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Community Resilience in Scotland's Islands during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) Pandemic

AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND MARINE

social research

Broadford, Skye, Scotland

Community Resilience in Scotland's Islands during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Final report

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Introduction

Background to the research

In 2019, Scotland's first National Islands Plan was published. This plan, which was required by the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, recognises both the particular challenges faced by Scotland's islands and their value to Scotland as a whole in terms of economic activity, ecological diversity, and, especially, the social capital of island communities. Community resilience - defined by the Scottish Government as 'communities and individuals harnessing resources and expertise to help themselves prepare for, respond to and recover from emergencies' – is a key theme in the Plan.[1]

The challenges presented by the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic have prompted extraordinary responses from many communities across Scotland, including the islands. It is this response – and the networks that supported it and stemmed from it – that this research seeks to explore and learn from.

The Scottish Government commissioned Ipsos Scotland, in association with Pollyanna Chapman of Impact Hub Inverness, to produce a series of case studies exploring examples of community resilience in Scotland's islands. The research aims to use the learning from impacts encountered and solutions that have been identified during this pandemic to build the resilience in Scotland's island and mainland communities. More specifically, it aims to:

- produce a series of case studies exploring examples of island community resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- identify key learning points from each case study in order to inform the delivery of the National Islands Plan, and
- recommend how community resilience may be strengthened across the islands and mainland of Scotland.

Methodology

Overview

To achieve these aims, the research team carried out qualitative and desk-based research to identify and produce five case studies that explored community resilience in Scotland's islands. This involved several stages.

[1] Ready Scotland is a website maintained by the Scottish Government's Resilience Division. Its aim is to help communities across Scotland become resilient and able to bounce back from disruptive challenges. The Ready Scotland website provides guidance on and examples of best practice of community resilience, available via this link https://ready.scot/how-scotland-prepares/preparing-scotland-guidance/building-resilient-communities

Firstly, stakeholder interviews were conducted with a range of organisations to help identify potential case studies across Scotland. Stakeholders included:

- island local authorities
- representatives of Highlands and Islands Enterprise
- Scottish Islands Federation
- Foundation Scotland

In parallel to the stakeholder interviews, desk research (involving a review of websites and social media), was carried out to capture as many examples as possible. Examples gathered from stakeholder interviews and desk research were then compiled into a long list of possible case studies from which a shortlist was created. The shortlisting process involved using a range of assessment criteria to identify case studies which reflected the variety of activities and initiatives that island communities undertook in response to the pandemic, including:

- island location (across the six local authorities)
- island size
- funded and non-funded activity (for example, funded through one of a number of specific funds set up in response to COVID-19)
- centrally organised and grassroots efforts
- new and existing networks/groups
- issues being addressed in conjunction with pandemic response (for example, food poverty, waste, fuel poverty, isolation, connectivity)
- whether there was likely to be sufficient detail for a case study.

In discussion with the Scottish Government, a final list of five case studies were identified from the shortlist, reflecting a range of island sizes, locations and experiences.

The five case studies

The five case studies identified for this research were:

- **Bressay** – an island in the Shetland archipelago with a population of around 360 people, where an existing community interest company adapted to the pandemic and began offering a prescription delivery service for residents.

- **Broadford and Strath** – in the southern area of the Isle of Skye, where an existing group started deliveries of food and cooked meals to vulnerable people in the community.

- **Galson** – on the northwest coast of the Isle of Lewis in the Western Isles, where the community land trust instigated a series of measures to ensure there was good communication to and between people who might need support, and a delivery service for prescriptions and crofting supplies.

- **Islay** – the southernmost of the Inner Hebrides islands off the west coast of Scotland, where several groups (some already established and some formed in response to the pandemic) came together to coordinate support for the island's residents in terms of emergency services and community assistance.

- **Sanday** – one of the outer Orkney islands, where the existing development trust led a programme of support for people on the island, providing financial support, food, technology and communications, and general wellbeing support.

The location of each case study is summarised in figure 1.1 below.

Figure 1.1: Case study locations

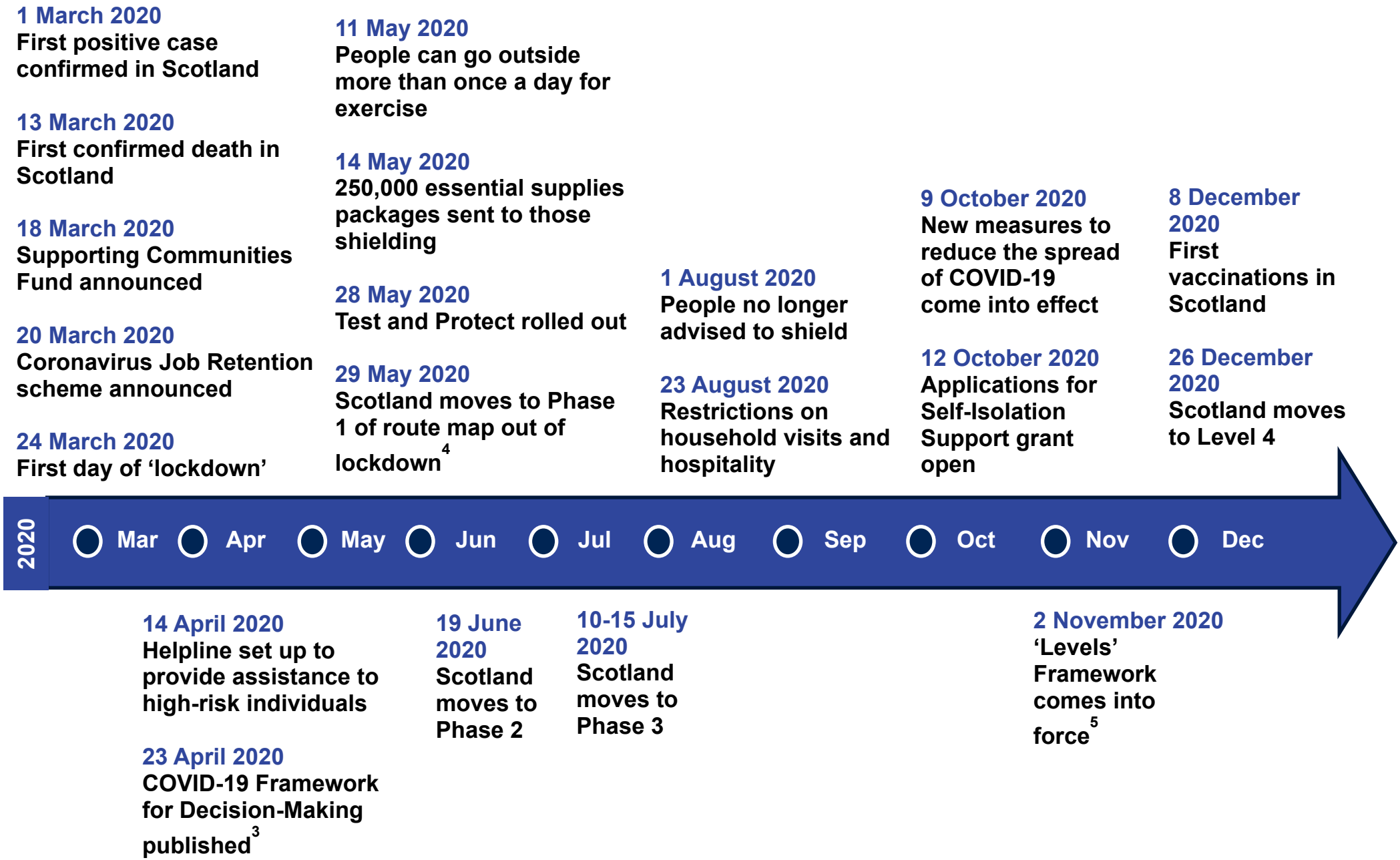
It is important to remember the context within which these initiatives took place. The experiences of island communities, and indeed communities across Scotland, were heavily impacted and influenced by COVID-19. There was a great deal of uncertainty, especially in the first months of 2020, about how long the pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions would last. The experiences of the islands included in these case

studies fluctuated in response to the pandemic as events unfolded and the various impacts were felt.[2]

For context, a summary of the COVID-19 timeline highlighting the key events in Scotland is shown in figure 1.2 below.

[2] The report “COVID-19, lockdowns, and financial hardship in rural areas: insights from the Rural Lives project” provided insights into why and how people in rural areas experience and negotiate poverty and social exclusion, with a focus on the impacts of the pandemic and lockdown on individuals experiencing financial hardship. The report is available through via this link https://www.rurallives.co.uk/uploads/1/2/7/3/127324359/rural_lives_-_covid-19_lockdowns_and_financial_hardship_in_rural_areas_final_05.05.21.pdf

Figure 1.2: COVID-19 in Scotland: a timeline



5 January 2021
Scotland moves into lockdown. Islands remain in Level 3

29 January 2021
Western Isles moves to Level 4

16 April 2021
Travel within Scotland for outdoor recreation allowed

26 April 2021
Scotland moves to Level 3

26 April 2021
Lateral flow kits available for people without symptoms

5 June 2021
Islands in Level 1 move to Level 0

9 August 2021
Scotland moves beyond Level 0

18 February 2021
Testing expanded to close contacts

23 February 2021
Updated Strategic Framework published[6]

17 May 2021
Most of mainland Scotland moves to Level 2. Most islands move to Level 1

19 July 2021
Scotland moves to Level 0

29 November 2021
Omicron identified in Scotland

Footnotes from the tim eline are shown below:[3456]

[3] Information on the COVID-19 Framework for Decision-Making is on the Scottish Government website available here: https://www.gov.scot/news/looking-beyond-lockdown/

[4] Information on the different Phases out of lockdown is available on the Scottish Government website available here: https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-framework-decision-making-scotlands-route-map-through-out-crisis/

[5] Information on the 'Levels' Framework is available on the Scottish Government website available here: https://www.gov.scot/news/scotlands-strategic-framework/

[6] Information on the Updated Strategic Framework is available on the Scottish Government website available here: https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-strategic-framework-update-february-2021/pages/overview/

There was a range of funding made available to help communities respond to the pandemic. The funds mentioned in the case studies are listed below (please note this does not represent an exhaustive list of funds used by the islands included in this report):

- Supporting Communities – a Scottish Government fund for community anchor organisations, such as charities, voluntary organisations, community controlled housing associations and social enterprises to help support local responses to the pandemic.[7] In the Highlands and Islands, the fund was administered by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) on behalf of the Scottish Government.

- Communities Recovery Fund – a Scottish Government fund administered by the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO). It aimed to support community groups, charities, social enterprises, and voluntary organisations who were supporting people and communities in responding to the challenges presented by COVID-19.[8]

- Foundation Scotland's Response Recovery and Resilience Fund – Foundation Scotland is a charitable trust which helps people and organisations to fund causes. In partnership with the National Emergencies Trust, Foundation Scotland's Response, Recovery and Resilience Fund launched at the end of March 2020, distributing funds to charities and community groups across Scotland.[9]

- Co-op COVID-19 Fund – over the summer of 2020, Co-op customers raised £1.5m by buying items from their picnic range, with 20p per item donated to the National Emergencies Trust (NET). NET worked with local Community Foundations to distribute this money to food charities and community causes to fund programmes that provide access to food and sustainable solutions to food poverty.[10]

- The Prince's Countryside Fund – a charity founded in 2010 by Prince Charles to help support family farms and rural communities.[11]

[7] The SCVO website provides information about the Supporting Communities Fund and a list of the awards that were made, available here: https://scvo.scot/support/coronavirus/funding/scottish-government/supporting-communities-fund

[8] The SCVO website provides information about the Communities Recovery Fund and a list of the local authority areas that received support through the fund, available here: https://scvo.scot/support/coronavirus/funding/scottish-government/community-recovery/crf

[9] The Foundation Scotland website provides information about the Response, Recovery and Resilience Fund, including examples of how the fund might be used, available here: https://www.foundationscotland.org.uk/apply-for-funding/funding-available/rrr-fund#:~:text=About%20this%20fund,groups%20the%20length%20of%20Scotland.

[10] The Supporting Communities website provide information about the Co-op COVID_19 Fund, available here: http://supportingcommunities.org/funding-news-1/2020/10/30/the-co-op-covid-19-fund

[11] The Princes Countryside Fund website provides information about the fund including examples of projects that received funding, available here: https://www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/

- Corra Foundation – The Foundation's aim is to help individuals and communities experiencing disadvantage all across Scotland and in countries around the world.[12]

[12] The Corra Foundation website provides information about the grant funding it provides to communities, available here: https://www.corra.scot/

Scope and limitations

The aim in qualitative research is not to achieve a sample that is statistically representative of the wider population, but to identify as much diversity of experience as possible. It must therefore be acknowledged that the case studies presented in this report are not intended to be read as an exhaustive summary of the activities undertaken on the islands under study, but an account of the experiences of some island communities based on interviews with some of the individuals closely involved. In cases where the activities involved multiple groups and individuals working together, it was not possible to speak with all involved and not all perspectives were gathered.

Attempts were made to interview beneficiaries (that is, those who availed of the services or activities being organised) via the organisers, using channels such as community newsletters to let people know about the research and invite them to get in touch to share their experiences if they wanted to. However, no responses were obtained and in some cases the organisers felt it was not appropriate to promote the research among this audience given the circumstances (for instance, the financial or emotional challenges being experienced). In some cases, it was possible to include the views of beneficiaries from feedback gathered by organisers or by speaking with volunteers who were closer to those accessing services.

Furthermore, given the range and diversity of responses of communities across Scotland's islands, it would not be possible to give a comprehensive account or represent them all and this report does not seek to do so. The stakeholder interviews and desk research, which took place within a limited timeframe, generated approximately 70 possible examples and highlights the scale of activity. As outlined above, the case studies were selected to illustrate the various ways in which island communities across Scotland have responded to the pandemic.

It was not possible to include a case study for island communities in North Ayrshire, as the short-listed projects we approached to take part from that area either did not respond or were unable to commit to an interview within the timescales of this study. As a result, the activities of the island communities in North Ayrshire (consisting of Arran and the Cumbraes) are not represented in this report. This does not suggest that these islands had less activity, or were any less resilient, than other islands during COVID-19. Indeed, the stakeholder interviews and desk research highlighted a range of community initiatives that took place in North Ayrshire during the pandemic. The lack of case study from that area is therefore due to the practicalities of this study and should not be read as an assessment of the nature of community resilience in North Ayrshire.

The remainder of this report outlines the key themes that emerged from the case studies before presenting each case study in turn.

Resilience on Scotland's islands: key learnings and recommendations

The case studies, while distinct in many ways, share some characteristics which offer insight into the factors that make a community resilient. The themes that emerged from the case studies and stakeholder interviews are summarised here and form the key learnings and recommendations for how resilience may be strengthened across the islands and mainland of Scotland.

Key learnings

Mobilisation and coordination

Across the islands, a commonly cited success factor was the speed with which individuals or groups came together to respond to the pandemic.

The communities with existing groups and infrastructure were able to come together and deal with the pandemic emergency more quickly. This included a formal network of community organisations and groups that already existed prior to the pandemic that could mobilise immediately (such as trusts, community councils or emergency planning groups), as well as the more informal networks, including the residents and local businesses. These networks were commonly viewed as proactive, resourceful, and collaborative.

Another element to mobilisation in the context of the pandemic was the prevalence of furlough within communities.[13] While not a prominent theme in the case studies, furlough was highlighted by some as a contributing factor to the mobilisation effort, such as in Islay where administrative support was able to be provided by those furloughed. Similarly, one of the organisers of the prescription delivery service in Bressay was able to offer more of their time because their normal work had stopped due to the pandemic.

Having a group or individual responsible for coordinating the community response was also identified as an important success factor in the islands' pandemic responses. In all case studies, there were individuals and groups who felt a sense of responsibility to take on a coordination role to ensure support reached those who needed it. This echoes one of the key principles in building resilience highlighted in a Ready Scotland guidance document from May 2019, which states that creating a culture of empowerment is

[13] Under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS), employers could put employees on furlough and claim a grant towards employees' wages. The scheme ended on 30th September 2021.

fundamental to individuals and communities feeling able to take action in response to emergencies.[14]

Having a local emergency plan

Preparedness for emergencies is underpinned by legislation that outlines the key organisations responsible for ensuring the effective management of emergencies.[15] Under this legislation, there is a statutory duty placed on local authorities, NHS bodies and emergency services to assess the risk of emergencies occurring and put in place emergency plans.[16]

In Scotland, there are Regional Resilience Partnerships (RRPs) (North, West and East) which enable multi-agency co-ordination in the event of emergencies (for example the police, fire, ambulance, and coastguard services). Within each RRP area there are a number of Local Resilience Partnerships (LRPs) which work with RRPs to develop approaches to dealing with emergencies.

In some cases, such as in Islay, there was a responder-led emergency planning group and plan in place at the island level which offered an established vehicle to respond quickly, with community input and support from the Local Resilience Partnership, during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In other areas, such as in Broadford and Strath, and Galson, there was not a plan in place at the community level to coincide with statutory emergency planning. Reflecting on their experiences of the pandemic, it was felt that the communities needed a local plan in place to respond to future emergencies (for example, to prepare for the impact of climate change).

As well as expressing a desire to develop an emergency plan at a community level (with support from Scottish Government), it was suggested that communities should be involved in the development of emergency planning at a local authority or Community Planning Partnership level. The Scottish Government's Resilience Division leads on emergency planning and provides guidance on emergency planning for community groups on the Ready Scotland website.[17]

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[14] Ready Scotland is a website maintained by the Scottish Government's Resilience Division. Its aim is to help communities across Scotland become resilient and able to bounce back from disruptive challenges. In May 2019, it published 'Scottish Guidance on Community Resilience' which outlined the key principles and approach to building community resilience, available here: https://ready.scot/get-involved/community-groups/guide-emergency-planning-community-groups

[15] The Ready Scotland website includes information about the legislation that underpins the work carried out to ensure the effective management of emergencies in Scotland, available here: https://ready.scot/how-scotland-prepares/preparing-scotland-guidance/philosophy-principles-structure-and-regulatory/chapter-2-legislation

[16] The UK Government website provides guidance on preparation and planning for emergencies, available here: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/preparation-and-planning-for-emergencies-responsibilities-of-responder-agencies-and-others

[17] The Ready Scotland website includes a guide to emergency planning for community groups, available here: https://ready.scot/get-involved/community-groups/guide-emergency-planning-community-groups

Communication

Communication was also recognised as a key component of initiatives that took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Regular communication between groups, with the community and with local authorities was important to ensure that effort was not being duplicated and that the communities were being appropriately and fully supported. Dialogue and engagement is another key principle highlighted by Ready Scotland's guidance on building resilience.[18]

Communication within the community took various forms; in Sanday there were fortnightly meetings with the Community Development Officers from other islands, while in Galson WhatsApp groups were set up to ensure everyone was looked out for and to gather feedback from the community over the course of the pandemic. In Bressay, word of mouth was a particularly important vehicle for encouraging service use.

The cascading down of accurate information on COVID-19 from the local authority level to organisers was also highlighted as an important aspect of communication which enabled them to tailor responses and decisions according to local need. Conversely, where communication was not as clear, it resulted in duplicated efforts, such as government-arranged food parcels being delivered to areas where community-arranged food parcels were already being distributed.

Local knowledge and networks

Tapping into existing community networks and utilising local knowledge was another key and common reason why the initiatives on these islands were considered to be successful. In Islay, this ensured that a volunteer network could be coordinated across the island to serve the needs of the communities. In Broadford and Strath, local knowledge and contacts were also central to the success of the project, both in terms of getting people involved, mustering resources, and reaching beneficiaries. By comparison, in Bressay an initial lack of local knowledge was the biggest challenge to delivering the prescription service.

The energy and spirit demonstrated by residents, organisations and local businesses helped to show communities what they were capable of and highlighted the level of trust placed in these existing networks. The experience of the pandemic helped some organisations on the islands to feel more confident about their own resilience.

On the other hand, the pandemic also eroded the strength of some local networks, reliant as they were on building familiarity through in-person social interactions. To ensure communities are resilient and able to respond to future emergencies, rebuilding networks will be an important part of the pandemic recovery on the islands and in rural

[18] The Ready Scotland website includes a guide to emergency planning for community groups, available here: https://ready.scot/get-involved/community-groups/guide-emergency-planning-community-groups

parts of Scotland. With knowledge and experience being held, in some cases, among a relatively small number of people (such as among a few residents, as in Islay, or within organisations like the Galson Estate Trust), knowledge sharing and succession planning is another important consideration for the sustainability of community resilience.

Tackling stigma

The established networks and close-knit communities, while a strength, also posed a challenge in terms of the stigma associated with vulnerability and needing support. The initiatives described in this report, such as in Broadford and Strath and Sanday, sought to tackle stigma and minimise the barriers to accessing support by adopting open and proactive approaches involving direct outreach. In Broadford and Strath, for instance, the focus was on reducing food waste rather than addressing food need, thereby taking away any stigma that might be attached to using the facilities set up.

Confidentiality was also an issue in smaller communities and posed a potential barrier to support. The range of ways in which this was managed highlights again the different approaches taken based on local knowledge. In Islay, having one familiar and trusted person for residents to contact when in need was considered most important. Meanwhile in Bressay, the organisers felt that people were reassured about confidentiality because of their relative neutrality and newness to the community.

Autonomy and support

Having control at a local level was an important factor for the success of the various initiatives; community organisers were able to get on and do what they felt was needed. That said, support from the local authorities and the ability to share learnings across island communities was also important.

During the pandemic, external funding – for example from the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund –was considered to be a valuable source of support. For some organisers, especially those operating at a grassroots level, there was some discomfort at first around the funding and issues of accountability associated with it. However, the accessibility and flexibility of funding – from various streams including local businesses and government grants – sustained many initiatives, such as the food growing, sharing and delivery schemes that took place in several of the islands.

For islands to be able to respond to a future emergency or crisis, there was a sense that communities should not have to compete for funding, but that there should be resources available to deliver what is necessary for the community, 'without strings attached' and with the flexibility to meet local needs.

Capacity and scale

Given the diversity and range in Scotland's islands in terms of geography, population and sociocultural characteristics, there were different approaches taken in building community resilience. Islay and Sanday's pandemic responses, for instance, were both island-wide, while Broadford and Strath's was focused on a particular area in Skye, and Curious Pilgrims in Bressay focused on a particular service gap (prescription deliveries).

As was highlighted in the case studies, the scale of the responses varied according to local needs. This was echoed in the stakeholder interviews conducted in the early stages of this research. From the stakeholder perspective, community capacity was considered to be a core part of community resilience and something which existed to different degrees across the islands. There is perhaps an optimum size and scale which lends itself to this grassroots response; Islay, Bressay and Sanday were clearly small enough to have an island-wide response, whereas Skye and Lewis were too large and diverse. This suggests that the scale at which any community emergency plan should be developed will depend on how communities see themselves, with some islands being able to develop a plan for the whole island, and others not.

Emergency planning and responses may need to happen at several levels (government, local authority, statutory agency, or community level), and how far it is appropriate to drill down will vary across islands. There was general agreement, however, that while a plan that applies across different local authorities (with community input) would be valuable, a plan at a more local, community level would also be needed. It was also felt that these two 'levels' of planning should be interwoven to some extent to avoid duplication.

Recommendations

The recommendations for strengthening community resilience across the islands and mainland of Scotland, based on the experiences and learnings of those communities included in this research, are to:

- Support and encourage communities to tap into their existing networks and infrastructure to respond quickly to future emergencies. This includes both formal networks, in the form of established community organisations, and informal networks of individuals, groups and businesses within the community.
- Where existing community networks have been eroded or are at risk, prioritising the rebuilding of networks as part of the pandemic recovery. This could be achieved through knowledge sharing between communities, particularly drawing lessons from communities with well-established community organisations. The

Ready Scotland website provides guidance on recovering from emergencies which could support this rebuilding effort.[19]

- Support and encourage the development of local, community level planning**.** This should include involving communities in the development of emergency planning at a local authority or Community Planning Partnership level, and promoting existing resources such as the guide to emergency planning provided on Ready Scotland website.[20]

- Support and encourage communication between communities, both at time of crisis but also on an ongoing basis. This networking (for example between representatives of community organisations) can help to share lessons and best practice related to community resilience. Existing resources on communication when an emergency is likely or has occurred could also be used to support this.[21]

- Ensure there is regular communication between communities and local authorities. As highlighted in Ready Scotland's guidance, responders (such as local authorities and emergency services) often play the role of experts, disseminating information to communities. This could mean ensuring that, during periods of emergency or crisis, there is a regular line of communication from local authorities down to the existing community infrastructure, making clear what response is being provided from the local authority. This can help to avoid duplication of efforts.

- Consider ways to tackle the stigma associated with seeking support to ensure that it is accessible to those in need during an emergency.

- Where available, signposting communities to funding or other resources that can help them respond to emergencies and/or support their ongoing resilience (such as the Ready Scotland guidance). The value of funding provided to support communities during the pandemic was clear from this research.

- Ensure there are flexible resources in place to enable communities to meet their local needs (as was the case with COVID-19 funding).

[19] The Ready Scotland website includes information on the principles for managing recovery from an emergency, available here: https://ready.scot/how-scotland-prepares/preparing-scotland-guidance/recovering-emergencies-scotland/managing-recovery

[20] The Ready Scotland website includes a guide to emergency planning for community groups, available here: https://ready.scot/get-involved/community-groups/guide-emergency-planning-community-groups

[21] The Ready Scotland website includes guidance on communicating with the public before, during and after emergencies, available here: https://ready.scot/how-scotland-prepares/preparing-scotland-guidance/warning-and-informing-scotland

Curious Pilgrims (Bressay)

Introduction

Bressay is an island on the east coast of Shetland. It is connected to mainland Shetland by a short ferry journey. The island is around seven miles long by three miles wide and has a community of around 360 people.[22] The Noss nature reserve on the neighbouring island is renowned for birdwatching in the summer months. Shetland has an older age profile than Scotland as a whole and this is reflected on Bressay. One of the community responses to COVID-19 on the island was the establishment of a prescription delivery service by a group called Curious Pilgrims which ran from March to October 2020. The organisation also delivered some arts projects later in the pandemic.

Who was involved

Curious Pilgrims is a small community interest company (CIC) based in Bressay. The aim of the organisation is "to merge the arts and the natural environment for the wellbeing of people in Shetland or with an interest in Shetland." Curious Pilgrims was founded in early 2020 just before the first national lockdown. The joint co-founders and co-directors moved to Shetland in 2019 after spending time in the Islands for work.

When the pandemic struck, Curious Pilgrims started a prescription delivery service in Bressay. In doing so, it was drawing on the ethos of the organisation and adapting to the needs of the community to provide immediate assistance, improve wellbeing and reduce possible negative effects of isolation.[23] The service was available to anyone on the island who needed it. While it was mainly used by people with long-term conditions and who have repeat prescriptions, it was also available to people who required short-term treatment for acute conditions.

Why the project happened

Bressay is generally well-connected to mainland Shetland. There are normally regular ferry sailings between Bressay and Lerwick with a journey time of under 10 minutes. Residents usually have to travel to a pharmacy in Lerwick to collect medicine or rely on family or friends to do this for them, as there is no pharmacy in Bressay nor a pharmacy that delivers prescriptions to the island.

Early in the pandemic, the physical distance from the pharmacy in Lerwick presented a number of challenges for people in Bressay. For instance, people may have felt uncomfortable travelling to the mainland to collect prescriptions due to perceived risks of

[22] The Shetland Islands of Opportunity website includes an area guide about Bressay and Noss, available here: https://www.shetland.org/visit/plan/areas/bressay-noss

[23] The Curious Pilgrims website provides a description of the group and the types of activities they have carried out, available here: https://www.curiouspilgrims.com/

contracting the virus and because of guidance to stay home and avoid public transport. It should be noted that Shetland was affected relatively early in the pandemic with the first cases recorded on 8 March 2020. People who were shielding or isolating and did not know anyone nearby who could bring essentials to them would also have struggled to access their prescription. It was not until 14 April 2020 that the national helpline for those at higher risk from COVID-19 who did not have family or community support was launched.[24] The sense of worry being felt at this time was highlighted by Curious Pilgrims:

"The uncertainty around how long the pandemic would go on for brought about a high degree of stress and anxiety, particularly in people who lived alone or who depended upon support of others to have their medication delivered to them in a timely fashion. The situation worsened when the ferry service to Lerwick was subjected to various restrictions."

One of the co-directors of Curious Pilgrims is a locum qualified health professional who was working in a pharmacy at the beginning of the pandemic. It is common for locum healthcare staff to come to Shetland to work for periods of time, but travel restrictions soon reduced numbers arriving. Curious Pilgrims felt there was no plan in place to ensure essential medicine reached Bressay residents so began offering a prescription delivery service.

"We immediately realised that the physical detachment from mainland along with a restricted ferry service and no emergency plan in place to address the needs related to people's healthcare were likely to bring about a major issue."

What the project involved

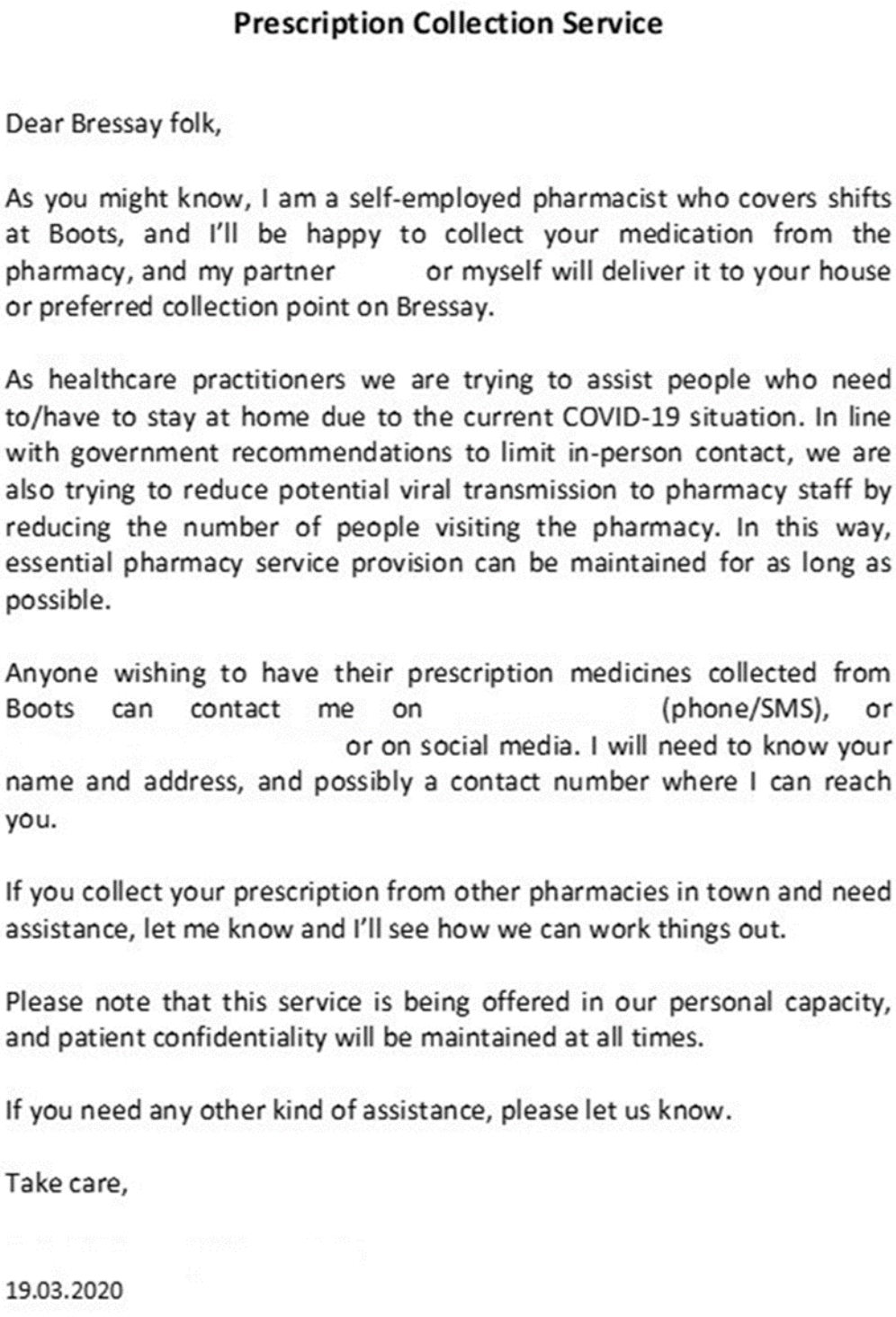
The prescription delivery service worked by people getting in touch with Curious Pilgrims to let them know that they had ordered a prescription from a pharmacy in Lerwick and when it would be ready for collection. Curious Pilgrims would collect the prescriptions during working hours or would take the ferry over specially to collect them. They would then take the prescriptions back to Bressay on the ferry and drive around to deliver them. This was done in a non-contact way by placing the prescriptions inside the door.

Curious Pilgrims advertised the prescription delivery service on social media and placed notices in the passenger lounge of the ferry. The adverts made clear that the service was free of charge and included the co-directors' email addresses and mobile phone numbers so people could get in touch any time (see figure 1.3 below).

[24] The Scottish Government website provides information on the national helpline established to support those at high COVID-19 risk, available here: https://www.gov.scot/news/support-for-those-at-high-covid-19-risk/

"We invited people to get in touch with us at any time to let us know that their prescription was due for collection, and there were situations when people would contact us in the early hours of the morning or late at night because all of a sudden they realised that they had forgotten to notify us in advance. This did not cause any problem for us."

Figure 1.3: An example of Curious Pilgrim's advertising of the prescription collection service (image courtesy of Curious Pilgrims)



Prescription Collection Service

Dear Bressay folk,

As you might know, I am a self-employed pharmacist who covers shifts at Boots, and I'll be happy to collect your medication from the pharmacy, and my partner or myself will deliver it to your house or preferred collection point on Bressay.

As healthcare practitioners we are trying to assist people who need to/have to stay at home due to the current COVID-19 situation. In line with government recommendations to limit in-person contact, we are also trying to reduce potential viral transmission to pharmacy staff by reducing the number of people visiting the pharmacy. In this way, essential pharmacy service provision can be maintained for as long as possible.

Anyone wishing to have their prescription medicines collected from Boots can contact me on (phone/SMS), or or on social media. I will need to know your name and address, and possibly a contact number where I can reach you.

If you collect your prescription from other pharmacies in town and need assistance, let me know and I'll see how we can work things out.

Please note that this service is being offered in our personal capacity, and patient confidentiality will be maintained at all times.

If you need any other kind of assistance, please let us know.

Take care,

19.03.2020

Word of mouth was also very important, and most people who made use of the service did so because they heard about it from other residents.

“In hindsight, and now that we understand the dynamic of the place that much better, we think that word of mouth was critical in people getting to know about the service that we were offering. When people contacted us they would say ‘I was told that you were doing so and so, would you mind doing this for me? We could see an increase in demand for our service as days went by.”

At one stage in the pandemic, Curious Pilgrims were collecting and delivering prescriptions every day, making sure they delivered on the day or the next day if the beneficiary’s door was closed. Over six months they delivered 490 items to 68 residents.

Confidentiality of the service was important. The organisers felt that people were reassured about confidentiality because of the co-director’s training and background as a health professional and also because the co-directors were relatively new to the community and “neutral” in a way which may have increased trust in confidentiality.

“Usually, in small communities, there’s so much going on in terms of talk and gossip. We had the feeling that since, at that stage, we barely knew anyone, we weren’t involved or aware of people’s history or background. For us it was a very straightforward situation – we need to deliver to a, b and c, and that was it.”

After about a month of meeting costs themselves, Curious Pilgrims applied for funding. The organisation was successful in an application to The Prince’s Countryside Fund, which awarded emergency grants to help communities respond to the impact of COVID-19. This funding meant that their expenses were covered from May to October 2020. The co-director has experience of applying for funding for arts and wellbeing projects so found the application process “fairly straightforward”. On reflection, they felt that securing grant funding had been important for continuation of the service because it mitigated some uncertainty about how the service could be sustained in the medium to long-term.

“Without grant funding, we think that the situation would have been more challenging because we couldn’t anticipate how long the pandemic would last. We think that a lot of people – and probably governments too – might have said ‘oh, it will just be two or three months and then we’ll be back to normal’. So in hindsight we think the grant has made a significant difference for us to be able to carry on with the service for as long as we did.”

Curious Pilgrims did not have direct experience of running a service like this but overall found the process smooth and did not experience significant issues or problems. The biggest challenge they faced was finding addresses for the first time. No other

organisations were involved in the development or running of the service. Curious Pilgrims did not feel the need to involve others like the local authority or NHS because they were confident in taking the initiative to organise it and noted that other bodies were focussed on other issues.

"We didn't feel the need to say 'oh we can only do this if we're supported by so and so'. That's our nature too, we're very pragmatic. We say 'okay what needs to be done? Can we do it? And if so, let's just get on with it.'"

Curious Pilgrims planned to run the prescription service for as long as it was needed. Demand was based on people's perception of risk so it came to a natural end as coronavirus restrictions eased. People began to look forward to being able to leave Bressay after so long, even just to collect their prescription, or family and friends were able to visit again.

"For some people, being 'stuck' on Bressay for a prolonged period of time without crossing to Lerwick was starting to have a certain negative impact. So as soon as restrictions started easing there was a natural transition from dependency on our service, to people resuming a more 'normal' state of affairs. People took the chance to cross over even if it was just to go to the pharmacy."

What next?

Curious Pilgrims continue to deliver prescriptions for a small number of Bressay residents but there are no plans to re-start the prescription delivery service more widely. It was felt to have come to a natural end as COVID-19 restrictions eased and there is a sense that measures are unlikely to be so restrictive in future. That being said, if a similar emergency arose and the service was needed Curious Pilgrims would be prepared to offer it again.

Curious Pilgrims is currently working on a project to record experiences of the pandemic. The 'Community Voices' project invites people of all ages and from all backgrounds and who have a strong connection to Shetland to creatively share their experiences of life during the pandemic. The project will show how COVID-19 affected people in different ways.

Reflections

Appreciation for the service was clear from the 'thank you' messages and gifts people would leave to be picked up when their prescription was dropped off. It was also demonstrated by the Community Spirit award Curious Pilgrims received from Voluntary Action Shetland in September 2020 (see figure 1.4 below).

Figure 1.4: The community spirit award given to Curious Pilgrims by Voluntary Action Scotland in recognition of their efforts (photo courtesy of Curious Pilgrims)

It was not possible to speak to anyone who had received prescription deliveries due to patient confidentiality. However Curious Pilgrims collected the following feedback from people who had used the service which highlights the mental health benefits for residents of knowing that someone was available to help them and of reducing their potential exposure to COVID-19.

“It has been a wonderful help through these difficult times. Always on time and delivered right to our enclosed porch. It has not only been a practical help but mentally lifting to benefit from the kindness offered. Thank you is an understatement.”

“The prescription delivery service to our island community has been, and still is, a valuable resource for all. Because of this service we are better able to reduce our potential exposure to the virus by completely avoiding the need for travel and collection ourselves. Stress levels are, therefore, also reduced.”

The co-directors also spoke about mental health benefits for themselves from helping their community and from giving them a meaningful way to spend time during such an uncertain period, especially as their normal work had stopped because of pandemic restrictions.

“As a musician working fulltime in the arts, I was suffering from the impact of Covid because all my work was suddenly wiped off my calendar - that’s at least two years of

planned work which have completely vanished. So, I think in a way, from a personal perspective, I felt that I was offering my time and energy to help people around our island."

Curious Pilgrims felt there were benefits for pharmacies too. The delivery service helped to lower and manage footfall where reduced opening hours would have meant more people inside the pharmacy in a shorter timeframe. This was obviously a period when the virus was still being understood and before the development of vaccines so there was increased emphasis on the importance of physical distancing to control the spread of the virus. A related aspect of the prescription service was that people would ask the co-director for medical advice on minor ailments which reduced demand on overstretched services. The prescription delivery service also complemented the national message not to stockpile medicines. People could be reassured that they would have access to their prescription so did not feel the need to order large quantities in advance.

"The people we were assisting could put their mind at rest that they were not going to run out of medication or be in a situation where medication could not be accessed due to the restrictions, and therefore they did not stockpile medication. If everybody had to stockpile meds the situation quickly snowballs into a major issue, resulting in product shortages even on a national level and other people are left without necessary medication. So, yes, we think that the service did make a difference in this respect too."

Lessons learned

Thinking about what they learned from the experience Curious Pilgrims highlighted the increased importance of community and awareness of the needs of older residents in particular.

"You really get to appreciate how older folk feel and can really become anxious about their supplies and about the need to feel that they're being taken care of. So for me, that was quite a new experience so to speak."

Curious Pilgrims took the initiative to organise and run the prescription delivery service. While they felt in their absence a similar service would have been set up on the island by other residents, this does highlight the importance of individual efforts to community resilience.

"We came up with this idea and just acted upon it. We felt that we could do it on our own because we had the confidence and energy to do so, and we do like to believe that if we hadn't done so, there would have been someone else to come up with this idea or take the initiative"

What community resilience means to Curious Pilgrims

Curious Pilgrims were asked what ‘community resilience’ means to them. They highlighted that it is about communities having the resources to be able to adapt to situations.

“I would say it’s about the community being able to step up or deal with a particular situation in times of need…when an event happens and the community is strong enough or closely knit enough or has the resources to be able to cope and to adapt to a situation.”

They had mixed views on how resilience manifests itself in island communities. On the one hand they felt that islanders are perhaps more resilient because they have to be when they cannot access resources as easily as they might on the Scottish mainland. On the other hand, there may be people who feel like they have to manage on their own because they live in more rural areas and might not be aware of support services available to them.

It was felt that the prescription service contributed to community resilience in Bressay by increasing knowledge and awareness that support was available for residents if they ever needed it.

“From the community’s perspective it’s knowing there’s somebody in the community who’s going to do something to help if help is needed. Just knowing that you’re not alone in a situation offers peace of mind and strengthens a positive feeling, even if you don’t need or use a service.”

Curious Pilgrims now feel better prepared to respond to emergencies because their experience during the pandemic has given them a sense of what they could expect in future.

In terms of advice for other communities experiencing an emergency Curious Pilgrims highlighted the importance of pooling knowledge and identifying resources or skills gaps to be filled.

“We like to sit down and brainstorm: What can we do to help? What skills, knowledge or knowhow do we possess to be able to set up a new service or activity for the benefit of the community? It’s boils down to using skills and resources more efficiently so that one person or organisation can do one thing while another can do something else, rather than everyone trying to do everything. I think that would be a good starting point and seeing what’s lacking in a community so you can do something about it.”

Broadford and Strath Community Company

Introduction

Broadford and Strath Community Company (BSCC) covers a large area in the south of Skye, stretching from the large population centre of Broadford to Elgol 14 miles away[25]. While Broadford is on the main road from the Skye Bridge to the island's capital, Portree, much of the rest of the area is reachable only by single track road. Broadford and Strath, already a large area, seemed to become an even bigger area when the COVID-19 pandemic first hit because of the transport infrastructure.

The population of the area is around 2,000 people, but because Skye is a popular tourist destination, there is considerable variation in population over the year, in "normal" times. In the year prior to lockdown, tourism generated an estimated £211 million for the island, from an estimated 650,000 visitors.[26] Tourism is believed to support nearly 3,000 jobs for Skye and Raasay residents, and so lockdown had a significant economic impact of the island. The unemployment claimant rate in the Portree TTWA (travel to work area) increased by 421% in March to July 2020.[27]

Who was involved

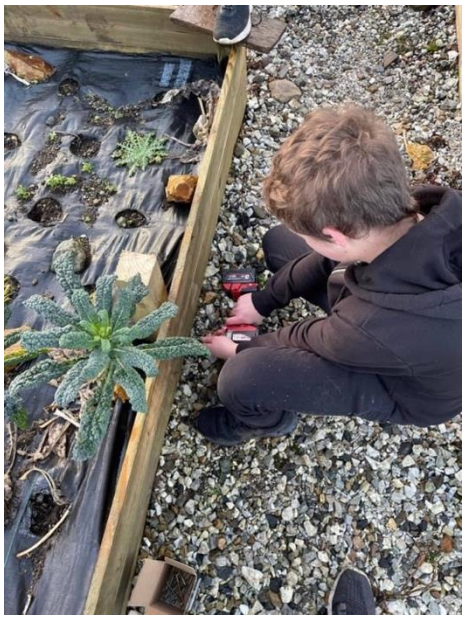
BSCC evolved from the Broadford Environmental Group and bought a local community woodland about 10 years ago. Since then, its activities have expanded considerably. As well as managing the woodland as a forestry resource they also raised funding to establish a campsite with electric hook-up points in the woodland. Camping Skye is now up and running and is one of their largest projects, redistributing any profit made back to the charity for its charitable purposes. They maintain a community garden in Broadford, an extensive path network in Broadford and Strath, and manage the Growers Hub which includes eight polytunnels and allotments, a Men's Shed, Flourish (a horticultural therapy group), and offer community growing and outdoor learning opportunities. BSCC is currently engaged in building new public toilets in both Broadford and Elgol and developing a safe route for walkers and cyclists from the Skye Bridge to Broadford. Many of their normal operations and income generation were impacted negatively by the pandemic.

[25] The Highland Council website provides information and boundary maps showing the Broadford and Strath Community Council area, available here: https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/4320/broadford_and_strath_community_councilpdf

[26] The Glasgow Caledonian University website provides information on the estimated amount of revenue generated by tourism in the Skye prior to COVID-19, available here: https://www.gcu.ac.uk/theuniversity/universitynews/2020-moffat-centre-skye-report-211million-covid19/

[27] The Highlands and Islands Enterprise website includes a report on the impact of COVID-19 on the Highlands and Islands, available here: https://www.hie.co.uk/media/9646/the-impact-of-COVID-19-on-the-highlands-and-islands.pdf

Figure 1.5: Community growing and outdoor learning organised by BSCC (photo courtesy of Love from Skye Photography)



BSSC currently has 24 sources of funding, and has 13 employees, most of whom are part time and dedicated to specific projects. They also have a bank of volunteers, which expanded considerably during the pandemic. The pandemic response of BSCC mainly centred around the provision of food and cooked meals to people across the BSCC area.

In addition to BSCC and its bank of volunteers, the food initiatives they co-ordinated involved various other local businesses/organisations with whom they worked in partnership for different aspects:

- the south end branch of The Community Foodbank – Skye and Lochalsh
- the Broadford Co-op and other local shops
- the local primary school (especially the school catering staff)
- a local hotel owner
- a local estate agent

The general initiative was aimed at anyone living in the BSCC area, although some aspects of it were more targeted in one way or another. For instance, those who were elderly, people shielding, socially isolated people (because of location or circumstance), and those likely to be in food poverty.

Why the project started

As an environmental group, BSCC had had a growing project up and running for a number of years, both in terms of leasing polytunnel/allotment space to locals and also growing food for distribution themselves. This latter aspect was largely managed by

volunteers. The garden area, known as the Growers Hub, was also used by other local groups (such as Flourish) and the local school children, all of whom would work in the garden and also take some of the produce that was grown. Social distancing restrictions during lockdowns meant that these groups were unable to access the gardens, and as the first lockdown coincided with the peak growing period, it was important that no produce went to waste.

Figure 1.6: Surplus produce from the local supermarket (photo courtesy of Love from Skye Photography)

At the start of 2020, a local woman was in the process of setting up the south end branch of The Community Foodbank – Skye and Lochalsh. In parallel, the manager of the local Broadford Co-op had also expressed interest in finding someone to work with to reduce the food waste from the shop and using it to address food need in the community. He approached the foodbank who in turn approached BSCC. The foodbank was able to take some of the surplus food, and BSCC set up a “Food Share” to take the rest, to avoid food waste. Prior to this, the surplus food would go into a skip and ultimately to landfill. The Co-op were aware that there were ‘skip-divers’ searching the skips at night for food, because of food poverty.

“BSCC created a daily Food Share where we would take all the food waste from the Co-op and share it at the, now closed due to Covid, community campsite. After seeing how successful it was we then moved it to the more central location at the Broadford Village Hall…At the start we thought it would last a few months however very quickly we realised that this wasn’t just a Covid issue but an ongoing issue and the project would be a long term one.”

What the project involved

The Co-op manager had already offered storage space within the store to help the foodbank get started in the early part of 2020, but the BSCC “Food Share” did not have any permanent space at all. BSCC quickly saw the benefits of working with the foodbank to bring together their own produce from the Growers Hub with the supermarket surplus and make it available for anyone that could make use of it during lockdown. This was done partly through establishing collection points around the BSCC area, and the foodbank volunteers organised deliveries to those who were not able to attend the collection points. BSCC recruited a team of volunteers to help with collection and distribution of the waste food. These volunteers were offered their fuel costs but all of them declined to claim any expenses. Eventually, with the support of a Project Officer, BSCC found a more permanent space for the Food Share and the foodbank, albeit on a temporary basis, and with Supporting Communities funding from Scottish Government BSCC also purchased a storage container, larger fridges and a freezer to enable them to store any surplus food. Funding also got them an additional polytunnel for further community growing.

“The manager of the local Co-op in Broadford was very positive about food need and ending food waste in the community, he was quite a driver actually and he offered us space for the foodbank within the Co-op so we had a store room and somewhere to distribute parcels from.”

The role of BSCC staff and volunteers was to collect the food from the supermarket and put it together with the surplus produce from their own growing area and leave it where it could be collected by anyone that needed it. In Broadford, this was initially in the campsite area, Camping Skye, owned by BSCC, and while they had 20 people take provisions on the first night, it was felt that this site was not the most suitable. Camping Skye is slightly out of Broadford, and so not necessarily easily accessible to those who might have benefitted most from the food. It was decided to use the Broadford village hall instead, and it operated from here for six nights a week, for three months. Volunteers also took the food to collection points in other areas such as Breakish and Ardvasar in Sleat. Any surplus that was left over was frozen and given to the foodbank. The foodbank and the Community Fridge were co-located, which was an unusual arrangement at the time but one that proved beneficial for the community as it took away some of the stigma that might otherwise be associated with food poverty and use of the foodbank.

Figure 1.7: Surplus food stored in the freezer (photo courtesy of Love from Skye Photography)

As the project evolved, there were ‘gluts’ of fresh produce which were sometimes difficult to make good use of. A chance discussion with a local hotel owner led to the offer of using the gluts to make meals which could be donated to those most in need. With funding from the Corra Foundation, BSCC paid for any additional ingredients that were needed to make the meals with, but the chef’s time was given free of charge. Identifying people who would benefit most from cooked meals was difficult because of the need for anonymity, and UK GDPR regulations, but using other local networks, such as the foodbank and the local school cook (because of free school meals), BSCC were able to distribute the cooked food via these networks without any breaches of UK GDPR and confidentiality and reach those most in need. For instance, the school cook would take a quota of meals and distribute them on behalf of BSCC to those families that received free school meals.

“It was a funny time, on the one hand you were really wanting to help people, and on the other hand its GDPR and all this stress about random folk going up and approaching people and knocking on doors at a time we were being told to keep our distance.”

Need was not necessarily associated with poverty, but with social isolation and vulnerability of one kind or another. One recipient, an elderly lady whose family were all on the mainland and who was in danger of being socially isolated, contacted BSCC to say she did not ‘need’ the meals, as she had enough money to buy her own food. She was told that it was not about financial need, necessarily, but about reducing food waste

and making sure older people were looked out for and were getting access to nutritious food. She was so grateful that she made a donation to BSCC which was enough ‘to pay for everyone’s meals for the week’. Almost 5,000 meals were made in total, with an average of 120 a week being produced.

Figure 1.8: Meals prepared by a local hotel owner (photo courtesy of Love from Skye Photography)

At some point during the first lockdown, food parcels were made available by the government, but these did not include fresh fruit or vegetables. BSCC supplemented these parcels with fresh produce from the supermarket waste and/or the produce grown at BSCC’s Growers Hub. Fruit however was not so readily available so when a local business ran a fundraiser for BSCC it was decided by the board to start an orchard for the community, ensuring available fruit for the community on a long-term basis.

Volunteers dropping off food were able to establish a relationship with the recipients, and so there was a wider benefit of being able to bring some social contact for isolated people. Through these relationships, volunteers could check up on the recipients more generally and make sure everything else was alright. Using local knowledge and contacts, a lot of thought was put into the pairing of volunteers with recipients to get the most out of the relationship for all concerned. So, for instance, a local nurse who was volunteering was paired with those that had health needs so that she was able to do an informal check on the recipients.

“Not everybody that got a meal was in food need, but socially they were quite isolated. Our weekly meals were such a lovely, lovely experience. It gave us something to do in lockdown, it was the highlight of our weeks to be honest. The volunteers built up a relationship with the people that they were delivering to and as well as delivering food

they would have a chat, see if they needed help with anything else. I made sure we paired the recipients with the right volunteer but I could only do that because I had local knowledge, it made it so much easier. One of our volunteers was a retired nurse, so if there were folk we were worried about we had her on hand."

Although the work was mainly done by volunteers recruited as part of the project, BSCC staff were key in getting it set up, recruiting and training volunteers, matching volunteers to recipients, and overseeing the whole project. In order to get the project off the ground, funding was sought from a number of sources. As well as covering some staffing costs for BSCC, funding also allowed them to purchase their own fridges and freezers, another polytunnel, purchase a storage container for the foodbank to store supplies, fund coordinators to set up the fridge, and recruit and train volunteers and to put systems and procedures in place.

"In some ways we tried to take the minimum we could run on and wanted to show very solid things for what we got. There was a lot of volunteer input and in some ways you were nervous about taking the money. We wanted to make sure we got the most of any funding we received in such difficult times. Had we had more core staff in place prior to the pandemic we could have done even more but as it was we did what we could with the capacity we had at the time."

The funding sources included:

- Supporting Communities Fund (Scottish Government) - £23K
- Corra Foundation - £2k
- COOP COVID-19 Funding - £5k
- Response Recovery & Resilience Fund (Foundation Scotland)- £5k

In making applications for funding for the project, BSCC were determined that any investment would have lasting value beyond the pandemic – they did not want to invest in anything that would not have a longer-term benefit for the community. They were also cautious and frugal, not wanting to have funding for anything that they did not need, and also wanting to have solid things that they could point at that were a result of the funding.

"There is an excellent legacy of the fridge being set-up…That was one of the key points for Broadford and Strath, that it wasn't just something that would disappear as soon as the crisis was over…there is a complete cycle of food management which wasn't in place before and there are better relationships or new relationships and networks forged within the community."

Local businesses also supported them, from the initial offer of storage from the Co-op, through the hotelier making meals, to nine months electricity donated by a local estate agent for the fridge, and a free “home” for the Community Fridge for a period. Various businesses and voluntary groups also wanted to fundraise to help out – a local jeweller auctioned off of a necklace and the proceeds were used to purchase an orchard, and the local football team fundraised for a contribution to the £2,000 for the additional ingredients needed by the hotelier for the meals.

The main period of activity of meal preparation and delivery was the first lockdown, but some aspects have continued beyond then, with the Community Fridges and the additional polytunnel continuing to be used. By October 2021, 948 volunteers had redistributed a minimum of £118,500 worth of food and supported some 9,480 people through the Fridge alone. As well as putting food in the fridges, BSCC also contact the school to give them surplus fruit, for instance, to distribute to children as play pieces.

What next?

The Community Fridge and foodbank are now well established in the village of Broadford, and there is also a community fridge in the Sleat area. Both are well used and will continue into the future, with BSCC collecting the food from the Co-op and managing the Broadford Community Fridge on a daily basis. The Sleat Community Fridge is managed by the Sleat Community Trust.

The additional polytunnel that was bought with the funding has added to the community resource of the Growers Hub, which is once again accessed by groups within the community. On Saturdays during the summer, the community is invited in to come and pick salad leaves through ‘Salad Saturdays’, encouraging the community into a space that they might not ordinarily visit.

Figure 1.9: Growers Hub including polytunnel purchased with COVID-19 funding (photo courtesy of Love from Skye Photography)

The legacy of the combined community fridge and foodbank has been a good result, and there are aspirations within the community for a ‘community supermarket’, where people

would pay a regular small membership fee in exchange for a bag of groceries each week. It could become almost like a farm shop and be expanded to include local growers and producers.

A lot of the volunteers that came forward have continued to be involved in BSCC, but in a different capacity rather than delivery of meals. The food projects have also increased the visibility of BSCC, and they are now looked to, to get involved in all sorts of new areas in the community. This could potentially have a resource implication for BSCC as they are a small team without any real core funding.

"Going forward, rebuilding community networks which have been devastated by Covid, because that's what built the community resilience in the first place."

Reflections - success factors

Having local people on the ground was vitally important as it was the local connections and networks that enabled the project to be so successful, both in terms of getting people involved, mustering resources, and reaching clients.

"The absolute key to the projects all working was local knowledge and local connections and local networks. Absolutely cannot overestimate the importance of that."

They feel the project had a huge impact, both in terms of reducing food waste, and addressing food poverty and social isolation in the community. There are still around 20 people attending the fridge daily. The food waste continues to be generated, and sometimes this can be as much as 20 large boxes a day. It all goes – there is never any food left.

A further factor in the success of the project was by taking an approach that was about reducing food waste rather than addressing food need, it was possible to address issues around stigma. This enabled them to help a lot of people that might not have otherwise come forward. But a lot of people had lost their income source, especially if this came from the tourism sector, and the 'open to all' approach enabled everyone in the community to benefit. Maintaining focus on the core purpose of BSCC also helped them to look at the long-term benefit that any activities would have.

Having local control and freedom to do what they felt was necessary was also a key element of the success of the projects, and the flexibility around use of the grants helped in this respect: it helped them to focus on meeting local needs, rather than having to deliver on objectives which had been set for the average issues at a national level.

The project has raised local awareness of BSCC and the Growers Hub and changed the perception of the organisation in the community. They are now asked to be involved in lots more things locally, but they do not always have the resources to do this.

Figure 1.10: The Growers Hub (photo courtesy of Love from Skye Photography)

Lessons learned

Reflecting on their experiences, it was clear that the communities were not ready; there was no plan in place for a pandemic but there is a need to have a plan for this type of thing in the future. For islands, the prospect of food shortages, whatever the cause, are very real. There was a lot of effort made by the community and this needs be more cohesive on a larger scale should a similar type of emergency happen again.

Having flexibility from funders as to how to use the grants received was very valuable, especially when things evolved and new opportunities and ideas came up.

Social interaction was key. The pandemic left an older generation disconnected because of the reliance on technology such as Zoom. At the other end of the scale, young people lost all the usual opportunities to network and socialise and this has had an impact.

It was also acknowledged that communities in Skye were not ready for this type of emergency and that further measures would be needed to help manage future emergencies. It would be very valuable to have a learning debrief to look into what was done and how it was done. BSCC will do this for their own purposes, but to have something co-ordinated at a Skye level would be very valuable.

“Communities aren’t ready. There was no plan. There was no emergency plan for a situation where we had food shortages and people were unemployed, for a pandemic essentially. There wasn’t a plan. You need a plan. that is the biggest learning point. So many things swung into action which was fantastic and amazing and a wonderful community effort.”

What community resilience means to BSCC

From the perspective of BSCC, community resilience is about the community being able to look after itself, and being able to withstand something that occurs unexpectedly, or even expectedly: being able to respond to a crisis.

Community resilience was very much seen to be built through networks and relationships. Some of these have been eroded by COVID-19, and they need rebuilt. For instance, networks are built by parents getting to know each other outside the school gates, or a community being galvanised round a local fundraising event. These all help build community resilience and they have not been able to take place through the pandemic.

Piece of advice to other communities

BSCC were asked what advice they would give to other island and rural communities to make them more resilient in the future, and they stated that it was key to be very aware of local networks and connections. These connections and networks need to be actively nurtured and developed, to build resilience, trust and knowledge. Having a local-level plan for emergencies was also important, so that people know what to do when things go wrong.

They also advised communities to look at what has been done elsewhere, and not reinvent the wheel.

Benefits – intended and unintended

There have been many different strands to the success and impact of the project:

- Mental health benefit for beneficiaries and volunteers. Many of the volunteers have spoken about the benefits to them – it filled a vacuum during the lockdowns, and gave them a real sense of purpose.

  “One of the big things was a mental health benefit during lockdown, not just for the people receiving food but for the volunteers who were involved in the projects. That sense of purpose and usefulness and their own community impact. And the new networks that volunteers that made and the really strong friendships amongst volunteers.”

- New friendships that developed. People are now missing this. The deliveries provided personal contact for people – they were like “the travellers of old, taking news from village to village”.

  “It was really important because for the meals that were being delivered, for some people receiving parcels, it was the only social contact they would have in a week.”

- Savings on waste food and food miles.

- Savings for the Co-op in not having to pay to landfill food.
- Bringing together the fridge and foodbank has been a really good idea, which was a slightly novel idea at the time.
- Children’s health – in some cases, better food now going to households with children, especially households with low incomes. They focused on children in households where there were other issues such as addictions, or young carers. They looked at getting food to children who were carers and getting food that they could make for themselves.
- Legacy of the infrastructure that they put in place with the funding (polytunnel, pigs, etc.).

Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (Galson Estate Trust)

Introduction

Galson is on the north-west side of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides, and is made up of 22 crofting communities. It goes right to the north-western tip of the island, to the Port of Nis, which is a destination for tourists wishing to reach the tip of the Outer Hebrides. It is an area rich in natural and cultural heritage. The 22 villages are spread up the coast, covering a distance of around 15 miles from south to north of the Estate area. Stornoway, the capital and main service centre of Lewis, is 12 miles away at the closest point, and around 30 at the furthest point. About 2,000 people live in the Galson area, which covers around 56,000 hectares.

Galson has an ageing population, and it is very mixed in terms of its socio-economic profile with extremes of wealth and poverty. Fuel poverty is a particular issue, but there is wider deprivation and many residents would be classed as vulnerable for one reason or another. In the Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) COVID19 vulnerability index,[28] Na h-Eileanan an Iar is ranked 7th out of Scotland's 32 local authorities in terms of combined community vulnerability score and 16% of the population of Na h-Eileanan an Iar live in datazones within the 20% most vulnerable in Scotland, slightly higher than the proportion regionally (14%).

Who was involved

Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn, or UOG, is the Trust for the community owned estate of Galson. UOG run the Galson Estate, which includes everything from working on new development projects, running the amenity site, crofting administration, and general estate business (deer and land management, responding to requests to put masts up on the estate, sporting activity, etc.). The main aim of the Trust, however, is to support the community that lives there.

Why the project was needed

Given the aim of the Trust, to represent and support the communities of Galson Estate, the Trust felt it had a responsibility to do what it could to look after the residents of the area at the start of the pandemic. They were aware of a number of potential issues that residents might encounter, and which they were in a position to help with.

[28] The Highlands and Islands Enterprise website provides an area profile for the Outer Hebrides area, available here: https://www.hie.co.uk/media/10594/na-h-eileanan-an-iar-area-profile-2020.pdf

"When Covid hit we realised that, just as we were going into lockdown, that we represent the people here and that we had the opportunity to do our best to look out for the people that live here."

Due to having an independent source of income, from wind turbines, the Trust staff were able to continue working, but some of their usual work was not possible. This gave them the ability to switch to doing other things as part of the pandemic response.

"We were able to maintain our staff. Nobody went on furlough so we all just worked through it. We had…all of our staff working. And we could afford to do that because the Trust has an income from the turbines. We were able to carry on, all working from home…with different roles and different tasks that we were doing to support the community."

What the project involved

By mid-March, the UOG team had sent out self-isolation forms, so that the type of help that people in the community needed was understood well before lockdown measures were brought in. A volunteer Facebook group was set-up to share help and guidance. Through this group, the Trust identified 45 volunteers to help as needed. UOG developed a plan of what they would do in the local area, some of which were new things (for example, WhatsApp groups, prescription deliveries, house numbering project, and administration of a hardship fund), and some of which were moving existing things into a new format (for example 85 online Gaelic and English BookBug sessions were delivered on YouTube, and online exercise classes were provided). The Trust stepped in to produce the free local community newsletter when the staff from the Spors Nis, who usually produced it, were furloughed. In addition, the Trust also launched 'mini beast' activities for children who can get into the garden or the croft.

"We got our heads together and came up with a plan."

One of the initial things that they did was to establish a WhatsApp group for each of the 22 villages in the area. These were co-ordinated by volunteers in each village. It was decided that WhatsApp was the easiest and most accessible way to set up a communication group, although they acknowledged that it would not suit everyone. For those people that did not have a phone or use WhatsApp, neighbours were nominated to be the conduit of information for these people, and to 'keep an eye on them'. UOG oversaw the establishment of the groups, and they made sure that in one way or another, everyone in the community was covered either directly or through a neighbour.

Overall, UOG recruited about 45 volunteers through a Facebook group, who were willing to help in whatever way they could. Initially this was helping to set up the WhatsApp groups, but subsequently they were deployed in delivering prescriptions from the two

local GP surgeries. Most days, there were deliveries to be made, sometimes only a couple, and on other days considerably more.

While undertaking prescription deliveries, they became aware of the difficulty of finding addresses in villages they did not know as well as their own. It is normal in crofting communities for the numbering of crofts to follow a pattern of when the houses were built, rather than to go in numerical order.

“What we discovered when we were delivering prescriptions was that few had numbers on their houses. And the way the crofts work, everybody’s houses are all mixed up, and you could have number 2 sitting beside number 100. It’s all over the place.”

Not only was the numbering confusing, it was also found that many croft houses did not have a number at all. UOG were concerned that the confusion they and the volunteers experienced when making the deliveries could have serious consequences should there be a medical emergency, with paramedics potentially being unable to find the right property.

“We had a real struggle and sometimes you would have a prescription in your hand and it could take you an hour to find a house. Even though there are maps in the phone books they are not particularly accurate, it’s very, very difficult. So we realised that was a real potential problem. If the pandemic had gone crazy here and somebody was really sick, the paramedics would have not been able to find the houses.”

The house numbering scheme covered the cost of a house number on slate. For those that were unable to install their own number, the funding could also cover the costs of a local carpenter to do this for them. There are around 800 houses in the Galson area, and of these, 600 were provided with a house number through the scheme. Funding of £9,000 from the Scottish Government’s Supporting Communities Fund, was sought to run the project, to cover the costs of manufacture and installation.

The start of the first lockdown coincided with the start of the lambing season, an important time for the crofting communities. Crofters were normally reliant on being able to access crofting supplies from the main crofting supplier in Stornoway, which would normally do deliveries into the community. The supplier decided that it was not safe for their staff to continue travelling to the communities to make deliveries, and so UOG decided to co-ordinate this on behalf of the crofters in the Galson area. A local car hire company offered them the use of a van for free, and three times a week UOG would arrange for a volunteer to drive to Stornoway and collect orders. They would then station themselves in a number of car parks in the Galson area, and crofters would come and collect their orders. By opening the van at the suppliers and allowing the supplies to be loaded on by them, and then opening the van doors in the various car parks, they were

able to safely make deliveries of supplies. They continued to do this throughout the lambing season and for the first lockdown.

“It stopped people travelling to and from town and going into shops and we felt that we could do it safely with the volunteers we had. That was quite a big job because a lot of people would be phoning us and giving us orders and we had to manage all of that side of it.”

Overall, UOG co-ordinated 3,200 deliveries of prescriptions and crofting supplies, and 450 hours of volunteer support were recorded (though it is assumed that a lot more hours were actually given, just not recorded).

As already noted above, there are pockets of deprivation in the Galson area, and COVID-19 will likely have exacerbated that. The charitable status of UOG mean that they were unable to help anyone financially, but instead they worked with a local church to establish a hardship fund. The Emergency Fund, called Beagan Taic, was aimed at supporting Estate residents who found themselves in severe financial hardship. The partnership with the Cross Free Church brought together the administrative capacity of the Trust with the financial resources of the Church. The administration of the fund was done by one member of the Trust, in order to maintain maximum confidentiality. This member of staff has now moved away from the area and left the employment of the Trust and so it was not possible to ascertain the number of awards made through the fund. The fund has now come to an end.

“It was kept very, very confidential. Everybody knows everybody in the community and everyone knows our staff. So it was kept to one or two people administering it.”

The WhatsApp groups were sources of ideas/requests for support from the community, as were the conversations with the community when out delivering prescriptions or taking orders for crofting supplies. UOG was not able to respond to all suggestions for activities they could get involved in, but did what they could to respond positively. They actively went out to community groups and local businesses, to see what help they could offer, and to make sure that they were all aware of official sources of support and grants that were available. They recognised that there was a rapidly changing landscape in terms of business and community support grants and did what they could to help people locally make sure they were accessing what they needed. UOG secured funding of £3,000 from Scottish Government’s Communities Recovery Fund (administered by SCVO) for each of eight local community and voluntary organisations, to help them deal with COVID-19 related impacts.

“There were so many grants out there and there potentially still is and trying to keep track of which ones we got for which projects and what the names of them is quite

challenging. At the time we were just so bang, bang, bang get everything done and so full on with it all."

What next?

Most of the initiatives UOG put in place came to a natural end point. Volunteers went back to work, people were able to get their own prescriptions again once they were able to go out and about, and the van on loan from the car hire company was returned as it was needed for commercial hire. Although the activities stopped, UOG and the community always knew that they could go back to doing them again if needed. The exception to this is the WhatsApp groups which continue to this day, and these will continue as long as the communities see merit in them being there. Although the immediate need for communication has passed, it is acknowledged that they may be needed again. It is also acknowledged that they could not have been set up at any other time because UOG would have been seen as 'controlling'. Not all of the WhatsApp groups are active, whilst others continue to be very active and have been re-purposed for whatever need the individual villages see. Membership of some of the village groups has been expanded to include non-residents with family connections in the Galson area, for example, because they see the value of being kept up to date with the news from the area.

"Others have been extremely active and still are to this day. They have been used for all sorts of things…used for random stuff like that. In the beginning it was I'm going to Tesco for my shopping, can I get anybody anything, or I'm going to get a prescription from town, or whatever, a lot of Covid related support that people were offering. Recently it's just random stuff, sometimes it's just chatting about stuff. Like do you remember such and such that used to live there and died 50 years ago, her daughter is doing this, just general chat."

There were considerable differences between the villages as to how active the groups were, and they are not really sure why this is the case. One suggestion was the varying age profiles of the villages, with older residents being less likely to use WhatsApp. Another suggestion was that in some cases, the community cohesion and communication was already very strong using other means, and so there was no real need for an additional communication route. Whatever the reasons, they were used to varying degrees, initially for COVID-19 related support (checking up on each other, people offering to collect shopping for neighbours etc.), and now for sharing local news and searching for missing animals.

"I think it is a really good thing to have one [WhatsApp group] going. We could never had done it in any other time but it was really appreciated."

Reflections

Making sure that they were in contact with other groups in the area was important for UOG, so that effort was not being duplicated, and equally things were not falling between the gaps in what was available. There were others doing other things in the local community such as meal delivery, for instance, and so there was no need for UOG to get involved in this area. That said, while UOG had no formal role in supporting other organisations locally, they helped them where they could, and ensured they had an understanding of what they were doing. Through the work that UOG did during the pandemic, they feel that the relationship they have with the local community has improved, and that the community showed a great deal of trust for the Trust.

"Everybody was good at doing what they could…We just communicated with the other organisations, we made sure we weren't stepping on each other's toes. But we were there for support should it be needed. We were part of a larger community."

The Trust felt that it was very important and appropriate that they took on a local role in offering and providing support. Support was available at many different levels, from UK-wide down to local communities, and they had a place in that hierarchy. National and local government had other issues to deal with, and they felt it was appropriate that more local action was led locally on the ground by groups such as UOG who were able to fill the gaps at a very local level.

"Our relationship with the community has changed for the better. It was a good way of getting to know the community better. We had a lot more face-to-face contact with people that we would maybe not have much contact with. Whether it was the older people that don't come out. We were on the doorstep chatting with them, delivering to them."

Looking back, they feel that everything that they did was successful and well received by the local community, and they would do the same again if it were needed. If this were the case, they would recruit additional volunteers, because it was a lot more work to co-ordinate the various activities than they had appreciated at the start. And once a project is up and running, and seen to be successful, it is harder to get additional volunteers. The start of something is the optimum time for recruiting volunteers, and they would have got more had they appreciated what was ahead of them, even if that meant some volunteers had very little to do.

At the start of the pandemic, the priority was to do what they could, as quickly as they could. The barriers that might have been perceived in 'normal' times were not considered at the time, and this was quite freeing in a way. Had they had more time to sit and plan and think about what to do, without the urgency of needing to do it, they might not have felt able to establish these initiatives. So for instance, delivery volunteers

did not always have a hi-vis jacket, or car insurance of volunteers was not necessarily checked to make sure it covered their volunteering activity.

“We thought these are not normal times, if anything happened we could justify it. There were things maybe later on that we thought of that we thought we should have thought of in the beginning. But in the beginning it was just we have to do something to help here.”

Having control at a local level was an important factor for the success of the various initiatives: they were able to get on and do what they felt was needed. Equally, getting feedback from the community through the WhatsApp groups and other direct communication, was also important so they could make sure they were on the right track.

“We were able to get our heads down and get on with it. Because we were on the ground and out speaking to people, we could get feedback on it. We could ensure that it was working. It was a chance to speak to people and get feedback straightaway from them that what we were doing was the right thing. And I think they knew that if there was anything else they thought we should be doing they could have contacted us or one of the board members.”

As an organisation, the experience of the pandemic has shown them what they are capable of, and also shown how the community trusts them to act on their behalf. It has highlighted the need for a process of emergency planning at the local level, and this is something that UOG is looking to put in place once things are more settled post-pandemic. For real value, this would be a joint process with relevant local groups, rather than being done in isolation. Some support to do this, and some involvement of community-based organisations into the Community Planning Western Isles Emergency Planning Co-ordinating Group (WIEPCG), would be very valuable moving forward.

“I just think that if we are in a crisis the community pulls together really well and are willing to trust the trust, to trust us, to manage what we can and to look to us to support them. That’s not always evidenced, you don’t always know what the community are thinking. It was good to know that in a time of crisis they would turn to us. And good for us to know as a staff team that we can do it. We were a pretty resilient staff team.”

What community resilience means to UOG

For UOG community resilience is about individuals and groups within the community coming together at times of emergency to work together, and that there are good communication channels to facilitate this. Working together can simply be making sure that they are not duplicating effort, or that they are doing so consciously because there is justification to do so. In other cases, it might be more involved than that with groups

actively delivering things jointly. There will always be some personalities that can get in the way of things within any community, but they consider themselves lucky that they are in a position where the majority are willing to come together and work round that.

“The ability to come together and work together and be able to problem solve together. To ensure that we can go forward doing the best that we can to maintain what we have got.”

The Outer Hebrides is a popular tourism destination, and this was no less the case in between lockdowns. Indeed, domestic holidays became more popular as a result of the pandemic, and the Western Isles saw its fair share of UK holiday makers, possibly being busier than ever. For UOG, this highlighted the need for investment in the local tourism infrastructure, which, in their opinion, was unable to cope with the demands placed on it at the time. Many of the communities in the Galson area would be considered as vulnerable (as evident in the HIE COVID-19 vulnerability index) and UOG felt that the lack of adequate tourism infrastructure increased the risk for local people. UOG think that funding to support appropriate tourism development is needed, through investment in waste and waste water disposal facilities, public toilets, bins, and grants for small scale private campsites. UOG would like to see “less marketing and more education” on appropriate ways to behave in rural communities that do not put local people at the same level of risk as was seen at times during the pandemic.

“Moving forward the one way we could be supported is the tourism infrastructure. The one place where we have been impacted is in the local tourism, not always negatively, where people are staying at home and coming to vulnerable areas where the infrastructure just isn’t in place for them. Going forward and still to do with Covid, and the impact of Covid is tourism infrastructure – more bins, more toilets, grants for people to set up private campsite areas on their land, less marketing and more education.”

Figure 1.11: Part of the Galson area coastline

Piece of advice to others

Community-based groups working together, and in some cases where appropriate with the statutory agencies, is crucial for communities if they are to be resilient to emergency situations such as was experienced with the pandemic. Having good working relations in ‘normal’ times enables groups to really come together when needed. An essential part of this is good communication.

Islay's pandemic response

Introduction

Islay lies off the west coast of Scotland. Known for its scenery, wildlife and numerous whisky distilleries, tourism is a significant part of the island's economy. Over 3,000 people live on Islay, which is affectionately known as 'the Queen of the Hebrides'. The island has a network of tight knit communities, each distinct from one another. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced the UK into lockdown in March 2020, connecting these communities was a vital step in building the island's resilience.

Who was involved

Prior to COVID-19, an Emergency Planning Group was already established in Islay. Chaired by Police Scotland, and attended by emergency and medical services as well as the local authority, it was considered to be the natural vehicle for planning in the early stages of the pandemic.

Islay's Emergency Planning Group was supported by the Local Resilience Partnership, a group which covers Argyll & Bute and also pre-existed the pandemic. In normal times, the group would meet twice a year, but during the pandemic it met weekly to ensure accurate and up-to-date information was distributed across the council area, including Islay.

As the prospect of a UK-wide lockdown emerged in early 2020, Islay residents began to question what would happen to the island. Calls for volunteers were welcomed but raised issues over safeguarding. In response to this, two residents formed a Resilience Group to help coordinate the volunteer effort.

The Emergency Planning Group and Resilience Group were among the main organisers of Islay's initial pandemic response, with support across the island from key partners including the Community Council, South Islay Development, the Islay Food Bank, Dunlossit Estate, and the Cooperative, as well as local businesses and residents.

Why the project happened

Although the Emergency Planning Group was already established and had been working together before the pandemic, it was felt that by some in the group that closer coordination between the emergency services would benefit the community at a time of such uncertainty. Moreover, it was recognised that infrastructure – such as a food delivery system from the main shop on the island - was needed to help the island adapt to life under lockdown.

“The community was quite nervous about Covid, and the infrastructure wasn’t there yet. There was no delivery service, the Coop wasn’t set up to do this at the time. You wouldn’t normally have the emergency services working so closely together, but it felt like the natural thing to do.”

Volunteers were therefore necessary to help with food deliveries and other practical support, as well as befriending residents to help combat social isolation. The Resilience Group was formed by local residents to enable the volunteers to provide support in a sustainable and coordinated way.

“There needed to be a central form of contact, one phone number that you can phone and know that help will be there. People needed someone who they know and trust.”

The groups worked together to support the residents of Islay, providing help to ‘anybody at all’ who needed it.

“Mainly there was a real feeling of community on the island and people wanting to help each other, that was really key. That was the driving force for everybody involved.”

What the project involved

The pandemic phase

Early in the pandemic, the Emergency Planning Group was convened to discuss how the emergency services could best support each other. At this point, there was a lot of uncertainty around COVID-19 and much of the conversation in these initial meetings revolved around worst case scenario planning and ‘bracing for the worst’. There was also discussion about how to get sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) to health and social care settings.

“What are we going to do with people if they become ill? We had one emergency ventilator and no ability to evacuate people off the island at that point.”

Around about the same time, two local residents were setting up a Resilience Group to help coordinate the volunteers coming forward to support Islay’s pandemic response. Within a week, 150 volunteers had come forward. A decision was made to split the island into seven districts, each with 10-20 volunteers and a coordinator. Regular meetings were held between the coordinators and the Resilience Group to ensure that issues were dealt with quickly. It was felt that this would be the most efficient and effective way of managing and responding to requests for help from communities, tapping into local networks and knowledge.

“The coordinators knew their patch, knew the crofts, knew the people.”

About a month into the pandemic, representatives from the Resilience Group and the Community Council were invited to join the weekly Emergency Planning Group meetings, which then increased to twice weekly meetings as events escalated. Given the level of uncertainty in the early stages, it was important that accurate and reliable information was obtained. The Local Resilience Partnership was also meeting weekly with input from a clinical lead. This ensured that accurate information cascaded through the Emergency Planning Group, the Resilience Group and to residents themselves.

"There was lots of noise in the media so we needed information straight from the horse's mouth and filter it down to emergency planning group. This was then passed onto coordinators, and so the community could be more relaxed about things."

The volunteers were doing a range of things to help people in the community, especially during the first few months of the pandemic. Some were befrienders, offering support and social contact to residents who would otherwise have been socially isolated, as the government's lockdown measures prevented household mixing. Others would do the shopping, pick up medication, and deliver hot meals for those isolating or shielding. There was also a fuel drop for residents who had run out of fuel to heat their homes. In the beginning, there were many calls for help from residents around Islay. Over time, as more information was circulated, more became known about the virus, and lockdown measures eased, the volume of calls declined.

Although the island's one shop - the Cooperative - did not initially have an online ordering and delivery system, this was set up in response to the lockdown, and the store became a key partner in the island's handling of the pandemic. Another key partner was the Dunlossit Estate, a family-owned estate, which converted part of the property into storage space so that food could be ordered and stored in bulk. They made up emergency food parcels which volunteers were able to distribute to households based on need.

Recovery phase

By June 2020, the country moved into a new phase of careful and cautious changes to the lockdown regulations, following an announcement by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on 'the move to phase one of a route map out of lockdown'.[29] Around this time, organisers in Islay sought greater control over the relaxation of measures, in recognition of the unique position of the islands. It was felt that a 'blanket change' across Scotland was not appropriate for the island community. On behalf of Islay, the Community Council approached the Scottish Government and requested that the Argyll islands be given greater autonomy in terms of determining its COVID-19 level status. In the summer of

[29] The Scottish Government website provides details of the announcements made by the First Minister about the move to phase one of the route map out of lockdown, available here: https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-COVID-19-update-first-ministers-speech-28-2020/

2020, Scottish Government agreed to this. Allowing the islands greater autonomy over its COVID-19 measures meant that, when other parts of Scotland went into another lockdown later that year, Islay was able to avoid this due to low prevalence of the virus.

“Some of us felt relatively safe in the community because of essential travel rules, which allowed us to have greater levels of freedom within the island. Mental health and isolation was becoming a big problem with people living remotely and not having neighbours nearby. We needed to be able to relax to the extent that these people could be connected again.”

On the other hand, once non-essential travel was permitted, and the resumption of tourism to Islay was possible, there were ‘polarised’ views on how this should be handled. As Islay moved from response to recovery, it was felt that a more widely representative group was needed and that existing groups alone were not the right vehicle for this. Instead, the Community Council set up the Islay Covid Recovery Group. The purpose of the Islay Covid Recovery Group was to hear the range of views and use this to inform wider planning, so that the community could be reassured that the island was recovering and reopening safely. The group was chaired by a community councillor and had representatives from local businesses, the distilleries, sporting estates, ferry and airport services, churches, development groups, youth groups, and medical services, as well as the Community Council and Resilience Group.

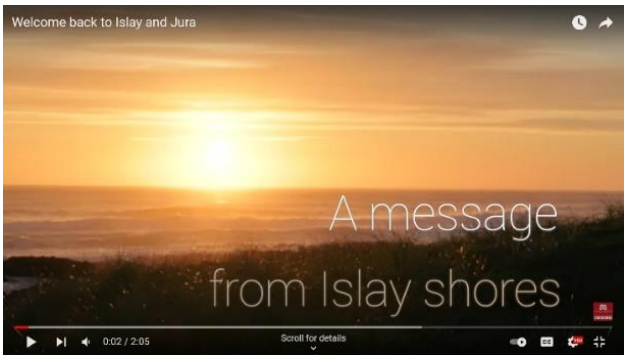
Some practical measures that were undertaken to safeguard residents and tourists included road signage in every village to remind people to maintain social distancing and wear masks, with hand sanitising stations placed around the island. The Resilience Group organised the delivery of ‘stay safe’ packs to homes around Islay.

The Islay Quilters, a local sewing group, who had been making PPE for the hospital and care home, made face masks for these packs. The Bruichladdich distillery and Diageo donated the alcohol to make hand sanitiser, which was produced by an Islay soap maker and distributed to every household on Islay and in the ‘stay safe’ packs. Other distilleries also provided sanitiser to top up the original supply and to enable businesses on Islay to have sanitiser stations. Approximately 500 ‘stay safe’ packs were delivered to homes in Islay, which included guidance on staying safe as the island reopened (see figure 1.12 below).

Figure 1.12: Stay safe packs delivered to homes around Islay (photo courtesy of Islay's Resilience Group)

A network of safe houses was established in case tourists became unwell with COVID-19 during their stay in Islay. To promote and encourage safe travel to Islay, a promotional video was released on social media (see figure 1.13 below).[30]

Figure 1.13: Still image from Islay's promotional video



To help residents readjust to life after lockdown, a buddy system was set up. Some people had not visited shops or public spaces for many months and were not used to the COVID-19 measures that had been put in place, such as mask wearing, one-way systems and social distancing. The Resilience Group also started a drop-in session in the spring of 2021, creating a safe space for people to meet and talk.

"The drops in really helpful in getting people out and overcoming their pandemic fears."

[30] The YouTube website includes a promotional video made to encourage safe travel to Islay, available here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmL3mTLGaW0

Challenges

One of the challenges of responding to the pandemic on the island was maintaining confidentiality. It was important that the difficult circumstances arising for residents reaching out to the volunteer network were handled sensitively and with respect for privacy. For the organisers, trust was a necessary pre-requisite.

"Islay's resilience is built on trust; trusting people to the delivery and with intimate confidential information that wouldn't be spread around. A response that was for the community, by the community."

Throughout the pandemic, communication and consultation were also at the core of Islay's pandemic response to respond to challenges. During the early stages, the groups established open channels of communication so that information could flow in both directions; from the groups to residents in terms of the latest information on COVID-19 cases and guidance; and from residents to the groups in terms of the communities' experiences and challenges. The volunteers and coordinators provided a vital conduit for knowledge sharing across the island.

It was recognised that some residents were not digitally connected and so some information might not be reaching them. In August 2020, the Resilience Group created a newsletter, which included the latest information specific to Islay. Around 400 copies were distributed to households, mostly to the elderly, on a monthly basis. By the end of 2021, around 300 copies were still being distributed and the last newsletter was due for distribution in February 2022. As well as keeping residents informed, it also helped reduce social isolation and loneliness, especially among those living in less well-connected parts of the island.

"People looked forward to it and it meant that coordinators could knock on the door and check in at least once a month."

As the island entered its recovery phase, there were divergent views on how Islay should reopen to tourists, which presented a challenge to organisers. Community consultation was an important way of understanding the range of views on Islay and helped chart a path for reopening to tourists in a safe way that was respectful to residents and supportive of local business. The community was consulted in a range of ways, such as through a survey and through the Islay Covid Recovery Group.

Funding

Islay's immediate response was unfunded, relying largely on the time and efforts of the organising groups and network of volunteers. Over the course of the pandemic, the island received financial support from various funding streams.

Substantial financial support was given by the island's local businesses and estates. The Ardbeg distillery, for example, funded the hot meals initiative organised by the Resilience Group. A 'Go Fund Me' page[31] was also set up for the many friends of Islay to give financial support.

Funding was obtained by community organisations, including South Islay Development, Islay and Jura Community Enterprises and Islay Development Initiative, who worked together to develop the Islay Covid Fund. South Islay Development's furloughed staff also volunteered their time to manage expenses, so that volunteers could claim mileage.

From the Islay Covid Fund, an application scheme was also set up as part of the recovery effort, whereby small organisations could apply for up to £2,000 in funding to help them re-open safely. The road signage around the island and newsletters were also made possible through the Covid Fund.

What next?

Once the Islay Covid Recovery Group was established, the Emergency Planning Group resumed its normal running. Other than reconvening in early December 2021 to discuss a newly emerging variant (Omicron), the group returned to 'business as usual'. The Local Resilience Partnership is also meeting less frequently but can be convened if the need arises.

The Recovery Group has continued to meet monthly and support the community, although not to the same scale as was seen during 2020 and 2021.

At the time of writing in January 2022, although initiatives such as the newsletter and drop-in sessions have continued and will continue to as long as they are wanted by residents, the Resilience Group plans to disband in March 2022. However, the community spirit that emerged in response to the pandemic is something that the organisers want to build on going forward. The group has applied for funding and is planning a consultation to understand what the community's needs are and to develop a community led initiative that lives beyond the pandemic.

"We want to harness this energy and this community spirit now before it all disappears. We want it to be community led. We will come up with a strategic plan to take this forward and feedback from people in the community is really positive. It feels like this is really needed, but it needs to be bottom up, not top down."

Reflections

When reflecting on Islay's pandemic response, the quick and coordinated mobilisation of the Resilience Group was highlighted as a particular success. The collaboration between

[31] 'Go Fund Me' is a crowdfunding platform that allows people to raise money for different events or causes.

the various groups, such as the Emergency Planning Group and the Resilience Group, enabled such effective coordination.

"The resilience group in particular grew from nothing to a large and complicated operation in a very short space of time and the amount of volunteers they were co-ordinating at its busiest was extraordinary."

As there was no major outbreak on Islay, it is difficult for those involved in Islay's pandemic response to know the full extent to which they would be prepared for future emergencies. However, the existence of the Emergency Planning Group was, and will continue to be, an effective vehicle for bringing people together who can prepare and respond.

"Had we had a major outbreak there would have been lessons learned from that but the fact that we didn't, we were as prepared as we could be and will continue to meet and discuss and put additional preparedness in place as needed. We are as prepared as we can be for any future emergency."

What community resilience means to the Emergency Planning Group

When asked what 'community resilience' means to them, one organiser of Islay's pandemic response emphasised planning:

"Having a plan A, having a plan B, and making sure that you've got the resources to put that plan into effect. It means that you've got a community that can look after themselves, that can make decisions, that have ownership over what happens to them, it's not done to them. Once a community is resilient, anything that comes up, no matter how awful it is, they can manage in a community led way."

Advice to others

Based on their experiences, those involved in Islay's pandemic response from the Emergency Planning Group and Resilience Group and shared their advice on how other island or rural communities in Scotland could become more resilient when faced with challenges like the pandemic, or other emergencies, in the future. The key elements were speed, being community-led and coordinated by those in a position of trust:

"Act quickly. We were starting to meet within the first week or two of the pandemic. And try and get as many people around the table as possible. It can be really challenging getting people meeting, but that's not something we experienced because of all the groundwork we were doing pre-pandemic." (Emergency Planning Group)

"Make sure its community led, that you have somebody to drive it. You need a focal point, a person or organisation, to home in on, so that those have trusted responsibility to deliver." (Resilience Group)

Sanday Development Trust

Introduction

Sanday is one of the larger inhabited islands off the coast of mainland Orkney. The island is 16 miles long and has a population of approximately 500. There are two settlements that host most of the island's amenities: Kettletoft, which has two hotels, and Lady Village, which has two shops and a heritage centre. The island can be reached by ferry and by air from Kirkwall, on mainland Orkney.

Who was involved

Sanday Development Trust has been in existence since 2004 and its objectives are to: "create an economically prosperous, sustainable community that is connected to the wider world, but to remain a safe, unspoilt environment where people are proud to live, able to work, to bring up and educate their children, to fulfil their own hopes and ambitions, and to grow old gracefully, enjoying the quality of life that is second to none."

When COVID-19 hit, the Trust focused its activities on providing a package of support for people on the island impacted by the pandemic. It was supported with funding from the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund, administered by HIE.

The Trust is one of three community organisations on Sanday. The others are Sanday Community Association, which provides recreation and leisure facilities and organises activities for island residents, and Sanday Community Council. In delivering its package of support, the Development Trust worked closely with both these organisations as well as with the wider, informal network of groups, clubs, businesses and individuals on the island.

"The Trust had more access to funding and facilities than the other groups. But we were one part of a much bigger picture."

Alongside the activities of the Trust, Sanday Community Council also formed a community resilience group in response to the pandemic. This was one of a number of community resilience groups established across the Orkney islands, formed around existing community council structures. Through regular meetings, these groups assisted Orkney Islands Council to identify local issues and ensure appropriate support (from the council, NHS Orkney and other agencies) was provided where needed. The Sanday Community Resilience Group included representatives from the Development Trust, as well as the local surgery and service providers.

Why the project started

Sanday Development Trust's project was initiated in direct response to the pandemic, with the overall aim of helping people on the island that were most in need of support. The Trust felt that supporting those in need was fundamental to their role and was simply what the community would have expected from them.

"It is what people would have expected from a Development Trust. If we hadn't [provided this support] we would have questioned our purpose. It gave us the opportunity to prove our worth and to jump into action."

The nature of living and working on a small island meant that the financial impacts of COVID-19 were being acutely felt. Several people on the island carried out manual jobs, and often had multiple jobs at the same time - for example, someone might work part time at the ferry terminal, part time as a courier, and part time in the airport. Many of these jobs were directly impacted by the pandemic, meaning that several people on the island lost their main, if not all, sources of income.

The Trust therefore initiated its project to help those that were in financial need, including those that had lost their income as a result of COVID-19 (these people could identify themselves as being in this position and then come forward). They initially did this through by providing a food support scheme, though the project later developed to include other aspects, as outlined below.

What the project involved

Food support

The project started as a food support scheme, allowing people to claim £10 per week per family member towards their shopping (at either of the two shops on the island). This was targeted at those that had lost income as a result of COVID-19, as well as those in financial need that were aged over 70, had been notified by the NHS as being 'vulnerable', or had young children. For the first ten weeks this scheme was funded directly by the Trust, as they were not yet clear what external funding might be available, nor how long the support would be needed. In the first ten weeks, it helped over 50 people (around 10% of the island).

External funding then became available through the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund. There was flexibility in how the funding could be used, meaning the Trust could decide how best to use it to meet the needs of islanders. They used some of the funding to continue the food support scheme, allowing this to continue for a further six weeks.

Home fuel grant

Funding was allocated towards a home fuel grant, involving a one-off payment of £50 towards home heating costs. The grant was paid directly to the fuel supplier and was available to the same groups as the food scheme.

Emergency equipment

During lockdown, it would have been difficult for tradespeople to travel to the island, for example to repair household equipment. The Trust therefore purchased a new washing machine and fridge freezer, which were available to use at the community centre. This meant that if someone's washing machine or fridge broke down, they could use these facilities in the meantime (see image in figure 1.14 below).

Figure 1.14: Clip from the Sanday Trust Times advertising the washing machine and fridge freezer at the community centre

Source: Sanday Trust Times, at www.sandaydt.org

"No Home Is Alone"

The 'No Home is Alone' initiative involved a group of volunteers, working with the Trust, phoning around every household to make sure people were okay and ask if they needed any support. This was partly to make sure people knew what support was available, but also so that they felt connected and not isolated. Part of the Trust's (and volunteers') role was to encourage people to take up support that was available. When making these calls, they found that some people in the community were initially reluctant to take up support, feeling that others would be more in need than they were (even though they had specific needs, were elderly, or were shielding).

“Often people who are in need don’t like to take it because they feel that others are in greater need. So part of our role was showing people that this was their time, that they were worthy of the support, and that it was okay to accept it.”

Technology and communication

Supporting communication and connectivity was part of the No Home is Alone initiative. Funding enabled the Trust to buy technology they could provide (on loan) to help people stay connected (see image in figure 1.15 below). This included radios, smart speakers, phones, tablets and mobile hotspots, which members of the Trust would help install. They also organised events such as a weekly online Zoom bingo, as a way to keep the community connected and interacting with each other.

Figure 1.15: Clip from the Sanday Trust Times advertising the technology loan and support scheme

Source: Sanday Trust Times, at www.sandaydt.org

They felt these online forms of communication were vital in helping to maintain the social interaction and sense of community that are such important aspects of life on the island. When an easing of restrictions allowed, they therefore opened the Bubble Café, as a space for people to start meeting again in person.

“What holds a community together is social interaction. And when that all stopped, you are literally cutting the connections that make a place a community. So we had to find ways of helping people to interact with each without being physically together.”

Other aspects

The Trust also used the funding to purchase hand sanitiser, produced locally by the Orkney Distillery in Kirkwall. Bottles of hand sanitiser were delivered to every household on the island, and free refills were provided to key workers and other individuals that needed it. They also offered to pay the fuel expenses for people that had volunteered to help deliver food or supplies to others on the island, so that these volunteers were not

out of pocket. However, nobody took up this offer, as they were happy to do this without being reimbursed.

What next?

Most of the initiatives outlined above have now come to an end, as they were mainly focused on supporting islanders during the earlier stages of the pandemic when lockdown measures were at their most restrictive. However, the Trust still has technology equipment that they make available, to help keep people connected, and offers use of the emergency washing machine and fridge.

The Trust also continues to provide a range of types of support for the community, including ongoing initiatives specifically related to COVID-19 (for example, it offers free Lateral Flow Tests and help on how to use them). It continues to communicate with islanders through its newsletter (the Trust Times), signposting to resources, events and other support.

The other community organisations on the island (the Community Association and the Community Council) are also ongoing.

Reflections

Overall, the Trust considered the project a success. It largely managed to achieve what it set out to do, and did not experience any significant challenges along the way.

Success factors

The existing community networks on the islands were seen as a key reason why the project worked as well as it did. This included the formal network of community organisations that already existed prior to the pandemic (the Development Trust, Community Council and Community Association), that were able to mobilise quickly and reach out to people that were most in need. It also included the more informal networks on the island – the local shops that provided food, the postal workers who helped with deliveries, the over 50s club that provided meals on wheels, and the island residents who looked out for and/or checked in on their neighbours. This community network was described as being proactive and resourceful, with an in-built sense of resilience that comes from living on a small island.

“The islands are more resilient, capable or resourceful than the mainland. Where you have a bigger population, most people sit back and wait for things to happen, because there are services like the council, the police, the NHS…On the islands it works the other way around, with the sense that ‘we will do this ourselves, because who else will?’”

The fact that the existing network was there meant that the Trust did not have to reach out to ask for volunteers to help – people came forward, and they tapped into that existing network.

"In this community people realise that what happens to someone else today could easily happen to them tomorrow. So people genuinely care and look out for each other."

Regular communication across the islands, through fortnightly meetings between the Community Development Officers, was also considered very helpful to the success of the project. These meetings, which were initiated by HIE, helped them to share ideas and tips on dealing with particular issues, and generally support each other. They also willingly shared that information with mainland Orkney.

The external funding from the Scottish Government was another key factor in the success of the project, helping the Trust to sustain its food support scheme and roll out the other elements of the project. The Trust also received "invaluable" guidance from HIE when applying for funding.

Lessons learned

One of the key lessons from the project was the importance of community. As already noted, the island has a strong sense of community which meant that people checked on and looked out for each other. Close connections and communication with people across the island also made it easier for the Trust to know who might be in need of support.

"I realised that sense of community does mean something, and it does work. If it didn't, then we would have really struggled…I am grateful that during a pandemic I was on an island that was able to get on with things and not have to rely on someone else coming in and doing it for us."

Another lesson was the importance of providing people with a means of connecting with each other. On an island where people rely so much on social interaction, it was important to replicate that as much as possible. They managed to do this, to an extent, using technology.

Though not a major concern, the Trust acknowledged that being in a small community means being somewhat reliant on certain active individuals to lead and get involved in initiatives. What happens when those people leave or pass away? However, they had also seen new people coming to live on the island who had come forward to get involved in community activities, which was an encouraging sign.

What community resilience means to the Trust

Reflecting on what 'community resilience' means to them, the Trust stressed that this is a characteristic that is inherent in small islands. As noted above, they felt that resilience

was linked with a strong sense of community and a desire to get things done, rather than waiting for someone else to take action.

“Resilient is something that island communities have always been. We have that sense of getting on with it, doing things for ourselves. Even if people on the islands are not your friends or you don’t know them very well, you are still connected to them. So that sense of community means you come together and get through it.”

Advice to others

In terms of advice for other communities, the importance of communication was emphasised. Communication among members of the community helped to ensure that the people that needed support received it, and communication between representatives of the islands helped to learn lessons and built a broader network of support.

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