

Grey and Pleasant Land: An Interdisciplinary Exploration of the Connectivity of Older People in Rural Civic Society

Background

'Grey and Pleasant Land' is one of a number of projects funded under the *'New Dynamics of Ageing'* programme. This seven-year research initiative, the largest research programme on ageing to date in the UK, is a unique collaboration between five UK Research Councils – ESRC, EPSRC, BBSRC, MRC and AHRC – supporting scientists from across the disciplines to work together on research which will benefit the quality of life of older people.

The overall project will involve an internationally-significant team of more than 20 academics, drawn from the fields of rural studies, social care, gerontology, economic and social geography, sociology and psychology, led by Professor Catherine Hennessy of Plymouth University. They will contribute to seven 'work packages', with the Centre for Transport and Society (CTS) specifically engaged on work package 3 (WP3), entitled *'Travelling through the Rural Lifecourse'*.

WP3, is being undertaken with colleagues from the universities of Bournemouth and Swansea, and has a specific focus on mobility. Researchers in several other Faculties in UWE are also involved in the Grey and Pleasant Land project, but are engaged with different work packages.

Project Methodology

The Grey and Pleasant Land project will use a range of biographical and survey methods. It will employ a framework of quantitative and qualitative approaches and tools, as well as perspectives from the arts and humanities, the social and geographic sciences, informatics and (importantly) transport studies to

characterise key aspects of older people's connectivities (i.e., cultural, spatial, social, economic and technological) in rural community life - and the role which these links play in facilitating civic engagement. The research is being carried out in case study areas in South West England and Wales and addresses the following principal questions:

- How and in what ways are older people connected to civic society in these rural settings?
- What is the impact of this connectivity on older people's quality of life in rural areas?
- How is later life experienced across diverse rural contexts and within subgroups of older people?
- How can novel interdisciplinary approaches be used to capture and disseminate evidence about older people's participation in and contributions to rural civic society, i.e., as a source of rural community capital?

As already mentioned, the Project has been constructed around seven interlinked work packages. The first of these (WP1) has identified the candidate study areas, three in Wales, and three in SW England. Of these, one area from each region has been selected to reflect a distinct set of characteristics (relative to the region/country). In summary the three area types were:

- Type 1: remote and deprived,
- Type 2: less remote and deprived than 1,
- Type 3: relatively affluent and accessible

The selected locations are:

Settlement(s)	District	Type
Nr Bodmin	North Cornwall	1
Nr Shaftesbury / Gillingham	North Dorset	2
Nr Painswick,	Gloucestershire	3

Nr Llanarth / Lampeter	Dyfed	1
Nr Rhayader	Powys	2
Nr Raglan / Monmouth	Monmouthshire	3

Work Package 3

The goal of this strand of the Grey and Pleasant Land is to increase our understanding of older persons' physical connectivity in relation to their transport and other mobility needs in rural areas and the goal of achieving sustainable rural communities. Current rural transport policy dilemmas will be examined, namely:

- understanding the instrumental and affective value older motorists attach to car access and overcoming car loss;
- the definition of public transport solutions which meet wider quality of life objectives; and
- personal mobility alternatives to the car (examining the social, health and technical inhibitors to cycling (particularly for the younger old) and walking (with a focus on the oldest old), along with the relevance of 'intermediate' solutions such as mobility scooters—now popular in towns—in rural areas.

For each of the three policy areas a deeper understanding of the impasse specifically as it relates to the needs and aspirations of older travellers will be sought, with the intention of assisting in the management of adjustments to individuals' 'mobility capital' brought about by changing personal conditions, aspirations or environmental consciousness. Hence, the research will add to knowledge about how carbon-intensive travel by rural elders needs to be, and the wider implications of substituting virtual mobility for movement. The 'new mobilities' perspective will be developed through a consideration of mobility along a continuum ranging from physical through virtual and potential mobility to imaginative 'mobility'.

Project Activity

WP1 collected out an initial 'quantitative' data gathering exercise in the summer of 2009, collecting over nine hundred questionnaires

across the six study areas. This survey data has provided source material for the five thematic areas of research that make up Grey and Pleasant Land – including WP3. It has also supplied the 'leads' for the WP3 'qualitative' interviews carried out in spring 2010. These interviews specifically focussed on mobility themes. Approximately forty interviews have been undertaken to date, lasting around an hour each. The interviewees were selected to include a range of age groups, the six locations, and different mobility circumstances and modes. Colleagues at the University of Bournemouth have conducted more in-depth interviews with a further ten candidates from the same pool. This data is now being analysed (summer 2010).

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