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# Supporting Communities Learning Event Report

**June 2022**

## Introduction/Background

SCDC's Supporting Communities programme works with ten communities across Scotland to address the wider social, economic and environmental opportunities in their area through community-led plans or place-based approaches. The range of support varies according to the capacity and community development support needs required by each community but aims to increase the capacity, inclusiveness, networking and partnership working to help them both influence service providers and take direct action to address local needs. This is particularly important given the need to develop strong community infrastructure as the Community Empowerment Act is reviewed and the participation environment is characterised by both increased opportunities and a resulting complexity.

## Purpose and Outline of the Session

The shared learning session was held at the end of May, having been postponed earlier in the calendar year. It has been another challenging few months for the individuals, groups and projects throughout the Supporting Communities programme. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic is still having an impact on our communities and how they work together.

Due to the ongoing implications of the pandemic, the session was held online. It was great to see 12 participants from Glasgow, Wester Ross, Aberdeen and Moray, representing 6 of the communities supported, who joined us for the presentations and discussions.

The first presentation was from Torridon and Kinlochewe, who started their community-led plan during the pandemic, and who shared their experiences of gathering community views when life was restricted. The second presentation was from the Buckie community. Community Action Planning is a longer, more established process in Moray, and their focus was on progression and starting to review their action plan and the impact of keeping people engaged during the pandemic and as we enter the recovery phase.

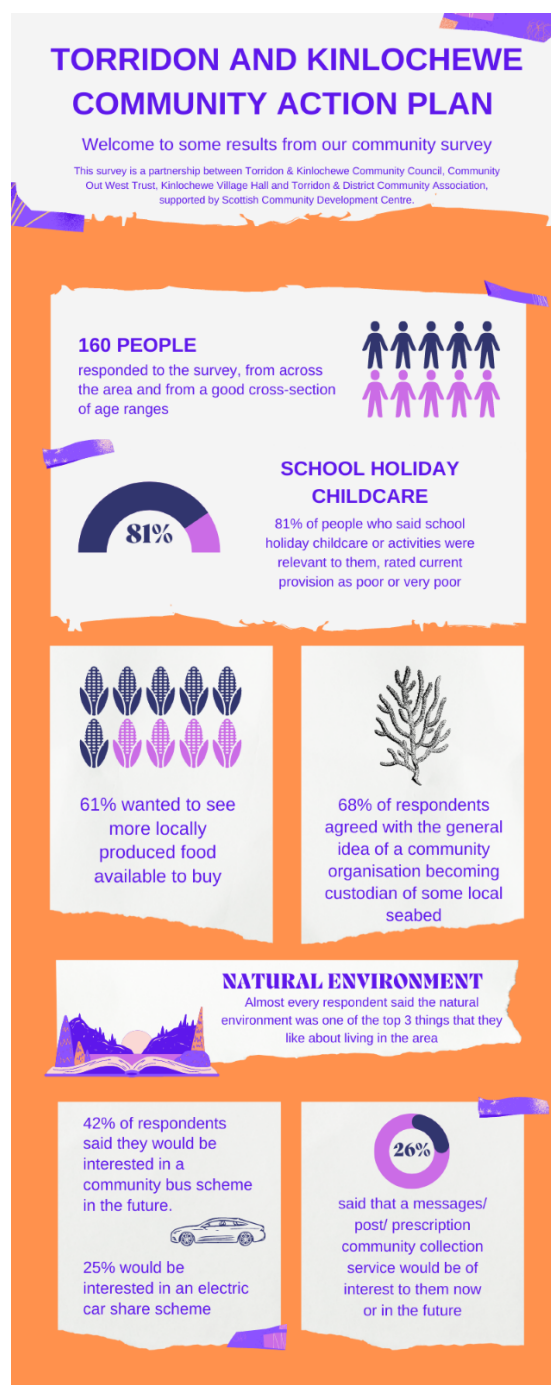
The session was designed to be informal to allow participants to hear about what was happening in other areas, and to learn of the ways groups were still engaging.

There was opportunity for discussion and questions for both presenting groups.

## Discussion session 1 – Torridon and Kinlochewe

Caroline Hamilton from the Torridon & Kinlochewe Community Development Group shared their experience of starting the Community-led action plan process and undertaking their community consultation whilst Covid restrictions were still in place. Torridon and Kinlochewe is a very remote rural area in the Northwest of Scotland with a community scattered across a wide geography. The group shared their experience of undertaking a community consultation during the pandemic.

The Covid pandemic had moved community meetings online and the Community Council were meeting regularly by Zoom, with local community attendance. The community survey carried out in November and December 2021 was mainly digital, with some back up options for those who couldn't engage digitally. The survey was available online through the community council website and was launched at two face-to-face community events on the 6th of November – one in Torridon and the other in Kinlochewe. Paper copies of the survey were available at the launch events, and through members of the working group while the survey was open. 160 people took part in the survey, which took about 1 hour to complete - this is almost 50% of the population. This also represented a good spread of age, gender and residency from across the area.



Key points from their experience were:

- The process was mainly digital, with offline consultation forms available to back this up for people who couldn't complete the online consultation
- A range of communication methods were used - online, social media, telephone, leaflets, etc. They also held two face-to-face events (when it was allowed) where the community were able to come along and ask questions, find out more, pick up paper forms, find out how to engage online
- The pandemic moved community meetings online and had familiarised the community with using Zoom. People were attending community meetings by zoom, so that helped with trying to get people engaged
- It was a developmental/incremental process - importance of gradually introducing the idea and bringing other people on board
- Taking the time was worth it – this helped to get it out to the whole community and also to get the content right.
- Any action plan couldn't be taken forward or implemented by one group alone, so needed to broaden it out from the Community Council to other groups and individuals - not a closed group!
- Piloting of the survey was useful and also involved people in disseminating the survey wider
- The importance of anonymity, particularly within a small community

## **Next Steps**

The group are now starting to send the results/findings out to other community and statutory organisations - including Skye & Lochalsh Council for Voluntary Services, GALE (Gairloch and Loch Ewe development trust who also cover the Kinlochewe area), the National Trust, Highland Council, the community planning partnership, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and the Community Housing Trust who provided the questions for the housing section.

## Discussion Session 2 – Buckie

Susan Chalmers, one of the community members from the Buckie Monitoring Group and Tracey Rae from Moray Council’s Community Support Unit shared their experiences of reviewing and refreshing their “A Better Buckie” community action plan through the pandemic, and how they had to switch from their normal way of working to considering online engagements and meetings.



Susan and Tracey shared how the first plan had been developed, outlining the engagement and things they had been able to do, and then spoke about the impact of the pandemic on their community consultation to refresh the plan, and to widen the area the plan covered. The initial plan had covered a small area within Buckie (Buckie Central East), which wasn’t an area the community identified with, so the group felt it made more sense to expand the boundaries to cover the whole settlement.

### Key Learning Points

- It always takes longer than you think – but the time is a worthwhile investment to get it right!
- COVID-19 meant direct engagement was not possible, so things had to shift online and new ways of keeping the community informed were used
- COVID-19 increased collaboration and cooperation between groups to help the community
- The first plan was led by top-down themes, the review is themed around issues that make more sense to local people and groups
- The review process was at the request of and is being led by the monitoring group
- It is important to have the right information and support to map new data whilst cross-referencing it with the old plan to ensure nothing is lost
- Reviewing what information you have, and where the gaps are is essential to making sure all voices are heard

- Aligning with other community plans – like the Local Outcome Improvement Plan and Moray Council Corporate plan – can be a really important way to highlight community needs and aspirations
- Monitoring is very important – but should be simple, relevant and meaningful
- There is a real requirement and need for support – practical, developmental and technical

## Summary

Both discussions highlighted the importance of taking the time to get the process right. This can be easier to do when a group are involved in a community-led action plan process but can be harder when it's an externally controlled process such as developing a locality plan. However, for a plan to have real depth of engagement and the capacity to influence, we need to take the time to get it right.

It can be difficult to find data in rural areas to evidence need for services because deprivation is often dispersed, and SIMD data isn't reliable. It can also be the case that how public sector agencies define a community may not always match how the community would define itself. Where communities are undertaking surveys that identify need it's helpful to capture information in a way that allows it to be extracted and shared with other service providers. Involving other service providers in designing the survey, making sure that information is captured in a way that works for multiple organisations and sharing the findings with partners increases the impact.

There was some discussion around the length of the community consultation carried out in Torridon and Kinlochewe with some areas feeling they must keep surveys short. However, the experience in Torridon and Kinlochewe and previously in Lochalsh is that these communities were happy to take time to complete a long and detailed survey.

The use of social media and online promotion is something that is important with some of the barriers to online engagement having been removed for some people during the pandemic. However, it is important to remember that there remains a digital gap due to skills, connections and access to devices and that alternative promotion and engagement is still essential.

Often, engagement run by communities themselves will have better response rates and capture the views of a wider audience. There is a wide context of plans within communities and engaging with agency partners early can help to make sure that information gathered can influence more than just the community's plan. However, this depends on the relationship between communities and agency partners - community groups who contribute to partnerships as equal and valued members are more likely to engage with those partners around community plans.

## What's coming next

We will be continuing to provide opportunities for shared learning across all the groups and projects that we are supporting. The sessions will focus on what's important to the participating groups, will give people an opportunity to showcase what they do, and will also allow exploration of wider issues such as the climate emergency and the cost-of-living crisis. We are planning to deliver 2 more sessions over the course of the year and will provide more information about them in the coming months.