



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Research and Library Service Briefing Note

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Paper 000/00

13th January 2011

NIAR 009-11

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# Report on the CARDI conference on Rural Ageing – NUI Galway, 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> December 2010.

## 1 Background

The Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI) is a not for profit organisation that works across the island of Ireland promoting research and cooperation, whilst seeking to influence the direction of research relating to ageing and older people.

As part of its ongoing work programme CARDI organised this 2 day conference at the New University of Ireland Campus in Galway as a mechanism to both showcase the findings from research into the challenges posed by an ageing rural population and in order to encourage debate and thinking around possible solutions.

The welcome and introduction to the conference was provided by Dr Roger O'Sullivan, Director of CARDI and Professor Tom Scharf, Director of the Irish Centre for Gerontology based in NUI Galway. Both speakers emphasised the fact that the organisation of this conference indicated a **growing recognition of the need to better**

**understand the challenges and opportunities presented by an ageing rural population.** There was also recognition of the fact that there is an **ongoing need for hard evidence around rural ageing and that whilst comparisons between urban and rural communities are interesting, this approach can often be unhelpful when seeking to improve the quality of life for rural people.** Dr O'Sullivan also highlighted the challenge around completed **research in the field of ageing often being adapted rather than adopted by policy makers** whilst Professor Scharf drew attention to both the **demographic changes in rural areas and the fact that understandings of rural tended to be nation specific rather than generic.**

There follows a brief overview of the main issues raised by each of the sessions at the 2 day conference.

2. **Keynote Address – *Ageing in Rural Areas: Myths, Insights and Omissions*** - Professor Norah Keating, Co-Director of Research on Ageing, Policies and Practice, Department of Human Ecology, University of Alberta, Canada.

As one of the world's leading gerontologists Professor Keating was well placed to give a rounded and widely informed overview of the particular issues and challenges associated with ageing in rural areas. The Professor took the opportunity to contrast rural ageing 20 years ago with rural ageing as it is today as summarised in table 1 below.

Features of rural Ageing 20 years ago	Features of rural ageing today
Hadn't gained the attention of gerontologists	Increasing complexity of geography of families
Occupation and ideology defined rural	Networks of support at a distance
Particular challenges for rural people – work barriers, few/poor pensions and rural poverty	High and increasing costs of living in rural areas – harsh climate vs idyllic setting
Family ideology and support into old age	Declining infrastructure – victim of centralisation
Objective data showing life in rural areas was hard for older people – but when asked they said they were OK.	Older people as key volunteers –family and wider community

**Table 1: Features of rural ageing - 20 years ago and today**

Professor Keating acknowledged that many of the identified issues/features that had existed 20 years ago also continued to impact on rural ageing today. In general terms she believed that the situation for ageing in rural communities could be best described as **vulnerable people in vulnerable places**, whilst recognising that distance was a critical factor in terms of vulnerability. On the specific issue of compulsory volunteerism, the professor brought to life the fact that whilst **volunteering is often a good thing there are instances where it can be perceived as being a compulsory part of living in certain communities.** In this regard the professor raised the question as to **what we are expecting from older people in terms of volunteering and whether these expectations are realistic.**

In addition the professor highlighted the fact that **distance and rural meant different things in different parts of the world, with distances between neighbours and communities in sparsely populated locations such as northern Canada far exceeding those found in Ireland, North and South for example.**

Despite the different definitions of ‘rural’ and ‘distance’ across the world there were nonetheless quite a few **common traits that were associated with rural communities and which can be backed up with objective evidence** as follows:

- Family oriented/family dependent;
- Slower pace of life - less pressured;
- Strong community feeling;
- Resilient, self reliant, hard working;
- Close connections to the land; and
- Culture of stoicism.

Whilst rural gerontology was still very much a developing area of research, in closing her address Professor Keating identified a number of key issues that researchers and policy makers alike should be actively considering over the coming years as follows:

- **Older volunteers** – on whom many rural community services and activities currently depend – are **increasingly less prepared to engage in everything – more likely to pick and choose;**
- **Need to move to a point where older people, and the activities and skills they possess are considered as an asset to rural communities;**
- Given the increasing distance between family support structures due to increased social mobility there are **challenges for older people with few or distant family members – particularly relevant for people who didn’t marry or those with no previous connection to the area who may have chosen to retire there;**
- **Lack of formal recognition for the role and contribution of carers** – many older people are carers but don’t recognise that they are;
- **Widening disparities in access to health services and professionals;**

### 3. ***Healthy Ageing – is rural a good place to grow old?*** – Dr Kieran Walsh, Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, NUI Galway.

Dr Walsh’s input to the conference focussed on the research that he recently completed as part of the Health Ageing in Rural Communities (HARC) project, an ongoing north south academic and voluntary sector research network. This project looked at the experience of ageing for people in 3 different rural communities across Ireland, north and south as follows:

- Ards Peninsula;
- Letterfrack and Connemara; and

- Blacklion/Belcoo – cross border.

The largely qualitative piece of work conducted in each of these 3 study areas highlighted how rural older people related to the wider rural communities in which they lived. The key findings from this research were summarised as follows:

- **Ageing in rural areas is not a uniform or generic process** – people have differing experiences in different communities;
- **Older people relate in different ways to their rural places;**
- **The demographic composition of many rural communities is increasingly diverse** – this can be positive but can also lead to tensions in some instances
- **The role of both specific older peoples and more generic community groups within each of the communities, and the positive contribution these made to the community as a whole, was very evident;**
- **Many older people are actively involved in their communities, often providing support and services that benefit the entire community** – there are concerns around the declining rates of civic engagement and volunteering however and the impact this change could have.

A full copy of the research can be accessed through the following link -

[http://www.harcresearch.com/images/HARC%20Report%20\(Low-Res-Final\).pdf](http://www.harcresearch.com/images/HARC%20Report%20(Low-Res-Final).pdf)

#### 4. ***Rural Transport – going nowhere fast*** – Dr Aoife Ahern, Senior Lecturer University College Dublin.

Dr Ahern 's presentation highlighted **the transport challenges facing older people in rural areas based upon research that she has completed covering both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland**. A key objective of this research had been to **establish the transport services that existed across the island of Ireland and establish how effective these were at meeting the needs of rural older people**.

It was **Dr Ahern's assertion that there was a distinct lack of information on the travel patterns of older people but that based upon the primary research she had completed** there were a number of clear issues emerging as follows:

- **The ageing rural population poses a major challenge to both the current and future rural transport infrastructure;**
- **There is a real need for a cohesive transport approach that is not merely focussed on meeting the needs of minority groups;**
- **The car is the main means of transport for rural older people and as a result is a lifeline – essential rather than a luxury**. Cessation of car use through either choice or as a result of cost or health has a major impact on rural older people;
- **There is a need for a cross island and cross border rural transport policy;**

- There is a **lack of interaction and co-ordination between public, private and community transport services in rural areas;**
- **Health Services** – a key service for many rural older people – **need to take account of the transport infrastructure available to rural older people in terms of both design and delivery.**

5. ***Rural Housing Policy: past, present and future*** – Mr Michael Conway, Rural Housing Co-ordinator, Northern Ireland Housing Executive.

As the Housing Executive's Rural Housing Co-ordinator, Mr Conway drew upon both the statistics collected and programmes of work undertaken by the NIHE to illustrate the **particular housing challenges facing rural older people**. A key statistic he used related to the fact that according to the **2009 House Conditions Survey there remained 7,000 unfit rural properties within Northern Ireland (which equates to 1.2% of all occupied dwellings)**. In addition **60% of these unfit properties were occupied by people aged over 60**.

Whilst the **number and proportion of rural unfit properties was undoubtedly dropping** Mr Conway emphasised the fact that the NIHE was now **getting down to the so called 'hard core' of unfit homes which were harder to improve due to factors such as location, cost, or reluctance of the occupiers**.

To date the NIHE has delivered **3,000 home replacement grants across Northern Ireland which have directly improved the quality of life of many rural older people**, and a practical example of this grant in action was provided through a short video presentation profiling an elderly resident in a rural community who had availed of and benefitted from the scheme. In addition Mr Conway highlighted the NIHE's **Supporting People Programme, and how the services it delivers, continue to enable many rural older people to live independently within their communities**.

The major future challenges identified by Mr Conway in regard to housing issues for rural older people were as follows:

- There continues to be a **lack of both sheltered and supported accommodation/housing within Northern Ireland as a whole but particularly within rural areas** – with a **rapidly growing older rural population** this makes it **increasingly difficult for many older people to age within and remain within their rural communities**.
- The **NIHE continues and is likely to continue to face funding and budgetary pressures that adversely impact on the areas such as improvement and replacement grants**.

6. ***Growing old in rural areas – don't age in the wrong place!*** – Conor Skehan, Head of Department of Environment and Planning and Dr Lorcan SIRR, Head of Research, College of Engineering and Built Environment, Dublin Institute of Technology.

In what proved to be a somewhat provocative and controversial presentation Mr Skehan and Dr SIRR drew a contrast between what they saw as the **rural dream and the urban reality of ageing**. The central thrust of their presentation was around the **need to encourage people to plan for their old age so as to ensure that they age in the right place**. This theme was illustrated through a **real life example of an ageing couple who had left inner city Dublin to move to a rural and isolated community upon their retirement**. The **perceived rural idyll that they moved to however proved to be a far tougher reality as ill health led to the death of the husband and the social isolation of his widow, who was living in large house unsuited to her needs and within a community where no-one knew her and the services that she needed to survive were difficult to access**.

Both gentlemen felt that in **relation to the challenges posed by an ageing rural population there was a real need for policy makers and individuals to address tomorrows causes rather than today's symptoms**. By way of example they highlighted that the **house you live in aged 45 is likely the house that you will age in – perhaps die in, and that as a result people need to ensure that this home is suited to meet their needs as they age in terms of design and location to name but two factors**.

Speaking as planners both speakers also advocated the **need to develop specialist functions for villages and small towns and that the creation/adaptation of specific locations where people could age well should be actively considered**.

7. ***Retiring to rural areas: evidence from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland*** – Dr Marsaili MacLeod, Research Fellow, Queen's University Belfast.

Dr MacLeod provided a brief overview of some of the early **findings from a UK wide Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study into the impact of retirement on rural communities**. It was clear from even the preliminary findings presented that **migration is a key driver of rural ageing within particular rural communities**. In addition the largely **raw data appears to suggest that people have different reasons for moving to rural areas and that there appear to be different tranches of elderly migration with pre retirement (50-54 years) and post retirement (65+) having different impacts upon the communities where they choose to locate**.

Dr MacLeod stressed the fact that the analysis of the **data from this research was still at a very early stage** and that a fuller picture of the issues identified would emerge over the coming year.

8. ***Engaging older people in policy change – lessons shared*** – Ms Caroline Maguire, Rural Older People’s Co-ordinator, Rural Community Network, Northern Ireland.

Ms Maguire provided an overview of the Rural Community Network’s Skills for Solutions Programme which is a **community empowerment programme designed to equip rural older people with the skills to develop innovative approaches to meeting their service needs**. A key element here is in **helping older people learn how best to lobby and influence policy makers**.

The project is now up and running in Fermanagh and on the Ards Peninsula and Ms Maguire was able to provide the following insights into the challenges facing older people based on the experience to date:

- **Many rural older people appear to have a frame of mind to accept what is given to them in terms of services** – lack of willingness or interest to challenge the status quo;
- **Many issues for older rural people are going unreported and unaddressed** – despite in many instances being small and relatively easy to address eg putting up a written timetable on a bus stop – may be **due to a number of factors ranging from not knowing what to do about the issue, to disillusionment as a result of the issue not being addressed despite being raised previously**;
- **Many rural older people remain largely oblivious to the major challenges coming their ways in terms of how departmental budget cuts will affect the services that they use** on a regular basis such as health and transport.

9. ***Rural ageing – an economic analysis*** – Professor Eamon O’Shea, Irish Centre for Social Gerontology, NUI Galway.

Professor O’Shea’s presentation focussed on the role that older people play and the contribution that they make to the rural economy. Historically, meeting the needs of older people has been seen by many economists as a major drain on the economy, but Professor O’Shea highlighted the fact that older people in many rural communities are actually net contributors to the economy, and it could be argued are keeping many rural economies alive due to:

- Their ability to work flexibly in many low paid, but essential jobs;
- Their role in volunteering – and the key services that volunteers provide to the entire community;

- Their tendency to shop locally and avail of local services;
- Their involvement in caring – old and young- public and private.

As a result the Professor advocated the need for specific older centric economic policies in rural communities.