



Commission for  
Rural Communities

Tackling rural disadvantage

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Social isolation  
experienced by  
older people in  
rural communities:

Executive Summary

The Commission for Rural Communities acts as the advocate for England's rural communities, as an expert adviser to government, and as a watchdog to ensure that government actions, policies and programmes recognise and respond effectively to rural needs, with a particular focus on disadvantage.

It has three key functions:

**Rural advocate:**

the voice for rural people, businesses and communities

**Expert adviser:**

giving evidence-based, objective advice to government and others

**Independent watchdog:**

monitoring, reporting on and seeking to mainstream rural into the delivery of policies nationally, regionally and locally

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## **Background**

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### **Introduction**

For some people, the effects of not having family close to home, perhaps as a consequence of re-location or bereavement, can leave them in a position where they do not have day-to-day contact with others. This can be compounded by physical difficulties leaving the home, to a point where there is very little contact with other people. Under the Government's Localism agenda, services which can address social isolation may be delivered at as local a level as possible, and be provided by a combination of public, private and voluntary sector organisations.

This report examines the rural dimension to these issues, and assesses the impact that Government policy is having on three key areas of policy and public services: social care, transport and housing; and the extent to which they address social isolation for older people. It also identifies a number of approaches, and examples of good practice, which can maximise the benefits of community and voluntary activity. The report concludes with a series of recommendations.

### **Economic and policy context**

The following key factors provide the context to the report:

- The current economic outlook, relatively fragile state of the UK economy, and current programme of deficit reduction.
- The Government's stated ambition to re-balance the economy away from the public sector and towards the private sector.
- The increased emphasis on the role of the private and voluntary sectors in service delivery.

### **Key facts**

- 23% of the rural population are over retirement age compared to 18% in urban areas<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, for Cabinet Office, 2009

- The older population is also projected to rise, with the over-85 age group increasing by 186% by 2028 in rural areas – compared to 149% for the UK as a whole<sup>2</sup>.
- Because the population tends to be older, crude rates of disease, disability and mortality are far higher in rural areas than urban.
- Social isolation has been found to exert an independent influence on risk for mortality comparable with well established risk factors such as smoking.

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## Social care

- As the All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services has noted<sup>3</sup>, providing care ‘to rural populations entails unavoidable additional costs due to diseconomies of scale, additional travel time and related costs, and the effects of caring for an older population’.
- The ‘Caring for our future’ white paper introduces a mandatory policy of personal budgets for those in need of care, and encourages a mix of services provided by private, public and voluntary sector organisations. At a time when Local Authorities are increasingly expected to relinquish the delivery of adult care services, the viability of providing care services for private companies is weaker in rural than urban areas.
- Funding formulae appear to relate to historic patterns of service rather than to actual levels of need. The effect of this is to continue a situation where rural Local Authorities receive less funding per head, even though there are greater needs in rural areas because the rural population tends to be older than that in urban areas. The 2012 Business Rate Retention consultation suggests that rural areas will benefit from some modest enhancement in levels of funding in the future, but does not envisage the necessary re-assessment of the balance between funding and need in the funding formula for Local Authorities.
- Variations in per capita social care expenditure on older people (aged 65 or over) are extreme. Expenditure across the twelve Inner London Boroughs in 2009-10, for example, amounted an

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<sup>2</sup> Oxford Consultants for Social Inclusion, for Cabinet Office, 2009

<sup>3</sup> The implications of national funding formulae for rural health and education funding, All Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Affairs, 2010

average of £1,750 per person aged 65+ compared to just £773 per capita across the 27 Shire Counties.

- This means that, despite the greater costs of delivering services, personal budgets tend to be lower in rural areas than urban.
- Faced with reduced funding levels, Local Authorities are having to restrict funded social care to individuals with more pressing needs, instead of being able to fund preventative care. This increases the risk of social isolation for others. The national minimum eligibility threshold is a welcome means to address this, but will only work satisfactorily if funding to rural Local Authorities is made fairer.
- There are opportunities for increased support to older people from community and voluntary groups. Surveys indicate that up to 30% of the population is prepared to take part in voluntary work<sup>4</sup>.

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## Transport

- The availability of transport is vital to rural areas because of the obvious challenges of travelling to friends, family and services from more remote places. As a consequence, car ownership is greater in rural areas than urban<sup>5</sup>, and extends to people on lower incomes.
- Those older people without access to their own transport have greater chances of experiencing social isolation in rural areas than urban, and so the availability of public transport is vital.
- Subsidies to scheduled bus services are being reduced or withdrawn. The Transport Select Committee<sup>6</sup> showed that reductions made in the 2010 spending review included:
  - local authority revenue expenditure cut by 28%
  - changes made to the DfT's formula for concessionary fare reimbursements
  - Bus Service Operators Grant (BSOG) cut by 20% from 2012-13

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<sup>4</sup> Place Survey, 2008

<sup>5</sup> DfT National Travel Survey, 2010

<sup>6</sup> Transport Select Committee, 2011: *Bus services after the spending review*

- A recent survey<sup>7</sup> indicated that 'the hardest hit places are those which are the most rural and which have the highest proportion of retired residents
- The provision of community transport is increasingly important. However, there are inconsistencies in Local Authorities' policies towards community transport including:
  - the degree to which scheduled bus services continue to be subsidised
  - the types of community transport on which concessionary passes are valid
  - the approach to using concessionary fares before 9.30am.
- These three inconsistencies create a situation where older people can experience very different levels of access to public transport in different areas, and present an opportunity to re-think how concessionary travel is financed.

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## Housing

- The role that social isolation plays as a risk factor for illnesses such as coronary heart disease is generally accepted. In addition, it can increase risks of falls and other injuries. Appropriate housing, in either the private or rented sectors, can help prevent falls or other injuries. Housing located close to services and friends or family is a factor in preventing social isolation.
- Preventing ill-health helps to reduce public expenditure on transport, the NHS and on benefits as well as being a clear social objective. There are therefore clear savings to be made across the public sector from the existence of dwellings, publicly or privately owned, that are more suitable for older people in rural communities.
- People tend to have changing housing needs as they age. For some, adaptations to their own home are sufficient, whilst others may move into purpose built accommodation, some needing on-site support and others able to continue without assistance.
- Changes to benefit eligibility criteria may have unintended consequences as people approaching retirement age and deemed to be under-occupying a socially rented property, may

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<sup>7</sup> Rural Services Network, 2011

be forced to move some distance or face benefit reductions. This could lead to social isolation.

- The CRC has welcomed the arrival of the National Planning Policy Framework, which we believe will help speed up planning decisions, and encourage local people to contribute to decisions about the numbers and types of housing that are built in rural areas, including housing for local older people.

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Given the decrease in public spending across the board we can expect to see reductions in the way that many services are delivered in rural areas. Much will depend on the energy, enthusiasm, and leadership qualities of local people, whether in employment in the state, private or voluntary sectors, or working on an unpaid basis, to make things happen. Localism implies that services should be increasingly designed to meet the specific needs of older people in small rural communities, and we support this concept. However, we question the extent to which this will mean that some services which can help to reduce social isolation for older people, such as some aspects of care, public transport or specialist housing, can be provided on a universal basis when localism is accompanied by unprecedented cuts in council funding. We note the commitment given in *Open Public Services 2012*<sup>8</sup> that 'The Government will ensure that issues of fairness for people in rural areas accessing individual services are taken into account when developing policy'. *We hope that, regardless of where they live, older people enjoy equal opportunity of access to services for equal needs.*

Key to this is an equitable distribution of Government funding between rural and urban areas, on the basis of need. Funding decisions by central Government and Local Authorities relating to social care, transport and benefits, call into question whether need is the determining factor. A more joined-up approach, focused on the needs of older people in rural areas, would go some way to reducing the risk of social isolation and in doing so would also reduce expenditure from the public purse. This is not a call for additional funding, but for fairness for older people in rural areas, as envisaged in the *Open Public Services White Paper*.

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<sup>8</sup> *Open Public Services 2012*, Cabinet Office

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## Recommendations

1. The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Communities and Local Government should commission research into the formula used to distribute funding for social care to Local Authorities, examining in particular whether the needs (rather than historic usage) of rural communities are treated similarly to those of urban areas.
2. The Cabinet Office should work with the voluntary sector to establish a programme, perhaps linked to the Community Organisers programme, which provides volunteers wishing to establish or manage community activities with access to mentoring and leadership training.
3. The Local Government Association and the National Council for Voluntary Organisations should develop guidance aimed at ensuring that reductions in spending do not lead to a reduction in the number of paid volunteer co-ordinators.
4. The Department for Transport should explore the feasibility of replacing the concessionary fare system with one by which older people have access to personal budgets for scheduled and community transport services.
5. Local Authorities should consider using the Community Transport Fund and other revenue sources to provide training for local people to pass minibuss driving licences.
6. Following the introduction of the National Planning Policy Framework, the Department for Communities and Local Government should monitor the numbers of newly built dwellings aimed at older people in rural areas and issue a report two years after the implementation of the NPPF in spring 2014.
7. The Department for Work and Pensions should introduce a protection that ensures that people approaching retirement age will not experience a reduction in their housing benefit as a consequence of the under-occupancy provision unless suitable alternative accommodation is available to them within their own community.



**Commission for  
Rural Communities**

Unit 1 Saw Mills End  
Corinium Avenue  
Gloucester. GL4 3DE

**Telephone** 01452 627508

**Email** [info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk](mailto:info@ruralcommunities.gov.uk)

**www** [defra.gov.uk/crc](http://defra.gov.uk/crc)