together,
we help
to build forward
better

Social action during the coronavirus pandemic:

Learning from the crisis to help build forward better

(part of the Social Action Inquiry Scotland)

Contents

Executive summary

In May 2020, a partnership group consisting of Carnegie UK Trust, Corra Foundation, the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE), Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations (SCVO), The National Lottery Community Fund, The Robertson Trust and Foundation Scotland published a summary founding document which outlined their intention to research and better understand the role of "social action"[1]: how people come together to improve their lives and how this can be harnessed to create a fairer Scotland. A social action inquiry was to be launched in 2020; however, as a consequence of Covid-19, this has been delayed and will now launch in the Spring of 2021. With the growing number of examples of individuals and groups participating in social action efforts to support their communities during these unprecedented times, partners identified the pandemic as an opportunity to learn about informal social action in response to a crisis. This report brings together learning from across Scotland through survey research, interviews, citizen journalism and creative outputs.

The findings, approaches and recommendations emerging from this report will inform the wider Social Action Inquiry.

The consultancy group (The Collective) contacted a total of 138 people from a diverse range of organisations, communities and individuals involved in formal and non-formal social action across Scotland.

→ A total of 18 Community Researchers were recruited and trained who conducted their own co-designed and socially distanced surveys with 367 participants in November 2020.

→ A total of 22 creative stories were developed for the **www.togetherwehelp.scot** microsite for the project and shared across a variety of channels.

'Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing'
– Arundhati Roy.[2]

We have seen that possibility in the responses to this crisis. The challenge for funders, service providers and decision makers is to support such initiatives and actions without stifling creativity and trying to make these fit the current unequal systems we have.

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[1] https://www.corra.scot/wp-content/uploads/Social-Action-Inquiry-Scotland-summary-founding-document-May-2020-for-distribution-with-tender-doc.docx (Accessed 07 Jan 2021)
[2] https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca (accessed 4 Jan 2021)

Key findings

→ 60% of participants got involved in social action because they felt compelled to "do their part" and help their communities.

→ Almost 1 in 3 got involved in social action efforts after hearing about it from a friend or neighbour.

→ The most common social action efforts were food distribution/collection, grocery or prescription pick-ups for neighbours and befriending or "checking-in" with isolating/ shielding neighbours.

→ A third of participants were new to volunteering in their communities.

→ 44% of participants were also getting social action support (e.g. through a foodbank).

→ 51% of participants felt there was an increase in community frustration at ongoing inequality.

→ 64% felt there was a reduction in stigma in coming forward for support.

→ Participants emphasised the need to not view social action through "rose-tinted glasses" but to understand that many social action interventions are a direct result of poverty, exclusion and inequality.

→ Respondents stated that mental wellbeing had declined and that mental health needed to be a local priority. In particular, they highlighted multiple experiences of providing voluntary support whilst encountering their neighbours at their most vulnerable and at-risk due to declining mental wellbeing yet not knowing how to respond or appropriately help.

→ Respondents explained that they felt empowered by supporting their communities but equally disempowered by the impact of inequality and feeling that their communities were being overlooked.

→ Participants wanted to see more local decision making and co-production which included their communities and a diverse cross-section of Scotland.

→ Respondents stated that their communities responded with impressive speed, innovation and empathy.

→ The majority of social action efforts galvanised support online or through smartphone apps. As such, digital exclusion and digital literacy were identified as key concerns.

Key recommendations

The recommendations in this report were co-produced with the community researchers to ensure an accurate reflection of needs being identified on the ground across communities.

For funders, local government and charities:

→ Co-design funding methodologies and approaches with local communities and individuals who are experts by experience.

→ Allow rapid and fast access to funds by those who have no infrastructure and are responding to a crisis.

→ Funders and project developers should consider coming together to invest in a network of Scotland-wide (paid) community voices to inform their funding practices and funding decisions.

→ Wellbeing, befriending and "checking-in" support should be funded further, along with re-investment in community development efforts which have lost funds in real terms through austerity measures faced by public services.

For local and national policy makers and those responsible for policy implementation:

→ Across Scotland, at community-level, there should be investment in a programme of citizen capacity building which supports democratic and social participation.

→ Identify routes to increase state-level support available through the social security system within Scotland to allow individuals and families to live with choice, dignity and without the risk of destitution. Deliver sustainable, long-term funding for third sector interventions to enable them to support those in communities more fully.

→ Bolder action is needed to tackle root causes of poverty and inequality. Consideration must be given to the implementation of Universal Basic Income and practical ways in which a "wellbeing economy" can be created to deliver for those furthest away from opportunity and financial security.

→ Those providing support, either as volunteers or working in third or public sector organisations, must have access to appropriate wellbeing support and access to funded mental health related training.

→ Significant increased investment in mental health services which focus on local delivery and are responsive to the needs of minoritised groups must be prioritised.

→ Invest further resources on ensuring equal access to digital skills and the internet. This should include consistent access to broadband in rural communities, distribution of technology and data access to low income families. Consideration should be given to a universal broadband policy in Scotland.

→ Power and decision-making must be shifted from a top-down to a ground-up approach, away from centralisation and into the hands of those with lived experience of inequality. Further investment and roll-out of the citizen panels, assemblies and lived experience panel approaches currently being utilised by the Scottish Government should be pursued.

Introduction

Since March 2020, as the first social restrictions came into place across the UK, there have been increasing reports of "communities coming together"[3] to lend a hand. The ways in which communities have supported one another have varied. In some cases, it is groups already formed changing their activities to meet the immediate needs of local residents. These groups include established work through community councils, places of worship, youth groups and food banks which moved their focus to delivering helplines for older people and those who have underlying health conditions or setting up emergency food parcels to be delivered. Other community responses have included pre-existing informal groups (such as walking groups or parent and toddler groups) engaging in shared volunteer activities for their local communities (such as collecting food donations or creating a rota to visit older people in their gardens). Finally, the most common response was that of individuals (or neighbours working as a new group) simply checking in on those on their street or setting up new communication methods (such as neighbourhood WhatsApp groups) to stay in touch, share information and provide assistance to one another as and when needed.

Regardless of the method of participation, it is clear that social action engagement and volunteering have increased dramatically.

The Scottish Government also responded to this growing empathy in communities, with the "Scotland Cares" campaign to encourage those who could volunteer, to provide support where possible. The Ready Scotland website[4] has been established to provide guidance to community groups and those looking to volunteer. At the same time retired NHS workers or those who had left the sector were asked to step-up and rejoin. Rhetoric during this time heavily featured language of communities "pulling together", "building back better" and "getting through this together".

However, whilst the response is welcome and necessary, how it is sustained and how communities are supported beyond the immediate crisis needs further analysis. Local authorities, governments and third sector partners have already been working to identify routes forward through small scale surveys and larger academic studies, including a UK wide survey by King's College London.[5]

It is almost a year since the first cases of Coronavirus were reported in the UK. The pandemic has accelerated and shone an intense light on existing inequalities, increasing poverty, and under-resourced public, statutory and non-statutory sectors. The central message of the report is about communities and individuals coming together to help each other in quick, responsive, creative ways on very local levels across Scotland during a time of intense crisis.

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[3] https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/oct/07/uk-artists-combat-isolation-with-freewheeling-lullabies-and doorstep-concerts-coronavirus
[4] https://ready.scot/get-involved/playing-your-part (accessed 28 Nov 2020)
[5] https://www.kcl.ac.uk/news/researchers-to-investigate-how-coronavirus-has-brought-communities-together (accessed 28 Nov 2020)

What is social action and why does it matter?

The term "social action" has been used within social care and community development since the 1970s[6] when it was attached to social work (largely in the United States) and applied to the understanding of power, societal change and the impact on the individual or community. However, since then the term has become more generalised and is defined differently depending on the context it is being applied to.

The Social Action Model as defined by Charles Zastrow[7] in 2009 works particularly well for this research project, as it focuses on the power of collective action to bring about positive change in communities, led by those within the community itself. It focuses on power and resource redistribution and on the creation of a more empowered, just and equal society.

Social action differs from general volunteering as it is focused on the community of the individual(s) involved rather than a national charity or an issue focused organisation.[8] It should be noted that the definition often defines "community" as within immediate geographical distance, i.e. place-based rather than a wider understanding of community, e.g. cultural commonality such as heritage or language. Social action focuses on identifying and responding to local problems, to improve conditions and/or advocate for change; it is usually delivered through hyper-local and independent groups.[9] The forthcoming wider social action inquiry will include voluntary efforts in both place based communities and communities of interest.

In terms of policy making, the frequent use of the term "social action" arose from the drive for volunteering through the "big society" initiative of the then coalition UK Government of 2010. Later, the Office for Civil Society defined "social action" as:

"people coming together to help improve their lives and solve the problems that are important in their communities. It can broadly be defined as practical action in the service of others, which is (i) carried out by individuals or groups of people working together, (ii) not mandated and not for profit, (iii) done for the good of others – individuals, communities and/ or society, and (iv) bringing about social change and or value."

Since then, there have been a number of different iterations of volunteer programmes and community engagement promotions across both the UK and Scottish Governments, and the term has become more commonly used within the Third and Public Sectors.

Similarly, "community organising" became more frequently used in a similar context to social action, after substantial spotlight under the 2008 Obama Campaign in the United States, despite it being a long-known term and organising method across campaigning and trade union movements.[10] Both social action and community organising, at their core, have the same focus: individuals empowered to make change, and lead change, on the ground to improve their lives and the lives of those around them.

[6] S. K. Khinduka and Bernard J. Coughlin, Social Service Review, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Mar., 1975)
[7] Charles Zastrow (27 January 2009). The Practice of Social Work: A Comprehensive Worktext:. Cengage Learning. p 284 - 287
[8] Volunteering and social action, National Voices (May 2017).
[9] A narrative to complement the six principles for engaging people and communities (National Voices, 2017)
[10] https://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/07/us/politics/07community.html, accessed 29 Nov 2020

According to the 2018 Scottish Household Survey, 48% of adults had volunteered (this included both formal volunteering such as weekly hours to a mental health support helpline and informal volunteering, more in line with what this report is evaluating). This equates to 150 million hours of formal volunteering time and 211 million hours in informal volunteering, which contributes an estimated £5.5 billion to local economies across Scotland. However, details on the extent of participation in "social action" or "community organising" in Scotland are as yet unknown, largely due the informal, reactive, and at times, spontaneous nature of it; as such, a formal calculation of social action engagement in Scotland is likely to never be a fully accurate picture of what is going on in our local communities.

Much of the Government and charity sector-focused work on "social action" has focused on youth participation. The largest effort on this has been the #iwill campaign which encourages young people to make a difference in their communities through action focused on environmentalism, safety, health and wellbeing and education. YouthLink Scotland was a key player in this work[11] and supported 30 #iwill ambassadors to support the delivery of this localised engagement across the country. The purpose of the #iwill campaign was to support at least 60% of 10 to 20-year-olds to take part in "meaningful" action at least once in the year. According to the Centre for Youth Impact (2017)[12], the benefits of this social action have been extensive "there is a marked benefit in terms of life satisfaction and increased resilience to challenges they [young people] might face in their lives." However, what is critical and highlighted by the Centre

for Youth Impact, is the disparity in class of the young people taking part in the campaign, with higher numbers from affluent backgrounds able to take part.

Beyond volunteering in a general sense, and returning to the original idea behind "social action", it has a particular importance in society as it is about citizen led, locally relevant community improvement. Through social action, communities may become more empowered and can instigate change to create a healthier and fairer society but do so on their own terms, rather than a top-down approach, such as a national engagement programme.

Across Scotland, countless examples of social action can be learnt from; there are informal groups of parents working together to support their local school or walking groups set up to tackle loneliness for older people. There are also more formalised social action examples through community councils such as participatory budgeting activities.[13] Examples of informal or "organic" social action include; an Edinburgh based local park clean-up which began as a simple Facebook group of a few residents and has since grown to hundreds of neighbours joining in and sharing in the maintaining of their local green space. In East Lothian, residents have worked together to create a "welcoming committee" for any refugees being settled in their area which has included writing welcome letters, preparing parcels of food and acting as befrienders.[14] A final example, led by young people in Inverness, has won awards for bringing together youngsters with new diagnoses of diabetes, raising funds for diabetes charities and providing support and advice to local teenagers dealing with their new diagnosis.[15]

[11] https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/programmes/iwill-scotland/ (accessed 06 Dec 2020)

[12] https://www.youthimpact.uk/blogs/social-action-in-practice (accessed 06 Dec 2020)

[13] http://www.communitycouncils.scot/report-on-impact-of-participatory-budgeting-activity.html (accessed 07 Jan 2021)

[14] https://www.eastlothiancourier.com/news/14114805.residents-back-refugees/ (accessed 07 Jan 2021)

[15] https://www.inverness-courier.co.uk/news/inspirational-highland-volunteer-group-wins-diabetes-scotland-award-180602/ (accessed 07 Jan 2021)

Social action and community power

The Social Action Model explained above, focuses on collective power and the ability to change our local communities for the better, whether that be the local environment, green spaces, housing or public services. However, the term used within the UK (particularly in volunteering promotion programmes) is less political and more focused on "doing good" and charity or altruism; however, volunteering activity which focuses on the needs of our local communities for example food banks, helplines tackling loneliness or park "clean-ups" are connected to inequality, to politics and to policy decisions. To separate this activity from political reality is not truly possible. Whilst the reasoning for an individual to engage in social action may not be politically motivated or viewed through such a lens, as the Social Action Model explains, it is possible for the activity led by individuals or community groups to have a positive, wider political impact and may create a redistribution of power or at the very least a feeling of civic participation and control.

Professor Jenny Pearce conducted a review[16] of social action and power as part of the North of England "Connected Communities" project. In this she described the use of power and understanding of power by communities, not in a traditional hierarchical sense, but "as about cooperation, listening, sharing and enabling others. Non- dominating forms of power, it is argued, offer the best potential for building participation and connecting communities". In this review, Pearce explores the way in which community empowerment and participation has been approached which assumes top-down and traditional definitions of power. However, social action which is genuinely organic and led by grassroots does not duplicate structured methods of participation or policy making; rather it is flexible, changing and not necessarily planned through but rather reactive to community needs.

[16] Connected Communities Power in Community: A Research and Social Action Scoping Review, J. Pearce

Within the Scottish Government and across the third sector, activity to engage the public and develop improved methods of engagement and participation have become more common. Examples include the Scottish Government's Social Security Lived Experience Panels and Citizens Assemblies[17] and Inclusion Scotland's People Led Policy Panel.[18] These initiatives are incredibly important; however, they differ from social action, as they are structured forms of engagement with specific targets to inform national or local policy making. In contrast, social action is organic, does not necessarily have a predetermined outcome and is led from the ground-up. However, participation methods such as citizen assemblies and grassroots social action can work together across society to create a more informed, more powerful and more engaged public.

Given the varied ways in which social action is defined, as described above, this project focuses on social action which is organic, which is voluntary and which has been newly formed or is an existing local delivery which has changed to meet the needs of the community during the pandemic crisis.

The analysis of findings in this report draws on the Social Action Model, which focuses on how community empowerment, policy influencing and collective action can be harnessed through social action efforts to change communities for the better. In this report we see "power" or "empowerment" in a similar way as described by Prof. Jenny Pearce and how communities interpret the term themselves: being listened to, listening to others, influencing on the issues they feel matter and enabling others to take part.

17 https://www.citizensassembly.scot/ (accessed 16 Dec 2020)
18 https://inclusionscotland.org/what-we-do/policy/people-led-policy/ (accessed 16 Dec 2020)

Social action and pandemic crisis response

The experience of Covid-19 in communities and their response to help one another have already been researched by a number of organisations. Carnegie UK Trust's recent report[19] on community responses to Covid-19 identified four "levels" of response: the hyperlocal, community/third sector responses, local authority responses and partnerships (our current report focuses on the first two of these). In their listening exercises across the UK, they identified that the communities particularly affected by the crisis were those on zero hour contracts, those already experiencing poverty and migrant communities. Further, they found that participants wanted to see more recognition for "community spirit" and increased value placed on the capabilities of communities, with community power embedded within the decision making "system" across the UK. The report also explained the need to maintain local collaborative approaches learnt through this crisis period before returning to a "normal" that worked only for a minority.

Similarly, Locality, an England based community power organisation, has published a report[20] focused on seven case studies of community intervention during the pandemic. In this report social action initiatives and communities are referred to as "cogs of connection" which are identified as being critical to social cohesion. The report also recognises that established community organisations have adapted at great pace to meet changing needs during the pandemic; however, for them to maintain this pace and meet the challenges of the future, they will need considerable support. Crucially, the report states the need for community power to be recognised in decision making and the need for a community-focused economic recovery.

Finally, many organisations including the Scottish Community Development Centre, Corra Foundation and Scotland's Towns Partnership, have collated a number of case studies and stories of community responses during Covid-19, which provide a hugely important narrative recognising the ways in which communities have responded to one another during the pandemic.

In this report, similar to the Carnegie UK Trust report, we focus on hyperlocal and community based activity, with a view to identifying not just what was delivered on the ground, but critically, what motivated people to help their community and what we can learn from this to enable more community power and create a fairer Scotland.

19   Carnegie UK Trust; COVID-19 and Communities Listening Project: A Shared Response (2020)
20   Locality; We were built for this (2020)

What we did and how we did it

The methodology developed for this project was an iterative process, given the global pandemic and changes to restrictions. Approaches were as accessible as possible and as creative as possible whilst largely working online.

Research questions

The following research questions were identified to support the purpose of the project and enable the learning which the commission is seeking:

1. What social action is taking place across Scotland in response to the pandemic?

2. Why did people get involved in the social action?

3. What have the challenges been in participating in social action and what gaps exist in delivery or participation?

4. What can Scotland learn from these social action examples?

5. What impact (or perceived impact) has there been in communities as a consequence of social action?

6. Who has participated and has participation been inclusive?

Definitions

In order to investigate the research questions thoroughly we first confirmed key definitions with the commissioning group.

"Social action" was defined as "activities undertaken by an individual or a group of individuals within their local communities to support those around them without additional payment. The activities are informed by an identified need of a community or gap within the community". We did include those working in local community development/third sector funded organisations, provided they were delivering Covid-19 specific efforts. Throughout the research we use this term synonymous with "community action" as this was found to be an easier term to understand by the participants we worked with.

"Covid-19 related activities" were defined as any activity established from March 2020 to date in response to community needs as a consequence of the pandemic, for example, food parcels for those shielding.

The "individuals or groups of individuals" were defined as volunteers who have responded to their local community either by setting up an informal group or initiative themselves, as part of a pre-existing informal group (such as a parent and toddler group) or a community specific Covid-19 response by a locally based charity.

The term "social action" was not well understood or did not feel relevant to the groups we worked with. Participants preferred the use of "community support" or simply "volunteering". As such, in our research delivery we have tried to use these terms more often.

Identifying social action examples and participants

In order to engage a wide and diverse range of people and understand the different types of social action initiatives that have emerged as a consequence of Covid-19, the consultancy group reached out through a number of methods. These included requests for contact through social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn), utilising the grassroots networks of the commissioning group organisations and the consultants and finally sending out a request to participate through the SCVO Coronavirus Community Assistance Directory which hosts hundreds of local initiatives. From this, 138 social action examples were contacted (or contacted the project independently). These were further categorised into:

1. Mutual Aid Groups	**2.** Emotional and social support	**3.** Transport/ deliveries	**4.** Food and Groceries
5. Information and advice	**7.** Specialist support (e.g. for carers or addiction support)		**8.** Other

Identifying social action is a complex process and there are two key reasons for this: firstly, the most local, neighbourhood focused or individually led social action examples do not have a digital footprint and often work through phone, text messaging or word-of-mouth. As such, these are difficult to identify and therefore less likely engage in a national project. Secondly, many social action examples, whilst appearing to be a local delivery during Covid-19, were linked to regional or national organisations which pre-existed the pandemic. The consultancy group took a decision to include those which are linked to very local organisations only and not those linked to national or regional third sector organisations.

To assist the "sorting process" of which social action examples to include in this project, we categorised all which were found through our research as follows:

1

National third sector organisations which engaged in new activity/response for Covid-19 (for example, a national children's charity

2

Regional organisations which engaged in new activity/response for Covid-19 (for example, a third sector regional interface)

3

A local/community focused pre-existing organisation which engaged in specific Covid-19 activities with new volunteers (for example, a youth group/centre or food bank)

4

A local informal group which engaged in new activities with new or existing volunteers for Covid-19 (for example, a parent and toddler group)

5

An entirely new activity, by a group newly formed or an individual, specifically for Covid-19 and hyperlocal

For the research to provide the insights sought after by the commissioning group which defined social action as "community/neighbourhood level action taken by more informal or grassroots groups", those social action examples which were categorised as 3, 4, or 5 only were included in this project.

Demographic and Intersectional analysis

Whilst data was limited from some demographic groups, where a representative sample was available (which were: gender, caring responsibilities and ethnicity), analysis has included a deeper dive to identify if there were demographic group differences. Where possible (particularly on gender and ethnicity), a further intersectional analysis was also performed. Where there are differences from the overall data analysis, this has been included in the findings; however, largely there were no notable differences in findings between minoritised groups. We must stress that this does not mean that differences do not exist, it simply means discernible differences were not identified in this report. Communities which have experienced systemic inequality will often experience place-based community differently, as such it is imperative that an equalities focused and intersectional approach in this type of research is always taken.

Representative and equalities-informed approaches

At the heart of this project is an inclusive and representative approach which is informed by the realities of systemic inequality. In order to deliver this project with these values, specific effort and investment was made to ensure a diverse and representative group of community researchers and that participants were from a diverse background. This included discussion on ethics and inequality with community researchers, specific questions asked during focus groups on the impact of pre-existing inequality and discrimination, and background reading in relation to social action which acknowledges and analyses the impact of privilege and inequality.

Methodology of creative outputs

In order to promote the work of this project and share the important stories of those delivering social action, a website was created: **www.togetherwehelp.scot**, where stories were posted, progress of the research was shared and invitations to participate were published.

All 138 examples which met the criteria for "social action" were contacted and asked to share their stories and focus on what they did and what Scotland can learn. These 138 examples all met the definition of categories 3, 4 and 5, as explained above. They were given creative freedom on how they could share their stories: through photography, video, blog or recorded interview. From this initial contact 22 shared their stories for us to learn from.

These stories were then coded for the primary, secondary and tertiary themes they expressed which are analysed later in this report.

Methodology of community research

All 138 social action example key contacts were asked if they would like to participate in the project as "community researchers". This role involved attending a training session (facilitated by Scottish Community Development Centre and Community Enterprise[21]) to build skills on how to develop survey questions, how to conduct research, survey ethics and distribution. The community researchers were asked to survey those members of their local community who had volunteered their time and participated in or led social action initiatives. Community researchers were paid £200 for their time and input.

From the original contact, 18 community researchers were recruited (based on the type of social action they delivered and their geography, to ensure wide representation across Scotland).

A combination of research methods were employed, which met the needs of both a national project and the core purpose of community research - which focuses on research being fully led by grassroots community members. Community research usually involves the method of the research, the research questions, the delivery, the analysis and write-up being fully conducted by community members. With this project already having defined research questions for the consultancy group to investigate, a pre-made survey of nine questions was created with three additional questions for each community researcher to develop themselves, which are relevant to their own communities and which investigate issues they feel are pertinent to their local area. The surveys were distributed online through social media messaging, on Whatsapp, via Zoom, as interviews over the phone or socially distanced interviews, whichever method was most appropriate for the researchers. The responses were then collated and recommendations were developed and sense-checked with community researchers to ensure a fair and accurate interpretation had been derived by consultants.

Along with collecting surveys from social action participants, community researchers also took part in a more detailed survey, video interviews and an online focus group. The community researchers involvement as research participants included asking them further open comments on what policymakers need to do differently, what the challenges of delivering social action was and their experience as community researchers.

[21] https://www.scdc.org.uk/

Community researchers surveyed in the following areas of Scotland:

→ Wishaw
→ Bonnybridge
→ Glenrothes
→ Cumnock
→ Glasgow North East
→ Rural South Lanarkshire
→ Govan
→ Biggar
→ Drumchapel
→ Edinburgh Leith
→ Dornie
→ Pitlochry
→ Perth
→ Castlemilk
→ Larbert
→ Edinburgh South

Whilst there is representation from across Scotland and specific effort was made to ensure rural representation, the majority of community researchers were still from the central belt. This was largely due to accessibility and knowledge of social action efforts being delivered in a limited time, the digital footprint of social action efforts (those based in urban areas were more likely to be using social media) and pre-existing contacts provided to the consultancy group.
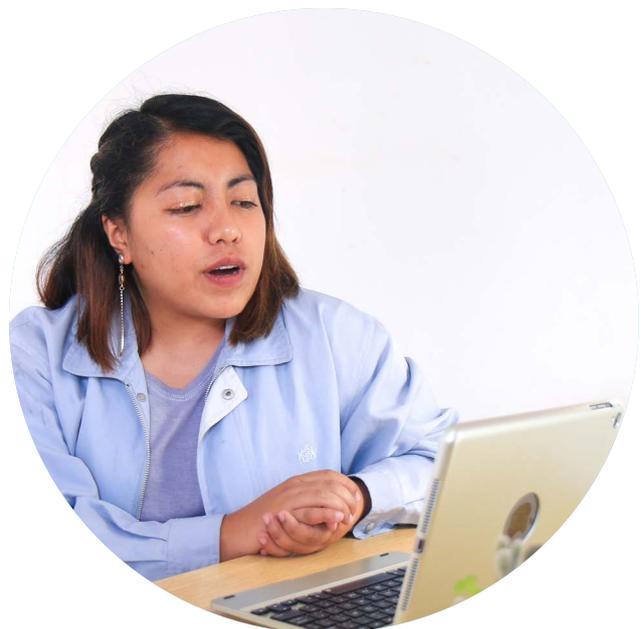
What we learnt:

Who was involved?

In total (including community researchers who themselves delivered social action initiatives), 367 respondents took part in our survey.

Of these 367 respondents, the breakdown of demographics is below. We purposely asked detailed questions about who was involved to enable us to understand the success of our reach and whether efforts were inclusive and representative.

Table 1: Demographics of participants:

Gender		
	Man	37%
	Woman	57%
	Trans	0.3%
	Non-binary/other	1%
	Prefer not to say	4%

Religion		
	Christian (all denominations)	42%
	Muslim	14%
	Buddhist	1%
	Hindu	1%
	Jewish	1.4%
	Sikh	1.4%
	Prefer not to say	31%
	Other	7%

Disability		
	Yes	15%
	No	79%
	Prefer not to say	6%

Ethnicity		
	White Scottish/English/NI/Welsh	65%
	White Irish	2%
	White Gypsy/Traveller	0.6%
	Any other white background	4%
	Mixed ethnic background	2%
	Indian	0.3%
	Pakistani	4%

Sexuality		
	Heterosexual	82%
	Lesbian or Gay	6%
	Bisexual or other	3%
	Prefer not to say	9%

Age		
	Under 18	1.7%
	18-24	8%
	25-34	15%
	35-44	26%
	45-54	20%
	55-64	16%
	65+	10%
	Prefer not to say	2.5%

Caring responsibilities		
	Yes	44%
	No	53%
	Prefer not to say	3%

Ethnicity		
	Bangladeshi	0.3%
	Chinese	1.7%
	Any other Asian Background	0.6%
	African	4.3%
	Any other black/African/Caribbean background	1.1%
	Arab	8%
	Prefer not to say	5.1%
	Other	0.8%

From the table above we can see that, whilst there was a higher than population average representation from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities, there was an under-representation of disabled people and of LGBT people. Efforts to engage and research on social action and community participation must work harder (including any work of this kind in the future) to include a diverse and representative sample. This emphasises the need to invest time and resource in relationship building on the ground. Whilst the remote working need caused by Covid-19 has created limitations in outreach, this engagement barrier existed before the pandemic, as those who are furthest from opportunity, power and inclusion across Scotland are less likely to be participating in pre-existing systems. Systems need to be re-invented from the ground up, rather than top down, and be co-produced with community leaders.

The above data also tells us that women were more likely to respond to the survey (20% more than men) and are therefore potentially more likely to be involved in social action. This chimes with the National Council of Voluntary Organisation's 2020 analysis of volunteers which found that women were more likely than men to volunteer at least once in the year.[22] **Within this, we analysed further and found that of those who stated they had caring responsibilities (44% of survey respondents), 80% were women.** This is in line with data from multiple women's organisations (including the Scottish Women's Budget Group) who have repeatedly reported the disproportionate caring responsibilities taken on by women.

80%

of survey respondents who stated they had caring responsibilities were women

22 https://twitter.com/Mr_Minchin/status/1349777005575888901 (accessed 07 Jan 2021)

What were people's motivations to help?

We asked respondents to tell us why they took part in, or led, social action efforts in their local communities, to better understand their motivations and help us consider how this may be sustained in the future.

We asked them to pick one of the reasons in the table below to explain why they took part. From the responses, the vast majority (over 60%) participated in community action, simply to help their local neighbours and community, when they saw a need.

This was reiterated in the focus group. As one participant stated:

"I didn't think about it much, it's just because it needed doing and everyone wanted to be there for each other"

A survey participant said:

"People have came together, maybe for the first time, we did it cause we wanted to find solutions, we just wanted to do something to make it a bit better. Doesn't matter how small, doesn't matter if it's just 3 houses on your street, it's just doing something positive"

Table 2: Motivation for taking part and percentage who agree or strongly agree with the statement (only one answer from this multiple choice question could be picked):

60%
**To support my
local community**

17%
**To feel
helpful**

12%
**To have a sense
of socialising within
restrictions**

7%
**Because I had more
time due to furlough or
reduced working hours**

3%
Other
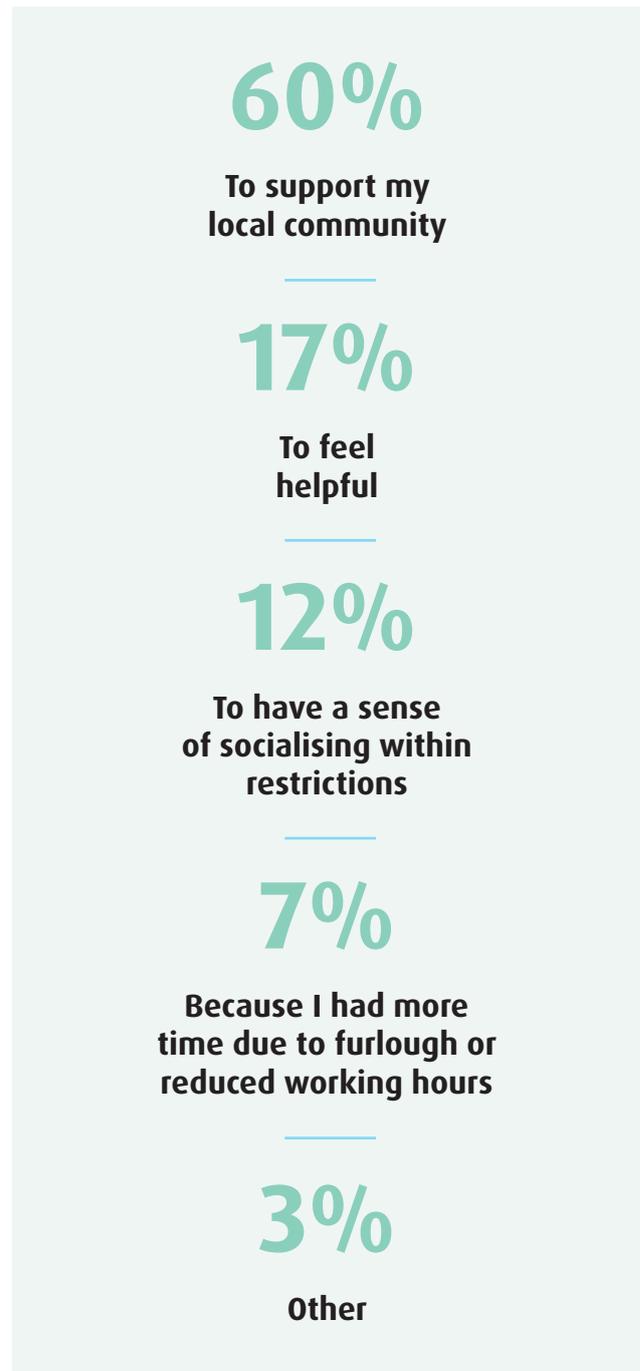
As participants were required to pick only one answer, it should be highlighted that there may have been multiple reasons for taking part in social action; the survey asked for the "most relevant" reason to be chosen as the answer.

New volunteers or more work by the same people?

We asked respondents whether they had been involved in volunteering or social action efforts before, to understand whether new people were engaged in their communities during Covid-19. **We found that almost a third of participants (32%) were new to social action, with 68% stating they had volunteered in their communities before.**

This tells us that local social action efforts during the pandemic opened the doors to new people and potentially encouraged more cohesion within communities.

How did people get involved in social action?

We asked how people found out about the social action efforts they were involved in, to better understand how communication worked and how this can be harnessed in the future. Participants were able to choose one answer from a pre-written list. The most common answer was hearing about social action efforts through a friend or neighbour, illustrating the hyperlocal nature of social action in communities, followed closely by participating in a new initiative by a community organisation they were already aware of.

Participants who replied "other" stated they had taken part after reading about it in a local newspaper, receiving a flyer through their door, after their workplace was approached to get involved or through their school.

Table 3: How people found out about social action (% of participants who chose this answer):

17%
Read about it online

30%
Heard about it from a friend or neighbour

14%
Identified a need and starting something yourself

24%
Saw an organisation you knew doing something specific for Covid-19 (including religious bodies)

4%
Did your own research and found something to get involved in

11%
Other
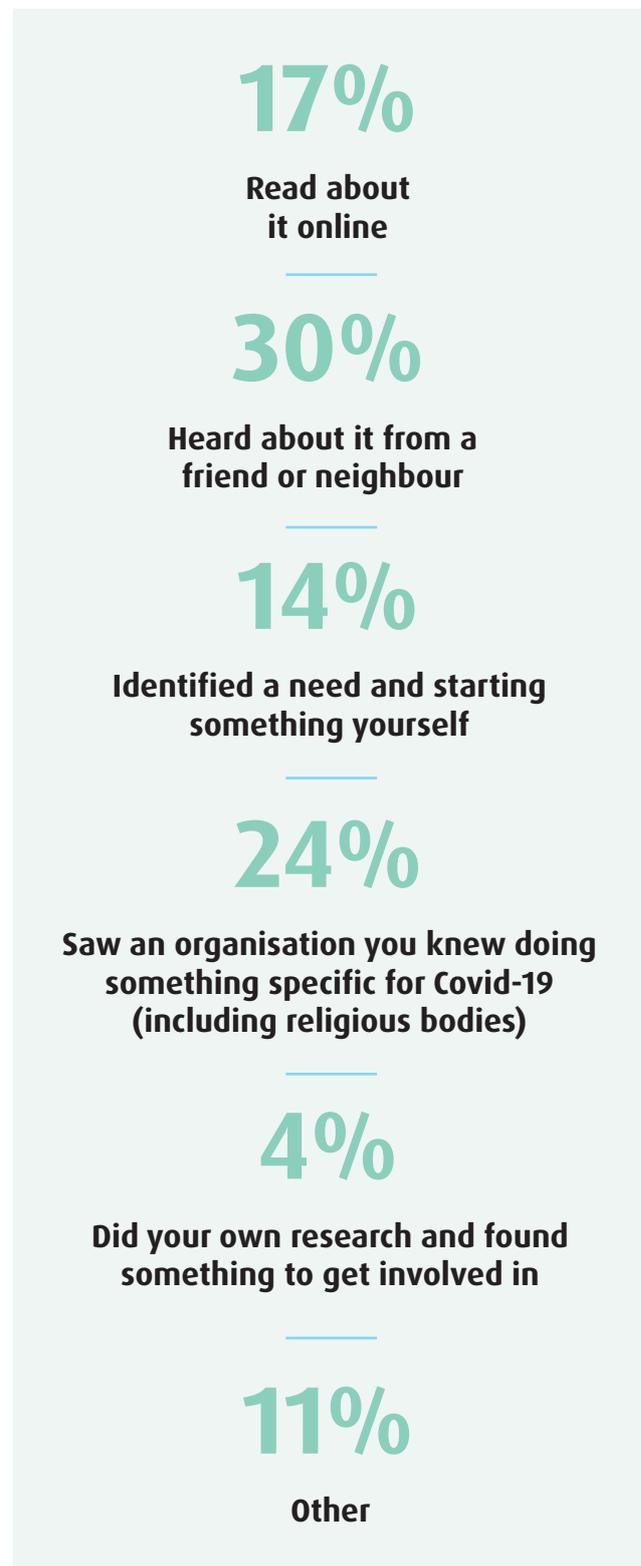
The types of activity people were involved in

We asked respondents what social action they were involved in. The majority (24%) were involved in the collection of, packaging of and/ or delivery of food parcels, either as a newly formed group or joining the local food bank. The second most common social action activity, with 16% of participants, was the delivery of groceries or prescriptions for a local neighbour who was shielding or at high-risk of Covid-19. Finally, befriending and calling individuals who are shielding to prevent loneliness and isolation was delivered by 12% of participants. This ranged from coordinated helplines, to simply weekly calls to an elderly neighbour. Table 4 provides a full breakdown.

A small proportion of those who responded to the survey (approximately 11%, and 3 community researchers) were participating in specific social action activities for those who shared their culture, religion or migration status alongside general social action within their local communities, for example, providing specialist food parcels or providing social distancing information in their first language.

As a community researcher explained:

"I am working with groups who are immigrants not just in my area in North Glasgow...for some I am writing Arabic for them to know about the situation and keep safe.

We have been purchasing food items that are need for the cooking of our community, and parcels and also provided phone top ups for people."

Table 4: Social action activities

Social action activities		
	Delivering/packaging/ collecting food (as a group or part of local food bank)	24%
	Delivering groceries/ prescriptions/other to neighbours	16%
	Befriending/checking-in with people	12%
	Making face masks or PPE	8%
	General coordination of volunteers	7%
	Support for/with children and young people	6%
	Covid-19 info sharing and leafleting	5%
	Making and distributing cooked meals	5%
	Technology loans or digital support	4%
	General/free transport	3%
	Outdoor activities (e.g. walking group)	2%
	Translation services/English Support	2%
	Stewarding/Covid-19 safety measures for places of worship	2%
	Other	4%

Supporting others and getting support yourself

We wanted to know more about who was involved in social action efforts and whether they themselves were supported through social action and community initiatives. We asked participants if they had received support through a social action effort during the pandemic so far. **Almost half (44%) had received support from local community efforts** (such as food parcels, support with accessing technology or help with groceries/deliveries). 56% had not received Covid-19 social action support themselves.

As one of the community researchers explained:

"The reason I am so passionate about helping is because I have had to use the food bank, you don't realise the things people need, until you have been there yourself..."

The importance of kindness, of reciprocity and empathy was repeated throughout this research. Whilst multiple challenges were acknowledged, both community researchers and participants emphasised the values of "paying forward" kindness and the need for "togetherness" to make it through the pandemic.

The impact and challenges of social action during Covid-19

To understand more about the perceived impact of social action efforts and the feelings in regards to the need for social action within their communities, we asked participants to tell us to what extent they felt that the statements below (Table 5) were accurate.

Participants felt that social action efforts have connected the community and increased knowledge about the support available in their local areas (with 90% of participants agreeing or strongly agreeing with the corresponding statement). **Furthermore, 1 in 5 participants told us that they felt the social action in their communities had not necessarily delivered any substantial change, as the issues they are working on (such as poverty and isolation) existed pre-pandemic, and the same need for the delivery of social action has continued.**

What was particularly encouraging was the improvement participants felt had been achieved in their community's ability to ask for support. **64% of participants felt that there was a reduction in stigma that can be associated with seeking support, particularly for those who needed emergency access to food and/ or had lost their income. However, when disaggregated, for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) respondents this was lower, at 57%. BAME participants were less likely to agree or strongly agree that there was a reduction in stigma in coming forward for support, highlighting the need to deliver inclusive and non-judgemental support and services to ensure all who need assistance are able to come forward and seek it.**

Table 5: Perceived impact of social action efforts within communities (% of participants who agreed or strongly agreed with the statements)

87%
The community felt more connected

90%
People in the community learnt more about the organisations and support systems around them

78%
People in the community got to know each other better

25%
There was no or little change as the issues we were helping with existed before Covid-19

33%
There was an increase in frustration in a lack of organisation or duplication of support being delivered (through different social action efforts in one area)

64%
There was a reduction in the stigma people sometimes feel in coming forward for any support

Participants also expressed frustration (below), which was not a direct consequence of their involvement in social action, however was further highlighted or made more obvious through their volunteering activities. Over 60% of our respondents stated that they felt there was a growing frustration towards lockdown and Covid-19 restrictions, which has been found in other research sets regarding public communications. Participants explained that they felt frustration towards social distancing was growing and they were able to detect this through their social action activities, with individuals expressing losing patience with the duration of the pandemic.

Over half of respondents felt there was an increase in frustration at ongoing inequality (beyond Covid-19) which has been further highlighted by the pandemic. The impact on and exacerbating of inequality has been well documented by third sector organisations and in the Scottish Government's recent report on the impact of Covid-19 on equality.[23] Participants (in particular community researchers) repeatedly expressed that they were aware of inequality in their communities; however, being involved in social action increased their frustration at the level and persistence of inequality and poverty.

64%
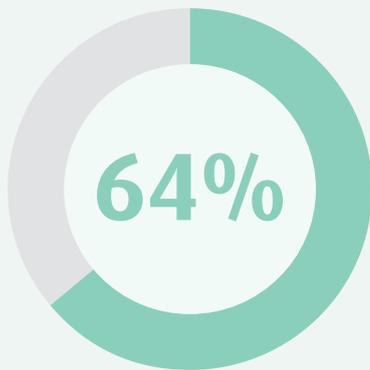
There was an increase in frustration at the current environment of restrictions

51%
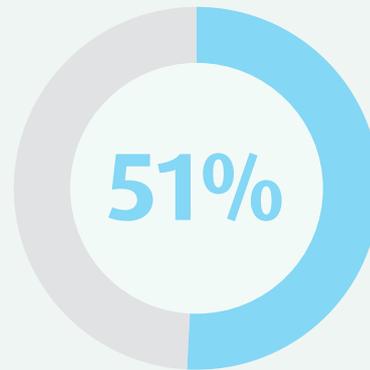
There was an increase in frustration at the inequalities which continue in our community

[23] The Impact of Covid-19 on equality in Scotland, Scottish Government (accessed 18 Dec 2020)

As one survey respondent said (and this same sentiment was echoed by many others):

"The community was stronger. It felt a better place, they all pulled together as a whole... and delivered to the community's most vulnerable."

From the focus group a participant reflected:

"We had an overwhelming response from people, saying it was great that we were doing what we were doing, but it really shouldn't have been needed in the first place. We shouldn't need to give internet and devices to people. It shouldn't be that bad.

I feel the only challenge came when restrictions began to lift and people began returning to work. With less volunteers we had to change how things were done, before the demand couldn't be met.

A lot of need and support required responses in real time...we were not always able to do that."

Sustainability of social action efforts

To understand whether social action engagement and delivery have existed beyond initial interest or the first "emergency" period in March/April, we asked participants two questions. The first was about their own participation and whether at the time of filling in the survey (early November 2020) they were still involved in social action efforts. **1 in 3 (33%) were no longer involved beyond the first lockdown**. The reasons for this included: the particular social action they were delivering was no longer needed (e.g. grocery deliveries when initially supermarkets were unable to meet demand), their period of furlough being over and returning to work, changes in work patterns, risks to their own health or their children returning to school and life getting "back to normal". **However for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic respondents this was inverse, 2 in 3 were no longer involved, with 1 in 3 still participating in social action.** When asked why this was the case, many respondents stated this was due to a return to work, the social action need being fulfilled elsewhere or an increase in caring responsibilities.

The second question we asked participants related to whether they felt the increase in social action efforts in general would be sustained during a second lockdown (this was before the introduction of the tier system). 84% were confident that social action efforts by community volunteers would continue to be delivered across Scotland to meet local area needs.

One survey participant said:

"I hope it is, but everyone is fatigued now, too many people are in extreme poverty and suffering loneliness"

Another participant said:

"we as a community and a nation were all completely winging it as the pandemic began but i feel by now and ongoing we are more prepared for what is or may be coming in the future."

Returning to the "impact of social action", participants stated a growing frustration with Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown, along with a third of participants who responded to the survey and were no longer participating in social action efforts, illustrating that there has been a "mood-change" since the beginning of the effects of the pandemic in March 2020 and the emerging of pandemic specific social action. A number of participants explained that in the first lockdown there was hope and enthusiasm, however by December 2020 (when this report was being collated), a number of factors including shorter days, bad weather, frustration and fatigue, had made some feel less engaged in social action, and felt less able to help.

As one individual from the focus group said:

"It's morale; at the beginning it was high, weather was better. The area I'm in is now going into phase 4 and now mood and morale is so low, in my family, at my work and in the street."

Inclusivity of social action

We wanted to find out whether social action efforts were inclusive of the diversity of communities and whether they were representative of the population getting, or in need of, support. Many previous studies have shown us that volunteering activities can often be the purview of those who are in more privileged positions and have the ability to spend time on efforts for no financial remuneration.[24] This relates to financial privilege and how it interacts with race, migration and English as a first language.

From the 367 respondents, 42% believed social activities were inclusive of all across their communities, 16% disagreed, and 42% said they did not know, as they were either unsure of how far reaching the social action was or it was an individual endeavour.

From the focus group, further detail was provided. Participants told us more could be and should be done to ensure community based organisations and efforts are inclusive; however, they stressed that the reactive and organic nature of social action often means that it is not planned in a way that would allow for outreach activities or strategic engagement to ensure representation. They also stressed that social action efforts specific to communities, such as Halal food deliveries, people who share a culture or heritage setting up zoom calls to avoid loneliness, religious communities setting up online prayer sessions, were visible across Scotland. This does however illustrate a limitation of the place based approach, which focuses on geography and locality of community rather than shared backgrounds of communities or communities of interest. As two community researchers (who supported interest communities across Scotland such as migrants) explained during interview, communities are not simply about shared postcodes, but shared heritage, experience and sometimes shared discrimination. However, innovative responses to Covid-19 (particularly the use of online engagement) brought communities together in ways which had not been used before and provided a platform for voices not heard before.

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[24] Mohan and Bolton (2019), The University of Birmingham, https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/tsrc/blog/ volunteering-and-civic-engagement.aspx (accessed 18 Dec 2020)

As Jenny from new formed LGBTQ voices explained[25]:

 "These digital conversation spaces are more important than ever, particularly in rural communities such as Dumfries and Galloway. Spaces for celebrating LGBTQ identity are scarce enough as is but with Covid-19 restrictions we see people completely cut off from communities of like minded individuals leaving behind an unheard population."

We also heard from Ethan[26], who explained why young people need to be included and how their efforts have sometimes been overlooked during Covid-19:

"I think what Scotland could learn from this is listen to our youth more, give us more opportunities to show our abilities and what we are capable of and can achieve."

A survey participant told us:

"I'm disabled and don't make the "high risk" category, so I was still able to go out and help other folk, but I know some disabled people who wanted to, but didn't know if it would be safe or even if they were welcome. So I think we need to be making sure we are clear about that and making it open to everyone, or we just make people feel more isolated"

25 https://www.togetherwehelp.scot/stories/lgbtq-conversations (accessed 07 Jan 2021)
26 https://www.togetherwehelp.scot/stories/youngpeoplearestrong (accessed 07 Jan 2021)

Social action in rural communities

There were many examples of social action interventions across Scotland. To ensure geographical representation, we made a specific effort to engage community researchers from rural communities. Four community researchers were based in rural areas (Dornie, Pitlochry, Rural South Lanarkshire and Biggar) and asked additional questions about challenges with delivering social action efforts in rural communities.

Most respondents from these communities (over 60%) stated that not having access to a car, poor internet connection, bad weather and distance between homes created problems in getting out to people and potential further feelings of isolation.

As one participant said:

"Some homes are not easily accessible, especially if it's heavy rain or ice, even with local bus service or car."

And another said:

"Distance is a challenge and I know that the food bank early on decided to form subsidiary foodbanks to avoid long distance travel and have food readily at hand as demand was set to increase."

And a third participant stated the potential financial impact for volunteers:

"It does bring challenges as volunteers have to travel long distances to support people and this can be costly for them."

One of the community researchers also asked participants (a group of 20 in a rural area) if being in a small community, where there is more familiarity between residents, added to concerns over confidentiality (and feelings of stigmatisation) in coming forward for support or offering support, particularly in relation to food poverty.
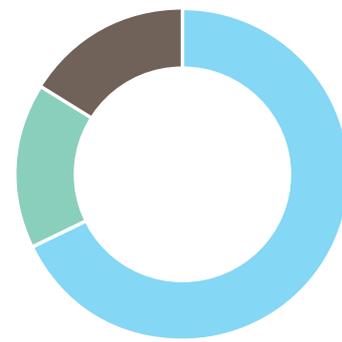
68%
agreed that delivering specifically in a rural area created challenges with confidentiality

16%
said no, there are no challenges of this sort

16%
said they "did not know."

This was inverse to the overall data gathered which indicated a reduction of stigma in asking for support. This illustrated the need for disaggregated and geographically representative data when delivering national analysis.

In the focus group, community researchers reflected on the impact of Covid-19 on the emotions of a close and small rural community:

"The death of someone in the village created a lot of worry and fear, we realised this was on our doorstep too, and we wanted to help even more."

Feeling valued and understanding inequality

Community researchers were able to add up to three extra questions they wanted to learn more about in their communities. Three researchers added questions that asked 58 participants if they felt valued and recognised for their efforts in their communities (as a closed question). Two researchers asked whether participants (29) had learnt anything new about their communities or changed attitudes about inequality in their communities (as an open comment).

93%

of respondents to this question said they felt valued and recognised for their efforts

In open questions asking if participants had learnt anything new from taking part, the majority stated that they had not learnt anything new specifically as they were part of the community and felt aware of the issues local to them; however, a third of open comments stated that whilst they knew about issues relating to isolation, poverty and inequality, they had not appreciated the extent of it until being involved in social action.

"I didn't realise how socially isolated some people are and how a little touch of kindness can impact their lives."

"It made me realise just how important a phone call can be to those who are lonely or isolated."

"...prior to volunteering I hadn't realised just how many people are cut off from the rest of society. Mainly older people with no knowledge of social media platforms and the need for money to buy devices and broadband, electricity etc. I hadn't realised just how many people are going hungry or have addictions. I think in the past I knew these things but I must've had an "I'm alright" attitude. Whereas now it has sunk in and I'm more empathetic and don't want people to struggle and know I have to fight with them to get change."

This was also echoed in the focus group by participants, who stated that there was a higher level of empathy and understanding about poverty and how close to poverty most people are on a daily basis.

As one participant summarised:

"I think what people have realised is how close each and every one of us is to being vulnerable or at risk. No matter how secure people thought their job was, this has affected everybody. When it comes down to the wire, the only difference between us is how quickly we've went to poverty. The difference is how many pay cheques you're away from poverty."

Trends identified from creative outputs on the "Together We Help" website

As part of this project, 20 "stories" were created by individuals participating in social action efforts. These were either as interviews, as recorded videos or written blogs.

From these 20 stories, 8 stories were created by individuals or small groups newly created during the pandemic, 8 were created by community organisations who had engaged in new activities to respond to Covid-19, and 4 were created by local informal groups such as parent and toddler groups which pre-existed the pandemic but worked together in some way to provide community support.

From the 22 people providing creative outputs (stories) for the project to learn from, 7 were involved in wellbeing or "check-in" activities within their communities, 7 were involved in creative or arts related social action, 5 were involved in food distribution, and 1 made face-masks or PPE.

Four contributors were either self-isolating at the time of writing or have been shielding during the pandemic. All four stated that participating in social action helped others but helped them to feel less lonely during this time; as Emily explained:

"I was shielding as I have had cancer since I was 14 years old...it really helped us get through such an isolating time and it was so lovely to bring a bit of kindness and happiness to our community during this difficult time."

And as Linda told us:

"I thought, I want to be able to help people here.... Anybody that could help, did.... I've been on my own a long long time, for myself it's to get out and about and meet people."

Those participating in individual social action interventions found it more difficult to answer questions relating to what changes (whether in policy or activities) are needed across Scotland. Evidence from this work suggests that those participating in group-based activities are more likely to have had conversations about wider inequality and how their social action efforts relate to Scotland-wide improvements that may be needed.

The vast majority of contributions focused on the positive impact of social action and what was achieved during a difficult time. Particular focus was put on community resilience, community power and inclusion.

As Mazhar summarised:

"I found for the first time people forgot their labels ..Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, English, Scottish, Pakistani etc and became one multi-cultural community to support each other during the fight to reduce the transmission of the Coronavirus."

Themes from Focus Groups and Open Comments

We cannot look at "social action" through rose-tinted glasses

What was very clear from both the survey responses, and particularly from our community researchers, was the concern around an emerging simplistic view of social action during this pandemic. There has been a lot of attention on, and praise for, neighbours and communities coming together to support each other. Whilst this is welcomed and the pandemic has brought a renewed sense of community across some areas of Scotland, participants repeatedly said that they did not want this attention to overshadow the reality of why some of the social action efforts where needed. Distribution of food parcels is a consequence of poverty, and loneliness of older people is a consequence of under-resourced social care and societal attitudes towards older people. Some social action efforts were very specific to the pandemic (such as grocery shopping for those self-isolating) but the majority of volunteering grew out of long-existing inequalities, exacerbated by Covid-19.

As one participant summarised:

"it's a blessing and a curse for our volunteering to be successful and in high demand. On one hand, I'm happy it is useful and helping, but if food parcels are in demand, it's because people are poor and their pay just isn't making it through the week or maybe even lost the job they had."

This was reiterated by others, particularly on food insecurity:

"community action should not have to exist if decision makers had appropriately put the right mechanisms in place to help everyone during the first and ongoing waves of covid."

"There should not have been a need for the Food Bank before the pandemic first of all".

Innovation and Rapid Response

The fast-paced response of communities to meet each other's needs was clear from participants' feedback. In both the survey and focus group, participants explained that pre-existing local groups (such as food banks) quickly changed their activities to support those isolating, for example, understanding that individuals may not be able to physically come to the food bank and therefore set up delivery services and food parcels. Individual efforts or newly formed groups (such as neighbourhood Whatsapp or Facebook groups, as described in the articles on the "Together We Help" website by Saima in Edinburgh and Lindsay in Aberdeen or the garden library set up by Christina in Leith) were created overnight. Places of worship such as Glasgow Gurdwara and Colston Milton Parish Church set up grocery deliveries and hot meals within days of the first lockdown.

Community Researchers highlighted the importance of being able to act quickly, and this being enabled by trust within the local community and local knowledge of "who needed what and when".

"Before we set up the chat group, I only knew a few of my most immediate neighbours but the chat group grew very quickly and everyone invited those they knew. It's been live for over eight months now and still going strong."

"When we were put into lockdown, we (Sikh Sanjog) knew that we had to act fast, so that not only our service users, but also the most vulnerable within our society did not get left behind and fall through the cracks."

Mental health and wellbeing

From participants' responses it was clear that many of the social action efforts focused on preventing loneliness and isolation during the pandemic. However, a critical issue was raised by multiple community researchers about the extent of growing mental health issues within their communities. In particular, they stated that they felt there were not enough local places to signpost members of their communities to and that for many with pre-existing mental health concerns, the move for some services to phone calls and online support during the pandemic, whilst understandable, was not sufficient.

Participants explained that when delivering social action such as dropping off food parcels or grocery deliveries they were often also a listening ear for those feeling lonely or finding the current circumstances difficult. Whilst they were happy to do this to an extent, at times there were mental health disclosures from those they were helping that they were not equipped to deal with nor was it appropriate for them to try to provide support. This had an impact on the community more widely, but also on those taking part in social action efforts. As those delivering social action were visible, there was, at times, an assumption that they were an "authorised" service and able to provide more support than was appropriate or was the purpose of their voluntary activities.
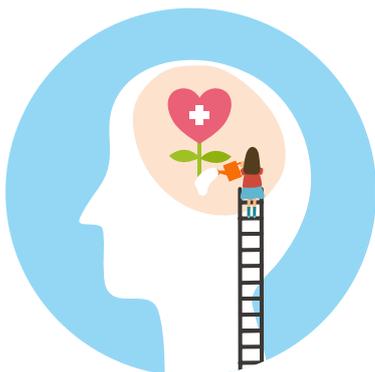
A participant in the focus group said:

"As a small community group, I was getting referrals from people in local services for young people in our area, all the service they got was a supportive email, that wasn't enough...we met young folks in the park, if we could let people eat out for a tenner, could we not have thought of better ways to support our young people who needed their services to continue?"

A survey respondent said:

"some of us didn't have the expertise to support this, some of our volunteers went to doors and came back crying when the old woman they chapped the door of wasn't ok and told them she wasn't doing well."

A focus group participant said:

"I was doing some check-in calls, just asking people if they need food parcels or a prescription picked up, and people would end up telling me their health problems...I was immediately out of my depth, I can't advise, I'm not trained on this."

And another said:

"People who were getting a visit from a psychiatric nurse once a week now had to get a phone call only, they saw us doing work and they would come to us with things that we couldn't help with. One of our group had to support someone feeling suicidal."

Technology and digital inclusion

Many of the social action efforts, included in this project and beyond, relied on social media (predominantly Facebook) and digital platforms (most commonly WhatsApp) to connect with one another and identify needs in the community. However, participants highlighted the digital divide within their communities, caused by poverty (for those without the ability to afford technology or data) and a lack of digital literacy (particularly for older neighbours). Participants stated that the reliance on online contact, or services moving to online access only, created additional barriers to inclusion which caused further isolation.

As a survey respondent said:

"A lot of correspondence has and is done online and i believe there are many people within the community without access to an online platform, so didn't know what we were doing, didn't know about the walking group."

A participant in the focus group said:

"Many in my community don't have Wi-Fi in their houses, when they had to do homeschooling, they didn't have devices or internet, it is not fair for their children. So we got together and helped with that, but it was probably not enough."

Connection, partnerships and empathy

Repeatedly, survey respondents and focus group participants praised the way in which communities came together, the deeper understanding they had for one another and how community groups found ways to join forces rather than continuing in their siloes or sometimes working in competition with one another. Participants emphasised that this was a rare "silver lining" of the difficult circumstances Covid-19 created. They stated that they were heartened by the way individuals from all backgrounds felt a sense of connection and community.

As one survey respondent said:

"There was more trust in local organisations. People being more aware of the difficulties some people are experiencing. More sense of community...I noticed a lot more cooperation between groups in the community that very much made a huge difference.

Existing partnerships were enhanced and new relationships were forged. More resilience and great community spirit. Empowerment.

Groups of people who would never come across one another bonded throughout activities. Trust was built between members of the community who we would never engage with us on a regular basis."

Cooperation with and inclusion of communities and community groups

In both the open comments of the survey and the focus group, the need for more local decision making and community involvement by those with power was highlighted. Community researchers from across Scotland stated that, whilst they were doing what they could to help their neighbours, they felt that being more involved and responded to by their local authority, community members being asked what they thought of decisions and being better informed about Covid-19 restrictions would have helped them deliver social action efforts better and could, potentially, increase feelings of empowerment within the community.

As one community researcher explained:

"We knew the reality, we were in this for months yet, but there's a lack of direction… young people, vulnerable people are struggling massively… please get us solutions, work with us for an answer. Communities need this."

Terry who wrote an article for the "Together We Help" website said:

"I think the main thing Scotland could learn from Darkwood Crew is that our communities hold the solutions to many of our larger global problems including the pandemic, climate change and collective well being. Collective responsibility and empowering communities is vital to any suggested wellbeing recovery."

Conclusion

Understanding what motivated individuals to participate in social action during Covid-19 is hugely helpful in supporting the sustaining of such efforts and community cohesion in the future. It was clear from the responses that a feeling of "wanting to help" or "doing the right thing" was what motivated most to take part; however, linked to this was who in the community was sharing communication about how to help. Participants were most likely to hear about how to help from a friend, neighbour or an organisation they already knew. This suggests that trust and pre-existing relationships within the community are key to engaging people to take part. Creating more space for community relationships to be cultivated is critical to community cohesion and wellbeing (as many studies on community empowerment have indicated). However, whilst many community members took part in social action, the sustaining of participation appears to be, unsurprisingly, intrinsically linked to feeling of hope, of enthusiasm for the tasks and feelings of empowerment. To maintain these feelings and therefore to sustain community efforts, valuing the voices within our communities and redistributing power is critical to the continuation of social action efforts.

From the survey participants and community researchers, one of the repeated threads across the findings was the importance of community voice and empowerment. Whether participants were discussing pre-existing inequalities, communication during the pandemic or access to services, the need for communities to be centred and prioritised in decision making was emphasised again and again. In particular, it was explained that the voice of communities needed to be a standard part of Scotland's planning and that community groups did not have the capacity or indeed the energy to continue "banging on the door" in the hope of being heard. As one of our community researchers put it, "we've been trying to get the message across, please listen to the grassroot organisations who have been at the coalface, allow us to be involved in the planning in the future...I was allowed into some conversations with the council, but I had to really fight for it."

Particularly important points were made about mental health and social care. Whilst there were heartening responses which indicated that stigma around seeking support was reduced and "normalised", there was a clear acknowledgement that mental wellbeing in communities was declining. In terms of voluntary and organic social action efforts, intervening on mental wellbeing may not be appropriate or helpful, instead participants stressed the need for investment in local mental health support services and their interest in being better informed to enable signposting and appropriate emergency support. The community researchers in particular expressed that, whilst the enthusiasm to deliver social action in the community continued, there were concerns for the mental wellbeing of the volunteers who were trying to help people in extreme crisis.

A blessing and a curse

Whilst the challenges within communities and delivery of social action were made clear (including a recognition of how the pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in their communities), there were also multiple examples of innovation, hopefulness and collectivism from communities across Scotland. Participants described the importance of feeling helpful in the current circumstances and were proud that their efforts were in demand and able to respond to growing needs. Community researchers and participants were clear about the importance of their social action efforts and, in particular, how their social action supported those feeling isolated and lonely. The majority of efforts focused on supporting those experiencing food insecurity and those feeling alone or in need of a "check-in". However, equally it was clear that the experiences of isolation were made significantly worse within their communities by digital exclusion or a lack of digital literacy. Those leading social action efforts expressed their own frustration and empathy at the exclusion within their volunteering work of those who were not able to access social media to keep in touch. There were also multiple comments and feedback which expressed dismay at the level of demand for food parcels or for isolation support. Participants become more aware of the extent of inequality in their communities, and whilst they were glad to help, in some cases, they wished they had not needed to; causing some to describe their activities as both a blessing and a curse.

The recommendations on the following page are informed by these findings and were co-produced with the community researchers, who sense-checked the analysis and conclusions reached before publication.

Recommendations

Recommendations for funders, local government and charitable organisations:

→ **Trust those doing the work** – Those on the ground know their communities, this knowledge should be trusted, respected and engaged more. **Funders should co-design funding methodologies, develop relational and inclusive approaches with local communities and individuals who are experts by experience, practises and knowledge.**

→ **Take away bureaucracy** – Access to funding needs to remove barriers and be inclusive for small local organisations. Allow rapid and fast access to funds by those who have no infrastructure and are responding to a crisis. Develop systems which are adaptable to crisis support and management, rather than those which have been a hindrance or overly bureaucratic, particularly in times of crisis when an injection of funds is required to respond to community needs. Ensure systems are developed which mitigate against these factors quickly, as the pandemic is still ongoing and its social and economic impact will continue to be felt for years to come.

→ **Mix and match expertise between hyperlocal and national organisation**s – Inputs from community researchers explained that they felt their value and experience was overlooked, often meaning less competent responses within the communities. The expertise of those doing the work on the ground is critical to enable well informed responses, resource distribution and robust referral systems. This should work alongside resources and support from statutory and non-statutory organisations to deliver the most impactful services and reach those who are most in need.

➔ **Create easy methods for communities to feedback the lessons of Covid-19** – Community researchers and survey participants reported that isolation and loneliness, a feature of life before Covid-19 for many, were exacerbated by the pandemic and resulting restrictions, as were poverty and mental ill health. They also reported that the ability for communities to come together (through sped up funding routes and national support) was welcome, and should not be forgotten. To enable this learning to be embedded into future public, third sector and community development work, continuous outreach and feedback should be sought directly from communities; this should not replicate the hierarchical approaches used in national consultations. Instead this should be led by community researchers and community leaders. **Funders and project developers should consider coming together to invest in a network of Scotland-wide (paid) community voices to inform their funding practices and funding decisions.**

➔ **Ongoing Support within communities** – For some community groups such as older people, there was some respite through wellbeing support delivered and general "checking in". This form of support needs to continue throughout the pandemic and beyond, through re-investment in community development and support services (such as befriending or connection helplines). These public services (particularly those funded through local government) have seen a reduction (at least in real terms) of funding as austerity measures have continued and been passed on from national to local governments.

Recommendations for national and local policy makers and those responsible for policy implementation

→ **Support capacity building** – Provide knowledge dissemination and training opportunities for those working in communities, so they can engage as equal partners in the policy process and co-design locally based policies and best practise. Work with community researchers, creative storytellers and others on what they identify as the key issues, where they think policy development should go and who to work with to develop programmes and opportunities that are sustainable. **Across Scotland, at community-level, there should be investment in a programme of citizen capacity building which supports democratic and social participation. By doing so, we create empowered communities, higher levels of political accountability, knowledge on human rights and potentially improve wellbeing.**

→ **Allowing social action to remain organic** – Not all social action (especially that which is individually led) is looking to expand or become mainstream provision, instead it is simply focused neighbourhood or community connection. Create an infrastructure that does not stifle creativity and organic grassroots activity but recognises its validity and place in identifying and meeting local needs. The Social Action Inquiry must ensure that this forms the basis of understanding civic action in Scotland today and creates accessible methods of engagement for individual actions and organic participation to be recognised.

→ **Do not assume community action can or should replace system or state support** – During Covid-19 communities responded to a crisis but cannot themselves solve the issues that created these circumstances and the poverty that created or exacerbated the situation for so many. Support systems must continue and be better resourced to improve people's lives. For example, mental health support and outdoor groups were created for young people for whom online support was not appropriate or was unavailable. Community action assisted here in a crisis and may continue to provide some support on the ground; however, a well-resourced, well rounded mental health support system is required to deliver what is needed and to complement the on-the-ground work. **Identify routes to increase state-level support available through the social security system within Scotland to allow individuals and families to live with choice, dignity and without the risk of destitution and deliver long-term and sustainably funded third sector interventions.**

→ **Make space around the decision making table by valuing local expertise** – Communities should not have to shout to be heard or feel that they have to ask for permission to participate in resource development, distribution, policy influence and development at local and national levels. Relationship building is a key component to creating diverse spaces and approaches that are non-hierarchical but operate at very local levels. Investment and prioritisation of community voices is critical in policy and programme development.

→ **Bolder action is needed to tackle root causes of poverty and inequality** – Those who responded to this project were clear that the pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing inequality in our communities. Poor health, low-paid and under-valued work and poverty are consequences of a system which is not fit for purpose and which is not working for the majority. Participants wanted to see bolder action on these issues. The recovery from Covid-19 should be viewed as recovery from deep-rooted inequality in our communities and should be pursued with bold action which focuses on the most localised implementation. **Consideration must be given to the implementation of Universal Basic Income and practical ways in which a "wellbeing economy" can be created to deliver for those furthest away from opportunity and financial security.**

→ **Prioritise mental health and wellbeing, including for those delivering support in their communities** – The responses made clear that mental health across communities has been negatively impacted by the pandemic. As such mental wellbeing and support should be prioritised and met with an increase in investment, **in particular, mental health support which is fit for purpose for those from diverse backgrounds and with ranging needs, including, but not limited to, those with caring responsibilities and those from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic community. Those providing support, either as volunteers or working in third or public sector organisations, must have access to appropriate wellbeing support and access to funded mental health related training.**

→ **Digital literacy and inequality** – Covid-19 has highlighted the extent of the digital divide, both in terms of digital literacy and access to data, internet and technology. The impact of this has been felt most in rural communities, with elderly populations and those on low or no income. **Given the level of importance of the digital world to enable individuals to work and connect, now is the time to invest further resources on ensuring equal access to digital skills and the internet. This should include consistent access to broadband in rural communities and distribution of technology and data access to low income families. Consideration should be given to a universal broadband policy in Scotland.**

→ **Localise decision making and develop trust** – Repeatedly, the need for communities to be a more central part of decision making and to help inform better local outcomes was highlighted. Specifically, the feeling of current action only playing "lip-service" was explained. There should be further investment and prioritisation of local decision making, which includes an ongoing system of participation and feedback and a local engagement strategy which co-produces the economic and social decisions of Scotland (as per the recommendation above for the future social action inquiry). **Power and decision-making must be shifted from a top-down to a ground-up approach, away from centralisation and into the hands of those with lived experience of inequality and the consequences of policy as it is delivered. This can be delivered through further investment and roll-out of the citizen panels, assemblies and lived experience panel approaches currently being utilised by the Scottish Government.**

Recommendations for the forthcoming wider social action inquiry:

→ **Using accessible language** – Repeatedly participants told us that the term "social action" was not clear and did not reflect how they described what they have done during the pandemic. They suggested "community support" or "community volunteering". This terminology needs to be clear to enable participation at the most local level to take part in the forthcoming inquiry.

→ **Inclusion of all** – The forthcoming inquiry should make resources available for fuller outreach across communities (and in particular focus on the inclusion of communities too often ignored: BAME communities, disabled people, carers and migrant communities). **To deliver this fairly, there should be payment made to participants for their expertise and input and resources allocated to allow access such as translation services or British Sign Language (BSL) interpretations. Inclusion activities must be proactively promoted rather than an "available on request" approach.**

→ **Led by the community and co-produced** – As with this project, research, analysis and delivery should be led by those leading and participating in social action efforts. For the inquiry to be well-informed it should be led by the expertise of community voices. As such, high-quality feedback and feed-in mechanisms should be used throughout the duration of the inquiry alongside an accountability group of individuals who are delivering social action on the ground.

→ **Flexibility and time allocation** – There must be adequate time allocated within the inquiry to deliver co-production in a meaningful way. Due to the nature of a Covid-19 specific inquiry and the need to act quickly, co-production was not as deeply embedded as would have been preferred in this research. Flexibility in how individuals and community groups are involved should be ensured with significant lead in time, given the pressures many are currently feeling due to the pandemic and acknowledging that all involved in social action efforts are doing so in their "spare time".

→ **Capacity building and support** – The forthcoming inquiry should include a specific fund on community and participants' capacity building to ensure there is parity of esteem between all individuals taking part, regardless of the type of social action they were involved in. This capacity building should include training on how policy is made, the impact of policy on community responses and how to ethically conduct community research. During this short-term project, resources were allocated to training for community researchers, and it would be recommended for a similar process to be adopted again for all participants to be enabled to fully provide feedback.

→ **Employ multiple methods of participation** – During this project it was clear that multiple methods of participation were critical to allow full engagement. In this project this included opportunities as researchers, as survey respondents, as blog writers or interviewees. This ensured participation was accessible and appropriate for all. Co-production methods should be employed to work with those delivering social action efforts to identify the most appropriate and preferred participation methods.

"We know the issues, it's good that it's being recognised by those higher up, but keep us in mind, don't forget communities. Please let this report have some solutions. I worry that communities are going to be the folk that miss out going forward, but we could be a good part of the solution...we should be working at every level to end the unfairness that has been felt for so long in all our communities."

Further analysis and questions for exploration

The development, delivery and analysis of this report was co-produced with 18 community researchers to ensure that recommendations were an accurate interpretation of the experience in communities during Covid-19. As explained in the recommendations, civic and policy influencing knowledge must be developed across communities to create genuine access to wider political participation and to create parity of esteem between policy developers and the public. Without this, discussions and recommendations gathered from the public remain abstract and are often treated in isolation from the policy landscape. However, what this report illustrates is the depth of expertise and knowledge on the ground which can only benefit the policy making process and its implementation. The following is further analysis provided by consultant researchers but informed by dialogue with participants.

A key thread throughout this research is on community empowerment and participation. Repeatedly, participants talked about the need for communities to be consulted in a more meaningful way and to be trusted to make local decisions to improve their neighbourhoods. Community participation and local decision making is not a new debate in Scotland, indeed the importance of it was recognised in the passing of the Community Empowerment Act (2015). This act enabled communities to collectively buy their own land and buildings and empowers communities through "participation requests" which can be made of any public service authority (for example a hospital or school) in the hope to improve local service delivery. The act was a turning point, but given the response from social action participants in this report, it is clear that the empowerment hoped for has

yet to be delivered. The Scottish Government funded a review[27] of participation requests enabled by the act, and found that between 2017 and 2019 only 46 participation requests were made (of which 27 were accepted) and that barriers to participation remained, including cost implications, knowledge of the processes and lengthy decision making processes. This evaluation alongside this report highlight key questions which need further exploration: **To what extent are communities empowered to use the act to their advantage? And what additions within the act itself or within implementation can be pursued to make the act of further value to community ownership and empowerment?** Whilst the Community Empowerment Act (2015) attempts to create a bridge between public authorities and local communities, the bridge between national or local policy-making and communities remains missing,

[27] Participation Requests: Evaluation of Part 3 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, Glasgow Caledonian University (2020).

with efforts being largely piecemeal and voluntary. As mentioned in this report, there is a clear need for further investment in participatory policy making (through local citizens' assemblies or lived experience panels) which must become a mainstreamed element of national and local governing in Scotland. The launch of the "A Connected Scotland Strategy"[28] clearly indicates the intent of the Scottish Government to build community cohesion, reduce loneliness and increase empowerment. Priority 1 includes the following early action:

"Consider what more we can do to devolve decision-making locally through the work of the local governance review, and look at how future work in this area could potentially allow communities to reduce social isolation and loneliness".

It is clear from this report, and the experiences of social action efforts reflected in it, that the consideration of how local decision-making can be enabled must now become tangible action. The answers to how this is enabled come from communities themselves, as throughout the pandemic communities have illustrated their innovation, their expertise and their ability to rapidly respond. This must now be met with mutual respect that is illustrated through trust in communities to make real local decisions which improve their wellbeing, their local economies and their local environments.

It is welcome that the Scottish Government formed the "Covid-19 Public Engagement Expert Advisory Group"[29] to inform how the Scottish Government can better engage the public in decision making and health communications.

Importantly, this group is also to provide wider insight into embedding participatory methods in policy making. A welcome next step for the participation group and the Connected Scotland strategy would be to engage with those who have informed this report and will inform the forthcoming social action inquiry, asking the key questions: **How can communities be equal partners in the development of a policy participation strategy (or similar) for Scotland? How can communities (at the most local level) be more equal partners in the implementation, review and scrutiny of the Connected Scotland strategy for it to lead by example on what it wishes to create? What Scotland-wide, resourced and consistent decision-making pathways will be created to empower local communities?**

Covid-19 has exacerbated the digital divide in Scotland in terms of both who has digital literacy and who has the financial means to access internet and technology. The majority of the social action examples in this report utilised technology and the internet in some way, largely through WhatsApp and Facebook. Whilst for many this was an effective way to communicate and grow a network, for some this further entrenched isolation, particularly for low or no-income families who were suddenly expected to home-school with no laptop and/or no reliable internet. This has been recognised by the Scottish Government with the launch of the "Connecting Scotland" programme[30] which aims to get 50,000 digitally excluded households online by the end of 2021. These efforts are welcome and could be further supported through the exploration of world-leading policy on universal access to broadband, recognising the essential nature of the digital world.

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[28] A Connected Scotland: our strategy for tackling social isolation and loneliness and building stronger social connections, Scottish Government, 2018.
[29] https://www.gov.scot/groups/coronavirus-covid-19-public-engagement-expert-advisory-group/ (accessed 14 Jan 2021)
[30] https://connecting.scot/organisations (Accessed 14 Jan 2021)

In this research there were countless examples of innovation, of empathy and of community solidarity. It is important that communities are recognised and that we share the joys of communities feeling more connected. However, as much as we saw the positive, to do justice to the experiences of communities on the ground during Covid-19, we must acknowledge the inequalities and struggles they have faced. Repeatedly, the mental health decline of both participants in social action and those they were assisting was highlighted. The report recommends further investment in mental health services, parity of esteem with physical health, local access to services and the delivery of mental health training to volunteers as a standard practice. Whilst these calls have been made before and, to at least some extent, have been recognised in the 10-year mental health strategy for Scotland,[31] key questions remain: **How can communities better hold to account the deliverables of this mental health strategy? What mechanisms can be put in place to allow communities to inform progress reports by providing first hand experience of mental health impacts of Covid-19 and beyond? To what extent is the mental health strategy delivering for minoritised groups?**

An important point expressed by community researchers was the need for mental health support which understood the needs of young people and minoritised groups (particularly the BAME community). Whilst the long-term strategy is welcome it currently exists without an equalities focus which understands the reality of systemic inequality. The impact of Covid-19 on mental health will be profound and there will be increased consequences for those already experiencing inequality. To recognise this fully, a review of the mental health strategy should take place with an equalities, intersectional lens and with the community voice at the centre.

A further, and critical, theme referred to throughout the findings is the reality of poverty and inequality in Scotland. Participants recognised that much of the social action they were engaged in, such as delivering food parcels or befriending services for those who were isolated, were needed as a consequence of long-standing inequality. Community researchers expressed their anger and frustration at having to deliver countless food parcels for families living in poverty because they understood that this was a reflection of a society which was not functioning for those who needed it the most. Repeatedly, they stated they wanted to see action, not merely rhetoric, and rallied against what they felt was a piecemeal approach to tackling poverty and the lack of impact in their communities. The creation of the Poverty and Inequality Commission therefore is of significant importance to the delivery of change that participants in this research hope to see. It is particularly welcome that the commission is taking a participatory approach in how it recommends policy responses and how it scrutinises policy already being delivered. From the analysis of the feedback from participants in this research, communities want to see fast-paced change that makes a genuine difference to their lives by creating financial security. Key questions for policymakers and the commission include: **In what ways is anti-poverty delivery taking an equalities and anti-discrimination approach and delivering for those furthest away from financial security? How can the barriers to financial support (including stigma and bureaucracy) be overcome to deliver for those who need crisis interventions (e.g. during Covid-19)? How can communities and social action efforts play a more practical role in eliminating systemic inequality by being a bridge between policy and faster-paced delivery?**

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[31] https://www.gov.scot/publications/mental-health-strategy-2017-2027/ (accessed 14 Jan 2021)

In January 2021, the Scottish Government published the Social Renewal Advisory Board report[32] which advocates for fairer recovery from Covid-19. The findings in this project related to participation and community voice, minoritised groups, systemic inequality and poverty and mental health, complement the recommendations from the Social Renewal Advisory Board and provide further, compelling evidence for an equalities focused recovery and bolder action to tackle income inequality. In particular, this report shares similar recommendations to the advisory board's call for a basic level of income for all residents in Scotland, a focus on participatory policy making and co-production and targets to tackle digital exclusion.

The purpose of this report is to provide insights directly from communities in how they have come together to support one another during the challenging circumstances caused by Covid-19. The positivity of neighbours connecting and supporting each other cannot be denied, but the efforts across our communities deserve a deeper analysis which does not simply recognise and applaud the efforts, but instead asks why interventions for basic needs were necessary and how community Scotland can learn and create a fairer system through the learning of Covid-19?

It is now for policy and decision makers, funders, third sector organisations and others, at local and national levels, to recognise the expertise that exists within our communities and take on the challenges that have been put to them in this report.

[32] https://www.gov.scot/publications/not-now-social-renewal-advisory-board-report-january-2021/ (accessed 21 Jan 20210

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