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Rural lives during COVID-19: crisis, resilience and redistributing societal risk

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the redistribution and rescaling of societal risk in rural Britain during the COVID-19 pandemic, as one episode of the permacrisis. Drawing on empirical work in three contrasting areas of Scotland and England, we analyse individuals' experiences of risk and of the institutions which offer them support in times of crisis (markets, state, voluntary and community organisations, and family and friends). Our findings reveal the unequal distribution of societal risk during the pandemic, exacerbated by a legacy of precariatization and individualisation in the labour market and welfare reforms. Although the state acted to mitigate risk and financial hardship during the lockdown, it was often voluntary and community organisations that filled the gaps left by the inability of the state to reach effectively into rural areas. Social infrastructure and institutional capital are therefore central to the mitigation of vulnerability and societal risk. This raises important questions about the capacity of institutions to provide support in times of crisis to rural citizens. Unless there is societal pooling of risk through such institutions to ensure social protection and that nobody is disadvantaged by where they live, future episodes of the permacrisis are likely to exacerbate inequalities and vulnerabilities in rural communities.

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Introduction

Rural communities are popularly characterised as resilient, socially cohesive and better able to withstand natural disasters and social disruption, notwithstanding academic critiques of such idyllic framings. Indeed, 'community resilience is often viewed as an inherent property of rural places, albeit one that has been undermined by their growing vulnerability in the face of decades of change and restructuring' (Cheshire et al., 2015, p. 9) and one revealed often to constitute a discursive practice of neoliberalisation (Cheshire, 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic tested the resilience and the vulnerability of communities and of individuals during the initial waves of 2020-22, in ways

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which are still being understood. Moreover, it has been argued (Henig & Knight, 2023; Tooze, 2022; Turnbull, 2022; Wolf, 2022) that this pandemic might be regarded as only one element of a ‘polycrisis’ or ‘permacrisis’ (the *Collins Dictionary* word of the year in 2022), referring to a state of ongoing disruption to political, economic and social life, exemplified in Britain by the financial crisis, austerity, Brexit, the cost-of-living crisis, the NHS crisis, the invasion of Ukraine, and of course climate change. What can we learn from the experience of rural citizens during the COVID-19 crisis to help negotiate the permacrisis as it unfolds into the future?

Resilience and vulnerability are inescapably intertwined with risk and responsibility, yet most studies of resilience examine community resilience to the neglect of individual vulnerabilities and the redistribution and rescaling of risk (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012). Our core concern in this paper is the redistribution and individualisation of societal risk in times of crisis, and what lessons this might suggest for negotiating the permacrisis. Beck (1992, 2000) argued that the reconfiguration of welfare regimes in advanced societies under neoliberalism has contributed to a modern risk society, characterised by profound uncertainty and individualisation of responsibility and risk. While state support offsets disadvantage for many, welfare conditionality and cutbacks mean that state systems now often compound the precarity of increasingly flexible and insecure labour markets (Standing, 2011). Simultaneously, the permacrisis presents new challenges and uncertainties for individuals and communities and raises questions about the capacity of institutions, such as the state, voluntary sector or family, to provide support in times of crisis.

This paper therefore explores the redistribution and rescaling of societal risk in rural Britain during the COVID-19 pandemic, as one episode of the permacrisis, drawing on empirical work with poorer and disadvantaged households in three contrasting areas of rural Scotland and England before and during the first lockdown. In particular, the paper explores individuals’ experiences of risk and of institutions which might offer them support, namely markets, the state, voluntary and community organisations, and family and friends. This approach enables us to consider both ‘emergency’ and ‘everyday’ aspects of community resilience (Currie et al., 2022) and how risk is redistributed and rescaled within a crisis.

Risk, resilience, responsibility and crisis

The concept of the ‘risk society’ refers to ‘an age in which the social order of the national state, class, ethnicity and the traditional family is in decline’. Instead, an ‘ethic of individual self-fulfilment and achievement’ and the creation of ‘a life of your own’ came to dominate (Beck, 2000, p. 165). The post-war welfare state had operated as a risk pooling mechanism, underpinned by values of social solidarity and radical kindness. However, as neoliberalism displaced Keynesianism as the dominant economic narrative, there was a reconfiguration of welfare regimes in many countries, including Britain, requiring ‘an increasingly personalised responsibility for managing life’s adversities’ (Asenova et al., 2015, pp. 14–15) and compelling the self-organisation of individual biographies. The pace of change, the increased role of impersonal systems, institutions and algorithms, globalisation, and the widespread shift towards flexible labour markets and insecure employment meant that the ability to survive and prosper became more precarious for many (Standing, 2011).

Welfare reforms and austerity policies have intensified this precarity and individualisation of risk. Drawing on US welfare reform, ‘work activation’ policies which brought greater conditionality and toughening of sanctions for welfare benefit claimants were introduced in Britain under Labour’s Welfare to Work programme, and subsequently intensified under the Conservative – Liberal Democrat Coalition government from 2010 alongside severe cuts in welfare spending. Hastings et al. (2017) regard these austerity measures less as a response to the global financial crisis but rather as a fundamental part of a longer-term neoliberal project which aims to re-shape and redefine the state at a national and local level. Similarly, Levitas (2013) views the global financial crisis as a justifying mantra for disempowering and dismantling systems of social protection, restructuring, rescaling and downsizing the state, and shifting risk and responsibility on to the public and specifically the poor. Often the idea of resilience is deployed to justify or compensate ‘for the withdrawal of the state from commitment to collective security and the collectivisation of risks’ (Wright, 2022, p. 137).

These processes of individualisation, and redistribution of risk operate not only on individuals and social groups but also affect the resilience and prosperity of places and place-communities. Just as citizens are increasingly expected to take individualised responsibility for their own wellbeing, places and place-communities are expected to take responsibility for their future wellbeing under a neoliberal regime of self-help and competition (Cheshire et al., 2015). This leads to a highly uneven geography of rural development as the state’s role weakens, with primarily the more affluent communities with greater institutional capacity-to-act organising to defend their interests and to pursue their objectives, taking advantage of whatever competitive government schemes remain. Meanwhile, poorer rural communities and those without institutional capacity (knowledge, networks, and ability to mobilise) will find it more difficult to generate rural development actions (Shucksmith, 2010). They may well lose services and facilities, enjoying less control over changes affecting them. Such inequalities become self-reinforcing as community resilience becomes individualised and risk is redistributed and rescaled (MacKinnon & Derickson, 2012).

Although resilience and its relation to the capacity of a rural community to absorb and/or adapt to change has been well-researched (Glass et al., 2022; McAreavey, 2022; Scott, 2013; Skerratt, 2013), the redistribution of societal risk amongst citizens is a relatively neglected aspect of resilience thinking in rural and urban studies. An exception to this is Wright (2022, p. 2) who seeks to link ‘resilience debates with critical sociological and social policy insights into vulnerability, coping and social suffering, exploring what factors shape resilience and vulnerability at local levels and in specific contexts of adversity, and examining the role of policy and government in the production and distribution of risks.’ Pointing to the state’s control of funding, welfare provision, bureaucratic systems, power relations and systems of rights, she finds that, beyond individual agency, ‘the resilience of individuals, families, households and communities rests on wider systems of societal resilience, and institutions of shared security and protection, and that without structural sources of resilience there are inequalities in how resilient people can be’ (Wright, 2022, p. 138). Crucially, ‘this means shifting the focus from understanding resilience as behaviour to understanding it as structurally located and shaped’ (p.139).

This is highly relevant to risk, resilience and vulnerability in the polycrisis or permacrisis – an emerging concept defined by Lent (2022) as ‘a state of ongoing disruption to political,

economic and social life from which there is no foreseeable exit'. While many citizens are longing for stability and predictability, Zuleeg et al. (2021) concur that 'once we have managed to master the current pandemic, we will not enter a permanent 'new normal'. Rather, Europeans will have to prepare for and adapt to a radically and regularly changing environment. The world we live in will continue to be characterised by high levels of uncertainty, fragility and unpredictability.' Whether or not we accept Tooze's (2022) characterisation of polycrisis as a marker of our age, capturing overlapping and interconnected crises beyond cause and effect, the term conveys the complexity of an increasingly uncertain world in a state of flux and transition (Henig & Knight, 2023), Polycrisis, in their view, draws attention to a set of knotted events, 'at a moment in history when eventedness is denser – where multiple critical events are clumping together, and where crises have amassed with increased speed, intensity and complexity' (Henig & Knight, 2023, p. 6). In the face of this, Tooze calls for technological innovation while Henig and Knight propose collective action and solidarity. Both Lent and Zuleeg et al. advocate a larger central state response, and indeed a recalibration of decision-making and delivery mechanisms to respond to the increased volatility and uncertainty. But these are not the only structural sources of support. These complex global threats are unfolding at the same time as everyday life is becoming increasingly difficult and challenging for certain groups in society. We therefore need a more nuanced understanding of how risk, vulnerability and resilience are structurally located and shaped, and what agency may still achieve.

The research presented in this paper uses financial hardship and vulnerability as a heuristic prism through which to enquire into the broader, underlying processes of social exclusion in rural areas which generate and redistribute risk, vulnerability and resilience. To that end, our focus was on the interconnections between individuals' and households' everyday experiences of financial hardship, wellbeing and the structural and external processes bringing social exclusion through changes, for example, in local economies, employment, housing markets, welfare support and services, mediated through place. This necessitated analysis at both the individual/household level, enquiring about experiences and causes of financial hardship and vulnerability and revealing strategies and sources of help and support, alongside analysis of the economic, social and policy context through which processes of social exclusion operate to generate or redistribute financial hardship, vulnerability and risk. Adapting Polanyi's (1977) formulation of market-exchange, redistribution and reciprocity as three types of socio-economic relations that represent distinct forms of economic integration, these processes are distinguished for analytic purposes as: markets (access according to market exchange); state (access according to need or other bureaucratic criteria); voluntary and community sector (access according to charitable or associative criteria); and family and friends (access according to reciprocity). This framework builds on the earlier work of Commins (2004), Philip and Shucksmith (2003) and Reimer (2004) to explore how changes in each of these four systems of resource allocation affect individual/household financial hardship, wellbeing and vulnerability.

Methodology

Qualitative data were collected in three case study areas (Figure 1). Two were in Scotland: an accessible rural area, the wards of Blairgowrie and the Glens and part of Strathmore in

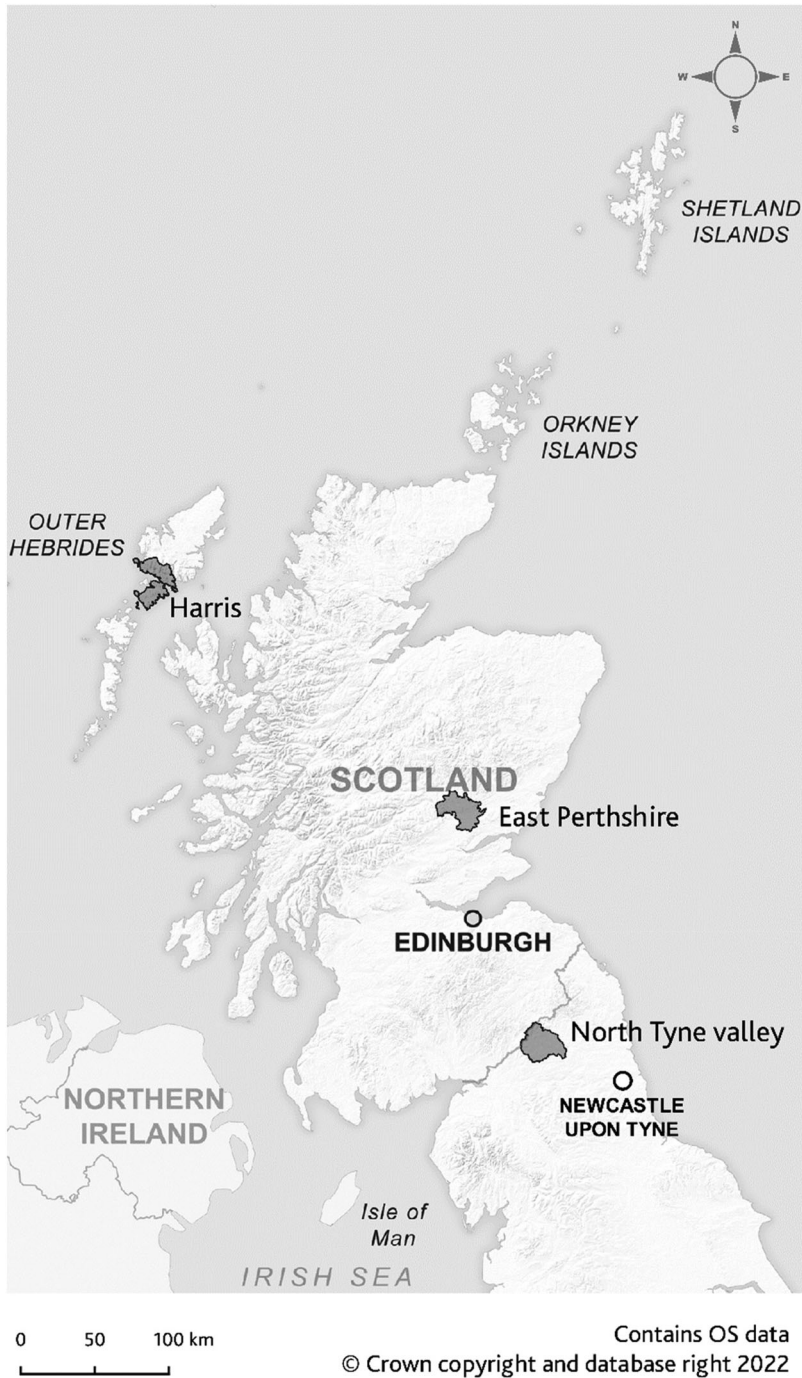


Figure 1. Map of the study areas.

East Perthshire (Perth and Kinross local authority area), and a remote island area, Harris (Na h-Eileanan Siar local authority area). The third was in a remote mainland area in England, the North Tyne valley (within the Northumberland local authority area). The

case studies were chosen to reflect different types of rural area and circumstances, and our familiarity with the areas from previous work (Shucksmith & Chapman, 1998). Some additional inclusive growth indicators for these three council areas, compared to Scotland and England averages, are shown in Table 1. Such data are not available for the study areas themselves.

The Blairgowrie and the Glens case study area forms the northern part of Eastern Perthshire and has a population of about 19,000 in an area of 468 km². The principal town is Blairgowrie and Rattray, with fertile lowlands and smaller towns to the south, and remote glens (valleys) to the north. The area is renowned for the growing of soft fruit and its history of textile weaving, and the landscape attracts tourists, commuters and retirement migrants. Although Perth and Kinross as a whole has relatively low levels of deprivation compared to other parts of Scotland, there are many people living in poverty (Perth and Kinross Community Planning Partnership, 2017). The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) identifies parts of Perth City and Rattray (which is in the case study area) as amongst the 10% most deprived areas in Scotland. Eastern Perthshire has one of the fastest growing populations in Scotland. From 2001 to 2011, the population increased by 9%, similar to the rest of Perth and Kinross (Eastern Perthshire Action Partnership, n.d.), compared with the Scottish average of 5% in the same period. There is an ageing population in Eastern Perthshire, which is expected to place a greater demand on social care services in the future.

Harris lies in the Outer Hebrides, a region described as an ‘economically fragile area relatively reliant on primary industries’ (Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership, 2019, p. 4), particularly crofting, fishing and agriculture. Harris Tweed weaving, tourism, construction and the public sector are also important sources of employment. Connection to the mainland is by plane or ferry and the main town is Tarbert, outside of which the area is sparsely populated. The local authority area has the lowest population

Table 1. Additional descriptive information about the case study areas (key inclusive growth indicators).

	Na h-Eileanan Siar (Western Isles)	Perth and Kinross	Scotland	Northumberland	England
Population 2018 (% change 2002-18)	26,600 (+0.8%)	153,800 (+13.8%)	-	321,600 (+4.2%)	-
GVA per head (2016)	£17,276	£25,765	£24,800	£16,140	£27,108
Employment rate (16-64) (2018)	80.4%	80.9%	77.4%	71.5%	76.3%
Gross weekly pay (full-time workers, 2019)	£519.30	£566.40	£578.30	£490.60	£587.50 (GB)
Percentage of households that are fuel poor (required fuel costs >10% of income, 2019)	40%	25%	24%	14.1%	13.4%
Percentage of households classed as workless (2019)	14.7%	12%	17.7%	19.7%	13.9% (GB)
Claimant count (Feb 2020 – before lockdown)	465 (3%)	1,865 (2%)	3.3%	6,665 (3.5%)	3.0% (GB)
Proportion of addresses where superfast broadband is not available (2023) ¹	29.2% (of rural addresses)	29.8% (of rural addresses)	6.3%	12.1%	4.1%

¹Broadband data relates to UK constituencies (Na h-Eileanan Siar, Perth and North Perthshire, Hexham). Sources: ONS NOMIS regional labour market profiles (population, employment, pay and claimant data); Energy Action Scotland (fuel poverty data, Scotland); UK Government sub-regional poverty data (fuel poverty data, England); UK Parliament House of Commons Library, based on Ofcom data (superfast broadband data by constituency).

density in Scotland at nine people per square kilometre, which can make the delivery and accessibility of services challenging. The population of Harris has steadily declined, falling by almost 50% since 1951 (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, n.d.). Approximately 2,000 people currently live in this case study area. The Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) does not define any areas in the Outer Hebrides council area as being amongst Scotland's 20% most deprived locations. However, this can 'lead to a situation where households in rural areas are omitted from policy and targeting by national interventions designed to address poverty and inequalities' (Outer Hebrides Community Planning Partnership, 2019, p. 4). One of the key features of Harris is the recent growth of community land ownership (Combe et al., 2020), which has been linked to increased resilience in rural communities (Glass et al., 2022). The Outer Hebrides was ranked highest in the Scottish government's Brexit Vulnerability Index¹ (Scottish Government, 2019), with Harris specifically at risk of increased income deprivation and changes in the population.

Just under half of Northumberland's population lives in rural areas (46%). The county is sparsely populated for England, with 63 people per square kilometre (Northumberland County Council, 2018). Northumberland falls into the most deprived 20% of local authorities in England for the number of people who are employment deprived and/or income deprived. The county is also in the top ten local authorities in England for the percentage point increase in the proportion of Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOAs) in the most deprived 10% between the Indicators of Deprivation (IoD) in 2015 and 2019 (Northumberland County Council, 2019). The North Tyne valley in Northumberland borders Scotland and includes the four civil parishes of Bellingham, Kielder, Falstone and Tarsset and Greystead. Combined, the parishes cover about 530km² and had an estimated population of 2019 people in 2017, one of the lowest population densities in England. Part of the area is within the boundaries of Northumberland National Park and the communities are largely viewed as beyond commuting distance from Newcastle. Key industries include agriculture (hill farming) and forestry, with tourism and associated activities now more important, particularly due to the International Dark Sky Park designation.

The data presented and analysed in this paper is a subset of the data collected in the 'Rural Lives' project, which is compiled in its entirety in Shucksmith et al. (2023). The Rural Lives research explored why and how people in rural areas experience and negotiate poverty and social exclusion, examining the role of societal processes, individual circumstances and the four sources of support outlined in the previous section. In that research, there were three stages to the fieldwork in each of the case studies. We firstly interviewed a range of 'gatekeepers', such as advice agencies, foodbanks, public bodies and third-sector organisations, who were likely to encounter people experiencing financial hardship. We discussed the reasons why people experience financial hardship and the extent to which the four systems of support can help.

The second stage consisted of interviews with individuals who had experienced financial hardship, or who were at risk of doing so. These respondents were either found with help from the gatekeepers who were interviewed in the first stage or through requests in local newsletters or on community Facebook pages. These interviews explored people's life histories and experiences of living in their local area. We particularly sought to gather information on life events, work, housing, sources of support and

other key issues pertinent to the overall study. All of the interviews with gatekeepers and individuals in East Perthshire and Harris were conducted in person between September 2019 and February 2020. Face-to-face interviews were not possible for most of the interviews in Northumberland following the spread of COVID-19 to the UK and the announcement of the first national lockdown in March 2020. Instead, these interviews took place online or via telephone, following the emerging advice at the time for conducting fieldwork in a pandemic (Lupton, 2021). Further details of the methods and the findings from these two stages are available in Shucksmith et al. (2023).

The third and final stage of the fieldwork involved three themed focus groups with representatives from organisations based in (or offering support to those based in) each case study area. In this paper, we draw on the data collected in this final stage of the Rural Lives research. The focus groups were used both to test the validity of the findings from the interviews in the first and second stages and to explore how rural financial hardship and vulnerability had been experienced in the three areas during the COVID-19 pandemic and first lockdown. Additional topics of discussion varied, based on the pertinent themes emerging from the interviews in each area. These themes are presented in Table 2, along with more information about the participants. Because these focus groups were conducted online during the pandemic, we followed Lupton's (2021) guidance on the appropriate size of focus groups. In total, 24 participants took part in the focus groups (nine male and 15 female participants). When deciding which participants to invite to the focus groups, we aimed to include different types of organisations – public, private or VCSE (voluntary and community sector) – that were interested in the main theme of each discussion. Examples of the types of organisations that took part included local authorities and health boards (public sector), local businesses (private sector) and community trusts, foodbanks and Citizens Advice Bureaux (VCSE). Sometimes, this meant that we invited one or more of the gatekeepers who took part in the first stage of the research to attend a focus group. Otherwise, participants were recruited either via snowball sampling through the gatekeepers, or as a result of being referred to in the content of interviews in the first or second stages (e.g. when an interviewee talked about relevant organisations/initiatives). Nine focus groups were conducted online between March and September 2020. At least two members of the research team attended each focus group to facilitate the conversation and take notes. The focus groups were audio recorded with the consent of participants

Table 2. Descriptive information about the focus groups.

	Focus group	Number of participants and gender (M/F)	Types of organisations (private, public or VCSE)	Main theme of discussion
East Perthshire	1	3 (3F)	3 VCSE	Poverty and welfare support
	2	2 (1M, 1F)	1 public, 1 VCSE	Health and social care
	3	3 (3F)	1 public, 2 VCSE	Role of third sector
Harris	1	3 (2M, 1F)	2 private, 1 VCSE	Business and tourism
	2	3 (2M, 1F)	3 VCSE	Community trusts
	3	1 (1M)	1 VCSE	Poverty and welfare support
North Tyne Valley	1	3 (3F)	1 public, 1 private, 1 VCSE	Poverty and welfare
	2	3 (3F)	3 public	Health and wellbeing
	3	3 (3M)	3 VCSE	Community trusts

and transcribed for thematic analysis. The analysis was conducted manually according to six themes which emerged from the earlier stages of the fieldwork, listed below.

In the sections that follow, we focus our analysis on the data collected in the focus groups that related to rural citizens' experiences of COVID-19 in the case study areas. Although additional topics were discussed in the focus groups (as shown in Table 2), these are not considered in this paper and are instead explored in more detail in Shucksmith et al. (2023). Using the analytical frame of the four sources of support to explore how risk, vulnerability and resilience were structurally located and shaped during the pandemic and first UK lockdown, we explore the following topics that were discussed by the participants:

- the extent to which the welfare system met the needs of rural residents during the first lockdown;
- how the pandemic and lockdown affected precarity and the volatility of rural incomes (and would do in the future);
- the health and wellbeing impacts of the pandemic and lockdown on rural residents;
- rural experiences of digitalisation during the lockdown;
- how a range of organisations offering support to rural residents responded to the situation; and
- whether the willingness of rural residents to ask for/accept help and support had changed.

Results

Experiences in the study areas during the COVID-19 pandemic brought a range of rural vulnerabilities into sharp relief. Below, we analyse rural residents' experiences of the four sources of support (markets, state, voluntary and community sector, and family and friends) to understand how societal risk in rural communities was redistributed and rescaled during the early stages of the pandemic. Quotes from the focus groups (FG) are included in the analysis and the study area and type of organisation represented by the quoted participant are shown (public, private or VCSE). No further details of the participants are revealed to ensure their anonymity, as promised when they gave their prior informed consent to take part in the research. Where appropriate, secondary sources collected during the fieldwork provide additional context.

Markets during a crisis

Like in many rural areas, the economic impacts of the lockdown that began in the UK in March 2020 were felt in all major sectors in the study areas, with individuals, groups and organisations responding in many ways to support people experiencing financial hardship. In recent years, there has been an increasing reliance on employment and self-employment in tourism and hospitality in all the study areas (Shucksmith et al., 2023). With this industry hit hard by the effects of the lockdown, many people were particularly susceptible to the risks associated with the closure of businesses, with job losses and loss of income for people needing several jobs to earn a living and/or those who undertook casual employment to boost their household income.

A survey of businesses carried out by Perth and Kinross Council in May 2020 (reported by Littlejohn, 2020) showed ‘the impact of the pandemic was felt in all major sectors and localities in Perth and Kinross, with 80% of businesses reporting a loss of income due to the crisis’ (East Perthshire FG1, VCSE), with the tourism, hospitality and leisure sector experiencing the most difficulty. Reliance on tourism and hospitality is also strong in Harris and the North Tyne valley, where there were many job losses. In the North Tyne valley, redundancies led to an increase in requests for support from the Citizens’ Advice Bureau (CAB): ‘at the moment [in April 2020], we’ve got a lot of customers who have just been, kind of, cut off, or let loose, by their employers with a vague promise that they’ll get some payment at the end of April’ (North Tyne Valley FG1, VCSE). One focus group participant in Harris also poignantly described the precarity of many self-employed rural workers’ lives during the first lockdown, particularly those with two or more jobs, which can be seasonal and provide them with volatile incomes:

‘We’re quite a fragile network. I always describe it as nobody really works. It’s not like formal ... we have real problems with government data because everybody is self-employed, some of it might not even make it on to tax returns. ... There’s lots of income supplements ... , people doing part time jobs and cobbling things together, all working for themselves. ... Then something like this [Covid] comes along and it begins to unwind in all sorts of ways.’ (Harris FG1, private).

Although these employment and business impacts were substantially mitigated in the study areas by the state, notably through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (hereafter CJRS) and the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (hereafter SEISS) – more commonly known as furlough² – many who work in tourism, in all three study areas, have insecure, casual or seasonal work (and zero-hour contracts are common) (Shucksmith et al., 2023). As a result, they received little help from the furlough schemes, particularly during the early stages of the pandemic:

‘... you can pick examples like the cleaners in the houses have just been dropped and it’s up to the self-catering person to say, ‘Alright, well I’ll give you half,’ or whatever just throughout the season but they’ve just been dropped. Nobody has done a grant for them. I don’t know where it will go but they’re unlikely to get on the self-employed scheme. They’ve just been dropped.’ (Harris FG1, private)

These impacts were felt particularly strongly by those individuals working in seasonal roles in rural areas, often on a zero-hours contract. For these workers, the timing of the first lockdown was akin to having ‘three winters’ because businesses were forced to close before the season started, when people would normally take up their seasonal employment and the 2020 summer season did not materialise due to COVID-19 related travel restrictions. The following discussion in FG1 in East Perthshire highlights the rural dimensions of this issue:

Participant 1 (VCSE): ‘If the employment pattern is more seasonal in the rural areas, does that mean that there’s more people falling between the cracks because of that seasonality and when the cut-off point was and jobs were likely to start up again for the season?’

Participant 2 (VCSE): ‘I think the seasonality aspect is more about the zero hours. So, they may have been on a zero hours contract, have seen themselves through the winter on their reduced hours and then expected it to pick up just as the lockdown started so they’ve just

had to then go on to the universal credit because the furlough pay would have been next to nothing because they've been on zero hours over the winter. Or perhaps the seasonal work was literally seasonal work, they don't have a contract over the winter but they earn enough over the summer to see themselves through or apply for benefits over the winter and then start their job. That tends to be, in my experience of the people that I've worked with anyway over the years.'

Almost a third of the workforce in Perthshire was on furlough in the summer of 2020 (compared with the Scottish average of 25% in the same period) (Littlejohn, 2020). Around 24% of the working-age population in the Outer Hebrides (including Harris) was also furloughed at that time (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2020). Participants in all the study areas expressed serious concerns about youth unemployment as a result of the pandemic and lockdown, which was in stark contrast with the more familiar issue of youth underemployment³ in the study areas prior to 2020. Youth unemployment was regarded as an unfamiliar problem that organisations and agencies in rural localities have not 'really traditionally had to battle with' and which would require a 'new level of learning and intense support' (East Perthshire FG1, VCSE):

'The unemployment rate has gone up by 35% [citing figures in Littlejohn, 2020]. A lot of that is [young] people coming back to the island for the summer wanting to start their tourism jobs, working in bed and breakfasts, pubs and things like that and, of course, there's nothing there for them. So, there's a lot of young people been added to the employment register.' (Harris FG3, VCSE)

In Harris, visitor numbers have increased rapidly in recent years (Outer Hebrides Tourism data cited by North Harris Trust, 2021) with a lot of new tourism businesses established. This was said by FG3 participants to have made the sector even more vulnerable to the pandemic-related economic downturn because the levels of debt required for these businesses to start were based on pre-pandemic projections of tourism and trading levels: 'I do know that they are struggling, particularly businesses which were set up this year or in the last couple of years with no real accounts to show. There have been a lot of businesses set up in the last couple of years. So, it's a huge worry' (Harris FG1, private).

Meanwhile, more fortunate residents (often in professional occupations) were able to work from home with their incomes unaffected, if they had good broadband connectivity and more spacious houses. Moreover, the risks of their catching COVID-19 were reduced by not using public transport or mixing with others who might be carrying the virus. The risks of losing income from employment were highly unevenly distributed in rural Britain (Wright, 2022), intensifying pre-existing inequalities although mitigated for many by the state's furlough schemes.

Societal risk and the state

The purpose of a welfare state is to provide social protection in just such circumstances through the social pooling of risk. For those who lost their employment or who were not eligible for enough support from the furlough scheme, it was necessary to apply for welfare support through the state-run, means-tested Universal Credit (hereafter UC) scheme, and throughout the country, there was a dramatic rise in the claimant rate (Mockley & McInnes, 2021). Many had to apply who had never encountered the system before. Focus group participants described people's 'shock' at how low the

benefit payments were, suggesting this might change the general perception of the welfare system in general. While at first some tried to survive on their savings, eventually they had to 'negotiate this new, solely online Universal Credit system' which was described as 'a real struggle' (East Perthshire FG1, VCSE). Those with poor literacy or poor mental health, and those with poor internet and/or mobile phone connections (alongside the closure of venues offering free WiFi access) experienced the greatest difficulty. Advice services therefore noted a 'massive rush of people coming to us one to one because they didn't know how to use the IT to claim' and representatives of the CAB felt that they 'were reaching people that they had been unaware of being in need previously' (Harris FG3, VCSE). Similarly, many agencies across the Outer Hebrides saw an increase in the number of clients with employment, financial and fuel poverty concerns (Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, 2020). Having successfully applied for UC, people then faced a six-week delay, designed into the system, before receiving their first payment. These delays caused hardship in all the study areas as it had prior to the pandemic (Shucksmith et al., 2023). However, COVID-19 highlighted this issue: 'it really has been the delay in Universal Credit for people that has been a big thing around here' (East Perthshire FG3, VCSE).

The lockdown also brought the variation in the quality of broadband (see Table 1 above) and the necessity of good connectivity into sharper focus, demonstrating inequality among those learning or working from home with poor connections or a complete lack of connection to the internet prohibiting people's ability to apply for state support during the crisis, or to access other essential services such as food deliveries. Access to broadband and the mobile phone network was also a challenge in the North Tyne valley for ensuring people were aware of the support available to them:

'But there [the North Tyne valley], communication is a massive thing because you've not got mobile phones that are working. You've got talking to farming communities when they're out of the house the majority of the day. So, you can't catch them on the landline. You know as well as I do, just that whole communication and actually that's a massive priority. How do we let them know that we're here? How do we let them know what's available to them?' (North Tyne valley FG2, public)

Despite these challenges and the closure of Job Centres, there was general praise in all the study areas for the way the Department of Work and Pensions staff rose to the challenge of processing the wave of new welfare support claims, reportedly 'abandoning [some of the] bureaucracy' and going 'above and beyond a lot on a personal level' (East Perthshire FG1, VCSE). Many of the harsher elements of the welfare regime such as sanctions, clawback of overpayments and medical reassessments for Personal Independence Payments were suspended temporarily; medical assessments were conducted by telephone instead of requiring attendance at distant offices; and, overall, a more generous and supportive culture was adopted.

One of the exclusively rural impacts of the pandemic arose out of the limited state provision of suitable specialist health facilities and support in remote communities, particularly the islands. This brought the precarity of remote rural healthcare into sharp focus, a topic that has been explored by others (e.g. Abelson et al., 2020; Maclaren & Philip, 2021). From the perspective of focus group participants in Harris, access to intensive care beds was described as very limited. Some local councils moved quickly to work with

community groups, notably in Northumberland where ‘Northumberland Communities Together’ was launched to bring local health support workers and planners under one ‘hub’, which ‘strengthened the resources that were currently there’ (North Tyne Valley FG1, public). However, respondents told us that state support for care at home was often withdrawn or reduced due to the social distancing restrictions, so impacting on many vulnerable people and their unpaid carers. One participant described the experiences of families with children with disabilities:

‘... most of these children are either at a special school or they have support that is different. All that went. So, you’ve got families who are exhausted, because they have been doing this for three months now. They are all tired [and unpaid carers] have taken an absolute hammering over Covid, and I am deeply concerned about their wellbeing, their vulnerability and their financial vulnerability too’ (East Perthshire FG2, VCSE).

Another rural issue was presented by the distance that people needed to travel to receive different forms of state support during the pandemic and lockdown. For example, despite there being a community campus in Blairgowrie, critical workers based in a medical centre in Blairgowrie were required to transport their children to and from Perth (15 miles away) for care before and after their shift:

‘So that’s definitely a rural issue. And I don’t know why that is how it is, because it’s not that we are not vocal. It’s not that we are not coordinated, confident communities. We’re very well-resourced communities. But we had a campus sitting there and not providing any of the stuff... So I think that that needs to be looked at later on, because I’m sure there would have been ways to bring staff to the campus, or even to have a bit of a space in the campus to do that.’ (East Perthshire, FG2, VCSE)

Similarly, some rural residents on low incomes, with limited savings or in caring roles had to travel significant distances to spend the food vouchers that they received as a form of financial support from local councils during the pandemic. This highlighted a lack of appreciation/consideration of the level of provision of services in some rural areas in the design of such schemes. For example, individuals living in Bellingham had to travel 16 miles to Hexham to spend vouchers in eligible supermarkets:

‘And, you know, there’s only the Co-op [in Bellingham], and so it is more expensive to live up there. Even with stuff through Covid they were getting the vouchers and then they don’t have the ability to get to the shops where they could use the vouchers because they’re all mainstream supermarkets that there isn’t available.’ (North Tyne valley FG2, public)

Despite these challenges, rural experiences of delivering state support during the pandemic and lockdown led to some improvements in the outreach practices of public agencies delivering services in rural communities. For example, an organisation supporting children and families in Northumberland rapidly improved their online services, which they see as ‘the first step into building what we hope would be a long-term relationship [with the families they work with]’ and something that ‘wouldn’t have happened as quickly as it has [otherwise]’ (North Tyne valley FG2, public). Similarly, in the context of rural social care provision, efforts undertaken by neighbours and others in the community during the pandemic and lockdown provided inspiration for solving some of the systemic challenges associated with distant organisations/agencies delivering social care in rural and remote communities (Wilson, 2019):

‘And so how can we change that good volunteer who’s been going in to a neighbour into a part-time care and support worker, a home care worker, a micro, or a social enterprise? And that will be the next bit. That, for me, is the excitement – that you’ve got, potentially, this massive bit of the workforce now that could be providing care at home. Because we’ve let them [during the pandemic]. You can’t go back and say, ‘Oh, actually, it wasn’t safe,’ because, actually, it has been safe . . . I think it’s about having a good conversation about the fact that we’ve got the capacity here to make home care better, to allow people to stay at home and have the care that they want, and to have their well-being better, and therefore they are less of a drain on the services, if that’s the way that you want to follow that economic argument.’ (East Perthshire, FG2, VCSE)

The role of voluntary and community organisations

Across the case study areas, individuals, groups and organisations responded in many ways to the impacts of the pandemic and lockdowns on people experiencing financial hardship. Although various forms of statutory support were provided by the state (as outlined in the previous section), VCSEs in the study areas were often the first port of call because people ‘would rather go to the third sector for more of that kind, compassionate and empathetic approach first and foremost’ (East Perthshire FG1, VCSE) and for emergency supplies of food during lockdown.

In general, these organisations responded quickly and effectively to the crisis, helping people access welfare benefits at the outset and then continuing to help those who fell through the cracks of state support. In Northumberland, the network of 36 Warm Hubs run by Community Action Northumberland (CAN) had to close their doors to members of the community but ‘part of their offer was providing a warm meal’ and volunteers delivered food locally and were also available remotely for advice (North Tyne valley FG3, VCSE). For many people, access to support from organisations like CAN worked well by phone or email, but others missed face-to-face support (Shucksmith et al., 2023).

A range of VCSEs also arranged food parcels, home deliveries of prescriptions and shopping, and phone calls to vulnerable people. The number of food parcels going to Harris ‘increased dramatically’ (Harris FG3, public) and people seemed to ‘come forward [for help] more than they may have done previously’ (East Perthshire FG1, VCSE). This observation contrasted with the stigma associated in the earlier stages of the Rural Lives research with seeking support in small communities, as people generally wish to avoid being known as needing help and support (Shucksmith et al., 2023). VCSEs were also helped during the lockdown by large numbers of new volunteers, predominantly of working age: ‘we were astounded by the volunteer response, absolutely astounded’ (East Perthshire FG3, VCSE). There were aspirations among the participants that this engagement of younger volunteers might continue in the future. However, during the second UK-wide lockdown, imposed in late December 2020 after the completion of our fieldwork, stories about rural volunteering and ‘communities rallying round to face the lockdown together’ did not seem to hit headlines (Maclaren & Philip, 2021).

The ability of VCSEs to respond in the study areas appeared to depend not only on ingenuity and additional volunteers, but also on the financial strength of the organisation and its assets. The community trusts in Harris had to furlough their staff and suspend

operations to survive the loss of tourism-related income, leaving community councils to play a central role. However, neighbouring trusts elsewhere in the Outer Hebrides, with continuing revenue from community-owned wind farms, were able to expand their operations, and indeed coordinate support to their communities (Currie et al., 2021). In Northumberland, VCSEs reliant on revenue from suspended activities in community halls, charity shops or fundraising events suffered significant loss of income, in some cases threatening their financial sustainability (North Tyne FG3, VCSE). In Scotland, grants such as the Third Sector Resilience Fund, the Community Recovery Fund and Adapt and Thrive helped VCSEs like this to stay afloat during lockdown.

While the highly active and important role of VCSEs during the pandemic was praised in all study areas, we also heard of duplication between the work of VCSEs and the local authority. While there were very local, democratic organisations able and ready to provide community-based support, these groups were not necessarily always used to their full potential and there were frustrations about the lack of joined-up working. One complaint was that VCSEs were used for delivery of services but were excluded from strategic partnership planning: in East Perthshire, for example, VCSEs had to respond to instructions issued from ‘Gold Command’ (East Perthshire FG3, VCSE). This resonates with McAreavey’s (2022) finding that localism tends to devolve service delivery rather than power and authority and that VCSEs play a critical role in that service delivery, potentially compromising their independence from the state.

Friends, family and neighbours

The national pattern of communities stepping in to make sure their friends, family and neighbours were looked after during the first lockdown was replicated in the study areas. In the Western Isles, participants felt that the situation had brought greater community cohesion and support. We were told that the community had mobilised during the pandemic, making sure that people were cared for and there was someone looking out for those who were on their own, or shielding. This reversed the recent trend of people not knowing each other as well as they might have in the past:

‘Whilst there was always that culture there of neighbours helping each other out, I think sometimes that’s assumed of the Western Isles and it’s not actually always real. ... People don’t mix in the same way that they did 20 years ago. [Since lockdown] we have [WhatsApp] groups ... it’s been the most transformational thing ... for probably the last hundred years.’ (Harris FG2, VCSE)

In the North Tyne valley participants described how many residents are used to surviving and having food stocks at home, in preparation for being snowed in during winter months. There were many examples of community members working hard to support each other during the lockdown, as well as businesses continuing to provide local services and expanding their offering and reach as needed. The owner of a local shop in Harris ‘just said to folk, all the old folks, ‘Right, if you want to order anything just give us a phone call or if you’re on Facebook or whatever send us a message and we’ll deliver all your groceries to you.’ (Harris FG2, VCSE). Those groups or organisations asking for food donations noted how communities were ‘extraordinarily generous’ (North Tyne valley FG3, VCSE) and that ‘actually, practically, when you’re in a rural area and something needs to be done for somebody, people do share and work together’ (East Perthshire FG2, VCSE).

It is well established that people in small communities who transgress social norms (perhaps by claiming welfare benefits) may face social sanction and exclusion (Black et al., 2019; Sherman, 2009). However, the lockdown may have also enabled some people to ask for help more easily than previously. It appears that less stigma was attached to claiming UC or even to accessing food parcels and free school meals as the nature of the crisis absolved recipients of blame, shifting perceptions of stigma, and making people more open to support of one kind or another in the future. As one participant explained, 'I really think that was my overriding impression of the impact of COVID on Bellingham and, you know, the surrounding area. It's just how they came together and looked out for each other' (North Tyne valley, FG2, VCSE). The desire and willingness of people to offer help, whether through formal or informal volunteering or through everyday acts of kindness, was regularly praised in the focus group discussion, and for many this reinforced a dominant discourse of caring, self-reliant, resilient rural communities.

Discussion and conclusion

Experiences of the pandemic in these three study areas reveal the unequal distribution of societal risk found also by Wright (2022), among others. A growing individualisation of societal risk occurred prior to the pandemic, in accordance with Beck's theory of the risk society under neoliberalism, but for many this was temporarily reversed by the state's interventions during lockdown in what some have called 'crisis-Keynesianism' (Wood et al., 2023) or 'covid-Keynesianism' (Montgomerie, 2023). Nevertheless, precariatization in labour markets prior to the pandemic left many people vulnerable not only to loss of income from employment but also to ineligibility for government support such as CJRS and SEISS, with those in the tourism and hospitality sector and those with multiple casual sources of earnings badly affected. There was also the legacy of austerity policies in reducing the eligibility for, and levels of, welfare benefits and the funding available for reaching into rural areas with help and advice (NAO, 2021; Gray et al., 2023). Our findings thus support Wright's (2022, p. 140) observation that 'policy plays a central role in distributing the types of resources that people have to draw on in times of adversity, but also in shaping the situational vulnerabilities they face, and is fundamental in either maintaining or undermining existing institutions of collective security.'

This is apparent from the way the state mitigated risk and hardship during the pandemic through provision of funding through the CJRS and SEISS, through a temporary uplift to UC, and through relaxing temporarily some of the barriers, sanctions and penalties introduced in recent welfare reforms. The state also mitigated these risks (unevenly) through the vaccination programme and associated public health measures. Many hoped that this recognition of a necessary role for the state in social protection – whether covid-Keynesianism or crisis-Keynesianism – might inform subsequent policies and practices when engaging with the emerging permacrisis, although Gray et al. (2023) caution against over-optimism in this respect.

Often state support schemes and welfare benefits were accessed with the help of VCSEs, which were effective also in providing direct help through initiatives such as food banks and deliveries. The importance of voluntary and community action and support was heightened during the pandemic (Rees et al., 2022), often filling the gaps left by the inability of the state to reach effectively into rural areas, despite inadequate

resources depleted by a decade of austerity and neoliberalisation. The diversity of voluntary and community groups is also important in offering people different 'entry' points to the welfare system and other support structures, depending on their personal networks. Bynner et al. (2021, p. 167) argue that developing a new strategic and complementary relationship that 'fully engages locally embedded voluntary organisations at all stages of emergency response and resilience planning' is needed going forwards. However, Wright (2022, p. 140) strikes a cautionary note, observing that, vital though it is, 'the third sector cannot act as a full substitute for universal provision' and warning (like McAreavey, 2022) that VCSEs may be less able to push for the radical change needed to tackle vulnerabilities because of their co-option by government into service delivery. Ensuring that the state and voluntary sector work better together in rural contexts will be fundamental to socially inclusive resilience in an increasingly uncertain world in a state of flux and transition from which there is no foreseeable exit (polycrisis/permacrisis).

Another conclusion emerging from this research is the importance of social infrastructure and institutional capital to the mitigation of vulnerability and social risk. Digital infrastructure proved crucial during the pandemic: the centralisation of services, including education, health, retail and advisory services, was offset for some by digitalisation while others (unable to access or to afford broadband) found these essential services even less accessible than before. Some were able to continue their desk-based employment or their education from home, while others were effectively cut off. Different places also have different institutional capital with which to support one another and to act collectively in pursuit of shared goals and values. Community assets, from village halls, public spaces and anchor institutions (McAreavey, 2022) to revenue from wind farms, enabled people to work together and address needs during the pandemic. Softer community assets, such as leadership, kindness, skills in conflict resolution and connections to public agencies, were also very important in building inclusive communities and enhancing local opportunity structures for the least powerful in rural societies. In each of the study areas there was evidence of the beneficial legacies of past efforts at community development and their long-term building of institutional capacity (Harris FG2, East Perthshire FG2, North Tyne valley FG3). These legacies may extend to how the case study communities could respond to other crisis situations.

Many of these findings, such as precariatization deriving from changing labour markets and welfare reforms, have relevance in both rural and urban places, but this study has identified some distinctively rural elements. In relation to welfare systems these elements relate to the volatility of many rural incomes, digitalisation and digital exclusion, difficulties in accessing advice and support, and typically lower claimant rates. As a further layer on top of this, rural citizens experience higher costs of living and widespread fuel poverty, while the social infrastructure is depleted through centralisation of services and institutions. For some, this is offset by digitalisation, while for others this exacerbates difficulties of access through digital exclusion. Meanwhile, VCSEs have been active in supporting many of the people disadvantaged by markets and the state, and their services are highly valued, but they also face challenges of reach into rural areas as well as resource constraints. Family, friends and neighbours are another important source of support, but people's ability to draw on this source varies according to the characteristics of the community they live in, its social norms, social capital and personal relationships. There is a tendency to idealise rural

communities as places where everyone looks after one another, and there is a concern that this reputation for self-help and social cohesion facilitates and legitimises a withdrawal of state welfare services from rural areas.

This paper began by asking about the capacity of institutions, such as the state, voluntary sector or family, to provide support in the context of an emerging permacrisis or polycrisis which presents intractable new challenges and uncertainties for individuals and communities in rural areas. It is evident from the experience of rural citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic that crises tend to exacerbate inequalities and vulnerabilities unless there is societal pooling of risk through such institutions to ensure not only social protection but also that nobody is disadvantaged by where they live. The growing individualisation of such societal risks under neoliberalism and austerity, as Beck envisaged, was mitigated temporarily during the pandemic by more Keynesian risk pooling measures, which could point towards the merits of a pursuit of social cohesion by a more 'activist' state in the permacrisis (Sandbu, 2020), with scope also for more agency for communities, building on the transformational nature of some of the practices that evolved out of the pandemic.

There are lessons here too in terms of supporting and enabling social infrastructure and institutional capital, both in the local state and in the voluntary and community sector, to develop local responses to the unfolding permacrisis and to accompany national measures. Moreover, people's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic have provided more evidence that both national, person-centred measures (e.g. CJRS, UC) and local, place-based action (e.g. advice services, foodbanks, local institutions, community hubs, project working) can make a significant difference to people's vulnerability and wellbeing. This raises important questions about how policy can enable synergies between these two types of interventions.

Finally, there is a need to refine notions of community resilience to include consideration of social cohesion and the (re)distribution of risk and vulnerability between social groups and individuals within communities. Further research is required on what might constitute inclusive resilience in general, and for rural societies in particular, at a time of permacrisis? Whose responsibility is this, and at what scale?

Notes

1. 53% of the region's data zones are in the 20% most vulnerable in Scotland.
2. The CJRS was set up by the UK Government in March 2020 to help employers pay their workers' wages if they were unable to work during the pandemic and lockdowns and/or if they had caring responsibilities or were in a high-risk group for severe illness from coronavirus. The SEISS scheme did not begin until May 2020, leading to delays in payments for those who were self-employed.
3. Those in underemployment refers to workers seeking more hours than they are working. In 2019, total under-employment (among those 16 years and over) was 34.4% in Na h-Eileanan Siar and 23.7% in Perth and Kinross (data from the SCRIG Inclusive Growth Dashboard). Data not available for Northumberland.

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