



Commission for Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

The housing and
support needs of older
people in rural areas



An operating division of the Countryside Agency



Summary

This publication summarizes research commissioned by the Countryside Agency and the Housing Corporation to examine the housing and support needs of older people in rural areas. There were three elements to the study: consultations with older people living in rural areas; a review of national policy and analysis of data from the 2001 Census and Survey of English Housing; and an exploration of the housing and support needs of older people and local service responses in five rural districts in England (Scarborough, Bromsgrove, Waveney, Pendle and North Dorset).

Main findings

Consultations with older people

Older people involved in this research made it clear that enabling choices around meeting housing needs in rural areas was not just about housing, but about making critical linkages with other key features of rural living, such as transport and access to a range of services. Transport was viewed as the most significant issue facing older people in the countryside.

Most respondents intended to stay in their own homes as they got older. They emphasised the importance of ensuring existing accommodation arrangements could be sustained through renovation, maintenance and improvements and the installation of facilities, such as downstairs toilets and bathrooms, as well as adaptations. Heating was a cause for concern as many rural areas did not have mains gas supplies and other options (such as oil and solid fuel) can be costly.

For those who wanted to move, or had moved, there were mixed views about the types of accommodation that should be available within smaller communities. Currently, older people's choices are constrained both in the public and private sector. Some felt that people should be able to live in the communities where they have always lived; others were more circumspect, noting that developments of housing for older people would be more appropriately located in larger settlements. The availability of affordable housing was viewed as important for people of all ages.

Given limited alternative options in terms of accommodation, low-level support services were seen as crucial way of helping people to continue to live in their current homes. When asked about the types of services that made a real difference to older people in the countryside, people talked about low-level preventative services, such as assistance with small domestic repairs, heavier gardening tasks, lifts to the doctors and hospital appointments, fetching and shopping.

Policy overview

Older people in rural areas live in a context that has seen an increase both in the number of policies that affect them and also in the extent to which there is an inter-dependence between those policies. A key development has been the emergence of, and growing significance of, regional governance and also an expectation of more joined-up working between agencies. At the same time, the way that policies are implemented is subject to growing regulation and inspection.

An opportunity for a local and rural input is not always possible, because of the structures of government. Systems and processes do not always take account of local plans and hopes. Continuing age discrimination also hampers policy outcomes, although there is a recognition of the importance of involving older people in policy development and implementation. There is also a need to take account of new thinking about, and new definitions of, housing and services, such as sheltered housing and the potential role of Extra Care housing in rural areas.

National data

Census data showed that 27.9% of the population of England were aged 55+. However, in rural areas this rose to 31.5% of the population. Almost 1 in 3 people in rural areas were aged 55 and over, compared with 1 in 4 people living in urban areas. Self-reported health status among rural older people was better than among their urban peers, although the greatest differences were among the younger-old. Older people in rural areas also reported less life limiting-illness than their urban peers, nevertheless, there was considerable morbidity among the oldest rural residents. Average levels of income fell steadily as people aged – just under 1 in 10 households of people aged 50-64 had a household income of less than £100 per week, but this rose to almost 3 in 10 households of people aged 75 and above.

A greater proportion of older people were owner occupiers in the countryside than in urban areas. Eighty one per cent of people aged over 55 owned their own home in the countryside (compared with 73% in urban areas). However, the proportion of people owning their own homes dropped with age. The proportion of people aged 55+ in social rented accommodation in rural areas was lower (11%) than in urban areas (21%), although a greater proportion of very old people lived in social rented accommodation.

Adequate warmth in the home is crucial for the health and well being of older people. The 2001 Census showed that 93% of people aged 55+ in rural areas had central heating, although more than 10% of those 85+ had no central heating.

Analysis of the 2001 Survey of English Housing showed that compared with younger age groups, older people tended to demonstrate considerable satisfaction with both their homes and the areas in which they lived. This fact supported the views expressed by the older people who took part in the consultation element of the research and the aspiration to remain living in their own homes.

Case studies of housing and support needs in rural areas

Agencies in rural areas have clear views about what needs are, but are less able to quantify them and thereby justify the provision of resources for particular groups. Needs assessment methods are lacking, although there is a shared recognition that there are considerable unmet needs for a range of services. Areas of concern for services providers are: older people's mental health services, particularly services for dementia; older people from Black and Minority Ethnic groups; and support for older homeowners.

There appears to be a reasonable supply of sheltered housing, but it does not always meet the expectations of many older people. Some existing sheltered housing schemes, particularly those that are older, are already difficult to let. Extra Care housing schemes were in various stages of development in all the case study areas. There is some evidence that some older people will make trade-offs between the advantages and disadvantages of remaining in a village or remote settlement and moving to larger settlements with easier access to facilities. Many older homeowners are asset rich but income poor and there are only patchy mechanisms to assist them with the maintenance and upkeep of their properties.

The lack of affordable and suitable homes limits the choices of older people themselves and is also impacting on other sections of the community. This has consequences for older people, notably difficulties in recruitment and retention of care staff and the loss of informal family support networks.

Preventative services were seen to be crucial to maintaining independence, preventing isolation, offering a route into other services, and providing opportunities for regular checks on health status and general well-being. Usually, these services were provided by voluntary sector agencies with (insecure) funding from statutory sector agencies.

Conclusions and recommendations

Meeting the needs and aspirations of older people in the variety of circumstances found in different rural areas requires specific and tailored approaches which are often more difficult and costly than in urban areas. However, the starting point for addressing these needs is one of recognising the aspiration of equity and diversity in the way that policy responds to older people in rural areas.

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Needs assessment

- Needs assessments undertaken as part of surveys by rural housing enablers, or in parish plan and village appraisals, or through local initiatives (such as the Community Investment Prospectus across North Yorkshire) should be widely promoted. Small area housing needs data should be collated at regional level to inform Regional Housing Strategies, and ensure they have a rural dimension. Needs data could also be more widely shared between agencies that commission and provide services for older people.

Maximising the potential of the existing housing stock

- The potential of the existing housing stock in rural areas should be maximised by:
 - greater investment to rectify non-decent housing stock in rural areas;
 - the development of Home Improvement Agencies, including a minimum standard of service that can be expected across all rural areas;
 - giving particular consideration to the operation of Disabled Facilities Grants.

The housing market – future housing provision

- Much more attention is needed on the place of older people as a key group in housing market planning at both regional and local authority levels. Older people are important to ensuring the sustainability of rural communities, given the high proportion of older people who live in the countryside, and migration trends.
- It is essential to develop a (rural) stock profile that is, and must be, responsive to the needs of older people. Greater emphasis needs to be placed on ensuring that new build in the private and public sector can meet the needs and aspirations of older people in the future. In smaller settlements attention should be more focused on ensuring that all new build in the future, including small developments of affordable housing, maximises the potential to meet the needs and aspirations of older people. Beyond accessibility, consideration needs to be given to space standards to allow opportunities in the future for adaptation and installation of equipment.
- Models of Extra Care housing that specifically address rural needs, through services such as outreach, links with community transport etc. should be evaluated and promoted. In addition, new thinking is needed about flexible service models that cross housing support, primary care, social care and other community support services which can support older people in living in ordinary housing in rural communities. The Government's Housing and Older People's Development Group could provide a forum for promoting housing models that respond to the needs of older people in rural areas.

Resources for housing and care in rural areas

- In the rural context the majority of older people are homeowners. Further attention should be given to the potential of equity release schemes and developing schemes with shared-ownership.
- Competing claims and very limited resources are a fact of life, but it may be worth exploring the evidence base behind the decision-making of commissioners and providers. How far is there an awareness of the needs of older people in rural areas amongst key groups such as councillors?

Low-level and preventative services

- Low-level support and preventative services are of particular importance in the rural context. To ensure that low-level support and preventative services are seen to be part of the mainstream, the National Service Framework for Older People, Supporting People Strategies and local Joint Strategies for Older People should place greater emphasis on preventative services.

Strategies for older people in rural areas

- The rural dimension of regional and sub-regional housing strategies needs to be further developed: there is evidence of rural proofing, but clearly greater consideration of the needs and aspirations of older people at regional level is required. This should be paralleled by a requirement for integrated strategies for older people – including housing – at a district level, linked to the Local Strategic Partnership and the Community Plan, where these exist.

Care staff recruitment

- Care staff retention and recruitment difficulties are particularly acute in rural areas. Generic care workers who are able to take on a wide range of tasks may be one way forward, although we do not underestimate the difficulties there may be in terms of training, insurance, health and safety legislation and so forth.
- Staff shortages also highlight the need to support informal carers.

Linking housing, transport and access to services in the countryside

- Most respondents viewed transport as the most significant issue facing older people in the countryside. Indeed, policies and investment aimed at promoting accessibility for older people were likely to have knock-on effects in terms of helping to sustain housing options in rural areas. Strategies in rural areas must make the links between the diverse aspects of daily living as part of a whole system approach. Developments at regional level with regard to transport planning must embrace examples what works in rural areas up and down the country.

Black and Minority Ethnic groups

- Agencies should consider how the needs of older Black and Minority Ethnic people can be met, both now and in the future, in the rural context, as a matter of principle. Joint working, for example, through rural forums, particularly at regional level, can help to coordinate and facilitate these developments.

Mental health services

- A consistent view from service providers and commissioners was that older people with mental health problems were particularly poorly served in rural areas. Again, in reviewing the National Service Framework for Older People, greater emphasis could be placed on services that respond to the mental health needs of older people.

Cost, value for money and sustainability

- It is undeniable that providing housing and services in rural areas can cost more. This is a well-known fact which is always mentioned in any study on the countryside, but somehow the fact that things cost more seems to be held against rural areas or is used as an excuse for inaction. Volume savings cannot always be made and it would be inappropriate in many instances to try. However, higher costs can be mediated through achieving good value for money and they can be justified when the benefits of providing a building or service add to the sustainability of a local community.

Listening and responding to older people

- The way that providers and policymakers engage, and work in partnership with, older people is a necessary component of any policy or service development that touches on the concerns of older people themselves. It is essential that the views of older people living in the countryside are part of this process and that the development of engagement models include the potential for incorporating a rural dimension.

Further reading

This publication and the full report of this research are available to download from both the CRC <www.ruralcommunities.gov.uk> and Housing Corporation <www.housingcorp.gov.uk> websites

Bevan, M., Croucher, K., Fletcher, P., Rhodes, D. and Riseborough, M. (2005). The Housing and support needs of older people in rural areas. CRC 26. London: The Countryside Agency.

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