



Summary of SRITC Workshop proceedings on COVID-19 as a Catalyst for Rural Mobility from  
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## Introduction

COVID-19 has fundamentally changed the way we live. While the pandemic has damaged economies and devastated lives, it has also opened the door to new approaches to mobility. On 7<sup>th</sup> October 2020 the question of ‘how can COVID be an accelerator of Rural Mobility’ was addressed at the 2020 Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community (SRITC) Convention.

The Convention is a two-day collaborative event organized by Scottish Rural and Islands Transport Community (SRITC); an ever-growing organization dedicated to improving rural mobility and transportation as foundations of regional development, economic growth, health, education and tourism. First held in 2018 and then again in 2019, the Convention has gathered stakeholders from the public and private sectors across rural and islands community to discuss issues, share learnings and engage with partners.

The 2020 event, which was held online and attracted over 150 attendees from around the world, was organized into four main sessions: Islands Mobility, Innovation and Rural Mobility, Rural Mobility Hubs, and Rural MaaS (Mobility as a Service). In addition, two workshops took place, with the first focusing on **“how can COVID be an accelerator for rural mobility?”**. This report outlines four key findings and discussion points that emerged from the seven groups participating in this workshop.

The groups were carefully balanced to include a variety of stakeholders from community Organisations, Island representatives to the public and private sectors. This mix ensured a robust discussion with a cross section of society views presented. The four themes discussed below were:

- Transport change.
- Connectivity.
- People, Processes & Procurement, and
- Enabling Innovation.

## **1. TRANSPORT CHANGE**

The first case of COVID-19 appeared in Scotland on March 1, 2020. Since then, as the government-issued lockdown limited travel and the virus spread throughout the Central Lowlands, the Highlands, and rural and island areas, three notable trends in travel and mobility related to the lockdown were documented.

### **a) Shift toward localisation.**

Localisation describes when decision-making and control of an area is led by those residing in said area. The session highlighted that community involvement should be a part of this process, and the pandemic indicates that community working groups can, and have played a large role in addressing cross-sector, post-COVID planning.

### **b) Increase in active transportation.**

Active modes such as cycling and walking during the quieter lockdown period, offered the safety of being in open spaces and gave people the chance to simply, “get out.” Going forward, infrastructure support is necessary to create the pavements and paths that allow people to move safely and access essential services.

### **c) More homeworking, Less Commuting.**

Changes in travel patterns driven by the stay-at-home orders saw many people ‘logging on’ from home to start their workday rather than commuting. The evidence gathered indicated that this change has led to more urban professionals seeking to move to rural areas which will increase demand for flexible and integrated transport services.

From these behavioral shifts emerges a requirement to integrate mobility services and community services in centralised, accessible locations. A possible solution, which was discussed on day two of the convention, is the role of community ‘mobility hubs’ that bridge the gap between urban and rural areas while providing community services such as information, socialisation, flexible work places, internet connection, health services, and accessible access to multiple transport modes.

## **2. CONNECTIVITY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shown the need for greater digital connectivity in rural and island areas and this was discussed across all the groups. The daily commute has been replaced with home-working, and studies indicate this will continue to some degree in the post-pandemic future. Furthermore, urban professionals have started to relocate to live in rural communities. Both cases highlight the value of reliable, consistent broadband access.

The groups debated the actions needed to achieve the goal of universal access and use of high-speed broadband across all rural and islands communities. There was broad agreement across the groups that COVID-19 further strengthens the business case for universal access as it would eliminate the digital exclusion gaps exposed by the pandemic while strengthening local economies and improving quality of life for all residents.

The “levelling up” of local jobs markets was one example of an economic benefit highlighted by the groups. This focusing on how access to high speed broadband would enable women and other disproportionately impacted groups to access employment opportunities from which they are currently excluded.

The possibility of developing new digital platforms, enabled by access to high speed broadband, was cited as an opportunity to create new collaboration and support networks that are more inclusive, representative, and accurately reflect the needs of all members of local communities. The data captured through these networks could then be used to support business cases for new services.

It was acknowledged that the Scottish Government’s R100 project is a key facilitator to delivering the infrastructure improvements needed to achieve universal access to high speed broadband. However, the general sentiment across all groups was that even when this project is completed there will still be “digital poverty” gaps.

The groups agreed that in parallel to the roll out of new digital infrastructure, education programmes within communities will be a critical step to ensuring that the benefits of high-speed broadband are experienced by everyone.

### **3. PEOPLE, PROCESS AND PROCUREMENT**

#### **a) People**

Transport is not an end of itself, it enables people to access essential goods and services. Understanding the diversity of travel needs and behaviours of the residents within rural and islands communities, is a critical first step towards creating new mobility solutions.

COVID-19 has changed the way that conversations are taking place, and relationships developed within communities. Lockdowns have pushed more of these to take place online which while challenging for the less digitally literate at the outset, has revealed benefits and created opportunities that would otherwise have been neglected. These include:

- One to one interviews conducted in person, over the phone, or through video chat
- Community surveys administered online
- Video or virtual presentations at town halls, community forums, and public meetings
- Online discussion forums and blogs
- Social media
- Rankings/voting
- Community engagement and support teams for each village

A successful example of an online survey is the one [administered by Inclusion Scotland](#) to gather first-person information on what disabled individuals were experiencing as a result of COVID-19. Over 822 people responded, allowing the organisation to pinpoint the concerns of this group.

From a travel behaviour perspective, it was acknowledged that the willingness and ability of people to change how and when they travel should not be under-estimated. Behaviour change is possible, but the right incentives need to be in place, and change must happen at a pace that is suitable to the residents of each community.

While travel behaviours have changed to a degree as a consequence of the pandemic, there was a shared concern across members of all of the workshop groups about the sustainability of these changes, and agreement that appropriate long-term incentive and support programmes will be needed.

## b) **Process**

The COVID pandemic has created severe health/social, economic and fiscal impacts across rural and islands communities. The need to quickly address these issues has led to the acceleration of the roll out of new mobility solutions.

For example, we have seen an acceleration of licensing reviews and an openness to new approaches from the public and private sectors, even though the former is continuing to be slowed down by legislative processes. As one group member wisely stated, “now is the time to do more and think less”.

The workshop groups also addressed the impact that the pandemic has had on the freight sector. It was noted that islands and rural communities are extremely vulnerable to disruptions in supply chains. The former significantly so due to the extra time and cost of goods delivery.

As a consequence of these disruptions, it was highlighted within the workshops that out of necessity, some community non-profit social groups have developed their own integrated goods delivery systems. By adapting existing infrastructure to meet changing needs, tactics such as this show that new solutions can be rapidly developed without being held up by “red tape”.

### **c) Procurement**

The pandemic has exposed the issues associated with existing public procurement processes while also forcing a more urgent focus on how they can be resolved. The groups highlighted that one positive development has been a greater willingness of local authorities to make their procurement processes more inclusive with a greater focus on local SME suppliers.

At a national level, since 2014, the Scottish Government has invested over £4.7 million in a range of measures to support the introduction and development of participatory budgeting and this can be a possible procurement route to explore. Participatory Budgeting (PB) switches the paradigm by allowing citizens to collectively decide how to spend public money. This innovation originated from blending two policy agendas: community empowerment and social justice.

## **4. BUILDING BACK BETTER: ENABLING INNOVATION**

Innovation often comes as a result of necessity. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on public transport in 2020 has reduced the number of journeys taken in Scotland by 100 million. With such a large drop, and the subsequent impact on the profits of private sector transport operators, the workshop participants concluded that now is the time to accelerate the development of new business and service models.

In this context, the opportunity to develop rural Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) services using existing resources and vehicles as a means to providing dependable transportation for essential workers while filling transport gaps was discussed within the groups. It was noted that the development of DRT services and associated business models could be further facilitated through emerging technologies such as 5G that will integrate the connectivity of people, machines, objects, and devices.

One final area where innovation could support rural and islands communities that emerged through the workshops was integrating the delivery of light freight (medicine, goods, and groceries), and people using the existing network of local vehicles. An example cited within one group was the Postbus service which used to be a common feature across many rural communities, moving not only local post but people.

## **IN SUMMARY**

The COVID-19 pandemic has created abrupt changes in travel behaviours. Most notably, an increase in active travel via foot and bike, and a decline in bus patronage.

At the same time, the pandemic is accelerating the development of new services and solutions as governments and cities cut legislative red tape and streamline procurement processes.

As we look toward a post-pandemic future, the lessons learned during 2020 provide the foundation for the innovation that needs to take place in the near future. Innovations that will enable new rural mobility services to be successfully developed, tested, and scaled across rural and island communities creating benefits for local residents and the Scottish nation.

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