The rural idyll under stress

In her reflection for Mental Health Awareness Week, Eileen Davies, Archdeacon of Cardigan, considers the effects of the pandemic on our rural communities

Covid-19 has certainly changed our lives, the way we live from day to day, what we are able to do and not to do. The coronavirus has seen the best and worst in people, in the manner and way that we have had to adjust to staying at home, keeping the vulnerable safe, social distancing and the closure of so many businesses, as well as closing our churches, schools and pubs. People’s pre-conceived ideas of living in a rural idyll, some in very remote places, with plenty of fresh air, panoramic views, almost boundless open space to exercise and seeing no one have proved optimistic, to say the least.

It is true, in rural West Wales, the confirmed cases of Covid-19 have been minimal, but it has affected individuals who have suffered mild symptoms, others who have been seriously ill and recovered, and other families have lost loved ones to the virus, battling alone in hospital with no close relatives to hold their hand. Every life is important, and may we, living in the country, never be complacent, but live our lives responsibly, thinking of others as well as keeping safe ourselves.

Staying at home and self-isolating can mean not seeing or speaking to anyone for days on end. At the beginning of the lockdown, this was not too bad, but as the weeks roll on, loneliness takes its toll. We have seen rural communities come together to telephone on people on a regular basis, with an assigned list for each individual to contact, social media keeps people in touch as do Skype, Facetime and emails, if you have broadband. In various parts of our deep rural areas, mobile signal and broadband are non-existent, but nothing compares to having a chat. The Young Farmers Club Movement leads the way in contacting their members, engaging in various online competitions, videoing a young farmer carrying out everyday tasks. The Young Farmers Club, in each of their local areas, have posted flyers through letterboxes with telephone numbers of members offering to pick up shopping, prescriptions, or just to have a chat.

Farming, the backbone of our rural areas, has to carry on through the pandemic, with the regular routine of milking every morning and evening, to provide daily fresh milk to consumers. But for some dairy farmers the milk processor has no market for their milk, with coffee shops closed, no ferries running and no aeroplanes flying, so the plug on the milk tank is pulled, with millions of litres flowing down the drain. Taking livestock to markets is different, with some livestock markets operating a drop and go system, where the farmer does not get out of the vehicle, the drover takes the livestock to the pens, and the farmer heads home, not talking to anyone. The price is decided between the auctioneer and the dealers present. Spring lambs have seen a good trade, with demand reflecting decent prices. The beef market, on the other hand, has declined, as the consumer cannot afford to buy the most
expensive cuts of meat and restaurants are closed, the latter being where the main market opportunities for steak would be realised.

The dry, sunny weather has enabled the farmers to plough the land and sow, (which will require a drop of rain), the sheep to be sheared and the first cut of silage to be mowed. Agriculture never stops, so as to ensure there is fresh food readily available on our tables, produced locally from field to fork. Farmers are key workers.

The spring sunshine can tempt people to venture to rural areas, for walks, exercise and cycling, with footpaths in secluded places an attraction. But I trust people will be responsible and stay at home, not to put our rural people at risk. Caring for the vulnerable has proved difficult for some, with carers having to travel to individual homes, having to ensure their safety and the safety of the ones for whom they care. Care homes have been closed to all visitors, with loved ones not able to visit. Respite care for some families is a lifeline, but now this is not possible, and the weight of solely caring for a loved one is born upon the one shoulder.

Life carries on in our rural areas, as it must, but at what price? The knock on effect of Covid-19 will be felt for a very long time, financially. But what of the mental wellbeing of all who are isolated?

This week being Mental Health Awareness Week, Tir Dewi is there for you and our volunteers offer a listening ear. Pick up the phone, even if it is only for a chat - we are ready to listen. Tel: 0800 1214722.