Agenda
Rural Services Partnership Vulnerability Group Meeting

Hosted:	**Online via Zoom**
Date:	**Monday 6th December 2021**
Time:	**11am – 12noon**

Chaired by Nik Harwood, Chair of Rural Services Partnership

1. **Apologies for Absence**

2. **Minutes of Previous Meeting**
   27th April 2021 ([See Link to Minutes and papers](#))

3. **Matters Arising**

4. **RSN Rural Vulnerability and Disadvantage Statement 2021 (**see Attachment 1**)**
   Statement to be updated in 2022 – are there any particular points to be revised?

   Individual Appendices of Good Practice received to date (see Attachment 2)
   [(See link to Minutes 23.11.20 – reference Item 5B for full list of Appendices required)](#)

5. **Rural Vulnerability: What is the impact of current pressures?**
   Nick Hubbard, Citizens Advice to present

6. **State of Care in County and Rural Areas- a joint report by Rural Services Network (RSN) and the County Council Network (CCN)**
   Graham Biggs, Chief Executive (RSN) to present

7. **General Discussion**

8. **Any Other Business**

9. **Close**

RSN Rural Vulnerability and Disadvantage Statement 2021

Context

Despite being the most urban country within the UK, almost 90% of England's land area is categorised as rural[1]. Rural areas are home to 9.53 million people (2018) or 17% of the population[2]. More people live in small rural towns, villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings than live in Greater London.

England's rural communities are extremely diverse economically, environmentally and socially. They include, amongst others, remote and upland communities; coastal settlements; commuter villages and former mining communities. There is no doubt about the beauty and tranquillity of many rural areas but, as the former Commission for Rural Communities said "You can't eat the view". For those who are disadvantaged or vulnerable life in rural areas can be very difficult.

On the positive side, rural communities do often exhibit a certain strength and resilience with local authorities and the voluntary/ community sector providing much important support for those disadvantages or vulnerable. However, this is no excuse for central government's and other organisations' policies ignoring the existing and growing problems of rural residents.

How is vulnerability and disadvantage different in rural areas?

Even small rural communities typically have a wide-ranging socio-economic mix of residents, with wealthy and poor households often immediate neighbours. This mix means that averaged statistics, such as average earnings, tend to disguise the real extent and severity of hidden disadvantage. Certainly the romantic image of the 'rural idyll' is far from reality for many residents.

Another major difference between urban and rural areas is demographic. Rural areas tend to have proportionately far more people in the older age groups (24.8% are over 65 in predominantly rural areas compared to 16.8% in predominantly urban areas)[2]. Rural areas also have proportionately fewer residents of working age. These differences are widening and it is estimated that 30% of the rural population will be aged over 65 by 2035.

% of population aged 65+
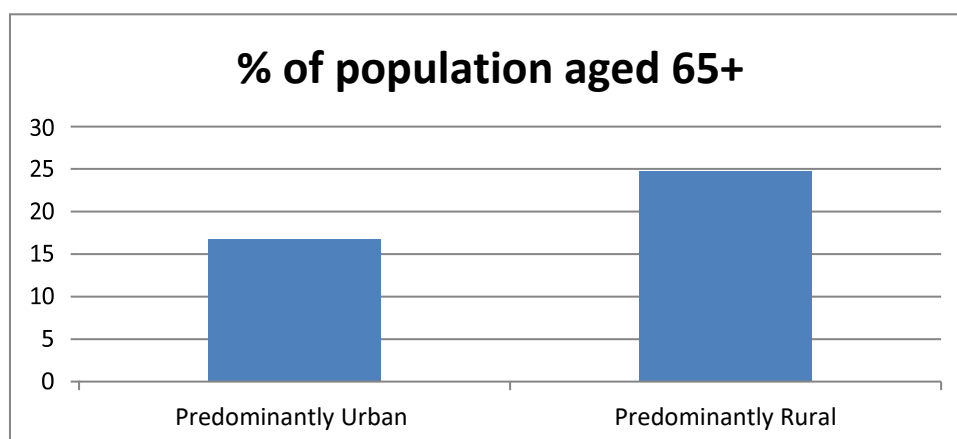
What are the 'rural' problems?

As identified in RSN's 'Rural Strategy' there are many issues contributing to rural vulnerability and disadvantage including difficulties in accessing facilities and services, higher housing and general cost of living, low local wages, lack of opportunity, and little political priority. These issues are interconnected in complex ways.

Access to services and facilities.

The challenges of rural accessibility have long been recognised but in recent years the difficulties in accessing facilities and services have become yet more acute.

'Walk- to' rural facilities such as pubs, Post Offices and shops are continuing to decline. Other facilities and services (e.g. supermarkets; hospitals; GP surgeries; job centres; youth clubs; and council offices) are centralising in urban, often out -of -centre, locations which are hard for rural residents to get to, except by private car. For example, almost 30% of rural residents live more than 30 minutes' drive time from a major hospital. If travelling by public transport almost 43% of rural residents live more than an hour away compared to less than 7% of urban dwellers. These figures do not address frequency of service issues.

51% of the rural population are living in areas that have the poorest accessibility to services (lowest 10 per cent decile) based on minimum travel times, compared with just 2% of the urban population.[2]

Unsurprisingly rural residents have to travel further. In 2017/18 people living in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings travelled 9,965 miles on average, 95% further than in urban conurbations and 52% further than the average for England as a whole.[2]
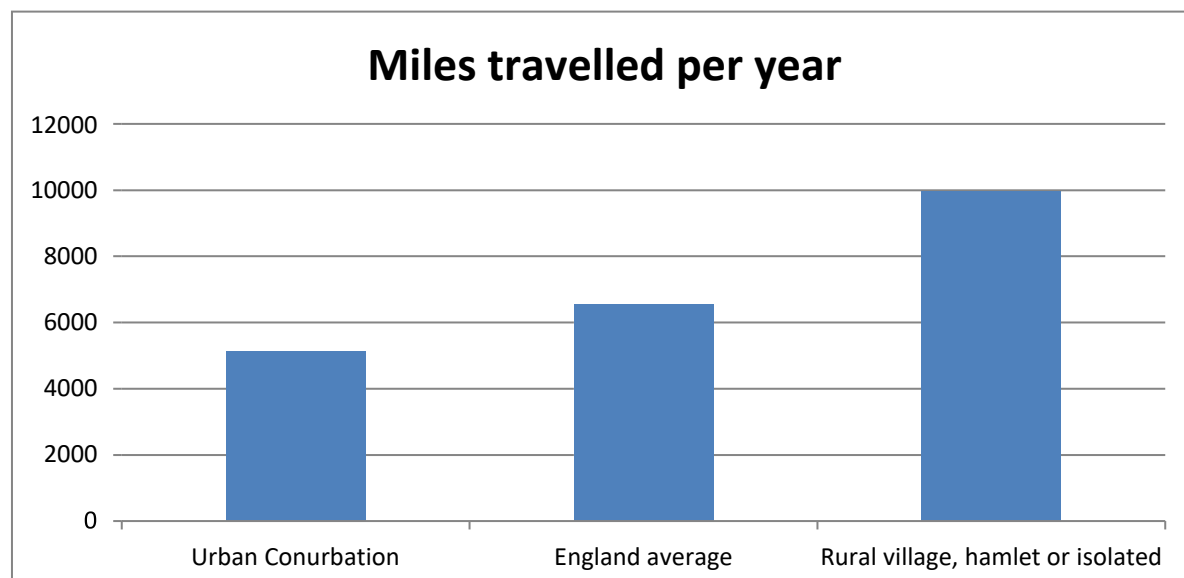
At the same time rural public transport is continuing to contract. "Ten years ago such buses, which often connect to poorer or isolated areas and communities, represented a third of all bus services. Now, funding for bus services in England has fallen by over £162 million (43 per cent) in real terms in comparison to 2009/10". [3] In England some 243 services were reduced or withdrawn in 2018/19 alone.[3]

Many small rural communities have no bus service whatsoever and for others it is absolutely minimal. Such rural buses as still remain often run on radial routes to the nearest town/ city centre but other destinations are much more difficult or totally impossible to reach. Even where some limited public transport is available it very rarely runs at convenient times for accessing employment/training or attending fixed -time appointments such as doctor's appointments. Accordingly, if you are unable to drive you are dependent upon others to access employment, post- 16 education/training; shops; medical facilities; and a host of other essential activities.

Community transport and taxi alternatives, whilst helpful, are not without their drawbacks, not least their unsuitability for spontaneous or urgent trips. Older people cannot use their bus passes on community buses and even the expensive option of taxis is not necessarily always available. Whether by private car or other means, the additional cost for rural households of essential travel is very significant. For example, it is not unusual for 16-18 year olds to pay in excess of £800 p.a. just to access education.

The problems of poor rural accessibility and increased travel costs also impact on those trying to provide services to customers and clients including, notably, health and social care professionals; council services; and the voluntary sector.

Rural areas generally also suffer from inferior digital services compared to urban areas. In 2019 8% of rural premises could not get a 10 Mbps fixed line connection and 19% could not get a 30 Mbps (superfast broadband) connection. The equivalent urban figures are 1% and 3% respectively. Accessing the internet is also a very significant added financial burden in areas where no free wi-fi provision is available.[4]

With mobile provision, in 2019 a basic phone call could not be made inside 32% of rural premises on all four networks. A 4G connection could not be accessed on all four networks inside 58% of rural premises. The equivalent urban figures are 3% and 14% respectively. Two particular issues experienced with mobile provision are weak signal strength within many rural premises and the extent of network coverage in open countryside.[4]

Low wages and higher costs of living
The earned average wage in rural areas (workplace based) compared to the urban average is almost 7.5% lower. [5]

Rural residents also face higher costs:
- Housing costs. In 2018, the average lower quartile house price was 8.8 times the average lower quartile earnings in predominantly rural areas. This compares with 7.5 in predominantly urban areas (excluding London).[2]
- Fuel poverty. In 2018 some 12% of rural households were in fuel poverty compared to 10.3% of urban households. Also, the average fuel poverty gap (the reduction in fuel bill that the average fuel poor household needs in order to not be classed as fuel poor)for rural fuel poor households was £690, over twice the National of £334.[6] Whilst future home standards have an important role in the conservation of fuel and power in new housing a larger proportion of rural homes are older, off the mains gas grid, and more difficult to treat.

- Travel. In 2018 average weekly transport costs for households in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings was £139.20 (£60.60 higher than for urban areas) which accounted for 15% of their weekly disposable income.[7]

- Higher costs of service delivery. A diverse range of services cost more in rural areas. For example, recent research showed that rural Councils paid 13% more for domiciliary social care.[8] There are many other examples e.g. the higher grocery costs in village shops and commercial delivery firms charging supplements for remoter areas.

"People in rural areas typically need to spend 10–20 per cent more on everyday requirements than those in urban areas. The more remote the area, the greater these additional costs." (Joseph Rowntree Foundation 2010)[9]

Lack of opportunity

The challenges facing rural residents can have severe consequences for the most vulnerable and disadvantaged and can adversely affect social mobility.

Young people in rural areas often face particular difficulties in accessing appropriate education, training and employment opportunities due to the limited availability of local options combined with the lack of convenient and affordable public transport.

Comparing results using deprivation level (IDACI decile bands), rural areas had lower achievement levels in English and Maths at Secondary level for all levels of deprivation compared with urban areas (2017/18).[2] Also, as at March 2019, 18 per cent of secondary schools in rural areas had received 'Outstanding' as the most recent inspection outcome, compared with 22 per cent of secondary schools in urban areas.[2]

Only 48.1% of rural students have access to a Further Education site within 30 minutes travel time using Public Transport/Walking compared to 92.3% in urban areas (2017).[2]

Percentage of students with a Further Education site within 30 minutes travel using public transport/ walking
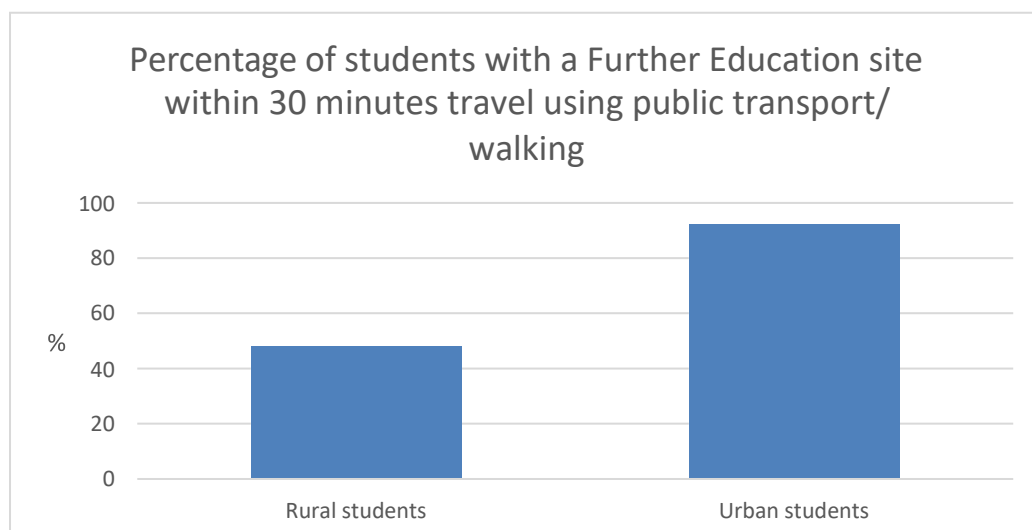
Rural areas typically offer far fewer employment and training opportunities which particularly disadvantages people who are unable to drive. In predominantly urban areas the proportion of the working age population with NVQ Level 4 or an equivalent qualification was 46.7 per cent compared with 37.2 per cent in predominantly rural areas (2018 workplace based data).

Climate change issues

Many areas of rural England suffer acutely from the environmental social and economic impacts of extreme weather, including notably flooding and coastal erosion. The Environment Agency has estimated that some 5.2m homes are at risk of flooding in England alone.[10] Not only are homes at risk, but severe flooding can damage transport routes, result in the collapse of infrastructure, accelerate soil erosion, and involve loss of livestock.

The Covid-19 pandemic

Economy. The economic costs of the pandemic have severely affected both rural and urban areas but there have been marked geographical difference between areas. At certain times almost one third of employments have been furloughed in both rural and urban areas. This and rising unemployment adversely affect both family budgets and expenditure in local economies. Whilst, on average, the unemployment rate (the statistics do not reflect under-employment issues) remains lower in predominantly rural areas the rate of increase in the percentage of the population who are jobless has risen faster than in urban areas since February 2020.

Of particular concern in many rural areas is the reliance on one particular sector, and/or sectors that are seasonal and low-paid, for a high proportion of jobs. For example, the accommodation, and food and drink sectors have been particularly acutely affected by significant declines in both domestic and inbound tourism spend which is reflected in redundancies and well as high take-up of the Job Retention Scheme. Ten rural local authority areas have over 20% of their jobs in tourism. In rural areas with a high reliance on a single sector for employment alternative jobs may be very difficult to find locally.

Partly because of their reliance of vulnerable sectors of employment there is concern, backed by research, that the on-going impact of Covid-19 " will be felt the most in county areas" with economic decline in more rural areas being comparatively greater than in London and major cities.[11]

Local Authorities have been hit hard by the Covid-19 related funding gap as their income has decreased at the same time that demand for services has increased. The Local Government Association has estimated the shortfall between additional costs and Government funding at some £7.4bn nationally.[12] Many rural local authorities are likely to face particular difficulties with their local economies damaged; few options for increasing income; and increased demand for services which are already generally more costly to provide (in unit cost terms) than in more urban areas. The implications for a wide range of services, not least social care and discretionary services such as public transport, are very worrying.

There is concern too that increasing numbers of small rural businesses will not survive causing hardship to those directly affected and resulting in further deterioration in the vitality of rural town high streets and leaving more rural villages without even a village shops and pub. There is a real issue of small premises in rural areas not being able to operate profitably due to social distancing requirements.

Individual health and wellbeing. Whilst the incidence of confirmed cases of Covid-19 has, on average, been lower in predominantly rural areas than in more urban locations, impacts on many rural residents have been severe. Examples include:

- Poor broadband and mobile connectivity in many rural areas presented difficulties for rural residents trying to work from home. It has also caused problems for those needing to access services online.
- Online delivery of services, including healthcare and education, raised issues of exclusion for the elderly and for poorer sectors of the community.
- Isolation and loneliness have increased, not least amongst elderly people living alone. This is exacerbated by the poor broadband and mobile connectivity referred to above.

The political dimension

In Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland (and in most of Europe similarly) rural areas receive special financial attention by their Governments. In England however, that is rarely the case and indeed rural areas receive far less government financial support for their services per head of population than do their urban counterparts. This unfairness is not helped by the lack of genuine rural proofing and the inadequate provision of meaningful fine-grained statistics about the realities of rural living.

Far from being confined to Central Government, this lack of rural focus (or even the most cursory consideration of rural issues) is evident in plans and actions of many service providers in both the public and private sectors. Arguably this is because disadvantaged and vulnerable people in rural areas are geographically scattered and include such a diverse mix of demographic characteristics that they are not a cohesive lobbying group and are accordingly easy to ignore.

What is the RSN doing?

As the only organisation currently examining aspects of rural vulnerability and disadvantage on a regular basis we have developed a number of initiatives:

- The Rural Services Network holds meetings involving rural local authorities to consider the situation (alongside Rural Health and Social Care) on two occasions a year.
- The group involving non-local authority rural organisations, The Rural Services Partnership, has formed a sub- group to consider rural vulnerability issues. We will seek to encourage Rural Service Partners to produce service specific appendices to this document detailing the rural vulnerability and disadvantage situation as seen by those working in particular services and its customers. i.e. Youth, Older People, Health, Transport, Education, Commerce, Small Businesses.
- We work with the Rural England Community Interest Company to operate a Rural Vulnerability Day in Parliament early each year and the RSN also acts as the Secretariat for a Parliamentary Group Meeting of MPs and Peers.
- We have established a Rural/ Market Towns Group to enable focus on the issues facing those towns.
- We promote the sharing of information and best practice.

- We support the work of the National Rural Crime Network and the National Centre for Rural Health and Care. In the latter case we jointly provide the Rural Health and Care Alliance services to its members.

Ideas for tackling Rural Vulnerability and Disadvantage

Rural Vulnerability is a collective term that applies to an array of rural circumstances and situations which is perhaps best considered in the specific contexts of particular identified problems and issues.

Given the reduction and centralisation of public services, the ageing demographic s of rural areas, and the challenges facing young people, the likelihood is that an increasing proportion of the rural population will become disadvantaged and/or vulnerable in the future.

The Utility Service Regulators Ofgem, Ofwat, and Ofcom are asking power, water and telecommunications companies to do work and set up systems to give consideration to both identify and assist their vulnerable customers and the phrase is also employed by the Financial Conduct Authority. The power and water industries employ a Priority Services Register situation to allow people to inform or register their difficulties so that companies are aware of their situation.

Whilst recognising the need for confidentiality of the individual in many cases it is essential for private sector companies, local authorities and the voluntary sector to collaboratively address the challenges facing rural communities. We also think that people 'on the ground' such as Parish/Town Councils, voluntary groups and possibly Church Councils could have a more defined wider role.

In summary:

1. **It is our view that the number of people of all ages living in rural areas and who are particularly vulnerable/ disadvantaged is increasing markedly year-on-year and that immediate action is required.**

2. **We have an established track record of working to improve the public financing of rural areas and support for the rural economy. (We operate through a small charge system with rural local authorities and we are dependent on these arrangements to highlight these issues and to put measures in place to try to tackle them.)**

3. **RSN has the experience, track-record, and the team to work with existing and new partners to address vulnerability and disadvantage. By supporting our existing work and working with our members we can provide a collective rural voice and dedicated resources to tackle rural vulnerability and disadvantage.**

References

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<u>Rural Vulnerability Statement 2021 Appendices</u>

Rural Vulnerability Appendix: The Role that Rural Churches can play in Revitalising Rural.

It is estimated that there are around 20,000 churches in UK, of which about 9,000 are classed as rural.   However, more than 2,000 of these rural churches have congregations of fewer than ten people. The church building must be thought of as a community building, even if not classed solely as a "resource".

For example, the Church of England describes itself as being a denomination as, "being represented in almost every community". Equally, it must be remembered that the prime role of any church building is that of worship. Of late, most rural churches only have a Service once every two weeks, thus leaving the building empty for the rest of the time, with the exception of funerals, weddings and baptisms.

Almost every discussion on the future of church buildings mentions the opportunity to use them for community purposes. The core idea is that the congregation makes the building available for wider use. In addition to being an expression of neighbourliness and mission, this provides an income, and will also mean that there is a wider stakeholder group if major repairs are ever required. There are many examples where the future of a church building has been transformed through being regularly used for a variety of purposes.

But there are four reasons why this type of extended use cannot be a solution for every church. Firstly, small congregations are less likely to have the capacity to do this. Secondly, most villages already have village halls and may not need the extra space. Thirdly, in some rural areas the population is simply too sparse to generate the necessary demand for community use. Finally, it may not be possible to use the church building in this way, for heritage or other reasons.

But where the church can be used, the Church Council could easily utilise the building for a variety of reasons. There are some reasons for saying this. Firstly, the church often the only 'resource' in a village. Secondly, local authority slashed budgets are leading to youth centres, children's centres and lunch clubs being closed or reduced in size. Thirdly, an increasing need and opportunity for churches and faith groups to explore ways together some of the challenges being faced by local communities. Fourthly, social interaction in rural communities can help combat mental health issues.

So, all in all, from a historical, social, mental health, worship and a financially viewpoint, it makes common sense to use rural church buildings for other purposes.

 Revd Richard Kirlew

Agricultural Chaplains Association

Rural Vulnerability Appendix: Rural Transport

Sustainable communities rely on public transport to provide equality of access to goods and services and to provide social mobility for those who cannot drive or afford a car. They also require an efficient and reliable public transport service to maximize the use of roadspace for the movement of people without having an adverse effect on the local economy. Public transport also helps reduce the environmental adverse impact of travel, both locally in terms of emissions, noise and severance, and globally in respect of carbon emissions.

The impacts of the Covid 19 pandemic and of the ongoing climate change crisis on rural transport have been, and will remain, significant. The pandemic has resulted in sustained patronage reductions – and changes to people's work, shopping, education and retail habits mean that many of these negative effects may not be fully reversed. In contrast, the urban flight phenomenon may lead to increased demand for travel in rural areas which cannot be left to default to private car use.

Decarbonisation brings challenges for transport which are exacerbated in rural areas, where travel distances tend to be longer. Most rural communities rely on buses and community transport, and their conversion from fossil fuel use has a significant cost (for vehicles and infrastructure),but is constrained by the longer daily operational range often required. This is often beyond the daily range of electric buses charged overnight, and can require additional charging equipment en route to deliver the required daily operation, or the use of even more expensive hydrogen fuel cell power.

All these will require funding support. The government's National Bus Strategy promises more bus services, more frequently, for longer daily and weekly periods, using modern clean and green vehicles, with improved ticketing and information. All this is intended to achieve modal shift from private car use, delivering the wider societal objectives set out above. However, today, bus operators remain reliant on government funding to continue in business, but it is unclear for how long this will remain available. Partnership working, delivered through Enhanced Partnerships which build on authorities' Bus Service Improvement Plans (BSIPs) delivered in October 2021, will assume ever greater importance. Central Government has promised local authorities support to deliver these improvements, and for other initiatives including reinstatement of rural bus services and decarbonization of buses, but individual allocations are not yet known. In the immediate shorter term, though, it is highly likely that recovery funding will still be required, in order that the growth and improvements that are expected under the BSIPs can be built upon a stable and sustainable base.

John Birtwistle

First Group

Rural Vulnerability Appendix: Young People

A little over 21% of the UK population is aged under 18. Young people are often disadvantaged, marginalised, isolated and disaffected – largely through systemic features which don't accommodate their personal, social, educational, and economic developmental needs. Young people are known to be the loneliest section of society. Young people may have hundreds, indeed thousands, of 'friends' and 'followers' on social media – and yet have no significant close inter-connection with other young people in their community.

We know that the horrible irony of vulnerable young people is that they don't see themselves as vulnerable – which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable. With a decreasing lack of accessible support services and networks, young people are at increased risk of exploitation – across the realms of child sexual exploitation, criminalisation through "county lines" operations, and through potential radicalisation.

In rural areas, these dynamics are amplified. During the pandemic, these dynamics were amplified further – particularly in relation to "county lines" as the methodology adapted to increase reach into market towns and rural parishes (with significantly less visible adults during periods of lockdown) and to increasingly target young women.

In rural areas, services are hard-to-reach. The historic and traditional, classic, features of vulnerability are well-understood: geography makes services distant; poor access to transport increases isolation and inhibits participation and opportunity; poor digital infrastructure (including mobile phone signal, inadequate broadband coverage, lack of access to devices). Young people have no ability to affect any of the barriers to access. Young people may travel huge distances to attend education – and the school bus is the only way home; extra-curricular activities (formal or not) are not available to them.

In turn, access to further education and training opportunities are difficult to reach – often involving incredibly long journeys. Young people in rural areas (which can often be described as jobs-rich but career-poor) are often under pressure to be economically active – contributing to both their own costs and sometimes to the family finances – and this can be a binary choice between education and wage-earning.

Emotional wellbeing and mental health issues are at unprecedented levels for young people – accompanied by a lack of easily-accessible preventative and early intervention services (where demand is outstripping supply); the rural vulnerability lens applied here creates a bleak picture. The longer-term impact of young people's isolation, loneliness and poor mental health into adulthood cannot be underestimated; it will affect employability, economic activity, relationships, aspirations and social mobility enormously.

We need an increased awareness of the needs of rural young people – an understanding of their long-term future (both where they want to stay in the countryside and where they want to migrate to urban areas); we need to support them to articulate their needs and amplify their voice so that it is heard properly by decision-makers; and we need to turn rhetoric into action. The historic dynamic of rural vulnerability of young people is well-known – we need defined action now to change the defined narrative that young people suffer from.

Nik Harwood

Chief Executive: Young Somerset
Chair: Rural Services Partnership