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Older People in Rural Communities: Exploring Attachment, Contribution and Diversity in Rural Ireland and Northern Ireland

Prepared by
The Healthy Ageing in Rural Communities (HARC) Research Network
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Executive Summary

Why This Report Is Important
Comparative rural ageing in Ireland and Northern Ireland has not been widely considered in research or policy domains. Neither is there a well developed understanding in either jurisdiction of growing older in rural places. As a consequence, little is known about the relationship between older inhabitants and their rural communities. Given the social, cultural, economic and historical dimensions associated with rural areas and the diverse backgrounds and perspectives of older people living there, this is likely to be a complex construction. The role of this relationship in mediating experiences of rural living for older people and in shaping the way in which older people engage with and contribute to their communities is also unknown. The ageing demography and the distribution of the rural population mean that the current information deficits impact on our capacity to support older people living in rural areas and ultimately impinge on the sustainability of rural communities.

What We Did
This report documents research on older people living in three rural case-study areas across the island of Ireland. The work originated from within the Healthy Ageing in Rural Communities (HARC) research network, which was funded by the Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI).

The aim of the study was to conduct a baseline analysis of the experiences of older people living in Letterfrack (Connemara, County Galway), the Ards Peninsula (County Down), and Blacklion and Belcoo (Cavan-Fermanagh cross border area), and to explore the role of the community groups that both represent and serve older people in these communities. The groups included FORUM, a community development organisation in Letterfrack, a range of community and craft groups in the Ards Peninsula and the Blacklion/Belcoo Active Age Group.

The research involved three principle components: a context component, which explored contextual and macro factors in rural ageing; a case-study component, which involved focus groups (27 participants in all) and in-depth interviews (12 participants) with older people in each of the areas; and a feedback component to ensure that the groups and the research participants had an opportunity to contribute to the final report.

What We Found
Ageing in rural areas is not a uniform process; it does not involve a generic set of experiences nor does it involve static and homogenous communities. While both the lack of economic opportunities and an ageing demographic were evident within each of the sites, the diversity of people’s backgrounds and perspectives; the capacities of their communities; the economic and social changes that have occurred; and the various cohorts within populations make growing older in rural places both a dynamic and very much an individual experience.

This is underlined by the diverse demographic composition of the populations and the degree of stratification evident within the three sites. Reflecting the sub-groups of native older people (Catholic and Protestant), older retirees, commuters, returned emigrants and foreign national labour migrants, these communities were stratified by birthplace; reason for living in an area; length of time living in an area; and religious and cultural factors. In some cases, this resulted in tensions between the various sub-groups, especially when reinforced by socio-political events and religious polarisation, whereas in other cases it indicated a layered population and an increasingly diverse community.

It is unsurprising, therefore, that older people with different individual contexts and life histories relate in different ways to their rural places. Both rural, as a term, and attachment to place were interpreted differently depending on whether people were born and reared in the community or had moved into the area from an urban area, or as a returned emigrant. Native older people focused more on personal meanings and self-identity, emphasising historical attachments, connections to birth-place, relationships, and the aesthetics of place. For older people who had moved to these areas later in life, the concentration was on certain aesthetic qualities (e.g. peace and quiet), but more so on the isolating and disadvantaged characteristics of rural places. Attachment to rural place is clearly a multi-faceted phenomenon meaning different things to different people at different times of their life.
There were several commonalities in the social and economic contexts across the three sites. Evidence of cycles of decline (lack of employment opportunities led to population decline, resulting in a reduction of health and social services) within these areas was apparent; for some communities more than others. Compounding effects of service rationalisation and recessionary cutbacks meant that local health and service infrastructure was under threat or had already been reduced. People were concerned that the loss of these services would impact on the capacity of the community to provide for residents’ health and well-being. Public transport was a major issue for all participants. Some older people did not own a car; others were no longer in a position to drive for a variety of reasons. Fragmented provision, times and frequency of bus services and difficulties in accessing primary and emergency health care were core issues.

It is within this complex social and economic context that FORUM, the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group and the range of groups on the Ards Peninsula were operating. Although, there were differences in the scope and scale of the organisations, the findings demonstrate that the groups were making a crucial contribution to the life of each community and the well-being of individual older people. The role of these groups in providing choice, connections and opportunities, and empowering engagement by older people in the locality, should not be underestimated – nor should their capacity for contributing to community integration and cohesion.

The contribution of older people individually and collectively must also be recognised. In each of the sites, older people were actively engaged with their local communities through informal and formal voluntary and community work. Reciprocity was a key element in sustaining social cohesion in these communities; those who currently volunteered and those who could no longer volunteer due to ill-health, spoke about the benefits of providing support for others. It was clear that, amidst concerns of declining rates of civic engagement, that older people both generated and sustained social capital within these areas.

The small-scale nature of this research restricts the inferences that can be drawn from its findings. It reflects a wish to develop an experiential understanding of rural ageing within three communities, which will provide the basis for future larger-scale research activity. Yet, this report highlights significant themes of attachment, contribution, diversity and community and how they intersect to construct complex experiences of rural ageing. Rural places are not mere landscapes that provide an aesthetic environment for growing older. They are dynamic contexts in themselves that can facilitate, challenge and enhance the lives of older people living within them. In that light, and as a reflection of the findings of this report, rural ageing brings with it a potential for both social exclusion and inclusion. That being the case, public policy needs to recognise the potential of loss and absence within rural communities and respond accordingly through the provision of investment that supports the maximum participation of older people in rural life.
Patsie is 88 years of age and lives alone, five miles beyond Letterfrack, in a cottage overlooking the sea. He was born in the area, but had spent more than 25 years working as a labourer in the midland counties of Ireland. Patsie had returned to his locality after retirement 30 years previously and spoke about his relationship with his home-place. Like many other participants, he emphasises his native connection to the area and how much it means to him to be living in his home – although, in Patsie’s case he also refers to the time he spent away from his community.

“Oh it means a lot. I think I couldn’t be in a nicer place. But I wasn’t here all my life…
This is where I was born, over the road.”

While Patsie was not unhappy when he was living away from home, he missed his home-place and in particular he missed the sea.

“I had an awful strong attachment you see to the sea. I missed the sea up in the midlands.
Tisn’t but the midlands are nice. But still I missed the sea.”

Patsie loves GAA games, especially hurling. He is no longer able to attend matches as regularly as he once did, but he remains an avid supporter of the local team and his county; the television and the radio are his medium of sporting contact. On the surface, at least, Patsie may appear to be at risk of social isolation; living in a geographically remote area and no longer being able to drive. However, for Patsie these circumstances were not particularly problematic and do not appear to trouble him overly. Instead, he talks about how fortunate he is and expresses a distinct appreciation for what he has in his life currently. This appreciation is founded in comparisons with the harshness of rural living for past generations and was again rooted to his native locality.

“I don’t know really but I know, like I have a good quality of life now. I have good pensions. And, I’ve home help. I’ve a good quality of life and I like you know, it’s my native place, you see. It’s where I was born.”

It is not just because of his particular home-place that Patsie likes the countryside. Patsie is very clear in his contrast of urban versus rural living that rural areas possess particular attributes that he likes, while urban places fall somewhat short.

“Ah you know you have more freedom out the country. Yeah, I wouldn’t like to live in a town, ‘cause even if I went to Dublin for a night… I wouldn’t feel a bit comfortable. And with cars noising all night and the newsboys with the papers…You’re more privacy too. When you’re out on your own you can relax, read. In a town you see, there’d be noise every side of ya.”

Unsurprisingly, the conversation with Patsie once again drifts back to his home-place and to his love of the sea in front of his cottage.

Patsie: “…I love that view out there, look at them islands and looking across at Mayo (laughs). It means a lot to me. And that lovely strand below ‘cause the tide is out.”

Researcher: “Ok, and is it nice to look at or does it mean something more: is the sea a part of you?”

Patsie: “I think so.”
1. Introduction and Methodology
Introduction

It is difficult to think about ageing in Ireland and Northern Ireland, without considering rurality and rural living. Population processes in both jurisdictions, particularly emigration, has carved an ageing demographic into our rural landscape: older people comprise 12 per cent of the aggregate rural population in Ireland and 13.7 per cent in Northern Ireland (CSO, 2006; NISRA, 2001; 2008). What is more, is that traditionally the island of Ireland is known for its rural geographies and a socio-cultural identity rooted within those geographies. While perhaps a stronger urbanised perspective has emerged across social, economic, and political dimensions, rurality is still very much engrained in who we are and how others are likely to view us as an island. This, understandably, is particularly relevant for older generations. There is then the question of what we conceptualise rural ageing to mean and what we associate with growing older in rural Ireland and Northern Ireland.

At a practical and policy level, there is a sense that when we think about older people in these communities, we tend to problematise rural ageing. It is fair to say that this to a degree is reflected in the international literature, which is dominated by the challenges of growing old in rural places. Isolating geographies, together with low-density and dispersed populations, create particular problems for service provision, personal mobility and maintaining social connectedness (Krout, 1988; Joseph and Chalmers, 1995; Ryan-Nicholls, 2004). Combined with structural issues, such as declining local economies and a receding community infrastructure, rural places can become socially, economically and politically marginalised (NCAOP, 2001; Marcellini et al., 2007). They may also become unsustainable (Farmer et al., 2005).

Taking this context and applying it to the potential vulnerabilities of the ageing process has led to the suggestion of a ‘double jeopardy’ for rural older people (Krout, 1986; Joseph and Cloutier-Fisher, 2005). Certainly, there has been some evidence to indicate that growing older in rural places can be accompanied by a higher risk of poverty, isolation and loneliness (Wenger, 2001; NCAOP, 2001; Rural Community Network, 2004; Savikko et al., 2005). In the context of the current economic recession, the potential for these issues to be intensified is all too apparent. Alternatively, at an emotional and perhaps romantic level; we think about close-knit, supportive communities nestled in scenic landscapes, which inspire a strong sense of cohesion and belonging amongst older people. Again, this too is represented in the literature – although perhaps in a more critical way (Rowles, 1988; Wenger, 2001; Keating, 2005). Kevitt (1988) linked high rates of subjective well-being, amongst objectively disadvantaged rural older people, to several psychosocial factors including a sense of friend and neighbour network and personal space. Similarly, social capital within these rural communities has been credited with providing the potential to address rural marginalisation of older people (Keating et al., 2005). In addition, the accumulation of memories, attachments and associations that come from living and ageing in place is said to reinforce the personal identity of rural dwellers (Rowles, 1983; 1993; Heenan, 2010). It is this role of place as a setting of experience and relationships that leads to an emotional bond or attachment between people and places (Shumaker and Taylor, 1983; Rubinstein and Parmalee, 1992; Gustafson, 2001). The notion of place attachment featured strongly in rural ageing studies and has been suggested by Burholt (2006), to comprise of: location satisfaction; historical perspective; aesthetic and emotional components of location; social support; social integration; appropriateness of the environment and relocation constraints.

The reality is that rural ageing includes both positive and negative aspects (Wenger, 2001) and that it is likely to mean different things to different people at different stages of their life course. Consequently, older people will engage with their communities in diverse ways and to different extents. It has been noted that research, measurement and administrative categorisation, often fails to account for the diversity across (Rowles, 1988) and within rural places. Given that research (e.g. Burholt and Naylor, 2005) has demonstrated that people from various perspectives

1 This figure is for people aged 65 years and over based on 2001 census figures with estimates of population changes between 2001 and 2008 included. It should be noted that in Ireland figures for older people are reported for 65 years plus, whereas in Northern Ireland figures for older women are reported for 60 years plus and for older men are reported for 65 years plus. The rural figures compare with a lower proportion of older people in urban areas in Ireland (10 per cent) and a slightly higher proportion of older people in urban areas in Northern Ireland (14.6 per cent).
(e.g. native residents and inward retiree residents) relate to different types of communities in different ways, this is likely to be a crucial consideration. Our understanding of growing old in a rural place, especially in the context of Ireland and Northern Ireland, is not well developed (Burholt, 2006; Hennan, 2010). Over the years, rural ageing on the island of Ireland has evoked substantial political and social rhetoric, but a coherent policy and research focus has been absent. Without such a focus, there is a risk that rural ageing will not be prioritised and that ageing in these settings will be viewed as a homogenous set of experiences lived by a homogenous group of people in homogenous communities.

There is also a danger that older people in rural areas will be viewed as a needs-based group who burden the over-stretched exchequers and welfare systems of the two jurisdictions. It has been suggested that this image is already pervasive within some of our existing policy and bureaucratic structures for the general older adult population (NESF, 2005; O’Shea, 2007). In effect, the multiple roles of older people in our society and the contribution that they make to communities have been overlooked (O’Shea and Conboy, 2005; Le Mesurier, 2003). Given the challenges that have been documented around rural living, similar, if not more dependent, associations may be linked with rural older people. Currently, however, we know little about how individuals actually engage with their rural communities in later life, or to what degree they participate in local structures and activities.

Anecdotal evidence from Ireland and Northern Ireland would suggest a complex dynamic, but one where older people are far from passive and are involved in multiple ways in their communities. Heenan (2010a; 2010b), in qualitative studies of rural Northern Ireland, also reports that older people are often an important source of social capital. For the most part though, while there has been some relevant work documented in the volunteering literature (Hawe, 1994; Kincade et al., 1996; Lochner et al., 1999; Le Mesurier, 2006), there has been limited research on older people’s participation and contribution in rural areas (Dorfman and Rubenstein, 1994; Skinner and Joseph, 2007; Walsh and O’Shea, 2008). Considering the ageing demographic within many of our rural areas and the potential issues around sustainability of these settlements, knowing how older people engage with and support these communities is essential for the future.

It is in this context of complex and multiple information deficits that the Healthy Ageing in Rural Communities (HARC) research network was established. HARC, which is funded by the Centre for Ageing Research and Development in Ireland (CARDI), is an interdisciplinary cross-border initiative that brings together academic and stakeholder colleagues from the Irish Centre for Social Gerontology and Discipline of Geography at the National University of Ireland Galway; the Centre for Health Improvement and the Institute of Spatial and Environmental Planning at Queen’s University Belfast; the Rural Community Network; and FORUM Letterfrack. As a part of a larger programme of HARC work on rural dwelling older people, this report is an initial exploratory effort to address some of the current knowledge gaps on rural ageing in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This cross-border work is particularly important given the history between these two jurisdictions, and the cultural, socio-economic and socio-political similarities, and differences, between Ireland and Northern Ireland.

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1The HARC network, and the research documented in this report, were funded by a grant of €15,000 received under Call 1 of the CARDI Grants Programme.
1. Introduction and Methodology

The aim of the study was to conduct a baseline analysis of the experiences of older people living in three rural case-study sites across the island of Ireland, and to identify groups within these areas that encourage and facilitate the participation and engagement of older people in the local community. The research had five core objectives:

1. Describe the available data on older people in rural Ireland and Northern Ireland and use this information to contextualise and contrast growing older in rural communities in the two jurisdictions.

2. Identify three case-study sites across the island and the groups that work for and with older people in these areas.

3. Explore the experiences of older people, from different backgrounds, living in each of the sites and the way in which they are engaged with and contribute to their local communities.

4. Investigate the impact of the groups on older people and their role in facilitating older people’s engagement in the communities.

5. Explore the data with respect to existing policy and the requirements for future research and policy on rural dwelling older people.
Methodology

We wanted to structure our approach to this research around positive rather than negative dimensions of rural ageing. This did not mean that the challenges, issues and problems that can influence growing older in rural areas were ignored; in fact they dominate some sections of the report. Instead, it meant that we set aside notions of burden and crisis in how we framed the research and developed our methodology. This reflected not only the aim of the research, but the way in which older people and the organisations that they were involved with, were included in the study.

It was also important that the methodology should represent the different perspectives and disciplinary expertise of the members of the HARC network. Given that geographical, socio-economic, gerontological, public health and service provisions elements were all likely to be intertwined in the experiences of rural dwelling older people this was both advantageous and a necessary requirement. Therefore, and in line with the research objectives, the methodology was constructed around three principal components: a context component; a qualitative case-study component; and a feedback and learning component.

Although the research was exploratory in nature, this combination of mixed methodologies helped to facilitate a multi-level exploration of rural ageing. The strategy also served as a means of capturing ecological elements and the heterogeneity of these communities (Hawe, 1994; Nilsen, 2006; Adams et al., 2007). The mixed-methodology also helped to strengthen the evidence base for analysis and interpretation of the findings (Moran-Ellis et al., 2006; Woolley, 2009; Bazeley, 2010).

Context Component

The purpose of this component was to explore the key macro-level factors influencing ageing in rural areas. In addition to describing and contrasting the socio-political structures and context of Ireland and Northern Ireland, the existing literature was reviewed and used to highlight key knowledge gaps. This involved an examination of existing cross-border data-sets in the areas of demographic structure, service provision and health and well-being. As a part of this contextualisation process, the meaning of ‘rural’ in policy and bureaucratic terms, and in the circumstances of an increasingly urbanised society, was also explored. Chapter 3 presents the findings of this component in the form of an overview of key contextual factors influencing rural ageing in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

Case-Study Component

The purpose of the case-studies was to gather a qualitative understanding of ageing in rural communities and of the groups that work for and with older people in these areas. Three different case-study sites were included in the research: Letterfrack, in Connemara, County Galway; the Ards Peninsula in County Down; and Blacklion-Belcoo in the County Cavan and County Fermanagh cross-border region. Within each site there was a focus on the individual experiences of rural dwelling older adults and on the groups that they were involved with in the locality.

In Letterfrack, the focus was on a community development organisation, called FORUM, and the older people that used its services and were involved in its activities. In Blacklion-Belcoo, the research concentrated on the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group and its older adult members. In the Ards Peninsula, an initial review identified that activities with and for older people on the Peninsula were not rooted in one organisation type. For that reason, participants were involved in a range of groups including community, craft and charity organisations. The groups across all three sites involved various aspects of service provision, empowerment, and opportunities for social connectedness. An element of the case-studies was to describe the activities of each of the groups along with the communities and the regions that these groups operate within. Chapter 4 provides this description for each of the sites.

Data collection focused on the experiences of older people in each of the areas and their participation in the groups and the wider community. A preliminary focus group was held with the Ards Senior Forum to identify key topics of interest for the research and to inform the design of the data collection instruments. A combination of focus group discussions and in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed to collect the primary information across the three sites. While a
1. Introduction and Methodology

A topic guide was used for the focus group and an interview schedule was used for the semi-structured interviews, the broad areas of interest were similar and included the following topics:

- Experiences of ageing in rural Ireland
  - Attachment to place
  - Social connectedness
  - Service provision and transport
  - Community capacity and cohesion
- Type of involvement in group
  - Volunteer/participant/service user
- Contribution
  - Participation in and contribution to the community
  - Personal impact of being involved in the group
  - Contribution of the group to older people and the community

Focus groups were conducted in Letterfrack (n=7; aged 63 to 82 years), the Ards (n=7; aged 59 to 78 years) and Blacklion-Belcoo (n=13; aged 60 to 85 years) with a total of 27 participants comprising of five men and 22 women. The focus groups gathered information in a group setting and helped to identify collective opinions on rural ageing.

Four in-depth semi-structured interviews with older people were also conducted in each of the sites (n=12). The purpose of the interviews was to explore both the central topics and the themes that emerged from the focus group discussions in more detail. In the interviews, consideration was given to representing the younger old (65-79 years); the older old (80 years and over); males and females; local and new-comer residents and isolated and non-isolated older people in the participant sample. The participants were two men and two women from Letterfrack, (aged 80 to 91 years); two men and two women from the Ards communities (aged 69 to 71 years); and four women from Blacklion-Belcoo (aged 74 to 82 years). All participants were identified by and recruited through gatekeepers from the groups in each of the case study sites. Information sheets were distributed to potential participants and informed consent was then requested. The focus group discussions and the semi-structured interviews were audio-recorded. Chapter 5 presents the findings of the data collection and serves as the core information for this report.

Feedback Component

This component involved the establishment of a Feedback Forum in conjunction with the groups and participants from each of the case-study sites. The Forum provided an opportunity for the three participating sites to respond and contribute to the preliminary findings of the research and facilitated knowledge transfer between the three sites. The Forum also helped identify elements of best practice across the groups and to encourage a stronger partnership between the research team and the case-study communities. Preliminary findings were used to discuss the principal challenges, opportunities and recommendations for older people and for the groups that work with and for them in rural areas. The Feedback Forum took place in Enniskillen in September 2010 with the research team and 10 people from across the three sites. While this was not an action research methodology per se, it did encourage sharing of best practice and helped to foster the empowering nature of research.

Chapter 6 draws on the findings of the research, and the feedback that emerged from the Forum, to discuss the key themes of the fieldwork in the context of existing and future policy and research agendas.
Rural Narratives: Maureen

“...the nearest I could get to home.”

Like many older people living on the island of Ireland, Maureen left her home, in Lettercurbeen in Connemara, to emigrate to England for work. At first, Maureen worked in a range of jobs in different parts of England; later, after marriage, she concentrated on rearing a family in a suburb of Manchester; during her children’s school years she returned to work and continued to work until her retirement. Although Maureen, who is now in her early 80s, had spent most of her life in England, she never forgot where she was from and speaks about the connection she had to her home community.

“I always missed my village, my home. Yeah, I always missed that, but I used to come back when I was single every year on holidays. But I really missed, I always, well I always wanted to come back. I wouldn’t want to end up dead [or] dying in England. I wanted to be back in Ireland. That was one thing.”

After retirement, Maureen and her husband moved back to Ireland and built a house near Letterfrack, which was approximately ten miles away from her original home-place. Maureen describes the peacefulness of the area that she lives in and the beautiful scenery and landscape surrounding her home. At the same time, Maureen is very clear about where her feelings and her identity are rooted.

“I was born and reared about ten miles from here. Yeah, that place [Lettercurbeen]… that’s still in my mind (laughs). But I like it here too like…Well am, well it’s the nearest I could get to home (laughs)... Well I’m here over twenty years, that’s a good while ago. A good while, but Lettercurbeen is my identity really… It’s where I was born and reared.”

For Maureen, having a native link to an area, where she was born and reared, strengthens her relationship to Lettercurbeen and in some ways disconnects her from her current place of residence – even though Maureen admits her new community is a nice place to live and, relative to England, is in close proximity to her original home.

Maureen: “It took me a good while to settle in here though. You know it did yeah.”

Researcher: “And was that because you were coming from England?”

Maureen: “I think it was because I was in a different parish!... Well the best things now at my age is it’s a nice area to live in and there’s nice scenery and it’s part of near the area where I was reared: it’s not quiet. But it’s not far away from the area where I was reared, which I liked.”

Names and details in this narrative have been changed to protect the identity of the participant.
2. Contextualising Rural Ageing on the Island of Ireland
The world's population is ageing. A recent report by the US Census Bureau (Kinsella and He, 2009) forecasts that over the next 30 years, the number of people aged 65 and over will almost double from 506 million to 1.3 billion, an increase from 7 per cent of the world's population to 14 per cent. The population of Ireland is also ageing. In 2009, those aged 65 and over comprised 14 per cent of the population in Northern Ireland (NISRA, 2010), while in Ireland the proportion was lower, with just over 11 per cent of the population aged 65 or over (CSO, 2009). Very little is known about the experience of ageing in Ireland and Northern Ireland. We do know that differences in policy, care structures and funding between the two jurisdictions are likely to result in differential impacts on older people's quality of life. These differences provide a unique opportunity to learn, by comparing the experiences of growing older in the different jurisdictions. However, this opportunity for learning is hampered by a lack of comparable data, which is especially evident when the focus is on specific groups of people or specific areas, such as older people living in rural areas.

As a starting point, it is useful to compare older people in general in Ireland and Northern Ireland, while later the limited set of indicators available for rural older people will be discussed. Two relatively recent reports have attempted to compare health and lifestyles in the two jurisdictions (McGee et al., 2005; Ward et al., 2009): the first – hereafter referred to as SLÁN – used data from the 2007 SLÁN survey of 10,364 respondents in Ireland, and the Northern Ireland Health and Social Well-being survey of 4,245 respondents in Northern Ireland (Ward et al., 2009); while the other, funded under the Healthy Ageing Research Programme (HARP) - and hereafter referred to as HARP - conducted primary surveys of approximately 1,000 people aged 65 and over, both sides of the border. While the SLÁN survey has the advantage that it includes more respondents, it is hampered by a lack of comparability on the methods and questions used for the two samples. The HARP study has the advantage that the same set of questions was asked in the two jurisdictions.

The HARP analysis showed that there were no regional differences in sample age or gender; for example, 59 per cent of participants in Ireland and 57 per cent of participants in Northern Ireland were aged less than 74, while 44 per cent of participants in the Ireland and 42 per cent in Northern Ireland were male. However, differences were observed in terms of marital status, education and household composition between the two jurisdictions, with those in Ireland more likely to be married, to have higher levels of education and to live with others, compared to their counterparts in Northern Ireland.

Both the SLÁN and HARP studies showed a higher proportion of older people reporting poorer health in Northern Ireland, compared to Ireland; for example, 70 per cent of those aged 65 and over in Ireland report their health as excellent, very good or good, compared to just 52 per cent in Northern Ireland (Ward et al., 2009). McGee et al. (2005) explain this difference with respect to differences in functional impairment, rather than differing levels of psychological well being. Significant differences were observed in terms of how self-sufficient respondents regarded themselves (81 per cent of respondents in Ireland reported that they were self-sufficient, compared to 61 per cent in Northern Ireland), while no significant differences were found in the reporting of depression between the two jurisdictions.

Despite the consistent finding of poorer self-reported health between the two regions, more objective measures of health status were broadly comparable; for example, 22 per cent and 21 per cent of respondents in Ireland and Northern Ireland reported being diagnosed with a chronic condition (Ward et al., 2009). In addition, no particular pattern was observed in terms of health service usage. Participants in Ireland were more likely than those in Northern Ireland to have visited their general practitioner (GP) in the previous year, and the mean number of GP visits was also greater in Ireland. However, respondents in Northern Ireland were more likely to have accessed other primary care services, including chiropody, optician and dental services. Little differences were observed in use of inpatient services, although older people in Northern Ireland were more likely to avail of outpatient services compared to their counterparts in Ireland.
The evidence on health behaviours too is mixed, with, for example, a slightly higher proportion of older people in Northern Ireland reporting that they are current smokers compared to Ireland (McGee et al., 2005), while a higher proportion of Irish respondents were obese (Ward et al., 2009). As the authors of one of the studies acknowledge (McGee et al., 2005), the pattern of health and social service use across the jurisdictions is complex, with neither system appearing to perform consistently better or worse than the other. While the welfare states in the two regions are different, both in terms of provision and funding, this does not seem to have generated major and consistent differences in health and well-being.

The distribution of older people throughout the island places a natural emphasis on rural life when focusing on ageing in Ireland, as older adults tend to be over represented in rural communities. Again it is difficult to compare precisely the proportion of older people living in rural areas in Ireland and Northern Ireland given the different methodologies used to define urban and rural areas in the two jurisdictions (e.g. different settlement sizes for rural classification). However, it appears that a higher proportion of people live in rural areas in Ireland than in Northern Ireland. Of those aged 60 to 74, in Northern Ireland 32 per cent lived in a rural area compared to 47 per cent in Ireland, (Evason et al., 2004; Evason and Devine, 2005). Figure 1 below shows the percentage of respondents to the HARP survey living in rural areas in both Ireland and Northern Ireland. Two points are noteworthy: firstly, the figure confirms previous findings of a higher proportion of older people in Ireland living in rural areas compared to Northern Ireland, and secondly, in Ireland a higher proportion of the older-old live in rural areas compared to the younger-old; however, this trend was not observed for Northern Ireland.

**Figure 1: Percentage of population living in rural area**

Source: McGee et al., 2005
Rural areas are often defined with reference to low population density and distance from services, both of which may significantly impact on an ageing population. Much has been written about rural ageing in an international context (Wenger, 2001; Ryan-Nicholls, 2004); with a number of key issues around transportation, access to services, poverty and social isolation identified. However, the research has also brought out the complexities of ageing in rural areas, with the experience of rural ageing depending on the characteristics of the area as well as the individual. Wenger (2001), for example, having examined a number of common myths about ageing in rural communities, concluded that ageing in rural Britain had advantages and disadvantages but was neither better nor worse than ageing in urban areas. However, she also noted that rural service provision requires a different approach from that in urban areas.

While the importance of rural dimensions for ageing in Ireland has been recognised, research has been fragmented and limited to small-scale projects. Nonetheless some research has looked at ageing in rural areas, although this has generally focused on one jurisdiction. McGee and colleagues’ cross-border analysis of older people’s health and health service usage included an assessment by urban and rural residence. They found no significant urban-rural differences in ratings of current health in either jurisdiction. However, they did note some differences in health service usage. For example, rural participants in Northern Ireland were found to visit their GP more often than their urban counterparts; while urban participants were more likely to access a range of other services including meals on wheels, chiropody, opticians and dental services. The higher use of these more discretionary services in urban areas more than likely reflected their greater availability, rather than any need differentials.

Fahey et al. (2007) examined the social circumstance of older people in Ireland, including where possible a breakdown by urban and rural residence. They found differences in housing related deprivation between rural older people and rural working age people, as well as between rural older people and urban older people. For example, 21.5 per cent of rural older people lacked central heating, compared to 9.1 per cent of rural working age people and 8.7 per cent of urban older people. This trend was also observed for other household items including hot water and a bath or shower. Based on the 1997 Living in Ireland survey,
Layte et al. (1999) examined the income, deprivation and well-being of older people in Ireland. They hypothesised that living in a rural location may contribute to social isolation because of the relative weakness of public transport systems compared to urban areas, and because lower housing density may make it less likely that rural dwellers would see friends and neighbours on a regular basis. They found some support for their hypothesis, with rural dwellers over 65 less likely to speak with neighbours, family and friends on a daily basis compared to their urban counterparts. However, there was also evidence to suggest that rural older dwellers were very likely to have contact with neighbours and family once or twice a week. McGee et al. (2005) in their cross-border analysis found that slightly more participants in Northern Ireland reported feeling lonely quite or very often than in Ireland (17 per cent versus 13 per cent); however, there was little evidence to suggest that those in rural areas were more likely to experience loneliness than their urban counterparts. More recently, Heenan (2010) completed 71 in-depth interviews with older people, carers and a range of service providers in rural Northern Ireland. She identified a number of key themes of importance to rural older people, which highlight the complexity of growing older in rural areas. Throughout the research, difficulties in accessing services emerged as one of the greatest problems associated with living in a rural area, with issues around travel and distance being regarded as significant problems in accessing services.

Older people themselves can make an important contribution to the sustainability of rural areas. While much has been written about the potential negative consequences of population ageing, especially on pension provision and public services usage, the potential contribution of older people has been largely ignored (O’Shea and Conboy, 2005). While one study has estimated the value of childcare provided by grandparents to be in the region of £500 million in the South East of England and the value of voluntary activity to be around £950 million (Meadows, 2004), there has been little work looking at the social and cultural contribution that older people make to their community. Researchers have also noted that there has neither been an effort to understand or to acknowledge the role that rural older people play in the civic society of rural places (Hennan, 2010; Le Mesurier, 2003; Le Mesurier, 2006).

A scoping study of older people in rural areas in Scotland noted that older people have an important input to make in terms of the cultural life of rural communities, as well as in volunteering (Phimister et al., 2003). They showed that just over 30 per cent of those aged 65 to 74 in rural areas had volunteered their time in a range of activities including church or religious groups, working with other older people and working with younger people. In England, researchers found that older people were not only beneficiaries of social enterprises (defined as commercial enterprises established with the main purpose of providing social benefits for their communities and including a credit union, housing association and community transport scheme), but were also significant participants in the management board and volunteers of the enterprises concerned (Moreton et al., 2005). The authors tentatively concluded that given the fragile financial existence of many of the enterprises, they would not be able to exist at all without the voluntary commitment of older people.

One recent study in Ireland has looked at the contribution of membership of an older adult active retirement group (Third Age Foundation – TAF) to the older people themselves and to the wider community (Walsh and O’Shea, 2008). The majority of respondents felt that membership of the group improved their life satisfaction; however, while most people valued membership as a means to reduce their own loneliness and isolation, they tended to highlight the social gains associated with membership. While TAF provided activity for its members, it also contributed more widely in the community including involvement in intergenerational projects and reaching out to marginalised people, which were highly valued by the local community.

In this sense, the contribution of older people, and of the groups that they are involved with, have been credited with generating significant social capital for rural places (Le Mesurier, 2003; Le Mesurier, 2006; Walsh and O’Shea, 2008). Heenan (2010) found that older people are an important and under-valued source of social capital in these communities, serving as both service users and voluntary providers. Similarly, Walsh and O’Shea (2008) noted that rural older dwellers can be agents of community empowerment through their participation in community based groups. Finally, in a
study of social capital networks in farming communities, Heenan (2010)b demonstrated that rural older people did not adhere to a stereotype of dependency, but instead represented a substantial economic and social resource for the rural areas.

Policy initiatives on rural ageing in Ireland are rare; while policies relating to ageing in general, and rural development are relevant, they often fail to consider the complexities of growing older in rural areas. Much rural policy is centred on economic development, which in many instances ignores the potential contribution of older people to the social and cultural life of rural areas. For example, the White Paper on Rural Development in Ireland (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1999) identified the higher dependency ratios and loss of younger people in rural areas as detrimental to the economic, social and cultural life of rural areas, as well as eroding the capacity of the community to act collectively on its own behalf, but ignored the existing and potential contribution that older people can make to the sustainability of rural areas.

To date, much policy on ageing has failed to consider the unique opportunities and challenges associated with ageing in rural areas, even though, in Ireland at least, almost as many older people live in rural areas as urban areas. The most recent, if now dated, strategy for older people in Ireland (Working Party on Services for the Elderly, 1998) largely focused on the health and biological aspects of ageing, failing to recognise the broader issues of growing older. A more recent paper called for the development of a new strategy for older people focusing on all aspects of older people’s lives, as well as recognising and supporting the contribution of older people in terms of work, volunteering, wisdom and culture (O’Shea, 2007). A consultation is currently underway for the development of a new strategy of ageing in the Ireland. In Northern Ireland, Ageing in an Inclusive Society was launched in 2005 (Office for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister, 2005). The strategy aimed to ensure that all older people had the opportunity to make informed choices so that they may pursue healthy, active and positive ageing. One of the guiding principles of the strategy was “rural proofing” which aims to ensure that all policy proposals identify any likely impact which policy might have on rural areas or communities, and offer an assessment of how any differential impact can be addressed. It remains to be seen how successful the strategy is, or indeed the proposed strategy in Ireland will be, in improving the quality of life of older people across the island.
Jane moved to her rural community on the Ards Peninsula after marrying her husband, who is a farmer, 18 years previously. Having lived in Belfast for most of her life, it was apparent to Jane, who is now in her late 60s, that there are significant differences between rural and urban communities. While there are certainly positives, Jane identifies distinct social and infrastructural challenges with respect to the geography of rural communities and the sparsely populated landscapes.

“I think you've defined quite well here, distance, isolation and in the middle of the country, you know very few services really. Isolation, I suppose would be the biggest one.”

Living in the middle of a farming region, where neighbours are separated by large parcels of land and have few daily interactions, accentuates issues around security and crime. As with a number of other participants, Jane refers to the lack of a police presence in rural communities and the implications that this can have for localised crime and feelings of personal safety. Relative to more densely populated urban areas Jane also describes the potential for people in rural communities to be less aware of their neighbours.

“I've lived in the cities and you've got your neighbours and you've got people who would notice anything amiss. Whereas in the country…you know we could do really with the Police. You know, a good neighbourhood scheme, where people would notice if things were amiss and do something.”

For Jane and her family, it is important to support the local services in the community. While the larger supermarkets in the towns are used once a month, Jane frequently calls to the local small shops, and the post office, for daily items and supplies. However, although Jane still drives, she recognises that transport is perhaps the most significant problem in the community both for accessing essential services and for social contact.

“You know I love my home and I do upholstery and I do everything. There's nothing much I don't do, but at the same time after about three days you just want to get out into civilisation and have a chat with somebody… The biggest thing would be transport, getting out and about, you know if you weren't fit. For the girls from Kircubbin, the main bus comes through Kircubbin and they aren't too bad but if you lived over here it would be different. The bus service isn't as good over here.”

Names and details in this narrative have been changed to protect the identity of the participant.
3. The Case-Study Sites
The Ards Peninsula and the Ards’ Groups for Older People

The Ards Peninsula is located on the eastern edge of Northern Ireland in County Down and, for the purposes of this research, it comprises an area stretching some 20 miles south of an axis between the towns of Newtownards and Donaghadee (see figure 2). The Peninsula is within the commuting zone to Belfast which is situated some 10 miles to the west of that axis. It is bounded on its western side by Strangford Lough with the main A20 road running through the villages of Portaferry, Kircubbin and Greyabbey.

Some four miles to the east, the coastline fronts on to the Irish Sea and there the main A2 road stretches northwards from Cloughey to Portavogie, Ballyhalbert, Ballywalter and Millisle. Accordingly, the settlement pattern comprises a series of villages set out like beads along the edge of the Peninsula, with the interior comprising a largely dispersed farm and non-farm residential population and within which the only village of note is Carrowdore.

Figure 2: The Ards Peninsula and its neighbouring areas.

Source: Central Statistics Office – SAPMAP – downloaded 12:11:10; License number 01/05/001; Scale: 1:391454
In the main, the Ards Peninsula is outward looking for employment, major services and retailing, though the villages do act as important centres for local convenience shopping and community activities. Churches and a wide range of community centres give vitality to local living, not least that by older people. The Ards Peninsula also attracts visitors for purposes of recreation and tourism and, in particular, it has a significant number of large permanently sited caravan parks that form part of the second home accommodation base. It is a popular retirement locale. Accordingly, accessibility is key to understanding the development dynamics that impact on the Ards Peninsula with the car and passenger ferry between Portaferry and Strangford forming a crucial link from its southern extension to the regional town of Downpatrick with its hospital, education and public administration services.

There are six wards within the Ards Peninsula (Millisle, Carrowdore, Ballywalter, Kircubbin, Portavogie and Portaferry) which provide the basis for constructing an aggregate profile drawing on data published by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA). Key features of the area can be summarised as follows:

- in 2001 the total population of the Ards Peninsula was 19,316 persons; almost 60 per cent of the population (11,500) lived within the nine villages listed above, thus pointing to a pattern of complementary countryside living for many people;

- a total of 3,796 people were aged 60 years and over in 2001 amounting to 20 per cent of the overall population of the Ards Peninsula. The equivalent share within the Northern Ireland population was 18 per cent;

- in 2001, 71 per cent of the population was classified as having a Protestant and other Christian community background compared to the Northern Ireland share of 53 per cent. Those from a Catholic community background amounted to 30 per cent with the equivalent Northern Ireland figure being 44 per cent. Those with a Catholic community background are more strongly represented in Kircubbin ward (63 per cent) and Portaferry ward (85 per cent). Those with a Protestant and other Christian community background are more strongly represented in Millisle ward (91 per cent), Carrowdore ward (91 per cent), Ballywalter ward (90 per cent) and Portavogie ward (84 per cent);

- within the context of the Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure 2005, all six wards in the Ards Peninsula lie outside the top 10 per cent most deprived wards in the region. Out of a total of 582 wards, they are situated within the band of 247 (Portaferry ward) to 441 (Carrowdore ward) for the Multiple Deprivation Measure. It is really only the Proximity to Services Domain that highlights a relatively weaker performance with the following ward rankings: Portavogie – 62, Carrowdore – 107, Kircubbin – 123, Ballywalter – 156, Portaferry – 180 and Millisle – 203, and where the lower the ranking number, the greater the relative deprivation;
the 2004 travel time to an Accident and Emergency Hospital for all wards is above the Northern Ireland average of 13 minutes. The best performing ward is Portaferry (15 minutes) though this is related to the operation of the Strangford Ferry. Elsewhere on the Ards Peninsula the travel times are 26 minutes for Portavogie ward, 24 minutes for Ballywalter ward, 23 minutes for Millisle ward, 22 minutes for Kircubbin ward and 21 minutes for Carrowdore ward;

within the Ards Peninsula the percentage of people who stated in 2001 that they provided unpaid care to family, friends, neighbours or others compares well with the Northern Ireland figure of 11 per cent. Millisle ward was 13.7 per cent, Carrowdore ward was 14 per cent, Ballywalter ward was 13 per cent, Portavogie ward was 12 per cent, Kircubbin ward was 11 per cent and Portaferry ward was 11 per cent;

within the Ards Peninsula there were 927 lone pensioner households in 2001 amounting to 13 per cent of all households across the pilot study area.

This is in line with a Northern Ireland share of 13 per cent for this type of household;

in 2008 the average number of monthly unemployment-related benefits claimants, as a percentage of the working age population varied from 2 per cent in Millisle to 3 per cent in Portaferry, with the Northern Ireland equivalent figure standing at 3 per cent.

In short, the Ards Peninsula displays some significant variations in its physical geography, its settlement pattern and its socio economic well-being. Relative proximity to the Belfast Metropolitan Area and Downpatrick suggests a strong functional connectedness with areas outside the peninsula, but which is counterbalanced by strong local identities that are largely village based. It is within this context that social infrastructure support for and issues faced by older people can be located.

As mentioned previously, after an initial review it was evident that older people were engaged in a variety of different groups across the Ards peninsula, with no one model or type of group being more prevalent than others. This was a reflection of the degree to which older people in the Ards were embedded across a variety of dimensions. For that reason, the Ards participants were drawn from a range of groups throughout the Peninsula and from a number of the communities. Participants’ activities included voluntary and charity work in local community and church organisations and participation in recreational and craft groups. The groups varied in size and in their roles, but for the most part met on a weekly basis and involved a social element.
3. The Case-Study Sites

Letterfrack, Connemara and FORUM

The village of Letterfrack and its hinterland is located in north western Connemara in County Galway. Situated 51 miles north-west of Galway and 9 miles north-east of Clifden, the rural landscape features the Maumturk and the Twelve Pins mountain ranges, a scattering of loughs and an intricate coastline (see figure 3).

Figure 3: Letterfrack, its neighbouring areas and its location in Galway County.

The village itself is set on a cross roads and is overlooked by the Connemara National Park and the Diamond Mountain. A number of pubs, small shops and eateries border the village green, with a community development complex, including the Furniture College (linked to the Galway-Mayo Institute of Technology), public library service, and enterprise and community services, located at the far side of the green. The community development complex, which was previously a Christian Brother industrial school, is responsible for much of the local and regional development activity.

Reflecting the scenic countryside surrounding Letterfrack and the neighbouring areas (e.g. Kylemore, Tullycross, Tully, Renvyle and Lettergesh), tourism would be a strong source of income for the region. While the local economy is still rooted in agriculture (farming and to a lesser degree fishing), commuting for employment to the larger urban centres is a common feature of the area. Much of the information available for the area is at the District Electoral Division (DED - Ballynakill). Drawing on 2006 census data and small area population statistics, some key demographic characteristics of the area are as follows:
3. The Case-Study Sites

- in 2006, the population of Letterfrack was 168 people, with 13 per cent of the local population at the DED level aged 65 years or over. Relative to the national average of 11 per cent aged 65 years and over, this marks an over-representation of older people in this area;

- in Ballynakill DED, 79 per cent of people stated that their religion was Catholic, almost 12 per cent stated they had no religion and just under 8 per cent stated they belonged to other religions. This compares to just under 92 per cent of people reporting that they were Catholic at the Galway county level.

- unlike Northern Ireland statistics, deprivation indicators are only available at a regional rather than a local level in Ireland. That said, in terms of access to essential services the HSE Map Centre indicates that the closest district hospital is in Clifden (9 miles and a 14 minute drive away) and the closest general hospital with accident and emergency services is in Galway City (51 miles and a 1 hour and 17 minute drive away). The closest primary care facilities (in the form of a general practitioner (GP) and health clinic) are located in Renvyle, 4 miles from Letterfrack.

- within the Ballynakill DED 25 people stated they provided unpaid personal help to family, friends, neighbours or others. Just under half provided more than 15 hours of help per week.

- for confidentiality reasons information on lone pensioner households is not available at the DED level.

- in 2006, 12 per cent of people were unemployed in the Ballynakill DED. Current unemployment figures are not available at the DED level in Ireland.

Letterfrack and the surrounding hinterland are embedded in a strongly rural and isolated region of North West Connemara. The community has a large ageing population and although still benefits from a significant tourist industry and a local college cohort, possesses a high unemployment rate, which is likely to have increased since the 2006 figure.

FORUM is a community development organisation based in the community development complex in Letterfrack. FORUM was established as a Model Action Project under the European Union Third Poverty Programme in 1989, to tackle rural decline and social and economic disadvantage in the North West Connemara region. FORUM is currently supported under the Community Development Programme for rural development partnerships. In addition to the other target groups of the unemployed, and people with disabilities, FORUM draws on its volunteer and professional workers to address the loneliness, isolation and service deficits of older people through the provision of social activities, networking and a range of services. The activities of the group include a companion carer service, meal delivery, laundry, transport to day care, lunch clubs, intergenerational programmes and an active age group. FORUM targets older people in the immediate area and spread across neighbouring communities, such as Kylemore, Tullycross, Tully, Renvyle and Lettergesh.
Blacklion-Belcoo and the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group

Belcoo, in County Fermanagh, and Blacklion, in County Cavan, are situated on the Fermanagh and Cavan border separated by a bridge over the Belcoo River (see figure 4). This is a mountain, hill and lakeland rural area of exceptional landscape quality with a local economy dominated by small farms and an increasing dependency on tourism and recreation. The two villages, which serve as local service centres, are situated between Upper and Lower Lough McNeen at the heart of the UNESCO recognised and cross-border Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark. The nearest major towns are Enniskillen to the east (12 miles via the A4) and Sligo to the west (30 miles via the N16).

Figure 4: Blacklion-Belcoo, its neighbouring areas and its cross-border location.

During the Troubles the Blacklion-Belcoo road was a strategically significant crossing point between Northern Ireland and Ireland and both villages were sites of customs and border security barracks. Drawing primarily on larger scale NISRA data and complemented where available by small area population statistics CSO data (CSO, 2006b), some key demographic features of Blacklion-Belcoo are as follows:

- the population of Belcoo in 2001 was some 200 persons, with that for Blacklion standing at some 174 persons in 2006 (Creamer et al., 2008);
- within the more extensive ward of Belcoo and Garrison (2,459 persons in 2001) some 21 per cent of the population was aged 60 years and over in 2001, with the equivalent figure for County Fermanagh being 18 per cent. There is no information specifically available for Blacklion, but in the larger District Electoral Division of Tuam (349 persons in 2006) some 20 per cent of people were aged 65 years and over in 2006;
- within the Belcoo and Garrison ward some 89 per cent of the population was from a Catholic community background in 2001, with the
equivalent for County Fermanagh being 56 per cent. Almost 94 per cent of the population in Tuam DED was stated as Catholic in the 2006 census with the corresponding for County Cavan being 86 per cent;

- while the Belcoo and Garrison ward ranks as 303 out of 506 wards on the 2010 Multiple Deprivation Measure, it is ranked as 3 on the Proximity to Services Domain, thus pointing to the high relative geographical peripherality of this area - the lower the number, the greater the relative deprivation. The travel time to an Accident and Emergency hospital in 2004 is calculated at 33 minutes, compared with 18 minutes for County Fermanagh. Similar information has not been collected for Blacklion, although again according to the HSE Map Centre the closest community hospital is in Manorhamilton (13 miles and an 18 minute drive away) and the closest general hospital with accident and emergency services is in Sligo (29 miles and a 30 minute drive away);

- within the Belcoo and Garrison ward the percentage of people who stated in 2001 that they provided unpaid care to family, friends, neighbours or others was 10 per cent in line with County Fermanagh as a whole. Within Tuam DED, 23 people provide unpaid personal help with just under half giving more than 15 hours per week;

- within the Belcoo and Garrison ward there were 117 lone pensioner households in 2001 amounting to 14 per cent of all households; the corresponding figure for County Fermanagh was 13 per cent which is slightly higher than the regional equivalent of 12.8 per cent. For confidentiality reasons this data is not available at DED level for Blacklion;

- in 2008 the average number of monthly unemployment-related benefits claimants, as a percentage of the working age population was 2.4 per cent in the Belcoo and Garrison ward which is broadly in line with the Northern Ireland figure; in 2006 6.3% of people were unemployed in the Tuam DED. Current unemployment figures are not available at the DED level in Ireland.

In short, Blacklion-Belcoo, together with their surrounding countryside, is more modest in regard to its population level compared with the Ards Peninsula. Most people have a primarily Catholic community background. However, there are broadly comparable insights to the two other case-study sites that can be
gleaned from the data revolving around constrained access to services, a high proportion of older people, a significant cohort of lone pensioner households, high levels of unpaid care and jobs in non-agricultural employment as a counterbalance to farming.

The Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group was established by a number of local older people in 2006 as a part of a wider active age initiative in County Leitrim and County Cavan. The core purpose of the group is to address social isolation and combat loneliness for older people through the organisation of social meetings and outings, card playing and singing sessions and information seminars. The group has also been involved in intergenerational programmes and Peace and Reconciliation Projects. The Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group meets weekly between September and June in the primary care centre in Blacklion. The Active Age Group draws its membership from both Blacklion and Belcoo, and their surrounding hinterland. The group has approximately 20 members with a regular weekly attendance of 14 to 20 people. The Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group receives support funding from the HSE, which is used to run the group’s activities.
William has lived on the Ards Peninsula for over 40 years and had commuted to work in Belfast up until retirement. Being heavily involved in local and voluntary organisations, he is very much aware of the social and economic challenges that surround his village and other similar communities across the Peninsula. William describes how the lack of facilities, low levels of local authority investment, geographic isolation and limited opportunities for employment combine to construct a deprived and neglected community.

“Employment is a major problem…These young people are still going to grow up to be older people. And quite a lot of the older people in the village haven't worked for years. They are working age but there are no jobs, so unemployment is a major problem…Until the beginning of this year we didn't even have a waste paper bin in the main streets...councillors drive through the village and just didn't see the neglect of the village. Paper lying strewn about the road…”

William also talks about how it is to this backdrop that his community, and a number of other local villages, were struggling with issues of integration and social cohesion. In part, this is due to the segregation of Protestant and Catholic populations across the Peninsula and insular attitudes within some communities.

“The other issue which is quite sensitive at times is that because of our polarisation here in the village, and all the villages in the peninsula – we have about ninety nine point five percent Protestant population – …for some of them [village residents] the world drops off when it gets to the thirty mile per hour signs!”

However, William highlights that Protestant and Catholic relations are only a small part of the integration issue. As with other rural communities, William's village and its hinterland is comprised of many distinct groups and, in this case, included commuters, different Protestant communities and people who moved to the area because of the Troubles. William talks about how the different cohorts have affected the villages and in turn how rural life has affected these groups of people.

“Way back in seventy one, seventy two, there was a massive cultural change in the village here; you had the old villagers who left their doors open and your next door neighbours would be borrowing bags of sugar. The doors were left open; the keys were left in doors. And then the government gave people the opportunity to move out of Belfast, mostly Belfast…and literally overnight this village went from something like about…five hundred residents to about fifteen hundred residents. A completely different culture. And the locals found that no longer could they leave their key in the door…and I think you may find them [the migrants of the Troubles] moving back. They are lost in the village now, because they can no longer nip out down the corner shop, the corner shop doesn't exist here.”

Names and details in this narrative have been changed to protect the identity of the participant.
4. Ageing in Rural Communities
4. Ageing in Rural Communities

The research findings are presented thematically. These themes are used to provide insight into the relationship between older people and rural places and the experiences, challenges and opportunities related to ageing in rural communities on the island of Ireland. While a number of the themes are specific to the individual case-study sites, the majority were evident in some form or another across all three locations. It is important to acknowledge from the outset that many of the themes are interconnected.

We will first identify what older people think about rural living, including what it means for participants to live in rural areas. We will then describe the nature of rural life for older people in these case-study sites. This will involve exploring research participants' experiences with the local service infrastructure; the social connections and support relationships available in these communities; and the context of the communities as derived from demographic structure, socio-political and socio-cultural histories and the current economic climate. Next, we will focus on the groups within each of the case-study sites. In particular, the impact of these organisations on older people and their communities will be described. Finally, findings on the contribution of older people in rural communities will be presented.

Rural Living: Meanings and Attachments

The connection to place, and in particular place attachment and the meanings associated with rural residency, emerged as a significant theme within the interviews and focus groups. In general, rural living was interpreted differently by older people indigenous to the communities and those who have come to live in these areas from outside.

Interviewees were asked what they understood the term rural to mean. While this question related to an academic interest in how people in Ireland and Northern Ireland define rurality, it also served to illustrate how participants' location histories and relationship with their communities influenced their conception of the rural. For participants who were native to these areas, rural often centred on the emotional aspects of place and what their communities meant personally, rather than a more objective interpretation of the physical and structural components. Participants described how rural for them was a construction of peace and quiet; community relationships; connections to birthplace; wide open spaces, and the psychological and emotional freedom that such spaces facilitated.

Yes, the area like all round. Well I've been living here all my life, I never moved anywhere. And ah, I mean I found it a very nice part of the country or the world to live in: quiet and peaceful. And we have very good neighbours. And ah, you know everything goes on grand.
(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

In Blacklion-Belcoo, this construction was also evident for participants who had moved into the area, but who were originally from similar rural communities elsewhere.

For participants who were originally from more urban communities, the meaning of rural focused more on the geographic and environmental characteristics of the places. This was most apparent for those individuals who had moved to these three communities later in life. When the person felt no connection to the locality or was not content with living in a rural area there was sometimes a problematisation of rural life. This tended to concentrate on the isolating aspects of the geographic landscape and the deficient service infrastructure. Distance, isolation, poor transport networks and unemployment were some of the characteristics highlighted.

Well, deprivation, employment or lack of employment. Lack of facilities and geographical isolation...we are 11 miles from the nearest big centre...another four miles away from a hospital...We don't have a local ambulance base...we are talking about the whole of the Peninsula.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

The meaning that participants associated with rural was intertwined with their attachments to their particular communities. Again, those individuals who were born and brought up in the three places spoke in depth about their connection to and fondness for their community. Several interviewees cited their native upbringing as an explanation for being tethered to these areas throughout their life course and described the communities as sites of much of their personal and life history. It is unsurprising, therefore, that a number of individuals considered the rural communities where they lived as being a part of their identity.
Oh I was born here, I was born near the holy well, about a mile up the road from here [interviewer name], and I don't think I was ever intended to be away from it.
(Source: Interview with female Belcoo resident)

Some participants had spent time away from their communities either having migrated abroad or to other parts of the island to live and work. These individuals spoke about how they were lonesome for their communities and particular aspects of their home places while they were away.

Participants spoke about how the characteristics of rural places appeared to naturally suit the preferences of older people. The majority of interviewees, regardless of having a native connection to the area or not, mentioned the strength of local relationships, scenery, and in particular the peace and quiet of rural places as being reasons for staying in the communities.

The wide open spaces and plenty of fresh air and you know lack of noise as we get older. I love the sound of silence now… more so than I did when I was younger. I love the peace and the quiet. It comes with advancement of your age, I think, that you can't stick the same rula bula that you did when you were younger. And I like that in the rural area.
(Source: Interview with female Belcoo resident)

For other participants, attachment to the area was embedded within the landscape of neighbours and community support that they had established and drew upon. The strength and resilience of these connections were obvious, with one participant from Blacklion-Belcoo highlighting that even in the face of personal adversity, and a turbulent political history, her attachment to her local community was unwavering. Participants who described a strong attachment to their home environment also contrasted the positive aspects of rural life with the negative aspects of urban living.

Well I don't know, I think the country's lovely like. Out in the country. Very congested areas in the cities. And there's great freedom here like for us you know and we're all a kind of a family all round you know.
(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

By contrast, there was evidence of a disconnect or a disassociation in some people's relationships with their communities. While many of the participants spoke about the congruence between rural place characteristics and their own preferences, others described a divergence. For instance, a small number of interviewees commented that sometimes rural places can be too peaceful and too quiet, indicating that the nature and appreciation of such attributes are very much relative.

Oh it is a nice place, a nice resting place cause you could rest all the time if you wanted (laughs). Then when you go to bed properly you won't rest at all. You can only sleep so much.
(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)

There's quiet. Then there's quiet. Quiet and then dead.
(Source: Interview with Female Ards resident)

Feelings of disconnection or 'this is not my place' were strongest amongst those who conceptualised rural as meaning disadvantaged and who had moved into these areas from more urban areas later in life. These participants tended to speak about the depleted infrastructure and the exclusionary characteristics of rural places.

So we came back here and the place was goin', my wife's place was goin'. Nobody there for it, so we took it over… (laughs) Well I tell you it doesn't mean nothing to me really. It's not too bad I can still drive. Now, but if I wasn't driving a car I'd be out of here. Yeah, I'd get out of here. So because, there's nothing you could do, you're there, stuck. But the car saves you.
(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)

Those from the Ards Peninsula particularly commented on these aspects of their communities. Many of the villages in the Ards had suffered badly from declining indigenous industries, such as fishing and farming, which had left large gaps in the economic landscape. Although tourism was a source of income for these communities, it was very much specific to each village and did not always reach full potential.

Participants from Letterfrack and the Ards mentioned the harshness and loneliness of winters in a rural
community. The extreme weather that affected Ireland and Northern Ireland during the 2009-2010 winter meant that all participants were acutely aware of the difficulties of poor weather conditions. Participants noted that in general there was little opportunity to socialise or to leave the house during wintertime.

There is nothing to do in the winter, that's the whole problem. If there were things on for people to go to in the winter, even if it was down in the church, they could organise something.
(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

The specificity of attachment to home-places was also underlined in interviews. One participant, who returned to Ireland after 40 years in England, commented that even when in close proximity to her original parish, she still did not feel like she was truly home. For those who used to live in urban areas, comparisons were drawn with life in towns and cities, lamenting what urban places had and rural places did not, winter or summer. This is in contrast to the urban-rural comparisons, outlined previously, made by those originally from rural areas.

There was always something going on [in Bangor], something to do or somewhere to go. Just because you are so far away and the bus routes are not good, you can’t go out for a meal or if you’re wanting to have a wee drink you couldn’t because the buses come home that early...You can’t socialise.
(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

**Community and Service Infrastructure: Rationalisation and Recession**

Economic decline, with respect to rationalisation and recession, did feature in the narrative of respondents. However, this was not in terms of connections between economic activity and market opportunities within the three case-study sites. As we will see below, people were much more forthcoming in making the connection between social services provision and health and well-being.

It is important to note that regardless of whether or not participants had formed a strong attachment to their communities, issues around service provision were significant in each of the sites. Participants referred to the general absence of a service infrastructure within rural areas. There were insufficient health and social care services, in terms of primary, acute and emergency care; poor retail services, with little access to cost-efficient supermarkets and market choice; insufficient banking services; absence of employment; and a lack of social and recreational facilities. For some of these services, there was an acknowledgement of the economies of scale argument as applied to rural communities. However, there was still an emphasis on the difficulty that the lack of provision creates for older people - especially with respect to health and well-being.

Letterfrack, Blacklion-Belcoo and the Ards were all sites of service depletion stemming from rural service rationalisation and, since 2008, recessionary cut-backs. Mobile banking services, post offices, primary health care clinics, home-help support and community development projects were either under threat or had already suffered depletion in each of the communities. Focus group participants highlighted the importance of routine person-led services that engage directly with older people in their own homes. Participants mentioned service representatives such as the post-man/woman and the local bus driver, as providing elements of social contact and health monitoring.

And like there was some talk at one stage...about putting post boxes [at the gates of houses] and if that happened like, that's an awful loss 'cause the post man calls to your door and he will take note if he thinks there's anything wrong.
(Source: Letterfrack focus group participant)

I had a massive heart attack and one of the bus men, the rural lift driver...opened the window and got in.
(Source: Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

Dereliction was also a problem for some of the case-study communities. Interviewees from the Ards spoke about the disrepair of a number of the villages on the Peninsula and the neglect of public facilities and greens spaces.

Ballywalter, over the last ten years, maybe twenty years, has been left to deteriorate very badly. Dilapidated
There’s one across the road there which is terrible looking. There are public toilets, which were closed off by the council further up here, on the same side as this building. Big, iron bars up the front of it. Weeds growing willy nilly. Terrible! And being allowed to deteriorate badly.

(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

One Ards participant highlighted that in recent years much of the public investment appeared to be directed disproportionately towards Catholic communities, such as Portaferry and Kircubbin. This was said to be an issue for many of the other villages and towns on the Peninsula, leading some participants to feel that their own communities had been forgotten.

The effects of the economic recession were evident across the three sites, exacerbating many of the existing challenges around service infrastructure. There was a sense among the Letterfrack focus group participants that the progress that had been made during Ireland’s economic boom had to a large extent been undone in recent years.

(Source: Female Letterfrack focus group participant)

We thought we were going very well in the past number of years, like we had a lot of services in and... we were saying you know you’ll get your chiropody and then somebody said the chiropody is gone... It’s the same in everything, it’s the same in schools, we were just building up, we were just getting there but now with the cut backs that’s where they seem to be cutting. I mean the chiropody only came once a month!

(Source: Female Letterfrack focus group participant)

Allocation of home-help support had been reduced in Blacklion, and in Belcoo the GP surgery was closed and relocated eight miles away. Although there was a GP surgery over the bridge in Blacklion, Northern Ireland residents are still required to travel the eight mile distance to the new health centre. Letterfrack participants noted that because budget cuts are so widespread, service depletion is often accepted and treated as a part of living in a rural area during a recession.

(Source: Female Letterfrack focus group participant)

On the other hand, a number of participants pointed to the difference between the localised recession that gave rise to massive emigration in the 1950s when they were working and the global nature of the current economic decline.

(Source: Interview with female Blacklion resident)

Transport

Transport was identified by the older people who took part in this research as being the most significant issue. Many of the problems around socialisation and service infrastructure were framed in the context of having an inadequate public transport system. Therefore, while issues around provision were certainly real, access to the available services was often the core challenge.

In Belcoo, people could avail of a subsidised rural lift scheme, which would call to their homes at a prearranged time and drop them to their desired destination. Participants praised the service, but because the subsidy is not available for travelling to a group, the participants did state it could sometimes be
expensive; it was also restrictive, given that the drivers were not insured to travel over the border. A similar scheme was available for Blacklion residents, but was not subsidised and therefore not widely used. For the most part, public transport in each of the three communities served the village centres, but did not connect to the surrounding rural environs. Participants highlighted that even when the public bus route suited their needs, the times and frequency of the bus rarely did.

*We don't have a very good transport system. Now, I thought I'd come down today from Greyabbey by bus. I could have got a bus down in time, but couldn't get one back.*
(Source: Female Ards focus group participant)

Interviewees in the Ards described some variation in the quality of the transport system across the Peninsula, but nevertheless described the network connections between the different communities as being insufficient.

The impact of the lack of transport was evident at a number of levels. For older people living in the countryside, the potential for isolation and disconnection from the immediate and wider community was enhanced. Without transport, travel to friends and relatives was limited leading to poor social connectedness. This was especially true for people who depended on others to drive them or no longer had access to private transport.

*...well when my husband was alive we done things different. Because he had the car, he drove the car and we visited his people and we visited ours, which are in the parish but not right on the road. But it was completely different when he went [died].*
(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

Although concerns were primarily related to the infrequency of the buses and the restrictiveness of the bus routes, issues around the age-friendliness of public transport were also apparent.

*It's the timing of the bus. The bus passes my door but you could be marooned... as you get older you can't, well I can't walk except with a stick. I can't walk and carry things. So if you need to go to town for something, some specific shopping of some kind and it was heavy, you just couldn't carry it that distance.*
(Source: Female Ards focus group participant)

When attempting to access health services, transport problems took on additional weight. Participants spoke about the cost of hiring taxis to travel to hospital and clinic appointments. People were reluctant to request a lift from neighbours unless in an emergency. This was true whether people had lived in the place all their life or had come in to the area from outside. While transport to primary and acute care was problematic, it was these emergency cases that were of most concern. To the dismay of focus group participants in the Ards, deficient emergency transport was again tacitly accepted as part of the realities of living in the countryside by the authorities.

*...And every time you call them [emergency services], no matter who you are and what time it is, you still get the same thing. 'What is wrong?'; 'Can you get this, can you do that there?' They don't come out as quick as they are supposed to come out. And ... I took a heart attack and the doctor was sitting beside me. He gave me a tablet and he said, 'Have you got a headache with that'. I said, 'Yes'. He said, 'You'll have to get up the road'. I said, 'Right', and he said, 'If I call an ambulance it would take an hour there and an hour back'. He says, 'Have you anybody that could take you by car?'. Lucky enough my daughter was at home who got me up and if she hadn't been at home, there was nobody.*
(Source: Male Ards focus group participant)

Participants stated that it wasn't just the transport itself that was an issue, but it was also the quality and the nature of the road networks that have to be travelled in order to access emergency services.

*My wife, before she died, took ill down here and we had to get the ambulance out. And the state of the roads was terrible. And the ambulance crew in the back of the thing apologised to my wife at the way she was having to be transported down.*
(Source: Male Ards focus group participant)
Changing Dynamics

Interview and focus group participants described rural areas as sites of change – not just in terms of differences between the past and present, but in terms of an on-going process of transformation. Industrial, demographic and social changes have combined to influence the dynamics of rural life in Letterfrack, Blacklion-Belcoo and the Ards. A number of interviewees mentioned the former subsistence lifestyle of rural areas when they were growing up and the requirement to ensure an adequate supply of food from the land and livestock. This was especially emphasised by Letterfrack residents.

But it’s different; it’s a changed rural area now. You see one time, of course now they had to do it, one time they sowed an awful lot of potatoes and vegetables. And they had their own milk, butter. But that’s all gone. They don’t do anything like that anymore. Everything is bought, even the potatoes. Like it’s hard to believe it.
(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)

The variable and unreliable nature of this existence was illustrated through interviewees’ accounts of the harshness of rural living for families with only basic provisions. In this respect, the level of technology and affluence in today’s society was credited with securing an improved standard of living for rural people.

...I mean years ago times were hard and poor, rearing the children, different now really. I mean there’s more of everything now like since we got electricity and all that sure. You know we’re set, it brought us up, wonderful really.
(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

However, there was an awareness that with such advancement, agricultural, marine and manufacturing production were declining in favour of a shift towards more service-orientated urban-based enterprises. As a consequence, the quantity and quality of work available in rural areas had changed and a large part of rural life had been transformed.

And unfortunately, on a daily basis, we are losing quite a bit of that rural life. Because the fishing industry has gone, more or less, belly up. Farming, well it’s a constant struggle for farmers, you know.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

For those of working age, travelling to the towns and cities was a growing feature of some of these rural areas, as one Ards interviewee describes:

Well if you want to work you have to commute. That road in the morning everybody is going up and in the evening everybody is coming down it whether you live in Kircubbin, Portaferry or Portavogie, wherever. Everybody has to do it, including myself.
(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

The demographic composition of the three communities had also changed. In addition to the native local population, older retirees from other parts of Ireland and Northern Ireland, returned Irish migrants from the UK and the US, and foreign national labour migrants were now resident within each of the areas.

There are a lot of other people who’ve moved in, over the last ten years I’d say, who are English. Am, well you have mixed, you know English and Polish and what have you. So I think now in the latter years you have a diversity of obviously different religions.
(Source: Interview with female Belcoo resident)

In addition, commuter populations had relocated to rural areas during the property boom to avail of cheaper housing and now represented a significant proportion of the rural population living in reasonably close proximity to cities. Given its proximity to Belfast and other large sites of employment, commuter housing was particularly evident in parts of the Ards Peninsula.

Well, we have a lot of private housing estates, well two or three private housing estates. Mostly commuters who found the prices down here a lot cheaper than the houses closer to the city. A lot of them don’t stay, they move in...buy a house reasonably cheap and then move back again.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

With coastal views and scenic villages, the Ards has also become a popular retirement destination for older people from outside the area, particularly from Belfast and other accessible urban centres. While commuter and retiree migration are now the most common sources of population increase in the Ards, the Troubles had propelled large numbers of people to move from...
4. Ageing in Rural Communities

affected areas to the Peninsula. Significant proportions of this group still remain today. Finally, even though population diversity was apparent in Letterfrack, Blacklion-Belcoo and Ards, there was still an emphasis on the demographic ageing structure within the communities and the implications that this may have for health and community provisions.

My fear would be not having enough facilities for health down where we are - the people that are here are all scattered all out. We’re going to have a village within a village of concentrated older people and that would be my one fear.

(Source: Male Ards focus group participant)

Participants, particularly those who were native to rural communities, spoke about the changes to social relationships and interpersonal connections in rural areas. Several interviewees noted that people no longer seemed to call to each other’s homes. Social visiting had been a major part of the social and cultural fabric of the three sites. While often just a casual social call, these visits could in other instances involve larger group elements of communal socialisation, story telling, recitation and music. For many, the advent of television and its proliferation in the family home was the principal reason for the decrease in social visiting. Regardless of the root cause, the loss of this aspect of rural life and the social company that visiting provided was lamented by participants.

It is, it is, isolated now I could say around here like because well I see plenty passing but I could be here and I could be alone. Nobody visits now really. Visiting days have stopped now since television and all that came in (laughs)… ‘Twas lovely when people visited you and you had the cup of tea and the chat. You know ‘twas great company.

(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

In combination with the low population densities and the isolating geographies of some of these rural areas, these communities could be very lonely places. This is described by one participant from Letterfrack who also highlights the compounding effect of winter.

Sure you don’t, you don’t hardly see a sinner soul at the moment. Sometimes a guy comes in, next thing you mightn’t see him again for a week. But I don’t mind this time of year. But wintertime yes I would mind.

(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)

As a result, participants described how the daily social contacts of some rural dwelling older people were based on intermittent social interactions and dependent on periodic, but fleeting, conversations stemming from person-led service delivery.

Community Networks: Support and Belonging

Despite the apparent decline of visiting within the rural communities included in this study, the majority of research participants still felt connected to their communities and described informal support networks as a strong component within these areas. Interviewees and focus group participants described how they felt a connectedness to their community through these networks, helping to foster a sense of belonging amongst the older residents and in some cases a perception of social unity within their locality. The structure and extent of the networks were not necessarily bounded by the borders of participants’ immediate localities. Instead they sometimes reflected the accumulated interpersonal connections that threaded a person’s life course and that spanned the surrounding hinterland and communities.

Do you understand me now, like if you’re sick or sore in hospital for instance, you have them from Renvyle you have them even from Clifden, they’ll come to see you. Once they know you, you know this sort of way, there’s always a great unity between us.

(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

From participants’ accounts, it was apparent that the networks provided emotional and practical support for older residents within the three sites. A number of participants described neighbours and friends in the locality as a dependable source of assistance during periods of ill health and infirmity. Without such support there was a sense that the independence of some older people within the community would not be sustainable.

Well the community, the neighbours here, they’re all very good to me; for I was fairly bad. They used to come… Oh they all ask did I want anything done? Yeah, they’d cut a
informal support networks appeared to be operational even for individuals who were not natives to the three areas. Participants noted the strength of connections between rural dwelling people and the willingness of country neighbours to watch out and care for each other.

I think in the country the people are always looking out for you and keeping an eye out for you. I had a man come yesterday and he said, oh, his wife passed and he hasn't found his feet yet. He said the cat was hungry and we fed her. He said, 'Were you away?' I said, 'Oh yeah, I was away all week'. But they missed me!

(Source: Interview with female Blacklion resident)

In a lot of cases it was the knowledge that someone was there to help that seemed to be of most importance for older participants. It not only provided people with the feeling of being supported but also the sense that people were concerned about them and cared for them as members of the community.

A small number of interviewees who had moved into rural areas described a more disconnected, introverted community. These individuals did not feel that they were a part of the local network of neighbours and community members. In most cases, this disassociation stemmed from the initial difficulties in integration that were encountered when they first moved to the area. Consequently, participants were less likely to garner the same sense of belonging or unity from their communities.

I don't think you would ever get attached to this place to be honest with you. People seem to hide. There are things out there for them, but they won't claim anything. They're not coming out to claim anything, they're just sitting in their house you know.

(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

Another individual, who was native to the Blacklion-Belcoo region, remarked that support from some neighbours was only evident when they paid their final respects at a person's funeral; suggesting that community connections can sometimes lack practical intervention and occur only as a part of social and religious traditions.

Well they'd be all at the funeral alright, but you'd not see too many beforehand!

(Source: Female Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

For the most part though, research participants praised the readiness of their rural neighbours to provide help and support when it was required. While there was an acceptance that with today's work-life balance people cannot always be attentive, participants seemed confident that members of their community would be available when they were needed.

I suppose they're so busy with their own lives that they haven't time to be running in and out to see you. But they would always make you aware, 'Don't hesitate, tell me and I'll be there'. That goes for a lot of my neighbours.

(Source: Female Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

Layers of Stratification

In the previous two sections reference was made to the interpersonal connections within rural communities and the diverse demographic composition of local populations. We now need to examine the intersection of these two aspects of rural life in more depth. The communities appeared to be stratified according to birthplace, reason for living in an area, length of time living in an area, and religious and cultural factors. This reflects the variety of sub-groups residing in the rural communities. The diverse rural population includes those who lived in the communities their entire lives, older retirees, commuters, returned emigrants and foreign national labour migrants. In some cases the stratification resulted in tensions between the various sub-groups, whereas in other cases it simply indicated a layered population structure that contributed to growing population diversity.

A number of participants mentioned the emergence of new migrant communities and how this form of diversity influenced their perceptions of where they lived. The increase in the number of foreign nationals was held in contrast to the perceived ethnic homogeneity of their rural area in the past. Some
participants found it difficult to adjust to the cultural and ethnic changes that were occurring in their community and particularly in the local service and hospitality sector. Other participants were critical of the attitudes of some local residents towards foreign national labour migrants, especially considering Ireland’s past and recent history of emigration. These participants were uncomfortable with the intolerance exhibited by some of the community.

What would they do if it was said [negative comments] to me or said to the ones that were saying it?
(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)

Several participants talked about how some native residents perceive a clear distinction between those who were born in the community and those who were not. This was even apparent to those individuals who had spent most of their lives in these areas; suggesting a relativity of rurality and a categorisation of ‘rural’ and ‘real rural’ people.

Male Participant: Depends on people who lived here before you, whether you’re rural or not. Different people turned up here looking for some part of Portaferry and I was going over to tell them, whoever it was, and someone from Portaferry said, ‘He doesn’t live here’.

Female Participant: Forty odd years!
(Source: Ards focus group participants)

For Blacklion-Belcoo and the Ards, socio-political histories and the relatively strong native Catholic and Protestant populations introduced additional community dynamics. In Blacklion-Belcoo, participants spoke about the relationships between Protestant and Catholic communities as being reasonably strong – considering when these relationships would have evolved and the various tensions surrounding them.

I’m still very good friends with Protestants and I work with them… I suppose one can’t help noticing things but then you give up and say I’ve got this far. I’m not going to, I’m not going to argue with them anymore… Just let it be.
(Source: Interview with female Belcoo resident)

The particular demographic composition of the Ards accentuated the stratification evident within its population. The native Catholic and Protestant cohorts, the migrants from areas affected by the Troubles, the sizeable commuter population and the substantial number of older retirees, confounded issues of fragmentation. In some cases the differences across population sub-groups established subtle cultural distinctions across the villages in the Ards.

It’s so funny because Kircubbin [predominantly Catholic] and Greyabbey [predominantly Protestant] are so different. Kircubbin always reminds me of a southern village. I don’t know why I say that, but it’s just sort of — the double parking at the side of the road — everything is more casual. Whereas, as I say, we reckon that Greyabbey is more like a little English village.
(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

In other cases, it was clear that having multiple sub-groups within small communities gave rise to a complex set of interactions and, in some instances, tensions between groups. This in turn was suggested to have implications for community and civic engagement.

… a big lot of the population in this village, particularly the older population, are still holding on to the old ideas of ‘I can spot a Catholic at sixty yards, because of the width of his eyes.’ That’s the mentality we are dealing with. In the early part of the Troubles, we had a big movement down from the likes of Belfast — housing estates were developed. Now, you don’t have the same problem… because most of the people that live in these private housing estates are commuters. They don’t really play a major part in the village.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

Attempts to address issues of social cohesion and integration were sometimes met with indifference on the part of native and more tenured community residents.

They [native residents] always stand back… We need to try and involve the new people that are coming to the village and create a different atmosphere instead of thinking we will just stay the way we are because nobody seems to want to bother.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)
Participants from the Ards did state that there are differences among villages on the Peninsula with respect to integration and cross-community relations.

...we have a good reputation, where we've always got on very well with all our neighbours. We interact with them [the Catholic community] a lot. Both sides and we've always got on very well. Whereas [another village] was a bit sectarian, as you would have seen from all the painting.
(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

The complexity of some of these communities is not just rooted in between-group differences. Instead, issues surrounding community relations can be a product of, and further exacerbated by, within-group tensions. As one older man notes, these tensions can occur between those who are typically not viewed as being in opposition to each other.

The Churches [different Protestant congregations] have their own halls. And never the twain will meet. We all suffer under this misapprehension that the main difficulties in this country is Protestant/Catholic - it’s not - it’s Protestant.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

Finally, the lack of service infrastructure, and particularly a suitable transportation network, was cited as sustaining the segregation between village communities on the Ards Peninsula. The potential for an integrated and non-separatist set of communities was essentially hampered by the absence of opportunities and a means for engagement.

All those villages [Portavogie, Ballyhalbert, Portaferry, Kircubbin] are separate and to one degree or another, polarised, because of lack of transportation – public transportation. So, they very seldom meet.
(Source: Interview with male Ards resident)

The Troubles

The Troubles emerged as a significant theme within the research sites in Northern Ireland. Previously in this research, we have seen how this period of conflict served as a determinant of outward migration from distressed urban centres to the Ards Peninsula. In this section we will focus on the Troubles as a period of time that impacted on the past experiences of the current generation of older people and continues to influence their daily lives in a rural community. The majority of information on direct experiences of the Troubles stems from the focus group and interviews with participants from the cross-border community of Blacklion-Belcoo.

During the Troubles, participants actively avoided places, typically the larger towns that were affected or more likely to be affected by sectarian activity. For those Catholic residents living in Blacklion, there was a reluctance to travel over the border and a concern that they would somehow become involved or implicated in the actions of paramilitaries.

I wouldn't go to Enniskillen or even go to Belcoo, we stayed over on my side...You minded your own business. Didn't mention it. There was quite a few IRA people around us, you didn't want to get involved...You never knew, you'd be pulled in and told to open up the boot.
(Source: Interview with female Blacklion resident)

In this way, the Troubles served to intensify the potential for rural isolation amongst people living on both sides of the border. This period of hostilities effectively enhanced the problems surrounding service provision and access. Avoiding larger urban centres meant that the majority of provisions had to be gathered from the immediate community.

Even the people in Belcoo now, am do you know, they would be a bit reluctant to go in [to Enniskillen] because of the Troubles. They would, and I think that kept a lot of people in their homes, you know as opposed to going into town.
(Source: Interview with female Blacklion resident)

On some occasions, events associated with the Troubles occurred in very close proximity to the residents of Blacklion and Belcoo and brought a realisation for participants that they were living amidst terrorist and
army activities. Nevertheless, it was clear from interviewees' accounts that daily life in these rural communities had to, and still did, continue.

_I had a few guards staying and one of them was from Mayo… he says… ‘There’s a bomb in the village’, and I said, ‘Och, pull the other one’. He said, ‘There’s a bomb just out there in the village and it’s supposed to go off.’ It sunk in then… A controlled explosion. And when I saw the havoc… I’d been terribly lucky and I said [to the guards], when you are ready I’ll have something for tea for you… Well, you sort of accepted it… You just got on with your life, you couldn’t say live in constant fear._

(Source: Interview with female Blacklion resident)

Some participants experienced a sense of loss. This arose less from the events of the Troubles, than the long-term segregation of Blacklion from Belcoo by the North/South border and the effect that the border had on the relationship between the two villages. One participant describes this loss in terms of the cost to social and historical culture:

_My idea, my opinion, that in 1920 we [the Belcoo Catholic community] lost our culture. Do you understand me, because we were fed culture from England into the North… We were fed in the education system, in the media all geared towards more or less towards Britain… It’s very hard to claim it [culture] back._

(Source: Female Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

Participants described their communities as still being affected by this period of unrest. Identifiable marks of the Troubles are evident on the aesthetic of the Blacklion and Belcoo landscape, with a decommissioned army barracks standing in the centre of Belcoo village.

_Figure 5: Belcoo Police Barracks_

Participants described their communities as still being affected by this period of unrest. Identifiable marks of the Troubles are evident on the aesthetic of the Blacklion and Belcoo landscape, with a decommissioned army barracks standing in the centre of Belcoo village.

_Figure 5: Belcoo Police Barracks_

Yet, participants also highlighted that people recognise that there is a need to move on from this period and to engage in developing cross-community relations and community capacity.

_I know old habits die hard and some people [find it] very hard to come to terms with what has happened and they are quite suspicious of people… But I think people are prepared now to take the opportunity of coming together._

(Source: Interview with female Belcoo resident)

Despite the Troubles, the atmosphere in and across Blacklion-Belcoo was described as relaxed and warm. People highlighted that even during the Troubles there was a sense of camaraderie between the two villages which has been strengthened in recent years. One of the unanticipated outcomes of the end of the Troubles is the vulnerability that older residents feel...
because of the decommissioning of the security and border posts. Participants stated that there had been a dramatic increase in the number of break-ins and burglaries of older people’s homes on both sides of the border. In many cases, the perpetrators would cross over the border to commit the crimes and travel back over the border to escape pursuit by the relevant police force. As a consequence, older people in Blacklion-Belcoo described feeling personally more secure during the Troubles.

Since things settled down, the Troubles, they [the police forces on both sides of the border] were all moved out...Well we were [safer] because they were always on the road, they were always on the back road.

(Source: Female Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

The Impact of Groups Working with and for Older People
This section will explore the impact of groups working with and for older people within each of the community case-study sites. The previous sections have served to provide an outline of the context within which these groups operate, including the relationship between the case-study participants and their communities; the lack of service infrastructure in these areas; the changing nature of these communities; the diversity of their population; and the social and cultural dynamics that impact on local cohesion.

There are clear differences in the scope and the scale of each of the organisations covered by this research. FORUM in Letterfrack possesses a more formalised professional structure targeting broad social and economic disadvantage in the area. By contrast, the groups in Blacklion-Belcoo and the Ards have evolved from a more organic community base and have more targeted objectives. The Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age group aims specifically to address older people’s social isolation. The groups in the Ards seek to provide opportunities for older people to socialise and to engage in various community activities, but are more diffuse in terms of their impact. Thus, in practical terms the organisations work differently and mean different things in the different places. However, despite such variation, our fieldwork highlighted the crucial contribution made by the various groups to the life of each community.

In Letterfrack, FORUM’s work in the area of social care augmented and built upon the existing formal and informal infrastructure in the local area, enhancing service and community capacity and creating a coherent voice for older adult service users. This was the case despite that fact that some interviewees were not always aware of FORUM’s role in service provision. That said, participants spoke about the multiplicity of FORUM’s role within the local community and its functions as coordinator, mediator and provider. Focus group participants especially credited its advocate activities with negotiating and securing services for the locality.

Female Participant 1: FORUM fought, didn’t it [female participant 2] for everything for this area?

Female Participant 2: Yeah, you fought and you fought and you fought for it and the marvellous thing about FORUM was that what we never had … people coming out to us. We had the Health Board; we had the County Council; we had these people coming out, sitting at meetings here, hearing us local people, the volunteers, hearing us saying what we wanted and therefore they got to know us and they could put a face on us and we could put a face on them. And then we began to get the services…

(Source: Female Letterfrack focus group participants)

To an extent, the other groups that participated in this research (Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age and a number of the Ards community groups) provided similar services with respect to information provision and advocating for local service infrastructure and the rights and entitlements of older residents. In this manner all of the organisations across the three sites sought to empower older people within their own communities.

…we wouldn’t be afraid now when elections come to tell them what we think of them and things like that. We’d have more confidence I’d say to talk out, say what we have to!

(Source: Female Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

Participants spoke about how all of the groups helped to encourage participation within the localities. Individuals who were somewhat disconnected from the area or who were living alone in remote areas at risk from isolation and social exclusion were especially targeted. Essentially, these organisations provided those
without connections to the community, with a means to link with their surrounding neighbours and places. A returned Irish emigrant residing in the rural hinterland of Letterfrack describes the importance of a simple weekly outing organised by FORUM:

'It [FORUM lunch club] does a lot really, because I go out and I have lunch that day and I meet all these people. We have a chat and we have a game of bingo and a game of cards or do some exercises...you get to know people and get friendly with them. You know, I'd look forward to the chat once a week...Because if I didn't go out, it'd be a very lonely life here.'

(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

The significance of these groups was echoed across all three communities. Interviewees and focus group participants felt that there were direct health and well-being benefits associated with participation. Participants specifically mentioned the positive impact of communal activity and social engagement on fellow members who had experienced traumatic circumstances.

Some of the groups, particularly FORUM and the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age group, had organised intergenerational projects. While these projects were typically focused on knowledge transfers between older people and primary or post-primary school pupils, they were generally credited with fostering solidarity between the generations.

Well it does help us in dealing with young people. We have firsthand knowledge of interacting with those children or we call them children, you know in that school up there, and that can only be good.

(Source: Female Blacklion-Belcoo focus group participant)

Intergenerational programmes were also found to help develop a longer-term connection with the younger cohorts of the community.

And I mean some of them, they're older now and they have nearly finished school, and one child came up to me in the church and said, you know, 'Hello [participant's name], how are you getting on?' (laughs).

(Source: Female Letterfrack focus group participant)

There was evidence to suggest that these organisations helped to nurture a sense of cohesion within fragmented and stratified communities. Many of the organisations attempted to bring the various sub-groups within a community's population together. In Letterfrack this meant encouraging participation amongst both native and new members of the community, while in Blacklion-Belcoo and the Ards it also referred to building cross-community relations with Catholic and Protestant residents.

Oh yes, it brings everybody together. It's cross-community. There used to be funding for those things. It's inclusive, bringing people together from different religions and different abilities...Nobody feels left out that I can see.

(Source: Interview with female Ards resident)

FORUM in Letterfrack, the Active Age Group in Blacklion-Belcoo, and the variety of groups in the Ards, ultimately constructed pathways for engagement for older people in rural community life; whether this was in terms of social integration and engagement or with respect to the utilisation of community services. It was clear from the research that these organisations had influenced the communities within which they are embedded. However, it is the impact of these groups on individual well-being that needs to be principally considered.

It's the social contact and the way that your mind is broadened...cause in the village of Belcoo, it's not very big, there's no big contact with people apart from the church or the chapel, there's no drama going on or dancing (laughs), you'd have to go to the pub. Am, but we get that in Active Age and it has opened up for me a wonderful life at 82 which I never expected, [interviewer name], but it just pulled me right up by the shoelaces, it said 'Right you can do it'.

(Source: Interview with female Belcoo resident)

Interview and focus group participants did highlight a number of barriers and future limitations that could influence the sustainability and future development of these organisations. These include: funding, recruiting new members and encouraging people to take on responsibility.
The importance of funding was mentioned by all participants. In the case of FORUM, participants were concerned that government funding would be reduced as a part of recessionary cutbacks. While there was a hope that this would not happen, people recognised the unstable economic climate and that funding for related local services, such as chiropody, had already been withdrawn. For the Blacklion-Belcoo active age group, the HSE funding was viewed as a crucial support. The group in Blacklion-Belcoo was held in contrast to other active age groups just over the border, which did not have funding and as a result were not able to maintain the same level of prominence and activity in their community. Similarly, the various groups in the Ards did not receive steady funding. Participants underlined the importance of consistent financial resources for these organisations if they are to sustain their activities into the future.

Issues around participation and membership were also raised in the focus groups and interviews. This was at a number of levels. Firstly, participants described the difficulty in encouraging participation of new members. In part, the lack of new membership was viewed as being a reflection of the stratification within some of the community populations and of the social stigma that was perceived to be associated with older adult organisations. Problems in encouraging men to attend such groups also led some individuals to think that there was a gender difference with respect to participation.

Women tend to be the ‘joiners’, men, no matter what you do, I find it very difficult to get them to join anything. I am involved with a senior citizens group in Bangor and we run programmes monthly and I run programmes that should be of interest to men as well, but can I get the men to come? Very few.

(Source: Female Ards focus group participant)

Other participants felt that men’s reluctance to join such groups was related to the suitability of the organised events and groups.

Female participant 1: Men will always find a way to the pub… (laughter) Female participant 2:…Yeah, am, there isn’t really I suppose a lot and as for men; the men apart from going to the pub, the men have no organised event

(Source: Female Letterfrack focus group participants)

Secondly, the difficulty in recruiting volunteers and in encouraging people to take on organisational and leadership responsibilities was highlighted. Participants engaged in running organisations stated that rotating positions on group committees was not always feasible given the lack of interest in taking on additional responsibility. Finally, participants from Blacklion-Belcoo and the Ards noted that professional assistance in the form of paid positions would be helpful for the development of the organisations.

The Participation and Contribution of Older People

The majority of older people in this research were actively engaged with their local communities in one form or another. In most cases, participants from Blacklion-Belcoo, the Ards and Letterfrack were actively involved in the groups, assisting in their organisation and development. In addition, the majority of these participants acted as volunteers for a range of other community organisations that contributed to the vibrancy of rural community life. This encompassed charitable groups, church organisations, historical societies and activity groups. Aside from these formal contributions, older participants were also engaged in a range of informal activities, including babysitting and assisting more dependent relatives and neighbours.

For other participants, typically older old individuals, general health, mobility and energy levels prevented or impinged upon their capacity to contribute to their communities and to participate within their locality.

Ah no, I’m quiet happy now the way I am. You see I’m not able you see…I wouldn’t be able to take part as much now at my age, you know.

(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)

Even in circumstances where active participation in community groups was constrained by an individual’s health status, research participants continued to contribute to their communities in a variety of ways. Several participants spoke about their economic contribution to the local area and to the various businesses and shops in the vicinity. They also described their utilisation of the services and facilities provided in the locality. Participants viewed their contribution in terms of sustaining the local
community and in providing one more consumer/user to justify the presence of the statutory funded infrastructure.

...going to Mass and things like that, that's all I do really... Yeah, that's how I support the club, you know by going to it. You have your meal there, you buy your meal and all that, like you contribute that way to both of them [club and community].
(Source: Interview with female Letterfrack resident)

A strong element of reciprocity emerged from the discussion around contributing to the community. Volunteering and making a contribution was not viewed as a simple one-way community role. Participants spoke about the nature of voluntary activity and the benefits that they in turn received from making the contribution; either from the activity of volunteering itself or from the reciprocal actions of other members of the community. Individuals who were currently engaged in community activity perceived their contribution as helping themselves as much as helping others.

Participants who were no longer able to volunteer actively, described how their previous contribution to the locality motivated reciprocation from current members of the community. This was exemplified by an older woman from Blacklion who had been instrumental in establishing voluntary activities and community groups in the area:

Sure, but I got a lot out of it [volunteering] as well. And nowadays, seeing as I'm not really able you know, people are very good to me. It's pay back time! I am getting pay back now!
(Source: Interview with female Blacklion resident)

An older man living outside Letterfrack who had provided transport to neighbours and friends described similar rewards:

Sure I was driving the car up to lately. I used to bring people to mass (laughs)...I was very active...And if they were stuck for a lift, I'd bring them...I leave that to younger people [now] (laughs). Now they call to me.
(Source: Interview with male Letterfrack resident)
Participants recognised the need to make an effort within their own rural localities. This referred to mixing with other people socially and to becoming engaged in community activities. Combating isolation and social exclusion was viewed as a mutual process that although sometimes needs to be led by the community also requires the older person to take a more active role.

Well I think if you are interested, you have to, you can get involved with other groups. You do need to do that as you are getting older. You have to make the effort to go out and join things.
(Source: Female Ards focus group participant)

The need to make an effort also referred to undertaking a civic responsibility in the locality. A number of participants highlighted the apparent lack of willingness of some people to become active citizens. Even with today’s level of work participation, older individuals felt that it was the civic duty of local residents to assist in running and developing the community.

I just think the people today aren’t willing to take responsibility. I worked, but I got my children looked after and my mother, I had an invalid mother, four dogs and a full-time teaching career and I still did things. But I think that again, whenever you think of young women now today; ‘I’m working and I can’t do anything else,’ but we all did.
(Source: Female Ards focus group participant)

However, interview and focus group participants did state that volunteering and making a contribution did not appear to be as valued as it should. Participants in this research described how government departments and policy makers failed to recognise the efforts of older people to support and contribute to their own communities.

Well, if you hadn’t the volunteers you’d be dead, that’s it. If people didn’t volunteer, the authorities, as you call it, well they are useless as far as transport, hospitals, everything… You go to politicians and nobody does anything for you. It’s the older people that’s fighting all the time.
(Source: Male Ards focus group participant)

Participants were disappointed that there appeared to be little worth placed on the time and financial investment that older volunteers were making to rural areas. They were also disappointed that the financial saving to the state did not appear to be acknowledged or appreciated. Without such contributions, it was felt that these communities would certainly have suffered.

I have friends, several friends, who do volunteer driving and they are saving the government an enormous amount. I mean, they get a petrol allowance, but for the time that they spend and the wear and tear of their car, driving kids to school – for special needs children. Taking people to hospital appointments, I mean, it’s a valuable service.
(Source: Female Ards focus group participant)
Rural Narratives: Mary

“It’s the best thing that ever happened to me…”

Mary was born and reared in the Blacklion-Belcoo area and although she had spent several years working away from home, she has lived in and around these villages for most of her life. Mary loves her home and loves her community. She has been, from an early age, always engaged in community life: assisting in her local parish activities; and helping in voluntary organisations. In some form or another, Mary has continued to participate in these activities in retirement and into her 80s. However, she talks not about her contribution to the community, but the contribution of the community and of volunteering to her well-being and her sense of self.

“I was always involved, up to there [points to the top of her head] in parish work…and those [voluntary activities] have brought people to me. All the time, people are coming, coming, coming all the time… I don’t have to go away out to Manorhamilton or Sligo or wherever to meet people. They’re coming here… And I’m lucky in that respect so what I do voluntarily comes back a hundred fold.”

Mary also describes what the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group means to her and how it is now a significant part of her community and social life. She outlines how the group had re-energised her in recent years and encouraged her to continue her participation in the locality. But for Mary, there is a concern that the current economic climate could impact on the future of the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group and threaten the contribution that the group makes to the lives of older people in the area.

“But I’m so glad. It’s [the Blacklion-Belcoo Active Age Group] the best thing that ever happened to me… But I wouldn’t be surprised with the climate that’s in it at the minute…but there’s less and less money in the coffers for these things. It’s getting less and less and less and…I wouldn’t be surprised if it comes to the stage where we’ll only receive the bare minimum…Oh I think it would be a loss now, I hope it doesn’t fold up.”

Regardless of the possibilities, however, Mary highlights that it will be the individual members who will ultimately decide, through their participation and their commitment, if the group would continue to meet and develop.

“You know really and truly if you’ve a mind to do a thing, you get out [to participate] if it’s doing you good and maybe you might say I’ll go and keep up the club. But people are not always civic minded you know, it’s hard to know.”

Names and details in this narrative have been changed to protect the identity of the participant.
5. Convergence, Divergence and Lessons for Research and Policy
There is a tendency for cumulative cycles of decline to occur in rural areas: poor employment opportunities lead to out-migration which in turn leads to a reduction in population, unbalanced age structures and falling demand, which reinforces the poor employment potential of the area. This is quickly followed by a reduction in health and social services provision that threatens the sustainability of human and social capital and the very community itself. Thus may begin a cycle of deprivation incorporating: mobility, isolation, income, health, opportunity and accessibility. It is now largely taken for granted that health and social services provision in rural areas cannot be provided to the same level as in urban areas due to economies of scale arguments. Optimality with respect of provision is usually measured in efficiency terms only, without reference to the distributional consequences of different policies, particularly for older people living in rural areas. It is particularly challenging, therefore, to develop an understanding of the lives of older people living in rural areas where small, dispersed populations mean that traditional models of care and support may not be feasible or appropriate.

This research is a preliminary exploration of rural life for older people on the island of Ireland. There was no hypothesis to be tested, no theory to be examined, simply a desire to map out the experiences of older people in three selected areas on both sides of the border. In that way it is perhaps appropriate to view this work as the basis for a more substantial longer-term HARC project on understanding rural life for older people. The absence of a coherent body of research dedicated to the analysis of older people living in rural areas made it imperative that some preliminary groundwork was done focusing on the real lives and experiences of older people in rural settings. In doing so, we hoped to catch some glimpse of convergence and divergence across communities which would allow some lessons to be learned for future research and policy.

It is tempting to see rural areas in static terms, where populations age in a uniform way leading to a gradual shift in age structure over time through emigration of younger generations as economic opportunities decline. This is in contrast to the dynamic nature of ageing in urban areas, to where younger cohorts move in search of work and opportunities which are no longer available in rural areas. Like all stereotypes, there is an element of truth in both of these statements. Rural communities typically contain higher percentages of older people than are found in urban areas. But this fact tends to hide the diversity of the ageing experience in rural areas and the diversity of the very communities themselves. Certainly the majority of older people living in rural areas were likely born there and will even more likely remain there until they die. There are, however, dynamic elements to population change at older ages in rural areas. Some older people move into rural areas from urban areas in search of a different life in retirement than they experienced during their working life, attracted by a perceived slower pace of life, aesthetics or simply a desire for change. These people have no historical attachment to either rural spaces or the communities that inhabit them. In contrast, there is another group of inward migrants who do have historical attachment to rural areas and it is for that very reason that they move back to their former rural homeland, or a similar place, upon retirement. Consequently, older people living in rural areas are likely to be more heterogeneous than sometimes thought as a result of inward migration, whatever the source. This is confirmed in the populations analysed for this study.

Even broader levels of stratification are evident in the three areas in this study. Not only have these areas experienced inward migration of older people, but migrant workers from other countries have also been an enduring phenomenon, most of whom arrived during the recent period of sustained economic growth. These broad stratifications contain the potential for tension, not only between native rural populations and new older retirees, but also between migrant foreign workers and local rural populations. Participants in this study talked about how some native residents perceive a clear distinction between those who were born in the community and those who were not, suggesting a continuum of rurality with so-called ‘rural’ and ‘real rural’ at either end. Our work does not explore the implications of such tensions for belonging and attachment, but quite clearly this stratification will have some effects. Not surprisingly, tensions were also evident between the two main religions in Northern Ireland, although there was recognition of recent
positive changes and an acceptance that progress had been made. That acceptance had not yet translated into universal integrated models of community engagement for older people across the religious divide. In any case, this is unsurprising given that divisions continue to exist within communities, as reported by some of the respondents in the study.

It is clear from this study that rural areas, and the communities that are within them, are not merely settings to be referenced or catalogued in geographical, sociological or economic terms. Rural places also play a key role in generating and maintaining self-identity, making the experience of ageing in a rural community a personal phenomenon that can only be fully understood through the complex lens of the older person. Of course geography matters and older people interviewed for this study spoke about their attachment to place based on the aesthetics of the local environment, historical and native connections, the scenery and physical distance. Similarly people referenced the importance of community, trust, shared obligation and collective memory. Economics loomed large throughout, sometimes explicit, mostly implicit, as people spoke about the decline of traditional industries, the flight of younger people and the consequent rationalisation and curtailment of social services in rural areas. But for all that, there remained a common theme that older people created their own definition and image of ageing in a rural space, influenced by all of the above, but separate, and very much dependent to their own personal circumstances and life-course experience.

One of the implications of this phenomenological perspective is the potential for attachment to place to be mediated by the personal contexts in which individuals conceptualise belonging and exclusion. One of the key findings from the work is how attachment to place in the three sites tended to be interpreted differently depending on whether the respondent had lived in an area all of their life, or had moved into the area from outside, either through resettlement from an urban area, or as a returned emigrant. Native older people tended to emphasise historical attachment to the community, referencing strong ties to people, communities and organisations. Attachment to place was based on self-identity, personal ties, social support, shared cultural allegiances, and repeated common experiences. In
contrast, older people ageing in rural spaces having retired there from urban settlements tended to explain attachment more in terms of the physical and social environment and, in the case of the latter especially, in more critical terms. Those returning to rural areas after many years away maintained their original attachment in terms of identity and emotional ties, but were sometimes more ambiguous in relation to the satisfaction and completeness of these identities following their return, or the aesthetics of their new surroundings. In summary, attachment to rural place is a multi-faceted phenomenon that means different things to different people at different times of their life.

One common theme running through the interviews across the three sites is the weakness of social services provision for older people as a result of prolonged disinvestment in public goods in rural areas. The economic arguments for depleted social services in rural areas are well known and were outlined earlier. The results are familiar and can be seen in the reduction in police stations, post-offices, local health and social care services, local shops and local pubs in rural areas. These absences were keenly felt by older people interviewed for this study. Although the three areas differ in terms of geography and proximity to major towns and cities, most respondents were acutely aware of deficiencies in social services provision. With that realisation came a sense of injustice, a belief that for them the economic argument always seemed to outweigh considerations of equity and fairness. While generally people were stoical and resilient in the face of social deficits, and even in some case possessed a relative appreciation for what they have, the research does point to significant concerns about security and health. If rural living potentially facilitates a deep attachment to people and places thereby enhancing quality of life, rural areas may also be poor places to grow old due to a paucity of services and opportunities.

Connectivity was a key part of the conversations with older people in the study. In particular, indigenous older people spoke about the importance of relationships with neighbours and how reciprocity and kinship impacted positively on the quality of rural life. It was not always the necessity that neighbour supported neighbour, it was the knowledge that this would happen if the need arose. People valued independence, but it was easier to value when accompanied by the realisation that shared community values of understanding and commitment would lead to support being provided if needed. That connectivity was more difficult to establish for older people moving into a rural area from outside. It was no less valued, but it did not happen automatically. Some people did not feel that they were a part of a caring local network of neighbours and friends. For these people, feelings of disconnection stemmed from the initial difficulties in integration that were encountered when they first moved to the area. Belonging takes time and for some people is difficult to achieve at all, particularly in less stable, transient rural communities.

There were more practical aspects to connectivity for older people living in rural areas. Public transport, or the lack of it, was a key concern across the three case study sites. Some older people did not own a car and relied exclusively on public transport; others were no longer in a position to drive due to ill-health, or their partner who used to drive them everywhere had died. While neighbours could generally be relied upon for lifts, people preferred to make their own arrangements and not be beholden to others for such a basic right. In the Ards Peninsula, people described variation in the quality of the transport system across the region, describing the network connections as partial and incomplete. In Belcoo, the subsidised rural lift scheme was highly valued, even if it too had restrictions, particularly in respect of travel across the border. The community bus scheme in Blacklion was not subsidised and therefore was not widely used. For the most part, public transport in each of the three communities served the village centres, but did not connect to the surrounding rural environs. Participants in Connemara highlighted that even when the public bus route suited their needs, the times and frequency of the bus rarely did. The absence of a comprehensive public transport system in each of the sites meant that private fee-paying alternatives had to be used more frequently, especially for journeys to and from medical practitioners, hospital out-patient clinics and even for social visits. Consequently transport costs for older people were higher than they should have been.

Social exclusion is of course much wider and deeper than distance, isolation, or the absence of social services. It is a complex process operating across several
domains and impacting on the capabilities of older people and their ability to fully participate in society. Social exclusion involves a denial of rights, resources, goods and services that would allow people the opportunity to participate in normal relationships and activities across economic, social and cultural spheres. Social exclusion among older people is likely, therefore, to affect not only the quality of life and health of people, but also the social capital and social cohesion of the society within which they live and threaten their fundamental entitlement to social justice and equality. What we have seen from this preliminary research, however, is that exclusion is mediated by the kind of rural community older people live in, through its capacity to strengthen or weaken the capabilities of older people. There are different types of rural spaces and communities, just as there are different kinds of older people.

Eales et al. (2006) identified four distinct groups of rural older adults: community active, stoic, marginalised, and frail, each with different levels of participation and needs. Our focus in this study has largely been on the first of these groups, those people who are active members of their communities. The evidence from those interviewed suggests a strong positive social contribution by older people living in the three sites. Commitment to social values is high and the level of support provided to vulnerable neighbours is significant. The volunteering ethos is particularly strong among older people who see helping others as part of the responsibility attached to living in a rural area. Volunteering is part of a life-time reciprocity process that extends across the life-cycle with people receiving help at certain stages of their life and giving help and support at other times. Support for others is, therefore, borne out of a combination of morality, duty, obligation, reciprocity and self-interest. The idea that what you give you get back was quite strong in the people interviewed. So too was derision for those of all ages who shirk their responsibilities to help others less fortunate than themselves.

The role of community organisations in facilitating the positive contribution of older people should not be under-estimated in the three communities. Even though organisational form was different across the sites, each organisation facilitated voluntary effort and significant community engagement. FORUM provided the integrative framework for meeting the multifaceted needs of older people in Connemara. The Ards community groups emphasised activities and social opportunities for a wide variety of participants, while the Blacklion-Belcoo group addressed social inclusion through combating isolation and empowering older people. As Heenan (2010) argues, community-based resources are an essential component of the quality of life for older people living in rural areas. What these organisations do is provide an environment whereby older people can participate at various levels, giving them some control over the creation of a social milieu that reflects their own values and aspirations. These organisations can help shape communities by providing choice and opportunities that otherwise might not exist. They also have the potential to draw in people that might otherwise be excluded, thereby broadening participation and forging new or latent identities with rural spaces and people. The fact that such organisations usually exist on a shoestring budget should not detract from their role in recognising and reconciling the various advantages and disadvantages of rural living.

So what can be gleaned for research and policy from our analysis of the three pilot areas? It is much easier to draw inference for research than for policy given the small-scale nature of the project. The most important conclusion is how little we know about rural ageing in Ireland. We need a new integrated research programme for the island of Ireland that will help to explore relationships between ageing and place in rural areas. Research is also needed to establish integrated benchmarks for health and social services provision, connectivity, transport and quality of life for older people living in rural communities. The use and application of indicators and targets have contributed to the alleviation of poverty in Ireland through focusing attention on policy instruments, programmes and outcomes. The same approach could serve an equally important function in addressing social inclusion and exclusion for older people living in rural areas.

Economies of scale arguments are most frequently invoked to explain spatial differences in health and social services provision between urban and rural areas. These arguments have not been contested in Ireland,
because the debate has never moved beyond an economic efficiency framework. But clearly social justice objectives are important, and for fundamental changes to occur there will have to be a radical reassessment of the relative weighting given to efficiency and equity in public policy-making for rural areas. That can only happen if we can develop models for social inclusion in rural areas that incorporate the issues that matter for older people living there. A new research programme should, therefore, endeavour to present measurable social justice arguments for greater focus on ageing rural communities on the island.

The maintenance of rural communities and the protection of both culture and way of life should be a fundamental goal for government in Ireland and Northern Ireland. The visible hand of moral leadership has too often been absent as a counter-balance to the invisible hand of the market in public policy-making for rural areas. Up to now, the primary approach to maintaining rural communities has been the strategy of promoting various types of rural economic development and measuring deprivation in local communities within Northern Ireland. These are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the maintenance of a vibrant rural tradition in both parts of the island. Economic development means little if the intrinsic social and civic capabilities of older people are underplayed or ignored. There must be a dual approach to development that recognises the importance of the economic and the social in the lives of older people and their capacity to contribute to both. Rural transformation is as much about opportunities for personal and social development as it is about economic growth.

Concluding Comments
The research documented in this report originates from discussions within the HARC research network. It deals with the role and potential of older people within three rural communities in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It also explores the importance and impact of the groups that support and represent older people within rural communities. While the findings are specific to the context of each of these sites and the life histories of the individual participants, the research indicates both a convergence and divergence in relation to ageing within rural areas on the island of Ireland. There was convergence in terms of the multiple levels of engagement and positive contribution of older people within these places, encompassing economic, social, cultural, and civic life. Divergence was evident in respect of attachment to place, solidarity, sense of belonging and participation. The work also highlights the potential for exclusion, loss and absence within older populations living in rural communities. It is beyond the scope of this report to formulate detailed policy recommendations for the future. Yet, it is clear that public policy needs to recognise the diversity and complexity of ageing in rural communities in Ireland and Northern Ireland. There is not a homogenous community of older people living in rural areas. Furthermore, it is clear that more research is necessary to explore the complexity of rural ageing in greater detail, particularly in relation to attachment, continuity, connectivity, participation and capability-enhancement. Most importantly of all, we need to understand more about the nature of inclusion and exclusion in rural communities, particularly in relation to whether some older people are more susceptible than others to poverty and multiple forms of deprivation.
6. References
6. References


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6. References


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