

# Covid Changescapes: Our Caithness Community

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North Highland College  
University of the  
Highlands and Islands



**Caithness Voluntary Group**

Highland 3  
Third Sector Interface  
Supporting Our Community

Part of the Highland Third Sector Interface and a Member of the  
Voluntary Action Scotland Interface Network

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The research team would first like to thank all the members of our community who engaged with us and opened up their experiences to us in what has been an unprecedented hardship. We would like to thank them for talking us through some of their best moments, to some of the times when they may well have been the most vulnerable in their whole lifetime. We have been truly humbled at working with everyone involved.

We owe a huge debt of gratitude to our community volunteers who gave up their own valuable time to help our research project, but most importantly our communities. We hope you enjoyed the experience, even if it meant coming out of your comfort zone for a while. We really couldn't have done it without you, and we look forward to hopefully working with you in the near future.

A great thanks to our service providers who looked after us during the pandemic and then spent the time talking us through that experience.

A very notable mention needs to go to the staff at both organisations who support all of this work but don't often get their names on the cover page.

And to the funders, the Scottish Funding Council, who awarded the money to make this possible.

Most importantly the biggest thanks goes to our very own community here in Caithness. You looked after us all during this period of hardship.

*Now come all ye people, come over the Ord,  
There's a welcome awaiting that you can afford,  
Be ye a pauper or be ye a Lord,  
Ye will always be welcome in Caithness.*

Donald Sutherland

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## INTRODUCTION

This is one of the four case studies carried out in qualitative research across the Highlands and Islands to examine the experiences of local communities found in Caithness on the north coast of the Scottish mainland. The project is led by Vicky Johnson from Inverness College UHI and Rosalind Bryce from Perth College UHI in collaboration with Donna Heddle from Orkney College UHI, Steve Taylor from West Highlands UHI and Magnus Davidson from North Highland College UHI.

The research has been co-constructed in each of the four sites, in Inverness, Wester Ross, Caithness and Orkney, with local partners embedded in the sites selected. These local partners have then worked with academic leads from UHI and voluntary teams where possible. In Caithness the research was then carried out by the Caithness Voluntary Group with support from the team at North Highland College UHI.

The aim of the project is to understand the impacts of Covid-19 and influence strategies for recovery through systematic community driven research, including understanding individual/group support and actions raised in communities and providing evidence to change policy and practice regionally.

The team in Caithness worked from March to July 2021 to achieve the following objectives. To:

- Implement community-driven research which seeks to understand landscapes of change and the actions taken in response to the global coronavirus pandemic.
- Capture this experience as a case study for that area/ site.
- Influence policy and practice locally and regionally with community perspectives/ evidence about landscapes of change and covid recovery.

This report is intended for use locally and regionally to go alongside a cross case report that will provide the analysis across the highlands and islands through the voices of local residents. This in-depth qualitative research can help to understand the complexity of the negative and positive experiences, how these differ with geographies, inequalities and support, and what actions are prioritised by local people who are hardest hit and local volunteers and service providers as we emerge from the pandemic.

This report sets out the social and economic background found in Caithness, background to the Covid Pandemic response in the county, before looking at the results across 6 different small studies undertaken by community researchers and the research team.

## THE ETHICAL AND SAFETY FRAMEWORK

The cross-case research applied for ethical approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Highlands and Islands. In accordance with this, the research team in Inverness developed local protocols so that the team and participants were safe and the evidence produced according to the agreed data management for the project and the university. Participant information sheets were developed in order to make the purpose and use of the research clear and so that participants could then provide informed consent through signing a consent form or providing verbal informed consent to the partner organisation of one of the UHI team members. (See Appendix 1 for details of forms and protocols).

## PROJECT PARTNERS

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### CAITHNESS VOLUNTARY GROUP

Caithness Voluntary Group (CVG) exists to support the voluntary sector in Caithness and to assist organisations in coming together for common purposes and local people in gaining access to the decision making processes which affect their community. It aims to present to the outside world the common policies and concerns of voluntary organisations and to develop new ways of responding to need in partnership with statutory health, social work, education, housing, employment, environmental and recreation agencies in the social and economic regeneration of the area. Caithness Voluntary Group are based in Wick.

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### NORTH HIGHLAND COLLEGE UHI

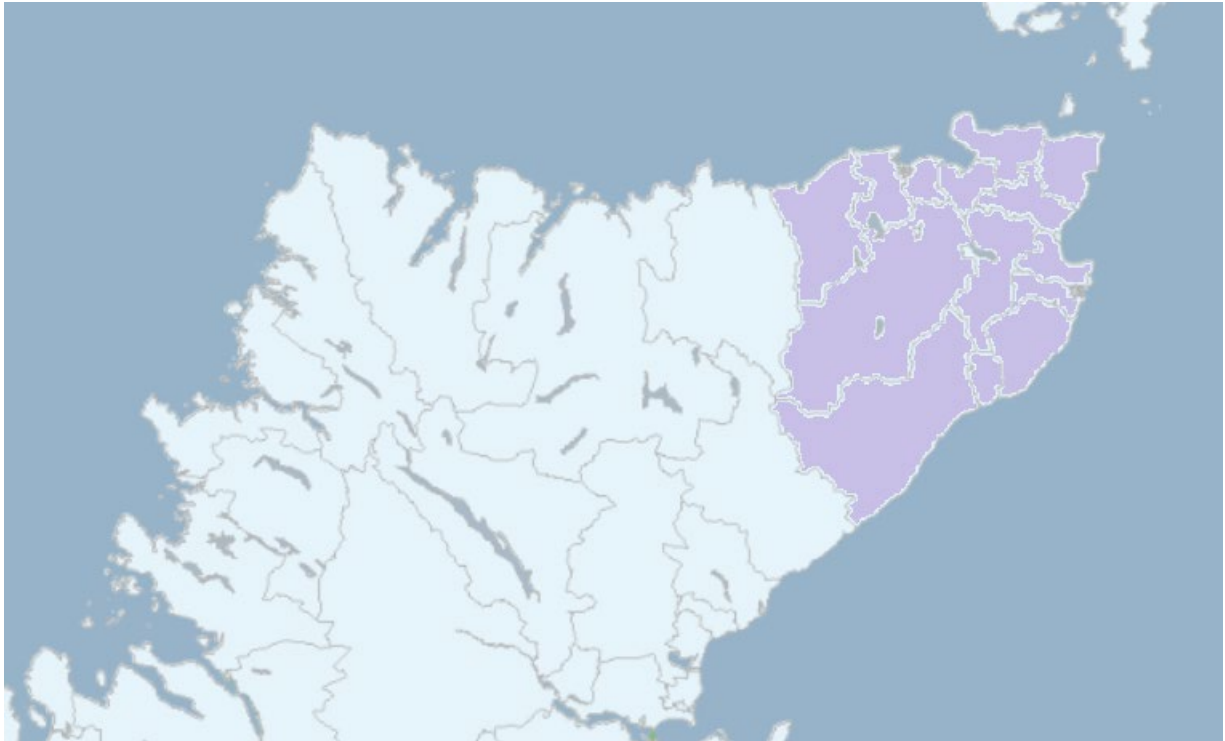
North Highland College UHI (NHC) is one of thirteen academic partners and research centres that make up the University of the Highlands and Islands. As a tertiary institution North Highland College UHI delivers further and higher education programmes across the campuses in the North Highlands. The main campus is in Thurso with an additional Caithness campus in Halkirk.

This work was completed by the Environmental Research Institute (ERI) which undertakes social research under its Environment, Economy, and Society theme in relation to issues affecting rural, remote, coastal and island regions and communities. This social research is undertaken owing to the location of the ERI in the northern Highlands and in line with the UHI mission to 'have a transformational impact on the prospects of our region, its economy, its people and its communities'.

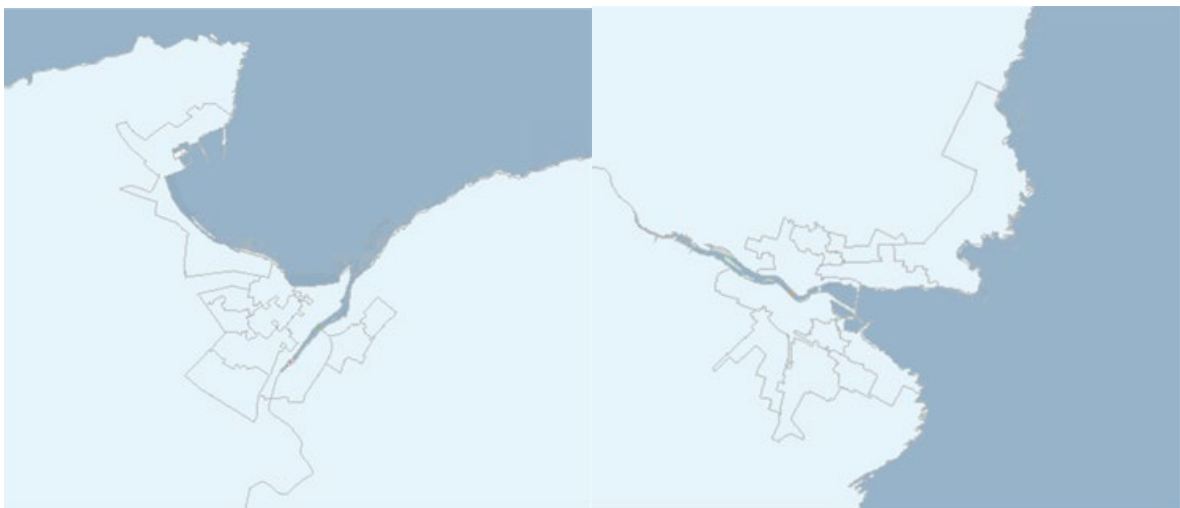
## BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE CAITHNESS COMMUNITY

Caithness is a historic county located in the far north eastern corner of the Scottish mainland. It neighbours Sutherland to the west and is surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the north and the North Sea to the east. The geographic area can be found in Figure 1.

Caithness, as seen in Figure 1, is found within the Highland Council local authority area and in 2019 had a population of 25,360. Caithness' transport needs are served by the A9 main road, the Far North Line for rail requirements, Wick John O'Groats Airport, and two car ferries and a seasonal foot ferry to Orkney.

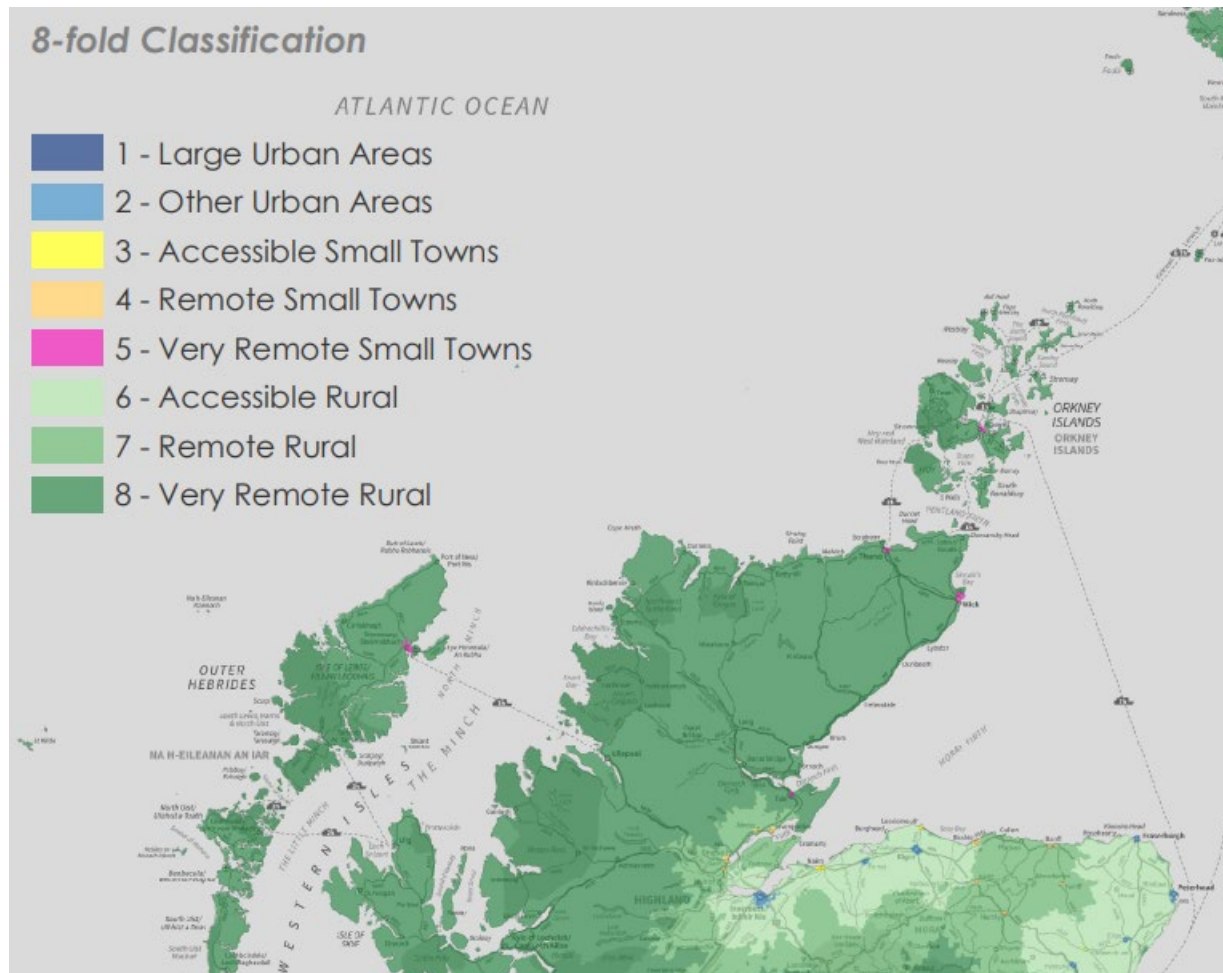


**Figure 1. Caithness highlighted in purple with associated datazones.**



**Figure 2. Subset of the towns of Thurso (left) and Wick (right) with associated datazones.**

Caithness can be considered to be mainly rural with two large towns, Thurso and Wick, as seen in Figure 2. Using the 8-fold rural urban classification, as seen in Figure 3 Caithness is considered very remote rural with the towns very remote small towns. It's worth noting here that in rural Highland Wick and Thurso are considered large towns but from a national perspective, small towns.



**Figure 3. The Scottish Government 8-fold Urban-Rural Classification showing all of Caithness as Very Remote Rural apart from the two Very Remote Small Towns of Thurso and Wick.**

Projections from the Highland Council<sup>i</sup> show Caithness population, unlike Highland population, which is increasing in number, is decreasing in number. Much of this population loss is found in the two main towns of Wick, and Thurso and Scrabster as seen in Figure 3.



Population trends 2011 to 2016				
Settlement	2011 to 2016		Population change	
			-/+	%
Fortrose and Rosemarkie	2,095 to <b>2,306</b>		<b>+211</b>	<b>+9.2%</b>
Portree	2,427 to <b>2,523</b>		<b>+96</b>	<b>+4.0%</b>
Inverness	62,285 to <b>63,780</b>		<b>+1495</b>	<b>+2.3%</b>
Nairn	9,919 to <b>10,022</b>		<b>+103</b>	<b>+1.0%</b>
Fort William		10,292 to <b>10,175</b>	<b>-117</b>	<b>-1.2%</b>
Wick		6,932 to <b>6,798</b>	<b>-134</b>	<b>-2.0%</b>
Thurso and Scrabster		8,234 to <b>7,850</b>	<b>-384</b>	<b>-4.9%</b>
Kinlochleven		879 to <b>807</b>	<b>-72</b>	<b>-8.9%</b>
Mallaig		828 to <b>758</b>	<b>-70</b>	<b>-9.3%</b>

Figure 3. Population change in Highland Region from 2011 to 2016 showing Wick and Thurso and Scrabster showing population loss.

Projections from the Highland Council show this population loss is expected to continue through the next two decades leading to substantial population loss in the county, especially compared to other areas in Highland Region.

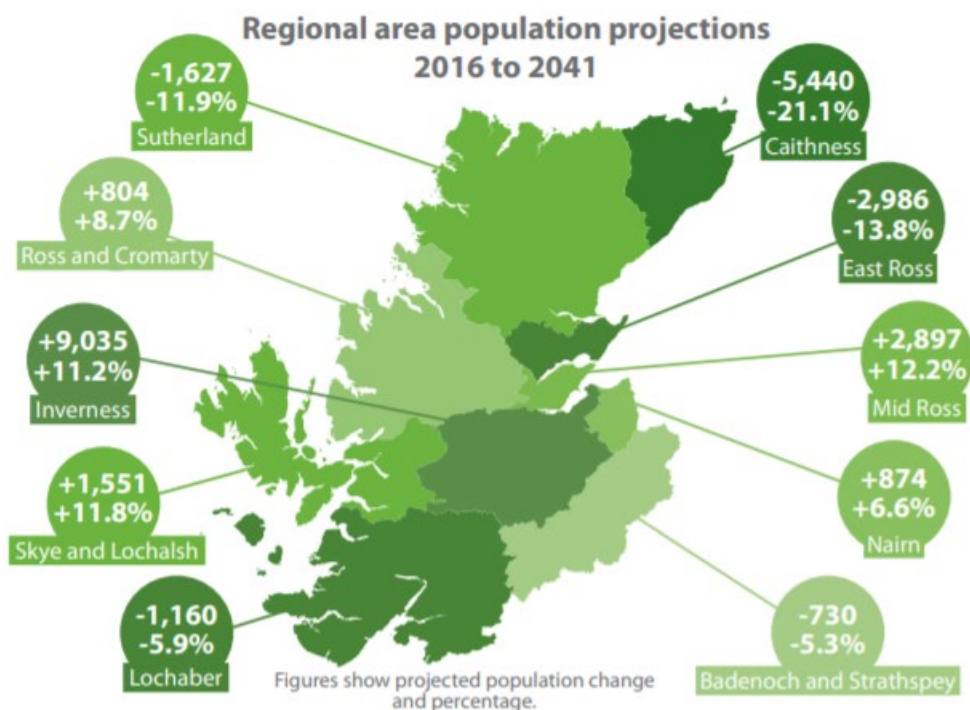


Figure 3. Population projections for Highland Region from 2016 to 2041 showing a population decrease of 5,440 (21.1%) for Caithness.



Part of this population loss can be associated with the decommissioning of the Dounreay nuclear site which was home to the UK's fast breeder reactor test site. The site at Dounreay is a significant employer in the county with expected completion of the decommissioning expected early in the 2030s.

The county is home to significant renewable energy resources with a large amount of onshore wind already built, a large offshore wind farm built off the east coast, new offshore wind farms being built or expected off the east and north coasts, and the world's largest tidal stream array in Caithness waters in the Pentland Firth.

As such the county is undergoing a process of significant industrial change from one energy industry to another. If not managed correctly there is a risk of significant depopulation, and socioeconomic challenges if employment is not transitioned from one industry to another.

As seen in Table 1. There are a range of deprivation levels across datazones with deprivation generally being found in the towns and in particular Wick. On average Caithness is found to be mid-table of national deprivation.

**Table 1 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation<sup>ii</sup> statistics for Caithness Datazones**

Data zone name	Local authority	SIMD 2020v2 rank	SIMD 2020v2 vigintile	SIMD 2020v2 decile	SIMD 2020v2 quintile	SIMD 2020v2 income rank	SIMD 2020 employment rank	SIMD 2020 education rank	SIMD 2020 health rank	SIMD 2020 access rank	SIMD 2020 crime rank	SIMD 2020 housing rank	2017 Population	Working age population	Urban rural class
Caithness South - 01	Highland	2298	7	4	2	3379	2080	2924	3563	176	5818	4733.5	762	439	Remote Rural
Caithness South - 02	Highland	2916	9	5	3	3456	2683	4049	4099	369	5504	4436	749	425	Remote Rural
Caithness South - 03	Highland	1416	5	3	2	1706	927	1677	2653	980	4492	4492	683	373	Remote Rural
Caithness South - 04	Highland	4929	15	8	4	4631	5317	4878	5813	869	5350	6084	689	439	Remote Rural
Wick South - 01	Highland	2845	9	5	3	2991	3139	1153	2686	6563	2374	5252	532	338	Remote Small Towns
Wick South - 02	Highland	912	3	2	1	1270	730	524	1156	6073	650	3800	527	301	Remote Small Towns
Wick South - 03	Highland	215	1	1	1	417	178.5	148	240	4202	446	1700	476	323	Remote Small Towns
Wick South - 04	Highland	1004	3	2	1	919	1116	692	1743	4468	423	3520	706	436	Remote Small Towns
Wick South - 05	Highland	2649	8	4	2	2253	3008	2293	2437	5073	1543	5594	569	349	Remote Small Towns
Wick South - 06	Highland	4452	13	7	4	4752	4138	3383	3526	6233	1135	5302	692	459	Remote Small Towns
Wick North - 01	Highland	1555	5	3	2	1539	1952	1499	1654	6588	94	2096	602	349	Remote Small Towns
Wick North - 02	Highland	1976	6	3	2	1679	1870	1614	2048	5992	2172	4069	562	360	Remote Small Towns
Wick North - 03	Highland	659	2	1	1	619	911	393	645	4929	1165	1492	704	418	Remote Small Towns
Wick North - 04	Highland	4974	15	8	4	4895	4766	2877	4179	5230	4129	6071	663	402	Remote Small Towns
Wick North - 05	Highland	4032	12	6	3	4600	4845	2407	3565	1116	6031	6283	713	429	Remote Small Towns
Caithness North East - 01	Highland	2933	9	5	3	3814	2875	3041	4108	353	5691	4118	845	478	Remote Rural
Caithness North East - 02	Highland	4037	12	6	3	4657	4228	4352	5173	440	4430	4239	595	384	Remote Rural
Caithness North East - 03	Highland	2904	9	5	3	3934	3419	2687	3983	153	6295	5550.5	692	397	Remote Rural
Caithness North East - 04	Highland	3110	9	5	3	3563	3977	3280	2806	415	5536	6264	634	364	Remote Rural
Caithness North East - 05	Highland	4060	12	6	3	4394	5140.5	5739	5012	110	6435	4751	828	459	Remote Rural
Caithness North West - 01	Highland	1838	6	3	2	1761	1456	2002	2024	4355	2025	3123	595	373	Remote Rural
Caithness North West - 02	Highland	4391	13	7	4	5154	4653	4258	4712	526	5048	6102	688	394	Remote Rural
Caithness North West - 03	Highland	3376	10	5	3	3809	3736	2734	4414	638	5142	4972	617	418	Remote Rural

Caithness North West - 04	Highland	4677	14	7	4	4216	4149	4725	4485	2285	5872	5921	943	552	Remote Rural
Caithness North West - 05	Highland	3994	12	6	3	4693	4382.5	4825	5455	208	5041	5087	883	554	Remote Rural
Caithness North West - 06	Highland	4771	14	7	4	5249.5	4582	4985	5763	673	4822	6035	785	480	Remote Rural
Caithness North West - 07	Highland	3528	11	6	3	4235	4050	3757	4874	205	5548	5374	638	367	Remote Rural
Thurso East - 01	Highland	2601	8	4	2	2588	2201	3529	2829	6579	410	3640	791	488	Remote Small Towns
Thurso East - 02	Highland	2838	9	5	3	3078	2788	1834	2921	3844	2204	5362	670	417	Remote Small Towns
Thurso East - 03	Highland	2334	7	4	2	2524.5	2077	2577	2490	4559	649	6233	658	399	Remote Small Towns
Thurso East - 04	Highland	3084	9	5	3	3049	2416	3598	3807	2758	2502	6192.5	489	317	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 01	Highland	1439	5	3	2	1477.5	1336	1182	1731	5836	658	3587.5	562	319	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 02	Highland	5163	15	8	4	4814	3843	4713	4816	6417	3725	5473	567	365	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 03	Highland	4702	14	7	4	4319	3628	3898	4912	5399	3366	5861.5	802	484	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 04	Highland	1422	5	3	2	1336	1049	2493	1601	3477	1504	3194	863	557	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 05	Highland	3853	12	6	3	3860	3072	2954	4231	4234	4325	3523	574	314	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 06	Highland	4734	14	7	4	3613	4538	3491	4772	4808	6009	4686	525	334	Remote Small Towns
Thurso West - 07	Highland	5175	15	8	4	5257.5	5081	5888	4813	990	6820	6346	742	447	Remote Small Towns

## IMPACT OF COVID 19 ON THE COMMUNITY

### CAITHNESS COVID RESILIENCE GROUP

At the beginning of the pandemic Allan Tait, the Senior Development Officer of Caithness Voluntary Group set up the Caithness COVID Resilience Group for the local community groups and statutory organisations to join. It was formed from stakeholder groups and organisations, in response to the problems faced during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fully inclusive, spanning from HIE representatives to grassroots community groups.

The purpose of the Resilience group was to allow its members to give updates on their activities and let the other groups and statutory organisations know what support was being provided to the community, it also allowed for the groups to offer each other support where required.

The Resilience group won the Highland Third Sector Interface award for 'Community Cohesion Champion' in February 2021.



In June 2020, the Covid Resilience Group moved from resilience to recovery and collectively decided to tackle some of the issues in thematic groups. At this point, the two subgroups that have continued are those focussed on Social Isolation and Mental Health, and Food and Fuel Insecurity.

The Chairs of these Action Groups now report to the Caithness Community Planning Partnership and the Covid Resilience Group.

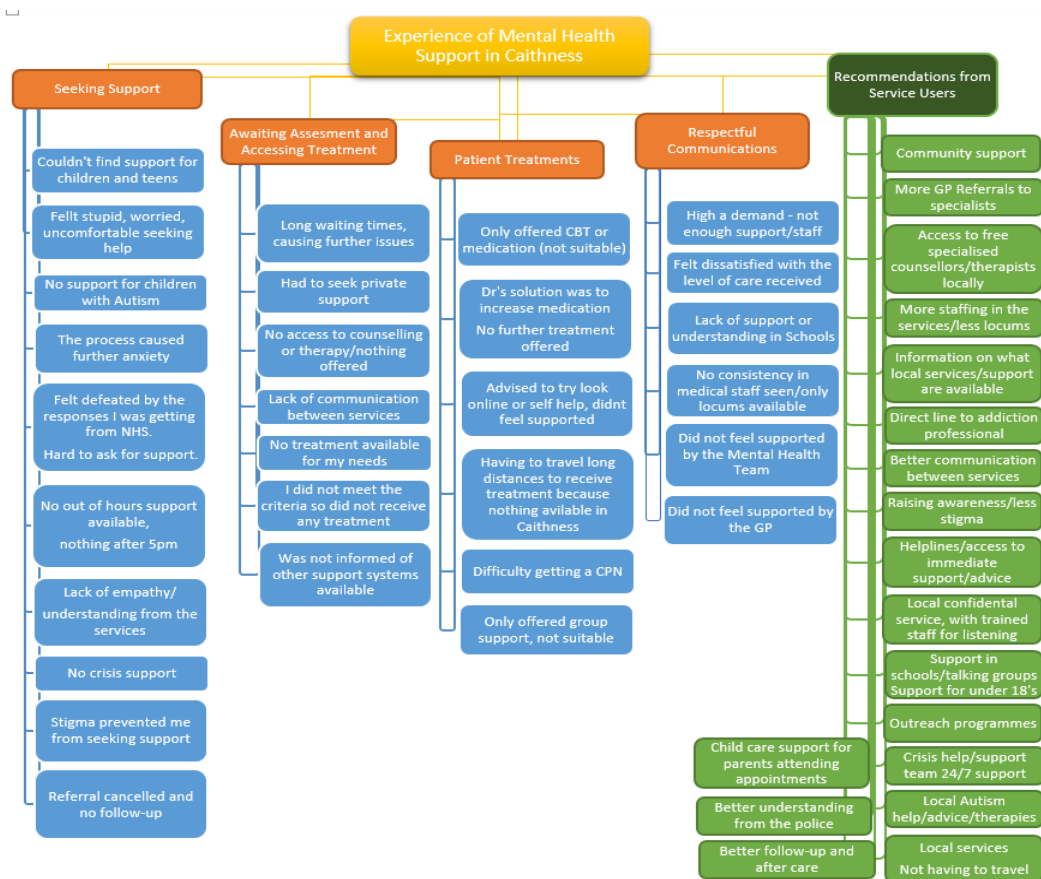
These groups have helped bring together many third sectors and statutory organisations who have pulled their resources and knowledge together to support the Caithness community throughout the Pandemic.

Caithness has long struggled with the mental health needs of its community due to a lack of long term mental health staffing requirements in the region. Since the pandemic, this has increased and there have been a large number of suicides in the region.

THE MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING ACTION GROUP exists to collaborate across sectors in a non-partisan way, around issues related to mental wellbeing, including the prevention of poor mental health, improving the community response to poor mental health, understand current mental health across Caithness, distribute research findings, seek opportunities to plug gaps appropriately.

In 2020 the action group undertook a Caithness wide survey via online platforms, the purpose of this research was to investigate the resources available in Caithness surrounding mental health, from the community's perspective.

Below is a summary chart from the finding of that survey.



One of the common themes from the responses was around Covid-19 and how people had already been on very long waiting lists to see the mental health team or to receive Cognitive Behavioural Therapy. The survey has helped the action group put actions into practice to better support the community with their mental health needs and has a 12-month plan to achieve this:

- 1, Develop a campaign to tackle the stigma around mental health and raise awareness of the range of community-based support services
- 2, empowering people to make choices about how they are supported towards recovery
- 3, collectively identify and respond to gaps in provision
- 4, Bridge the gaps across sectors to avoid duplication and strengthen networks
- 5, educating communities about how to stay well
- 6a, Mapping out third sector, private sector, and statutory services for easier signposting and;
- 6b, provide clarity by improving understanding of pathways to available services and their purposes
- 7, Building capacity for self-management techniques and coping mechanisms

THE FOOD INSECURITY AND FUEL POVERTY ACTION GROUP are working on a survey to gather information from Caithness residents on their 'Home Efficiency and Wellbeing'. The information gathered will allow the group to support people with their home energy costs, as well as find out about what fire safety they have in place. The Scottish Fire and Rescue Service are a member of the action group and those households who complete the survey will be offered the opportunity of a free home safety check from the local Fire and Rescue Service. The survey will also explore how households have managed financially and if they are aware of the Foodbank and the support it can provide. Participants will also be offered the opportunity to receive a free home energy assessment from Home Energy Scotland.

The group aims to highlight available support and gather relevant information on potential barriers to accessing these services. The information gathered will also help target limited resources of local organisations and hopefully provide relevant data for future funding stream bids. Information gathered will hopefully provide partner organisations with a better understanding of the barriers to accessing available services and help improve the health and wellbeing of those residents in most need.

During the pandemic, many local community groups had to change their role and became a social service offering food and delivery to people who were struggling financially or having to shield. This had a knock-on effect on the local food banks who became redundant. To date, people are slowly starting to use the foodbank again, as community groups are going back to their normal services. This did engage the action group into why people used their community groups rather than the food bank.

There is the possibility of stigma being an issue around food banks. As a result, the food bank has started up its re-engagement with community groups as well as local junior and high schools. They have signed many of them up at referral agencies which allowed for the food bank to deliver the food parcels directly to the groups or schools saving people from having



to go directly to the food bank to collect. The food bank hopes that this will help with any stigma issues that are attached to using the food bank by removing the need to go to them directly.

## **METHODOLOGY OF THE SURVEY/RESEARCH**

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### CAITHNESS VOLUNTARY GROUP EXPERIENCE

CVG was responsible for recruiting community volunteers. The recruitment process took place largely through their social media and their email contacts. Timescales were short and opportunities for gathering in person were limited somewhat due to the pandemic. The volunteers were initially keen but due to personal and capacity issues, some were not able to proceed in the research.

The initial conversations with the volunteers sparked a varied collection of ideas to research. The themes were broader than the initial thoughts highlighted in the resilience response feedback. The Lead changed early on in the project but this transition was smooth due to the staff member already involved in the Changescapes project.

The Lead kept everyone informed on meetings and to conversations feedback. If time had allowed, the team could have extended the scope of the research by contacting other groups of interest to invite them to participate.

The remaining volunteers were open to suggestions and adaptable to the current climate. Some of the original methodologies had to be changed due to the pandemic and therefore the results are not as comprehensive as we may have achieved in 'normal' circumstances. Our attempts at a creative strand in our research did not succeed. Again, if we had more time and could promote our ideas wider and for longer, it is likely we would have attained more data.

One thing to note is that a post was placed on social media to invite participants to contribute creative expressions of covid 19. Other posts on the page achieve a much greater reach in a similar timescale. From this, we can learn that the avenue chosen was perhaps not valid for this research. Although one of the pages (Listening Ear) is a mental health project and it was anticipated we might attract 'reflections' from people who have experienced changes to their mental health during the pandemic. Again, given more time to prepare something, we may have received a better response.

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### NORTH HIGHLAND COLLEGE EXPERIENCE

NCH have been the academic partner on the team, responsible for commissioning the community facilitator team and working with them to co-construct the research project appropriate for Caithness.

The working relationship with CVG was excellent, largely in part facilitated by the experience of the two authors working together previously on a research project related to the Caithness community.

There was a time period initially where both partners settled into their respective roles and CVG taking the lead on volunteer recruitment. NHC supported CVG in the planning process and worked with the wider team, including the volunteers to co-construct the research themes and methods. In one case NHC worked directly to develop a research theme with a volunteer.

This working relationship could be considered different to many previous research projects NHC have undertaken but worked with a very high level of success. The local nature of partners, both with a very good understanding of research and the community, led to an excellent piece of work being done with all partners and volunteers achieving a high level of satisfaction.

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#### METHODOLOGY OF VOLUNTEERS

Five people from the community volunteered to do the research: Catherine, Elena, Emma, Julie and Val. Each volunteer chose a different theme and methodology. CVG also completed a piece of work by Stephanie which also be included in this section.

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#### CATHERINE

**Interview Subjects:** Catherine looked at the effects on the environment from people being outside and walking a lot more during Covid-19 and what effects the influx of tourism has had on the environment. There are also questions about the government encouraging people to get outside but what financial support did they offer to maintain the effects. Who monitored the areas and who maintained them? What funding was offered and what funding is available now. What did this do to the roads?

**Interview Location:** Catherine is a volunteer with Caithness Paths and the River Side Group who volunteer to keep the area clean. They have had to respond to the social demand of people needing to get outdoors.

**Interview Method:** Catherine is going to talk to the other volunteers with who she works and ask them the questions directly in a survey format.

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#### ELENA

**Interview Subjects:** Elena wanted to look into how children have responded to Covid-19 and what effects it has had on them now and in the long term. Originally Elena wanted to interview primary school children, this became a challenge due to time limitations and covid-19 restrictions.

**Interview Location:** Originally planned to go door to door with neighbours, Elena is also going to speak with school teachers who she knows to ask about how to ask the questions and if it would be okay. This became a challenge due to time limitations and covid-19 restrictions.

**Interview Method:** Due to the time limitations and covid-19 restrictions, Elena was not able to proceed with the project as she would have liked. Instead, an online survey was set up to distribute to high school children, friends and family.

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#### EMMA

**Interview Subjects:** What wanted to know the effects on people who had to work or volunteered during covid-19 and what effect this had on people's mental health and wellbeing.

**Interview Location:** Emma planned to do the interviews over video call or within video groups meetings. She also planned to speak to her staff and volunteers at Caithness and Sutherland Women's Aid. Unfortunately, because of the pandemic, Emma's workload just became too challenging to devote the time she would have liked to the project.

**Interview Method:** As Emma was not able to provide the time due to work pressures, an online survey was created to distribute to the Caithness community, using word of mouth and social media platforms.

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#### JULIE

**Interview Subjects:** Wanted to know what are the impacts of isolation during covid had on the community: emotionally and financially.

**Interview Location:** Julie gathered the research through her community work on Ormlie Estate. She spoke with service users and parent and toddler groups to gather the data.

**Interview Method:** Julie used a written survey format to gather the data. She spoke one on one in an interview format to service users of the Ormlie Community Association.

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#### VALERIE

**Interview Subjects:** Wanted to understand the impact of bereavement on the community. Interview subjects were therefore members of the community who had experienced bereavement or worked with those who had experienced bereavement during the pandemic.

**Interview Location:** Val undertook the interviews at the homes of the interviewees or in public locations such as cafes.

**Interview Method:** Val used semi-structure qualitative interviews aimed at 30 minutes but in some cases stretching out to a number of hours. Notes were recorded by hand rather than with a voice recorder.

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## STEPHANIE

**Interview Subject:** Stephanie wanted to know what it was like for a community or statutory organisation working during the pandemic.

**Interview Location:** The survey was distributed online and through the Caithness Voluntary group's members. Stephanie attended the Mental Health and Social Isolation Action group meeting which is attended by many community groups and statutory organisations. Julie Marker the Chair encouraged the members to complete the survey during the meeting.

**Interview Method:** This method was done using an online survey. The survey was a selection of open questions. The demographic and covid data questions were not asked during this survey as the questions were asked to the organisation as a whole rather than individual employees.

## ANALYSIS OF THE RESPONSES

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### DEMOGRAPHIC AND COVID-19 DATA FROM ALL RESPONDENTS/PARTICIPANTS

A summary of all respondents can be found below. Before any data was collected from individuals by volunteers, they completed a coding sheet provided by the research team. The sheet asked respondents questions around a range of typical questions to create a profile for the respondent as well as specific questions related to residency in Caithness and Covid-19 impacts such as furlough, shielding, and testing. Service providers were not asked to provide this information as they responded on behalf of their organisation. The results of the coding were used in the analysis of the results.

Ethnicity		Age		Disability		Disability Type	
Scottish	21	Age 15	6	Yes	6	Mobility	
British	30	Age 16	1	No	45	Dyslexia	
Mixed Ethnic Groups	1	16 - 29	7	Length of time in Caithness		Area type	
White and Black	1	30 - 49	23	Less than a year	2	Town	29
Irish	1	50 - 64	9	1 - 5 years	4	Village	10
Employment		65+	2	6 - 10 years	3	Rural	12
Full-time	24	Housing type		11 - 20 year	4	Born in Caithness	
Part-time	10	Own	22	21 - 30 years	1	Yes	41
School student	7	Private rented	6	31 - 40 years	8	No	11
Self-employed	1	Social living	4	50+ years	2	Shielding	
Unemplo yed	4	Council house	11	All of life in Caithnes	14	Yes	6
Volunteer	2	Rent free	2	In and out of Caithnes	3	No	48
Carer and Househol d	1	Tested for Covid-19		Long term moved in	3	Family Covid-19 test result positive?	
Retired	1	Yes	26	Covid-19 test result Positive.		Yes - positive	4
Self-isolated		No	27	Yes - Positive	3	No - Negative	50
Yes	12	Gender		No - Negative	32		
No	43	Male	17				
Furloughed		Female	36				
Full-time	8						
Part-time	2						
No	20						

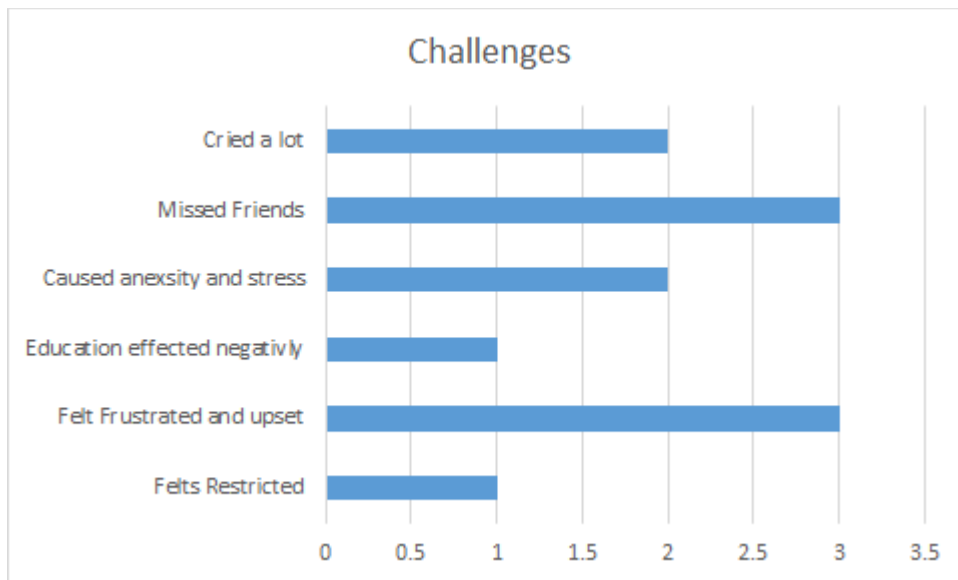
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## GOING TO SCHOOL DURING A PANDEMIC: SURVEY RESULTS

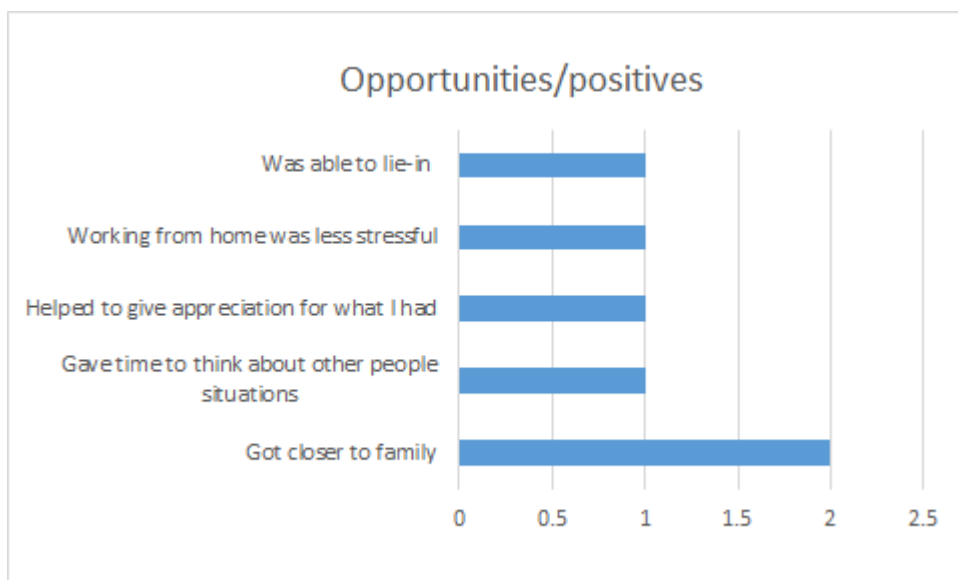
### Pandemic friends missed friend's family

Throughout the report we have separated the open question responses into four categories; Challenges, Opportunities and Positives, Support and looking forward, with these responses

we were only able to split them into two categories 'Challenges and 'Opportunities and Positives'.



Six themes came out of challenges: 2 of the students said that they cried a lot during the lockdown. Three of the students said that they missed friends, 2 said it caused them stress and anxiety, 1 that they were worried about an effect on their education. Three of the students felt frustrated and upset and one felt restricted.



Five common themes came from Opportunities/Positives: one student stated that they liked that they got to have a lie-in now as didn't have to get up and get out of the door for school. One stated that they found it less stressful working from home as they did not have to go outside where the virus was. One stated that being at home meant that they got time to think and appreciate everything that they had, that they got to think about other people and the situations that they are in, they were grateful for their situation and concerned for others. Two of the students said that they got closer to family, which they enjoyed.



*"Some lows of the pandemic were that you often felt restricted and frustrated as you couldn't just leave your house and go see family members or friends. You often missed out on a lot of opportunities during the pandemic and I also feel it affected our education a lot as well. Also, I feel that it causes a lot of anxiety for a few as they would be nervous to leave the house or interact with others after lockdown as they hadn't in a long time. However, in some ways, I feel the pandemic caused everyone to become that little bit closer and more thoughtful and they had the time to think about others in worse situations and being away from each other caused us to appreciate what we have more."*

*(Female age 15)*

*"missed my friends and made me cry and didn't have a lot of enjoyment"*

*(Female age 15)*

*"I wanted to cry every day and I only enjoyed working with my friends at our online tasks. however, I found that working from home was less stressful and gave me less anxiety about the situation"*

*(Female age 15)*

*"Connected more with family, but was very hard not being able to see friends"*

*(Female age 15)*

*"I missed my friends and I fell behind in school. However, I found that working from was less stressful"*

*(Female age 15)*

*"Highs - able to wake up later for school"*

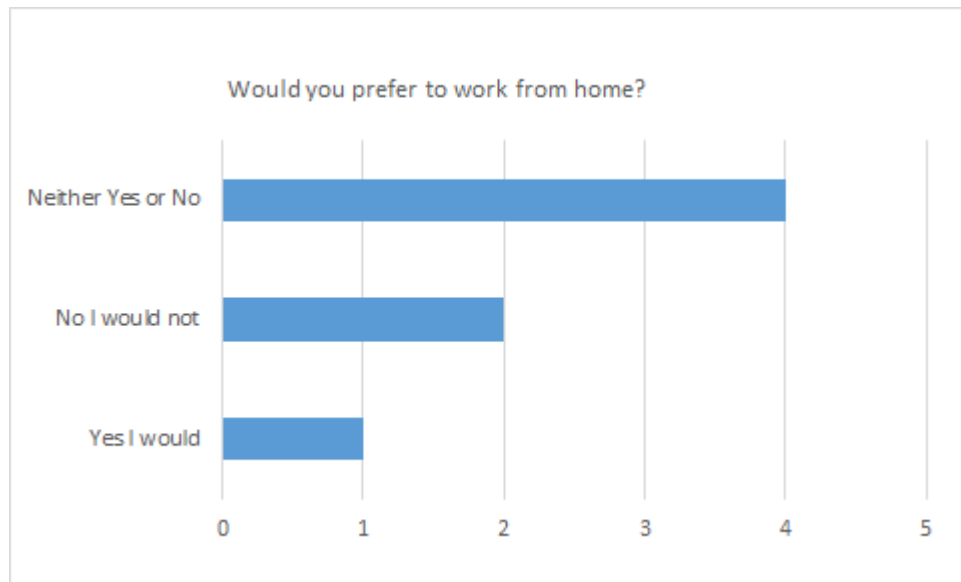
*Lows - missing friends and family"*

*(Female age 16)*

*"It was bad"*

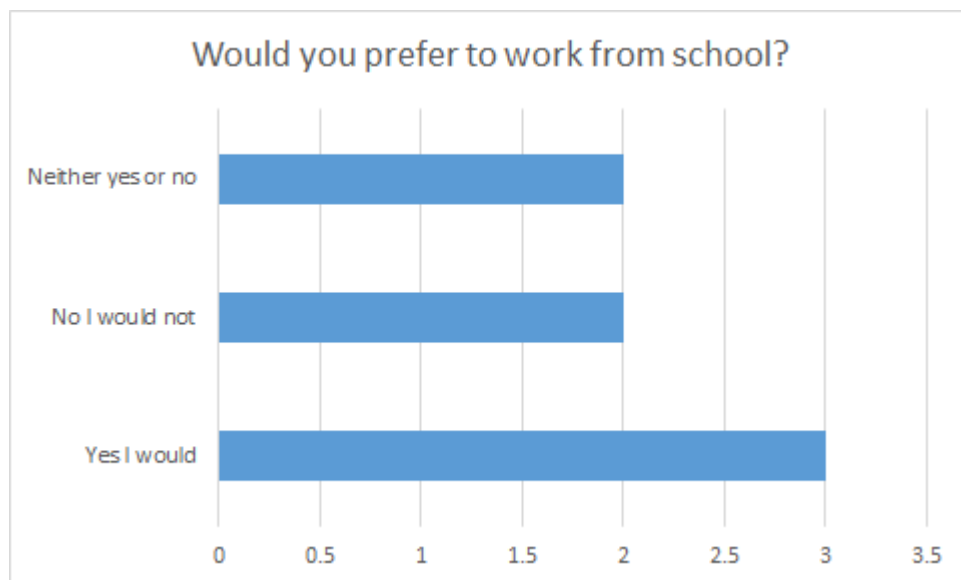
*(male age 15)*

**Q1**



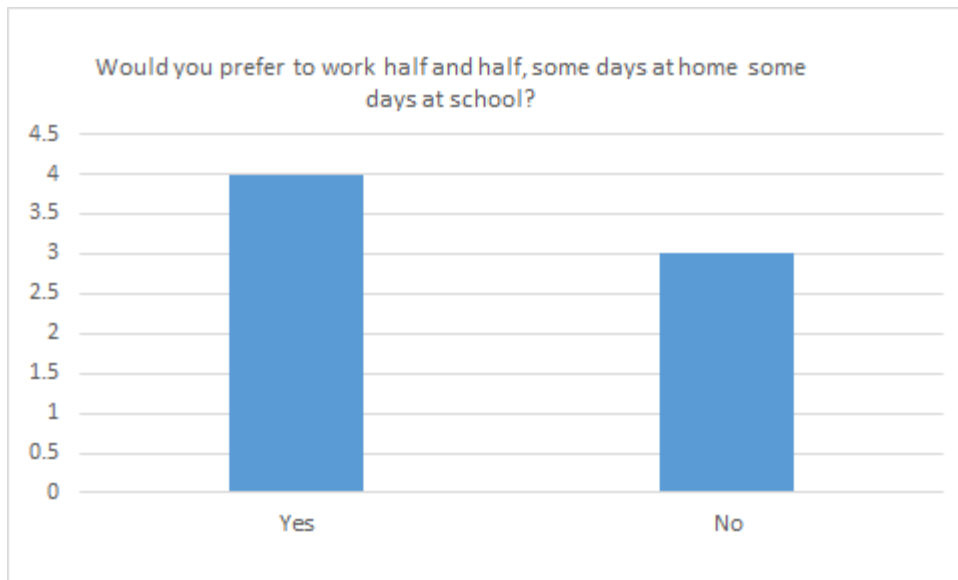
In Q1 4 participants stated that they neither wanted to nor didn't want to study from home, 2 did not want to have to study from home and 1 said they would prefer home-schooling.

**Q2**



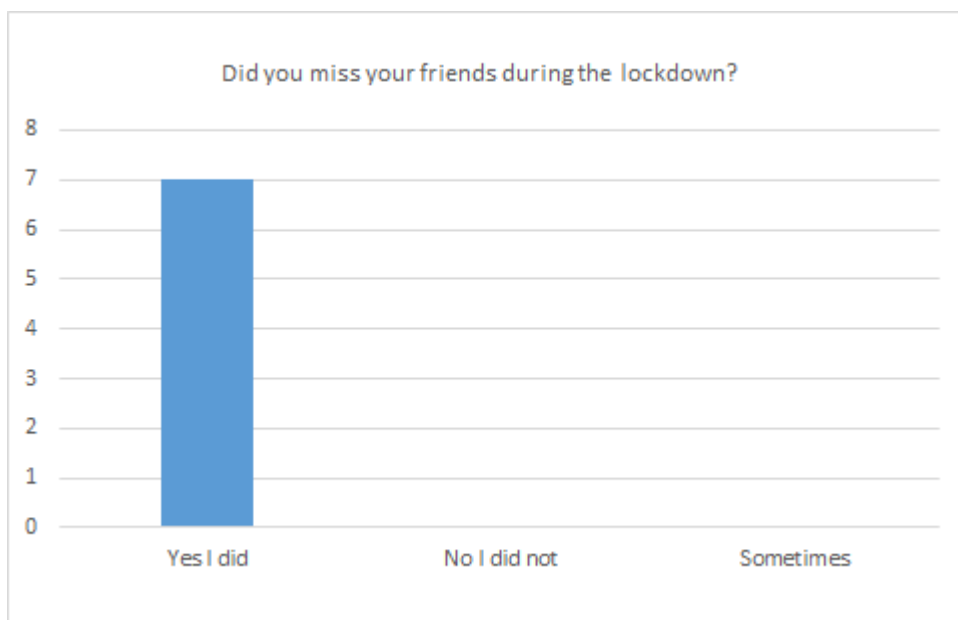
In Q2 3 participants would prefer working from school, 2 said neither yes or no, 2 said they would not prefer working from school.

**Q3**



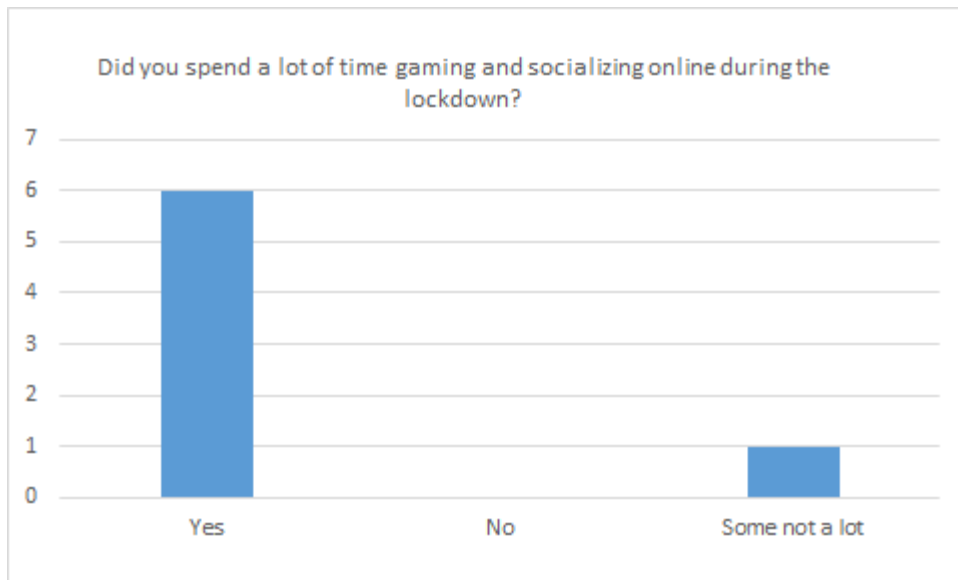
In Q3 4 would participants prefer working half and a half and 3 stated they would not prefer that.

#### Q4



In Q4 all of the participants stated that they missed their friends during the lockdown and working from home.

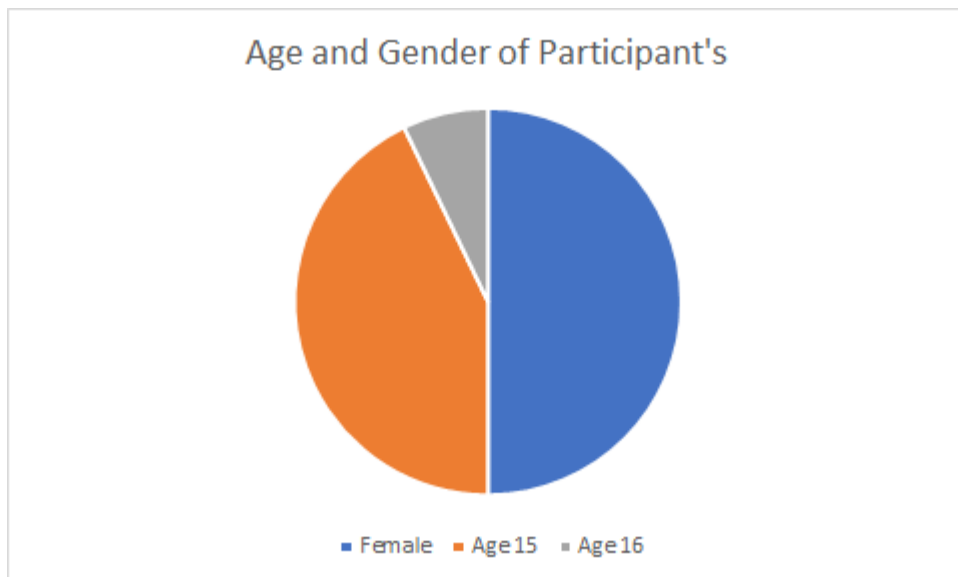
#### Q5



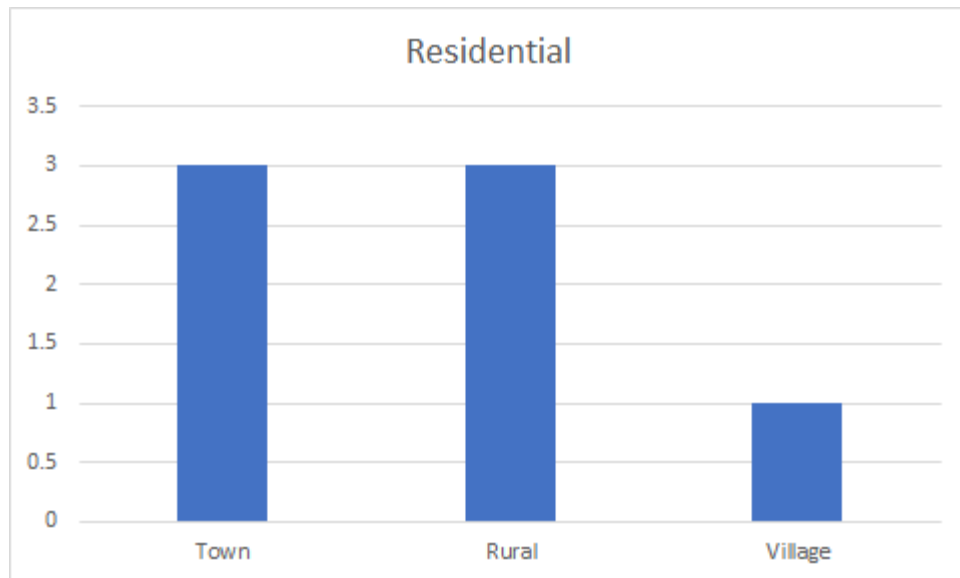
In Q5 a majority of participants said that they spent a lot of time socialising and gaming online during the lockdown and 1 person said they did some but not a lot.

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#### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION



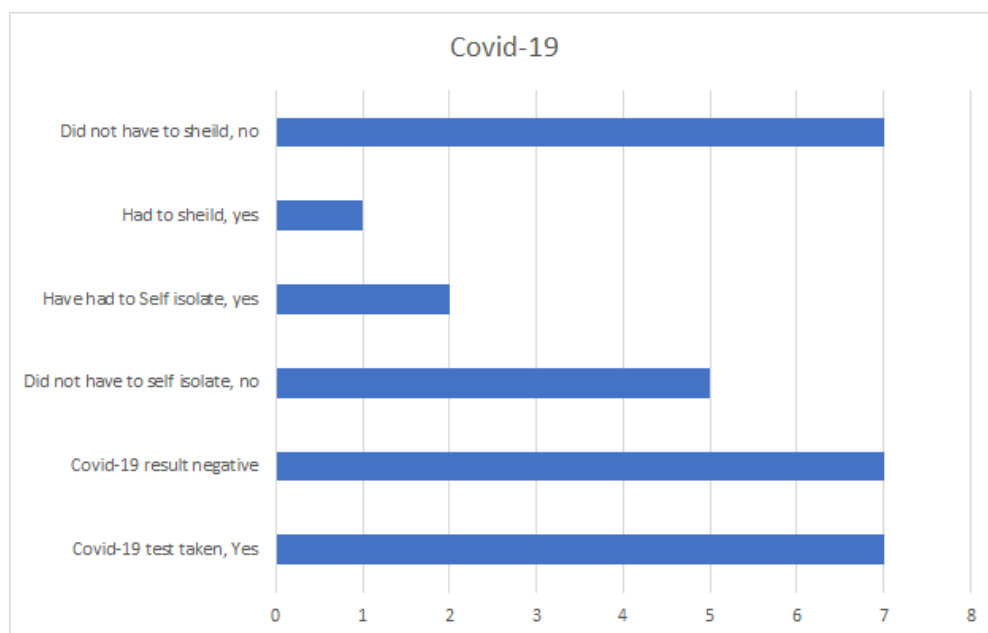
The demographics of this survey showed that all 7 participants were female, 6 of them aged 15 and 1 aged 16.



Three of the participants lived in a town, three lived in a rural area and 1 lived in a village.

#### COVID-19 QUESTIONS

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As all participants attended High School, taking a covid test is mandatory. That is what all 7 selected yes to the question 'Have you ever had a Covid-19 test?'. All answered that they had received negative results, that they have never contracted the virus. Two of the seven had previously had to self-isolate and one previously had to shield.

#### WORKING DURING COVID: SURVEY RESULTS

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First, we will look at the open questions answered in this survey. They have been separated into four categories.

- Challenges
- Opportunities/Positives
- Support
- Looking forward

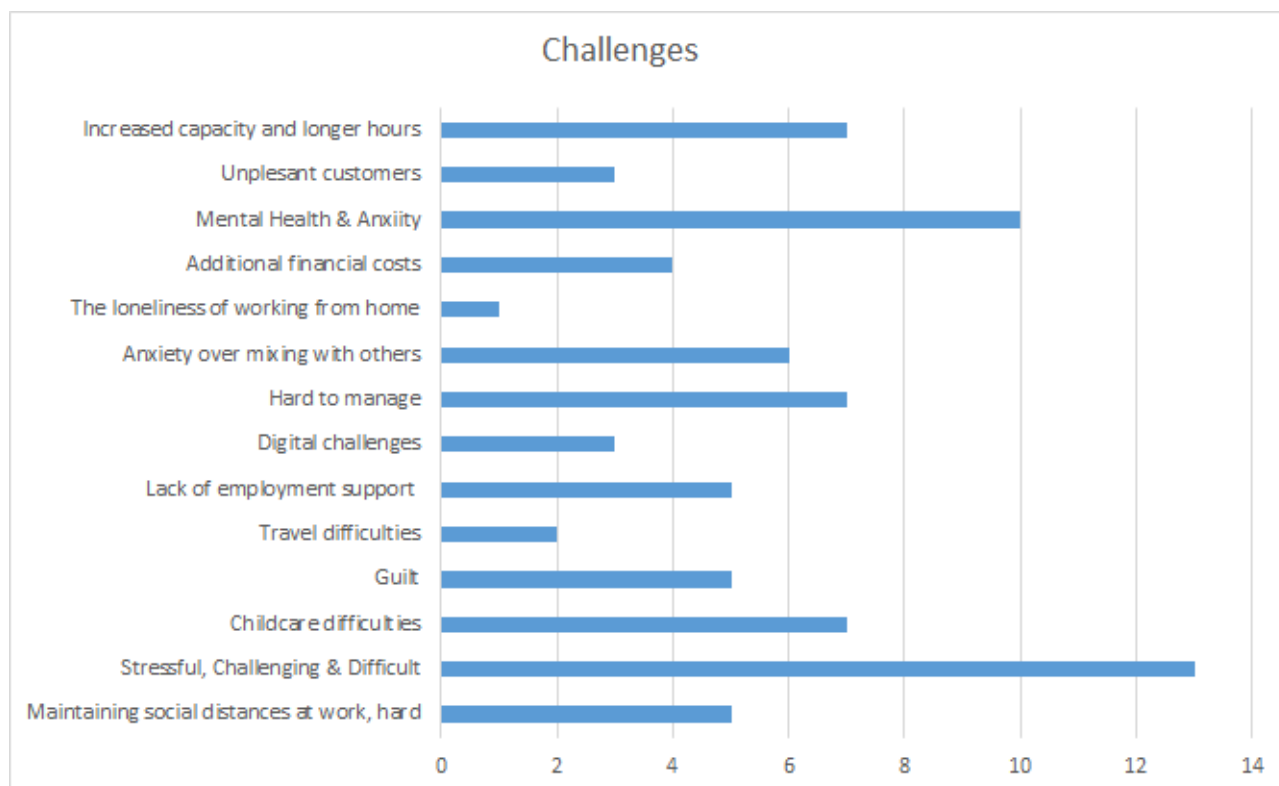
From these categories, we have created common themes that came from the *open* questions asked within the survey; these responses are from all the open questions.

The open questions were as follows:

- What are your thoughts on having to work during the pandemic?
- What challenges have you had to overcome due to working during Covid?
- If you have children, how did you find balancing the time for your work, their home-schooling or caring for your child?
- If you do feel you have been supported, can you give examples?
- If you don't feel you have been supported, what could have been done better?
- What would you expect/want to see put in place in your workplace to do this?
- If you would like to expand on any of the answers given above, please do so here.

day continue work job t changing people time covid  
 working home stressful work also kept life  
 pandemic going work home challenging difficult





Because people were working from home they found themselves working much longer hours than they normally would, they wouldn't take the same breaks that they use to and they wouldn't have that same social interaction. People who worked in the catering industry found that some customers were difficult and did not like it when the staff challenged them for not wearing a mask. Lots of participants talked about how difficult it was to find childcare and managing work and home life was stressful and quite often left them feeling guilty.

*"There's a temptation to work on-demand rather than in a sustainable manner, and I've had to develop a different type of resilience to deal with the additional pressure of work-life balance when there is no enforceable structure."*

(Female 30 – 49)

*"Had to purchase my desk, printer, lockable pedestal, chair etc and it costs to repurpose a spare bedroom for an office. Also, no compensation for electricity and heating costs, very little communication with colleagues as the majority of the work was via email."*

(Female aged 30 – 49)

*"Dealing with vulnerable persons over the telephone when a face to face appointment would be more normal and result in a more satisfactory delivery of service."*

(Female aged 30 – 49)

*"Stressful. Increased cleaning throughout the workplace, angry customers because of our covid rules, "anti-maskers", having covid me and not being able to work and leave the house"*

(Female aged 50 – 64)

*"Working away from home and leaving my child for very long periods has been the hardest part of the global pandemic and leaving my partner to try to juggle working at home with a young child has been extremely tough. Feeling guilty at leaving your family at home and the constant worry that they are ok when you are on the other side of the world and would be extremely difficult in these times to get home if there were any issues."*

(male aged 30 – 49)

*"I felt pressure from working in my home in that I couldn't switch off as much as my work was constantly visible in my home life. I also felt obliged to be instantly contactable. Managing/balancing work and family life. Working through exhaustion caused by media-related fears."*

(Female aged 30 – 49)

*"t's been very difficult, especially with the constant changes in regards to entering people's homes. - Management officially telling you to follow the covid guidelines but then forcing you to "get on with the job regardless" - Children - Very difficult, thankfully we had a lot of help from grandparents."*

(Male aged 30 – 49)



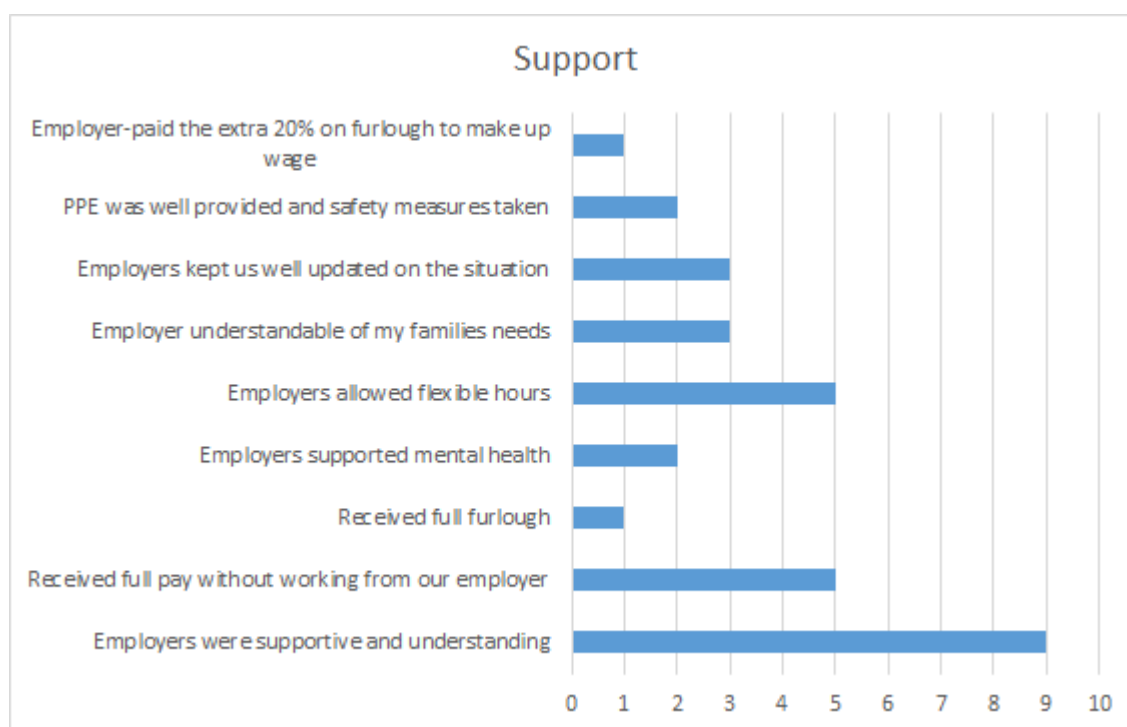
People stated that they liked working because it kept them busy, they felt that work environments had improved and that they had saved money on travel costs due to not having to drive or get the bus/train. Participants also liked that they got to spend more time with their children, although that could be stressful trying to find a balance between being a parent and working.

*"Has been a challenge but a great learning curve should a pandemic ever happen again"*

(Female aged 30 – 49)

*"I spend less money on fuel and car expenses. I also waste a lot less time travelling and setting up for work. As when I work from home I can start work nearly immediately, but when I go into the office I may spend upwards of an hour and a half with preparations, travelling there and back again"*

(Female aged 50 – 64)



The majority of the participant felt supported by their employers. They felt that they were well updated and that their employers had provided the appropriate PPE where required. Other participants either received a full furlough and a couple other even had their employer make up the missing 20% from furlough pay.

*"My employers have been very supportive when I've had to request time off at the last minute due to changing childcare arrangements, and we've been able to arrange a greater flexibility in working hours"*

(Female aged 30 – 49)

*"Our employer continued to pay us without furlough so we didn't have any worries in that respect. Continually updated on our work situation"*

(Male aged 30 – 49)

*"Due to my raised anxiety levels I was given time off and constant messages to make sure I was doing well before coming back to work"*

(Female aged 30 – 49)

*"I wasn't supported during the first lockdown and no one knew what the challenges would be but I was granted 2 months Furlough on full pay in the second lockdown which helped. I was*

*also given a new laptop which solved my constant IT problems”*

*(Female aged 50 – 64)*

*“While I was furloughed, my employer paid the extra 20% so I was still getting my full pay.*

*When I was back in the office, safety measures”*

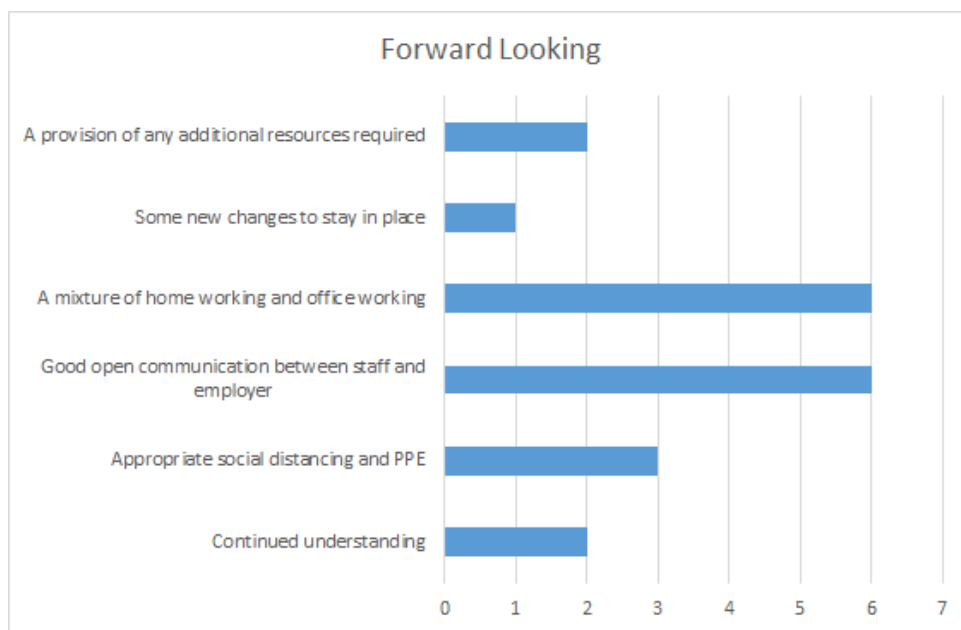
*(Male aged 30 – 49)*

*“Were taken such as extra cleaning etc. It was arranged that each worker was in by themselves on a rota basis, to avoid unnecessary cross-contact. My manager was very understanding when it came to workload, and encouraged me to talk to him if there was anything I was struggling to complete so he could help with extra office time or asking another colleague to complete”*

*(Female aged 16 – 29)*

*“We were always told from the start that we won’t have to do anything or even attend work during Covid if we didn’t feel safe. Where I work is funded by the UK government and our wages come from a pre-set budget so there was no requirement to furlough”*

*(Female aged 30 – 49)*



Participants expressed that employers must provide the right PPE where required. Going forward they wanted a mix of home and office working. They thought employers also needed to make sure that they keep the staff updated and well informed.

*“Ensuring there are appropriate social distancing measures and a sustained stock of hand sanitiser and cleaning materials. These will still be very important, despite vaccinations, and I’m confident my employers won’t become lax in ensuring our safety. It’s important to keep communication open and ensure all teams feel safe in returning to the office when the time comes”*

*(Female aged 16 – 29)*

“A slow return to the office. A blend of home working and office work”  
(Female aged 50 – 64)

“I appreciate that some elements of my job need to be delivered in as similar a manner as possible, however many can and have been changed, and ideally should remain changed once "normality" has been restored”  
(Female aged 50 – 64)

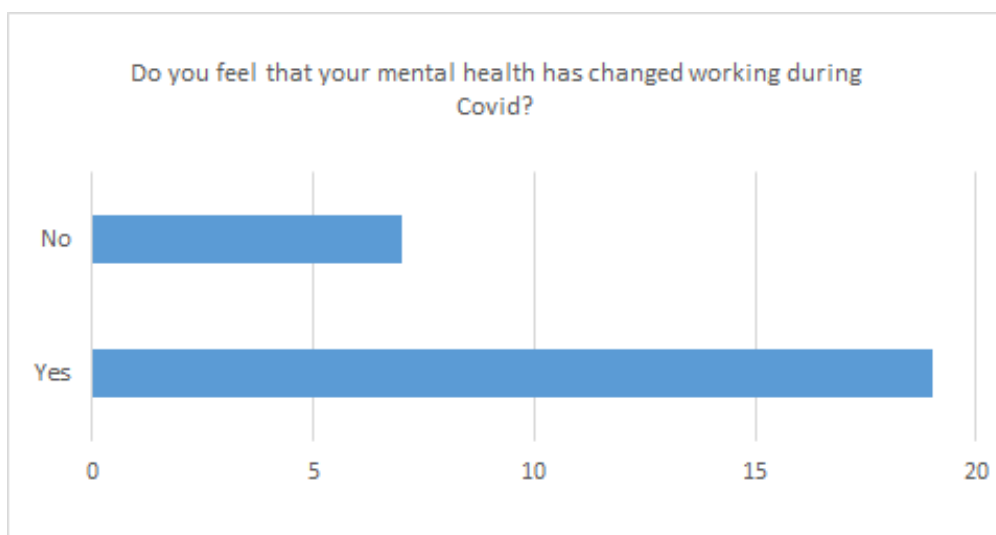
“I asked for additional resources and support but these were not forthcoming and my previous employer became blaming and judgmental when I was struggling to deliver the expectations of trying to do the role of 5 employees. They could have helped by providing additional resources when requested or to have not expected the impossible when we were so short of staff”  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

“Our new office should have enough space to distance but if there isn't it would be good to have a rota to know when to go in. I'd also want to be allowed to keep working from home on some days”  
(Male aged 30 – 49)

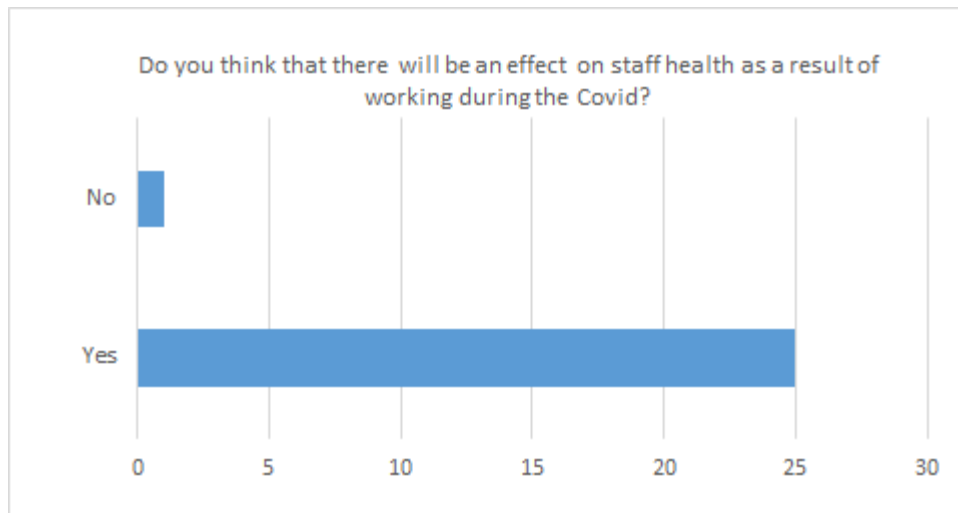
“Check-ins, more stringent enforcement of restrictions e.g. social distancing. - Enforcement of remaining restrictions e.g. social distancing/wearing masks”  
(Female aged 16 – 29)

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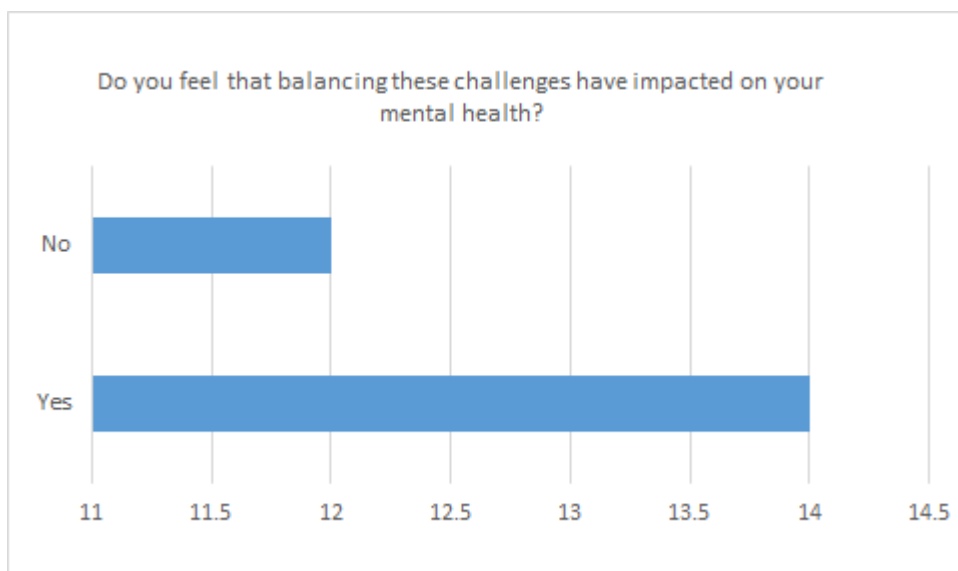
#### CLOSED QUESTIONS RESPONSES FOR THE 'WORKING DURING COVID' SURVEY.



In response 19 of the 26 participants said that yes, their mental health had changed while working during the pandemic. 7 participants said that it had not changed.

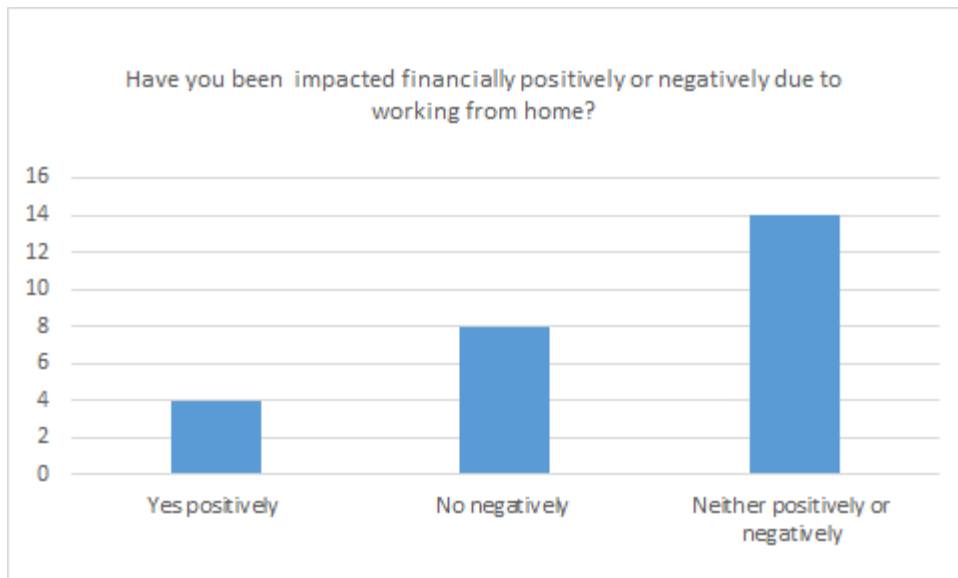


Of the 26 participants, 25 stated that yes staffing mental health will be affected due to working during Covid-19. 1 person stated that no there would not.

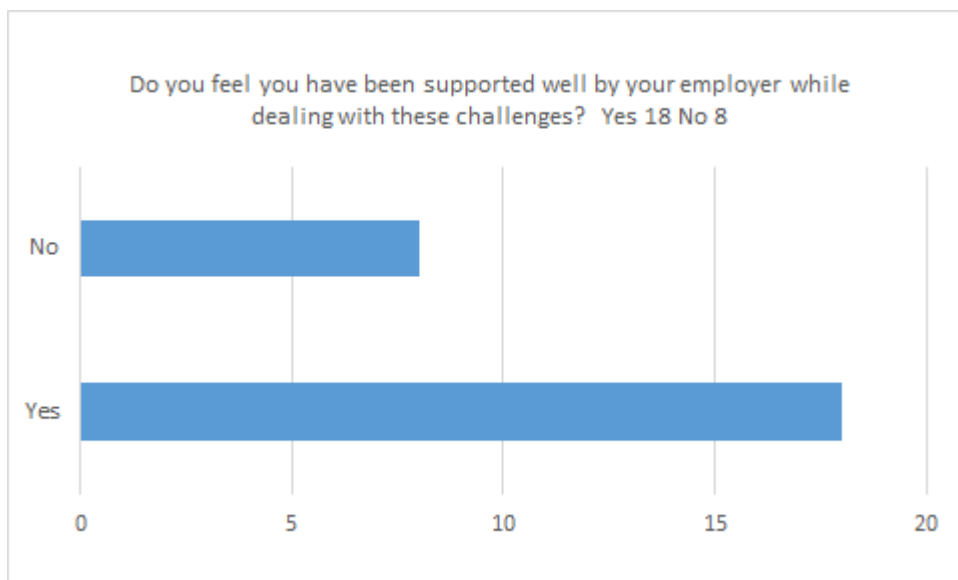


This question asked about people who had the responsibility of the family or loved ones at home to care for, as well as work. 14 people said that it had affected their mental health and 12 people said that it had not, the latter response will include people who do not have children. Unfortunately, an option was not made to select not applicable, which would have made the numbers more accurate.

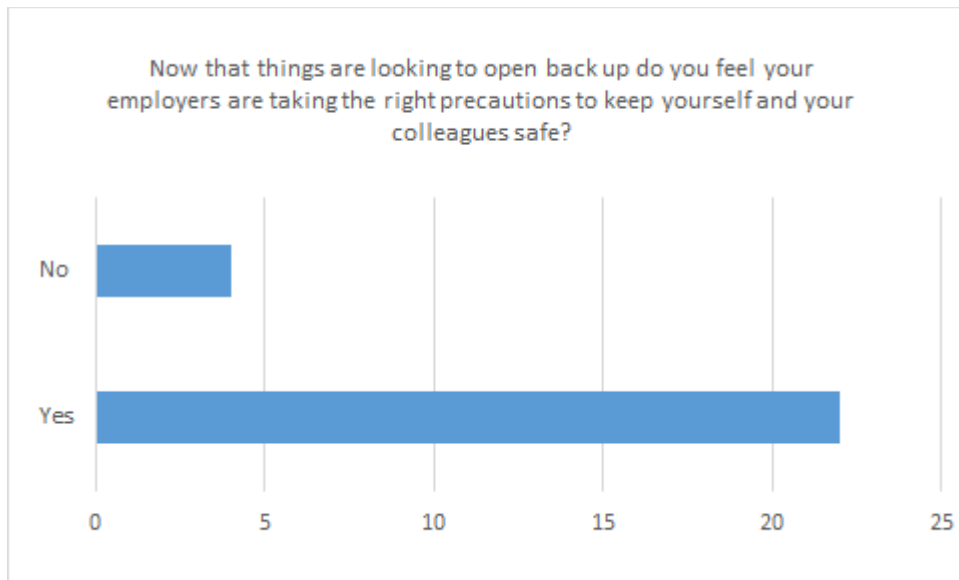




In response 14 people say they had not been affected financially during Covid-19, 8 people said that they had and 4 people that their finances had improved.



In response 18 people felt that they had been supported by their employer and 8 people did not feel that they had been supported.

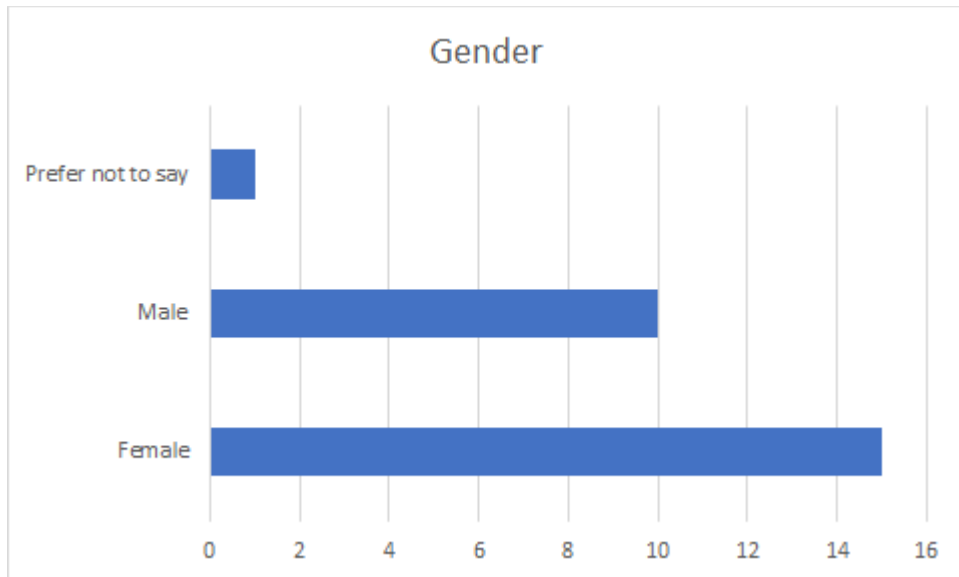


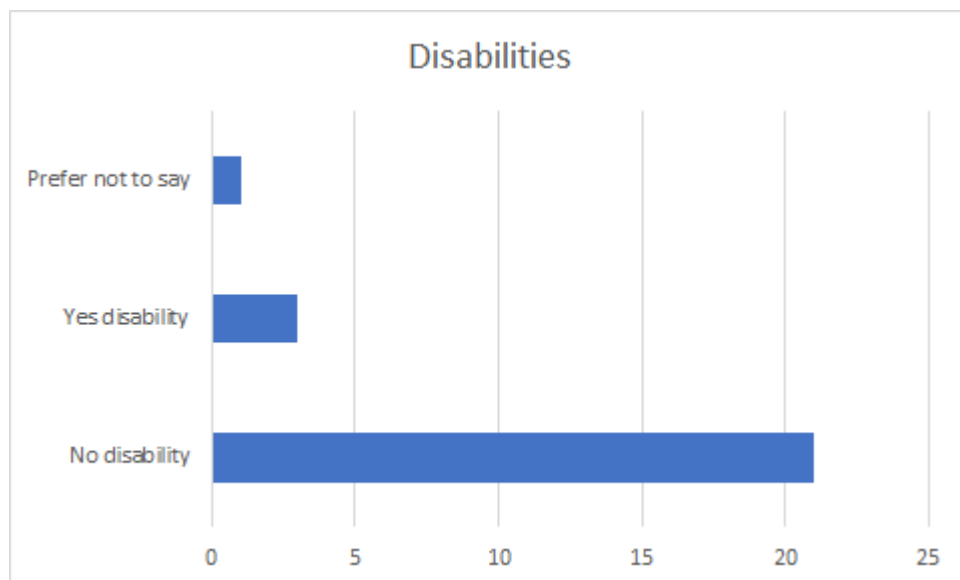
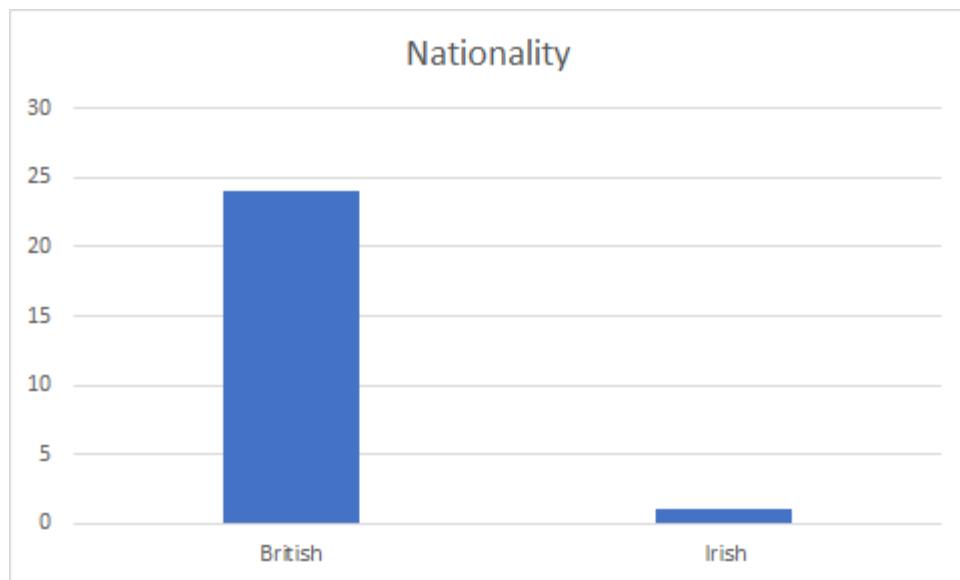
In response 22 people stated that they felt confident their employer would put the right precautions in place on returning to the workplace, 4 people did not feel their employees were going to do this.

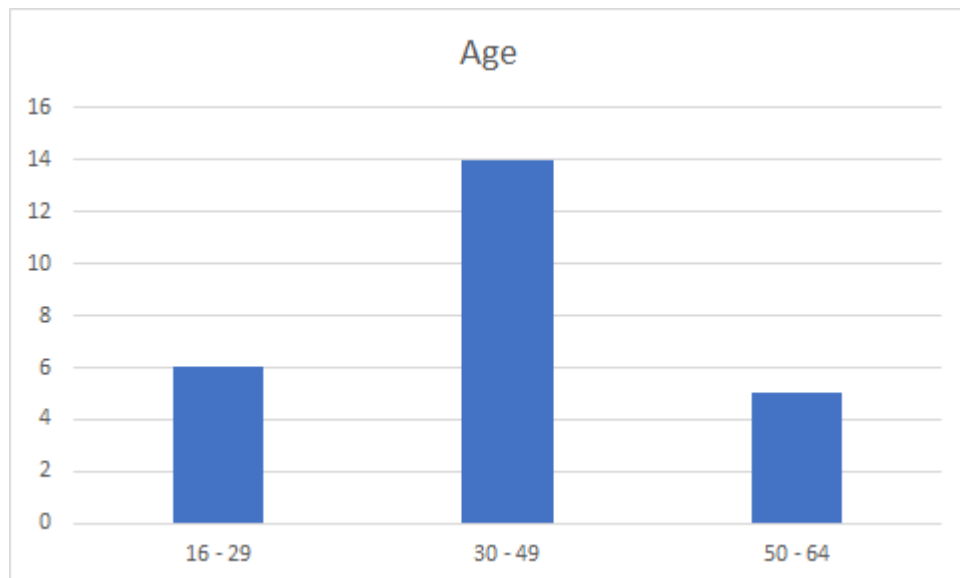
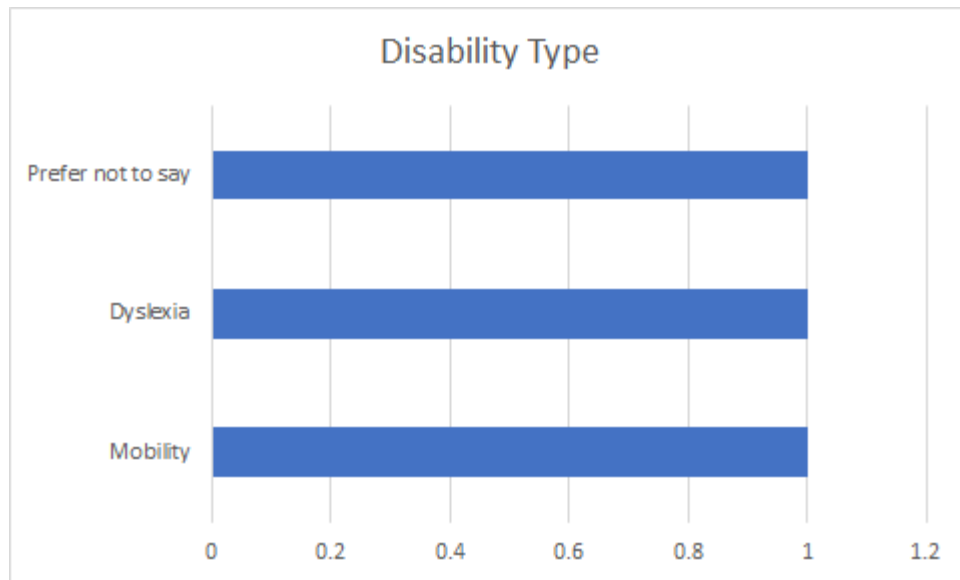
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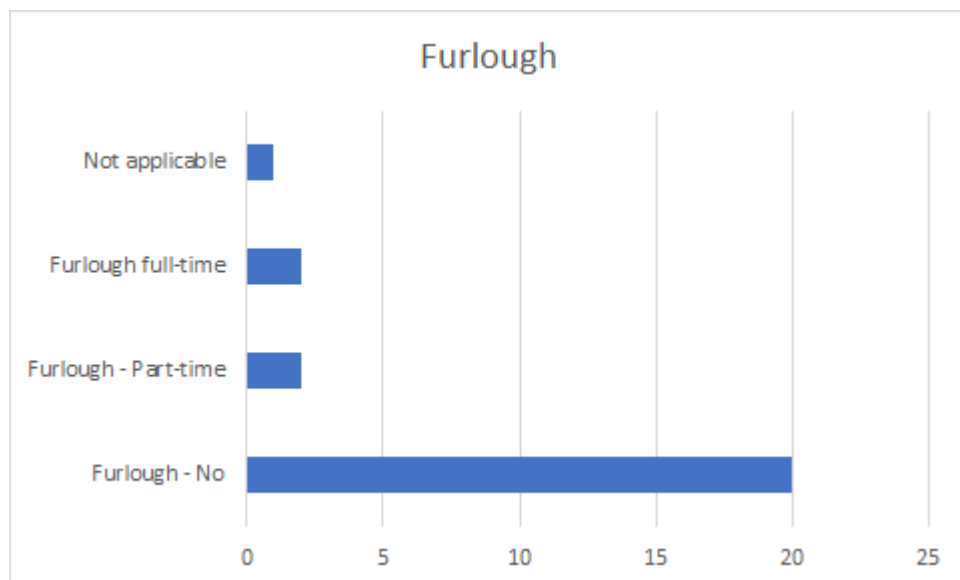
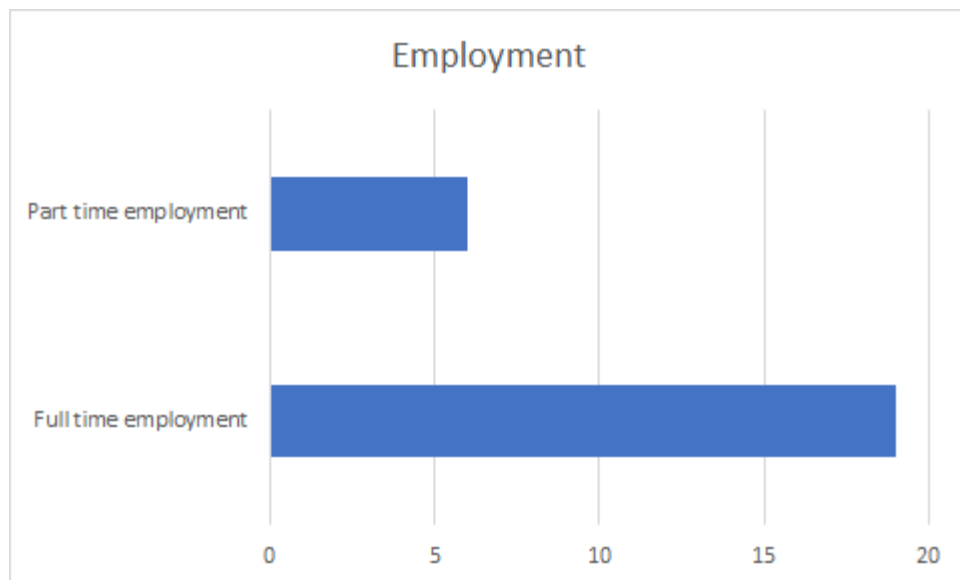
#### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

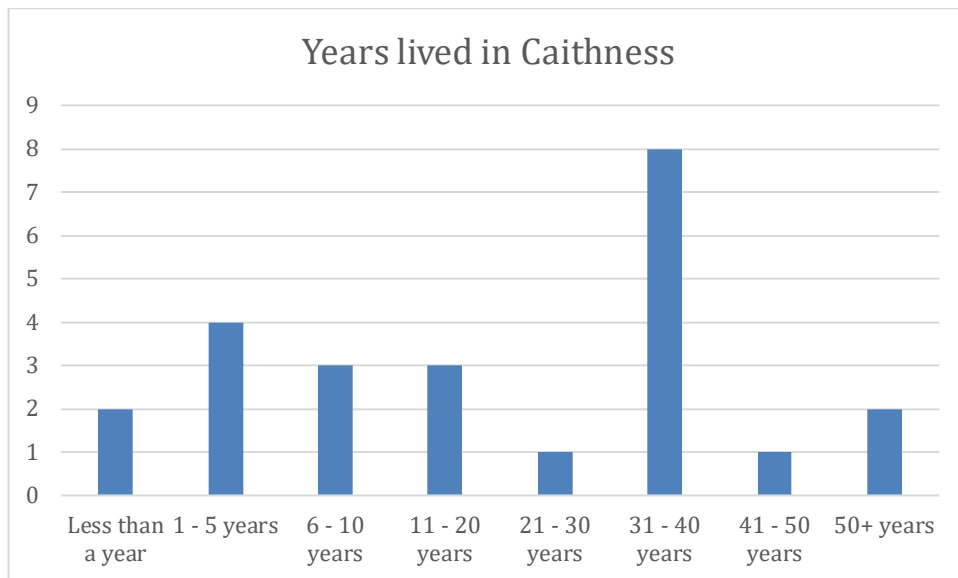
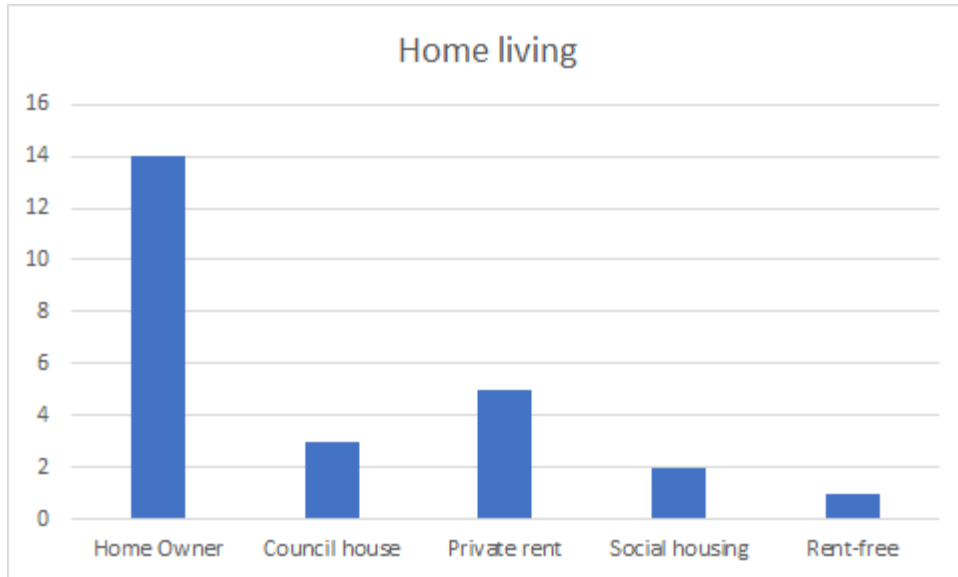
The following section contains the results of the demographic questions asked for the working during covid survey.

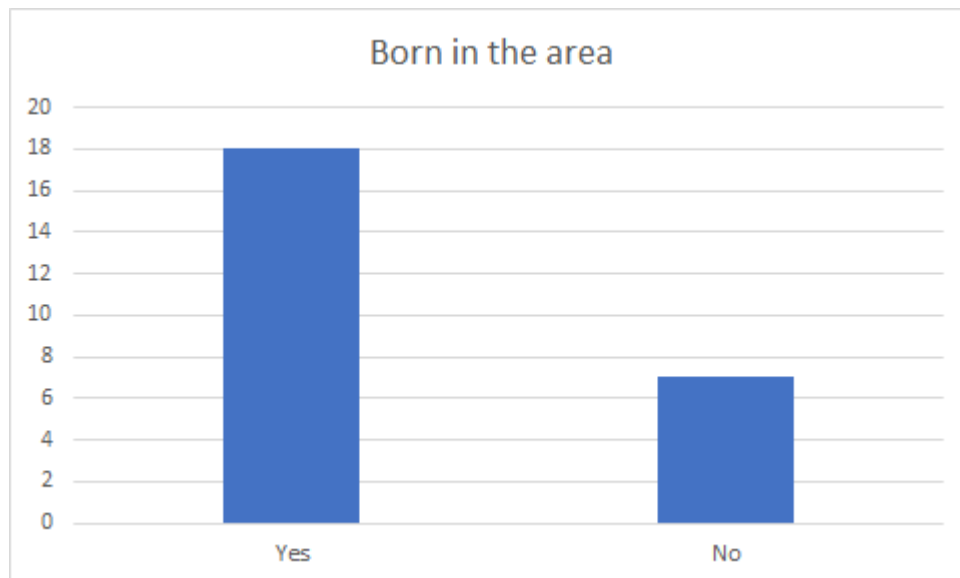
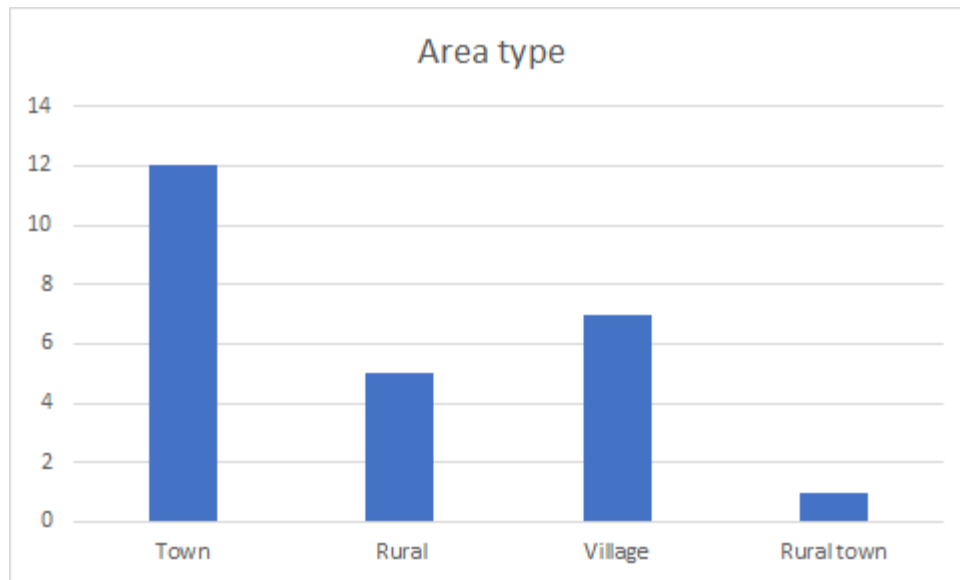








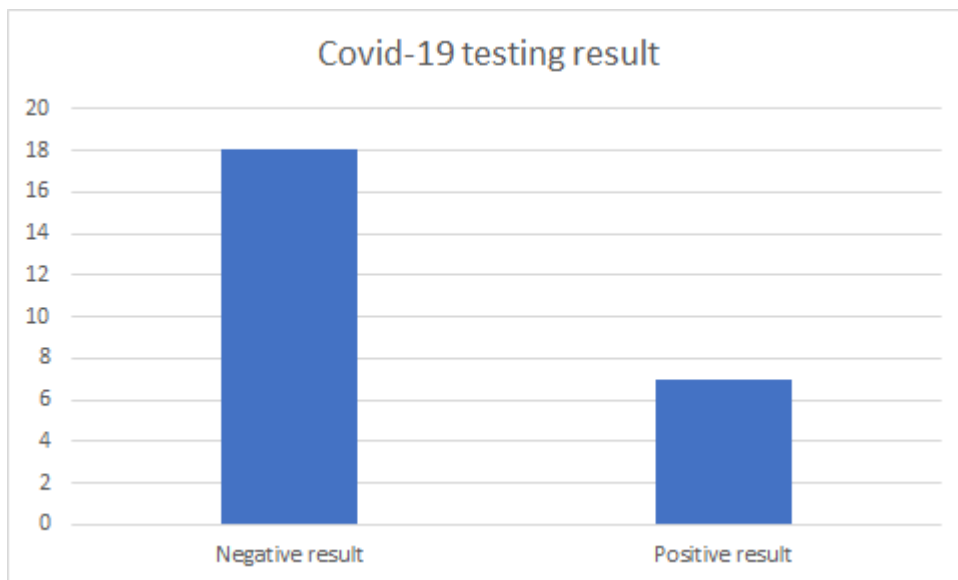
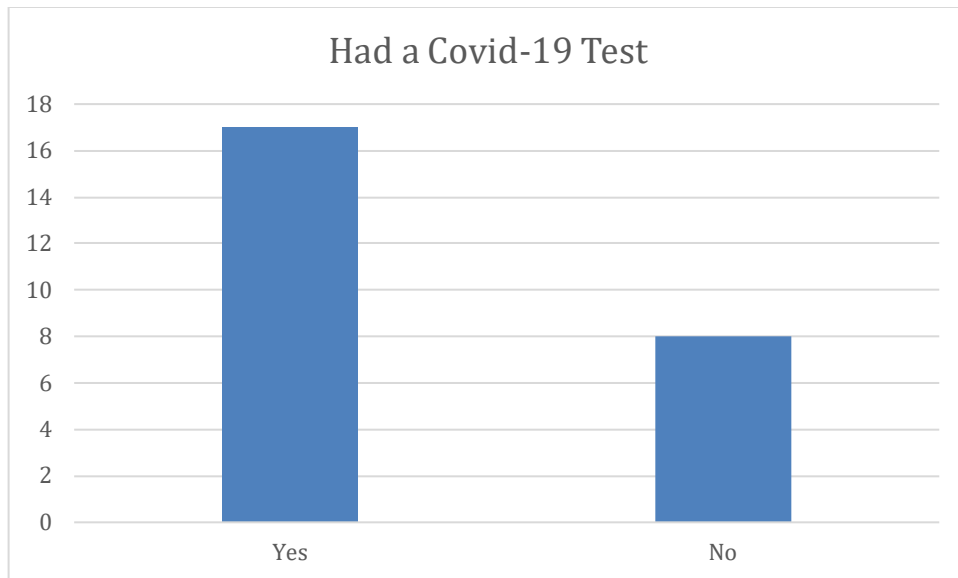




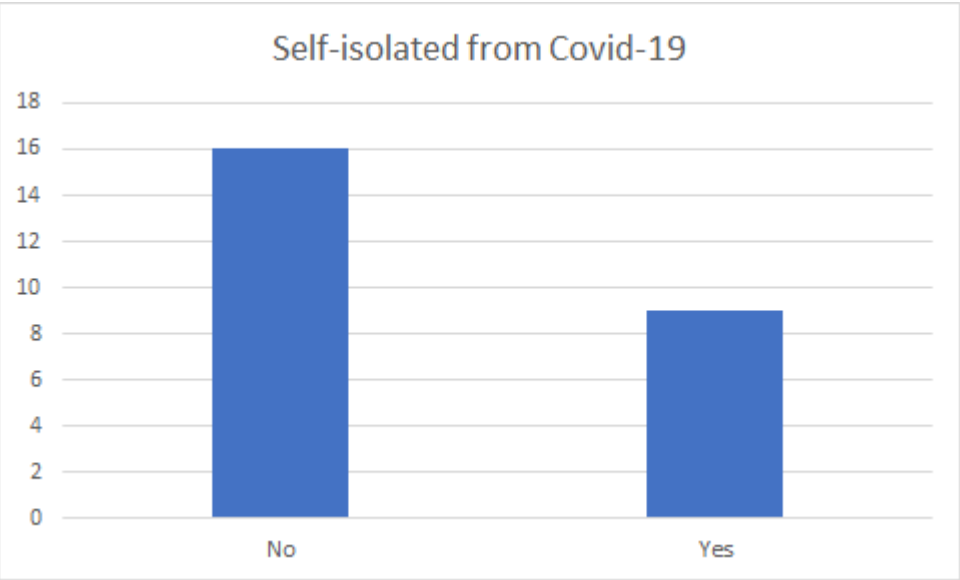
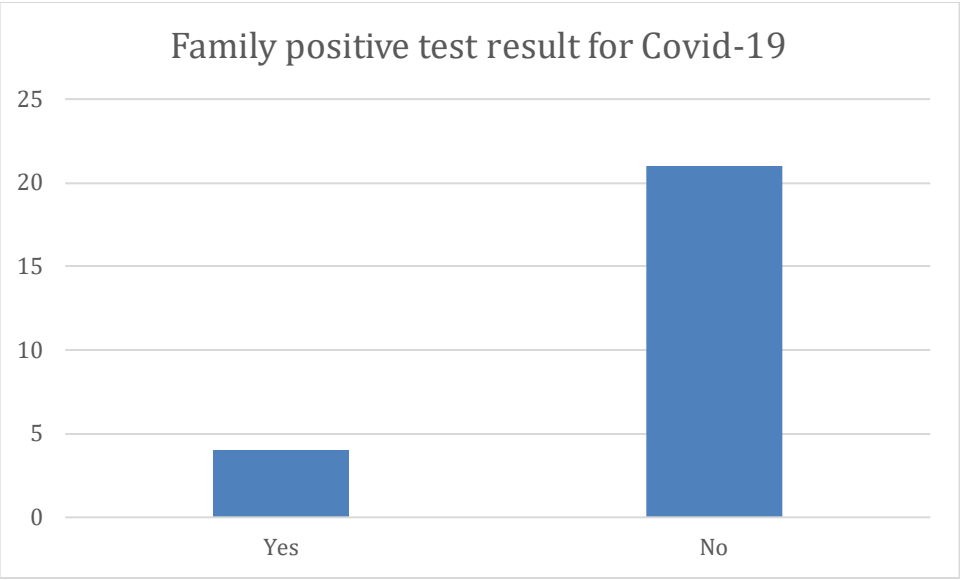
#### COVID-19 QUESTIONS

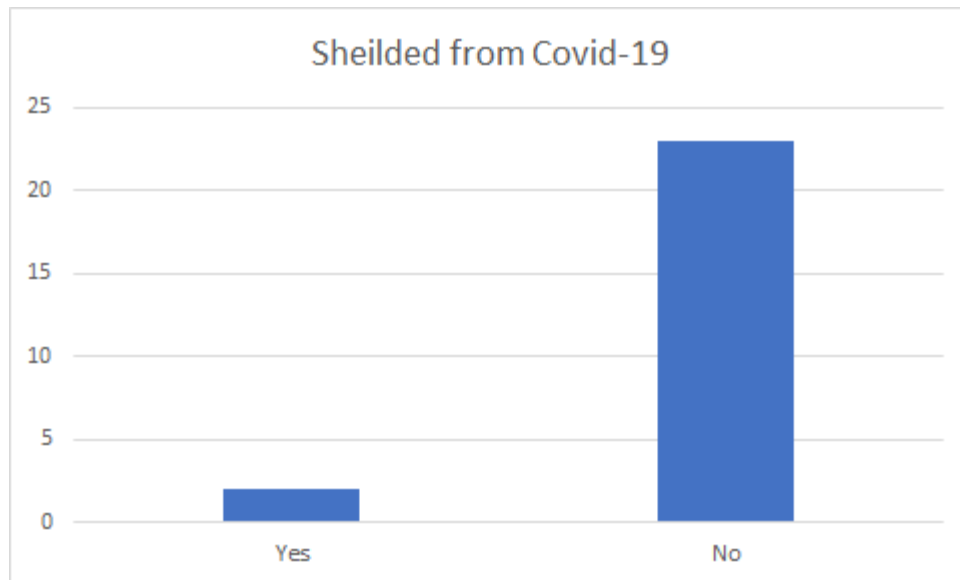
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The following section contains the results of the Covid-19 health questions asked for the working during covid survey.









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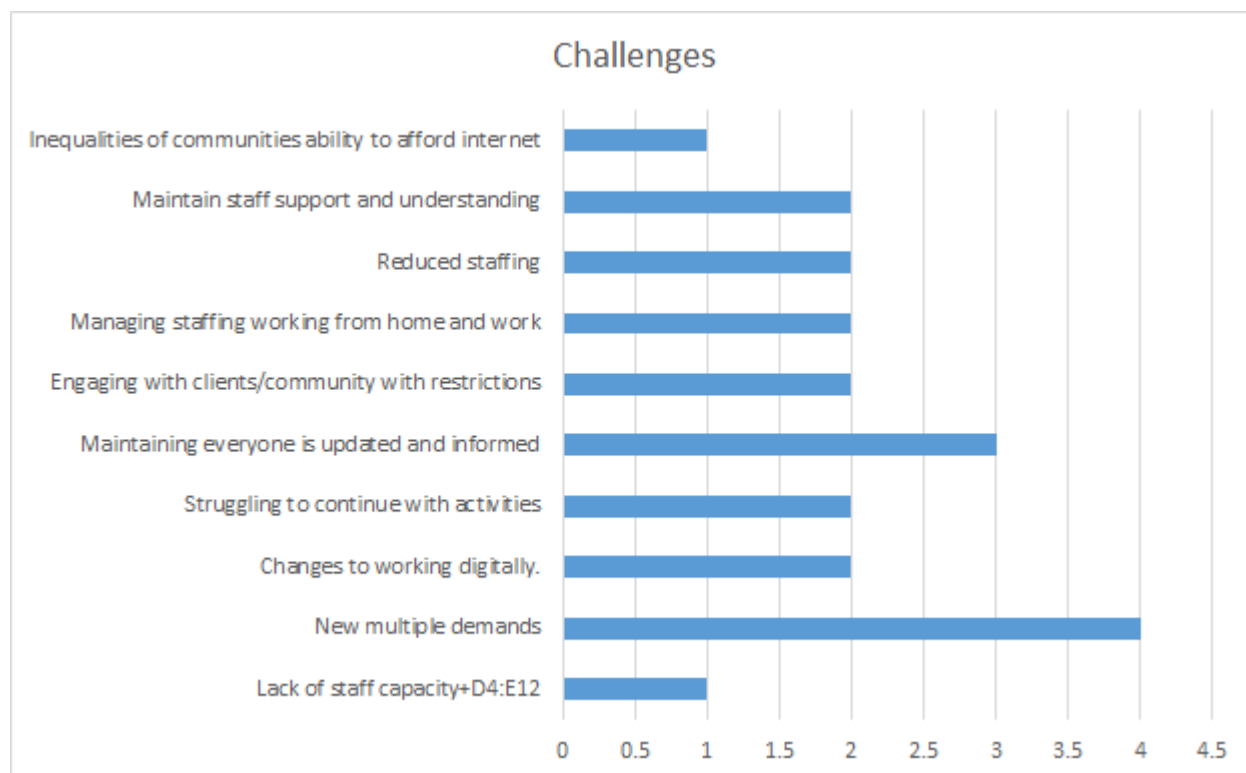
#### WHAT WAS IT LIKE AS AN ORGANISATION: SURVEY RESULTS.

In this survey, only open questions were asked. We will look at the questions answered and again separate them into four categories.

- Challenges
- Opportunities/Positives
- Support
- Looking forward

From these categories, we have created common themes that came from the *open* questions asked within the survey.

These questions were asked on behalf of the organisation involved so have not been coded against the questions asked to individual respondents.



There were challenges with reduced staffing due to some people isolating, on furlough or shielding. Managing staff who were working from home was something that needed consideration too as it meant making sure that they were okay and well supported still.

There were many new demands on the voluntary and statutory sectors too, staff working longer hours and having to do new roles that they wouldn't normally do, to make sure that the community were supported. This caused stress and there is the concern of burnout.

*"Relaying relevant and accurate information to all personnel promptly, ensuring that they feel safe and aware of what the requirements are for their and others health and wellbeing"*

*"Covid 19!!! Lack of staff capacity, multiple demands, work in a health-related field"*

*"Keeping activities going, especially as indoor facilities have been closed or severely restricted"*

*"Working with the community when you cannot engage with the community. Having to get creative to start projects. Overcoming the amount of time it has taken to achieve things. Something that would normally only take a few days has taken months sometimes"*

*"Working within other services to support users due to reduction in staff (furloughed)"*

*"Accepting that things take longer to achieve now. - Having to adapt to finding new ways to communicate with the community and find new ways to create social activities with many safety regulations. - Allow for an understanding of staff working from home, making work and home life a challenge. Being understanding and supportive of that"*

*“The extent of people suffering from poor mental health. The difference the community sector can make quickly if given the support. The major inequality suffered by people without internet access, quite often as a result of poverty”*



It was stated that there had been many more online training opportunities which the organisations hoped would continue once things go back to normal. Being in a rural community it can be expensive and time-consuming having to travel long distances to meetings and training. They stated that new avenues and opportunities had opened up and that organisations had started working together better due to more people holding meetings online. It has helped with communication between all groups, which created a better support network.

*“We have worked with so many different organisations and those new connections will make our organisation stronger going forward”*

*“Developing new collaborative partnerships and networks, more local and regional cohesion around planning and delivery”*

*“People have banded together within their teams. The company's direction towards working from home”*

*“We have seen lots of new friendships build all around the Highland area from our online activities”*

*“All the organisations going online. Before if there was a community meeting or a meeting for different groups from around the county would need to meet up, they were always quite low attended. Now, we see different people from different groups and statutory organisations all working together. It uses to be impossible to get all these different people in one room as the travelling was too much and too time-consuming”*

*“That the community are very good at pulling together. That staff are extremely adaptive and creative in making sure that they can still get their job done and support the community. That humans are inherently kind”*



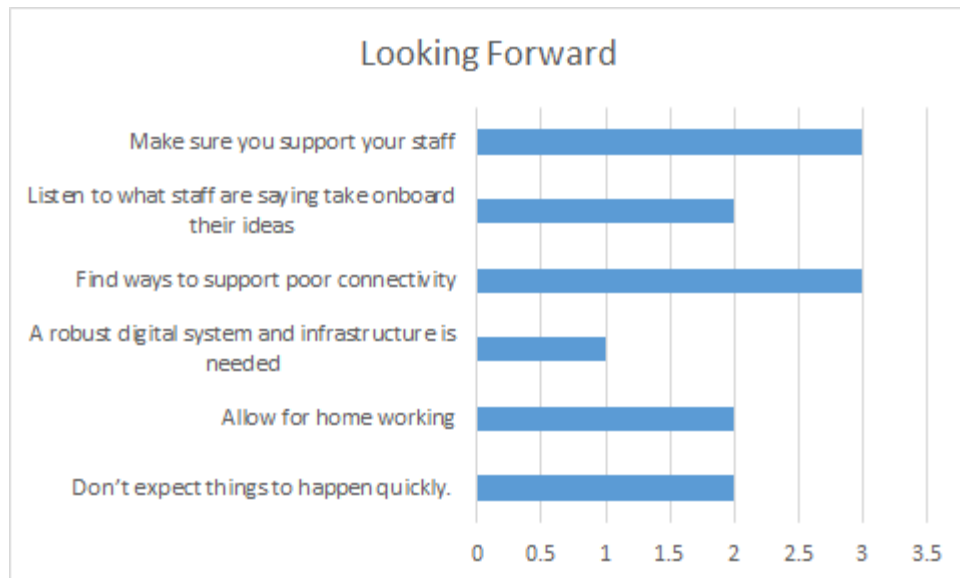
It was expressed that employers needed to make sure they supported the mental health needs of their employees, to be more flexible with working from home and office, and what hours were worked and when, where possible.

*“Working from home. Ensuring security is in place to allow working from home. Methods of communication for home workers and site workers”*

*“Allow for an understanding of staff working from home, making work and home-life a challenge. Being understanding and supportive of that”*

*“Changing face to face to online Upping peer support from monthly to weekly Staff working from home”*

*“Everyone's response is different, requiring different support. People are coming together to help and support others as best as they can. Things can change and it's not a case of 'but this is how it's always been done”*



The organisations made it clear just how important it is to make sure that you are providing the best support possible to your staff and to be understanding. Many stated that going forward there has to be a greater understanding of your staffs home situations.

*“Make time for the staff, allow them to adapt and support them in every way possible. Adapting to the current situation has put immense pressure on workers and families. Creating a support system in your organisation goes a long way”*

*“Listen to everyone in the team as everyone has great ideas and don't be scared to try new things”*

*“Listen to the ground-floor & in-person workers, they're the ones doing the job, know it best and are likely to take the advice of better ways of working. Change is possible so don't dismiss an idea if it's not liked - it might be a better way forward for the organisation. People within the company are the biggest and best asset, listen to and use them wisely”*

*“Have robust digital systems and infrastructure in place for staff and service users as well as alternatives for those who are not linked to the internet or smartphones”*

*“Be prepared for the long haul”*

*“Large organisation - Staff need to be cared for”*

#### DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION AND COVID-19 QUESTIONS

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There were no demographic or covid questions asked to the organisations as they represented as a whole rather than individuals.

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#### HOW DID COVID-19 AFFECT YOU MENTALLY AND FINANCIALLY: SURVEY RESULTS

We will look at the open questions answered in this survey. The common themes cover three of the four-set categories;

- Challenges
- Opportunities/Positives
- Support

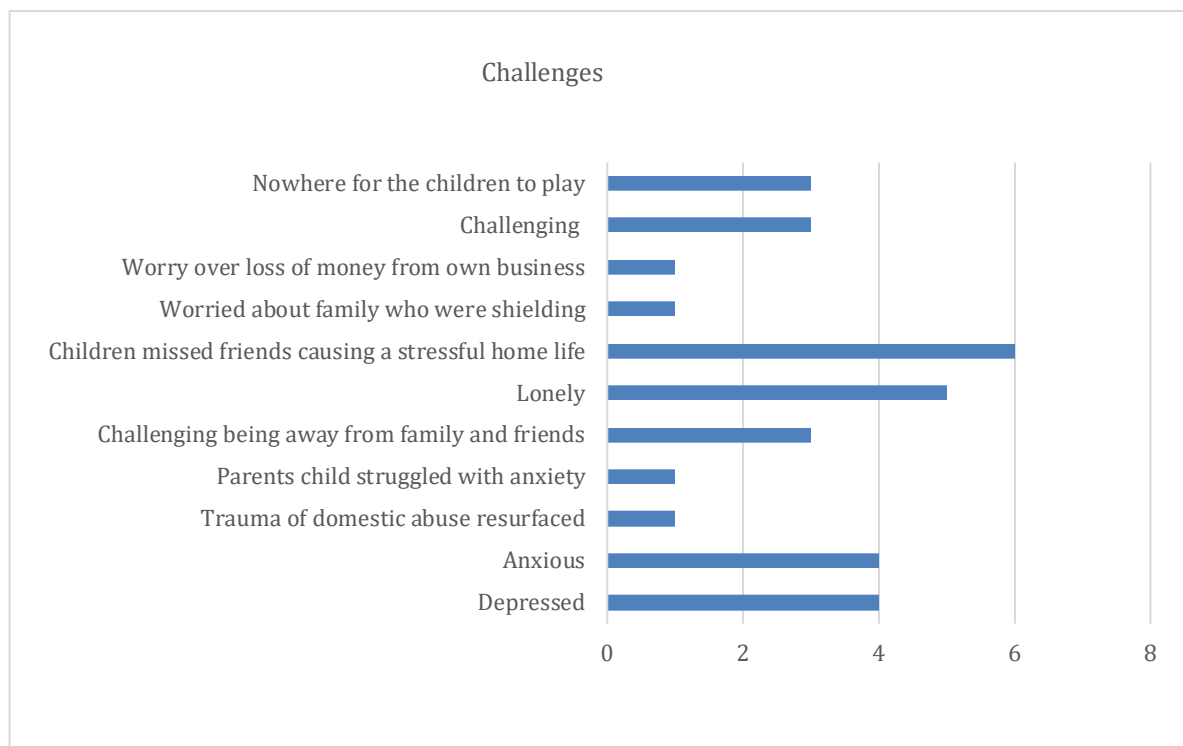
Two questions were asked by Julie to her service users, these were

- How did Covid-19 affect your Mental Health
- How did Covid-19 affect you financially

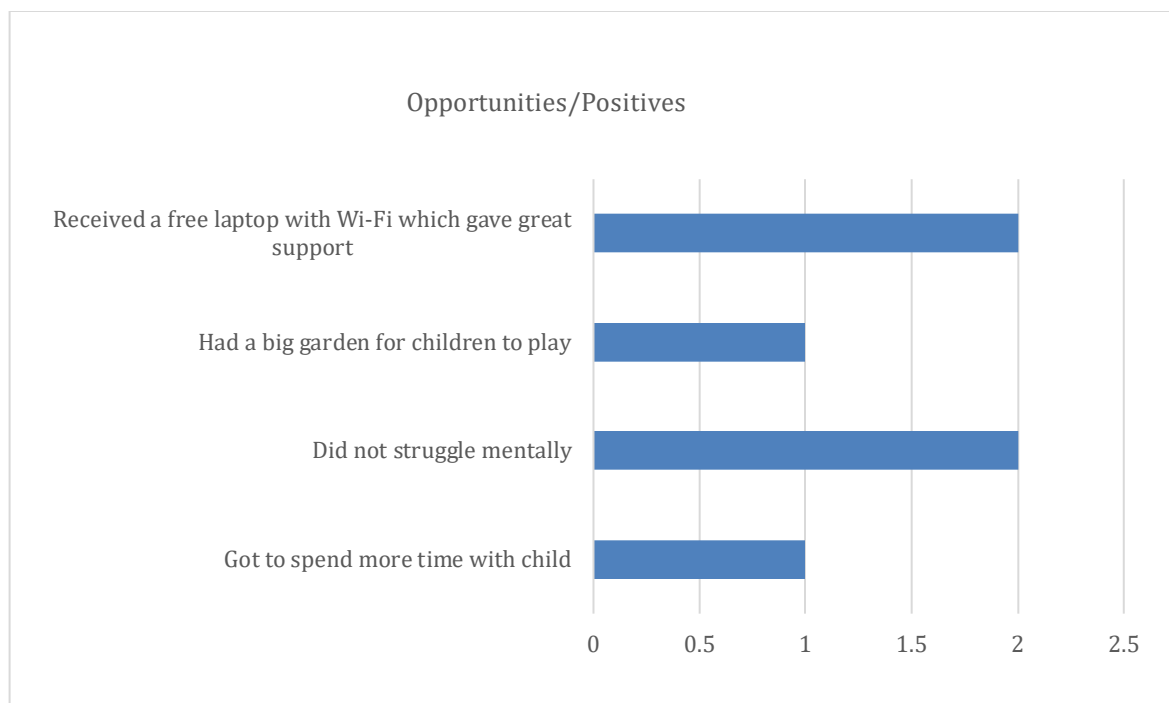
Both sets of questions have been separated in the categories they matched up to.

#### THEMES ATTACHED TO THE RESPONDENTS MENTAL HEALTH

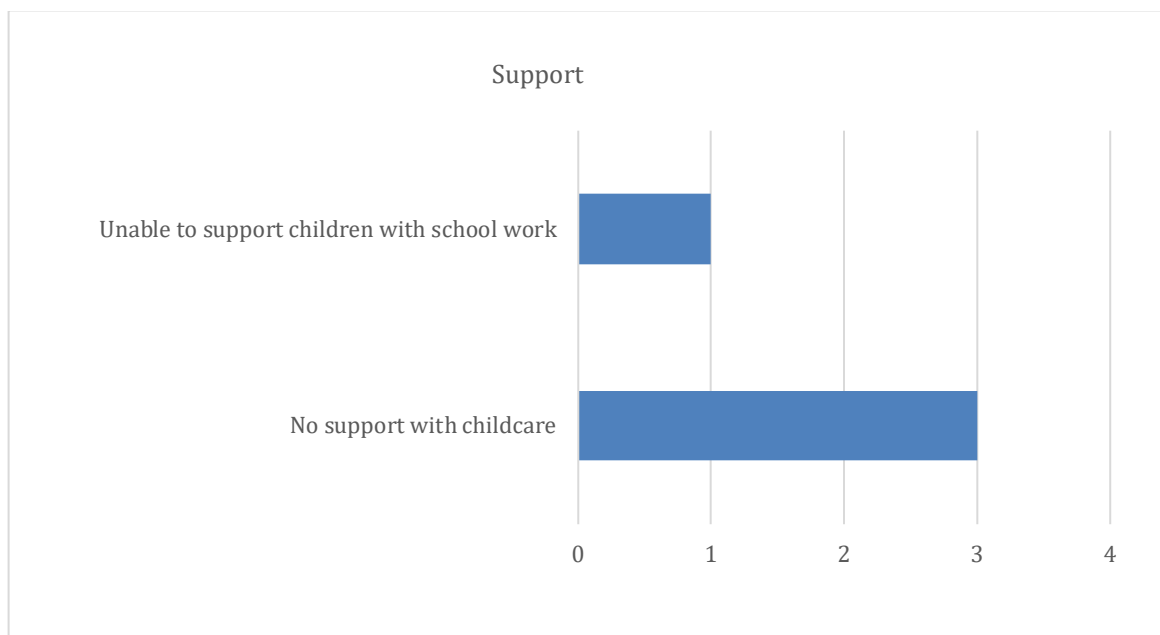
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The participants found it stressful trying to manage a household with teenage children, trying to keep them entertained and support them with their schoolwork. Parents with small children also struggled due to not having a support network around them, many of them still had to work full time too. It was clear that a lot of people were struggling with depression, anxiety and loneliness too.



Some participants talked about receiving a free laptop, this is through a government-run scheme called 'Connecting Scotland'. It offers free i-Pad's or Chromebooks along with 20 months of free wifi for people who are struggling to pay for their own devices.



The support chart on this one is not a positive one like the other ones, with the feedback from these participants it was clear that they had struggled a lot. It was poignant that the parents found it difficult to manage and stressful taking care of their children without any support network.

*I have been more anxious depressed and lonely. My traumas due to domestic abuse resurfaced due to being alone and unable to work. Having my children home all day and with no support*



*was very stress full as I felt I was unable to support them with their school work*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*I missed my work and felt helpless and that I could have done more. Over time I have developed anxiety. Being away from family and friends has been tough, but a positive has been I got to spend time with my daughter, I wouldn't have otherwise.*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*it was harder as I became a mum for the 2nd time during lockdown and had no support I missed my family network, my older child struggled not being able to go out to play or mix with family and friends.*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

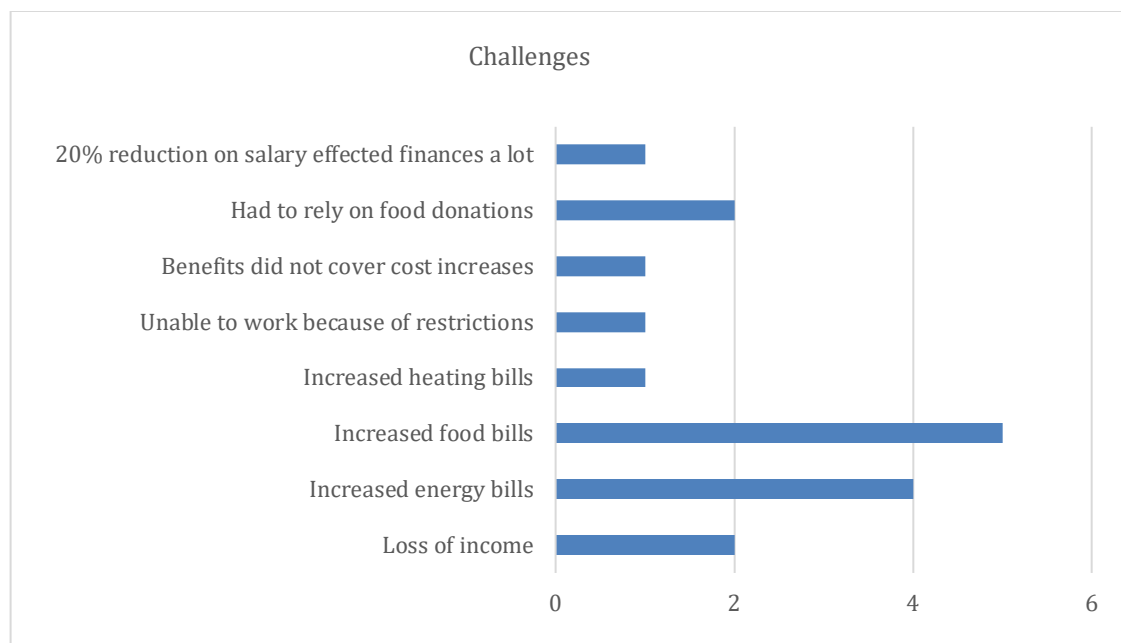
*it was hard as my teenagers were unable to go out and mix with friends, this caused huge arguments and stress, making me depressed and my illness worse. I worried about my dad who had no support due to my shielding.*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*it was very hard and challenging as myself, wife and children were stuck in the house, we have a tiny back garden with no sunlight this caused arguments, stresses and other issues, when we received a laptop and Wi-Fi connection this helped, as the children were able to speak with their friends online and keep up to date with school work*  
(Male aged 30 – 49)

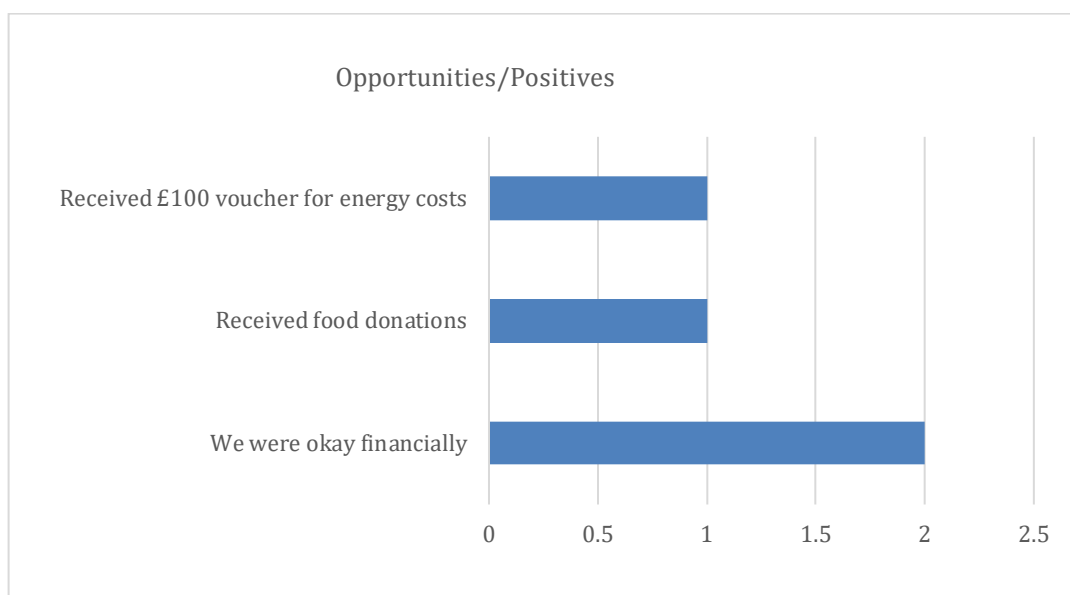
*I missed my family very much, special birthdays were missed. I was lonely and isolated from family friend and neighbours*  
(Female aged 65+)

THEMES ATTACHED TO THE RESPONDENTS FINANCES

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There were lots of challenges expressed by the people who were interviewed by Julie on the Ormlie estate. They had to receive food parcels. The benefits they received did not allow them enough to pay for food and bills. They had an increase in energy costs, heating costs and food bills because all the family were home all day. Some participants also had a loss of income.



One participant received an energy voucher from the Highland Council for £100 which they were very grateful for, they also received food parcels which they also really appreciated. Although another participant who talked about food parcels saw this as a negative, just at the thought that they were in a situation where they needed one. Two participants stated that they did not struggle with their finances, which they saw a lucky.

*I was affected by the loss of income, increase energy and food bills due to my children and me being at home all day.*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*I was impacted due to increased utility and food bills*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*We struggled due to reduction in income and increased heating, electricity and food bills*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*My bills were increased due to having 3 teenagers at home, the increased food and energy bills*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

*It was hard due to increased electricity and food bills, we were lucky we received food donations, a laptop and a £100 voucher towards the electricity bill*  
(Female aged 30 – 49)

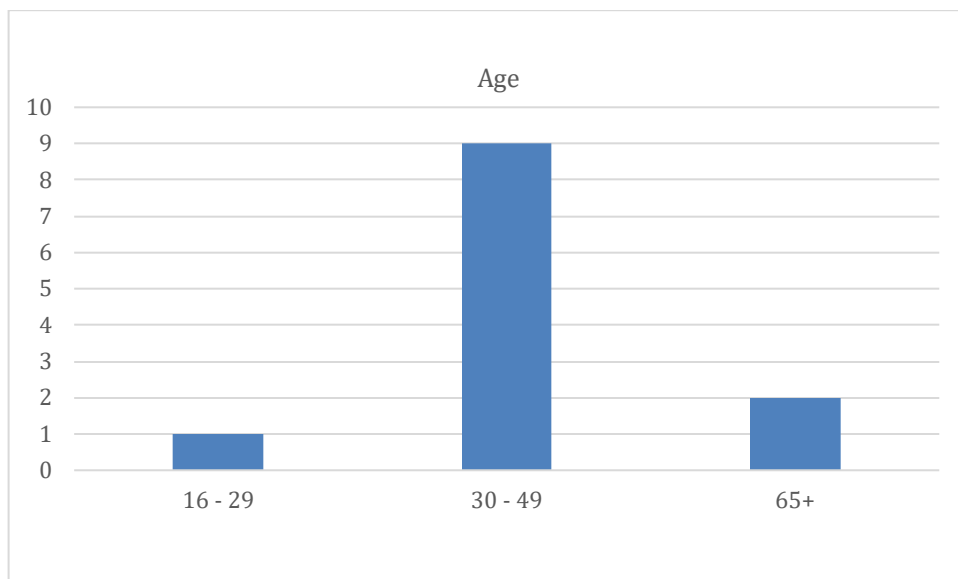
*I was furloughed and had a 20% reduction in income which badly affected my family. We relied on food donations.*  
(Male 30 – 39)

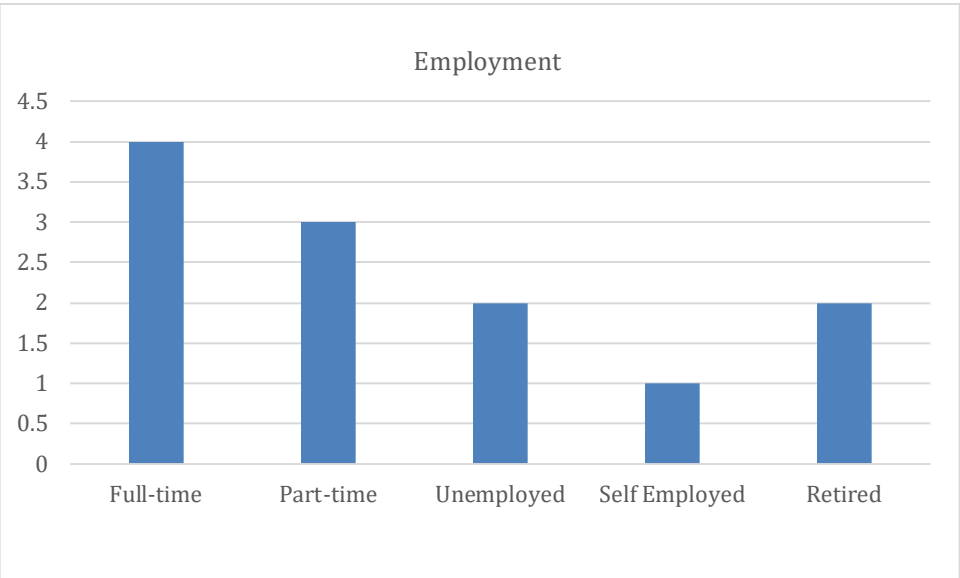
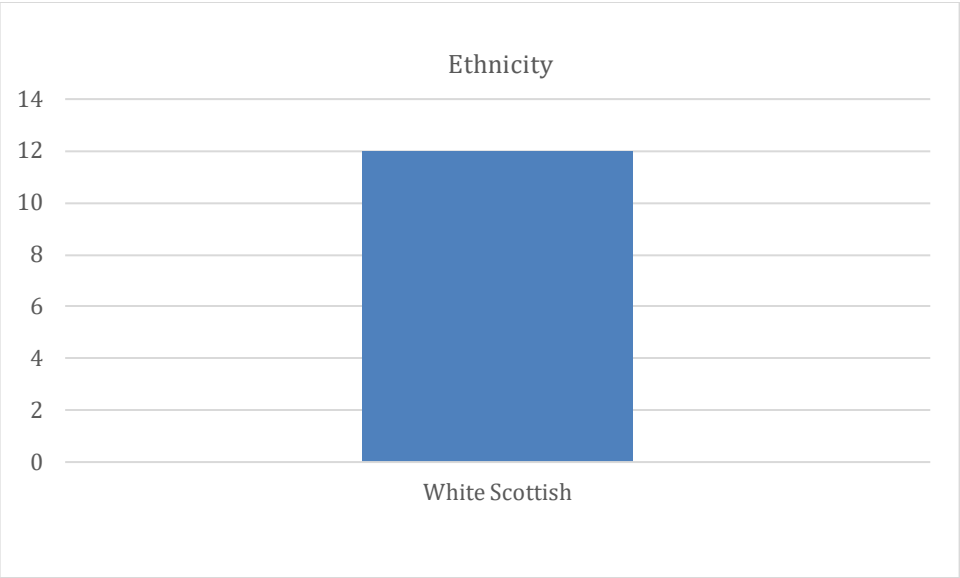
*I was unaffected financially*  
(Male 65+)

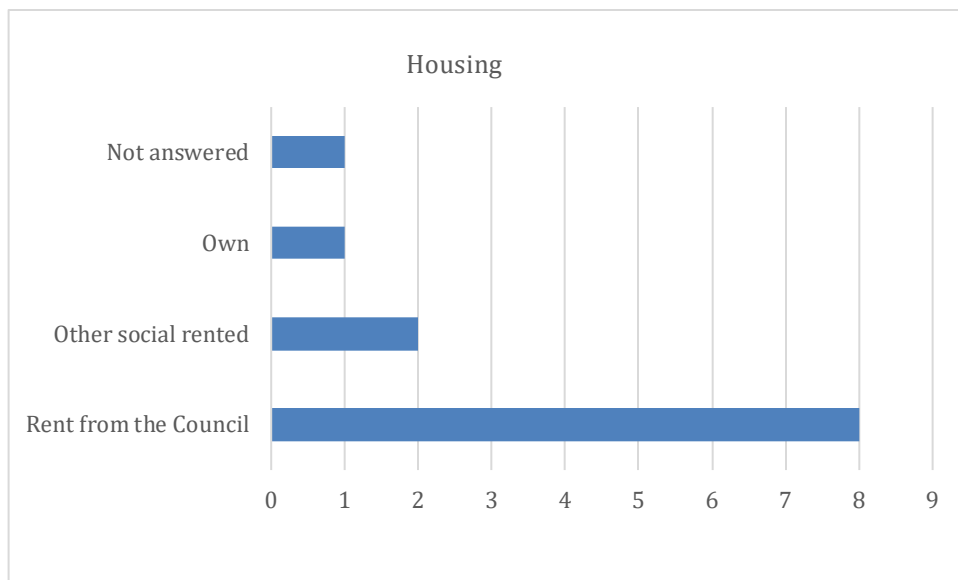
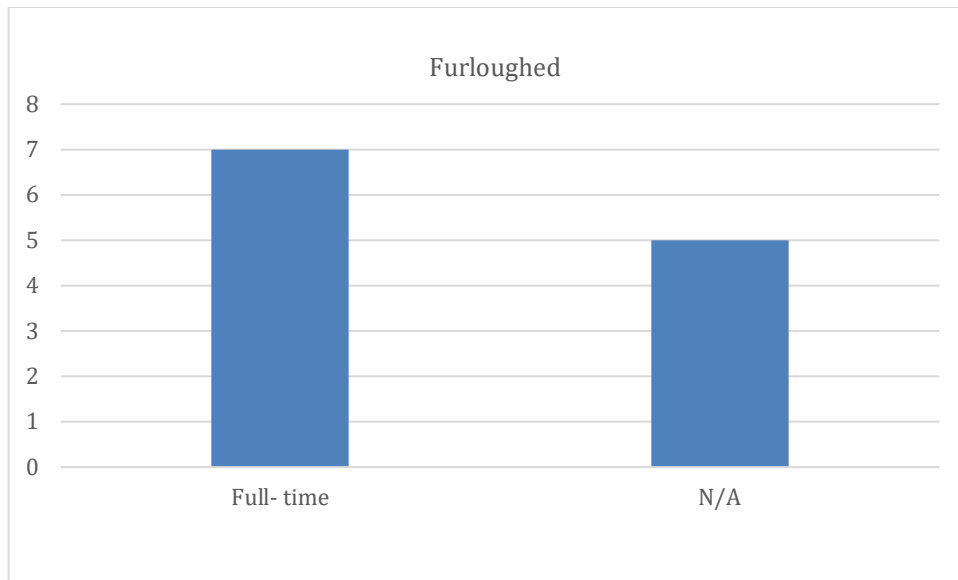
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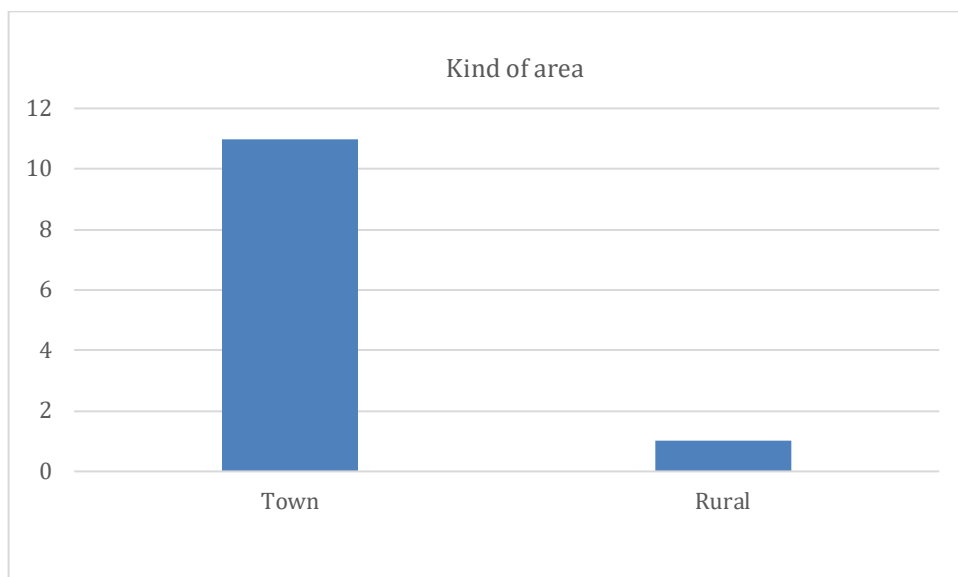
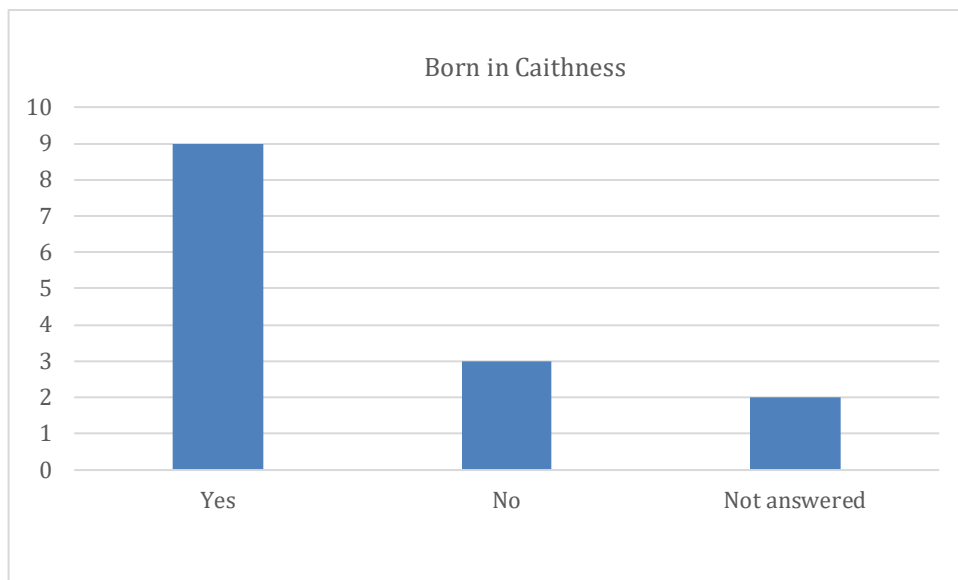
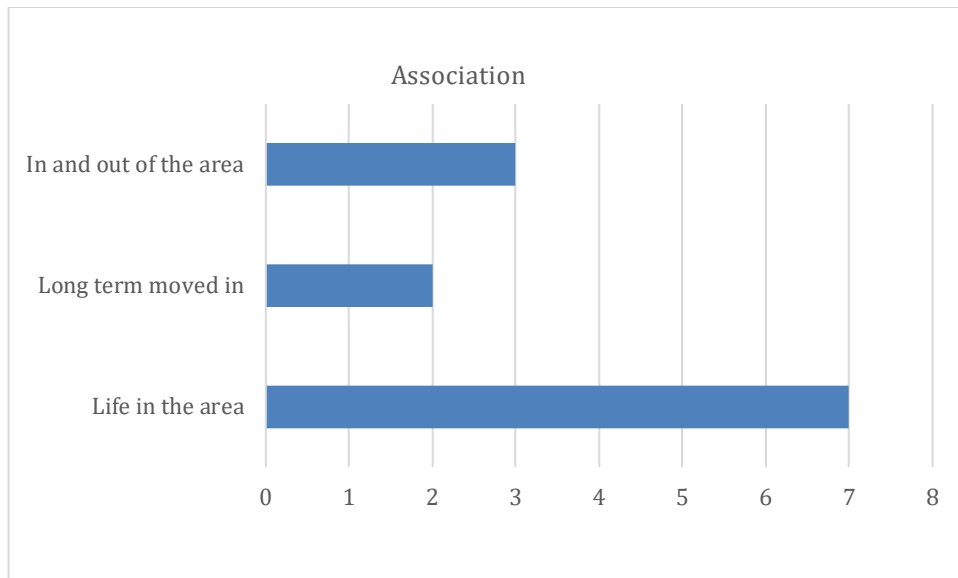
#### DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONS

The following section contains the results of the demographic questions asked for the mental and financial survey results.





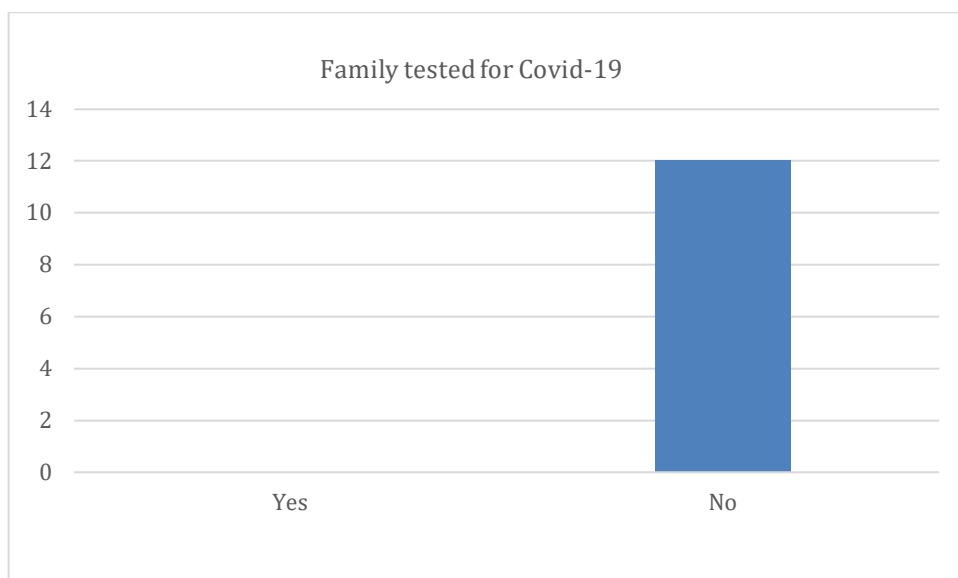
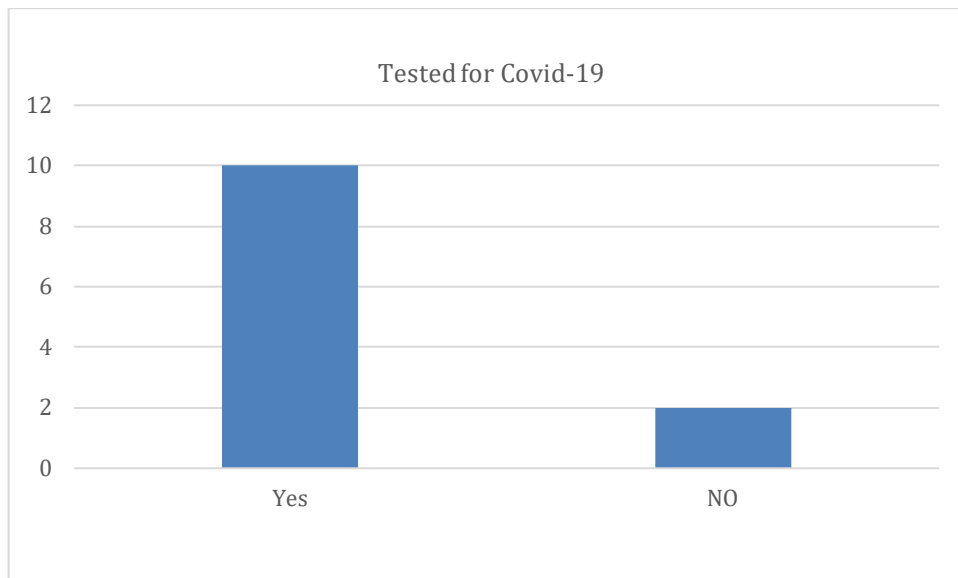


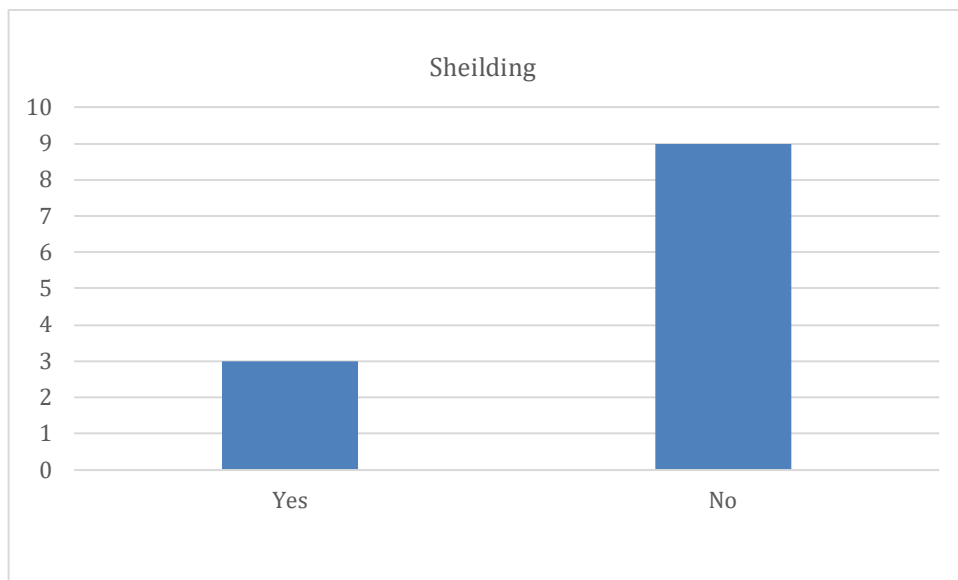
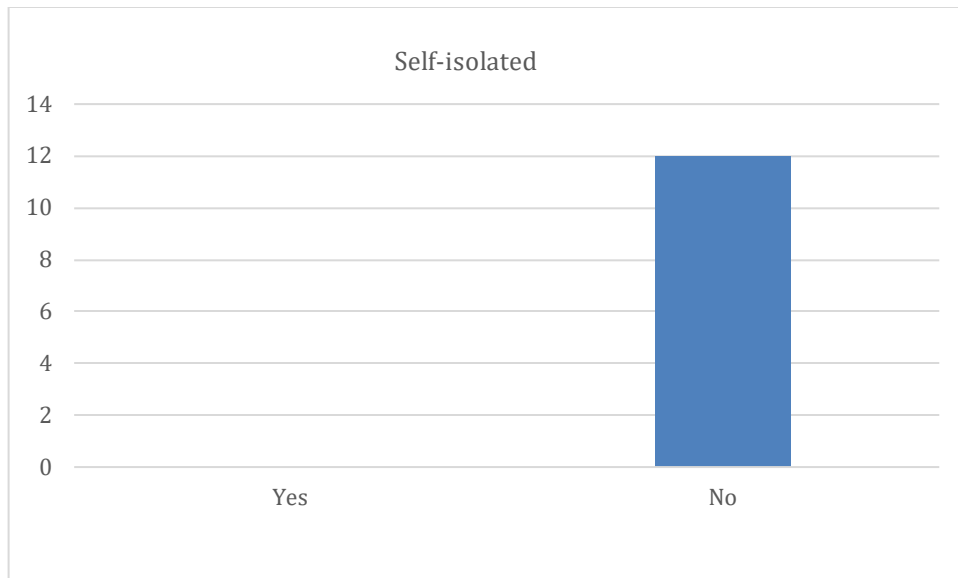


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## COVID-19 QUESTIONS

The following section contains the results of the demographic questions asked for the mental and financial survey results.





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#### COVID-19 AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT

The following section outlines the responses to the short interviews with volunteers working in Caithness in environmental related activities. Respondents were asked whether they thought the Covid Pandemic had an impact on the environment. All respondents thought that the pandemic did have an impact on the environment with some suggestions both in regard to positive and negative impacts.

*"Less traffic"*

*(Female 50)*

*"The roads, litter, and human waste needs addressed"*



*(Male 30-49)*

All respondents apart from one spent more time outside during lockdown. The one respondent who spent less time outside responded suggesting that restrictions were the reason:

*"I am normally out and about a lot, but we were restricted"*

*(Male 30-49)*

Respondents were asked whether they felt there was enough support from the Government to support the extra pressures put on the environment. All respondents responded that they were unsure with some reasons being given:

*"Roads now a serious state with people holidaying local. Need more public facilities." (Female 50)*

*"I'm not sure, it was all new for everyone and no one could have predicted this" (Male 16-29)*

The interview went on to ask respondents if they felt that the community had pulled together to tackle any effects on the environment. All agreed that they had, however one suggested that this was not uniform across the whole community:

*"Many try to respect regulations but not all – litter and fly tipping."*

*(Female 50-64)*

There were mixed results as to whether there was an increase in maintenance required by those who volunteered with various environmental organisations. For one volunteer this was associated with increased numbers:

*"The forest is usually busy anyway, but for the last year we have seemed about 100% increase in people and cars to the car park"*

*(Male 30-49)*

There was a final question asked around whether respondents felt the local authority, in this case Highland Council, could have facilitated the use of outdoor space better. Respondents were largely in agreement that the space could have been better facilitated:

*"Open public toilets, have facilities for travellers to get rid of their waste."*

*(Female 50-64)*

*"Maintained the roads and car parks better as they were neglected to a bad extent, potholes very bad especially in non-urgent roads but there are a lot of rural connecting roads, not just main routes."*

*(Male 30-49)*

Respondents were all from villages or rural areas in Caithness with a higher percentage of unemployed and volunteers compared to other aspects of the study, perhaps reflecting the sampling method used.

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#### COVID-19 INTERVIEWS ON THE IMPACT ON THE BEAREAVMENT PROCESS

The following section outlines results from the semi-structure qualitative interviews undertaking to understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the bereavement process.

Results from the bereavement interviews come from a range of interviewees. Some of the interviewees are those who have experienced bereavement at some point through the pandemic, some of the interviewees are those who have worked with those bereaved through the pandemic (including palliative care professional, emergency services personnel and civil celebrant), and some of the interviewees fall into both categories.

The results will first address the four open question responses categories: Challenges, Opportunities and Positives, Support and Looking forward, before looking at specific themes and topics.

The majority of the responses could largely be attributed to the challenge's category across a broad range of opinions. Many could be considered a hard time made worse:

*"There are big differences between before and during covid."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

*"This has been so hard on families at a hard time in their lives. It is hard anyway but because of Covid sitting with face masks covering their faces so that the dying person could not recognise who they were, not being able to share the grief made it all so much worse." (Female 50-64)  
Palliative care professional*

One respondent in particular highlighted this issue through their story. They felt that the challenges associated with the covid pandemic had specifically led to her father's death:

*"although my dad didn't die from Covid, I really believe that the lockdown caused his death because the hospital being closed, he couldn't get the treatment for his condition... Dad's treatment was never finished so he had to go back in to finish the treatment and because of this he got hospital acquired pneumonia which killed him, it is on his death certificate." (Female 16-29) Bereaved*

In this case the challenge of not being able to get treatment on a normal schedule, led to hospitalisation for a separate complication. The situation was made worse in that the family member thought that with greater access, available during non-covid times, they would have spotted the complications sooner:

*"If visiting hours hadn't been so restricted, we would have been able to visit more and would have noticed what was going on and prevented that actions that caused his death." (Female 16-29) Bereaved*

All interviewees did suggest at least on opportunity or positive outcome with almost everyone addressing a specific theme or topic of interest which will be covered later in this section. One professional did highlight that most bereaved understood and accepted the situation they found themselves in:

*"On the whole the bereaved families have been accepting of and understanding of the situation."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

A number of the interviewees identified different aspects of support they provided or had provided to them. One professional highlighted that they don't think they could have done anymore under the circumstances:

*"I don't think we could have done anymore to make things easier than we did do." (Female 50-64)*

*Palliative care professional*

However almost all comments from those bereaved centred on the work of the funeral directors and these were all of a positive nature despite some of the complications of working under lockdown:

*"I was so glad the funeral directors sorted it out it was one less thing for me to worry about."*

*(Female 16-29) Bereaved*

*"The people at Dunnetts ( the funeral directors) were really helpful but it was all distance and face masks which made things rather cold and distant."*

*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

Funeral directors were also singled out for their adaptability under the circumstances to new ways of working:

*"It has also meant that funeral directors have adapted very quickly to use apps that allow people to attend the funeral from anywhere."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

*"There have been a number of adaptations made by the funeral industry for example some companies could supply a "wake in a box" which was a round of sandwiches, a couple of cakes and a miniature, a wine or a soft drink with which to toast the deceased."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

All respondents were keen to suggest ways to improve looking forward with the civil celebrant who also experienced bereavement offering the most comprehensive suggestions:

*"People are infinitely adaptable. Communication is the key to success. Levels of empathy within the industry need to be consistent regardless of the situation. How it is perceived can be affected by the communication method. Physical and visual cues are minimised in some communication methods. The need for masks exacerbates this, you can't see a smile through a mask, transparent masks might help. Established beliefs and traditions around funeral practices can be changed when necessity requires."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

Against the backdrop of these four main categories some key themes came through from with specific reference to issues related to bereavement.

One issue that came through a majority of the interviews was the issue of technology and the impact this had on the bereavement process, both positive and negative. A number of issues related to the move to paperwork being done electronically and this leading to delays, many the cause of the hospital:

*"After his death everything had to be done electronically, this was done by the hospital but they forgot or at least delayed getting the information to the registrar who then had to phone me."*  
*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

*"...getting a death certificate for example was all done via email, no talking to a person all very impersonal."*  
*(Female 50-64) Palliative care professional*

Technology was quickly adopted by the service providers (covered earlier in this section) but from a user perspective the results were sometimes cold and impersonal both in planning funeral services as well as taking part in funeral services:

*"...writing the eulogy with the celebrant getting the information to him all had to be done by email it was just so cold, impersonal and lacking the human touch."*  
*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

*"I took advantage of attending a Zoom funeral and almost wish I hadn't, I watched on as a pretty dreadful service took place."*

*(Female 65+)*

*"The counselling/ceremony preparations evolve quite quickly into phone call and internet meetings which were a bit of a double edged sword, in one way it made things very impersonal but on the other had it also meant that... family and friends from around the world could have input into the creation of the funeral service"*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

As we saw elsewhere in the economy businesses were quick to adapt to doing business against the backdrop of lockdown. The funeral industry also undertook these measures:

*"There have been a number of adaptations made by the funeral industry for example some companies could supply a "wake in a box" which was a round of sandwiches, a couple of cakes and a miniature, a wine or a soft drink with which to toast the deceased."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

Funeral services did however provide a fairly common benefit across many respondents in limiting the number of negative outcomes from the services. These negative outcomes mainly alluded to difficult family relationships. Interviewees managed to find some humour and relief in these comments:

*"If there was a plus side at least we didn't have to put up with 'rubber neckers' or family picking holes!"*

*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

*"So many people chose to have immediate family only funerals – having tight covid restrictions has proved a blessing to some families!"*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

*"In some ways lockdown made things easier, no family could get up so no family politics, we knew what dad wanted and so he got it, no arguments."*

*(Female 16-29) Bereaved*

People wanting to mark their respects also found novel ways to do so, particularly in a local sense. As part of the new normal with restricted service sizes many people lined the streets as the funeral procession passed:

*"Anecdotal evidence – because of the restricted numbers attending for such a long time, where the deceased was a member of a large family group, a community group or a particularly young members of the groups or family and friends would, socially distancing and keeping to the covid restrictions, line the route or surround the cemetery showing their respect for the deceased. People have adapted and understood the need."*

*(Male 50-64) Bereaved and Civil Celebrant*

*"One friend, former Royal Navy, passed away early in the lockdown and I couldn't let him 'cross the bar' without some sort of send-off so my wife and I stood at the gateway of where the funeral took place and saluted the hearse in."*

*(Male 65+) Bereaved*

The main theme to come in across almost every respondent was the lack of human touch which is used in many bereavement situations to help comfort the bereaved. This was noted from professionals wanting to help as well as those wanting helped. It has been considered in this case both in a physical and metaphorical sense:

*"There is a complete lack of bereavement counselling, the community health team have never been in touch. The human touch is so desperately needed."*

*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

*Wearing a mask hides all facial expression making communication hard, this sounds blunt but emergency situations are always the same, words without the personal touch are just words."*

*(Male 50-64) Emergency Services Personnel*

*"It was hard for us as well as we weren't able to provide any comfort we couldn't hug or touch anyone and it is so natural for us to do this, it has been horrid. Everything has been so lacking the human touch"*

*(Female 50-64) Palliative care professional*

*"...writing the eulogy with the celebrant getting the information to him all had to be done by email it was just so cold, impersonal and lacking the human touch."*

*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

*"There is a complete lack of bereavement counselling, the community health team have never been in touch. The human touch is so desperately needed."*

*(Female 50-64) Bereaved*

Respondents were mainly older and retired, perhaps reflecting those more likely to experience bereavement but also perhaps due to the purposive sampling approach. There were however a number of younger individuals who offered unique insight into the bereavement process. Perhaps again reflecting the older age of respondents, most were owners of their own homes. Most respondents were long term moved in with two thirds being found in a town and one third being found in a rural area.

## LESSONS FROM THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The following sections aims to capture lessons from each respective research theme. These have not been prioritised, however in cases where it has been possible an indication of support from respondents has been made.

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### WORKING DURING COVID SURVEY; LESSONS LEARNT

When asked if they thought that their mental health had been affected 19 of the 26 participants stated that they did feel like their mental health had been affected and 25 participants of the 26 felt that there was going to be an effect on staff health as a result of Covid-19.

When asked if trying to care for a child or family member had affected their mental health with still having to try and continue working 14 stated that yes it had been affected and 12 did not feel that it had.

18 of the participants felt that their employer had supported them throughout the pandemic and 8 stated that they did not feel that they had got the support they needed.

When asked, now that things are looking to open back up, do you feel your employers are taking the right precautions to keep yourself and your colleagues safe, 22 said that yes they thought their employer had taken the correct precautions and 4 people stated that their employees had not done enough?

When asked if they had been negatively affected by the pandemic 4 people stated that they had been financially affected, 8 stated that they had not been affected and 14 said that they had neither been positively or negatively affected.

The majority of employers were supportive, understanding and allowed for flexible hours. Several also offered full pay without needing to work or claiming furlough.

There was also a lot of pressure for people to work without any real structure and on-demand. People were waking up and as they were working from home they found themselves not getting that time between home and the office. This put pressure on the staff.

Due to Covid-19, many parents struggle with childcare. Although employees were often supportive and understanding of this, it caused a lot of stress to the workers trying to balance working and being a parent. This often caused guilt over not being able to commit fully to either.

There is a question if employers need to go back to the office full time working. Does this way of a working life help support families by offering flexible hours working from home and office? Would this help support the mental health needs of the workforce?

Looking forward, the participants expressed that appropriate social distancing in an office/working environment was vital and that communication and reassurance between staff and the employer were important to keep staff updated and procedures.

It was also expressed that due to Covid-19 some work practices had changed and that they should be considered as a new 'normal'.

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#### GOING TO SCHOOL DURING A PANDEMIC: LESSONS LEARNT.

The majority of the students who participated would prefer to go to school rather than be self-isolated at home

When asked if the students preferred to work from school three said that they preferred school 2 said they would not and two said that they either would or wouldn't. This is interesting compared to the question of the preferred working at home or school where all 7 participants said they preferred working from school.

When asked if they would prefer half and half, working from home and school 4 stated yes they would prefer this and three stated that they would not.

When asked if they would like to go back to home-schooling only one out of the seven said they would prefer this.

All the participants stated that they missed their friends during isolation

During the lockdown, many of the participants found that they played a lot of online gaming with friends.

From the open responses, it was clear that studying from home was challenging and a couple of the participants stated that it made them cry daily, that they missed their friends and did not enjoy working from home.

They also stated that they felt that working from home had harmed their education.

However, the participants also stated that it allowed them to appreciate what they had and to look at how others were struggling in the pandemic and try to see things from their perspective.

They also stated that it helped them to become closer with their families.

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#### What was it like as an organisation during a pandemic: Lessons learnt.

The organisations stated that they felt that communication had improved a lot since the pandemic, through the use of everyone connecting online. They also felt that networking had improved and organisations and community groups had been about to work together a lot better.



It was also expressed that new avenues of working had opened up and that some of the changes were for the better and to be considered going forward.

There had been challenges in providing the right support to service users without being able to meet in person and any activities which had been organised were delayed or had to be cancelled.

Because of demand on the services this meant that a lot of the groups were at capacity, managing to staff, making sure that staff mental health needs were being supported and keeping them well informed was is challenging but very important.

Because of the pandemic inequalities and poverty was highlighted even more. This brought about concerns around connectivity and people being able to afford it. No projects have been set up to help manage these inequalities which will continue going forward.

Looking to the future the organisations mentioned how important it is to listen to your staff, especially the ones working on the ground. Letting them feed up and offer new ideas was something that needing to be done.

A strong home and working digital system were also recognised as something that needed a lot of support. Caithness has many rural communities and if more staff are likely to be working from home and the office in the future, these capabilities are a must.

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#### HOW WERE YOU AFFECTED BY COVID-19 WITH YOUR MENTAL HEALTH AND FINANCES: LESSONS LEARNT

A lot of the respondents struggled with their mental health. They struggled with anxiety, depression, stress and loneliness. This was primarily due to being so isolated in their own homes. They struggled with the stresses of trying to manage the household when teenagers lived there due to their struggle with not being allowed to go out and spend time with their friends.

Parents also struggled with not seeing friends and family as they would often help support them with childcare, not having their normal support made being a parent and working very challenging and stressful which intern lead to anxiety and depression. One of the respondents because a new parent during the second lockdown which caused a great deal of anxiety not having family around them.

Several others struggled due to not having any outside space with their homes, some only had small gardens which meant that the families struggled.

A large proportion of the respondents had increased energy, heating and food bills. This was due to both a loss of earnings and the whole of the family is home. One participant was unable to work due to restrictions, they did receive benefits but this was not enough to pay the utility bills or to feed the family.

- Other families had to receive food parcels due to not having the finances to foo their family.
- Two of the participants received a free laptop and Wi-Fi which helped them with their work and the children's schoolwork, it also helped relieve some of the stress from the children as they were able to communicate with their friends.
- £100 energy vouchers were also received from the Highland Council who one of the participants were very grateful to receive.
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## PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT

Respondents were more likely to spend time outdoors during lockdown unless the restrictions impacted on their usual ability to spend a lot of time outdoors.

There were both positive and negative impacts associated with the pandemic, less traffic was highlighted as one issue which was a positive however for those driving roads have been seen to have been negatively impacted in terms of quality

Responsibility of governance for the environment was unclear with many respondents answering that they were unsure as to whether the government has provided enough support and whether the local authority had facilitated outdoor space well enough, however the respondents we clear that the community had pulled together to target negative impacts.

The main issues raised were the negative impacts to the environment and the resulting mitigation efforts needed rather than positive impacts.

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## MANAGING BEREAVEMENT BETTER

Lessons from the bereavement work can be suggested from a number of parts of the interview process. First looking at minimising the negative aspects to the bereavement process, and secondly to maximise the positive outcomes from bereavement during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Respondents identified that digital could be found in both these categories. There was emphasis that digital was impersonal, led to delays in the registration process, and was difficult to navigate with no experience. If, like other sectors, there is a shift to digital working there should be an effort made to minimise these negative aspects and to create easier protocols to follow for both staff and families to ensure speedy processing from the hospitals and easier processing from the family perspective.

There were however positive outcomes that could be replicated in regard to using videoconferencing for organisation of funerals and to include a greater audience, it should be noted that for funeral services this may not be appropriate.

The smaller rural hospitals found it easier to work with Covid-19 regulations for the benefit of patients and families. It seems that their size and number of patients allowed them, in some cases, to react quicker and adapt easier to make the palliative care time and bereavement process easier for families due to increased time with patients. It could be appropriate to examine this reaction and adaptability to scale up to larger hospitals.

The main focus of working better for the future from respondents was finding ways to add the human touch to processes, both physically but also metaphorically. Rules on physical touch from service providers could be relaxed in certain environments with PPE equipment. Ways of making processes more human, for example speaking to someone on the phone rather than working with online forms, could be beneficial for future practice.

## VOLUNTEER CASE STUDIES

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### EMMA'S CASE STUDY

#### **How did you find the meetings/how was the project organised/could we have done anything any better?**

The Changescape project was a really good opportunity as a member of the Caithness community to get involved in research on a local level in an accessible way. I have a background in research, but found the meetings helpful, welcoming and inclusive and felt that anyone could have got involved from beginner to someone more familiar with the research. I would welcome more opportunities like this in future.

From my perspective, the timescale was too short to enable what I felt would be sufficient time for planning and data collection. Consequently, I feel that perhaps the findings will be limited as a result and I do believe it was a project that deserved more time (though I do understand why timescales were required). Admittedly, I am used to being involved in projects of a much longer timescale and perhaps joined the project a bit ignorant of how short the timescale was. I would also have some thoughts around the timing of the research as I feel that we are still very much amid the pandemic and have often reflected on at what point would be most appropriate to reflect – a research project in itself!

#### **What was the topic you wanted to research and what were the reasons for this?**

I have been conscious throughout the pandemic of the effects of the pandemic on the working workforce – particularly those identified as key workers. This status covers a huge range of individuals working across several sectors from the NHS, Education, emergency services, social work services, health and social care, voluntary sector services, essential retail, postal services, refuse collection services among so many others. While there has been a lot of recognition around the ongoing work of those who fall into this category throughout the pandemic, there has been less conversation and acknowledgement of the potential impact of

having continued working during such a difficult time. Those of us falling into this category continued doing our jobs in a very difficult world to the world we lived in February 2020 while also managing our own experiences and responses to the pandemic.

I felt like part of research surrounding the pandemic, it was important to acknowledge and learn something about the experiences and impact on the working workforce – those whose lives didn't slow down, who were not furloughed and continued doing a job during extremely challenging circumstances. Importantly, I thought it would be really important to understand the experiences and impact to create some learnings and understand how these working workforces can be supported going forward.

### **What was your experience of working during the pandemic?**

Working in a voluntary sector, essential, frontline service, I never stopped working. We had to adapt very quickly, changing working practices and working from home (something I have never done before) to ensure we were able to continue to provide a service to those who needed us. To a degree, continuing to work throughout the pandemic played a huge role in giving me focus and purpose – I realised quite quickly that my work played a significant role in my self-care during the pandemic. It played a part in helping me to cope with this changing world. On the other hand, I have never been busier and admittedly, I am very tired.

### **Why were you unable to commit (heavy workloads, times being challenging because of covid)**

The short timescale of the project made it incredibly difficult for me to commit due to other commitments both within and out with work. The research timings also coincided with a return to (some) face-to-face work, which had to be prioritised. I have never been busier than I have during the past year and I simply did not have enough hours in the day, week or month to enable me to commit as much as I had hoped to.

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#### VALERIE ASHPOL – BEREAVEMENT INTERVIEW EXPERIENCE

Val saw the research team's social media advertisement looking for volunteers and attended the first community research team meeting. There were a broad range of volunteers in attendance (all of which apart from one continued to the end of the project) as well as representatives from both Caithness Voluntary Group and North Highland College UHI.

Val initially was put off by the meeting as volunteers introduced themselves to the meeting using their professional job roles and organisations, partly reflecting the makeup of the volunteer base drawn from Caithness Voluntary Group members. For Val the meeting never felt like a community project, rather a research project and she initially pulled out of going further with the research until reassured of the community researcher role despite first appearances.

The motivation behind signing up was based on boredom. Having completed an undergraduate degree with the University of the Highlands and Islands she wanted something else to continue to do and to continue to keep her brain stimulated. The project came along at

the right time as at the beginning of lockdown she knew someone really struggling with bereavement and it motivated her to look at and discuss this huge taboo, especially difficult during covid. Val has now been accepted onto a UHI post-graduate course due to start after the summer.

Having completed an undergraduate dissertation with UHI before Val was acquainted with the research process and worked with researchers from North Highland College UHI to develop her research methodology and questions. A semi-structured qualitative approach was agreed using a snowballing sampling technique.

Having completed the research it became clear that the semi-structured questions were useful but the conversation took many different avenues and stretched out well beyond the half an hour scheduled in some cases. The snowballing technique was aided in this case due to the rural nature of the communities involved and knowing who had experienced bereavement during lockdown.

The interviews allowed her to go and explore these interesting areas which are outwith usual remits for community researchers, especially backed up with the support of the community facilitator, the expertise of the research partner, and the ethics framework to give confidence to tackle these sensitive issues.

Acting as a filter the interviews acted in two parts, one as a research role, one as friendly ear to help support those in the community. The most important aspect was providing an ear to listen who is not necessary a professional and allowing people to talk through these issues they've not had a chance to get off their chest.

Val noted after the process was completed that honesty was the most important part and she let the volunteers read everything she had written to make sure they were happy with it. She also made clear that the word councillor for the listening part was not appropriate, they didn't want a councillor they want someone to talk to.

On completing the work, she told the research team that she hadn't expected to get as much out of the work as she did and that it wasn't as hard to complete as she had expected. The process was enlightening and using research skills from academic studies (with UHI) was enjoyable.

Asking to sum up the work and suggestions for going forward she noted the thing that has been missing was physical human touch, often the need for a hug. She noted that it had been a privilege to do this work and she felt honoured they were able to share this with her.

She undertook some of the interviews in cafes and when her and her interviewee went to pay for their tea and cake the café refused to accept payment as they had heard what the project was about and thought it important for the community. This small act of kindness from the café reflects the value of the project better than any words we can write in the report.

## ACTION PLAN/CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Caithness Voluntary Group has been supporting the community since 1989. When the pandemic hit it did everything that it could to support the community groups, voluntary organisations and statutory organisations, who support the community.

Currently, there are no known '*set action plans*' that can be shown. The groups in Caithness during the pandemic all took on different roles to their standard duties. They became a social service, supporting the vulnerable and people struggling financially. They did this by providing support, advice, help with benefits and funding. They provide free food services and even delivered them to people's homes.

Now, the organisations are slowly returning to 'normal', with some organisations there is a new normal; that is working online with people, finding more innovative ways to support the community. Many more people were discovered who were already struggling socially and financially. Covid-19 brought many people to the attention of the supporting organisations, who they might not have been able to reach in the past or might not have been made aware of. The knowledge of these vulnerable people means that the groups can keep working to find the community the right support needed.

The support that the groups have shown has been overwhelming and heart-warming to see. All these groups/organisations have their action plans to –

- Support mental health needs in the community
- Providing free training around mental health
- Reduce food poverty
- Reduce fuel poverty
- Support parents who are struggling
- Help the community with connectivity, especially those who cannot afford it

## REFERENCES

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<sup>i</sup> Highland Council (2019) Highland Council Corporate Plan (online) Available at [https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/4620/corporate\\_plan](https://www.highland.gov.uk/downloads/file/4620/corporate_plan)

<sup>ii</sup> Scottish Government (2020) Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (online) Available at <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/>