



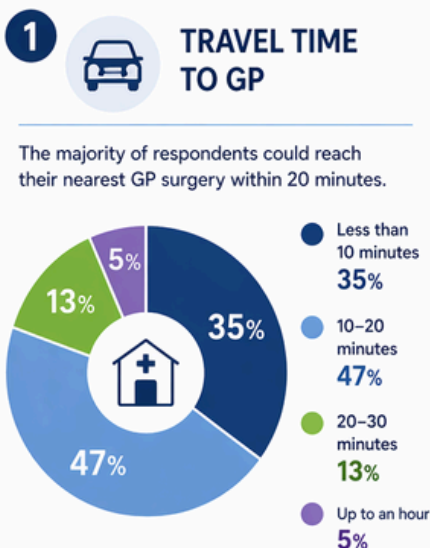
Access to healthcare is a fundamental concern for rural communities. With older-than-average populations, dispersed settlements, and often considerable distances to hospitals and specialist services, rural areas face distinctive challenges in ensuring residents can access the care they need, when they need it.

The closure of local facilities, difficulties in recruiting healthcare staff to rural areas, and the increasing reliance on digital booking systems all compound these challenges. For those without access to a car, or too unwell to drive, getting to a GP appointment, let alone a hospital, can become a major obstacle to receiving care.

Social care faces similar pressures. Providing domiciliary care in areas where clients may live miles apart is inherently more costly and time-consuming than in urban areas, yet funding formulas often fail to reflect this. The result is a care sector struggling to recruit and retain staff, leaving some of the most vulnerable rural residents without the support they need.

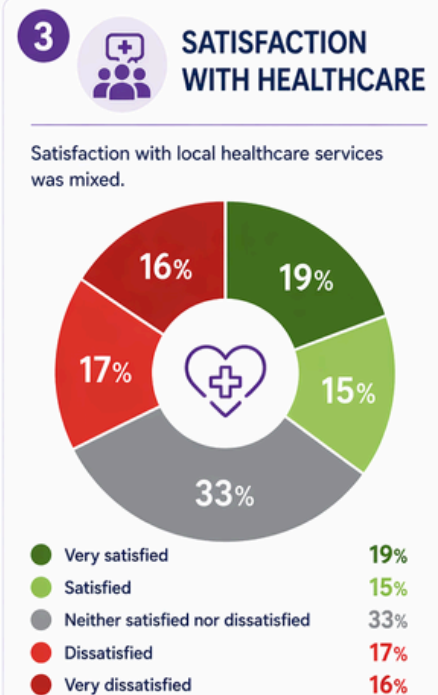
Key Survey Findings

The survey explored respondents' experiences of accessing healthcare and asked respondents for a number of priority areas for improvement.



 Nearly one in five faced longer journeys of between 20–30 minutes or up to an hour.

These figures assume access to a car – for those relying on public transport, journey times would typically be considerably longer or unfeasible if there were no public transport options.





The focus groups highlight significant barriers to accessing healthcare in rural areas, bringing the data to life through lived experience.

Distance and limited transport options were consistently identified as key challenges, with many relying on private cars and facing long journeys to reach services. Access is particularly difficult for those without a vehicle, or where public transport is limited or poorly connected. Participants reported growing pressure on primary care, including long waits for appointments and the decline of home visits. The shift to digital-first systems was also seen as a barrier, particularly for older residents and those with limited digital access.

Concerns were raised about emergency response times, workforce shortages in social care, and delays in accessing care packages. Specialist and mental health services are increasingly centralised, requiring travel over longer distances and contributing to delayed or unmet need.

A lack of coordination between services further compounds these issues, with participants describing fragmented care and limited follow-up.

Overall, these challenges are leading some individuals to delay or avoid seeking care. Participants emphasised the need for more accessible, locally delivered, and better coordinated services, alongside a more holistic approach that reflects the realities of rural life.





KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about rural health and social care

1

Nearly a fifth of respondents travel more than 20 minutes to reach their GP, with journey times considerably longer for those without cars.



2

More respondents are dissatisfied than satisfied with local healthcare availability.



3

Reduced hospital waiting times and better GP access are the top healthcare priorities.



4

Home visits have become extremely rare, leaving housebound patients struggling to access care.



5

Online booking systems disadvantage those without digital skills, particularly older people and those without reliable broadband.



6

Ambulance response times can be longer in rural areas.



7

Care worker recruitment can be an issue, with low pay, unpaid travel time, and demanding conditions.



8

Specialist services are increasingly centralised in distant hospitals, requiring lengthy and costly journeys.



9

Mental health services are particularly difficult to access, with long waiting lists and services located far from rural communities.



10

There can be a lack of joined-up, holistic care – patients are passed between services with no one taking overall responsibility.



11

Many people are delaying or avoiding healthcare due to the barriers involved, with potentially serious consequences.



12

Community and voluntary organisations are stepping in to fill gaps, but cannot substitute for properly funded services.



Rural residents want accessible, timely and joined-up health and social care that meets their needs. Geographic distance, digital exclusion, workforce shortages and fragmented services are creating serious barriers to good health and wellbeing in rural communities.

