



Older people

Older people are an integral part of vibrant rural community life

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Introduction

Older people are an integral part of vibrant rural community life. They should be assured of ease of access to support and services that enable them to live full and active lives and remain within their community

Overview

The number of older people living in rural areas is increasing faster than in urban areas. In rural communities many older people contribute to community activity and can be the main users of facilities and services.

However, although people are living longer they may, as a consequence, increase their use of health services and other local facilities. The Government has a policy of older people remaining in their own

communities for as long as possible. Key to this is the availability of services and facilities to the older generation at a price they can afford and, of considerable importance, enabling them to remain in their communities with their friends and family.

With the recent health centralisation agenda and cuts to outreach services it means that they are now faced with difficulties in accessing services

which were previously available locally. Transport to these services is now a major consideration for many who no longer have their own transport or cannot afford the cost of taxis.

Older people are also the single largest group on low incomes in rural areas. Rural poverty and deprivation is often hidden because it is masked by surrounding wealth. For older people this is often compounded due to their reluctance to seek help and because of isolation from services, they lack

information about their entitled benefits. They are further disadvantaged by the extra costs of accessing essential services and impacts of heating older, less fuel efficient homes. This means that the rising level of elderly people who find themselves financially excluded and the availability of local services are inextricably linked.

As people age they have fundamental life choices to make. However, in rural areas these choices can be highly restricted, as is the support and information available to them.

Given the long history of their work within rural communities, members of the ACRE Network have a strong understanding of the relationships between residents' needs and local service provision.

Much of the Network's support for general community initiatives, such as village halls,

community-owned shops and transport schemes, have proportionately higher benefit for elderly people in the area who rely on them for day-to-day needs.

However, older people also have specific needs and the ACRE Network is involved in many local initiatives aimed at meeting these. Our support aims to enable older people to retain active and healthy lives as members of their community, supported by their own social networks.



Our support aims to enable older people to retain active and healthy lives as members of their community



Issue: Health and well-being of an ageing population

The rural population is ageing faster than in other parts of the country — a quarter of England's rural population is over 60. This brings with it specific health and social care needs. However, rural populations are often distant from the services that they require, particularly if they have specialised needs

Solution: Ensuring health services are shaped to older people's needs

Across the country, there are examples of ACRE Network members working to improve support for older people often living in isolated and difficult circumstances.

An audit of the Wiltshire Link Schemes, which are supported by ACRE Network member Community First, shows the enormous contribution volunteers make to the lives of others.

The 45 Link Schemes in Wiltshire cover 98% of the county and involve volunteers helping people who struggle with everyday tasks, such as getting to GP or hospital appointments, doing the shopping or tidying up the garden.

Link Schemes are entirely volunteer-run and based in local communities. 1,746 Wiltshire volunteers donated their time and efforts to over 1,000 people each week in 2013, helping older people to remain independent in their own homes and reducing social isolation for those in rural communities.

Hampshire is one of the leading counties in developing community awareness of dementia, with



the first 'Dementia-Friendly High Street' pilots taking place in Lyndhurst and Romsey. ACRE Network member Community Action Hampshire is working with partners on ways to take the concept into rural communities. One initiative is to raise awareness with village hall committees on ways to make community buildings more dementia friendly.

ACRE Network member Oxfordshire Rural Community Council is working with the NHS and Guidepost Trust on a Dementia-Friendly Communities project. It ensures residents are supported to remain active in their communities for as long as possible.

The ACRE Network also provides a range of solutions to enable better transport access to services in local towns. For example, Humber & Wolds Rural Community Council runs a voluntary car service, targeted at older people and the disabled who either have no private or public transport available. It has enabled individuals to access essential services, improved social inclusion and increased opportunities for volunteer working.

Issue: Inaccessible services and information

In rural areas, mobility and access to services and information can become problematic for older people as social care needs arise and financial circumstances change

Solution: Rural access to services and information

Social networks in the community may be strong, but older people may not wish to advertise their individual and personal needs within their own community.

Making contact with external service providers is much more difficult when living long distances

away from advice points and surgeries, especially for those who have lived independently for many years. Support infrastructure, tailored to the rural community context, can ensure better access to advice and services, particularly for those attempting to get help for the first time.

Solution: Rural access to services and information

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Gloucestershire Rural Community Council developed a Village Agents Scheme which has since been replicated by a number of fellow ACRE Network members.

Part-time Village Agents are recruited to act across a cluster of communities, making themselves, and the service they can provide, known to people in the locality. Being locally recruited, locally-based, well trained and well networked, they are able to bridge the gap between the local community and those statutory and voluntary organisations able to offer help or support where required.

Acting as facilitators they provide high quality information, promote access to a wide range of

services, carry out a series of practical checks and identify unmet need within their community.

The Community Council for Somerset's Village Agents played a key role in helping older people with support and advice during the flooding of the Somerset Levels in early 2014.

The Rural Community Council of Essex's Village Agents service is making a real difference to the lives of elderly and isolated people living in the Braintree, Chelmsford and Maldon districts. Since its launch in October 2009, the team of 12 agents has helped more than 3,000 registered users, making more than 11,000 referrals on their behalf. The service is funded by Essex County Council and was strongly endorsed by the 'Who Will Care?' Commission report on the future direction of health and social care in Essex.

Issue: Isolation and lack of support

Social isolation and lack of support leading to loneliness and depression can be an insidious feature for some older people living in rural areas. The increasing centralisation of services away from rural areas and reduced opportunity for social networking is a strong cause for this situation

Solution: Local support services

Many older people do not have the necessary family support as they would have had in days gone by. Whilst they may be in relative good health, small issues which they have difficulty in resolving can mount up, resulting in loss of confidence and depression. Consequently this reduces their ability to play as active a part as they would like in local society.

Rutland Community Spirit, a project by ACRE Network member Leicestershire & Rutland Rural Community Council is in its fifth year of delivering support to elderly people in their own homes to make them more independent and increase their social wellbeing. As well as support at home, the scheme provides people with the opportunity to take part in social activities both locally and further afield.

The Wiltshire Good Neighbour scheme, run by Community First, ensures that the most vulnerable

older residents of rural Wiltshire are able to access the services, support and information they need in order to live safe, comfortable, fulfilling and independent lives. A network of local Good Neighbour co-ordinators provide older people with a friendly and approachable first point of contact within their community. The co-ordinators are well known within their communities and are able to identify those in need and visit them in their own homes. They then help the client to access the services they need — from having a smoke alarm fitted to advice

on dealing with debt.

Key outcomes from schemes such as these are that older and vulnerable people are able to remain living in their own homes as long as possible, reducing pressure on statutory services, improved health and well-being for users and helping to build more cohesive communities.

