

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Living with Physical and Sensory Impairment in Rural Areas: Challenges and Responses

The major themes addressed in this research are disability and rural living. Nearly nine million people in England, 18% of the population, have a physical or sensory impairment or experience a long term limiting illness. Around three million of them live in a rural area, and many of them are inappropriately housed. The research investigated disabled peoples' experience of rural housing and the built environment with an emphasis on the choices that are available to them, and how these choices are constrained. It investigated the care and support they receive, and the importance of informal family and community-based networks in helping to provide care and sustain independent living. Finally, it looked at rural transport, access to rural services, and the uses disabled people are making of personal computers and the Internet.

Key findings and conclusions

For disabled people living in rural areas, the critical issues affecting their quality of life are:

- physically inaccessible housing and a lack of housing choice arising from a serious shortage of accessible or adapted homes;
- inconsistencies and gaps in the way that independent living is supported and personal care is provided;
- issues arising from the location of disabled peoples' homes that are compounded by unreliable, physically inaccessible transport, dangerous country roads, and physically inaccessible public spaces and buildings of all kinds;
- essential services that are not available at all in some areas, and that are frequently not adapted to meet disabled peoples' needs;
- the failure to develop the potential of information and communication systems that could help to overcome some of the barriers that disabled people living in the countryside face;
- a general failure of rural policy to consider the needs of disabled people as an essential feature of social inclusion.

Disabled people living in rural areas face multiple disadvantages that arise from both their disability and the fact that they live in a rural area. There are also qualitative differences between the difficulties and challenges faced by disabled people and non-disabled people living in rural areas.

Finally, disabled people living in rural areas are likely to face considerably greater difficulties than their urban counterparts. Yet the disadvantages faced by disabled people in comparison with non-disabled people, and the additional challenges created by living in the countryside are not recognised or reflected in public policy.

The research found evidence of discriminatory social attitudes as well as institutional discrimination.

"Discrimination is encountered all the time in the most mundane of everyday situations." (Survey respondent)

Breaches of the Disability Discrimination Acts 1995 and 2005 appear to be common. Public bodies and other organisations are failing to take the needs of disabled people into account in the way they operate and in the services they provide.

The changing countryside

Rural areas have undergone major economic and social change in recent years. There has been a long-term decline in the number of jobs in agriculture and mining, an increase in service sector employment, and there is a high proportion of casual and seasonal work. Younger people have been leaving rural areas because of poor employment prospects, and the lack of affordable housing. Yet rural populations have been growing at twice the national average because of inward migration by people moving out of towns on retirement or to own second homes.

As a result, there have been profound changes in the social structure of communities and the economic structure of local housing markets. House prices are increasing; there has been an increase in housing need and a higher level of demand for affordable housing. 'Right to buy' sales of council houses have disproportionately reduced affordable housing in rural areas compared with urban areas. Council waiting lists are growing, and rural homelessness is increasing. All these issues are affecting the lives of disabled people in rural areas.

Incomes

A large majority of the surveyed households in all five areas depended entirely or mainly on income from pensions, disability and other benefits. On average:

- eighty percent of respondents' households do not have any earned income;
- income from property or investments was significant in only two study areas - West Cornwall and the Lake District;
- when income from property and investments is discounted, an estimated three quarters of all respondent households are entirely dependent on pensions, disability and other benefits.

Housing

Local authority housing needs assessments in all the study areas demonstrate that many disabled people are unsatisfactorily housed and that there is an unmet backlog of need for accessible and adapted homes. In addition,

- the cost of housing in relation to incomes, and the suitability and availability of accessible housing for sale on the open market are barriers to home ownership;
- there is an unmet demand for home adaptations associated with a lack of information about disabled facilities grants, rationing of grants, the cost of building works, and the limited capacity of a disabled person or their family to organise the necessary work if there is no home improvement agency in their area;
- there is a general shortage of social housing for rent and very little of the housing that becomes available each year is adapted to meet disabled peoples' needs;

- these difficulties are made worse by the fact that most local housing authorities do not have information about disabled peoples' housing needs, or how many adapted or accessible homes exist in their areas.

Some local authorities are working towards the collection of information on disabled peoples' housing needs but even in those districts information about the supply of accessible housing was incomplete. The authors conclude that local authorities should be developing Housing Strategies for Disabled People, and adopting Disability Housing Registers as the basis for such strategies.

Many disabled people - perhaps the majority - do not need and would not wish to live in specialised housing schemes. What they need is an accessible home that meets their particular needs - either because it has been adapted or because it has been built to lifetime homes or full wheelchair access standards. However, there is considerable reluctance on the part of private house-builders and some housing associations to build new homes to lifetime homes standards. Part M of the Building Regulations should be amended to ensure that all new homes are built to lifetime homes standards. Local authorities should invest a proportion of their own capital allocations in the development of higher standard wheelchair housing and in an increased disabled facilities grant pot. Two authorities in two of the study areas are already doing this. The important role played by the town and country planning system in delivering affordable and accessible housing in smaller rural settlements is also noted.

Personal care and support for independent living

Almost three quarters of all survey respondents depend on informal assistance from their family, neighbours or the wider community. These informal networks make it possible for disabled people to live relatively independent lives in a rural area in the absence of care and support provided by statutory services.

Some disabled people do not appear to have been assessed for statutory care and support services, while others who need care and support have been means tested and cannot afford to make a financial contribution towards the cost. As a consequence, some are not receiving the care they need from statutory services.

Housing support paid for through the Supporting People system appears to be irrelevant to the needs of most people responding to the surveys because it does not address their non-housing support needs. In any case, very little 'floating support' delivered in their own homes is available because a very high proportion of supporting people funding is tied up in specialist residential schemes run by housing associations or their agents.

A minority of survey respondents - a very small minority in some study areas - receive direct payments from social services and employ personal assistants who provide care and support. Pilot programmes that combine supporting people grant with direct payments as a means of giving disabled people greater control over their care and support appear to be a positive way forward.

An issue of concern here is not only that a high proportion of support and care is being provided by informal carers, but also that information, advice and support may not be available for them. There is clear evidence from the surveys that some respondents and their carers do not have all the advice and information that they need - either because it is not available, or because they do not know how or where to obtain it.

Disability organisations play an important role in providing information, advice and support to disabled people and their carers. However, the level of coverage by disability organisations varied considerably across the study areas. There were more organisations providing information, advice and support to disabled people in some areas than in others. This appears to be partly a product of statutory funding which varies enormously between different areas. Where disability organisations did exist, some were locally based; others were countywide or sub-regional in their operation. The research suggests that while larger-scale organisations may be good at providing information and training for front-line organisations, they may be less good at providing close-up support to individual disabled people and their carers. The smaller local groups appeared to be better able to stay in touch with disabled people in their area.

Local authorities and councils of voluntary service could do more to promote and support locality based support networks for disabled people and their carers.

These networks should be supported by district or sub-regional resource organisations that provide up-to-date information, training and other services such as insurance for local groups.

The Home Office's ChangeUp programme provides an opportunity for the voluntary and community sector and their funders to consider how the advantages of larger scale organisations can be combined with the advantages of a local presence in a 'hierarchy of service provision' in which district-wide or sub-regional infrastructure organisations support front-line groups and individual carers.

Public Transport

One third of all survey respondents' households do not own a car compared with a quarter in England as a whole. A further third of disabled people living in households with a car could not use it when they needed to. In total, 58% of the disabled people responding to the surveys did not have access to a car when needed it and therefore face transport difficulties. Among those who identified challenges associated with travel, the most commonly cited were:

- problems associated with public transport including an absence of services, inconvenient timetables, unreliable and infrequent services;
- barriers caused by inaccessible public transport vehicles;
- the cost of transport and travel ; and
- difficulty getting from home to the bus stop including distance, and poor access to or along main roads.

These are all issues that can only be solved through better strategic planning and increased investment in accessible services. Some local transport strategies covering the study areas made no mention of the needs of disabled people. Even where disability was referred to, the scope of the proposals was limited to the provision of more disabled parking bays and support for taxi vouchers or similar schemes. Regional and local transport authorities preparing local transport plans for rural areas should be required to consider fully the needs of disabled people.

Access to local services

Respondents to the area surveys said that their access to local services is limited by availability, by

where they lived in relation to the service they need to use, by the limitations on their transport, by whether or not roads and pavements are safe, by whether premises from which services are delivered are physically accessible, and by the level of facilities in those premises.

The action being taken by government agencies and local authorities to preserve and develop rural services will, if successful, benefit everyone living in the countryside whether they are disabled or not. However, the issue of safety and physical accessibility does not appear to be high on the agenda of some rural authorities. Action is needed in two areas: roads, pavements and public spaces; and premises to which the general public has access.

Delivering public services to disabled people in rural areas

Rural services face a dilemma in delivery to disabled people. Low population density means that they are faced with the choice of making services available to everyone where they live, or of centralising services in larger market towns and urban areas where the economies of scale are better. This latter option may be organisationally and financially advantageous to the service provider but requires their service users to travel to where the service is located. If, in addition, rural service providers are required to take the needs of disabled people into account, then issues of low population density and of whether services are taken to the customer or the customer travels to the service become even more difficult to resolve. For public policy, therefore, the issue is whether it is reasonable to ask disabled people to move to a home in a town at whatever personal cost in order to receive the services that they need.

Only a minority of disabled people need specialised services that combine high-cost capital investment with intensive care. It may be appropriate to consider locating this high-cost, staff-intensive investment in market towns or other urban centres where aggregate demand would help to ensure that resources are fully used. Specialised facilities and staff that are available in one of these central locations could also support disabled people with less specialised needs living elsewhere in a local catchment area.

Investment in services could be thought of as a planned hierarchy. Central service 'hubs' would provide specialised, high-capital investment

services for an area that might cover an entire local authority or several local authorities depending on the service. Less specialised provision requiring low or no capital investment would be available at a local level in market towns or larger villages in mixed use, multi-purpose or multi-agency premises. A further tier of out-reach services - perhaps provided in partnership with voluntary organisations or community-based groups - would be available in venues such as village halls, public houses, schools or peoples' own homes. Some health services and at least one national supermarket chain is organising tiered services along these lines. Depending on the needs of individual disabled people, the development of service hierarchies in rural areas would tend to expand the range and improve the reach of available services and at the same time give disabled people greater choice. Those requiring highly specialised facilities and services may still in the end need to move. But they would be a minority.

Information and communication technologies

Use of Internet services and knowledge of how to use computers and associated adaptive equipment is increasing but considerable barriers continue to exist for disabled people. In spite of the good use of personal computers and the Internet that some survey respondents were making, the major difficulty posed by the proliferation of initiatives in this field is that many disabled people appeared to be unaware of them, were unable to use them if they did not have access to home computers or the skills to make the best use of them, or they were unaffordable. Indeed, some voluntary organisations working with disabled people in the five study areas had fairly rudimentary ICT facilities and a limited knowledge of the potential of new technologies. These organisations are not in a strong position to advise disabled people on the benefits of new technologies.

Government at the national, regional and local levels must undertake targeted promotion of the benefits of new technologies for disabled people both directly, and via local authorities and voluntary organisations. Rural local authorities should expand their remit beyond the use of new information and communication technologies for 'e-government' to develop electronic information and communication systems that promote inclusive local communities. The particular

difficulties experienced by disabled people in obtaining information, training and access to goods and services need to be taken into account in developing local electronic information and communication systems.

Final Conclusions

The needs of disabled people living in rural areas are invisible to many public bodies and commercial organisations. This is partly because the population in rural areas tends to be dispersed and the existence of disabled people is hidden. However, it is also because 'disability' is treated as an issue that is someone else's concern - often left to so-called 'specialist organisations'. There is a direct parallel between the invisibility of disabled people's needs and the 'colour-blind' approach to race relations that characterised much public policy during the 1980s and early 1990s.

Following the passing of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005 by Parliament earlier in 2005, the legislation on disability discrimination has been strengthened. However, there is no system to ensure compliance or to enforce implementation. The Disability Rights Commission should consider whether the policies and procedures of a wide range of regulatory bodies need to be strengthened to ensure that public service providers that are subject to their regulatory overview are fully compliant with the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act 2005.

Independent living is the key to self-realisation for disabled people, and as a policy aim it is being

undermined and frustrated. In order to promote independent living as the centrepiece of policy for disabled people, many aspects of public policy, procedure and service delivery will need to change. A strategic review is needed of the way in which all the policies of public bodies operating in rural areas combine to create barriers and disadvantages for disabled people. This should be a 'Haskins-style review' focussing on the impact of rural policy and service delivery on the lives of disabled people.

Such a review would form the basis for a 'national strategy for disabled people and their carers living in rural areas'. This would drive local strategies for each local authority area developed as part of the community planning process. Disabled people and the organisations that support them and represent their interests need to be at the heart of this process.

It is a requirement set out in the 2004 Rural White Paper that the policies of all Government departments and agencies should take account of rural circumstances and needs. This is termed 'rural-proofing'.

It follows from the findings and conclusions of this research that all public policies, plans and systems affecting rural areas should be 'disability proofed' as part of the duty placed on public bodies to promote equality for disabled people. This is essential if the needs of disabled people are to be taken fully into account in the development of rural policy and services in ways that promote their human rights and ability to live independently.

ABOUT THIS RESEARCH

There is a large body of research on disability, which tends either to give a very generalised picture or to focus on some aspect of disability such as the barriers created by inaccessible buildings. The position of disabled people living in different settings and the impact of these settings on their lives has not been considered in any depth. The body of research on disability does not tell us, for example, whether the circumstances of disabled people living in rural areas are different from those living in urban areas. Nor does it tell us whether there are any significant differences in the challenges faced by disabled people compared with non-disabled people living in rural areas.

This research, commissioned by the Housing Corporation as part of its Innovation and Good Practice Programme, set out to answer these and other questions. It looked at the challenges and barriers that disabled people living in rural areas face, the ways in which they overcome these challenges, and the need for changes in policy and the way that services are delivered.

The research combined two methodologies: an extensive desktop review of literature on rural policy, disability and related subjects; and fieldwork in selected rural areas that included postal surveys of disabled people and workshops with statutory bodies and voluntary agencies working with disabled people. Five study areas were selected for the fieldwork:

East Lindsey, Lincolnshire (defined by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister as a remote rural district);
Penwith, Cornwall (a remote rural district);
Shepway, Kent (an accessible rural district);
South Lakeland, Cumbria (a remote rural district); and
Wear Valley, County Durham (a remote rural district).

All five areas have been identified by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs as having 'significant economic and social disadvantage'. The postal surveys carried out in the five areas received responses from 224 disabled people - an overall response rate of 41%.

The research results are being published in a series of reports under the overall title *Living with Physical and Sensory Impairment in Rural Areas: Challenges and Responses*. There are seven reports and working papers in the series:

Volume 1: Policy and Practice
Volume 2: Technical Report
Working Paper 1: Area Profile of East Lindsey
Working Paper 2: Area Profile of Penwith
Working Paper 3: Area Profile of Shepway
Working Paper 4: Area Profile of South Lakeland
Working Paper 5: Area Profile of Wear Valley.

Copies of these reports on CD Rom can be obtained from:

Publications Dept, North Harbour Consulting Limited, 20 Newlyn Way, Port Solent, Portsmouth PO6 4TN

Email: northharbour@btconnect.com

Volume 1 - Policy and Practice is also available online on the Housing Corporation website at www.housingcorplibrary.org.uk/housingcorp/nsf and on the North Harbour Consulting website www.northharbourconsulting.co.uk.