

CORONAVIRUS CRISIS How tech-savvy knitters, hat makers and tea sellers are attracting thousands of new customers during the big shutdown



Thousands sign up for blood trial

More than 6,500 people have signed up for a trial to see if blood plasma from coronavirus survivors can help those ill in hospital. The potential treatment, known as convalescent plasma, could help patients whose bodies are not producing sufficient antibodies to fight the virus.

The plasma from recovered patients is to be trialled by doctors at London's Guy's and St Thomas' hospital.

If the trials prove the treatment to be effective, NHS Blood and Transplant will begin a national programme to deliver up to 10,000 units of convalescent plasma per week to the NHS, enough to treat 5,000 patients each week.

Dr Manu Shankar-Hari said: "As a new disease, there are no proven drugs to treat critically ill patients with Covid-19. Providing critically ill patients with plasma from patients who have recovered could improve their chances of recovery."

A total of 1,559 patients have died in Scotland after testing positive for coronavirus, an increase of 44 from Friday.

The number of people who have tested positive for the virus is at 11,927, a rise of 273 from the previous day.

Across the UK, 28,131 people have died, up by 621.

Ebola drug fights virus

US regulators have approved emergency use of an Ebola drug that appears to help some coronavirus patients recover faster.

It is the first drug shown to help fight Covid-19, which has killed more than 230,000 people worldwide.

The Food and Drug Administration acted after preliminary results from a government-sponsored study showed remdesivir shortened the recovery time for hospitalised Covid-19 patients by about four days and might also reduce deaths.

The Highlands and buy lands as crafty islanders set up shop on world wide web



Blue skies above Soroby Bay in Tiree

By Laura Smith
lasmith@sundaypost.com

Keep calm, code and carry on quickly became an unplanned mantra for island entrepreneur Rhoda Meek, whose fledgling business, Tiree Tea, is facing a rocky first season.

Six weeks ago, Rhoda was sitting in her remote croft on the Hebridean island, surrounded by mountains of boxed tea bags, processing the news that her island would be shut off to tourists indefinitely.

But she realised she could put her skills as a former freelance digital product manager to good use. In a whirlwind of creativity, the tech-savvy trader came up with Isle20.com – a digital lifeline to island businesses dependent on tourism.

The online directory showcases 350 small businesses across 26 Scottish islands, from artisan dog biscuits on Arran to craft vinegar brewed on Orkney.

"I realised tourism was going to take a real hit and I would need to up my online game to get through summer," said Rhoda, 37. "Luckily I have the skills to do this but knew others in my situation wouldn't. Over a weekend, I threw together a site where small businesses can advertise themselves. It's basically like Not On The High Street for the Scottish islands.

"This is a way to continue to support the people on those islands by shopping locally."

Isle20 is free for island traders to join, thanks to Scottish Islands Federation start-up funding. Since going live on March 17, it has accrued 28,000 hits and has redirected more than 25,000 shoppers to its members' websites.

"It's nice to know we are all struggling through this together," said Rhoda, who added that the island's postal service had been a lifeline for businesses and islanders.

"Our post office and postal workers have been incredible. I'm not an Amazon warehouse shipping vast quantities. I send out small-batch orders once a week."

An early travel ban has ensured

no Covid-19 deaths in the Western Isles, while there have been six deaths recorded on Shetland and two on Orkney. But remote, independent craft and design businesses across the islands are among the hardest hit as the restrictions on travel and tourism continue into summer.

Rhoda added: "The majority of businesses here rely on tourism and mainly operate through summer. For many, that summer income gets them through the winter, so missing a peak tourist season will affect people the entire year."

Despite the tourism drought, islanders agree protecting their ageing populations is vital. There are no Intensive Care Unit beds with ventilators on the islands and medical evacuation to the mainland would be weather-dependent.

"With a three-to-one ratio of elderly in the population (on Tiree), and the distance from hospitals, we have a very vulnerable community," added Rhoda. "Everyone wants to keep the island safe and are putting their community first."

When her contract working remotely for a tech start-up in San Francisco ended recently, Rhoda began focusing on Tiree Tea.

"I'd had this idea percolating for a while and finally put it into motion with a trial run last November."

"I've created tea blends inspired by Tiree with an external company but I do all the packaging, marketing and shipping from the island."

"I had a great response over the winter so was looking forward to properly launching this year. And then we had a global pandemic. But if I can crack online sales and break even through this, I'm laughing."

Rhoda has also found time to care for 39 new lambs on her land while running Tiree Tea and Isle20.com. But she admits island life is eerily quiet.

"It feels strange on the island right now. It's spring but it feels like winter because the island is so quiet without tourists."

Rhoda hopes her website will continue to promote island crafters and traders after lockdown ends.

"When all this is over, I hope Isle20 can promote island business through the quieter winter months," she added.



Jenny Robertson embraces Eigg's peace and quiet with spinning wheel and pet dog

JENNY'S STORY

I love working alone so, for me, social distancing is a way of life

Living in isolation is second nature to Jenny Robertson, a spinner and knitter who has lived alone on Eigg for over a decade, with only her pet dog Sorley for company.

Jenny signed her business, AnNead Hand Knitwear, up to Isle20 last week.

"I'm fairly anti-social and enjoy working alone so this doesn't bother me but my orders have slowed

down a lot," said Jenny, 65. "People are worried about their finances. It's difficult because I'm a small business making high-end products, so my orders don't flood in anyway."

"I sell a lot at the Royal Highland Show, which is cancelled this year. The majority of my sales are online so joining Isle20 will really help to raise the

profile of my business. It's wonderful to see small creative businesses banding together."

Originally from South Africa, Jenny settled permanently on Eigg in 2009 after falling in love with island life. Self-taught, she laboriously spins naturally-dyed wool into delicate, cobweb yarns using a spinning wheel. These

are crafted into intricate shawls, scarves and gloves. Her most complex bridal shawls take two months to complete. "When I'm making a special order, I'm spinning good wishes in for them and there's something special about that."

Jenny is enjoying Eigg being quieter. "It's normally busier, it's nice to have the island to ourselves now."

MELANIE'S STORY

Creative people are not cut-throat. We're all in it together



Melanie Mouat

Based on the northern coast of Unst, a tiny island on the very tip of Shetland, Melanie Mouat is used to living on the edge. But the uncertain future of her handmade soap business has filled her with dread over the past few weeks.

"Because we rely so much on tourism in the summer, including cruise ships, and the fact that

the Up Helly Aa fire festivals and Shetland Wool Week have been cancelled this year, it will have a huge impact," said Melanie, 43.

"The situation is depressing because I mainly supply small shops on the island and across the mainland, and I did panic when the independent shops I work with started cancelling orders. I

do have a website but online sales were never a priority, so I've had to change how I do business."

Melanie started Mella Handmade Soap three years ago. She operates from a small workshop attached to her parents' house, where she was living before essential social-isolating rules came into play. She heard about Isle20 from

Sandra MacLeod on Lewis. "The creative, island industry has always been collaborative, not cut-throat, and because all our islands all rely on tourism to boost the local economy, it's a great idea that we all work together."

Despite closing to tourists early and adhering to strict social distancing rules, there

have been six Covid-19 deaths on Shetland and 54 confirmed cases.

Melanie says islanders are taking every precaution.

"We've seen an extra level of community spirit and people are being really vigilant."

Melanie's selection of soaps



SANDRA'S STORY



A model wears handcrafted Modren bag

We have to change to survive

Sandra MacLeod, an accessories designer, says the "make do and mend" attitude of Isle20.com reflects a resourcefulness and community spirit shared by islanders.

"I've thought from the start it will be collaboration and community that gets us through this," said Sandra, 51.

"You need to quickly rethink what you're doing to survive and I think Isle20 has been a good, quick and simple response. A lot of people feel an affinity with the islands. They want to support businesses here and this makes it easy to find us."

From her workshop in Lewis, Sandra creates bespoke Harris Tweed bags, hats and accessories under her label, Modren.

With her key customer base reliant on temporarily-banned summer events such as weddings and garden parties, Sandra is now having to streamline and sell exclusively online.

"We've got to change to survive this so I'm now making smaller items, like purses, which I'm more likely to sell right now," she said. "I'm glad to still be working as it keeps me in a routine."

Despite the hardship, Sandra said residents of the Western Isles were unified in their response to the coronavirus pandemic.

"It's a bit surreal that, because we are down to lifeline services, nobody can get here but equally we can't get off the island!" said Sandra.

"But it's definitely a good place to be while this is going on because you can go for a long walk on the beach with the dog and that gives you a sense of freedom."

"At times, you can go into a wee bubble where it feels like nothing's changed. Not everyone is so lucky."

ADDED AGONY ON GRIEVING FAMILIES DURING THE CRISIS PAGES 12&13

Stair climb at £390,000

A 90-year-old woman is close to raising £400,000 for the NHS and a hospice by climbing her stairs to the equivalent height of an iconic Highland mountain.

Inspired by 100-year-old Captain Tom Moore's 100 laps of his garden, Margaret Payne began her endeavour on Easter Sunday.

Mrs Payne, of Ardar, Assynt, in Sutherland, has set the challenge of climbing her stairs until she has ascended the same height as Suilven near Lochinver, which stands at 2398 feet.

By yesterday she had raised almost £390,000.

She said: "I'm completely overwhelmed and humbled by the generosity of everyone who has donated to this amazing cause."

Lockdown diaries call

Glasgow City Archives is appealing to citizens to start keeping a diary of their days in lockdown.

It is hoped accounts of people's lives while stuck at home will provide a fascinating window into the coronavirus crisis for future generations.

Archivist Michael Gallagher said: "We want to encourage the people of Glasgow to record their experience of coronavirus, which we will keep forever in the City Archives. That way, future generations can gain a real insight into life under lockdown during a global pandemic."

"No detail is too big or too small. It is often the day-to-day minutiae that paints the most vivid picture."

Warnings on exercise

The country's top divers have been banned from putting the bounce into training during lockdown.

Scottish Swimming have told all divers to avoid using trampolines because of the high risk of injury involved and the extra pressure it could put on the NHS.

In guidance issued to all members, Scottish Swimming said: "It is advised that the diving community should not be training on trampolines in gardens and divers should be concentrating on body conditioning and health and wellbeing."

"The number of injuries that can be caused from trampolines in gardens could put a huge amount of pressure on the NHS."