

**RuralWIDe: Being involved in a participatory research project from the  
perspective of a volunteer**

**Presented by Beryl Riley**

At the age of 67 I heard about the Rural Wide survey from a friend. We had both been involved in Red Cross in various ways for many years. Suddenly we had been told that due to present day insurance regulations we were no longer able to carry out First Aid Duties. My friend attended a Winter Fayre for the elderly where Age Concern were advertising this project and recruiting volunteers. She asked if I would like to volunteer which I did and was accepted.

I started on the project when the survey of the older people in Rural Gwynedd was about to start. The questionnaire had already been designed and at the first meeting I attended, the Academics, Ness and Gill, went through it and I had the chance to practise it with other volunteers.

The time to prepare for the real interviews came, well into winter, when it was cold and miserable, just the time to get out of the house and do something interesting and worthwhile.

We did three interviews first and had these checked before proceeding.

Having had the go ahead the fun began. People with no phone numbers in the directory, some had died, others moved away or even the house was their holiday home so the list of potential respondents was the biggest stumbling block and at times very disheartening. We would suggest to other researchers that buying a sample frame from a market research firm has some serious drawbacks.

I tried to make appointments with people but with a very few had to just arrive. I received a welcome and found people very trusting, maybe too trusting for their own good. Some of them knew me but I suspect would have trusted other people calling. I felt they were very vulnerable. I insisted on them looking at my identity card and stressed they should always do this. One lady who spent most of her time sat in her chair keeping busy with craftwork was not able to get up to answer the door. While her husband was home this was

fine but when he was out she just called to people to walk in. She would benefit from an entry phone.

When interviewing I felt embarrassed asking the financial questions and most of my participants preferred not to answer this section.

Some of the answers given to various questions did not fit in with what they actually seemed able to do. One lady said she was just about house bound but proceeded to tell me how she stood on a stool to attend to her wall garden. I think that this shows that you can't always believe the so-called 'facts' that are quoted from surveys that rely entirely on quantitative data. My experience was that there is often a quite different reality behind the numbers!

As interviewers we learnt a lot by the personal contact. The importance of carers whether paid or family came over clearly. A little help meant many were able to stay in their own homes longer keeping a certain degree of independence and maintaining their dignity.

It was surprising how well they were all adapting to their situation of being over 75. One or two were doubtful as to whether there were likely to be any positive results from the survey. As I got more into it I could see the information when all put together could lead to useful improvements in the lives of the elderly in the area. I found this very interesting and encouraging.

As I don't drive I made use of Public Transport, the best way to see how it works; but I needed my husband to drive me to a few places.

The homes visited varied considerably from old houses mostly well adapted to today's standards, to modern warm bungalows. Just a few of the older ones were not quite warm enough. With my husband as photographer we are able to show the types of housing and the areas, which show the effect on the way of living. Pictures also show some of the services used. The local bus in one area used by many for shopping etc. which gives people greater social contact. There is a health centre in a porta-cabin in the village I live in, also a meeting point.

At the end of the interviews everyone was handed an information sheet with useful contact numbers. These were very gladly received. Several of my people were Welsh speaking but chose the English version.

After the interviews were completed we met Ness and Gill to analyse the data. This was done on a one -to - one basis. I worked with Gill using SPSS. This

would have been impossible on my own but with her directions this became relatively simple, a good way of improving my computer skills.

Throughout the survey the contact and support from Ness and Gill was fantastic, they were both really interested to hear about our findings and adventures which some of our visits really were!

It was so good to be involved with such a great group of elderly people who have so much to offer to society today. They have such a wealth of knowledge and experience. Many of their answers formed a similar pattern but the variety of their previous employments was absolutely amazing.

There is hope for the future if the elderly are used as an asset to the community and treated with respect.