



Community Connections



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Strengthening social connections and
improving access to information

Our Highlights and Learning

Community Connections

This publication describes the activities and learning from the Community Connections project. We hope it encourages people in other places to develop activities that lead to more social connections between people in their communities.

Background

The Community Connections project was based in two rural areas in Scotland:

- **Eaglesham and Waterfoot in East Renfrewshire**
- **Brechin, Edzell and the Northern Glens in North Angus**

The project was developed from what we heard from local people through our Rural Wisdom project, which explored the ways in which older people shaped and contributed to their communities. People told us that they would like to see better communication across their community and more opportunities for people of all ages to get together.

Community Connections was designed around two key themes:

- **Strengthening social connections**
- **Improving access to information**

We worked towards creating opportunities for this to happen in ways that were small-scale and very local - ideas and activities that would enable people to gather together, chat, share information and in doing so would feel more connected to their community.

We wanted to bring together groups, activities and services that were used by the whole community, particularly older people and people who may feel isolated or disconnected from their community. In North Angus, we also worked alongside groups and services that support people living with dementia. By working alongside these groups we were able to build on the good things that they were already doing and through the sharing of good ideas support them to become more sustainable so they can continue to benefit local people in the future, long after the end of the Community Connections project.

The project was funded from May 2019 - September 2020 by the Greater Renfrewshire & Inverclyde LEADER programme through The European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development: Europe investing in rural areas.

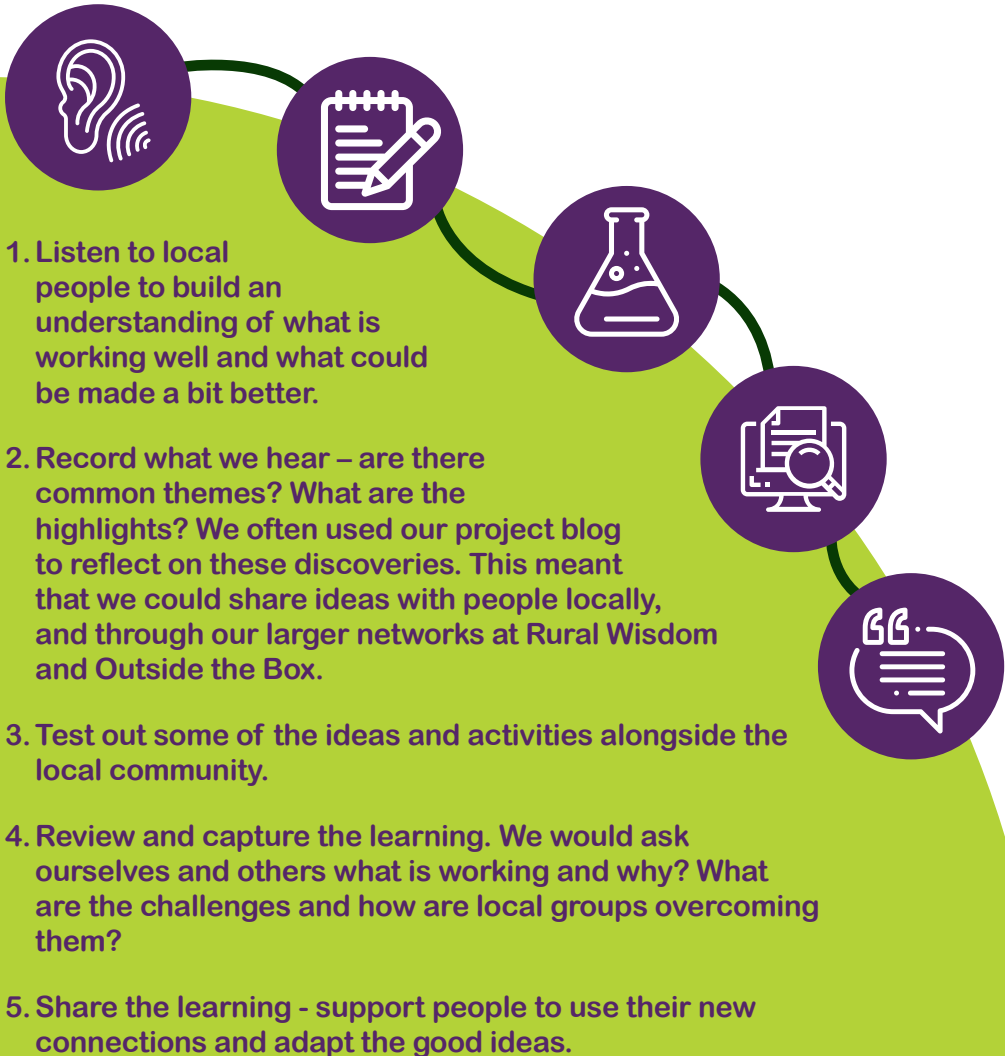


**Scottish Rural
Development
Programme**



Our Approach

We had Community Workers based in each location to support local activity and link in with each other so we could share the learning and good ideas across the project. We wanted to make sure that the project was adaptable enough to respond to what we heard from local people. Our approach looked something like this:



Adapting to COVID-19 Lockdown

The project ran from summer 2019 to early autumn 2020 – so we were working when Covid-19 hit Scotland in March 2020. We felt that it was important to keep the project going during the COVID-19 lockdown. We knew that local people and groups were working hard to rise to the new challenges and respond with innovative solutions. Now more than ever, strong connections and good communication were crucial to our collective wellbeing and recovery. The lockdown coincided with what was planned to be the busiest part of our project. Learning from the communities we worked with, we adapted and found new ways to work.

Who did we connect with?

In both areas we worked alongside a wide range of people. This included local people who heard about the project and were interested in making more connections for themselves or local people who were part of groups and wanted to share what they were doing with others.

We made sure that we went along and contributed to community events such as the Angus Council Participatory Budgeting events, steering groups, and workshops. We worked alongside other third sector organisations and community groups often delivering activities in partnership, like our Eaglesham event with ‘ROAR – Connections for Life’. We also wanted to make sure we were sharing information from across the relevant local authorities. In East Renfrewshire we did this by taking part in the HSCP self-directed support Talking Points sessions and linking in with the local Third Sector Interface, Voluntary Action East Renfrewshire. In Angus we connected with projects like the Brechin Healthcare Group, Kirrie Connections, Locality Partnerships, and Brechin Community Football Trust.

Our wider contacts from our sister project, Rural Wisdom, also contributed some valuable information and learning. For example, our friends from Wales at Volunteering Matters Cymru shared their experiences of starting a community newsletter.

Overall, we met with over 200 people and worked alongside around 60 community groups and organisations. Local people will be taking on activities that got started or grew through Community Connections. People also found the connections between groups, and between places to be extremely helpful, and these connections will also be continuing.



Strengthening Social Connections

– What worked?

We worked in lots of different ways to support people to build their social connections. We introduced people to community groups, hosted community events and helped new ideas get off the ground. Here are some of our highlights:

- We launched the Chatty Café at Ian’s Kitchen. This gave local people of all ages somewhere to go, to meet other people, have a chat, and feel connected to others. This is part of a national scheme that also provided ‘virtual’ chatty cafés online during the COVID-19 Lockdown. You can find a Chatty Café near you by visiting www.thechattycafescheme.com
- We hosted community events and ‘Village Gatherings’ where people could meet local groups and try out a new activity. For example, our ‘Stay Mobile, Stay Connected’ event introduced local people to ‘ROAR – Connections for Life’ with whom we worked in partnership to deliver the event.
- ‘Joining the dots’ was an important theme to our work in Angus. There were lots of great things happening, so we worked towards building the connections between these activities – to raise awareness of the opportunities for local people, and to support the sustainability of the groups. “I spoke to Derek at the well-being event organised up at the high school campus and he really opened my eyes to just how much groups activity happens locally. Gave me a better idea of volunteering opportunities and that’s something I was looking to know more about.”
- We connected local people with groups that were already running in their community. People came along to one activity, such as the Chatty Café, and found out about other things they could join – like their local History Society.
- We organised ‘whole-community’ activities that included lots of people like our ‘Eaglesham History Quiz’. Community groups helped to create the quiz which was about the local heritage trail – this encouraged people to get out and explore their village. Shops and businesses circulated the quiz sheets and offered prizes for the raffle.

“We loved spending the time together really exploring the village we live in”



- In Angus we worked with groups to identify what resources they had available to them and how they could use these to enhance their community activities, allowing people to make more social connections. We introduced them to other groups so they could share these resources and build stronger partnerships.

“The local knowledge on groups activity in the area has been a real asset to the trust as we develop our vision and plans to develop assets in the community and likewise partnership opportunities.”



- We also supported people to make more personal connections and friendships. Working with the local Self-Directed Support Forum we were able to bring together an older veteran and a young person who both had a keen interest in the war. Sharing interests, skills and passions helps us to feel connected to others.



We continued to work alongside the local community throughout the COVID-19 lockdown. We changed our approach and connected with people through phone calls, emails, and social media. We saw local people reach out to support each other more than ever.

- We spoke to local organisations to find out how they were responding to the changes and shared what we heard. Kirrie Connections, a dementia friendly community hub, told us about how they adapted their art classes by sending out activity packs. They started a letter-writing ‘pen pal’ project and moved their carers’ peer-support sessions onto video-calls. These methods took lots of time and resources, but people responded really positively.
- We supported people to connect and share in safe, socially distanced ways. A great example of this is when we introduced a local woman who had a passion for music to a local sheltered housing complex. A karaoke machine and a car park were all that was needed for everyone to enjoy a sing-along and feel part of something uplifting.
- Facebook proved to be a brilliant connector during the lockdown. Our project page as well as our Community Workers pages provided fast, up to date information with over 1,500 people following. We used these pages to connect local people with the newly formed COVID Community Response Groups.



“Liz in in Eaglesham keeps us connected on Facebook. Her village history quiz competition was great fun, and my son and I learned so much about our village.”

Information and Communication

– What worked?

At the start of the project we heard that there was lots happening across the villages, but it could be tricky to find out about it. Local people also felt that they often missed out on information from across their local authority, sometimes due to their rural location. We also wanted to ensure that local people had a voice and were able to communicate their opinions with those that could support positive change. Here is a selection of the approaches we used:

- Using our communications channels, we shared, encouraged, and supported people to contribute to local and national consultations. These were about lots of different issues ranging from local arts projects to national policies.
- We provided information about national initiatives and supported people to register with projects such as ‘Wavelength’. They offer radios, televisions, and tablet computers to help people maintain and increase the number of meaningful connections they have in their lives.
www.wavelength.org.uk
- We connected people with local organisations who could offer more personalised information and support such as Self-Directed Support Forums.
- We updated and developed shared resources like the Brechin ‘Groups Directory’ which brings together key information from across the area. These resources can now be used and adapted by other organisations such as the North East Locality Information Group (NELIG).

• Our ‘Village Quiz’ not only connected people through a bit of fun, it also provided us with a great

communication tool. We included three questions at the end of the quiz, these were about what people wanted to see from their community. People handed back their quiz sheets, so we were able to collate all the great information they shared.

- We also circulated our own online survey to find out how people shared information. Lots of people mentioned social media like Facebook, word of mouth or posters and leaflets in local shops. We received responses from individuals and groups ranging from The Brownies to arts projects to Community Councils.
- In Angus, we hosted ‘Visioning Conversations’. This enabled groups to outline their ambitions and identify the opportunities to develop their community activities. Through the information we collated in the ‘Groups Directory’ we were able to offer advice about next steps and direct them to other organisations and agencies who could offer additional assistance.

“Would like ways to find out about what’s going on in Eaglesham and Waterfoot like a community newsletter. Really miss the Extra Newspaper.”



When we moved into the Lockdown phase of the COVID-19 crisis we had to find alternative methods to share information and support communication across the communities.

- We made the best use of our connections on Facebook and tested out Facebook Live sessions which received around 300 views. This wasn't something we had tried before and we had to learn as we went, but we knew from our survey that this was a great platform to reach people.
- We supported post-lockdown information sharing in Angus by working with the Brechin Healthcare Group to support the opening of the Jenner Centre. This community hub provided much needed safe space for groups and organisations to share information, resources, and solutions around themes of mental health and wellbeing. *"[Derek's] support for BHG's vision and purpose in the area has been much appreciated, he's helped to develop relationships with local groups and foster new collaborative opportunities to build wellbeing in the community."*

- Not everyone likes to be online or has access to the internet, especially in rural areas. We went back to the suggestions about a local newsletter in Eaglesham and Waterfoot, and decided to test out the idea. We got some advice from our Rural Wisdom contacts and were able to pull together key information provided to us by local groups, services, and businesses. It was well received, and local people have said they would be interested in contributing so it can continue in future.
- The few shops that were open were happy to display copies of our newsletter, but it was important that it reached people who couldn't get out or were shielding. We connected with the local pharmacy and they agreed to add a newsletter to every prescription that they made up. This meant that we could reach people in a safe way without too much additional effort from any one person.
- We worked to connect groups who could complement each other post-lockdown, offering support to achieve common goals, like Brechin City Youth Football Club and Brechin Healthcare Group who both identified mental health as a priority area.



The communities we worked alongside said they appreciated having a single point of contact for the project. Our Community Workers were able to bring a personal touch and build in a flexibility to our approach. This enabled us to work alongside local people seeking stronger connections as well as work in partnership with more strategic organisations such as locality groups and Health and Social Care Partnerships.



Kindness Connects

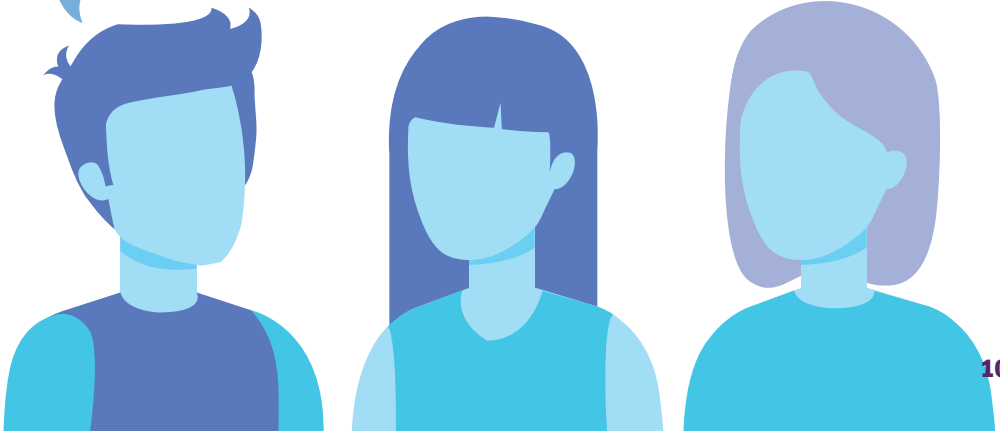
A key part of the project was sharing all the great things happening across the communities – to support these to continue and to encourage others to get involved. Local groups kept us up to date with events and activities, but there were also smaller things happening day-to-day that people wanted to share and celebrate.

As the project went on, and particularly throughout lockdown, it was highlighted that 'kindness connects'. People were finding new ways to connect with each other – to offer support through small acts of kindness. As these were shared with us, we captured them in a series of blogs. Our 'Kindness in Communities' blogs became popular across social media and highlighted a range of things including the 'Eaglesham Street Library', local fundraising efforts, pop-up fancy dress and new Fairy Trails. The comments on our blog told us that highlighting these kind acts supported people to feel connected to each other and their community - building a sense of belonging and pride.

"That's amazing what people are doing, it's so lovely to read about all the kind and positive things people are doing for people in their community. Thanks for sharing 😊 x"

"Wonderful and heart-warming to read, thank you for this, you are a wonderful person ❤️ stay safe"

"What a great community in which we live! It is comforting, in these times, to know that the neighbourhood is pulling together for everyone! Never has an Ozzie soap theme been more relevant!"



Sharing the Learning

We have developed a range of guides and resources that share our learning from the project. These bring together the knowledge, hints and tips from these communities and others across Scotland. They include a range of ways to connect and share:

- Connecting to the Internet
- Zoom Video Calling
- Creating a Newsletter
- Connecting with Neighbours

These can be downloaded from the Outside the Box website www.otbds.org/resources

or if you would like to receive a printed copy please get in touch.



We would like to thank the individuals, groups, communities, and funders who have worked with us on this project.



Connect with us!

Community Connections was an Outside the Box project. If you would like to connect with us or find out about our Rural Wisdom project, please get in touch.

You can contact us at:
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www.otbds.org

www.ruralwisdom.org



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