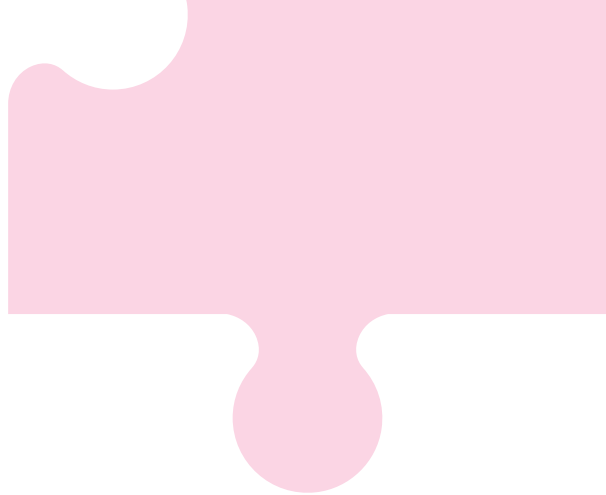




Built-in Resilience:

Community Landowners' Responses to the Covid-19 Crisis

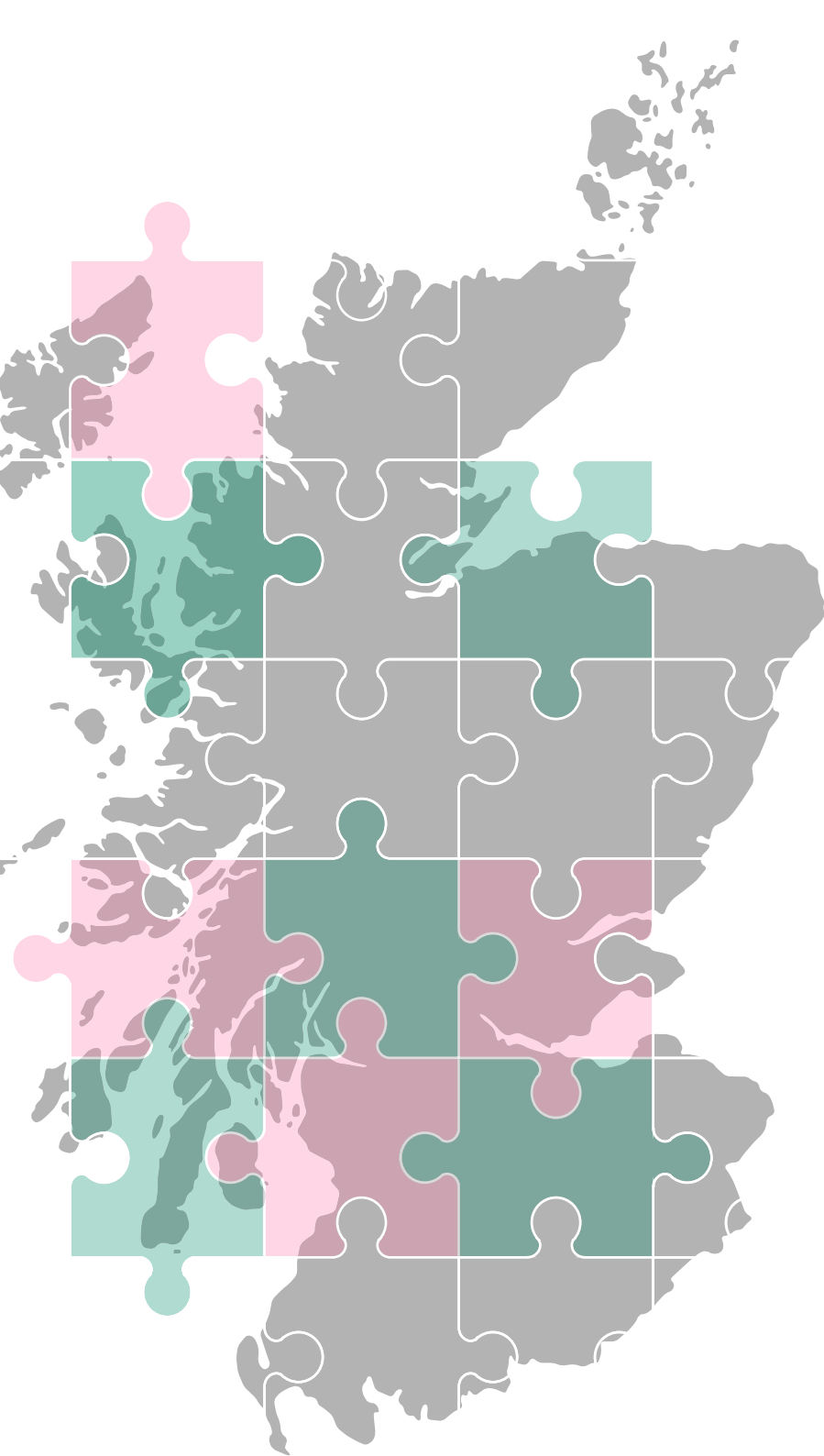


**Written by David Ross, journalist and author,
on behalf of Community Land Scotland and
the Community Woodlands Association.**



Community
Woodlands
Association

COMMUNITY*
LAND SCOTLAND



Foreword

I became Chair of Community Land Scotland just as we were all starting to realise and understand the huge changes that COVID would bring to all of our lives. I was part of the very early discussions in my own community, and through my roles on Gigha and Eigg, those communities too, in working out how we could help each other navigate and survive through these unprecedented times. I was and remain impressed by the responsive, can do attitude and goodwill shown by neighbours in these communities and how working together has helped make these difficult times more bearable. This has been the experience of many communities across Scotland who have come together to help find local solutions to local needs. What we do in this Report is highlight how community landowners were specifically able to respond quickly and effectively due to their community reach and credibility, as well as having an existing infrastructure in place.

David's report tells this story, focussing on several different community landowners who responded in a variety of ways to local need. It highlights the deep connections into communities that democratic community ownership demands. Having the organisational infrastructure and resources already in place, meant that community landowners were able to respond quickly, effectively and, most importantly, appropriately to what their individual communities needed. These organisations have confidence in their own ability to deliver, as well as their communities having confidence in them that they will act.

What their response to this crisis has shown, is that the investment that has been made into community landownership, by Government and by the communities themselves, has paid unforeseen dividends. These communities now have the local infrastructure in place to respond to this and future problems. During this crisis, community landownership has proved itself to be a model that delivers real added value to how our society can function.

Chair of Community Land Scotland , Ailsa Raeburn.



Over the last few decades, hundreds of community organisations across Scotland have acquired assets - woodlands, land, buildings - to help them address the needs of their communities, whether that's for affordable housing, accessible recreation, or local shops and services.

Owning and managing assets enables groups to deliver their objectives and improve the lives of their communities, and in addition the experience of doing so builds community confidence and capacity, and empowers community organisations to tackle new issues.

The coronavirus epidemic has been a challenge nobody wanted, but the wide ranging and effective responses of community bodies illustrated here demonstrates the value of community-owned land and assets in developing community resilience and underlines the importance of continued support for the expansion and development of the sector.

Jon Hollingdale, CEO, Community Woodlands Association

“

“Small communities know where the fragile and break points are, they know how to garner support and put things in place for those in immediate or potential need. Eigg is no different in that. But the skills and knowledge that Eigg has developed in stewarding the island have been invaluable. In the first days and weeks, Eigg’s community moved quickly and effectively to put things in place.

Two months in, Eigg is beginning to plan for the future. Everything around the progress of COVID19 is still unclear and likely to change, but islanders are used to working with uncertainty.”

Lucy Conway, Isle of Eigg
Heritage Trust

At time of crisis our natural instinct is to come together. One particular cruelty of coronavirus was that obeying that instinct was the last thing we should do.

Unlike wartime, we had had to stay apart in order to limit the spread of infection. Family conversations were conducted across fences or through windows. Young children felt abandoned by grandparents who were no longer there to give them a hug. Elderly neighbours and those with health conditions, disappeared from sight. Visitors to rural areas defying government direction, were not welcome. Life in communities across the land was changed utterly, but the challenge was the same for all - how to help protect each other when we couldn’t get close.

The gauntlet had to be picked up at a local level. The Scottish Government was at pains to deliver the public health message, the do’s and don’ts of fighting infection. There was a clarity to the lockdown instruction, but it could never provide answers to so many questions of how exactly we were supposed to survive while staying at home.

Community bodies across the land came up with plans that would literally save lives, giving the lie to the common assumption that the word ‘community’ indicates something amateur or lacking fleetness of foot. These bodies’ roots went deep into local life. None more so than those which already owned local land, buildings or other assets. This report is an attempt to highlight and celebrate the importance of these efforts.

Many of these community owners had come into existence, specifically to protect the interests of their community, to save services or address depopulation, frequently in the face of failing private ownership.

Where people have been confident and determined enough to take such control, there is a collective self-esteem and sense of responsibility which leads them to be first on the ground in a crisis such as the pandemic. To a large extent this was about harnessing the natural human concern for neighbours and addressing their needs at a time of danger. But it has served to underline the value of the community ownership model in the life of Scotland.



“

“During the initial pandemic response, many of us were scrambling to get community groups off the ground from scratch to help in our towns and cities. In places like Eigg, that community structure is already there to a greater extent - obviously a pandemic is a new situation for all of us, but they have done their own community planning for so long their processes and structures are well developed. Their resilience planning and documentation that they were feeding back to us in the early stages of the pandemic was what you'd might hope to get from a world-class NGO. These small communities are seriously impressive.”

Cllr Ben Thompson, Highland Council

It should not surprise anyone who knows of its roots. The modern community land movement was launched in 1992 when 100 crofters in Assynt learnt the North Lochinver Estate, where their people had lived and worked for generations, was to be sold in seven different lots. The prospect of multiple ownership deeply concerned local residents, the more so when they realised their presence on the 21,000 acres, had been all but airbrushed from the marketing material. The crofters campaigned hard and bought their land, with support from agencies and ordinary people across Scotland and beyond.

Some of the leaders in Assynt had earlier watched when the people of Eigg had made initially unsuccessful attempts to buy their island, after years of the highly erratic stewardship by a private owner. The islanders' cause became the more pressing when it became clear that a new private owner was using the island as a pawn in a game of international land speculation which ended in financial collapse. The community along with its partners the Scottish Wildlife Trust and the Highland Council, finally took control in 1997.

These episodes were arguably the first-time Highland people had taken direct action to change the hand history had dealt them, since the land raids of the early 20th century culminating at Balmartin in North Uist in 1952.

Hundreds of communities the length and breadth of Scotland followed in the footsteps of Eigg and Knoydart, as they tried to secure a more certain future for residents by taking control of local assets, particularly land – 429 different community bodies according to the most recent government figures. Stemming depopulation was often the primary objective. But the community ownership model spread into urban areas as well. Whether in urban or rural Scotland, it was pursued to offer people, particularly the young, greater economic opportunity in the future.



“

“Communities all over Scotland have been acquiring land and property assets for many years now, most with help from the Scottish Land Fund. Ownership is not an end in itself but part of a process of increasing resilience and putting communities in a stronger position to respond to both opportunities and challenges. This is no better illustrated than the quick response of community landowners to providing a range of vital services to local people in response to COVID-19.”

John Watt, Chair of the Scottish Land Fund Committee

Local support had to be demonstrated through the ballot box, for community purchases to proceed under the land reform legislation. This democratic legitimacy of community ownership bodies, whose membership has to be open to all, has helped build a reservoir of local trust in those leading the exercise. This was crucial these past few months as the pandemic engulfed Scotland.

If these community owners could buy and run an estate, a ferry or a woodland; if they could build a hydro scheme and new houses, or erect wind turbines; if they could secure income streams of tens, sometimes hundreds of thousands of pounds a year; they could be relied on to make sure Mrs MacDonald's prescription was delivered and the shopping for the Cameron family was left at their front door.

These community owners provided an anchor for local residents as the tide of infection flooded.

The Scottish Government and its predecessor the Scottish Executive, had initially supported the growth of community ownership as a step towards achieving a more balanced pattern of land ownership. But the Covid-19 public health emergency has proved that the model also creates a new front line in local resilience. Something that ministers should recognise as they chart a course towards economic recovery.

The growth of community ownership in the last two decades has been largely financed by the Scottish Land Fund (SLF) which was established in 2000, as part of Holyrood's land reform agenda. It was initially funded by the UK Lottery's New Opportunities Fund. But in July 2006 that Land Fund came to an end. Financial support for land purchases thereafter came from a wider big lottery fund, Growing Community Assets.

But in 2007 the SNP Scottish Government came to power with a manifesto commitment to establish a new Scottish Land Fund, which it was later to honour.

“

“When modern Scottish land reform got moving in the 1990s, it was never just about the economics or the agriculture. It was always first and foremost about people, about community, and rebuilding a rich and resilient human ecology. The coronavirus crisis has shown that at its best. Community land trusts have had the legitimacy and the infrastructure to put resilience quickly into action.”

Alastair McIntosh, writer and academic

There has been some criticism of the cost to the public purse. But in his study of what had been achieved (“From the Low Tide of the Sea to the Highest Mountain Tops”), the respected Highland historian Professor James Hunter argued it had been money well spent.

He wrote that the £30m total from public and lottery sources which helped take the first half-a-million acres of land into community control over two decades was equivalent to the bill for only 600 yards of Edinburgh’s tramlines. It amounted to less than 7% of the cost of the five-mile M74 completion stretch of motorway in Glasgow and matched the subsidy farmers and landowners receive in Britain every three or four days.

Expenditure on community ownership in the eight years since Professor Hunter wrote his book, has remained modest in comparison with other publicly funded investment. But the coronavirus has revealed its true human value is greater than originally thought. And that has never been more obvious than in the last two and half months, as communities looked after their own.

Whether in the Outer Isles, Southern Scotland or the urban areas of the Central Belt, the challenges were basically the same – how to ensure those most at risk from infection could survive without leaving their homes; how to get their food and medicines to them; how to maintain a semblance of community life while minimising the chance of the virus getting a grip locally.

The number of people who volunteered to help in every community was extraordinary. It showed the seriousness of the threat was understood and was testimony to the strength of community relations.



Galson

As the coronavirus swept across Europe, remote crofting townships had to prepare for the worst, just like everywhere else. Good communications were at the forefront of the thinking of Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn (The Galson Estate Trust).

The community landowners of the 56,000-acre Galson Estate in the north of Lewis, knew they had to have a way of communicating directly and quickly to the 1900 residents, many of them elderly, in 800 households across 22 villages. There was a need to inform them what support was on offer, and to encourage them to help each other. They took their lead from the top, as Lisa Maclean UOG's Commercial Development Manager, explained:

"We were really fortunate as I think we managed to mobilise the community pretty promptly. I had heard the First Minister on the radio on my way into work and she mentioned 'WhatsApp Trees', basically groups for folk who live on the same street etc. I thought it might be good to do this for every village on the Estate - taking account of those who don't have WhatsApp by recording a phone number.

The idea behind this was to account for every single household in a bid to foster a way of allowing people to help each other - providing mutual support as opposed to setting up a helpline and then having to match volunteers or becoming so swamped we couldn't help anyone properly."

She said that this approach seemed to work well, and the Trust had almost universal coverage of all residents on the Estate fairly quickly. Volunteers followed up and made contact with those who had been more difficult to contact.

"Whilst this has been a mammoth task, the Trust has seen neighbours offering to do shopping, take in bins and even just saying a friendly, 'morning, how are you all today?' Gestures that might seem trivial under normal circumstances, can provide a lifeline to members of the community self-isolating."

“

“We’re fortunate to live in a community with a strong community ethos and the Urras team were able to move quickly to create a support network that was there for the community where it was most needed.

As a community landlord with a great staff team, an independent income stream from our wind turbines and thirteen years working across the community we were able to bring reassurance and confidence at a time of great uncertainty.”

Agnes Rennie, Urras Oighreachd
Ghabhsainn

The UOG also redeployed a member of its staff to become a delivery driver. The local car hire company was offering vans free of charge, so the Trust quickly got insurance in place and decided to offer to make collections from the local crofting co-operative, Lewis Crofters in Stornoway. This was important as the co-operative could no longer offer deliveries as they needed all their staff to operate a drive-through service for residents calling in telephone orders.

The Trust’s delivery service has been running three days a week with three drop-off areas (large car parks at community buildings) across the Estate. Prescriptions were also delivered from two local surgeries, five days per week. On some days there could be more than 100.

Lisa said that volunteer drivers were working on a rota basis, delivering to all 22 villages on the Estate on specified days. “This made the logistics of delivering large volumes of prescriptions a lot easier. The Trust has also put volunteer support into one local shop to enable it to stay open as it was providing essential items, such as fuel and gas.”

But there were other needs which had to be satisfied to ease the pain of lockdown. The “Stay at Home” message was clear. So, to help keep people connected and entertained at home, the Trust began offering Gaelic and English Bookbug sessions. This was on OUG’s newly created YouTube channel, three times per week. A Gentle Movement class session was also offered, and this will run every Thursday.

Lisa said, “The Trust has been talking about setting up a YouTube channel for a while, this situation has spurred us on. In the end it turned out to be very easy to do and free. We just had to overcome our fear of presenting!”

All this was done at one of the busiest times in a crofter’s year – lambing.

Elsewhere on the island, the Carloway Estate Trust adopted a different approach. It owns 11,500 acres, with over 200 crofts spread across the nine townships.

The Trust assumed the role of an enabler giving vital back office support to other local community groups that were providing frontline support to residents across the estate area. This has been possible due to their established local presence, their relationship with external agencies and the trust within the community they serve.

It has been supporting four groups undertaking a range of functions -

- Helplines that match required services to volunteers.
- Prescription delivery services. Collecting and delivering shopping including supermarkets, Post Office and Lewis Crofters where required. This is being carried out by volunteers.
- “How are you?” telephone calls.
- Setting up small food / necessities banks in three places across the estate area.

This allowed residents to pick up essentials if they run out. One a “pop-up shop” and one operating on an ‘honesty-shop’ basis. An emergency fund to provide help in emergency situations – for example money, non-repayable, to purchase food.

Sally Reynolds, the Carloway Trust’s Development Officer said

“There are strong existing bonds and organisations in local communities. These organisations know their local communities and what is needed. Residents know who to ask for what and who to speak to. Our organisations are embedded in the community and have trusted networks which we can call on. In other words, we can just get on with it and are galvanised for action immediately. We are also able to relay information quickly and effectively. The future though is uncertain, not only in terms of the financial and economic impact of the crisis but how social isolation and the knock-on effect of this on mental health will affect everyone. However, this crisis has enabled people to realise how resilient their community is as well as giving a renewed appreciation of land, place and pace!”

Carloway Estate Trust



Cromarty



On the other side of the old county of Ross-shire from Lewis is Cromarty, where community groups were also swinging into action.

The online Cromarty Live newsletter was an important source of local information. Eighty volunteers, more than 10% of the population stepped forward to help. They provided a back-up in the local shop where staff had been working 15-hour days. A grocery delivery service was organised, as was one for daily newspapers to keep the footfall, and therefore risk of infection in the shop to a minimum.

As elsewhere local residents were suffering a loss of income as employers shut down. The Cromarty Care Project (a local charity which provides home care and works to improve health and wellbeing and reduce social isolation), approached the Karen Napier Fund, part of Foundation Scotland, for support. A grant of £5,000 was confirmed, which was later matched by Cromarty's Church of Scotland. Another £5,000 was received from Karen Napier and was again matched by the Church of Scotland. The money has been used for vouchers to purchase food and other necessities at the shop.

Representatives from the Cromarty and District Community Council, Cromarty Care and the Cromarty Community Development Trust (CCDT) have been involved in the effort.

The CCDT was established in 2017 by the community council to take ownership of the oldest building in Cromarty, the 17th century Townlands Barn, which had originally been a farmhouse. Since then the trust's main focus has been trying to raise money to save the Cromarty/Nigg ferry service by restoring the decaying slipways. It is also in the process of taking over Highland Council-owned woodland to establish a site for motorhomes.

Nigel Shapcott is a trustee of Cromarty Care and a CCDT director. He was co-opted on to the community council to help co-ordinate the local pandemic effort. He said

"We have all been living through a horrible time, but the way the community responded has been so positive. Well over 10% of the Cromarty's population came forward to volunteer. There were people of all ages, many of them school pupils. Their enthusiasm has been so encouraging. The challenge for communities in the future, is to find ways to continue to channel that energy and commitment, once more normal times return."

Skye



Meanwhile back on the west in Skye, Community Woodlands Association Member, the Broadford and Strath Community Company, which was established in 2003 to improve the natural and built local environment, has made great efforts to ensure residents have enough to eat.

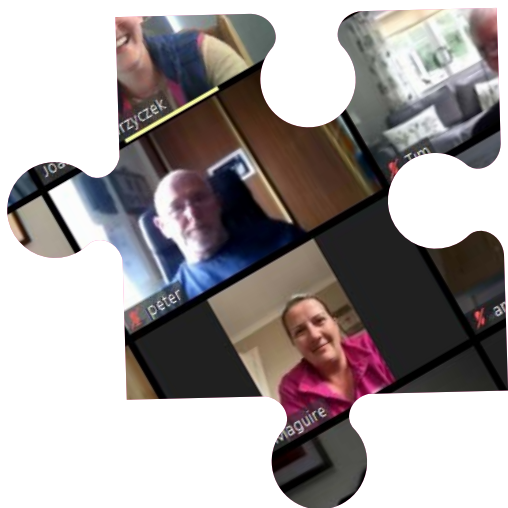
It started a food share with produce from the Co-op which would otherwise have gone to waste. Volunteers have also supplemented this with fresh produce from the community allotment which is within the company's woodland site. They have also provided 90 hot meals per week to families and elderly people in need.

Having discovered the amount of food that has been going to waste and the level of need / demand from local food banks pre-lockdown, the community company is investing in a community fridge and freezer so that the support and initiatives will continue into the future.

Food security

It is a problem that many community landowners have found themselves having to address during the health crisis. South Cowal Community Enterprises (SCCE) in Argyll acquired The Lido shop and Post Office in the village of Innellan to the south of Dunoon in December. The shop provides essential groceries, newspapers and ferry tickets to a rural population of around 1600 scattered over 16 miles of coastline.

SCCE carried out extensive community engagement in the run up to the shop buyout and there was widespread support for the idea of stocking more local produce. The plan was to integrate local produce into the shop over a period of a year but in the week up to the lockdown the supply chain started to break down and only around a quarter of the food ordered from the wholesaler was being delivered.



South Cowal

At the same time, SCCE was working with a local community support group to deliver essential groceries to people who were shielding or self-isolating and the shop's footfall had risen by 50% as many people didn't want to take the risk of travelling to Dunoon to buy food.

Lindsay Chalmers, Vice-Chair of SCCE said:

"This situation created a bit of an emergency as we had people dependent on us for food but no essentials such as bread, milk and pasta. Our Development Officer, who is funded through the Scottish Land Fund, completely reconfigured our supply chain in a week by working with local suppliers and farmers. The suppliers really pulled out the stops to get essential food to us."

"These changes have been very popular and the arrival of new produce such as milk and toffee sauce from the Wee Isle Dairy on Gigha, gave the community something to talk about when there wasn't much positive news. We will keep all of these local suppliers and are also planning to set up a community garden to improve food security."

Lindsay also said the SCCE certainly hadn't planned for a pandemic in year one of its business plan.

"But the fact that The Lido was the only public building to be open during the crisis and that we have such deep roots in the community thanks to the buyout process, meant that we have found ourselves, along with the Community Council, taking a pivotal role in the community response. This included setting up a telephone support line and tablet-lending library and we are now working on setting up an online activities programme."

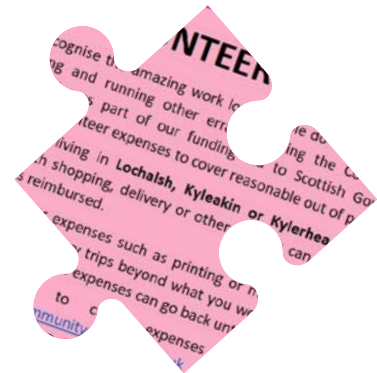


“

“Two days before lockdown I was out cycling and called in at a local community-owned shop to pick up some chocolate. The place was a hive of activity, with people drawing up lists of vulnerable residents and volunteer delivery drivers, making up food parcels and discussing what else needed to be done. There was a quiet sense of confidence and competence to it all despite the looming crisis. Community ownership and community empowerment are closely interlinked. One leads to the other and vice versa, creating a virtuous spiral. There are many people across Scotland who now owe their lives to the fact that community ownership is now so prevalent in our country.”

Andrew Thin, Chair of the
Scottish Land Commission

Why community response to the virus was so effective in the Highlands and Islands.



Recent research published by Ailsa Higgins, of Glasgow University examined why social enterprises are markedly overrepresented in remote-rural areas such as the Highlands and Islands, which account for only 6% of Scotland's population, but are home to 21% of all such bodies.

The Scottish Government defines social enterprises as “businesses with a social or environmental purpose, and whose profits are re-invested into fulfilling their mission. They empower communities, tackle social problems, and create jobs - particularly for people who are at a disadvantage in the standard jobs market.”

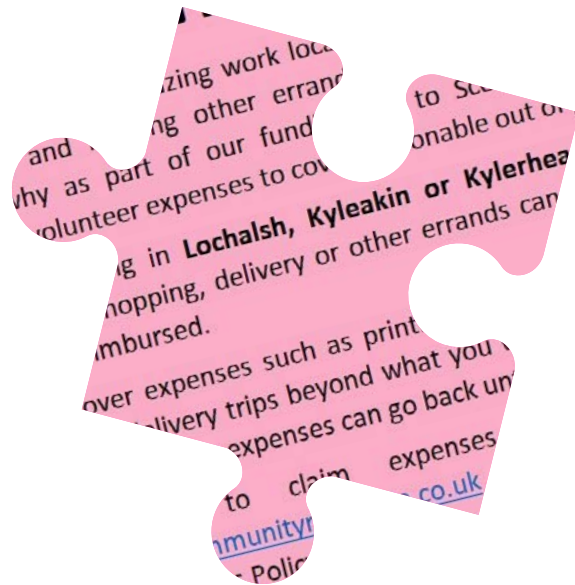
Amongst its findings of the research were that 75% of respondents agreed that social enterprise density in the H&I had arisen out of necessity as the best model for retaining essential services.

100% of respondents agreed that ‘islander mentality’ is the real driver, a willingness to problem solve and take responsibility for local issues.

83% were in agreement that rural social enterprises often existed for service provision to make communities more sustainable and are driven by need or opportunity.

These responses will not astonish anyone who has observed the changing psychology of those who live and work in the Highlands and Islands in the last 30 years. It is an area which has been defined and disfigured by population loss over the past two and half centuries.

The history of “The Highland Clearances” is still deeply rooted, and not just in the crofting communities of the north and west, but across Scotland and beyond. It is one which helped shape public attitudes to the early community buyouts from Eigg onwards. It was clear in their messages that many people thought that in making their donations to support one of the buyouts, they were doing their wee bit to start reversing the Clearances. Or at very least make comment on that sad period.



As it was, population loss continued throughout much of the 20th century. An air of decay hung over many communities. It was to lift with the arrival of the buyouts, which released hitherto unseen excitement, energy and enterprise. Businesses were started, houses built, income generated. They all started to reverse the chronic depopulation which had blighted them for so long, still the single most important criterion of Highland success.

The message became clear – if your community has a problem, do something about it at local level. Don't wait for assistance and support to be passed down by the authorities. Go and seek it. The figures from Glasgow University on social enterprises show the message got through. So does the Highland response to the pandemic.

Such local bodies have also displayed their willingness to work together, and with others when faced with a threat. There has been a prime example amongst Argyll's islands these last weeks:

Mull and Iona

Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT) is the largest community-led organisation covering the two islands, but with the arrival of the pandemic, close working relations were established with South West Mull and Iona Development (SWMID), Tobermory Harbour Association (THA) and the North West Mull Community Woodland Company (NWMCWC). In addition to managing a woodland and a hydro scheme the last mentioned is the new community owner of the island of Ulva, courtesy of support from the Scottish Land Fund.

With MICT as the lead applicant, the group was awarded £50,000 by Highlands and Islands Enterprise from the Scottish Government's Supporting Communities Fund.

The money got vital initiatives off the ground. Ulva Ferry Community Transport, operated by MICT since 2014, could not any carry passengers in its community bus or car, because of the infection risk. But it has been delivering groceries and prescriptions.





Islanders have been manufacturing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including scrubs, face visors and facemasks in case local NHS / care workers needed them a time when supplies on the mainland were stretched.

In the south west of the island SWMID and Iona Community Council have been trying to ensure residents are supported.

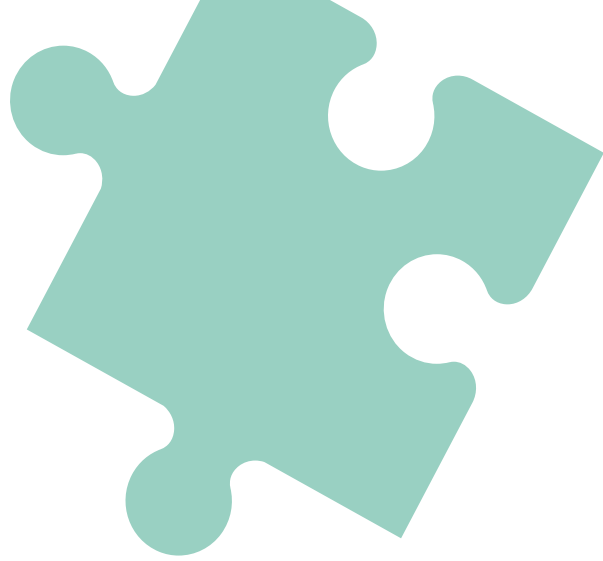
An added complication has been poor broadband speeds, with high school pupils back home increasing internet use significantly. But there are many people who are not online. SWMID initiated a phone call service with volunteers calling vulnerable, elderly, self-isolating members of the community regularly.

The service uses a traffic light system (red, amber, green) depending on the level of support required. There is a special team in place for residents with more complex needs and includes volunteers with professional experience in health, well-being and financial matters.

The crisis has seen community organisations and local businesses work together. Whitetail Gin and Tobermory Distillery have been providing free supplies of hand sanitiser. SWMID delivered a batch to the 350 households. The deliveries took quite a long time as many wanted a good chat, not having seen anyone for days, sometimes weeks.

Local shops have also been going out of their way to support people including making deliveries and offering the option of leaving essential supplies in easily accessible places for people in need to anonymously collect.

To the north of the island Tobermory Harbour Association (THA) operates the port as a social enterprise. Closing the harbour to non-essential vessels, cruise and pleasure craft, has impacted on THA's ability to generate income, with predictions of an 88% drop this financial year.



Peebles



The fillip to the wider community of the island by remaining 'open' to essential vessels was considered much greater. This has meant that fishing boats, the CalMac ferry to Kilchoan, the Tobermory RNLI lifeboat, commercial craft, and boats required in an emergency and for medivacs could all still use the harbour.

THA also operates the local public toilets, showers and laundry. During lockdown, these facilities have been closed to the public, with only the laundry facility remaining open, as an essential service. But the showers and toilets have been made available to key workers.

Mull Community Council has been organising weekly zoom meetings so that individual organisations can update each other on what they are doing and where there is potential for further collaboration.

Tourism drives the economy of both Mull and Iona. Many local businesses have written off the coming summer season which means they will have gone from October 2019 to March 2021 depending on their own reserves or support from local / central government.

Thoughts are now turning to how best to rebuild when lockdown is fully lifted.

As in Mull and Iona, school pupils throughout Scotland have been trying to continue their learning at home with or without the help of their one parents. But in one Borders town, the issue has been particularly pressing.

The South of Scotland is one of the fastest growing areas for community ownership and the town of Peebles in the Scottish Borders is one place that has embraced the opportunities that community ownership brings. In recent years, Peebles Community Trust (PCT) has purchased the 17-acre Eshiels woodland on the outskirts of the town and the former Ex-Serviceman's Club in the town centre. The building had been used by around 100 community groups, but the club had gone into administration potentially leaving them without space. Both of these purchases were part-funded through the Scottish Land Fund.



PCT has also used Community Right to Buy (CRtB) legislation to Register an Interest in a 5.5 acre former mill site in the town which they hope to use to develop affordable housing, residential accommodation for elderly people, protect existing allotments on the site and develop start-up business space.

The town has had a bumpy year after Peebles High School was hit by a serious fire at the end of November and its 1121 pupils had to be taught in at a variety of sites throughout the town and beyond. PCT was involved in helping some of the groups that use the school continue in the new School Brae Hub.

When the pandemic hit, Peebles was incredibly quick to respond, forming a Covid-19 Mutual Support Group a week before the lockdown, on the initiative of local retained firefighter Sophie Hamilton. This Support Group now has 300 volunteers and has been providing: 60 cooked meals a day, food parcels from the Food Bank which are being delivered by the local rugby club, a dog-walking service, the delivery of prescriptions and a telephone support service.

Peebles Community Trust (PCT) describes their role as ‘Helping the community help the community’.

Alex Wilson, PCT Coordinator and Administrator said “PCT has acted as the conduit for the £70,000 grant from Scottish Government’s Supporting Communities Fund. Without it, the Mutual Aid group would have been reliant on income from a crowdfunding page. We have also commissioned a local hotel to produce cooked and chilled ready meals. It

“The Trust set up an iZettle account that enables volunteer expenses to be paid electronically overcoming challenges that other groups were facing in distributing funds to individuals. The Trust also collaborated with local magazine Peebles Life to produce a 32-page Covid-19 special that outlines all of the services available to people in Peebles during the crisis.”

PCT is also looking ahead to the lockdown easing and has plans to use the extensive space in the School Brae Hub for socially distanced activities such as yoga.





Keep it local

The report by [Power to Change](#) is entitled “Local Heroes How to sustain community spirit beyond Covid-19.”

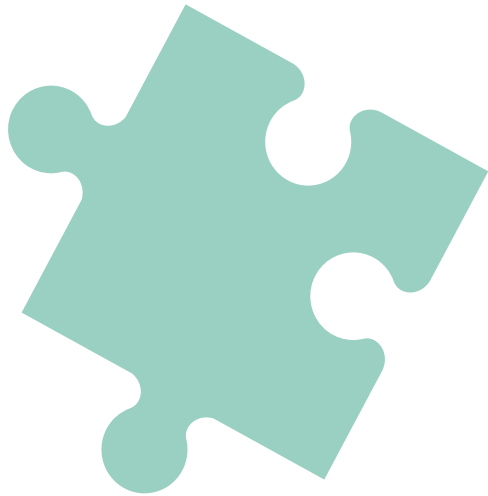
The report observes that the pandemic has shown that some needs can be met regardless of location. Fitness guru Joe Wicks, for example, had gained a global audience of over a million viewers with his morning PE sessions on YouTube. People had connected with friends and family across the world with an ease that would not have been possible even a decade ago.

But it also goes on to argue that the authorities cannot be allowed to forget all that was achieved on the ground -

“..what this crisis has also revealed is the critical value of the very local. Feeding those at risk of going hungry, ensuring that people who need help can get connected to the internet, making sure that those at risk of domestic violence are supported – these all require a very local response. And the response is effective because it is delivered by people who are also local, who know the area and it’s needs because it is their home too and are trusted because they are not providing a service so much as supporting the place where they live. This is the essence of community business and community organisations more widely. This highly responsive local action has been essential to dealing with the crisis, but it must be sustained if we are to effectively meet need in the longer term and build stronger local economies. To make this happen, budgets need to be devolved to community-level organisations along with the responsibility to meet local needs.”

It is a message that resonates across the land and is repeated by many north of the border.





Urban as well as Rural

Mention of community ownership commonly brings images of the Highlands and Islands to mind, which is understandable given the headline buyouts in places like Gigha, South Uist and Harris.

There has always been some community ownership in Scotland's towns and cities, but it was never seen as part of a wider land reform movement. That changed in 2016 when the Scottish Government rolled out the Scottish Land Fund and Community Right to Buy powers to Scotland's towns and cities.

As a result, around 100 urban bodies have been, or are working with Community Land Scotland to take local control of local assets such as redundant buildings, swimming baths, precious green spaces or patches of derelict land. Almost a quarter of applications to the Scottish Land Fund are now from such urban communities, some of them trying. They are all driven by the desire to create opportunities for local residents, particularly the young.

Govanhill baths



Many are in areas where high proportions of people speak English as a second language.

This raised another cruel element of coronavirus - the disproportionate number of deaths among black and ethnic minority (BAME) people, including doctors and other NHS and care workers.

It was something recognised in Glasgow by Govanhill Baths Community Trust, a community hub based in the heart of Govanhill, south of the Clyde, providing free health and wellbeing workshops and classes for the local community.

It has been using a £500 outreach grant from Community Land Scotland to help respond to the Covid-19 crisis, by running a Postal Stories engagement project – the aim of which is to engage with people without any internet access.



Kinning Park



The Trust's Learning and Outreach officer Katherine Midgley said many BAME residents had jobs on the frontline, cleaners for example in hospitals, and had been subject to a backlash and false accusations of spreading the virus. This had resulted in many residents feeling uncomfortable, unwelcome and extremely isolated in their own community. The Trust has been trying very hard to reach these residents to offer support and assistance where possible.

"The Trust and other local community organisations have been able to respond so quickly and effectively to the crisis as they are more able to adapt and to make decisions very quickly without getting bogged down in bureaucracy. It is also easier to collaborate when there isn't the strict hierarchy that can sometimes be found in some of the larger, statutory organisations and agencies".

A bit to the north west of Govanhill, lies the Kinning Park Complex, a multi-use community space whose operators have been organising local volunteers to fight the pandemic. They know all about fighting a cause.

The Complex is housed in an old red sandstone building, built around 1910 as the science block of Lambhill Street secondary school, not far from Rangers' Ibrox Stadium. When it closed as a school, it became a council-run community centre between 1979 and 1996. But it fell into disrepair and the local authority, which had been suffering expenditure cuts, decided to close it.

Local residents who used the centre, occupied the building for 55 days and nights and pressed their case for the centre to be kept open. Meetings were held, petitions signed, banners were painted for a march to the City Chambers.

After a lengthy standoff, a peppercorn rent was agreed and a local community group took over the running of the building, renting out space to other users. In 2019 the community-led membership body Kinning Park Complex bought the building.

“

“As projects like Midsteeple Quarter are demonstrating, community-led ownership and property development has been highly successful at generating genuinely local solutions in partnership with public and private sectors. Empowering communities to take an active role in the stewardship of local assets and green-housing local enterprise, has to be a significant part of Scotland’s COVID transition.”

Matt Baker, Midsteeple Quarter (which is buying High Street buildings in Dumfries)

It is used for a huge range of activities according to Martin Avila, Complex Director:

“ We have offices for the likes of community groups and charities. We have studios for artists. We have two big halls. One is used largely used for physical activity, everything from theatre and dance, including dance classes for kids, to martial arts. The other hall is used by the likes of campaigning groups and other local organisations for events. There is also a café.”

But the building was closed for renovation before the arrival of coronavirus in the city. So, Martin and his team have been co-ordinating the Complex’s response to coronavirus from their homes and organising deliveries from another community hall in the local area.

There are about 12,000 households within two miles of the Kinning Park Complex, all located in First Minister Nicola Sturgeon’s constituency. A key element in the Kinning Park strategy has been to try to put as many of these people in contact with each other as possible. This has meant that those in need of help, can be identified quickly. They then get extra support through check-in and catch-up phone calls, and if necessary, access to a mental health nurse.

The Home Office’s unit for processing applications from asylum is a few streets away from the Complex, and asylum seekers are initially housed locally. Their standard financial assistance amounts to less than £40 a week, so clearly need support.

The Complex has set up of an Organised Acts of Kindness programme that has seen them: register 100 volunteers from the local community; deliver flyers to every household with information on where to get help; offer a dog-walking service; gardening help; and art and English classes. Volunteers are currently delivering almost 500 nutritious meals per month, with grocery boxes providing another 4500 meal equivalents.



Martin Avila said, “We have also secured around £100,000 in funding for other community organisations that in turn are supporting another 500 households across the city.”

He believed there had been one positive side to the crisis:

“We’ve been able to engage with people in the neighbourhood in a way we never have done before. There are 20 plus years of history of the Kinning Park Complex, but the building isn’t known to everyone in the community – or it wasn’t. Across Glasgow we’ve seen many, many more people approaching their community organisations to say, ‘How can we help?’ The number volunteering has been amazing, at least a tenfold increase to normal times.

It has been a busy time for all here, but it has reaffirmed why we do what we do. The public health emergency apart, none of the challenges we have been facing are really new.

The food poverty, the fuel poverty, inequality, the hunger, the isolation, the poor health, all existed before because of 10 years of austerity. They have now been supercharged. What are we going to do when this immediate crisis finishes? Are we going to be expected to just abandon everybody? That’s not going to be possible for the staff or volunteers psychologically.

What has changed through the pandemic is that by getting closer to more people, community organisations can now identify the problems better. The way to tackle them is to get everybody in the community to participate and work with colleagues in the public sector. What has also changed due the pandemic is that there is less of a stigma to asking for help. More and more people from across society are having to ask. “





The Future





What the coronavirus emergency has clearly underlined, is that the community ownership model ensures a local resilience. Not only should that not be lost, it should be extended to new areas as an integral element in government thinking on how best to rebuild Scotland. The strength of communities who own their own assets – be they large estates like Galson, or inner-city centres like Kinning Park – have been tested and produced amazing results. Their innovative and risk appropriate responses to this crisis have been founded on their local strengths in engagement, trust and organisation. How can we build on this and ensure the progress made won't be lost?

Community Land Scotland has already made a [compelling case](#) to Ministers and MSPs for a bold 'Rural New Deal' embracing further land reform, as a driver of economic recovery and a means of building a greener future. Community landowners have already led the way in renewable energy generation and conservation.

The Scottish Land Fund should continue to operate but with a significantly increased budget, up to £20m a year. This would provide the investment necessary to ensure that there is new momentum to community acquisitions across Scotland, continuing Scotland's strong tradition of investing in its local communities to help them address the needs and opportunities of their own local areas.

A Land Value Tax and other fiscal measures should be considered, to reduce the inflated land values which only currently help ensure that so much land is owned by a private few.

A supplementary charge to the Land and Buildings Transactions Tax for private sales of large rural estates over a certain size, could help finance the Scottish Land Fund. The Fund in turn would support more community buyouts and provide ongoing support for those already purchased.



Community Land Scotland's Policy Director Calum MacLeod said:

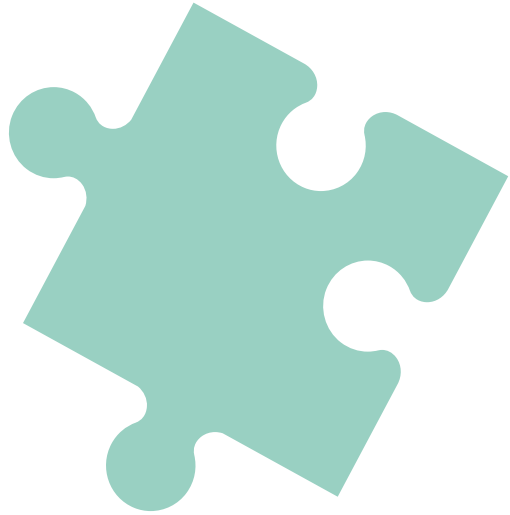
"Now is the time for bold thinking and the political will to make that happen. We need more community land and asset ownership because it's a proven model of enhancing the resilience of rural and urban communities. That's why we're calling for retention and expansion of the £10m Scottish Land Fund up to £20m annually to provide the necessary investment to ensure that scaling-up of community land ownership across Scotland."

He said that while the economic storm created by the coronavirus had to be addressed urgently, so too did the climate emergency which had not gone away.

"Community landowners have already led the way in renewable energy generation and conservation. The more community landowners there are, the greater their contribution to a Green economic recovery would be. This would be achieved by ensuring the sustainable management of land for carbon capture and renewables development - leading to payments for public goods to address the climate emergency - which are reinvested in our communities. Strengthening further those communities and giving them the tools to help address both local problems and global problems."

"We need a Rural New Deal, diversifying how land and other assets such as forests and marine resources are owned and used so as to deliver the climate change mitigation and adaptations, affordable housing, employment creation and growth that are essential to the sustainability of our rural places and to delivering wider public benefits."

Ministers must listen. Nobody should think that returning to the way things were before the pandemic, would be a goal worthy of all the effort, loss and sacrifice.



Credits:

Front cover image: Willie Urquhart

Design: tacit-tacit.co.uk



COMMUNITY*
LAND SCOTLAND



Community
Woodlands
Association

Supported by:



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
gov.scot

Community Land Scotland
www.communitylandscotland.org.uk
Email: info@communitylandscotland.org.uk
Telephone: 07884 314297

Community Woodlands Association
www.communitywoods.org
Email: jon@communitywoods.org
Telephone: 01309 674004

Community Land Scotland - Fearann Coimhearsnachd na h-Alba is a charity registered in Scotland SC041864, Company Number 385572 Registered office: c/o RA Clement, 5 Argyll Square, Oban PA34 4AZ

The Community Woodlands Association is a Company Limited by Guarantee registered in Scotland. Company No: 275097 Charity No: SC038374 Registered Office: Old Poltalloch, Kilmartin, Argyll PA31 8RQ.