

# Austerity, welfare reform and older people in rural Wales: competing discourses of dependency and opportunity?

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# Positioning older people within the austerity agenda

- Previous rounds of welfare reform sought to reduce pensioner poverty
  - Winter Fuel payments, Pension Credit, free bus passes, home energy efficiency grants
  - Eight per cent reduction in pensioner poverty rate between 1998/99 and 2009/10 (Walker, 2012)
- Older people have been protected from key elements of the austerity / welfare reform agenda
  - ‘Triple lock’ of basic state pension until 2015
  - Excluded from state benefit cuts
  - Universal provision of key welfare benefits

# Positioning older people within the austerity agenda

- Older person poverty still exists
  - 16 per cent of people aged 65 years or over are living in poverty in the UK (Age UK, 2014)
- New financial challenges
  - Recent rises in fuel and food costs, low interest rates on savings
  - Cutting back on household expenditure (Age Cymru, 2014)
- Public sector cuts impacting on older people
  - “This was the year when the cuts began to bite deep. After three years of doing everything possible to avoid any direct impact on older and disabled people, plundering other departments first and screwing every penny out of overheads, councils started to run out of options. Almost one in three social services directors in England acknowledged that cuts this year would mean fewer people getting care and support” (Brindle, 2013)

# Positioning older people within the austerity agenda

Walker (2012)

- “The press feeding frenzy over winter fuel allowances, free prescriptions, NHS eye tests and other older people’s benefits combines ageism with an inherent neoliberal antagonism towards universalism, disguised as fake austerity politics appeals to generational fairness.”
- “Older people are being transferred from the safe political haven of the deserving to the radically more exposed position of being one of the main threats to Britain’s economic future.”
- Divisive generational politics rather a focus on the centrality of the welfare state for present and future generations

# Attitudes to government spending on different benefit claimants, 1998-2013

Percentage of respondents who would like to see more government spending on benefits

	1998	2008	2011	2013	Change 1998-2013
People who care for those sick or disabled	82	83	74	73	-9
Disabled people who cannot work	72	61	53	54	-18
<b>Retired people</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>-23</b>
Single parents	34	37	29	31	-3
Unemployed people	22	14	15	15	-7
Parents who work on very low wages	68	67	58	59	-9

Source: British Social Attitude Surveys (n=3146 - 3244 per year)

# Rural impacts of austerity

## The Rural Coalition (2010)

- Initial optimism about new opportunities
  - “The new Coalition Government’s commitment to the ‘Big Society’ in an era of relative austerity in public funding sets a clear rural challenge, yet provides clear rural opportunities. We need to achieve better rural services, at less cost. To do that we need to harness the power and understanding of local communities themselves to delivery their own tailored solutions. Rural areas have strengths upon which to build that new dynamic for local services.”

# Rural impacts of austerity

## Commission for Rural Communities (2010)

- Vulnerability of rural areas to cuts
  - “...many public services will be protected during a period of retrenchment. However, if there do have to be significant service cuts, then it is those services that are less popular, less ‘fashionable’ and less noticed that would be likely to suffer first. This would variously affect all places. But the constituency of support for those services in rural areas is likely to be even smaller and less powerful than in urban areas.”
- Discretionary public spending under particular pressure
  - Popularity and visibility may protect such services
  - Pragmatic deal-making between different tiers of local government
- Dangers of digital service provision
  - Digitally excluded, removal of ‘meeting places’

# Rural impacts of austerity

## Rural Services Network (2011)

- Rural impacts
  - “...reductions in local government budgets will hit rural communities hard leaving many rural residents disadvantaged.”
- Broader geographical impact
  - “When a particular service...is closed it has a greater impact on the local population as it may be difficult to get to the next nearest provider.”
- Cutting from a lower level of service provision
  - ‘Unfairness of government funding [formulae]’
  - Ignore historical local politics of anti-welfarism and new politics of middle-class migration
- Rural innovation
  - “The research also highlights some excellent examples of innovation and there is much evidence of localism at work in this report. Parish and town councils, volunteers, community trusts, social enterprises and the like are playing a growing part in rural service delivery.”

# Exploring the impacts of austerity on older people in rural Wales

## **Older People and Place in Rural Wales (2012-13)** with Shane Doheny

Funded by the Welsh Government

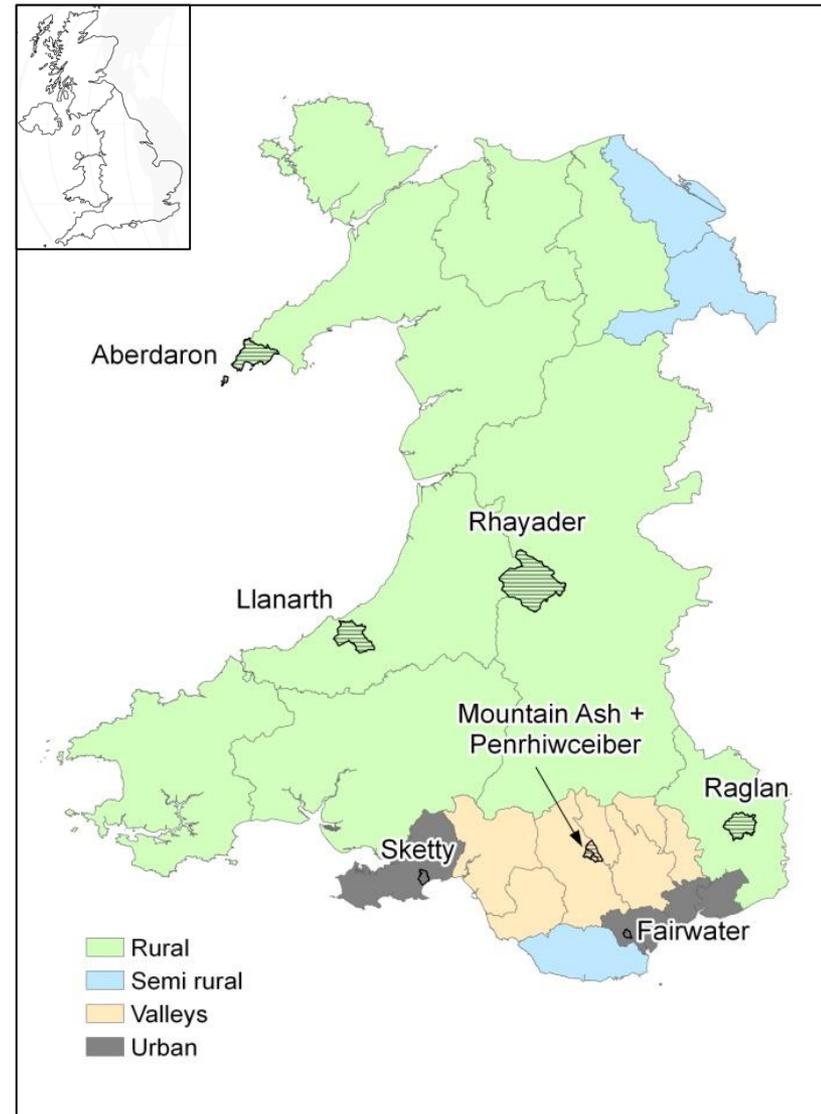
Age-based analysis of household survey data, 2013

Survey of local services, 2013

Seven case-study places (rural and non-rural)

Interviews with local authority and third sector service providers

Interviews with older people



# Service provision for older people in rural Wales

- 48 per cent of rural communities lacked a club for the over 60s, rising to over 60 per cent for communities with less than 1,000 people
- 91 per cent lacked any advice service
- 86 per cent lacked a support service for vulnerable elderly people
- 28 per cent of respondents considered that the provision of welfare services in their community had changed for the worse since 2010 (68 per cent stayed the same; 3 per cent improved)

Low level interventions for older people	
Handy person / repairs scheme	17%
Luncheon club	27%
Befriending scheme	10%
Meals service	30%
Mobile care service	21%
Community warden scheme	17%
none	42%

Rural services survey, 2013 (responses from 379 town and community councils)

# Recession, what recession?

- “The recession, it takes a long time to have an effect here; it’s always been the case. You hear about the recession...but a lot of our economy is dependent on people from outside coming into to spend.” (Aberdaron councillor)
- “I think the recession perhaps hasn’t hit areas such as this as it might in the future. We’ve got quite an abundance of local authority employed staff...quite a big employer, and I don’t think that has been shredding the jobs as much as it might in the future. I think the bite might come in the next two of three years...Agriculture always does well in a recession. We’re a hugely agricultural part of the world so in effect farmers have never had it so good in a way.” (Rhayader councillor)
- “I personally don’t think the recession has hit much in Rhayader. Obviously there is some families who will have lost their jobs and are experiencing hardship...[but] the majority of pensioners are on a pension, it doesn’t affect them the recession at the moment.” (Rhayader vol. org.)

# There's nothing new about austerity here

- INT: Can I ask you about the austerity pressures...the financial kind of cut backs, have they had an impact thus far on the people services in Monmouthshire?
- RES: No, not at all
- INT: Not at all? So you're not seeing services cut?
- RES: We have a mantra here - we will continue to find ways of doing better with less. We're mindful of the issues that are faced in English authorities...it's certainly more severe that we've faced in Wales but we know it's coming and we've got our issues to deal with. [We are] the only Conservative authority in Wales...we always feel that we've been rather poorly done in terms of RSG (Revenue Support Grant) provision...So the positive elements of that is that we've got used to dealing with doing as much as we can with pretty little for a very long time. So for us, even though it's getting harder, there is still a sense of business as usual; it's always been like that."  
(Monmouthshire councillor)

# Pride and prejudice 1: making do, hidden from view

- “It’s a cultural thing in rural areas...They don’t want people to know they are struggling...and I think that is where your issue of people not coming forward to claim benefits that is open to them.” (Gwynedd councillor)
- “I come from the farming community, and I am well aware that there are people there with a higher level of need quite often than those we are providing care for. There is an enormous amount of pride within the indigenous farming community and they do get on with it...and often live in what many of us would consider to be poor circumstances...There is a huge amount of rural poverty which is very very hard to sort of get underneath. I was going to say expose but that would be the wrong word because there’s so much dignity around that people wouldn’t want it exposed...they just tighten their belts and get on with it...” (Powys councillor)
- “I mean the people that are in poverty are 75 to 100...Once you get past 80 you’re in the generation that [see] Social Services as those wicked people who take your children away...that’s what it was like when they were young and you don’t accept help from anybody. My parents managed and I can manage. And nobody will know that I haven’t got a fire and I go to bed at 6pm to keep warm...” (elders’ vol. org.)

# Austerity bites

- “We’ve maintained it thus far but I think rather than sort of slash and burn...we’re trying to transform, we are just trying to provide care in very different ways so that we don’t have to reduce the levels of care, but there are areas we are going to have to look at...there are areas of service where we have provided historically but we don’t have to statutorily and they would be things like meals on wheels but it’s a very, very hot political potato if we try to remove something like that.” (elders’ vol. org.)
- “We’re looking to take a corporate approach to how we work because the inevitability of anyone who has got any kind of contribution to make in the public sector is that you’ve got to start finding ways of effectively doing better with less...you know there is no other choice but to do that, or just do less and that’s not our game. We’re looking to find ways of improving and still doing it with ever, ever less resource.” (Monmouthshire councillor)
- “There is no doubt that the squeeze...is going to get harder now in the next couple of years. The council, we have a financial strategy in place that hopefully there’s no need to cut services for two or three years again. We have efficiency savings...but what I heard yesterday is that the funding from the UK Government to the Welsh government is being squeezed even more. That automatically means that the squeeze will come down to the local authorities.” (Gwynedd officer)

# Community impacts of public spending cuts

- “My budget is in the region of £35 million. You know it’s being eroded gradually and potentially may be eroded more than gradually next year...If it moves to [a] five per cent [cut]...that’s not playing around the edges; it’s actually closing down services...If this authority contracts, contracts until it does basically education and social services, because those are our statutory duties, that actually undermines everything we talk about here. So, if for example, they close down all the libraries, bus services get worse, you know all the money gets taken out, that doesn’t serve my purpose...it undermines it and forces me back to a crisis response...I want a vibrant community and yet at the moment most of the cuts are falling on areas you know like the library, leisure, waste, transport, so there is a real challenge about how that one plays out. You can’t do all this stuff and not have some community infrastructure that supports it.” (Monmouthshire officer)

# The squeezed third sector

- “The third sector really is key in all this. All these cuts are going on across the board, where there is a big issue about the third sector stepping in. But the third sector needs to be funded and they’re being squeezed as well. It is a difficult situation.” (Gwynedd officer)
- “The impact [public sector cuts] is having on somebody who provides services for older people, there’s an impact because some of our funding has been cut, only by a few per cent but our funding is being squeezed and of course one of our major projects is community transport, so [the] fuel [price] has obviously rocketed...We’re eating into our reserves now because grant funding is getting harder and harder to actually secure...” (Rhayader vol. org.)
- “My chief executive officer...he spends his whole time just looking for money, trying to keep us going.” (elders’ vol. org.)
- “You can do a hundred miles just to collect people from one lunch club, twice a day, once a week. That’s some cost, to say nothing of getting the bus on the road.” (elders’ vol. org.)

# Pride and prejudice 2:

## local and national discourses of the undeserving poor

- “I think quite a few people are too proud to claim benefits because they might have to go into their local post office to get it and so they’ll know that they’re claiming...It’s difficult but you’ve got to...get into these communities and tell people what it’s for and really walk with them on the journey until it’s stopped.” (elders’ vol. org.)
- “And I know, I’ve had people go in to the Post Office to get their money out and they say ‘they look at me like I’m a benefits scrounger’ and this might be someone of 62 who’s worked all their lives, paid all their contributions...and become unwell, but then suddenly they’re seen as the hoodie that’s taking money off people who are working hard and it’s really very very wrong.” (elders’ vol. org.)
- “They [the government] are actually making people feel defensive and they’re making them less likely to claim benefits, much less likely. Because, I mean, we want people to maximise their income because we want them to manage at home. We want to put the help in to allow them to manage at home. Sometimes, I mean, it costs a huge amount to put people in a care home or a hospital. It so much cheaper to put in just the small things that make them able to manage.” (elders’ vol. org.)

# Community-based welfare

- “Where I live is a little village called X and you’ve got certain people that if you don’t see Joe Bloggs for a couple of days – oh where is he, what’s happened to him? We’ve got to check that he’s ok. Or if we know that there’s somebody not very well...we’ve got certain people that go round and see, make sure that they’ve got food, make sure they’ve got warmth” (elders’ vol. org.)
- “What is important for us in Monmouthshire...in the sense of well-being is actually keeping them[older people] in their communities as long as possible with quality of life. Therefore getting the local community engaged, with family, friends, keeping people in their homes.” (Monmouthshire councillor)
- “Local coordination...is a way of mapping within our community the assets that people have in those communities. So it will be through local coordinators engaging with communities and actually finding out to far greater detail about these people – who lives there and what they can offer and what they need...instead of having a community with all their faces pointing to some degree towards the social service and local authority whenever something, a service is required, they all come in, as an analogy, they’re all in a ring. They’re actually looking at each other to find resource to help each other. So it’s just finding a way through choice of getting communities to actually start thinking about what they can do for each other and only when that has been exhausted do they then look to us as an authority or the social care organisation.” (Monmouthshire officer)

# Austerity meets enabling

- “So it’s beginning to happen. We took some savings but what they’re describing is that people who used to be one-to-one managed by somebody, paid to hang out with them, are now volunteering in a shop or beginning to go on their own and do stuff. It’s not rocket science and yet we were actually paying professionals to spend their time with people whose lives would be more independent and more fulfilled if they weren’t doing that...” (Monmouthshire officer)
- “Yes there’s a big drive for independent living here – home helps go round and put them to bed and make a meal and make a fire and things like that...we’ve a new programme which is called re-enabling...you get an intensive course for six weeks and it makes you get up off your seat and they help you actually peel the potatoes and help you make the fire so that in six weeks’ time you’ve got your confidence and you’re a bit more mobile, and your able to look after yourself...At the end of the day it’s not that they’re trying to abandon you, they’re trying to help you to help yourself...So it’s more cost effective for the council to spend a hundred quid for six weeks rather than fifty quid a week into infinity...” (Aberdaron councillor)

# Reframing care work(ers)

- “I would like to see more people coming in to the care industry but I suppose people associate jobs in the care industry with sort of low level jobs. But there is a whole range of jobs and that’s another thing we need to do in Powys, is keep our young people here because we need the young people to help with the older ones anyway and we need that balance, but people inevitably leave because...there are not enough jobs.” (Powys councillor)
- “Community support drivers, I would say 99.9 per cent of them are retired and they are people that’s moved into the area...” (elders’ vol. org.)
- “Direct payments have been used more with disabled people, not so much with older people but it’s something I think we need to look at...again because of the difficulty of getting people to work in the care sector...we’ve been trying to get [private care] companies interested in it...What they say is they can’t get the staff...” (Gwynedd officer)
- “We are also trying to encourage direct payments...where the funding would go directly to the service user and they buy in their care. So, if they wanted to employ the next door neighbour to care for them, they could do that. And it usually works out cheaper than using our own staff, where we have pension costs, travelling costs and all that.” (elders’ vol. org.)

# Concluding comments

- Rural welfare dependency?
  - Distance from rather than reliance on the welfare state
- Long histories of austerity in rural places
  - Lower level local government interventions and cultures of ‘making do’
- Rural impacts of austerity
  - Not yet bit, biting harder, nothing to bite
- Informality, voluntarism, community involvement and personal responsibility in rural welfare provision complicates readings of austerity
  - Complex mix of cuts, state withdrawal, individualisation, pragmatism, enabling, empowering and new possibilities

## Chapter 6

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