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Pluralised responses to policing the Pandemic: Analysing the emergence of informal order maintenance strategies, the changing 'policing web', and the impacts of COVID-19 in rural communities.

A Report on Interim Findings

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## Executive Summary

Acknowledging the differential impacts of COVID-19 on communities, this project examines how the policing of rural communities has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. We assessed the changing demands made of the police and other key organisations, agencies and groups supporting order maintenance in rural communities and how they adapted their roles. Taking a case study approach, the project examined the similarities and differences between two rural communities and their experiences of policing and being policed through the first year of COVID-19. We also considered the short- and medium-term impact of changes to order maintenance in rural communities and explored the longer-term implications concerning trust and confidence in these communities.

We employed a qualitative methodology, comprising an analysis of social media, twenty-two individual semi-structured interviews with key strategic, tactical, and operational staff from statutory agencies such as Police Scotland, Local Authorities (including Council Officers and local Councillors), a National Park, Forestry and Land Scotland, and local voluntary groups. We also held focus groups with three Community Councils. The pseudonymised case-study areas encapsulate different 'rurals': 'Craignorth', represents remote-rural communities in the north of Scotland and 'Glen Roy' captures an accessible rural community in the central belt of Scotland.

Findings developed from thematic analysis of the data showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and magnified existing pre-pandemic problems, particularly around (a lack of) access to service provision. The centralisation of resources to 'hub' towns and cities has accentuated feelings that some rural communities have reduced services and feel increasingly neglected and peripheral in decision making around resourcing. As a result, in the early phases of the pandemic, some rural community organisations filled the gaps left by services that were either withdrawn or moved online. Being sensitive to the particularities of local rural contexts is an important part of understanding the overall response. Communities, other formal agencies (e.g., police, local authorities), and the third sector utilised and developed

extant structures, local knowledge, and networks of collective efficacy to organise support which addressed the needs of specific communities. Those communities with strong existing networks therefore tended to have clearer response channels than those with less formally structured organising networks.

Our findings also show that as the pandemic has progressed, the value placed on outdoor and rural areas has increased. People want to consume them more, which has affected the social and economic fabric of these areas and communities (e.g., housing has rapidly increased in value in many rural locations and local infrastructures are strained by increased tourist activity). Indeed, there are tensions between national and local decision making, and how to resource and support (re)imagined rural areas facing larger influxes of tourists and home buyers, especially with national decisions predicated on public health concerns and risks posed by COVID-19 having profound impacts on rural communities. While this might be accepted as we continue to progress through the pandemic-related crisis, consideration must be given about how to balance (competing) local and national policy and decision making, ensuring that rural communities are engaged and empowered in the process.

Police Scotland also appears to be successfully treading careful lines between the enforcement and discretionary policing of emergency legislation, where trust and confidence in the organisation is at stake. Communities were broadly supportive of the approaches taken in the pandemic reflecting the findings of the Independent Advisory Group's report to the Scottish Police Authority Board (2020, p. 8), which showed that there had been "increased levels of public support and approval of policing in Scotland". This may have been, as a Scottish Centre for Criminal Justice study argues (McVie, 2021, p. 47) attributable in part "to the high levels of discretion in police use of the new powers during the pandemic, with strong emphasis on informal means of encouraging people to comply with the Regulations and rare use of enforcement." However, this same report also found that enforcement using Fixed Penalty Notices had been "highest amongst those living in Scotland's poorest neighbourhoods" reflecting "an additional degree of inequality in the way the pandemic was experienced amongst certain groups of people who live in communities that are already typified by poorer health, economic, educational and environmental outcomes" (2021, p.48). It is interesting, therefore, to reflect on the impact of policing in different rural communities.

Our data also revealed some evidence in Craignorth of a disconnect between trust and confidence in the police in general and trust and confidence in policing throughout the pandemic (i.e., participants appeared to ‘frame’ policing in the pandemic as something distinct to policing in ‘normal’ times). This highlights the continued importance of addressing historical police-community challenges and raises further future-oriented questions about the longer-term impacts of trust and confidence in the police in the post-pandemic context.

We hope this report will inform practitioners as they continue to respond to ever-changing demands concerning the broader health agenda and order-maintenance as the pandemic unfolds. We also hope that in the longer-term the project will inform the wider policy-agendas in several key areas such as service provision models in remote-rural Scottish communities, particularly with regards policing and mental health, as well as public access to the countryside.

Whilst the study was undertaken in Scotland, our conclusions are relevant to the pluralised policing of rural communities further afield during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Summary of findings

### Finding 1

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated and magnified existing pre-pandemic challenges. The pandemic has accentuated the impact on rural communities of the move towards more centralised and 'abstract' health and police service provision, where many rural communities have reduced, less personal services and feel increasingly neglected and peripheral in resourcing decisions. Rural communities are concerned about this and it is undermining confidence more generally in the ability of both the National Health Service and Police Scotland to meet community expectations regarding level and quality of service.

### Finding 2

In the early phases of the pandemic gaps in local service provision were frequently left by some agencies and organisations who withdrew or moved online and were inaccessible to people during the early stages of the pandemic. Communities, other formal agencies and the third sector nimbly and innovatively adapted and enhanced extant structures, or developed new ones, to fill these gaps, utilising local knowledge, and networks of collective efficacy to organise specific, nuanced support for vulnerable people (particularly those who were shielding, isolated or in mental health crisis) which was, overall, sensitive to the peculiarities of local rural contexts. However, there were concerns around the appropriateness and sustainability of the police and voluntary sector continuing to fill the gap in NHS mental health service provision in Craignorth.

### Finding 3

Those communities and multi-agency groups with strong existing networks comprising people who had developed strong, trusting, open and frank interpersonal working relationships and who had authority to take quick decisions on behalf of their agency or organisation, tended to respond more nimbly and effectively than those with less formally structured organising networks.

#### Finding 4

The value placed on outdoor and rural areas has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, affecting the social and economic fabric of these areas and communities. There are tensions apparent between national and local decision making, and how to resource and support (re)imagined rural areas facing larger influxes of tourists, including an increase of people who are unfamiliar with the Countryside Access Code. As we continue to progress through the pandemic-related crisis and beyond, consideration must be given about how to balance (competing) local and national policy and decision making, ensuring that rural communities are engaged and empowered in the process.

#### Finding 5

While Police Scotland has on the whole successfully trodden a careful line between the enforcement and discretionary policing of emergency COVID-19 legislation, there is an ongoing need to address historical community challenges around relationships, structural tensions (centralisation) and service delivery (abstract policing). These are issues which appear to be affecting public trust and confidence in some rural communities.



## Key Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

That urgent consideration be given by the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and the NHS to addressing the reported gap and waiting lists in emergency mental health service provision within rural communities. Given that mental health issues in rural locations are often hidden and services remote to these communities, a focus on rural mental health provision is recommended.

### Recommendation 2

That key services, especially Police Scotland and NHS mental health services, review their footprint in rural communities, consider the impact of centralising and removing services (even if replaced with online provision) and consult with rural communities to explore key concerns.

### Recommendation 3

That consideration is given as to how the economic and social benefits arising from increased tourism to rural areas and the infrastructure required to support it, might be balanced against the needs of rural communities and how future decisions are developed in conversation with these communities. This might be achieved through the development of meaningful local place planning leading to the development of adequately funded local development plans.

### Recommendation 4

Whilst recognising the wider societal benefits to be realised through greater public use and awareness of the countryside, it is recommended that support be put in place to help facilitate access to the countryside in a responsible manner and to ease the (perceived) burden on rural communities. This could include employing more countryside rangers, improving infrastructure in popular tourist spots and re-invigorating public education programmes regarding the Countryside Access Code. This should be done with the support of local community groups who can identify and co-develop solutions to these perceived issues.

### Recommendation 5

A national ‘mapping’ exercise should be undertaken to understand how rural community structures vary in stature and structure across the country, ‘what works’ for different communities and help resource these more effectively. This should go beyond formalised community planning and council structures and seek to understand funding structures in place for different communities. Doing this will help build up a picture of ‘community partnership blackspots’ and create a resource for the police and other agencies to utilise in times of crisis. It will also help with the following recommendations.

### Recommendation 6

That the Scottish Government and Local Authorities build on the success of the nuanced, nimble local partnership responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the important role of the voluntary sector, and that these be incorporated into future Integrated Emergency Management and Civil Contingencies planning in a way which aligns national strategy with the individual needs of different rural communities.

### Recommendation 7

That local partnerships carefully consider their future membership so that the benefits of having key decision-makers who have developed strong, trusting, interpersonal working relationships during the crisis phase of the pandemic are not lost as agencies transition into the post-pandemic recovery phase.

### Recommendation 8

That Local Authorities may wish to consider adopting and learning from the formalised, pre-pandemic structures in Craignorth (Local Authority Ward Manager; Voluntary Coordination Group) which facilitated a rapid, effective, nuanced and co-ordinated response, particularly in the initial phases of the pandemic. This will help support future emergency planning. This requires national consultation with a variety of rural communities to look at ‘what worked’ nationally in response to the pandemic in rural locations. Our study highlights the importance of formalised, active rural community structures in aiding a successful response to COVID-19.

### Recommendation 9

That the Scottish government and Local Authorities may wish to consider whether the membership, remit and funding of existing Community Planning Partnerships is appropriate going forward for responding to crisis.

### Recommendation 10

In order that local community groups can quickly and easily secure funding to support nimble, effective and nuanced community responses to future civil emergencies, it is recommended that a Reserved Emergency Fund be established. This would be ring-fenced for local emergencies and with the work done with mapping community structures, local rural delivery mechanisms could be taken into consideration with where these funds are held.

### Recommendation 11

That training is offered to those volunteering and working in rural community partnerships to enhance their work, including how to implement recommendations 5-8 effectively. This will enhance the ability of local community planning and help support rural services to plan more effectively for future events. The funding structure of rural community partnerships should also be reviewed and enhanced if necessary.

### Recommendation 12

That a follow-up study is undertaken in summer of 2022 with the aim of undertaking a comparative analysis of data to be gathered in relation to 2021.

# 1. Introduction

## Background

The COVID-19 Pandemic is a global challenge, impacting on everyone in different ways. Yet the way that the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 have differentially manifested themselves in local communities is important to understand. As Governments around the world struggled to contain the virus, legislation restricting personal liberty was hastily enacted. In Scotland this involved the introduction of the Coronavirus (Scotland) Act (2020) and the Coronavirus (Scotland No.2) Act (2020), which gave police officers significant new powers of enforcement, with potentially long-term implications for police legitimacy and trust and confidence in the organisation. Realising the potential for conflict with otherwise law-abiding citizens, Police Scotland quickly adopted the UK Police Chiefs Council 4-Es strategy (to 'Engage' with the public face-to-face, to 'Educate' them with regards the emergency guidance and legislation, to 'Encourage' them to comply with them and finally, as a last resort, to 'Enforce' the legislation). This approach was intended to ensure, using soft power/discretion, that long-term, post-pandemic public trust and confidence in Scottish policing was not adversely affected by the introduction of the COVID-19 legislation. The Chief Constable also established the Independent Advisory Group (IAG) under the chairmanship of John Scott QC with a view to independently monitoring police use of their new powers and in particular monitoring the service's compliance with Human Rights legislation.

Furthermore, the third sector, local authorities and local communities have important roles in the way(s) that the pandemic is being managed at the local level. This project was concerned therefore, with exploring how the policing of rural communities was being impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic and what the likely long-term implications of these impacts might be on trust and confidence not only in Police Scotland, but also in other key agencies and organisations involved in the plural policing response. Limited evidence is available on public perceptions of policing in the radically new social context brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic.

At a time of unprecedented change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, it is important to consider how policing has impacted on communities in different ways. The COVID-19 pandemic has witnessed a step change in the way that policing is delivered across the UK, with public health messaging backed up by unprecedented laws giving the police power to enforce social distancing and the 'stay at home' message. At a time of great health uncertainty, there has been a distinct rural dimension to the policing response in the pandemic, with both policing and communities being required to respond to the crisis. As lockdowns have eased and tightened, rural areas have been the focus of particular attention as people have travelled to less densely populated areas in order to avoid contact with others but in so doing, have created challenges for officers in rural areas tasked with enforcing the lockdown. Arguably, the application of these police powers in rural areas is more visible and keenly felt as a result of the 'soft policing' rural communities pre-pandemic normally experience.

As Wooff (2015; 2017) has argued, rural communities are under-researched particularly in the criminology and policing literature. Yet, policing in these communities has often relied on a mix of careful negotiation of order and 'soft' policing, where the police frequently use their discretion and community policing tactics to maintain order. Firstly, this is because the police tend to use networks and discretion to deal with low level incivility (Wooff, 2015). Secondly, as a result of structural changes and digitalisation, the police in rural communities have become arguably more 'abstract' (Wooff, Forthcoming; Terpstra *et al.*, 2019). Thirdly, because rural imaginations frequently paint these places as idylls with little or no crime resulting, policing priorities tend to focus on urban centres where crime rates are higher (Neal and Walters, 2008).

As our understanding of the COVID-19 pandemic develops, evidence is emerging that its impact, both socially and geographically, is uneven (see for example Peters, 2020). Media focus has generally been on urban locations and has linked the severity of impacts of the pandemic more acutely with deprivation and ethnicity. Rural locations have however, been largely neglected from this analysis, yet have faced geographical and social challenges, including social and digital isolation and being remote from

services and support. Of relevance is the movement of people from urban to rural locations for the purposes of leisure and exercise (BBC, 2020a).

Public health concerns have led many communities to respond independently of governmental organisations. These have varied with some distinctive organised community responses appearing to address absences or perceived gaps in order maintenance and health service provision. At the earlier stages of the pandemic, examples included signalling to 'outsiders' that they weren't welcome, through the erection of unsanctioned roadblocks in lay-bys. These responses have been both physical and virtual in nature where social networks have facilitated both community organising and external messaging. Equally, other non-policing organisations have been drawn into order maintenance and surveillance functions through for example Ranger Services and Enforcement Officers being called in to ticket poorly parked cars. Moreover, fears of public health have led to activities, previously considered as mundane and every day, to be the focus of importance where local notions of justice and fairness have amplified rural surveillance and reporting of anti-social behaviour. This raises further questions about the new and complex amalgam of different agencies involved in the order maintenance of these communities, including Rangers Services, Special Constables and the community.

At first glance, such concerns appear to converge around similar focal points associated with crime; threats to social order are constructed as coming from other places beyond those communities and need to be managed (Girling *et al.*, 2000). This raises interesting questions about the collective efficacy of ruralities, how they respond to fill perceived gaps in community safety where police capacity for enforcement is limited, and what this means of trust and confidence in policing.

The focus on rural communities through the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore, raises questions about access to justice, the plural policing responses within these communities and the extent to which the police support the emergence of emergency order maintenance and enhance these community led initiatives.

## 2. Methodology

The following sections will briefly describe the research aims and design, the case study areas, our data collection methods, and analytic approach.

### Research Aim & Outcomes

This project had one central aim; to explore how the policing of rural communities has been impacted by the COVID-19 epidemic and what the likely long-term implications of these impacts are on trust and confidence in police/policing in these communities. This can be broken down into several specific research questions:

**RQ1** How has public demand for policing in rural areas changed in response to COVID-19? How have strategic priorities and operational procedures of the police in rural communities adapted and what are the implications of any such changes for public trust and confidence in the police?

**RQ2** What impact(s) has COVID-19 had on the networks of other organisations, agencies or community groups which play a role in the policing of rural communities? How have these different communities organised, adapted, and innovated to maintain social order and access justice?

**RQ3** What are the similarities and differences between two rural communities' experiences of COVID-19 and concomitant policing adaptations and challenges?

**RQ4** What are the predicted short- and medium-term impacts of these changes to order maintenance in rural communities (access to countryside, vigilantism, volunteering in communities, online groups etc).

### Research design

The project employed a case study design (Yin, 2018), taking as its sample two different rural communities in Scotland. This design facilitated comparison across cases thereby establishing a clear picture of similarities and differences in experiences across varied rural contexts. It also facilitated examination of also how the specificity

of local context figured into rural communities' experience of policing during the pandemic, the challenges that it presented, and ultimately how communities adapted and overcame them. The project adopted a multiple data generation method to develop as detailed a picture as possible while also complying with Edinburgh Napier University Ethics guidelines and research integrity code of practice.

### Case Study Area 1: Glen Roy

Glen Roy is a rural town situated in the central belt of Scotland within about a one-hour drive of Glasgow and Edinburgh which between them encapsulates about 1.5 million people. It is located within one of Scotland's two National Parks and comprises several areas of outstanding natural beauty including mountains, glens and lochs. The National Park Board comprises some members who are elected by the community and some who are appointed by Scottish Ministers following nomination by the Local Authorities. The Board agree the overall direction of the Park Authority headed by a Chief Executive and a number of committees concerned amongst other things with planning and access. Amongst its operational staff are full-time salaried Park Rangers who, supported by volunteer Rangers undertake patrols in the Park's area. The Park Authority, Glen Roy and the surrounding areas have experienced significant policing issues arising from the large movement of visitors, particularly during the early summer of 2020 as the first national lockdown began to be lifted and international travel was either discouraged or restricted. The town of Glen Roy comprises about 3,700 residents many of whom are employed in tourism and the public service sector. It has limited access by public transport (bus), with most visitors travelling to the area by private transport. A major landowner in the area is Forestry and Land Scotland, a Scottish Government quango previously known as the Forestry Commission.

Glen Roy comprises several bodies within its governance structures, namely a UK (Westminster) Government Member of Parliament, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs), a National Park with elected Board members, and a single Council with local representation being via elected Community Councillors and elected Councillors. There is a small local police station comprising both response and community officers with leadership and management being provided remotely by a senior management team.



Demographically, the area is mixed with a wide range of people, housing and activities. For example, the number of households comprising older people with no resident children is higher than the Scottish average; there is a mix of professional and non-professional occupations and a significant number of residents are in part-time employment or are self-employed, with many working within tourism, hospitality and public services. Population rates are growing (6% from 2001 to 2011) whilst there has been a 14% increase in the number of households during the same period. Approximately 70% of homes are privately owned, with about 25% being council or social housing and 10% being private or other rented.

On the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020 (Scottish Government, 2020) the picture is somewhat mixed, with some areas of the town in the 5% least deprived in Scotland and some in the top 5%. Serviced accommodation has declined whilst self-catering has increased which has had an adverse impact on employment for people engaged in local hospitality.

Given its positionality as a semi-rural community, its location within a National Park, its proximity to Glasgow and Edinburgh and the known challenges it had been facing due to increased visitor numbers, Glen Roy was selected as a suitable comparative case study with regards case study two, a remote rural area in the north of Scotland.

### Case Study Area 2: Craignorth

Craignorth is a remote-rural area located in the northeast of mainland Scotland, covering an area of about 700 square miles encapsulating two small rural towns of about 7,300 and 9,000 residents respectively, together with several smaller communities which collectively comprise a population of about 24,000. Economically fishing and tourism predominate, with a popular scenic driving trail passing through.

It is one of eight districts within a wider single Local Authority and comprises several Council Wards each with elected Ward Councillors. The Council, unlike Glen Roy, has a ward Manager covering the area who provides a local, single point of contact between communities and the Council. There are several community councils covering Craignorth – two were selected for this study, one from each from two main towns, each of which is served by a police station staffed by both response and

community officers. Leadership and management are provided by a senior leadership team based remotely.

It is located about one hundred miles from the administrative hub for most of the key public service agencies— police, health, local authority etc - which is about a two-hour drive away, with Edinburgh and Glasgow being about a five-hour drive away. There are several rail links and stations in the area including the two main towns.

Demographically it is mixed, but with greater levels of deprivation on the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020 than Glen Roy. Police Scotland are aware that public confidence in policing varies between the two areas, being higher in Glen Roy than in Craignorth.

Given the above and its positionality as a remote-rural community with fewer boundary challenges arising from the Scottish Government's COVID-19-tiered travel restrictions between different local authority areas than Glen Roy, Craignorth was selected as the second case study area.

### The Fieldwork: Sampling, data collection and analysis

Fieldwork was divided into work packages, with the findings of work package one feeding into work package two. Work package one partly addressed the first two research questions about the changing nature of demand and response. The intention had been to analyse computerised records of contacts by the public with Police Scotland. However, due to resource and data protection challenges this approach had to be developed, with the focus being on the gathering and analysis of online data from social media-based community groups and forums. Whilst the use of social media in this way is an emerging research technique and provides an insight into 'the policed' within communities, there are limitations to its use in this way. One significant limitation is lack of certainty as to who is creating the content and its reliability (McCormick, 2017). Whilst cognisance of this limitation was given when analysing data obtained from this source, it did prove helpful in shaping the interview and focus group schedules.

Work Package two explored these findings in more detail. It employed online group and individual interviews (n=38) with participants identified through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. They included police officers (senior managers, middle managers and community constables), National Park employees, Local Authority employees (senior managers and team supervisors), community volunteers, elected Community representatives (Community Councillors and local Councillors), Mountain Rescuers, and Forestry and Land Scotland employees. The interviews and focus groups explored their experiences of maintaining social order, promoting social safety and wellbeing, and sensibilities towards the police and policing during the pandemic across the case study locations.

The interviews and focus groups took place during the second period of national lockdown (March and April 2021) with its statutory restrictions on movement and social interaction, thereby preventing data gathering in-person in the field. This necessitated the use of 'virtual' face-to-face individual interviews and focus groups comprising between six and eight participants using Microsoft Teams. Interviews and focus groups ranged from 45 minutes to 90 minutes. All interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed. Interview and focus group data were imported onto NVivo QDAS package for coding and subsequent thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Themes presented in this report were developed from this rich dataset.

Triangulating the findings of these two work packages (Denizen, 1970) allowed us to build up a detailed picture of pluralised policing responses to the pandemic in rural communities. That said, our inability to physically visit the communities and our reliance on online media means that the picture presented here is inevitably a partial one, and fails to capture important voices (e.g., tourists and visitors, residents without internet access, local business owners). The impact of this is an inevitable outcome of COVID-19 and the ramifications need to be considered.

## 3. Findings

The following section outlines and describes the primary findings of our analysis. The section has been organized by theme to enable a more effective discussion of qualitative similarities and differences between the case study locations. It will explore the most distinctive thematic commonalities in experiences identified in both case study areas amongst organisational staff and community representatives.

Firstly, it will explore those findings which relate to the interplay between a significant increase in visitor numbers and community concerns about public health (mental and physical), anti-social behaviour, the Countryside Access Code, infrastructure deficits, changing COVID restrictions levels and social norms.

Secondly, it will explore those findings which relate to the pluralised responses to these challenges, highlighting the role of national, regional and local community bodies and the impact on police community relationships. While there are commonalities to both areas, it is important to acknowledge the qualitatively different ways they manifest in the data which is a function of the local social contexts giving rise to them. Their unique characteristics highlight the ways in which accounting for local community contexts in decision making and policy at a national level would allow for more effective responses in periods of crisis (while acknowledging the speed of the onset of COVID-19).

### 3.1 Changing demand on the case study communities and the bodies supporting them.

#### Lock-down fatigue, 'staycationing' and an early summer (2020)

Whilst compliance with COVID restrictions within the study communities was generally regarded as being quite high, a period of exceptionally fine weather around Easter 2020 led to significant volumes of visitors breaching the COVID travel restrictions (at the time people were unable to leave their local authority). Many visitors travelled illegally to both Glen Roy and Craignorth particularly to well-known beauty spots, mountain walks and Lochside car parks for weekends and overnight stays, despite

much of the service infrastructure (public toilets, shops etc) remaining closed. They came in large numbers as this quotation from a local police officer shows:

*“Easter onwards was a major problem because a lot of people did not comply with the rules and they came, and they came in great numbers”* [Police Officer]

Participants frequently described this increased volume as ‘unprecedented’, ‘swamped’, ‘off-the-scale’ with police participants in particular reporting that they were ‘smashed’ when describing the high level of demand being placed upon them. As this officer explained:

*“The demand kind of went through the roof”* [Police Officer]

However, the immediate concern for the study communities concerned perceived infection risks posed by ‘incomers’.

#### Public Health Concerns: Perceptions of the dangers of ‘incomers’

There was a clear perception in the two case studies that a large risk to the public health of the community was from visitors bringing COVID-19 from higher-infection rate, urban areas. These quotations firstly from a community councillor in Craignorth and secondly from a community councillor in Glen Roy exemplify this:

*“I think just basically a lot of people weren’t happy because we were quite low on casualties to COVID up here, we didn’t really want anybody coming into our territory, we didn’t want the bug”* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

*“The other things involved a problem that we had with people who were coming into the area and concerns that they were bringing this virus with them. They were coming from Europe, from England and from outside areas.”* [Community Councillor, Glen Roy]

This concern was highest during the early stages of the pandemic immediately before the first national lockdown in March 2020 and as that lockdown began to ease in the

early summer of 2020. Our data showed a real concern amongst participants that their communities would be overwhelmed with infections as a function of the increased amount of people passing through those spaces. This perception of rural locations as 'safe havens' under threat from those outside, echo the 'insider-outsider dichotomy' explored at length in the rural literature. It was set against a background of a widely held perception that levels of compliance with the COVID-19 legislation in their own communities was high, a sense of services which had been strained pre-pandemic being strained even further and a sense of protecting local vulnerable people. Some communities responded with low-level vigilantism. For example, the use of hay bales to block access, signage to discourage visitors from visiting, posting photographs on social media of visitors queuing outside local take-away outlets and criticising the proprietors, and in some instances, verbally challenging visitors.

We found concerns not only about the potential impact on the health of community members but also on people working on the front line, such as police officers and shop workers. For example, our data revealed high levels of COVID anxiety amongst police officer participants, particularly those in operational response roles who ran the risk of being infected with the COVID-19 virus particularly when having to engage up close with members of the public. Police officers expressed concerns not only for their own health and safety but also for their families, especially if they were more vulnerable to serious illness. Some officers recounted incidents in which those they had arrested had spat at them and claimed to have COVID-19 and of infection outbreaks within their workplace. Line managers reported agonising about the health, safety and welfare of their officers, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic when there were challenges around the provision of PPE and many working practices required to be changed. This quotation from a police manager exemplifies this:

*"I can hear and physically see officers petrified for their health because you had individuals saying, 'I have COVID', making efforts to display signs, whether it was coughing or whatever. But they were having to lay hands on people and all that sort of thing. So, these unknowns started to become a real fear for officers."* [Police Manager, Cragnorth]

These findings reflect those from Carmargo's (2021) study involving police officers from eleven English forces. For example, she also found there to be fears and anxieties amongst officers, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic when the nature of the virus was largely unknown. However, the data from our study demonstrated that unlike their English counterparts, Police Scotland managers were deeply concerned about their staff.

Reflecting on this stage of the pandemic, when less was known about transmission of the virus and PPE was not widely available, there was a sense of 'battening down the hatches' as much as possible in rural communities, and indeed amongst partner agencies, something which was not possible for frontline police officers, as this police officer explained:

*"We never really thought, oh well that's us going to shut ourselves away for the next few months, it was just let's roll up our sleeves and get on with it. They've had to think a lot more about what they were doing but in general there's still been the kind of motivation and a keenness to get involved in things and resolve it."* [Police Officer]

These concerns about the potential risks to public health arising from the influx of visitors, particularly during the early summer of 2020, conflicted with those within the communities who relied on tourism for their livelihoods, as this comment from a local police officer in Glen Roy shows:

*"Half of the community wanted the tourists for their income and the other half of the community wanted the police to get rid of the tourists because they saw the tourists as super spreaders of the virus."* [Police Officer]

While in the past there may have been tensions between the economic side of tourism and the impact of it on the quality-of-life for those in these communities, this third dimension during the pandemic, namely concern about the health impacts of COVID-19 being brought and spread in rural communities, led to debates about how much to 'open up' the community, and as we shall now come onto, concerns about the impact of some visitors on the environment and social norms.

## Concerns about the impact of increased visitor numbers and 'new' visitors

The incursion of the increased number of tourists and a disrespecting of the environment and local social values by some, had a negative impact on local sense of social order. For example, this Craignorth community councillor expressed concern that the volume of visitors was causing delicate local environments:

*"I think the key problem is that the area was woefully underprepared for the sheer numbers that came. There are camp sites and you can tolerate a certain amount of wild camping, the environment can absorb it but a lot of these beaches and the tracks down to them and very delicate environments, it doesn't take much to damage them."*

[Community Councillor, Craignorth]

Some participants were of the view that many of the visitors who were posing a risk to the environment were 'new' to the countryside and were unaware of how to look after themselves or the rural spaces they found themselves in, as these quotations firstly from a Glen Roy community Councillor and secondly from a Visitor Services manager exemplify:

*"The Loch XXXX side problem, a lot of it was down to city people, if I could use that phrase, coming to the countryside for the first time and not really understanding how fragile it is. And I don't think many of them left the mess behind them intentionally and not caring. They just didn't seem to know."* [Community Councillor, Glen Roy]

*"And I think post July when we started having the visitors, we got a different type of tourist. The big problem that's happened in the past if you like pre-pandemic, was that with the advent of cheap holidays to Spain etc, etc and all the rest of it, they all went there. And it felt like we met the risky part of the population...we had a very concentrated type of person and actually quite a lot of these people had never really visited our sites before. That risky group of people created a huge wave of problems for us because they didn't know how to be respectful about the countryside. It's their first time, they were treating it like an urban*



*area, like there's a street cleaner going to come and pick up everything after them. Why isn't there a litter bin on top of the hill, sort of thing."*

[Visitor Services Manager]

The Visitor Services Manager quoted above suggested that pre-pandemic, early-season visitors would be largely from outwith the UK, with the school holiday period seeing a predominance of UK visitors who were familiar with the countryside and how to respect it. However, in the summer of 2020 there was a large influx of visitors who appeared to be less familiar with the rural locations, with the Countryside Access Code and with the community norms in these areas. For example, the same Visitor Services Manager recounted numerous encounters with visitors who did not have appropriate clothing or footwear for hillwalking and who questioned why there weren't toilets on the summit of a local three-thousand-foot-high mountain:

*"This has become a bit of a trope but there is a degree of truth in it. You've got a higher degree of a different type of people coming. So, the way it's generally put across to me in a very crude manner that I've heard people say is 'well they're basically coming here instead of buggering off to Ibiza'"* [Visitor Services Manager]

Some participants recognised that visitors from urban areas were benefiting from being able to access the countryside, and others saw the positives in new groups of people accessing the countryside for the first time, presenting an opportunity to educate them as to the benefits of the Scottish countryside. However, others expressed the view that some of those coming to the countryside did not appear to understand the norms of these spaces, as this participant explained:

*"I think I would agree that people don't have a full knowledge of the [Countryside Outdoor Access] Code....people see the first line of the Code that says you can camp. They don't always read the rest. So, people think they've got an understanding of the Code but really they're not looking at the nuances."* [Visitor Services Manager]

There was also a view that the Code was too general, as the same participant explained:

*“The Code is just a little bit too general...with dogs it says don’t go into a field with dogs or keep the dog under control. But you’ve got a lot of fields and open areas have just got open cliffs, not enclosed fields or the hillsides. So, people sometimes read what they want to read into the Code.”* [Visitor Services Manager]

While it appears that the Countryside Access Code could be better understood and clarified, there is also a general point here about a perception that a significant minority of post-first lockdown tourists caused problems for Glen Roy and Craignorth communities. While this isn’t necessarily a COVID-19 specific issue, the added threat of importation of the virus, increase in visitor numbers and reduction in services in these locations magnified these concerns at this time.

The sense here, then, is that there was an increase in visitors who seemed less familiar with the norms of rural communities and associated outdoor pursuits. This combined with a reduction in availability of the usual tourist infrastructure (e.g., toilets, bins, shops and cafes) created a challenge not only for those organisations supporting countryside access but also for the local communities. This was layered with the ongoing health concerns around COVID-19 being brought into these rural communities by visitors, with an interesting symbolism associated with ‘dirty camping’ and littering being synonymous with bringing in COVID-19.

### Increased social disorder in rural communities

Whilst classic order maintenance concerns (Newburn, 2017) and travelling disorder (Girling *et al.*, 2000) are not new, our data found that they were amplified and exacerbated by the pandemic (in quantity and intensity). They were exacerbated to a degree which was unprecedented and impacted on local spaces and people in a way which threatened not only the sense of local order but also the quality of life of residents. For example, amongst Glen Roy’s participants, the volume and behaviour of some visitors was a theme which dominated the discourse, particularly concerning the early summer of 2020 when the first national lockdown began to ease. Participants frequently highlighted concerns around lack of sensitivity to local social values and countryside ‘etiquette’ (beyond the formal guidance with the Access Code). They highlighted anti-social behaviour such as illegal and inconsiderate parking at popular

beauty spots which hampered emergency vehicle access, dirty camping including irresponsible toileting, littering (BBC, 2020b), and invasion of private spaces (for example, using resident's front gardens as toilets). Residents expressed a feeling of being swamped by tourists and expressed both fear and frustration at a lack of sensitivity by some towards local social values which challenged their sense of local order and quality of life, as these quotations demonstrate:

*"... bad parking was going up what is a road to two farms. Emergency vehicles couldn't pass...the fire engine couldn't get past and the ambulance couldn't get back down."* [Community Councillor, Glen Roy]

As a result of the lack of parking spaces near a Glen Roy beauty spot, some visitors parked in nearby residential streets, which as this community councillor explained resulted in:

*"People jumping into people's gardens to relieve themselves and all that sort of stuff. It was not great you know."* [Community Councillor, Glen Roy]

Similar concerns were expressed by the Craignorth participants as these local community councillors explained:

*"The XXX basically just went crazy with the amount of traffic that was up here. So, there were rumblings about people being up here. But that was probably more to be honest the nuisance effect of the amount of people who were up here and the mess they were leaving. All of the campsites were overwhelmed, there were people throwing their rubbish. There were people basically doing their toilet in ditches and stuff like that."* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

*"I think when people see that people are defecating behind their hedge on the side of the road, emptying their toilet waste in lay-bys, I think it shocked the locals in because they've not seen it before."* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

*“Moving then to the XXXX official campsite. There were people for whatever reasons leaving excrement in the wash hand basins in the washroom, this sort of thing. Really perverse behaviour.”* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

*“The crofter who had a field of grass next to the public toilets was either unable to cut some of it for silage because there was so much human waste in the field for when the toilets were out of order”* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

Although these are relatively minor issues that are not solely as a result of COVID-19, they represent community frustration and, as Wooff (2015) has highlighted, relatively minor anti-social behaviour in rural communities can ‘signal’ wider disorder.

### Infrastructure issues – short and long-term

Tensions around increasing visitors to the case study areas were not new, as this quotation from a Local Authority employee demonstrates:

*“There’s a consequence to all this promotion of tourism and we need that investment in the infrastructure to say ‘yea, great, come here and we’ll be providing all of this, but we need to manage you and we need to help you all be responsible by education but also infrastructure.”* [Local Authority Employee]

However, they were exacerbated by policy decisions taken by national, regional and local bodies during the first national lockdown and during the gradual easing of restrictions in the spring and early summer of 2020. For example, many of the car parks owned and operated by Councils, the National Park and Forestry and Land Scotland in Glen Roy had been closed and remained closed. Whilst this was intended to discourage people from breaking the COVID travel restrictions, it resulted in visitors parking in what were often narrow, single track access roads in the vicinity of, or in some cases on, busy main roads risking both their own safety and that of others. In Craignorth, the challenge was coping with what participants called the ‘camper home army’. Here, the pre-pandemic popularity of a scenic driving route was eclipsed by the

volume of motorhome owners escaping to this remote rural area where what little overnight parking and toileting facilities were also closed. The behaviour of some for example, parking on common grazing land and inappropriately depositing litter and human waste caused tension between them and the local communities, with some minor altercations taking place.

Many of these tensions arose from and were exacerbated by UK and Scottish government pandemic-related policies (foreign travel was being discouraged, people were actively encouraged by the First Minister to ‘staycation’ in Scotland and to work from home where possible). Some however, stemmed from pre-pandemic tensions around balancing national strategies connected with public access to rural spaces to improve Scotland’s health with established local norms. For example, we found evidence of class-based sensibilities (and offending them), geographical tensions (protecting local places with a sense of ownership of certain places) and inter-generational conflicts being at play, as this comment by a Glen Roy community councillor demonstrates:

*“It’s got to be said that [names a local beauty spot] was always seen as a quiet place for local residents to go. So, I think looking towards the future, we should be looking at certain areas in Glen Roy that we don’t market...there’s certain woods that should just be left for quiet recreation and contemplation and looking at and understanding nature...I think there should be one or two places left that locals can go knowing that we’ve got a nice quiet place to go to.”* [Community Councillor, Glen Roy]

However, as this Local Authority employee demonstrates, there was a degree of tension between the views of locals and those of key policy makers:

*“I’ll maybe go to Council meetings and people that have moved out are saying ‘don’t let these people near us’. And I’m like ‘you were able to buy a nice cottage in the country and put your kids to a nice school that’s got small class sizes, but you don’t want folk on your doorstep on a weekend?’”* [Local Authority Employee]

The sections above point to issues which led to tensions between different groups at a national, regional and community level and balancing economic, health and quality of life concerns.

## 3.2 Pluralized responses to order and safety maintenance

Here we outline how organisations came together or formed new ways of working to address the additional demands they were facing and to fill in the gaps in service provision left by the pandemic, but also highlight the differential nature of these relations across the cases, focusing on policing of the pandemic.

### Statutory agency responses

The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 seeks to minimise disruption in the event of an emergency and to ensure that the United Kingdom is better prepared to deal with a range of emergencies, including those which affect human welfare, such as loss of life and illness. The Civil Contingencies Act 2004 (Contingency Planning) (Scotland) Regulations 2005 set out further detail on the application of the Act in Scotland, regarding the duties and roles of responders. Responsibility for most civil contingency matters is devolved, except for national security, counterterrorism and energy policy. The UK and Scottish Governments agreed a non-legally binding concordat in 2006 to ensure effective cooperation on civil contingencies issues. The Act imposes specific duties on two categories of responders: Category 1 responders namely the police, local authorities, NHS Health Boards, SEPA and the Maritime and Coastguard Agency; Category 2 Responders which includes energy and telecommunications suppliers, HSE and NHS National Services Scotland. The Act also highlights that other organisations, such as the voluntary sector, can have an important role in contributing to effective preparation for, response to and recovery from a major emergency. Responsibility rests first and foremost with the Category 1 and 2 responders, unless the nature or scale of the event dictates that the Scottish Government (and sometimes the UK Government) is best placed to co-ordinate the emergency response.

The nature of the COVID-19 pandemic was such that both the UK and Scottish Governments provided strategic direction and co-ordination through the Category 1 Responder organisations at a national level. One of the key themes that we identified from our data was an inevitable but ever-present tension between the national, regional and local agendas particularly about how local agendas should work, could work and how this was playing out in practice.

Analysis of the data found a widely held perception of a disconnect between UK and Scottish government policies, and within the Scottish context, between regional and local enactment of those policies. For example, our data showed that the divergent messaging from both the UK and Scottish Governments concerning both guidance (which is not legally enforceable) and statutory Emergency Regulations (which is), led to confusion and frustration, as these Craignorth community councillors highlighted:

*“We’ve got stuff coming out of the Scottish government...I would feel more secure if they were the same [as UK Government]. They’re not, it’s different things. The devolved government is doing different stuff. I would feel better if there was one story coming out.”* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

*“We were caught between one thing was being said in England, and you thought, right ok and the then the Scottish government...in the end because we were Scotland, I stopped listening to what Boris Johnson was saying and I just was listening to exactly what Nicola Sturgeon was saying because they were the rules for Scotland. But yes, I agree, it would have been better if it had been this was the rules for everybody...it’s different for Wales and Ireland and England. All of them are different.”* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

There was a suspicion amongst participants that some of the divergent messaging had more to do with politicking between the UK and Scottish Governments than the practical business of crisis management, as this Craignorth community councillor explained:

*“There is now a clear feeling here that somewhere or other there was a bit of politics floating around there and the fact that the British Army were helping out in practical terms on the ground didn’t seem to get as well advertised in my opinion as it should have been.”* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

Many participants, especially police officers, also expressed frustration at the number and complexity of Scottish Government guidance and statutory regulations and at the



frequency with which they change, often at short notice (see Police Foundation, 2020; Maskaly *et al.*, 2021). These quotations, firstly from a Craignorth Ward Councillor and secondly from a police officer exemplify this:

*“They have changed with monotonous regularity actually and clarity as to what rules are in place at one particular time. At that time, we had various tiers and people didn’t know which tier it was. It was so much easier when the whole country was in a similar state of lockdown. So, there was that confusion which didn’t help matters.”*  
[Ward Councillor, Craignorth]

*“You know the legislation has been drawn up on the back of a fag packet to be honest with you, and it changes every two minutes. If you go to the toilet, it changes when you come back out. And how do you manage that? So, I’ll give you an example. The legislation when it initially came out, we’d been given a power-point briefing which was thirty slides when it came out. It is now at ninety slides and that’s all of the legislation and all the exemptions, it’s impossible to manage, it’s a moving target.”* [Police Officer]

At a regional level, Local Authorities in the case study areas created ‘war cabinets’ in which a small number of council officers and elected members took fast-time, strategic decisions, which was generally seen by elected members as necessary during the early stages of the pandemic, despite the loss of normal democratic principles underpinning local government. Despite this, our data showed that in Craignorth there were strong links between communities, Community Councils, local Councillors and the statutory agencies and that in the absence of the normal democratic business of the Council, the local Ward Manager had played a pivotal role in acting as a point of contact between the community and the Council (the local Authority had established (prior to the pandemic) local Ward Managers embedded within Council Ward areas, who acted as personal, single points of contact between local communities and the physically remote Council headquarters). For example, the local Ward Manager established a Community Hub during the early stages of the pandemic and provided a helpful, local point of contact for communities and community groups during the early

stages of the pandemic. This contrasted with Glen Roy where the local Authority relied almost exclusively on demand management via their public contact centre.

Despite the centralisation of local authority decision-making in Glen Roy and the resultant suspension of normal democratic processes, our data showed that Glen Roy local councillors were trying to act as an important conduit between the community and the Council but were perceived by the latter as an irritation. This had resulted in efforts by the Council to blunt their voices, as this quotation from a Council employee shows:

*“The elected members behave themselves now, they’ve been put in their place.”* [Council Employee]

Whilst this might be explained by the urgent, strategic decisions which needed to be taken by the Local Authority’s ‘War Cabinet’, local Councillors nonetheless had to fight against this mentality in order to maintain their critical democratic role. However, workload for local Councillors increased considerably once emergency restrictions began to be lifted and normal Local Authority business resumed. This was particularly challenging for those Councillors who had other commitments such as caring responsibilities and home schooling as this Ward Councillor in Craignorth explained:

*“After lockdown was eased and as strategic committees came back it just mushroomed and I would say that I’ve never been busier than I am now. It’s absolutely ridiculous. I could be attending four or five meetings every hour of every day.”* [Ward Councillor, Craignorth]

Collaborative working became an important part of the response to COVID-19. During the first lockdown in spring of 2020, most statutory agencies either furloughed staff or withdrew their front-line operational staff to the safety of their own homes to work from there – driven by concerns for the health, safety and welfare of their staff. However, others, primarily the police, retained a front-line operational presence, often filling the gap left by the other agencies which were unable to deliver their normal service. Despite this, there was a sense from the data of very strong multi-agency collaboration. For example, despite not formally being part of the Civil Contingencies Act multi-agency planning and response arrangements, a multi-agency group which

had been established in Glen Roy pre-pandemic to co-ordinate responses to visitors to the National Park during tourist seasons, responded quickly to the rapid increase in visitor numbers during the early summer of 2020 and into the late autumn when visitor numbers began to decline. Having key senior managers with authority to take decisions concerning the allocation of resources and working closely together on a daily or weekly basis in a spirit of trust, frankness and commitment was widely acknowledged as being particularly important in achieving quick, positive outcomes as this quotation from a National Park employee demonstrates:

*“So, we had quite a lot of really useful conversations and it was at officer level. So, it was the doers, but it was equally we were able to be really frank and open which for so many organisations to be saying ‘this is a real nightmare for me to try and get through, I’ve tried my best. Or, ‘we’ve got this far and that’s as much as we can do’ and to actually be able to say ‘that’s me, I’ve got no more staff, we’ve got no one out on Sunday.’ We probably wouldn’t be able to say that in a public environment because we would get lambasted for it. But as a group we can say ‘right, how can we support you?’” [National Park Employee]*

### [Harnessing collective efficacy among rural communities](#)

There was an overwhelming feeling that volunteer groups and the statutory agencies have come together through the pandemic and enhanced existing relationships or formed constellations of new ones which harnessed their latent strengths. For example, what came through from the data gathered in relation to both case study areas was that many of the statutory agencies were not, as this senior manager admitted, “quite so ready for it” by which they meant the pandemic and the first national lockdown. However, community groups by contrast were particularly nimble and able to step into the gaps left by some of the statutory services which couldn’t operate during the early stages of the pandemic, particularly around supporting vulnerable people. As this Council employee explained:

*“At the start of the pandemic the local community response was quicker than the Council. It was humbling”. [Council Employee]*

Those who were isolating, those who were afraid to leave their homes and those who were digitally excluded, were supported with shopping, the collection of medical prescriptions and the provision of hot meals. Various groups including Community Councils, voluntary groups and Community Development Trusts quickly organised themselves, often in partnership with others, secured emergency funding and provided the necessary support. In doing so, they were surprised by the number of isolated, lonely and otherwise vulnerable people within the community who neither they, nor the statutory agencies, had previously been aware of. This information, together with the capacity and capability of community and voluntary groups to provide support, is something which those agencies with statutory responsibility for health and social care should consider when formulating future policy and practice.

Interestingly, one of the differences between Glen Roy and Craignorth was around the extent to which formalised structures were in place pre-pandemic and the impact which their presence or absence had on community responses. In addition to the previously mentioned Ward Manager, the existence pre-pandemic of a funded voluntary group in Craignorth with responsibility for supporting local voluntary groups with initial set-up, on-going maintenance and, if required, winding up, was particularly helpful. This organisation comprising a small, salaried team quickly identified a gap in service provision left by the withdrawal of statutory services, particularly around mental health, but also with regards supporting other vulnerable members of the community through, for example, buying shopping and collecting prescriptions. This organisation quickly coordinated fourteen local voluntary groups who worked together to fill the gaps. Their work was widely recognised amongst the participants as having made a significant, effective and efficient contribution to community wellbeing and order maintenance, especially during the first national lockdown. Some were of the view that it was more effective than the statutory Community Planning Partnership for the area, as this police officer explained:

*“So, they are the third sector interface up here... they’re the umbrella group for all the small organisations, so it [names manager of voluntary group] that instigated these weekly calls, and downed tools and completely changed how they worked. But what was interesting was that they all did a great job individually [the various voluntary*

*groups in Craignorth], they all pulled together as a unit....So it came to a point where there were between thirty and forty individual charities coming into this zoom meeting every week, and just saying 'I need some butter, could you get some butter?' or 'I need some signage'... and they just worked like a unit, it was really quite impressive. But yea (names voluntary co-ordination group] was the sort of co-ordinating force of all of that and subsequently the community planning partnership, which was limping along, jumped on the back of that and completely rebranded what they were doing to fall in line with the resilience effort which has again just been a huge step forward.” [Police Officer]*

The local Development Trust also played a key role in the local response, as the same police manager highlighted:

*“So, another organisation that was hugely instrumental was [XXXX] Community Development Trust. They turned their offices into what looks like a police strategy room. They’ve got maps all over the walls and colour coded areas, huge amounts of materials. And what they did was they developed information packs, signage, basically a whole strategy for how they could go into vulnerable people’s houses and people who were shielding and help them. And they made it available to all community groups in [Craignorth]. So, they weren’t territorial at all.” [Police Officer]*

This pre-existing infrastructure, which enabled a rapid, formally co-ordinated response in the Craignorth case study and which was widely recognised as effective was not found within the Glen Roy case study and echo the ambitions of the Christie Commission Report (2011). Despite this, local community leaders such as the part-time Town Co-ordinator who is funded jointly by the Community Council and the Development Trust, quickly secured emergency funding and co-ordinated local community response efforts such as food shopping collecting medications and providing freshly cooked hot meals for the elderly and infirm and for those shielding.

What also came through strongly in our data was a widely held perception that local knowledge and local contacts between those who were sensitive to the needs of the local areas had made a significant difference in providing an effective response to the pandemic, particularly during the early stages. For example, close working relationships between local police officers, Council officers, elected Councillors and local voluntary groups to name but a few, meant that key decision-makers knew who to go to. Decisions resulting in action were taken quickly, organisations actioned them quickly without waiting weeks as otherwise might have been the case pre-pandemic, as this senior police officer explained:

*“There are some enduring issues that have always been there and we’ve never even before my time have ever been able to resolve. What this year has done, I’m not saying that we’ve solved everything, but some of the fast action that’s been taken by partners to resolve some issues has been quite incredible.”* [Senior Police Officer]

There was also a perception that larger, urban areas did not have these connections (personal contacts). These connections were there in rural locations before but they have been developed massively over the past year improving awareness amongst community groups of who to go to and what other groups are doing.

The data showed a big difference between the initial eight to ten weeks of the first national lockdown in the spring of 2020 during which the sense of coming together within the community, and when our data was gathered in the spring of 2021. For example, when the first national lockdown began to ease in the early summer of 2020, community groups rallied together to support the vulnerable as described earlier. However, a year later as the latest lockdown was coming to an end, our data showed that frustrations with the on-going restrictions and anxieties about the long-term management of Covid-19 were manifesting in micro-aggressions by the public towards front line staff working in shops, pubs, and other public service roles.

*“They get a lot of rudeness. I mean the people in the Co-Op, they got spat at. They asked people to keep to the one-way system, they got abuse...they’re being abused by people...”* [Glen Roy Community Councillor]

Harnessing the community networks going forward and supporting community development through training and funds would be beneficial in planning for future events. But beyond this, it speaks to greater community empowerment, for example through the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (2015), greater support where services are removed permanently, and greater support to create more locally accountable, nimble and democratic decision-making structures than some of the existing community and local authority arrangements.

Conversely, pre-pandemic public concerns around the retrenchment of policing and other public services to urban centres shaped community perceptions of agency responses to the pandemic, particularly in Cragnorth, thereby complicating the response to this unprecedented event (see Hansden and Lory, 2020 for similar findings in the United States of America).

#### Local Context: Centralisation of public services and 'abstract' policing

Another key theme to emerge from an analysis of the data is that of local context. Previous research has shown that rural communities often perceive that they have been treated by regional and national governments in a monolithic way. Local social context, both current and historical, are therefore important in influencing communities trust and confidence in the Scottish Government and the statutory agencies. This was most apparent in Cragnorth where, during focus group discussions, participants cited frustration at some of Police Scotland's structural and procedural changes which collectively were undermining their confidence in the force. For example, the closure of many small, single-officer local police stations; reduction in the opening hours of the larger remaining stations; contact points mounted on the front wall of police stations; the national 101 non-emergency telephone number and the delays in the calls being answered; and an on-line contact forms. Collectively, these changes had resulted in a widely held perception that the public were being funnelled into a more 'abstracted' connection with Police Scotland.

This resulted in people reporting a sense of loss of the person to person, face to face interaction between them and local police officers who knew and understood the area. It wasn't just the 'abstract' nature of the way in which they were being forced to interact with Police Scotland, it was quality of the in-person interaction, particularly the

contextual knowledge which shaped that person-to-person interaction. Participants expressed frustration that remote call takers based in Dundee, Edinburgh or Glasgow did not have a detailed local knowledge or understanding of where in town people might be talking about when they are making that call, did not understand who key people were or what key local problems were. Their perception was, as a result, that the response or conversation with the call centre operators were quite disconnected from the people and the places that they were grading calls and allocating resources to. The participants conveyed a feeling that the quality of their engagement with routine local policing had suffered as a result of nationalisation and centralising forces, to the extent that they felt neglected and devalued, as this Community Councillor explained:

*“Yeah, on the police side of things we have to go back quite a number of years when Police Scotland came in. Prior to that we had bigger numbers of police in the town, we had more officers. We had a police station that was 24/7, you could just walk in and speak to them. When Police Scotland came along, they certainly restricted the hours that you could go into a police station and it had to be done on the phone. Normally when you phone you get the local police station and nine times out of ten you knew the cop at the end of the phone. When you phone the police now, it's someone at Dundee that answers. It's gone straightaway, the rapport is gone straightaway. So, in one way we're quite used to being a bit more distanced from the Police than what we were. In the pandemic it was again fitting into that, we're not close to the police, we know that they are, but not as close as we were prior to Police Scotland kind of thing. And we could see them from a distance, that we knew they were there.” [Craignorth Community Councillor]*

We found that local Craignorth police officers were also dissatisfied not only with the abstracted means by which the public could make initial contact with the police but also by what they perceived as a reduction in front-line first response officers arising from centralisation, as this quotation from a local officer demonstrates:

*“It is frustrating that as a police officer I can't offer the public exactly what they want. Contacting the police is very, very difficult and cops*



*not always there to respond apart from the most urgent of cases.”*

[Craignorth Police Officer]

At the same time, these findings need to be qualified with an acknowledgement that communities understood that this was a bigger centralised picture and that those resources simply weren't there to put into these places. Communities understood that police were being pulled to higher risk urban areas which had more serious problems which needed a more imminent response more frequently. That said, the data showed clearly that the local and national sensibilities towards risk and safety conflicted in the way that they played around trust and confidence, particularly around policing and health. There was a widely held perception that there was a general neglect of the extreme rural by the Scottish government which had contributed to the centralisation of services, including policing.

#### [Gaps in NHS Mental Health Services: the impact on Police Scotland and the voluntary sector in Craignorth](#)

However, it is important to recognise and acknowledge that the need for police to respond, and how they respond, to different issues within rural communities is ultimately framed by different challenges and different contexts which had been taking place pre-pandemic. For example, in Craignorth, many participants perceived that NHS decisions about centralisation and an increasingly abstracted mental health service provision were having a detrimental impact on the community, as these community councillors explained:

*“There's certain things within NHS XXXX that [Craignorth] is fighting for because we're second-class citizens basically. They've centralised so many things, they forget that we are 120 miles away from Inverness, that road is a dangerous road to travel and the potholes are ridiculous. In winter it is just treacherous, we're the forgotten county basically when it comes to NHS [area]. Especially the mental health side of things is just unbelievable.”* [Craignorth Community Councillor]

*“Myself and XXX are members of the [Craignorth] Health Action team, which is a team that is highlighting quite a few problems in respect of*

*National Health. And we really have a mental health problem up here, we've had ten suicides in the period of the lockdown. There is a lot of problems, there's not the staff. There's no 24-hour coverage, it's a 9 to 5 job.*" [Craignorth Community Councillor]

Our data found that this had resulted in the police and voluntary agencies filling the resultant gap in demand concerning people in mental health crisis which arose during the early stages of the pandemic. This demand on the police and voluntary organisations rose exponentially following significant increases in requests for immediate help from those in mental health crisis (Peters, 2020). Local police officers reported that they had been responding to a significant increase in calls to people threatening self-harm, vulnerable missing persons, suicides and drugs-related deaths. As one local Community Councillor explained:

*"I know from officers that their workload in relation to mental health matters has just soared. They're way up to 80% to 90% of their work now is to do with mental health. Because unfortunately we don't have NHS services here that can deal with it, and it's left basically to them and they admit themselves they're not the idea professionals to deal with it, but they will never walk away from it. We've had people with mental health problems actually ending up in a cell because there's nowhere else for them to go, there's no other safe place to go. So that's been a big, big strain on the police.* [Community Councillor, Craignorth]

One police officer commented:

*"We have become a mental health service."* [Police Officer]

Whilst it was widely recognised by the public and voluntary sector that police officers were doing their best, it was also widely recognised that other organisations may be better placed to undertake this role. Police officers themselves recognised that they based their decision-making largely on experiential knowledge developed through dealing with people in mental health crisis rather than the theoretical, science-based knowledge utilised by mental health professionals.

So, the public experience of the pandemic at this macro level was influenced by pre-existing structural factors; health service provision, inequality and proximity to services and infrastructure which simply cannot hope to be solved in isolation or be left to communities themselves to solve. There is a clear need for, on the one-hand, national governments, regional councils and public service agencies to support local communities when making decisions in a context of a crisis like the pandemic. However, on the other hand it is untenable to simply expect local communities to solve them alone. So, there needs to be a balancing act here between identifying how to support local communities in the ways which they have organically found work well and at the same time to invest in that.

The pandemic has without doubt exacerbated pre-existing inequalities which demand structurally oriented policy responses for example, social policy, health policy responses from regional and national authorities and where relevant, investment at a national level to support not only pre-existing multi-agency partnerships but also those which emerged to address the problem. It was clear that the centralisation and abstraction of service provision and the withdrawal of clear personalised relationships between service users and service providers, which is rationalised based on efficiency and effectiveness, is at the same time having negative impacts on how communities perceive those organisations.

### [The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Police Officers in rural areas of Scotland](#)

The pandemic has brought the intersection between order and safety maintenance/policing and health into sharp focus. The main role imposed on Police Scotland by the Scottish Government guidance and emergency legislation became one of supporting the Scottish Government and the Health services' strategic efforts to manage the pandemic by preventing virus transmission.

Politically, Police Scotland has had to carefully navigate how to police the stringent and constantly changing COVID-19 legislation whilst maintaining the pre-pandemic levels of public trust and confidence through to the post-pandemic era. This has been achieved principally through adoption of the UK Police Chief Council's Four E's strategy.

In terms of Policing, the four E's approach was generally perceived by the public to be positive, as these quotations demonstrate:

*"I don't think they've been too harsh because there hasn't really been a lot of trouble up here, especially in the pandemic. But I don't think they've actually been too soft either."* [Craignorth Community Councillor]

*"The word that comes to mind is sympathetically. I think it must be a really difficult job for them... the police are great and you don't hear of them falling out with people or there being many fines."* [Craignorth Community Councillor]

This perception also included young people as this teenage Craignorth community councillor explained:

*"I think what I find surprising is that I actually know young people that have had illegal parties and stuff that have been disrupted and stopped by the police. And I kind of assumed that they would be anti-police in that way and they wouldn't like the work they were doing, and thought they were maybe jobsworths or whatever. But most of them actually said that they handled it quite well. I don't know that many people got fined, I think they just took their details and let them go home type of thing."* [Craignorth Community Councillor]

The data showed that rural communities in both case study areas were aware of increased visibility and personal interactions by the police which appeared to have a positive impact on public trust and confidence in how the police were responding to the pandemic. Police Scotland's own survey which drew on 36,500 responses and was published in May 2021, showed that over the previous 12 months the average public trust confidence in Police Scotland was 57%, 9% higher than pre-pandemic levels (Police Scotland, 2021). This same survey found that "Increased police presence at identified key locations...was particularly important to those living in rural areas with lower COVID-19 rates, who had concerns about domestic tourists from Scottish regions with higher infection rates visiting their area." That said, local officers

highlighted a tension between the strategic direction which focused on the use of soft power, with enforcement only being enacted as a last resort, and the demands of some sections of the community that officers move more quickly to enforcement (see Charman, 2021). One officer complained that they had been given:

*“...feather dusters to stop steam rollers coming down [Glen Roy] Main Street.”* [Police Officer]

This was particularly keenly felt by those police officers who were also members of the rural communities in which they worked, with some reporting a sense of hostility either directly or indirectly from some sections of the community. This came from both those who felt that the police weren't being sufficiently robust in their enforcement of the legislation and those who felt that the police were being draconian. It was noted that such complaints made via social media platforms were usually not responded to by police.

Operational officers also appeared unaware of the rationale underpinning the four E's approach (to maintain trust and confidence post-pandemic) as this officer explained:

*“Police got asked repeatedly why they are not doing more, why are they not doing roadblocks, and a lot of the time operational police officers had to try and come up with an answer but a lot of the time the honest answer was that senior officers had told them that they weren't doing it but the operational cops never fully understood why. Whilst cops were satisfied that the rationale would be sound, it wasn't communicated to junior officers who were then unable to provide a clear and concise explanation to communities...there was a disconnect between the national messaging and local action by the police.”* [Police Officer]

Despite this, the findings from this study broadly support those of Police Scotland and of the Independent Advisory Group, namely that Police Scotland had struck the right balance between supporting the Scottish Government's broader public health agenda, Human Rights and maintaining public trust and confidence. The evidence from the Independent Advisory Group found that around 80% of police/public interactions with

regards COVID-19 legislation did not result in enforcement action being taken. Our data from police officers showed that where enforcement has been taken it has generally been against persistent offenders, what they often called “the usual suspects” and against those who blatantly disregarded the legislation – even in some cases charging people with culpable and reckless conduct. For example, in January 2021, two women who breached COVID-19 travel restrictions by travelling from Fife to the central belt and had to be rescued by Mountain Rescue volunteers after getting into difficulty on Ben Lomond BBC (2021a), were charged with culpable and reckless conduct.

However, the long-term impact on police legitimacy remains, as yet, unknown (see Jones, 2020) and may be worthy of further study.

## 4. Discussion

In the discussion section which follows, we explore in more detail the similarities and differences of policing and being policed at a time of crisis and what they suggest about the distinctive experience of the pandemic in rural Scotland. We also explore how the lessons emerging might inform future responses.

A central theme to emerge from analysis of the data was the way in which misalignments in national, regional, and local agenda and priorities became accentuated in the pandemic. This may, in part, have arisen from the enormity of the COVID-19 pandemic which dictated that Scottish government take the lead co-ordination role. However, we argue that this led to local Category 1 responders (as defined by the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) and which include the Police and Local Authorities) becoming more the enactors of distant policy decisions which effectively suspended (for various reasons) local democratic deliberation and the involvement of local communities in decision making about policing, particularly during the first national lockdown. In the following sections, we explore, by thinking through the lens of the national -vs- regional -vs- local, how that tension played out using different examples across the cases studies. We then consider what it suggests moving forward.

### 4.1 Policing a pandemic (and other crises): Formal and informal policing and order maintenance challenges in rurality at a time of national crisis

As the Northern Ireland Policing Board's Report on the Thematic Review of the Policing Response to Covid-19 (2020, p.7) suggested, "giving the police powers to tell people how to live their own lives is fraught with danger, however important the objective is. Support and confidence in the police are very difficult to build and very easy to erode". Police Scotland's adoption of the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) '4-Es strategy' was intended to mitigate, at least in part, this risk. This strategy broadly reflected a pre-pandemic style of policing which was mainly characterised by "responsibilization, communication and persuasion" (Terpstra *et al.*, 2021, p.11) and working with citizens. Positive public interactions and engagement underpin order

maintenance work and are crucial to promoting voluntary compliance and minimising 'use of force' (Waddington, 1999).

The data generated in our conversations with both organisations and community representatives suggests the Four E's approach was broadly well understood. However, there was also evidence that some police officers and members of the community felt a tension between the foregrounding of 'engagement', education and encouragement over enforcement of COVID-19 guidance and Emergency Regulations. This was amplified by the ambiguity and inconsistency of 'the rules' both over time and between nations which meant that officer discretion was needed during individual interactions. Police were required make decisions about things that they wouldn't normally make judgements about. For example, where people were travelling within an area in which travel restrictions had been imposed by the Scottish government, individual officers needed to make judgements about whether a person's rationale for travelling fell within or outwith the guidelines or legislation. Judicious use of individual officer discretion during face-to-face, in-person interactions, we argue, were fundamental to realising the intended policy outcomes of the Four E's strategy.

Our assertion finds echoes within the sociology of policing literature. For example, as Charman and Williams (2021, p. 2) suggest, "there is extensive evidence available to support the relationship between fair treatment and perceptions of police legitimacy". However, police legitimacy is a "continually negotiated area" (Charman and Williams, 2021, p.2) and this has very much been the case during the pandemic. As with Ghaemmaghami *et al.*'s (2021, p.15) survey of residents on the Isle of Wight in England, perceptions of 'satisfactory' and 'unsatisfactory' policing during the pandemic were associated with the extent to which the police shared information with them, the extent to which the police were cognisant of their concerns or disregarding of them, and the extent to which there was a sense of confusion over policing's role. In this case study, members of the public in the Craignorth case study area were aware of and supportive of the four E's approach and satisfied that the police were listening to their concerns, particularly through personal interaction with the local Inspector. However, it was also clear from the data that prior to the pandemic, trust and confidence in the local police had been fragile. This appeared to have two primary



bases. Firstly, community dissatisfaction with the outcome of historical high-profile police investigations:

*“There's been at least three serious incidences up here and it has never been resolved. I'm not saying who is involved or who wasn't involved. But I would say that quite a lot of public now don't trust the police.”* [Community Councillor]

Secondly (which will be the focus of our discussion), the increasing centralisation of resources coupled with the increasingly 'abstract' means by which local communities can make initial contact with Police Scotland, particularly the national 101 non-emergency telephone number.

## 4.2 Centralisation and Abstract Service Provision: Neglecting the Periphery

### Abstract Service Delivery

Abstract policing is a concept proposed by Terpstra *et al.* in their 2019 paper entitled 'The Abstract Police: A conceptual exploration of unintended changes of police organizations', which discusses recent police reforms in the Netherlands and Scotland. They suggest that following the 2013 police reforms which resulted in considerable organisational scale enlargement and highly centralised national forces (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2014, 2015), the police in both countries became more... “dependent on rigid systems and system information. Citizens and communities became more at a distance” (p. 399).

As our data showed, those members of the public from Craignorth who took part in this study perceived that they had in recent years become increasingly physically distanced from their local police. They attributed this largely to the closure of many small rural stations, the reduction in opening hours at the remaining stations (no longer 24/7) and the increasing reliance by the police on the 101 non-emergency telephone number and on-line reporting as the principle means of making initial contact with Police Scotland. Whilst this Multichannel Model (Terpstra *et al.*, 2019, p. 347) provides the public with plenty of choice as to how to contact the police, Welch *et al.*, (2004)

argue that it is primarily a convenient way for the police to manage their workload, effectively 'keeping citizens at arm's length' (Welch *et al.*, 2004, p. 388). The public from Craignorth who we spoke to complained that it does not allow them to speak with local officers or staff. Instead, they must speak with staff from hundreds of miles away who don't know them, don't know the area or it's issues and who are not as sensitive to nuanced local issues and history underpinning them as local officers and police staff. This had undermined their confidence in the police to the extent that some no longer contacted the police when previously they would have done, something which was also found by other post Scottish police reform studies (SIPR, WWS and ScotCen, 2017, p. 23).

Our findings also highlighted that notions of 'good' or 'professional' policing amongst the community and amongst local police officers were at odds with organisational notions of 'good' policing. For example, there was a widely held perception amongst the former that 'good' policing entailed personal, direct, face-to-face interaction with local police officers who knew the community and who were sensitive to nuanced local issues and the history underpinning them. The organisational notions of professional policing however were being "realised in more abstract or decontextualised ways, less dependent on local knowledge and personal and informal relations" (Terpstra *et al.*, 2019, p. 343). Why is personal and direct interaction and relationships between local police and the public important? Those members of the public who have low levels of trust and confidence in the police often have better relationships with community police officers if they are known personally to one another (Van der Vijver, 2004) and know and understand the communities they serve. Victims of serious crimes often prefer to make a report personally to an officer rather than via an abstract contact system (Boekhoorn and Tolsma, 2015). "Abstract systems depend on trust...but this trust in abstract systems does not provide the 'moral rewards which can be obtained from personalised trust...' (Giddens, 1990, p. 88).

The accounts of residents' experience of policing in the area suggests that striving to improve 'efficiency' and 'cost effectiveness' needs to be approached cautiously, and in a way that is sensitive to local notions of 'good policing' and service 'needs'. This is not a new balancing act and broadly reflects challenges which emerged with the advent and adoption within policing of mechanised units and radios in the mid

twentieth century. However, responding to COVID-19 illustrates the importance of local community knowledge and we appear to be at the point where the emphasis on refining the means of policing is distracting from its ends. Ultimately services need to weigh these data and efficiency driven improvements against the likely qualitative cost in human relationships prompted by abstract policing models, which seems particularly accentuated in rurality.

## Centralisation

The frustration in Craignorth concerning the centralisation of resources might be understood as organisationally preventable as opposed to operationally preventable (Ricciardelli, 2018). With the increasing centralisation in larger, remote towns and cities, organisational specialisation and a continual move towards an 'abstract' model of service delivery, not only by Police Scotland but also by other public service agencies, risks enhancing the sense of isolation in rural communities, especially remote rural communities. This was perceived as almost a stripping away of their identity, or the identity of that local space. Place is important, particularly in remote rural communities and 'local knowledge – of both the analytic, factual kind and the intimate, experiential kind – remains an indispensable resource for agencies whose core business is making safety' (Police Foundation, 2021). In addition, as this study showed in relation to Craignorth, local officers focused on urgent, high-risk calls (what Terpstra *et al*, 2019 called 'core tasks') which left both them and the community with the perception that there has been a 'degradation in the status of community policing and police work in rural areas'. The perception amongst police officers and the public was that this was in part, due to fewer operational response officers.

### *Centralisation of NHS Mental Health Services and the impact on policing in Craignorth during the COVID-19 Pandemic*

This study also showed how the pre-pandemic centralisation and abstract service provision of other public services had implications not only for the wider community but also for policing. For example, many of the Craignorth participants perceived that in the years leading up to the pandemic, the NHS in general and mental health services, had been centralised to a major urban area some 100 miles away, that capacity reduced and that service provision had become increasingly abstract. This

perceived reduction in service provision had, in their view, become a service gap during the early stages of the pandemic as the incidence of people in mental health crisis increased significantly, which both the local police and voluntary groups stepped in to fill, as best they could. Whilst communities acknowledged that the police were doing their best to help, it was also recognised that they are not professionally trained to deal with people in mental health crisis. It was felt by the community and by local police officers that NHS mental health professionals should be providing this service. Whilst local volunteer groups were also filling the service gap left by the NHS by supporting those in mental health crisis, considerable concern remained in the community about the increased number of people committing suicide or dying from drugs overdose during the pandemic.

Whilst the establishment of a strategic level, multi-agency taskforce which aims to develop long-term solutions to the mental health issues in Cragorth was generally welcomed by participants, it is also important to acknowledge that the need for police and other agencies and voluntary groups to respond was ultimately framed by NHS decisions about centralisation, an increasingly abstract service delivery model and insufficient resourcing. With regards the latter, it was also widely recognised by Cragorth participants that securing and retaining the services of specialist mental health staff was a challenge for the NHS. In the short to medium term therefore, challenges remain for Police Scotland, the Local Authority and for local voluntary groups in meeting not only current demand but also what they anticipate will be even higher levels of demand post-pandemic. For example, do these other agencies and organisations have the capacity and capability to meet this demand? Does an online service delivery model work in remote rural communities where poor internet broadband speeds can hamper access and more critically, are those in mental health crisis receiving the best possible service?

It is therefore recommended that urgent consideration be given by the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and the NHS to addressing the reported gap and waiting lists in emergency mental health service provision within rural communities. Given that mental health issues in rural locations are often hidden and services remote to these communities, a focus on rural mental health provision is recommended. (Recommendation 1).

## The impact of centralisation and abstract service delivery on public confidence

Despite a commitment to developing local policing services which meet the needs of local communities, police reform in Scotland “raised concerns about the consequences of these national structures for local policing and for relationships with local communities” (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2015, p. 1). Some have argued that the national structure enhances local policing, particularly through the equitable availability of specialist policing services. Whilst this might be true, the findings from this study have shown there to be “fundamental tensions between the pressure to centralize and standardize” (Terpstra and Fyfe, 2015, p. 15) and what the communities of Craignorth perceived as ‘good’ policing, namely policing in which they had a more personal relationship with and sense of ownership. In the drive for effectiveness and efficiency the data suggested that in this remote rural community, the associated structural changes were having a negative impact on public trust and confidence and thereby police legitimacy. The centralisation of service provision in the name of efficiency and cost effectiveness, not only by the police but also by other public services (particularly NHS Mental Health Services in Craignorth), coupled with an increasingly abstract model of demand management, are seen as insufficient to support positive community relationships.

Despite positive perceptions with regards Police Scotland’s response to the pandemic, long-standing concerns about the police handling of historic, high-profile cases, continued to act as a sort of folklore shaping and affecting the local community’s relationship with the police and undermining public trust and confidence. What was quite striking about this was that the community in Craignorth seemed to make a distinction between police effectiveness more generally and recognising their effectiveness in the context of the pandemic, seeing the former less favourably and the latter.

We argue, based on the findings from this study, that the dominating view of police professionalism within Police Scotland may be at odds with the dominant view of police professionalism within rural communities, especially remote rural communities such as Craignorth, thereby undermining trust and confidence. We recommend therefore, that key services, especially Police Scotland and NHS mental health services, review

their footprint in rural communities, consider the impact of centralising and removing services (even if replaced with online provision) and consult with rural communities to explore and alleviate their concerns (Recommendation 2).

### 4.3. Outdoor Countryside Access

#### Infrastructure

Our data revealed a tension between local rural communities on the one hand and national and regional organisations on the other, with the latter being perceived by local communities as foregrounding the needs of visitors over those of local residents when promoting outdoor access. The tension between the community ideals of preserving and protecting their notion of the pre-existing social order was in direct conflict with the strategic aims of Scottish government around a healthier and greener Scotland which was being realised by various arms-length public bodies through the provision of equal access to the countryside for all and attracting visitors into the wider area for which they had a statutory remit.

What we also picked up on in the data was that in advertising ‘staycations’ and promoting these rural spaces, participants argued that this neglected local sensitivities about the role of tourism in rural communities. Although this debate does precede the pandemic, COVID-19 created a tipping point or flash point where the number of visitors consuming these spaces was overwhelming for both the rural communities and statutory agencies within the case study areas. Thus, the pandemic exacerbated these issues, including the insufficient infrastructure which had existed pre-pandemic.

We therefore recommend, that consideration is given as to how the economic and social benefits arising from increased tourism to rural areas and the infrastructure required to support it, might be balanced against the needs of rural communities and how future decisions are developed in conversation with these communities. This might be achieved through the development of meaningful local place planning leading to the development of adequately funded local development plans (Recommendation 3).

Despite concerns that during the winter of 2020 into 2021, a reduction in the seniority of agency representatives and a reduction in the frequency of inter-agency meetings might be signalling a return to pre-pandemic, silo working, indications are that the agencies have responded well to the 2021 summer season by taking some initial steps towards providing temporary solutions to some of the long-standing, pre-pandemic infrastructure issues (BBC, 2021b). For example, the installation of temporary toilets at popular beauty spots; the employment of additional Council Enforcement Officers and the alteration of their working patterns so that they covered weekends and not just weekdays as had been the case pre-pandemic; the installation of temporary electronic signage advising people that parking enforcement measures are in place. The Council and the National Park in Glen Roy have also been using social media to provide real-time information to the public regarding the availability of parking spaces in key visitor car parks, advising when they are full or nearly full. They have also been posting warnings that parking enforcement officers will be on the ground issuing Fixed Penalty Notices to vehicles parked illegally. However, whilst these measures are to be welcomed, the complex and nuanced interplay between community needs and national strategic outcomes will require a national, integrated approach which is connected with, and developed in conversation with, local communities.

### Countryside Access Code

Awareness raising around the responsible and safe engagement in outdoor activities has become a significant issue during the pandemic – the outdoor has become much more of a marketable thing and that can be challenging. The community aspects of this have also been challenging around contested relationships, for example contested tourist/local community debates; tension with ‘urban outsiders’ who don’t demonstrate respect for local social order, natural resource or understand access code. Again, not necessarily a new debate but something which featured strongly in the data from both case study areas.

Whilst recognising the wider societal benefits to be realised through greater public use and awareness of the countryside, it is recommended that support be put in place to help facilitate access to the countryside in a responsible manner and to ease the (perceived) burden on rural communities. This could include employing more

countryside rangers, improving infrastructure in popular tourist spots and re-invigorating public education programmes regarding the Countryside Access Code and how to access the countryside in an appropriate and sustainable way. This should be done with the support of local community groups who can identify and co-develop solutions to these perceived problems (Recommendation 4).

#### 4.4 Tipping the scales back to communities: harnessing collective efficacy and empowering local rurality to help overcome rural fragility

In terms of framing the findings, we are thinking about fragility and uncertainty, particularly around the fragility of social order and the fragility of infrastructure which has been thrown into sharp relief during the pandemic. For example, the fragility resulting from the increasing isolation of rural communities from essential services resulting from abstract service provision from larger, physically distanced hubs; the fragility of digital access for some remote rural communities and/or some sections of communities at a time when service provision is increasingly moving on-line; the fragility around demand and a sense that rural communities are at the whim of national government and the statutory service agencies such as the local authority, NHS and Police Scotland in terms of service provision; at the whim of the national government with regards travel, including travel abroad and the impact that has (together with active encouragement by the First Minister) to boost the Scottish economy by 'stay-cationing' and the impact that has on local communities such as the 'camper home army' in Craignorth. Some of the divides within rural communities have been exposed, for example, the fragility of small-town tourism and services being over-run versus fear of the virus; the impact of what seem like arbitrary boundaries around local authorities based on per one hundred thousand Covid infection rates, can have a really big impact on local services.

So, we think that there is a real tension, fragility and uncertainty which has emerged between national government which is making decisions which impact on local authorities which have to respond, relying to a greater or lesser extent on communities, local agencies, local organisations and voluntary groups and other local service providers to react to quickly and fulfil the needs of the communities they are serving or working with.



## The benefits of established, community-based resilience founded on and strong, trusting interpersonal relationships

In both case studies, participant narratives suggested a latent disconnect between central government policy and decision making on the one hand, and the practical enactment and communication with groups locally who are expected to implement or 'benefit' from those policies and decisions. The response to the pandemic has been characterised as a centrally dictated strategy that was fed outwards, with little discussion or critical reflection on the impact of 'work from home', 'furlough', and restrictions on regional and international travel on (remote) rural communities and the varying impact on different rural communities in Scotland. This, coupled with the establishment of 'war cabinets' by local Authorities through which to enable regional responses to national policy have also overridden normal democratic processes and excluded local communities from debates and decision making. The speed of the pandemic may have necessitated this response, but this is very much the antithesis to the pursuance of community empowerment. Yet communities were also required to fill in the gaps.

The way(s) that communities filled the gaps appears variable. Different communities used different networks at different times and in different capacities. It would be beneficial going forward to try and capture and map both the formal and informal community planning/development partnerships that exist across rural Scotland (Recommendation 5). Not only will this facilitate future response to crisis but will also allow local authorities to identify communities which lack these structures and which therefore may require a different sort of support going forward.

In many ways the pandemic has exposed some of the true benefits of plural policing, with key elements being pivotal to the success of rural communities' in addressing some of the pre-existing fragilities which were exacerbated during the early stages of the pandemic. For example, the value of strong, frank, trusting and personal working relationships between key, local stakeholders from statutory agencies and voluntary community groups in the effective 'buy in' to shared demand management and resource allocation, often going the extra mile for one another in order to achieve success. This enabled a nimble response to the initial gaps in service provision and thereby to achieving positive outcomes, especially for the most vulnerable. Following

the mapping of community networks and groups (Recommendation 5), we recommend that the Scottish Government and Local Authorities build on the success of the nuanced, nimble local partnership responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the important role of the voluntary sector, and that these be incorporated into future Integrated Emergency Management and Civil Contingencies planning in a way which aligns national strategy with the individual needs of different rural communities (Recommendation 6).

Many participants were keen for this positive outcome of closer, integrated working to be maintained not only during the remainder of the pandemic but also post-pandemic. However, some were concerned that it would fall away once the crisis phase of the pandemic is over. We therefore recommend that local partnerships carefully consider their future membership so that the benefits of having key decision-makers who have developed strong, trusting, interpersonal working relationships during the crisis phase of the pandemic are not lost as agencies transition into the post-pandemic recovery phase (Recommendation 7).

It is also recommended that Local Authorities may wish to adopt and learn from the formalised, pre-pandemic structures in Craignorth (Local Authority Ward Manager; Voluntary Coordination Group) which facilitated a rapid, effective, nuanced and co-ordinated response, particularly in the initial phases of the pandemic. This will help support future emergency planning. This requires national consultation with a variety of rural communities to look at 'what worked' nationally in response to the pandemic in rural locations. Our study highlights the importance of formalised, active rural community structures in aiding a successful response to COVID-19 (Recommendation 8).

Whilst there will be a challenge going forward around how communities re-establish themselves into the pre-pandemic democratic decision-making process (or at least to the extent that it can be argued to have existed), there are several ways in which this might be facilitated. For example, over the last ten years, Scottish government have emphasised community empowerment, through for example, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (2015). Whilst its success or failure falls beyond the scope of this report, Part 2 (Community Planning) might provide a suitable vehicle by which communities might, at least in part re-establish themselves into the democratic

decision-making process whilst also building on the successes of the local community responses discussed in this paper. For example, it was remarked upon in Craignorth that consideration should be given to reviewing membership of the statutory Community Planning Partnership supplementing it with those groups, organisations and agencies such as the Volunteer Coordination Group which had worked effectively together to provide a nimble, nuanced, locally focused response. We therefore recommend that the Scottish government and Local Authorities may wish to consider whether the membership, remit and funding of existing Community Planning Partnerships is appropriate going forward for responding to crisis (Recommendation 9).

However, it was also found that in both case study areas, the funding arrangements for local groups such as the Volunteer Coordination Group, Community Council, Development Trust and others are complex, uncoordinated, unstructured and inadequate. For example, the Craignorth Volunteer Coordination Group's only regular funding comes from the Scottish Government via the Third Sector Interface but is minimal. Additional funds must be secured through ad-hoc, short-term projects. Community Councils receive minimal financial support for administrative costs, with any additional funds for local distribution having to be raised through other means. Development Trust remits across Scotland are varied, complex and set by each local, unelected Trust. For example, in Glen Roy the focus is on infrastructure and amenity development rather than social welfare. Whilst it did respond to the crisis by coordinating the provision of hot meals to the elderly and infirm, it had to seek emergency external funding which inevitably delayed the emergency response. In order that local community groups can quickly and easily secure funding to support nimble, effective and nuanced community responses to future civil emergencies, it is recommended that a Reserved Emergency Fund be established and managed at a level that makes most fiscal sense and based on understandings of community structures garnered through implementation of recommendation 5 (Recommendation 10).

We also recommend that training is offered to those volunteering and working in rural community partnerships to enhance their work, including how to implement recommendations 5-9 effectively. This will enhance the ability of local community

planning and help support rural services to plan more effectively for future events (Recommendation 11)

### *Local context and police legitimacy*

It has been important learning that when we talk about abstract service provision, for example the 101 numbers, local authority centralised public call desks and so on, that organisations which have moved to physically distant hubs do not necessarily take account of local context. Thematic analysis revealed a widely held perception within the remote-rural community that the reduction of smaller, local police stations, the creation of centralised call centres hundreds of miles away (Hail, 2020) and the reduction of locally embedded officers with whom they could develop direct, familiar, trusting, and close relationships was widely perceived as conflicting with notions of 'good' or 'professional' policing (Terpstra *et al.* 2019, p. 340). Indeed, the data showed that some community members were resisting the abstract policing model by, for example, deciding not to report on-going acts of criminality to the police. This conflicted with a generally positive perception of the policing style adopted during the pandemic which, particularly during the first national lockdown in the spring of 2020, encapsulated a more visible, personally interactive approach to police-public interactions. It also conflicted with the perception of senior police managers and the findings of Police Scotland's own public consultation surveys, that the organisational restructuring (centralisation, specialisation and the creation of remote call centres) of Police Scotland was successfully combining a more efficient, effective and nationally equitable service with high levels of public satisfaction.

The pandemic has illustrated the need for that local feel, local understanding, the local context to be built back into service provision, particularly in rural areas which have never been busier and never more popular with visitors. So, there is a sense that some of the local issues during the pandemic were able to be resolved because of the rapid development of local, close, personal, working relationships. Where these existed pre-pandemic, they served as something of an advantage, particularly during the early days of the pandemic. One remaining challenge having brought people and organisations closer together in response to the pandemic, is how to maintain effective

grass-root responses to local people's needs as society returns to 'normal' and organisations return to their 'everyday' roles?

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, this study has shown that some public service agencies involved in the 'pluralised policing' response were initially unprepared for the impact of the pandemic and the demands which were placed on them not only by the UK and Scottish governments, but also by rural communities. However, through a combination of effective multi-agency co-operation, the commendable efforts of various community voluntary groups, and high levels of compliance by the public, order was largely maintained and vulnerable members of the community supported. However, this study has also shown that much of the demand placed on individuals and the organisations and groups they work in, were magnified by existing pre-pandemic problems. In particular, the move towards more centralised and 'abstract' mental health and police service provision has been keenly felt in rural communities. Whilst Police Scotland has successfully trodden a careful line between the enforcement and discretionary policing of emergency legislation, this study has shown that there is a continued importance of addressing historical community relations and organisational structural issues which might affect the longer-term impacts on public trust and confidence in some rural communities in the post-pandemic era.

It has also shown that the value placed on outdoor and rural areas has increased during the pandemic, affecting the social and economic fabric of these areas and communities and increasing tensions between national and local decision making concerning public access and the provision of adequate infrastructure.

As the pandemic approaches its third-year, longer-term concerns regarding pre-pandemic issues which were exacerbated by the pandemic, such as the police role in dealing with those in mental health crisis, remain and indeed may persist long after the pandemic has ended. Whilst we were struck by the energy and commitment of all those who took part in this study and who were in the front-line of Scotland's local response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we had concerns that some, particularly the police officers, were experiencing fatigue and burn-out from being in critical-incident

mode for 18 months (see Stognert, Miller and McLean, 2020). It is therefore important that in addition to the physical responses, the health and wellbeing of staff members is considered. Given that this study has explored the lived experiences of rural communities during 2020, we recommend that a follow-up study is undertaken with the aim of undertaking a comparative analysis in relation to 2021 (Recommendation 12).

## Key Recommendations

Based on this study's findings our recommendations are:

### Recommendation 1

That urgent consideration be given by the Scottish Government, Local Authorities and the NHS to addressing the reported gap and waiting lists in emergency mental health service provision within rural communities. Given that mental health issues in rural locations are often hidden and services remote to these communities, a focus on rural mental health provision is recommended.

### Recommendation 2

That key services, especially Police Scotland and NHS mental health services, review their footprint in rural communities, consider the impact of centralising and removing services (even if replaced with online provision) and consult with rural communities to explore key concerns.

### Recommendation 3

That consideration is given as to how the economic and social benefits arising from increased tourism to rural areas and the infrastructure required to support it, might be balanced against the needs of rural communities and how future decisions are developed in conversation with these communities. This might be achieved through the development of meaningful local place planning leading to the development of adequately funded local development plans.

### Recommendation 4

Whilst recognising the wider societal benefits to be realised through greater public use and awareness of the countryside, it is recommended that support be put in place to help facilitate access to the countryside in a responsible manner and to ease the (perceived) burden on rural communities. This could include employing more countryside rangers, improving infrastructure in popular tourist spots and re-invigorating public education programmes regarding the Countryside Access Code.

This should be done with the support of local community groups who can identify and co-develop solutions to these perceived issues.

#### Recommendation 5

A national 'mapping' exercise should be undertaken to understand how rural community structures vary in stature and structure across the country, 'what works' for different communities and help resource these more effectively. This should go beyond formalised community planning and council structures and seek to understand funding structures in place for different communities. Doing this will help build up a picture of 'community partnership blackspots' and create a resource for the police and other agencies to utilise in times of crisis. It will also help with the following recommendations.

#### Recommendation 6

That the Scottish Government and Local Authorities build on the success of the nuanced, nimble local partnership responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the important role of the voluntary sector, and that these be incorporated into future Integrated Emergency Management and Civil Contingencies planning in a way which aligns national strategy with the individual needs of different rural communities.

#### Recommendation 7

That local partnerships carefully consider their future membership so that the benefits of having key decision-makers who have developed strong, trusting, interpersonal working relationships during the crisis phase of the pandemic are not lost as agencies transition into the post-pandemic recovery phase.

#### Recommendation 8

That Local Authorities may wish to consider adopting and learning from the formalised, pre-pandemic structures in Craignorth (Local Authority Ward Manager; Voluntary Coordination Group) which facilitated a rapid, effective, nuanced and co-ordinated response, particularly in the initial phases of the pandemic. This will help support future emergency planning. This requires national consultation with a variety of rural



communities to look at 'what worked' nationally in response to the pandemic in rural locations. Our study highlights the importance of formalised, active rural community structures in aiding a successful response to COVID-19.

#### Recommendation 9

That the Scottish government and Local Authorities may wish to consider whether the membership, remit and funding of existing Community Planning Partnerships is appropriate going forward for responding to crisis.

#### Recommendation 10

In order that local community groups can quickly and easily secure funding to support nimble, effective and nuanced community responses to future civil emergencies, it is recommended that a Reserved Emergency Fund be established. This would be ring-fenced for local emergencies and with the work done with mapping community structures, local rural delivery mechanisms could be taken into consideration with where these funds are held.

#### Recommendation 11

That training is offered to those volunteering and working in rural community partnerships to enhance their work, including how to implement recommendations 5-8 effectively. This will enhance the ability of local community planning and help support rural services to plan more effectively for future events. The funding structure of rural community partnerships should also be reviewed and enhanced if necessary.

#### Recommendation 12

That a follow-up study is undertaken in summer of 2022 with the aim of undertaking a comparative analysis of data to be gathered in relation to 2021.

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