

Power of older people could save villages

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Older people could hold the key to revitalising rural communities, researchers say.

An international team, led by the University of Exeter, will use a method called "guided conversations" as part of a toolkit designed to find out what older people in rural communities want and need.

Researchers will then help communities design and set up solutions to their problems using the voluntary, public and private sectors.

The project, called Healthy Ageing through Innovation in Rural Europe (HAIRE), has won a grant of 5.3 million euros (£4.5m) from the EU to work in eight rural communities—two each in Belgium, France, the Netherlands and the UK (Feock in Cornwall and Rother in East Sussex).

"In Europe, the US and many other countries, populations are ageing, leading to a host of issues ranging from pressure on [health services](#) to increased isolation and loneliness," said Professor Catherine Leyshon, of the University of Exeter.

"This situation is especially acute in rural communities, many of which are at risk of dying out.

"The challenge for many societies is to manage the needs of the ageing population while encouraging healthy ageing and realising the potential of older people, which has been overlooked."

The project team, which includes the University of Plymouth, will encourage older people to:

- define what support they need.
- participate in the design and delivery of services.
- develop solutions for themselves to reduce loneliness and improve [quality of life](#), health and wellbeing.

Initiatives might include community transport schemes, starting new clubs and societies, and bringing together the younger and [older generations](#).

Volunteers will be trained to identify their underused community assets and networks and conduct "guided conversations" with about 600 people (aged 60+ and no longer in employment) across the eight communities in the study, finding out how people feel about their lives and the place in which they live.

The researchers aim to create a "tool kit"—a set of steps that could be used anywhere to identify problems and solutions that will improve people's lives.

"We want to make [rural communities](#) socially sustainable for the long term," said Professor Leyshon.

"To do that, we need to reinvigorate the voluntary sector, with older people involved in making that happen.

"This will work differently based on the needs of each community.

"The problems facing communities like Feock or Rother will be

different than those in France, Belgium or the Netherlands.

"However, we might learn lessons that can apply to many communities, and it will be possible to use our 'tool kit' anywhere."

Feock Parish Council has been seeking to support its residents for several years through local societies and organisations, and more recently through a service that connects people together according to need.

"The Council is excited by the opportunities now offered through HAIRE to help its older population in a more sustainable way," said Councillor Keith Hambly-Staite, Lead on HAIRE for the Parish Council.

"Working together, we are more likely to break out of the box and create activities and systems that meet the needs of people in a way that will make a real difference now and in the future."

The project could link with the concept of "social prescribing", in which doctors suggest patients improve their mental or physical health with a social activity such as joining a walking group.

It is hoped that communities involved in the project will have more such groups and services available, making social prescribing easier.

As well as increasing community vitality, the researchers hope to get older people actively involved in service design and delivery at a much more strategic level.

They also hope that training local volunteers will begin a process in which knowledge about "social innovation" will spread from the project areas to neighbouring communities.

The [project](#) is funded by Interreg 2 Seas, which promotes territorial

cooperation between the UK, France, Belgium and the Netherlands.

Provided by University of Exeter

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