



June 2022

# Rural Living Project

## Briefing Paper Two

When and how do people get involved  
in their rural communities?

Emilia Pietka-Nykaza & Helen Baillot



## Rural Living Project

This briefing paper summarises the findings of the Rural Living Project led by Emilia Pietka-Nykaza from the University of the West of Scotland, and Helen Baillot, an independent researcher based in the Highlands. The data collection took place in the Inner Moray Firth area of the Scottish Highlands between October 2021 and April 2022, and included interviews with seven UK nationals, eight EU nationals and eight service providers. In addition, the team undertook site visits to Dingwall, Alness, Fortrose, Invergordon and Avoch to capture the landscapes of places identified by the participants as significant. This paper is designed to share key findings that could inform policies that aim to retain rural populations and build sustainable communities in rural places. The full research report, and Briefing Paper One (on staying in rural places) are available at the project website: [www.rurallivingscotland.com](http://www.rurallivingscotland.com)

## Community Involvement

In this paper, we summarise findings relating to the ways in which rural stayers – local stayers, internal migrants and international migrants – get involved in their communities. Firstly, we suggest different levels of involvement that emerged from the data before exploring when people are most likely to choose to become involved. Then we identify factors that can prevent people from committing to community activities and initiatives.

## Typologies of involvement

A number of layers of involvement in communities were identified through thematic analysis of the interviews. These are represented at figure one and explored in more detail below.

**Friendliness & civility:** Every person who took part in the research spoke warmly of the friendliness and civility they had encountered and perceived across the Highlands and the Inner Moray Firth region. For some participants, small acts of civility such as greetings in the street were the only form of community involvement they were able to engage in either due to language barriers or lack of time. While these small acts of friendliness and civility were a vital basis from which to build and maintain sustainable communities, they did not in every case translate into deeper community involvement.

**Informal mutual assistance:** All but four participants described instances when they had received or offered assistance to others living locally on an informal, reciprocal basis. This included offering support when people had experienced bereavement, checking on elderly neighbours, and helping each other with cleaning or childcare. Even where participants had not (yet) offered or received help, there was a sense that within Highland communities, people looked out for one another, and that help would be forthcoming if you ever you were in need. However, the obligations inherent within acts of mutual assistance could lead to an imbalance in expectations. Some international migrants felt that co-nationals who had arrived more recently or were experiencing problems took too much from them and offered little in return.

**Organised activities:** Participants gave several examples of more formalised community involvement whereby people organised or took part in community initiatives and activities. These had come to the fore during Covid-19, with communities having to be “*creative*” about the ways in which they helped one another. This type of community-led activity includes food sharing initiatives, community-run venues, child-focused activities, transport initiatives and language schools for children of international migrants. Taking part allowed people to meet their practical needs or to develop certain skills, for example woodworking, language or sporting skills; and had an important social function in reducing isolation and connecting people with others living locally.

**Work:** While community involvement is often understood, explicitly or implicitly to refer to people working for the community as volunteers; the role of skilled workers in driving forward community development and addressing practical and strategic issues through their work should be recognised. However, being able to access the type of skilled or specialist employment opportunities that enable workers to contribute in this way is contingent on navigating the labour market and overcoming barriers to career development and progression.

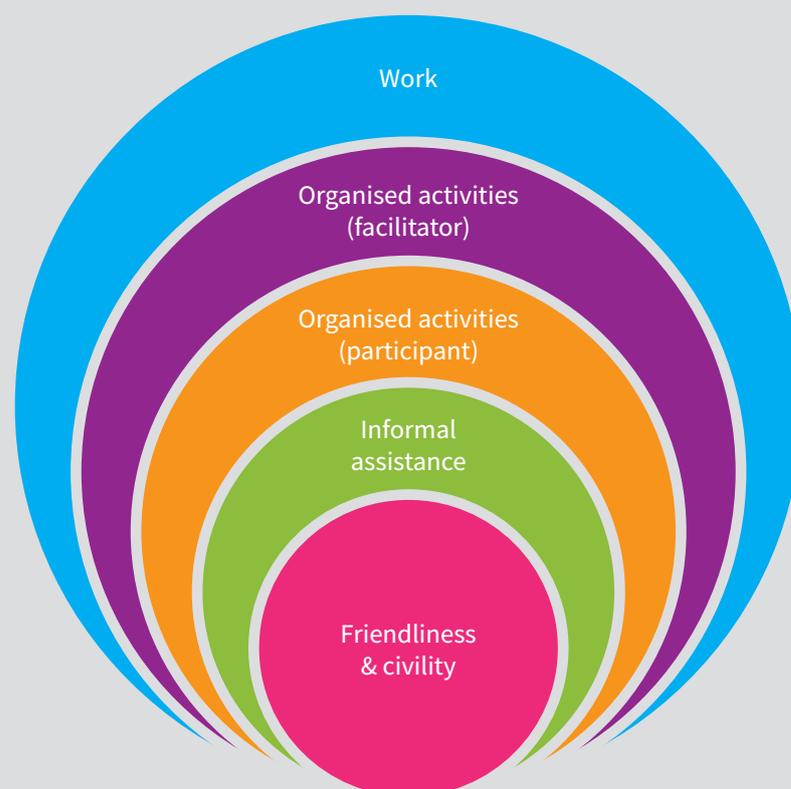


Image one:  
Levels of involvement

## When do people become involved?

While people can become involved in communities at any stage in their lives, three key moments emerged as being times when people have the capacity, and the desire, to engage in community-led activities.

### Moving into the area

Several people who had moved to the Highlands from elsewhere in the UK spoke about their decision to take part in community activities shortly after they arrived in the Highlands. For these people, a prime motivation was their desire to contribute to and become integrated into their new communities.

### Bringing up young children

Activities that centred around children were sought, and in some cases instigated, not only to keep children occupied or help them to develop new skills; but also as a strategy to reduce the social isolation that some mothers felt when they were at home with infants.

### Retirement

Retirement is a crucial moment when community involvement can become both possible and desirable. Motivations included reducing social isolation, improving the area and complementing or substituting for gaps in statutory provision.

## Barriers to involvement

For some people, most notably the younger participants, **full time work** was all-consuming particularly when combined with personal caring responsibilities. This was especially true for those participants who worked in lower skilled jobs. Leaving home in the morning and returning late in the day, having spent the day outside your immediate village or town, could prevent residents from meeting and sharing time with other people living locally. This was compounded for newer international arrivals if their workplace was somewhere that they were not able to converse with colleagues or had limited opportunities to develop confidence in English.

**Health and wellbeing** were barriers faced by some participants. There was a sense that some voluntary work and roles were onerous and could lead to burn-out, especially if beneficiaries of the work were less than grateful for the effort volunteers were putting in.

Finally, while participants mostly described their communities as inclusive and harmonious, people could feel excluded from opportunities for community involvement. This could be related to **a lack of information available to those who were outside of “the circle of friends”**; to perceptions of who might be welcome to take part, based on the profile of those who were the visible face of certain projects. This potential for exclusion was related to ethnicity but also to other intersecting factors such as gender and age, meaning that not only international migrants but also UK-born participants could sometimes feel left out.