

Policing a Pandemic: Order Maintenance in Rural Scotland during Covid-19

Policing and the Pandemic: the Scottish Experience
Roundtable

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Project Aim

This project aimed to:

- Explore how the policing of rural communities has been impacted by the Covid-19 epidemic and
- Explore the likely long-term implications of Covid-19 on rural communities.



Research Questions

RQ1 How has public demand for policing in rural areas changed in response to Covid-19? (e.g. what are the priorities, how have they changed and what are the potential implications for trust and confidence in the police?)

RQ2 What impact(s) has Covid-19 had on other organisations, agencies or community groups that play a role in the order maintenance of rural communities? How have these different communities organised, adapted, and innovated to maintain social order and access justice?

RQ3 What are the similarities and differences between different rural communities' experiences of Covid-19 and associated policing adaptations and challenges?

RQ4 What are the predicted short and medium-term impacts of these changes to order maintenance in rural communities (access to countryside, vigilantism, volunteering in communities, online groups etc).

Method

- Case study approach – Remote Rural in Northern Scotland (Craignorth) and Semi-Rural (Glen Roy)
- 23 semi-structured Interviews (Police Scotland, National Parks, Forestry & Land Scotland, Mountain Rescue, Voluntary Groups, Local Councils, Councillors, Community Councils)
- 3 Focus Groups (mainly community and councillors)
- Fieldwork took place online Feb-May 2021

Preliminary findings

Policing the pandemic in rural Scotland: Immediate response (Lockdown 1)

- Concerns about visitors bringing virus into community - **Health concerns** for responders, esp. police officers (*'I can hear and physically see officers petrified for their health'*)
- Initial **challenges implementing legislation** (and ensuring compliance) in rural communities – change in policing style
- Trying to police **anxiety/disorientation/uncertainty**
- Change in demand profile, particularly around **low-level incivility**:
 - *'the most disconcerting was the Friday and Saturday night shifts and back shifts with no pubs...eerie'*
 - *'Yeah there's obviously been this whole new area of business where people are reporting Covid breaches and we get those daily to be honest, every day there's one or two calls about 'There's someone in a campervan. There's too many people in a house. There's a party'*
- Police initially **broadened role** and did a lot of activities that staff from other agencies on furlough etc. would normally have done – picking up the pieces.
- **Dealing with volume of visitors** - many breaking restrictions
- Widely recognised that police did their best under the circumstances (praise for the pandemic response cf 'normal')

Policing the pandemic in rural Scotland: Medium term (Summer-Lockdown 2)

- **Establishment and embedding of 4 E's** approach generally well received, especially with powers and boundaries changing v regularly.
- Very positive **multi-agency working** in case studies (esp where pre-existing formalised relationships)
- Understanding and supporting the strong **collective community responses**
 - **Importance of local officers who know local communities and people**
- More traditional policing challenges begin to emerge:
 - Increased demand around those in **mental health crisis**
 - Managing C19 issues and more 'regular' issues
- **Policing the volume of visitors** – coping with the "camperhome army":
 - Threatened both the sense of local order but also the quality of life of local residents
 - Some communities responded with **low level vigilantism** – hay bales across farm tracks etc.
 - **Insider/Outsider** status keenly applied. ASB/ Dirty Camping – not just a nuisance but **symbolic of disease and bringing it in to communities**
- Anxiety about the future and planning for this summer – early evidence is it has been reasonably successful?

Moving forward: key
challenges for policing in
rural communities?

National and local disconnect?

- Tensions between **local and national decision making**:
 - Impact of national government decisions on rural communities (flights, boundaries)
 - Importance of **re-engaging rural communities** in decision making: Loss of/ Change in regular community engagement during pandemic
 - Managing conflicting viewpoints locally around national policy: Managed right to roam/ accessibility of rural space and order maintenance in these spaces
 - National policing models applied to the country neglecting rural social context (eg access to online)?
 - Local police contacts key in maintaining trust and legitimacy and advocating for communities/partnerships
- **Trust and confidence and importance in local social contexts** (present and historical):
 - **Disconnect between trust and confidence** in the police in general and trust and confidence in the police in relation to the response to the pandemic
 - Public experience of pandemic influenced by **pre-existing structural factors** (e.g. health service provision, inequality, proximity to services) which cannot be solved locally or in isolation by the police
 - **The pandemic has exacerbated pre-existing problems (eg mental health/digital divide) – more work needs to be done on unpicking these issues**

Rural Policing Post Pandemic?

- **Impact of COVID-19 on relationship between Police Scotland and rural communities?**
 - Response generally well received, but how will this translate post-covid? Historic issue?
- **'Abstract policing' – frustration in remote rural communities about loss of services (broader than the police).**
 - Respondents liked C19 increased visibility and personal interaction = increased trust and confidence?
 - How to balance national service provision with desire in rural communities for localised access to officers/force?
 - More apparent with need for local context after much national decision making...
- **Re-engaging rural communities in decision making – but how to do it effectively (role for technology?)**
- **Positive partnership working in COVID-19 at all levels – continue to capitalise on positive working relationships**
- **Police are involved in treading a very careful line:**
 - The differential application of rules and policing: some groups more policed than others
 - Thrown in to the middle of some of the other political debates around the pandemic: staycations, policing 'need' etc.

Some final thoughts...

- Rural areas have increased in value – people want to consume it more due to the reconceptualization of and feelings towards space:
 - The pandemic has changed how we view and value places – make sense of safety and danger differently (e.g. open spaces vs lack of health care)
 - This has widely varying implications for the people who live in these very different rural places (e.g. house prices, desire to 'escape' etc)
 - Impact on resourcing for policing is unclear, but the rural is often forgotten about from policing point of view, perhaps that should change?