Rural Social Work in Cumbria: An Exploratory Case Study

Final report (June 2020)

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Introduction and Background

Department for Education funding enabled the formal establishment of the Cumbria-Lancaster Social Work Teaching Partnership in 2016. This formal partnership consolidated existing joint working arrangements and relationships between Cumbria County Council and Lancaster University. Through these opportunities for closer working arrangements, a number of the context-specific challenges faced by social work practitioners in Cumbria began to emerge and appeared to be linked to the rural context or remoteness of practice settings.

Cumbria is in the North West of England, bordering Scotland, Northumberland, County Durham, Yorkshire and Lancashire. The county is divided into six districts – Copeland, Allerdale, Carlisle, Eden, Barrow-in-Furness and South Lakeland. Cumbria is the second largest county in the country by surface area, and with a population of just below half a million, it is the second most sparsely populated county in England. Cumbria is primarily rural in terms of the size and distribution of settlements and population across its surface area. Using the Office for National Statistics rural-urban classification system, large areas of Cumbria are defined as being sparsely populated areas of villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings. The proportion of the population in Cumbria estimated as living rurally is 54%, which is significantly greater than the national figure of 18%. In Carlisle, the district with the smallest population or rural residents, the equivalent percentage is 27%. In both Allerdale and Eden, over 70% of residents live rurally. Amongst Cumbria's six districts, only in Carlisle and Barrow-in-Furness do most of the population live in urban areas. Apart from the city of Carlisle in the north of the county, Cumbria has only five towns with a population of over 20,000: the coastal towns of Workington and Whitehaven (on the western coast), Barrow-in-Furness, Kendal and Ulverston. The figures in this section are derived from the Cumbria Intelligence Observatory (CIO 2008, 2010, 2015, 2016).

An exploratory review of the academic literature revealed sparse information and research on social work in rural and remote settings in England and the UK. Apart from a couple of key authors (for example Richard Pugh and Colin Turbett) is has been difficult to find any substantive writing about rurality and social work, with a UK focus. This is in direct contrast to the international literature, especially from North America and Australia, which indicates a great deal of interest in the particular nature of social work practice in rural and remote settings. This research project aimed to consider the impact of rurality on social work practice in the county of Cumbria. A small research team lead the project, which combined a review of published literature and primary qualitative data collection through focus groups and interviews. This was a small-scale project, but aimed to open up dialogue on the neglected topic of rural social work in the UK, complemented by a stakeholder engagement event.

Literature Review

We reviewed the academic literature on the challenges and opportunities that rural practice presents to social workers and on the impact of these on the professional and personal life of social workers. Below we present the main findings from this review divided between challenges and opportunities.

Challenges of rural social work

1. Scarcity of resources and services for services users

Dealing with the "*consistent dearth of formal resources*" (Riebschleger 2007: 204) and services in the communities they work and engaging in '*paucity management'*, i.e. finding ways "*to counter the effects of operating within resource-poor situations*" (Mlckek 2005: 298) appear to be key features of rural social work practice (see also Gregory 2005; Mackie 2012; Sidell et al 2006). Respondents in a study by Lonne and Cheers (2004) spoke about the lack of resources and referral options as factors negatively affecting work-related stress, burnout and workers' decisions about length of stay in their post.

2. Scarcity of resources, support and training for rural social workers

2.1. Lack of good supervision and professional isolation

Rural social workers often report a lack of good supervision (Hodgkin 2002; Krieg Mayer 2001; Schmidt and Klein 2004). When supervisors are not co-located with the rural practitioners and are instead based centrally in regional headquarters, they may be distanced from the realities and specificities of the practice context. The lack of developmental, supportive supervision reinforces the commonly referred to theme of professional isolation with rural social workers being and feeling geographically remote from professional and personal supports, organisational decision-making, and professionals in other fields (Lonne and Cheers 2000).

2.2. Continuing education and training

Access to continuing education and training is often problematic in rural settings (Gregory 2005; Krieg Mayer 2001; Lonne and Cheers 2004; Mackie 2012). Rural social workers report a lack of training opportunities locally. What training is available is often too far away, meaning that, as for social work service users, considerations around travel and overnight accommodation costs, childcare arrangements and time away from work may make attendance prohibitive.

2.3. Inadequate preparation for rural practice

The majority of rural social workers who took part in the study by Lonne and Cheers (2000: 23) reported having received no information, advice or support from their employer about "*their communities, positions or anticipated adjustment issues prior to commencing duties*". This was said to be particularly a problem for practitioners who had moved from urban areas. In the UK, Turbett (2004, 2006, 2009) has persistently called attention to the scant or inexistent attention paid to rural practice in academic social work teaching in the UK.

2.4. Cultural competence

Respondents in the study by Riebschleger (2007) were challenged by the process of acquiring cultural competence in their specific rural context i.e. learning about and adapting their practice to the language, values, customs, traditions, beliefs and unwritten rules of the local communities (see also Brocious et al 2013, and Turbett 2009).

2.5. Adjustment to rural life and practice

Studies by Lonne (1990) and Zapf (1993) researching the adjustment process, which occurred when social workers relocated to rural settings in Australia and Canada, indicate that adjustment is challenging for the practitioner. They recommend preparation for social workers, either through their educational and professional training, or through their employer having appropriate, planned and organised support structures and systems in place. Apart from individual issues for the social worker, relocation to a rural area may create family challenges for social workers, such as children feeling uprooted and partners facing unemployment (Krieg Mayer 2001; Lonne and Cheers 2000).

3. Workplace-related harassment and violence

Rural social workers reported concerns around work-related harassment and violence and concerns for their own safety and that of their family (Green 2003; Green, Gregory and Mason 2003; Gregory 2005; Krieg Mayer 2001; Schmidt and Klein 2004). Schmidt and Klein (2004: 239) comparing urban-based social workers with social workers practising in the northern territories of Canada found that *"[b]oth urban and northern groups ranked safety as a main threat but the level of feeling about this issue was much more significant and intense for northern workers. They cited safety issues as a factor in any potential decision to leave the north, whereas urban workers did not cite this as a significant factor."*

4. Living and working in small communities

Rural social workers report that the social dynamics of small communities present professional and personal challenges linked to their heightened visibility in the community, the lack of anonymity and the difficulties in separating their professional and personal lives (Brocious et al 2013; Green 2007; Gregory et al. 2007). This heightened visibility is extended to the social workers' families, which becomes a source of concern and anxiety. Living in close social proximity with service users presents its own challenges (e.g. Humble et al 2013). In Riebschleger (2007: 207), several respondents "*described new social workers that left rural practice reportedly because in a rural community, nothing is truly private … For them, it was intrusive.*"

Dual relationships, another salient feature of practice in small communities, create ethical dilemmas for social workers with respect to managing personal and professional boundaries (e.g. Halverson and Brownlee 2010). Gregory (2005: 270) argues that "*[s]uccessful resolution of the ethical dilemmas which arise from being engaged in dual and multiple relationships may be a defining factor in rural practitioners' longevity either in those geographic settings or in this specific field of practice.*" As important as the topic is, unfortunately, as Pugh (2007: 1407; 1420) observes, there is: "*little explicit recognition of dual relationships in the UK literature*" and a "*paucity of reliable information about how rural practitioners actually go about their work in the UK*".

5. High staff turnover and recruitment difficulties

The high staff turnover of rural social workers and the significant difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers are common findings in the international literature and they have a negative impact on incumbent rural practitioners increasing workloads, depressing morale and diverting scarce resources away from practice with social work service users (e.g. Dellemain and Warburton 2013; Dollard, Winefield and Winefield 1999; Krieg Mayer 2001; Lonne and Cheers 2000; Lonne 1990).

6. Urban-centred social work policy

Turbett (2009) argues that centrally determined/regulated social work policy fails to give sufficient attention to the particularities of rural and remote contexts and their impact on social work practice. Turbett (2009: 519) identifies the danger that "*practice in remote and rural areas is [...] subsumed totally into poorly fitting urban-based models with consequent further alienations and disadvantage to service users and the workers who live alongside them*". Graham et al (2011) argue that social work education, guidelines and 'best practice' are not aligned with the realities of rural practice. Brownlee et al (2010) discuss how these issues play out in technological solutions to the problems of resource deficiencies in rural settings. A related argument is made by Pugh (2007: 1411) who expresses the concern that the "*formal proceduralization of practice*" may squeeze the space for local adaptations. Similarly, respondents in Krieg Mayer (2001) identified a gap between organisational policies, plans and designs about the delivery of services and the difficulties besetting the frontline.

7. Occupational stress

Pugh and Cheers (2010) summarising the international literature on rural social work note that organisational rather than service user, personal or non-work factors make the greatest contribution to occupational stress. They list the following factors as particularly relevant to rural practice: poor supervision, weak links between practitioners and their communities, being young and professionally inexperienced, after-hours work, high social visibility, greater physical distance from the supervisor, threats to personal and family safety, difficulties in delivering ethical and professional services in the community, conflicts between workers' professional training and what is perceived as good practice in their community especially around issues of dual and multiple relationships, confidentiality and maintaining professional boundaries.

Opportunities, rewards and joys of rural social work

1. Personal life and personal history

Close personal relationships and a deeply held sense of connection to the place though ties of family, biography, marriage, tradition, culture, ancestry, identity and ethnic origin dominate social workers' accounts of the reasons for their decisions to live and practice in rural settings (Krieg Mayer 2001; Schmidt and Klein 2004; Sidell et al 2006; see also Pugh and Cheers 2010). Rural social workers speak of being rooted or connected to the place, either through their personal biography or having built a life there. For example, Sidell et al (2006: 34) write that: "*study respondents appear to reside in rural areas due to strong connections of family, not necessarily career decisions*".

2. Way of life and closeness to nature

Social workers list a range of factors that they appreciate about the lifestyles supported by the places in which they live (Green and Lonne 2005; Gregory 2005; Krieg Mayer 2001; Riebschleger 2007; Schmidt and Klein 2004; Sidell et al 2006): peacefulness, quietness, a slower and less hectic pace of life; less traffic and city noise; a safe and good living environment for raising children; easy access to local services including childcare; and an overall higher quality of life. Rural social workers appreciate and value the local environment and the qualities of the natural setting. They express enjoyment of being in close proximity to nature, wilderness, beautiful landscapes and of having the opportunity to undertake outdoor

pursuits and recreational activities that would otherwise require extensive travel (Gregory 2005; Krieg Mayer 2001; Schmidt and Klein 2004; Sidell et al 2006).

3. Social relationships and community

Rural social workers report valuing the sense of connection, neighbourliness and closeness to others they experience in the places they live (Gregory 2005; Schmidt and Klein 2004; Sidell et al 2006). Further, a sense of being part of and of contributing to their community through their profession was described as important to them (Green and Mason 2000, cited in Green and Lonne 2005; Sidell et al 2006). In particular, social workers spoke of the joy and satisfaction of witnessing first hand the positive impact of their work and the successes of service users (Krieg Mayer 2001; Riebschleger 2007).

4. Professional practice

Rural social workers spoke of the opportunities for personal and professional development and career advancement afforded by rural practice through gaining valuable and distinct work experience and the opportunity to broaden and diversify one's skills (Krieg Mayer 2001; Lonne and Cheers 2004; Schmidt and Klein 2004).

Rural social workers valued the use of generalist practice skills across a diverse range of fields (Lonne and Cheers 2004; Schmidt and Klein 2004; Sidell et al 2016) and the stimulation and variety afforded by their work (Krieg Mayer 2001). Rural social workers felt that their practice was characterised by more autonomy, flexibility, opportunity for creativity and less bureaucracy with fewer agency-imposed rules and the freedom to try different ideas (Gregory 2005; Krieg Mayer 2001; Riebschleger 2007; Schmidt and Klein 2004).

Conclusion

Although the literature specific to rural social work is limited, with greater insights available from North America and Australia, important findings can be drawn from this review. First, the literature reports a disconnect between centralised design and regulation of social work, and the realities of rural practice, with the latter requiring often greater flexibility than is afforded by national regulations. There are very particular challenges to living and working in a rural context, not least the potential for close residential proximity to service users. Practising in a rural context is not driven primarily by career objectives, but rather established links to place, family ties, or preference for the pace and beauty of rural landscapes. Moving into rural areas requires a period of adaptation – agencies should be prepared to provide support for this adaptation.

Aims, Objectives and Methods

The collection of primary qualitative data aimed to complement the literature review.

Research Question:

1. How does rurality impact on social work service provision in Cumbria?

Aims:

1. To reveal challenges faced by social workers working with rural and isolated communities, families and individuals in Cumbria;
2. To uncover good and innovative practice among social workers working with rural and isolated communities, families and individuals in Cumbria.

Objectives:

1. To assess the ways in which rurality creates challenges for practising social workers;
2. To identify good and context specific social work practice within Cumbria;
3. To surface ways in which social workers practise innovatively to mitigate practical challenges created by rurality;
4. To identify possible changes to practice methods or organisational arrangements that could benefit social work practice in Cumbria.

Methods and Participants:

Phase 1 – Focus groups (semi-structured)

One focus group was held in each of the 3 established geographical areas of Cumbria (West, North and South). Participants were all social work practitioners working within CCC. Invitation was by email to all social workers within the council. Participants were therefore self-selecting. This resulted in 13 participants in total, 1 whose practice area was children, and 12 participants whose practice focused on adult service users. The focus groups were audio recorded, transcribed and then analysed by the three authors separately with the aim of identifying their main themes. The authors then met to present and discuss the themes they had derived independently and to achieve a consensus, joint view on the final list and content of the main themes. These were used to inform the semi-structured questions used in the second phase of data collection.

Phase 2 – Interviews (semi-structured)

12 social work practitioners were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Again, contact was made with social workers via an email to all social workers in the council meaning participants were self-selecting. Of the 12 participants, 8 worked in adult social work settings and 4 in children's social work settings. Interviews were audio recorded, transcribed and analysed through manual open coding.

The social work participants who contributed to this research were all self-selecting. This, alongside the relatively low number of participants, means the data gathered is not fully representative of all social workers working within the council. A noticeable feature of the participants is that they could all be described as experienced social workers and well settled within Cumbria and therefore the findings of this research should be considered within this context.

Ethical approval was granted by the appropriate Ethics Committee within Lancaster University.

Findings

The findings from this study largely align with the existing literature on rural social work. We identified 6 themes from our data, which are explored below.

1. Extensive travel

Extensive travel is a defining feature of social work practice in Cumbria. To be a social worker in Cumbria is to travel, typically to drive, alone, in your own car, for very large parts of your working day. The extent of work-related travel presents challenges to social workers with regards to the following:

1) Workload management

A number of factors, apart from geographical distance, combine in Cumbria – e.g. the weather, agricultural or tourist traffic, the conditions of the rural road network, the terrain – to increase the demands of travel. Research participants spoke of travel routinely adding two to four hours to the time required for a service user visit or to attend a work meeting. Consequently, the time available for attending to other work activities is restricted contributing to the workload and time pressures experienced by social workers. Participants told us that they adjust to the workload implications of travel in the following ways:

1.1) Working longer hours and extending the working day

Participants told us that with the working day consumed by visits, work meetings and travel, completing the necessary associated paperwork, and catching up with voicemail, texts and e-mail are often displaced in the evenings. Extending the working day requires fitting work around other responsibilities, e.g. family roles and childcare, and is facilitated by the Council's systems and policies that enable agile working, in particular TOIL and mobile working such as working from home or from touch-down spaces.

However, working flexibly, adapting the number of working hours in a day to workload demands and balancing longer days with shorter days (or with days off) was not necessarily neutral in terms of the physical and mental demands placed on social workers. The accumulated tiredness of working consecutive longer days was not always counter-balanced by a reduced working day or week immediately. Instead, the state of overwork may be maintained until an opportunity to take time back as TOIL could be found. In a condition of being overworked, social workers said that they did not always perform to the standards they would have liked. These issues were exacerbated under conditions in which the social workers were unsure as to when or even whether they could take back, recorded TOIL. Circumstances of under-staffing (e.g. through colleague sickness or in teams facing recruitment challenges) or of emergency or unplanned work sometimes prevented social workers from reclaiming time through TOIL.

Mobile phones and laptops and the capacity to connect remotely into Council's systems from different places were seen as helpful to social workers but working away from an office was not completely enabled by technology and meant that social workers were not consistently able to work remotely within Cumbria. Further, mobile technology does not entirely live up to its promise in rural contexts. Mobile phone signals do not have universal coverage in Cumbria and therefore the advantages and benefits of having a mobile phone are not realisable everywhere. Mobile technology did not consistently counterbalance the workload pressures created by extensive travel.

1.2) Working on the move

Driving may often be described as 'dead time' and as unproductive but work still happens within driving time. Travel time is interrupted by 'work episodes' and also permeated by the anticipation and the preparedness of dealing with emergencies and other urgent and unexpected work. One participant described her car as a 'mini-office' in which she performs work, but which (as a time-saving measure) she uses regularly as a place to have a meal. Aware of the possibility of being contacted for emergencies, participants talked about stopping at lay-bys to check their phones and to prioritise the phone calls, texts and e-mails they received. Mobile phones make social workers contactable even when out of their office or other work base. They provide constant reminders of incoming work and enable other people to make a claim on the social worker's attention at all times. Going against Council policy, a number of participants told us that they make use of their mobile phones while driving in order to reduce workload pressures and to connect with colleagues.

1.3) Paying careful attention to time and diary management

Rural social workers pay particular attention to diary and time management to the extent that they have control over their daily schedule. Alongside productivity and efficiency, participants use diary and time management as a practice of self-care. However, the careful planning of service user visits and work meetings in order to maximise efficiency by reducing the proportion of time spent travelling may not always be possible, given the need to respond to incoming work, the needs, requirements and geographical location of service users and by the unexpected demands of emergency and unplanned work. Diary and time management appear to mitigate workload and time pressures but did not seem adequate to cancel them out.

1.4) Team management mitigating workload pressures

In our participants' accounts, the time pressures created by travel could be mitigated by supportive team management, which incorporated travel time into workload management systems. Accommodating management, however, was not a universal experience with two respondents saying that caseload allocation within their teams was blind to travel requirements leaving individual social workers to deal with the implications.

2) Personal safety, lone working in remote and isolated places, and exposure to travel-related and service user-related risks

Almost all participants who travelled regularly as part of their role recounted instances of feeling that their safety could have been put at risk due to the weather and road conditions while driving for work. Social workers are asked to assess, judge and decide on the risks that are prudent for them to take on the road given the anticipated road and traffic conditions and the characteristics of their car. Further, they must possess and be able to deploy skills in the safe handling of their vehicle in adverse conditions.

Participants consistently praised the Council's warning systems for travel-related weather risks, the Council's policies around dealing with travel-related risks and the way they are applied in team management practice. Participants felt supported in cancelling, postponing or otherwise modifying their travel plans in order to avoid exposure to weather-related risks. However, social workers working out-of-hours said they cannot benefit from these warning systems as e-mails and alerts are not sent to them outside office hours. Social workers told us that they use apps on their private mobile phones to inform them of weather, traffic and road conditions across Cumbria. A participant suggested that the Council could be more proactive in supporting employees to prepare for winter driving, e.g. by sending out e-mails

offering guidance and advice on the matter, and that it would be good practice for the Council to offer relevant equipment for social workers to carry in their cars, such as winter shovels and torches.

Participants reported that they regularly travel to remote and isolated places far away from their office bases. Their sense of separation from sources of support was said to be augmented by the lack of mobile phone signal reception in parts of Cumbria leaving social workers unable to contact their office bases or other sources of help. Our participants explained that poor mobile phone signal reception is not a feature of rural Cumbria alone and that urban places including parts of central Carlisle are not well served in this respect. Apart from leaving social workers effectively isolated, these issues also can profoundly disrupt their work as voicemail and text messages may only be delivered with a significant delay, in some cases of days.

When visiting the homes of service users in remote and isolated places, the frequent lack of a mobile phone signal leaves the social worker relying primarily on the lone working policies and procedures of their team and on any measures they adopt as an individual. One participant told us that she uses a mobile phone app that allows their partner to view their specific location on a map. However, even if safety alerts are raised, support may be quite a long time away as postal addresses alone may not allow the easy identification of single dwellings in remote and isolated settings. Service user homes may be hard to find or to access adding to long journey times and to a sense of entering a situation of potential risk. Consequently, the lone working policy may not feel particularly reassuring.

3) The financial impact on social workers of using one's own car for work

The removal of essential car users' allowance for social workers in adult services was experienced as a pay cut and was interpreted as underestimating the role and importance of the car in rural practice. The current mileage rate was also seen as underestimating the costs of maintaining and running a car for business purposes.

The policy of restricting own car use for journeys under 100 miles was seen as not reflecting work and travel realities in Cumbria. Hiring a car requires planning that may not be possible when journeys become necessary at short notice. It can also create unexpected problems for social workers. A participant told us about her neighbours complaining about the extra parking space taken up by the hire car especially when the hire car company does not collect on time. Finally, using a hired care for a pre-set journey reduces the flexibility and optionality of travel arrangements. One social worker told us that, on account of these issues, she uses her own car even for journeys longer than 100 miles but only claims mileage up to the limit of 100 miles. On the other hand, the car hire service appears to work well for social workers, who know their travel commitments well in advance and can plan for them.

4) Access to training and professional development opportunities

This was a sub-theme raised by two participants who offered contrasting accounts. For one participant, distances and travel did not restrict access to professional development opportunities. They felt they had ample training and development opportunities within Cumbria. For the second participant however, training opportunities were mainly to be found out-of-county. The time implications of out-of-county travelling made accessing such training prohibitive due to their negative implications both in terms of workload but also for the participant's family life.

5) Lifestyle and health considerations

Even though driving may be thought of, as unproductive time, it can be physically and mentally demanding and at the same time sedentary. The physical demands of being an 'agile' worker in terms of carrying out equipment and paperwork may be compounded by the physical demands of driving. People with injuries or disabilities may be disadvantaged by the requirement to travel extensively on the job and to be 'agile'. Two participants noted the tiredness they experienced after driving for long periods. Participants also noted how extensive travel contributes to a very sedentary profession involving very little physical activity and expressed their concern about its health impacts.

6) Driving can present an opportunity to reflect, de-stress, appreciate the beauty of the landscape and act as a barrier between work and non-work life

Driving, with its solitude and unbroken stretches of time, afforded participants the opportunity to think uninterruptedly and in the absence of distractions in a way that would perhaps be impossible in a busy office environment. The details of recent visits or the complications of a difficult piece of work can be reflected on, analysed and processed and decisions on next steps can be arrived at. The time imposed by travel between service user visits or between the place of work and one's home facilitates the setting of psychological boundaries. Finally, driving can be experienced as pleasurable both in itself but also because it offers the opportunity to experience the beauty of the Cumbrian landscape. On the other hand, a number of participants contrasted their current experiences to past times when they did not cover geographical areas as extensive as they did at the time of interview and instead their caseloads were concentrated around smaller geographical patches.

2. Service provision

Alongside the extensive, solitary travel, difficulties in service provision was the second most prominent theme in our participants' accounts of the lived experience of rural social work. Our participants found the severe difficulties in the supply and availability of services to be a major challenge in their work.

Shortfalls in service provision affect practitioners on a personal and emotional level. Witnessing the negative consequences of the lack of provision for service users affects social workers negatively. Social workers spoke of experiencing stress, frustration and a sense of professional inefficacy at their inability to secure the desired arrangements for the people they support. They talked about a sense of futility assessing people who live in places that the social workers knew it would be very hard to source services for. They spoke of feeling under intense pressure to come up with solutions to the lack of care provision. Social workers concentrate on themselves the grievances, complaints and discontents caused by the lack of service provision from service users, their family members and other professionals such as GPs.

The implications of the difficulties in sourcing services on social work practice, as described by our participants, are extensive. Firstly, there are clear workload implications as the time social workers need to spend per case increases. In the absence of readily available, robust and reliable provision that can quickly address and settle issues around safeguarding, managing risk and the dependable translation of care plans into practice, the management of these issues falls back on the social worker. The social worker needs to attempt to identify, assess and broker any available, possible and potential sources of support in a workable configuration that can address to some extent the gaps left by the existing service provision: '*piece-mealing together care'* as put by one participant. The social worker intermediates between care providers, people who use services, their family and friends, other professionals

and her own managers and Council governance systems in order to secure resources and to achieve practical, on-the-ground arrangements that benefit service users. Social workers may use their networks of inter-professional reciprocity, trust and shared values in order to gain resources on behalf of service users even when these resources are deployed at the limits of their intended remit. Addressing, even partially and temporarily, the gaps of existing provision drives professionals into adaptive and creative ways of working in order to meet the requirements of circumstances that the wide welfare and support systems were not designed to address. However, the network of support that can be mobilised in place by a social worker may not meet the full spectrum of needs of the person. A social worker may then need to risk-assess the consequences of, for example, a person returning home from hospital but without the arrangements in place that would fully meet their needs. Further, these arrangements must be negotiated between the social worker and other professionals, e.g. health colleagues, whose frameworks of working with risk may be different. The complexity of the new arrangements, their ad hoc character and their potential instability mean that the social worker needs to monitor, review, risk assess and problem solve when threads of this supportive net are seen to come undone which increases the social worker's involvement with each case.

A further consequence of the unavailability of adequate services for social work practice is the inescapable reliance on informal supports such as family, friends, neighbours, local charities, community organisations, and local people willing to provide care and support when paid through a direct payment. Participants in this study offered differing accounts of how the reliance on informal and community supports works for service users and for social workers. In one account, informal and community supports allowed for the creation of bespoke, holistic, stimulating, truly personalised arrangements that were contrasted to the regimented, homogeneous, impersonal, unexciting and, in certain instances, undignified provision of formal supports. Social workers, in this account, are able to catalyse community solutions that are creative and specific to the place and make use of community resources. In contributing to the setting up of these arrangements, social workers speak of a renewed sense of creativity and professional effectiveness and a sense of exercising one's professional autonomy.

However, even participants who lauded informal supports and offered accounts of rural and remote communities deploying their social capital effectively cautioned against the exclusive reliance on informal supports.

Firstly, our participants noted that the availability of informal supports is very differently distributed between people. Our participants noted that communities differ to the extent that they retain collective resources such as post-offices, shops, village halls, churches or banks. A number of communities lack these resources entirely. The lack of banks in many communities creates particular difficulties for the administration of direct payments. Further, participants found that older people may not want to open a bank account even in the places where there are banks.

Secondly, the variability in the availability of informal supports may be linked in a systematic manner to the specific needs of the person supported raising the questions of equity and justice. One participant explained that, in her experience, people with mental health problems had difficulties with maintaining/cultivating close and supportive social networks of family and friends around them.

Thirdly, the unavailability of formal services entails the lack of fall back options, if arrangements relying on direct payments or community supports collapse or for those periods in time when these supports may be unavailable.

Fourthly, community support may not be unconditional and therefore may not be equally available to everyone or equally welcome by everyone. Community support may be available only to those already integrated in the community's social networks and to those willing to relinquish their privacy. Further, communities may display indifference, avoidance or hostility against certain social work service user groups. For example, one participant who worked in the field of mental health noted that widespread negative perceptions of mental health may mean that it is hard to enlist the support of people in the community whether in a paid or unpaid capacity. In the participant's experience, communities can be intolerant or marginalising to such an extent that in certain cases people need to be supported to move to different places. On the other hand, in the account of another participant, communities can be accepting, inclusive, supportive, helpful and compassionate.

Sixthly, participants expressed their concerns on the issue of people employed as personal assistants and paid through direct budgets typically charging a lot more per hour relative to service delivery organisations and not being registered with the CQC or monitored and regulated in any other way.

Finally, participants noted that in their professional experience informal and community supports may be utterly lacking or only be rarely available. The capacity of local organisations to address community needs was said to have been negatively impacted by the public policy of fiscal austerity. The demography of communities in Cumbria often entails a lack of an available labour pool from which to source personal assistants or the attenuation of a place's social capital when holiday homes become prevalent.

3. Working in small communities

Half of our participants (six out of twelve) raised issues that we have grouped under the theme of working in small communities. Small communities present the social worker with a distinctive field of practice that presents its own set of challenges and opportunities. We identified the following sub-themes:

1) Dual relationships between social workers and people who use services

Participants were aware of the risks presented by dual relationships to service users and social workers and took measures to avoid them. Firstly, participants told us that they intentionally chose to live in different places to those they worked in in order to separate the places of their practice and their non-work life. Secondly, participants self-regulated their practice. They prevented the formation of dual relationships by not taking up the cases of people who live in the same place as them or people who they already know socially. Additionally, social workers protected the privacy of people they knew were involved with social work services by trying to limit any exposure to their personal information they might come across as part of the work of their teams. Thirdly, social workers spoke about being transparent about any pre-existing dual relationships involving the service user and documenting and evidencing the discussions and decisions on the issue. Fourthly, participants regulated their social relationships and their presence in the local community. They avoided the initiation of social relationships with people that the social workers knew were users of social work services. The social workers also managed their public image depending on the context and the audience by regulating their conduct and demeanour. Social workers assume that their occupation is common knowledge in their social milieu given the small size of the places they live in.

Participants did not hold a one-sided view of dual relationships as problematic or negative. Participants recognise professional relationships are not impervious to the influence of local norms, customs and traditions and that this influence can be beneficial for practice. One participant suggested that the local norms of friendly interaction and the embeddedness of the

social worker in the network of local social relationships facilitates the formation of good working relationships between social workers and service users. Sharing a rural identity and a shared experience of the difficulties of rural life with users of services contributed to the strength and quality of the professional relationship. However, building relationships meant allowing local norms of mutual help and support and the shared rural context to shape the professional relationship. As an example, one social worker explained that for service users living in remote places without easy and quick access to shops, it was common to ask visitors, including the social worker, for household items that they could get on their way to the service users e.g. food items such as milk, bread, pasta.

2) Dual relationships between social work service users and professional carers

Participants were alert to the risks of dual relationships, especially with regards to privacy and confidentiality, between service users and support workers. In small communities, it is not unusual for service users and support workers to already know each other and each other's families. The pre-existing familiarity may be seen as advantageous or as disadvantageous by service users. People who use services may feel they benefit from already knowing something about their background, character and family origin. Alternatively, service users may worry about their private affairs becoming public matters.

3) Close working relationships between social workers and other professionals

In the words of one participant, professionals from different agencies become '*one rural team*' as a consequence of the shared hardships of rural practice, the shared understanding of issues and problems and the shared experience of rural life as well as the small size of the network of professionals. Relationships are described as '*informal*' and open and people as being '*approachable*' and '*accommodating*'. Professional interactions are not impersonal and not hampered by institutional boundaries with professionals finding it easy to contact one another.

4) Increased public visibility of social workers

Social workers in smaller places are more easily identifiable and encounters with service users in public places are more likely. In addition, social distances between people are reduced so that people become identifiable and contactable through their family and social networks. One participant explained how the difficulties in maintaining anonymity in a small place led her to avoid the area where she used to work in for at least two years after she changed her job. On the other hand, participants talked about being recognised and appreciated for their work by their local communities. Communities can offer social workers a sense of belonging and of occupying a valued place in a greater whole.

5) Protecting the privacy of people who use social work services

In small communities, a visiting social worker is a visible and identifiable outsider whose entry into the community and their activities within it attract the interest of other members of the community. In accordance with local norms of interaction, the social worker may be openly asked about the reasons of their visit and about the people they are visiting. The social worker needs to find ways of navigating these interactions without damaging the privacy of service users. Interacting with other members of the community may be unavoidable, as in rural and remote places, finding individual houses may not be straightforward as several houses may share the same address and as satellite navigation systems do not accurately locate specific addresses or may not work due to lack of signal.

6) Managing the risks of lone working when making home visits

This sense of vulnerability stemming from working alone in a remote location in the absence of mobile phone signal can be compounded in small communities by the possibility that the social worker visiting a service user may be confronted by members of her extended family or support network. This is a case of the tightness of the community becoming a challenging issue for the social worker. If people are embedded in dense social relationships, they are less likely to present as individuated as required by the abstract model of the one-to-one, confidential and professional relationship between service user and social worker. This situation presents the dilemma of fostering and maintaining good relationships with people who use services and their families but also of social workers taking steps to protect themselves and managing situations that may appear threatening and unpredictable.

7) Strong, distinctive, place-based identities of communities in Cumbria

Rural places do not share a uniform, homogeneous identity. Neighbouring places that to outsiders may appear very similar can be separated by very sharp cultural divides including distinct and sometimes even antagonistic place-based identities. People and places may have very entrenched and sharply demarcated notions of who belongs where based on markers such as accent and membership of local, social networks. In terms of practice, these identity differences become very important when social work service users refuse to access services or to re-locate in places in which they would feel as 'outsiders' and as 'not belonging'. Equally, communities may resist the relocation in their midst of people that they see as 'outsiders'. Knowledge of the place and of its specificities at the very granular level afforded by an intimate knowledge of its communities is central to effective and appropriate rural practice.

4. Dispersed teams

In our participants' accounts, team work arrangements were strongly linked to wellbeing at work and to considerations about staying in or leaving one's role. For three of our participants, working in a dispersed team entailed an attenuated sense of team identity, belonging and cohesion; reduced opportunities for receiving team support, practical and emotional; reduced opportunities for team learning; and a sense of isolation or, at least, marked interpersonal distance between colleagues. Participants talked about how, under their current teamwork configurations, they felt they were missing out on the everyday, casual, incidental support colleagues offer to one another when co-located.

For two participants, adapting to working as part of a dispersed team was particularly difficult at the start of their employment and they both cited the challenges they faced as reasons for considering to leave their job. They both had in previous employment outside Cumbria been members of co-located teams. Both participants said that, over time, they adapted to working as part of a dispersed team and that, at the time of the interview, they appreciated its advantages in terms of autonomy, self-direction and flexibility. However, for one of them, the disadvantages and challenges of working in a dispersed team remained a work welfare issue and a reason for doubting her longevity in her role.

In contrast to these accounts, team arrangements, in the accounts of two other participants, were described as contributory to their wellbeing at work, as contributory to the social workers staying in their role and as protective against other work challenges. The participant who was part of a dispersed team talked about the ways in which the team actively, intentionally and systematically looked after its cohesion and collective wellbeing. The participant who was part of a co-located team talked about his team valuing peer learning whether this was about the experience of members who have been in the team long term or the new knowledge and skills that new starters brought with them.

5. Living in Cumbria

Alongside social work itself, the practice of working with and for people, Cumbria is an important factor in people's accounts of what they find positive, rewarding, beneficial and sustaining in their work. Participants, particularly those with a long history of living in Cumbria, indicated a strong connection to Cumbria, its landscape and associated lifestyle opportunities. Cumbria is not just a pleasant backdrop or a beautiful but neutral and passive setting. Instead, for many of our participants, working in Cumbria is incidental to having chosen to live in Cumbria. The place appears to embody people's idea of what a good life is and it enables them to live the life they aspire to. Living in Cumbria, and by implication working in Cumbria, is about fulfilment, self-actualisation and happiness.

Participants deeply appreciate the unique landscape and engage in the leisure activities afforded by it. The landscape has a profound effect on our participants at many different levels. One participant spoke of its psychological importance describing it as *'comforting'*, as engendering a feeling of *'being grounded'*, as a setting that helps relieve stress, that offers the opportunity to consider alternative perspectives and finally as a setting that engenders a sense of awe. Participants also spoke of being attracted by the small size of Cumbria's communities and by the nature of social relationships within small communities.

6. Social work as intrinsically rewarding

Participants spoke about the ways their work and profession were experienced as intrinsically rewarding. Participants talked about loving their work and deriving enjoyment and satisfaction from it. Participants found their work personally and socially meaningful. They valued its purpose of contributing to the lives of others and to the public good. What they felt they were able to do for the people they supported they found valuable and impactful even when service users and the wider public did not appear to appreciate or acknowledge it. Participants did not just value the outcomes they were working towards but also the interactions and relationships with the people they supported and with other professionals. They talked about feeling honoured and privileged to work with people who use services and described them as '*amazing*', '*wonderful*' and as *'great people'*. Further, participants valued the opportunities the profession afforded to them to exercise professional autonomy, authority, judgement and discretion and also the opportunities for personal and professional development. Here, the commitment to social work might be considered not particular to Cumbria, but to be widely felt among those drawn to this profession.

Suggestions for Policy and Practice Development

We have drawn out the following 14 suggestions for policy and practice development from the findings of this research

1. Work with local social work education providers to encourage local people to consider social work as a career.
2. Recruitment campaigns to focus on those most likely to commit to working in Cumbria.
3. Support for newly appointed social workers to adjust to rural practice.
4. Explicit acknowledgement by team managers about the impact of driving on both time and wellbeing.
5. Consideration of a contribution towards the financial cost of personal car use and/or provision of equipment for winter driving.
6. Consideration of more flexibility around the hire car process.
7. Review of lone working policies within the Council and local teams.
8. Continued advice and recommendation about adverse weather threats.
9. Renewed focus on the 'time off in lieu' (TOIL) policy.
10. Continued development of resources to enable positive agile working.
11. Review of the further potential role of technology, to enable connection, communication and training opportunities.
12. Formal opportunities for connection with team and management (for example supervision, peer supervision, team meetings).
13. Informal opportunities to bring teams together (for example a coordinated monthly team lunch times).
14. Review of and possible adoption of a community model of social work in some areas of Cumbria.

We have grouped these suggestions into three themes, which are explored in some detail below. We recognise that these suggestions are interconnected and that some are already areas of work and activity within Cumbria County Council.

Recruiting and retaining a rural work force

1. Work with local social work education providers to encourage local people to consider social work as a career.
2. Recruitment campaigns to focus on those most likely to commit to Cumbria.
3. Support for newly appointed social workers to adjust to rural practice.

This small-scale study revealed that the social workers who participated felt an extremely strong sense of connection to Cumbria as a whole, its communities and its beautiful landscape. The participants of this study were settled in Cumbria and well-adjusted in their profession. Our sample was self-selecting and therefore its composition cannot be considered reflective of the population of social workers in Cumbria. However, its composition is very similar to the participant samples found in the international research literature on rural social workers which points to the existence of "*a large pool of committed and identified social workers who prefer to live and work in rural communities*" (Lonne and Cheers 2000: 26). This "*community of rural social workers*" is composed of people who are experienced in their profession and well versed in rural life. They are very satisfied with their rural lifestyles believing they allow a higher quality life with the advantages outweighing the disadvantages; they do not wish to move to more urban settings as they identify strongly with rural living; and, they tend themselves to have rural backgrounds, for example, having grown up in a rural place.

The composition of our sample and the international research suggest to us the working hypothesis that recruitment campaigns aiming to attract people with the highest likelihood of settling in their roles and in the place should be targeted at people who are from Cumbria, and/or at people who have experience of living in rural settings and environments similar to that of Cumbria, and/or at people who aspire to enjoy the lifestyle afforded by places like Cumbria. This could include work with local social work education providers to raise the profile of social work as a career thereby encouraging local people to access social work education to become qualified social workers. With regards to recruiting people from outside Cumbria, it may be relevant to consider that for a number of our participants working in Cumbria appeared incidental to living in Cumbria. The place, the landscape, its people, the lifestyle all featured strongly in the things social workers found positive and sustaining in their work. Foregrounding in recruitment campaigns, the attractions of Cumbria and the quality of life that can be attained by social workers and their families may attract those people who are more likely to settle in the place and their role out of satisfaction with their life in Cumbria. Flexible working arrangements and part-time working are likely to be attractive to people wishing to make the most of the place, achieve a desirable work/life balance and as a way to mitigate the pressures of the job.

The social workers in our research sample identified challenges and difficulties with their work. However, these did not appear to overwhelm their levels of intrinsic motivation in pursuing their roles and as expected from an experienced and well-adjusted group found ways to mitigate or neutralise their impact on their working and non-working lives. However, it is reasonable to expect that the same challenges could be experienced as overwhelming for other groups of people, such as new entrants either to the profession or to Cumbria. On the basis of our research findings, we suggest that newly appointed rural social workers could benefit from structured and systemic employer support with regards to the following topics which could be covered during the induction of new workers and included in social workers' supervision and personal development sessions as required.

i. Adjustment to dispersed team working and agile working

In the accounts of three participants who found aspects of dispersed teamwork arrangements problematic, the configuration of teamwork becomes, rather than a source of support, another challenge for a new starter to contend with. This is particularly so if specific and appropriate support, on the part of the employer or the team manager, is lacking and if the new starter does not already possess the competencies involved in proactively and competently building connections with peers, in self-reflexive monitoring of their wellbeing, and in seeking support and help. Although the opportunity for agile working does help manage some of the practical challenges of rural practice, dispersed teams may offer fewer opportunities to members to build up their knowledge and competencies through peer learning and support and may expose new members to higher stress and self-doubt regarding the quality of their decision-making and practice in the absence of validation from more experienced colleagues. These parameters may contribute to social workers leaving their roles.

One participant was part of a dispersed team but felt that her team was very strong. She talked about the ways in which the team actively, intentionally and systematically looked after its cohesion and collective wellbeing. Team members did this by valuing shared time. For example, they scheduled time for team members to spend together, whether in structured, formal teamwork such as team meetings, peer supervision, and continuous professional development events, or in informal, unstructured but regular meet-ups and opportunities to chat, for example, during people's lunch breaks, having a monthly lunch that the whole team attends or occasionally arranging to meet socially outside of work hours. The team appeared

to take an intentional approach to strengthening those factors that protected and promoted team wellbeing. The participant described team relationships as being characterised by humour but also a sense of mutual trust and the shared belief, backed up by experience, that people would support and help each other when needed. For this participant, being part of a positive team, '*sharing the good times and the bad times*', was, alongside deriving intrinsic motivation from the job, a central factor in staying in the role. The Council could learn from best practice within existing teams and support their wider adoption in teams that do not take such a systematic approach to their cohesion and collective wellbeing.

ii. Adjustment to aspects of social work practice in rural and/or remote and isolated settings

a) Building cultural competence: working in small communities and understanding the diversity of distinctive, place-based identities in Cumbria

New entrants to Cumbria or to the profession could potentially benefit from a systematic introduction to the demands and opportunities presented to social work practice by the context of small, rural communities. In particular, based on our research findings, new entrants are likely to be challenged by the following: i) protecting the privacy of service users when making home visits; ii) understanding the norms of social interactions, e.g. service users living in places with no shops requesting social workers to get small food items for them, and how to build rapport and set boundaries in positive relationships with service users; iii) negotiating dual relationships between service users and social workers, informal carers and other professionals; iv) social workers protecting their own privacy and anonymity; iv) understanding the importance of place-based, cultural identities in shaping the choices and decisions of social work service users.

b) Working in conditions of service and resource scarcity and mobilising informal and community supports

Rural social workers are asked to operate in resource-poor situations and to counter their effects on service users. However, to do so is presumably harder when social workers have not been prepared either through their education or by their employer for these contingencies and/or when social workers are unfamiliar with the lived realities of rural settings. A respondent in the study by Brownlee et al (2010: 632) in northern Canada expressed this in this way: "*The fact that there needs to be understanding that the services just aren't available in the small northern communities that are found in the south or in larger, urban centres. In my training, it was assumed that we would have access to services.*" A focus on cultural competence could support social workers in adapting their practice to their settings making use of the opportunities they present in order to counter the challenges. Further, rural social workers could potentially benefit from a clear understanding of the limitations of available technology in rural settings and their implications for practice e.g. the unavailability of telecare services in certain places, the lack of mobile phone signal, the limitations of GPS electronic mapping systems such as Google Maps in remote and isolated settings.

Supporting social workers to manage travel requirements

4. Explicit acknowledgement by team managers about the impact of driving both on time and wellbeing
5. Continued advice and recommendation about adverse weather threats
6. Consideration of a contribution towards the financial cost of personal car use and/or provision of equipment for winter driving
7. Consideration of more flexibility around personal car use and the hire car system
8. Review of lone working policies across the council and within local teams

The findings from this research indicate that social workers in Cumbria are travelling professionals, and by this we mean predominantly *driving* professionals spending significant amounts of time in the car. Given the nature of Cumbria's geography and transport links, it seems fair to assume there are unlikely to be any significant changes to the amount of travel time spent in cars by social workers in Cumbria in the immediate future. This research indicated the impact that travel has on workload management as so much of the working day is spent travelling that time left to fulfil social work responsibilities becomes reduced. It also appears that the physical, emotional and cognitive demands of long distance driving can also have an impact on social worker's wellbeing. It appears that some social workers feel that the impact of travel is more explicitly acknowledged by their managers than others and although the explicit acknowledgement of time spent in the car does not practically reduce traveling time, it does serve to validate social worker's experiences which can support overall wellbeing. Social workers are already finding ways to mitigate the impact of time spent traveling with their creative use of time and use of resources provided to work in an agile manner, explored further below.

The findings from this study also revealed that social workers accept and understand that their role involves driving and there is a commitment to visiting and seeing people who use social work services in settings such as their home or current place of residence. This, however also surfaced some challenges associated with how to manage safety when working in remote places. Safety refers to personal safety when visiting people who use services, but also adverse weather and related driving conditions. Participants talked extremely positively about the email alerts providing information about possible weather threats, which implies that it would be helpful for this to continue. Given the extent of lone driving undertaken by social workers, the question also arises of how County Council policies and advice, contained for example in the Car Driver Handbook, become alive in team management and how social workers are supported to refresh their awareness of policies and advice and to implement them in practice. One participant suggested that the Council could be more proactive in supporting social workers prepare for winter driving by sending via e-mail reminders about the steps required to ensure their cars are winter ready and by providing social workers with the requisite equipment for winter driving such as torches. Some social workers are already taking steps to get their cars 'winter ready' to deal with potential weather hazards in Cumbria at their own personal cost. Whilst the council has clearly gone some way to attempt to reduce the demand on social workers use of their own vehicle through the hire car system, there was a sense that increased flexibility of this service and its relationship with personal car use would reduce the stress experienced by some by the requirement to use the hire car system.

Personal safety also relates to visiting people who use services in rural and remote locations. The issue of the unreliability of mobile phone signal reception across Cumbria puts social workers in a position of vulnerability. This implies it would be helpful for systems and processes around lone working need to be rethought taking into account the difficulties of communication given the lack of mobile signal reception and the difficulties of locating and identifying individual dwellings in remote and difficult to access locations.

Enabling autonomous but well supported social workers

9. Renewed focus on the 'time off in lieu' (TOIL) policy
10. Continued development of resources to enable positive agile working
11. Review of the further potential role of technology, to enable connection, communication and training opportunities.
12. Formal opportunities for connection with team and management (for example supervision, peer supervision, team meetings)

13. Informal opportunities to bring teams together (for example coordinated monthly team lunch times)
14. Review of and possible adoption of a community model of social work in some areas of Cumbria

Social workers are very aware of the potential of the TOIL policy to support flexible use of their working hours. It was considered positive to be able to work beyond standard working hours if workload required but problematic that social workers were not always able to compensate for this by recouping the extra time worked. Workload demand is a challenge here. However, a renewed commitment to a working TOIL policy by the Council could result in more effective use of social worker's time. Agile working is also considered beneficial as a way to support workload management as well as enabling a sense of autonomy and a way to avoid busy and distracting office settings when a quiet workspace is required. The challenge around agile working is the dispersal effect that it has on teams, possibly leading to a sense of disconnection and isolation. The use of technology to further support agile working, but also to mitigate some of its negative impact, did not feature in our discussions with participants. However, given the development of such technologies, it is suggested here that their full potential in terms of both reducing travel and enabling connectivity between colleagues and people who use services is explored. There is evidence within this study of teams already finding creative ways to overcome the challenges created by the need to work in an agile fashion. This is being done by teams explicitly working to counter the impact of dispersal though finding formal and informal ways of remaining in contact with each other. It is possible that the use of technology could further support this activity.

The findings of this research indicated very real challenges for both social workers and people who use services attributed to the lack of service provision to draw upon in rural and remote locations and communities. This study also revealed the skilful way that social workers practice in partnership with others to mitigate the lack of formal services in some areas although recognised the challenges created by associated dual-relationships. The opportunity to work closely with members of small communities and the professionals serving them was identified as a positive aspect of social work practice in Cumbria creating an increased sense of professional effectiveness and fulfilment when practising in this way. Rural social work has strong links with this concept of community social work as an approach to practice. Our final noted implication is that the adoption of a community model of social work practice might be effective in some rural and remote areas of Cumbria.

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