



Rural Social Work – What is It and Why is it Unique?

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www.iriss.org.uk/community





“Landscapes can be deceptive. Sometimes a landscape seems to be less a setting for the life of its inhabitants than a curtain behind which their struggles, achievements and accidents take place.

For those who, with the inhabitants are behind the curtain, landmarks are no longer only geographic but also biographical and personal.”

John Berger 1967

A Fortunate Man – the Story of a Country Doctor (John Sassall)

Characteristics and Characterisations of Island Life


- Rural community identity through geography – compare this with the multiplicity of urban “communities”
- Shared knowledge and networking – gossip, “placing” and mutual aid



Different Considerations for Rural Social Workers: Living and Working in a Small Community

- **Dual Relationships & Boundaries**
- **Confidentiality**






Creative and rewarding practice possibilities – the unique opportunities presented in a rural setting - 1

- **Generalist (including community and ecological) practice social work approaches to building capacity and upstream responses to issues that might produce downstream referrals e.g. carer issues and resources for the socially isolated.**

ISSUES/BARRIERS:

- social work education,
- fit with specialised service delivery,
- centralisation of service delivery in an age of austerity




Creative and rewarding practice possibilities – the unique opportunities presented in a rural setting - 2

- **Strong local networking involving front line workers in different agencies (e.g. health, education, police) community activists (and potential activists).**
- **Covid-19 experiences – Orkney Community Hub**

ISSUES/BARRIERS

- top down ownership and control of partnership working – property of managers rather than front line workers
- token and ill thought-out solutions offered to promoting such practice – e.g. co-location, bureaucratic protocols
- agile working and disappearance of supportive teams
- space in high statutory caseloads




Creative and rewarding practice possibilities – the unique opportunities presented in a rural setting - 3

- **Opportunity to develop practice wisdom based on the building of experience and knowledge of a locality and its inhabitants.**
- **Important during Covid-19 when much hidden from sight**

Issues/Barriers

- high staff turnover
- social work education
- absence of staff motivation (!!!)



Creative and rewarding practice possibilities – the unique opportunities presented in a rural setting - 4

- **Opportunity to build understanding and knowledge of social issues affecting rural areas**
- **Covid-19 - physical and social isolation exaggerated,**
- **.....and Poverty (food, housing and fuel) issues**

Issues /Barriers

- employer support for training / education
- absence of policy recognition
- social work education

Rural Social Work is.....

- the use of particular skills and knowledge to meet the needs of rural communities
- a practice that builds on the assets typically found in rural communities: place, familiarity and shared knowledge; a small population; a tradition of mutual aid
- a practice that addresses issues of disadvantage: remoteness, distance and transport difficulties; lack of choice over services with an absence of specialist ones; hidden poverty – often in the midst of beauty and wealth
- a practice based on generalist and ecological styles of practice (i.e. Community Social Work); this includes strong networking based on local knowledge; continuity and trust; working with dual relationships




Recent research...

- Department for Education funded research 2019 (pre Covid-19)
- Cumbria in the north of England
- 12 self-selecting social workers
- So statistically unrepresentative of the population of social workers in Cumbria





Six main themes in social workers' accounts

1. Extensive and challenging travel
 2. Lack of service provision
 3. Working in small communities
 4. Working in dispersed teams
 5. Living in Cumbria
 6. Social work as intrinsically rewarding
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1. Travel

- Challenges
 - A. Workload management and time pressure
 - B. Personal safety and exposure to travel-related risks
 - C. Financial costs carried by the social worker
- Opportunities
 - D. Emotional wellbeing

The forced development of online working likely to have mitigated some of the challenges but possibly leads to other unintended consequences...



2. Service Provision

- Complete lack of or inadequate supply of services leading to negative outcomes for people using services - likely to be even more so with Covid-19
- Created a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with the social work role
- Reliance on non-traditional carers which could be challenging
- But....opportunity for creativity, for arrangements that offer better experiences and better outcomes
- Sense of increased professional effectiveness



3. Working in small communities

- Challenges
 - Dual relationships: social worker– service user. How can privacy be protected?
 - Lone working
- Opportunities
 - Long-term, stable relationships between service users and other professionals e.g. GPs
 - Strong and positive relationships between social workers and other professionals – “one rural team”
 - Strong, local, place-based identities
 - Communities recognising and appreciating the work of social workers

Online and remote working may reduce challenges
could also impact on opportunities?



4. Dispersed Teams

- Opportunities
 - Autonomy, self-direction and flexibility
 - No office politics to contend with
 - Saves on travelling time
- Challenges
 - Sense of disconnection and isolation from the team (agile working)
 - Working in a dispersed team required a period of adjustment
 - Uncertainty about robustness of practice without the feedback of team members
 - These challenges likely to be amplified in current context of Covid-19



5. Living in Cumbria

- Entirely positive...
 - Appreciating the beauty of the environment
 - The lifestyle
 - Lifestyle mitigated some of the difficulties they experienced in their practice
- The importance of the place should not be underestimated

So, 'place' is personally very important – but how does this change if people are in 'lockdown' arrangements and cannot access the 'place'?



6. Social work as intrinsically rewarding

- Contributing positively to the lives of service users
 - Getting positive feedback
 - Hearing about successes
- Exercising professional autonomy, judgement and discretion
- Personal development

Long term impact of Covid-19 on professional fulfilment and satisfaction is unknown.....

Resources

Rural Social Work in Scotland (2019) – IRISS Insight 47

<https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/rural-social-work-scotland>

Rediscovering and Mainstreaming Community Social Work Practice in Scotland (2020) – IRISS Insight 56

<https://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/insights/rediscovering-and-mainstreaming-community-social-work-scotland>

Rural Social Work Practice in Scotland (2011)

BASW / Venture Press

Rural Social Work in Cumbria: An Exploratory Case Study (2020)

Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, Lancaster University

<https://www.cjf-lancaster.org.uk/files/pdfs/RSW%20report.pdf>

