

**AUSTERITY, WELFARE REFORM AND OLDER PEOPLE IN RURAL PLACES:
COMPETING DISCOURSES OF VOLUNTARISM AND COMMUNITY?**

CHAPTER FOR *GROWING OLD IN RESOURCE COMMUNITIES: NEW
FRONTIERS OF RURAL AGING*, M SKINNER AND N HANLON (Editors),
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INTRODUCTION

“A dark slumber cloaked the land. Not only had the sense of crisis passed without any serious attempts to rectify the flaws that had nearly caused the economy to grind to a halt, but unaccountably, the political right had emerged from the tumult stronger, unapologetic, and even less restrained in its rapacity and credulity than prior to the crash.” (Mirowski, 2013, 1-2)

Austerity has emerged as an important policy discourse in many countries during the last few years. It has been claimed by national governments that it is the best, indeed only, response to the recent economic crisis. The origins of this crisis have been well documented: bad lending by banks in the US led to the destabilisation of financial institutions in other countries, which led to government bailouts of some of these institutions, which in turn resulted in rising levels of national debt and economic recession, which led to the introduction of policies that would reduce national debt and reinstate economic competitiveness (Blyth, 2013). What is missing from this chain of events, as Mirowski points out, is any meaningful attempt to deal with the source of the problem. Far from the banking crisis leading to any radical reappraisal of the deregulation of the financial sector and neoliberalism more generally, it appears that the political right has emerged as a stronger force of control over national policy in a number of countries across the developed world.

In a broad ranging review of the historical development of austerity, Schui (2014) argues that while it is widely accepted that it represents a failed concept in intellectual and economic terms, austerity has remained attractive to politicians of the right as a symbolic tool. For Blyth (2013), austerity has retained its attraction amongst national governments for two main reasons:

“Partly because the commonsense notion that ‘more debt doesn’t cure debt’ remains seductive in its simplicity, but partly because it enables conservatives to try (once again) to run the detested welfare state out of town, it [austerity] never seems to die.” (10)

Indeed, when we come to examine the ways in which discourses of austerity have been mobilized in countries such as the US and UK in recent years, what is apparent is that the focus of blame has switched from the actions of financial elites to the unsustainability of current levels of public (welfare) spending. As Mirowski (2013) comments, ‘in the name of probity, the working class was attacked from all sides, even by nominal ‘socialist’ parties.’ (2) Furthermore, it is claimed that placing the responsibility on those at the bottom to deal with the banking crises not only does not make sense economically but will create a more unequal society (Blyth, 2013). In these terms, the austerity agenda needs to be viewed as part of the broader neoliberal agenda to encourage free market economics and downplay the role of the state. It also connects with recent processes of welfare reform in countries such as the US and UK that have sought to reposition welfare as workfare (see Milbourne, 2008) and utilise the welfare state to ‘sort, categorise and allocate positions to

people;...issue incentives and awards for certain classes of people and certain types of behaviours, and dole out constraints and punishments for others' (Clarke, 2008, 200).

My aim within this chapter is to scale down these discussions of austerity in two senses: first, by exploring how austerity has impacted on the lives of older people; and second, by considering the ways in which the austerity agenda has been played out in rural places. In terms of structure, the chapter commences with a critical review of the implementation of austerity policies in the UK before moving on to consider the ways in which academic and media commentators have discussed their impacts – potential and actual - on older people and rural places. I then draw on materials from a recent study of the relations between older people and place in Wales to provide an in-depth account of the connections between austerity, welfare reform and older people in particular rural places.

AUSTERITY UK: PUBLIC SECTOR CUTS AND WELFARE REFORM

“We have a plan – and we are carefully implementing that plan. Already we have cut the deficit by a third. And we are sticking to the task. But that doesn't just mean making difficult decisions on public spending. It also means something more profound. It means building a leaner, more efficient state. We need to do more with less. Not just now, but permanently...” (David Cameron, UK Prime Minister, 11th November 2013)

In his speech to the financial institutions of the City of London at the Lord Mayor's Banquet in 2013, the UK's Prime Minister took stock of the financial measures introduced by the Coalition Government since being elected to power three years earlier. The speech was notable not only for the claims being made about the public spending cuts and debt reduction that had been achieved to date, but for its reference to the future of the state and austerity. Rather than constructing austerity as a short-term fix to the problems created by the bail-out of major financial institutions, Cameron talked about public sector cuts as part of a broader and longer-term restructuring of state – business – civil society relations, with austerity very much positioned as a permanent feature of central government policy. The themes of this speech resonate with previous policy ideas and developments introduced by the Coalition Government. In July 2010, barely two months after the general election, Cameron introduced his Big Society idea to the British people. Promoted in terms of the empowerment of local communities and citizens, the Prime Minister constructed the Big Society as a:

“huge culture change where people, in their everyday lives, in their homes, in their neighbourhoods, in their workplaces don't always turn to officials, local authorities or central government for answers to the problems they face but instead feel both free and powerful enough to help themselves and their own communities”.

What is hidden within the Big Society narrative is the billions of pounds worth of public sector cuts introduced since the general election that have forced individuals and communities away from the state as a provider of welfare. As O'Hara (2014, 3) comments, 'at recurring intervals since 2010 departmental budgets were slashed across central and local government, meaning many public and community services...were eradicated, reorganised or pared down as a result.' According to Duffy (2014), more than half of these cuts have fallen on two areas – local government spending and welfare benefits. Reductions in the Revenue Support Grant to local authorities have created acute problems for them in delivering services and led to staff redundancies. Cuts in welfare benefits have also been associated with a broader programme of welfare reform, which has consisted of a major reconfiguration of the benefits system, the scrapping of certain benefits, the reduction of the financial value of existing benefits and the increased use of sanctions to enforce this new system.

For O'Hara (2014), the scale of this welfare reform programme signals the end of the welfare state as we know it. However, rather than representing a radical new policy development, the Coalition's attempt to restructure welfare support can be seen as following on from previous programmes of welfare reform. The last three decades have witnessed initiatives by national governments of the right and centre left to instigate changes to the welfare state in the UK. The Conservative governments of the 1980s and early 1990s sought to cut the welfare budget and diminish the role of the local state from provider to enabler of key areas of welfare delivery. In the early 1990s, US models of workfare began to be incorporated into the UK welfare system,

with welfare reinterpreted by government as an economic policy tool rather than a mechanism for supporting the most vulnerable within society. When Labour came to power in 1997, welfare reform was high on its political agenda but it was again the US-based workfare approach to welfare policy that was actively promoted. New groups of the long-term unemployed were targeted with training programmes to allow them to make the transition from welfare to work, and the benefit system was tweaked 'to make work pay'. There was also the increased use of sanctions for those deemed not to be taking advantage of these new training and work opportunities as well as the further devolution of responsibility for delivering welfare to more complex coalitions of local stakeholders.

In similar ways to recent accounts of the austerity project, these programmes of welfare reform were largely moral and political projects, reframing the rights and responsibilities associated with the welfare system in relation to the state and its citizens. Arguably, the Conservative administrations were more concerned with shrinking the state's commitment to welfare provision and reducing the power of local government to provide welfare in their areas, but both Labour and Conservative governments sought to move away from the idea of the welfare state as a provider of universal support to one that actively moves people from state dependency to work.

AUSTERITY, OLDER PEOPLE AND RURAL PLACES

The previous rounds of welfare reform introduced by the Labour governments (1997-2010) did much to tackle poverty amongst older people. Whilst the main focus was on eradicating child poverty in the UK by 2020, Labour introduced a suite of new measures that sought to reduce pensioner poverty. It established Pension Credit to ensure that all older people receive enough state pension to keep them above the official poverty line. In addition, new universal benefits were brought in to address issues of fuel poverty and immobility, including winter fuel payments to help older people heat their homes in the colder months, free bus passes to allow travel on public transport during off-peak hours, and home efficiency grants to allow older people to insulate their properties. The success of these policies in relation to tackling pensioner poverty has been clearly evidenced by official figures: between 1998/99 and 2009/10 there was a reduction in the poverty rate amongst older people of eight percentage points, equating to 600,000 pensioners being taken out of poverty (Walker 2012).

In relation to the current government's austerity agenda, older people have largely been excluded from key elements of spending cuts and welfare reform. The previous coalition government introduced a so-called 'triple lock' of the state retirement pension until 2015, meaning that its value will increase by the rate of increase in earnings, retail prices or 2.5 per cent per year, whichever is the highest. It is also the case that cuts to state benefits have been targeted at working-age groups, and the universal provision of the pensioner benefits introduced by the Labour governments has been protected. However, some commentators have called for a more nuanced reading of the impacts of austerity on the lives of older people. In a recent report on

pensioner poverty, Age Cymru (2014) argues that although it welcomes real term increases in the value of the state pension, these increases build on a relatively low starting point as the value of the pension was eroded by previous governments. Indeed, government statistics indicate that about 16 per cent of people aged 65 years or over in the UK are living below the official poverty line. Moreover, there is emerging evidence that the financial situations of older people have begun to deteriorate:

“Mirroring the rest of society, the finances of many older people have become increasingly pressurised by a combination of the rising costs essential goods such as food and fuel, historically low interest rates on savings and plummeting annuity rates for those reaching retirement with private pensions. This has meant that the incomes of many older people have remained static (and reduced in real terms) whilst the prices of many things they buy have rapidly increased.” (Age Cymru, 2014, 4)

A survey of older people in Wales conducted by Age Cymru (2014) reveals that 28 per cent stated that they were unable to ‘afford everything they needed without being worried whether they could afford it’, 57 per cent were concerned about energy bills and more than one-third were cutting back on key areas of spending.

Older people are also beginning to be impacted indirectly by the austerity agenda. With increasing cuts to their budgets, local authorities are having to make difficult decisions about the funding of a range of key public services, with social care

services to old and vulnerable groups now seen to be at risk (Ginn, 2014). As Brindle (2013) comments in a review of social policy change during 2013:

“This was the year when the cuts began to bite deep. After three years of doing everything possible to avoid any direct impact on older and disabled people, plundering other departments first and screwing every penny out of overheads, councils started to run out of options. Almost one in three social services directors in England acknowledged that cuts this year would mean fewer people getting care and support”

With austerity largely focused on the working-age population, Walker (2012) argues that public, media and political attitudes towards older people are beginning to shift, with older people ‘being transferred from the safe political haven of the deserving to the radically more exposed position of being one of the main threats to Britain’s economic future’ (812). Walker cites evidence from the British Social Attitudes Survey, an annual official survey of a panel of more than 3,000 individuals, which shows a sharp fall in the proportion of respondents supporting increased government spending on older people during recent years, as well as recent hostility towards universal benefit provision to older people within the popular press in the UK. For Walker, what is being witnessed is a political campaign that ‘combines ageism with an inherent neoliberal antagonism towards universalism, disguised as fake austerity politics [that] appeals to generational fairness’ (814), rather than one that recognises the centrality of the welfare state for both present and future generations.

Moving from older people to rural places, it is fair to say that there has been relatively little written about the rural impacts of austerity in the UK. Furthermore, what has appeared has been produced by policy and political groups rather than academics. The first reference to the (potential) impacts of austerity in rural places came from the Rural Coalition, a group of rural local authorities. In a report produced in 2010, it provided a largely positive assessment of the likely rural impacts of austerity, pointing more to the opportunities than challenges presented by this emerging policy agenda:

“The new Coalition Government’s commitment to the ‘Big Society’ in an era of relative austerity in public funding sets a clear rural challenge, yet provides clear rural opportunities. We need to achieve better rural services, at less cost. To do that we need to harness the power and understanding of local communities themselves to delivery their own tailored solutions. Rural areas have strengths upon which to build that new dynamic for local services.” (30)

The Commission for Rural Communities (2010), a government-funded advisory body on rural issues, was more pessimistic in its reading of austerity. In a report also published in 2010 it suggested that rural areas are particularly vulnerable to public sector cuts given the increased costs of delivering services in rural areas and the lower levels of political support for rural service provision. In addition, the Commission pointed to the ways in which cuts to discretionary spending on ‘softer’

services, such as libraries, community centres and public transport, would have more significant impacts on community cohesion in rural places. The following year another coalition of rural local authorities – the Rural Services Network – published a report that provided an equally pessimistic assessment of the likely impacts of austerity in rural areas. It claimed that public sector cuts would have a broader geographical impact in rural areas given the increased difficulty of travelling to the next nearest service provider. The Network also suggested that lower levels of existing public sector service provision in rural places would mean that future cuts would impact harder, with some services disappearing altogether rather than merely being scaled down.

EXPLORING THE IMPACTS OF AUSTERITY ON OLDER PEOPLE IN RURAL WALES

The chapter now moves on to explore the impacts of austerity and welfare reform on older people's lives and services in rural areas by drawing on findings from recent research on the relations between older people and place in four localities in rural Wales¹: Aberdaron, a remote coastal village in north-west Wales; Llanarth, a small coastal village in the mid-west; Rhayader, a market town in central Wales; and Raglan, a small commuter town in the south-east of the country. Within each place interviews were undertaken with local government officers and councillors, third sector organisations working with older people, and older people. In addition, analysis was undertaken of two data sets: the first relates to a survey of town and

¹ I am grateful to the Welsh Government and European Commission for funding this research through the Wales Rural Observatory (see www.walesruralobservatory.org.uk)

community councils across rural Wales examining the changing provision of local services; the second results from a representative survey of 3,200 households that explored various aspects of living and working in rural places, and permitted an age-based analysis.

Embedded cultures of local austerity

Ideas and practices of austerity are far from new in many parts of rural Wales in terms of patterns of service delivery and local attitudes towards welfare. The survey of local services reveals that most rural communities lacked a range of key services for older people. For example, only 48 per cent of communities contained a club for the over 60s, with this figure falling to under 40 per cent in communities with less than 1,000 residents. More startling, 91 per cent of communities were without any advice services and 86 per cent lacked a support service for vulnerable elderly people. Table 1 reveals that even low level interventions for older people were largely absent across rural Wales, with 42 per cent of rural communities not possessing any of the six low level services included in the table, and the most common service – meals on wheels – only present in 30 per cent of these communities.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

This idea of an embedded form of austerity in relation to service provision for older people was reinforced by the interviews with officers and councillors from local authorities. In the following extract from an interview with a local councillor we witness a denial on any significant impacts of national public sector spending cuts, in part due to the protection of local government spending by the Welsh Government, but mainly due to the ways in which this rural local authority has been forced to operate on a restricted budget over a number of years:

“We have a mantra here - we will continue to find ways of doing better with less. We’re mindful of the issues that are faced in English authorities...it’s certainly more severe that we’ve faced in Wales but we know it’s coming and we’ve got our issues to deal with. [We are] the only Conservative authority in Wales...we always feel that we’ve been rather poorly done in terms of RSG (Revenue Support Grant) provision...So the positive elements of that is that we’ve got used to dealing with doing as much as we can with pretty little for a very long time. So for us, even though it’s getting harder, there is still a sense of business as usual; it’s always been like that.”

Austerity can be seen as having a longstanding presence in these rural places in another sense. Far from depending on the state for support during periods of material hardship, the research indicates that older people living on low income tend to ‘make do’ within the private and informal arenas, contest the presence of poverty within their local areas and hold antagonistic attitudes towards the welfare state. To illustrate these points, I will draw on findings from the household survey and

materials from the stakeholder interviews. Turning first to the survey and focusing on older people living in poor households, only one-quarter were claiming any means-tested welfare benefits and 72 per cent stated that they did not recognise the presence of poverty in their local area. It is also apparent from the survey that older people were downplaying aspects of material hardship. While almost half had savings of less than £5,000 and 37 per cent agreed that they would find it 'impossible or difficult to find £100 to meet an unexpected expense', only 31 per cent stated that they were finding it difficult to cope on their current income. Similarly, only five per cent of older people living below the poverty line considered their quality of life to be 'bad' or 'very bad', with the vast majority (80 per cent) constructing quality of life in positive terms.

These themes of poverty denial, 'making do' and antagonism towards the welfare state also featured prominently within the stakeholder interviews. One local authority councillor referred to entrenched local cultures that acted to contain material hardships within the personal sphere, commenting that older people on low income 'don't want people to know they are struggling...and I think that is where your issue [arises] of people not coming forward to claim benefits that is open to them.' Another councilor talked about the hidden nature of poverty in his rural area, with those older people not approaching the local authority for assistance often in greater need than those receiving state support:

"I come from the farming community, and I am well aware that there are people there with a higher level of need quite often than those we are

providing care for. There is an enormous amount of pride within the indigenous farming community and they do get on with it...and often live in what many of us would consider to be poor circumstances...There is a huge amount of rural poverty which is very very hard to sort of get underneath. I was going to say expose but that would be the wrong word because there's so much dignity around that people wouldn't want it exposed...they just tighten their belts and get on with it..."

In addition to this issue of personal pride, there was evidence of mistrust of the local welfare state amongst some members of the older old age group, which was acting to compound the hiddenness of older person poverty in these places. As one third sector stakeholder commented:

"I mean the people that are in poverty are 75 to 100...Once you get past 80 you're in the generation that [see] Social Services as those wicked people who take your children away...that's what it was like when they were young and you don't accept help from anybody. My parents managed and I can manage. And nobody will know that I haven't got a fire and I go to bed at 6pm to keep warm..."

Such antagonistic attitudes towards the welfare state combine with the close-knit nature of rural living to create practical as well as cultural problems for older people in claiming the state benefits to which they are entitled. In the following extract from an interview with a representative of an elders' voluntary organisation, we witness

the increased visibility associated with claiming state benefit payments in village Post Offices:

“I think quite a few people are too proud to claim benefits because they might have to go into their local post office to get it and so they’ll [local people] know that they’re claiming...It’s difficult but you’ve got to...get into these communities and tell people what it’s for and really walk with them on the journey until it’s stopped.”

This increased visibility of claiming benefit clearly connects with local cultures of self-help and antagonism towards the welfare state. As another third sector stakeholder commented, ‘I’ve had people go in to the Post Office to get their money out and they say “they look at me like I’m a benefits scrounger” ...they’re seen as the hoodie that’s taking money off people who are working hard and it’s really very very wrong.’ It is likely that the moral dimensions of UK government’s austerity project will extenuate such local community attitudes towards state benefit receipt, reducing benefit claimant rates and increasing levels of hidden poverty amongst older people in these and other rural areas.

Austerity bites

There are signs that austerity is beginning to impact on particular places and areas of service provision. Returning to the survey of local services, although 68 per cent of town and community council respondents considered the provision of welfare

services in their community to have remained static during the three years prior to the survey, 28 per cent felt that it had changed for the worst compared with only three per cent of respondents who had noticed a change for the better. The interviews with local government and third sector stakeholders also point to the impacts of national austerity policy. The case-study local authorities had so far responded to reductions in levels of funding through processes of internal reorganisation and what were referred to as 'efficiency savings', often involving the restructuring of and minor cuts to non-statutory services. As one officer commented, 'we've maintained it thus far but I think rather than sort of slash and burn...we're trying to transform, we are just trying to provide care in very different ways so that we don't have to reduce the levels of care'. However, there was recognition that this situation would not be able to be maintained in future years:

"There is no doubt that the squeeze...is going to get harder now in the next couple of years. The council, we have a financial strategy in place that hopefully there's no need to cut services for two or three years again. We have efficiency savings...but what I heard yesterday is that the funding from the UK Government to the Welsh government is being squeezed even more. That automatically means that the squeeze will come down to the local authorities." (local authority officer)

The focus of efficiency savings on 'softer' services, such as libraries, community centres and leisure, whilst seen as inevitable by both local authority officers and councillors, was not without its problems. Interviewees pointed to linkages between

statutory and non-statutory service provision, with the latter playing a key role in preventing older people needing to rely on the former. Indeed, community infrastructure was viewed as essential not only to the well-being of elders in rural areas but also to the efficient functioning of the local welfare system. As one officer argued, 'if for example, they close down all the libraries, bus services get worse, you know all the money gets taken out, that doesn't serve my purpose...it undermines it and forces me back to a crisis response...'

Similar points were made about the impacts of austerity on the third sector in the case-study places. In one sense, the UK's austerity policy is predicated on communities and voluntary groups playing a greater role in the provision of services to disadvantaged and vulnerable groups within society. In another, public sector cuts are being passed on to the third sector, meaning that their actual and potential contributions to the welfare system are being undermined by austerity. As one of the local authority officers commented, 'the third sector really is key in all this. All these cuts are going on across the board, where there is a big issue about the third sector stepping in. But the third sector needs to be funded and they're being squeezed as well. It is a difficult situation.' What is also apparent from the interviews is that the web of local welfare provision is being held together by some rather thin threads, with small increases in operating costs or minor reductions in public sector funding risking the viability of third sector service provision in these areas. Amongst the third sector stakeholders, community transport was often highlighted as being particularly vulnerable to increasing costs and cuts:

“The impact [public sector cuts] is having on somebody who provides services for older people, there’s an impact because some of our funding has been cut, only by a few per cent but our funding is being squeezed and of course one of our major projects is community transport, so [the] fuel [price] has obviously rocketed...We’re eating into our reserves now because grant funding is getting harder and harder to actually secure...” (Third sector stakeholder)

Austerity, community and empowerment

In the final part of this section I want to explore the ways in which dominant national narratives of austerity both connect with and contradict local discourses of community, enablement and empowerment. As is widely acknowledged in the rural studies literature, ideas of community have been and continue to be a significant component of rural living, with rural residents acknowledging the presence of and involvement in their local community. Important here have been local cultures of caring as can be seen in one of the third sector stakeholders description of her village:

“Where I live is a little village called X and you’ve got certain people that if you don’t see Joe Bloggs for a couple of days – oh where is he, what’s happened to him? We’ve got to check that he’s ok. Or if we know that

there's somebody not very well...we've got certain people that go round and see, make sure that they've got food, make sure they've got warmth"

The significance of community and informal social support to rural residents also emerges from the household survey. The vast majority of the older poor appear to be content with their local communities: 69 per cent felt very satisfied with their local area as a place to live and 93 per cent of respondents stated that they 'definitely enjoyed living in my community'. It is also apparent that a great deal of community-based support exists in rural areas, with 82 per cent of older people on low income agreeing with the statement that 'people in my community look after each other'. Turning to caring and voluntarism, 42 per cent had provided care for neighbours or friends during the last 12 months and 32 per cent of older people in low income households had undertaken voluntary work over the same period.

Each of the local authorities had attempted to mobilise these forms of informal support in an effort to provide community-based welfare for (vulnerable) older people. For example, one councillor discussed how his authority was attempting to keep older people in their local communities for as long as possible whilst maintaining a good quality of life, which involved 'getting the local community engaged, with family, friends, keeping people in their homes'. Officers identified the key task here as the co-ordination of community-based activity, with local coordinators needed to record community assets as well as needs in relation to older people's support requirements in particular places. Such an approach, it was suggested, required local people 'looking at each other to find resource to help each

other' and 'getting communities to actually start thinking about what they can do for each other and only when that has been exhausted do they then look to us as an authority or the social care organisation' (local authority officer).

What is evident here is a reordering of welfare responsibilities with the local state being repositioned below the local community as a provider of welfare support to older people. Such an approach would appear to reinforce the national austerity discourse of shrinking the state and enlarging societal care and responsibility.

However, further discussions with officers revealed a more complex situation; one in which this different balance between state, community and individual responsibilities connects with more effective policy interventions for both local government and older people. Certainly, officers referred to the financial savings being delivered by these new approaches to welfare provision but what appeared to more significant to them was the ways in which these new forms of working had also increased the ability for older people to live independent lives for longer periods in the community. In the words of one officer:

“So it’s beginning to happen. We took some savings but what they’re describing is that people who used to be one-to-one managed by somebody, paid to hang out with them, are now volunteering in a shop or beginning to go on their own and do stuff. It’s not rocket science and yet we were actually paying professionals to spend their time with people whose lives would be more independent and more fulfilled if they weren’t doing that...”

CONCLUSION

It is clear from the case-study material presented in this chapter that national austerity policy does not map easily on to the delivery of services to older people in rural places. A key reason for this is that the austerity agenda rests on sets of assumptions that would seem to be less relevant to older people and rural places. Key aspects of the welfare reform programme associated with austerity have been targeted at welfare dependency and, in particular, the reduction of benefit payments to working age groups positioned outside of the formal labour market. The policy goal has been to move ever-larger numbers of people from welfare to work and, as such, those older groups retired from work have not been affected. In addition, the universal older person benefits introduced by the previous Labour administrations have remained untouched by subsequent national governments.

It is also the case that smaller government has long been a feature of rural areas, with many of the welfare services taken for granted in the city largely absent in rural places. Consequently, there has been increased reliance placed on community and other informal systems of support to plug gaps in the statutory welfare system. Indeed, it can be suggested that it is distance from rather than dependency on the welfare state that represents the key problem facing low-income groups and welfare service providers in rural areas. In one sense, this makes rural places more resilient to the austerity agenda. As one officer commented, it is 'business as usual', as rural

local authorities have long been expected to provide services to vulnerable groups on restricted budgets. In another, it is apparent from the case-study research that austerity is beginning to impact hard(er) on rural local authorities, with organisational efficiencies and reductions in funding to peripheral services no longer sufficient to respond to new public sector cuts being imposed on local government. It is probably too early to ascertain the real impacts of austerity on these and other rural places but what is clear is that while third sector and community-based welfare initiatives may be more developed in rural areas, many of these are reliant on public sector funding of one sort or another, meaning that their futures remain in doubt. This is one of the paradoxes of the austerity agenda: it seeks to empower voluntary groups and communities to provide welfare support whilst at the same time cutting their support structures and sources of funding. In addition, as O'Hara (2014) argues, the valiant efforts of community and voluntary groups to deliver welfare in the face of public sector cuts is acting to conceal the real impacts of austerity at the local level.

As with previous periods of austerity in the UK, recent public sector spending cuts and associated programmes of welfare reform have been characterised by a complex set of scalar politics, with local impacts and responses dependent on particular local policy contexts and constellations of state and third sector actors present in specific places. What is also apparent from this study is the way in which UK devolution has provided another layer of complexity to understandings of austerity. The Welsh Government has channelled its reduced budget into different policy areas to those of the UK Government and, in doing this, appears to have

lessened the impact of national austerity policy in the case-study places (see also Chaney, 2013).

Looking across the four case study places, the local impacts of UK austerity policy can be interpreted in a couple of ways. First, the new national austerity agenda would appear to be reinforcing longer-standing local policies and cultures of austerity in these rural places, perpetuating the invisibility of poverty amongst older groups and making them more reluctant to claim the state benefits to which they are entitled. Second, it is possible to identify some more positive local consequences of austerity as public sector funding cuts have encouraged local authorities to develop new models of welfare provision, some of which build on community assets to enable older people to live longer and more productive lives in their own homes and places. What is apparent here is that while such community-centred approaches are delivering cost savings, and thus conforming to the austerity agenda, they have been designed primarily to make better use of pre-existing community resources and to enable and empower older people to maintain a degree of independence within their localities. It will be interesting to see how these approaches fare in the face of future rounds of public sector cuts.

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Table 1: The proportion of rural communities in Wales with low level services for older people

Low level interventions for older people	
Handy person / repairs scheme	17%
Luncheon club	27%
Befriending scheme	10%
Meals service	30%
Mobile care service	21%
Community warden scheme	17%
None	42%

Source: Wales Rural Observatory Rural services survey, 2013 (responses from 379 town and community councils)