

Older People and Village Services: Exploring the Impact of Community-Based Services in Rural England

A study funded by Age Concern East and West Midlands, the Eastern Region and Age Concern England, undertaken by Peter Dwyer and Irene Hardill in the Graduate School, Business, Law and Social Sciences, Nottingham Trent University.

This qualitative study focuses on six examples of community based services delivered by local Age Concerns that offer that 'little bit of help' to older people in a variety of village/dispersed rural settings in England. It highlights the extent to which these services are valued by older people living in the countryside and the important role they play in promoting the social inclusion and well-being of senior citizens resident in rural England.

The research is based on interviews with 44 older users of the six village services and 25 key informants.

Key findings

- Village services such as lunch clubs, befriending and information and advice services actively promote the social inclusion of older people for relatively small cost. They are highly valued by service users, older volunteers and the wider rural community.
- Whilst there is nothing intrinsically problematic about living in very rural settings, aspects of contemporary country life, notably a lack of transport options and locally available services, may exacerbate the social exclusion of older rural residents.
- The overwhelming majority of users of village services are female. Older men are often reluctant to engage with the services currently on offer in rural areas.
- The users of village services are almost exclusively white.
- Loneliness and isolation are strong and recurrent themes in the lives of many older people living in very rural settings.
- Village services significantly enhance the lives of older rural residents for relatively little cost.
- As part of a wider package of formal and informal support village services play an important role in maintaining older rural residents in their own homes. As a result, often they negate the need for more expensive institutionalised care packages.
- The system of competitive tender (often for time limited funding), which underpins many village services is innovative, in that it stimulates providers to identify and, *if successful*, meet the pressing needs of older rural residents. However, such finite funding arrangements also have major resource implications for providers, and, in the long-term undermine the stability and quality of services.
- Village services, of the type reviewed in this study, would be unsustainable without the continuing goodwill, commitment and generosity of both paid staff and older volunteers working in the voluntary sector.
- The expertise of Age Concern in providing trustworthy services to meet the diverse needs of older rural residents is recognized by service users and funders alike.

Background to the study

Defining remote rural areas is not straightforward. Today there is no sharp dividing line on the ground between what is rural and what is urban. That said, rural areas offer an important reference point for policy makers and analysts in understanding the broader implications of demographic ageing. Older people are concentrated in rural areas, and such areas are generally characterised by an ageing population.

The current trend to build rural economic development and service delivery around market towns as local 'hubs' may well meet the needs of the majority of the rural population. However, such a policy thrust poses challenges to those organisations serving older people living in more remote rural areas due to e. g. the dispersed nature of the population, (lack of) access to public and private transport and issues of accessibility and isolation. Moreover in the new mixed economy of welfare, the contracting out of service delivery may involve the public, private and voluntary and community sector, in combinations that vary spatially.

This research took place in very rural locations within three English Regions (East Midlands, West Midlands and the East of England). The study area forms a swathe of land in middle England stretching from the North Sea in the east, to the Welsh border in the west, from Herefordshire in the south to Derbyshire in the north. The study focused on older adults in '*remote rural communities*'. Six existing services (two in each of the three regions), providing help and support to older people in rural settings were chosen by the Age Concern commissioning panel to form the basis of the study. Each of the projects (listed below) aims to promote the well-being of their older clients in various ways. Projects 1, 2, 4 and 6 focus on overcoming older people's social isolation, whilst projects 3 and 5 offer information/advice and practical support in respect of rights to benefits and services. As such the six projects attempt to promote the social and economic inclusion of older people in rural settings.

PROJECT NAME	OUTLINE OF SERVICE PROVIDED
Project 1 – Community Warden Service	Community warden giving emotional/practical support to housebound/lonely, bereaved, and people convalescing after hospitalisation in dispersed villages in remote part of a county
Project 2 – Mobilising Local Communities	Rural county-wide initiative to grow community self help networks, analysis centred on a neighbourhood lunch club held in a parish centre
Project 3 – Accessing Welfare Rights	Helping older residents access entitlements in a tightly defined area (former mining communities and rural villages in part of a county)
Project 4 – Befriending Services	Two linked befriending projects which provide a regular social visit for clients living alone or in isolated settings
Project 5 – Information and Advice	Service offering information and advice on benefits and services to older people in dispersed rural areas, including a dedicated worker to visit older people in their homes to help

Service	clients access welfare entitlements
Project 6 – Lunch Club/ Mobile Care Service	Combines a regular social event and meal with delivery of mobile hand, foot and hair care to older people living in very rural settings

Method, sample, analysis

In total 69 participants were interviewed using qualitative techniques in the course of the fieldwork. 44 were older people who made use of one of the six village services under consideration and 25 were key informants involved in the management, day to day delivery, or financing of the services.

Of the 44 older service users interviewed 32 were women and 12 men. All but four of the service users were aged 70+ at the time of interview and ages ranged from 58 to 93 years. 18 service users were interviewed in four focus groups, 16 were interviewed individually and 10 in pairs. The sample included both partnered older people and those living alone. All older service users were white. Fieldwork was conducted between July 30th and December 3rd 2007.

Interviews were recorded on audiotape, transcribed verbatim and analysed using grid analysis and thematic code and retrieve methods. All participants subsequently received a copy of their transcript and were invited to feedback any further responses/reflections to the researcher team.

The 'problems' of growing old in the countryside?

The problems faced by older people who live in rural settings are a common characteristic of previous research and were a strong feature of this study. A lack of accessible public transport, the ongoing loss of local amenities and geographical isolation, in combination with the physical limitations that may occur in later life, often lead to diminished opportunities for contact with relatives and other local community members.

Well I think it's most unfair for people living in the rural areas that they can't sort of get on a bus. Because as you are older you can't walk so far. I mean until I was 80 I could walk (U18).

No isolated is not too strong a word...she lives over a mile from the village, she has osteoporosis quite badly, she can't drive any more. She's 84 I think... Now there are only two other properties up there. So if she doesn't see her neighbour she doesn't see anybody. She's not ill enough to have home help or nurses or carers because she is able to get about in the house. But she can't go out (U12).

Yes because it is very rural here. At least two people live a long way out of here. There are no buses in this area.... There's a gentleman in there [lunch club] who lives in a little cottage along there, he can't get a bus ... They don't get a lot of help, well certainly don't get any help transport wise (K113).

In some ways a rural setting may exacerbate the social exclusion of some older residents living in dispersed villages and hamlets. Physical isolation, a lack of public transport, an inability to afford or drive a car in old age and a lack of specialised local services may combine to the detriment of some older rural residents' well-being.

Nevertheless, it is important to avoid simply problematising the lives of older rural residents. Older people in the study also highlighted the advantages that growing old in the countryside may encompass; including peace and quiet and, for some, informal support from friends and neighbours

Out here we don't have any problems. We've no trouble with yobbos about really. We get the telephone box broken into now and again. That's down the road. We don't have anybody raving about or anything like that. I think we're all right...Well the only thing is that you have to travel 6 miles to shop. There is no shop here at all. There's no pub, so we can't go and have a pint (U44).

I think people are more friendly in the country...That's right they [neighbours] keep an eye on me... I'm in a bungalow all on my own and there's nobody near but the neighbours come (U16).

I mean wonderful views and everything but you do need human contact (U22).

Village services: challenging social exclusion and promoting health and well-being

All the village services under investigation in this study made tangible, positive differences to the lives of older people living in rural settings. The users interviewed clearly valued the services they received and had nothing but praise for the workers and volunteers who delivered the various services.

Well she brightens up my morning. I wish she would stay longer but she has to go to see quite a lot of other people.... She just sits and talks...She's a nice woman. I'm lucky to have someone like that calling. I've never said much to her about it. If you like tell her she's a very nice person (U5).

Village services promote the social inclusion of older rural people by helping to combat loneliness and social isolation. They also help to alleviate poverty in old age by alerting older people to their entitlements and enhancing benefit take up; particularly when they offer an individualised one to one service in rural residents' own homes.

What I would have done without [project workers name], I don't know...I just want to emphasise that I was so lucky that she came along and I was awarded the allowance. Its made me feel so happy about it because you do not feel as if you are begging something (U18).

[The project worker] fought for my husband to get extra help with his disability... She helped us fill everything in, she did everything for us ... I was having a really bad time of it last year. What else did she help us with? Oh Pension Credit, rent rebate and council tax. She did all that for us.... A letter came and we were told how much we could get money-wise, leaving me in tears. It still chokes me about it now. Because we have never, ever, even been able to go out and buy something without thinking, you know simple things. It made such a big difference to our lives, it really did (U24).

In a very real sense village services also play an important role in maintaining older rural residents in their own homes for as long as possible. They, therefore, delay or negate the need for more expensive institutionalised health and social care packages and promote independent living among senior citizens living in the countryside.

We were able to reach one particular man in a very isolated village...I could see the gentleman couldn't move, his legs were so swollen they were like tree trunks. He'd never been to the doctor. ...Wouldn't ask for any help except from his daughter...I said we're helping your daughter, we're not helping you. Your daughter needs help. So I took it from that angle... because the focus was taken away from him it worked (K16).

She had a problem with her ulcer on her leg and she wouldn't go to the doctor. Now once the foot care lady had said to me, 'there's a problem there', I can then take them to one side and say, you know you must go to the doctors... How she walked I do not know. But we caught that in time you see, because we managed to persuade her. It is little things (KR3).

The village services at the heart of this study are often 'low level' in terms of financial costs and where they feature in relation to other funding priorities, but they are far from low level in terms of their positive impact on the lives of older users. They represent excellent value for money.

Delivering village services: some issues for providers

It is clear that the expertise of Age Concern in providing trustworthy services to meet the diverse needs of older rural residents is recognized by service users and funders alike. However, evidence in the study highlights some common and persistent problems faced by those who manage and deliver village services for older people in rural settings. These include issues related to the additional costs (in terms of both time and money), of providing services to older users who are often dispersed over wide areas. The recruitment of paid workers and volunteers in the right locations to deliver the services can also be problematic.

So it can be difficult to get workers and volunteers. Simply providing the service is difficult. Its also very expensive you have to have transport to get around to visit somebody's home. You can be talking about a farm track a mile and a half off the next tarmac road (K110).

Additionally, the move away from a grants based method of financing services towards a more competitive short-term contract system has significant implications for the maintenance and long-term sustainability of services for older rural users.

There is no long term money... we just can't plan. You're getting some projects that are only for a year and it takes three or four months to get started and three months to wind down because the staff have to know what's happening (K122).

I think the one thing you learn is that funding comes and goes but you need to remain constant...go with the flow and seek appropriate funding (K17).

There's no time to be strategic or time to develop. That's your problem. You are being reactive all the time (K19).

I always have one eye on the budget. I have to make it work in that way(K115).

The system of competitive tender (for often time limited funding), which underpins many village services can be seen as innovative, in that it may stimulate providers to identify and, *if successful*, meet the pressing needs of older rural residents. However, such finite funding arrangements also have major resource implications for

providers, and, in the long-term can serve to undermine the stability and quality of services.

The older users of village services who took part in this research were exclusively white and routinely female. It is important that the diverse needs of older male and senior citizens from black and minority ethnic (BME) communities living in the countryside are fully considered when establishing, delivering and developing village services in the future.

Policy recommendations

- Village services are beneficial to both individual older people and wider rural communities. Their social value is not reflected in current funding levels. Funding should be increased to reflect the economic and social benefits that these 'low level' interventions have for older users and public welfare providers such as local authorities, health trusts and other agencies.
- Social clauses should become an accepted element of public service contracts. This would allow the wider social value of village services to be recognized, measured and ultimately funded by service commissioners.
- The full additional financial costs (e.g. of transport and staff time) of providing services for older people in rural areas need to be factored into future funding arrangements.
- The short-term competitive funding arrangements, that finance many village services create a disproportionate administrative burden and deflect resources away from frontline services. It would be more cost effective and appropriate for service commissioners to reward previously recognized and trusted providers of high quality services for older rural users, with longer contracts, subject to annual monitoring.
- The financial costs of managing, training and maintaining the volunteer workforce that underpins many village services should be recognized by commissioners and factored into contracts.
- In rural areas which lack frequent bus services older people should be provided with mobility vouchers to enable them to purchase transport from a range of providers to meet their day to day needs.
- Providers of village services must ensure that the diverse needs of Black and Minority Ethnic senior citizens are considered fully when establishing, delivering and developing those services.
- Providers need to find new and innovative ways of engaging with older men in rural areas. More thought needs to be given by providers to the specific needs of older men and ways of encouraging them to engage with village services in the future.

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