Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland - Rural experiences of COVID-19: Insights from frontline practitioners
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Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland (CNS) is based in the University of Glasgow, working in partnership with the Glasgow Centre for Population Health. In collaboration with Policy Scotland and the Network for Social and Educational Equity CNS is undertaking a programme of research and intelligence gathering in high poverty settings across Scotland that seeks to understand how local responses are working in the current rapidly changing context and provide insights that can support the next phase of COVID-19 action at both local and national levels. This document presents the views and experiences of frontline practitioners working in rural communities and is one of a series sharing insights emerging from the research.

In some communities, the hardship experienced by families is masked. Commonly used area-based measures, such as the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD), may not pick up these hidden and local pockets of poverty and disadvantage.

At the height of the COVID-19 crisis, many families across Scotland faced increased financial pressures, challenges supporting children's home learning and added stress on their mental health and wellbeing. In rural areas, these challenges were amplified by limited access and reductions in public transport links and local support services and the unspoken stigma often associated with poverty. Staff on the frontline of the pandemic response in these areas spoke about and identified a number of issues which came to the fore during the lockdown period:

- Many families did not want to accept help because they were afraid of being judged by their neighbours. It was felt that there was *"stigma attached to someone coming to the door with food every day"*. This feeling was prevalent in rural villages where there was the perception that "*everyone knows everyone else's business"*. *"We've had cases over the last few months where families didn't want to accept help from local volunteer organisations, because they didn't want people to know that they needed help"*.
- Stigma was underpinned by individualised notions of poverty where individuals and families felt they were to blame for their circumstances.
- Given the wide-ranging social, emotional and financial effects of the pandemic, which included many families who had not experienced poverty or required support before, there were signs of a shift in the attitudes of community members as seeking help became more accepted.
- Community councils and other groups supporting the local response, showed signs of greater social solidarity and community cohesion. A local authority worker reflected on the changing local attitudes to poverty and disadvantage: *"we've seen that change a little bit, because it's now become everybody's issue"*.

Unexpected reductions in household income and short-term financial difficulties from individuals being placed on furlough, being made redundant or delays in receiving benefits resulted in many families living in rural areas experiencing food poverty. For local services, a number of challenges in helping families who had fallen into poverty were identified by interviewees:

- Food Banks provided services across the local authority areas by providing a wide variety of foods and top-up cards for power and phones, alongside guidance and information to local community members and front-line workers.
- Community Wellbeing Helpline call handlers had to encourage parents to overcome the emotional barrier of receiving help. Parents calling the Helpline, recognised that they needed food for their families, but often reacted with "*embarrassment and shame"* when they were referred to a Food Bank.

- The stigma associated with receiving help from a Food Bank, meant that in some communities, pop-up vans with food and household supplies, provided an alternative approach to food provision.
- Supermarket home deliveries in lockdown also became very difficult to access, especially in rural communities. A third sector organisation provided fresh food boxes to help overcome the difficulty in accessing affordable fresh food in geographically isolated villages, especially for families without access to a car.
- Local services worked hard to respond in innovative ways to the food and practical needs of rural communities during the lockdown and formed new partnerships and networks to strengthen local collaboration.

The pandemic and lockdown also reinforced the transport difficulties and the sense of isolation often experienced by individuals and families living in rural areas:

- The limited public transport services that were previously in place to support rural communities virtually disappeared overnight, as highlighted by one interviewee "*It's like everything's just stopped".* This added to the feelings of social isolation for many rural residents and families.
- Local authorities issued vouchers to replace free school meals for eligible children. These were a welcome support to families; it is worth noting that there were challenges in redeeming the vouchers locally for some.
- Support will be required to reconnect families local support services. One interviewee described the children she worked with as being *"quieter, more subdued"* since lockdown and suggested that *"re-building confidence"* amongst children should be a priority for nurseries and schools moving forward*.*

In summary, the insights of frontline workers interviewed as part of this research suggested the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on some rural communities, particularly those who were already experiencing poverty or disadvantage. The issues and challenges faced by families in rural communities due to the pandemic displayed both similarities and differences to communities in other geographical settings as discussed. Increasing understanding of the specific differences experienced by those in rural communities can support targeted recovery planning in these areas.

Key questions for consideration:

- How can the needs of geographically isolated communities be better accounted for when planning for COVID-19 recovery?
- How can the community solidarity that has emerged during the pandemic be further developed, and strengthen the resilience of community organisations?

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