delivering for
Older People in Rural Areas
a good practice guide
Introduction

The proportion of older people in England’s rural areas is significantly higher than in urban areas and the rural population is ageing more rapidly. Rural areas are therefore increasingly at the ‘cutting edge’ in developing appropriate responses to an ageing population, whilst also coping with the additional challenges of their ‘rurality’ such as the relative isolation of their communities from main service centres and the dispersed pattern of settlements.

This booklet and accompanying website brings together the experience of those meeting the challenges of delivering for older people in a rural context. It is aimed at those in the public, private and voluntary sectors who are involved in either commissioning or delivering services for older people, and identifies good practice in delivering mainstream and targeted services for, or involving older people in, rural areas.

It has also been designed to support local authorities in responding to some of the challenges laid out in the new government strategy for older people ‘Opportunity Age’ and the Audit Commission’s revised Comprehensive Performance Assessment 2006, which have sought to underline the role of older people as active consumers of public services exercising control and choice about the way these services are designed and delivered, rather than being passive recipients.

Quality research, inclusive consultation and a readiness to look outside conventional service delivery patterns to embrace social enterprise, public/private partnerships and increased integration, are the cornerstones of success.

www.ageconcern.org.uk/rural or www.helptheaged.org.uk/rural

The websites contain information on national policies, as well as information on demographic trends and initiatives impacting on older people in rural areas. There is further information about all the case studies evaluated during the research for this booklet. Details are also provided about useful organisations, and other resources including websites and publications to help those involved in addressing the interests and needs of older rural residents. These websites are part of the Ageing & the Countryside resource developed by a partnership of Age Concern England, Help the Aged, Defra and the Commission for Rural Communities.

Delivering for older people – the rural context:

Services to support older rural people to maintain active and independent lives need innovative approaches and careful planning if they are to address the challenges of rural living:

- High per capita costs of delivering services to small numbers scattered over large areas.
- Increasing centralisation of services, particularly of health care.
- Limited transport options may restrict mobility and access, increasing dependency and exclusion.
- Access and boundary issues: many communities are at the edge of, or straddle, local government boundaries which may make access to services particularly problematic.
- Additional support requirements for isolated staff and volunteers.
- The fear of isolation of many elderly rural residents in an emergency.
- Low expectations by older rural residents of responses to need.
- Time required to develop local community trust and confidence in new initiatives where past change and opportunities have been limited.
- A culture of self-reliance, resulting in lower take-up of benefits, and delays in seeking medical help.

Key demographic trends in rural areas:

Over the next 20 years the number of older people in rural districts will continue to rise, with the number of those in the 60–74 age group increasing by 40% and those over 75 by 60%. Ageing populations result from falling fertility rates and people are living longer, healthier lives. These trends have been exaggerated by the impact of migration and the baby boom generation, those born between the end of World War II and the 1960s, who are beginning to reach retirement age. Migration is not being driven by people retiring to the countryside, who account for only 10% of rural migration, but by middle-aged people moving into the countryside and staying there into retirement. At the same time young people in the 15–24 age group are leaving rural areas for further education or to find jobs.

- The 65+ age group represents 18.3% of the rural population compared with 15.9% for England as a whole.
- The average age of a rural resident is 50, compared to 42 in urban areas.
- Life expectancy of men is increasing and there is likely to be an increase in the number of older couples rather than single female households.
- By 2028 in remote rural districts it is forecast that half of all residents will be 50+, with a significant rise in the numbers aged 85+.
Developing successful services – 10 guiding principles

1. **Older people’s lives are multi-faceted** Individuals may play a variety of roles within their community as carers, grandparents, volunteers, employees or parish councillors, demonstrating the diversity of people’s lives and interests throughout their older years. Service commissioners and providers not only need to recognise this, but to understand that the contributions that individuals make will change over time, as will their needs.

2. **Research** Comprehensive and inclusive research in each location where the service will operate is an essential prerequisite for success. This research should include detailed consultation with potential users of the service and volunteers. Local volunteers’ information about facilities or activities can make a valuable contribution to practical delivery.

3. **Bottom-up approach** Successful services, particularly those with a strong voluntary contribution need to be developed in close consultation with both their intended users and the wider community if they are to be owned and embedded within the social fabric. It is a process which takes time and must be led by the community, but will result in a service which is much more responsive to local need.

4. **Integration** Integrating the service with others helps create a critical mass to strengthen and enhance all services, as well as increasing the chances of continuation. Integration may include sharing local facilities or staff, or providing a ‘one-stop shop’ to link a number of related services.

5. **Partnership** Joint working between a range of organisations from within the public and voluntary sectors not only brings together expertise and resources to support the development of a new project, but by involving the key stakeholders within the area, this can strengthen engagement with the community and thus build support for long term continuation.

6. **Business planning** Projects need to be developed with clear aims and targets within existing resource constraints. Where projects are dependent on short-term external funding, succession strategies should be developed at an early stage to ensure project continuation where the project is delivering on its outputs.

7. **Supporting local volunteers** Offering opportunities for volunteers to participate more fully in their local community, and in areas where they feel valued and valuable is crucial to attracting and retaining them. It is also important to recognise skills, experience and abilities, and to help develop volunteers through training and support to enhance their satisfaction and sense of worth.

8. **Identify project champions** Innovative projects require a champion, or some individual or individuals leading the partnership who have the enthusiasm and energy to convince others that the project will work and who can back up the business plan with action. In some cases these ‘movers and shakers’ may be a paid project officer, in others, particularly social enterprises, it may be older people themselves who are involved in the development and delivery of services for their community.

9. **Developing an opportunistic approach to funding** While social services and health trusts are likely to be the main source of funding, there may be other organisations, such as parish councils, and national or local charities who can provide funding support, as well as parts of the public sector where projects are linked to other agendas such as increased participation in sport, countryside recreation or economic activity. These ‘one-off’ sources of funding can be invaluable when piloting a new service or approach, but care needs to be taken to ensure they do not detract from the original purpose of the project.

10. **Monitoring and evaluation** Monitoring is not only important for evaluating whether the service is delivering on its objectives, but can also be used to help justify its future continuation. An evidence base of local case studies and data showing the wider social and economic benefits of a project can be a powerful tool for advocacy and for generating positive local media interest, as well as future funding.
What matters to older people in rural areas

From theory to practice – Meeting the needs of older rural people

There are many excellent examples of high quality services for older people in rural areas. The ones featured in this booklet and the additional ones on the accompanying website have been chosen for the way in which they illustrate the 10 guiding principles for developing successful services for older people in rural areas.

Many of the initiatives are small-scale but have made an immediate impact on people’s lives, adding value to existing statutory services. All of these projects are operating in rural areas, with all the additional complexity that this generates for service delivery, but have built on the strong community and voluntary sectors in rural areas through social enterprise or use innovative approaches such as partnership working to share resources or create economies of scale.

Promoting active lives and well-being

There is a well established link between regular physical activity and the reduction in the rates of cardiovascular diseases and some cancers. Exercise referral schemes are growing in popularity among GPs. Projects such as the national Walking the Way to Health initiative have used volunteer support to develop a programme of walks in local areas.

Pedal Back the Years is a similar scheme based in Cornwall that promotes cycling. It is a partnership between the local Primary Care Trust (PCT), Sports Action Zone, Countryside Agency, local councils and a local cycle hire firm.

Upstream is the brainchild of a group of GPs in mid-Devon who recognised that older and isolated patients were caught in a cycle of depression and dependency. The scheme aims to rekindle and bolster people’s passion for living by helping them to engage in stimulating creative, leisure and learning and social activities including arts and crafts, computing, creative writing, t’ai chi, oral history, music and board games. People are referred to an Upstream mentor by primary health and social care services.

Information services

Access to information and advice is a key resource for local people in maintaining active and independent lives. Access to information is also critical to letting people know their entitlements to welfare benefits and sources of support to overcome social exclusion. However, the problems of isolation and distance mean that many older rural residents have found it difficult to get the information and advice they require.

A number of local authorities have sought to develop integrated access points or ‘one-stop shops’ to provide information on a wide range of public and voluntary services, as well as leisure, life-long learning opportunities and volunteering opportunities in the local area.

Without these services many older people in the Fens would be without benefits and allowances to which they are entitled; their lives would be worse and serious problems associated with poverty would be greater.

NHS Trust

Pendle Rural Information Service provides free and confidential advice and information to anyone living in the rural parts of the district. Services include regular drop-in sessions and appointments at the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), supported by outreach sessions in community centres and village halls. A home visiting service is provided for people who can not attend the office or outreach centre and advice and information is also available by telephone and email. Surgeries are held on relevant topics, e.g. attendance allowances for local groups, including Age Concern groups. Fenland Forms and Outreach is a similar scheme run by the CAB in Cambridgeshire, which takes information and advice to where people are, local events, clubs, groups and people’s homes. The project also provides a form-filling service focussing on disability and attendance allowance.

Maintaining independence

Support to live independently at home is a key concern for older people and for public agencies working to meet targets to prevent hospital admission and speed up hospital discharges. Schemes to support independent living may include mobile warden services or initiatives such as the Northumberland Rural Shopping Project, which enables older rural residents to go shopping in their local market town, and the Stroud Gardening Assistance Scheme which provides subsidised gardening support. The Stroud scheme provides contract gardeners who encourage and support older people to do what they can in their gardens. Gardeners and clients share decisions about planting and cultivation, and for those who can do very little gardening, ways are identified to reduce the maintenance needs of their gardens.

The Carenetwork enables volunteers to meet the needs of elderly and isolated or vulnerable people in the rural parts of the Ely diocese. This umbrella organisation supports the development of good neighbour or care schemes, mobile warden schemes, social car schemes and the Welcome Home from Hospital initiative, through research and by offering practical resources to encourage and support effective responses to local need. The Welcome Home from Hospital scheme provides short-term practical help to ease the transition from hospital to home. The service is free and confidential, and is provided by trained volunteers supported by a paid co-ordinator, and offers help for up to two weeks after discharge.

Carenetwork operates ten Mobile Wardens schemes in South Cambridgeshire which aim to offer that ‘little bit of help’ which enables older people to remain in their own homes and in their own communities.

The schemes provide daily contact through either visits or phone calls which prompt help when required. Each scheme is independent and run by a parish council or voluntary management committee who employ staff and manage volunteers.

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NHS Trust
Developing the potential of community support

Many elderly rural residents rely on the support of friends and neighbours to help maintain their independence. These informal networks are based on friendship and reciprocity. There are a number of voluntary schemes which have sought to develop these networks to benefit not just older people but the wider community.

The Northern Fells Group aims to improve services for people living in a remote part of Cumbria by making it easier for people to access services and, where required develop new ones. Underpinning the Group’s work is careful research to define parish profiles and to identify unmet health and social needs.

The Group provides volunteer-led services including a minibus service providing flexible door-to-door transport, luncheon clubs, an information service and a ‘Lend a hand’ group, which provides neighbourly support through handymen, personal and domestic help for people who are ill or less able, and for those who care for them.

Working in partnership

There are a large number of examples of joint working between social services and primary care trusts, as well as a range of initiatives which have developed strong partnerships between the public and voluntary sectors. The majority of such partnerships involve those with a strong health, community and social services focus. There are, however, a range of other influential stakeholders in rural communities, including local churches and the Women’s Institute.

A number of successful projects for older people have involved these organisations. Bones in mind is a peer-led health education and activity programme to improve women’s health and reduce the risks associated with falls and osteoporosis which was developed through a partnership of the health promotion service in Cornwall and the Cornwall Federation of Women’s Institutes.

Integrating service provision to meet specific needs

Integrated service provision between health, social services and other relevant bodies to focus on the needs of a particular group of individuals can radically improve the quality of provision through better targeted services. There are a number of examples of such projects targeted at rural dwellers with a range of health conditions such as dementia for people and their carers.

Farm Out in the High Peak in Derbyshire is a project focused on the health needs of farmers and their families, and was formed after a research report identified specific needs. It is an area in which the average age of a farmer is 58, and many of them have been affected by the economic decline in farming.

The project provides a range of services including a nurse drop-in clinic at the local agricultural centre, dedicated physiotherapist service for the agriculture community, with sessions provided at livestock markets and through farm visits, appointment of primary mental health worker for the rural community and rural remiscence project targeted at older people. Farm Out is supported by the PCT, farming bodies and other local and voluntary organisations.

Understanding what older people want

Too often public policy in rural areas on a range of issues such as housing, planning and economic regeneration includes broad generalisations about the needs of older people which are based on outdated assumptions than actual fact. Older people in the countryside are diverse: they include the very active, who may still be working or involved in a wide range of voluntary work or leisure activities, as well as the more vulnerable who through poor health, poverty and/or isolation require significant levels of support.

Detailed research and analysis of the characteristics of individual rural communities are therefore vitally important if appropriate services are to be developed now and in the future. With some rural areas having over a fifth of their population over 65, it is essential that all mainstream local authority services better reflect the interests and concerns of an ageing population, rather than ghettoising older people’s issues within social services departments.

Profiling rural communities

Rural areas differ significantly in their population profiles and the needs of their residents. The recent introduction of census output areas enables data from the Census to be analysed at the level of postcode units (approximately 125 households), which allows the sparsity of an area to be taken into consideration. Other useful sources of data include the National Health Service Register and local village surveys including Parish Plans.

The following information is particularly useful in helping to develop a profile of a rural community:
- age, gender, ethnicity
- household type and housing status
- economic activity and income levels
- levels of health and well being
- number of carers
- access of households to private cars.

Consultation – the importance of understanding what older people want

A key concern among older people is that they should be empowered to influence the decisions about services that impact upon them. It is a concern which has been recognised by government through the work of the Audit Commission. From 2005 local authorities with their partners will be required to present evidence to the Audit Commission “that the council, with its partners, ensures that the services it commissions and delivers in all areas relating to the dimensions of independence listed below, take into account the aspirations and needs of older people, now and in the future as part of a strategic approach”.

This holistic approach has already been adopted by a number of rural authorities, including Shropshire County Council with its Overarching Strategy for Older People which identifies how all council services (including social care, crime, education, leisure, sport, culture, planning, and highways) can improve the quality of life of older people directly and by working with partners in the National Health Service, district and parish councils and the voluntary and independent sectors.
Consultation

Consultation can take many forms, from formal structures to informal discussions with older people in their own homes, or as members of community groups linked to an existing event or regular meeting.

Consultation needs to engage and involve people in not only supporting initiatives, but helping to design them to meet the specific needs of that community. Existing networks of older people such as local Age Concern groups, Help the Aged or Arthritis Care, can be a valuable source of local knowledge prior to the finalisation of plans, allowing local differences to be built into service delivery. The consultation process also helps develop local ownership of a service, which can be essential to the ability to recruit support through local networks (for resources, referrers, users and volunteers).

Older people’s forums

Older people’s forums operate in many areas, often at county or district level and are linked with Local Strategic Partnerships and Community Plans. They offer a two-way process – for older people to raise their views and for public organisations to consult older people. The Forums, and their links with public debate, support NHS and local authority targets for public involvement.

Help the Aged and Age Concern have supported the introduction and development of Forums. Initial steps include support for open meetings where older people discuss local issues and concerns with local authority and NHS staff and voluntary groups and a programme of discussions with local older people’s groups to define local priorities. Start-up grants can support the development of forum committees and volunteer involvement.

Experience shows that to be effective forums need:
- stable and active committees, which can be demanding in rural areas where large distances separate people and communities and where bringing people together is hindered by distance and geography
- support from paid staff in local authorities, NHS trusts or voluntary organisations
- ongoing funds to reimburse volunteer expenses and meeting costs
- trust and confidence from statutory services
- local ways of working that reflect local networks and experiences.

Volunteering

Many older people are actively involved in rural services not as beneficiaries but as volunteers working with local organisations to help other members of their community. In addition to the time and energy they contribute to a scheme, volunteers also provide an important connection and source of information about their community and service users, and can help recruit other volunteers.

Rural social enterprise

A number of the case studies in this booklet and on the accompanying website are community and social enterprises which have been established with the main purpose of providing social benefits to the community. The management boards and volunteers of the majority of rural social enterprises are dominated by the over-50s, who bring significant life skills and experience to these projects, as well as enormous amounts of time and commitment. The Rural Lifelines programme highlighted the contribution rural social enterprise can deliver to rural people whose strong sense of community is a significant factor in overcoming the problems of sparsity and isolation in rural areas.

However, current support by a range of agencies for such enterprises is often haphazard, and a proactive approach is required to foster their development, if they are to fulfil their potential in forming a key part of the toolkit to support statutory bodies in meeting the needs of older rural residents in the 21st century.

Our committee has all sorts – some who’ve spent their lives bossing other people around, and some who’ve stayed at home – retired now mostly. They use their skills to make the scheme work properly. We’re proud of what we do.

Volunteer, Mobile Warden scheme, Cambridgeshire

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The Delivering for older people in rural areas website accompanying this booklet contains detailed information and resources on the following:

- Policy context impacting on older people in rural areas
- Key demographic trends in rural areas
- Detailed case studies illustrating rural service delivery
- Rural Social Enterprise – Rural Lifelines
- Suggestions for further reading
- Useful websites
- List of key organisations and contacts

Photos courtesy of:
- Countryside Agency: R Pilgrim/Julia Bayne/Rob Fraser
- Pedal Back the Years: David Cuffwright
- In Touch: Gloucestershire Rural Community Council
- Age Concern Northumberland
- Care & Repair Stroud (Ltd)
- Northern Fells Group
- Bones in Mind: Central Cornwall Primary Care Trust
- High Peak and Dales Primary Care Trust
- Northern Fells Group
- Shropshire County Council