



Rural Older People and Homecare:

New research identifies inequities shaped by discourse

HOMeAGE Policy Brief Series

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What is the purpose of this policy brief?

This policy brief aims to 1) highlight the injustices for rural older people that are shaped by discursive practices in current policy regarding homecare, and 2) to raise awareness amongst policy makers who work in areas related to older people, rural development, and homecare development of these injustices and the need to take specific actions to address homecare challenges faced by rural older adults.

Why is this topic important?

Ireland is in the midst of efforts to advance homecare legislation and regulation. It is essential to consider the specific needs of rural older people within the reform of the statutory homecare scheme and to deliver everyone the “Right Care, Right Place, Right Time” (Sláintecare, 2017).

In Ireland, 40% of the population live in rural areas (CSO, 2022), and 44% of people aged 65 years and above live in rural settings with less than 1,500 people (CSO, 2016). Given rural areas are generally “where the population is ageing faster” (Keating et al., 2013, p.230) and are generally more likely to be subject to inequalities in care provision (Walsh & Lyons, 2021), it is essential that there is a specific focus on rural older people to ensure these individuals can live well in the places that they desire.

Homecare plays a vital role in the quality of later life of rural older people, and the demand for homecare is increasing in rural areas given how global processes of urbanization and mobility can disrupt traditional rural support systems (Hanlon & Kearns, 2016; Home Instead, 2024). Rural older people face more challenges regarding homecare, such as limited access to services, care workforce shortages and longer long travel times for ancillary services (Kovacs et al., 2023; Walsh & Lyons, 2021). Despite these longstanding and unique challenges faced by rural older people, questions remain about how rural homecare is thought about and prioritized within policies (Zhou et al., 2022). their voices are seldom considered in policy, particularly in relation to homecare. As policy discourse – which can be described as the language and values related to a policy topic – is understood to express the attitudes and norms of a society and its key policy actors (Jenson 1988, Burr, 1995, Foucault, 2013), understanding how homecare for rural older people is framed in current Irish policy is necessary before introducing sustainable and equitable homecare legislation.

Key messages

1. New research identifies neglect of the needs of rural older people in the current policy landscape.
2. As homecare in Ireland is currently in a transitional stage, existing injustice and age-biased discourse must be removed from future policy linked to homecare.
3. There are unmet calls for cross-departmental collaboration to address the diverse needs of older people.
4. Given the unique challenges that rural older people face and the significant role of homecare, there is a need to address both rurality and ageing together in the future of homecare development.



Who should read this policy brief?

This policy brief is relevant for policymakers in homecare, rural development, and ageing, as well as civil society groups who work to support older people living in rural areas.

What was found?

A critical review was conducted on policy and policy related materials linked to the topic of homecare for rural older people. This involved the analysis of 53 strategies, plans, reports and documents, and a detailed focus on the language used to describe the topic, challenges and any solutions. Consideration was especially given to whether the needs of rural older people were identified and addressed. Below are some findings.

Neglect of rural older people's needs in policy

Voices of current generations of rural older people regarding homecare are neglected in the current policy landscape.

The discourse around homecare for rural older people is fragmented and absent across rural, ageing and care policies. This reflects the meagre attention given to rural homecare within policy, with no singular policy specific focusing on the issue of homecare. In other documents we found limited coverage of this topic. In summary, it was found that:

- In the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013), there is no specific focus on rural places despite its recognition that “rural older people are vulnerable group” (DOH, 2013, P13);
- In the Sláintecare Report (2017), rural older people are not categorized separately as a targeted group that needs attention;
- In Our Rural Future (2021), a strategy on rural development, the needs and voices of older people are not prioritized, with a stronger focus on ensuring young people can live and work in rural areas.

This neglect exacerbates inequalities and leaves rural older people more vulnerable to being overlooked.

Background

The Irish Context

Ireland's rural population is ageing at a faster rate than urban areas (O'Sullivan et al., 2022), with many older people choosing to “age in place” in their communities. However, the infrastructure and services needed to support this choice are lacking (Hall, 2020). For example:

- **Homecare Services:** Demand for homecare far exceeds supply, with rural areas particularly underserved.
- **Healthcare Access:** Rural older people often face long travel distances to access hospitals or specialist care.
- **Social Isolation:** Geographic isolation and limited community services contribute to loneliness and mental health issues among rural older people.

Policy Gaps

- **National Ageing Strategy:** While the strategy acknowledges the importance of ageing in place, it lacks specific measures to address rural challenges.
- **Sláintecare:** The focus on universal healthcare access does not adequately consider the unique barriers faced by rural older people.
- **Homecare regulation:** The absence of a statutory homecare scheme exacerbates inequities in service provision across rural and urban areas



Unmet calls for cross-departmental collaboration

There is often significant reliance on single, intermittent policies and strategies that have little scope within their terms of reference, and less in their resourcing, to meaningfully engage with complex and intersectional challenges within different populations groups. For instance, in rural policies (Our Rural Future 2021), a focus on economic-oriented development in rural areas tends to overshadow the value of rural older people in productive society and focus on retaining young people in rural areas. This distances our attention from the concerns and needs of heterogeneous older populations. A focus on all life stages of all people, and future generations of older people, in some ageing-related policies (National Positive Ageing Strategy 2013) is reasonable but can risk neglecting the needs of current generations of older people.

The needs of older people, particularly in rural areas, span multiple policy areas, including those focused on rural settings, ageing, and care service provision. However, current approaches are often siloed, with limited coordination between policy programmes and actors across these different areas. This lack of collaboration results in a higher likelihood of a more fragmented policy focus. This in turn can lead to more fragmented services that mean greater inefficiencies, and greater levels of unmet need for older people in rural areas.

A need for considering both rurality and ageing in homecare policy development

In the context of current homecare developments in Ireland, it is essential to ensure that policies are effective, equitable, and responsive to the specific needs of rural older adults, including the Sláintecare reforms and the move toward a statutory homecare scheme.

Although rural homecare is largely absent from policy narratives, repeated calls for coordinated approaches across government have emerged. Initiatives such as “rural proofing” and frameworks like the National Positive Ageing Strategy (2013) and the Madrid International Plan of Action on Ageing (2022 review) highlight the necessity of mainstreaming ageing in all policy areas. The proposed population-based resource allocation model (O’Malley et al., 2023) has the potential to improve the efficient and equitable allocation of care service resources due to its consideration of both rurality and ageing, and if it is adapted to account for different types of rural areas and different kinds of needs of rural population groups (Walsh & Hill, 2024).

What is needed is a rights-based, person-centred homecare model that would address unique challenges faced by different older people in diverse rural contexts, fostering a more inclusive and sustainable homecare system that serves all citizens, regardless of their age and where they live.

Policy Recommendations

To address the voices of rural older people in policy, policy makers should consider the following recommendations:

1. Increased attention must be given to the specific circumstances and care needs of older people living in rural areas, both within national policies and service planning and implementation across rural-, ageing- and care-related areas.



- a. The unique challenges and needs of rural older people must be included within the implementation of Sláintecare, the development of homecare regulatory standards and any future policies on rural communities.
2. Establish an Interdepartmental Taskforce on homecare for rural older people to coordinate policies and services across departments, and to ensure neither people nor places are neglected in policy development.
 - a. Develop a cross-departmental homecare action plan for rural ageing, which maps out future strategies to ensure equity in service provisions and dedicated funding for rural homecare initiatives.
3. Include voices from heterogeneous rural older adult populations in homecare policy and service development to embed a person- and place-centred approach to home care provision.
 - a. Develop meaningful engagement channels to include older people's views and preferences at strategic policy, national and local practice, and individual care levels.

Conclusion

Ireland's ageing population, particularly in rural areas, requires urgent action to address systemic gaps in policy and service provision related to homecare. By addressing rural ageing in national policies, fostering cross-departmental collaboration, and by accounting for the needs and voices of heterogeneous rural older people in homecare development, policy makers can ensure that diverse older people in different rural areas in Ireland receive the support they need to age with dignity and independence.

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About HOMeAGE

HOMeAGE is a Marie Skłodowska Curie doctoral training network on 'Advancing Research and Training on Ageing, Place and Home. It aims to institute an interdisciplinary, intersectoral, and international programme of doctoral training and research that drives the development of new leaders in excellence for the advancement of evidence-based innovation on ageing in place. For more information, please visit <https://homeage-dn.eu>.



Age Action Ireland

Age Action is Ireland's leading advocacy organisation for older people and ageing. As well as informing and influencing policy, we provide practical programmes to support older people to age in place and combat digital exclusion through our Care and Repair and Getting Started Services.



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