

## CommonHealth Briefing Paper Series: Paper Number 7



### Project 3 - Growth at the Edge

#### Danielle Kelly

Researcher,  
Yunus Centre for  
Social Business & Health,  
Glasgow Caledonian University

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#### Social Enterprises involved in Growth at the Edge:

- **Seaboard Memorial Hall, Tain**  
Delivering: Community activities, classes / clubs, café
- **Cothrom, South Uist**  
Delivering: Education and training qualifications alongside childcare
- **COPE Ltd, Lerwick**  
Delivering: Employment and skills development for adults with learning disabilities
- **Transport for Tongue (T4T), Tongue**  
Delivering: Community transport across three regions
- **Atlantic Islands Centre, Isle of Luig**  
Delivering: Community café hub, heritage centre and employment and training for local young people
- **Cantray Park, Croy**  
Delivering: Education, training and work experience for adults with learning disabilities
- **Helmsdale & District Development Trust, Helmsdale**  
Delivering: Community development and support

In June 2015, the CommonHealth Project 'Growth at the Edge' set out to explore the health and wellbeing effects of rural social enterprise activity on individuals and communities the Highlands & Islands of Scotland. This involved studying seven social enterprises involved in a variety of different sectors.

We conducted in-depth interviews with 64 participants of all ages, including board members, staff, volunteers and service users. A number of communities were also visited for extended periods of time to explore the rural context in which the social enterprises were operating. This briefing paper reports selected self-reported findings from this work in relation to the role of social enterprises in addressing social isolation and loneliness in rural communities.

#### Social isolation and loneliness in rural areas

Living in a remote or rural area has been identified as a prominent risk factor for social isolation and loneliness; attributed to being geographically dispersed from others and poor transport links, reducing opportunities for social contact<sup>1</sup>. Public spending cuts have had a substantial effect on the landscape of rural health care delivery with the withdrawal of local public services, like healthcare organisations and transport, which may have served to act on this issue.

Research has shown that social isolation and loneliness can lead to increased feelings of depression, lowered social functioning and mortality<sup>2,3</sup>. As a result, social isolation and loneliness has been recognised as a major public health concern in the UK and in 2015, the Equal Opportunities Commission launched an inquiry into this issue on behalf of the Scottish Parliament. The inquiry set out a number of recommendations to tackle this issue including a call for evidence of what is already working on the ground, particularly within the third sector.

The Scottish Government has emphasised the potential role that social enterprises can take in helping to reduce social isolation and loneliness because of their embedded place within communities. Rural communities are frequently seen as a fertile ground for social enterprise activity, as they are often characterised as being self-sufficient and collectively resilient. Nonetheless, rural communities are also likely to have smaller pools of human and economic resources, high levels of outward migration and a heavy reliance on volunteers to develop and sustain communities, therefore their ability to deliver social enterprise service provision is open to question.

**Social isolation** refers to the quality and quantity of the social relationships a person has at individual, group, community and societal levels.

**Loneliness** is a subjective feeling experienced when there is a difference between an individual's felt and ideal levels of social relationships.

**Scottish Government, 2018**

The following findings provide an insight into the potential for social enterprises to address social isolation in rural communities, but also the challenges associated with this.

### Key findings

- Over half (34) of the study participants reported that they had been socially isolated or lonely before taking part in social enterprise activity. Of those who reported being socially isolated or lonely, 80% were service users of the social enterprise.
- Study participants stated the following reasons for being socially isolated and/or lonely before they became involved in the social enterprise:
  - **Living alone** (through bereavement, separation, old age)
  - **Having 'nothing to do'** (boredom, lack of choice/activities)
  - **Poor social connectedness** (no similar interest groups, commonalities)
  - **Poor physical connectedness** (lack of transport, distance from others)
  - **Being an 'incomer'** (for example a retiree, not integrated into new community)

Living alone and poor social connectedness are risk factors that were similarly identified by the Scottish Government. However, living in a remote or rural location was found to exacerbate such factors.

- For those geographically isolated, the community transport initiative, Transport for Tongue, offered people who were living alone an opportunity to meet and interact with other people. This included a door to door collection service for those who live in very remote locations that dropped them at lunch clubs or to local towns:

*'I wouldn't know all these people, for the rest of the week I'm all alone, you know, and because of Mary, she's ever so helpful, and the carers, so they are wonderful, it's a life saver'*

**(Service user, Transport for Tongue).**

- Social enterprise activities, such as community cafes and educational classes, were found to provide individuals with the motivation to 'get out of the house' and take part in meaningful activities, which in turn decreased their feelings of social isolation and loneliness:

*'It gives my dad an interest as well because... if this place wasn't here he would be... sitting in the house watching the telly every single day by himself until I come home and he would come and see me at six o'clock. And he wouldn't have anything to focus on'*

**(Service user, Atlantic Islands Centre)**

- Social enterprises that provided activities for adults with learning disabilities were reported to decrease feelings of social isolation and loneliness in younger adults (aged 20-30 years). Participants with disabilities felt particularly isolated because of the small proportion of adults with similar experiences within rural populations. Therefore, the social enterprise aimed to deliver education, employment and social spaces that provided opportunities to meet people that they could share their experiences with:

*'Since leaving school I don't have any friends of my own age. Basically where I live I hang around with the younger children, and being able to be in that environment (Cantray Park) where there is the older people is basically what I need is just interacting with older people than younger'*

**(Service user, Cantray Park)**

- Of the 34 participants that reported feeling socially isolated or lonely, 12 had recently moved into the rural communities studied. The type of loneliness that was described by incomers can be transient or short term, related to situational factors such as not knowing anyone or being away from family. Social enterprises were described as offering a way to feel connected to the community:

*'I think we would have felt quite isolated because I didn't know anybody...I think it would have taken us a lot longer to settle in to the area if we hadn't had the facilities (Seaboard Memorial Hall) here'*

**(Service user, Seaboard Memorial Hall)**

*'If we weren't involved with T4T we would be a lot more isolated than we are, we would be socially excluded (from the community)'*

**(Volunteer, Transport for Tongue)**

- Participants reported feelings of improved health and wellbeing as a result of being less socially isolated and lonely, the most prominent of which was a decreased sense of depression:

*'After I left school I was basically just in my house doing nothing and basically I was getting depressed, very depressed, that I basically got to a stage where I basically wanted to kill myself. But obviously then I started here and basically I'm a lot happier'*

**(Service user, Cantray Park)**

Further health and wellbeing effects included an increased sense of confidence through meeting new people and learning new skills; an increased sense of purpose and belonging through being connected and included within the community; and, an increased sense of happiness and contentment with their lives.

- Although social enterprises were found to provide activities that decreased social isolation and loneliness and improved health and wellbeing, staff and volunteers at the social enterprises expressed feelings of volunteer burn out and exhaustion

related to providing such services. Furthermore, they expressed how working at the social enterprise added pressure and responsibility to help people in their communities that they had not expected:

*'You think, "Oh gosh, this place might collapse and it will be my fault and everybody'll know it." So I did feel the added pressure at that point to try and make things better, to try to keep this place going'*

**(Volunteer at social enterprise)**

- The findings showed that there are smaller pools of people and expertise for communities to draw from to keep social enterprises running, due to small and dispersed population sizes, and predominantly older populations. Moreover, rural communities may not always have existing skills needed within their population needed to run social enterprises:

*'When you're not trained to do this...sometimes you're making decisions and you're thinking, "Oh...," you're kind of basing it on your household income and think, "Well we can't afford to pay for that and we're not having that," and you're doing that with this whole project of hundreds of thousands of pounds, which is scary'*

**(Volunteer at social enterprise)**

This type of responsibility was burdensome on a small number of people, and often resulted in negative effects on the personal lives of social enterprise staff and volunteers, especially in those who had already retired:

*'Quite often our weekends are just interrupted...it does have an effect on your family life. There is no doubt about it. And even going away for family weekends, and that, sometimes you just have to miss out on it, because you've made a commitment to here'*

**(Staff member at social enterprise)**

- Participants reported that the visibility of social enterprises within rural communities meant that community members would be reluctant to volunteer, as they would often hear stories about the associated pressures and stress.

## Discussion - relevance to the CommonHealth programme

Social enterprises' ability to address social isolation and loneliness has emerged as a major finding from the in-depth work carried out as part of this project. In considering the recommendations that the Scottish Government has promoted to tackle issues of social isolation and loneliness, this research contributes to evidencing 'what works' by highlighting the strength but also the challenges faced by social enterprises in rural communities.

The findings have outlined the ways in which social enterprise activity is actively addressing social isolation in people of all ages living in rural and remote communities in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The services that are offered by social enterprises, can be a 'lifesaver' for those who are geographically isolated with 'little to do'. Moreover, such activity can be used as a tool for the integration of incomers into communities who might otherwise feel socially excluded. However, the sustainability of social enterprises is debatable in communities with limited



human and economic capacity, particularly in areas with high numbers of older volunteers. The withdrawal of public service and depletion of budgets in areas such as transport and healthcare, means increasing responsibility on community members to counteract this with more informal service provision. For that reason, there needs to be a wider consideration of the resources, capacity and resilience of communities to be able to continue to respond to such public health issues.

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#### Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health

Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road, Glasgow G4 0BA  
T 0141 331 8330 E [commonhealth@gcu.ac.uk](mailto:commonhealth@gcu.ac.uk)

[www.commonhealth.uk](http://www.commonhealth.uk)

[www.commonhealthresearch.wordpress.com](http://www.commonhealthresearch.wordpress.com)

[www.gcu.ac.uk/yunuscentre](http://www.gcu.ac.uk/yunuscentre)

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