

## 2.8

### Is Rural Ireland A Good Place In Which To Grow Old? By Sheelagh Connolly<sup>1</sup>, Martina Gavin<sup>2</sup>, Caroline Maguire<sup>3</sup>, John McDonagh<sup>4</sup>, Michael Murray<sup>5</sup>, Eamon O'Shea<sup>6</sup>, Tom Scharf<sup>7</sup> And Kieran Walsh<sup>8</sup>

#### 1. Introduction

The theme of *ageing in rural areas* has gained increasing attention from policy makers and researchers in the last few decades in a situation where *older people* now often comprise a disproportionately larger share of those living in rural areas (see for example, Lowe and Speakman, 2006; Heenan, 2010.). This recognition is important because many stereotypes have evolved about *rural ageing*. *Rural families, communities and places* are often idealised, contributing to a tendency to romanticise *age and ageing in rural settings*. This is exacerbated by the difficulty of identifying social exclusion in rural environments simply because deprivation is not easily found in concentrated clusters of people, as is often the case in urban neighbourhoods. Sometimes *older people in rural areas* qualify their experience of poverty and isolation by drawing attention to the more positive aspects of rural life. The result is that *rural older people* are sometimes portrayed as being more resilient and self-sufficient and which may, in turn, be used to justify public policy inaction. This paper critically examines the notion of a rural idyll as it relates to the lived experiences of *older people* and presents some of the key findings that have emerged from

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a baseline research project conducted in 2010 across the island of Ireland.

#### 2. The Baseline Research Project

An interdisciplinary, practitioner and academic, cross-border research network on *Healthy Ageing in Rural Communities (HARC)* was established in late 2009 with the following 5 core objectives in mind:

- share existing knowledge on *ageing in rural areas* of Northern Ireland (NI) and the Republic of Ireland (RoI);
- enhance the capacity for research on *healthy ageing* across the island of Ireland;
- identify key research questions on *healthy ageing in rural communities* in NI and the RoI;
- explore the potential for a coordinated, interdisciplinary research programme and the submission of research funding applications; and
- act as a dissemination and discussion network for future research in the area of *rural healthy ageing*.

Pilot funding was subsequently received from the Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI) to allow the authors of this paper to form a Network which ultimately led to a base-line investigation into the lived experiences of *older people in rural communities* on the island of Ireland. Three case study 'sites' were selected comprising the Ards Peninsula in NI, the Blacklion – Belcoo cross-border area in Counties Cavan and Fermanagh, and the Letterfrack district of Connemara in the RoI. In each area there are organisations engaging with *older people* and these helped provide opportunities for focus group discussion and face-to-face interviews over the period April to June 2010 that involved a total of 40 *older people*. The findings from this research were published in full in early December 2010 ([www.harcresearch.com](http://www.harcresearch.com)) and in the section below we summarise some of the key insights.

### 3. Indicative Research Findings

Discussion of the baseline research findings can usefully be structured under 4 headings that derive from a seminal paper by Wenger (2001). This explores idealised images of life for *older people in rural areas* of the United Kingdom (UK). These propositions are that *older people*:

- live in pretty villages and small towns, where they spend their retirement happy and contented with few worries or cares;
- have strong family support networks that are available to provide loving and appropriate care if needed;
- live in well integrated communities that take special pains to ensure that the needs of *older people* are met; and
- have better health and life satisfaction than people in urban areas, and so have fewer service needs.

Against a stylised backdrop of “chocolate box cottages in the glow of hazy sunshine” (p.126), Wenger concludes that “*growing old in rural areas* is probably neither worse nor better than *ageing in urban areas*”, but that “it can be a qualitatively different experience” (p.126). Attention is drawn to the importance of neighbour and community networks as a compensating factor for those without strong family connections, an ethos of mutual support, and constraints on rural service provision. Accordingly, the question can now be posed regarding the extent to which the baseline research in the 3 case study sites on the island of Ireland reveals comparable concerns.

*Image of Rural Life 1: Older people live in pretty villages and small towns, where they spend their retirement happy and contented with few worries or cares.*

Rural places do matter to *older people* and for those born and brought up in their current localities, interview data offered personal perspectives that support a measure of contentment. So, for example, a Connemara resident commented:

“Well I have been living here all my life. I never moved anywhere. And ah, I mean I found it a very nice part of the country or the world to live in. Quiet and peaceful. And we have very good neighbours. And ah, you know, every-

thing goes on grand.”

This expression of contentment with a rural place was echoed by an *older person* from Blacklion – Belcoo:

“The wide open spaces and plenty of fresh air and, you know, lack of noise as we get *older*. I love the sound of silence now... more so than I did when I was younger. I love the peace and the quiet, it comes with *advancement of your age* and, I think, you can’t stick the same ‘rula bula’ that you did when you were *younger* and I like that in the rural area.”

Nonetheless, there was a marked awareness among the *older people* that were interviewed in the baseline project that the nature of rural living is changing, not least in regard to shifts in employment from traditional sectors in the countryside, towards service based work in urban areas. An Ards Peninsula interviewee commented as follows:

“And unfortunately, on a daily basis, we are losing quite a bit of that rural life... The fishing industry has gone, more or less, belly up. Farming, well it’s a constant struggle for farmers, you know.”

*Image of Rural Life 2: Older people have strong family support networks that are available to provide loving and appropriate care if needed.*

The availability of close-by family support varied considerably across *older people interviewees* and, often, it was complementary to visits by carers and neighbours. An *older person* from Connemara illustrates that point:

“Now I have, as I said to you, my carer coming into me and I look forward to that... and ah, I have my son, or sons, one of them every night to stay with me, ’cause I wouldn’t stay alone in this day and age. And they come into me, one of them every night. They do it on their turn... I wouldn’t like to be on my own at night, and I look forward to them coming in.”

Family support can thus provide a stronger sense of personal security and also help with general maintenance work around the house. However, the absence of family support is also acknowledged as a reality for some older people and in the Ards Peninsula one interviewee observed:

“As you get older it’s more difficult to do things... The garden outgrows you. It’s the

people who are on their own, who don't have children. I mean there are a lot of people who don't have children, or children who don't bother with them. Which is sad."

The loss of a spouse can add to that sense of isolation from family networks as recorded by the comments from an interviewee in Blacklion – Belcoo:

"When my husband was alive, we done things different. Because he had the car and we visited his people and we visited ours, which are in the parish but not right on the road. But it was completely different when he went, you know, well I had a better time when he was alive."

*Image of Rural Life 3: Older people live in well integrated communities that take special pains to ensure that the needs of older people are met.*

Rural communities comprise a diversity of long established residents and newcomers. The latter may be retired people, second-home owners or commuters and, in this context, community integration was addressed by one interviewee from the Ards Peninsula:

"They don't mix with the local community at all. There is a whole hinterland behind me of new houses and you would never really see these people. They just seem to be in their house in the evenings, back to work in the mornings. And they don't mix. We have tried to enlarge the population of the Womens' Institute, for example, and they aren't interested – they won't come out at night."

This comment also hints at the importance for *older people* of having opportunities to join local activity groups to help offset isolation and loneliness. Time and time again the research revealed a high level of appreciation by interviewees for that contact which does require personal commitment to be a 'joiner'. An interviewee from the Ards Peninsula captured this reality very well when stating:

"You can get involved with other groups – you need to do that as you are getting older. You have to make the effort to go out and join things."

The strong community role of *Active Ageing* support groups is well illustrated by the case of Blacklion – Belcoo where one interviewee commented:

"We have a full diary... Somebody coming

in doing yoga or hygiene. There's always something. It's very rarely we're without. But if there's nobody here then we can have a sing song, we have an exercise tape or we can have a discussion on long ago, and you know, we have a reminiscence, oh, great reminiscence, oh, we don't be stuck for words now, and we get tea and homemade cake and homemade jam."

Such groups, it would seem, also make a contribution to the deepening of community cohesion as observed in the Ards Peninsula:

"Oh yes, it brings everybody together. It's cross community. There used to be funding for those things. It's inclusive, bringing people together from different religions and different abilities. Nobody feels left out that I can see."

*Image of Rural Life 4: Older people have better health and life satisfaction than people in urban areas, and so have fewer service needs.*

Time and time again *older people* interviewees drew attention to the importance of services for life satisfaction, but with access to them being highly contingent on the availability of private, community and public transport. The frequency and timing of bus connections are crucial here, not least when locally fixed services are being depleted and there is a need to travel to health clinics, post offices and banks. Taxis are used by rural older people, but are costly, and thus personal mobility is important as argued by one interviewee from the Ards Peninsula:

"Everything is too far away. I mean, I couldn't walk to the shop, it's about a mile away. I've had heart attacks and my wife has had heart attacks. If you hadn't a car you couldn't survive."

The availability of emergency transport has particular resonance in rural areas and within the Ards Peninsula, another interviewee recounted the following personal story:

"And every time you call them, no matter who you are and what time it is, you still get the same thing: 'What is wrong? Can you get this, can you do that there?' They don't come out as quick as they are supposed to come out. And... I took a heart attack and the doctor was sitting beside me. He gave me a tablet and he said 'Have you got a headache with that?' I said 'Yes'. He said 'You'll have to get up the road'. I said 'Right' and he said 'If I call an ambulance it would take an hour here and an hour back.' He

says 'Have you anybody that could take you by car?' Lucky enough my daughter was at home, who got me up and if she hadn't been at home there was nobody."

The research pinpoints transport as a recurrent factor in the lives of *older people* in rural Ireland. One comment from an interviewee in Connemara strongly underlines its cross-cutting relevance to the four themes explored in this paper:

"The Active Age here like people get to know each other from the different villages and then if they travel into Clifden, into the day care, they meet people from outlying areas, other areas as well...I know a man who went, the same man he hadn't moved out of the house...or anything for years, and ah he went to the day care centre and there he met people he had played football against fifty years ago. He was so excited he was talking about it for the whole week. And that would never have come about except that the day care service was set up, and the bus was set up to bring him, and ah it gave him a new lease of life."

#### 4. Next Steps

There is evidence, therefore, that *rural living by older people* is linked with a deep attachment to people and places, thereby enhancing quality of life and thus it is appropriate that the maintaining of rural communities should be a fundamental goal for government. A key strategy in this sphere has been the promotion of rural economic development and while this is both necessary and valuable, it is not a sufficient condition to secure long-term rural vibrancy. Rural transformation is very much related to the existence of opportunities for personal and social development and in that regard the research highlights the positive role that older people play in rural communities, the capabilities of *older people*, the diversity of rural communities and the interaction between ageing and rurality as it relates to the realities of daily living. The images of rural living, discussed above, provide a useful set of lenses through which to view these attributes.

The preliminary evidence presented in this paper is only the start of a longer-term enquiry into *rural ageing*. During 2011 the now extended HARC network is scheduled to take forward in-depth research on these matters having received

an additional tranche of funding from CARDI. The precise focus will be on social exclusion and *older people* in diverse rural settings (i.e. village, dispersed and island rural communities in accessible and remote locations in NI and the RoI). The project will include a comparative perspective from rural Scotland. At its conclusion, a more complete response should then be available to the question, "Is rural Ireland a good place in which to *grow old*?"

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