Rural Wisdom Evaluation
The value of connection
November 2020

Rural Wisdom is a five-year National Lottery funded project exploring the impact of community-based activities that are led by older people living in rural areas in Scotland and Wales. As part of the project ambitions, the Rural Wisdom partners, Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters Cymru and the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) are sharing the learning to enable people living and working in rural areas to apply and benefit from, what works.

"Rural Wisdom, as we knew it, had been stopped in its tracks"
(Staff member Volunteering Matters)

On 23rd March 2020, the team from Volunteering Matters Cymru, leading the Rural Wisdom project in Wales, faced the stark reality that this grassroots, community-based initiative focused on the lives of older people was going to be an inevitable casualty of the coronavirus pandemic.

This report shares the experiences and reflections from the team, about what was developing in the new communities, what has changed as a result of the pandemic and what these fast-changing, challenging times has meant for our understanding of Rural Wisdom.

In the months prior to the coronavirus pandemic the Development Workers were starting to see the early signs of people coming together in the Stage 2 communities: the Dale Peninsula in

Pembrokeshire and Holywell in Flintshire. These two new sites had been selected for their diversity from the original sites, to test the model in different areas but they purposefully picked the same local authority to retain staff who knew the project and could access wider support through services they knew existed in the local area. The team were benefiting from lessons learnt from their work in the original sites. Older residents were starting to engage in activities that connected them with other people and their communities and the Development Workers' networks were growing with local organisations that shared the same aims. Social groups in Milford Haven and the community café in Leeswood were running with the support of local residents and being sustained in the original sites.

The Dale Peninsula

In the Dale Peninsula (which includes Marloes, St Ishmaels and Dale) older people had identified a number of issues to be addressed through this work. There were practical challenges such as the availability and cost of transport, not knowing where to go for information and limited cohesion between organisations and people on the ground. People also raised concerns about the wellbeing of their older community members. They felt that loneliness and isolation was an issue but they couldn't be sure of the scale; people lacked the confidence to get involved in the community and they felt some residents who didn't have anyone in their lives to support them or be advocates for them, were particularly vulnerable.

The Development Worker had spent months getting to know the community, visiting the area, talking to residents, connecting with the voluntary and public sector services, finding out what was going on and what was needed.

By the New Year she had partnered with the team leader of a local Community Connector service. This service aims to find support, services and activities for local residents in order to decrease loneliness and isolation, improve mental health and get people engaged, active and having a voice. Both the Development Worker and the Community Connector team leader saw an opportunity to join forces and benefit from their shared energy, expertise and confidence to engage with people in the Peninsula. Together, they worked on weekly village hall get-togethers for older residents, culminating in an information day with soup and sandwiches and a bus mystery tour, which was something people had said they wanted to experience and, as it turned out, enjoyed immensely. The shoots from the seeds that had been sown months earlier were starting to show through.

Holywell

In Holywell the people living in this community highlighted that for many older people there is a perception that the community is not a safe place at night, with young people meeting up in the streets for lack of somewhere to go or something to do. Poor street lighting and for some people with poor vision, this feeling is compounded. Public transport is restricted after 5pm and outlying areas of the community also have issues around accessibility such as poor pavements. Finally, members of the community aren't aware of what's available to them so don't join in.

In the months prior to the national lockdown the Rural Wisdom Development Work spent time meeting local people, connecting with local organisations and groups to find out more about the people and communities, what the challenges were and where the opportunities to address some of the issues lay. She identified early on that the Holway estate in Holywell was disconnected from other parts of the community and people living there felt less included or welcomed. Through building relationships, she made links with this community and now sits on the Holway Community Partnership Board, which is made up of organisations supporting development work in this area. The council recently took over a property on the estate called the Holway Hub House in order to better connect into this community. The Development Worker was due to be based at Hub House twice a week to increase their presence in the community and be more accessible to older people. Sadly, COVID-19 put the plans for Hub House opening on hold, but the council are still planning to open the building once they are able to. The Development Worker has also worked with a couple of residents who supported the running of the community centre, called Friends of Holway, to paint a wall in the centre as part of the pop-up cinema nights they started running, they also had started craft classes. The Development Worker had also sought funding on their behalf from Keep Wales Tidy. This was for a butterfly garden at the Holway Hub House to create a nice outdoor space for the people who visited. This application was successful and there were plans to use this as an opportunity for a spring intergenerational event but due to the lockdown they were unable to. They have kept the wild seeds and bulbs and hope to do it next year instead. Despite these developments the Development Worker has found engagement and uptake from the Holway community has taken time. Building trust is a fundamental part of this work, particularly in communities like this when residents have been promised many things but have seen little improvement or progress. In other parts of the town the Development Worker has set up two tablet courses in the local library and sits on the Age Friendly Steering group who funded a drama practitioner to work in schools to talk to young people about community safety and people who are vulnerable.

COVID-19 and Rural Wisdom in Wales

When the country went into lockdown the Development Workers were unable to realize all the plans they had made for the two new areas. Volunteering Matters' entire national organisation quickly came together to repurpose and redirect their efforts, with the Wales regional team working intensively on their local response to this unprecedented situation. Staff and volunteers were trying to find out what people needed and what they could do to deliver the outcomes of projects, but in different ways. They had to be reactive, responding to the needs of the people who were known to the organisation and then to those not known to the organisation. This meant pushing resources to where they were needed most. The flexibility and understanding from funders enabled this to happen.

For older people, the impact of the coronavirus pandemic has been incredibly detrimental. The issues identified, around loneliness, isolation and vulnerability, have been exacerbated by the measures to shield and isolate from family, friends and the wider community over a prolonged period of time. Building and maintaining connections with people, even remotely, has never been so important.

The email groups that both Development Workers had been building over the last fours years became a valuable resource and the primary mechanism to stay connected to these communities. They would send out regular emails to everyone on the list sharing information, updates on what was happening and good news stories; anything to keep communications open and people connected. One Development Worker explained that sometimes the email went out and there was no response, sometimes it was met with "that sounds interesting can you tell me more?" and there were no requests for the emails to stop being sent. As a result, the development workers recognised that communication was absolutely key, keeping people aware of what was going on would help people not feel so isolated.

Apart from staying connected with people through emails, there was little else the Development Workers could do on the ground at this time, so with the rest of the Wales team, they repurposed their time to focus on designing and delivering a Volunteering Matters COVID-19 Response Programme. This was a volunteering model which could be taken off the shelf and replicated anywhere, which offered telephone befriending, picking up prescriptions, shopping and dog walking to people in the communities. It was offered to eight local authorities across Wales; the areas with existing projects and volunteers were offered it first. In Pembrokeshire the Development Worker recruited 12 new volunteers for the COVID-19 Response Programme and three existing volunteers offered to help. A few more have joined us since and the volunteers are currently supporting 30 people with prescription collection, tele-befriending and shopping. In Leeswood, the Development Worker recruited people who volunteered at the community café and they in turn invited another resident who wanted to do something but didn't know where to start.

In a period of uncertainty, fear and risk, people were feeling the burden and weight of the situation but were equally eager to help. Volunteering Matters staff were able to take the pressure off people and the weight of responsibility that the situation had created by providing an enabling and advisory role particularly around risk assessments and developing safe practices. This crucial enabling role that is synonymous with Rural Wisdom, relies on not doing things for people and communities but with them. This expertise in volunteer recruitment was called upon by the local health board for a new pendant lifeline service that is being delivered through the local West Wales Care partnership, so the staff team have been recruiting lifeline responders since July.

Beyond the work with communities, Rural Wisdom in Wales has continued to provide opportunities for older people to have a voice in strategic or policy work. The Older People's Commission in Wales Office (OPCinW) for Wales has been very active during the pandemic, running engagement events to understand the impact of COVID- 19 on older people's mental wellbeing, loneliness, isolation and the scare factors of COVID-19 worrying them and their families. Listening to people through these events means that the OPCinW can be responsive to their needs. One Development Worker has also revived her contact with the Audit Office to explore opportunities as they currently do a lot of youth social action.

There has also been sharing of good practice and ideas around the solutions to rural transport issues between Wales and Scotland. One of the Rural Wisdom Development Workers in Scotland had planned to visit Wales to find out more about the initiatives that were running as part of the Pembrokeshire Association of Community Transport Organisations (PACTO). This organisation provides community transport services to people and groups who don't have access to their own transport or who are unable to access public transport. Due to the pandemic, plans for the Scottish Development Worker to visit were cancelled and online meetings were held instead.

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What we are learning

Rural Wisdom is grounded in an organic, grass roots approach which listens to people about what's needed and then works with them (rather than for them) to enable change. Building relationships and connections with and between people and the community is fundamental to the success of this model. The most significant impact of the last seven months on Rural Wisdom has been the limitations faced by the Development Workers in furthering the relationships and the connections they had started to build in the new communities. It has highlighted that where connections, relationships and trust have been built over time communities will galvanize in times of crisis and self-mobilise. However, the Development Workers had established relationships in the original and new sites and have stayed surprisingly well-connected, let people know what's going on and support people through these challenging times. It has also been a reminder that older people who don't have a digital life may be harder to reach and at higher risk of isolation and loneliness so finding other ways to connect is essential.

Despite restrictions older people are still willing and able to contribute to their communities. Development Workers are working with people over the age of 70 who still volunteer but have adapted what they do based on their circumstances and restrictions, for example being a telephone befriender. Through engagement events, local community councils and steering groups, older people are still having a voice and influencing change; the difference is that they now meet online.

Where groups or events have been sustained and taken on by the community the pandemic has only put a pause on their activity, although it is hard to tell how long for. However, other activities such as the school lunch club in Leeswood, that hadn't been running long enough for it to be embedded or sustained, may need support to get re-started. Having a person to co-ordinate things and bring people together until it is sustainable is a key function of the Development Worker. There have been key volunteers who are natural leaders that have taken on new roles to help in other ways during the coronavirus pandemic. This help in time of crisis with empathy and understanding will be important to try and build and sustain. It's essential to give volunteers a good experience, stay in contact with them even if there isn't a role for them at the time, ensure that they have a purpose or function and that they feel valued for their contribution.

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Looking ahead

Where development activity with new sites has stopped, Development Workers are concerned about how much time is left to reconnect, re-engage and progress activities in these communities before the end of the project. With Wales experiencing a second lockdown in October 2020, and in line with government and organisational advice, Development Workers have not been planning any engagement or activities in their communities, but importantly, Volunteering Matters has put in place detailed planning across the organisation for when activity can be resumed. The Development Worker for Holywell, having received additional funding for the garden, is keen to develop the Keep Wales tidy project and also set up a tablet course in Holywell. There were also plans for a lunch club, similar to the one set up in Leeswood, with a local primary school. The situation has highlighted how much time is needed to achieve sustainable change in a project like this and from the experience of the Development Workers, when change moves at the speed of trust, two years isn't enough. Sustainability is built into Rural Wisdom from the start and over the course of the four years this has happened for some initiatives in the original sites it will need to be address as soon as possible in the new sites. It will be important to be realistic about what can achieved in the new sites when they are able to get back into these communities.

At a strategic level, Rural Wisdom will be a vehicle to inform developments around the Age Friendly Community agenda in Wales. Rural Wisdom is in regular contact with the Ageing Well network lead, whose work forms part of the Commission's overall activity . The network is part of the Older People's Commissioner's Office for Wales. The Age Friendly Community initiative is working at local authority level to get WHO status in Welsh areas. Through discussions with the Rural Wisdom team it was identified that that rural aspect of this work needed to be considered and that different approaches may be needed as a result. For example, in rural areas there may only be one community shop serving a whole community whereas in more urban areas there may be 15- 20 shops and businesses – so the emphasis and importance of the age friendly message may need to be reflected. This will be an area of increased focus for Rural Wisdom in the coming year alongside continuing work on the loneliness and isolation agenda and Dementia Friends initiatives in rural areas.

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In the first stage of Rural Wisdom, Development Workers worked closely with older people and their communities to identify and address the key issues, achieve the project outcomes and create sustainable change. In Stage 2, Development Workers introduced Rural Wisdom to new, rural communities in Wales and Scotland applying the learning from Stage 1 to address local priorities and achieve the same overarching project outcomes.

Scotland: Stage 1 Eaglesham, Highland Perthshire, North Angus
               Stage 2 Moray Scottish Borders
Wales: Stage 1 Leeswood & Pontblyddyn, Milford Haven
               Stage 2 Holywell and Dale Peninsula

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Resources

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