



Developing agendas for rural health research, policy and practice

A report of the IRH research seminar 29th September 2009,
West Midlands Government Office

Introduction

The aim of the seminar was threefold:

- i. to engage in setting rural health research agendas
- ii. to develop potential collaborations for projects and developing an informal rural health research network
- iii. to launch the IRH research strategy

The seminar was attended by delegates from a wide range of disciplines including academia, local government, NHS and the voluntary sector.

Presentations

The seminar, chaired by Professor Linda McKie (Glasgow Caledonian University and Chair of the IRH Research Advisory Group), was opened with a key note presentation by Helen Howson from the Welsh Assembly Government who outlined the role of research in developing the Rural Health Plan for Wales. This was followed by a presentation from Rowena Clayton (Department of Health, West Midlands) who used small area statistics to highlight the inequalities in rural health across the West Midlands. Linda Syson-Nibbs (Derbyshire County PCT) gave an overview of the Farm Out project in Derbyshire as an example of putting research evidence into practice. Finally, Jenny Deaville presented the new 5-year research strategy for IRH.

Workshops

The workshop session was run in a 'carousel' style where delegates were split into four groups and rotated around each of the following four workshops:

- access to services (*Group facilitator - Linda Syson Nibbs, Derbyshire County PCT*)

- chronic disease/long term conditions (*Group facilitator - Helen Swindlehurst, Shropshire County PCT, NHSTelford & Wrekin*)
- health and sustainable environment (*Group facilitator – Jenny Deaville, IRH*)
- rural medical, health and social care education (*Group facilitator – Jane Randall Smith, IRH*)

Under each theme the groups had to consider the following questions:

- What are the priority research questions under the theme
- Who are the key partners/collaborators
- Who are the best potential funders

A summary of the findings for each theme follows:

Health and the sustainable environment

What are the priority research questions?

- What is the nature (perception) of safe green space in rural areas? (ie is it physical danger eg cattle, water, trees etc rather than crime)
- How can the use of safe green space be best promoted for health and wellbeing?
- What is the level of road traffic accidents in rural areas? Does the lack of footpaths contribute to road traffic accidents?
- What are the factors causing high rates of fatalities from road traffic accidents in rural areas?
- What are the implications of the aging demography for the housing stock available in rural areas? Eg is there enough affordable and suitable housing? What is the cost of adapting homes?
- What is the extent of fuel poverty in rural areas and the impact on health and well-being?
- What is the role of home diagnostics/telehealth in maintaining people in their own environment in rural areas?
- What are the health implications of climate change?
- What are the health benefits of rural communities for urban dwellers? Does this increase sustainability of rural communities?

It was argued that many of these issues are inter-related and that a systems dynamic model approach could be an appropriate methodology. A project looking at many issues in one community ties in with the approach taken in the Herefordshire Total Place Pilots

Who are the key partners/collaborators?

- Health & Social Services
- Voluntary sector
- Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs
- Department of Energy and Climate Change
- Links to academics & policy/practitioner researchers

Who are the best potential funders?

- HTA assessment of homes for people >75
- Joseph Rowntree
- NSPCC
- Age concern
- Fuel poverty charities
- WAG Funding on sustainability
- NERC led cross-research council programme on “living with environmental change”

Chronic Disease/Long Term Conditions

What are the priority research questions?

- Case management in rural areas: are current models applicable?
- What is an appropriate model of care?
- Is access important in monitoring and management of Long Term Conditions?
- Research re telehealth – what is the most appropriate model? What are the challenges and barriers in use?
- What is the point of need in terms of disease profiling?
- Roles of healthcare professionals in rural areas – what is the appropriate skill mix and the best way of providing this?
- What is the role of local provision, e.g food production, in maintaining well-being
- Does the current interface between the health/social care/voluntary sectors operate at optimum levels to deliver appropriate services for people with long term conditions living in rural communities ?

- How will the changing demographic profile in rural areas impact upon levels of long term conditions?
- Public Health Initiatives – do they have a greater or lower impact in rural areas?
- The important partner in the management of long term conditions is the patient – self management, developing the patient as expert

Who are the key partners/collaborators?

- Ambulance Trusts
- Social Care
- GPs
- Local authorities
- Voluntary Sector
- Links – Health/Social – Academic Sector
- Family Carers
- Pharmacies

Who are the best potential funders?

- PCTs/LHBs/Scottish Health Boards
- SHAs – equivalent
- DH/WAG/Scottish Exec
- Research Council
- DEFRA

Rural, Medical, Health & Social Care Education

What are the priority research questions?

- What can the rural context offer to medical health and social care education?
- Could rotations with larger centres be used to maintain skills for working in rural settings?
- What are the educational implications of developing new ways of working in rural settings?
- What is the most effective use of available skills in rural areas?
- What are the educational implications of developing a generic rural health worker?

- Are there any differences in clinical outcomes where methods of service delivery differ in urban and rural areas?
- How can generalists (GPs) and the multi-skilled rural health worker gain credibility where there is a drive towards specialisation?
- What are the information needs of both the public (and professionals) about services that are available?
- How can the Royal Colleges be encouraged to engage in the rural health agenda and rural proof their policies?
- What are the barriers to clinical training being undertaken in more rural settings or introducing the rural context in clinical training?

Who are the key partners/collaborators?

- NHS – SHA workforce development
- Wales - NLIH National Leadership and Innovation Agency in Health
- RCN/nurses

Who are the best potential funders?

- Private sector
- NHS
- Joseph Rowntree
- DEFRA Social Research Unit/Wales?
- Clinical Academic Career Fellowship

Access to Services

What are the priority research questions?

- How does rurality impact on access to in and out of hours services?
- What is the relationship between health and wellbeing and local food procurement?
- What is the role of qualitative data in measuring access to services?
- How to reconcile choose and book access/ NHS constitution?
- How can access to services be best defined and measured?
- Do different access criteria apply to different treatments?

- What are the cross-border access issues and how do they impact on patients and services?
- How can preventative services be best promoted?
- What is the value/efficiency of out reach services – evaluation

Who are the key partners/collaborators?

- Voluntary Sector
- Local Authorities
- Non Governmental Organisations
- PCTs
- Specialist Organisations e.g. Cancer Care

Who are the best potential funders?

- R D Agency

Common themes from across the workshops

Whilst the workshops were subject specific a number of key themes emerged in more than one group relating to methodology and the use of existing evidence:

- Make greater use of unpublished literature and service reviews
- To encourage greater links between academics and policy/practitioner researchers – the importance of inter-disciplinary research
- To raise rurality as an issue on service providers' agendas at all levels.