

## Mapping the third sector in rural Scotland: An initial review of the literature

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Previous research commissioned by The Scottish Government<sup>1</sup> has identified a pronounced knowledge gap relating to the nature and extent of the third sector in more rural areas of Scotland. This is particularly significant given the increased emphasis on the role of the third sector, and volunteering, in contributing to public service reform and the building and sustaining of civil society in a challenging economic climate. This document summarises the key themes emerging from a review of existing literature regarding voluntary activity and the third sector in rural Scotland.

### Main Findings

- Rates of formal volunteering in Scotland generally increase with degree of rurality, with the highest reported rates of formal volunteering in remote rural Scotland.
- The evidence suggests that the nature of formal volunteering in rural areas of Scotland is distinct. It appears likely to be 'substitutional' (bridging gaps between service provision and service need) rather than or as well as 'additional'. This suggests it is important to understand the motivations and nature of voluntary activity already undertaken in order to ensure that any initiatives seeking further involvement from volunteers is realistic and sustainable.
- Literature suggests there may be a distinct role for the third sector in rural areas, given the particular socio-economic and spatial characteristics of these areas.
- There are a higher number of registered charities per head in rural areas of Scotland in comparison to urban areas. Whilst this may suggest a particularly significant role for the third sector in rural Scotland, little work systematically identifies the key activities of these charities and how these compare to urban areas.
- Most literature regarding the role of the third sector in rural Scotland is at case study level, or focuses on a specific theme. The areas in which most material appears available include: infrastructure (for example housing, fuel, and health); community facilities (for example village halls; shops; petrol stations); community energy projects; and community land purchase.
- There is a lack of research and evidence regarding the larger scale delivery of services by the third sector in rural areas. This should not be taken as meaning that the contribution of the third sector to service provision is limited, rather that our conclusions are restricted to what the evidence base covers.
- Research regarding the effects of the economic downturn on the third sector appears to be mixed, contingent upon size of organisation and the nature of activities undertaken. Little research has been undertaken to specifically address the rural third sector's experience.

## Introduction

This review has been undertaken in response to recent Scottish Government research which found that there is a pronounced knowledge gap surrounding the nature and extent of the third sector in rural Scotland.

This gap is particularly significant given ongoing public service reform which sees an ever greater role for individuals, communities and the third sector.

It is therefore important to understand the contribution that the third sector (supported in large part by volunteers) already makes to the delivery of public services and to understand the likely impact of social and economic pressures on the third sector landscape and the services it is able to provide.

This review identifies and reviews existing qualitative and quantitative research undertaken which can help inform our understanding of the nature and extent of volunteering and the third sector in rural Scotland, and identifies research gaps in our understanding of volunteering and the third sector in rural Scotland.

## Methodology

This review employs a large scale literature review in conjunction with the direct contact of key informants across Scotland and the UK more widely. It has been undertaken in the course of a three month internship with the Scottish Government. Given these constraints of time and resources it is intended as an initial scoping of key themes and acts as a starting point for further research.

It should be noted that the findings are limited by what the literature tells us. Given that there are gaps in the evidence base the review cannot be considered to be a comprehensive picture of the rural third sector.

## Scotland's rural population: volunteering

Rates of formal volunteering in Scotland generally increase with degree of rurality, and have done so consistently over time. The influence of rurality appears to remain significant, even controlling for a number of individual variables. However it is more challenging to identify how far *what* is done by volunteers in urban as opposed to rural areas is distinct.

Smaller-scale research suggests that the formal volunteering of those in rural Scotland may be particularly 'broad' in nature, across a large number

of organisations but for less time in each organisation compared to those in urban areas, whose profile of volunteering may be particularly 'deep': volunteering with fewer organisations but devoting a greater amount of time to each one.

Research suggests that volunteers in rural areas are engaged in activity which substitutes the delivery of services, rather than or as well as activity which is 'additional' (to public services).

Therefore, whilst high rates of formal volunteering in rural areas of Scotland may be understood as a positive social indicator, attention needs to be given to the motivations and nature of such activity to ensure any further participation is sustainable.

## Comparing the urban and rural third sector in Scotland

Definition of the third sector is contested. It is often characterised as being composed of organisations that are formally organised, non-profit distributing, constitutionally independent from the state, self-governing and benefitting from some form of voluntarism.

Literature suggests there is a distinct role for the third sector in rural Scotland given the distinct socio-economic and spatial characteristics.

In Scotland, it appears there is a higher number – per head – of registered charities in a number of rural LAs compared to urban areas. Whilst this may suggest that there is a particularly significant role for the third sector in more rural areas, little work has been undertaken to identify the roles of these charities, and how far they too may be 'substitutional' or 'additional' in nature.

## The Scottish rural third sector: key areas of evidence

There appear to be imbalances in rural third sector research quantity and quality. Particular foci include certain components (for example the 'regulated' sector, social enterprises) and certain geographical areas within Scotland (the Highlands and Islands). There also appear pronounced gaps in research regarding certain aspects of the third sector, for example direct urban/rural comparisons are very rarely made, and most research appears to focus on smaller scale case studies, generally at the local level. Information at larger scales is lacking.

Thematically, there are several areas which appear to have drawn the most attention in terms of literature.

Infrastructure – including housing, fuel, health and communications – has been highlighted as a particular challenge for the population of rural Scotland. Case studies across rural Scotland have shown the third sector to have a strong role in addressing these concerns, in particular with regards to populations at a greater risk of social exclusion, such as older people.

Community facilities – such as village halls – have been shown to play a particularly strong role in rural areas, and in the overwhelming number of cases to be owned by the local community. They provide sites of social capital development, employment, voluntary activity and existing (and potential) sites of multi-service delivery.

It is impossible within the remit of this study to establish how far there is a commonality of third sector activity in rural areas in comparison with more urban areas. It is also challenging to draw a causal link directly between rurality and the nature and extent of activity undertaken.

There are however a wealth of case studies demonstrating the role of third sector activity in rural areas of Scotland in the fields of community energy projects, the provision of community owned and run services (including shops/post offices, gyms, transport, care homes), community land purchase and community woodlands delivered by organisations identifying themselves variously as development trusts, community interest companies, social enterprises, charities and/or voluntary organisations.

## **The third sector in rural Scotland: the economic downturn**

There is a lack of research assessing the impact of the economic downturn on the rural third sector – within and outwith Scotland.

Literature discussing the impact of the economic downturn on the third sector in general suggests that the effects are likely to be unevenly felt across the sector varying according to the size of organisation, the source of funding on which an organisation is dependent and the nature of activities undertaken.

Research suggests consequences of the economic downturn include an increased demand for the services of third sector organisations, subsequent increasing demands on resources (financial, paid workers and volunteers) and an increased amount

of competition for resources. However, it is unclear whether financial resources will increase in this economic climate.

Evidence from the UK more widely suggests that reduced public sector budgets are expected to impact severely on the third sector which would potentially limit its ability to respond to increased demand. Furthermore, any relationship between the economic downturn and charitable giving appears unclear as yet.

## **Conclusions**

This review should be treated as a starting point in the exploration of the third sector and volunteering landscape in rural Scotland.

The research reviewed suggests that there are higher rates of volunteering in rural areas compared with urban areas and a larger number of registered charities per head in rural local authorities than in urban ones. In this way, these findings indicate the third sector and volunteering activity is distinct in nature and role in rural areas compared with urban areas.

There is limited research on which to draw conclusions regarding the impact of the economic downturn on the Scottish rural third sector.

Overall, within the evidence base there are many examples of the activity of the third sector, particularly smaller scale activity in rural Scotland. However there is a need for more comprehensive research and data availability if the nature and extent of the third sector's role in public service delivery in rural Scotland is to be more fully understood.

This document, along with full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at [socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk) or on 0131-244 7560.

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<sup>1</sup> Dacombe, R. Bach, S. (2009) *The evidence base for third sector policy in Scotland: a review of selected recent literature*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government Social Research.



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