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## Volunteering and public service reform in rural Scotland

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***Rural volunteers often play multiple and diverse roles. They often report fulfilling service-oriented and more generalist roles, supporting the findings from other research that suggest that rural volunteering is often 'substitutive' rather than 'additional'. This has implications for the sustainability of voluntary participation in rural areas and requires that policymakers recognise that the capacities of volunteers to engage with the public service reform agenda vary socially and geographically.***

### Key Messages

- This briefing summarises the key findings of research which explored what research and data can tell us about volunteering in rural areas of Scotland at a time of public service reform. In particular, it examined rural/urban variations in volunteering participation and opportunities<sup>3</sup>. Such variations will have implications for the sustainability of the current programme of public service reform in different areas of Scotland.
- The roles of individuals, communities and the third sector are often discussed in relation to the key components of public service reform in Scotland, including localism and co-production. However, limited attention has been paid to the ways that volunteering can be supported by national policy, and few links between volunteering and its role in public service reform made.
- Previous research has shown that there are higher rates of formal volunteering in rural Scotland than urban Scotland. The role of the third sector and volunteering may also be important in rural areas in terms of filling the gaps between service provision and service need ('substitutive' rather than 'additional' activity), particularly given the challenging service delivery landscape.
- Analysis of the 'Volunteering in Scottish Charities 2011' data found that:
  - Charities in more rural areas stated that they primarily benefited the local community;
  - The primary areas of work of more rural charities were the local community or neighbourhood groups, youth/children, or religion, with some variations between remote and accessible rural areas;
  - Charities in more rural areas were less likely to report involving paid staff;
  - Charities in more rural areas were more likely to report challenges recruiting board members, but were less likely to be concerned about recruiting board members with the right skills;
  - Rural charities were less likely to report having witnessed a decrease in numbers of volunteers involved, and were more likely to report the number of volunteers remaining static rather than decreasing.
- Additional analysis of the Scottish Household Survey (2007-2011) found that:
  - Many of the reported volunteer activities that are more prevalent in rural areas are service-based, such as providing transport. Rural volunteers are also more likely to be involved in generalist roles (i.e. doing 'whatever is required' or 'just helping out').
  - The findings support the characterisation of rural volunteering as broad across several activities, while urban volunteering is deeper, focused on fewer or more specific activities.

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<sup>3</sup> The full report based on this work is available via the Rural Policy Centre's [Thriving Communities Publications](#).

## Introduction and Rationale

Recent research published by SRUC's Rural Policy Centre identified that, in Scotland, there are more registered charities per head of population in rural areas compared to urban areas<sup>4</sup>. In addition, it found that the characteristics of charities – including their purposes – might also vary with degree of rurality. However this work focused on the organisations through which volunteering takes place, rather than on volunteering itself.

This follow-on work examines whether the nature and extent of volunteering (an activity which often takes place through charities or the wider third sector) also varies geographically. It does so in recognition that volunteers often play a key role in the activities of a charity, and asks what this might mean for a sustainable and realistic programme of public service reform. The Christie Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services (which reported in 2011<sup>5</sup>) and the 2011 Scottish Spending Review<sup>6</sup> both identified a range of challenges which will be faced by the public sector (including demographic change, widening economic and social inequalities, and the lack of preventative spend) and therefore the need to make better use of scarce resources from the public, private and third sectors to ensure the future sustainability of public services. Localism and co-production are at the heart of this, and require participation at the level of the individual, family and/or community.

## Methods

- A desk based review of academic, policy and practice literature relating to rurality, volunteering and public service reform.
- A review of data provided by Volunteer Development Scotland in the 'Volunteering in Scottish Charities 2011' survey, examining rural/urban variations.
- An analysis of data presented in the Scottish Government's Scottish Household Survey from 2007-2011, exploring rural/urban variations.

## Key Messages for Policy

- Policy-makers need to recognise the levels of voluntary activity that are required as part of public service reform and acknowledge that capacities to engage vary socially and geographically.
- A geographically sensitive approach to involving and supporting volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations appears justified, given that rural volunteers often play multiple and diverse roles across a range of charities, with their roles more likely to be 'broad' than 'deep'.
- Developing the skills of rural volunteers and ensuring that they are supported adequately to avoid 'burnout' in light of increasing expectations through public service reform is important.
- Many rural volunteers are engaged in generalist roles, and in activities that are more 'substitutional' rather than 'additional'. This has implications for the sustainability of voluntary participation in rural areas, given that some research suggests that this is kind of activity is less sustainable.
- Attention must be paid to existing voluntary participation levels ('how much' and 'what is done'), what support might be required to develop the capacity for further volunteering, and where it may be inappropriate or unsustainable to seek greater levels of volunteering.
- Scotland has a relatively 'localised' network of volunteering and voluntary sector support through Volunteer Centres/Third Sector Interfaces. This network has the potential to be utilised to examine and address these regional variations in participation, capacity and support needs.
- It is important to recognise that service delivery is just one example of volunteering activity, with motivations for volunteering being broad, and activities diverse.

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<sup>4</sup> For more information, see: [www.sruc.ac.uk/info/120336/thriving\\_communities/634/2012\\_mapping\\_the\\_distribution\\_of\\_charities\\_in\\_scotland](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/info/120336/thriving_communities/634/2012_mapping_the_distribution_of_charities_in_scotland).

<sup>5</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Review/publicservicescommission>.

<sup>6</sup> For more information, see: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/10/04153155/0>.