



national rural and islands mental health forum

impact report



Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba
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2025/26

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A word from the Convener

It is my pleasure to introduce this Impact Report for the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum. Since its creation in 2017, convened by Change Mental Health with support from the Scottish Government, the Forum has grown into a trusted national network bringing together organisations, practitioners, researchers and communities to improve mental wellbeing across rural and island Scotland.

Over the past year the Forum has continued to strengthen its role as a collaborative space where knowledge, experience and policy can come together. Reflecting the growing importance of our work with island communities, the Forum adopted a new name during the year - the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum. This change recognises both the breadth of the Forum's reach and the increasing engagement with partners across Scotland's islands.

The Forum now connects hundreds of individuals representing organisations across the public sector, academia, the third sector, community groups and private industry. Through regular online seminars, partnership activity and engagement events, the Forum provides a platform for organisations to share research, develop practical solutions and ensure that the realities of rural life are reflected in national conversations about mental health and wellbeing.

Throughout 2025–2026 the Forum hosted a programme of online seminars that brought together speakers and participants from across Scotland and beyond. These sessions explored a wide range of topics affecting rural mental health, including research developments, youth wellbeing, suicide prevention and the impact of economic and environmental pressures on rural communities. By creating a welcoming and trusted environment for dialogue, the Forum continues to support collaboration across sectors and encourage more open discussion of mental health challenges.

Alongside this programme of activity, the Forum continued to engage directly with rural communities. A highlight of the year was our presence at the Royal Highland Show, where the Forum hosted a stand throughout the four-day event. This provided an opportunity to speak directly with people working in agriculture and rural industries, helping raise awareness of mental health support while encouraging open conversations about wellbeing within rural communities.

The Forum also strengthened its international connections during the year through participation in the European Rural Parliament, held in Inverurie. By contributing to the programme and leading a study visit focused on mental health and wellbeing, the Forum helped share Scotland's experience of community-led approaches to rural mental health while learning from partners across Europe facing similar challenges.

Collaboration remains central to the Forum's impact. Through partnerships with organisations including Police Scotland, Healthcare Improvement Scotland, research institutions and rural development organisations, the Forum continues to act as a catalyst for practical initiatives that support wellbeing across rural communities. These partnerships demonstrate the value of bringing together diverse expertise to address the complex factors affecting mental health in rural and island settings.

Crucially, the Forum also plays an important role in strengthening the connection between communities and policymakers. By providing a space where practitioners, researchers and community organisations can engage with government teams, the Forum helps ensure that the lived experiences of rural and island communities inform the development of national mental health policy and services.

What emerges clearly from this report is the value of connection. By bringing together organisations and individuals who might otherwise never meet, the Forum enables collaboration, learning and shared action. Through these networks, knowledge travels more quickly between communities, practitioners and policymakers, strengthening collective efforts to improve mental wellbeing across rural and island Scotland.

I would like to thank all those who contribute to the Forum - presenters, participants, partners and supporters - for their continued commitment and expertise. Together, we are helping to ensure that rural and island communities are better supported, better connected, and better represented in Scotland's mental health landscape.

Jim Hume

Director of Policy, Public Affairs and Communications
Convener, National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum
Change Mental Health



A year in numbers

627
seminar
registrations

9
sessions
held

496
individual
members

18
speakers

Total number
of membership
organisations grown
from 287 to **337**

Average number of
registrations (**69**) per
session

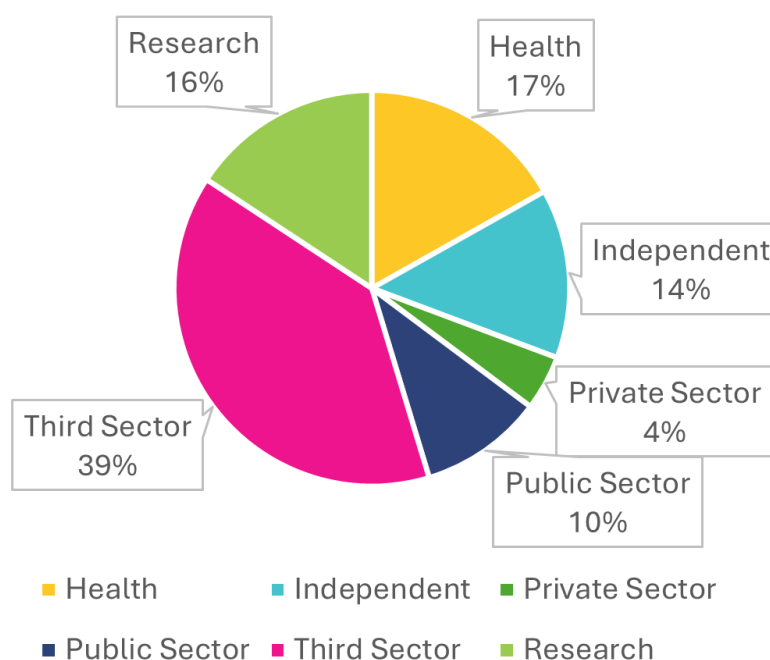
- Held prominent stand at Royal Highland Show, with over 220,000 attendees, 2,850 visitors to stand, including 19 MSPs and MP. 178 individuals completed our survey on rural and island mental health at the stand, providing 1,336 unique responses.
- Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands officially visited the stand and other Ministers also attended, such as the Minister for Agriculture and Connectivity, Minister for Public Health and Women's Health and Chair of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Select Committee at Westminster.
- Developed, promoted and reviewed the mental health leaflet that goes to 100,600 certificate renewals for shotguns, air weapons and firearms in Scotland
 - Firearm certificates: ~25,200
 - Shotgun certificates: ~43,800
 - Air weapon certificates: ~31,600
- Developed, promoted and reviewed the mental health support leaflet that goes to 627,918 certificate renewal and applications in England and Wales
 - Firearm certificates: 145,306
 - Shotgun certificates: 482,612(note some people hold both shotgun and firearms certificates, the above numbers are the individual certificates.)



This year, the Forum’s seminar topics included:

- Metabolism and mental health
- Caring for Ukrainian refugees
- Engaging rural young people in health research
- Eating disorders
- Young Islanders’ Network mental health challenges
- Addressing crisis and distress in children and young people
- Scotland’s Land Use Strategy consultation
- Suicide Prevention Scotland: Children and Young People Toolkit, and suicide prevention communications
- Supporting Mental Health in Rural Sweden
- Mental health lessons from the 6th European Rural Parliament
- Building financial and mental resilience in Scotland’s rural youth
- Children and Adolescent Mental Health in Rural Scotland
- Rural mental health support via NHS24 Breathing Space
- Climate Change Anxiety and Mental Health in Rural Scotland
- Life with learning disabilities in rural Scotland
- British Hydropower Association, community benefit and mental wellbeing

Pie chart breakdown of attendee categories:



Background, Aims and Outcomes

In 2017, Change Mental Health and the Rural Policy Centre of Scotland's Rural College **commissioned a survey into rural mental health**. The report came about through a shared need. Both organisations recognised a significant gap in their knowledge: a systematic understanding of how people with mental illness experience their day to day lives across rural Scotland.

There was anecdotal evidence accumulated over years of engaging with service users and from knowledge of specific needs, for example within the farming community, but there didn't exist a clear picture across the country. This knowledge gap was a fundamental driver to create a picture of the policy landscape for those with firsthand experience of mental illness, from the islands in the north and west, to the mainland areas in the south and east, from more accessible rural communities through to the very remotest parts.

In response and partnership with the Scottish Government, the National Rural Mental Health Forum (NRMHF) began thereafter in 2017, convened and managed by Change Mental Health. The original quarterly in-person Forum events morphed to become nine online Forums and a Royal Highland Show event per year, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

This online format has increased the membership, attendance, scope and impact of the Forum to 337 organisations, comprising almost 500 individuals from a wide spectrum of organisations, connecting stakeholders and policymakers across the public, private and third sectors, health and research sectors, and independent organisations and individuals.

This year, we changed our name to the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum (NRIMHF) to better reflect our growing work with island communities. We welcome the Scottish Government's new **National Islands Plan**, which commits to close collaboration with the Forum to bring together *'lived experience and local expertise to identify barriers and share innovative practice'*.

In partnership with the Rural Communities Team and Population Mental Health Division within the Scottish Government, the following 2025-2026 outcomes were agreed for the Forum:

Outcome 1: Mental illness stigma is reduced and mental wellbeing is improved

Outcome 2: The reach and impact of the Forum has grown

Outcome 3: Innovative practice is integrated into the Forum

Outcome 4: Policy is enhanced

The following sections will take each Outcome in turn and explore Forum activities from 1 April 2025 - 31 March 2026.

Impact

Outcome 1: Mental illness stigma is reduced and mental wellbeing is improved

The Forum will continue to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and improve mental wellbeing by enabling dialogue, creating safe spaces for marginalised voices, and tackling inequality. It brings together partners to challenge stigma in communities where privacy concerns and visible lives often deter individuals from seeking help until crisis point.

Over the course of the project, the Forum delivered a programme of nine monthly online seminars designed to create safe and inclusive spaces for discussion around rural and island mental health. These sessions brought together practitioners, researchers, policymakers and people with lived experience from across Scotland and beyond. By providing a regular and trusted space for discussion, the forums helped normalise conversations around mental health, reduce stigma and encourage participants to reflect on how their own organisations and communities can contribute to more supportive environments.

Participants consistently highlighted the value of the Forum as a welcoming and constructive space for dialogue. One presenter reflected that **“the Forum was a very welcoming space which gave me the opportunity to present issues we were discussing... while the tone was informal, the topics raised were important, considered and challenging in a good way. It allowed me to reflect and consider new perspectives.”** Creating this environment for open discussion was central to the Forum’s role in supporting collaboration and shared learning across rural and island communities.

Each forum combined discussion with expert presentations, enabling participants to engage with research, policy developments and examples of practice from across Scotland and internationally. Presentations covered a wide range of issues affecting rural mental health. Dr Arish Mudra Rakshasa-Loots from the University of Edinburgh explored emerging research on the links between metabolism and mental health, while Dr Zhuoni Xiao and Sarah Robertson from Generation Scotland discussed approaches to engaging rural young people in health research. Sessions focusing on children and young people also featured contributions from Harriet Waugh and Sophie Avery of the Scottish Government on crisis and distress in children and young people, and Jenny Ferguson of Suicide Prevention Scotland, who introduced the Children and Young People Toolkit designed to support early intervention and prevention.

The programme also ensured that rural and island communities were able to share their experiences and influence wider discussions about policy and practice. Louise McQuaid from the Young Islanders Network presented on the mental health challenges faced by young people living on Scotland’s islands, highlighting the unique pressures experienced in geographically remote communities. A dedicated session with Enable explored the challenges faced by people with learning disabilities in rural areas and the barriers they encounter in accessing appropriate mental health support. Across the year, discussions frequently returned to the structural barriers affecting rural mental health, including service availability, transport, digital connectivity and isolation.

Alongside these discussions, the forums acted as an important platform for collaboration and knowledge exchange. Across the programme, speakers from a wide range of sectors contributed insights into how communities and organisations can respond more effectively to mental health challenges. For example, Hannah Dibnah from Change Mental Health presented on the Me & Money programme, exploring how building financial resilience among young people can support mental wellbeing in rural Scotland. Representatives from NHS 24 also discussed developments in digital health services and the refresh of NHS 24 services within GP practices, highlighting opportunities to improve access to support in rural and island communities. Sessions also explored the role of national support services such as Breathing Space and the challenges faced by rural businesses and communities in maintaining wellbeing.

Speakers also noted the value of the Forum in enabling organisations to connect with communities they might not otherwise reach. As one presenter from BEAT reflected, **“presenting to the forum was a great way of making contacts in new areas that are sometimes overlooked by UK-wide services like ours. Follow-up discussions were key in connecting people in rural and island communities to our services.”** Similarly, representatives from Breathing Space at NHS 24 highlighted the Forum’s role in strengthening partnership working across Scotland’s rural mental health sector, noting that the Forum **“gives Breathing Space a platform to reach out to organisations that we might not ordinarily engage with... From this event numerous other partnerships have developed as a result of our attendance.”**

The programme also explored wider structural and environmental factors affecting mental health. Alastair Noble from the Scottish Government discussed the Land Use Strategy consultation and the relationship between land use, rural development and wellbeing, while research presented by Rhiannon Hawkins from the University of Glasgow examined the impact of climate anxiety on mental health in rural Scotland. International perspectives were also included, with contributions from Fagersta Municipality and the Swedish Regional Development Agency on supporting mental health in rural Sweden, and Kateryna Pluita from UCARE, who shared insights into humanitarian assistance and support for Ukrainian refugees. These contributions helped place Scotland’s rural mental health challenges within a broader international and policy context.

Beyond the online programme, the Forum also strengthened its public engagement through a prominent presence at the 2025 Royal Highland Show. Over the course of the event, the Forum engaged with a large and diverse audience, including members of the public, community organisations, MSPs and other key stakeholders. The stand provided a visible and welcoming space where people could access information, discuss mental health openly and learn about the support available within their communities. These conversations helped raise awareness of rural mental health challenges while encouraging more open and stigma-free dialogue about wellbeing in rural Scotland.

Taken together, the programme of forums and public engagement activity helped strengthen connections between organisations, communities and policymakers, while providing a space where research, lived experience and frontline practice could inform future action on rural and island mental health. As one long-standing member of the Forum observed, the network has become **“a welcoming and important space to share research, connect with rural communities and partners, and ensure that lived experience and collaborative working help inform more effective mental health policy and practice across Scotland.”**

Case Study: Raising Awareness and Challenging Stigma at the Royal Highland Show

In June 2025, the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum took part in the Royal Highland Show, Scotland's largest attended event and the UK's most visited rural show, attracting more than 220,000 visitors. The Forum hosted a stand throughout the four-day show, creating an open and welcoming space where people from across rural and island communities could talk about mental health, learn about available support, and share their experiences. By bringing conversations about mental wellbeing into a major rural gathering, the Forum helped normalise discussion of mental health in communities where privacy concerns and stigma can still discourage people from seeking help.

The stand also became an important platform for political engagement and advocacy. Over the course of the event, the Forum hosted 19 organised visits from MSPs and MPs, including the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands, the Minister for Agriculture, the Minister for Public Health and Women's Health, and the Chairman of Westminster's Environment and Rural Affairs Committee. These visits provided an opportunity to highlight the mental health challenges faced by rural and island communities directly with policymakers, ensuring that lived experience and community perspectives were part of national conversations about rural wellbeing.



Alongside these conversations, the Forum conducted a public survey to better understand how people perceive mental health challenges in rural and island Scotland. A total of **178 individuals** completed the survey at the stand, providing **1,336 unique responses** and insights into public awareness and experiences. The findings suggested that awareness of rural mental health issues is already relatively high: **84 respondents said they were "very aware"** of the challenges faced by rural communities, while a further **71 described themselves as "somewhat aware"**.

However, the survey also highlighted the barriers that still prevent people from accessing support. Respondents identified stigma and lack of privacy as a major challenge, alongside practical barriers such as limited local services, transport difficulties and a lack of awareness of available support. These responses reinforced a key message frequently heard across the Forum's work: in smaller rural communities, concerns about visibility and anonymity can make it harder for people to come forward until their mental health has significantly deteriorated.

Participants also highlighted the groups they believe require greater attention in rural mental health planning. Young people were most frequently identified, followed by older adults and people working in agriculture. Respondents also emphasised the need to better support minority communities and those who may already experience barriers to accessing services, including the LGBTQIA+ community and refugees.

The open-ended responses offered particularly powerful insight into community attitudes. Many respondents stressed the importance of creating spaces where people feel safe to speak openly about their mental health. One participant commented simply "**being more open**", while another suggested that mental health education should begin earlier, calling for "**more talk about mental health in schools**". Others emphasised the need for greater awareness and stronger local support networks so that people know where to turn when they need help.

Overall, the Forum's presence at the Royal Highland Show demonstrated how large public events can be used to challenge stigma and spark meaningful conversations about mental wellbeing. By engaging directly with the public, gathering insights through the survey, and facilitating conversations with policymakers, the Forum helped amplify the voices of rural communities and highlight the barriers they face. In doing so, this work contributed directly to Outcome 1 by raising awareness, encouraging open dialogue and strengthening collective efforts to reduce stigma and improve mental wellbeing across rural and island Scotland.



Outcome 2: The reach and impact of the Forum has grown

The Forum will extend its national footprint, deepen community connections, and serve as a collaborative network of (at the time 287) organisations tackling mental health collectively, especially in more isolated and underserved communities.

The National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum continued to expand its reach and influence during the 2025–2026 programme, strengthening its role as a national network connecting organisations working to improve mental health and wellbeing in rural and island communities. Over the course of the year the Forum grew to include 496 members across 337 organisations, representing partners from the public sector, academia, the third sector, community organisations and private industry. This growth reflects the increasing recognition of the Forum as a trusted platform for collaboration and shared learning and demonstrates its expanding footprint across Scotland’s rural and island communities.

The Forum’s programme of nine online seminars played a central role in extending this reach. The online format continues to enable participation from organisations and individuals who might otherwise struggle to attend in person due to distance, cost or time constraints. Participants joined from across Scotland as well as from international partner organisations, creating opportunities for dialogue across sectors and geographies. Feedback gathered through post-forum surveys and follow-up discussions continues to inform the development of the programme, ensuring that sessions remain responsive to the needs of participants and aligned with emerging issues affecting rural mental health.

Attendee and presenter feedback consistently highlights the value of the Forum as a space that enables meaningful connection and learning. One participant noted that **“disparate groups who wouldn’t normally connect come together at the Forum and we learn so much from what is shared.”** Another attendee commented that **“any time I miss a Forum, I check to see what the presentations have been... I can catch up on what I’ve missed on YouTube.”** These reflections illustrate how the Forum’s online programme not only reaches a wide audience in real time but also extends its impact through recorded content and ongoing engagement between sessions.

The diversity of presentations delivered during the year further demonstrates the growing reach of the network. Speakers included representatives from universities, national charities, government departments and international organisations. Contributions ranged from research into rural mental health and young people’s wellbeing, to discussions on financial resilience, suicide prevention and the delivery of mental health services in remote areas.

The Forum also strengthened its international engagement through participation in the European Rural Parliament, where representatives shared Scotland's experience of supporting rural mental health and led a study visit focused on wellbeing in rural communities. This engagement provided an opportunity to exchange learning with partners from across Europe while demonstrating the value of Scotland's collaborative approach to rural mental health. The Forum's participation also helped bring international perspectives back into the network, enriching discussions within subsequent seminars and strengthening links with European partners working on similar challenges.

The Forum continues to grow as a collaborative national network. By expanding membership, strengthening partnerships, gathering feedback and engaging with communities both locally and internationally, the Forum has extended its reach while deepening its impact. In doing so, it continues to connect organisations and individuals who share a commitment to improving mental health and wellbeing across Scotland's rural and island communities.

Case Study: Expanding Reach Through the European Rural Parliament

The National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum significantly expanded its reach in October 2025 through its involvement in the 6th European Rural Parliament (ERP), held in Inverurie. The event brought together hundreds of delegates from across Europe to share ideas and solutions to the challenges facing rural communities. Change Mental Health played a central role in the programme, organising and leading a dedicated Mental Health and Wellbeing Study Trip as part of the official event. Notably, Change Mental Health was the only mental health charity represented at the Parliament, providing a unique opportunity to place rural mental wellbeing firmly on the agenda alongside discussions on economic development, sustainability and rural resilience.

The study trip attracted strong interest from delegates and was itself oversubscribed, reflecting the growing recognition across Europe that mental health is a critical issue for rural communities. Delegates from a wide range of countries joined the visit to explore how local organisations in rural Scotland are developing practical, community-based responses to issues such as isolation, stigma and access to services. By bringing together international delegates with local practitioners and organisations, the Forum was able to showcase the innovation and resilience present in rural communities while strengthening relationships with partners working on rural development across Europe.

During the study trip, participants visited four organisations delivering impactful community initiatives across Stonehaven and Banchory. Community Collective in Stonehaven demonstrated the role that volunteer-led organisations can play in



tackling food insecurity and social isolation, highlighting how grassroots initiatives can strengthen community resilience and wellbeing. The Haven, also in Stonehaven, provided an example of a social enterprise deeply embedded in its community, offering a welcoming space where individuals can access practical support while participating in wellbeing activities such as yoga and community food programmes.

Delegates also visited The Seedbox in Banchory, an organisation that places outdoor learning and nature-based activities at the centre of its work. Through programmes that combine employability support, environmental engagement and confidence-building, The Seedbox supports individuals who face barriers to work while improving routine, self-esteem and mental wellbeing. The visit concluded at The Barn, a not-for-profit arts venue created from a converted farm building, where creative workshops and cultural events foster connection, reduce isolation and support emotional expression within the community.

Alongside the site visits, the Forum organised a panel discussion exploring the complexities of mental health in rural contexts. The panel featured Magda Czarnecka, CEO of Feniks, which supports the wellbeing and integration of Central and Eastern European communities in Scotland; Josie Barclay of RSABI, which provides practical and emotional support to people working in Scottish agriculture; and Lisa-Jane Dock from NHS 24 Breathing Space, Scotland's national helpline for individuals experiencing low mood, anxiety or distress. The discussion, chaired by Jim Hume of Change Mental Health, explored both the strengths and challenges of rural life, including the role of strong communities alongside barriers such as stigma, transport difficulties and limited access to services.

The study trip and panel discussion created valuable opportunities for knowledge exchange between organisations working in different sectors and countries. Delegates reflected on the importance of community-led solutions that recognise the realities of rural life, where local networks and grassroots initiatives often play a crucial role in supporting wellbeing. By highlighting practical examples of rural innovation, the Forum demonstrated how collaborative approaches can strengthen mental health support across communities.

Feedback from participants was extremely positive. Artemis Pana, National Coordinator for Scottish Rural Action, described the study trip as **“a powerful example of how rural communities can come together to support wellbeing and address mental health challenges through collaboration and local innovation.”** Such feedback reinforced the importance of including mental health within broader rural policy discussions and demonstrated the appetite among international partners to learn from Scotland's experience.

Through its leadership at the European Rural Parliament, the Forum significantly broadened its influence and visibility, ensuring mental wellbeing remained a central part of conversations about rural development. The oversubscribed study trip, strong delegate engagement and new partnerships formed during the event all contributed to expanding the Forum's network and strengthening its role as a collaborative platform for organisations working to improve mental wellbeing in rural and island communities.

Outcome 3: Innovative practice is integrated into the Forum

The Forum promotes early intervention, workplace resilience, and creative cross-sector responses to mental health needs. It uses real-time community insights and research to drive improvement, particularly around self-harm, suicide prevention, and pre-crisis support.

The Forum's programme of seminars, partnerships and collaborative initiatives creates opportunities for organisations to exchange research, explore new approaches and respond collectively to emerging challenges.

Collaboration with the Young Islanders' Network and other youth partners helped highlight the distinct pressures faced by young people in remote communities, including isolation, limited services and the need for locally relevant wellbeing support. Presentations from Louise McQuaid of the Young Islanders Network and contributions from youth-focused research projects helped ensure that young people's perspectives remain central to discussions about mental health support in rural Scotland. These conversations also supported the identification of training needs and opportunities to promote preventative wellbeing strategies among young people across rural and island locations.

Innovative practice has also been supported through collaboration with organisations working directly with rural industries and workplaces. The Forum continued to strengthen relationships with partners such as RSABI and Farmstrong, both of which support the mental health and wellbeing of people working in agriculture. Through ongoing engagement and joint discussions, these partnerships help identify opportunities to improve suicide prevention support, share practical resources and ensure that mental health awareness is embedded within agricultural communities. As one partner organisation reflected, the Forum provides **“a great place to meet with those invested in wellbeing within the rural environment of Scotland... and to learn from both the Forum and the connections made through it.”**

The Forum also continued to facilitate collaboration across a diverse range of sectors and organisations. Contributors during the year included representatives from national charities, government departments, international partners and rural industry groups. Discussions explored the links between economic pressures, environmental change and mental wellbeing, while also highlighting the role of workplaces and community organisations in supporting resilience. Partnerships with organisations including UCARE, rural development bodies and industry representatives helped embed mental wellbeing conversations across civic, scientific and minority community networks, demonstrating how cross-sector collaboration can strengthen support for rural populations.

A significant example of the Forum's commitment to innovative outreach and early intervention is its ongoing work with Police Scotland on the firearms mental health support leaflet.

Case Study: Cross-Sector Innovation in Suicide Prevention - Firearms and Mental Health

A key example of how the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum integrates innovative practice into its work is the development and ongoing promotion of the firearms and mental health support leaflet. Created through collaboration between the Forum, Police Scotland, RSABI and other partners, the resource represents a practical cross-sector response to suicide prevention in rural communities. It reflects the Forum's role in bringing together organisations from policing, agriculture and mental health services to develop solutions that are both preventative and sensitive to the realities of rural life.

The leaflet was developed in response to concerns that some firearms licence holders may be reluctant to seek help for mental health difficulties due to fears about how this could affect their licence. The resource therefore focuses on encouraging open and early conversations about wellbeing while reassuring licence holders that there are supportive pathways available if they are struggling. By promoting awareness, responsible conversations and signposting to support services, the leaflet helps reduce stigma and encourages people to seek help before reaching crisis point.

The initiative has achieved significant reach. In Scotland alone there are over 100,600 firearms, shotgun and air weapon certificates issued, and each certificate application and renewal receives the mental health support leaflet as part of the licensing process. The success of the initiative has been widely recognised, and the approach has since been adopted across England and Wales, which the Forum has developed the support leaflet for. As a result, the leaflet now reaches more than 728,518 certificate renewals and applications across the UK, significantly expanding the impact of the Forum's work beyond Scotland.

The leaflet has also been recognised as an example of best practice in collaborative suicide prevention. Police Scotland nominated the initiative for a Chief Constable Partnership Award, reflecting the strength of the partnership between mental health organisations, policing and the rural sector. The project demonstrates how targeted interventions, developed with input from trusted organisations, can help reach communities that may not engage with traditional mental health campaigns.

Importantly, the resource is not static. The Forum works with Police Scotland and other partners to keep the leaflet under continuous review, ensuring that information remains accurate, relevant and aligned with the latest suicide prevention guidance and available support services. This ongoing partnership ensures that the leaflet continues to reflect both emerging evidence and the lived experiences of rural communities.



Looking ahead to 2026–2027, partners involved in the initiative are exploring how the leaflet could form the foundation of a wider suicide prevention campaign aimed specifically at firearms licence holders. Discussions between the Forum, RSABI, Police Scotland and other stakeholders are considering how the messages contained within the leaflet could be expanded through broader awareness-raising activity, outreach and partnership engagement.

Through initiatives such as the firearms leaflet, the Forum demonstrates how innovative, collaborative approaches can support early intervention and suicide prevention in rural contexts. By combining community insight, research evidence and cross-sector expertise, the Forum continues to develop practical tools that strengthen resilience, encourage help-seeking behaviour and support the mental wellbeing of people living and working in rural and island communities.



Outcome 4: Policy is enhanced

The Forum ensures the lived realities of rural and island Scotland inform the development and implementation of national mental health policy. It serves as a trusted intermediary between communities and government.

The National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum continues to play an important role in strengthening the relationship between rural communities and national policy development. By bringing together practitioners, researchers, policymakers and community organisations from across Scotland, the Forum provides a trusted space where the lived realities of rural and island life can inform discussions about mental health policy and service delivery. Through its programme of seminars and ongoing engagement with government officials, the Forum ensures that the experiences and perspectives of rural communities are reflected in national conversations about wellbeing and support.

Throughout the year, the Forum maintained regular engagement with Scottish Government teams working across a range of policy areas relevant to rural mental health. These discussions included work relating to the Suicide Prevention Strategy and Action Plan, the Time, Space and Compassion Framework, the Self-Harm Strategy and Action Plan, the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy, the National Islands Plan and the Land Use Strategy. By providing a route for dialogue between policymakers and those working directly with rural communities, the Forum helps ensure that emerging policies reflect the realities of delivering and accessing services in remote and rural settings.

The programme of nine online seminars provided a practical mechanism for sharing policy developments with the Forum's growing network. Representatives from the Scottish Government regularly contributed to discussions, enabling Forum members to hear directly about new initiatives while also providing feedback based on frontline experience. For example, Harriet Waugh and Sophie Avery from the Scottish Government presented on crisis and distress in children and young people, while Alastair Noble discussed the Land Use Strategy consultation and the relationship between rural development and wellbeing. These sessions created opportunities for policymakers to hear from organisations working in rural contexts and to better understand the barriers faced by communities in accessing support.

The Forum also helps ensure that policy discussions are informed by a diverse range of voices. Its membership includes organisations working with a wide range of communities and identities across rural Scotland, including young people, island residents, minority communities and those facing economic or geographic barriers to accessing care. Presentations during the year highlighted the experiences of young island communities, the challenges faced by people with learning disabilities in rural areas and the needs of young people experiencing financial pressure or mental distress. By amplifying these perspectives, the Forum helps ensure that policy conversations reflect the diversity of experiences present across rural and island Scotland.

Participants frequently highlight the value of the Forum as a mechanism for connecting policy and practice. As one attendee noted, the Forum provides “a lens to look out beyond the city-scape and properly consider the different populations that are hardly reached in other ways.” Another contributor observed that “if the Forum didn’t exist, we would have to create it just to be able to effectively consult with people in rural parts of Scotland.” These reflections underline the role of the Forum as an intermediary space where policymakers and communities can engage in constructive dialogue.

Through its regular meetings with government partners and its ongoing programme of seminars, the Forum continues to support the development of rural-sensitive approaches to mental health policy.

By sharing evidence, lived experience and frontline insight from across Scotland’s rural and island communities, the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum helps ensure that national policy conversations remain grounded in the realities of the communities they seek to serve.

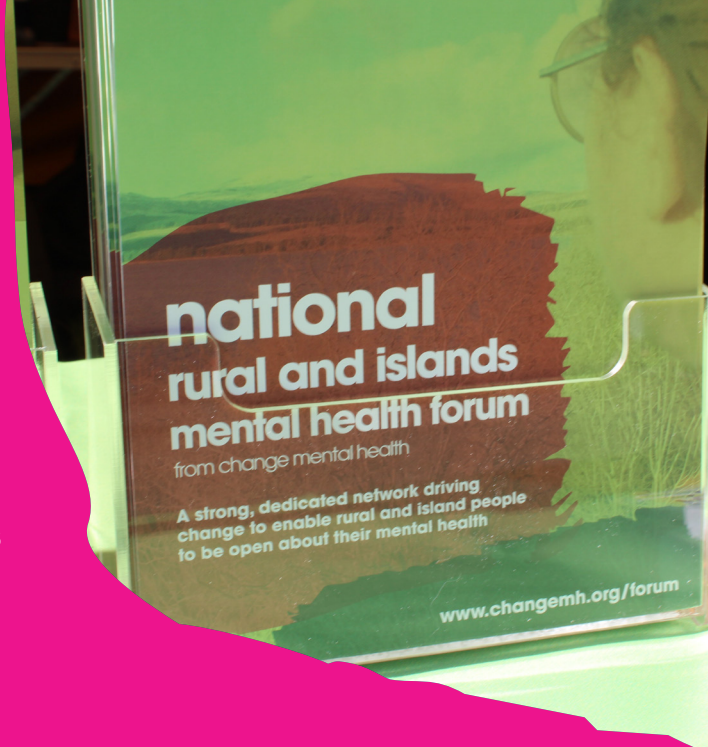
Case Study: Strengthening Policy Through the Forum’s Seminar Programme

A central way the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum strengthens national policy is through its programme of regular seminars, which bring together policymakers, researchers, practitioners and community organisations to share knowledge and lived experience. These sessions provide a trusted environment where those working directly with rural communities can engage with government policy teams and discuss the realities of delivering mental health support in remote and rural settings. By creating this space for dialogue, the Forum ensures that national policy development remains grounded in the lived experiences of rural and island communities.

The seminars play an important role in strengthening relationships between Scottish Government policy teams and the organisations working on the ground. Representatives from the Scottish Government’s rural, islands and community mental health teams regularly attend Forum meetings, using them as an opportunity to hear directly from practitioners, researchers and community groups about the barriers faced by rural populations. Through these discussions, the Forum helps policymakers gather valuable insight into how mental health strategies and services are experienced in practice across rural and island Scotland.

Across the year, the Forum hosted a diverse range of speakers whose work connects research, practice and policy. Presentations included Dr Arish Mudra Rakshasa-Loots from the University of Edinburgh exploring emerging research into metabolic psychiatry and its links to mental health outcomes, while Alex Jones from Beat Eating Disorders discussed the challenges of recognising and supporting eating disorders in rural communities. Kateryna Pluita from UCARE also shared insights into supporting Ukrainian refugees, highlighting the additional challenges faced by displaced people living in rural areas where services and support networks can be more dispersed.

Other sessions focused on the experiences of young people and the importance of engaging rural communities in research and service design. Presentations from researchers



including Sarah Robertson from the University of Edinburgh and colleagues from Generation Scotland explored how rural young people can be more meaningfully involved in health research and policy development. These discussions highlighted how research, community engagement and policy development can work together to better understand the specific mental health challenges facing rural populations.

The Forum also provides an important platform for Scottish Government representatives and national organisations to discuss emerging policy priorities and initiatives. Through these sessions, policymakers are able to explain upcoming strategies and programmes while receiving feedback from organisations delivering services in rural areas. This two-way dialogue allows the Scottish Government to test ideas, gather insight and ensure that national mental health strategies are informed by the experiences of communities living outside the central belt.

Feedback from presenters reflects the value of this collaborative environment. One presenter described the Forum as **“a golden opportunity to share research and practical resources with people working on the ground in rural communities”**, while others noted that the Forum enables organisations to build connections that would otherwise be difficult across geographically dispersed regions. The opportunity to engage directly with policymakers was also highlighted as a key benefit of the seminars.

Attendees likewise emphasised the importance of the Forum in bridging the gap between communities and government. Participants described the sessions as **“a great space to share awareness on changes to policy outwith the central belt”**, while other attendees shared their positive experiences connecting with different organisations and groups. These reflections underline the Forum’s role as a meeting point where evidence, lived experience and policy development intersect.

Through its seminar programme, the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum continues to act as a trusted intermediary between communities and government. By strengthening relationships between Scottish Government policy teams and key stakeholders, and by providing a platform where rural insight can shape strategy and service delivery, the Forum helps ensure that mental health policy in Scotland reflects the realities and needs of rural and island communities.



**national rural and islands
mental health forum**
from change mental health

Reflections / year ahead

With funding secured for 2026–2027, the National Rural and Islands Mental Health Forum is well placed to build on the progress made over the past year. The Forum continues to grow as a collaborative space where organisations, researchers, practitioners and policymakers can come together to share learning, develop partnerships and ensure that rural voices are heard in national conversations about mental health. As the Forum enters the next phase of its work, the focus will remain on strengthening these connections and expanding the reach of the network across rural and island communities.

This work is taking place in a period of considerable uncertainty. Across Scotland, communities and businesses continue to face significant economic pressures driven by the cost of living, rising operational costs and ongoing challenges within public services. These pressures are felt particularly strongly in rural and island areas, where geographic isolation, transport limitations and reduced service availability can intensify existing inequalities. Policymakers and service providers are navigating a complex landscape in which demand for support is increasing at the same time as resources are shrinking.

In this context, the need for collective action around mental health and wellbeing has never been greater. Tackling stigma and discrimination remains a central priority. In smaller and more visible communities, fears around privacy and judgement can still prevent individuals from seeking help until they are in crisis. The Forum will therefore continue to prioritise initiatives that encourage open conversation about mental health, promote early intervention and support communities to recognise and respond to signs of distress.

At the same time, improving wellbeing in rural and island communities requires a broader understanding of resilience. Mental health does not exist in isolation from other pressures people face in their daily lives. Economic insecurity, housing, employment, access to services, transport connectivity and community cohesion all shape how individuals and communities experience wellbeing. Over the coming year the Forum will continue to bring together partners from across sectors to explore how these wider determinants can be addressed in ways that strengthen resilience across rural Scotland.

The collaborative nature of the Forum will remain central to this work. By connecting organisations working across agriculture, research, healthcare, the third sector and government, the Forum provides a unique platform for sharing innovative practice and identifying solutions that reflect the realities of rural life. These partnerships allow ideas and evidence to travel more quickly between communities, practitioners and policymakers, helping ensure that responses to mental health challenges are practical, informed and rooted in lived experience.

Looking ahead, the Forum remains committed to amplifying the voices of rural and island communities and ensuring they continue to shape national conversations about mental health and wellbeing. The challenges ahead are significant, but so too is the collective commitment of the organisations, communities and individuals who contribute to the Forum.

Through this shared effort, and through the continued leadership of Change Mental Health and support from the Scottish Government, there remains a clear hope for the future: that by working together we can help build a Scotland where rural and island communities are supported to thrive, and where **no one needs to face mental illness alone**.