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Extended Research Article

‘Come and work here!’ Qualitative research exploring community-led initiatives to improve healthcare recruitment and retention in remote and rural areas

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Plain language summary

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Plain language summary

What was the question?

Public contributors on a previous project about recruitment and retention of medical staff in remote and rural areas alerted us to actions that local communities can take:

- to attract healthcare workers to take up posts in their area
- to encourage them to stay once they arrive.

These local actions are largely undocumented, so we set out to investigate what local communities were doing to attract or retain healthcare workers, with two public coinvestigators.

What did we do?

We conducted case studies in five local communities, three in Scotland and two in England. We spoke to community members, healthcare staff and family. We also analysed a sample of remote and rural job adverts, looking at what they do to make local areas appealing.

What did we find?

Communities drew on a range of local 'assets' to help attract and retain healthcare staff and their families. These included beautiful local landscapes; outdoor activities; a safe and cohesive community for children; high quality of life and work-life balance; skills of local people (e.g. those with marketing and design experience, photographers and filmmakers). Often, a small number of people drove these efforts.

There was less focus on retention. Where this worked well, it often relied on informal social networks of key individuals who created social links for incoming families to integrate them into community life.

Communities struggle with the absence of some key assets, including housing (both cost and availability, particularly in tourist areas); schools, notably secondary schools; employment opportunities for other family members; cultural activities.

What does this mean?

Successful recruitment and retention needs to focus on the whole person and family, and social integration to the community, not just the job. More active use can be made of community skills, knowledge and energy to support this.

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