



**Covid-19: Social and cultural impact of possible restrictions
on travel and social gatherings over the winter**
Response from the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities

The Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) is the representative body of all the Jewish communities in Scotland. SCoJeC advances public understanding about the Jewish religion, culture, and community, by providing information and assistance to educational, health, and welfare organisations, representing the Scottish Jewish community to Government and others on matters affecting the Jewish community. It also provides a support network for smaller communities and individuals who are not connected with any Jewish community, and assists organisations within community to comply with various regulatory requirements. SCoJeC also promotes dialogue and understanding between the Jewish community and other communities in Scotland, and works in partnership with other organisations and stakeholders to promote equality, good relations, and understanding among community groups. (SCIO no. SC029438)

Immediately prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, the Scottish Council of Jewish Communities (SCoJeC) was engaged in a qualitative survey of the Scottish Jewish community to update our two previous *Being Jewish in Scotland* reports.¹ The scope of our survey was subsequently widened specifically to include the impact of lockdown. This response is based on responses to that survey, the findings of which will shortly be published, and on the many phone calls and e-mails we have received during the pandemic, and anticipates that the impact of possible restrictions over the winter will be similar to those already experienced during recent months.

The Institute for Jewish Policy Research has also conducted research into the impact of Covid-19 on the UK Jewish community. These very significant studies² include the Scottish experience.

The previous periods of lockdown have included five major Jewish festivals, Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost), Rosh HaShanah (New Year), Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement), and Sukkot (Tabernacles). At these times Jewish people normally gather with family and friends, attend synagogue, and participate in a wide range of social and cultural activities, but all of these have been severely curtailed this year although very limited synagogue services are now permitted. The eight-day festival of Chanukah, usually celebrated with family, begins on 10 December, when the community is aware that restrictions on travel and social gatherings may still apply.

¹ *Being Jewish in Scotland* (2012) <https://www.scojec.org/resources/files/bjis.pdf>

What's Changed about Being Jewish in Scotland (2015) <https://www.scojec.org/resources/files/bjis2.pdf>

² <https://jpr.org.uk/publications>

As research has shown, the biggest impact of Covid-19 has been on the elderly and ethnic minorities. The Scottish Jewish Community is an ageing community, and first indications are that the excess death rate during the pandemic has been very significant. This is obviously of concern, especially with the approach of winter, when the rate of deaths is generally higher.

Covid-19 travel restrictions over and above normal winter anxieties about slipping on wet, or icy pavements, are likely to increase feelings of isolation, and we anticipate that welfare programmes set up by communal organisations during the first wave of the pandemic will need to be stepped up, particularly to provide regular hot meals for elderly and vulnerable people, and social contact by phone, zoom, etc.

Even if regulations were to be eased in the coming months, feelings of anxiety and isolation are likely to continue. Transport was a particular concern among respondents to our survey, with comments such as *"I do not want to use public transport to attend events but have no other transport options."*, and *"I am too disabled to drive but social distancing is impossible on public transport."* Furthermore, 40% of respondents told us that they are either "uncomfortable" or "very uncomfortable" about returning to in-person events, and only 34% of participants said they will feel "comfortable" or "very comfortable" to attend face-to-face activities.

The majority of people in the Jewish community have been able to adapt to online activities, but some have reported difficulties in understanding how to use software, poor internet connections, and discomfort with video conferencing. One respondent also raised the issue of hearing problems preventing active participation in online audio activities.

At the start of the pandemic, SCoJeC very quickly moved our social and cultural activities online, and we also make our large 'zoom room' freely available to a wide range of communal organisations to enable them to do likewise. We also ran sessions to help people access online activities, and for organisations to enable them to utilise these online facilities to best effect.

We received many positive comments about online activities such as *"I love the accessibility of online networking within our Jewish community"*, and *"Greater access to community events and religious services been possible during lockdown"*. Many people felt that communal connections have been strengthened during the pandemic, as synagogues, professional welfare organisations, and volunteers have all worked together to provide practical and emotional support. They reported increased pride in being Jewish, and said they have developed closer connections among the community as families have helped one another through this challenging time, with comments such as *"Unable to go to shul [synagogue] services, but have been more involved with community activities face masks, gloves, anti bac gel etc"*, and *"I feel the Jewish Community has become much closer. I have always been a volunteer for various organisations and have seen how many people are helped within the Community. Now due to having been isolating and therefore a bit on the receiving end I realise how important being a member of the Community can be."*

Others, however, have found the experience of only remote contact very isolating, and 16% reported a decrease in their participation in Jewish activities. *"It has changed so much,"* said one respondent, *"Not being able to get kosher food or go to shul*

[synagogue]. Kinda feel isolated as zoom is not the same as a proper social gathering.” and another told us, “It feels very disconnecting and very very isolating for someone who is an extrovert”.

Antisemitism also continues to be a worry for many people, exacerbated in some cases by their current inability to receive in-person support from family, friends, and communal organisations because of covid-19 restrictions. *“I feel an awkwardness about talking about being Jewish, even to friends. I feel that there is less understanding and tolerance of Jewish people now than there was in the past.”* said one respondent, and other comments included *“I am alone and unsupported and feel certain that my employer and colleagues do not understand antisemitism.”*, *“It didn’t feel like this 6 years ago. Now it feels unwelcome.”*, *“Antisemitism has been normalised within society. People make comments and don’t realise they are antisemitic.”*

In summary, it would, appear that the impact of Covid-19 on the Jewish community is mixed. Although the majority of the community live in East Renfrewshire and elsewhere in the central belt, these urban centres also conceal isolated Jewish people who, for one or another reason, do not have regular contact with or easy access to the wider Jewish community. There are also many small groups of Jewish people and isolated individuals living throughout the whole of Scotland, and many of these have told us that they welcome the increase in online events that enables them to participate on a regular basis in social and religious activities that they could not normally attend, and the opportunities these provide to ‘meet’ other Jewish people despite the geographical separation. As a result of this finding, we anticipate offering ‘blended’ activities after the pandemic, with a mix of face-to-face and online events in order to continue this higher level of access for otherwise isolated people.

This has not, however, been the universal experience. A significant number of people find enforced reliance on internet-based activities alienating and isolating, particularly those who are not computer literate, or who live in areas with slow or unreliable internet connections. As already stated, the Jewish community in Scotland is overwhelmingly an aging community; many young people have moved elsewhere, and the pandemic-imposed isolation experienced by elderly parents and grandparents, some of whom may never have used, much less own, a computer or smartphone, is not only distressing for the people concerned, but has also laid an additional burden on communal welfare organisations already struggling to meet existing demand with reduced numbers of staff and volunteers due to illness, self-isolating, or shielding.

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