

## The longest year: life under local restrictions

Scotland briefing, February 2021

### Background

- The British Red Cross recommends in its new report, [The Longest Year](#), that more needs to be done to ensure people facing hardship can access the practical, emotional and financial support they need under Covid-19 restrictions, local and national.
- This briefing summarises the report and sets out recommendations for the Scottish Government, UK governments and local authorities. It includes insights from qualitative and quantitative research exploring the experiences of people and organisations living and working in areas that have been under tighter local restrictions.
- The Longest Year is the latest report from the British Red Cross's growing body of evidence around the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on people across the UK. It adds to [Access to food in emergencies](#) which covers food insecurity and [Lonely and left behind](#), exploring the experience of loneliness among shielders and those who are 'chronically lonely'.

### Summary of recommendations

- We are calling on governments across the UK to fully meet the humanitarian needs of the individuals and communities most vulnerable to hardship during Covid-19 restrictions, and in recovery.
- As in any emergency, everyone living under Covid-19 restrictions should have access to clear and accessible information, financial support, shelter, emergency food, psychosocial support and connections.
- We found that over a third of people in Scotland (36 per cent) were not confident they would know where to go for financial support if they needed it under local restrictions. Nine percent of people would also have found financial support to self-isolate helpful.
- The Red Cross recommends that the Scottish Government:
  - Ensures a holistic package of mental health, emotional and practical support is offered by default alongside emergency Covid-19 assistance, such as food, and in new welfare delivered by Social Security Scotland.
  - Continues to permit extended households under future guidance so long as it is safe to do so, recognising the significant mental health benefits.
  - Builds on an expanded Self-Isolation Support Grant by including automatic registration in the Protect Scotland app to ensure it reaches those most at risk.
  - Increases the promotion of Crisis Grants, maintains additional investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) and commits to a full review of the SWF.

### About the report

- The Longest Year explores the experiences of people living and working under additional Covid-19 local restrictions in the UK.

- Twenty-three in-depth interviews were carried out with members of the public, and six in-depth interviews were conducted with professionals who played a key role in supporting communities under local restrictions. Interviews were carried out between October and December 2020.
- In Scotland, four adults living in Level 4 restrictions in Glasgow were interviewed.
- We also carried out polling with a nationally representative sample of 2,000 adults in the UK and boosted to a representative sample of 500 adults in Scotland. Fieldwork was conducted from 8 to 22 December 2020.

## Our findings

### The impact of local restrictions on day-to-day life

- People are continuing to limit their interactions with others even where the rules allow it. This is, in most cases, due to an ongoing fear of contracting Covid-19. However, for some it is rooted in a lack of understanding about the rules and a fear of doing the wrong thing.
- Little face-to-face interaction was cited as the hardest thing about living under local restrictions and national lockdowns, and participants valued even limited opportunities to see people from other households outside.
- For the most part research participants were eventually able to obtain essentials like food or medicine under local restrictions, either by going to the shop themselves, shopping online, relying on informal networks to help or accessing formal support. Though some, particularly those with no close support networks, said it had been a challenge to do so. However financial pressures have impacted people's ability to afford essentials.

### Mental health and wellbeing

- Our research suggests the biggest impact of living under local restrictions is on people's mental health. This was for a combination of reasons, including boredom, frustration, worries about the virus and financial concerns, but the most common triggers were isolation and feelings of loneliness.
- People are not confident about accessing support or talking about their problems. 32 per cent of people disagree that under local restrictions, they would be confident that they would know where to go for mental health or emotional support if needed and forty-five per cent agree that it is hard to talk about their problems when so many people are having a difficult time due to Covid-19.
- While people of all ages and from all backgrounds had seen an impact on their mental health, those living alone, those who were clinically vulnerable or clinically extremely vulnerable, and those caring for others felt particularly isolated and despondent. Data from the Scottish Health Survey published in January 2021 showed that over a quarter of those receiving shielding advice experienced loneliness in a two week period and 11 per cent experienced loneliness always or often<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Scottish Health Survey, Scottish Government, January 2021: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-health-survey-telephone-survey-august-september-2020-main-report/>

- A number of participants also mentioned how much they valued extended households, or support bubbles, describing them as “a lifeline”.

#### **The Scottish Government should:**

- > Ensure local health boards have the resources they need to meet the mental health and emotional support needs of those most at risk. This should include those living alone, the clinically vulnerable and clinically extremely vulnerable, as well as their carers and others in their household.
- > Continue the welcome inclusion of advice to combat loneliness in the Clear Your Head mental health campaign as we move out of winter, recognising the long-term risk of social isolation. There should also be wider promotion of advice on overcoming loneliness and supporting friends and family members who may be struggling. We would like to see future campaigns emphasise the foundational nature of stigma and discrimination to mental health problems and encourage and equip people to talk openly about their own and others’ mental health.
- > Attach psychosocial support to other public services that are likely to encounter those most in need, including alongside new welfare delivered by Social Security Scotland. Similarly, the UK Government should ensure this support is attached to mainstream benefits and other social security.
- > Ensure that local restrictions guidance allows for extended households, and meeting an individual from another household outdoors, as long as it continues to be safe. These exceptions should be promoted clearly in guidance and wider communications to ensure people do not restrict themselves from permitted interactions that could have significant benefits for their mental health.

#### **Financial security**

- Those participating in our research had experienced a range of challenges under local restrictions, including recent and long-term unemployment; reduced income; difficulties making low income, social security or asylum seeker support payments stretch to cover increased living costs; and food insecurity. This was having a significant negative impact on their mental health.
- Too many people are not confident that they could get the support they might need. Around one in ten people (9 per cent) said financial support to self-isolate would have been helpful to them under local restrictions. More than a third (36 per cent) disagree that under local restrictions, they would be confident that they would know where to go for financial support if needed.
- The uplift to Universal Credit and Working Tax Credit is welcome and should be extended to ensure that families can make ends meet and afford essentials while the economic effects of the pandemic are still being felt. Similarly, the income support schemes, such as the Self-Employment Income Support Scheme and the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, should remain in place in order to support Covid-19 recovery.
- The Scottish Government took the welcome step of greatly expanding the Scottish Welfare Fund (SWF) at the start of the pandemic. However, applications and awards have varied by local authority, an issue that pre-dates Covid-19, and not all experiencing crisis have been able to access this support, including those supported

by Aberlour and One Parent Families Scotland's hardship funds<sup>2</sup>. Concerns regarding administrative funding of the SWF pre-date the pandemic, as well as around criteria, sums awarded and overall awareness<sup>3</sup>.

- The British Red Cross launched its own hardship fund, in partnership with Aviva, in April 2020 which has now supported nearly 2,000 families in Scotland, with over a quarter of recipients experiencing disruption to their social security payments.
- Self-Isolation Support Grants are a key form of assistance for people as we navigate local restrictions, with our polling showing that one in ten people in Scotland would have found this financial support helpful. Initial uptake was much below the forecasted budget for the scheme, set at "upwards of £11 million" from October to the end of the financial year<sup>4</sup>, however only £345,000 and £580,000 were spent in October and November, with only 23 and 29 per cent of respective applications successful<sup>5</sup>. We therefore welcome the announcement of an expanded scheme from early February, designed to maximise uptake amongst those on low incomes, including those in receipt of council tax reductions and carers.
- As of December the Protect Scotland test and protect app did not include functionality to make an application and verify users for the Grant, as is the case with the equivalent app in England<sup>6</sup> and to a lesser extent in Wales<sup>7</sup>.
- We welcome the roll out of the Scottish Child Payment and support existing calls to fast-track its delivery, recognising the additional pressures on families and growing numbers of children estimated to be eligible since the start of the pandemic<sup>8</sup>.

#### **The Scottish Government should:**

- > Ensure maximum promotion of the Self-Isolation Support Grant, targeted at people most likely to be on low incomes and those who are hardest to reach.
- > Prioritise including details of the Grant in positive Protect Scotland notifications, allowing users to be verified and apply for it within the app in order to maximise awareness and uptake amongst everyone who may be required to self-isolate.
- > Consider other routes for awareness-raising for people who are not using the app or those who do not have digital access, who will disproportionately be on low incomes.
- > Maintain the enhanced investment in the Scottish Welfare Fund and review it going forward, recognising the long-standing problems of awareness, access and inconsistency across local authority areas.

<sup>2</sup> End Child Poverty Scotland – 2021 Manifesto:

[https://cpag.org.uk/system/files\\_force/files/page/ECP%20Manifesto.pdf?download=1](https://cpag.org.uk/system/files_force/files/page/ECP%20Manifesto.pdf?download=1)

<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Welfare Fund: Strengthening the Safety Net, A Menu for Change, 2019:

<https://amenuforchange.files.wordpress.com/2020/01/a-menu-for-change-swf-report-updated.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Written Question S5W-32250, Sarah Boyack MSP, 2 October 2020: <https://beta.parliament.scot/chamber-and-committees/written-questions-and-answers/question?ref=S5W-32250>

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government – Scottish Welfare Fund, Self-Isolation Support Grant and Discretionary Housing Payments: monthly data, 12 January 2020: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/swf-monthly-management-information/>

<sup>6</sup> Coronavirus: NHS Covid-19 app starts offering self-isolate payments, BBC News, 10 December 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/technology-55259272>

<sup>7</sup> Covid: NHS Wales app users can apply for £500 self-isolation payment, BBC News, 2 February 2020: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-55891893>

<sup>8</sup> Scottish Government - Scottish Child Payment could support up to 194,000 children, September 2020: <https://www.gov.scot/news/scottish-child-payment-could-support-up-to-194-000-children/>

### Financial support for people seeking asylum

- The people seeking asylum that took part in this research spoke of the difficulties making their asylum support payments of £39.63 per week stretch to cover their living costs, particularly when they were forced to shop in local, more expensive shops as a result of local restrictions. Asylum support payments were increased by £1.75 per week in June 2020, and by a further 3p in October 2020 (totalling £1.78), a significantly lower increase than the £20 uplift to Universal Credit.
- Asylum seekers' ability to spend this money is also restricted as a result of the fact that the ASPEN card, which is how asylum support payments are made, cannot be used online, and in some cases cannot be used to take out cash, either.
- We welcomed the additional hardship support for people with no recourse to public funds (NRPF), with an initial pilot scheme funded by the Scottish Government reaching people through the British Red Cross this winter. The pressures facing people with NRPF status will not disappear after winter, and the effects of Brexit on European Economic Area nationals mean that this support should be continued.

#### **The Home Office should:**

- > Increase Asylum Support rates in line with the £20 per week increase to Universal Credit and enable ASPEN cards to be used online.

#### **The Scottish Government should:**

- > Continue to offer hardship support to people with NRPF status, currently being delivered through the British Red Cross's hardship fund in partnership with organisations across Scotland.

### Barriers to accessing support

- Despite an increase in practical, emotional and financial support needs under Covid-19 restrictions, for the most part people don't know where to turn for help. This was particularly true for those who have never accessed support before, and professionals expressed concern about those who are digitally isolated.
- Many participants felt there had also been a decline in the availability of both formal and informal support during local restrictions.
- This research identified several groups particularly like to say they haven't been able to access advice, services and other support under local restrictions, including but not limited to younger people aged 18-24.
- The majority of participants in our research expressed reservations about seeking support for a variety of reasons, including stigma, not wanting to burden others, fears of ineligibility, and a reluctance to use certain channels or services they had found unsatisfactory before.

#### **Local authorities should:**

- > Target support to areas and individuals most at risk by partnering with the voluntary and community sector and local communities, using tools such as the Red Cross's Vulnerability Index.

#### **The Scottish Government should:**

- > Ensure that those living under additional restrictions receive a level of support tailored to meet their individual needs, addressing both the access and cost implications for those who are vulnerable. This should specifically support those struggling to afford essentials, such as food, and those shielding.
- > Ensure that all local authorities are fully resourced to continue to support the clinically vulnerable, clinically extremely vulnerable and non-shielded vulnerable, with access to essentials such as food.

#### **Accessing and understanding information about local restriction rules**

- Our qualitative interviews and polling show people are struggling to access and understand information about local restrictions in their area. Many felt confused about what they could and couldn't and had found it difficult to keep up with changes to the rules. In some cases, people have disengaged entirely.
  - Almost three quarters of people (74 per cent) say they are confident that they fully understand the coronavirus restrictions in their local area.
  - More than two in five (42 per cent) say they find it difficult to keep up to date with the latest coronavirus restrictions in their local area.
  - Fewer than a third (29 per cent) say that they find the news online or in print useful for keeping up with Covid-19 local restrictions in their area whereas 38 per cent find the news on television or radio useful.
- We recognise positive steps from the Scottish Government and local authorities in targeting those most vulnerable with information and support, including establishing the national Covid-19 helpline<sup>9</sup> and providing extra support for the Voluntary and Community Sector through the Third Sector Resilience Fund.
- People whose first language isn't English, were even more likely to struggle to understand information about local restrictions, and many we spoke to that were in this group had not seen information about local restrictions in any language other than English.
- Research by the Scottish Commission on Learning Disability has shown anxiety and uncertainty around how long measures would last, the impact on usual support and activities and increased social isolation amongst people with learning and intellectual disabilities. It also found that carers experienced a lack of clear guidance on shielding and other specific issues, such as how often people with learning disabilities could leave the house<sup>10</sup>.

#### **The Scottish Government:**

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<sup>9</sup> Coronavirus (COVID-19): shielding advice and support, Scottish Government, November 2020: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/covid-shielding/pages/contacts/>

<sup>10</sup> The impact of Coronavirus on people with learning disabilities, Scottish Commission on Learning Disability, June 2020: <https://www.sclld.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/SCLD-Coronavirus-Report-FINAL.pdf>

- > Should keep tiered or level systems as consistent as possible to avoid confusion and motivate people to follow the rules. Work with local authorities to ensure any guidance on the rules and restrictions during coronavirus is provided in multiple languages, as standard.
- > Ensure it provides timely and easy to understand guidance on Covid-19 and local restrictions to those with a disability, impairment or sensory loss, in line with the aims of the Accessible Information Standard. It should ensure any new guidance is comprehensive in addressing issues specific to people with physical and learning disabilities and those providing care.

**Local authorities should:**

- > Regularly disseminate both online and offline information that is tailored to the local community, proactively targeting information and advice to people who are digitally isolated, and whose first language is not English.

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## Case Study: Rosie, 35-44, Glasgow

Rosie has been living in Glasgow for two years. She loves her area and finds the people very friendly. She's happy to have spent so long in one place, having spent a few years being moved around whilst she waited for the outcome of her asylum claim. She has no friends or family who live nearby, but she keeps in touch with people she met during the asylum process on the phone and through Zoom. Rosie has a number of serious health issues, including diabetes, so has been shielding since March, except when she has to go to medical appointments. Local restrictions have therefore made little impact on her, as she did not change her routines at all after the first national lockdown ended. Rosie is therefore unsure which Level of restrictions Glasgow is currently under.

Keeping busy while shielding has been very difficult for Rosie, as she doesn't have a television, laptop or internet access in her flat. Her neighbour has let her use his WiFi, so she was able to access the internet through her phone. Rosie can't remember first hearing about local restrictions, but she does regularly read the news on her phone on the BBC, The Mirror and other sites. Rosie also received a text from the Home Office telling her that a local lockdown was being introduced, as well as a letter from her housing association. The community practitioner at her GP surgery has also been very helpful in making sure that Rosie has all the information she needs. Overall, due to concerns about her health and uncertainty over the specific rules of local restrictions, Rosie has decided to just stay at home as much as possible.

"I try as much as I can to understand rules. I generalise everything. I just know I have to stay home because I don't know. You never know. Tier this and Tier that, I really don't know, so I just no matter what I stay at home. Just a total lockdown on my end." Rosie is also concerned about how people who are not as confident in their English as she is are able to follow and understand local restrictions.

I can read and write, but when it comes to this Tier thingy, I'm having problems, so how about people whose English is not as good as me? All those people should be catered for, so they [people communicating local restrictions] need to do more. Everyone has a right to know what's going on and how to protect themselves, and they [people with weaker English] don't know the gravity of the pandemic"

Fortunately, Rosie has been able to access support which has ensured she has been delivered food throughout the pandemic when she has not been able to go out. Rosie was already involved with the British Red Cross before the pandemic, so when access to food became a challenge during lockdown, she was linked up with local community projects and food banks who deliver food to her every week.

It is the isolation and not seeing other people which Rosie has found most challenging. Rosie was used to being heavily involved with charities and groups related to asylum and really appreciates that these meetings have been moved online so she can still talk to people. Being in a new country, where she doesn't have relatives, online meetings and groups have been a vital lifeline during this time.

"It's not only giving people money, but talking to people, listening to people that's the biggest thing. Because if you can't share your problems it will kill you"