

POSTER ABSTRACT

Rural Health Equity: Mobilising Arts and Heritage-based Community Assets to promote health and well-being and reduce health inequalities

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Background: Community-based services like exercise groups, outdoor activities, art therapies and peer support are increasingly being ‘prescribed’ to address mental health conditions, sedentary lifestyles and health inequalities. Despite greater recognition of potential benefits, such interventions are not universally available or accessible, particularly in rural areas, where the extent of social isolation, deprivation and health inequality can remain hidden. Rural areas provide unique challenges for service delivery due to the economic and logistical challenges in large geographical areas with dispersed populations.

By working closely with communities, peer researchers, healthcare professionals and third sector organisations, this project aims to maximise the use of community-based services and assets e.g. museums, libraries and heritage sites to promote health and well-being and to reduce health inequalities. The intention is to inform service commissioning, improve services, increase community resilience and widen community engagement with local arts and heritage assets and resources, particularly amongst the most disadvantaged. The project builds on the previous AHRC funded Prescribe Heritage Highland work which focused on the challenges of prescribing and scaling up cultural and natural heritage interventions for health and well-being within remote and rural areas.

Methods: Taking a co-design approach, the project is carrying out asset-mapping and developing a rural model for collaborative community working in partnership with peer researchers and stakeholder groups, comprising residents with lived experience, healthcare professionals and third sector organisations.

Supported by the team, the peer researchers will undertake asset-mapping and, with stakeholder help, they will identify key resources and service gaps in three rural areas in the Scottish Highlands. The project will also involve focus groups with service providers, community research and participatory events to engage the wider community. In addition, the research team will collect data on measuring rural health inequality.

Results: Cultural, community and mental health organisations have been working with researchers to build trust and develop relationships in order to design participant-led arts and

heritage-based activities and promote community research capacity. The aim is to widen participation in local arts and heritage assets to extend the mental health and wellbeing benefits to those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implications: Funded by the UKRI/AHRC, the project runs for 3 years (2024-27). It will add to evidence on asset-based approaches, co-production, community engagement, service design and the value of rural community assets as well as offer new insights on health inequalities for rural policy development across the UK. All learning will be shared with other rural communities, service planners and policy makers across the UK. The project aims to widen engagement with community resources and services in order to extend health and well-being benefits to those experiencing the greatest disadvantage in rural areas.