Welcome to the Fourth OPeRA Newsletter

This edition contains information about the latest developments in the Grey and Pleasant Land? Project. Lots has been happening since our last newsletter, including the completion of the Work Package 1 survey, our first webcast in Work Package 6 and the launch of the project web site. Read on to find out more.

Grey and Pleasant Land?
An Interdisciplinary Exploration of Older People’s Connectivity in Rural Civic Society

Work Package One: The connectivity of older people in rural areas, an overview.

An in-depth door to door survey of 900 people aged 60 and over has now been completed. The survey, which is designed to assess the connectivity of older people in rural communities, was undertaken in 6 different areas, 3 in Wales and 3 in South West England. One area from each country was chosen to reflect a distinct set of characteristics relating to three area types. These were:

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<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>South West England</th>
<th>Wales</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A remote and deprived area</td>
<td>Blisland and St Breward, Cornwall</td>
<td>Llanarth, Ceredigion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A less remote and deprived area</td>
<td>The Stours, Dorset</td>
<td>Rhayader, Powys</td>
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<tr>
<td>A relatively affluent and accessible area</td>
<td>Painswick, Gloucestershire</td>
<td>Raglan, Monmouthshire</td>
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150 in-person interviews were undertaken in each area by a small group of surveyors. The questions were mainly asked in a multiple-choice format, with a variety of questions relating to each of the Work Packages within the Grey and Pleasant Land project. These

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included questions on participation, transport, computer usage, social connectivity, feelings about their community and decision making. The questionnaires have produced enormous amounts of data which are currently being analyzed and will then be used to inform other areas of the project.

For the most part, the survey process ran smoothly and the surveyors were generally welcomed by the community who were often very keen to hear about the project and to be given the opportunity to input their views. However, in some areas difficulties were encountered, some of which were quite surprising. For example, surveyors working in Blisland and St Breward in Cornwall came across a number of obstacles. For example, community members had recently been consulted on a number of issues, each of which involved answering questionnaires, some of the residents therefore saw the Grey and Pleasant Land survey as “yet another” piece of paperwork, and were therefore reluctant to take part.

Once the WP1 survey data has been analyzed, we will be able to gain an overview of the connectivity of older people in rural communities, the findings of which will be built on throughout the project. The questionnaire gave the opportunity to participants to volunteer to be involved in further aspects of the project, and some of them will most likely take part in the research that is being undertaken within the other Work Packages.

When this work is complete Nigel Curry, who is leading this work package, would be very happy to present and discuss the findings of the survey with members of the Older People’s Panel.

The Canada Connection
The Grey and Pleasant Land project is linked to Canadian researchers at the University of Alberta who have recently conducted a national study of older people in rural areas in Canada. This partnership has been further expanded under a new joint initiative funded by the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) and the New Dynamics of Ageing programme. This new three-year project, 'Connectivity of older adults in rural communities: Health in context', is led by Professor Norah Keating at the University of Alberta in collaboration with Dr Verena Menec at the University of Manitoba.

The project focuses on the health of older adults in relation to their inclusion (‘connectivity’) in rural communities in Canada and the UK. This research will increase our understanding of how social relationships and engagement in rural places enhance or constrain quality of life in older age, and what constitutes ‘age-friendly’ communities across Canadian and UK rural settings.

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We are very pleased to announce the launch of a web site for the Grey and Pleasant Land Project. At www.greyandpleasantland.org.uk you can find everything you need to know about the project. A key feature is the Discussion Forum where you can ‘pop in’, see who else is there and post an introduction. Access to this part of the site requires a username and password, which can be obtained by emailing Inocencio.Maramba@plymouth.ac.uk, along with some brief instructions on how to get in to the discussion forum and to post.

At the moment there are three forums: (i) introductions, (ii) methods of communication, where a theme about how older people use different forms of communication has started, and (iii) webcast chat archives, containing the transcripts from webcast events.

Other areas of the web site include a description of the project, outlines of each of the 7 work packages, a list of upcoming events, links of organisational partners and the contact details of the members of the research team. This is very much a work in progress so do look out for additional features.

The September Webcast

Work Package 6, led by Professor Ray Jones from Plymouth University, aims to build on the involvement of collaborating stakeholder groups in this research (older rural persons panels, non-academic partner organisations and international academic experts in rural ageing) to explore views on quality of life issues for older rural people. This work package is using web-based computer methods to enable connectivity among these groups and to investigate older rural persons’ use and experiences of communication technology.

As part of this process a very successful ‘webcast’ (an interactive web conference) was held in September 2009. The aim of this initial event was to familiarise participants with the technology, to explain the purpose of the work package, and to introduce the members to each other. After general introductions and aims we used (virtual) break-out rooms so that participants could ‘chat’ and get to know each other better. There are currently 31 older people registered with this part of the study (12 from SW England, 11 from Wales, and 8 from Manitoba), although as you will see only a few have so far posted an introduction. There are 15 people representing supporting organisations, 6 researchers from other project work packages and eight ‘international expert academics’ (who are not researchers on the project). If you are interested in joining this work package please contact Ray Jones at R.Jones-5@plymouth.ac.uk

The New Dynamics of Ageing Programme: an update

The final round of commissioning of the NDA Programme has just been completed with the addition of 12 new Programme Grants. The latest newsletter can be downloaded from http://newdynamics.group.shef.ac.uk/newsletters/7 If you would like to be sent a hard copy please contact Simon Evans using the details on the back page.
Profile

This is one of a series in which we tell you about members of the research team. This time we focus on Catherine Hennessy, overall project lead and Professor of Public Health and Ageing at the University of Plymouth.

In Catherine’s words . . . .
I have been doing research on the topic of older people’s health and well-being for over 25 years. My particular interest in culture and ageing has taken me to some interesting locations to work with diverse groups of older people: Asians and Pacific Islanders in Hawaii, Chinese elders in San Francisco, and older people in American Indian tribes in rural and remote areas. Much of this research has focused on provision of services to older people and the cultural, geographical or other factors that affect access to care. For a number of years I worked at the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the national public health agency, where I did research looking at health and quality of life in older age. In 2001 I moved to the UK to continue working in this area through the Growing Older Programme, a national research initiative on older people’s quality of life. I also became involved in efforts to encourage the UK Research Councils to expand funding for interdisciplinary research benefiting older people. The ‘Grey and Pleasant Land?’ project is an exciting opportunity for me to bring together researchers from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds to investigate older people’s role in the well-being of rural communities and to raise public awareness of these contributions to rural community life.

Can You Help?

At the last meeting of the Older People’s Panel you told us which work packages you were most interested in. Since then some of you have taken part in a webcast as part of Work Package 6, ‘Using the Internet to Connect Stakeholders in Rural Ageing’. The researchers from Work Packages 2 (Understanding the Role of Cultural Activities in Ageing) and 3 (Travelling Through the Rural Lifecourse) are keen to hear from you. There are many ways in which you could contribute, including:

- providing examples of good/bad practice in rural transport;
- commenting on the interview materials they will be using;
- making them aware of the range of cultural and leisure activities which older people are involved in;
- giving feedback on their findings;
- advising them on how policy and practice recommendations might be rolled out.

If this sounds interesting then please contact the Work Package leads using the following details:

For WP2: Catherine Hennessy
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We welcome your comments on this newsletter and any suggestions for future editions.

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