

Kerry Booth, Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network speaks with Matt Barbet on Sky News Sunrise, Thursday 5 June 2025.



MB: If you've been to a more rural high street in a town, you will have noticed things have changed quite a bit in recent years, not least, a lot of banks closing, and that issue is going to be debated by MPs in the House of Commons today, because it impacts quite a few people, including those who may not be familiar with going online for their banking or have limited public transport options as well. Kerry booth is the Chief Executive of the Rural Services Network, and joins me now.

Kerry, good to see you, this is something people will be more than familiar with, but it's getting worse, is it?

KB: Absolutely and some of these effects of the closures of banks are felt, much more keenly in our rural areas where there are poor transport links, and you might have to travel much further to find an alternative bank or an alternative post office where you might want to get some cash out or deposit cash.

MB: Is it just an assumption on the part of these companies that everyone could just go online now, everyone's using a smartphone, when actually that's not the case.

KB: Absolutely, yes, we've seen a decline in the amount of people using cash for transactions, but it's still around one in 10 where we use cash in this country for a transaction, and the certain groups of people that are more impacted by this so older people who may not be as confident using online technology.

It might affect those on low incomes who like to manage their budget with cash. It's much easier to be able to do that.

And those in rural areas, you have that poor transport and often have poor connectivity, so you might want to do a transaction online, but actually the reality is, you need to run down the end of a lane up a hill to get that mobile phone two step verification to enable the payment to go through.

KB: So there's real challenges felt by some of those in rural communities around accessing cash and banking services.

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MB: It's also fair to say that people just want a bit of face to face interaction, don't they?

Whether they're going to the post office to get out some cash or draw their pension or they're going into a bank, sometimes it feels like we're losing that human connection. Everything's just done by pressing buttons or tapping your phone screen.

KB: It is and for some of our elderly residents, actually, that might be the only person that they speak to in a day going into the bank to engage. We're seeing more and more services going online.

Often, doctors appointments and other appointments are online. Being able to see people is really important for some of our residents.

I would say as well, it's it's also the impact on some of our businesses. So in our rural areas, we have a large number of sole traders, small businesses, and for them, the ability to deposit cash, to get cash out, is really important.

This government is focused on growing the economy, and we need to make sure we enable that rural economy to exist and to grow and to thrive as well. The lack of banking opportunities can really limit that for those in rural areas.

MB: Banks obviously provide a service, but ultimately their businesses with shareholders to answer to, and we're looking at some of the big names on high streets right now.

If they can't make the numbers add up, if it's costing them more than they're making from having branches, it's no surprise that they're deciding to close them. Is there any sort of an answer to that?

KB: We're seeing the growth of banking hubs in some of our communities. I think the government opened, or re-opened the 100th one at Christmas last year.

And this government has committed to opening more of those community banking hubs. That might be a space where on one day, a particular bank will come in, and then on another, a different bank will come in to provide some services in a hub.

I think we've got around 400 banks pencilled in for closure this year, and if we've only got 100 community hubs, actually, that's just this year alone. It's not necessarily covering that gap.

MB: Banks, post offices, other businesses, a lot of them, will say that the rents on high streets and the rates haven't shifted in line with what they need to provide. They're still high. There's no point in them wasting the money on these still high rents when landlords, councils don't want to seem to change things for the better.

KB: Absolutely, that's a challenge for those banking industries, but when we see the last bank leave, that has a really big impact on a community. It might mean if a bank goes from a rural high street, actually, that's less reason for people to visit that high street, to visit those shops, to engage with those businesses. So that can have quite a negative impact on the surrounding businesses in a rural area once that bank goes, which impacts our economy as well.

MB: Kerry, quick word on what you're hoping to hear from the MPs debate in the commons later.

KB: I'm hoping that they understand some of those challenges in rural areas. Because, there are challenges for those accessing banking services in our cities as well when the banks close, but it's compounded in rural areas. So when you have that lack of connectivity, lack of transport and difficulty for our aging population that we have in rural areas, that's a really big impact.

I just hope that the MPs recognise the challenges for rural communities, and take that into consideration when they're making policy.

MB: That was Kerry Booth from the rural Services Network. Thanks so much.