

Delivering For All: Rural Realities

*A national survey of rural residents across
England, brought to you by the
Rural Services Network*



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Delivering for All is a campaign led by the Rural Services Network that sets out our key policy asks of Government.

This research project brings the human element to that policy language, setting out the lived experiences of rural residents to bring the statistics to life and demonstrate what the inadequate services actually mean to people living in rural communities.

It is vital that the rural voice is heard, almost 10 million people live in rural England and we need to ensure that policy makers from civil servants right up to the Prime Minister understand the challenges that our rural communities face.

Rural communities have so much to offer this country, we know that the rural economy has the potential to add up to £19 Billion to the Treasury, and it is time that we enabled our rural communities not merely to survive, but to thrive, and reach their potential, for the good of the whole nation.



**Cllr Roger Phillips,
Chair of The Rural Services
Network**

About the Rural Services Network

The Rural Services Network (RSN) is the national champion for rural services, representing the interests of rural service providers across England. As an independent membership organisation, RSN brings together almost 450 organisations committed to improving rural life and services, including rural local authorities, housing associations, health trusts, transport providers, and third-sector bodies delivering services in rural areas.

RSN exists because rural communities face distinct challenges that are too often overlooked in national policymaking. Delivering services across dispersed populations costs more, yet rural councils consistently receive less government funding than their urban counterparts. Public transport is scarcer, digital connectivity patchier, and access to healthcare, housing, and employment opportunities more limited. RSN works to ensure these realities are understood and addressed and campaigns for dedicated rural focused policy rather than a one size fits all approach.

The RSN holds a unique position in the rural policy landscape. It serves as a special interest group of the Local Government Association and provides the secretariat and support for the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Rural Services, ensuring that rural issues have a voice in Parliament. RSN representatives sit on national working groups covering rural crime, rural health and care, and other key policy areas, and engage directly with government ministers to advocate for rural communities.

Through its work, RSN aims to ensure that the needs and concerns of the millions of people who live and work in rural England are heard in national policy making – and that rural communities can thrive, not merely survive.



The Research

Two complementary research methods were used: a national questionnaire survey and a series of focus groups with rural residents.

The survey gathered views from 2,418 people living in rural areas across England, providing robust quantitative data on experiences and attitudes across all seven topic areas.

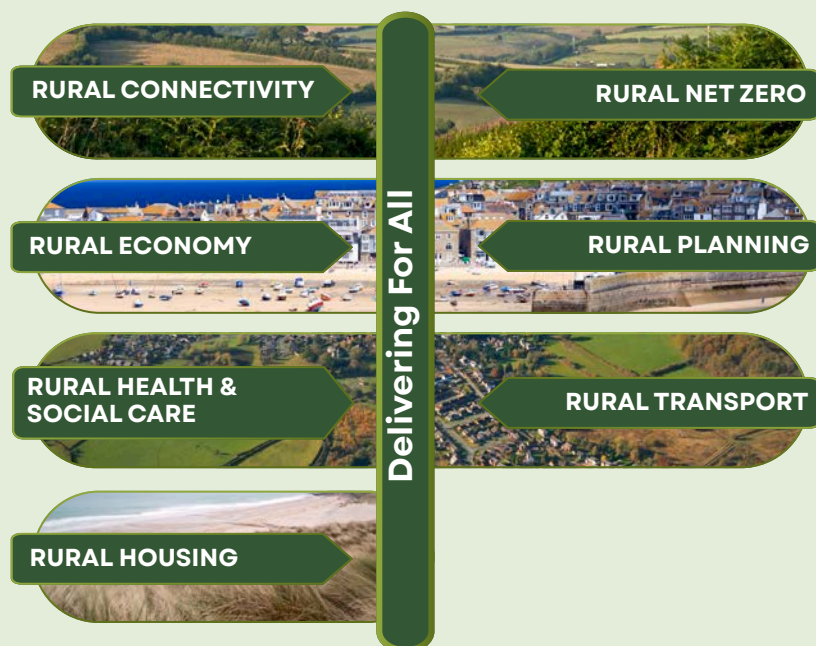
The focus groups allowed for deeper conversation, giving participants the opportunity to share their stories in their own words and explore the connections between different issues affecting their communities.

Together, these methods combine statistical weight with lived experience, ensuring that the findings presented in this report are both credible and grounded in the realities of rural life.

The Findings

The following sections present the findings from both the questionnaire survey and the focus groups, organised across the seven topic areas examined in this research:

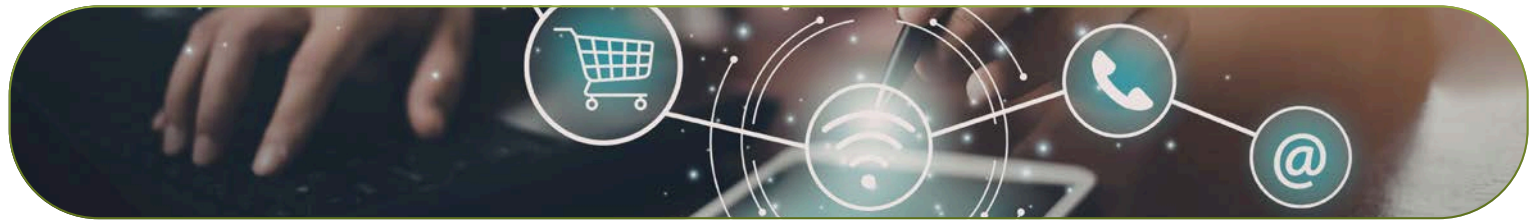
Each section follows a consistent structure. We begin with the key findings from the survey data, highlighting the most significant statistics and patterns. These are then brought to life through quotes from the focus group discussions, illustrating what the numbers mean in practice for people living in rural communities. Each section concludes by drawing out the key issues identified.



Throughout, it is important to remember that these topics do not exist in isolation. Poor transport links affect access to healthcare. Housing costs push young people away, undermining the rural economy.

Lack of digital connectivity limits opportunities for remote working and access to services. The challenges facing rural communities are deeply interconnected, and effective solutions will need to recognise this. We return to these cross-cutting themes later in the report.

The findings paint a picture of rural communities under pressure – but also of residents who care deeply about where they live and want to see their areas thrive. Their voices deserve to be heard.



Digital connectivity has become essential infrastructure for modern life.

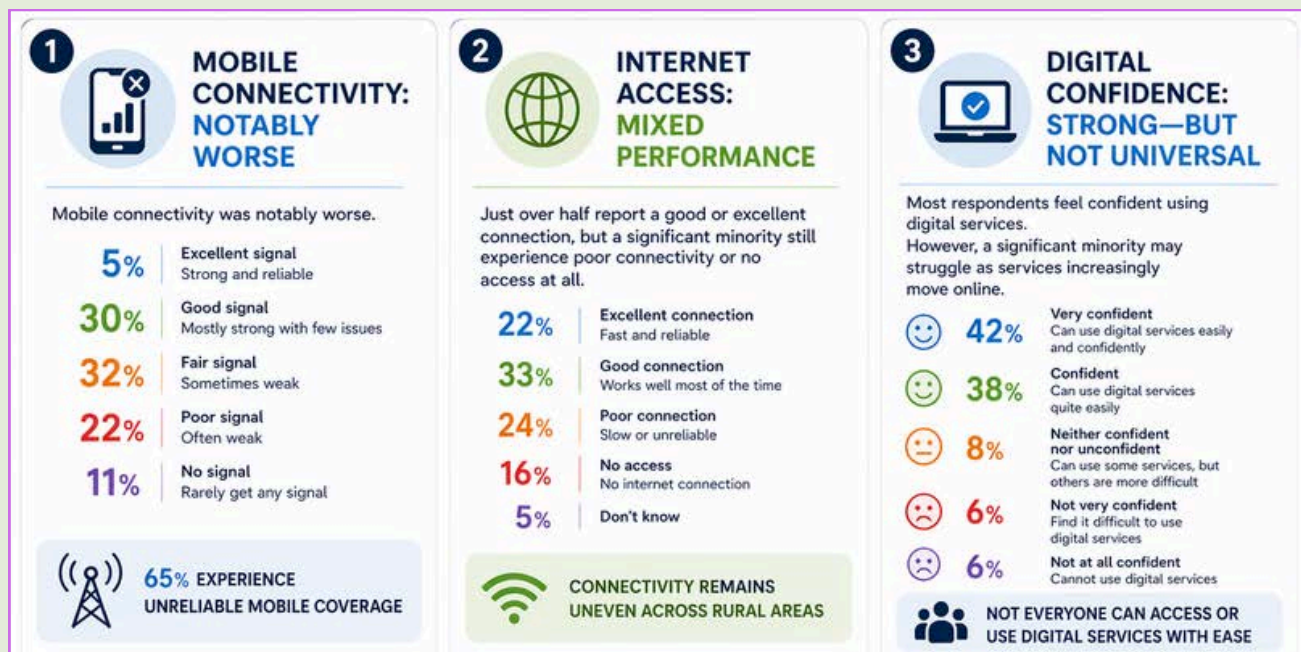
From accessing healthcare and banking services to working from home, completing homework and staying in touch with family, reliable internet and mobile phone signal are no longer luxuries but necessities.

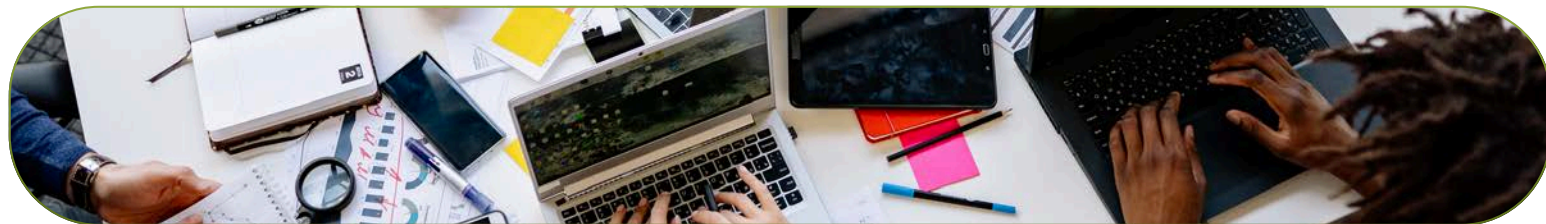
For rural communities, good connectivity can help overcome some of the challenges of distance and remoteness, enabling access to services that might otherwise require lengthy journeys.

Poor connectivity, by contrast, compounds existing disadvantages, leaving rural residents unable to access the same opportunities as their urban counterparts. This also can limit the potential of rural businesses to grow.

Key Survey Findings

The survey revealed a mixed picture on rural connectivity, with broadband generally performing better than mobile phone signal.





The focus groups revealed the real-world consequences of connectivity challenges, and the frustration felt by those living with inadequate services.

For many, particularly those working from home, inconsistent internet access directly affects their ability to work. Participants also reported paying high costs for relatively slow speeds, often in contrast to faster, cheaper services available elsewhere.

Mobile coverage remains uneven, with noticeable gaps even within short distances and limited access to newer technologies such as 5G.

The transition to digital Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) systems raised concerns about reliability, particularly for older residents and those with additional needs. A recurring theme was that services may be technically available but not always usable in practice.

Participants also highlighted risks around telecare devices and the impact of power cuts, which can disrupt internet, phone access, and essential daily activities, including running businesses.

As physical services decline in rural areas, digital connectivity is becoming increasingly essential. Without it, residents face barriers to accessing basic services and support.

Frustration was also expressed about the lack of accessible human support from telecommunications providers, particularly for those less confident online. Affordability remains a significant challenge. Connectivity is increasingly a necessity, yet costs can be prohibitive for lower-income households, reinforcing digital exclusion.

WHAT RURAL RESIDENTS TOLD US ABOUT... RURAL CONNECTIVITY

“My partner is a solicitor, and she works from home a lot, and sometimes she’s working, **the internet’s dropping when she’s on calls... she can’t do her job.**”



“It’s probably patchy, because Cornwall’s just full of valleys... **some places are good and some places aren’t.**”



“I’ve got a couple of friends in the village who are now in their 80s. One’s got dementia, and one’s got a physical disability. They’re both very connected. However, there’s... **you can be connected and still not be able to utilise, and I think that’s really important.**”



“I’m keeping my landline because I **can rely upon my landline – the mobile’s a bit hit and miss.**”



“There’s a lot of telecare devices that connect that don’t work with the new systems. **What happens when the power goes off?**”



“That doesn’t help that you can’t have stable electricity, because if you’ve got no electric, **you have no internet, and your phones don’t work these days either.**”



“My village has no pub, no post office, no nothing – **digital access is essential.**”



“Telecommunications companies don’t put phone numbers on their websites, because **they don’t want you to ring them.**”



“We’re paying 40-odd pound a month – **that’s a lot of money for someone who’s only on minimum wage, or a single parent.**”



Rural residents rely on connectivity every day – for work, wellbeing, safety and essential services. But patchy signals, power outages, high costs and lack of support make it harder to stay connected.



KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about digital connectivity



1 Mobile phone signal remains unreliable across much of rural England, with a third of respondents experiencing poor or very poor coverage.



2 Broadband speeds vary significantly, with some rural areas still receiving inadequate connections despite being willing to pay for upgrades.



3 The switch from copper landlines to digital services poses risks for vulnerable people, particularly during power cuts.



4 Residents generally feel confident with digital skills, however the infrastructure is not there for them to utilise.



5 Power supply instability compounds connectivity problems, affecting both residents and businesses.



6 Service providers show limited understanding of rural-specific challenges.



7 The closure of physical services (banks, post offices) has made digital connectivity essential, yet not everyone can access or use digital services.



8 Cost of connectivity is a burden for lower-income households, yet is increasingly necessary to access other services and deals.



9 Older people and those with disabilities face particular challenges, and people's digital skills can decline over their lifetime due to illness or cognitive changes.



Reliable, affordable digital connectivity is essential for rural communities to access services, stay connected, and take part in modern life. Addressing these issues must be a priority for policymakers and service providers.





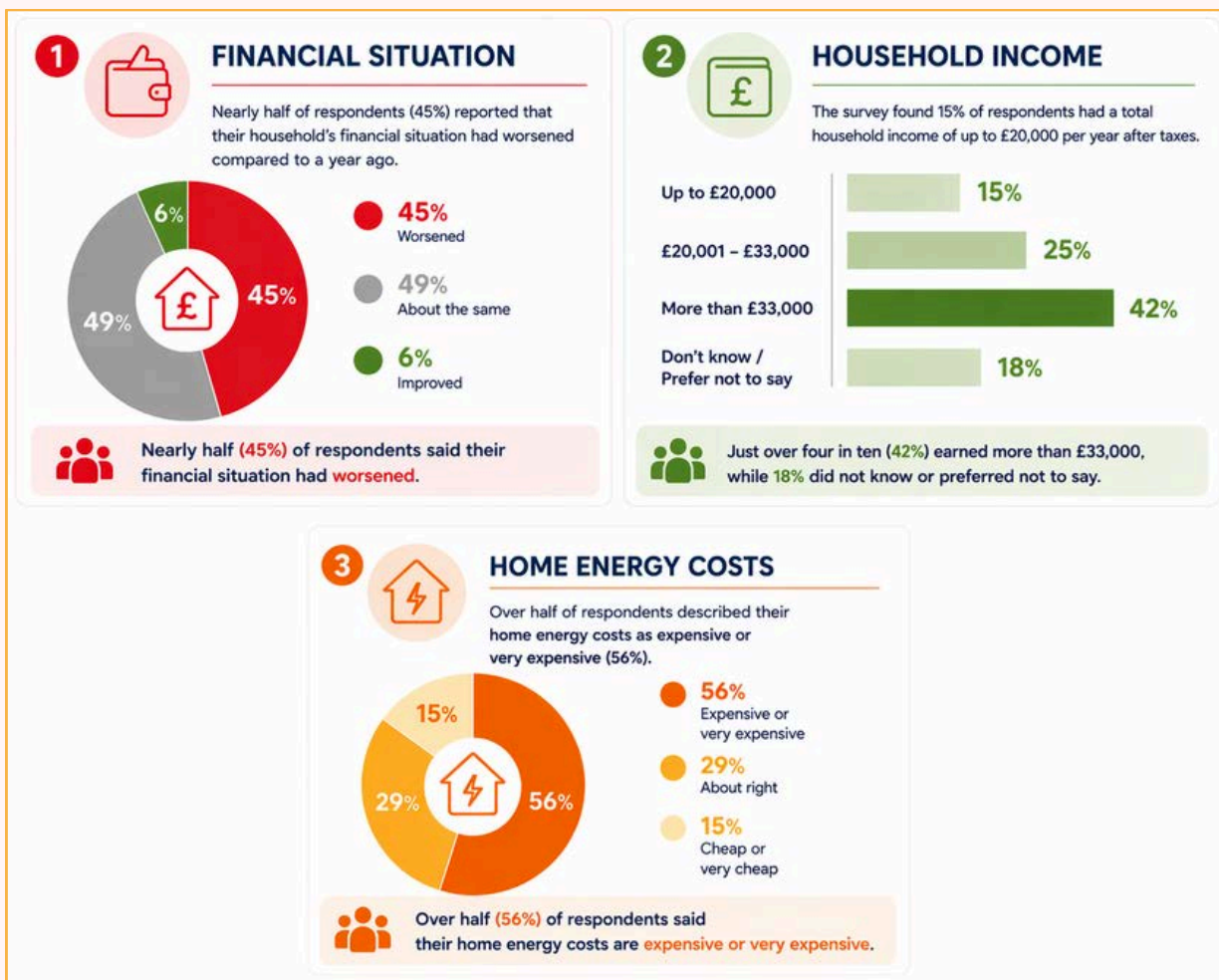
A healthy local economy is fundamental to the vitality of rural communities. It provides employment, supports local services, and gives young people a reason to stay.

Yet rural economies face distinctive challenges: limited diversity of employment opportunities, reliance on seasonal industries, difficulties attracting investment, and the constant pull of towns and cities that offer more choice and better wages.

Understanding these challenges – and their consequences for rural communities – is essential to developing policies that genuinely support rural economic prosperity.

Key Survey Findings

The survey collected data on respondents' financial circumstances and economic situation, revealing a picture of economic pressure for many rural households.





The focus groups highlighted rural economies under sustained pressure, with participants pointing to limited opportunities, barriers to growth, and a strong sense of being overlooked.

While there are examples of individual success, many described an economy that is struggling overall. Efforts to diversify are often constrained, with planning restrictions consistently identified as a significant barrier to business development, innovation, and local job creation.

A heavy reliance on sectors such as hospitality and tourism was seen as a key structural weakness. While these industries provide important sources of employment, they are often associated with low pay, seasonal demand, and limited career progression, making it difficult to retain younger people. This contributes to a cycle in which younger residents leave in search of better opportunities elsewhere, leading to ageing populations and reduced economic vitality within rural communities.

Challenges in attracting and retaining skilled professionals were also widely highlighted, particularly in sectors such as healthcare and education. Career progression within rural areas was described as limited, with few clear pathways for advancement without relocating, further compounding workforce shortages.

Planning policy emerged as a consistent and significant concern. Participants described difficulties in securing approval for developments that could support local economies, including business expansion and diversification. This was seen as restricting growth and, in some cases, forcing businesses to relocate to urban areas where opportunities to develop are perceived to be greater.

Rising costs are placing additional strain on rural businesses, with increasing overheads and limited ability to pass these costs on to customers. This financial pressure is compounded by smaller customer bases and reduced footfall compared to urban areas. At the same time, participants pointed to a lack of long-term, strategic thinking in policy and funding, with short-term approaches seen as hindering sustainable economic development and limiting confidence for future investment.

Looking ahead, many expressed concern about continued economic stagnation and a gradual drift towards towns and cities, both in terms of people and investment.

There was a clear and consistent call for more coordinated, long-term planning and a more joined-up approach to supporting rural economies, with policies that better reflect the specific challenges and opportunities facing rural areas.



WHAT RURAL RESIDENTS TOLD US ABOUT...

RURAL ECONOMY

“Struggling. I think that’s the answer to that.”



“We’re not keeping our youngsters here, we’re just keeping an elderly population. And then the elderly population can’t get around eventually... so we’ve got to keep the youngsters here, we’ve got to make it viable for the youngsters.”



“We are not attracting people who are career-based.”



“Career progression here is very stale. You either sort of move on to develop your own business, if you’re an employee, which is extremely difficult, or you’re waiting for somebody that’s senior to you... to retire, so that they all move up one stage.”



“Any business that is growing has to then move to an area where there’s an industrial estate... which means it’s moving again to a town or city.”



WHAT RURAL RESIDENTS TOLD US ABOUT...

RURAL ECONOMY

“It would have been an additional string to the bow of a local business. But they brought out all sorts of... anything they could think of to actually try and stop it.”



“Their expenses and overheads, particularly, are almost unbearable now.”



“Business rate relief is sort of... seems to be disappearing more... the costs of electricity, gas... water, sewage charges are dramatically increasing all the time. All their overheads are increasing. They struggle to put their prices up because people can’t afford them otherwise.”



“The councils will give you money to fix that thing, right there and then. But they’re not looking at that long-term problem... they’re not looking far enough to the future to develop correctly.”



“If nothing changes, it’s just going to continue to struggle. There will be an economy there, but it won’t be a dynamic economy. There will be more continued drift to the towns and cities.”



“We’re drifting, definitely... we’ve got no outlook for the future.”



“What is needed is a much more holistic look at the whole thing. It seems as if departments and governments departments almost fight each other, or three doesn’t seem to be joined-up thinking. And there’s no proper, real plan for the rural areas.”



KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about rural economy

1

Nearly half of respondents reported worsening household finances over the past year.



2

Rural economies (particularly in the South West) are over-reliant on hospitality and tourism, which offer seasonal, low-paid work with limited career progression.



3

Young people are leaving for towns and cities, creating a demographic imbalance and draining rural areas of energy and skills.



4

Planning restrictions can prevent businesses from diversifying and expanding.



5

Rising costs (energy, water, business rates) are squeezing small businesses, while they struggle to raise prices.



6

There is little joined up thinking between different agencies and government departments on rural economic development.



7

Short-term funding cycles prevent long-term planning and investment.



8

Rural businesses feel forgotten and overlooked compared to urban areas.



9

Lack of infrastructure (transport, drainage, utilities) constrains business growth.



A strong, resilient rural economy needs long-term investment, joined-up policies, and recognition of the unique challenges rural communities face.



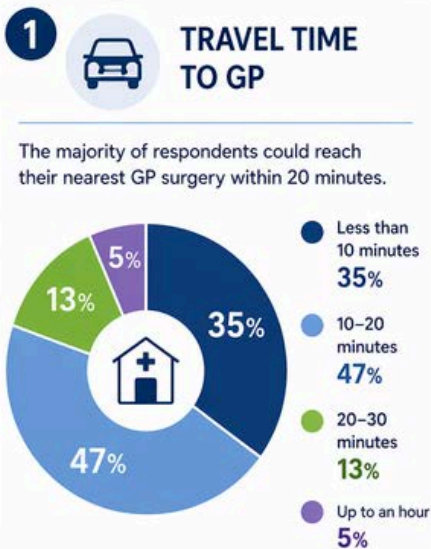
Access to healthcare is a fundamental concern for rural communities. With older-than-average populations, dispersed settlements, and often considerable distances to hospitals and specialist services, rural areas face distinctive challenges in ensuring residents can access the care they need, when they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

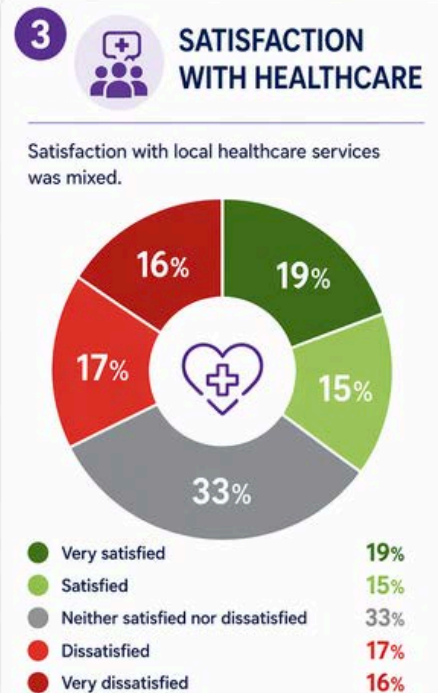
Key Survey Findings

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 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.



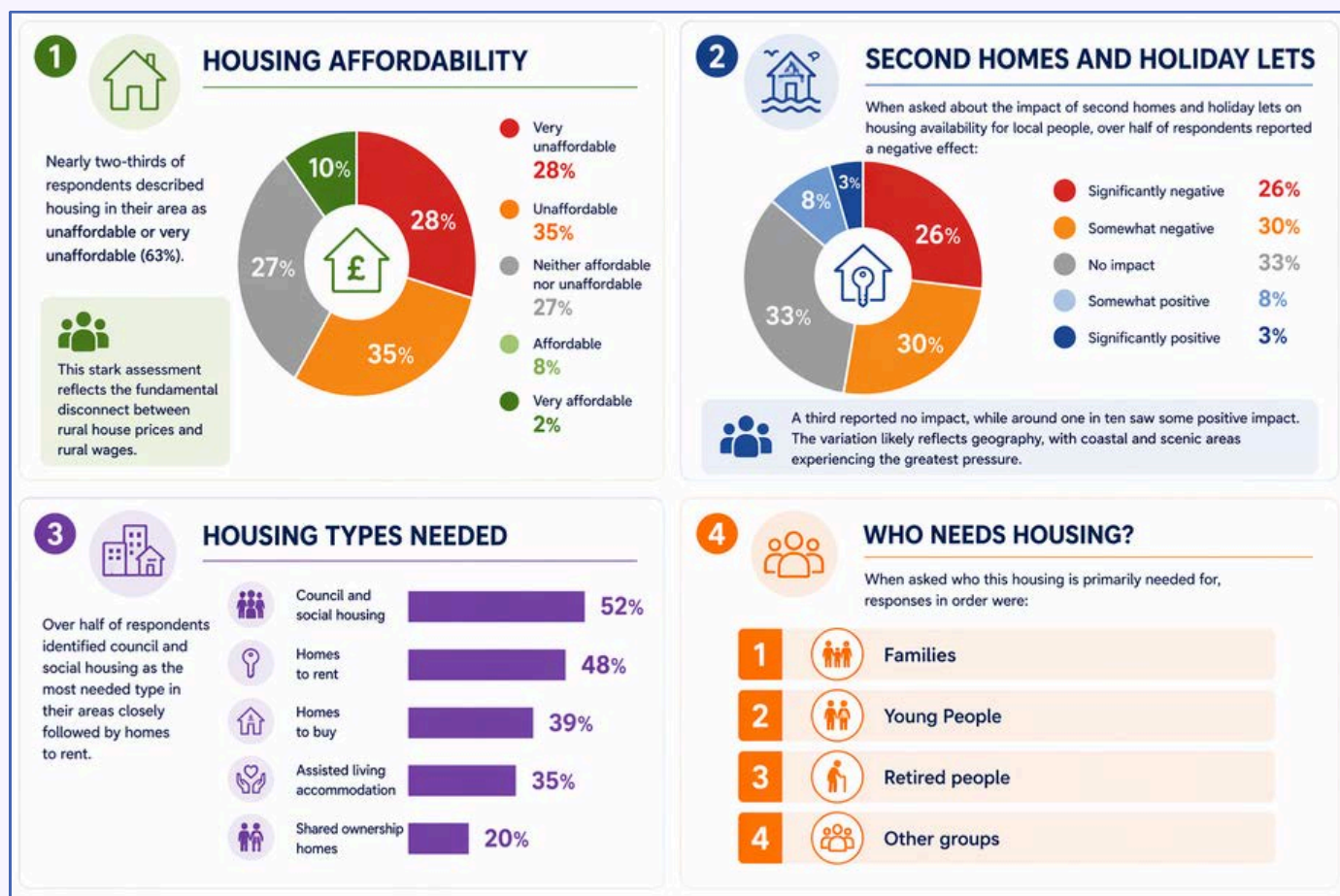


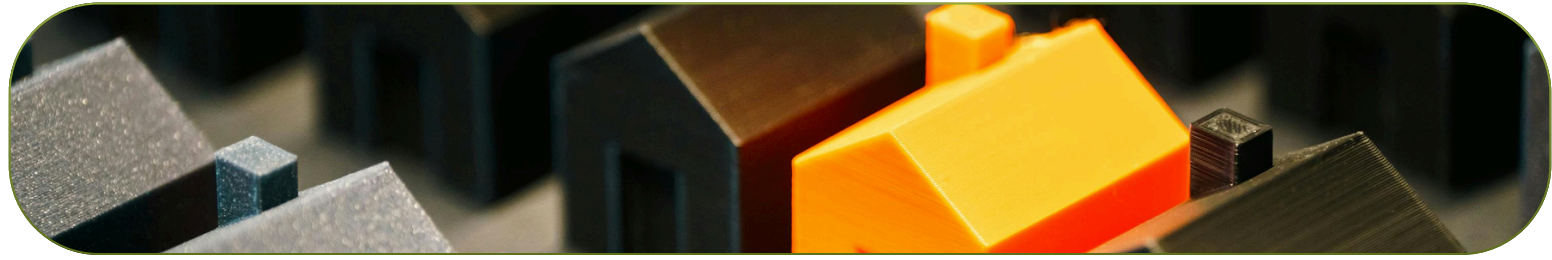
Housing lies at the heart of whether rural communities can thrive or merely survive. Without homes that local people can afford to buy or rent, villages and small towns face an uncertain future – losing their young people to urban areas, becoming dormitories for commuters or enclaves of retirees, and struggling to maintain the working-age population needed to sustain local services and businesses.

The issues are well-documented: house prices that far outstrip local earnings, a shortage of social and affordable housing, the loss of long-term rental properties to the holiday let market, and new developments that can cater to buyers from elsewhere rather than local need. What is less often heard is the lived experience of those trying to navigate this market, and the consequences for the communities left behind.

Key Survey Findings

The survey explored respondents' views on housing affordability, the impact of second homes and holiday lets, and the types of housing most needed in their areas.





The focus groups highlight a rural housing market increasingly out of reach for local people, with house prices outpacing local earnings and limiting access to affordable homes.

As a result, rural populations are shifting, with more wealthier incomers and fewer younger people and families. Participants described ageing communities and the loss of working-age residents, with implications for community sustainability and local services.

New housing was widely seen as failing to meet local need, often targeting external buyers, including second home owners and holiday lets. There is a shortage of smaller, lower-cost homes, while higher-value properties are prioritised. Existing homes can also become unaffordable over time, further reducing options for first-time buyers.

Young people are particularly affected, often pushed into private renting or forced to leave. The growth of second homes adds further pressure, with wider ripple effects on surrounding areas.

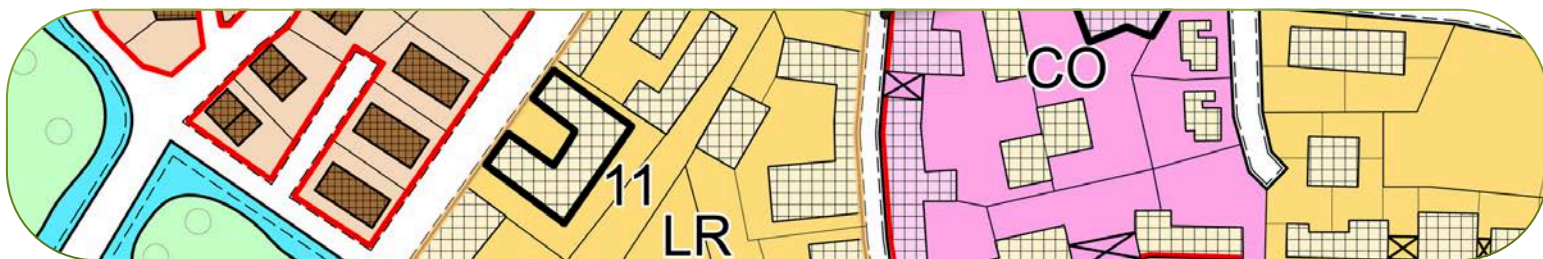
These issues also affect local economies, with employers struggling to recruit due to a lack of affordable housing. Participants noted that housing numbers alone do not reflect who homes are built for, and that delivery can face local resistance.

There was a strong call for planning to better prioritise local need and for more effective use of existing housing stock. More broadly, participants questioned whether national policy fully reflects the realities of rural housing.

Overall, the findings point to a housing system misaligned with local needs, with consequences for communities, economies, and long-term sustainability.





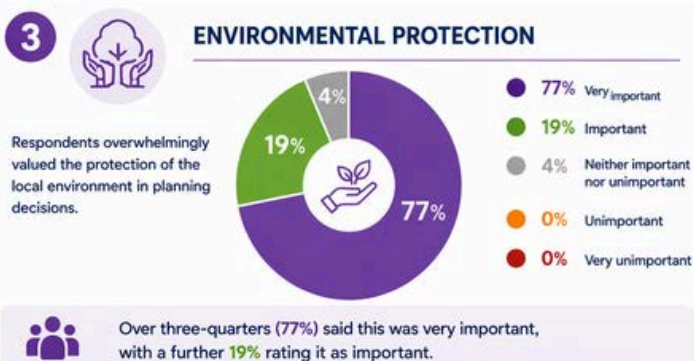
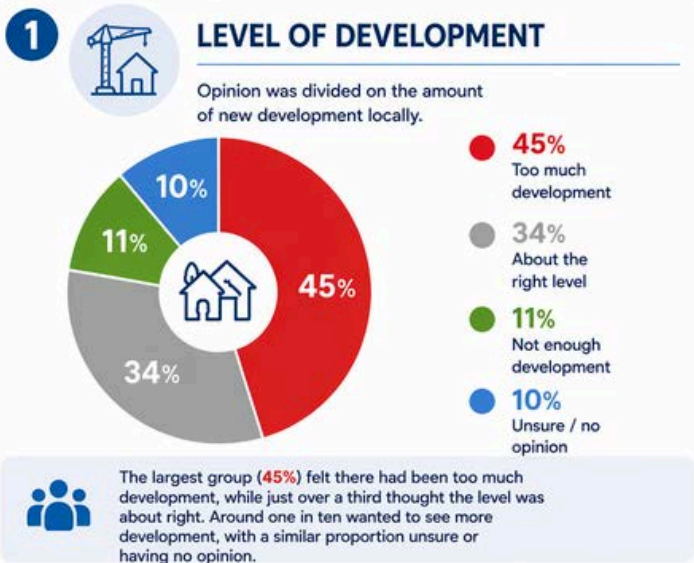


The planning system shapes what gets built, where, and for whom. In rural areas, planning decisions can make the difference between communities that thrive and those that slowly decline – determining whether new homes serve local need or outside investors, whether local businesses can expand, and whether the character and environment that make rural areas special are protected or eroded.

Yet rural residents often feel that the planning system does not work in their favour. The result is a system that, whatever its intentions, too often fails rural communities.

Key Survey Findings

The survey explored respondents' views on local development and the effectiveness of the planning system.





Participants expressed strong frustration with the planning system, feeling it often favours those with greater financial resources while disadvantaging local people.

Concerns were raised about affordable housing commitments not being upheld, and about the limited influence of neighbourhood plans despite significant community effort. Changes to rural housing were also highlighted, with smaller homes being expanded or redeveloped in ways that reduce affordability and limit access for local residents. Many felt the system does not adequately reflect rural needs, applying approaches better suited to urban areas. There were also concerns about reduced transparency and local oversight in decision-making.

The impact on communities was clear, particularly the loss of younger households and the knock-on effects on local services. The growth of second homes and holiday lets was seen as further restricting long-term housing availability.

Overall, participants called for stronger controls to prioritise local need and make better use of existing housing stock.

WHAT RURAL RESIDENTS TOLD US ABOUT...

RURAL PLANNING

“Right at the end of the development process, the affordable homes suddenly disappear.”



“It's never been verified. We put quite a lot of work into writing this Neighbourhood Development Plan.”



“No one local's going to be able to afford them. The idea of small, traditional houses gradually vanishes.”



“There needs to be some adaptation towards rural needs, rather than a one-size-fits-all.”

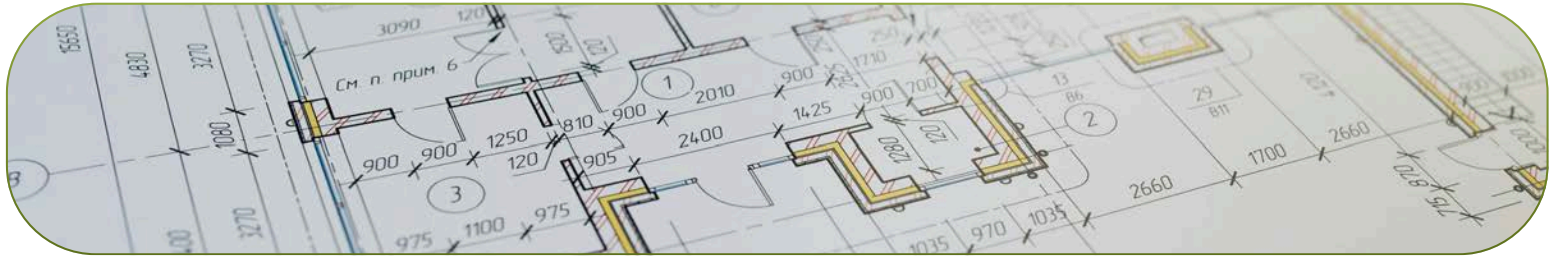


“There's nothing long-term for people to rent.”



“Housing shouldn't be used as an investment.”





KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about rural planning

- 1** Over half of respondents rate the planning system as ineffective or very ineffective at meeting community needs.

55%
INEFFECTIVE OR VERY INEFFECTIVE

PLANNING SYSTEM
- 2** Nearly half feel there has been too much development locally, yet more housing for local people remains the top development priority.

TOO MUCH DEVELOPMENT
47%

TOP PRIORITY: MORE HOUSING FOR LOCAL PEOPLE
- 3** Environmental protection is overwhelmingly valued but seen as inadequately enforced.

PROTECTION ENFORCEMENT INADEQUATE
- 4** Developers promise affordable housing but find ways to avoid delivering it.

PROMISE AFFORDABLE HOUSING

EXCEPTION APPLIED
- 5** Neighbourhood plans, despite significant community effort, can be ignored if not ratified.

NEIGHBOURHOOD PLAN

NOT RATIFIED
- 6** Small traditional homes are being extended out of reach of local buyers.

££

££££
- 7** One-size-fits-all national policies fail to account for rural distinctiveness.

ONE-SIZE-FITS-ALL POLICY
- 8** National reforms threaten to further reduce local voice and environmental protections.

NATIONAL REFORMS

LOCAL VOICE

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTIONS
- 9** The planning system interacts with housing, second homes, and demographic change to shape which communities thrive and which decline.

PLANNING SYSTEM

HOUSING

SECOND HOMES

DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGE



Rural residents want a planning system that listens to local people, protects what makes their communities special, and enables the right homes and development in the right places for a sustainable rural future.



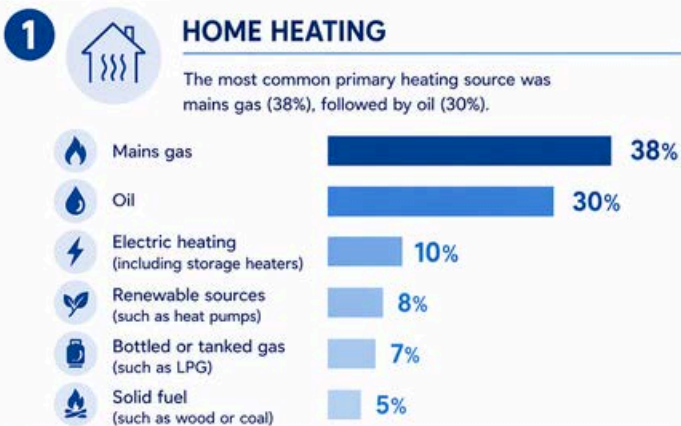


The transition to net zero presents rural areas with both distinctive challenges and significant opportunities. Many rural homes are off the gas grid, reliant on oil, solid fuel, or expensive electric heating – and often housed in older, harder-to-insulate buildings. Electric vehicle charging infrastructure is sparse, while car dependency remains high due to limited public transport. Yet rural areas also possess natural advantages: space for renewable energy generation, potential for community-scale heating schemes, and agricultural land that could contribute to carbon sequestration through changed practices.

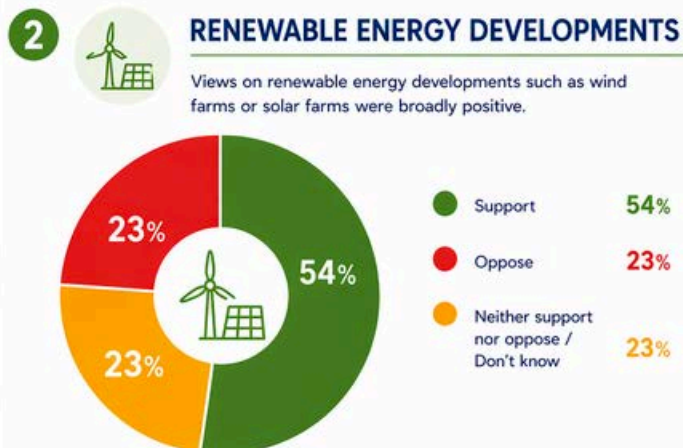
The question is whether policy and investment will enable rural communities to participate in the net zero transition, or whether they will be left behind, facing the costs of decarbonisation without sharing in its benefits.

Key Survey Findings

The survey explored respondents' home heating arrangements, views on renewable energy, and access to electric vehicle charging.



This distribution highlights that a significant proportion of rural households remain dependent on carbon-intensive heating fuels, with nearly a third of respondents using oil.



Over half of respondents expressed support for developments in their local area. Opposition was a smaller view, with 23% being opposed.



Nearly half of respondents rated it as inadequate or very inadequate. Only 9% rated it as adequate or very adequate. A third said they did not know or that the question was not applicable to them – potentially reflecting both limited infrastructure and limited EV ownership in rural areas.



Participants showed strong support for environmental action, but highlighted significant practical barriers to achieving net zero in rural areas.

Older housing stock was a major challenge, with many properties unsuitable for insulation or renewable technologies, and additional constraints created by planning requirements. Even where improvements were possible, high upfront costs limited uptake, particularly for those without access to financial resources.

Infrastructure barriers were also evident. Limited access to charging points made electric vehicle adoption difficult, while grid capacity restricted both individual and community-scale renewable energy solutions.

Despite these challenges, there was clear enthusiasm for local and community-led energy initiatives, alongside a strong view that rural communities should directly benefit from nearby developments. Examples of progress were noted, including community projects and engagement with sustainable farming practices. However, participants highlighted inequalities in who can afford to invest in green technologies.

More broadly, rural areas were seen as overlooked in national net zero policy, with issues such as unreliable power supply and inefficient delivery systems adding to the challenge. Overall, participants emphasised the need for more practical, locally tailored approaches that reflect the realities of rural life.

WHAT RURAL RESIDENTS TOLD US ABOUT... RURAL NET ZERO

“

“Our house is 400 years old... the roof can't take the weight of [solar panels]...
You can't insulate it.”



“

“I still had to make an initial outlay of about £12,000...
Most people don't have the money to do anything.”



“

“I haven't got an electric car, because I can't plug it in at home.”



“

“We couldn't actually put a charger close enough to the house.”



“

“Where there is going to be something locally, the locals should benefit from it.”



“

“We're living in the dark ages... we get power cuts quite a lot... We have generators that we share.”



“

“I would love to see a central delivery hub... like the postie.”



Rural residents want to do their bit for Net Zero, but the upfront costs, outdated homes, poor infrastructure, and rural inequalities make it far from straightforward.



KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about rural net zero

1

Nearly a third of rural homes of respondents are heated by oil, with limited access to mains gas.



2

Only around 9% use renewable heating sources such as heat pumps.



3

Over half of respondents support renewable energy developments in their area, but practical barriers limit uptake.



4

EV charging infrastructure is rated as inadequate or very inadequate by nearly half of respondents.



5

Older housing stock, including listed buildings, presents significant challenges for insulation and retrofit.



6

Upfront costs for measures like heat pumps and solar panels are prohibitive for many.



7

Planning restrictions in protected landscapes add further barriers.



8

Grid capacity constrains both individual installations and community-scale schemes.



9

Contract farmers and tenant farmers have less incentive to invest in long-term environmental improvements.



10

Positive examples exist of community-scale solutions, including geothermal, village heating schemes, and net-zero retrofits.



11

Local communities should benefit from renewable developments on their doorstep.



12

The term "net zero" has become politically charged, complicating community engagement.



13

Rural areas risk being left behind in the transition – facing costs without sharing benefits.



14

Delivery logistics in dispersed rural areas generate significant emissions that could be reduced through consolidation.



Rural residents want a fair, realistic and locally led transition to net zero – one that reduces emissions, lowers bills, protects the environment and ensures rural communities share in the benefits.





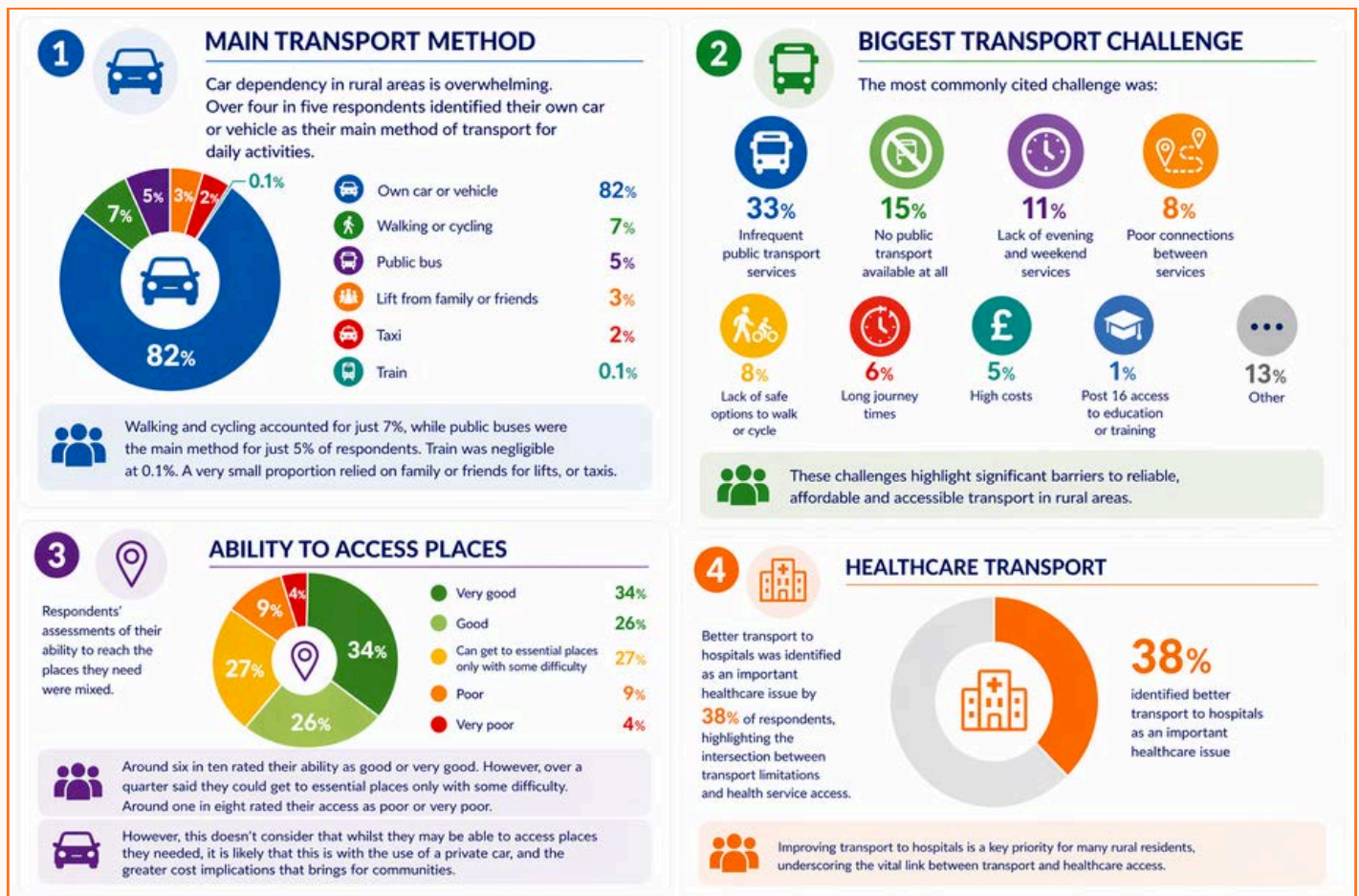
Transport is the thread that connects rural residents to employment, education, healthcare, and social life. When that thread is frayed or missing entirely, the consequences ripple through every aspect of daily existence. Yet rural transport has experienced decades of decline: bus services cut or withdrawn altogether, and a growing assumption that car ownership is the only viable option.

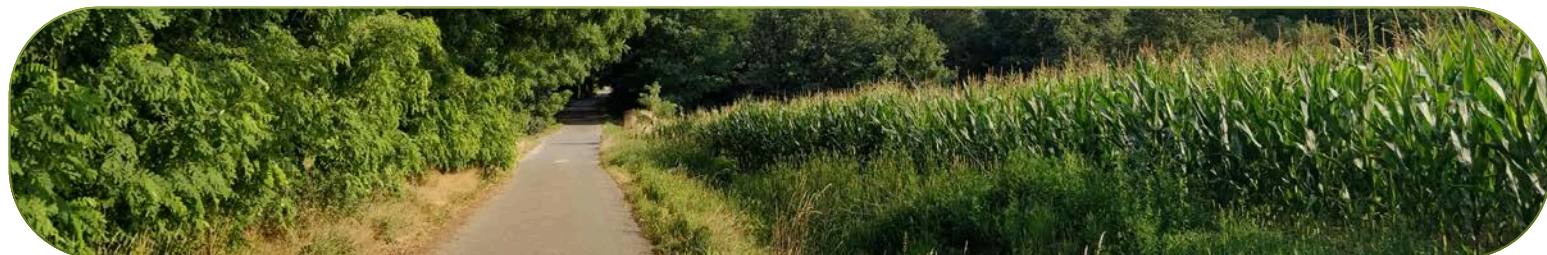
For those who cannot drive, the young, the elderly, those with disabilities, and those who simply cannot afford a vehicle – this assumption translates into isolation. Even for car owners, the dependency brings costs: financial, environmental, and in terms of the time spent behind the wheel simply to access basic services.

The result is a transport system that increasingly fails to meet rural needs, with consequences for economic opportunity, community sustainability, and individual wellbeing.

Key Survey Findings

The survey explored respondents' primary transport methods, the challenges they face, and their ability to access the places they need.





Participants described significant challenges with rural transport, with many experiencing reduced services or no public transport at all.

Access to essential services, including healthcare, was seen as heavily dependent on car ownership, leaving those without vehicles, particularly older residents, at risk of isolation. In response, communities have developed informal support networks, but these are not a substitute for reliable transport provision.

Limited transport options were also seen to restrict access to employment and education, particularly for younger people, contributing to longer-term demographic change as younger residents move away.

Inequalities in provision were highlighted, including variations in fares and service levels across nearby areas. Alternative modes such as cycling were often not considered safe or practical due to road conditions and infrastructure limitations. There was a strong perception that rural transport needs are not fully understood or prioritised at a national level. Participants called for basic improvements, such as minimum service levels, alongside more flexible, locally tailored solutions.

Overall, sustained funding for community-led initiatives and recognition of the diverse needs of rural areas were seen as essential to improving transport access.

WHAT RURAL RESIDENTS TOLD US ABOUT... RURAL TRANSPORT

“Can I say nought? Because we don't have any public transport where we are.”



“I'm not going to walk 5 miles into town every day.”



“Our doctor's is actually 15 miles away... we have to have a car.”



“It means that people are very isolated.”



“I've seen young people having to be ferried all over the place by their parents...”



“He... gave up his further education and got a job, because that's all there was to do.”



“No. I don't think they're in touch with anything in rural areas, to be honest.”



“Providing at least a bus service to every village at least once a day would be a start.”







KEY ISSUES IDENTIFIED

What rural residents told us about rural transport

1

Over four in five rural residents depend on a private car as their main transport method.



2

Nearly half cite infrequent or non-existent public transport as their biggest transport challenge.



3

Around one in eight struggle to access the places they need, with serious implications for wellbeing.



4

Bus services have been cut or withdrawn entirely from many rural villages.



5

Rail service reductions have created vicious circles of declining usage and further cuts.



6

Those without cars – particularly the elderly – face isolation and dependence on others.



7

Young people's access to employment and education is constrained by transport limitations.



8

Post-16 transport costs can be prohibitive for families on low incomes.



9

Cross-boundary fare differences create arbitrary inequalities.



10

Cycling is not a safe or practical alternative in most rural areas.



11

Community volunteer schemes fill gaps but need sustained funding to operate.



12

One-size-fits-all policies fail; different communities need tailored solutions.



13

Rural transport has fallen off the policy agenda.



14

Rural residents are not asking for urban-level services – just reliable, basic connections to essential services.



15

Rural residents want accessible, affordable and reliable transport that connects people to the places they need to be.



Rural communities want a transport system that is reliable, affordable and designed around rural realities – so everyone can access essential services, opportunities and connections.



AGEING POPULATION

- Health Services face increasing demand from older populations
- Housing market lack smaller accessible properties to allow residents to downsize while remaining in communities
- Poor transport options mean that older populations can become increasingly isolated



A coordinated approach to meet the needs of older residents in rural areas would reduce the demands on services

FUNDING GAP

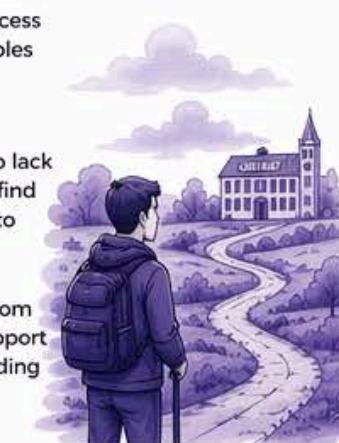
- Rural Councils receive less funding per head
- Impact of lack of funding is felt by residents as services are reduced or withdrawn
- Funding gap impacts voluntary and community sector who try to fill the gap left by retreating budgets



Lack of funding for rural areas will mean that rural services decline and opportunity will be limited for rural residents.

LACK OF JOINED UP THINKING

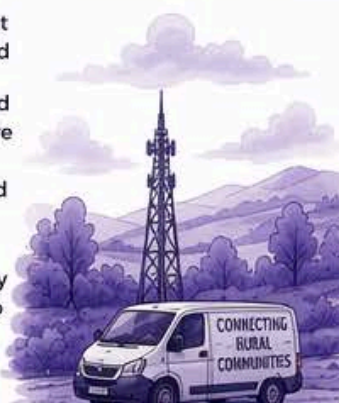
- Young people can struggle to access post 16 education as bus timetables (if they exist) do not align with college hours
- Businesses cannot expand due to lack of skilled workforce who cannot find affordable housing, or transport to get to work
- Social tenants can be relocated from urban to rural villages without support networks, transport or understanding of services available.



Frustration at siloed thinking and policy delivery due to lack of comprehensive rural strategy

SHORT TERM FIX vs LONG TERM PLAN

- Annual funding cycles can prevent organisations from planning ahead
- Digital connectivity has progressed but target dates for completion are moving further away at the same time as more services are provided online, leaving residents behind.
- There is no comprehensive strategy for rural areas from Government to enable joined up thinking, and strategic planning to properly benefit rural communities



There is a need for a comprehensive long term strategy for rural areas to enable it to reach its full potential

Delivering For All: Rural Realities

*A national survey of rural residents across
England, brought to you by the
Rural Services Network*



www.rsnonline.org.uk



The National Champion For Rural Services