

Grey and Pleasant Land? An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Connectivity of Older People in Rural Civic Society

This research was funded by the research councils for three years, to 2012, to explore the contribution that older people make to the rural communities in which they live, what problems they have in making such a contribution and how this contribution can be maximised. As well as the CCRI, it involved the Universities of the West of England, Plymouth, Bournemouth, Cardiff and Swansea as well as the University of Edmonton in Canada.

Methodological Approach

The study had a number of work packages examining different facets of this contribution. They were all underpinned by a large quantitative survey. This examined individuals over 60 in two remote rural areas in England (North Cornwall) and Wales (Llanarth, Dyfed), two areas close to urban areas (Painswick in England and Raglan in Wales) and two areas in between (West Dorset and Rhayader, Powys), so the data is good for looking at geographical remoteness. 150 doorstep interviews were conducted in each case study area, 900 in total. Some results from the surveys can help us understand the relative importance of community on the one hand and remoteness on the other in understanding rural isolation amongst the over 60s.

The Importance of Community

'Neighbourliness' is a central support mechanism for older people. In the survey, it was more important than family or any of the public services. This seemed to be the same in more remote as well as less remote areas, as figure 1 shows.

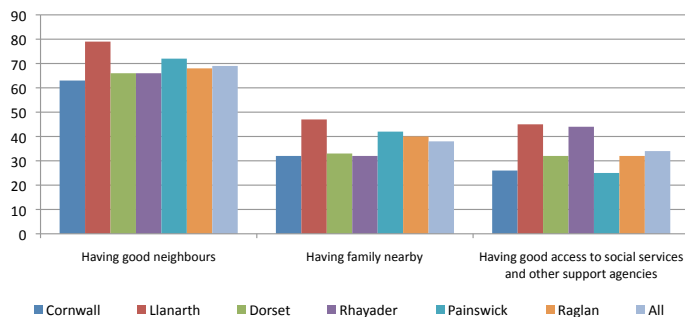


Figure 1.- In terms of social support: those thinking that access to neighbours, family and official services are 'very important' (each case study area separately)



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Neighbourliness, too, seems to be more important for community cohesion than volunteering in any formal sense. Whilst some 47% of those interviewed in the surveys felt that they assisted others regularly in an informal basis, only 38% claimed that they did undertake some form of voluntary work.

Unsurprisingly, older people and those who are not well are less likely to be actively involved in their communities than younger, healthier older people. Less obviously, married people are more likely to be involved. The strongest influences over active involvement are (former) occupational status and levels of qualification. The higher these are, the higher the levels of community involvement are likely to be. But there is no association between levels of involvement and levels of wealth, length of residence in a community or its degree of remoteness. Overall, 81% of the survey claimed that they were as involved in their community as they wanted to be.

Limits to Community Participation

The reasons why older people did not get involved in community activities are shown in figure 2.

It is striking here that a lack of interest (a preference not to participate) is almost as strong as all of the other limitations put together, generally perceived as constraints. Clearly, many older residents are happy 'being' in their community, rather than actively contributing to its development.

Policy Consequences

These findings are important for policy, not only because the government is seeking to make communities themselves more active (through, for example, the localism agenda and the Big Society), but also because research shows that older people tend to be more active than other age groups in society, and rural older people tend to be more active than urban ones. This research shows that active community participation is neither universal nor a universal aspiration. Exercising the right 'not to take part' in community activities is strong. Also, the factors that make people most likely to take part, such as occupational status and levels of qualifications, are largely beyond the influence of community policy, certainly in the short term.

Figure 2 – things that strongly limit, or prevent, people getting involved in community activities (all areas together)

