



Rachel Evans, Senior Project Development Coordinator from national charity Volunteering Matters shares her 'Rural Wisdom' about tackling isolation among older people in Wales and Scotland.

Volunteering Matters is a national charity leading UK volunteering in policy and practice. We believe that everyone can play a role in their community and should have the chance to participate; we build volunteering projects and programmes to reflect this.

This week we are focusing on our life-changing work with retired and older people - what better time to share the learnings from our Rural Wisdom project...

In April of this year, work began on delivering the Rural Wisdom project to communities in Scotland and Wales.

Rural Wisdom is a new way of looking at community work: nothing is set in stone until work starts in earnest in the chosen areas. Only then are goals set with local people, a process supported by the independent evaluators of the project, the National Development Team for Inclusion.

The overall aim of the project is to provide each participating community with a dedicated worker to help older people achieve the small reasonable goals that might make a huge difference to residents – part of the role of the development worker is to interpret the concepts coming from the community, come up with ideas that fit the brief and then bring the community members on board to turn them into reality. The project will also provide constant information about what is being achieved (and what does not work) to other communities so that valuable learning is passed on.

A four year Big Lottery-funded initiative, the project's lead partner is Outside The Box in Scotland. Delivery in Wales is being co-ordinated by Volunteering Matters Cymru, the Welsh arm of the national charity Volunteering Matters.

In each of the two contributing home nations, eight communities will have participated throughout the life of the project, four in Wales and four in Scotland. Two Welsh and two Scottish communities are the focus in the first and second years and years three and four will see activity begin in four more communities. The two charities will maintain the progress they have already made in the first four areas.

Whilst working with our communities, we are keeping in mind three really important movements: Age-Friendly Communities, The Campaign to End Loneliness and Dementia-Friendly Communities.

Keeping things simple, achievable, enjoyable and satisfying is really important, as communities need to:

- see and feel that they are part of something positive
- see and feel that anyone can have an idea worth listening to
- see and feel that they can make a difference
- feel their confidence growing in terms of what can be done at grassroots level and lose their fear of becoming over-involved
- feel a fresh sense of connection with their town or village and neighbours.

For this first half of the project, the Welsh communities chosen were Milford Haven in Pembrokeshire and Leeswood & Pontblyddyn in Flintshire. Rachel Evans, Volunteering Matters project co-ordinator for Rural Wisdom in Milford, began her work in earnest on the 9th May when the launch event for the project was held at Milford Town Hall. This was attended by around 30 people in a great mix of local residents, Milford organisations or county-wide or national

organisations who include Milford in their work. Some great discussions were held that day and hopes and wishes for the town were debated at length.

Leeswood & Pontblyddyn took a slightly different approach – spurred on by the first steps they had already made along the road to becoming an Age-Friendly community, a steering group had already been established. A meeting similar to Milford's was held at Leeswood's village hall, the meeting-place for the whole community. Unavoidably, the Flintshire end of the project started a little later than the Milford end, but after a couple of months' hard work on the ground, Shereen Devine, Volunteering Matters project co-ordinator for Rural Wisdom in Leeswood & Pontblyddyn, is getting to know everyone and working on realizing the vision of her community.

Actions so far in Milford Haven:

- There is a growing email group of nearly 60 local people and organisations with an interest in Milford; news and events are circulated amongst the members by Rachel and members can use the group to pass on news of their own.
- A monthly events listing called Milford Haven What's On saw a successful start in September, as a response to local people feeling that there was not enough communication about available activities. It was felt that if people do not call at the library, go to the leisure centre, do not take a local paper or are not online, they are probably missing the vital conduits to what is happening locally. 225 copies are printed of every edition whilst electronic circulation takes the listing to further readers. New people get in touch every month about listing their community-based activity and future funding is being discussed at local level. Planning for a bumper December and January edition is underway.
- There are weekly social sessions at the Pill Centre, centred around boardgames and friendship. This was the idea of Milford's current Mayor, Colin, and the Rural Wisdom project helped it to happen. 30 people have attended since PALs (Pill Activities & Laughs) was started in August – 22 of those are Milford residents (although one or two come from Haverfordwest) and 8 community workers have attended to provide information or support an individual member. Last month, Jess from Dewis worked with Rachel to arrange for the Society for Electoral Change to visit the group as part of their Missing Voices campaign. Matt from the Society talked with the group about politics in general and more specifically why people do not vote. On another occasion, Paul, a member of the Neighbourhood Police Team, visited the group to talk about hate crime and to reassure the members about the support the police can offer.

Our 93 year old PALs member is an expert Scrabble player and extremely competitive. She comes to PALs every week and brings her Scrabble dictionary. Fuelled by tea and welshcakes, she beats the competition every time. When she leaves she always tells us what a lovely time she has had and her daughters are delighted that their mum has a new outlet for her energy.



- A new knitting group has started at Milford Library as a result of demand – our Thursday group, long-established, was at capacity. Our friends at the Library wanted another group, as did the existing knitters who did not want to see any new craftspeople disappointed. A weekly Monday afternoon get-together has been the result and a maximum of 8 to 10 ladies attend every week, with two of our experienced volunteers, Pauline and Ruth, stepping up to anchor the group and welcome everyone.



- Ongoing work with our wonderful colleagues at the Library, Tracey, Laura, Maureen and Cath and Rachel, the Older People's Strategy Co-ordinator with Pembrokeshire County Council, will bring about a new telephone book club for isolated people and this will hopefully be followed by a physical book group. The project has a great part to play in this – Rachel has been promoting it to local people and will go out to visit isolated people interested in the telephone book club, giving them confidence in the set-up, talking about their book choices and then chairing the telephone calls until a member of the group wants to take over.
- On November 1st, the first luncheon club session was held at the Hubberston & Hakin Community Centre. This was as a result of Jackie's determination – she is a community activist who was spurred on at the Rural Wisdom launch by the reassurance, enthusiasm and support of people in the town and the project. Jackie spent a couple of months organising arrangements and Rural Wisdom helped with set-up costs and will help every month at the event. Just last week, Jackie, her trusty fellow organisers Norma and Pam, and a brace of willing helpers delivered a tasty two-course hot lunch to 27 diners to thoroughly enjoyed their meal. The previous luncheon club at the centre, organised by hard-working local volunteers, had had to close a couple of years previously and the new venture is already bringing happiness, company, laughter and nutritious food to the over-60s in the area, many of whom had attended the old club.

When Jackie was asked how she thought it had all gone, she said "There was a really good atmosphere and everyone has helped – I'm really pleased!"



- A seasoned Milford volunteer will be undergoing Understanding Dementia training, provided by colleagues in our neighbouring local authority of Carmarthen:

Paul has been a befriender to 5 vulnerable people, in Milford and elsewhere. This training will give him more insight into the condition of one of his current clients who is experiencing memory loss. Paul always says: "I'm thanked for coming to the house to visit – I tell them that it is I who get the most out of it. You do your best for the best."

In Flintshire, the steering group had a brilliant Carnival day back in the late summer and took the opportunity to survey some of the residents. Both at the steering group meeting and in the survey, there was a strong feeling in Leeswood that the generations should all be considered together as local older people are concerned about the youngsters. Plans are now afoot for:

- a litterpick
- a drive to increase the membership of local craft groups with an emphasis on encouraging younger members to join
- members of the allotment society to work with the local school
- increased promotion of local activities using existing means and new to encourage more people of all ages to take part.

As was mentioned above, a big part of our project is to pass on any learning from what we do so that other communities can benefit from our experience. Sometimes this happens very naturally when people can see at first hand what effect a change is having:

In Pembrokeshire, Jess from Dewis loved the idea of PALs as she attends regularly and felt it could be replicated in her hometown of Neyland, only a few miles from Milford. Jess felt that a social boardgames session could encourage older and disabled people to come out for a couple of hours and enjoy themselves – the first Neyland session is starting this week on Thursday 9th November.

However, something else is needed to spread the word further. Outside The Box have created a fantastic newsletter for Rural Wisdom in which they describe what is happening in the four current Rural Wisdom areas. Ruth, the editor, would love to hear from anyone at all who would like to subscribe to this free but fascinating read – get in touch with Ruth (contact details below) if you are interested. Subscribers' details will be kept private and you will read first-hand about initiatives you might like to try in your own area.

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