

AI Generated notes

Rural Health and Care Seminar 27 November 2024

Summary

The Seminar looked at the challenges faced by rural health services, the need for a new toolkit to address workforce issues in rural areas, and the importance of capturing innovative regional practices and best practices in rural recruitment, training, and retention. The meeting also highlighted the challenges faced by rural general practices, the need for rural communities to have access to healthcare services, and the preliminary findings from a survey on health and wellbeing issues in the farming community in North Yorkshire.

Introduction

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, introduced the final seminar of 2024, focusing on rural health and care. Kerry stated that the Rural Services Network is a membership organisation with over 500 members, advocating for rural communities through its "Delivering for Rural" campaign. Kerry emphasised the need for tailored government policies to address the unique challenges faced by rural communities, including access to healthcare, workforce recruitment, and housing affordability.

Rural Health Challenges and Solutions

Jessica Sellick from the National Centre for Rural Health and Care discussed the Centre's background and its previous work on workforce issues. She highlighted the challenges faced by rural trusts, including recruitment and retention difficulties, higher travel costs, and the need to comply with automatic staffing levels. Jessica also mentioned the Centre's work with the Nuffield Trust to analyse the impact of rurality on healthcare costs and the Centre's toolkit for rural proofing. She emphasised the importance of rural proofing in policy and decision-making and mentioned the Centre's support for action research and international collaboration. Jessica then handed over to her colleague, Anna Whelan, who discussed the Centre's work on a workforce toolkit.

Workforce Crisis Planning and Recruitment

Anna discussed the need for a timely response to the workforce crisis, focusing on planning, recruitment, and retention in England and beyond. She highlighted the importance of capturing innovative regional practices and best practices in rural recruitment, training, and retention. Anna also mentioned a call for evidence and shared some questions from the call, including inquiries about workforce planning, policies for professional well-being, and opportunities for career development and networking.

Rural Health Challenges and Solutions

Anna and Jessica discussed the need for a new toolkit to address workforce issues in rural areas. They highlighted the challenges of funding and staffing during seasonal population surges. Graham, Director of the National Centre for Rural Health and Care, emphasised the toolkit's dual purpose: to gather evidence for policy influence and to assist providers on the ground. Jessica stressed the need for diverse perspectives in the call for evidence.

Rural Dispensing Practices and Challenges

Dr Richard West, Chairman of the Dispensing Doctors' Association discussed the differences between rural and urban dispensing practices, highlighting that rural practices often handle a broader range of tasks due to limited access to A&E services. He also noted that rural practices often have to play the role of both prescriber and dispenser due to the lack of pharmacies in rural areas. He emphasised the need for rural practices to have a different set of skills to effectively serve their patients. Richard explained how rural practices often have a more mixed population, with both deprived and affluent individuals, where the deprivation can be hidden in funding formulas. He also discussed the challenges of rural practices, including the need for home visits due to poor infrastructure, the difficulty of implementing primary care networks in rural areas, and the higher visiting rate due to lack of public transport. Richard emphasised the need to design transport networks to allow patients to access health services rather than just local towns.

Rural General Practices' Financial Challenges

Richard discussed the challenges faced by rural general practices, emphasising the importance of community involvement and the need for a more sustainable financial system. He highlighted the difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, the impact of outdated IT infrastructure, and the strain of increasing employer's National Insurance costs without corresponding funding. Richard also underscored the need for a more supportive environment for rural practices, encouraging politicians to consider the implications of their policies on rural communities.

Rural Health Inequality Challenges Discussed

Kerry advised that the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services has identified rural health and care as a priority. Kerry is working with the APPG to ensure that new MPs in rural areas are informed about rural policy challenges. Richard discussed the need for rural communities to have access to healthcare services, and the importance of considering the needs of rural communities when developing healthcare services.

Farming Community Health and Wellbeing Issues

Alicia from Healthwatch North Yorkshire presented on two research projects on rural health inequalities and the challenges faced by the farming community in accessing healthcare. The projects highlighted issues such as lack of access to healthcare services, high costs of healthcare in rural areas, and the need for community support. The findings from these projects will be used to inform future healthcare strategies and policies.

Alicia shared preliminary findings from a survey and conversations with 149 people about health and wellbeing issues in the farming community. The top three health issues reported were back, joint, knee, shoulder, or muscle pain (74%), stress and anxiety (42%), and sleep problems (31%). Many respondents cited barriers to seeking help, including difficulty arranging appointments around farming work, lack of time, not feeling their problems were severe enough, and a lack of understanding from healthcare professionals about the farming way of life. The top five suggestions for improving access to healthcare included drop-in clinics at local farming sites, healthcare professionals who understand the farming way of life, more flexible appointment times, a farmer's walking day at their GP practice, and mobile health units in local villages and towns. Alicia also shared positive experiences from the Field Nurse initiative and the importance of understanding the farming calendar and pressures. The full report will be released in spring next year.

Closing thoughts

Alicia highlighted the need for better data collection and analysis at the local level to understand the specific needs of rural communities. Jessica emphasised the importance of prevention and early intervention in healthcare, and the need for policymakers to consider the unique challenges faced by rural areas when designing policies and allocating resources. The speakers also discussed the potential of technology, such as telemedicine and mobile phone signal tracking, to improve healthcare access in rural areas. The seminar ended with a call for policymakers to prioritise the needs of rural communities and to recognise rurality as a health inequality in its own right.