

Are Country Towns and Villages Sustainable Environments for Older People? 2011

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Abstract

Long-term trends in transport, retail, communications and the geography of health care are affecting the ways that people access services in rural areas. At the same time, a planning emphasis on concentrating jobs and houses in more 'sustainable' settlements and conurbations, while rural areas are developed as sites for commuters, consumers and tourists, moves attention away from the needs and contributions of those who, by choice or necessity, lead smaller footprint lives

These trends, while affecting rural residents at all ages, may be particularly disabling for some categories of rural elder – for example, those on a low income, with physical and sensory impairments, without access to private transport and lacking a supportive social network. At the same time, besides their significant informal contributions, older people's formal input to rural areas has become increasingly vital, as the pool of those available for lower-paid and voluntary work - from supporting social activities to sitting on a parish or town council - dwindles.

This ESRC/DCLG-funded research study takes place at time when rural ageing is at the spearhead of demographic shift nationally. It is also a time of steady, and intensifying change in the way that public services are funded and delivered. At the cusp of these changes, the study has explored the sustainability of ageing *rural* places from two perspectives. The older people's perspective uses a 'human ecology' approach to examine the degree to which rural places are able to 'sustain' their older populations. The governance perspective uses a 'pillars of sustainability' approach to review the economic, social and environmental sustainability of ageing rural places. The investigation takes place in one pilot study and two case study rural areas in the North East of England, each area including a central market town and connected to it, a well-connected string of settlements, as well as a less well-connected cluster. It employs a case study method based on an overall qualitative approach, drawing upon a range of data including qualitative interviews, observation and audit, policy review and census statistics, in order to arrive at conclusions about the sustainability of rural ageing.