

Rural Vulnerability Statement 2021 Appendices

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**