



# designed to deliver

reducing the isolation of older people in  
rural communities

By focusing on local conditions,  
promoting community ownership and  
understanding individual needs, pioneering  
rural services can improve older people's housing.



Older people are dominant in rural populations. The average age of the population in rural areas is 50, compared to 42 in urban areas and, as the number of older people migrating to the countryside increases, so the average age continues to rise. A quarter of older people in rural areas live on low incomes. Half of people over 60 in rural areas are dependent on the state pension. Few claim welfare benefits. Many live in isolation, with no local family support network.

Eight projects from hact's Older People's Programme pioneered different solutions to the social exclusion of older people in rural communities.

— *Continues on back of document*

# The Older People's Programme

**The Third Sector has always played a critical role in developing ideas and practical solutions, but this ingenuity is often compromised by a lack of the requisite resources needed to develop ideas into sustainable solutions.** In 2003, using funding from the Henry Smith Charity and the Housing Corporation, hact launched its Older People's Programme, in order to pioneer housing solutions for older people.

In partnership with the LintelTrust in Scotland, NIHACT in Northern Ireland and Community Housing Cymru in Wales, hact invited Third Sector organisations to apply for grants for projects that would develop and test practical solutions to housing issues affecting older people. In total, 19 projects from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were given funds totalling £1 million.

The criteria for choosing the projects included ideas that could address gaps in services affecting marginalised older people, including those with mental health problems, older people in rural areas and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and refugee elders.

All of the projects worked with, as well as for, the benefit of older people. Hact encouraged all the projects to consult with older people, to develop partnerships with other organisations and to share their experiences with other projects on the programme. To ensure that insights from the programme were captured, hact employed Peter Fletcher Associates and Moyra Riseborough to evaluate the project. Finally, an advisory group was convened, composed of experts in older people's housing and this met regularly over four years.

Eight of the projects pioneered solutions for older people living in rural areas, focusing on solutions to social exclusion from rural shopping projects to handy-person services. By focusing on local circumstances, community needs and the specific needs of individuals, each developed insights for government and other Third Sector organisations.

All recognised that rural services should be designed and delivered according to local need – taking an urban recipe and applying it to the countryside won't necessarily result in success. Similarly, housing services need to recognise the diversity of need in the countryside. There is no such thing as a typical older person, whether they live in the city or a village. By making sweeping assumptions about older people in rural communities, service providers tend only to reinforce inequality and encourage exclusion. The housing challenges in rural areas require invention, dedication and determination, as the projects in the Older People's Programme demonstrated.

## Project information

### **Abbeyfield Ballachulish – lunch club plus**

Ballachulish

[www.scotland.abbeyfield.com/balachulish.htm](http://www.scotland.abbeyfield.com/balachulish.htm)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to reach-out to older people living in the Ballachulish area and bring them to the lunch club plus, with add-on services including information, financial advice and mental stimulation.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- unfortunately, because of problems within the society, their ambitious plans didn't come to fruition.

### **Age Concern Northumberland – rural access project**

Northumberland

[www.ageconcernnorthumberland.org.uk](http://www.ageconcernnorthumberland.org.uk)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to establish a rural access project to enable older people living in the rural extremities of the county to come together for cultural and health events, and to do their own shopping.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- awarded National Demonstration Project status by DEFRA for tackling rural isolation;
- 1,000–1,750 people participate in the outings each year, resulting in improved health, reduced social exclusion, particularly of older men, and helping them stay in their homes and communities.

### **Borders Independent Advocacy Service – citizen advocates**

Borders

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to establish an advocacy service for older people in very rural areas, particularly those suffering from dementia, with little formal or informal support.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- established an advocacy service in its first year in operation;
- despite a general shortage of volunteers, by January 2006, the project was providing advocacy services in six rural residential care homes.

### **Care and Repair England – housing options service**

Various, including Derbyshire Dales and East Riding

[www.careandrepair-england.org.uk](http://www.careandrepair-england.org.uk)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to provide better information for older owner occupiers seeking advice on housing problems and options, under the title *Should I Stay or Should I Go?*

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- contributed to national good practice on housing options advice for older people;
- established a housing options web site, training material for housing advisors and other resources, all of which were tested on service users.

### **Dane Housing – *assistive technology***

Cheshire

[www.dane-housing.co.uk](http://www.dane-housing.co.uk)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to use assistive technology for people with dementia to enable them to remain in their own homes for longer.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- installed assistive technology in the homes of 75 people;
- developed a comprehensive telecare manual, including procedures, referral arrangements and assessment tools, as well as a user-friendly leaflet explaining telecare.

### **Lochaber Community Care Forum – *improving service delivery***

Highlands

[www.hccf.org.uk](http://www.hccf.org.uk)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to identify current and future needs of isolated older people in two rural communities.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- Audited community care provision and identified specific housing and other service needs, which were subsequently improved;
- Produced two research reports, including detailed recommendations for Homes for Life design and build principles, as well as local services, including podiatry and community transport.

### **North and West Sutherland Community Care Forum – *handyperson service***

Highlands

[www.hccf.org.uk](http://www.hccf.org.uk)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to research local older people's needs for living in their homes with dignity and independence, and to develop appropriate services.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- ran five focus groups and conducted individual interviews throughout the region, an area of approx 2,350 square miles;
- subsequently, developed a handyperson service and, following further discussions with service users, a publication on housing options for older people.

### **Wessex Reinvestment Trust – *equity-based financial products***

Devon

[www.wessexrt.co.uk](http://www.wessexrt.co.uk)

#### **PROJECT AIM**

- to establish a low cost, risk-free, equity-based financial product for older people in rural areas, working in partnership with local authorities and home improvement agencies.

#### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

- persuaded ten local authorities – including their lawyers, financial directors and elected members – to bid collectively for regional funding, resulting in a loan fund of £2.6 million;
- by April 2007, over 110 older people had drawn down low-cost loans and more than £1 million of capital funding had been committed.

## **Design and deliver for rural, not urban areas**

**The projects with a rural focus showed conclusively that housing, care and support services for older people in rural areas have to be designed for those specific settings.**

Taking an urban recipe and trying to import it wholesale into a rural setting often won't work.

Take the example of North and West Sutherland Community Care Forum. The region served by the forum covers an area of approximately 2,350 square miles. Over 20% of the population of 14,000 people are over 65 years old, but incomes in later life tend to be very low. Many of the roads are single track.

The housing study conducted by North and West Sutherland Community Care Forum indicated that levels of housing disrepair among the client group were high. When it came to scoping the requirements for the handyman services, it had to not only factor in the level of need and the huge distances involved, but also issues such as extreme weather, costs of materials and the likelihood that, as the study had shown, the repairs were often relatively small – but nonetheless necessary. While the scoping exercise could draw on the experience of the handyman service run by Lochaber Community Care Forum, it still had to be tailored to meet local needs and practicalities.

Tailoring to particular rural settings was also evident in the work done by Care and Repair England's *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* housing options pilots in East Riding, Derbyshire Dales and Warwickshire. Longer lead-in times were needed to establish the pilots and it was important to rely on established networks with good knowledge of local communities. All three of the rural pilots reported a lack of suitable alternative housing to purchase or rent that would meet the needs of older people.

## **Research the services people want, and need**

**Micro studies on very small populations that are scattered across a large geographical area demonstrate the diversity of need in rural communities.** Even if there are only one or two older people in a small hamlet who need a service it doesn't mean that their needs will be similar. Only by talking with them, and local service providers, can local solutions be developed.

The study by Lochaber Community Care Forum on Spean Bridge and Roy Bridge communities produced highly detailed information that has helped everyone understand what services are needed. The study prompted discussions with local agencies and providers pioneering potential solutions. The second study conducted by Lochaber, showed that people thought that community care support and housing services had improved in the area since the first report was produced. Podiatry and local community transport services had both improved as a result of the consultation with service providers following the first research study.

Comments and questions were raised by service users about the suitability of their housing in supporting people with disabilities or mobility problems. As a consequence, the Forum is now working with the local planning department on Homes for Life design and build principles, as well as with housing providers and designers.

The Lochaber Community Care Forum and other fellow members of the Highland Community Care Forum network share information and practice regularly. They understand the importance of tailoring research methodologies to different areas and have much to offer other organisations wanting to study rural needs and develop practicable services.

## Creativity and imagination, rural style

**Stereotypically, imagination and creativity are confined to urban areas.** The projects on the Older People's Programme demonstrated that this is a myth.

Age Concern Northumberland's *Rural Access* project is a preventative service that reaches out and supports isolated and vulnerable older people in communities scattered across the county. The *Rural Access* project not only tackles the lack of available public transport, but also makes vital connections between people. The project doesn't just enable older people to go shopping, it also arranges numerous outings, linked to health or cultural events. This means that older people don't just get out of their homes, they are also able to pick up information on housing and health, meet and make new friends and discover other services in their area. It's an apparently simple solution, but a successful one, nonetheless. Importantly, it also works for men, who are often the most isolated in rural communities.

The Wessex Reinvestment Trust (WRT) is a community development finance institution and operates on a not-for-profit basis. It is the only rural organisation of its type. Through numerous meetings and presentations, it managed to persuade ten local authorities to pool their grants for older people's home improvements into one pot. With £2.65 million to draw on, WRT is now able to offer loans to older homeowners with repayment rates of 3%, through an equity-release mechanism. In addition, by working with local authorities and home improvement agencies, their scheme ensures that the older homeowner doesn't have to worry about the pricing, project managing and payment of the building work.

This equity-based financial product is trustworthy and reliable as well as affordable. It is a truly modern solution that is helping

older owner-occupiers find the means to deal with problems of disrepair and the need for adaptations. And, above all, it demonstrates the creativity and imagination that exists in rural areas.

Abbeyfield Ballachulish's project demonstrates the importance of partnership working in realising rural creativity. The idea of extending the organisation's housing support services to non-Abbeyfield tenants operating from a new centre was both ambitious and inventive. The practicalities, however, of running the project and developing the new centre underlined how, without effective partnerships in place, small, voluntary-run organisations can suffer from isolation. As a consequence, the project failed to come to fruition.

## High costs, but added value

**The cost of providing services in rural areas is high but the added value has to be taken into account.** For example, North and West Sutherland's handyperson service covers a vast area and a visit to a single service user entails a long and costly journey. Materials have to be taken to properties so the costs are far higher than a comparative service in an urban area. In addition, fewer jobs can be scheduled each day because the distances in between homes are so large. On the other hand the handyperson service also provides information and liaison with other services, which acts akin to an outreach service.

Age Concern Northumberland's *Rural Access* project also travels large distances, as many people in rural parts of the county live at least an hour away from a major city. The project can spend up to an hour collecting everyone before it sets off on its journey. Fuel costs are high, as are the costs for suitably adapted transport for people with mobility problems and wheelchairs. Balancing out the costs, though, is the qualitative

and immeasurable difference the project makes to older people, carers and communities, as well as the impact it has on community development.

People usually only get an outing with the project once every six weeks but they look forward to them and talk about them. Older people gradually develop their own networks, talking to each other between outings, particularly on the telephone. Local volunteers recruited to help older people on the outings find that they want to help in other ways, for example, in running local exercise classes.

While the costs of running the *Rural Access* project might be high, the impact on older people's lives is significant, most notably in assisting them to stay in their homes and communities.

## Partnership enables sustainability

**Sustaining a reasonable level of services is crucial for rural areas.** When service levels dip below a certain level, there can be serious consequences. If services are kept to a tolerable level, then communities can be sustained. For example, a reduction in public transport affects older people and may impact negatively on communities.

North and West Sutherland Community Care Forum and the Lochaber Community Care Forum work with other partner organisations to sustain a level of service for community care service users, many of whom are older people. They understand that agencies have to work together to sustain this service, and the staff who work in them also have to bear in mind that with so few services their actions are really noticed.

The Wessex Reinvestment Trust Home Loan scheme and Care and Repair England's *Should I Stay or Should I Go?* project quite separately provided insights on how housing services could be improved in rural areas. *The Should I*

“**One of our service users, who is visually impaired through glaucoma, was extremely isolated.** She relied on her home help to do her shopping and never socialised with her neighbours. When we first visited her she was hesitant and had lost much of her confidence; but she was keen to get out and about, and we persuaded her to give it a try.

She has been using the *Rural Access* project regularly for over a year now, and in that time has become friendly with many of her neighbours whom we also take out. She now attends a day centre on a regular basis and thoroughly enjoys her shopping trips. She's no longer fully reliant on her home help, and her confidence and well-being has grown visibly.

Coming out on the trips has made an enormous difference to her; and her ability to maintain independent living has been greatly enhanced.

source: Age Concern Northumberland

*Stay or Should I Go?* project developed models for providing better advice and information on housing options and worked out how to train local advisors to do this. Meanwhile, Wessex Reinvestment Trust looked at how to sustain local communities after the devastating economic and social impacts from foot and mouth disease. They came up with financial solutions that would benefit many people, including older people.

Sustainability for the Borders Independent Advocacy Service was dependent on the number of volunteers that the project was able to recruit as citizen advocates. The key insight from this project is that rural communities have fewer people and, as a consequence, there will be fewer volunteers available – so the demand for their services will be higher. If projects are dependent on volunteers, then their sustainability can be called into question.

Age Concern Northumberland developed a rural access project that not only gets older people out of their homes, but also creates new networks and reinvigorates communities. Wessex Reinvestment Trust developed a unique equity-based low-cost loan by working with ten local authorities, home improvement agencies and regional government.

Both Lochaber Community Care Forum and North and West Sutherland Community Care Forum tapped into the knowledge of local networks, asked questions of individual older people and then developed appropriate solutions. Borders Independent Advocacy Service developed a network of citizen advocates, providing an invaluable service for older people with dementia in rural communities.

Care and Repair England ran three pilots in rural communities, providing much-needed information on housing options for older people, and a highly-valued service, according to customer feedback. Dane Housing introduced assistive technology into the houses of 75 older people with dementia, enabling them to stay at home in Cheshire.



**hact**

Octavia House  
50 Banner Street  
London EC1Y 8ST  
020 7247 7800  
info@hact.org.uk  
www.hact.org.uk



This document  
was funded by the  
Housing Corporation

## Recommendations

- Services should be designed and delivered for rural, not urban areas – taking urban models and applying them to rural situations doesn't work;
- Research the services people want, and need, using micro studies and recognise that diversity is also a rural issue;
- Imagination and creativity are not confined to urban areas – with adequate resourcing and effective consultation, rural-based organisations are just as capable of creating inventive services and products;
- Costs of delivering rural services might be higher, but the added value has to be taken into account – it might not show up on the bottom line, but the impact of well designed, appropriately delivered services can make an immeasurable impact on the lives of older people in rural communities;
- Sustainability of services is critical in the countryside – without them, the impact on the lives of individuals and the future of communities can be devastating. And partnerships are one key method of ensuring the sustainability of service delivery.