

20 MINUTE NEIGHBOURHOODS IN RURAL & ISLAND SCOTLAND

Report from practitioner roundtable – January 2022

Organised by Scottish Rural Action, the Scottish Rural & Islands Transport Community and SURF - Scotland's Regeneration Forum, the roundtable brought together practitioners (Appendix 1) from different rural and island geographies to discuss the application of 20 Minute Neighbourhoods (20 MNs) in place planning.

Practitioners agreed that, used at the grassroots, the 20 MN method can be a **useful conversation tool** to support community-led place planning, enabling rural and island communities to explore what 'living well locally' means to them.

Unintended negative impacts are likely to arise when the 20 MN method is applied as part of top-down planning processes, for example to shape Local Development Plans¹. Its application in this context **risks exacerbating the centralisation of rural services and reinforcing structural and institutional barriers to addressing poverty and inequality in rural and island communities.**

20 Minute Neighbourhoods and the Scottish policy context

Scotland is the only country in the world that is attempting to apply the 20 Minute Neighbourhood (20 MN) method on a national scale. This is a policy ambition which, from the outset, requires a flexible definition of 20 MNs which is relevant to diverse geographic communities. The draft fourth National Planning Framework (NPF4), published in November 2021, offers the Scottish Government's first attempt at such a definition ([page 74](#)):

"20 Minute Neighbourhoods are a method of achieving connected and compact neighbourhoods designed in such a way that all people can meet the majority of their daily needs within a reasonable walk, wheel or cycle (approx. 800m) of their home."

The desired outcomes of 20 MNs include decreased health inequalities, improved local economy, climate action, improved liveability of place and quality of life and the ability to age well in place.

The wording of NPF4, again from page 74, demonstrates confidence that 20 MNs could be applied across the whole of Scotland:

"The principle may be adjusted to varying geographical scales from cities and urban environments to rural and island communities."

Applying the 20 minute/800m benchmark in rural and island places

Practitioners agreed that the strength of the Scottish Government's definition is that it is easy to understand and visualise. Even where the 20 minute/800 meters benchmark is pie-in-the-sky, the 20 MN method is, potentially, a useful community-led planning tool, enabling people to visualise the built and natural environment they wish to live in and helping them to work through a process of prioritising services and facilities that should be easily accessible.

¹ Local Development Plans (LDPs) are covered by the Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 and set out the long term vision for where development should and shouldn't happen in the places they cover. Each of Scotland's 32 council areas, two national parks and four largest city regions are required to produce an LDP.

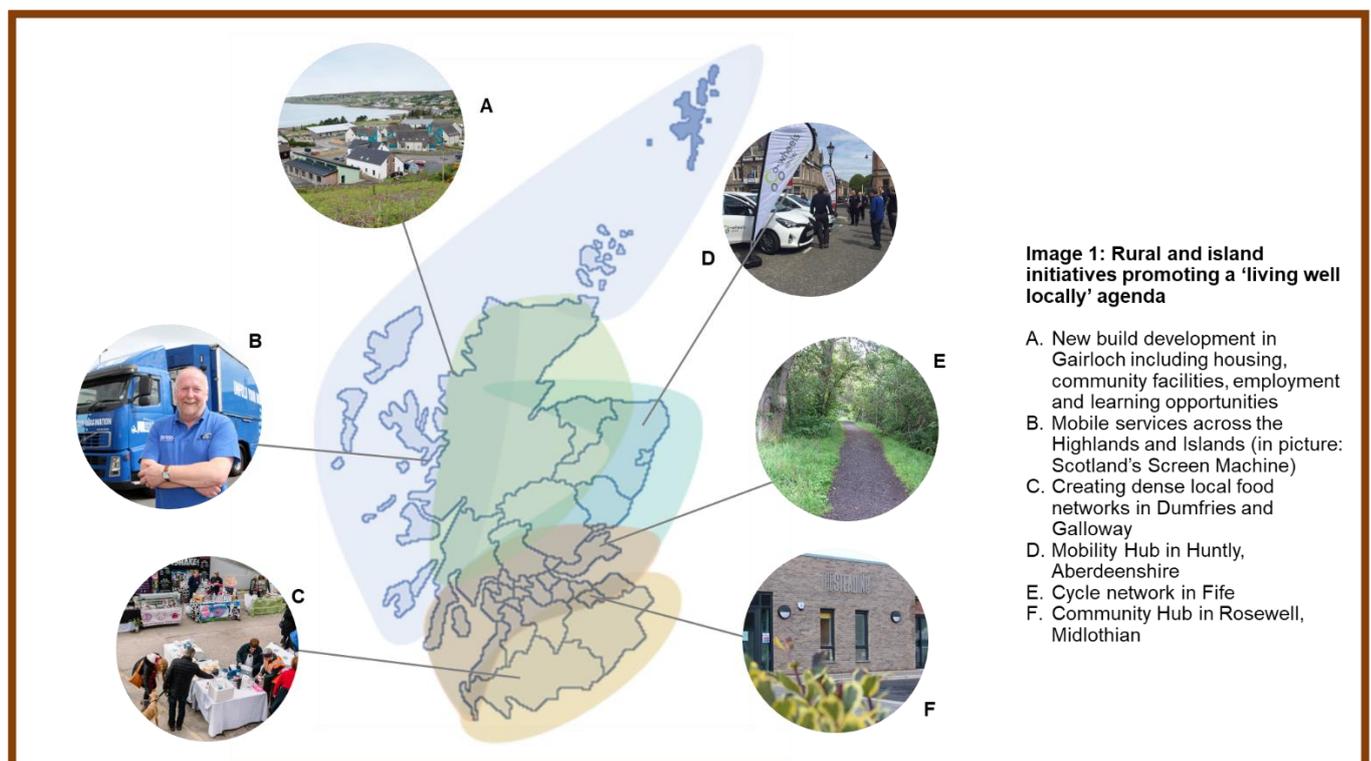
This 'public participation' element to designing 20 MNs is critical to its success, a point highlighted by Ramboll UK, a sustainability consultancy which [mapped](#) 20 MNs in a Scottish rural and urban context. Ramboll UK proposed three questions that practitioners and communities should consider when designing 20 MN:

1. What features and infrastructure – everything from services to jobs, pavements and greenspaces - are already there/what is needed?
2. What is the quality of experience when interacting with these features? Does it meet the test of 'living well locally'? Are the services accessible, the paths safe and the jobs good?
3. How do you best encourage behaviour change, e.g. the adoption of active or public transport modes, home working or buying local?

Ramboll UK used data on a range of indicators from transport availability, deprivation and neighbourhood satisfaction, to score neighbourhoods across Scotland for their compatibility with a 20 MN definition. One of the highest scoring neighbourhoods was Tollcross in central Edinburgh which came in at 99% compatible. Pitlochry was the highest scoring remote rural neighbourhood of Scotland at 68%, the lack of public transport being amongst the most significant factors in it not scoring higher. Though applying scores is an attractive way of simplifying a complex picture, Ramboll UK acknowledged that **most data sets do not drill down below postcode level, rendering the scoring meaningless for more dispersed rural and island communities.**

So, what is the picture at community level?

Practitioners identified a huge range of community planning initiatives (examples in image 1) currently delivered to achieve the outcomes of 20 MNs - decreased health inequalities, improved local economy, climate action and improved liveability - without the focus on time or distance. These initiatives are about being able to live well locally while safeguarding the environment. **Given that rural and island 'living well locally' initiatives are not predicated on the time bracket of 20 minutes, nor on the 800m distance, it seems a misnomer to brand them in line with 20 MNs.**

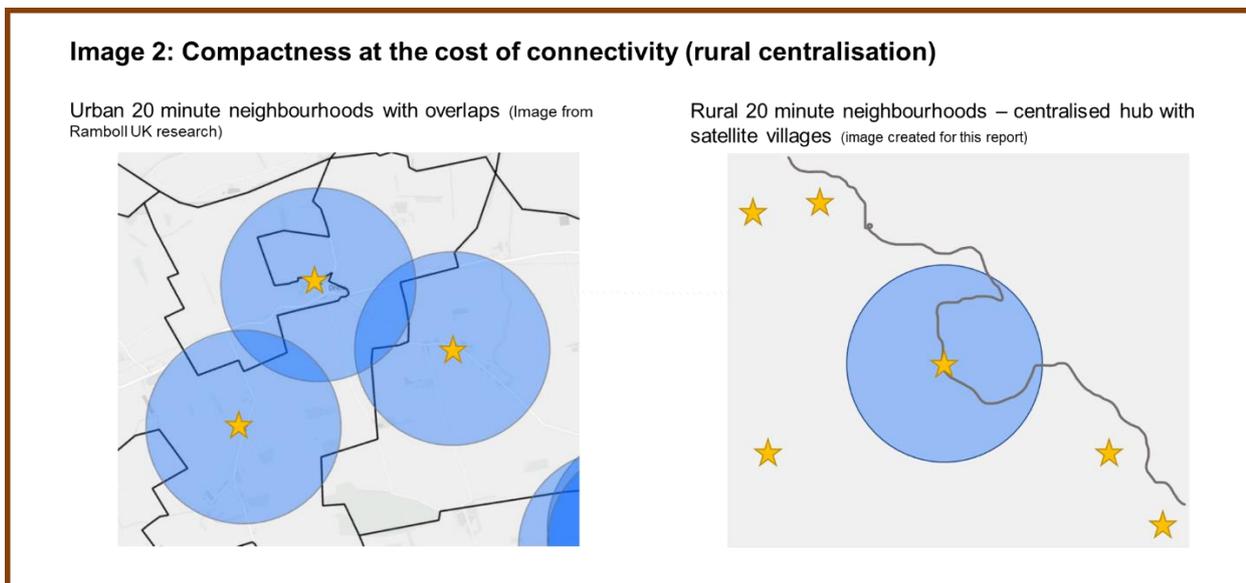


The problem of achieving a critical mass of population

There is another reason why branding rural and island 'living well locally' initiatives in line with 20MNs is a misnomer: **the 20 MN method is designed to build on a critical mass of population.**

The matter of population density was raised in a [rapid scoping exercise](#) undertaken by Margaret Douglas and Irene Beautyman from the Scottish Health and Inequalities Impact Assessment Network, which compared the application in Edinburgh of two scenarios, a 'traditional', low mix and low density development of 30 houses per hectare and a 20 MN mixed use development. Douglas and Beautyman noted that "a density of at least 65 dwellings per hectare is required" (p. 7) in order to ensure the 20 MN method is economically viable and able to sustain the services people may need to access on a daily basis.

This level of population density may be achieved relatively easily in an urban environment where the process of developing 20 MNs results in bringing services to the heart of communities, supporting a decentralising or localism agenda. Roundtable practitioners noted the opposite is likely to happen in a rural or island context where the only places you might get 20 MNs to work would be in small towns, volume newbuild estates or main villages (image 2).



Moving the 20 MN method away from a simple conversation tool and applying it to communities as part of a top-down regional planning process, for example within the context of Local Development Plans, therefore risks centralising services to rural and island population hubs while satellite villages or crofting settlements are cut off from each other and from development opportunities. Transport becomes unidirectional between the satellites and the main village or if you are in Midlothian, for example, between a village and Edinburgh.

As roundtable practitioners pointed out, centralisation is ruinous for community resilience and for local economies. It reinforces the structural barriers people face to participating in community life and also perpetuates negative population trends, including the outmigration of younger people. Hence there are significant tensions between 20 MNs and the Scottish Government's rural repopulation agenda.



Further comparisons between 20 MNs and rural & island ‘living well locally’ community-led planning initiatives

There is no set recipe for 20 MNs, nor for rural and island ‘living well locally’ initiatives, but a common concern - the reduction of private car ownership and use - provides a useful framework for further comparisons.

Reducing household reliance on cars is core to the 20 MNs method achieving social and environmental outcomes. This involves three areas of activity:

1. Bringing facilities and services into neighbourhoods, either physically or online;
2. Connecting neighbourhoods between each other through accessible and affordable public transport/active transport networks and;
3. Incentivising behaviour change, for example home working and public transport use, in part through encouraging public participation in designing 20 MNs.

While rural communities are also concerned with addressing the challenges of car dependency, a distinct rural/island approach is required across these three areas of activity. The tables below summarise roundtable practitioner discussions on areas of divergence and alignment between the 20 MN method and rural and island ‘living well locally’ initiatives.

1. Bringing facilities and services into neighbourhoods	
Focus of 20 MN method	Focus of rural & island ‘living well locally’
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating high density neighbourhoods where population numbers make it economically viable for services to locate to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating small housing developments which promote cooperative living as a form of service provision (e.g. SMART Clachans) • Creating high density supply/demand networks (e.g. food and energy networks, circular economies) where resources are used closer to production source • Investment in micro/social enterprise tailored to dispersed populations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning for shared community spaces, such as parks and multi-functional community hubs, and electric vehicle (EV) door to door Amazon-like deliveries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Similar to 20MN, supporting multifunctional community hubs, electric vehicle (EV) or drone door to door deliveries • Supporting mobile services which in themselves create shared community space e.g. libraries, hairdressers and the Screen Machine
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building on reliable, centralised broadband and mobile phone infrastructure to roll out digital services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addressing market failures in connectivity through supporting small scale, non-fibre dependent broadband infrastructure and network innovations such as LoRaWAN systems as a pre-requisite to rollout of digital services

2. Connecting neighbourhoods through public and active transport	
Focus of 20 MN method	Focus of rural & island 'living well locally'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In rural areas, creating networks of small towns/large volume newbuild estates/large villages (rural centralisation) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving connectivity between satellite villages and settlements Ferries, bridges and tunnels to overcome geographic barriers between settlements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improving public and active transport networks, and complementing with Mobility Hubs, Mobility as a Service (MaaS) systems and Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) initiatives including community transport initiatives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rather than complementing public transport system, Mobility Hubs and DRT/community transport initiatives are set up to overcome continuous market failure in provision of 'point to point' public transport Incentivising trust-based innovations such as closed loop car shares
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Neighbourhoods designed with minimal car-related features such as parking spaces. Where features are supported, these are designed to enable transition to EVs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Car related features remain critical to rural and island community planning with however, similar emphasis on supporting transition to EVs

3. Encouraging public participation and behaviour change	
Focus of 20 MN method	Focus of rural & island 'living well locally'
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public participation to shape design Public engagement on 20 MNs centred around addressing poverty and inequality and building on this, enabling people to contribute to addressing climate change. Urban-centric narrative on poverty and inequality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public participation to shape design Culture and local history/Indigenous knowledge core to planning Volunteer forces and community anchor organisations key to delivery Focus on addressing poverty and inequality and building on this, climate change. Rural narrative on inequality linked to dispersed populations, distance to services and high cost of living²
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Supporting small but critical infrastructure – benches, lights, toilets, signage - that makes the difference between people having an 800m walk, wheel or cycle and actually walking, wheeling or cycling it rather than using a car 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Similar focus on supporting small infrastructure

Practitioners noted that 'living well locally' initiatives use, as a starting point, a rural narrative on poverty and inequality. They also build on rural assets, e.g. sense of community, culture and history, food and energy production capacity and micro and social enterprise, to shape solutions. **This necessary intervention logic is missing from the 20 MN method which understands an urban dynamic of poverty and inequality (in 'pockets' rather than dispersed) and proposes solutions based on urban assets e.g. high population densities creating market opportunities, good baseline broadband and transport links.**

Accordingly, a top-down application of 20 MN risks reinforcing dominant, urban-centric narratives on poverty and inequality, thereby strengthening institutional barriers to addressing these issues in rural and island places.

² <https://www.gov.scot/publications/poverty-rural-scotland-review-evidence/>



A postscript on creating community

Methods like the 20 MN are attractive. They are aspirational, they make great headlines, and they are easy to shoehorn any intervention into, giving the superficial impression that they are universally relevant. As one roundtable practitioners said, “who would not want to live in a 20 MN?”

There is a crucial difference however, between the things people might want or expect in their daily lives and the things that are essential for daily living. Top down approaches to community planning frequently confuse expectations with need. The replacement, for example, of mobile library services with electric vehicle (EV) door to door book deliveries might make sense from a convenience point of view but it also removes a shared space from communities, a lifeline for those who are socially isolated. **Designing places to capitalise on community rather than on convenience is what rural and island places have done well for hundreds of years in order to survive and, in many cases, to flourish.**

The 20 MN method does make positive steps in the direction of creating communities rather than just neighbourhoods. It signifies a concrete shift, backed by policy, in the national conversation around place planning. Building on this, a great deal can be learned by 20 MN practitioners drawing on the experiences of those involved in rural ‘living well locally’ initiatives and vice versa.

In conclusion

The desired outcomes of 20 MNs - decreased health inequalities, improved local economy, climate action, improved liveability and ability to age well in place – are indisputably important for rural and island communities. With a small number of exceptions, the pathway to achieving these outcomes in rural and island communities is unlikely to be through applying the 20 MN method. Indeed, applying the 20 MN method is likely to centralise services and increase structural and institutional barriers to addressing poverty and inequality and, as a result, to addressing climate change.

Roundtable practitioners concluded that instead of on trying to fit 20 MNs to a rural and island context, for example by re-framing them as 30 or 45 Minute Neighbourhoods, **there is a need for a strong rural and island narrative on ‘living well locally’ which is recognised and resourced by those who set national and regional policy.**

Appendix 1 – About this report

Organised by Scottish Rural Action, the Scottish Rural & Islands Transport Community and SURF Scotland, the roundtable brought together practitioners from different rural and island geographies to discuss the application of 20 Minute Neighbourhoods (20 MN) in community planning.

With enormous thanks to the following people for their time and contributions:

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