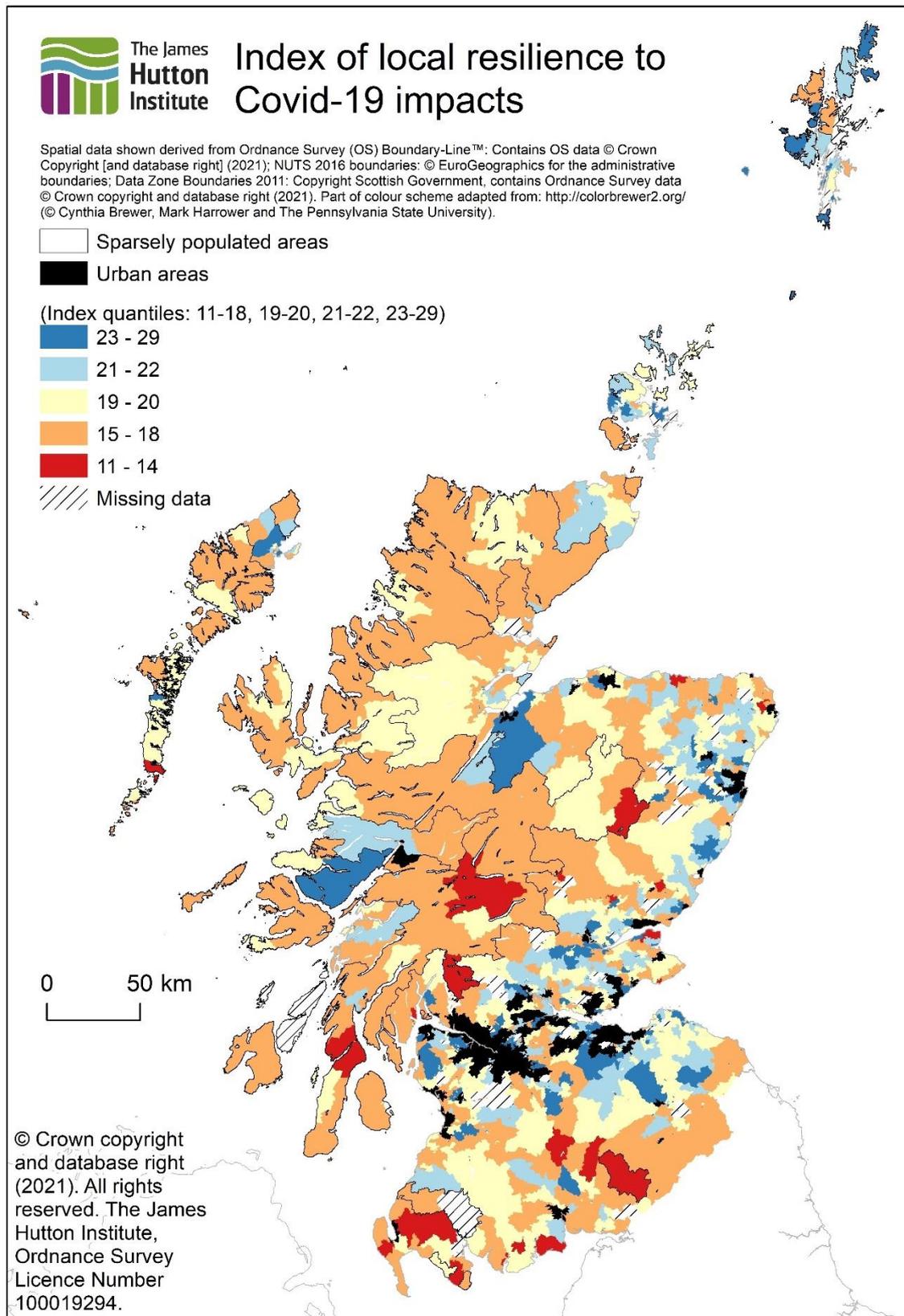
- population trends data and demographic trends;
- socio-economic status and employment (claimant rate and furlough vulnerability);
- social capital indicators (e.g. active charities);
- access to key services known to promote resilience (e.g. educational facilities, child care and elderly care facilities and broadband capacity)⁴.

Using these indicators and the corresponding datasets, two contrasting pairs of case studies were selected (see Table 1): two in the Western Isle and two in Fife. In practice, the communities in each pair represent examples (based on the indicators analysis) of communities which exhibit some characteristics indicative of lower or higher underlying capacity and resilience. Figure 1 shows the variation in Covid-resilience scores developed in the Phase 2 analysis. Additionally, the selection of the communities in Western Isles and Fife facilitates the analysis of two very contrasting rural regions with differing underlying demographic and capacity factors.

⁴ For an earlier report based on the initial work for this database see:

<https://zenodo.org/record/3733112#.XphibMhKg2x>

Figure 1 National variation in Covid-resilience scores⁵



⁵ A detailed explanation of the scoring system can be found in the Phase 2 report.

Table 1 Case study pairs (resilience based on indicators used in Phase 2 for case study selection)

Region and relevant Local Authority	Community	Indicative resilience and social capital values
Western Isles (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)	South Lochboisdale, Ludag and Eriskay (South Uist)	Lowest value range
	Stornoway and Broadbay	Highest value range
Fife (Fife Council)	Burntisland	Highest to medium value ranges
	Elie and surrounds	Lowest value range

The case studies allow for comparative analysis in localities, capturing different and in-depth lived experiences of the pandemic. Data collection followed a remote/online format due to ongoing lockdown restrictions at the time of the research. Following ethical and social research approval, interviews were conducted with a cross-section of stakeholders and community representatives at two scales: i) the scale of the selected local authority/region within which the two paired case studies are located; and ii) within the specific individual paired communities. The selection of pairs of communities from within the same local authority area allowed for a comparison based on localised and community-specific factors, set within an understanding of the regional governance and context within which both communities sit.

2.1.1 Case study interviews

In each of the two local authority areas (Fife and the Western Isles), 3-5 interviews were conducted, including representatives from the local authority and relevant regional organisations. These interviews provided key context for the region as a whole, including locally specific and region-wide challenges and response measures. Building on the regional interviews, 4-6 further interviews were conducted in each of the individual communities within each local authority (see Table 2). These generally included community council representatives, community trust chairs or key staff (where relevant), representatives of local charities/volunteer groups, local business representatives and an example of an older and/or younger community member in each case. This resulted in a total of 24 interviews across all interview groups.

Table 2: Proposed case study pairs (resilience based on indicators mapping for case selection)

Region Local Authority area	Number of interviews	Community	Number of interviews
Western Isles (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar)	5	South Uist	3
		Stornoway and Broadbay	5
Fife (Fife Council)	3	Burntisland	4
		Elie and surrounds	4

The regional and local community interviews had the same broad focus and followed the same themes of enquiry (see Appendix A for interview questions). In relation to challenges,

opportunities and responses, the interview structure incorporated the key elements of the enabling factors for community resilience identified previously. All interviews were conducted online, recorded and transcribed. The interviews covered the following key themes:

- **Background (profession, connection to area etc.) of the interviewee** and their involvement (and where relevant their organisation's involvement) in terms of impacts from and response to the pandemic and lockdown;
- **Key impacts and current challenges** – the 'lived experience' of the pandemic from the interviewee's perspective in relation to social or economic impacts or challenges at a personal, family/network, organisational or local community/economy level (or regional level for regional interviewees);
- **Responses to the pandemic and lockdown measures** at regional and local levels including specific examples of measures or schemes taken forward by individuals or organisations/local groups and the role of social capital and internal and capacity factors;
- **Lessons learned and capacity building** – what lessons have been learned and experiences gained from the pandemic and related activity within and around the region/community and which factors enabled a resilient response and which constrained it (i.e. capacity gaps);
- **Looking forwards and ongoing regional and community needs** – what have been identified through recent experiences as important regional or locally-specific ongoing challenges related to **capacity, governance, assets, infrastructure, enterprise etc, (are these the same as before or different)**; what are the key opportunities for the future and what support is required to ensure these opportunities are realised?



3 Case study findings

3.1 Western Isles (Regional case study)

3.1.1 Key impacts and current challenges

Five interviews were conducted with organisational representatives from the Outer Hebrides, including NHS Western Isles, HIE, the Hebridean Housing Partnership, Skills Development Scotland and a community land trust (CLT). The interviews are coded as WI1-WI5 in the text below. Several key impacts were identified, which have been grouped into six themes: i) individual and organisational upheaval; ii) service impacts and travel restrictions; iii) sectoral economic impacts; iv) social impacts; v) housing and in-migration effects; and vi) wider threats. As some interviewees noted, many impacts reflected existing (pre-pandemic) challenges and vulnerabilities, which had been exacerbated and exploited by the pandemic, including demographic factors, peripherality and services gaps.

All interviewees referred to their organisations as undergoing upheaval and change, with the NHS for example, undertaking a major re-organisation of services. Interviewees agreed their IT systems generally *'stood up to the challenge'* (WI3) of home working. Nevertheless, this required repeated reorganisation of staff, with two interviewees referring to new 'rota' systems, to facilitate small numbers of staff to go to their workplace, in part to facilitate contact and associated well-being benefits (WI3; WI4). The psychological toll of home working was recognised, with specific challenges for those with home schooling and caring responsibilities, linked to the loss of their support network: *'It's very challenging for people with families and caring responsibilities, there is an emotional workload...and a sense of falling behind, you have limited space, multiple people using the internet, the day isn't broken up....and your wider support network is gone'*

Impacts on services and logistical challenges were identified in multiple sectors, with normal health services delivery impacted and some specialist services and operations halted or delayed. Some interviewees noted that GP phone consultations were not always a suitable alternative and the NHS could make greater use of video calls and a blended approach, arguing that the *'digital health environment needs further consideration going forward'* (WI4).

Re-tasking staff, creating bed spaces and adapting hospitals was also identified as a specific challenge for a remote region with limited alternative capacity. Logistical challenges were also recognised in relation to acquiring and distributing PPE in a peripheral region with a dispersed population, with some instances of PPE supplies going missing in transit.

While essential transport on/off island was maintained, reductions in ferry and air services and restrictions resulted in disruption, including reduced access to specialist hospital treatment and specific challenges for those who regularly commute off-island. This has resulted in some island residents relocating off-island on a temporary or longer-term/permanent basis (WI2). Transport issues (further exacerbated by Brexit) were also recognised as having delayed access to goods and services for construction projects, resulting in higher costs and delays to housing projects.

Tourism and hospitality, a critical island sector, was referred to by all interviewees as having been exponentially impacted by the pandemic (including the permanent loss of at least two hospitality businesses in Stornoway). As WI2 noted, other related sectors had also been heavily impacted by the loss visitors, including and car hire businesses. Additionally, while reduced restrictions facilitated visitors (and contractors) at certain periods, this resulted in community concern, due to the ageing demographic and fear of virus transmission: *'there has been almost a sort of backlash like an anti-tourism, as people are feeling at risk due to visitors bringing in Covid'* (WI4). This was exacerbated by the closure of tourist facilities, despite large numbers of camper vans visiting during the summer, resulting in roadside waste disposal (e.g. from chemical toilets). Interviewees also expressed concerns relating to the speed of recovery of the tourism sector and ongoing social distancing requirements (e.g. reduced restaurant capacity), with most agreeing the recovery may take longer than expected. Wider food and drink markets had also been affected by reduced access to markets. This included aquaculture (a major regional employer)⁶, which had been impacted by logistical barriers and a crash in international markets (exacerbated by Brexit and disease impacts). Wider vulnerable sectors, including offshore oil and gas, had also been impacted, with related large business closures including the BiFab yard in Lewis.

Social isolation was recognised as an important impact, which had been compounded by the closure of community centres and the effective shut down of the creative industries sector (e.g. ceilidhs and festivals), resulting in the loss of collective socialising and economic losses for venues, artists and businesses. The limited availability of spaces to socialise in was a key factor, as WI2 noted: *'as we can't mix (in your home) you couldn't socialise except in a café or restaurant, but outside the tourist season we don't have any cafes in this area so that meant no socialising'*. Restrictions on attending funerals were particularly recognised as having had a deep cultural impact which would need to be addressed post-lockdown. As one interviewee explained: *'to not be able to go and say goodbye is a big shock, even finding out people have passed away is not being communicated in the same way, here grieving and funerals is an important part of the culture. We will have a lot of grieving to do when we...get back to church'* (WI3). Three interviewees also noted that their organisation had been less directly engaged with communities, resulting in reduced awareness of community concerns and a lower quality of local information for informing decision making. As WI5 stated: *'We have suffered as an*

⁶ With some fish farm businesses employing >100 employees and most projecting a loss for 2020-2021.

organisation by losing touch with the community...and we can't gauge community feeling as much because we are not out and about in the same way'.

Concerns relating to the effects of the pandemic on housing provision and in/out-migration were raised, with job losses and reliance on furlough payments resulting in increased rent arrears with this potentially increasing as furlough payments cease and universal credit applications increase.⁷ Additionally the number of empty rental properties has increased, with a longer turnaround time between tenants and increased contractor costs and supply chain challenges. The 'urban exodus' recognised as associated with the pandemic, has also increased demand for island properties from external buyers as retirement homes. As WI3 noted: *'The main impact of the pandemic has been the property sales boom...increased interest from external buyers...and the impact on demand and price...young folk in South Uist were saying they cannot afford the prices now.* This is exacerbated by lower average earnings in the islands, making it more challenging for young families to find a home.

Interviewees also collectively referred to parallel socio-economic concerns (or *'the double or triple-whammy effect'*) which were compounding Covid-specific concerns, which included:

- i) The impacts of Brexit for the fishing, aquaculture, food, farming and construction sectors, including disrupted and delayed supply lines and loss of export markets and an ongoing reliance on EU funding for specific job roles and initiatives.
- ii) The costs associated with adapting farming and crofting to a low carbon future.
- iii) Failure of the sub-sea power transmission cable (October 2020) between Skye and the Western Isles (the only mainland power link to Lewis and), resulting in significant income losses (>£0.5M) due to the inability to transmit energy generated from renewable schemes⁸ (including community schemes) to the power grid;
- iv) An expected decline in financial support for communities from mid-2021, potentially resulting in job losses and reduced capacity.

3.1.2 Responses to the pandemic and lockdown measures

In relation to responses interviewees discussed rapid-response measures (e.g. reducing visitors) and longer-term strategic approaches relating to socio-economic recovery. All interviewees referred to 'collective action' at organisational and community levels around four main themes: i) NHS rapid response; ii) coordinated economic/business support; iii) maintaining services; and iv) collective community action.

NHS Western Isles were identified as the 'frontline', having shifted to 'threat-response mode' through re-tasking staff and reorganising services to adapt to new priorities, zoning hospitals, providing call centres and working with partners to support testing, contact tracing and coordination of shielding. GP services also shifted to phone consultations and the NHS worked in partnership with public and third sector partners, including GP practices working with pharmacies and community groups to facilitate delivery of prescription medicines during

⁷ For the HPP 95% of their income is from rent and 42% of their tenants receive some form of welfare.

⁸ The cable is estimated to be out of commission for 18 months, resulting in losses to community groups and other energy providers, with some losses offset by SSE and Crown Estate funding.

lockdown. Additionally, to address the impacts of the pandemic on mental health the NHS and Western Isles Council developed a Psychological Wellbeing hub (Box 1).

Box 1. A Psychological Well-Being Hub in the Western Isles

In May 2020 NHS Western Isles and Comhairle nan Eilean Siar launched a Psychological Wellbeing Hub⁹ service to support people of all ages from across the Western Isles who are feeling psychologically distressed during the pandemic and want to seek support for themselves or their child. The service is specifically for those not currently receiving support for their mental or psychological health and staff from both organisations offer support and advice by phone, or through appointments where required. The Hub has been established to support people struggling to manage at home and to reduce the workload of frontline NHS staff and social care workers during the pandemic. The Hub complements support available through [Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's Covid-19 Support Helpline](#) (for practical support), and the [NHS Western Isles COVID-19 Advice Helpline](#) for COVID-19 queries.

The coordinated economic response was viewed as fundamental, with over 3100 people furloughed (24% of the workforce) and Universal Credit applications increasing from 350 to 876 during peak lockdown. Additionally, £9.18M was provided in business support and 700 people applied for support from the self-employed hardship scheme during the pandemic¹⁰. Interviewees repeatedly referred to the importance of a collaborative approach and the role of new partnerships, including between the NHS, Local Authority and HIE, to support businesses and communities. The development of an economic recovery plan¹¹ in June 2020 was viewed as an important step, particularly in relation to the establishment of an economic forum (and local forums in Barra, Uist and Harris) to collect industry intelligence and involve the private sector in focusing future recovery efforts. The specific role of HIE in coordinating additional funding was also identified, including approving 120 funding awards (just over £4M) from new schemes, as well as re-channelling some existing HIE funds, including through a Young Company Finance Scheme (with 7 approvals totalling £65,000).

Interviewees also referred to the collective response in relation to service continuity, including health services, social care and education provision. The role of E-Scoil¹² (see Stornoway case study) in providing a familiar mechanism for online learning was highlighted – including its future potential for increasing parity in education delivery across the islands. A further example of the responsiveness of service providers was the additional tenant support provided by the Hebridean Housing Partnership to 220 tenants during the pandemic (Box 2), with HPP planning on maintaining this support longer term.

Communities were recognised as having responded well to restrictions, with a relatively high level of compliance, which contributed to low case numbers. Community groups were seen as having demonstrated strong community spirit, expressed through activities by organisations like Resilient Uist¹³, the South Harris Community Response Group¹⁴ and North Uist online community hub¹⁵ including welfare visits, food deliveries and PPE distribution.

⁹ For further information about the Psychological and Wellbeing hub [here](#).

¹⁰ For data on schemes see: <https://community-funding-mapping-1-1-scotgov.hub.arcgis.com/>

¹¹ See: <https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/news/2020/june/comhairle-approves-plan-to-aid-economic-recovery/>

¹² See: <http://www.e-sgoil.com/>

¹³ See: <https://www.facebook.com/resilientuist/>

¹⁴ See: https://www.facebook.com/pg/SouthHarrisCRG/posts/?ref=page_internal

¹⁵ See: <https://www.dethadol.com/>

Box 2. Providing tenant support during a crisis (Hebridean Housing Partnership)

From the outset of the pandemic HHP used housing officers to provide support to tenants to check on their welfare and ensure HHP had a good awareness of support needs. This was developed as a new emergency service which included:

- Housing officers contacting all tenants across the islands to ensure they were safe and well and identify their immediate needs. Elderly and vulnerable tenants, (self-isolating or shielding etc.) were prioritised for any support they needed.
- Tenants were provided with advice on wider available support, including financial support/benefits, food and fuel support and support for internet access.
- Daily collection/delivery of food parcels from local foodbanks were arranged where required (due to financial or transport difficulties).
- Maintaining normal services and payment options to allow rent to be paid and discussing payment difficulties and options with tenants where these arise.

In addition to their normal role, the emergency services also contributed to wider community welfare, as one interviewee explained: *'the fire brigade, they went out at Christmas and travelled around with Santa...and the kids totally loved that and that gives a sense that people...had a thought to support families and the young people as we often we focus on the elderly'* (WI4). As some interviewees noted, this focus on supporting the elderly and vulnerable groups led to some groups receiving less attention and support, including adolescents. Critically, as community anchor organisations community land trusts, were recognised as having played a key role in rapidly responding to community needs (see Box 3).

Box 3 The response of a Community Land Trust during the Covid-19 pandemic

Urras Oighreachd Chàrlabhaigh (Carloway Estate Trust) played a key support and coordination role for volunteers and community groups during the pandemic, building on their existing relationships across the community and with key agencies/organisations. This included:

- Supporting the setting up of two volunteer helplines to identify needs and target support in the community.
- Engaging with people to reduce isolation impacts, including 'How are you?' phone calls, health walks and family food nights (when restrictions allowed);
- Administering volunteer expenses for prescription and shopping delivery services to support GP practices and pharmacies in caring for residents in higher risk categories.
- Establishing a hardship fund to provide support in emergency situations, such as providing food or paying for a taxi for a GP visit where no lifts are available.
- Supporting groups to set up food banks/shops to provide necessities, including two pop up shops (one of which has plans to expand to a community grocery shop).
- The trust provided support to other collaborative initiatives including emergency foodboxes (with the charity Fareshare), community food vouchers and hot Christmas dinner deliveries.

3.1.3 Lessons learned and capacity factors

Key factors identified as having supported a resilient response included: i) the region's low population density and peripherality (in relation to reduced viral transmission); ii) community cohesion and resilience; iii) the presence of anchor organisations; and iv) an adaptable economy. The low case numbers were attributed to the region's dispersed population (and lower number of 'connections'), which allowed for a degree of freedom (due to tiering) and facilitated some interaction to reduce isolation. All interviewees referred to an 'inbuilt resilience', which was perceived as a 'cultural attribute'. Three interviewees (WI1, WI2, WI4)

related this to past experiences, including power cuts, severe storms and the need to be more self-sufficient when living on an island. This life experience was seen as having made people more responsive to the needs of their neighbours (further strengthened by the high number of carers living in the community), which led to a cohesive community response during a crisis. As one stated:

'We are geographically isolated and get...some terrible weather. Uist in 2005 had one of the worst hurricanes and we lost 5 people. That had a huge impact on how we responded as a community. We have more of a focus since then on looking after each other...We hunker down from October to March due to poor weather, so you just stock up and prepare for winter differently here, so the lockdown was like that. People also still rely on the land...and took time to try grow their own...and made a point when they see people, to stop and ask...how they are coping. It's inherent that you do have a chat...so you have different knowledge about peoples challenges their health, their concerns and their sensitivities' (WI4)

This inbuilt 'neighbourliness' was also seen as having increased compliance, in part due to community members being concerned about how their neighbours would perceive any breach of lockdown (WI4; WI3). This was reinforced by the ageing demographic, with most viewing the containment of outbreaks as being the result of inbuilt cautiousness.

Due to their locally embedded nature and resources, community anchor organisations (such as CLTs) were perceived as a key component of local-level responses to the pandemic. These organisations were able to rapidly mobilise and support volunteers and work with a network of partners to provide key services, including food banks, prescription deliveries and safeguarding community well-being (see Box 3). The adaptable and networked nature of these organisations facilitated rapid access to available support which could then be distributed to where it was most needed - with WI5 arguing that whether or not a community had an anchor organisation directly affected the degree of impacts they experienced. Interviewees agreed that the responsiveness of CLTs during the pandemic had strengthened their perceived role and their links with stakeholders and community bodies and cemented their position in the regional 'organisational hierarchy'. As one stated: *'The trusts...there is more relevance for them now in some ways, they are sometimes seen as distant, how do people get underneath that and get to know the individuals. Them taking on a different role of rapid responder to individual concerns that's been hugely positive for them, they will hopefully build on that with their memberships and their future ownership and those renewed relationships and get more people involved, the door is open to get people now'* (WI4).

Economically, while vulnerabilities were recognised (see below), the high level of public sector employment in the region had provided a safeguard, with most public sector employees shifting to a work at home approach. Additionally, while the self employed represented a vulnerable group, the micro-scale of many SMEs also allowed them to change rapidly and potentially adapt to evolving markets and opportunities.

Key factors seen as having limited the resilience of the region to the pandemic included: i) demographic vulnerabilities (i.e. an ageing population requiring support during lockdown); ii) services and capacity gaps; iii) peripherality and sectoral economic dependency; and iv) leadership and communication challenges. The challenge of an ageing demographic was exacerbated by continued out-migration of younger residents, in-migration of retirees, and

increasing housing costs (Section 3.1.2). This was perceived as likely to worsen over time, resulting in higher dependency rates, increased requirements for social care and increased risk exposure in the case of future pandemics. The dispersed nature of healthcare services was also highlighted and an apparent north-south divide in terms of the quality of broadband coverage was identified, with poorer connectivity noted in Barra, South Uist and parts of North Uist in particular (and Uig and Bernara on Lewis).

Interviewees also referred to their organisational capacity and resource constraints in relation to the speed and volume of work (e.g. managing support schemes), with community capacity also identified as a longer-term concern (WI2; WI4). The form and experience of volunteering had also changed, with less opportunities for social benefits or older people engaging in volunteering. Two interviewees highlighted the risk of pressure being placed on third sector organisations already operating at capacity, to deliver services normally provided by the local authority, which could be exacerbated by post-pandemic budget cuts.

The region's peripherality was recognised as having exacerbated economic impacts, due to a reliance on tourism and high levels of self-employment and employment in accommodation and hospitality¹⁶. The effects of peripherality were also a factor within the region, potentially resulting in longer-term impacts in Barra and South Uist. Additionally, while the islands benefitted from being in a lower tier (of restrictions) at certain points, this was offset by the fact that tourism remained largely absent when mainland Scotland was in a higher tier, with areas in Tier 1-3 also receiving less support than those in tier 4 (despite tourism businesses often remaining closed) (WI4). These issues have been compounded by some schemes not being sufficiently island proofed. As one interviewee explained: *'Some schemes did not support small scale, part-time operators...a new fund came out for wedding photographers, but you have to prove 50% of income is lost and that...has to have come from cancelled weddings. But they would not have loads, island weddings are limited. For venues, they might have had 1-2 weddings cancelled but that's a lot for an island hotel, but if criteria suits a bigger business who get 50% of income from weddings it doesn't work here'*(WI4).

Two interviewees also referred to the lack of a central communication hub for Covid issues (although communications from NHS Western Isles and Western Isles News were valued). This was perceived as having increased anxieties and 'a sense of isolation', with a perceived lack of an authoritative and trusted leadership. The potential role of the Local Authority was highlighted in this regard, in relation to the need for regular communication. Communication challenges were also faced within organisations, with online board meetings challenging due to a loss of informal/free flowing discussion and reduced privacy (despite higher attendance).

3.1.4 Looking forwards and the rural recovery

This section outlines six themes of future opportunities, relating to shorter and longer term thinking, including: i) collaborative partnerships ii) infrastructural investment; iii) re-configuring services; iv) addressing demographic vulnerability; v) maintaining key services and housing provision; and vi) enhancing knowledge. These are expanded on below:

¹⁶ Reflecting wider findings which suggest a higher level of impacts for more peripheral/remote rural regions due to their sectoral dependencies, for example see: <https://fraserofallander.org/regional-impacts-of-the-coronavirus-pandemic/>

Strategic partnership working and effective leadership

Existing and new partnerships (between public, private and third sector organisations) offer opportunities for developing strategic approaches to addressing challenges. This includes the NHS working in partnerships with charities and the local authority (e.g. on social isolation), tourism businesses working with the council and HIE (e.g. on social distancing) and community anchor organisations coordinating volunteer activity¹⁷. This included the importance of developing a cohesive vision for the islands and effective and engaging leadership: *'it's about surviving as islands together, you work better when you work together...and you need a vision to ensure we are here and thriving in twenty years'* (WI3).

Infrastructural investment

Targeted investment in the road, transport and broadband networks (potentially including a Harris-Uists bridge) offers scope for enhancing access and providing economic stimulus and longer-term employment (e.g. through the Port development at Stornoway) and tourism benefits. The local area and Outer Hebrides Economic Forums represent a key element in taking forward the economic recovery in an informed and collaborative way.

Reconfigured services delivery (the 'new normal')

Opportunities exist in relation to retaining aspects of changes made during the pandemic, including in relation to home working, video conferencing, hygiene and use of PPE, use of E-SCOIL and digital GP consultations. These changes offer benefits for increasing access to services for peripheral communities and reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Nevertheless, they require a shift towards an increasingly blended approach to obtain the additional benefits of face-to-face interaction. Other aspects include housing providers maintaining high levels of tenant engagement post-pandemic (Box 3) and maintaining a more responsive, targeted and flexible approach to provision of business and community support.

Addressing demographic vulnerability and increasing in-migration

Stimulating in-migration represents a critical priority, including for managing increasing dependency rates and social care needs. The possibilities for increased working at home represents an opportunity for attracting skilled people of working age. Wider opportunities were recognised for decentralising Scottish Government and agency roles and related opportunities for infrastructural investment (e.g. flexible/shared office hubs), with the example HIE decentralising their travel and subsistence claims hub to Benbecula used to illustrate the potential impacts, which included 34 job roles. Decentralisation of public and private sector roles (e.g. in oil and gas etc.) offers scope for addressing poverty, stimulating house building, starting families (and supporting schools) and increasing community capacity. Retention of youth requires the provision of high quality job opportunities to allow students to return to the islands and promotion of local (culturally embedded) learning opportunities and the regions natural assets, affordable housing and quality of life.

Maintaining key services and addressing housing demand

Retaining a minimum standard of services including healthcare, education and transport, was viewed as critical to ensuring a sufficient level of 'regional attractiveness'. Addressing

¹⁷ Including direct collaboration, with community land bodies in the region having recently established Community land Outer Hebrides as an umbrella organisation for community landowners in the region:
<https://www.stornowaygazette.co.uk/business/new-body-consists-consortium-local-land-trusts-3123442>

affordable housing needs, particularly for younger in-migrants/families remains a key challenge, with potential for greater use of shared equity schemes and innovative partnerships between agencies, the local authority and community anchor organisations.

Improving the knowledge base on support needs and priorities

Knowledge gaps were highlighted in key areas including: i) the need for increased understanding of island in/out migration trends and drivers and younger peoples priorities in Scotland in relation to where they would like to live and work longer term and the potential implications for the islands; ii) engaging with SMEs to identify local-level challenges (including through the economic forums) and employment, skills and training gaps for businesses; and iii) engaging with island families to identify the pressures they face, support needs, upskilling opportunities and perspectives on island life during and post-pandemic.

3.2 Stornoway and Broadbay (Community case study)

3.2.1 Key impacts and current challenges

Five participants were interviewed across the Stornoway, Broadbay and Point & Sandwick area. They included community representatives, councillors and community action groups / community support groups. These interviews have been coded as S1-S5 in the text.

In terms of actual Covid-19 infection cases (and reflecting the wider Western isles situation), these have remained relatively low. The key impacts have been as a result of lockdown measures, and measures taken to prepare for a potential outbreak (such as cancellation of routine medical services).

Impacts that were mentioned by multiple participants include scaling back of non-Covid-19 medical services (including some for serious or urgent needs such as cancer treatment); withdrawal of public transport in the very early stages of the initial lockdown (including very limited ferry services between the island and the mainland/Skye); reduction in number of community-based services (such as informal communication, or ability for interest / support groups to meet physically – some of these were supporting particularly vulnerable groups such as cancer sufferers and new parents); elderly and vulnerable residents suffering from isolation and loneliness (enhanced by the remote location of some residences on the island); feeling of vulnerability in terms of food provision and reliance on connection with mainland (although no food shortages were actually reported – only an enhancement of an existing awareness of the need for greater self-sufficiency in this area).

3.2.2 Responses to the pandemic and lockdown

In all interviews, participants placed emphasis on how the community responded, strengths identified, and lessons learned. It is notable that these points were more prominent in the discussion than discussion of the actual impacts of the pandemic/lockdown.



Numerous examples were provided of individuals and formal / informal groups taking action to address or prevent impacts from the lockdown. Anchor organisations played a key role in bringing together community effort and resources, to deliver action and support. Box 4 outlines a range of services and systems set up by the Point and Sandwick Trust who were particularly active during the lockdown. Participants cited the actions of individuals and anchor organisations as the reason for the continuation of social services on the island (such as provisions for reaching out to isolated community members, including food and support for vulnerable community members) throughout the pandemic to date.

Examples of important responses include: coordinated use of volunteer efforts (phone line created by local authority to connect residents needs with relevant volunteer; similar activity was also reported by a community organisation); deliveries of food, medicine and other essential supplies to members of the community that were isolated or shielding; creation of a befriending service to support those isolated or vulnerable; enhanced use and wider roll-out of an existing online tool to support remote learning; creation of online events to replace in-person meetings for support and entertainment; use of a local school as a childcare hub; newsletters and 'goody bags' created to help those who would normally use the community centre to stay connected and engaged; an inter-generational project to help young people continue to connect with the elderly residents who would normally use the lunch club in the community hall.

Another comment common to many of the participants related to the social cohesion of the community. It was noted that the wider community of Stornoway, Broadbay and surrounding areas demonstrated a good awareness of what it means to have an elderly population and the vulnerabilities that come with being isolated (both in remote areas but also more generally as an island population – e.g. with reference to vulnerability of food supplies, lack of large scale medical facilities, etc.). The community as a whole was seen as having responded quickly and positively to lockdown and the associated restrictions imposed. It was noted multiple times that the pro-active behaviour of the wider community ensured stricter adherence to the lockdown measures than was evident on the mainland or even in semi-remote areas such as the Isle of Skye. Participants expressed the belief that it was this immediate and conscientious regard for the rules (along with strict controls on ferry transport) that resulted in such low case numbers on Lewis and Harris.

'Part of that is the geography...we're all very aware of the isolation.... I know from people involved in emergency planning, they were expecting 10 or 20 times more mortality than occurred. So what people were worried about as, if we didn't follow the rules, we would be trapped here. There would be no way of getting to the mainland because the mainland would have been even worse, and so there was an absolute determination to follow the rules'. (S2)

More efficient ways of working and an appreciation of a better work-life balance (for individuals and for organisations) as a result of the lockdown measures were also raised as examples of positive responses to the situation. Examples provided for more efficient working systems include remote/flexible working and the associated increase in available time, capacity for shared childcare provision and enhanced inclusivity of events that take place online (e.g. a support group for Alzheimer's sufferers which was attended by residents from across the island, rather than only those close to Stornoway). One organisation noted that the need for contactless handover of materials that they provide to customers had encouraged them to adopt a modern cataloguing system which has made their lending process more efficient and

their business more organised. Another organisation commented on how shops have increased their opening hours – not to encourage more shopping but to allow shoppers to be more dispersed throughout the day and reduce congestion in shops (which are often small or compact spaces).

Communication from the NHS and the local health board was repeatedly commended for its clarity and transparency in the face of the unprecedented challenges that were being faced. The health board was cited as a pro-active community leader during this crisis.

Box 4: Actions taken by the Point and Sandwick Trust during the pandemic

The Point and Sandwick Trust, normally a Community Trust distributing funds to the local community which have been gained from the Beinn Ghrideag wind farm, took quick action at the start of the pandemic to adapt its role to one of community leadership and coordination.

One of the key actions undertaken by the Trust was to secure funds from the Highland and Islands Enterprise Communities Fund, which was used to support a food and medicine delivery service to vulnerable people, and from the Foundation Scotland Wellbeing Fund to provide outreach telephone support and a cooked meal service to those in need. In addition, they made donations from their own revenue to support groups that needed financial support (including local community councils, those in need of PPE and NHS Western Isles).

The Trust facilitated numerous support activities, which included:

- Employment of drivers / coordinators for a food delivery service.
- Established 41 volunteer roles including leafleting, befriending, meal delivery and Community Council engagement.
- Utilised Zoom facilities for communication and training across the volunteer base.
- Small businesses were supported to adapt their service provisions for rural customers.
- Shop food and emergency food / meal package deliveries made to households in need.

3.2.3 Lessons learned and capacity building

Lessons learned were focused around three key themes: the capacity of the local population to act when needed; opportunities for gaining benefits from adaptations, areas in which resilience needs to be enhanced.

Social capital

The interviews provided an overwhelming sense of community spirit, voluntary effort and collective care willingness to support the wider community was cited by all five participants.

One of the key lessons that has come out of lockdown is the whole idea of community empowerment, engagement and mingling. This whole idea ... is really important and the Covid experience has enhanced that. We've learned that people value their communities a lot and it's something they take for granted. They're now learning that it's worth doing whatever they can to protect and enhance those communities. (S5)

This effort was supported and coordinated by local community organisations (e.g. the Point and Sandwick Trust) as well as the local authority in some areas, who collected information on volunteers and their abilities, and matched these with the needs of residents of the area. A number of participants noted that due to the size of the settlement and the coordinated

efforts of individuals and community leaders, they were confident that every vulnerable person or household had been identified and catered for. A more formal collection of information on people in these circumstances is likely to further enhance this community willingness in future crises.

It was mentioned that there had been limited communication from the local council to the community or to community organisations, but that NHS Western Isles had provided an excellent level of communication on the situation and the measures being taken to address it. One participant noted that a key lesson for them had been that, in such circumstances, the community and organisations should take the initiative when action is needed, rather than waiting for formal leadership or approval. This will shape their future goals and planning strategy.

Benefits arising from adaptation

There were many references to the opportunities and benefits that could be envisaged arising from adaptations that had been made during the lockdown. These primarily referred to remote and flexible working; more efficient ways of working, and the importance of supporting local services.

The potential for working remotely (from home or elsewhere) and the enhanced quality of life and equity provided by flexible working was noted by four of the five participants. They noted that new ways of working and the benefits they bring are likely to be carried ahead and utilised when the Covid-19 crisis has subsided. Specific reference was made to the benefits of focusing on outcomes rather than number of hours or specific time spent in a designated workplace location. The anticipated impact of that is better flexibility in work for those that need it, as well as more opportunities for jobs in the geographical area which would traditionally have required residents to leave or commute long distances. Consequently, issues of lack of jobs or certain types of employment may have less impact on population dynamics in the future. According to a local councillor, the ease in switching to remote working has led to an acknowledgement that regular travel across large parts of the country is not always necessary and has the potential for multiple benefits including better use of work (or personal) time, and reduced environmental / climatic impacts as well as cost efficiency.

The potential for online events and support mechanisms to make processes more inclusive was also highlighted by a number of participants and specific examples included the live music/ceilidh events broadcast on Friday evenings with the support of the communications team from the local authority (the event has been nominated for a Scot Trad award); a Gaelic club run by the Stornoway branch of Alzheimer's Scotland, but attended by people from across Scotland when moved online; educational initiatives; and broadcasting of a range of spiritual services on a weekly basis (see Box 5 for further examples and detail).

When asked about digital provision, all participants stated that access to broadband and mobile signal (4G) are quite good, especially within Stornoway, but that there are certain locations in more remote areas where connection is poor. It was noted that this good provision needs to be protected (and made more consistent, geographically) because it supports many of the advances made and positive outcomes of the pandemic. It was also clear from responses that there is a need to support those who do not have access to, or cannot use modern communication technologies if they are not to be left behind in the face of all of the

adjustments made and future changes to ways of working (often those with poor connectivity or inability to connect are also the most physically isolated people).

Box 5: The potential impacts of enhanced digital connectivity and online outreach

E-schol – remote & blended learning tool

E-Schol is an online remote and blended learning system that was developed by the Stornoway local authority around five years ago, to support students learning in remote locations. The aim was to ensure that students in smaller and / or more remote schools of the Outer Hebrides received the same level of variety, depth and engagement with the curriculum, as pupils in larger schools. Since the lockdown began, the tool has been adopted more widely across Stornoway, Lewis & Harris, and across the whole of Scotland.

Music sessions

A weekly online community ceilidh¹⁸ was created and broadcast by the communications team of the Western Isles local authority, as a way to bring culture, entertainment and connection to people during lockdown. It regularly received thousands of online participants / viewers. Efforts were made to deliver this to local care homes as well as individual homes. Funding has been secured to continue the service for another six months (from December 2020) and the initiative was nominated for a Scot Trad Award.

Interest groups and spiritual support

The Alzheimer's Scotland charity, Stornoway branch, made a number of adaptations to their provision to ensure residents and carers across the island were supported in lockdown. Some of these were related to primary care but others focused on entertainment, engagement and fulfilment. The Gaelic club, which usually meets in person in Stornoway was moved to an online event and was commended by the interviewee as becoming more inclusive, allowing members from as far afield as Glasgow to participate in something which was not previously available to them. In addition, the charity recognised the impact of the loss of spiritual engagement for many of its members and organised online worship sessions as well as one-to-one meetings between spiritual leaders and residents. These were noted as particularly effective in supporting mental health and wellbeing during the lockdown.

Local service providers have also been recognised as important members of remote communities. The critical service provided by grocery stores was raised by a number of participants. One outlined the shift in attitude of people, towards small, local (and sometimes remote) convenience stores. It was noted that rather than perceive them as occasional providers, there are now efforts to support and sustain small businesses.

Opportunities for growth of resilience

The pandemic has also highlighted a number of existing vulnerabilities for the community of Stornoway and surrounding areas. These include: reliance on mainland for food provision; vulnerability to energy provision, especially during poor weather, and the specific vulnerability of an island to increased pressures on the health system (as discussed above).

Many of the participants commented on the feeling of vulnerability that came about from reduced ferry and air services in terms of meeting food demand: *“The Island now has no resilience at all in terms of food provision”* (IS1)

¹⁸ <http://www.eileansiareceilidh.com/>

However, a number of participants noted that options for enhancing localised food provision are already being considered. These may include growing crops in poly-tunnels (to take advantage of long daylight hours in the summer) and supporting supermarkets in increasing their holding capacity for longer-term food supplies (one participant quoted that currently supermarkets only hold around three days' provision). The Point and Sandwick Trust also referred to their own particular vulnerability in being cut off from the main town of Stornoway during particularly high tides. They are working to develop a safety hub, which will provide energy, shelter and warm food to those who need it in such circumstances. While this is slightly detached from the specific case of the Covid-19 pandemic, it highlights the existing community level thinking around enhancing place-based resilience.

Number of cases of infection of Covid-19 were quoted by most participants as being low. Most addressed this from two perspectives: they felt lucky to have been relatively unaffected in health terms and pleased that lockdown measures had been effective, but conversely felt that if there had been a significant outbreak, the healthcare and other systems on the island may not have been able to cope. This highlighting of vulnerability led to a number of discussions within the interviews around the need to learn from this experience and be better prepared for future emergencies. Such preparations may include aspects such more self-sustaining food provisions, but also maintaining networks for actioning support, better contingency planning (before emergencies happen) and the need for robust digital technologies and connectivity.

3.2.4 Looking forward and the rural recovery

When questioned about key challenges looking ahead for the community, most participants noted that the main challenges they face existed prior to the pandemic. Some of the challenges may now be more complex or difficult to achieve, while others may have been addressed to some degree as a result of adaptations and changes made during the pandemic and lockdown. Key issues for the coming months and years were suggested to include future pandemics or other crises; availability of housing (especially for young people, and as a result of second home buying); depopulation (largely linked to job and education availability); reliance upon the tourism industry and food / energy provision.

It was suggested that with the substantial and likely permanent shift towards digital communication as a central part of the workplace, issues of job and educational availability may be, to some degree, ameliorated through opportunities for remote work and study. This may help mitigate some of the depopulation which has taken place in recent decades. However, the increased ability to work remotely and the current desire for people to relocate to rural areas could lead to further increase of home-buying from people not resident to the island. This could continue to force house prices up.

All of the participants were cognisant of the fact that similar crises are likely to become more frequent occurrences in the future. On one hand, this was considered to be a challenge, but on the other, it was noted that the current pandemic had taught lessons that can be used to increase resilience and allow preparedness for future crises. One important lesson was identified as the need to consider impacts as being felt across the whole community, rather than sectoral impacts (because the community is so small and people/services are so interconnected) and a need to be prepared to deal with them on a sectoral level.

“[we need] to be prepared... this could happen again at any time so we need to be prepared that if it does happen again, we're not in the same position, that we're up and ready to go, so

there's a 'battle plan' in place ... so we should never be in a position again where we're all going 'what do we do?' It's crazy really when you think about it, because we were unprepared for it ... and plans were changing every day." (IS3)

The need for the island to be able to adapt regulations and policy to suit their own context and needs was raised by multiple participants. There was an understanding that regulations need to be established nationally, but there was a call for flexibility within them to make them relevant to the unique challenges faced by island communities. Part of the solution to this could be for formal groups such as local councils to give residents more responsibility and power – this will reduce costs of implementation of measures and increase community ownership in their area.

A notably contentious issue that the community is currently dealing with is the re-introduction of tourism to the island. There is much economic reliance on tourism, and this has been absent for many months. Some parties are in desperate need of tourism, while many residents are reported to be nervous about or resistant to its re-introduction due to the risks it brings in terms of virus mobility.

3.3 South Uist (Community case study)

Three interviews were carried out in the South Uist community, focused in particular on the Lochboisdale/Eriskay area. They include a councillor, community development organisation and community support group. These interviews have been coded as SU1-SU3 below.

3.3.1 Key impacts and current challenges

The key local-level impacts identified by participants include: i) the suspension of health services such as cancer screening and mental health support; ii) the suspension of various community-based services such as adult literacy and employment support – for example: pre-employment training and jobs matching; SCQF personal development and core skills provision; CV writing sessions; iii) and a lack of statutory service provision (of an acceptable quality) for vulnerable people within the community. Additional impacts identified included restrictions on transport including the public bus service, community bus service and the Lochboisdale ferry. All three participants voiced concerns of long-term mental health impacts, particularly for the self-employed working age population. Although concern was expressed for elderly residents suffering from isolation, it was felt that community support was largely focused on supporting that demographic and that others within the community may be 'suffering in silence'.

3.3.2 Responses to the pandemic and lockdown

It was clear from all three interviews that the responses to the pandemic and lockdown within South Uist were perceived as being very much community and volunteer-led. There was a strong sense among participants of feeling 'abandoned' by the council, although it is worth noting that positive comments were made about the Scottish Government furlough scheme,



UK Government Bounce Back Loan Scheme¹⁹ and Scottish Government food parcels. There was a perception that council services and support were lacking during the Covid-19 pandemic largely due to historical cuts in funding and that this should be addressed in order to build future community resilience.

- As well as local shopping deliveries and prescription pickups being undertaken by local community groups (including Resilient Uist – see Box 6) community responses included: the Island Youth Project ‘Air an Stairsich’ (‘on the threshold’)²⁰. This initiative was funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and coordinated by young people on the island to tackle loneliness and to ensure the continued cohesion of the community. The Youth Project provided activities for young people based on media production, including running film clubs and hosting film night. The project also coordinated the taking/collation of photographs of families ‘on the threshold’ of their homes.
- Caraidean Uibhist²¹ continued their ‘befriending’ service for dementia patients but transferred this service to online video calls. Feedback on this has been extremely positive.
- An outdoor employment opportunity was provided by a local community development organisation, Cothrom, for mental health and substance misuse recovery clients. The recovery clients helped upgrade the outdoor nursery at Cothrom’s Ormiclate campus in South Uist. This included the building of fences, a tyre wall and mud kitchen. This project has also supported the increased provision of outdoor nursery activities that has been part of the nursery’s response to covid-19. Cothrom Òg (Cothrom nursery) is independently operated but works closely with Western Isles Council in the delivery of funded hours, and in providing places for children in receipt of the Sure Start programme.²²

Box 6 A local-level community led response to the pandemic - Resilient Uist²³

Resilient Uist was identified by all participants as the main community-level response to Covid-19 in the South Uist/Eriskay area. The group was set up in February 2020 as a sub-group of the community council to create a resilience plan for the area. The group is drawn from the community council, emergency services and local volunteers. Their main activity during the pandemic was organising/carrying out shopping and prescription runs for people isolating and unable to travel. At the time of interview, the group had driven 4000-5000 miles for prescription runs. The group also distributed ticks and crosses information cards to the community. A house would display a green tick in the window if they were ok but a red cross if they needed support. These were distributed across nine townships in Lochboisdale and Eriskay. Resilient Uist also supported the Council’s operations, including supporting the council-run helpline for people shielding. The helpline would contact Resilient Uist to facilitate the group providing support to that individuals identified through the helpline. Notably, Resilient Uist were not required to provide much support to residents in Eriskay as they: “sorted themselves, as they have historically always had to do this anyway”.

¹⁹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/apply-for-a-coronavirus-bounce-back-loan>

²⁰ To find more detail on this initiative see: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/1507568306209156/>

²¹ [Caraidean Uibhist](https://www.caraideanuibhist.org/) a charitable foundation located in Balivanich dedicated to helping those in need.

²² <https://www.cothrom.net/cothromog.html>

²³ For more information on Resilient Use see: <https://www.facebook.com/resilientuist/>

3.3.3 Lessons learned and capacity building

Despite criticisms of local government support, participants were generally positive about the communities' response to the pandemic/lockdown. Participants believed that their previous experiences as an island community in responding to isolation and lack of services (due to poor transport links and lack of facilities such as hospitals and shops) meant that the community was well-prepared to respond to lockdown measures. The communities are aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and through strong networks they were able to identify and communicate with members of the community to assist in providing services such as deliveries and prescription pick-ups. The communities' strong cultural values and links to the catholic church, as well as connection to the Gaelic language were identified as some reasons for such social cohesion. One interviewee stated:

'The Gaelic language is really important to the culture, so people will speak a lot of Gaelic and it's probably one of the strongest areas for Gaelic in Scotland... It's an oral language, not really a written language so it's passed on verbally... to do that you tend to have to be with people... it means we know each other's stories.' (SU1)

Discussions on lessons learned from the pandemic tended to focus on weakness within the community that were not necessarily brought about by the pandemic and resulting lockdowns, but were exacerbated by it. Concerns about the future economic resilience of the island were also discussed.

Transport within the islands and also connections to the mainland was identified as a main concern for the future and an area in which support is required to ensure the future resilience of the community. The Lochboisdale ferry service was seen as unreliable by participants but also deemed as a *'lifeline service that keeps being taken away'* (SU1). Suggestions for a tunnel to the mainland that is not weather dependent were made by one participant.

Poor digital connectivity on the island was also mentioned by all participants. It is important to note that the main issue identified with digital connectivity was not necessarily the access to digital devices or broadband, but the low uptake of community members engaging in digital drop-in services.

Concern around community organisations' reliance on spot purchasing of their services by the council was also identified as a potential area of weakness. Spot purchasing is often made up of small and short-term orders based on an immediate requirement/payment - (as opposed to longer term strategic procurement commitments by the council). There are multiple reasons that reliance on income from spot purchasing of services can be a risky form of funding for community organisations, but generally the concern is that there are usually no guarantees of income or fixed contracts. Longer term strategic contracts of community organisations' services procured by the council would provide future security and financial stability for community organisations. There is also a need for a more coordinated approach to supporting and identifying people who need employment, mental health and drug rehabilitation support within the 'system'. Participants noted that a number of individuals essentially 'slipped through the net' during the pandemic. In addition, the capacity of CPNs (Community psychiatric nurses) to deal with clients is being stretched and this is anticipated to get worse in the coming months/years.

3.3.4 Looking forwards and the rural recovery

A potential long-term issue identified was the lack of tourism on the islands and how this might impact the community financially. Many people on the islands rely on part-time work in the hospitality sector and would struggle without this source of income. However, one participant noted that once restrictions are lifted South Uist is likely to be a tourist 'hotspot' due to their unique outdoor landscapes. Comments were made that in the summer of 2020, a lack of public toilets, bins and camping facilities left beauty spots on the island littered with human waste and rubbish. To cope with potential increase in tourism to the island an increase in waste disposal units and public toilet facilities should be prioritised. As one interviewee stated:

'There was a big feeling of keeping tourists away, because people were coming from all over the UK... They [tourists] didn't realise how fragile the health service was here. Some [hotels, B&B's etc.] chose not to open to stop encouraging people to the islands... But it was the campervans and tents that still came. Official campsites closed down for a long time because they were trying to protect the island and looking to the future they want good relations... We are very vulnerable to bringing in Covid or any other disease. We are vulnerable from people leaving human waste behind. There were no public toilet facilities open – not many anyway' (SU3)

Future opportunities for the island were seen as relating to increasing the number of local employers and diversifying the types of employment available on the island. As part of the Comhairle's (Western Isles Council) 2019-2021 Procurement Strategy²⁴ one of the five priority themes for action is 'winning ways for local suppliers'. This is a commitment to ensuring suppliers from the Western Isles secure more public contracts; however, currently there are lack of local businesses within South Uist to support. Increased emphasis on local enterprise development therefore offers opportunities for obtaining/retaining available financial support within the local community.

Business opportunities identified included an increase in energy supply through hydrogen production, battery storage and local grids. Potential also exists for increasing local food production and processing. For example, one participant noted that all shellfish caught locally is shipped elsewhere for processing and is not consumed or sold on the island. The Covid-19 pandemic has also shown us that flexible working is possible, and many jobs can be done from home. There is optimism that with the right support this is an opportunity to attract people 'working from home' to make South Uist their new home.

Another point noted by multiple participants was the seasonality of jobs on the island and that many people had to work multiple jobs. A universal basic income as a back-up for people with unstable and seasonal work was suggested. The Furlough scheme has acted as a sort of basic income and has helped support people in beginning to set up their own businesses. As one interviewee commented: *'Although we are in scary times, people are doing something they've always wanted to do. This is the time to reset and put plans into action. We have always had to look out from the islands'* (SU1)

²⁴ <https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/media/7337/procurementstrategy.pdf>



3.4 Fife (Regional case study)

Interviews were conducted with three different organisations that serve the Fife region: Frontline Fife, which strives to help prevent homelessness through advice, advocacy and counselling to at-risk people living in Fife; Drugs, Alcohol and Psychotherapies Limited (DAPL) in Fife, which provide drug and alcohol users with therapy and guidance; and, Fife Council, which provides a range of services related to resilience across Fife. Interviews were held with a single representative from Frontline Fife and DAPL, and four people were interviewed (group interview) from Fife Emergency Resilience, each working in a rural area in Fife. These interviews are coded as F1-F3 in the text below. Three broad themes were particularly evident at regional level: i) transport costs and access to supermarkets; ii) individual and organisational disruptions; and iii) the importance of flexible funding schemes.

3.4.1 Key impacts and current challenges

All interviewees commented on how difficult it was to reach people due to the high cost of public transport. The exorbitant costs of public transport are an obstacle to receiving vital services and accessing affordable food, especially in rural and remote areas of Fife. As one interviewee noted: *'Some people were taking the nightrider [cheaper night bus service] and sleeping on people's floor to save the money for food'* (F4).

Many people in rural Fife who rely on public transport simply do not travel to population hubs to acquire food or other services. As one interviewee noted, the bus to a nearby city can cost upwards of £8 or £9, and that this cost ultimately meant that many choose not to travel far from their homes. This constraint was identified as having had a multiplier effect during the lockdown, potentially exacerbating impacts relating to isolation and loneliness and the related negative implications for mental health. As one interviewee noted: *'We are dealing with people who had mental health issues before who were managing them. But now they have [mental health issues] gone out of proportion, which makes it difficult'* (F2).

During the lockdown people living in more peripheral and remote parts of Fife travelled less due to fears of contracting Covid19. In addition, with the lockdown's negative consequences on the economy and the already high price of public transport, people chose to stay at home even more than previously. Some interviewees expressed particular concern about the mental wellbeing of residents living alone in more remote areas, who may not have been able to have any meaningful interactions with other people during lockdown periods. The resulting increase in isolation and loneliness was perceived as potentially contributing to a faster onset of dementia in vulnerable older people.

In terms of economic impacts, the accommodation and food services sector was identified as having suffered a particularly high level of impacts across the region (with this sector also the 4th largest sector in the region in terms of employment)²⁵. This reliance on tourism regionally was identified as having exacerbated wider economic impacts regionally, which included 7% of the workforce (10,600 employees) being furloughed during lockdown periods, with an additional 9,900 people having claimed a grant from the self-employment Income Support Scheme during the first phase of the scheme, with fifty companies also provided with additional employment support, with the manufacturing and arts and entertainment/recreation having suffered particularly high rates of redundancies in the region in 2020 (see previous footnote). In contrast to the rapid decline in visitors (and related income) during the first lockdown, a rapid increase in visitor numbers occurred during the period of reduced restrictions in the summer of 2020, which had knock on impacts in terms of pressures on local services and infrastructure and community concerns relating to inbound transmission of Covid-19.

3.4.2 Responses to the pandemic and lockdown

A common theme across interviewees representing social care and support services was a disruption in organisational workflow. This was most apparent in relation to how lockdown measures affected their ability to visit the homes of their clients in order to provide services. The lockdown prohibited home-visits, except in the case of emergencies, which limited their ability to provide client services in a business-as-usual manner. This posed a difficult challenge to overcome, the prevailing approach was to use mobile or smart phones to have calls or video chats. Mobile and smart phones have mixed effectiveness, and successful implementation and use of these approaches is situationally dependent.

Smart phones, when available, were used effectively to conduct video conferencing for counselling services. These devices proved a reliable alternative to in-home counselling services for drug and alcohol users whilst undergoing therapy. Whilst this approach was effective in ensuring these vulnerable groups have access to the services they need during lockdown, they had the added benefit of providing a *shift in control* for those receiving treatment. Those receiving counselling for drug and alcohol abuse are often put in distressful situations: they are required to come to a central location and may feel that they have no control or ability to easily leave once the session starts. As one interviewee stated: *'Talk about empowering the client...when you're on the end of the phone and you can just hang up on me at any moment, whose got the power in their hands there? If you and I were in a room, you*

²⁵ With less than half (46.3%) of businesses in this sector maintaining trading nationally in 2020 and 52.4% of accommodation/hospitality staff nationally having been furloughed. See: <https://www.fifeconomypartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/12/Fife-Business-Base-report-2020-v2.1.pdf>

would have to physically get up, leave the room, close the door and a social exchange would happen. Whereas over the phone you just hang up!’ (F2).

In contrast, holding services through mobile phone/smart phone-based calls or video conferencing allows the client to terminate the session as they wish, without fear of any embarrassment or retribution. In turn, clients often open-up more easily, thus leading to breakthroughs that may have otherwise been more difficult. This is a welcome change for counsellors as it has allowed them to focus a similar (or reduced) level of resources and provide the same or sometimes improved services to those in need. This represents a new model that will be carried into the future – even after the lockdown is over. As one interviewee stated: *‘It’s normal for someone to speak to you [on the phone] and tell you that everything is all right, but you then go into their home and quickly discover that everything is not all right. We can’t do that’ (F1).*

Providing counselling services over-the-phone, instead of making home visits, also has negative consequences. Often clients can hide anything that they may consider to be negative from those providing services, and they may use this tactic to pass themselves off as being better than they are. Not only can clients hide negative aspects from counsellors when holding meetings over a mobile or smart phone, but the nuance of in-person discussions is lost as well. Counsellors cannot see a client’s body language, which makes it difficult to make diagnoses.

In relation to combatting the negative effects of isolation exacerbated by lockdowns, Fife Council developed a relatively simple but effective programme of weekly calls (see Box 7). An unforeseen benefit of this approach has been that support workers have reported feeling better and more at ease after having these friendly phone chats with clients. Workers appear to find them beneficial for the same reason that clients do – having a friendly conversation with someone when your isolated or otherwise cut off from being near others makes them feel at ease and less anxious in general, reducing potential knock-on/longer term impacts in terms of stress and wellbeing.

Box 7. Fife Emergency Resilience - Combatting isolation impacts in Fife

Employees at Fife Council call those they have worked with in past, who they know live in more isolated parts of the region and have friendly catch-ups with them on a weekly basis. This approach works well and has several added benefits. The friendly nature of the conversations helps to make clients living in remote areas feel less lonely; clients enjoy catching up and will often confide to those on the other end of the telephone. When clients are more at ease, employees at Fife Council can better understand the nuance of their wellbeing, often picking up on verbal cues that might otherwise be more difficult to discern in more business-like approaches.

3.4.3 Lessons learned and capacity building

As identified above, a regional reliance (to an extent) on tourism and hospitality sectors for employment in particular, increased the regions vulnerability to the economic impacts of lockdowns, due to the high exposure of these sectors to the impacts of the pandemic²⁶.

²⁶ According to the Oxford Economics Covid-19 Vulnerability Index, Fife has a score of 101.6 and is the 10th most vulnerable council area out of the 32 local authorities in Scotland. The index considers a local authority’s economic diversity, business environment and digital connectivity to consider how able it is to withstand and respond to the

However, in contrast to some of the more peripheral regions of Scotland, the Fife region has a comparatively lower than average share of small firms and lower level of self-employment, with these factors strengthening the economic response during the pandemic²⁷.

Interviewees identified that support schemes and policy responses that were more flexible were generally best able to provide the biggest positive impacts for businesses and communities. This was particularly the case in relation to the availability of Crisis Grants²⁸ under the Scottish Welfare Fund, coordinated by Fife Council. The grants are available to provide support to those in need when coping with unexpected expenses and disasters, including funding for emergency living costs (food, fuel, nappies etc. until their next pay cheque) and impacts of a disaster (e.g. a pandemic). This fund is quite flexible in its requirements, and it was able to be used in innovative ways to make a large impact. For example, in one instance the fund was used to provide monies to make vehicle repairs, which allowed a family to access food and essential items, as well as allowing the recipients to access green spaces when travel restrictions permitted.

Fife Council worked closely with stakeholders who manage food banks in Fife. Food banks across Fife were able to become much more streamlined due to flexible funding and collective action from multiple charitable and community groups and stakeholder organisations. As interviewee stated: *'Our staff have set-up food hubs and made sure we got emergency food out to communities ... and quite a few new organisations have emerged and are delivering in partnership with us on food'* (F3).

Available funding has been important in addressing food needs, including the Food Fund Crisis Grant, which offers a high level of support and is used to ensure people can support their food needs for several weeks. This funding stream is flexible as it allows for further support in the form of fuel debt, the purchase of winter garments or major appliances. The flexibility of funding allowed for more longer-term planning by Fife Council members on how best to pair recipients with food sources (i.e., food banks) and, when necessary, other funding options. Going forward, this more streamlined approach to providing access to food and other services across the community will be adopted and scaled up.

Despite the relative proximity of Fife to the central belt, digital connectivity was identified as a continuing issue for parts of the region, with slow broadband speeds in some areas. Combined with a reliance on key sectors (some of which are less suited to working at home) this factor represents an ongoing capacity gap for parts of the region, which exacerbated the impacts of the pandemic and decreased the resilience of the regional response. In response, stakeholders from across Fife have been able to provide enhanced online-access to residents through the Connect-to-Scotland devices, which is running through the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations (SCVO) and Connecting Scotland. This programme provides electronic devices to people, delivering about 11,000 devices to vulnerable people across Fife. Phase 2 of the programme is currently focussing on families. Interviewees expressed great enthusiasm for the programme and noted its successes and roll out.

economic shock resulting from Covid-19. A score of above 100 means an area is more vulnerable than the average for Great Britain.

²⁷ See: <https://www.fifeconomypartnership.com/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/12/Fife-Business-Base-report-2020-v2.1.pdf>

²⁸ For further information see: <https://www.fife.gov.uk/kb/docs/articles/benefits-and-money-advice/crisis-and-community-care-grants>

3.4.4 Looking forwards and the rural recovery

Ongoing support in Fife involves: 1) ensuring that vulnerable groups (older people, people with mental health struggles) living in rural areas have adequate access to public transport; 2) promoting the further streamlining of food banks and ensuring they are accessible to those in need; and 3) continuing to provide flexible funding options for the region. The high cost of public transport in Fife was identified as one of the most important challenges for building resilience going forward, as it has the potential to act as a multiplier effect: impacting other services and needs beyond travel. The high costs of public transport in Fife restricts vulnerable people's travel and ability to access key services. Whilst the streamlining of food banks in the region is a success story, ongoing support to public transport to those seeking assistance from food banks would greatly increase their impact. Flexible funding has been shown to be a great benefit to those in Fife. Extending or promoting flexible funding options to allow for public transport would be an innovative and easy win, as existing anchor organisations, with strong networks into the rural communities, can help disseminate funding and information to those in need.



3.5 Burntisland (Community case study)

3.5.1 Key impacts and current challenges

Four interviews were conducted with organisational representatives from Burntisland Emergency Action Team, Burntisland and Kinghorn Rotary Club and local Burntisland residents. These interviews are coded as B1-B4 in the text below. A number of broad impacts were identified which can be grouped into four main themes: i) economic factors; ii) emotional/psychological impacts; iii) the challenge of home schooling; and iv) a lack of support from the local authority.

Interviewees identified that there is a diversity of financial situations amongst Burntisland residents: *'Geographically we are between one of the richest and poorest areas, which creates a mixed place'* (B1). This has resulted in challenges for some residents in purchasing basics: *'Burntisland has some very poor areas, food has been an issue for some of the age ranges'* (B2). Residents who would normally travel to the larger and often cheaper supermarkets for their food were unable to do so, instead some residents had to rely on the more expensive local shops including the Co-operative. *'Local food can be prohibitive as the Coop is the main shop and they are expensive, and unless you can travel to Kirkcaldy to buy from larger supermarkets it can be costly'* (B3). The pandemic has increased awareness of the economic situation in Burntisland and the level of poverty in Burntisland has been a shock to some interviewees: *'I got a shock at the amount of poverty in the town which has surprised a lot of people particularly as I thought I had a good understanding of the town'* (B3).

Interviewees discussed the personal emotional impact that the lock-down and covid-19 has had on them. Interviewees spoke about feeling exhausted and those who were working on the front line had experienced very emotional situations: *'I dealt with someone who had not eaten for three days'* (B4). Personal circumstances often exacerbated the emotional challenge, with one interviewee discussing the importance of having someone to speak to and *'unload the events of the day'* (B4). Interviewees also identified a perceived lack of support being available for local community support organisations in relation to how they should respond and support the community during the pandemic.

The challenge of home-schooling was identified by interviewees, both from a personal and an observational/organisational perspective: *'Lots of people are struggling with the home schooling during this lock-down'* [January/February 2021], *as there has been so much work given [to the pupils]... There should be an awareness of the pressure parents are being put under for home schooling too* (B4). Interviewees spoke about school closures creating an *'uneasy situation'* and noted that once schools did re-open after the first closure, some form of normality had returned. (B1).

Discussions around the withdrawal of the local authority and a related feeling of isolation was raised during interviews: *'There wasn't much support out there. Burntisland activated the emergency plan with Fife council, but the Local Authority and the Fife voluntary group did not really have their act together and did not have protocols in place for safe-guarding volunteers'* (B4). Concern was raised over facilities in Burntisland disappearing, including the leisure centre and swimming pool and the potential for vacant buildings in Burntisland as the Local Authority disinvest in large buildings for which they are currently responsible. The Community Council were in the process of attempting to save the Burgh Chambers by taking ownership and potentially re-designing the building (B3). However, it was noted that the council did not 'dictate' what to do and organisations that were already in Burntisland grew and adapted to the changes without local authority guidance (B1).

3.5.2 Responses to the pandemic and lockdown

In relation to responses to the pandemic interviewees discussed approaches relating to four main areas: i) collective/partnership-based activity including a prescription delivery service; ii) increasing food bank capacity and related activity; iii) door to door welfare checks; and iv) wider community support activities.

The collective action of multiple local community organisations was recognised, including that of the Community Council, Toll Community Centre, Burntisland Emergency Action Trust and Burntisland First Aid. These represent voluntary organisations embedded in the local community which were recognised as having worked well together during the pandemic. One partnership (the Burntisland Emergency Action Team) was highlighted for having coordinated prescription deliveries across the community effectively (see Box 8).

Box 8 Burntisland Emergency Action team (BEAT)

BEAT was originally based in the Toll community centre²⁹, with a more central location on the high street established at the start of the pandemic. BEAT was set up by the Burntisland Community Council³⁰ and represents a partnership between Burntisland Community Council, the Toll Community Centre, and Burntisland First Aid Trust³¹ (BFAT). During the pandemic BFAT delivered prescriptions to vulnerable and shielding residents in Burntisland. The role of BFAT in collecting prescriptions was particularly valued as they wore a uniform, which instilled a feeling of trust amongst the community and for those who required medication. Prescription delivery was perceived as a critical service for two reasons: i) those who were vulnerable, or shielding could still get their medication; and ii) the individual delivering the prescription could check-in with the resident. The service was widely appreciated by residents; however, it was noted that there was an occasion that this service was taken advantage of by those who did not require the service (B4). BEAT is supported by volunteers and funding from the local Rotary club and supporting communities fund³². Interviewees positively commended the work of the BEAT in supporting the community during the pandemic. '[BEAT] is a very good example of an initiative'. Additionally, interviews discussed the *'the fantastic community level support, including BEAT'*.

Rapidly enhancing food bank capacity represented an important area of local activity during the pandemic, with Burntisland's main foodbank having increased its provisioning to 260 hot meals and 400 food parcels every month³³. The level of demand placed on the food bank changed during the pandemic: *'There was a huge change in demand for the food bank'*. Prior to the pandemic the normal clients were generally older single men, however during the lockdown(s) there has been a change to more families using the service. This change in clients has also resulted in some changes to what the foodbank provides. The food bank also provided a social opportunity pre-pandemic, however due to the restrictions placed on facilities like this the food bank café had to close, which resulted in the social component diminishing.

The food bank is staffed by volunteers, however due to many volunteers being in the shielding category a greater number of volunteers were required to replace those that were shielding. Although there was a high number of people wanting to volunteer, volunteers still required training and food handling certificates. Social distancing also impacted the way the food bank operated; a one-way system was introduced and a queuing system. The location of the food bank was noted as having created some tension in the local community, with users explaining they did not want to be seen queuing in a very public place for the food bank: *'People felt embarrassed to que for the food bank'* (B4). The food bank has since moved from its "visible" presence on the high street. BEAT also introduced an additional food-bank service, establishing confidential deliveries of food parcels to residents in need. The potential for further partnership working between BEAT and the existing food bank service was recognised, with one interviewee noting that the current *'lack of cooperation from the foodbank was poor'* (B4).

BEAT volunteers also carried out door to door checks across Burntisland. This was a novel approach undertaken to support the community during a difficult time: *'BEAT first put leaflets through the doors and then went door-door'*. *It was a novel approach, someone coming to the*

²⁹ See: <http://www.tollcentre.org.uk/>

³⁰ See: <http://www.burntislandcc.org.uk/>

³¹ See: <http://bfast.org.uk/>

³² For further information on the Burntisland Community Trust and supporting communities fund see [here](#).

³³ See previous footnote

doors to ask after your welfare is not that common today, it was surprising as we are not used to it happening' (B1). The posting of leaflets with contact details for BEAT and signposting available support was hailed as a very positive example of community support. The contact details on the leaflets demonstrated that there were people to contact if community residents were struggling. Additionally, people who were not in need of support themselves called BEAT to highlight neighbours who were struggling due to the contact information being circulated across the community. BEAT noted that some particularly sensitive residents were found through this process *'A neighbour phoned BEAT to let us know their neighbour had not had electricity for a week'. The fact the neighbour knew of a service to call encouraged the neighbour to call BEAT (and raise the issue)'* (B4).

Other initiatives were also developed in Burntisland to support the community during the pandemic. These initiatives covered a range of activities and age groups and included:

- Burntisland juvenile pipe band supplied electric chanters so members could continue to practice during the lock-down.
- Broomhill Kids Gardening Club created drop off points for families.
- Creation of a swap-shop by the Toll Centre and BEAT, i.e. to facilitate swapping cans of soup for a jigsaw etc.
- The Push-bike project, run by BEAT is a bike support centre based at the community centre where bikes could be maintained and fixed, demand increased during the pandemic as people wanted their exercise to be cycling.

3.5.3 Lessons learned and capacity building

Three broad themes relating to the underlying capacity and resilience of the local community were highlighted, including: i) a thriving high street and the importance of essential local businesses; ii) community spirit and support; iii) the rapid growth in volunteer capacity during the pandemic. These are discussed further below. Interviewees described most of the Burntisland high street as thriving. The high street has essential shops which have been able to stay open and have experienced greater demand during the pandemic. A new café and new shops opened on the high-street during the pandemic which was perceived as a very positive outcome for such a challenging period. Businesses which have been able to stay open and invest to adapt to the regulations (e.g. through the installation of Perspex screens) have been more resilient and successful, compared to those which have not been able to stay open or were unable to invest to adapt their premises. Interviewees notes that people often feel comparatively safe on the high street, which has resulted in more people shopping local. In addition, this emphasis on 'staying local' was recognised as having resulted in the green space in Burntisland becoming a more utilised and effective community space. However, as recognised by some interviewees, while some residents are likely to have access to more disposable income and are therefore willing to pay more for local food and other goods this is not the case for all residents (as demonstrated by the increased demand on the local food bank). Furthermore, although the high street is currently thriving, some interviewees did question whether this would continue post-pandemic when the current restrictions were lifted

Interviewees discussed the increase in community spirit that has been experienced during the pandemic which has made Burntisland, as a community, more resilient. Although community spirit was recognised as having always been high in Burntisland, there have been very visible

increases in the community working together and supporting each other during the pandemic. According to one interviewee: *'(the) community is active and on-going, which may mean Burntisland becomes attractive for people to move into'*. Several examples were identified of the community coming together to support each-other through volunteering and giving donations to groups such as BEAT. Additionally, some businesses have supported BEAT by providing fresh produce, including baked goods.

The number of volunteers who have joined to support the Burntisland food bank and the activities of BEAT was recognised by some interviewees as overwhelming. BEAT received a major amount of public support (over 80 people signed up to volunteer during the pandemic) and to do a diverse range of tasks that BEAT has adopted, including dog walking, food deliveries and neighbourhood check-ins. Interviewees discussed the potential reasons for the increased popularity and interest in volunteering and noted the importance of people having been furloughed, not commuting and ultimately having more time available, as key reasons for the increased numbers of people volunteering.

3.5.4 Looking forwards and the rural recovery

This section outlines three key themes relating to further opportunities and the longer-term response to recovery post pandemic, including: i) greater empowerment of community councils; ii) the importance of developing a central hub of communication point for the community; and iii) developing more effective collaboration between community groups and wider stakeholders.

Interviewees identified the value a community council can have in boosting community resilience when they have the right level of support and responsibility: *'Having a strong community council is a good place to start [in building community capacity] and having the key members on it who want to build resilience'* (B4). There was an appreciation that being involved with the community council requires a considerable time commitment, although having a community council fund offered scope for alleviating time pressures to some extent. The budget allocation for community councils was raised with the view that greater control over a pot of money would be more effective than applying for grants: *We need community councils to have a greater budget to develop and allow communities to manage money. Chasing grants is not effective and not the best use of people's time. It's quite exhausting having to chase funding'*. (B3)

The development of effective prescription delivery services (by volunteers) was recognised as having been a success story. However, it was noted by interviewees that there was no central point for information on what support people required across the community and thus there was the feeling that some residents were being over-seen and the system was open to abuse, although this was recognised as having occurred relatively rarely. Hot meals were made in conjunction with BEAT and the local hotel using a 'golden list' which detailed the details of older people in Burntisland who would benefit from a hot meal and a conversation, with this system generally working well as the basis for linking a specific support measure with a community need.

Greater partnership working has been highlighted as critical for developing greater community resilience to future shocks. Although there were positive examples of collaboration amongst

BEAT, the community council, the Toll Centre and BFAT, interviewees argued that the collaboration between agencies needs to increase to ensure a more effective future short and longer-term response to addressing community needs. Additionally, the pandemic has created some new examples of partnership working, with the local school working with BEAT to identify vulnerable residents and to help support them. Additionally, developing a greater working relationship between Fife Council and the community was recognised as a critical opportunity for developing solutions to issues, including the potential closure of buildings (and related loss of community facilities and services). The community were recognised as having ‘plugged the gaps’ in availability of services (at least in the short term) and have demonstrated their abilities to respond effectively when the need arises: *‘this needs to be respected as partnership equals and the way of working needs to change’*. (B3)



3.6 Elie and the East Neuk (Community case study)

Four interviews were carried out with people from Elie and the coastal villages to the east (St Monans, Pittenweem, Anstruther, Crail) – the East Neuk. Views were shared from community councils, a community trust and a local business support organisation. A written response was also submitted on behalf of a community council. The interviews and written response are coded as EL1-5 in the text below.

3.6.1 Key impacts and current challenges

Interviewees were not aware of any deaths from Covid-19 in the area at the time of the research and case numbers have generally been very low, compared to the regional level case rates in Fife. The main negative impacts were recognised as having been because of the lockdown measures, which were described as *‘taking a terrible toll on people’s health and stress levels’* (EL3). Social isolation among elderly residents and vulnerable people was a concern for all the interviewees. As one described about her own situation: *‘I live on my own and I found it really difficult because it seemed to me that everyone else was in a bubble. They had their family around them, my family couldn’t travel to be with me’* (EL2).

For local businesses, the main negative impacts have been for those who work in hospitality, tourism and fishing sectors. Interviewees were concerned that there are still people who do not fit the criteria for business/other financial support. A specific example raised was families with young children whose income relies on the fishing industry. Many fishermen are self-employed and they did not have immediate access to support from the government at the outset when they were *‘suddenly out of work’* (EL1). Concerns had been raised at a meeting of the local community resilience planning group (ENCEPT – see below for more information)

that it may be harder for these families to ask for help, due to feelings of pride. One interviewee noted that they had seen some *'crowdfunding pages pop up for fishermen'* (EL1).

At the community level, some charities that support disadvantaged/vulnerable residents and/or the elderly have had to close because they cannot continue to raise funds. The mobile bank that normally serves Elie and other villages has not been to the area since March 2020 and it has been hard for those without access to a private car to use public transport to access the bank in Anstruther. However, the Post Office van has continued to visit. Concerns were also raised about the impending backlog of health treatments, including dental treatment.

In what is *'normally a busy, bustling place'* (EL4), a whole range of community activities have ceased (e.g. badminton, bowling, choirs, etc) and local services regarded as 'essential' for many have closed. Of particular concern to multiple interviewees in November/December was that the local library in Elie had still not re-opened, even though others in Fife have been open at intervals. As one interviewee stated: *'We've got a lovely wee library in Elie and it's been lying closed since March, which is a tragedy. These are the sorts of things, in this type of community – you've got an elderly population who uses the library a lot'* (EL4).

The closure of the East Neuk Centre Trust (ENCT) in Anstruther also had a major impact on the community: about 60 groups meet at the Trust's buildings regularly and provide crucial services, including welfare advice, mental health support and wellbeing activities. The ENCT is *'for the community and really local – the fact that [it] had to close – the people who use these services were really affected'* (EL1).

3.6.2 Responses to the pandemic and lockdown

As in the other case studies, there have been a range of individual, business and community responses to the lockdown measures. One interviewee described the IT support he provided informally to elderly residents learning to use new devices and develop the skills needed to interact with friends/family online. Other individuals have sewn masks, started a meal service in a bus, and undertaken running challenges to raise money for local charities. Local groups have set up 'virtual blethers', online quizzes and other social activities to keep in touch, and community organisations have continued to function using online meeting software. All interviewees felt there was a strengthened sense of community and there was *'hope that we will build on that momentum and more local groups will set up new services based on what we've seen and what we experienced'* (EL1).

Although the lockdown measures have limited residents' access to cheaper food at distant supermarkets (particularly those without a car), a lot of local shops have offered a delivery service during lockdown periods. As a result, several local shops have had more business than normal and some have *'quadrupled their turnover and have been working 24 hours a day to keep up'* (EL5). One interviewee explained that *'we are lucky here as we have a couple of farm shops'*, which meant that *'in terms of food, we did extremely well'* (EL2). For example, the staff at the Pittenweem Hub, which includes a pharmacy, Post Office and grocers, have continued to deliver goods locally, with help from local volunteers in co-ordination with the East Neuk Emergency Community Planning Team³⁴ (see Box 9).

³⁴ See the ENCEPT Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/ENCEPT.UK/>

Box 9: The East Neuk Community Emergency Planning Team response (ENCEPT)

ENCEPT is a voluntary organisation that existed before the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdowns. The organisation helps communities and individuals in the East Neuk to prepare for, respond to and recover from local emergencies, following their emergency strategy. The strategy was activated in the first week of the lockdown in March 2020 and the East Neuk Centre Trust's buildings were used to co-ordinate their services.

ENCEPT connected with all community councils in the area to develop a network of volunteers and make sure that the most vulnerable people and those shielding were able to access food and medicines. ENCEPT volunteers have delivered weekly food parcels and medicines to elderly people on a list compiled by GPs and other organisations. They also delivered food parcels to families experiencing financial hardship. While elderly residents were reached effectively by the volunteers, the same was not necessarily true for families in financial difficulty: *'We could do more for families – how do you reach families – people feel that if they need help and they have never done that before it's really hard – how can you do that in a dignified way?'* (EL1).

Volunteers also delivered fuel vouchers to some households and assisted families without access to WiFi and/or a device. The key to the success of this response was that ENCEPT communicated quickly and effectively with pharmacists, GPs, community councils and other organisations in the area. A phone support line was established and *'within weeks, there were a lot of organisations working together'* (EL1). It was a challenge to inform the community about the service and to ensure that it was used by those who needed it. Barriers to uptake included pride/shame related to asking for help and reaching residents who were not online/interacting with ENCEPT on social media – the lockdown restrictions did not permit ENCEPT volunteers to put flyers through doors.

ENCEPT was commended for *'stepp[ing] up at the beginning of the lockdown'* because there was some frustration that ENCEPT had to take on caring/support roles that *'had simply been withdrawn by Fife Council'* (EL3). One interviewee explained that ENCEPT wanted to work with the Fife Council Resilience Team but it took some time for the council to reorganise and set out their response plan, which caused some friction at the outset. There was also some overlap with support provided by Fife Voluntary Action.

ENCEPT volunteers met weekly during the first lockdown and continue to do so. Financial support for the weekly 'food gift bags' was provided by the local community, Foundation Scotland, East Neuk food bank and other donors.

Many businesses have adapted to cope with the impact of the lockdowns. For example, some local fishermen are selling their catch direct to consumers in branded fish vans, and many local food shops are reaching their clientele with deliveries. As lockdown eased in the summer of 2020, it became apparent that a challenge for local residents is knowing which businesses are open (and when), particularly when people are less willing to leave their homes and when communicating this type of information is challenging across dispersed communities. The 'East Neuk Now' app, which was in development prior to the lockdowns, may help to address this issue and is likely to become a more important resource than originally expected (see Box 10).

Box 10: East Neuk Now – an online community hub

*East Neuk Now*³⁵ is an app designed to bring together local information in one place and enable residents and visitors to access up-to-date information about business opening hours, community activities, local events, special offers, etc. Development of the app is being overseen by Visit East Neuk³⁶, a volunteer-run tourism association which helps to promote tourism in the area.

The aspiration is that having better knowledge about what there is to do/where there is to shop in the community will encourage people to *'go shopping again'* (EL5). Many local businesses do not have up-to-date information on their own websites (if they have one) and East Neuk Now overcomes that issue by providing a central platform.

Users of the app will be able to 'follow/connect' with retailers, sign up for updates and communicate directly with the businesses. Businesses will also be able to develop stronger relationships with their customers by keeping them updated about new products, etc. This will be important for businesses that wish to retain the customer base they have developed in the past year, encouraging people to maintain a 'shop local' attitude and support local retailers.

Development of the app is funded by Scottish Government through Scotland's Town Partnership. A similar online hub is being/has been developed in other Scottish towns and villages³⁷.

3.6.3 Lessons learned and capacity building

Overall, interviewees described how the situation has strengthened the community in the villages in some respects. As one interviewee described the community in Elie: *'On the whole, I think we are probably a stronger community. I have found out that there are half a dozen people in the village who will do anything for anyone'* (EL2). This was also the case in Pittenweem, where *'the community as a whole has pulled together and continues to support each other'* (EL3). ENCEPT was widely seen as very important in terms of their fast and effective response, while Fife Council was criticised by all but one of the interviewees for not offering enough support, not communicating well with local people and/or limiting essential services (e.g. recycling centres, local traffic management) when they were needed the most.

There was a general feeling among interviewees that although *'there is enough skills and capacity'*, financial support – particularly small grants – has been *'crucial'* (EL1). Small grants made available during the past year have been very important for the ongoing work of ENCEPT and others. For example, the East Neuk Centre Trust has been awarded a small grant to set up a 'Community Fridge' in one of their buildings in Anstruther. 'The Fridge' opened in January 2021 with free food items available for at-home cooking and eating. The project will help to address food poverty while also reducing local food waste, with food donated from supermarkets, farm shops and restaurants. However, some local groups have not been able to access funding because they are currently unable to set up business bank accounts – due to the mobile bank not visiting and the bank in Anstruther being closed. This was a restricting factor for local groups who are not yet set up officially (as a SCIO, CIC, etc.) and therefore unable to apply for grant funding at this time.

³⁵ See <https://www.eastneuknow.com/> (the web app – the phone app will be released in due course).

³⁶ See the Visit East Neuk Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/FifeEastNeukLTA/>

³⁷ Including: Stonehaven, North Uist, South Uist and Benbecula.

It was also clear that local groups/charities were generally able to work quickly – either independently or in partnership – to deliver support to those who needed it. For example, the East Centre Neuk Trust prepared a risk assessment in May 2020 for reopening its buildings when lockdown eased. They were able to reopen much more quickly than some council-run services. As one interviewee stated: *‘he strength from small, local groups is that they are more innovative, and they adapt quicker to the new situation...a lot of the services run by Fife Council are still not open’* (EL1). There was some frustration among interviewees about communication problems between groups and organisations, to ensure successful partnership working. This was highlighted as an issue *‘particularly between Fife Council and the local groups’* (EL1).

3.6.4 Looking forwards and the rural recovery

All interviewees noted how the area became *‘busy beyond comfortable’* and *‘creaking at the seams’* (EL4) in the summer of 2020 when lockdown measures were eased. These concerns highlight significant issues with visitor management infrastructure in all the coastal villages, which will need to be considered in the immediate future. Issues included: increased rubbish and human waste on beaches/near toilets that were closed; anti-social behaviour; problems with parking management; limited refuse collection/limited Recycling Centre hours. As one interviewee noted, the pandemic brought many of these underlying issues to the fore: *‘We are a sleepy village in the winter [...] we’re used to being a busy village in the summer, and all the negative things about that have been worse this year, significantly worse’* (EL2).

The situation also highlighted that public transport and active travel links along the coast are inadequate not only for residents³⁸ but also for supporting a sustainable tourism economy. Most of the interviewees were keen to see a strategic visitor management plan developed in partnership with Fife Council to enable visitors to come into the villages without their cars, reducing pressure on essential infrastructure (e.g. natural environment, local services, waste collection, etc.).

There is also an opportunity to provide more support to enable community organisations to work together effectively – the lockdown response has shown the potential for a strong, co-ordinated response from these organisations, if they communicate well and have strong networks between them. It is encouraging that, despite some initial challenges, ENCEPT and the Fife Council Resilience Team have now met and are working together. There are several ‘umbrella’ groups in the area, such as Fife Voluntary Action, the East Neuk Forum, Visit East Neuk, etc. and there was some confusion among interviewees about whether these groups link up/overlap to provide the services that the communities need, as well as whether they are well-supported by the local council.

³⁸ Across North East Fife, a high percentage of people are service-deprived (32%) – this means that many people in the area have to take a bus to access a chemist, primary school, dentist or doctor (see [‘Some people in North East Fife are struggling – now more than event’](#) by North East Fife’s Community Development team (August 2020).



4 Synthesis of key findings

4.1 Key impacts and local-regional variability

The identified impacts of the pandemic were broadly consistent, both within and between regions, with some variability evident in relation to sectoral economic impacts and economic dependencies, with the higher numbers of small businesses (with limited reserves) and self-employed in the Western Isles recognised as potentially exacerbating short and long-term economic impacts. Overall, the local community case studies strongly reinforced regional findings, while also highlighting the impacts of within region variability in relation to certain factors (e.g. distance to services, peripherality), although this within region variability was less evident in the Fife community case studies. Peripherality effects appear to have been offset to some extent by high levels of community cohesion and volunteering across the case studies, with the high levels of compliance in the Western Isles playing a role in minimising the more severe direct effects (e.g. case rates) of the pandemic. Additionally, some small local businesses exhibited an adaptive approach, with more essential businesses benefitting from an increased emphasis on local shopping during the pandemic.

Critically, many identified impacts were recognised as having intensified underlying long-term issues or capacity gaps – as opposed to representing new impacts resulting solely from the pandemic. This included (for example) concerns relating to retiree in-migration and affordable housing pressures in the Western Isles (perceived as having increased in 2020). Additionally,

the most severe economic impacts were specific to key sectors (including tourism, transport, fisheries and creative industries), as well as having disproportionately affected those on lower incomes (due to wider effects and sectoral effects). These impacts have been exacerbated by wider factors such as Brexit and parallel impacts (e.g. the loss of the sub-sea cable to the Western Isles). A further point of emphasis in the Western Isles related to how sectoral economic impacts had community-wide effects, with business closures in particular having considerable knock-on social and economic implications for families in small remote communities. A widespread concern was also evident (particularly in the Western Isles) that the timescales for recovery were uncertain, linked to uncertainty around the scale of the impacts once support measures were removed. Furthermore, underlying concerns about visitor pressures (in both regions) brought to the fore during the pandemic suggest the potential for tourism-related conflicts in the future.

Disruption to organisations and services, including both statutory and community/voluntary services and in particular the NHS, represented a key impact across all case studies. The effects of disruption to transport services was also widely felt, although this was exacerbated by underlying issues with high public transport costs in Fife, which had increased the economic impacts (and isolation effects) for those on lower incomes due to their inability to travel to lower cost shops and other essential services during the lockdowns. In contrast, challenges with maintaining supply chains for certain sectors (particularly construction) was a greater concern in the islands, reflecting the challenges of peripherality and compounded by Brexit effects.

The loss of community services, community hubs and face-to-face engagement (and related community connectivity) affected both regions and all case studies, with knock on impacts in terms of isolation and well-being effects. Additionally, home schooling and home working were widely recognised as requiring adjustments and causing stress and anxiety for many households. Interestingly, the case studies appear to show that geographic isolation (i.e. distance from services and population centres) does not appear to be the over-riding factor in relation to isolation and loneliness effects, with Fife interviewees repeatedly raising the issue of reduced connectivity and high transport costs resulting in social isolation and disproportionate economic impacts for those on lower incomes. Some groups (e.g. teenagers) also run the risk of receiving less focus due to the overriding emphasis on caring for those in older age groups. Notably, the social isolation effects were (to some extent) countered by a rapid rise in volunteering levels and community cohesion, with this factor particularly prevalent in the Western Isles (but clearly apparent in both regions). Nevertheless, concerns relating to vulnerability and a sense of being cut off were clearly apparent in South Uist, reflecting the particularly peripheral character of this community, with the cultural impacts of not being able to attend funerals also widely felt.

4.2 Factors enabling a resilient response (and regional variability)

Rapid and collective action by key agencies and a wide range of voluntary organisations represented the cornerstone of the response to the pandemic across the case studies in both regions, with the aim of maintaining services and community well-being and supporting businesses. Key factors which constrained the resilience of the response at community levels included underlying factors, such as demographic vulnerabilities and higher rates of dependency (particularly in the Western Isles in both cases) and deprivation and lower levels

of economic diversification. These aspects are clearly apparent from the increased demand on food banks (in both regions) and the sudden increased need for social care following lockdown. In the Western Isles, the region's peripherality is also a factor in relation to transport costs, retaining access to supply chains and potential dependency on the mainland/visitors for income, resources etc. Nevertheless, an interesting corollary evident from the case studies is that the region's low population density and peripherality reduced the potential for viral transmission, which (when combined with high compliance) resulted in very low case rates and comparative internal freedom at various points during 2020.

While the Western Isles is dependent on a relatively narrow range of economic sectors and exhibits high levels of self-employment, the high number of public sector jobs provided some economic security during the pandemic. Nevertheless, while the employment and business support measures were widely valued, as shown in the case studies, specific response measures were not always effectively 'island proofed' and/or suitable for small businesses or self-employed people with multiple job roles. Additionally, while the tiering system facilitated the islands to be moved to lower levels of restrictions, this did not result in a rapid economic bounceback – largely due to the continued lack of visitors from the mainland (and the reduced levels of business support available in lower tiers).

The case studies demonstrate that existing high levels of community cohesion (a factor in both regions but particularly so in the Western Isles) represents a major asset during a sustained emergency such as a pandemic. In the Western Isles this was attributed to the existence of 'cultural resilience' among residents, fostered through previous challenges and the geographic isolation of the region. This trait engendered a sense of community responsibility and belonging, which (to an extent) effectively counteracted some of the potentially more severe impacts of lockdowns relating to viral transmission (through compliance) and social isolation (through volunteer activity, prescription deliveries etc.). Nevertheless, a strong community response was also clearly evident in Fife (evidenced by the extent of volunteering), with a number of new and effective strategic partnerships having been formed between community groups and other stakeholders. In contrast, some criticisms of the local authority were evident in both regions and in all four community case studies, largely related to the slow speed of the local authority response, ineffective communication and coordination between the local authority and communities and, in some cases, a perceived lack of effective leadership from the local authority, resulting in some community organisations feeling isolated and unsupported.

Findings in all case studies demonstrate that local community bodies, and particularly more resourced anchor organisations (community trusts etc.), have played a critical role so far during the pandemic in relation to coordinating volunteers, re-tasking their staff to community support roles, providing support to other community groups and utilising their networks to match the support available to where it was most needed in the community. These organisations and smaller-scale community charities demonstrated an ability to respond relatively rapidly and in a flexible manner. The existence of local businesses and services (including post offices, shops and GPs etc.) was a further key factor in ensuring continued service availability (when travel restrictions were in place), with community infrastructure repeatedly recognised for its increased functionality and value during the pandemic.

One of the most defining responses to, and characteristics of, the pandemic has been the rapid shift to working, socialising and obtaining support online. Existing high-quality broadband networks in most parts of both regions facilitated this shift, with related issues of lack of access to a computer or tablet addressed in many cases through provision of these by the local authority, agencies or wider community organisations. Connectivity and previously tested systems (e.g. home working, E-Scoil, online events etc.) represented a major factor in relation to how the case study communities responded to the impacts of the pandemic. Notably, in a number of these cases, the potential additional benefits of inclusivity (e.g. online counselling, attending meetings from a distance etc.) were recognised.

4.3 The rural recovery and future support needs

Perhaps most critically, interviewees across all the case studies agreed that the full impacts of the pandemic and resulting lockdowns were yet to be felt by communities, with pressures (e.g. funding reductions, furlough removal etc.) likely to increase in some respects later in 2021. In relation to fostering community resilience, the case studies demonstrate a clear need to approach the challenge in relation to both emergency response planning and preparedness (e.g. community response groups, rapid response plans) and strengthening underlying capacity across a range of areas (e.g. anchor organisations, housing, demographics etc.) to enhance 'everyday' resilience³⁹. The key factors identified across the case studies as most critical for supporting an effective rural recovery and promoting resilience are summarised below.

Building on new partnerships and supporting anchor organisations

- The importance of building on existing and newly formed partnerships between third sector, public sector and private sector organisations and businesses.

This was identified in all case studies as fundamental to addressing the longer-term challenges identified here and for 'building back' post-pandemic to ensure a coordinated approach to community development, including tourism recovery and longer-term visitor management. Community anchor organisations (and/or wider reform of local government structures) represent a cornerstone of ensuring communities are sufficiently empowered and effectively structured to coordinate community responses and engage with both short and long-term challenges in collaboration with wider agencies and third sector bodies. In addition, enhancing local and regional-level leadership and communication (including from local authorities) remains a key challenge for building effective coalitions for retaining and enhancing services.

Capitalising on community spirit

- Maintaining and building on the widespread community response during the pandemic represents a key opportunity for existing community organisations.

Working at home and the furlough support scheme increased the free time of many community members, resulting in a widespread increase in volunteering. While this is likely to decline post-pandemic, continued work at home opportunities and the community spirit 'footprint' of the pandemic offers scope for re-energising community bodies and engaging with the community development agenda across Scottish communities.

³⁹ For an in-depth exploration of key underlying factors affecting community resilience see previous output from this research: <https://sefari.scot/research/objectives/local-assets-local-decisions-and-community-resilience>

Retaining and enhancing digital connectivity opportunities

- The pandemic has rapidly resulted in a wide range of new and more widely applied applications of digital tools, in education, health, social care, entertainment and wider community activity.

These offer scope to support a 'levelling up' in service delivery in more peripheral regions of Scotland, including in relation to delivery of the curriculum, with potential knock-on benefits in relation to reducing emissions. Critically, post-pandemic, this will require an emphasis on effective 'blended' approaches, particularly in relation to online working and health care.

Supporting adaptable local businesses

- The value and adaptability of local businesses in increasing local 'self-sufficiency' has been effectively demonstrated throughout the pandemic.

Building on this going forward requires an emphasis on local procurement by larger organisations (e.g. local authorities and agencies) and a focus on supporting local, place-based, private and social enterprises which add value to local produce.

Working at home and de-centralisation opportunities for remote rural areas

- The continued (partial) adoption of the work at home model offers opportunities, both in relation to attracting self-employed people to more remote parts of Scotland (where populations are declining) and for further de-centralisation of the employment hubs of larger businesses and organisations.

This offers scope for capitalising on the urban exodus phenomenon in ways which are more likely to benefit rural communities and economies in relation to increasing employment in the local area and addressing the demographic imbalance of regions like the Western Isles.

Addressing long-term structural capacity gaps

- As evident from the Western Isles case study in particular (but also in relation to public transport provision in Fife) a number of major infrastructural challenges remain in terms of addressing longer term community resilience against a more gradual demographic decline.

In addition to ensuring sufficient connectivity of the island regions, affordable housing remains a growing challenge in many peripheral regions (as demonstrated in the Western Isles case study). Addressing this challenge is recognised as requiring novel, place specific approaches developed through partnership approaches (e.g. between housing providers and community anchor organisations). In combination with a de-centralisation and local-enterprise agenda, addressing affordable housing demand represents a critical opportunity for such regions.

Retaining a flexible, targeted and responsive approach to financial support

- A range of examples from the case studies have demonstrated the importance and usefulness of a responsive and more targeted approach to providing support to enterprise and communities.

In addition, measures which foster (e.g. seed funding) the development of social enterprise and new income streams offer particular relevance going forward given ongoing economic pressures.

Enhancing the knowledge base on local-regional vulnerabilities

- As evidenced from the case studies in both regions, knowledge gaps exist in relation to local-level understanding of care needs and specific vulnerabilities across communities.

While embedded local organisations can coordinate measures to identify and respond to needs relatively rapidly, there remains a requirement for ensuring these vulnerabilities are understood before emergencies occur – to ensure community-level responses can be effectively coordinated and targeted rapidly.

Appendix 1 Interview themes (regional and local interviews)

Introductions and preamble

Thank participant. Introduce yourself. Recap details from invitation email:

- JHI and SRUC are conducting a programme of research funded by the Scottish Government on rural and island communities and wellbeing. We are currently speaking to stakeholders within specific regions and local communities in selected parts of Scotland to discuss your experiences of the pandemic and related lockdown measures. We would like to hear your views on how you yourself and the wider region/community has experienced the pandemic, in terms of the key impacts and also the responses you have seen in your area, and any thoughts you might have about future challenges and opportunities.

Consent & recording

- Have you had a chance to read the consent form (sent by email)?
 - If not, go through it on the phone.
- Do you have any questions about it?
- Are you happy to give your verbal consent (if not given by email)?
- And just to confirm, do you give your permission for audio recording of the interview?

Background

- Please could you tell me a bit about yourself and your role

Recent and current situation (key challenges/key responses so far)

- How have you experienced the pandemic up to now and what are the main ways the pandemic has impacted you and your family/network? (*Or your role/organisation for specific regional or organisational interviewees*)
- In relation to the region/community you live and/or work in what have been the main impacts experienced from the pandemic and resulting lock down measures?
- For regional: Has this varied across communities in your region and in what ways/why?
- Have there been specific impacts or challenges due to Covid/the lockdown relating to:
 - Local capacity or community structures;
 - Leadership and planning arrangements;
 - Wider networks or the availability of support;
 - Access/availability to services (including transport, broadband, education and childcare), community assets or funding;
 - Business, enterprise and specific sectoral impacts;
 - The regional/community demographic (e.g. older people and care services etc.);
 - Health and wellbeing and the environment.

Lessons learned

- What lessons do you think you have learned personally/within your networks (e.g. family, business, co-workers, local community, other organisations worked with)?
- In your view what have been the most important learning points for the region/community and what have been the biggest changes in your region/community?
- Has your region/community undertaken any interesting/novel approaches to the restrictions and challenges you would like to highlight?

- Has the pandemic highlighted or changed your view on the relative capacity and resilience of the community to respond and adapt to threats like Covid-19?
- Are there any specific aspects in your region/community you think were either important strengths or key weaknesses in relation to the resilience of the community/regional response?
- **(Probe on:** capacity or skills gaps revealed, services, assets, leadership, planning arrangements, external support networks, the local economy and enterprise base, local demographics and health and well-being – and factors like community cohesion/spirit)

Looking forwards

- Based on your experience and the experiences of your community so far, what do you think the most important future challenges and outcomes are likely to be?
 - Is your local community/region undertaking any specific measures to adapt to these challenges and opportunities as far as you are aware?
 - In your experience has the pandemic presented any positives/opportunities for your region/local area going forward? (Probe on: long term rural recovery, in-migration, green recovery/investment, home working etc.)
 - In your view how might your region/community build further capacity and become more resilient to future shocks (Probe on: capacity and structure, planning, wider support networks, improving key services, community asset acquisition, employment opportunities and business development, in-migration)
 - What support (and from whom) might your region/community need going forward to build capacity and resilience?
 - How would you like things to change in your region/local area as a result of the pandemic?
 - Do you have any final comments on any of the aspects we have discussed?

Appendix 2 Consent form and email template



RESEARCH CONSENT FORM

Title of Project:	Rural Communities and COVID-19
Principle Investigator:	Margaret Currie
Study Number:	RESAS RD3.4.1, 3.4.2 and 3.4.4

Please Initial Box

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated ___/___/___ for the above study. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and these have been answered fully and explicitly.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I am free to withdraw at any time, without providing any reason and without my legal rights being affected.	
I understand the study is being conducted by researchers from The James Hutton Institute and SRUC at the request of the Scottish Government.	
I understand that confidentiality will be maintained at all times and it will not be possible to identify me from any publications/outputs.	
I agree to take part in the above study.	
I agree to being contacted at a later date in relation to this study.	
I agree to being contacted about my willingness to take part in further research on this topic in the future.	
I agree for my interview to be recorded and transcribed.	
I acknowledge that I have read and understood the privacy notice below.	

Name of Participant (please print)

Signature

Date

PI/Researcher Name (please print)

Signature

Date

Privacy Notice

The James Hutton Institute (“Hutton”, “us” or “we”) will use your personal data for the purposes of the research undertaken in this project “**Rural Communities and COVID-19**”. Our legal basis for processing your data is that it is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest in relation to research funded by the **Scottish Government**.

In the above research study, we may process your name and contact details, your organisation/affiliation and any other information you choose to share with us via the interview or other communications.

We are the Data Controller over your personal data. We will not share your personal data, except with project partners at SRUC, unless required by law, and shall only retain it for as long as is necessary to fulfil the research undertaken on the project and deliver project outcomes. Your personal data will be stored on secure servers in the UK and will not be transferred outside of the EEA. You have rights in relation to your personal data. Please see our Privacy Notice at www.hutton.ac.uk/terms for further information or contact our Data Protection Officer on dpo@hutton.ac.uk or by telephone at 01382 346814.

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[To insert]