



Welcome

Rural Social Work – Challenges and Opportunities

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Working together to develop excellence in social work education and practice in Cumbria



What did we want to know?

Our overall research question –

How does rurality impact on social work provision in Cumbria?

Sub-questions

1. What challenges does rurality create for social workers?
2. How do social workers mitigate the challenges of rurality?
3. What opportunities and rewards does rurality entail for social workers and social work practice?
4. What are the implications of the above for social work service provision in Cumbria?

Our methods...

Three focus groups...

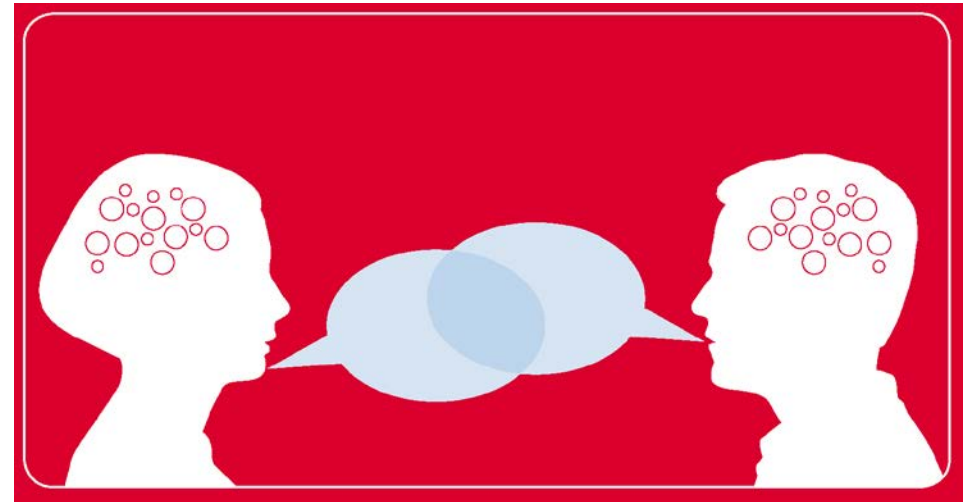


Twelve individual interviews



Who did we speak to? (interviews)

- Practising social workers working for Cumbria County Council
- Gender: 10 women; 2 men
- Setting: 8 Adults; 4 Children
- Team:
 - Mental health: 2
 - Hospital: 2
 - Adult Locality: 2
 - Adoption and Fostering: 2
 - Fostering: 1
 - Transition: 1
 - Other: 2
 - Support and Protect (Children's): 0



Caveats for interpreting our findings...

- Overall, our participants appear settled and well-adjusted in their profession and in Cumbria
 - Very experienced social workers
 - Have been living in Cumbria for more than 5 years, in most cases
- Self-selecting and small group and so statistically unrepresentative of the population of social workers
- Uncertainty as to whether they represent the views of social workers less settled in their profession and in Cumbria
- BUT their accounts are likely to be generalizable to the experiences of other social workers and are so informative and enlightening

What did we find?



Six main themes in social workers' accounts

1. Extensive and challenging travel
2. Lack of service provision
3. Working in small communities
4. Working in dispersed teams
5. Living in Cumbria
6. Social work as intrinsically rewarding

1. Extensive and Challenging Travel



Rural Social Work and Travel

- Challenges
 - A. Workload management and time pressure
 - B. Personal safety and exposure to travel-related risks
 - C. Financial costs carried by the social worker
- Opportunities
 - D. Emotional wellbeing

A. Workload management and time pressure

- Long travel times by car (car as mobile office)
- Travel time adds to the sense of workload pressure
- Social workers mitigated this by
 - Extending the working day
 - Careful time and diary management
 - Agile working
 - Seeking/receiving support from team managers

B. Personal safety and driving-related risks

- Apart from its workload implications, driving in itself can be a source of stress.
- Unfavourable driving conditions
 - Again, social workers worked to address these
 - County Council systems for alerting employees to weather-related risks are found very helpful and supportive by participants
- Lone visits to remote and isolated places
 - Lack of mobile telephone reception
 - Hard to find some properties
 - Lone working policy not always felt to be reassuring

C. Financial implications of using own car for work

- The extent of travel and the rural road network seen as exacting a high toll on social workers' cars
- A policy of restricting own car use for journeys under 100 miles seen as not reflecting work realities in Cumbria
- A car hire service appears to work well for social workers who know their travel commitments well in advance and can plan for them

D. Driving time as emotionally beneficial

- A necessary part of rural practice serving a dispersed population
- Time for reflection
- Time to de-stress
- A boundary between work and personal life
- An opportunity to appreciate the beauty of the landscape



2. Lack of Service Provision



Service Provision

- Complete lack of or inadequate supply of services leading to negative outcomes for people using services such as
 - Delayed hospital discharges
 - Avoidable recourse to residential provision
 - Lack of choice in domiciliary care
 - Increased length of stay in residential care for children
 - Travelling long distances and expending time and money in order to access appropriate services
- For social workers a sense of frustration and dissatisfaction with their role

Impact on social work practice - challenges

- Increased reliance on personal carers not employed by service providers and funded through direct payments
- Increased reliance on support by members of the local community
- Managing the expectations of other services

Impact on social work practice - opportunities

- Weaving a patchwork of ad hoc support arrangements bringing together family, personal assistants, and services and professionals working out of their remit in order to achieve a positive outcome for a service user
- Opportunity for creativity, for arrangements that offer better experiences and better outcomes
- Sense of increased professional effectiveness

3. Working in Small Communities



Working in small communities

- Challenges
 - Dual relationships: social worker – service user. How can privacy be protected?
 - Lone working
- Opportunities
 - Long-term, stable relationships between service users and other professionals e.g. GPs
 - Strong and positive relationships between social workers and other professionals – “one rural team”
 - Strong, local, place-based identities
 - Communities recognising and appreciating the work of social workers

4. Working in Dispersed Teams



Dispersed Teams

- Opportunities
 - Autonomy, self-direction and flexibility
 - No office politics to contend with
 - Saves on travelling time
- Challenges
 - Sense of disconnection and isolation from the team (agile working)
 - Working in a dispersed team required a period of adjustment particularly when being part of a physically co-located team has worked well in the past
 - Very little support around learning the role when first starting
 - Uncertainty about robustness of practice without the feedback of team members

5. Living in Cumbria



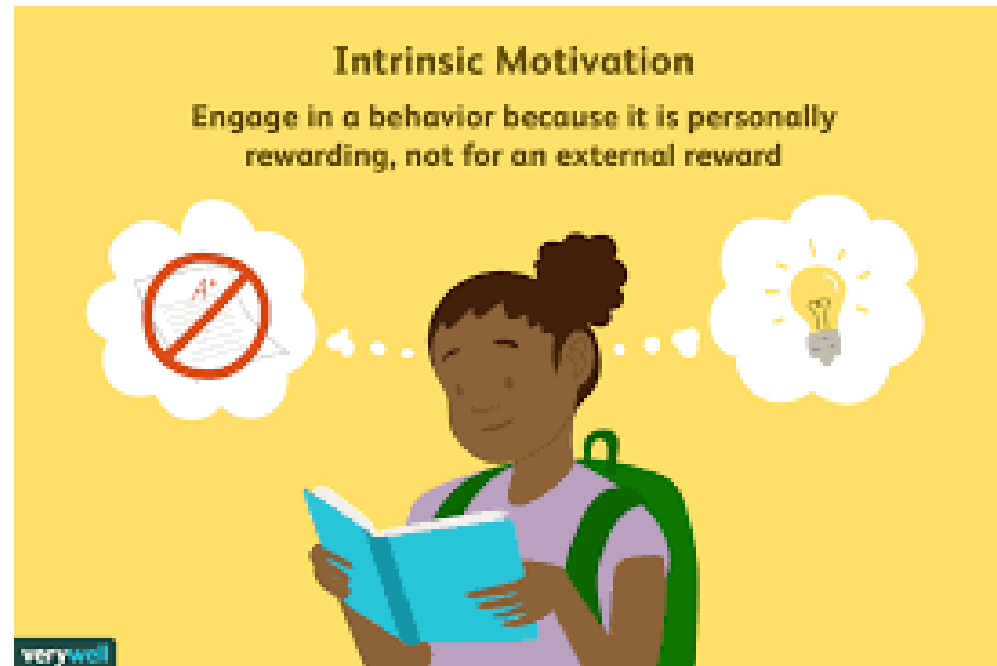
Living in Cumbria

- Entirely positive...
 - Appreciating the beauty of the environment
 - The lifestyle
- Consistent with findings of the international rural social work literature
 - Rural social workers are very much aware of the difficulties of their work and yet they are very satisfied with their lifestyles

The importance of the place

The place is not just a pleasant background add-on. It can be the very reason why people work in Cumbria – because they want to live in Cumbria.

6. Social Work as Intrinsically Rewarding



Social work as meaningful, purposeful and fulfilling

“I can’t deny sometimes I think why the heck did I go and do social work, could you not have done something else, but actually I love my job and if you love your job you never work a day in your life, but I can say that’s not true. But I really love what I do...”

“So I love that, love, love, love it. And I respect it very much. And that’s why I do what I do”

“every day is different and every day is a revelation in terms of seeing people’s lives as they are, listening to people’s histories, you know particularly with that older population who I think we underestimate so often their contributions and just their lives and their lifestyles and how they’ve contributed to their own communities, and to my community”

Social work as intrinsically rewarding

- Contributing positively to the lives of service users
 - Getting positive feedback
 - Hearing about successes
- Exercising professional autonomy, judgement and discretion
- Personal development

What could all this mean for social work in rural locations?

This combination of love of the place and love of the job could explain longevity in the role?

Challenges are (for some) mitigated by the opportunities to live and work in the way that they want?