Editorial

Rurality: Why This Is Important

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When asked by the publishing team to write the editorial for this on the broad topic of 'rurality' I wondered what I should write as there are books and journals that focus on many aspects of what is at the heart of 'rurality': both the remote and rural geographies and the impact of living in such locations on those who have either grown up there or who have chosen to move into rural areas. An area may be rural in the sense of landscape, often with scenic views and, depending on the country and the respective definition of what constitutes the size of a rural community may be a small village or even rural town. Or it may be a hamlet or farming area yes also remains accessible to urban cores where services such as banking, schools, health and social care, fuel and shopping are available. But rural can also mean living in communities of very few people at a long distance geographically and time wise from any services such as hospitals, long term care homes, specialist education and what many living in urban locations take for granted—locations with a choice of shops, restaurants, supermarkets, specialist health care.

The challenges of rurality are many and are well documented and resonate when asking people living in rural areas about their experiences. Transport, or the lack of it, that is affordable and available and accessible, both to get around the rural area or to access urban cores where services are located. Fuel poverty is also common in rural areas, as is poverty more generally. In the UK, a small country in terms of landmass, but with most of the population living in or near urban conurbations, rural poverty is higher than in urban areas rural areas (Shucksmith, Glass, Chapman and Atterton 2023, [1]). Access to broadband and other technologies can be problematic. Social isolation and loneliness can be. or become, a problem. Isolation can be particularly challenging as individuals age, when family members have moved out of rural communities, and if a sense of rural living 'not being as it used to be' when strong local communities become fragmented as they age, members die, and younger people move away for work or education.

The image of a rural idyll persists, for example, beautiful scenery, clean fresh air, ability to easily engage in outdoor pursuits, low crime rates, lower property prices an abundance of local produce. Yet this image is not always correct, take just one example, property prices often become inflated by second home owners buying holiday or second residencies in particular areas of outstanding natural beauty leading to a paucity of affordable housing for families from those communities and those working in the communities.

I recently visited a rural (and remote) community in Ontario, the sense of community spirit and engagement there is remarkable. Local members of the community are working together to address service and support gaps in housing, health and social care. They are leading the activism to bring about the change they require to support one another to live well in their community as they age (https://www.agingtogether.ca/ (accessed on 7 June 2024)). Examples such as these are important as they demonstrate the power of people to improve and change their circumstances. Community is important wherever one lives. Even if individuals are independent and enjoy their own company. Access to community services is still important. And for many, so too is a sense of belonging, a sense of connection with others. In rural areas this becomes more important when the challenges of rurality come to bite. For example, as people age, and as they develop certain health conditions that may limit their active participation in daily life. My research area of dementia is a good example of this (Innes, Morgan, Farmer 2020 [2]). How do communities work to provide the support and care individuals and family care partners and friends need when a person is no longer able to drive? When the nearest formal care services and support are a considerable drive away and where public transport may just not exist? How to build on

resources to create rural dementia friendly communities was the focus of a UK government task and finish group I served on. Guides such as the one produced by this group (Alzheimer Society, 2019 [3]) provide a starting point for other rural dwellers seeking to bring together their community to act and create places that support all who live there. Although this guide is about dementia, arguably the principles extend to rural living generally.

Rurality is therefore not just about the geographical landscape, which are of course diverse depending on the location on the planet). It is about the experiences and connections of those who live, work and play in rural geographies. It is in my view very much about the people who form the communities and who also care for the land.

References

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3. Alzheimer Society. *Dementia-Friendly Rural Communities Guide: A Practical Guide for Rural Communities to Support People Affected by Dementia.* 2019. Available online: https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/sites/default/files/2019-07/AS_DF_NEW_Rural_Guide_Online_09_07_19.pdf (accessed on 7 June 2024).