



Rural Wisdom Evaluation

Learning to expect the unexpected

December 2021



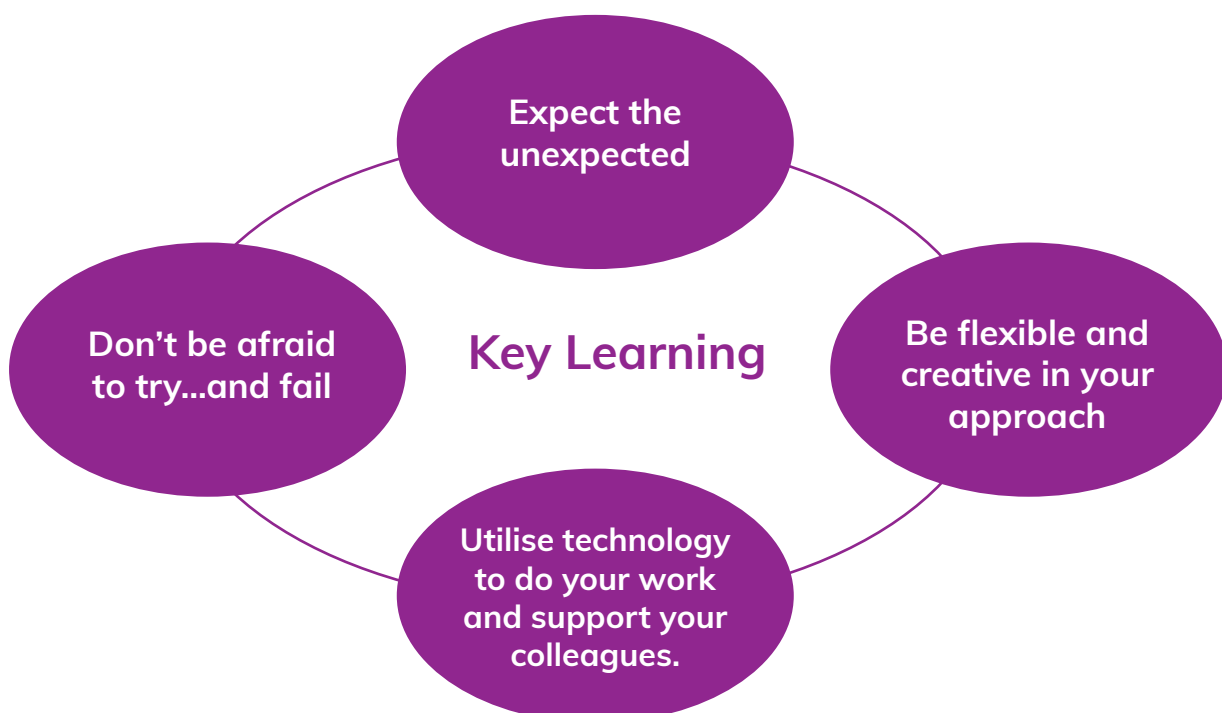
Rural Wisdom was a five-year National Lottery funded project exploring the impact of community-based activities that are led by older people living in rural areas in Scotland and Wales.

As part of the project ambitions, the Rural Wisdom partners, Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters Cymru and the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) are sharing the learning to enable people living and working in other rural areas to benefit from.

This is the fifth and final evaluation report for Wales, sharing learning and reflections from all those who have worked with and supported the rural communities of Leeswood and Pontblyddyn, Milford Haven, The Dale Peninsula, and Holywell.

Key Learning

The key learning to come from year five:



Project Design

Rural Wisdom was a long-term project, designed as a three-stage journey to be taken with communities across Scotland and Wales between 2017 – 2022. In Wales this involved:



Stage One: 2017 – 2019 Working with two local areas; Leeswood and Milford Haven, and hosting conversations with older people in other rural communities. Feeding learning into policy and practice developments across Wales.



Stage Two: 2019 – 2021 Working with two additional areas; The Dale Peninsula and Holywell and feeding findings into policy and practice developments across Wales.



Stage Three: 2020 – 2022 Continuing to support all rural areas involved in the project and contributions made to local and national policy development. Learning shared to raise the profile of the issues facing older people in rural areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an impact on the work able to be undertaken in Stages Two and Three, but the organic nature of Rural Wisdom's design meant that steps could still be taken towards the project outcomes of reducing loneliness and social isolation in Wales's rural communities at a time when this was more important than ever.

Outcomes

In response to the impact of COVID-19, new project and evaluation outcomes were co-created between Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters Cymru, the NDTi, community members and stakeholders early in year 5 via a series of online conversations and surveys.

Rural Wisdom has successfully adapted to Covid [sic] and stayed in touch with Key Community members to maintain a small community presence...But, I think it needs to consider its recovery plan. Some Community groups and communities have completely folded for many reasons and people feel anxious about going out again. (Survey respondent)

Original Outcomes

1. More older people in rural areas are having a voice and leading change in their local communities.
2. More older people get the support they want, which works well for them, through a wider range of community-based services.
3. Policies in Scotland and Wales support older people to continue to live in the rural communities they know and encourage older people's contribution to their communities.
4. The experience of older people in rural areas, and of their communities, contribute to the growth of communities across the UK that value, include and support older people.

Additional Outcomes

5. The connections and support networks made across generations in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, are supported to continue after the pandemic.
6. The voices of older people are listened to and valued in the recovery work undertaken in rural areas to rebuild communities, services, and infrastructure. Including what and how to reinstate in rural communities from before the pandemic.
7. Older people in rural communities are supported to reconnect with others in their local area in a way that feels safe.

Wales Locations

Stage One: 2017 – 2019



Leeswood and Pontblyddyn - two small rural villages in Flintshire nestled between Wrexham, the largest town in North Wales, and the smaller market town of Mold.

Milford Haven – and its surrounding area, boasts a population of around 13,000. The town is largely disconnected; it is 100 miles west of Cardiff and in a rural county with very few services and transport links. The decline of the fishing industry and high street in the town centre are among many changes that have been difficult for local people to adjust to.

Stage Two: 2019 – 2021



The Dale Peninsula – which includes the communities of Dale village, Marloes and St Ishmaels. The Peninsula is over 10 miles from Haverfordwest and Milford Haven. Many people on the Peninsula travel to Milford to see their GP or shop, whilst a trip to Haverfordwest is necessary for other services.

Holywell – is a market town in North East Wales in the county of Flintshire. The town is divided into four main areas as well as several smaller surrounding villages with a cumulative population of around 8,000 people.

Activity in year 5

“COVID has taught us to expect the unexpected...” (Development Worker)

The Development Workers in Wales were not due to be in post during the fifth year of Rural Wisdom. Their roles were expected to stop at the end of year four (January 2021), but due to the impact of COVID-19 and the flexibility of the National Lottery Community Fund funding, they were able to remain in post and actively engaged with the project throughout year five. As a result, all activity described in the remainder of this report goes beyond what was originally planned and should be viewed as a great achievement for Rural Wisdom and the Volunteering Matters Cymru team.

Throughout year five, the Development Workers have maintained contact with all four communities engaged with Rural Wisdom in Wales via Zoom, telephone, and email. In Pembrokeshire, contact has been predominantly maintained via the continued production and circulation of the ‘Milford What’s On’ and utilising the publications distribution list to share useful information, government guidance and health advice to local people. In Flintshire, similar contact has been maintained via the circulation of the Daily Bulletin, which provides local people with updates on what is happening, the most recent government guidance and health advice.

As well as maintaining contact, the Workers have also been able to ensure local people in all four Welsh communities have had the support they need by helping sustain the telephone befriending service and helping volunteers and community members who were paired together at the start of the pandemic stay supporting each other. This work has meant that people have remained connected to each other by having someone to talk to at least once a week, have their shopping delivered, medication collected, and dogs walked when needed. The provision of this support has been a vital lifeline to many of the people in these Rural Wisdom communities and the Workers are keen to ensure it stays in place for as long as is needed.

In addition to the connections and support being provided, the main focus of the work being undertaken in Flintshire in year 5, has been the Community Garden at Holway Hub House, Holywell. As part of this, the Development Worker has been able to help obtain a grant from ‘Keep Wales Tidy’ to provide the garden with a shed, greenhouse, water butt, vegetable and butterfly garden growing kits, bird feeders and a bench. This Grant will also be used to continue supporting the garden beyond the end of Rural Wisdom in 2022 and help maintain the bridge it offers the community by bringing generations together through the provision of educational and wellbeing opportunities.

In Pembrokeshire, the Development Worker has spent a lot of year five organically growing their wider connections to communities, providers, leaders, and services. One such connection was made with the Hywel Dda University Health Board via a conversation about how Rural Wisdom/Volunteering Matters Cymru could work with them. This led to a new partnership being created with Volunteering Matters Cymru joining the PIVOT partnership. PIVOT is the Pembrokeshire Intermediate Voluntary Organisations Team which provides volunteer community support to help prevent unnecessary hospital admissions or support upon discharge from hospital. It is a partnership between the British Red Cross, Pembrokeshire Association of Community Transport Organisations (PACTO), Royal Voluntary Service, Care & Repair, Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (PAVS) and now Volunteering Matters Cymru. This partnership would not have been possible without Rural Wisdom and will be a long-term legacy of the project in Pembrokeshire helping to ensure older people can remain living in the rural communities they know.

These developments across Wales, along with the continued strengthening of relationships with the Scottish Rural Wisdom team, has led to the creation of a series of online 'Conversation Starters' to share learning. Each conversation has covered a different topic of interest to community members in both nations, including from Wales:

- *Men2Men, a new social and mental health group in Pembrokeshire, sharing ideas with a South Lanarkshire Men's Shed;*
- *Helena Herklots, the Wales Commissioner for Older People, discussing rural policy issues for older people, and*
- *Details of the PIVOT partnership (detailed above)*

These 'Conversation Starters' have been very successful, with over 30 people from health, social care and community organisations attending the conversation about the PIVOT partnership. Due to the success of these conversations in 2021, the Development Workers in Scotland and Wales are planning to host another series in 2022 to continue the conversations already started and pick up new ones.

Progress towards outcomes

As the discussion in the previous section suggests, the Development Workers in Wales have been actively working towards the evaluation outcomes (listed on page 2) throughout year five.

The continued work done to keep people connected within communities via the circulation of information, the befriending service and volunteer pairing, as well as the growth of the Community Garden in Holywell, is all progress towards **outcome two**; 'more older people get the support they want, which works well for them, through a wider range of community-based services', and **outcome five**; 'the connections and support networks made across generations in rural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, are supported to continue after the pandemic.'

With the work done in Pembrokeshire and the PIVOT partnership progress towards **outcome two**; 'more older people get the support they want, which works well for them, through a wider range of community-based services', and **outcome three**; 'policies in Scotland and Wales support older people to continue to live in the rural communities they know and encourage older people's contribution to their communities.'

The development of the online 'Conversation Starters' for members of both Welsh and Scottish Rural Wisdom areas and other interested parties, is progress towards **outcome four**; 'the experience of older people in rural areas, and of their communities, contribute to the growth of communities across the UK that value, include and support older people', and **outcome six**; 'the voices of older people are listened to and valued in the recovery work undertaken in rural areas to rebuild communities, services, and infrastructure. Including what and how to reinstate in rural communities from before the pandemic.'

This progress towards outcomes in an unprecedented time for a community development project like Rural Wisdom should be held in high regard and the limited progress towards two of the outcomes learnt from rather than seen as a failure in any way.

The two outcomes that the work undertaken in year five has not contributed to is **outcome one** 'More older people in rural areas are having a voice and leading change in their local communities', and **outcome seven** 'older people in rural communities are supported to reconnect with others in their local area in a way that feels safe.'

Work done in years one to three, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, made progress towards **outcome one**, with both Workers and community members acknowledging that older people in rural areas were being seen and heard more positively than before Rural Wisdom started working there.

Rural Wisdom has been great support to people and gives them the confidence to have a voice and influence positive change. (Community Member)

Before COVID people were starting to take charge, with gentle guidance but they were starting to change. (Development Worker)

The ability for more work towards this outcome to continue in years four and five, was affected by the pandemic and the shift in focus of Rural Wisdom and its Workers towards keeping people safe, connected and well. The Workers in Wales believe that had the pandemic not happened, the voice of older people and their ability to influence change would have gone from strength to strength.

If it hadn't been for the pandemic, who knows where we'd be. Its hard to say as we wouldn't have had a year five, but we might have done more in the four years, our communities might have been further ahead and people might have been more confident. (Development Worker)

Work towards outcome seven, has been more challenging for the Welsh communities involved with Rural Wisdom due to the ever-changing COVID-19 landscape making reconnecting, even safely, difficult.

It's hard to know what to do for the best. Just when we begin thinking about doing things the rules change, or rates go up or there's a new variant. People don't feel safe. In many respects we've stopped thinking about when we'll do things in a room again, its easier. There are some groups, like knitting, that have set up again because people wanted them, but this is few and far between. (Development Worker)

Reflections

For the Workers involved with Rural Wisdom, the project has been about more than working towards the formal outcomes of the project or the evaluation, it has been part of their life for over five years and the communities they work with are close to those they live within. As a result, the project means a great deal to them, and the successes and challenges it has faced are felt deeply on both a professional and personal level.

I can honestly say this has been my best job ever. It has been an honour and a pleasure to be embedded and welcomed into other people's communities. It is very rewarding to see ideas practise long after we have pulled away from the Community. I am really going to miss this role. (Development Worker)

It has meant a great deal to me, and it's been great, but its been hard. I'm going to get emotional now...but, not being able to do the work we wanted to do, to embed in the Stage 2 communities like we envisaged, and, I think we'd have done more. I think we'd be on Stage 3 communities by now without COVID. It's hard to think about that. (Development Worker)

This second quote highlights the impact that COVID-19 has had on the Development Workers, their work, and the project overall. The pandemic has been the biggest challenge Rural Wisdom didn't know it was going to face, which has left and will continue to leave an emotional and professional legacy on all those involved. Yet, whilst the pandemic has in many respects had a negative impact on Rural Wisdom and the work it hoped to achieve, it has also had a positive impact.

We have learnt a new way of working, which has meant we are better connected....Why did we used to travel for hours, costing money and impacting the environment? We don't think anything of having Zoom meeting and connecting with people from all over now... being better connected means we've had support, the teams just been brilliant...it's really helped with how difficult it has been. (Development Worker)

COVID has taught us to expect the unexpected, to not be surprised when everything we think we know changes in an instant. It has been unsettling, but it has taught me to be creative and not afraid to try... Obviously, we were able to learn this because Rural Wisdom let us, the funding let us, but it meant being active rather than giving up. (Development Worker)

The positive impact of COVID-19 on Rural Wisdom has led to more work being done in Wales than originally intended, and better-connected communities and Workers across the home nations. In turn, this has led to the learning about what works being shared within the project and more broadly in ways not originally envisaged. And whilst this learning might not be what was expected at the start of the project in 2017, it is what works in 2021 which will hopefully benefit other community development projects now and in the future.

Summary

The work undertaken in Wales during year five of Rural Wisdom has gone above and beyond what was originally planned. The flexibility of the projects funding allowed the Development Workers to be actively engaged with their communities and the wider scope of Rural Wisdom throughout the year. The work they have done has provided evidence towards the evaluation outcomes by supporting older people to remain in their rural community if they wish, to feel supported in that community in ways that work for them, have their voices heard in the development of policy especially relating to the recovery of rural communities in light of COVID-19, and become connected to other people with similar interests to them both within their communities and other Rural Wisdom areas.

The reflections of the Development Workers have highlighted how working through a pandemic has affected the work they hoped to do, whilst also emphasizing the positive impact facing such an adverse period in history has had. The shift in year 4 to working remotely and utilising technology such as Zoom, to connect with each other, their Scottish counterparts, community members and stakeholders, has remained the norm throughout year five and has led to the project being better connected and the Workers feeling supported.

Having the context the project was being undertaken in changing on a regular basis throughout the year, and year 4, has also allowed the Workers to become more flexible, creative and unafraid to try than they feel they would have been without the pandemic. Meaning that new conversations, connections, opportunities and outcomes have been achieved for the people and rural communities of Wales that may not have occurred without COVID-19.

More information

Outside the Box, Volunteering Matters Cymru and the National Development Team for Inclusion (NDTi) hope that you find the learning from Rural Wisdom shared here useful.

If you would like more information about the information in this document, or about Rural Wisdom more generally, please refer to the project website www.ruralwisdom.org

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Resources

Find more information and resources at:
www.ruralwisdom.org

