**Support Services in Orkney for People with Autoimmune Disorders**

On the Orkney Islands, a range of NHS services, community organizations, and charities provide **practical, emotional, and social support** for those living with autoimmune conditions (e.g. multiple sclerosis, lupus, rheumatoid arthritis):

* **NHS Orkney & Specialist Care** – Orkney’s healthcare system (NHS Orkney) works with mainland specialists to ensure residents can access expert care. For example, a telemedicine rheumatology clinic allows patients with inflammatory conditions like rheumatoid arthritis or lupus to be seen by an Aberdeen-based specialist via video link at Balfour Hospital in Kirkwall. This award-winning service means patients get specialist consultations **closer to home**. Similarly, visiting or virtual neurology clinics support people with MS and other neurological autoimmune disorders.
* **Orkney MS Society (Local Branch)** – The Orkney branch of the MS Society (run by volunteers, many with MS) offers **practical assistance and emotional support** to anyone affected by multiple sclerosis. The group provides information, helps with grant funding for equipment or respite breaks, and even contributed to MS research. It organizes **social activities** – e.g. two group outings each year (summer and Christmas) that saw attendance grow to ~63 people . The branch also runs an art class and supports a weekly exercise class for members, helping reduce isolation and maintain wellbeing . *This local MS Society offers a vital peer network, financial help (such as grants for mobility aids), and regular social gatherings for emotional support.*
* **Orkney Multiple Sclerosis Therapy Centre** – Orkney has a dedicated MS Therapy Centre in Kirkwall which provides **specialized therapies** for people with MS and other illnesses . The centre (one of 60 across the UK) offers services like **hyperbaric oxygen therapy, physiotherapy, exercise classes and massage sessions** run by a small team. The community, including the MS Society branch, supports the centre (e.g. donating specialized exercise bikes for users ). *This provides practical support to improve physical health and symptom management, as well as a social hub for those with MS.*
* **Versus Arthritis – Orkney Branch** – People living with rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, and other musculoskeletal or autoimmune arthritis conditions can access support through the Orkney branch of Versus Arthritis (formerly Arthritis Care). This group meets **monthly** (first Thursday) in Kirkwall, offering a friendly forum with guest talks on health, wellbeing, and the “social elements of living with arthritis”. They organize social events like a summer outing and Christmas lunch for members. The meetings provide **peer support and companionship**, helping those with chronic joint conditions share experiences and coping tips. *(This local arthritis group focuses on social support, education, and reducing the isolation that often comes with chronic pain.)*
* **Accessible Transport and Practical Aid** – For those with mobility issues due to conditions like MS or severe arthritis, Orkney offers practical support such as the **Dial-a-Bus service** operated by Orkney Disability Forum. This door-to-door accessible minibus runs 7 days a week (8am–7pm) on the main island and linked isles , enabling people to attend medical appointments, support meetings, or simply visit friends. The Orkney Disability Forum also gives advice on Blue Badges, equipment loans (wheelchairs, scooters via Shopmobility), and works to improve disability access locally . *This is a key practical resource that helps individuals with autoimmune-related disabilities stay mobile and socially active in the community.*
* **Other Community Support** – A local support group called FAME (Fibromyalgia and ME) exists for chronic illness sufferers (fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue), which, while not autoimmune, provides a similar peer-support network in Orkney . For conditions without a specific local group (e.g. lupus), residents can tap into **national charity resources**. For example, **Lupus UK** offers trained telephone contacts and an online forum so that even those in remote areas like Orkney can talk to someone who understands their condition . These services provide **emotional support** and advice for patients, families and friends dealing with any autoimmune illness. Additionally, generic mental health and wellbeing services (such as the “Right There” wellbeing service for young people) are available to support emotional and social needs of those coping with chronic health conditions.

**NHS Orkney Healthcare Support for Autoimmune Conditions**

**Primary Care (GP Services):** General practitioners in Orkney are the first point of contact for anyone with an autoimmune condition. They provide initial evaluation, treatment, and referrals as needed. Orkney has several GP practices (e.g. in Kirkwall, Stromness, and the isles) serving the community. Your GP can manage routine aspects of autoimmune diseases (like medication monitoring and blood tests) and coordinate care with specialists. NHS Orkney’s integrated health and social care partnership (Orkney Health & Care) means GPs can also link patients with local nursing, social, and therapy services.

**The Balfour Hospital (Kirkwall):** The Balfour is Orkney’s general hospital, with outpatient clinics, inpatient beds, and an Emergency Department. While many autoimmune conditions are managed by GPs, the hospital provides specialist services when required. *Patients needing specialized treatment are often referred to the Scottish mainland (usually Aberdeen) for advanced care*, though efforts are made to deliver as much as possible locally . For example, NHS Orkney arranges visiting consultant clinics on-island to reduce the need for travel. The hospital’s **Outpatient Department** hosts visiting specialists (see below) and local specialist nurses. If you require urgent care or advice out of hours, you can contact The Balfour’s switchboard (dial **01856 888000**) to reach on-call healthcare staff .

**Specialist Nurse Support:** Orkney benefits from specialist nurses for certain long-term conditions. In particular, there is a **Multiple Sclerosis (MS) Clinical Nurse Specialist** (Moira Flett) based at The Balfour. Patients diagnosed with MS are **quickly referred to this nurse**, who provides information, advice, and ongoing support . (Notably, Orkney has one of the highest rates of MS in the world, making this role especially important .) The MS nurse’s remit also covers other neurological or long-term conditions (such as MND) due to Orkney’s small population . While there may not be specialist nurses for every autoimmune condition locally, your GP and the MSK (musculoskeletal) physiotherapy team can offer guidance on self-management for joint and muscle issues , and community nurses can help coordinate care for those with serious illnesses at home.

**Referral Pathways:** If a higher level of care is needed, GPs will refer patients to appropriate specialists. **NHS Orkney works closely with larger boards (NHS Grampian, Highland, etc.)** for specialist input. Referrals for conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, or vasculitis typically go to a **rheumatologist**; for neurological autoimmune diseases (e.g. MS), to a **neurologist**; for conditions like inflammatory bowel disease, to a **gastroenterologist**; and so on. Many initial specialist consultations can be done via *NHS Near Me* video appointments or visiting clinics in Orkney, so patients don’t always have to travel off-island. However, when complex procedures or inpatient treatments are required, patients may be transferred to mainland hospitals (usually Aberdeen Royal Infirmary). NHS Orkney provides a **Patient Travel** scheme to help with transport costs when off-island medical appointments are necessary (forms are available to request travel funding ).

**Specialist Clinics and Consultants for Autoimmune Conditions**

Although Orkney’s remote location means it does not have full-time resident specialists for every condition, there are regular clinics by visiting consultants and robust links to mainland services:

* **Rheumatology:** A consultant rheumatologist from NHS Grampian **visits Kirkwall regularly** (approximately every 2–3 months) to run clinics for patients with rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, lupus, ankylosing spondylitis and other autoimmune rheumatic diseases . This visiting service spares patients a 500-mile round trip to Aberdeen for routine appointments. The rheumatology clinic at The Balfour can assess new patients and follow up on ongoing treatment. Between visits, local GPs manage care with advice from the specialist as needed. (In some cases, if urgent or highly specialized care is required, patients may still travel to Aberdeen or Inverness.)
* **Neurology (Multiple Sclerosis and others):** Orkney has a high prevalence of MS, and services reflect that. **Neurology clinics** are held via visiting neurologists or telemedicine links. Once diagnosed, an MS patient is referred to the **MS Specialist Nurse** (see above) who is based at The Balfour . The nurse works closely with neurologists in Aberdeen; for example, they coordinate tests like MRI and can facilitate consultations. *Health services in Orkney respond very quickly once a person is diagnosed with MS, referring them promptly to the specialist nurse for support* . The nurse can also advise on disease-modifying therapies (which are typically prescribed by mainland neurologists but administered/monitored locally). For other neurological autoimmune conditions (e.g. myasthenia gravis or autoimmune encephalitis), patients would usually see a visiting neurologist or be referred to a neurology department on the mainland. Notably, Orkney also has a private **MS Therapy Centre** (detailed in the community section) offering supplementary therapies for people with MS.
* **Dermatology:** Autoimmune skin conditions like psoriasis or lupus-related rashes are seen by dermatology. Historically, dermatology in Orkney has been served by visiting consultants. (A few years ago, NHS Orkney faced a shortage of dermatology services and worked on sustainable solutions in partnership with mainland boards .) Currently, visiting dermatologists from Grampian hold periodic clinics in Orkney, and tele-dermatology (sending images to specialists) is also used. Patients with complex cases may travel to Aberdeen. Basic dermatology treatments (e.g. dressings, some phototherapy) can be done at The Balfour under local staff guidance.
* **Diabetes/Endocrinology:** Type 1 diabetes is an autoimmune condition managed by the **Orkney Diabetes Specialist Service**. While there is no resident endocrinologist, Orkney’s diabetes managed clinical network includes specialist nurses and dietitians who work closely with NHS Grampian consultants . They provide a *“holistic approach to diabetes care”* in Orkney . Regular clinics (including retinal screening) take place locally, and an Aberdeen endocrinologist may visit or see patients via video. Education programs for newly diagnosed Type 1 and Type 2 diabetics (like the “Control It” program for Type 2) are offered to help patients self-manage . Other endocrine autoimmune disorders (e.g. Addison’s, thyroiditis) would be handled similarly with GP coordination and specialist advice from Aberdeen.
* **Gastroenterology:** Autoimmune gastrointestinal conditions such as **Crohn’s disease** or **ulcerative colitis** are typically overseen by GI specialists in Aberdeen. Orkney has visiting gastroenterology clinics occasionally. Initial diagnostics (blood tests, basic endoscopy) can be done at The Balfour, but more complex procedures or IBD clinic appointments might require travel. However, the aim is to do follow-ups via telephone or NHS Near Me when appropriate. Dietetic support is available locally for dietary management of conditions like celiac disease (autoimmune gluten intolerance) or IBD.
* **Other Specialties:** For less common autoimmune conditions (e.g. autoimmune liver disease, kidney diseases, etc.), NHS Orkney will refer to the relevant specialist at a partner tertiary center. Many specialties – cardiology, respiratory, renal, etc. – hold **visiting outpatient clinics** in Orkney every few months . These clinics are run by dedicated visiting consultants who “**visit the islands at regular intervals – usually once every two or three months**” . For instance, a cardiologist usually visits bi-monthly , and similar intervals often apply for other specialties. This visiting consultant model helps cover specialist care for island residents. If your condition requires urgent specialist input between visits, the local doctors can consult mainland specialists by phone/email, or you may be asked to travel for sooner care.

**Note:** For any **acute exacerbation** of an autoimmune condition (e.g. severe flare of rheumatoid arthritis, MS relapse symptoms, etc.), The Balfour can provide initial urgent care and liaise with specialists for guidance on immediate management (like high-dose steroids). They can also arrange emergency transfers to mainland hospitals if necessary.

**Community Support Groups (In-Person & Virtual)**

Several local groups in Orkney provide peer support, information, and social connection for people living with autoimmune and chronic conditions. These groups are usually run by volunteers or are local branches of national charities:

* **Versus Arthritis – Orkney Branch:** This is a local arthritis support group under the Versus Arthritis charity. The Orkney Branch meets **monthly (first Thursday of each month at 2pm)** at the Pickaquoy Centre in Kirkwall . Meetings are informal and offer *entertainment, talks on health and wellbeing topics, and socializing for those living with arthritis* . The branch also organizes a summer outing and a Christmas lunch annually . It’s a friendly forum for anyone with arthritis or related conditions (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis, psoriatic arthritis, etc.) to share experiences and tips. If interested in attending, you can simply get in touch – **new members are welcome**.
* **MS Society – Orkney Group:** Orkney has an active branch of the MS Society, run by a dedicated team of local volunteers . Given the high number of people with multiple sclerosis in Orkney, this group is a vital source of support. The MS Society Orkney Group provides **emotional and practical support** to everyone affected by MS – whether you have MS or care for someone who does . They host information events, social get-togethers, and even help with small grants for needs like equipment or travel . Recently, the group has organized activities such as *art classes, physiotherapy sessions, and Reiki therapy* for members, sometimes in person and sometimes online . For example, a **weekly art class** and **physiotherapy exercise sessions** have been offered, and a qualified therapist provides **Reiki (relaxation therapy)** by appointment at the Suilven Centre in Kirkwall . Family members and carers are welcome at many events too . The group communicates news via a mailing list and a Facebook page (“MS in Orkney Information Page”). They emphasize that *“we don’t want anyone to face MS alone”*.
* **Orkney F.A.M.E Support Group (Fibromyalgia and ME/CFS):** People living with **fibromyalgia**, **Myalgic Encephalomyelitis/Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (ME/CFS)**, and other invisible chronic illnesses have a local peer group known as F.A.M.E. (Fibromyalgia And ME). The FAME group meets regularly (mostly daytime meetings, with occasional evenings) in venues around Kirkwall – in the past they have used the Library or community centres. Meetings provide a safe space to share experiences, coping strategies, and understanding. *“The support group has helped me… People in the group know what you are talking about and understand,”* says one member, highlighting the value of talking with others who “get it” . The group often holds awareness events (for example, on Fibromyalgia Awareness Day they’ve done info stalls at the Kirkwall Town Hall ) to let others know they exist. They welcome anyone in Orkney with fibromyalgia, ME, CFS, or related chronic pain/fatigue conditions. (The name “FAME” itself reflects the combination of Fibro and M.E. support.) To learn about upcoming meetings or to join, you can check their Facebook group (“Orkney FAME”) or contact the organizers by phone . *(See Key Contacts for the phone number.)*
* **Diabetes Support (Orkney):** Diabetes is another common autoimmune-related condition (Type 1 diabetes). The local volunteer-led **Diabetes UK Orkney Group** is currently *inactive* (it ceased regular meetings as a formal branch) . However, people with diabetes in Orkney can still find support through Diabetes Scotland’s resources. During the COVID-19 pandemic, **online peer support groups** and wellbeing sessions (yoga, mindfulness) were launched for island residents . Small group video chats are available for those with Type 1 and Type 2 diabetes, so Orcadians can connect with others in similar situations virtually . Diabetes Scotland noted that many people, especially in remote areas, feel isolated managing a long-term condition and these digital groups help provide community . In addition, Diabetes Scotland runs a helpline and forum (see Online Services below). So while there isn’t an in-person Orkney diabetes club right now, **support is “only a Zoom call or phone call away.”** Orkney’s Diabetes Specialist Nurses can also refer patients to structured education and local Facebook support communities.
* **Other Condition-Specific Groups:** For certain specific autoimmune conditions, there may not be a dedicated Orkney-only group, but national organizations can connect you with resources. For example, if you have lupus or Sjögren’s syndrome, **Lupus UK** can offer telephone/email support (though no Orkney branch). If you have coeliac disease, **Coeliac UK** has a Scotland network. You can ask a healthcare provider or Voluntary Action Orkney for info on any informal networks that might exist. Additionally, some **online forums** (outside of formal charities) are run by Orcadians – for instance, there is a local Facebook information page for **“MS in Orkney”** with over 1,700 followers sharing news and tips , and a personal blog “Orkney Fibromyalgia Sufferer” that fosters an online community . These can complement face-to-face support.

**Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services**

Living with an autoimmune disease can take a toll on mental health for both patients and caregivers. In Orkney, there are services to provide emotional support, counselling, and social care:

* **Orkney Blide Trust:** The Blide Trust is a local mental health charity aiming to *“promote mental wellbeing in Orkney.”* It offers a drop-in centre called **“The Blide Hoose”** in Kirkwall, where anyone experiencing mental ill health can find a safe, friendly space . The Blide provides **befriending, activity groups, and housing support** among other services . For example, members can participate in crafts, gardening, outings, or just have a cup of tea and chat – helping to combat isolation and depression. The staff and volunteers are experienced in supporting those with chronic conditions and the associated emotional challenges. You can self-refer or be referred by a GP/agency. **Contact:** Orkney Blide Trust, 54 Victoria St, Kirkwall, Tel 01856-874874 . (They also have a website with their weekly program of activities .) This is a great resource if you’re feeling anxious, down, or in need of peer company in a supportive environment.
* **NHS Orkney Community Mental Health Team (CMHT):** The CMHT is a multidisciplinary team of mental health professionals based at The Balfour, providing community-based psychiatric and psychological services across Orkney . The team includes mental health nurses, psychiatrists (visiting), clinical psychologists, and social workers who specialize in mental health . They can help with issues like depression, anxiety, or adjustment difficulties related to chronic illness. Generally, you access the CMHT via a referral from your GP (in urgent cases, some services can be accessed via the on-call system). The CMHT offers assessment, therapy (talking therapies or medication management), and can link you to further resources. They often coordinate with the Blide Trust and other agencies. *For out-of-hours mental health crises,* you can call **NHS 24 on 111** or The Balfour (01856 888000) to reach an on-call mental health practitioner . During office hours, the CMHT’s direct line is 01856 888280 .
* **Counselling Services:** While Orkney doesn’t have a large dedicated counseling center, there are a few options:
  + The charity **Relationships Scotland – Orkney** has trained counselors who see individuals, couples, or families dealing with difficulties (not just relationship issues; they handle general counseling too). They can support those struggling with the emotional impact of illness. They are based at Kirkwall Travel Centre, and can be reached at 01856-877750 or enquiries@rsorkney.org.uk .
  + For those dealing with bereavement (including loss after long illness), **Cruse Bereavement Care** has a local branch offering free bereavement counseling (contact 01856-871871) .
  + **Women’s Aid Orkney** provides support for women facing domestic abuse – relevant because living with illness can sometimes be complicated by family stress or abuse situations. They offer confidential support and refuge (Tel 01856-877900) .
  + **Home-Start Orkney** helps families under stress who have young children, which can include families where a parent’s health condition is affecting home life. They provide trained volunteers to visit and assist (Tel 01856-870770) .
* **Support for Caregivers:** If you are caring for a family member with an autoimmune condition, support is available for you too. **Crossroads Orkney** is a charitable service focused on helping unpaid carers. They offer information, *emotional support, and practical help* to carers with the aim of **“enhancing their quality of life.”** This can include respite care (so you can take a break while someone looks after your loved one), advocacy, or just a listening ear. Crossroads can also connect you with any carer benefits or training. **Contact:** Kirkwall Travel Centre, West Castle St, Tel 01856-870500, Email carers@crossroadsorkney.co.uk . Additionally, **Carers UK (Scotland)** has information for carers accessible online , and the Orkney Health & Care partnership runs a Carers’ Strategy – your GP or the VAO (Voluntary Action Orkney) can provide the local Carers Support Plan details.
* **Advocacy and Advice:** For those who feel their voice isn’t heard or need help navigating health and social care, **Advocacy Orkney** can assist. They help vulnerable people (including those with mental or physical health issues) to express their wishes and secure their rights . An advocate can accompany you to medical appointments or meetings to ensure you get the support you need. Contact: 01856-870111, info@advocacyorkney.org .
* **Peer Support and Helplines:** Sometimes you just need someone to talk to during tough times. The **Samaritans** offer 24/7 confidential emotional support by phone. You can call **116 123** any time to talk about whatever is troubling you – this is free and doesn’t show up on bills. Orkney has a local Samaritans branch (Kirkwall), but you’ll reach a trained listener wherever you call from. There’s also **Breathing Space** (a Scotland-wide helpline open evenings and weekends at 0800 83 85 87) for anyone feeling down or anxious . These services understand the unique stresses of chronic illness and are there to listen.
* **Befriending Services:** Chronic illness can lead to isolation, especially in a small community. **VAO Befriending Orkney** runs programs where volunteers are matched with individuals (either older adults or young people) for regular social contact . A befriender might visit you weekly or call for a chat – providing friendship and a link to the community. They also organize group activities and intergenerational projects . If you’d like a befriender, you can contact Voluntary Action Orkney’s Befriending team via the VAO office (Tel 01856-872897, according to VAO’s website) or see their page . This can be particularly helpful if your condition limits your ability to get out and about.
* **Community Social Support:** Beyond formal services, take advantage of community hubs – for example, local faith groups or hobby clubs in Orkney are often very welcoming and understanding if you have health limitations. Sometimes attending a gentle exercise class, a craft group, or a “tea and chat” afternoon at a community hall can boost mental health. Orkney has initiatives like “Nature Prescriptions” where GPs encourage patients to engage with nature for wellbeing (group walks, etc. are organized). The key message: **you are not alone**, and there are multiple avenues in Orkney to seek emotional and social support.

**Local Charities and Non-Profit Assistance**

In addition to the condition-specific groups and mental health services, several charities in Orkney offer practical support for those with chronic and autoimmune conditions:

* **Orkney MS Therapy Centre:** This is a unique local charity in Kirkwall that provides therapies for people with MS (and potentially other conditions). It is one of 60 MS therapy centers in the UK, run by a team of volunteers and staff. The Orkney MS Therapy Centre offers **specialized exercise classes, massage sessions, and hyperbaric oxygen treatment** for people living with MS . The centre has two physiotherapy suites and a hyperbaric oxygen chamber (which has been used in Orkney since 1984) to help manage symptoms . Users describe the centre as a *“welcoming and friendly place”* where there’s always time for a chat, and many find the therapies beneficial . The centre had paused operations during the pandemic and was seeking new leadership to reopen in 2022 , but it is expected to be running with a new committee (check their **Facebook page** or contact them directly). **Location:** Junction Road, Kirkwall (beside the Scout Hall). **Contact:** Tel 01856-875454 (open Mondays & Tuesdays) . Even if you don’t have MS, the existence of this centre shows the strong community support for chronic illness in Orkney – they may sometimes have capacity to offer therapies to those with similar needs (e.g. other neurological conditions) on a case-by-case basis.
* **Orkney Disability Forum (ODF):** ODF is a local charity devoted to helping people with any form of disability or mobility issue to live independently. Many autoimmune conditions can cause mobility problems or fatigue, and ODF can assist with practicalities. They run the **Dial-a-Bus** transport service and **Shopmobility**, which provides wheelchairs/scooters for use in Kirkwall . They also have a small stock of daily living aids and can advise on what equipment might help you at home . For example, if you need a shower seat, walking aid, or jar opener due to arthritis, ODF can point you in the right direction. They collaborate with the council’s **Selbro Resource Centre**, where you can try out assistive equipment in model rooms (kitchen, bathroom, etc.) and borrow items . **Contact ODF:** 18 Junction Road, Kirkwall, Tel 01856-870340, Email info@odforkney.com . Even if you’re not “registered disabled,” you can reach out for advice. They can also help with Blue Badge parking applications and offer general information on disability rights.
* **Voluntary Action Orkney (VAO):** VAO is the umbrella organization for Orkney’s voluntary sector. While not focused on any single condition, VAO can connect you to various support services and volunteer opportunities. They coordinate the befriending service mentioned above and have a directory of local support groups (for example, their online directory lists the MS Society, Arthritis group, etc.). If you’re not sure who to turn to, VAO is a good starting point for information on local charities. **Contact:** 01856-872897, or visit their office at Anchor Buildings, Kirkwall.
* **Crossroads Care Orkney:** (Mentioned earlier under carers support) – Crossroads is actually a charity, part of the Carers Trust network. They might be able to provide **respite care** workers to come to your home, allowing the person with the condition or their carer some rest time. Even an hour or two a week can make a difference. Crossroads also sometimes has funding for equipment or services that benefit the cared-for person. (Contact details in Mental Health/Psychosocial section above.)
* **Condition-Specific Charities:** Some national charities have local volunteers in Orkney:
  + **Chest, Heart & Stroke Scotland (CHSS)** – Orkney has had community support groups for stroke and long-term pulmonary illness; these aren’t autoimmune, but if you have an overlapping condition, you might engage with them.
  + **Arthritis (Versus Arthritis)** and **MS Society** – (covered in support groups) are major charities with Orkney branches.
  + **Macmillan Cancer Support** – if someone has an autoimmune condition secondary to cancer or vice versa, Macmillan has a presence at The Balfour’s Macmillan unit.
  + **Highlands & Islands Fibromyalgia** – there may be a regional network that Orkney folks can tap into beyond the local FAME group.
* **Financial and Practical Help:** Autoimmune conditions can create financial strain. Orkney has a **Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)** in Kirkwall that can help you access benefits (like Personal Independence Payment, Carer’s Allowance) and grants. Also, **Orkney Charitable Trust (OCT)** is a local charity that sometimes gives financial assistance to individuals in need due to illness (often aimed at families/children). **Orkney Foodbank** is available for anyone facing a crisis where they can’t afford food – vouchers for the foodbank are obtainable from GPs, CAB, social workers, etc., and the Foodbank is open Tuesdays and Fridays in Kirkwall . And if energy costs for heating (important in Orkney’s climate) are a worry due to being home unwell, the council and THAW Orkney have schemes to help with fuel poverty.

**Online and Hybrid Support Services Accessible from Orkney**

Being an island community, Orkney has embraced remote support options which can be extremely useful for those with autoimmune conditions who may not always be able to travel or meet in person. Here are some key online and telehealth resources:

* **NHS Inform & Condition Information:** *NHS Inform* (www.nhsinform.scot) is Scotland’s health information website. It has comprehensive, up-to-date guides on various autoimmune conditions (e.g. rheumatoid arthritis, MS, lupus, diabetes, etc.), treatments and self-management tips. It’s a great starting point to learn about your condition and what support is available nationally. NHS Inform also links to local services – for instance, there’s a page for “Diabetes Specialist Service – Orkney” that outlines how local care is coordinated . You can also find advice on managing symptoms (like the NHS Inform *Muscle, Bone and Joint* self-help guides for musculoskeletal pain ). All content is in English and written in an accessible way.
* **NHS Near Me (Video Consultations):** NHS Orkney, like the rest of Scotland, uses the “Near Me” secure video system to conduct appointments remotely. If you have internet access and a device, your GP or specialist might offer a Near Me video appointment – meaning you can consult with your Aberdeen specialist or Kirkwall GP from home (especially useful if you live on a smaller island or have mobility issues). This doesn’t require any special software beyond a web browser and camera. Many follow-up appointments for Orkney patients are now done by phone or Near Me, reducing the need to travel.
* **MS Society Helpline & Online Forum:** The MS Society runs a UK-wide **MS Helpline (0808 800 8000)** where you can call for information or emotional support . They also host an **online forum** where you can post questions and chat with others living with MS . This can be invaluable, especially if you want to anonymously ask things or it’s 2am and you can’t sleep – someone might be online to talk to. The Orkney MS Group is part of this larger network, and you can sign up for the MS Society’s **online community** via their website .
* **Versus Arthritis Helpline & Online Community:** Versus Arthritis offers a free **helpline at 0800 5200 520** for anyone with arthritis or related conditions . You can call to ask about medications, exercise, rights at work, or just to talk about how you’re feeling. The charity also has an **online community forum** where you can connect with others (the Versus Arthritis website has discussion forums and a virtual assistant chatbot) . Additionally, they have a **virtual branch** (online meetings) and lots of YouTube exercise classes for things like chair yoga or hand exercises. Given that the Orkney branch breaks over the summer months , these online resources can fill the gap.
* **Diabetes Scotland Online Support:** Diabetes Scotland (part of Diabetes UK) provides several remote services. They have an email helpline (helpline@diabetes.org.uk) and a support line (usually via the main Diabetes UK number). As noted, they launched **digital peer support groups on Zoom** – for example, groups specifically for Type 1 young adults, or separate ones for people with Type 2 . The groups are kept small to allow conversation, and you can join from home . They’ve also been offering **online mindfulness and yoga classes** tailored for people with diabetes, recognizing that stress can affect blood sugar . To get involved, you simply **email scotland@diabetes.org.uk** and they will invite you to the appropriate Zoom group . Furthermore, **My Diabetes My Way** is an interactive NHS web portal for Scotland – you can register to see your own diabetes records, get e-learning modules, and use apps to track your readings . Orkney’s diabetes team encourages patients to use this online tool as part of their care .
* **Social Media & Information Pages:** Many of the local groups have a social media presence where they share updates:
  + The **“MS in Orkney Information Page”** on Facebook is a public page that posts about meetings, research news, and personal stories; it has quite a following locally .
  + The **Orkney FAME group** likely coordinates via a closed Facebook group – once you make contact, they can add you.
  + The Orkney branch of **Arthritis** may not have its own Facebook, but Versus Arthritis Scotland’s Facebook page sometimes highlights Orkney events.
  + **Twitter/Instagram:** There is a Twitter account run by an Orkney fibromyalgia advocate (@OSufferer) which shares articles and encouragement.
  + Staying connected online can help you feel part of a wider community even when you’re physically remote.
* **E-Learning and Webinars:** Charities often host educational webinars. For example, Lupus UK, NRAS (National Rheumatoid Arthritis Society), MS Trust, etc., have done Zoom Q&As and online courses. With a decent internet connection, you can join any of these from Orkney. Check the charity websites for upcoming events. NHS Orkney’s Facebook page and the local press (Orcadian, Orkney News) also announce when there are health-related webinars or initiatives (like pain management courses or mindfulness workshops) open to the community.
* **Mental Health Online:** In addition to phone lines like Samaritans and Breathing Space, Orkney residents (especially younger people) can access services like **Kooth** – an online mental wellbeing community for youth, offering moderated forums and one-to-one chats with counselors . For adults, **Mind** (the mental health charity) has an online info hub and infoline (0300 123 3393) , and many find resources like the “Living Life to the Full” self-help courses (online CBT resources) useful. Being comfortable with online support has become important, and the pandemic accelerated acceptance of virtual help.
* **Telecare and Remote Monitoring:** If your condition is severe, Orkney Health & Care can install telecare devices (like emergency pendants or health monitors) in your home. This is more for safety (e.g., if you have falls or need to alert someone), but it’s worth mentioning that technology is used in Orkney to support independent living. For example, patients on certain medications might use home blood pressure or blood sugar monitors and relay readings electronically to their clinic.

**Important:** All online services are supplemental – they don’t replace seeing a doctor if you’re unwell. But they are *accessible from Orkney* and can greatly enhance your support network given geographic constraints. Also, ensure you have reliable internet or phone access; if not, the library in Kirkwall provides public internet, and the NHS Orkney Patient Advice staff can help print information for you. The blend of in-person and online support means you can get help even if weather or health keeps you at home.

**Scottish Areas with Highest Autoimmune Disease Prevalence**

Certain regions in Scotland are notable for having especially high rates of autoimmune disorders – in particular, the northern isles have **world-leading prevalence of multiple sclerosis (MS)**, an autoimmune neurological disease. Below we highlight three areas with the highest known autoimmune disease rates or populations, along with relevant data on diagnosed rates and overall prevalence:

* **Orkney Islands** – *Diagnosed MS rate:* **402 per 100,000** people, the highest MS prevalence ever recorded worldwide . (One in 170 women on Orkney has MS .) This rate, from a major 2012 study, was more than **double** the Scottish national MS prevalence at that time . *Overall prevalence:* Approximately **0.4%** of Orkney’s population lives with MS (versus ~0.2% across Scotland) . When considering all autoimmune disorders together, Orkney’s total burden is likely elevated as well – for context, about **10% of the UK population** has some form of autoimmune disease , so a small community like Orkney (population ~22,000) might have on the order of a couple thousand people affected by autoimmune conditions in total. The extraordinarily high MS rate on Orkney (often dubbed the *“MS capital”* of the world ) is a key contributor to its overall autoimmune disease prevalence.
* **Shetland Islands** – *Diagnosed MS rate:* **295 per 100,000** people , the second-highest MS prevalence in Scotland (only behind Orkney). This equates to roughly 0.3% of Shetland’s population having MS. Like Orkney, Shetland saw its MS rates rise over recent decades . *Overall prevalence:* Shetland’s **autoimmune disease burden** per capita is among the highest in the country, driven largely by MS. Its MS prevalence is about 40% higher than Scotland’s average . Although detailed data for all autoimmune diagnoses in Shetland are limited, the elevated MS frequency suggests environmental or genetic factors that might also influence other autoimmune conditions. (Scotland’s northern isles have been a focus of research to understand these unusual clusters .) In sum, Shetland’s small population (~23,000) includes a **disproportionately large number of autoimmune disease patients** relative to national norms, again chiefly due to MS.
* **City of Aberdeen** (Northeast Scotland) – *Diagnosed MS rate:* **229 per 100,000** people , which is the highest MS prevalence recorded for any Scottish city and notably above the national average . Aberdeen was identified in the same study as having one of the top three MS rates in Scotland (after Orkney and Shetland) . *Overall prevalence:* With a population of ~220,000, Aberdeen has a substantial absolute number of individuals with autoimmune diseases. An MS prevalence of 229/100k suggests roughly **500 individuals in the city living with MS**. Beyond MS, if around 10% of people have any autoimmune condition (the UK-wide estimate) , one could expect on the order of **20,000+ people in Aberdeen** affected by autoimmune disorders (including common conditions like rheumatoid arthritis, type 1 diabetes, thyroid autoimmune diseases, etc.). While Aberdeen’s **per-capita rate** for MS and some other autoimmune illnesses is high (possibly influenced by its northern latitude and genetic factors ), in terms of sheer numbers it also has one of the largest autoimmune disease populations in Scotland (given it is a major city). This dual distinction (high rate and a large patient population) makes Aberdeen a key area of focus for autoimmune health services in Scotland.

**Data source note:** The above prevalence rates for MS come from a comprehensive study published in *Journal of Neurology, Neurosurgery & Psychiatry* (2012), which found Orkney (402 per 100k), Shetland (295 per 100k), and Aberdeen (229 per 100k) to have the highest recorded MS rates . For comparison, **Scotland’s overall MS prevalence was ~209 per 100,000** in that period – already one of the highest national rates in the world – and other parts of the UK had lower rates (e.g. England 164, Wales 138 per 100k) . These regional disparities underline the **north-south gradient** in autoimmune disease prevalence, often hypothesized to relate to factors like vitamin D (sunlight exposure) or genetic ancestry . Moreover, recent large-scale research confirms that **autoimmune disorders affect roughly 1 in 10 people** in the UK, and that there are significant **regional variations** in the incidence of certain autoimmune conditions . The Orkney and Shetland islands remain outliers with **exceptionally high rates** for specific diseases like MS, whereas densely populated regions (Greater Glasgow, Lothian, etc.) have the largest absolute number of autoimmune patients despite more average per-capita rates.

Overall, **Scotland’s northern island communities (Orkney and Shetland) and the city of Aberdeen** stand out as having the **highest prevalence of autoimmune disorders** – particularly multiple sclerosis – whether measured by rate per population or by noteworthy cluster of cases. These data guide healthcare planning, indicating where enhanced resources for autoimmune disease support and research may be most needed.

**Key Contacts and Resources in Orkney**

Here is a summary list of who to contact for more information or assistance regarding these services in Orkney:

* **💠 NHS Orkney Main Switchboard (The Balfour Hospital):** 📞 **01856 888000** (24/7, for urgent healthcare queries, to reach on-call doctors or the hospital wards) . For general inquiries during office hours, you can also try 📞 **01856 888100** . The hospital can connect you to the Specialist Nurse for MS or any department you need.
* **💠 GP Practices in Orkney:** Contact your registered practice for appointments or referrals. (Kirkwall has **Heilendi Practice** at The Balfour – 📞 01856 888270 – and **Skerryvore Practice** – 📞 01856 888240. Stromness Surgery 📞 01856 850205, etc.). A full list is on the NHS Orkney website . Out-of-hours GP service is reached via NHS 24 (dial **111**). If it’s an emergency, call **999** as usual.
* **💠 NHS Orkney Community Mental Health Team:** 📞 **01856 888280** (Office hours) for mental health support or queries . NHS 24 at 111 for out-of-hours mental health crises.
* \*\*💠 **MS Specialist Nurse (Orkney)** – Moira Flett: Contact via The Balfour Hospital neurology/long-term conditions dept, likely through the hospital switchboard above. (She works part-time, so leave messages.) She is the point of contact for MS patients .
* **💠 Orkney Health & Care (OHAC) Social Services:** For community care assessments, care packages, OT assessments, etc. General contact via Orkney Islands Council, School Place, Kirkwall – 📞 **01856 873535** (ask for Adult Social Services).
* **🔹 Versus Arthritis Orkney Branch:** *Meetings:* 1st Thursday of each month, 2pm, at Pickaquoy Centre, Kirkwall . **Contact**: Versus Arthritis Scotland office – 📞 **0141 954 7776**, **email:** scotland@versusarthritis.org . (They will put you in touch with the Orkney branch organizers.) The Pickaquoy Centre address: Muddisdale Road, Kirkwall, KW15 1LR .
* **🔹 MS Society Orkney Group:** **Email:** **orkney@mssociety.org.uk** for the local branch. They also have an **MS Orkney Facebook page** (search “MS in Orkney Information Page”). No dedicated phone, but you can contact the MS Society Scotland office at 📞 0131 335 4050 and ask for Orkney group info. The group often meets at the Suilven Centre (East Road, Kirkwall) for activities like Reiki .
* **🔹 Orkney MS Therapy Centre:** **Phone:** 01856 875454 (when open, usually Mondays and Tuesdays) . Located on Junction Road, Kirkwall (beside Scout Hall, behind Indian Garden). *Facebook:* “Orkney MS Therapy Centre” for updates. (If no answer, you might contact a committee member via Facebook – as of 2022 they were recruiting a new chairperson .)
* **🔹 F.A.M.E. (Fibromyalgia & ME) Support Group:** **Facebook:** “Orkney FAME” (preferred contact method). **Contact phone:** 07513 297453 (from 2018 article – to reach one of the group organizers, Tina or Lorraine). They do not have an office; this is a personal mobile for inquiries about meeting times.
* **🔹 Orkney Blide Trust:** **Address:** 54 Victoria Street, Kirkwall. **Phone:** 01856 874874 . **Email:** admin@blidetrust.org.uk . **Website:** www.blidetrust.org.uk – for their activity calendar and referral info.
* **🔹 Crossroads Care Orkney:** **Phone:** 01856 870500 . **Email:** carers@crossroadsorkney.co.uk . Office at Kirkwall Travel Centre, West Castle Street. Call or email to discuss carer support needs or to self-refer as a carer.
* **🔹 Orkney Disability Forum:** **Phone:** 01856 870340 . **Email:** info@odforkney.com . **Address:** 18 Junction Road, Kirkwall. They can advise on transport (Dial-a-Bus booking, etc.) and equipment loans.
* **🔹 Advocacy Orkney:** **Phone:** 01856 870111 . **Email:** info@advocacyorkney.org . Office at 18 Queen Street, Kirkwall – call ahead to make an appointment with an advocate.
* **🔹 Samaritans (Orkney branch):** **Phone:** **116 123** (free, 24/7) . **Local address**: Kirkwall Travel Centre, West Castle Street (you can drop in or write to them there). For non-urgent queries, the UK email jo@samaritans.org is available.
* **🔹 Breathing Space (Scotland):** **Phone:** 0800 83 85 87 . (Evenings 6pm–2am weekdays, and 24hrs over weekends) – for anyone experiencing low mood or anxiety.
* **🔹 NHS 24 Helpline:** **Phone:** 111 – for out-of-hours medical advice including mental health. They can also direct you to any on-call services in Orkney.
* **🔹 National Helplines:**
  + Versus Arthritis Helpline: 0800 5200 520 (Mon–Fri) .
  + MS Society Helpline: 0808 800 8000 (Mon–Fri) .
  + Diabetes UK Helpline (Scotland): 0141 212 8710 or email helpline@diabetes.org.uk .
  + Lupus UK: 01708 731251 (they can connect you with others in Scotland).
  + Crohn’s & Colitis UK: 0300 222 5700.
  + Mind infoline: 0300 123 3393 for mental health advice.
  + (These are UK-wide but absolutely accessible to Orkney residents.)
* **🔹 Websites & Online Platforms:**
  + NHS Inform (www.nhsinform.scot) – official health information.
  + My Diabetes My Way (mydiabetesmyway.scot.nhs.uk) – manage your diabetes online .
  + MS Society Forums (community.mssociety.org.uk) – discussion boards for MS .
  + Versus Arthritis Online Community – via their website (community.versusarthritis.org).
  + Orkney Communities (www.orkneycommunities.co.uk) – local portal that hosts pages for many groups (e.g., Home-Start Orkney , Relationships Scotland Orkney , etc., can be found there).