The aim of this research was to provide information to inform the development of policies and practices aiming to improve the quality of life of older people living in rural Scotland. The scoping study reviews a wide range of material about older people in rural areas and presents data relating to older people from the Scottish Household Survey and the British Household Panel Survey. The report is structured around five quality of life themes: income; housing; accessibility; health and social care; and social and community life.

Main Findings

- Older people comprise a larger proportion of the population than ever before. The proportion of older people is greatest in rural areas of Scotland, with Dumfries and Galloway, Eilean Siar (Western Isles) and the Scottish Borders having the highest proportion of people of retirement age and above. A large minority of pensioners rely solely upon the state pension and other state benefits for their income. With no means of increasing their annual income the only way in which their financial status can be improved is via state payments.

- Findings from the Scottish Household Survey indicate that older rural people find a wide range of services less convenient than their urban counterparts. The rural dimension to health and social care is expressed primarily in terms of service delivery challenges. The increasing proportion of older people in Scotland will affect rural areas in particular, leading to increased demands upon health and social care services in rural areas in the future. Intensive home care is particularly valuable in rural communities as it allows older people to remain living in their community: a move into supported accommodation often requires a move of some distance and leads to a loss of community ties.

- The constraints of money, health and personal mobility in an individual or their spouse can reduce the ability to participate in social and community life. Older people in rural Scotland are more likely to give up their time to charitable and local groups than are older people living in urban areas. Community initiatives face continual financial insecurity. This can threaten the continuing provision of activities that enhance the quality of life of older people.

- Promoting quality of life requires policies, projects and initiatives that address issues from all the themes covered in this report.
Introduction

This report was commissioned to contribute to the development of policies and practices aiming to improve the quality of life of older people living in rural Scotland (older people are defined as those aged 55 and over, and the elderly are those aged 75 and over). Where possible, lessons from the experiences of Nordic countries were identified. This aim reflects the long-term targets of the Scottish Executive social justice agenda which include ensuring that older people are financially secure, and increasing the number of people who enjoy active, independent and healthy lives - or what is termed ‘active ageing’.

The first objective was to review current knowledge, policies and practices relating to the situation of older people living in rural communities of Scotland, the UK and the Nordic countries. This involved a comprehensive literature review of academic publications, policy documents and material produced by a variety of voluntary organisations.

The second objective was to provide new comparative analysis of the characteristics and life circumstances of different groups of older people living in rural communities across Scotland. The Scottish Household Survey and the British Household Panel Survey were the two data sets used in this research.

The third objective was to describe innovative policies and practices in Scotland and the Nordic countries designed to enhance quality of life amongst older people. This was achieved through direct contact with a range of statutory and voluntary organisations and through a request for information in local newspapers.

Demographic trends

Life expectancy has increased significantly in recent decades throughout the UK and other Western countries. Older people comprise a larger proportion of the population than ever before.

Rural local authority areas in Scotland have a higher proportion of their population over pensionable age than do the urban local authorities. The majority of rural local authorities saw an increase in the number of older people living in their area of jurisdiction between 1991 and 2000.

Income

At a UK level, average pensioners’ incomes are growing faster than average earnings and gender based income differences are narrowing.

There are lower levels of disposable income among older people in rural areas than among those living in urban areas. Low income amongst the rural elderly has been linked to low income in rural areas generally. Older people living in remote rural areas have lower incomes than those who live in more accessible parts of rural Scotland.

British Household Panel Survey data indicate that the young-old (55-75) in accessible rural areas have higher incomes than their urban and remote rural counterparts. However, the over 75s in accessible rural Scotland have the lowest incomes of all over 75s in the UK.

Notably, for the 65-74 and 75 and over age groups, the proportion of household income obtained from benefits is greater than that from pensions. Schemes which promote benefit uptake are therefore potentially very important to this group.

Housing

The housing needs of older people are highly variable and are closely associated with health status and age. Most older people do not require formal or informal assistance to maintain an active, independent life. Around 95% of the over 65s in Scotland live at home. A need for assistance becomes more likely with age, with the over 80s being those most likely to require support to live at home or require a move into supported accommodation.

Across rural Scotland there are a variety of initiatives including the WRVS Good Neighbour project, Dumfries and Galloway Council Gardening Scheme, and Badenoch and Strathspey Handyperson scheme that all help older people remain living at home.

Intensive home care is particularly valuable in rural communities as it allows older people to remain living in their community: a move into supported accommodation often requires a move of some distance and can lead to a loss of community ties.

Accessibility

Accessibility incorporates personal mobility and the ability to access a variety of goods, services and social activities.
Accessibility is critical for older people, particularly those living in rural areas.

Rural Scotland is characterised by a dependency upon private cars, although pensioner households are significantly less likely than other households in rural Scotland to run a car. There are many policies, projects and initiatives operating across rural Scotland that aim to improve the personal mobility of older people.

There has been a steady decrease in the number of services found in the smaller population centres of rural Britain in recent decades. Many services are now provided centrally. Those most vulnerable to the centralisation of some services and decreasing numbers of other, local services in rural Scotland are those on low incomes and who do not have ready access to transport, including the elderly.

Findings from the Scottish Household Survey indicate that older rural people find accessing services less convenient than their urban counterparts.

Many voluntary transport schemes operate in rural Scotland, including Shopmobility Ayrshire and the British Red Cross Transport and Escort Service. These initiatives help older people to access a range of services and to maintain their social lives.

There is scope for exploiting developments in information technology to improve access to services and information in rural Scotland. Although only a small proportion of over 75s have a home computer at present, it is likely that the proportion will increase in future generations.

**Health and Social Care**

The elderly are one of the largest consumers of NHS services, and as the absolute numbers within this age group increase there will be increased pressure placed on health services.

Accessing health services, particularly specialist services, can be problematic in rural Scotland, particularly in remote rural areas and amongst older rural residents.

The move to Care in the Community, together with increasing numbers of elderly residents across rural Scotland who require social care, places considerable demands upon social care services.

The rural dimension to health and social care is expressed primarily in terms of service delivery challenges.

The increasing proportion of older people in Scotland will affect rural areas in particular, leading to increased demands upon health and social care services in rural areas. Resource allocation systems (for the NHS and local authorities) will need to plan for the increased demands likely to be placed upon services as a result of demographic trends.

Initiatives such as the WRVS Home from Hospital service play an important role in easing the transition from hospital to home for many elderly people across rural Scotland.

**Social lives and Community life**

The organisation of and participation in a wide range of social and community activities comprise areas where older people can make a significant contribution to the vitality of their local community.

Older people in rural Scotland are more likely to give up their time to charitable and local groups than are older people living in urban areas. Many older volunteers give their time to projects that benefit other older people, and voluntary activities are an important means of promoting intergenerational contact within rural communities.

The constraints of money, health and personal mobility in an individual or their spouse can reduce the ability to participate in social and community life. Community initiatives face continual financial insecurity that can threaten the continuing provision of activities that enhance the quality of life of older people.

**Promoting quality of life**

Quality of life encompasses a wide range of economic, social, environmental and health factors. Promoting quality of life therefore requires policies, projects and initiatives that address all of the areas and issues outlined above.

**About the Study**

The study was carried out between March and June 2002 by Lorna Philip, Alana Gilbert, Natasha Mauthner and Euan Phimister. The study adopted a multi-method approach, including an extensive review of relevant literature, analysis of data from the Scottish Household Survey and the collection of primary data about a range of innovative initiatives, practices and policies targeted at older people in rural Scotland.
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