



Church of Ireland

Church and Society Commission

Discussion paper

Rural Isolation

Context

A substantial number of people in every age group within the adult population live by themselves, with this proportion increasing markedly as people grow older. The challenges of living alone are more enhanced in rural areas than in urban areas due to the more dispersed pattern of housing and the variable nature of farm incomes – often closely related to weather conditions and changing prices for produce.

Rural isolation is not easily defined. A person may or may not prefer to live alone and his or her status may be determined by choice, bereavement or the ending of a relationship among other factors. Isolation may be experienced by couples and families as well as individuals. Several factors which may contribute to a sense of isolation were identified in a Northern Ireland Assembly research paperⁱ in 2014. Geographical factors may include:

- Proximity to services (e.g. a post office, bank or shop);
- Travel distance to an emergency care department; and
- Access to a car or van (with fewer alternative forms of transport than in urban areas).

The scoping paper also noted that the proportion of adults living alone more than doubled between 1983 and 2014 and that the greatest increase in the number of older people is occurring in rural western areas. A rising number of people are living in poverty, including fuel poverty which is more prevalent in rural areas without a natural gas supply. Net farm incomes had varied between £10,000 and £30,000 in the previous eight years.

While noting that some people prefer to live alone, the paper found that rural isolation may well have negative impacts on individuals, including poorer mental health, a higher risk of suicide, and a lower life expectancy. Personal circumstances such as age, education, income and level of social interaction can play a part in determining a person's sense of isolation.

The first *Rural Ageing in Ireland* working paperⁱⁱ – published by NUI Galway in 2012 – noted that a higher proportion of older people live in rural areas compared to the general population and this trend is particularly apparent in border and western counties.

Rural Ageing in Ireland identified similar challenges to those identified in Northern Ireland i.e. low levels of service provision, inadequate public transport, and social exclusion (related to the migration of younger family members and fewer opportunities to socialise in shops and bars). Rural poverty is often less visible as its effects are not as concentrated as they would be in towns and cities. The paper affirmed the role of personal circumstances and has been followed up with further research into income, poverty and deprivation, social exclusion and genderⁱⁱⁱ.

Response

The Church of Ireland serves rural communities across the island and seeks to respond to the needs of its members and their neighbours through pastoral care and specific ministries. For example, senior citizens' groups provide a continued sense of community for those living alone in later life. Play groups can give valuable practical support for lone parents.

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honour one another above yourselves. Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervour, serving the Lord. Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practise hospitality.”

Romans 12.10-13

People living in the countryside can also benefit from assistance given by the Rural Support charity (Northern Ireland), the Irish Farmers’ Association’s Mind Our Farm Families helpline (Republic of Ireland), and other charities working to improve mental health and reduce financial stress (see below).

The Irish Government’s Rural Social Scheme allows farmers and fishermen living on low incomes to earn supplementary incomes e.g. through providing care or helping to maintain local facilities. The Farm Assist programme provides means-tested income support to farmers. The Rural Transport Fund and Rural Transport Programme help to sustain rural bus services in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland respectively.

Almighty God, whose will it is that the earth and the sea should bear fruit in due season: Bless the labours of those who work on land and sea, grant us a good harvest and the grace always to rejoice in your fatherly care; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Rogation Day Collect, Book of Common Prayer

Advice & Resources

Northern Ireland

Rural Support	0845 606 7 607	www.ruralsupport.org.uk
Christians Against Poverty	0800 328 0006	www.capuk.org
Samaritans	116 123	www.samaritans.org
Minding Your Head & LifeLine	0808 808 8000	www.mindingyourhead.info

Republic of Ireland

IFA: Mind Our Farm Families	1890 130 022	www.ifa.ie/mental-health
Money Advice and Budgeting Service	0761 07 2000	www.mabs.ie
Samaritans	116 123	www.samaritans.ie
HSE: Your Mental Health		www.yourmentalhealth.ie

ⁱ *Rural isolation, poverty and rural community/farmer wellbeing*, Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service (2014):

www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/raise/publications/2014/general/7314.pdf

ⁱⁱ *Rural Ageing in Ireland: Key Trends and Issues*, NUI Galway (2012):

www.icsg.ie/files/personfiles/m2184_ruralage1_issuesinageing.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Available at www.icsg.ie/content/rural-ageing-observatory