

# HIGHLANDS & ISLANDS CONNECTIONS

Caring, Connected Communities

Putting the community at the centre of mental wellbeing





"We heard how important local services are, with one of the key points being to get the right help at the right time. We also heard about stigma and the need for more sustained and co-ordinated awareness campaigns. What we also heard was the importance of simply getting together day-to-day regular and ordinary community interactions that created a sense of belonging and gave a sense of purpose."

Well Connected Communities Report, Support in Mind Scotland (2018)



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# Foreword

## Caring, Connected Communities

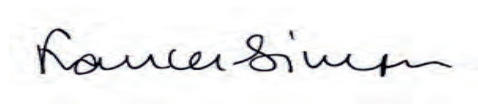
When we embarked on our work in 2016 to find out more about mental health in rural Scotland, we had no idea that this work would culminate in *Caring, Connected Communities*, a truly inspiring story of what local communities can achieve when connections are nurtured and people are trusted and enabled to find their own solutions to the issues they face.

Support in Mind Scotland has been providing support to people living with poor mental health and mental illness in rural areas for nearly 50 years, and we are proud of what we have achieved so far. When we started this work 4 years ago, we wanted to use that experience to develop new services in communities where we knew resources were diminishing and services were being relocated or lost completely.

But what we have learned through listening to the personal experiences of the many hundreds of people who have participated in our projects, is that whilst services matter, community matters much more. The connection between wellbeing and the place where we live is widely accepted and understood, but unless we understand the whole range of unique, dynamic and complex issues that drive a community, and the people who live in that community, we may be able to change and improve services, but we will never really transform people's lives.

The importance of community and of the vital community connections could not be in sharper relief as we launch this report amidst perhaps the greatest crisis that most of us will have experienced in our lives. COVID-19 is creating fear and distress at a time when we are being asked to keep our distance from those we love and care for and who love and care for us. We must learn from this collective experience what the real priorities are in terms of keeping people well; and we think that the communities who have provided their time and expertise to create this report have a great deal to teach us.

I am very grateful to everyone who has worked so hard to produce this report. It has completely reshaped our approach and confirmed our commitment to community development and the transformative power of collective action.



Frances Simpson

CEO Support in Mind Scotland





# Executive Summary

## 1. Background:

- a. The Highlands and Islands Connections 12-month project is an innovative, community-led approach to tackling mental health and wellbeing in remote and rural areas of Scotland.
- b. At least one in four people experience poor mental health at some time in their life, with evidence showing that living in a rural part of the country does not mean you will always have good mental health. Rural areas are not immune to the stresses and strains of everyday life.
- c. Project vision: to examine how simple, improved community connections could make a difference to mental health and wellbeing.

## 2. Approach:

- a. Focus: the whole community, not just those experiencing mental ill health; looking 'upstream' at ways to help people *avoid* mental ill health, rather than setting up a mental health service.
- b. Location: Uists and Benbecula in the Western Isles and the Isle of Mull, Argyll & Bute, building on previous community-based mental health work in these two areas.
- c. Teams: partnership-working between Support in Mind Scotland teams and pre-existing, in-community groups;
- d. Early stages: initial surveys carried out to identify local needs and opportunities in developing "communities of care". Local teams met to identify options for creating more caring places, followed by workshops with multiple stakeholders to identify how the project could "map" onto local activity and services. Promotional materials developed and distributed, followed by face to face meetings across the islands. Uists and Benbecula respondents focused on working with existing groups to improve communications and raise awareness of available mental health support; on the Isle of Mull, the priority for respondents was engaging businesses and other local organisations to improve connections and 'work place' mental wellbeing.
- e. Project awareness: the project teams used social media, local press, word-of-mouth and posters. The biggest successes were when local groups and organisations helped through local launch events, enabling coverage in national/local press and radio.

## 3. Project Outcomes:

- a. Uists and Benbecula:
  - i. Over 70 "dynamic hub" locations promoting mental health and wellbeing, with 130 community groups actively engaging and providing details of local activities;
  - ii. Development of Dè tha Dol, a What's On guide poster, with mental health and wellbeing woven seamlessly into the design/content, available for download via social media;
  - iii. Development of Dè tha Dol website and App, with training and support for 130 local organisations, businesses and services to use the App;
  - iv. A "Wall of hope" message board at a key community location;
  - v. "Blether Benches" built and sited locally to promote informal conversations to address social isolation;
  - vi. Locally-relevant mental health trial training package delivered as "Compassionate Conversations".



- b. Isle of Mull:
  - i. Businesses identified physical workplace improvements (including places to meet and talk informally) plus ways to help staff relax (e.g. Step Count Challenge);
  - ii. New links and connections created (e.g. community bus and theatre); Networking Events cemented new links;
  - iii. Delivered "i-Act" Mental Health training for the workplace, focused on common mental health issues;
  - iv. Delivered a Scottish Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training weekend, with the Isle of Mull now developing a team of Mental Health First Aiders.
- c. Overall project: showcase film documentary illustrating project achievements, developed with community partners across all project locations. Filmed by Prancing Jack Productions (Isle of Barra). Interviews with national level stakeholders including Ministers and MSPs.

- 4. Conclusions:** the evidence from Highlands and Islands Connections project demonstrates that:
- a. Place-based rural communities are very capable of developing more caring, connected communities;
  - b. Support in Mind Scotland adds value through strategic insight, linking people, and supporting groups and individuals to create solutions to local challenges;
  - c. Many community-based *activities* have been shown to improve mental wellbeing, but having a skilled and confident *network of people* will ensure support when someone needs it most;
  - d. Communities at the centre of mental wellbeing are critical to a sustainable approach.

- 5. Recommendations:** the following recommendations therefore follow on from these key findings:
- a. Priority must be given to communities in further enhancing their own mental wellbeing;
  - b. Systematic evidence must be built around how and why a community and place-based approach to mental wellbeing is proving to be successful;
  - c. Evaluation approaches must be developed to assess outcomes from interventions, that take into account qualitative, lived-experience evidence;
  - d. Targeted support should be available for:
    - i. building community knowledge bases to enhance mental wellbeing;
    - ii. capacity-building support for grass-roots Mental Wellbeing Action Plans;
    - iii. mental health awareness training within communities;
    - iv. identification and implementation of "upstream" (rather than crisis) and "life stage" interventions to support wellbeing.
  - e. Robust policy guidelines (regional and national) must be developed that both recognise and support mentally-healthy places and communities;
  - f. Investment must be prioritised for initiatives that can be scaled-up and rolled out across Scotland;
  - g. Investment in place and communities for mental wellbeing must be linked into National Rural Mental Health Forum's network, enabling two-way exchange of ideas, expertise and resources;
  - h. An evidence-base must be built as to how communities of place have enhanced mental wellbeing even under the Covid19 conditions of 2020.



# Introduction

## Highlands and Islands Connections - a pilot project exploring community based mental health

The Highlands and Islands Connections' project is an innovative approach to tackling mental health and wellbeing in remote and rural areas of Scotland. Poor mental health can be experienced wherever you live and in rural areas stigma, lack of anonymity and an inability to access services, can all act as barriers to support for individuals. Support in Mind Scotland, who run the National Rural Mental Health Forum, undertook research that highlighted that those who experience poor mental health in rural Scotland want the ability to be supported in their communities in a low level, non-clinical pre-crisis setting.

We know that at least one in four people will experience poor mental health at some time in their life, and we know that it doesn't matter who you are or where you live, you can experience poor mental health and wellbeing. Evidence clearly shows that just because you live in a rural part of the country, it doesn't mean to say that you will always have good mental health.

This project worked with communities in two pilot areas testing out different ways to engage, to develop and explore delivery of mental health support. No one size fits all, and in tackling mental health across Scotland, we need to ensure that any approach must be driven by those living in the area.

The Highlands and Islands' Project has taken a community-led, innovative approach over the course of twelve months and has:

- Helped organisations to identify and implement social changes in the workplace
- Developed the *Dè tha Dol* App featuring over 100 local organisations
- Helped organisations to identify and implement some physical adaptations in the workplace
- Delivered mental health awareness training sessions
- Engaged many different groups and individuals across social media platforms
- Developed and delivered a What's On Monthly Highlights poster to over 70 local hubs
- Organised various networking events and campaigns helping to connect organisations
- Created a film to capture the story of the project

I am particularly pleased that the project has produced a film journal. Not everyone warms to the traditional leaflet and newsletter approach and this film will be a valuable tool in taking forward the agenda of tackling mental health in a holistic, community-led approach. After all it is not just the traditional health services that are needed to support those who experience poor mental health, it is everyone's business. We need to think outside the box of how to improve mental health and wellbeing of people, no matter where they live and the Highlands and Islands Connections' project is an inspiration for policy makers, communities, businesses and support organisations to consider how best we can move forward in supporting individuals with poor mental health and indeed help the whole community.



Jim Hume

Convener of the National Rural Mental Health Forum



# Background

Does the environment play a vital role in our mental health? How important is it to belong in your community? Do we need an alternative approach to the traditional services and medical interventions used to improve mental health here in Scotland? Could we do more to reduce the numbers of people experiencing mental health conditions in the first place? These were the questions we were asking. These questions led to the development of the Highlands & Islands Connections project that took place between February 2019 and March 2020.

Our learning reflects the many conversations had with people who have contributed and added significant value to this exploration, especially those established groups already delivering mental health support, local businesses and other organisations who provide a wide spectrum of services. We hope in this report to paint a picture of some of the mental health challenges as seen from the local perspective, to summarise the activities undertaken during the 12 month pilot project and clearly highlight some down-to-earth practical examples of ways to create opportunities for local people to connect with each other. We hope that this will allow this report not only to be a record of activity, but also a useful aid-memoire of different ways to engage and improve community connections and ultimately build better, more caring places.

Throughout this journey the team has been blessed to travel across some of the most beautiful parts of Scotland, meeting with people who are passionate about creating better places. Along the route we have been challenged to push our own view of mental health. As with all good projects, you may find some of the answers, but nearly always you discover even more questions! Is it possible to create a more caring and a more equal society? What kind of place do we want to live in?

In February 2019 the team started their journey into exploring how to build more resilient, fair and mentally healthy communities.



Ros Halley

Highlands & Islands Connections Manager





# Context

Most people across Scotland still tend to think of mental health support being more traditional mental health services delivered often from a medical centre and involving a mix of psychotherapy and medication, which may also require some hospitalisation for the most severe cases. Saying that, an increasing number of people seem to be willing to try alternative interventions, including support groups, complementary & alternative medicine and self-help options. Whether through the statutory services, the voluntary sector or online, people are still having enormous issues accessing the support they feel they need and many organisations and services are struggling to keep up with demand and are finding it increasingly difficult to balance the books.

When people have struggled to get the support they need for their own mental health or that of their loved one, it is not surprising that there exists within the psychology of the population a strong desire to 'get the issue fixed as soon as possible' and to be able to move back to 'normal life'. After all, mental ill health can impact severely on individuals of all ages, their friends and their families. Rural areas are not immune to the stresses and strains of everyday life and across the beautiful landscapes of our two pilot areas there are individuals from all walks of life who are experiencing mental ill health, ranging from short spells of depression or anxiety through to severe and persistent conditions that are massively disruptive, frightening and life threatening.

At the start of the Highlands & Islands Connections project, it was quite difficult to engage people to explore 'community connection' ideas and we felt under pressure to justify the need for a different approach and had on numerous occasions to defend the growing evidence base around the importance of *social connection* for our mental wellbeing. Some people felt that promoting a more grass roots approach was simply avoiding putting 'proper services' into rural areas and others felt that 'making mental health everyone's business' was diluting already scarce resources which could otherwise be used to support those who already suffer from severe mental ill health. So, although the idea of grass roots community engagement in improving mental wellbeing is not something new, it is fair to say that it is not something that carries great weight in the mind of the general population and certainly was not universally accepted across the highlands and islands of Scotland. However, at the end of this project we had all learnt something new, and many had started to see things in a different light.



# The vision

Underpinning all the work was the desire to test ideas which could illustrate how simple, improved *community connections* could make a difference to our own mental health and the wellbeing of others. Woven into this simple vision was a desire to reach out to all corners of the community, not just engage with those already experiencing mental ill health. We wanted to empower people to become better informed about mental wellbeing, about the mental health support available and to help breakdown stigma and discrimination. Most importantly, we wanted to explore the role of the community in mental health, not just look at mental health in the community.

There was no desire to set up a mental health service, but rather look 'upstream' at ways to help people avoid mental ill health. We knew that we had to identify actions that could be undertaken and tested out during the twelve-month pilot project. We knew that we had to galvanise support locally and deliver in partnership with other organisations. This led to the development of some key actions during the pilot project. These can loosely be described as 'Making Physical and Social Adaptations', 'Encouraging Community & Business Interaction' and 'Improving Knowledge for All'.



# Our approach

The starting point for the project was the establishment of two small teams in the two designated areas. One team in the Uists and Benbecula in the Western Isles and one on the Isle of Mull, Argyll & Bute. These two areas had been previously involved in a small research project during 2018 with Support in Mind Scotland called *Well Connected Communities*<sup>1</sup>. This research looked at how people experienced mental health in rural areas and so initial contacts had already been established in the two pilot areas prior to this project starting.

Despite this obvious advantage, there were still significant challenges linked to establishing the project. These challenges can probably be best summarised as: recruitment challenges; the rural operating context; articulating the approach; and engaging the wider community beyond those traditionally involved in mental health.

The locations of each pilot naturally made the project more challenging. Especially during the colder months, travel was not always reliable, as locals know only too well! The challenges associated with the rural context were linked to local politics, sparse resources and difficult communication channels in some parts. By far the biggest of these issues in the Uists & Benbecula was avoiding duplication of effort and ensuring that the project was not negatively impacting on any existing resources, services or community efforts, whereas on the Isle of Mull the biggest issue was ensuring that the tone and content of communications were appropriate to engage the wider community in the project concept, particularly those not previously involved in mental health.

Recruitment for two full time community workers across both rural areas did not attract significant interest and generated a low level of job applications. Despite the best attempts to attract and retain local talent, for reasons related to childcare, personal health and competing economic opportunities, a core mainland-based team was created. The knock-on effect was that the team had to spend a considerable amount of time travelling to each pilot area. Thankfully, the ferry company Caledonian MacBrayne sponsored the team's travel.



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<sup>1</sup> Link to Well Connected Communities report:

<https://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/well-connected-communities-report>





# Local partnership

The initial exploratory work in each pilot area involved the teams reaching out to existing groups to help set up a sounding board to capture initial thoughts and ideas around how local mental wellbeing could be improved. Using local knowledge and distribution networks the team then created initial promotional materials and a survey which was traditionally distributed as well as circulated online. Local engagement and the survey captured a picture of community connections and mapped how mental health is currently perceived and experienced by individuals in both areas.

Reflecting local needs and interests, it was decided relatively early on that the project in the Uists & Benbecula would aim to engage individuals through working with existing groups and improving communications, whereas the project on the Isle of Mull would aim to engage businesses & other local organisations to look at ways to improve connections and mental wellbeing. Making one part of the project about the community and the other about businesses and organisations allowed us to effectively test out two completely different approaches to developing a 'community of care'.



# Research

A survey was created for each pilot area which reflected the differences in the approach. Both surveys asked respondents to rate their happiness, life satisfaction, physical health, feeling worthwhile, anxiety, mental wellbeing, loneliness and awareness of local support.

In the Uists & Benbecula 271 individuals took part in the survey between April and May 2019.

In the Uists and Benbecula, we found that respondents often felt anxious, lonely and had a low sense of life satisfaction, despite having a higher than average level of physical health.

Several key areas for improvement were identified from the results:

- Improved access to services and links between services
- Improved support for young working adults
- Improved support for stay-at-home parents
- Improved support for self-employed people
- More support for improving physical health, especially diet and exercise
- More employer-led mental health support



On the Isle of Mull, 65 participants from 8 businesses & organisations took part in the survey between April and May 2019.

On the Isle of Mull, despite having a positive sense of self-worth, more than half of the respondents rated themselves as feeling moderately anxious or worse and most respondents had low awareness of mental health support locally and most felt unable to speak to friends and family or engage with colleagues in their workplace about their mental wellbeing.

Several key areas for improvement were identified from the results:

- Those in the 55-64-year-old age bracket reported the highest levels of anxiety and lowest scores for happiness and wellbeing
- Older people reported a high level of loneliness
- Younger people reported a lower sense of belonging to the community
- Men were least aware of community activities or support
- Men had a lower wellbeing and happiness rating
- Men reported feeling lonelier and less likely to talk to colleagues about mental health

Across both pilot areas common themes emerged:

- People feel that there is a need for more support for young people and families
- People feel that there is a prevalence of social isolation and loneliness (especially amongst the older generation)
- People sense that services on the isles are sporadic and under-resourced
- People believe that there is a lack of access to mental health support
- People say there is a need for more general awareness and support of mental wellbeing
- People seem to want more events and creative use of public spaces
- People identified that there needs to be more effort made to remove stigma and discrimination around mental health





To put this in context we also examined the responses against the most recent Office of National Statistics report (ONS, May 2019). This provided us with a picture of the two pilot areas set against the UK backdrop.

Overall, respondents in both areas scored lower than the most recent ONS averages on all wellbeing measures. Respondents on Mull scored worse than average on reported levels of anxiety, happiness and feeling worthwhile, whilst respondents in the Uists and Benbecula reported their feeling of belonging to the community was lower than Mull's score for this question and the national average. On the positive side, overall health for both areas was in line with or above the reported national average.

### **Personal Wellbeing**

#### **'Very high rating of satisfaction with their lives'**

- National: 30.5%
- Mull: 21.2%
- Uists and Benbecula: 17.7%

#### **'Very high rating of how worthwhile they feel'**

- National: 36%
- Mull: 18.1%
- Uists and Benbecula: 21.7%

#### **'Rated their happiness as very high'**

- National: 35.1%
- Mull: 15.2%
- Uists and Benbecula: 23%

#### **'Rated their anxiety as very low'**

- National: 41.2%
- Mull: 19.7%
- Uists and Benbecula: 29.3%

### **Relationships**

#### **'Proportion of those in unhappy relationships'**

- National: 3.6%
- Mull: 6%
- Uists and Benbecula: 7%

#### **'Feelings of loneliness: often/always'**

- National: 5.5%
- Mull: 9%
- Uists and Benbecula: 10.5%

#### **'Agreed/agreed strongly they felt they belonged to their neighbourhood'**

- National: 68.8%
- Mull: 72.7%
- Uists and Benbecula: 60.6%



# Building on local knowledge

On the back of the community and business-based surveys undertaken, each team was also tasked with gathering individuals and groups together to explore mental health and opportunities for creating more caring places. Broadly speaking each area explored the following questions via face-to-face meetings and workshops:

- 1: Which mental health services are offered in the community and are they accessible?
- 2: What is the community's attitude towards mental health and is there an issue of stigma or discrimination?
- 3: What are the challenges around social and geographic isolation?
- 4: Which services could benefit the community to improve their overall mental health and wellbeing?



## Uists & Benbecula

Discussions were held with key community organisations, charities and NHS representatives to gather information around mental health support, community attitudes and to identify the main barriers to people accessing mental health and wellbeing services.

Workshops and discussions with key partners also helped us to identify the aims and objectives for the project, although the time constraints on the project often meant that there wasn't quite enough time to fully explore all options, leaving some groups feeling that the project was moving too fast and moving at times without the full engagement of all key partners.

During the conversations that partners shared, it emerged that there are a lot of services that advertise themselves as covering the whole of the Western Isles, but these services rarely come down to the Uists and Benbecula. The onus is often put on service users to travel up to Stornoway to receive support or alternatively receive support via phone or digital technology remotely. It was also noted that whilst there is some local support available on the Uists and Benbecula, potential users sometimes don't know how to access this or are put off accessing services due to the stigma of mental health in the community.

### Outcomes from the meetings across the Uists and Benbecula:

- Requirement for more mental health awareness, linking in with other community and business activities.
- A high level of interest in promoting more of the activities already going on in the area.
- A strong desire to see more Mental Health First Aid training and other training for a wider audience.
- An interest in re-instating the local paper's (Am Paipier) monthly 'What's On' page.
- An interest in working together with NHS Western Isles Health Promotions team to link in with their directory which lists all sports, activities, social groups and services available to the community in the Uists and Benbecula.
- A desire to see the creation of "Dè tha Dol" (What's Happening) posters and locating these across the isles.
- An interest in exploring options for digital communications in the shape of an App.
- An interest in exploring how community connections could be enhanced through improving physical spaces.





## Isle of Mull

On the Isle of Mull, participants were keen to share their experiences of accessing services. They stated that they felt the island was an 'outpost' of Argyll and Bute and often felt ignored by mainland services. Due to the nature of island living and the dispersed nature of the island's small communities, participants stated that they felt that there were areas on the island where people were more isolated and where accessing services would be even more difficult. People agreed if they did not have access to a car, then living on the island would be extremely difficult. It was also noted there are complex challenges around how life on the island is experienced depending on amongst other things age, gender, sexuality, economic activity and the family support systems available to an individual. Feedback from all meetings highlighted that reducing health-related services is impacting negatively on the health of the community. There are significant issues with accessing mainland services (eg. time constraints, travel by ferry, caring responsibilities) and people recognise that there is a worrying level of substance misuse and self-harm. Whilst most people on the Isle of Mull enjoy living on the island and feel safe there, people overall do not feel able to have open conversations with friends and family or work colleagues about their mental health. There is concern about the lack of engagement of young people in community activities and the impact of social media and cyber bullying. From the outside life on Mull may seem to offer an 'idyllic island lifestyle', but the reality can be far tougher.

### Outcomes from the meetings on the Isle of Mull:

- Interest in exploring what businesses and organisations can do to make improve physical and social adaptations on the Isle of Mull.
- Better signposting to additional mental health support in the community and online would be desired to encourage community & business interaction.
- A support system within each organisation to allow employees to support each other when coping with mental health issues would be beneficial.
- Interest in linking in with national campaigns to help reduce stigma & improve mental health awareness and ensure everyone's knowledge is improved.



# Caring, Connected Communities

## *Encouraging Community & Business Interaction*

The Highlands & Islands Connections project utilised social media, local press and word-of-mouth and posters to promote the project in both areas. This approach was relatively successful at reaching residents, however the biggest successes were linked to those occasions when local groups and organisations helped in the promotions.

A launch event was organised in both areas for partners to gather and learn about the project. During the project the team have succeeded in gaining exposure in the national press in the form of The Scotsman newspaper, regional press such as The Oban Times and Am Paipear and had various articles on Scotland's Rural Network and National Rural Mental Health Forum as well as featuring on BBC Alba and BBC Radio Nan Gàidheal. Presentations at local, regional and national conferences including the World Community Development Conference also helped to make connections and add value to the project throughout the year.

The project was represented at a variety of local and national events during 2019 including the Royal Highland Show in Edinburgh, the *Scottish Communities Conference* in Aviemore and at The National Rural Mental Health Forum.

In addition, the team participated in regular social media activities to raise awareness of the work going on. Over 400 Facebook posts and 282 Twitter tweets were made during the 12-month period.



## Encouraging Community & Business Interaction

A film opportunity came about during the project which enabled the team to capture the community activities already going on in the islands, as well as track progress towards testing out new thoughts and ideas around caring, connected communities. Prancing Jack Productions (based on the Isle of Barra) visited the Isle of Mull and the Uists and Benbecula on numerous occasions following the work of the team and filming activities and interviewing organisations on the isles.

The film crew met with many community trusts and all interviews were captured on film. Film material was used to create the Caring, Connected Communities film and some of the footage is being stored by the National Rural Mental Health Forum for future use and mini-clips were made available for use on social media by local partners.

Mull Safe and Sound, Mull and Iona Community Trust and Mull Musical Minds, Mull Ballet and the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust were all featured. In the Uists and Benbecula, Cothrom (Community Learning Centre), Claddach Kirkibost Centre, Grimsay Community Association, Museum nan Eilean (Uist & Barra), Tagsa Uibhist, Caraidean Uibhist and the Cuimhne Project were featured.

In addition, interviews were filmed with national level stakeholders, including Fergus Ewing MSP (Cabinet Secretary for Rural Economy & Tourism), Clare Haughey MSP (Minister for Mental Health), Miles Briggs MSP, Rhoda Grant MSP, Professor Sarah Skerratt (Director SRUC Policy Engagement), Jim Hume (Convener of the National Rural Mental Health Forum) and Frances Simpson (CEO, Support in Mind Scotland).

The film is not only a substantial visual record of the project, but also a poignant reminder of life just before the Covid19 lockdown, which started just weeks after completing the film. The film is available to view on Support in Mind Scotland's website<sup>2</sup>.

Beyond the overarching elements each area also identified different activities that they felt could help to encourage more community engagement and local business interaction.



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<sup>2</sup> Link to the Caring, Connected Communities film: <https://www.supportinmindscotland.org.uk/highlands-and-islands-connections>





## Encouraging Community & Business Interaction

### Uists & Benbecula

In the Uists and Benbecula, the team set out to deliver some of the thoughts and ideas that had been captured during the early engagement meetings. The first series of actions saw the development of a variety of promotional materials. Key locations or 'dynamic hubs' were identified to host materials and individuals across the areas were encouraged to get involved in activities and events that could help improve community connections, mental health and wellbeing. At the end of the project there were over 70 locations participating in the promotion of the project and 130 community groups were actively engaging and providing details of local activities.

Responding to local requests for more information about community events going on across the isles, the team developed Dè tha Dol<sup>3</sup>, a What's On guide for the area. This took the form of a poster, highlighting key events and activities, suitable for different age groups and relevant to different parts of the isles. Importantly, mental health and wellbeing information was woven seamlessly into the design and content of all promotional materials.

Posters were made available to download and print and distributed to dynamic hubs. The Dè tha Dol, What's On guide was also shared via social media including community Facebook groups: North Uist Appreciation Society; South Uist Appreciation Society; Grimsay Community Association; Eriskay Hall and Community; Benbecula Appreciation Society; Uist Noticeboard; Berneray Community; and Uist Jobs and Info.

In the lead up to World Mental Health Day (10. October 2019), Breathing Space materials were distributed across key locations including community centres, pubs, restaurants and shops. The team worked with Co-op stores in the area to develop a point of engagement with staff and shoppers to raise awareness of mental health and distribute leaflets and signpost individuals to a range of local and national support providers. The Co-op were keen to assist and fundraise for World Mental Health Day.



<sup>3</sup> Link to the Dè tha Dol website: <https://www.dethadol.com/>



## Encouraging Community & Business Interaction

### Isle of Mull

On the Isle of Mull, the team also developed some of the ideas that had been captured during the early engagement meetings and built on the survey results with the businesses and local organisations.

Initially this involved creation of a leaflet which was distributed to some key points around the island. These were intended to raise awareness of the project and to generate interest from local businesses. There was limited success in this approach and feedback suggested that a more direct, local face-to-face engagement would have been necessary to get better early buy-in from a range of partners to the project.

The key thrust of engagement activity undertaken on the Isle of Mull involved meeting with the survey participant organisations to determine what could be done to improve the workplace for staff, trustees and volunteers. A review of each set of survey results was undertaken and meetings arranged, followed by time to develop ideas and assess the likely costs involved.

Of the original 8 participating businesses and organisations, 5 managed to implement changes or undertake specific mental health related activities during the remaining project period. These changes ranged from physical improvements to identifying things that would help staff to relax.

By bringing the community groups and businesses together to discuss mental health and what could be done to improve places, slowly new connections emerged which had not been planned. Through conversations, links evolved, e.g. for World Mental Health Day 2019, the team made a connection between the local Community Bus Initiative and Comar Theatre on the isle. Identifying those at risk of social isolation through community contacts and social media, the team coordinated the involvement of people to attend performances from different parts of the isles. The feedback from this initiative was overwhelmingly positive, not just the performance experience going down well with the audience but the interaction and camaraderie on the journey. Creating a 'buddy-to-theatre' service is an excellent demonstration of the small things that can bring about change through joined-up thinking and lead towards creating a more caring community.



## Making Physical and Social Adaptations

Making any physical or social adaptation can take time and therefore this was a challenging aspect for the teams. Many conversations were had with groups and individuals to consider what simple changes could be made to make their places more welcoming, more open and more supportive. Simply opening minds to the possibility of change would have been a step forward, but what the team and the communities achieved in a short period of time provided us with an important insight. People are interested in being more inclusive and more caring, but they need to be provided with ideas, encouragement and support to make change happen.

### Uists & Benbecula

In the Uists and Benbecula, the team looked at ways that physical adaptations could be made to communal spaces. Discussions took place which led to the decision that a number of 'hubs' could be created in different locations across the isles. In addition to these information points, the team supported Claddach Kirkibost Centre to create a "Wall of Hope" during Mental Health Awareness Week (May 2019). Locals frequenting the centre were able to add messages and the activity acted as a conversation starter around mental wellbeing and local hopes and needs.

For World Mental Health Day the team worked with local Co-op stores to raise awareness of local and national mental health resources and used the opportunity in store to fundraise for a bench to physically improve the area. The overwhelming financial support from local people meant that three wooden benches or 'Blether Benches' could be purchased with the money raised. The team commissioned Cothrom ReStore to make the benches. The benches were then positioned in easily accessible locations, selected by locals. It is hoped that these benches act as a reminder of how important it is to connect and talk. The benches are in Creagorry (Benbecula), Lochboisdale (South Uist) and Daliburgh (South Uist). We hope that these 'Blether Benches' will in some small way help tackle isolation and loneliness and make talking about mental health a little bit more common place.



## Making Physical and Social Adaptations

### Isle of Mull

On the Isle of Mull, the team worked with the organisations and businesses to identify suitable options for physical and social adaptations linked to the survey results.

The team encouraged partners to look at physical adaptations such as improving meeting spaces, creating green space for connection with nature or reconfiguring rooms within a building for people to meet, eat lunch or enjoy a coffee with colleagues. Despite most of the partners feeling unsure about making changes, some physical changes were made including creation of a social space for staff at the offices of the Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust. Other ideas were considered but were not progressed within the available project timetable such as creation of a new more relaxing staff room at Tobermory High School. The school hopes to progress their ideas during 2020.

Whether installing a coffee machine, or arranging desk yoga sessions for staff, not all changes require significant restructuring or investment. The opportunities for creating better places are endless. Mull Safe and Sound, the local peer-support network was encouraged to do something to change the way they normally operate and so for one day they looked after themselves and spent time at the local spa.

Some of the Mull partners were interested in improving conversations, building trust and linking mental wellbeing to physical health. The team supported various organisations including Mull & Iona Community Trust to do a 6-week Step Count Challenge (a social exercise challenge). Twenty of the Trust's employees joined in with the challenge and the feedback from participants was incredibly positive.

Other social adaptations came about through the creation of a network of individuals and groups getting to know each other better. Support in Mind's presence on the island made it possible to bring together groups and organisations who would not normally meet. To further collaborative working across the Isle and between diverse groups, a Networking Event was organised in February 2020 to bring community groups together to exchange knowledge. This event took place at Craignure Village Hall and Mull Safe and Sound collaborated on the planning of the venue and promoted the event. There were 14 organisations from across Mull exhibiting at the event and sharing their information.





## Improving Knowledge for All

Running alongside the other two themes of '*Encouraging Community & Business Interaction*' and '*Making Physical and Social Adaptations*', both areas were tasked with identifying with local partners how best to build knowledge. This knowledge building had to be in addition to work already going on and be aimed at those not traditionally involved in mental health delivery. This meant reaching out to engage ordinary people, people working in places such as shops, cafes, visitor attractions and sport centres. In the *Well Connected Communities* research undertaken in 2018, people told us that they wanted to develop a greater understanding about mental health. This current project tested out different ways of building knowledge, helping people to reconnect and to have the skills to hold compassionate conversations.

### Uists & Benbecula

In the Uists and Benbecula the team worked with key partners to decide on where there might be value in bringing in formal training. Despite a demand from partners for Scottish Mental Health First Aid training, there were significant issues in finding someone to deliver this training in the area within the project timeframe. Due to these difficulties the training discussions moved onto creating a session that would build confidence about talking about mental health within the community. There were further challenges to overcome in developing this training as some of the local partners felt that training aimed at dedicated support workers would be more beneficial than training that was open to everyone. A key part of the project was to ensure that the community was recognised as being at the centre of mental health. Avoiding the development of approaches which were only open to those already involved in mental health was therefore critical.

The team worked with Cothrom to develop a locally relevant mental health training package and commissioned a local trainer to deliver a session on *Compassionate Conversations*, which took place early February 2020. Although only a handful of people attended the initial session it is hoped that this work can be built upon in the future.

Not all knowledge-building will take the form of a training course. In the Uists and Benbecula it was decided that an important part of building connections would be achieved through creating a digital platform for the isles. Building on the success of the Dè tha Dol What's On poster, the team decided that it would be worthwhile testing out the development of a digital version of the event guide. With additional support centrally, the team managed to get a website and an App up and running before the end of the project. The platform also called Dè tha Dol was launched late 2019 and can be downloaded for free from the App Store or Google Play. There are now over 100 organisations using the platform and information about mental health is woven into both the website and App in such a way that there is no stigma or discrimination.

Developing the platform has not been plain sailing. Liaising with 20 key partners to gather input/feedback and steer overall direction has been time-consuming and it has been at times difficult to meet the different expectations of such diverse groups. In addition, partner sign-up has been reluctant in some cases due to the short-term nature of this project. Despite reassurances about the website having long-term support it was not always enough to keep partners on-board.

Not everyone was able to use the App straightaway, so drop-in training events were organised and the team guided over 130 local organisations, businesses and services to support the sign-up process.



## Improving Knowledge for All

The team have utilised several networks to promote the platform, including the Dè tha Dol poster contributors, key partners, local business directories and community development companies.

Promotion included the production of the 'Sign-up' postcard which was distributed across the isles, A4 posters and stickers for listers to advertise that they are on the app. An advertisement in the local paper, articles in a national paper and on online networks were put in place and an interview with BBC Alba was broadcast on TV, on An La (the news). More work will be needed in the future to grow the number of users and to make the platform a really useful part of everyday life.

The general feedback from the community has been extremely positive. The website and App content continues to be coordinated centrally by Support in Mind Scotland for the time being, but it is hoped that a local partner will take on this role. The Dè tha Dol digital platform offers everyone in the Uists & Benbecula an opportunity to learn about what's going on in the area, to connect with each other and improve their knowledge about mental health by accessing one of the many regularly updated resources available on the platform.



## Improving Knowledge for All

### Isle of Mull

On the Isle of Mull, the team focussed on delivering training with the participating businesses and organisations. Building on the results of the surveys, the team organised two training sessions around mental health in the workplace. The i-Act Mental Health training for the workplace introduces common mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression and addresses how wellbeing can be improved to build resilience. Two sessions took place, firstly in September 2019 at The Aros Hall, which is a community owned and run facility in Tobermory and the second training took place in November 2019 at Tobermory High School. These two sessions created 25 local mental health ambassadors including 12 teachers.

Following on from the i-Act Mental Health training, partners on the isle felt that additional training in the form of Scottish Mental Health First Aid training would be hugely beneficial and something that would leave a positive legacy. Working with Mull Safe and Sound (a support group for anyone feeling vulnerable or isolated), a Scottish Mental Health First Aid training weekend was coordinated, promoted and took place at An Roth Business & Enterprise Centre, Craginure, which is the home of Mull and Iona Community Trust and its well-known charity shop. During January 2020, 19 participants from a wide range of backgrounds were trained including individuals from the Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust, Tobermory Bakery, Mull Aquarium and Tobermory Harbour Association and the school. In addition, a retired GP, an architect, an accountant and a DJ took part as well as other residents. The age range of participants was 18 - 80 years! Everyone took two whole days out of their schedules to be trained. Mull Safe & Sound is now taking forward its idea to create a Network of Mental Health First Aiders on the island.



# Final Reflections

This project embraced the opportunity to explore creating 'communities of care' and worked with trusted groups in each area to reach people who would not normally become involved in mental health initiatives. The project impacted locally by encouraging people to participate more in community life, whilst proactively working at community level to challenge stigma and increase awareness of mental health and wellbeing. By working with local groups in both areas it was possible to directly engage the wider local community to become part of the 'solution' and in some cases, a few of the actions undertaken during this project will contribute to long-term community cohesion.

Throughout the project, it came into sharp focus that the relationships that local people have with individuals, community groups, businesses and organisations in their local area are what makes for a *real* connection. Making the project about the people in the area, rather than the team or the organisation is a hugely important lesson for all organisations. Strategies of the future must harness the energy that people have and divert this towards positive solutions, allowing people from all walks of life to collaborate on activities, inspire one another with fresh ideas and contribute to the message that we all have a role to play in creating better, healthier and fairer places to live, work and play.

There are still those who do not believe mental health has anything to do with the environment, the society or the place we live and work. There are those who still think that a mental health charity should just be focussed on *only* providing support to those with severe mental ill-health. Throughout this project, time and time again it has been brought into clear view that we are all on a wellbeing spectrum and that we can all move up and down with our mental health throughout life. If we accept that then why must we wait for people to become critically ill before intervening?

The energy and commitment shown by the people who signed up, turned up and who so enthusiastically engaged with the project demonstrates beyond doubt that there is huge untapped potential within the community to positively change the mental health of a place. This project is only the start of a journey into understanding the real impact of establishing real connections across our communities. Further steps will be required to fully understand the role of people and place in mental health and to develop the community development approach further. It is hoped that the Highlands & Islands Connections project will have played a critical role in shaping a new way of thinking about mental health and places. Ultimately the project stuck to its goal of not creating more services for those already experiencing mental ill health and instead worked with others to try and find ways to create more caring towns and villages, so that hopefully fewer people get sick in the first place.

The project was not without significant challenges. There have been times when differing objectives between key partners and the team has caused friction, especially regarding the need to focus on the role of community, rather than the need for mental health services for those already experiencing mental ill health. Throughout the project, there were significant issues in recruitment and retention, as well as travel and budgetary challenges. It is also fair to say that there have been times when the remit of the project has been seen as woolly in terms of aim, audience and overall outcome.

Whilst the activities and engagements coordinated by the team may seem on the face of it to be simple and straightforward, it is the work behind the scenes that ultimately makes the difference. It is the conversation, the information shared and the connection made over a simple cup of tea. These critical elements help to build the capacity of the community to make change happen.





We are all too aware that change is required. With rising levels of inequalities, it is evident that we don't know each other well enough. The levels of loneliness and social isolation make life for the elderly in particular incredibly challenging, especially in rural areas. Without connection, our mental health is diminished. Despite all the efforts of recent years, people are starting to see that it is not enough to simply patch things up when they go wrong. We need to bring the idea of connectedness to the fore.

Notwithstanding all these challenges, the team has managed to deliver within a short timeframe, a series of interesting and thought-provoking activities which further opens the discussion around the role of community in mental health. In the future, more initiatives must focus on looking at 'up-stream intervention' to avoid having to fix the damage caused by non-resilient, non-supportive and unfair places and communities. Helping people to be able to make meaningful connections in their own environment has become the focus of our work. In many instances this project has shown us the value that can come from being the glue that brings together different parts of a place, geographically and thematically.

Communities are starting to realise that they need to dig deeper and try to resolve the issues that are causing problems in their community, including rising levels of anxiety and depression. We should not be focussed on preparing people to be able to withstand more discomfort, anguish or unhappiness, that does not make for real resilience. We should nourish individuals and support communities to make real connections and help everyone to be the best version of themselves. We need to embrace diversity, find greater empathy and be more authentic if we want to truly create a more caring, fair and equal society. We need to think about putting community at the centre of mental wellbeing.



# Recommendations

## The evidence from Highlands and Islands Connections project demonstrates that:

- Place-based rural communities are very capable of developing more caring, connected communities;
- Support in Mind Scotland adds value through strategic insight, linking people, and supporting groups and individuals to create solutions to local challenges;
- Many community-based *activities* have been shown to improve mental wellbeing, but having a skilled and confident *network of people* will ensure support when someone needs it most;
- Communities at the centre of mental wellbeing are critical to a sustainable approach.

## The following recommendations therefore follow on from these key findings:

1. Priority must be given to communities in further enhancing their own mental wellbeing;
2. Systematic evidence must be built around how and why a community and place-based approach to mental wellbeing is proving to be successful;
3. Evaluation approaches must be developed to assess outcomes from interventions, that take into account qualitative, lived-experience evidence;
4. Targeted support should be available for:
  - a. building community knowledge bases to enhance mental wellbeing;
  - b. capacity-building support for grass-roots Mental Wellbeing Action Plans;
  - c. mental health awareness training within communities;
  - d. identification and implementation of "upstream" (rather than crisis) and "life stage" interventions to support wellbeing.
5. Robust policy guidelines (regional and national) must be developed that both recognise and support mentally-healthy places and communities;
6. Investment must be prioritised for initiatives that can be scaled-up and rolled out across Scotland;
7. Investment in place and communities for mental wellbeing must be linked into National Rural Mental Health Forum's network, enabling two-way exchange of ideas, expertise and resources;
8. An evidence-base must be built as to how communities of place have enhanced mental wellbeing even under the Covid19 conditions of 2020.



# Case Studies

This report is based on our work in Scotland but has relevance to a wider audience across the UK and further afield. Some of the ideas could be easily replicated by other groups or organisations as part of a series of activities and actions to embed community connections. It is hoped that this project is the start of a blueprint for future grass-roots engagement that could lead to the development of more caring communities across the whole of Scotland.

It is noted that there is still much to do to understand fully what needs to happen at community level to ensure that everyone can experience good mental health, however we hope that the examples provided in this report inspire others to make simple changes.



# Blether Benches

## About the Activity

To reduce social isolation the team wanted to look at ways to provide opportunities to talk as even just having a chat can help mental wellbeing. Inspired by community *talking benches* elsewhere in the UK, the team discussed with the local Co-op stores the possibility of joint fundraising for community benches. Project preparation coincided with World Mental Health Day and Scottish Book Week (with the theme of "Blether"). Together with the Co-op stores, the team decided to fundraise for "Blether Benches" made by Cothrom ReStore, the workshop in the local community learning centre in South Uist.

## Partners

- Co-ops at Creagorry and Daliburgh
- Cothrom ReStore Workshop
- Lochboisdale Harbour,
- The Daliburgh Thrift Shop
- Daliburgh Post Office
- Local shoppers

## Project Management

The team initiated the project in September 2019, reaching out to the local Co-ops, who put fundraising buckets at their tills and asked shoppers for donations for the benches. To help reach their goal, the team worked with the Daliburgh Co-op to host a World Mental Health Awareness Day stall. After a month of fundraising, the funds were collected from both Co-ops and an order was placed at Cothrom for the benches. The team organised a launch day to unveil the benches to the community and the film crew were able to capture the day.

## Challenges

One of the challenges was choosing an activity that would engage all communities in the area. Finding the right location for the benches was also a challenge, as the location needed to be public enough to be accessible but not so exposed that the benches would be damaged by the weather. Advice from local businesses was extremely valuable.

## Achievement

Thanks to the generosity of the local community and partners, the project surpassed its fundraising target of providing one bench and the team were able to invest in two more benches; one located at Daliburgh Thrift Shop and the other at the Community Garden at Lochboisdale Harbour.

## Impact and Opportunities

This activity shows that community-driven approaches to improving mental health can be as simple as providing a space for people to come together and talk. It also highlights the importance of using local knowledge and resources. Activities like this are easily replicable elsewhere.

## Comments

*"Daliburgh Thrift Shop is seen as a hub for people and is very happy to support this initiative. We often have cyclists stopping at the shop, there is a bus that stops here and also, on a nice day, people like having somewhere to sit for a chat. If you're walking along, there are not many benches in this area, so this will be a great place for a bench."*

[Manager, Daliburgh Thrift Shop]





## Isle of Mull i-Act Training

### The Activity

We know from research and experience that healthy, productive and mentally positive workplaces are a crucial part of community wellbeing. On the Isle of Mull, many staff and managers from local businesses and organisations felt that they could improve staff and volunteer wellbeing in their workplaces, but they did not have the knowledge, time or resources. To help with this, the team decided to support the delivery of the iACT training programme on Mull, focussing on giving practical guidance for common mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression. The course was aimed at improving knowledge, skills and confidence in the workplace.

### Partners

The following organisations participated:

- Mull and Iona Community Trust
- Mull Safe and Sound
- Musical Minds
- Tobermory Harbour Authority
- Mull Aquarium
- The Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust
- Tobermory High School

### Project Management

The team worked with the project partners to identify suitable dates and venues and collaborated to ensure that as many individuals as possible could benefit from the training. Two full-day courses took place.

### Challenges

Making sure that the course would meet the needs of a wide range of organisations was challenging. It was also important to be clear about expectations with partners, in terms of allocating staff time to training and highlighting the benefits of their involvement.

### Achievement

Feedback from participants on the course was extremely positive, with 80% of participants strongly agreeing that the course was relevant and worthwhile. Post-training feedback highlighted that many participants planned to manage mental health differently in the workplace in the future.

### Impact and Opportunities

This activity showed that many workplaces in rural communities would like to improve their work wellbeing culture, but they need support to be able to do this. 25 people on the isle of Mull completed the course.

### Comments

*"The course was really valuable for understanding the complexities of the issues and how they could be supported".*

[Tobermory High School, i-ACT participant]



# Learning & Sharing Event

## About the Activity

Many organisations on the isle felt that communication could be improved. To help with this, the team developed a networking event to encourage new connections and collaborations.

## Partners

14 organisations from across Mull attended the event:

- Mull and Iona Community Trust
- Hebridean Whale and Dolphin Trust
- Nationwide Building Society
- Mull Through a Lens Club
- Hannah Morris - providing information on vegan diet
- Riding for the Disabled
- Mull U3A
- Mull Woodturners
- Mull Safe and Sound
- Mull Ballet
- Mull Open Mic
- South West Mull and Iona Development
- Mull Museum
- North Argyll Carers

## Project Management

The team co-produced the event with Mull Safe and Sound. The team promoted the event through partner networks, local venues and via social media, recruiting local organisations to participate. The team networked on the day and gathered feedback.

## Challenges

Pitching the event as a networking opportunity caused some confusion, as some groups thought the event would promote their services to the public. Another challenge was that the event aimed to encourage organisations to attend that might not consider themselves deliverers of 'wellbeing' services, therefore some organisations didn't think that the event would be suitable for them.

## Achievement

The Learning and Sharing Event attracted 40 attendees and a total of 14 exhibitor organisations. The event successfully met its goal of encouraging communication and awareness; most of the attendees fed back that they discovered something new about another organisation or activity on the island, and most exhibitors felt that the event helped connect people and organisations.

## Impact and Opportunities

The event has shown that even in a small place, there is still scope for people to meet new people and learn new things and that community wellbeing can be enhanced through improved communication and networking.

## Comments

*"Good event, bringing a good range of groups under one roof".*

*"Thank you for taking the time and effort to put this event on - much appreciated".*

[Participant at Learning & Sharing Event, Craignure, Isle of Mull]



## Mull and Iona Community Trust Step Count Challenge

### About the Activity

Following on from participation in the survey, the team started a conversation with Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT) to explore ways to improve workplace wellbeing. The Trust's staff and volunteers decided to run an activity that supported physical and mental wellbeing. They decided to participate in the Paths for All 'Step Count Challenge', which encourages organisations to sign up teams of staff to walk more, counting their steps over a six-week period. With team support, MICT signed up five teams in total, consisting of staff, directors and volunteers. The challenge took place over January and February 2020, when mood is often low.

### Partners

Mull and Iona Community Trust

### Project Management

Whilst the Highlands and Islands Connections Project provided the initial motivation by introducing the idea of workplace wellbeing, Mull and Iona Community Trust were the key drivers in researching and delivering Step Count Challenge to their staff. The project funded the sign-up fees and the cost of enough pedometers for the participating staff members. MICT managed sign-ups and coordinated the challenge throughout January and February 2020.

### Challenges

The chilly west coast winter proved the greatest challenge to this project, restricting opportunities to walk. Technical issues with pedometers also arose for those participants without their own fitness watches or phone Apps.

### Achievement

Of the 15 members of staff who took part in the challenge, all of them - even those that regularly achieved 10,000 steps a day - achieved higher step counts. The facilities through Paths for All helped to measure activity levels and showed the improvement of each team. MICT successfully met its goals for the project of promoting lunchtime walks, improving their team's physical wellbeing and supporting staff communication.

### Impact and Opportunities

This project shows that staff and volunteers are often willing to take part in wellbeing activities, however coordination and support from management is essential. Investing the time to promote these opportunities to staff, as well as making it enjoyable, is essential to supporting staff wellbeing.

### Comments

*"Step Challenge has been a journey of discovery; I've become more aware of my exercise levels and connected with my colleagues in a drive to be more active".*

*"Good fun and worthwhile"*

*"I think it has definitely been a positive challenge and would like it to be repeated, when the weather is better later in the year, as this has not been the easiest of times to get out and about!"*

[MICT Step Count Challenge participants]



# Scottish Mental Health First Aid Training

## The Activity

Many organisations on the island felt that taking part in a mental health training course would improve their awareness of mental wellbeing and enable them give support to people within their community. Together with local partners, the team chose to deliver the two-day Scottish Mental Health First Aid (SMHFA) training programme in partnership with Mull Safe and Sound.

## Partners

Mull Safe and Sound have an excellent understanding of the issues facing people with poor mental health on the island. All the project partners on Mull helped to promote the course and this was crucial in spreading the word and ultimately reaching a wide range of participants. Mull and Iona Community Trust provided the venue and went to extra lengths to offer their facilities at the weekend.

## Project Management

The team coordinated promotions, registration and feedback.

## Challenges

A major challenge of the SMHFA course is that it requires two days of participants' time -too much for some in the community to spare. Whilst the course was well attended, it was not possible to provide the training to all those who wished to participate. Making sure that the SMHFA course was well-advertised was another challenge.

## Achievement

The course was fully booked, proving the demand for mental health training in the community. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive, both in terms of delivery and content and all attendees felt that the course had helped to build their knowledge and skills in knowing how to guide someone in distress towards help.

## Impact and Opportunities

After the course, discussions took place about the establishment of a Mull Mental Health First Aid team, showing that supporting community mental health training can spark further discussion about how to make a positive lasting impact on community mental wellbeing.

## Comments

*"I have never had such an open discussion about mental health. It was highly emotional but also rewarding. It [the course] exceeded expectations".*

*"I feel better equipped to understand and help family and friends".*

[Feedback from course participants]





## Dè tha Dol App & Website

### About the Activity

As in many rural communities, social isolation is a pressing issue in the Western Isles. As the remoteness of the isles made establishing a physical central hub of information challenging, the project team decided instead to develop a community App and website to serve as a digital hub to raise awareness of social opportunities and wellbeing information. The App, named '*Dè tha Dol*' - 'What's Happening' in Gaelic - aimed to provide an innovative, community-led digital resource to connect local communities to events, services and opportunities to support their wellbeing.

### Partners

The development of the App<sup>4</sup> was a collaborative process, involving a wide range of partners:

- Our Community Hub (App developer)
- 15 local key partners
- Community representatives in Benbecula, North Uist and South Uist

### Project Management

After initial conversations with local partners, work to develop the App began in July 2019. The App was launched 'lightly' with key partners in August, allowing everyone to test out the functionality and make suggestions for new categories of information. The team created and distributed promotional material and held support workshops. Further refinements were made to the App during autumn, thereafter the team and the local partners focussed on promoting awareness of the App in the local community and continued to recruit local and national organisations.

### Challenges

There were significant challenges around developing a shared vision for the App, so the team had to work with local partners to overcome obstacles. Managing the sign-up process also proved a challenge, as providing support to new listers and members took a considerable time investment from the team. Finally, expectations had to be managed. The team used a pre-existing template to create the App, as the alternative would have been too expensive, however the trade-off was that some aspects of functionality and design were not possible.

### Achievement

With over 100 local and national listers, the *Dè tha Dol* App succeeded in creating a digital hub for community information. Feedback from partners and the wider community has been very positive. The App has received wider recognition for its innovative approach to community wellbeing, including a nomination for the 2020 Scottish Digital Health and Care Awards in the 'Innovative Remote and Rural Services' category.

### Impact and Opportunities

The project reached a wide audience and has engaged a broad range of local and national partners. Combining new technology with a place-based approach - such as supporting Gaelic-language content on the App - demonstrates the value in responding to local needs in new ways. Working closely with local partners was critical to the project's success, without that engagement the App would not have gained the reach that it did in such a short space of time.

### Comments

"Thank you - a great App!"

"Fantastic... it will be invaluable"

"Tha seo sgoinneil!" (This is great!)

[Feedback from users at drop-in session]

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<sup>4</sup> Link to the App and Website: <https://www.dethadol.com/>



# Volunteer Wellbeing Day

## About the Activity

Volunteer-led organisations are hugely important to mental wellbeing in rural areas such as the Isle of Mull. Volunteers coordinate peer-support groups, run activities, and provide invaluable opportunities for the community to connect. However, many volunteers report feeling that they do not have the opportunity to take time for their own wellbeing.

To support this, the team collaborated with volunteer organisation Mull Safe and Sound to arrange a Wellbeing Day for its volunteers. It was decided that an afternoon tea and spa visit would be a great way for volunteers to socialise together and take time for their mental wellbeing.

## Partners

Mull Safe and Sound

## Project Management

The team initiated the project by consulting with Mull Safe and Sound on opportunities to test a volunteer wellbeing activity. After exploring options together, it was agreed to proceed with organising a spa afternoon. The team arranged the day for the Safe and Sound volunteers, who were asked to document their day with photos and offer feedback.

## Challenges

With limited time and resources available for volunteer organisations, encouraging volunteers to take time to socialise and prioritise their mental wellbeing can prove challenging.

## Achievement

Feedback from the volunteers was extremely positive, reaffirming that taking time to look after our mental health and wellbeing is time well spent. Volunteers also felt that taking the time and space to focus on their own wellbeing re-energised them for their volunteer roles.

## Impact and Opportunities

The project shows that taking time for volunteer wellbeing is something that should be promoted and encouraged and allowing volunteers time to connect and support each other's wellbeing benefits not only the volunteers but also their organisations and communities. 'Volunteer Wellbeing Time' could be easily replicated elsewhere if organisations are given the right support.

## Comments

*"It would be amazing to do this annually as it is so beneficial for our own wellbeing and for readying us to help our members".*

*"Doing something different made us connect again on a better level".*

*"The calming music made us feel calm".*

*"The lack of distraction made us connect on a different level".*

*[Feedback from volunteers attending Spa session]*



# Compassionate Conversations Training

## About the Activity

In the Western Isles, like in many communities, stigma is a barrier to having open, supportive conversations about mental health. The team and partners recognised that there was no training currently available in the Uists & Benbecula that addressed the issue of stigma and discrimination. To address this, it was agreed that a specific training session would be developed to fill this gap and meet local needs.

## Partners

The training was co-developed with a training provider who lives locally. Input was also received from Cothrom Learning Centre and other key partners helped to identify what kind of training would be most appropriate to support the community's needs and goals.

## Project Management

The team began organising the training in October 2019 in collaboration with Cothrom and local trainer. The team then finalised course content with feedback from partners, organised the venue and sent invites out to key organisations. The training took place at Cothrom Community Learning Centre during February 2020.

## Challenges

The team found it difficult to recruit participants. Some of attendees could not attend due to a conflict between course times and the school holiday bus timetable, whilst immovable work commitments proved a barrier to others. Nine organisations expressed their interest in future training opportunities.

## Achievement

Four participants attended the first pilot session. The training course was positively received, with verbal feedback on the day from participants requesting follow-up training to build on the skills developed. The course can be utilised by Support in Mind Scotland in the future.

## Impact and Opportunities

Despite challenges with securing attendance, this project has shown that there is interest in delivery of appropriate mental health awareness training. Supporting organisations to be able to attend will be key to future success. Arranging a follow up session to consolidate learning would also help to maximise the impact from the training and providing handouts to take home with summaries of the training content and providing certificates for those who attended could also help the training to broaden its appeal with the wider community.

## Comments

*"I enjoyed yesterday's session, and I would very much welcome more in-depth study, if it becomes available."*

[Attendee, Compassionate Conversations Training]



## Mull Mental Health Awareness Theatre Trip

### The Activity

It was clear from an early stage in the project that social isolation, particularly for those with pre-existing mental health challenges, is a significant wellbeing issue on the island. To raise awareness of this, and to tie in with World Mental Health Awareness week, the team organised a theatre trip on Mull for individuals suffering from or at risk of social isolation.

### Partners

The following organisations were involved:

- Comar theatre and arts company
- Ulva Ferry Community Transport
- Mull & Iona Community Trust
- Befrienders Highland

### Project Management

The team reached out to local theatre company Comar, who were putting on the production and arranged for reduced-price tickets. The opportunity to attend the performance was promoted on social media during Mental Health Awareness week. The team then worked with Ulva Ferry Community Transport to arrange travel for attendees.

### Challenges

A lack of local befriending services on the island proved a challenge to this project, making the team reliant on word of mouth to spread awareness of the project. Additionally, whilst the research had suggested that men on Mull were more likely to report feeling lonely, all those who requested to participate in the events were women.

### Achievement

Promoting this project allowed the team to promote mental health across Mull and bring people with social isolation into contact with services that could support their wellbeing. The interest from partners and attendees in future trips (e.g. library trips) shows that there is a demand for similar activities in future.

### Impact and Opportunities

The event showed the importance connecting local services to provide support to those struggling with isolation in remote communities. Most of the attendees said that they had never used community transport before, demonstrating that connecting people to existing services is as important as creating new partnerships and opportunities.

### Comments

*"Thank you so much for a lovely evening, I still can't believe anyone would think of me for something."*

*"I have enjoyed coming to the theatre, that's the first time I have ever used the community bus and also been to the theatre, I would like to come again."*

*"This has been a lovely, if wet, evening out, thank you."*

*"What a lovely group of people to spend the evening with, we should all do it again."*

[Feedback from theatre-goers]





# Highlights

## Creating partnerships

- We partnered 8 local organisations on the Isle of Mull
- We partnered 16 local organisations in the Uists and Benbecula
- We established 74 information hubs across the Uists and Benbecula
- The *Dè tha Dol* App features over 100 organisations

## Engaging communities

- Our local launch events engaged 22 organisations
- We received over 300 responses to our community wellbeing survey
- The project made over 400 social media posts on Twitter and Facebook
- Our Mull *Learning and Sharing* event attracted 40 attendees
- Our *Blether Benches* community fundraiser tripled its funding target
- We organised a virtual Film Preview and Backstage Chat for community participants

## Making an impact

- Our mental health training events were attended by 59 people
- Over 80% of workshop participants felt that the training had benefitted them greatly
- Following training, partners now want to create a Mull Mental Health First Aid team
- We established 3 *Blether Benches* in the Uists and Benbecula
- The *Dè tha Dol* monthly highlights poster has been taken up by the local newspaper
- Team activities were established to improve mental health in various organisations
- Physical changes were made in various organisations to support mental wellbeing
- Our wellbeing survey is informing future projects and policy

## Building awareness

- We were shortlisted for a Scottish Digital Health Award for the *Dè tha Dol* App
- We delivered presentations to national partners and to the Scottish Parliament
- We regularly presented at the National Rural Mental Health Forum
- We presented at the World Community Development Conference in Dundee
- Our World Mental Health Day campaign reached over 70 organisations
- We had 12 press articles and 2 radio interviews in local and national media outlets
- We coordinated the production of a film called *Caring, Connected Communities*



# Community Partners - Thank You!

Taigh Chearsabhagh (Museum & Arts Centre)  
Volunteer Uibhist  
Western Isles Alcohol & Drugs Partnership  
Grimsay Community Association  
Uist Council of Voluntary Organisations  
NHS Health Promotions  
NHS Western Isles  
Cothrom (Community Learning Centre)  
Caraidean Uibhist (Befriending Service)  
Claddach Kirkibost Centre (Community facility, nursery, café and gift shop)  
Am Paipear (Award-winning community newspaper)  
Tagsa (Support for carers, people living with dementia and vulnerable people)  
Advocacy Western Isles  
Uist and Barra Community Sports Hub  
Cuimhne Project (Community connections for those with dementia)  
Creagorry and Daliburgh Co-ops  
Sports Scotland & Active Schools  
Museum nan Eilean (Uist & Barra)

-O-

Mull Safe & Sound  
Mull & Iona Community Trust  
Tobermory Harbour Authority  
Mull Aquarium  
Hebridean Whale & Dolphin Trust  
Tobermory High School  
Tobermory Bakery  
Mull Musical Minds  
Glengorm Castle

-O-

Special mention to the Daliburgh Thriftshop and Lochboisdale Harbour for involvement in the Blether Benches and to Mull Safe and Sound for being such a driving force for good on the Isle of Mull. Finally, thank you to the residents in both areas for engaging enthusiastically and helping to test out new approaches to improving mental wellbeing.

-O-



## Rural Team

Ros Halley (Project Manager); Gemma Jones (Western Isles Community Development Worker); Fiona Thompson (Argyll & Bute Community Development Worker); Crystal Hill (P/T Project Support Officer); Ben Lejac (P/T Project Administrator). For part of the project: Donnie Steele (Western Isles); Marion Elkin-Greener (Argyll & Bute); Stuart Scott (Argyll & Bute) and Mary Ireson (Argyll & Bute).

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