



Rural Wisdom Evaluation

The story of a community development project in the Covid-19 era

December 2021



1. Summary

Rural Wisdom has been a five-year National Lottery Community Fund 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 in this final evaluation report 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:



Rural Wisdom Communities

Scotland

- [Eaglesham and Waterfoot](#)
- [Highland Perthshire](#)
- [North Angus](#)
- [Burghead, Hopeman and Cummington](#)
- [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 and Waterfoot, Highland Perthshire, North Angus, Leeswood and Milford Haven, and hosting conversations with older people in other rural communities. Feeding early 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 taking place during Stages Two and Three, the organic nature of Rural Wisdom's design meant that steps could still be taken to reduce social isolation and loneliness and respond to the new situation.

Evaluation

NDTi were commissioned as the lead evaluation partner for Rural Wisdom in 2017 and remained as such until January 2020. At this time, the arrangements were reviewed and Outside the Box took over the evaluation of Rural Wisdom activity in Scotland, with NDTi leading the evaluation in Wales, [reviewing the policy](#) context that the project sat within in both nations, and drawing together this final report and a [key learning](#) document.

Key Findings

Undertaking a community development project like Rural Wisdom during a pandemic has been a challenging task for all involved. Yet, due to the longevity of Rural Wisdom (2017 – 2022), its funding (The National Lottery Community Fund) and the people employed to deliver and evaluate the work, the project was able to adapt. In many instances Rural Wisdom was able to increase its activities to reduce social isolation for older people in rural communities in Scotland and Wales as well as offer support to local groups in their response to the pandemic. Below are the key things that helped Rural Wisdom successfully achieve most of its outcomes during a unique period in history:



Local communities know what is best for them – Holding this belief at its heart allowed Rural Wisdom to hear the voices of people in communities and offer support, connections and resources where needed.



Having the right funding – Rural Wisdom had funding that allowed it to listen and work flexibly with communities, not 'do to' them.



Employing the right people – Rural Wisdom partners took the time to get the right Workers/volunteers in place; those who were local to the area, believed in the community, were able to be there for the long-term, and could be a conduit for ideas, contacts, information, and funding.



Listening and learning from people and their communities – Rural Wisdom Workers had warm conversations with people, listening to their ideas and concerns before offering ideas, information, contacts, and resources.



Building relationships and trust – Due to the right Workers/volunteers being in place, relationships were built, and trust garnered in communities that allowed change to happen even in the most adverse of circumstances.



Utilising local knowledge and skills – With the right Workers/volunteers in place, their local knowledge could be utilised to help build the projects connections, grow ideas, and develop Rural Wisdom over time.



Encouraging people to connect – The Workers/volunteers ability to encourage people to connect within and across communities, the local area and national networks meant that Rural Wisdom had more allies, opportunities, and partnerships.



Being flexible and creative – Being prepared and able to change the scope of Rural Wisdom in the face of COVID-19 was key to Rural Wisdom's success. But would likely have been needed during any long-term development project.



Sharing what was learnt – Telling other people and communities about things that were happening and being learnt in Rural Wisdom, led to new connections, ideas and approaches informing the projects delivery.



Engaging policy and decision makers – Sharing learning, knowledge and recommendations with policy and decision makers has helped embed Rural Wisdom on a local and national scale in both Scotland and Wales.

2. Introduction

2.1 About Rural Wisdom

What is Rural Wisdom

Rural Wisdom was a five-year (2017 – 2022) community development project, that aimed to explore how enabling older people in Scotland and Wales to use their voice, skills and experiences could bring about change and make rural communities work as people get older.

The project was created in response to the fact that [more older people live in rural communities than urban areas](#) in the UK, with the oldest populations being in [Wales and then Scotland](#). Despite this, work done towards creating Age Friendly Communities in the UK before the start of Rural Wisdom, had primarily focused on urban areas with far less attention being paid to ageing well in rural locations. This meant that until Rural Wisdom began, older people's issues, priorities, and needs in rural areas were widely overlooked by decision makers, commissioners, policy makers and other generations. For example, older people often had to move home or travel long distances to access what they needed; reported a lack of affordable, accessible housing; and had limited options for health and social care support that led them to feel a lack of choice and control.

Back in 2015/16 the two Rural Wisdom delivery partners; [Outside the Box](#), and [Volunteering Matters](#), felt that something had to be done to change this situation. They knew that older people (and others) in rural areas had experiences, gifts and talents that, if supported and harnessed could help drive the change needed to make rural communities age friendly. As a result, the concept of Rural Wisdom was born and successfully funded in 2017 by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Project Aims

The aims (and outcomes) of Rural Wisdom have evolved over time, specifically in response to the changing scope and focus of the project as a result to the COVID-19 pandemic. The original aims of the project were:

1. More older people in rural areas are having a voice and leading change in their local communities.
2. More older people get the support they want, which works well for them, through a wider range of community-based services.
3. Policies in Scotland and Wales support older people to continue to live in the rural communities they know and encourage older people's contribution to their communities.
4. The experience of older people in rural areas, and of their communities, contribute to the growth of communities across the UK that value, include and support older people.

In the spring of 2021, the following aims were added after consultation with project partners (detailed above and below), community members and stakeholders via a series of online conversations and surveys:

5. The connections and support networks made across generations in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, are supported to continue after the pandemic.
6. The voices of older people are listened to and valued in the recovery work undertaken in rural areas to rebuild communities, services, and infrastructure. Including what and how to reinstate in rural communities from before the pandemic.
7. Older people in rural communities are supported to reconnect with others in their local area in a way that feels safe.

The Rural Wisdom Partnership

Outside the Box was the lead partner for Rural Wisdom, supporting the overall project and leading the work in Scotland. Volunteering Matters led the work in Wales. The development workers based in the nine areas worked with the communities involved in Rural Wisdom during its five years. The [NDTi](#) and Outside the Box were responsible for the evaluation and sharing of learning from the project throughout.

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 and Waterfoot, Highland Perthshire, North Angus, Leeswood and Milford Haven, and hosting conversations with older people in other rural communities. Feeding early 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 falling during Stages Two and Three of the projects, the organic nature of Rural Wisdom's design meant that steps could be taken to respond to the new situation. In most instances, 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 in this report 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.

The Rural Wisdom Areas

Rural Wisdom was based in nine locations across Scotland and Wales.



Scotland

Stage One Locations

Eaglesham and Waterfoot - Eaglesham and Waterfoot are villages in East Renfrewshire with a population of under 4,000 people. There is only a mile between the two villages and are connected by sharing provisions like community council, library, school, and a few local shops. They are close to large urban areas where the main services are located, but public transport to them is limited.

Highland Perthshire – is the large area that includes the communities of Aberfeldy (biggest place with a population of 2,000), Kenmore, Fortingall, Glen Lyon, Kinloch Rannoch, Grandtully and Strathtay. People rely on themselves and each other and want to support local services. A priority is being able to grow old in the places that people know.

North Angus – Brechin has a population 7,400 but used to be a larger town while the village of Edzell had under 1,000 people but was expanding a lot with new housing. Issues for people here are the decline of local shops and services, poor transport links, and access to main services in other parts of Angus and health care in Dundee.

Stage Two Locations

Burghead, Hopeman and Cummington - are coastal communities north of Elgin in Moray. There are services across the villages and main services in 2 nearby towns, but poor transport links. Older people had been part of a big consultation process a few years earlier and had a lot of ideas for ways to improve services and opportunities in the area.

The Scottish Borders – is made up of small towns and large remote rural areas. Rural Wisdom began by working on issues that affected people across the area, then focussed on the village of Newton St Boswells and surrounding farms and very small villages. This area has a population of under 3,000 people and challenges around few local services and limited transport links with towns.



Wales

Stage One Locations

Leeswood and Pontblyddyn - Leeswood and Pontblyddyn are two small rural villages in Flintshire nestled between Wrexham and Mold. They have a population of just over 2,000 people.

Milford Haven – Milford Haven is based in Pembrokeshire and has a population of nearly 14,000 people.

Stage Two Locations

The Dale Peninsula - The Dale Peninsula in Pembrokeshire includes the communities of Dale Village, Marlos and St Ishmaels. The three communities have a combined population of just over 1,000 people.

Holywell – Holywell is a market town in Flintshire. The town and the surrounding villages have a combined population of just under 9,000 people.

2.2 The Evaluation

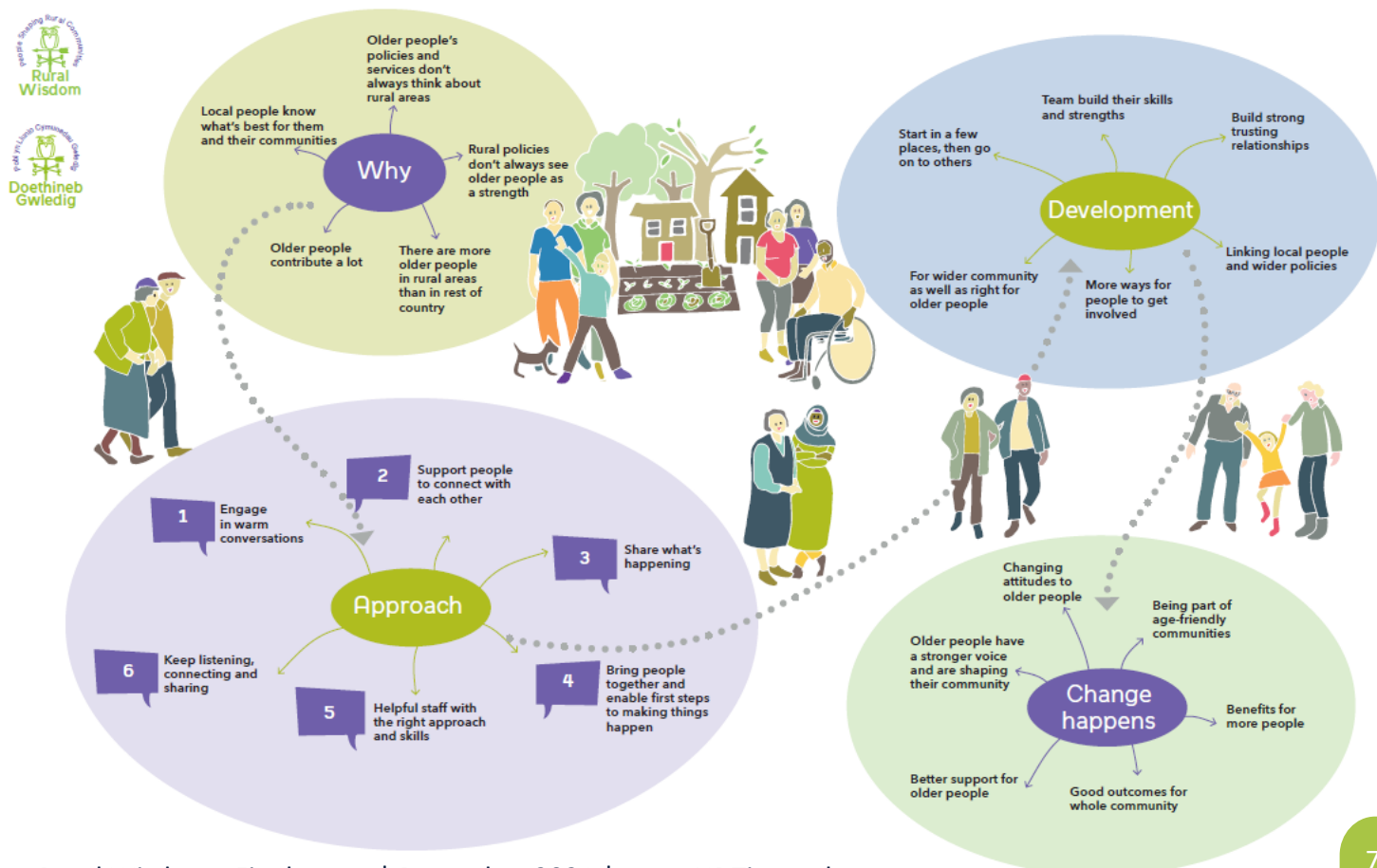
NDTi were commissioned as the lead evaluation partner for Rural Wisdom in 2017 and remained as such until January 2020. At this time, the arrangements were reviewed and Outside the Box took over the evaluation of Rural Wisdom activity in Scotland, with NDTi leading the evaluation in Wales, [reviewing the policy](#) context that the project sat within in both nations, and drawing together this final report and a [key learning](#) document.

NDTi, Outside the Box and Volunteering Matters worked throughout the evaluation and delivery of Rural Wisdom with local communities to achieve the project outcomes through:

- Tackling the issues that older people identified as priorities for their communities and providing opportunities for older people to shape their community to make it work well for them and other people who lived there.
- Developing community-led activities that included and supported older people, as well as connecting them to each other and others in the community.
- Building on and encouraging the strengths and experience that older people brought and encouraged agencies and other people to value and support this.
- Exploring ways to identify and show the impact of these activities, their contribution to bigger changes and how to share the learning from this.

The majority of the evaluation work undertaken in both nations focussed on this last point, with NDTi and Outside the Box working with partners and local communities to collect evidence and share learning as the project progressed. This approach is known as a formative evaluation, which means that evidence is collected from the beginning of the project and continually fed into the delivery to build on 'what is working' and learn from 'what's not working so well'. This is in contrast to 'summative evaluation', which uses evidence to report on impact at the end of a project. The formative evaluation of Rural Wisdom sat well within the overall design of the project which, as illustrated in the image below, aimed to embed a reciprocal way of working within communities that listened, learned, connected, changed, and grew.

Rural Wisdom: How we work



Evidence was collected for the evaluation via conversations and interviews with Development Workers and project partners; interviews with community members, leaders, local authority and health and social care stakeholders, change stories, case studies, blogs, attendance and participation in Rural Wisdom workers meetings and digital conversation starters, and an online survey.

The evidence collected via these methods informed the design and delivery of Rural Wisdom across the five years, as well as the publication of the following items to share learning more widely:

- [Progress reports - 2017/18](#)
- [Case studies - 2017/18](#)
- [Year 1 Evaluation Report - April 2019](#)
- [Evaluation update - January 2020](#)
- [Evaluation update - November 2020](#)
- [Policy Summary - March 2021](#)
- [Change Stories - November/December 2021](#)
- [Podcast - November 2021](#)
- [Key Learning Document - December 2021](#)
- [Final Evaluation update Scotland - December 2021](#)
- [Final Evaluation update Wales - December 2021](#)
- [Series of blog posts published throughout the project](#)

2.3 Using this report

This report tells the story of Rural Wisdom by sharing the work undertaken and drawing the key learning from across the five years together in one place. It is an overview of the project which highlights key points, activities, and achievements, rather than a detailed exploration of all that has happened since 2017. To avoid duplication or repetition the published items (listed above) and other relevant sources are widely referenced throughout the report. More information can also be found on the [Rural Wisdom website](#) or [NDTi's Rural Wisdom project page](#).

The report has the following sections:

Stage 1 2017 – 2019: Taking the first steps

This section brings together the learning from the work done across all stage one communities, as well as the key learning captured by the evaluation about what worked well and progress towards outcomes.

Stage 2 2019 – 2020: A fork in the road

This section shares details of how Rural Wisdom began working with stage two communities before the COVID-19 pandemic hit, as well as providing a reflective look back at how the work done in stage one informed and supported the work able to be undertaken in response to the pandemic.

Stage 3 2020 – 2022: The road less travelled

This section explores the work done during the height of the pandemic. It details how the project adapted and changed the way it worked with and for communities, embracing new ways of being and reshaping the outcomes of the project to reflect its new purpose. Progress towards the new outcomes and what worked well is all shared.

What this all means: The legacy of Rural Wisdom

This section will draw the report to a close, highlighting key messages to have emerged from the project and detail the legacy it will be leaving.

3. Stage One 2017 – 2019: Taking the first steps

3.1 Rural Wisdom communities

The communities engaged in stage one of Rural Wisdom were:

Scotland

[Eglesham and Waterfoot](#), [Highland Perthshire](#), [North Angus](#)

Wales

[Leeswood and Pontblyddyn](#), [Milford Haven](#)

3.2. Listening, learning, and developing

As highlighted in the introduction, Rural Wisdom was underpinned by the belief that older people living in rural communities across Scotland and Wales (as well as elsewhere) had experiences, gifts, and talents that, if supported and harnessed, could help drive the change needed to make rural communities age friendly.

With this at its heart, the Development Workers and NDTi began work with the stage one communities by engaging older people and encouraging them to talk about:

- local issues that affected them; and
- their ideas and suggestions for how to improve their areas to get the environment and support that would work well for them.

Some of the issues and priorities that arose from this engagement with older people, were common across all communities, whilst some were specific to particular regions or nations. More details about this (and other items discussed in this section) can be found [here](#) and [here](#), but the common issues and priorities were:

- Although many people felt well connected, they did want more information on what was going on in their local area to make better use of activities, grow connections and reach more people who felt lonely or isolated.
- A demand for an improvement in local facilities, infrastructure, and health and social care, to reduce the need to travel long distances for essential services.
- A need for services and organisations in rural communities to be better connected to each other as well as the communities they were serving.
- Access to and cost of transport in rural areas was a key issue affecting people's ability to be involved in their community and access the support and services they required.
- A need for more intergenerational and whole community activities.
- Better and affordable housing in rural areas to ensure people could remain in areas they knew.
- To have more of a voice in public sector plans and decisions that directly affect their lives and communities.
- To have their contributions better recognised and valued.

These issues, priorities and needs directly informed the project aims and outcomes that guided the focus of Rural Wisdom for the remainder of the project:

1. **More older people in rural areas are having a voice and leading change in their local communities.**
2. **More older people get the support they want, which works well for them, through a wider range of community-based services.**
3. **Policies in Scotland and Wales support older people to continue to live in the rural communities they know and encourage older people's contribution to their communities.**
4. **The experience of older people in rural areas, and of their communities, contribute to the growth of communities across the UK that value, include and support older people.**

3.3 Work done in stage one communities

Scotland

The initial engagement with older people in the Scottish Rural Wisdom communities was wide ranging and included meeting with existing organisations and individuals, including residents in sheltered housing, local people in community groups, attending local events; [pop-up shops](#) and [‘potting-shed’ consultations](#) where older people put their thoughts about their local areas on plant labels into pots called ‘sown’; ‘nurturing’; ‘blooming’ and challenges’. Each person got a small plant to take home as a ‘thank you’ for being involved (**outcome 1**).

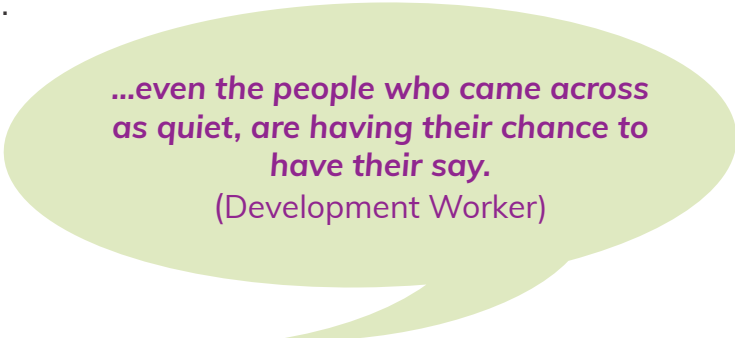
These engagement activities led to work being done in all three communities to bring older people together – and in some areas to meet with younger people - through community activities. These activities included [tea dances](#) and [singing groups](#) in North Angus; residents in sheltered [housing supporting primary school pupils](#) in Eaglesham; and supporting groups to link up and make better use of existing facilities (**outcome 1 and 2**).

Work was also done to address other key issues and priorities in local communities, such as improving [local infrastructure](#), [transport links](#) and setting up a befriending project (**outcome 1 and 2**). Links were also made with local councils, local and national organisations, and services to help progress Rural Wisdom’s priorities and develop new ideas and projects to help rural communities. This included new projects, such as the growth of [The Care and Wellbeing Co-Op](#) in Highland Perthshire, which existed before Rural Wisdom but was developed in partnership with community groups, service providers and the Co-op, to providing independent advice and support for people in the area to get access to social care. This development would not have taken place without the learning about local people’s needs garnered by Rural Wisdom (**outcome 1, 2 and 3**).

The learning from Rural Wisdom also allowed Outside the Box to take priority issues forward with local authorities, Health and Social Care Partnerships, Health Boards and the Scottish Government to inform the [‘Scottish Strategy: A Fairer Scotland’](#), as well as encourage people to contribute to strategy consultations such as [‘A Connected Scotland’](#) (**outcome 1 and 3**).

Wales

As with the work undertaken in Scotland, the work done in Wales in stage one was about bringing people together, listening to them and connecting them and the services around them. For example, in Milford Haven the Development Worker galvanized a group of people to come together and have the opportunity to talk and have their say on local matters and how to improve them (**outcome 1**).



*...even the people who came across as quiet, are having their chance to have their say.
(Development Worker)*

This led to the successful creation and continued publication of the [Milford Haven ‘What’s on’ guide](#), in response to local older people explaining that they often didn’t know what was going on or available to them (**outcome 1 and 2**). It also led to a number of groups either restarting, expanding or starting as a result of the Development Workers presence. For example, the [local library expanded](#) the groups it ran including a board game group every Friday and a ‘knit and natter’ group twice a week, and the creation of a regular tea, coffee and board games group set up by the Development Work in a local community centre (**outcome 1 and 2**).

In Leeswood & Pontblyddyn there was a consensus in the initial engagement activities in stage one, that older people weren't badly provided for, but the community as a whole needed something. The Development Worker heard this and hosted [film nights and afternoon teas](#) to bring people together and set up the [Sunshine Community Café](#) with the support of community members and local council (**outcome 1 and 2**). The café offers something that's intergenerational for the whole community, with babies as young as three days old to people over 80 popping in to see friends, have a chat and something to eat or drinks. It has had a huge impact on the community with one volunteer recalling:

One lady came in because she hardly ever goes out, so she came here just to meet a few people, you know, which is quite good.

Alongside these developments, there was evidence across Wales in stage one to suggest that older people were leading change in their local areas both via the activities already described and due to them being more broadly represented on the local community and Town councils than younger generations.

*There's no shortage of people over 70 involved in the community by any means.
(Community member)*

The learning from Rural Wisdom has also allowed Volunteering Matters to take priority issues forward with local authorities, health and social care services, and the Older People's Commissioner for Wales to help inform the '[Ageing Well in Wales](#)' programme, as well as encourage older people to contribute to strategy consultations such as '[Connected Communities](#)'.

3.4 What this work told us

The work undertaken in stage one of Rural Wisdom helped the project make significant strides towards the project outcomes (as detailed above) but also highlighted additional learning about what needs to be in place and who needs to be involved to make a community development project like this work; what challenges such a project and the communities face being involved; and the wider and unexpected impacts it has on other people, organisations, and services within a local area.

What and who needs to be involved

The work undertaken in stage one highlighted that for Rural Wisdom to be successful, the Development Workers in post needed to be enthusiastic, approachable, good communicators and willing to gently support and guide community members to start and sustain community activities and groups. Ideally, the Workers need to be supported by community volunteers of all ages as well, to help sustain activities and connectedness. The need for intergenerational involvement in a project like Rural Wisdom was a key finding to come from stage one, with older people in most communities in Scotland and Wales acknowledging that for their communities and in turn, older people within them, to thrive people of all ages needed to be included in developments and the creation of activities to ensure sustainability.

The challenges faced

At the beginning of stage one, some community members didn't feel they had the confidence or experience to take on a leading role or the ability to drive change. Whilst other community members didn't want the commitment of taking on such roles. The supportive work done by the Development Workers to help get things started in communities did go some way to changing this. The Workers supported individuals who were keen to take on these roles, to take their first steps and help them navigate the sometimes-complex map of service provision and engagement.

This stage of Rural Wisdom also faced challenges in providing evidence towards outcome 4 'The experience of older people in rural areas, and of their communities, contribute to the growth of communities across the UK that value, include and support older people'. However, this is a longer-term outcome for the project.

The impact on others

In stage one, Rural Wisdom communities, the local councils and Health and Social Care Partnerships covering those areas, liked the creative ways that the project had reached and engaged with older people and others in small rural places to improve links with the public sector.

Rural Wisdom can provide a link with the local community... so that when the HSCP talk about community engagement, community involvement and an asset-based approach it actually translates into something practical and meaningful. [Local authority area] has a 'Your Voice' campaign. For these approaches to really work, we need older people in local communities to have a voice – and council/HSCP needs to listen and work with communities on developing community – led activities and resources for people to use.

(HSCP officer)

This is something Rural Wisdom hoped to build on in stage two of the project, along with exploring how links to the Governments and national bodies could be maximised to increase Rural Wisdom's impact and how more intergenerational work could be embedded in rural communities to ensure ownership and sustainability of activities. This was in addition to and sat alongside the work to be done with stage two communities.

4. Stage Two 2019 – 2020: A Fork in the Road

4.1 Rural Wisdom communities

Alongside the continued work with stage one communities, the new communities engaged in stage one of Rural Wisdom were:

Scotland

[Burghead, Hopeman and Cummington](#), [The Scottish Borders](#)

Wales

[The Dale Peninsula](#), [Holywell](#).

4.2 Introducing Rural Wisdom

From early 2019 onwards, Development Workers in both nations and NDTi began gradually connecting with and introducing Rural Wisdom to stage two communities. This work was done alongside the continued contact with stage one communities which whilst decreasing in some areas, remained high in others and included the development of new spin-off projects. The introduction to Rural Wisdom offered to stage two communities included sharing information about what the project was about, what it could offer and what was being learnt from the communities in stage one. Conversations were then held with community members to find out about:

- local issues that affected them; and
- their ideas and suggestions for how to improve their areas to get the environment and support that would work well for them.

Unlike in stage one, these conversations did not reshape or alter the overall project aims/outcomes, but rather helped shape the focus of work to be done in the local area. For the most part the ideas, priorities and concerns in stage two communities were vastly similar to those in stage one (see previous chapter), with some local additions including:

- energy provision, fuel poverty and climate change;
- digital inclusion;
- lifelong learning.

4.3 Work done in stage two communities

Scotland

In response to the consultation with older people in Burghead, Hopeman and Cummington a bus committee was set up to help connect communities in the region physically, socially and intergenerationally. This committee was made up of Moray Council, tsiMoray, Rural Wisdom and local people. Rural Wisdom was able to connect the committee and other local people to their counterparts in Pembrokeshire, which led to a conversation and the sharing of learning by the [Pembrokeshire Association for Community Transport Organisations \(PACTO\)](#). As a result a [Community Bus service](#) was set up in the region, which became part of the COVID response effort in the area helping transport people to vaccination centres (**outcome 1, 2 and 3**). Similar work was done in the Borders, with the Development Worker supporting older people to draw on connections across Scotland and Wales, with members of PACTO travelling to meet local people. A transport survey was launched and the responses fed into a short film '[Travel with Confidence](#)' that was created with Borders Buses and Scottish Borders Older people's Champion, in response to concerns about travelling during COVID-19.

In addition, a survey on the issues of energy and fuel was produced and received an overwhelming response from local people. The findings from the survey provided a lot of information that was shared by Outside the Box at conferences, in conversations with Home Energy Scotland and the local MSPs, as well as being included in the [Scottish Government's 'Local Heat and Energy Efficiency Strategies'](#) pilot, and the creation of a Development Trust (**outcome 1 and 3**). A local Energy Advice Event to provide local people with information, advice and support about their energy (**outcome 2**)

In the Borders, work was also done to create a series of self-sustaining seasonal activities that encouraged more effective and regular social connections across generations within communities. For example, an outdoor pumpkin trail, a Remembrance Sunday poppy trail, and a virtual St Andrews Day Highland Hustle (**outcome 1 and 2**).

Wales

As in Scotland, the Development Workers began working with their communities in response to the consultation sessions. In The Dale Peninsula the Development Worker spent months getting to know the community, visiting the areas and finding out what was going on and what was needed. The fruits of this investment, included setting up, with the Community Connector team in the region, [The Dale Winter Warmers](#). These were a series of regular activities where local people were able to come together to share fun activities, [including a bus mystery tour](#), as well as the opportunity to connect with others and get advice and information. An email network was developed in the area as a result of the activities, which became a vital source of communication, information sharing and support for people during COVID-19 (**outcome 1 and 2**). Work in the Peninsula also fed into a new community transport initiative being developed by PACTO as it was found that several drivers in the villages were willing to offer lifts. This allowed many local people to be connected to a wider range of events and activities thus improving their social connections and reducing their feelings of loneliness (**outcomes 1, 2 and 3**).

In Holywell, a series of coffee mornings were set up to provide people with a space to come together and connect. It also offered them the opportunity to get information and advice as [Warm Wales](#) and the local Job Centre attended some of the coffee mornings (**outcome 1 and 2**). The Development Worker in Holywell was also invited to Holway Hub House, an information, advice and support centre in Holywell housing a wider range of local authority and third sector organisations. Rural Wisdom having a presence in the centre gave the project the opportunity to engage directly with the whole community and build connections with other services. Whilst based in the House, the Development Worker was able to support the Friends of Holway apply for and successful attain [Keep Wales Tidy funding](#) to create a [butterfly garden, vegetable patch and fruit trees](#) (**outcome 1 and 2**).

4.4 The fork in the road – COVID-19

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the UK with the first national lockdown beginning on the 23rd of March 2020. This hit Rural Wisdom and the stage two communities just as activities were taking off, relationships were being built, people were beginning to come together, and trust was being built. It also hit stage one communities as activities, groups and projects were beginning to run predominantly with the support of local residents and being sustained in local sites.

**Rural Wisdom, as we knew it,
had been stopped in its tracks.**
(Development worker)

After the initial shock, Development Workers, as well as Outside the Box and Volunteering Matters, began working on their COVID-19 response across Rural Wisdom communities and beyond.

In Scotland this work was focused on responding to the ongoing crisis, with older people playing a crucial role in identifying and delivering community supports and activities. Digital inclusion was also a key part of the COVID response work, with the Digital Buddies project being harnessed in the Borders to support older people connect with friends, family, groups, the community and the wider world.

Similar work was undertaken in Wales, with the addition of a tele-befriending service being set up and pairing community volunteers with those who had to shield.

All of this work is explored in more detail in the next chapter.

4.5 What this work told us

The work undertaken in stage two of Rural Wisdom continued to help the project make significant strides towards the project outcomes (as detailed above), whilst also highlighting the learning to be garnered from the cumulative effect of a long term staged project and how to respond to unexpected forks in the road.

Learning from stage one

Workers in both Scotland and Wales drew on and shared the learning from stage one of Rural Wisdom in their work with stage two sites. This included how to engage older people and people from younger generations in the project, how to attract the attention of local leaders, services, and organisations and how to feed directly into local and national strategic/policy developments.

It's like the inkspot strategy the military use. We started by creating relationships, networks and connections in stage one and now we're in stage two doing the same. If we had longer, we could connect up all these Rural Wisdom 'spots' like ink on a page.

(Development worker)

They were also able to draw on the relationships and networks developed in stage one to help developments in stage communities. The work done around transport issues and the connecting of PACTO to stage two communities across Scotland as well as the Dale Peninsula is one such example of this.

Responding to unexpected challenges

COVID-19 presented Rural Wisdom with a challenge it never knew it would face and was therefore not planned for. However, the response of the Development Workers and lead partners more broadly, meant that the project was able to continue. The ability of the project to do this was partly down to the funding being flexible enough to absorb the impact that COVID-19 made, but also the flexibility, creativity and willingness of the workers to continue.

The time taken by the lead partners to recruit the right Workers who were local to the areas, believed in and were invested in the communities and able to be around for the long term, meant it was important to them to continue and not leave the communities without the support the project intended to offer at a time when it was needed more than ever.

5. Stage Three 2020 – 2022: The road less travelled

5.1 Rural Wisdom communities

The communities involved in this stage of Rural Wisdom were:

Scotland

[Eaglesham and Waterfoot](#), [Highland Perthshire](#), [North Angus](#), [Burghead, Hopeman and Cummington](#), [The Scottish Borders](#)

Wales

[Leeswood and Pontblyddyn](#), [Milford Haven](#), [The Dale Peninsula](#), [Holywell](#).

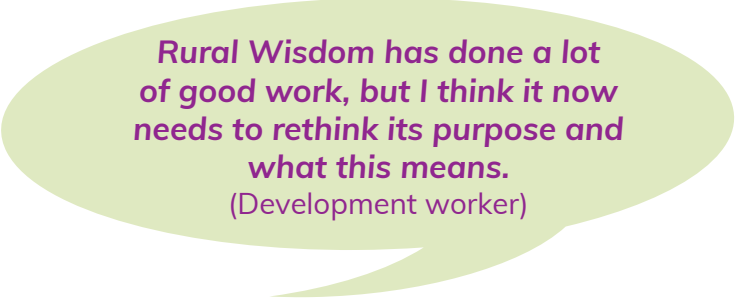
In addition to these nine Rural Wisdom communities, a number of other communities engaged with the project at this time. This was due to the growth in connections both within and across nations made by the Development Workers and the reach of Rural Wisdom's work.

5.2 COVID-19: Facing an unknown path

As noted in the previous chapter, the COVID-19 pandemic hit midway through the delivery of Rural Wisdom. The Development Workers and partners in both nations, with the support of NDTi colleagues, were quick to adapt and respond to the new situation.

5.3 New outcomes

In the spring of 2021, Outside the Box and NDTi hosted a series of online workshops and an online survey for community members, stakeholders, leaders, decision makers and partners to reflect on the project outcomes.



Rural Wisdom has done a lot of good work, but I think it now needs to rethink its purpose and what this means.
(Development worker)

The information gathered via these methods suggested that whilst the original project aims/outcomes were still relevant, there was a need for additional outcomes to be added to reflect the new context in which the project was running. Evaluators from Outside the Box and NDTi, therefore distilled the information gathered online and, with the approval from those involved in the consultation, added the following outcomes to the project:

5. The connections and support networks made across generations in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, are supported to continue after the pandemic.
6. The voices of older people are listened to and valued in the recovery work undertaken in rural areas to rebuild communities, services, and infrastructure. Including what and how to reinstate in rural communities from before the pandemic.
7. Older people in rural communities are supported to reconnect with others in their local area in a way that feels safe.

5.4 Work done in stage three communities

Scotland

In Scotland work was done to respond to the new needs in stage one and stage two Rural Wisdom communities, including keeping people connected and informed via online networks, social media platforms and a community newspaper newsletter. The shift to connecting online and the reliance this placed on digital technology was initially challenging for some older people across all areas. As a result, the Development Worker in the Borders helped set up the Digital Buddies project which supports older people to learn how to digitally connect to friends, family, groups, their communities & the wider world. They are supported by a Buddy (friend, family member or another community member) as well as given the technology to get started. The buddies have allowed the project to take a very personalised approach and support older people to do what's important to them, that's everything from online shopping to community council meetings, to Netflix. The Digital Buddies concept was shared widely across Rural Wisdom's networks including with Workers, older people and family members in other areas (**outcome 1 and 2**).

In addition to remote connections, the work done in the Borders and Hopeman pre-pandemic, to develop new and better-connected transport services were repurposed to provide vital links to COVID testing sites and vaccination centres across the region. Work in Moray and the Borders also saw the networks and relationships created pre-pandemic help ensure vital community services such as the local foodbank could continue supporting those most in need, through the provision of a gazebo and honesty box (**outcome 2**).

Finally, Rural Wisdom helped different generations of communities in the Borders to connect and have fun during a time when this was most definitely needed. Community sustaining activities like an outdoor pumpkin trail for Halloween 2020, a scarecrow competition for Halloween 2021, an outdoor poppy trail for Remembrance Sunday in 2020 (**outcome 2, 6 and 7**).



We started in Covid and just thought of simple easy ways for people to make connections and join in when they could.
(Development Worker)

Wales

As in Scotland, work was done in Wales to ensure people in both stage one and stage two communities were supported, connected and able to receive vital services throughout the pandemic.

In Milford Haven the 'What's On' guide email circulation list was used to share vital information and guidance, especially relating to COVID-19 restrictions, rules and vaccination. Similar activity was undertaken in the Dale Peninsula, Leeswood and Pontblyddyn and Holywell, with email lists created earlier in the project utilised for keeping communities connected. Please follow this [link](#) for more information (**outcome 1 and 2**).


In addition, [Volunteering Matters rolled out the Newport Response Model across Wales](#). In Rural Wisdom communities, the role out of the Model was successful due to the networks created pre-pandemic that could be utilised to share information and connect people who needed support with those who could provide it. This meant that people who needed it were able to receive weekly shopping and much needed medication delivered, have their dogs walked and someone to talk to over the phone/online on a weekly basis (**outcome 1 and 2**).

Finally, as local government guidance and restrictions in Wales began to allow, groups that were in place before the pandemic gradually began reconvening in ways that people felt safe, along with new groups and activities setting with the support of Rural Wisdom (**outcome 6 and 7**).

Across the project as a whole

As well as the work done to directly support communities in both Rural Wisdom nations during the pandemic, work was done by Development Workers and partners to connect online both within and across nations with each other, communities, stakeholders, decision makers and other networks that had a shared interest in Rural Wisdom's purpose and aims. Some of these connections were simply able to be made due to the shift to working online created by the pandemic, meaning that Workers did not have to travel and were able to do more and attend more meetings.

Working in this way greatly strengthened the relationship between Outside the Box and Volunteering Matters, with this element being a key highlight for many of the Workers:



It's been great working together so closely, we feel like a team, we were a team before, but we see each other so much more and really know each other now. We have all been through so much and have been there for each other.
(Development Worker)

Working online also allowed Development Workers to join meetings and conversations with new organisations and networks. In Pembrokeshire, this led to Volunteering Matters, as a result of Rural Wisdom, becoming a key new member of the [PIVOT partnership](#) providing support to people leaving hospital and/or preventing inappropriate hospital admissions (**outcome 3 and 6**).

Developments such as these, and conversations about energy, fuel poverty and the climate emergency in Moray, led to Rural Wisdom setting up a series of [online conversation starters](#) in 2021 that allowed people from across both nations, including people from Rural Wisdom communities and others, to come together to learn, discuss and develop ideas about topics that mattered to them and their communities.

5.5 What this work tells us

The work undertaken in stage three of Rural Wisdom has provided evidence towards both the original and additional outcomes (as detailed above), as well as highlighted the importance of Development Workers and partners being flexible, creative, and responsive to the needs of the communities they were working with and each other.

6. What this all means: The legacy of Rural Wisdom

Rural Wisdom was created and undertaken to help rural communities in Scotland and Wales harness the experiences, skills, and knowledge of older people to help create sustainable change that made their communities more age friendly.

The COVID-19 pandemic greatly altered the project and how it was delivered, but the focus upon change towards age friendly communities and a reduction in social isolation and loneliness, never faltered across the five years. The organic and reciprocal nature of the project within communities, in many instances, allowed Rural Wisdom to flourish during a turbulent period in history.

This report has endeavoured to tell the story of how Rural Wisdom achieved this by highlighting key points in time, activities, and achievements during the five years. It has by no means been able to share details of all the hard and tireless work done by Development Workers, partners, volunteers, community members, and stakeholders, or the plethora of magic moments the project has borne witness to since 2017. More information can also be found on the [Rural Wisdom website](#) or [NDTi's Rural Wisdom project page](#).

6.1 The Legacy

The changes that COVID-19 created within Rural Wisdom has meant that the legacy it is leaving is different to that envisaged at the start of the project. The hopes for creating sustainable change in communities, embedding older people's issues in rural policy and vice versa in Scotland and Wales, and taking learning from Rural Wisdom to the rest of the UK and beyond, have been altered somewhat.

Progress towards all of the project outcomes (original and additional) were achieved, as noted in previous sections of this report. In addition to the outcomes achieved, the work done by Rural Wisdom in the last five years tells a unique story of rural communities during a pandemic, highlighting how a community delivery project can help support and create change in those communities at the most challenging of times, as well as embed change in how projects are delivered, evaluated, and used to inform local and national policy and strategic developments.

The legacy in communities

Within the Rural Wisdom communities themselves a legacy is being left by:

- Groups, activities, and clubs that were set up before COVID-19 or have been inspired by these are opening up again in ways that older people feel safe to attend. For activities like the garden at Holway Hub House in Flintshire, the activities have never stopped, but more people are now able to get involved and contribute.
- Online networks, Facebook groups and the Milford Haven [What's On Guide](#) are still active, alongside people meeting and connecting outdoors, by phone etc. and using new ways of working that were right for each situation and the people involved.
- Intergenerational connections that were created before and strengthened by COVID-19 are being sustained in communities. This includes the continued support offered in communities to individuals who need to isolate due to COVID-19.

The legacy for future community development projects

For the Development Workers and partners, Rural Wisdom is leaving a legacy of change in their approach to developing, creating, and taking on new projects. This includes:

- Having the right funding in place that allows freedom to work with a community, rather than 'do to them', and the flexibility to adapt and change to the needs of a local context as well as unexpected events.
- Having the right people in place who are local to a project, invested in the communities and the project's aims, are good communicators and willing to be flexible, creative and brave in taking work forward.
- Taking time at the start of a project to get to know and understand the communities, develop relationships, build trust and create networks.
- Engaging with local and national decision and policy makers from the outset to get them onboard and embed the project.
- Not making assumptions about what people want, need, have, or can do.
- Having repeated conversations, especially when challenges are faced, to hear what it is that people need and want.
- Embracing new ways of working, that were right for the situation and the people involved. This included, but was not limited to utilising digital platforms (i.e. Zoom, Teams, Jam Boards, etc.), meeting outdoors, and phone activities.
- Sharing learning both within and across projects, but more widely is vital for a project's success.

The strategic legacy

As a result of the work undertaken during Rural Wisdom there are some significant policy and strategic legacies being left, including:

- The experiences, knowledge, and opinions of older people in rural communities being embedded in the '[Scottish Strategy: A Fairer Scotland](#)', '[A Connected Scotland](#)', '[Ageing Well in Wales](#)' and '[Connected Communities](#)' (Wales).
- The voices of older people in rural communities across Scotland and Wales being listened to and called upon in strategic conversations due to the connections made with local MPs, MSPs, and Welsh Assembly Members.
- Developments in how health and social care, especially in relation to hospital care, is delivered and experienced in rural communities, as a result of the PIVOT partnership in Pembrokeshire and the learning shared across Rural Wisdom nations.

6.2 What next?

As Rural Wisdom draws to a close and the funding available stops, the focus of many involved in the project during the five years is now upon what this means for the communities, people, organisations and stakeholders in the future.

Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters and NDTi are looking for ways to continue working together and are developing ideas for future work where there is a shared interest.

Outside the Box and Volunteering Matters are also working on grant applications to ensure funding is available for particular community projects and activities as well as to share the learning via a series of planned events and ways for people to get updates through the [Rural Wisdom website](#) and social networks.

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

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Resources

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

