

addressed more effectively. Our study is unique, as it brought together different stakeholders who were involved in sustained engagement over a twelve-month period. Whilst our approach was at times challenging, it supported genuine transformational change.

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### Developing participatory methods that meet the needs of rural communities: the Rural ECOH study

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The international literature is replete with case studies of community participation in healthcare planning. Many have not been systematically or robustly evaluated. The Rural ECOH study, across six Australian communities, was designed to robustly evaluate the usefulness of 'Remote Service Futures', an evidence-based method of community participation. Using oral health as a focus, the theory was that services and local people would come together for evidenced-based discussions about oral health and would design costed strategies to address oral health challenges. Whilst 'Remote Service Futures' has been successfully used in the United Kingdom, in the Australian context, its translation has not been easy. Our findings reflect the dilemma of whether local organisations really want to delegate decision-making power to communities, and whether people want to participate in structured ways. We discuss the challenges that we encountered, and provide examples of the approaches that we have used to engage all stakeholders, including modifications to ethics processes, using social media, community conversations, working with existing community and social groups, and extensive work with community champions. Our findings have implications for policy and practice. Whilst internationally, policy promotes the active engagement of citizens and health service providers in health planning, service design and evaluation, there is little guidance on how this can be achieved. Our recommendations provide clear direction for enacting participation policy at a service and community level.

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### The challenges of implementing community based research in an Australian rural healthcare context

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