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Building Resilience Capacity in Remote Rural Communities

Research funded by The National Centre for Resilience

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Date: 26/03/2024:



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CC	Community Council
GCAT	Glenkens Community & Arts Trust
LKRS	Loch Ken Ranger Service
LKT	Loch Ken Trust

Executive Summary

Climate change is increasing both the frequency and severity of extreme weather events. This is putting increasing pressure on remote rural communities to have robust community resilience plans.

Local authorities look to community councils to lead on the development of community resilience plans, but they are struggling to make progress. This is not from any lack of desire, rather from a lack of knowledge and capacity, coupled with conflicting priorities from other commitments.

Having a trusted community organisation support and co-ordinate this work can lead to significant progress being made by community councils, that they wouldn't be able to make alone.

Ideally, this work should be co-ordinated across multiple community council areas. This enables the sharing of both ideas and resources between neighbouring areas, improving community resilience on a sub-regional basis.

Community spaces, e.g. town/village halls, have a key role to play in improving community resilience. They will often be the focal point of community response to natural hazards, providing warm spaces, shelter and a 'command centre' to co-ordinate community activity.

However, very few community spaces have dedicated resilience plans. There is an opportunity to drive improvements in community resilience by compiling a 'toolkit' of templates, checklists and other resources to support community spaces to create resilience plans.

At a time when local authority resources are more stretched than ever, it is vital that communities are supported to make progress on this issue themselves. Unfortunately, for remote rural communities this is unlikely to happen without some dedicated support at community level.

Main body

Introduction

The increase in both frequency and severity of natural hazards in recent years has coincided with a steady reduction in public sector funding, capacity and resources to address these hazards. Essentially, as demand is rising, supply is falling.

This situation hits remote rural communities especially hard, as they represent some of the smallest, hardest to reach communities anywhere in Scotland. As such, they will inevitably be low down on any priority list for overstretched public sector resources.

Increasingly, communities are being asked to take on more responsibility for their own resilience. This process is often being led by community councils, who struggle to make meaningful progress. This can be for a number of reasons, primarily through lack of knowledge or capacity.

This action research project aims to investigate the potential benefits of a community-based organisation supporting communities to develop their resilience plans. It is also looking at effective mechanisms for neighbouring communities to support each other.

Background and Context

Loch Ken Ranger Service (LKRS) was established by Loch Ken Trust in 2021, as one of Scotland's first truly community-owned and led ranger services. Whilst much of their work is traditional countryside ranger activity, they are also exploring what else a community ranger service could do to support its communities. This includes a growing amount of work around community resilience.

Loch Ken Trust (LKT), as the operators of LKRS, were established as a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO) in 2020, in response to the withdrawal of countryside ranger services in 2019 by Dumfries & Galloway Council. Their purpose is to support sustainable local communities around Loch Ken and in April 2022 they published the Loch Ken Plan as a strategic plan to guide their work.

Recognising the importance of both community resilience and climate adaptation, LKT previously worked with Adaptation Scotland on the 'Climate Ready Ken' project, as part of the Climate Ready Localities programme.

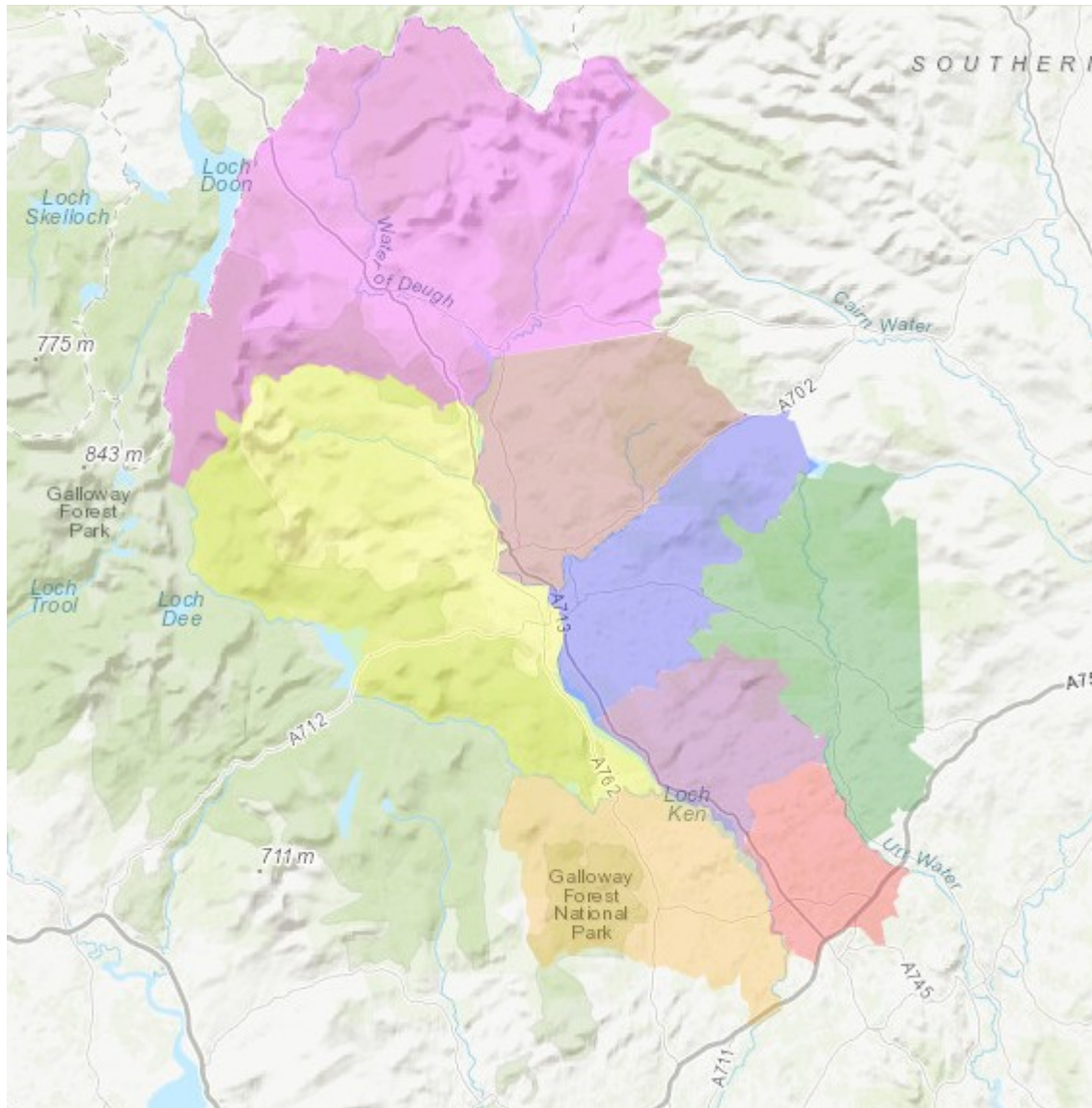


FIGURE 1 - MAP OF GLENKENS COMMUNITY COUNCIL AREAS

The Glenkens is well-defined both geographically and culturally, while at the same time not having any borders on a map. It can be considered as a grouping of 9 Community Council parishes grouped around the catchment of the Ken / Dee river in remote-rural Dumfries and Galloway. It stretches from Carsphairn in the North to Crossmichael in the south.

It encompasses the villages of Balmaclellan, Carsphairn, Corsock, Crossmichael, Kirkpatrick Durham, Laurieston, Mossdale, New Galloway, Parton and St John's Town of Dalry, plus outlying houses and farmstead and comprises about 4,000 people. It has an ageing population, with many older people living on their own or in couples.

The Glenkens Community & Arts Trust (GCAT) has a 22-year track record of economic regeneration through arts and community work in the Glenkens. They were created in response to the devastating Foot and Mouth epidemic of 1998 and since then have consistently delivered high-quality arts and community development work for our remote-rural community.

They are a key anchor organisation for the area, with a vision of making the Glenkens an excellent place to live for people of all ages. They are a key partner in this project, through their delivery of both the Glenkens Hub website and the Glenkens Community Spaces Network.

Research Methods

Community & LA Engagement

The initial phase of the project was around engagement. Through GCAT, information was sent to all 9 Glenkens community councils about the project and expressions of interest were invited. Positive responses were received from 5 of the 9 community councils.

LKT attended a meeting of the Glenkens Community Spaces Network, to explain the project and invite expressions of interest from the 24 different community spaces (village halls, town halls etc) in the network. Positive responses were received from 6 of the spaces.

Given the important role that the local authority plays in co-ordinating community resilience teams across the region, it was also important to engage with the LA's Community Resilience team. LKT had initial meetings with relevant officers who were very keen to support the project. The project came at a serendipitous time, as there had been a number of personnel changes with the LA, so this project presented an opportunity for the new officers to come and meet with individual community councils. The LA had also been updating the official council template for resilience plans and were preparing to roll the new template out across the region.

Selecting Project Participants

From the received expressions of interest, 3 community councils and 3 community spaces needed to be chosen. To maximise the potential learnings from the project, a diversity in the participants was sought.

First, we aimed to secure a geographical spread of participants around the project area, looking for participants on both sides of Loch Ken as well as to the north of the Glenkens.

Secondly, we aimed to choose participants who were at very different stages of preparedness and progress on community resilience matters. Some communities have made much more progress than others and we were keen to see if those areas at the beginning of this journey could learn from their more advanced peers.

Finally, we were keen to have at least one pilot community where we were working with both the community council and community space from that community. This would allow us to investigate any potential benefits of working co-operatively with both groups, for example how the community council and community space could support each other's work.

The chosen project participants were:

Community Councils	Community Spaces
Balmaclellan CC	Balmaclellan Village Hall
Balmaghie CC	New Galloway Town Hall
Dalry CC	Parton Village Hall

TABLE 1 - PROJECT PARTICIPANTS

Methodology

A workshop was delivered to each participant group, with Balmaclellan CC and Balmaclellan Village Hall opting to have a combined workshop for both groups.

The workshops had two main components; a review and gap analysis of existing paperwork and plans, followed by a scenario exercise to explore the decision-making required to actually implement resilience plans during a natural hazard event.

The outputs of these workshops were then used to inform follow-up activity, with LKRS supporting participant groups to ensure that each was able to complete an up-to-date resilience plan.

Gap Analysis of Existing Plans

The first challenge faced in carrying out the gap analysis part of the workshop was sourcing the existing plans and paperwork. For the community councils, there were two options; directly from the community council themselves, or from the local authority (who hold copies of all community resilience plans registered with them).

Within the community councils, it was frequently the case that committee members had changed since the previous plans were completed and no-one knew where to locate copies of the plan. Some groups were even unsure whether or not a previous plan had actually been produced.

Sourcing copies from the local authority didn't prove much easier. The personnel changes mentioned above meant that the new officers struggled to locate and share the plans to LKRS, as an external partner.

Where previous plans and associated paperwork could not be sourced in advance of the workshop, we instead looked through a blank copy of the new council template in detail, to inform the group of what information would be required.

For the community spaces the situation was much simpler; none of them had any previous resilience plans or paperwork to examine. In these workshops, we looked through the council template for community councils, to agree which bits were relevant for community spaces, in order to construct a meaningful template for those groups.

In all workshops, the gap analysis helped identify where the community needed to verify and update information. LKRS documented these actions and co-ordinated follow up activity to fill gaps within the existing paperwork.

Scenario Exercise

This part of the workshop was based around the fictional scenario of 'Storm Ken' approaching the area. Initial focus was on the decision making as the storm approached and what steps (if any) the participants would take to communicate the risks to the wider community and what preparations should be taken.

The session then looked at the sort of decisions and actions the participants would need to take during the actual storm and how the plan could be activated and delivered. The LKRS team would introduce new scenario 'updates', as roads became impassable or other events occurred. These were designed to look at a broad range of issue, such as the provision of personal care to vulnerable local residents, rather than just looking at the impact on access to communities i.e. road closures.

Each workshop closed with a summary session and agreement on next steps, with the aim to ensure that each participant had a fully completed resilience plan by the end of the project.

Post workshop engagement and follow up activity

LKRS wrote up details of each workshop, highlighting the information gaps and agreed actions to plug them. A follow-up meeting was arranged with each group to go through this work.

Additionally, a number of resources were suggested through the workshops that LKRS created and circulated to participants. These included a number of template forms and checklists that could help guide groups through decision-making during hazard events. These were made available to all groups.

Resilience Focus Event

Following our workshop with Dalry CC, they were keen to hold an event to engage the wider community on resilience issues. There was a good turnout and lots of willing volunteers keen to help with resilience. They talked through the importance of listing volunteers so they can be covered for light resilience duties on the Council's insurance policy.

They also came up with the idea of resilience postcards which could be printed and delivered to every household. The leaflets had some useful contact numbers on them and encouraged people to get in touch if they wished to be involved resilience planning. Also, it gave the opportunity for people to ask to be checked on in an extreme weather event.

Learnings

Capacity

The primary learning from the project is that there is no lack of desire within communities to do more on community resilience, but there is a lack of time and capacity within community groups to make meaningful progress.

In remote rural communities, many of the volunteers on community councils and hall committees are also members of various other groups and lack the time needed to progress resilience work.

Information and Communication

Rural community councils often cover a large, sparsely populated geographical area. Community councils often have very limited data and information about their own area. For example, many of the participants mentioned how useful it would be to have a full list of residential addresses in their area.

Communication was a key theme, both between committee members and to the wider community. Many members of community councils use personal email addresses for all communication. This creates a problem when committee members change and details become out of date. A way around this is to set up generic email addresses with access by multiple committee members. This also removes the risk of a key committee member being away and messages not being received.

When communicating to the wider community, things to consider included introducing people to the resilience plan as early as possible, via leaflet drops, social media and posters on the notice board.

Resources

Through the course of project delivery, it became clear that different communities had very different levels of resources available to them. For example, one group identified a potential need for additional privacy screens, for use in an emergency, but didn't know how they would go about sourcing them. The next group we worked with, when we mentioned this, made clear that they had multiple screens and would be happy to make them available if needed.

This highlighted an important benefit to having a trusted partner co-ordinating action across multiple neighbouring communities. LKRS is continuing to work with all groups to list what resources are available for use by other communities in times of crisis.

In addition to identifying resources already available in our communities, we also sought to identify a 'wish list' of additional resources that each community would like, if possible. These range from basic resources such as heaters and radios, through to more substantial items such as generators etc.

Outputs

Project outputs are below:

1. 3 community council areas with up to date, active 'local support plans' developed and agreed

Balmaghie, Dalry and Balmaclellan Community Councils all have up to date local support plans developed and agreed

2. 3 'community spaces' (village/town halls etc.) with support plans developed and agreed for extreme events

Balmaclellan Village Hall, Parton Village Hall and New Galloway Town Hall all have up to date local support plans agreed

3. Dedicated resilience section on the Glenkens Hub website, with key information and signposting to relevant support

Balmaclellan, Dalry and Balmaghie Community Councils now have secure static pages on the Glenkens Hub with resilience information and signposting to support

Likewise, New Galloway Town Hall, Balmaclellan Village Hall and Parton Village Hall also have secure static pages on the Glenkens Hub.

4. 'Emergency communication protocol' agreed with key partners, to ensure that key comms messages can reach remote rural communities and outlying, isolated properties

Improved links and open communication now exist between our Council Resilience Team and the Community Councils and Spaces, making it easier to access support.

Communities are more aware of those who are isolated and communities have various methods of promoting resilience messages. There is still further work to do to develop and agree a formal communication protocol with key partners, in line with the output.

5. Evidence base for the key issues to address in bridging the gap between remote rural communities and existing support from local authorities and the wider resilience community

Communication has been improved between the participant communities and local authority (and partner) support. Further work (post project) will continue to develop this evidence base

6. Evidence base for implementation of national/regional strategies via on-the-ground community action in a remote rural setting.

This evidence base has been begun, but not progressed to any great detail during this project.

Self-Assessment

Dumfries and Galloway Council run an Emergency Community Resilience Recognition Scheme with three levels, depending on the level of activity of the group. The groups were asked to self-assess against the listed criteria, indicating the tasks they were able to carry out.

All participant groups achieved a minimum Silver standard, with some achieving the Gold level, recognising their continued commitment to community resilience.

Real-life Situations

Since the workshops were held, we have experienced two named storms which have hit the region. These real-life situations have definitely brought resilience to the forefront of people's minds, and Community Councils are now communicating with each other and offering support to neighbouring resilience groups. When power was out in New Galloway, they were offered assistance from Balmaclellan. Also as a result of the workshops, New Galloway were able to open up the Village Hall for providing hot water during the recent lengthy power cut. As a result of this, a Community Council Network has been set up, meeting once a quarter to share learnings.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Every community that was part of this project had a strong desire to make their communities more resilient, but were struggling to make progress.

Primarily, this is due to a lack of capacity and support. The members of community councils and hall committees are all volunteers, many of them elderly and many with a number of other commitments.

By providing support and co-ordination, Loch Ken Ranger Service has been able to support every community council to complete their resilience plans and have them registered with the local authority. This simply wouldn't have happened without the support.

For the hall committees, the situation was even worse. None of the halls in this project had even considered having a dedicated resilience plan for their hall, before joining the project. At least with the community councils, the local authority provides a template for them to complete. With the halls it was a case of starting from scratch.

Using the local authority template as a base, a template for creating a resilience plan for community spaces has been developed, along with a number of other resources, such as checklists, templates etc. This could form the basis of a toolkit for committees trying to manage community spaces.

The project has also highlighted the importance of not just looking at a single community in isolation. The connections made between participant communities as part of this project has led to some very useful co-operation between different communities to share ideas and resources.



Previously, some of this work could have been driven by local authority resilience teams. Unfortunately, local authority resources are so stretched that it would be difficult to prioritise this work.

Loch Ken Ranger Service will continue to work with our communities to support them to become more resilient, but the level of support we are able to provide will be limited by available funding.

To accelerate the speed at which communities are able to become more resilient, it is vital that support is provided to community councils in remote rural areas. Without that support, few will be able to make meaningful progress, due to the other demands on their time.