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## The Rural SEN and young people in social enterprise

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The Rural SEN is a relatively new addition, established in May 2020, in response to Covid-19, and the need to better connect and support rural social enterprises. With the significant spread of social enterprises across rural, remote and island regions, there is an ongoing desire to connect with people from far afield, share news and learning, and benefit from a network of peer support. The Rural SEN has and will continue to meet virtually, recognising the improved equality of access for participants in more isolated locations. Since setting out, we have steadily grown in membership and in reach, and now have people tuning in from Orkney to Dumfries, with outreach remaining a priority.

Social enterprise is prevalent in Scotland's remote and rural areas, driven by factors including market failure, the need to sustain essential services, and desire to fulfil community needs and aspirations. There are a wealth of examples from the rural context of social enterprises providing lifeline services for communities, including care services, community transport, and meeting spaces. There is also a longstanding tradition in rural Scotland of securing land and assets for community benefit, with remote rural areas containing 63% of community-owned assets, and comprising 98% of land area in community ownership.

Over the past year, social and community enterprises have led agile responses to local needs, generating greater recognition of, and reliance on existing community networks and anchor organisations. This being said, organisations, staff, and volunteers have continued to adapt and provide services throughout stressful and challenging circumstances, and many are facing significant burn-out. Access to peer support has never been more important, and the shift to virtual has been a real highlight for many in rural and remote areas, who hope that the 'new normal' will maintain the same level of online participation and access.

Virtual community learning exchanges hosted via the Rural SEN have highlighted that there is an appetite to learn from the good practice and experience of rural social enterprises, and an enthusiasm to share learning with peers. The tendency for collaboration and collective leadership is a strength of social enterprises generally - but has the potential to generate significant impact in rural regions, where social enterprises can work effectively in partnership to broaden impact across and within communities. Upcoming community learning exchanges will focus on themes identified by Rural SEN members, including e-commerce, digital engagement, and involving young people. Get in touch to find out more.

As a 22 year-old, I am passionate about seeing more young people involved in social enterprise, and see access and progression routes which incorporate earning and learning as a vital way to engage young folk. In rural areas, there is often a lack of opportunity to pursue employment or further education, and as a result, many young people struggle to remain in their local communities and migrate to the central belt to access wider opportunities. This is known as the 'brain drain', which sees young talent and knowledge leave and not return, resulting in the deficit of working age people.

Social enterprises in Scotland have a track record of providing access routes into employment for marginalised groups, with 56% of social enterprises in Scotland employing people aged under 25. Data also indicates that 42% of social enterprises employ young people who were previously unemployed. Colleagues and I from Inspiralba published a report into [Access Routes for Young People](#), giving a context of rural demographic changes, the benefits of involving young people in social enterprise, and the personal impact created by opportunities including modern apprenticeships, graduate posts, work placements, research internships and being on a board.

There is also a need to focus on engagement from the top down, and it will be interesting to watch how the Scottish Government and partners look to involve young people and rural stakeholders in the delivery of the Social Enterprise Action Plan in the coming months. I hope that the greater focus on remote working will encourage more young people to seek opportunities to live and work rurally, where there is a stronger sense of community identity, improved wellbeing, and access to outdoor space which has become so sought after in light of successive lockdowns.

In short, rural businesses and social enterprises have a key role in attracting young people to work and learn, creating more sustainable communities throughout rural and remote regions, and should be supported to do so. Trends of urban flight have intensified in light of Covid-19, and there is a need to ensure that the already limited affordable housing supply in rural areas does not dwindle. With the ongoing work and deepening local impact of social enterprises across rural and island Scotland, it will be a busy year for many, but hopefully one that brings more positive change and a sustainable recovery.

See more on the [Rural SEN](#) and the [Rural SE Hub](#)