

Rural Issues

This brief report is an addendum to the report on key issues presented to the Social Inclusion Forum 2017. It is based on a roundtable discussion organised by Community Work Ireland with community workers living and working in rural areas in Galway, Kerry, Mayo and Longford.

Rural Deprivation vs Social Deprivation in Rural Areas

Rural transport, isolation and lack of services are all significant tissues in rural areas. However, although these are generally acknowledged, there was agreement that there needs be much more of a focus on social deprivation in rural areas, such as issues affecting Traveller, migrants (particularly undocumented migrants) women experiencing violence, etc. Participants were concerned that social inclusion work in rural areas funded by LEADER, SICAP and other programmes is firmly focused on those experiencing socio-economic deprivation in rural areas.

Hidden nature of poverty and deprivation

The HP Pobal Index of Affluence and Deprivation can be very misleading in rural areas. In a number of instances, areas that are not considered disadvantaged on the index can have high rates of hidden poverty and deprivation. One of the key issues highlighted was the hidden nature of poverty and deprivation in rural areas. Participants agreed that poverty and deprivation continue to hold a significant social stigma and many experiencing poverty will try to disguise the fact from neighbours and others. For these people and communities, being able to access services in a universal way is vital.

'We get to know people...build their trust so they know that they can speak to us about the difficult issues. They also know that if a service operates from our premises they can trust it'

Drug and alcohol misuse

Drug and alcohol is often perceived to be a more urban than rural issue. However, it was agreed that drug and alcohol misuse are major issues in rural areas. A number of participants stated that heroin and cocaine misuse is becoming common and anti-social behaviour issues and violence are increasing as a result. Participants reported harassment of parents and grandparents to pay debts incurred as a result of drugs. They highlighted that the use of drugs has become normalised and there is little understanding at the outset of the criminal element. Boredom and the lack of recreational facilities is compounding the problem

'There is so much of it now. It has a terrible effect on communities and we can't do as much as we would like – it's too big for us to grapple with. We don't have the resources'

Illegal Money Lending

Partly as a result of drug and alcohol misuse and partly because of poverty, illegal money lending is becoming an increasing problem in rural areas, bringing with it associated violence and threats.

Lack of services

There is a general lack of services in rural areas, making addressing serious issues such as drug misuse, violence, and illegal money lending very difficult.

'The nearest methadone clinic is in Limerick. How are people supposed to get there when there is no public transport? We don't have a Garda station so illegal money lending and other crimes are going undetected.'

Homelessness

There was agreement that homeless is becoming increasingly common. In rural areas, homelessness tends to be in the form of overcrowding and/or substandard accommodation. Participants pointed to the fact that in their areas, there were few if any properties available to buy or let, contributing to depopulation as people have no option but to move into urban areas to find accommodation.

Education and Unemployment

For those that have left school early or who want to retrain, opportunities are very scarce and they majority have to travel to avail of second-chance education or training. Transport and the lack of rural transport presents a major barrier to many in this situation.

Migrants and Refugees

Migrants form a significant proportion of the community in some areas. For these communities, language and English literacy can be major issues, and accessing education beyond second level is a considerable issue for migrants. There are particular issues for migrants that become undocumented and access to social protection is often difficult leading to significant poverty in many cases.

The resettlement of refugees in rural areas was highlighted as difficult when services that they need are not available to them.

'The level of racism is very evident. It's in schools, on the streets...everywhere.'

There was agreement that there is a rise in racism and racist incidents in rural areas.

Rural Resettlement

Rural resettlement was highlighted as a flawed model as it entails moving families often with complex needs to rural areas where there are few services and employment and education opportunities are scarce. Participants stated that this is a model that needs to be reviewed.

Community Work Approaches

There was consensus that there is a need for community work approaches to addressing the issues highlighted. The importance of Family Resource Centres (FRCs), Local Development Companies (LDCs) and other community development projects and initiatives was highlighted in this context.

Family Resource Centres are a key resource in many marginalised communities. They deal with a wide range of socio-economic issues, offer services to all in their communities and also act as a hub for other services such as the Money Advice and Budgeting Service. The combination of universal and targeted is considered to be crucial to ensuring that those in need can access services without fear of stigma. Accessing universal services is often a pathway to accessing more targeted, specialised services. However, it was acknowledged that FRCs are not present in all areas and FRCs and LDCs are under-resourced.

'FRCs are really important. They provide a base that is visible and accessible.'

There was consensus that some positive work is happening in rural areas under the SICAP programme but the emphasis on social inclusion under the LEADER programme needs to be improved.

