Rural Wisdom Evaluation
Key Findings
December 2021

Rural Wisdom has been a five-year Big Lottery funded project exploring the impact of community-based activities that are led by older people in rural areas in Scotland and Wales.

As part of the final stages of the project, the Rural Wisdom partners; Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters Cymru and the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) are sharing the learning from across the five years to enable people living and working in other rural areas across the UK to apply and benefit from what works.

Project Aims

The aims of Rural Wisdom have evolved during the five years to reflect the changing nature of the project and the communities it was working with, but have remained focused on:

Project aims

Reducing social isolation and loneliness;

Ensuring older people have a voice to lead change locally in their communities and nationally at a policy level;

Making sure more older people get the support they want in a way that works for them via a wider range of community-based services;

Influencing policy change in Scotland and Wales to ensure older people can continue to live in the rural communities they know and contribute to them.

Rural Wisdom Communities

Scotland

- **Eaglesham and Waterfoot**
- **Highland Perthshire**
- **North Angus**
- **Burghead, Hopeman and Cummingston**
- **Scottish Borders**

Wales

- **Leeswood and Pontblyddyn**
- **Milford Haven**
- **The Dale Peninsula**
- **Holywell**

Project Design

Rural Wisdom was a long-term project, designed as a three-stage journey to be taken with communities between 2017 – 2022.

Stage One: 2017 – 2019 Working with five local areas; Eaglesham, Highland Perthshire, North Angus, Leeswood and Milford Haven, and hosting conversations with older people in other rural communities. Feeding learning into policy and practice developments in Scotland and Wales.

Stage Two: 2019 – 2021 Working with four additional areas; Burghead and Hopeman, The Scottish Borders, The Dale Peninsula and Holywell, and findings fed into policy and practice developments in Scotland and Wales.

Stage Three: 2020 – 2022 All rural areas involved in the project continue to be supported and contributions made to local and national policy development. Learning is shared to raise the profile of the issues facing older people in rural areas.

Despite the COVID-19 pandemic altering the work expected to be done in Stages Two and Three, the organic nature of Rural Wisdom's design meant that steps could be taken to respond to the new situation. The project was able to increase its activities to reduce social isolation and support local groups in their response to the pandemic.

The learning shared here is therefore set within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Whilst this was a unique period of history, which will hopefully not be repeated, the lessons learnt can provide valuable insights into what it takes for a community project to thrive even in the most adverse of circumstances.

Laying the foundations

Local communities know what is best for them – Community projects should hold at their heart the belief that local people know what's best for them and their communities. A tight brief reflecting this should be provided to workers/volunteers.

Find the right funding – Find funding that allows you to listen to and work flexibly with a community, not 'do to' them within a fixed project outline.

Get the right people – Take the time to get the right workers/volunteers in place; those who are local to the area, believe in the community, will be there for the long-term, and can be a conduit for ideas, contacts, information, and funding.

Have warm conversations – Talk to people in place; visit communities, groups, and services. Speak to different people and ask different questions.

Build relationships and trust – Take the time to build relationships with people and communities. Doing this will develop trust and help the projects chances of success.

Listen and engage – Listen first to people's ideas and concerns before offering ideas, information, contacts, and resources.

Share what's happening – Tell other communities and policy makers about the things you are doing; share ideas, challenges, successes, and learning.

Utilise local knowledge and skills – Don't be afraid to utilise workers/volunteers' knowledge of the local area to build connections, grow ideas and develop your project.

Develop your skills and strengths – Community workers/volunteers should continuously develop and grow their skills to help meet the needs of the community they are supporting.

Encourage people to connect – The more broadly people connect to their community, the local area and national networks, the more allies, opportunities, and partnerships your project will have.

Support people to take their first steps – Work at their pace, support them to explore new ways of doing and being, speak up if you have an idea, but encourage them to take the lead and own what is happening in their community.

Facing forks in the road

Listen and engage with the communities' new needs – Listen again to people's ideas and concerns, before offering new ideas, information, contacts, and resources. Engage more people from different populations, communities, or areas if this feels important and useful.

Be flexible and creative – Be prepared to change the scope of your work completely. Think creatively about what is now needed and how this can be supported within communities.

Don't make assumptions – Be open and honest with communities and people about the challenges being faced. Don't assume what people want, need, can do or offer.

Talk to your funders and partners – Maintain regular communication with your funders and partners to ensure they know what is happening, what is needed and where they can help.

Find new ways of working together – Take the time to find new ways of working that help everyone remain involved and continue to develop the project. Ask questions about what people need to remain connected, what support they want and what equipment might help them.

Build on your relationships – Use the relationships created at the beginning of the project to support its new direction and the communities needs.
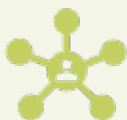
Share what's happening - Tell other communities and policy makers about the different things you are doing; share ideas, challenges, successes, and learning.

Connect and reflect – Provide space for community workers/volunteers, project leads and community members to reflect on what has been happening

Grieve the work you hoped you'd do – Community workers/volunteers and project leads should be given space and supported to mourn the work they hoped to do. This is especially important if the project has changed dramatically over time.

Leaving a legacy

Encourage connections – Support communities to maintain the relationships, networks and partnerships that have grown throughout the project.

Engage policy and decision makers – Share learning, knowledge and recommendations with policy and decision makers to help embed the project on a local and national scale.

Look for resources to support future projects – Support communities to find resources, premises, practical support and funding that helps maintain and, where needed, grow activities the project has helped set up.

Community ownership – Communities should own the project and the activities it generates. Community workers/volunteers should be able to begin handing over and pulling back from communities as the project comes to an end.

More information

Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters Cymru and the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) hope that you find the learning from Rural Wisdom shared here useful.

If you would like more information about the information in this document, or about Rural Wisdom more generally, please refer to the project website www.ruralwisdom.org

Evaluation Contact

Dr Victoria Mason-Angelow
Research and Evaluation Consultant
Victoria.Mason-Angelow@ndti.org.uk

National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi)
www.ndti.org.uk

Resources

Find more information and resources at:
www.ruralwisdom.org