



# Rural Poverty in Britain

A report by the Labour Rural  
Research Group

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Report sponsored by



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This report was published in March 2026, and authored by Jenny Riddell-Carpenter MP and Leila Poel.

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# ABOUT LRRG

## ABOUT LRRG

The Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG) brings together more than 40 rural and semi-rural Labour MPs – over 10% of the Parliamentary Labour Party. We represent what has often been described as Labour’s rural wall: communities that have placed their trust in a Labour Government in 2024 to deliver meaningful change.

That trust cannot be taken for granted. Too often, rural communities have been overlooked by successive Governments – assumed to be prosperous, politically peripheral, or resistant to change. The reality is different. Rural poverty is real, structural and too frequently invisible. If it goes unaddressed, it risks deepening inequality, weakening local economies, and eroding political confidence in places where Labour has worked hard to build support.

The distinct challenges facing rural Britain – higher living costs, weaker infrastructure, service withdrawal, housing pressures and economic fragility – require focused attention, not urban policy retrofitted to the countryside. A Labour Government elected on the promise of renewal must recognise that delivering growth, fairness and opportunity in rural areas is not optional; it is central to sustaining a broad and durable coalition of support.

The LRRG exists to ensure that rural voices are heard at the heart of Government. We are committed to developing the research, evidence and policy solutions needed to tackle rural poverty, unlock rural potential and demonstrate that Labour can deliver – not just in cities and towns, but across fields, coastlines and market towns too.

# INTRODUCTION

## BY LRRG CHAIR, JENNY RIDDELL-CARPENTER MP

Rural poverty is one of the most persistent and misunderstood forms of inequality in the UK today. For too many policymakers, and for too many departments in Whitehall, rurality is a persistent blind spot - rendering rural poverty invisible. Yet for millions of people across our countryside and coastal communities, hardship is not the exception, it is a daily reality.

Around 9.5 million people live in rural England. Headline statistics frequently suggest these areas experience lower levels of deprivation than our towns and cities. The evidence presented to this LRRG inquiry tells a very different story: rural poverty is dispersed rather than concentrated, embedded within communities that often display affluence. As a result, deprivation is masked, mismeasured and ultimately ignored.

In our evidence gathering for this report we heard from sector bodies, local authorities, NHS organisations, academic institutions, national charities, campaign groups, transport operators, rural businesses, individual submissions, as well as our own focus group that brought together people in rural Britain. Their testimonies were consistent and compelling: conventional measures routinely undercount rural hardship.

Area-based indices such as the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) fail to capture the true scale and nature of rural disadvantage. Even the most recent English Indices of Deprivation 2025 Rural Report itself cautions against relying on IMD rankings alone when assessing rural need - because, put simply, it acknowledges the blind spots caused when poverty is conserved through the lens of geography - which statistically dilutes the data and underrepresents the scale and nature of rural hardship.

Rural poverty is driven by the 'rural penalty': the additional costs and structural pressures that make everyday life more expensive and opportunities more fragile outside towns and cities. Households in the countryside face unavoidable car dependency and limited public transport, rising fuel and heating bills, the steady withdrawal of local services, acute housing pressures driven by constrained supply and external demand, insecure and seasonal employment, digital exclusion, and profound demographic change.

These are not isolated challenges; they compound one another. Higher transport costs reduce disposable income, service withdrawal increases travel distances, weak connectivity restricts access to work and support, and insecure employment magnifies financial instability. Over time, this rural penalty ignites costs, erodes resilience, and drives households closer to - or deeper into - poverty. It shapes life chances from childhood through to older age, embedding structural disadvantage in places too often assumed to be prosperous.

This report sets out the evidence in full. It exposes the hidden reality of rural poverty, challenges the complacency of existing measurement frameworks, and advances clear policy recommendations to close the gap. Rural Britain does not need sympathy - it needs structural change. The inequality facing rural communities is not inevitable. It is the product of policy choices, and it can be addressed by better ones.



**Jenny Riddell-Carpenter,**  
**MP for Suffolk Coastal**

# FOREWORD BY TIM BONNER

## COUNTRYSIDE ALLIANCE

Rural poverty is not a marginal concern, it is a structural failure hiding in plain sight. The evidence gathered in this report is unambiguous: millions of people across rural England face higher costs, fewer services and less support than their urban counterparts, yet our communities have been consistently overlooked by successive Governments. That has to change, and it has to change now.

The Countryside Alliance has long argued that Government priorities have been shaped overwhelmingly by urban assumptions. Transport investment flows to cities. Health services are centralised away from rural populations. School funding formulas penalise small schools. Housing policy fails to deliver genuinely affordable homes in rural areas. Digital connectivity, increasingly essential to modern life, reaches rural communities last, if at all. This is not the result of geography, it is the result of political choices and political choices can be changed.

What this report makes clear is that those choices carry a real human cost. Rural residents are not asking for special treatment, they are asking for systems that work. A bus that runs reliably. An NHS dentist within reach. Broadband fast enough to run a business. A school that

stays open. These are not luxuries, they are the basic infrastructure of opportunity that urban communities take for granted and which rural communities are consistently denied.

We therefore echo the report's central call for a comprehensive Rural Strategy, one that places social and economic mobility at its heart. For too long, rural policy has been an afterthought, delivered through fragmented initiatives rather than coherent, long-term investment. A genuine Rural Strategy would send a clear signal that this Government understands rural Britain not as a peripheral concern, but as central to national growth and social cohesion.

Rural areas represent enormous untapped economic potential and research suggests that with the right policy framework, rural economies could generate an additional £9–19 billion a year in tax revenue. Getting this right is not just a matter of fairness; it is a matter of the national interest.

That is why we urge the Government to treat the recommendations in this report seriously and to move with urgency. Rural communities have heard warm words before. What they need is action: on transport, on housing, on health, on connectivity and on the funding frameworks that continue to short-change rural schools and services year after year.

The Countryside Alliance welcomes this report and the work of the Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG) in producing it. Cross-party recognition of rural disadvantage is essential if we are to deliver lasting change. The evidence is here. The recommendations are clear. What rural communities need now is for the Government to act on them and to put rural priorities at the centre, not the margins, of its agenda.



Tim Bonner,  
Chief Executive,  
Countryside Alliance

# FOREWORD BY BARONESS MATTINSON

The cost of living remains the top issue for voters everywhere in the UK. 74% now say it is the issue that most concerns them, up a significant 38% since 2021. Almost twice as many put it in their top three issues over health or immigration, important though those issues are. Shockingly, a third of voters say they are 'struggling to cope' or worse still 'not coping at all'.

This last group is disproportionately more likely to come from a rural community. Focus groups commissioned by the Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG) tell a story of extreme hardship, with many forced to cut back on fuel, groceries and more. This much-needed report reports on these grim findings and identifies why rural life can be so much tougher: poor transport connectivity, lack of consumer choice – driven by limited access to budget groceries – lack of availability of adequate public services locally, especially schools and hospitals, all compounded by lower pay and higher housing costs, often inflated by tourism.

In short, people living in rural communities are paying a challenging price penalty, spending significantly more to achieve the most basic standard of living. The LRRG report sets out with clarity that this is the result of long term structural factors embedded in the way services, infrastructure and markets operate outside urban areas.

The LRRG are rightly eager to shine a light on this inequality – awareness is the first step in addressing any problem – but they have also developed a set of well thought-through recommendations, starting with the overarching proposition that the Government should adopt a

Rural Strategy, putting the social and economic mobility of rural Britain at its heart. There are many specific proposals worthy of consideration contained here – and the LRRG reasonably points out that effective delivery offers a clear upside too: if we can access the enormous untapped potential in British rural communities, analysis suggests this could result in billions of additional tax revenue.

July 2024 was a stunning electoral result for Labour, not least in the 40 or so rural constituencies that make up this group. Many new MPs represent constituencies that have never voted Labour before. Those voters turned to Labour because they felt neglected and overlooked. They were right. It is vital that Labour listens and acts now, and this report is a crucial start.



**Baroness Deborah Mattinson,  
Labour Peer**

# FINDINGS AND PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

Nearly 9.5 million people live in rural England – yet poverty in the countryside is routinely undercounted, underfunded and structurally overlooked.

This report reveals rural households face a “rural penalty”, spending hundreds – and often thousands – more each year on transport, food and energy simply to reach a basic standard of living.

The report, therefore, calls for a comprehensive Rural Strategy, placing social and economic mobility at its heart and reforming how government measures, funds and delivers services in rural Britain.

The report also highlights how standard government metrics struggle to capture unstable and seasonal employment patterns, incomes that stretch less far due to higher everyday costs, dependency on inefficient transport systems, limited access to genuinely affordable housing, and education and training opportunities that are harder to reach.

As a result, the structural challenges facing rural areas are frequently underestimated, meaning need is diluted in official statistics and under-reflected in funding decisions, leaving many communities to navigate economic and social pressures with insufficient recognition or support.

The report’s key findings include:

1. DEFRA data shows rural households spend on average £39 more per week on transport and £6 more per week on food than their urban counterparts – adding up to thousands of pounds in additional essential spending each year.
2. Energy costs are significantly higher too. Median rural fuel bills stand at £2,740, compared with £1,978 in London. Many rural homes are off the gas grid and rely on more expensive and volatile heating fuels.
3. Benefit under-claiming is markedly worse in rural communities. Pension Credit non-take-up rises from 35% in urban areas to 42% in rural areas, reaching 54% in villages and hamlets.
4. Rural authorities, meanwhile, delivered just 17,506 affordable homes in 2024–25 (compared with 47,256 in urban areas) when 44% of rural private rentals are classed as non-decent (compared with 21% nationally).
5. Average rural broadband speeds (51 Mb/s) fall well below urban averages (84 Mb/s), yet rural residents are increasingly expected to rely on digital alternatives where physical services are withdrawn.

# SUMMARY OF REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

## COST OF LIVING AND THE RURAL PENALTY

- 1. Policymakers must confront a simple truth: rural hardship is real, widespread, and structurally different from urban poverty.** The rural penalty — the unavoidable extra costs of living outside major towns and cities — drives households closer to the edge. Transport dependency, service withdrawal, fuel costs, housing pressures and digital gaps inflate everyday expenses and limit opportunity.
- Government and policymakers must acknowledge and accept this blind spot, and then work with policy experts, charities and rural groups to tackle the causes of rural poverty at its roots. **Developing a comprehensive ‘Rural Strategy’ with social and economic mobility at its core is critical.**
- 3. Transport accessibility must carry greater weight in policymaking.** Metrics should include transport costs as a percentage of household income, service frequency, waiting times, reliability, and journey times — capturing transport poverty’s multiplier effects.
- 4. Rural public transport requires long-term, stable funding, with capped fares covering complete journeys.**
- 5. Fuel poverty interventions must be targeted at off-grid homes,** including extended energy support and social tariffs.
- 6. Government should work with the big six supermarkets to introduce a “Rural Basket Delivery Guarantee”,** ensuring rural food and retail deserts are covered by delivery services. Low-income rural households must be able to access the same affordable supermarkets and price deals as their urban neighbours.

## INCOME, HIDDEN POVERTY AND FINANCIAL SECURITY

- 7. Rural poverty is routinely misrepresented by spatial aggregation.** Smaller geographic units — such as parishes and Output Areas — must be used, with variability measures within areas (including educational isolation).
- 8. The Rural Strategy should prioritise benefit uptake and financial support in rural communities,** working through farming networks, charities, churches and trusted community anchors.

## EMPLOYMENT, WORK AND RURAL ECONOMIES

- 9. The Government’s 2026 High Street Strategy must include an explicit rural focus.** Market towns and rural centres face structural challenges that, if ignored, will further restrict employment. This strategy is a critical opportunity to provide targeted support to rural businesses facing higher operating costs.
- 10. In-work support must reflect fluctuating and seasonal incomes common in rural economies.** The DWP’s JobsPlus model — a community-led employment programme delivering tailored support and incentives — should be adapted for rural Britain. Employment, careers advice and financial guidance must be taken out of Jobcentres and into communities, working through farming groups, rural charities, church networks and local anchors.

## EDUCATION, SEND, SKILLS AND LIFE CHANCES

- 11. The National Funding Formula must be amended to ensure fair distribution of school and SEND funding.** Historic proxy factors that entrench funding inequities must be removed, and schools given greater flexibility in how resources are deployed.
- 12. Declining pupil numbers in some rural primary schools present an opportunity.** Surplus capacity should be used to create dedicated SEND provision within existing buildings. Schools should be supported to bid for funding to establish in-house SEND units. This is a time-limited opportunity and requires urgent planning.

## HOUSING, ENERGY AND LIVING ENVIRONMENT

- 15. Rural Exception Sites should be expanded to deliver genuinely affordable homes for local people.** These small sites on the edges of settlements provide additional affordable housing outside local development plans and are essential to sustaining communities.
- 16. Government must address the practice of social housing providers selling rural stock** – often to fund urban development – which compounds rural housing shortages.
- 17. Investment in rural retrofitting and energy efficiency programmes is essential** to close the widening energy performance gap between rural and urban homes.

## HEALTH, DISABILITY, ISOLATION AND MENTAL WELLBEING

- 13. Rural areas must be prioritised in the rollout of the new Neighbourhood Health Service.** This is an opportunity to fundamentally redesign healthcare delivery – bringing services closer to home rather than relying on distant, urban hospitals.
- 14. Mental health provision must move beyond hub-based models.** Rural delivery should include outreach and mobile services, telephone and digital support (with recognition of connectivity gaps), and extended opening hours. A 9–5 model does not reflect the realities of farming, care work, retail, tourism and other rural employment patterns.

## CRIME, SAFETY AND COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

- 18. Tackling rural crime must be embedded within a Rural Strategy,** with improved reporting and data collection at its core.
- 19. Modern technologies – including drones – should be deployed to improve policing response times in hard-to-reach areas.**
- 20. Victim support services must be accessible in rural communities,** with targeted domestic abuse pilots working through community groups, church networks, charities and local partners to reach isolated victims.

## THE CONNECTIVITY DESERT

21. **Connectivity must sit at the heart of a Rural Strategy.** Without it, economic growth and service access will remain constrained.
22. **Government should establish a Great British Rural Connectivity Taskforce,** modelled on Ireland's National Broadband Initiative, bringing together providers, local authorities and technology experts to coordinate delivery and investment.
23. **Satellite technology programmes – including those such as Amazon's LEO systems and other providers – could be transformative for rural Britain.** Government must support adoption while ensuring affordability, accessibility and targeted rollout to communities most in need.
24. Government must **set a clearer definition of what constitutes high quality 5G (5G SA) in practice,** to ensure that headline coverage measures match the experiences of rural customers.

# FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS: LIVED EXPERIENCE

Focus group research commissioned exclusively for this report, and conducted in November 2025, provides perhaps the only current examination of poverty and challenges in rural Britain today.

Two groups were convened: one comprising residents from rural English constituencies, and one from rural Welsh constituencies. Participants were of mixed gender and all lived in areas classified as sparse or predominantly rural, including villages, countryside locations and towns with populations under 10,000. All participants were aged 25–45, had children under 11, were in social grades C2DE, lived in constituencies that over-index for income deprivation, child poverty or claimant rates, and in neighbourhoods ranked within the most deprived 50% nationally under the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

Across both groups, rural poverty was described less as isolation from ‘places’ and more as isolation from ‘systems’. Participants repeatedly emphasised that everyday life requires more planning, costs more, and requires more effort in everyday tasks than it should. Transport unreliability, overstretched health services and thinning education pathways were seen as mutually reinforcing and negative pressures, creating a persistent sense that rural living demands more from households while offering fewer supports in return.

Although people in our focus groups expressed strong attachment to rural life, too many felt overlooked by policies designed around urban assumptions. These findings reinforce the evidence submitted by organisations to this inquiry and underline the importance of policy frameworks that explicitly account for rural contexts rather than treating rurality as a marginal variation.

**Transport** emerged immediately and unprompted as the defining challenge of rural poverty. Car ownership was described not as a lifestyle choice but as a necessity; living without a car was described as almost unmanageable.

Across both English and Welsh groups, participants highlighted that:

- Bus and train services are irregular, expensive and unreliable,
- Journeys by public transport routinely take two to three times longer than by car,
- Lack of real-time information leaves parents stranded with children.

***“Without a vehicle, you’re struggling”***

Female, English group

***“It was a three-hour journey there and back, just to get my son to school”***

Male, Welsh group

Reliability mattered more than cost alone. People in our focus groups told us that they would consider using public transport if they could trust it. But too often they can’t. Instead, many people told us that they bypass nearby towns altogether and instead visit larger cities for shopping or services. The impact of this on our rural towns and centres is clear, and barely needs stating.

**Access to healthcare** was consistently described as worse in rural areas, particularly beyond basic GP provision - which itself was often difficult to secure. GP surgeries and NHS dentists were seen as oversubscribed to breaking point - or missing entirely.

While people in our focus groups recognised that these pressures are not unique to rural areas, the lack of transport significantly compounded the challenge.

Our focus groups reported that:

- Hospital care often required two- to three-hour journeys (based on car usage) if people wanted timely treatment,
- Staffing shortages were understood, but the consequences felt harsher than in cities.

For some, who regularly needed hospital treatment, this was debilitating. One woman, living in mid-Pembrokeshire, had a son who needed regular hospital visits. This involved massive upheaval on a regular basis.

***“Our local hospital just seems to be losing more and more of its services...if you’re someone who isn’t lucky enough to have a vehicle it’s not easy.”***

Female, Welsh group

Our focus groups also reported that **early years and primary education provision** was broadly comparable to urban areas. However, a sharp drop-off was reported at later stages. Post-16 options - including sixth forms, further education colleges and apprenticeships - were described as thin, fragmented and difficult to access.

Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) support was consistently described as harder to access for people living in rural areas. Several of the parents across our rural focus

***“The further through education you go, the further you have to travel”***

Male, English group

groups had children with specific needs, and every single one of them reported that getting their children the support they needed was harder where they lived than for those in larger towns and cities.

On the surface, participants’ **cost-of-living** concerns mirrored national sentiment: rising prices, tighter budgets and reduced financial headroom. What distinguished the rural experience was not what had become expensive, but the absence of alternatives when costs rose.

Key rural pressure points included:

- Fuel costs, given unavoidable car dependence,
- Higher food costs due to limited access to budget supermarkets,
- Tourism inflating local prices without corresponding wage increases.

***“You’re at the end of the word here, but the pay doesn’t reflect the costs”***

Male, Welsh group

Participants described a narrowing of options that made price rises more acute. Where urban households might switch supermarkets, rely more on public transport or access low-cost local services, rural families felt they had far fewer coping mechanisms and less support to fall back on.

## SUMMARY

- *Rural life is described as more challenging to live day to day: more time, more planning and greater costs for basics.*
- *Transport is a keystone issue that magnifies existing problems in health, education and work.*
- *Rural communities do not expect special treatment – but they do want systems that work for them and give them the same opportunity and options as people living in urban areas.*

## CONCLUSIONS

Our focus group research shows, with crystal clarity, that rural poverty is not defined by isolation from places, but by a lack of opportunity and a lack of options - all things that are taken for granted elsewhere.

Transport unreliability, limited service provision and higher living costs interact to make ordinary life more complex, more expensive and quite simply more exhausting for rural families.

These experiences reinforce the need for policies that are explicitly designed for rural contexts, ensuring that public services, infrastructure and support systems function effectively beyond urban settings.

# CHAPTER ONE: COST OF LIVING AND THE RURAL PENALTY

Across almost every submission received for this report, the cost of living emerged as the primary driver of rural poverty. Local authorities, charities and focus group participants consistently described what they termed the ‘rural penalty’ or the ‘rural premium’: the unavoidable additional costs households face simply because of where they live.

This is a shared reality for many rural areas; rural residents must travel further to access essential services and employment, have limited access to large supermarkets offering lower prices, and are more likely to live off the gas grid, relying instead on more expensive alternative fuels.

This lived experience is reflected in official data. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs’ (DEFRA) ‘Communities and Household Statistics for Rural England’ show that the average weekly food costs are £6 higher in rural areas, while rural households spend an average of £39 more per week on transport than their urban counterparts<sup>1</sup>. When combined with higher food, transport and energy costs, this amounts to thousands of pounds in additional annual expenditure for rural households, significantly eroding disposable income - particularly for those on low or fixed incomes.

This evidence shows us that rural poverty is not simply a matter of lower incomes, but of structurally higher living costs. This aligns with the findings of the Scottish Affairs Committee’s inquiry into the cost of living in rural areas, which recognised the “*distinctive and acute pressures*” created by the rural premium and concluded that financial support specifically tailored to remote and rural communities would be most effective in alleviating these challenges<sup>2</sup>.

## TRANSPORT POVERTY

One of the clearest and most immediate manifestations of the rural premium is ‘transport poverty’, given rural households spend significantly more on private transport because of the limited public transport options.

Submission and focus group testimony repeatedly described public transport services in rural areas as “*infrequent*”, “*unreliable*” or altogether “*absent*”, meaning owning a car (or having access to a car) is essential for work, education, healthcare and shopping. Yet we know that, in both urban and rural areas, access to a car is significantly lower among lower-income households, with Government figures revealing that more than 40% are without one.<sup>3</sup>

In rural areas, a lack of access to transport can be devastating – particularly for the poorest households – cutting them off from employment, social interaction and essential support services. The impact is especially severe for women. Research indicates that many rural women face barriers to employment as a result of the combined pressures of caring responsibilities and inadequate public transport provision<sup>4</sup>.

Transport East similarly highlighted the fragility of rural transport networks. They told us that “*many rural services are not commercially viable due to higher operating costs and lower patronage [which] has meant consistent service reductions and routes being cancelled*”. The impact of this is brought to life by the testimonies from our focus group, where all but one member of both focus groups told us they own a car - not by choice, but because the lack of public transport meant that it was essential.

<sup>1</sup>Department for Food, Environment and Rural Affairs, [Communities and Households Statistics for Rural England](#), (statistical data, December 2025).

<sup>2</sup>House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee, [Cost of living: impact on rural communities in Scotland](#), (research report, 24 January 2024).

<sup>3</sup>Government Office for Science, [Future of mobility: inequalities in mobility and access in the UK](#) (evidence review, 8 March 2019).

<sup>4</sup>L Dobbs, [Wedded to the car: women, employment and the importance of private transport](#) (research paper, 2005).

This reliance on private vehicles has wider implications for travel patterns. In 2021, people living in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings in England made the highest number of journeys and travelled the furthest - averaging around 769 trips and 6,449 miles per person each year. By contrast, residents in urban areas made slightly fewer trips (748 per person) and travelled considerably shorter distances, averaging 3,661 miles annually<sup>5</sup>.

These structural differences are compounded by higher fuel prices in remote locations. Devon County Council highlighted that in Lynton and Lynmouth - two remote communities in North Devon - the only available filling station currently charges £1.429 per litre. By comparison, the cheapest of several options in Camden Town - in London - is £1.239 per litre. This price disparity was also described by our Welsh focus group, with one female participant stating: *“Everything’s extortionate... Especially fuel, ‘cause you’ve got to drive everywhere. The largest thing I pay for is fuel”*.

Beyond fuel, car insurance, maintenance and vehicle taxation bring further financial burdens. One Dartmoor resident who submitted personal evidence noted that *“there is no public transport nearer than five miles down a long hill. One must have a car to get to it. More penalties applied to drivers trying to force us on to public transport are ludicrous.”* Similarly, a resident from Tewkesbury observed that *“promoting cycling and walking as a healthy alternative is unrealistic [in a rural context]”*. Transport costs are not a matter of choice for rural households but a structural necessity.

There is equally a growing perception - which in many ways is true - that much of the current transport policies, including

those relating to electric vehicles and active travel schemes, are almost exclusively shaped by urban assumptions and fail to account for the structural dependence on private vehicles in rural areas.

Active travel schemes can - and should - play a role in supporting transport and improving connectivity - but for the UK’s most isolated villages, there needs to be a real understanding that connecting villages to work and school just isn’t possible simply by improving walking or cycling routes. That’s not to say these same rural areas can’t benefit from active travel investment - as it can bring with it cycling and walking based tourism - but policymakers need to be realistic about the limits of active travel in the most remote rural villages. For our market towns and their satellite villages it can undoubtedly play a role in promoting better transport options - but for our remote communities only a properly funded bus network and wider public transport options can connect people to jobs, school and services.

## ENERGY IN RURAL AREAS

Energy costs represent a second, significant driver of cost-of-living pressures for rural households. A number of submissions, including from the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), the Poverty Alliance and Citizens Advice, underscore that off-grid households are exposed to higher and more volatile heating costs.

These pressures are exacerbated by the characteristics of rural housing stock. Lower average energy efficiency in rural areas, due to a greater prevalence of older, larger and detached homes, increases overall energy demand. As a result, even where households face the same unit prices, under the energy price cap, rural households are likely to incur higher energy bills. The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero (DESNZ)

<sup>5</sup>Department for Transport, [National Travel Survey 2021: Travel by Region and Rural and Urban Classification of Residence](#) (statistical data, 23 March 2023).

found that the combination of low energy efficiency and larger floor area resulted in a very high median fuel cost of £2,740 for rural households, contributing to higher rates of fuel poverty<sup>6</sup>. By contrast, DESNZ's sub-regional report notes that in London - a highly urban area - the median equivalised fuel cost is £1,978<sup>7</sup>, substantially lower than the rural figure.

However, the reality is that many rural homes are off the gas grid entirely, and therefore rely on heating oil or Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG). These alternative energy sources are not subject to the standard energy price cap and have historically been excluded from Government support schemes designed around mains gas. Devon County Council's submission highlighted the scale of this disparity, noting that for households off the gas grid, "*oil central heating is a minimum of 50% to 100% more expensive, and electric heating 250% to 300% more expensive*" than mains gas. This significantly higher cost places an additional and unavoidable financial burden on rural households, further intensifying energy-related cost-of-living pressures.

To make matters harder, prices for alternative fuels are not regulated in the same way as gas and electricity prices. This means they can vary day-to-day and between different local areas to a much greater extent<sup>8</sup>. This price volatility leaves off-grid rural households particularly exposed to sudden cost increases, further intensifying financial pressures and making budgeting more difficult. Countryside Alliance also rightly highlights that rural homes face the additional problem of "*having to pay for fuel in lump sums in advance*", placing significant strain on household finances and making it more difficult to manage cash flow.

Beyond individual households, rising energy costs are having a profound impact on the sustainability of rural businesses and essential community facilities. Nottingham Rural Action Network found that over 70% of community buildings in Nottinghamshire, such as village halls, identified energy costs as a growing threat to their continued operation. To mitigate this, 40% reported having to cut back on heating, opening hours or activities in order to manage rising costs. These buildings provide vital services and social infrastructure in rural areas, particularly for communities with above-average older populations who rely on them for social connection, access to services and wellbeing. As a result, increasing energy costs risk not only the closure of physical spaces, but also the erosion of community resilience and social cohesion in rural areas.

## FOOD AND SERVICES COSTS

Food and service costs illustrate how these cost-of-living pressures translate into daily household choices.

Recent Office for National Statistics data (ONS) shows that lower-income households experience disproportionately high food price pressures<sup>13</sup>. While ONS data doesn't disaggregate inflationary impacts by rurality, "basket of goods" and essential expenditure analyses show that there is compounded disadvantage; low-income rural households face higher prices for supermarket goods than those in urban areas, by an average of 27%<sup>9</sup>.

Our focus groups also told us that they regularly paid more for basic groceries due to limited access to large supermarkets, the higher delivery costs associated with stocking rural areas alongside additional travel costs to reach essential services.

<sup>6</sup>Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, [Annual Fuel Poverty Statistics Report 2025](#) (official statistics, 27 March 2025).

<sup>7</sup>Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, [Sub-regional Fuel Poverty in England, 2025](#) (2023 data) (official statistics, 30 April 2025).

<sup>8</sup>House of Commons Library, [Households off the gas-grid and prices for alternative fuels](#), (research briefing, 24 October 2024).

<sup>9</sup>Citizens Advice South Warwickshire, [CASW launches new report on rural poverty across South Warwickshire](#) (news release, 5 February 2025).

<sup>10</sup>Ibis

DEFRA's own statistics indicate that in 2019 only 25% of households in Rural Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings could reach a food store within 15 minutes by public transport or walking, compared with 97% of households in urban areas<sup>11</sup>. This is creating "food deserts" in rural Britain - an area poorly served by food shops where people without adequate transport or limited mobility struggle to access healthy food<sup>12</sup>.

Limited retail infrastructure in rural areas is no doubt the driving force for higher prices in rural shops. While consumers in deprived urban areas typically have access to chain supermarkets offering a wide range of lower-cost own-brand products,<sup>10</sup> rural communities often do not benefit from the same level of choice or affordability.

Our focus groups reinforced this picture. One Welsh participant told us that prices in their local village shop were noticeably higher than those in large chain supermarkets in major cities. While they recognised that this reflected higher delivery and operating costs, they nevertheless highlighted that it contributed to a higher cost of living for those residing outside urban areas.

This lack of 'shopper's choice' is not the only driver of hardship, however. Devon Community Foundation highlighted that "*food expenditure is often one of the few flexible elements within household budgets*", in contrast to fixed costs such as rent, utilities and essential transport. As a result, food security is particularly vulnerable to rising costs elsewhere, increasing the risk that rural households reduce food consumption or quality in order to manage wider cost-of-living pressures.

## CONCLUSIONS

Rural households spend significantly more simply to achieve a basic standard of living. The *rural penalty* is not the result of lifestyle choice or inefficiency, but of structural factors embedded in how services, infrastructure and markets operate outside urban areas.

A lack of choice or market failure often means that higher transport, energy and food costs are disproportionately borne by those on lower incomes.

Without targeted policy interventions that explicitly recognise and address these additional pressures, poverty will continue to permeate through our rural areas - and be hidden in plain sight.

Rural hardship needs to be recognised by policymakers, before tailored support that targets rural challenges can be delivered.

<sup>11</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Connectivity and Accessibility Statistics for Rural England](#) (official statistics, updated 15 October 2025).

<sup>12</sup>Cambridge Food Poverty Alliance, [Food Deserts and Food Swamps in Cambridge](#) (research paper, September 2019).

<sup>13</sup>Office for National Statistics, [Cost of Living Insights: Latest data and trends about the cost of living](#) (research report, February 2024).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: COST OF LIVING AND THE RURAL PENALTY

- 1.** First and foremost, policymakers must recognise that rural hardship is a reality for many in rural Britain, and rural poverty - and the very barriers to economic and social mobility - are very different to the barriers in urban Britain.
- 2.** A “Rural Strategy” needs to be developed and delivered, which puts social and economic mobility of rural Britain at its heart.
- 3.** Increase the weight of transport accessibility in policy by including metrics such as transport cost as a percentage of household income, public-service frequency, waiting time for buses, and reliability, time taken to travel to capture transport poverty’s multiplier effects.
- 4.** Provide long-term, stable funding for rural public transport, with capped prices for complete journeys.
- 5.** Target fuel poverty interventions, such as extending energy support and social tariffs, to off-grid homes
- 6.** Work with the big-six supermarkets to provide a “rural basket delivery guarantee” to ensure that rural food and shop deserts are covered by supermarket delivery services. This would mean that the lowest income households can access the same cheaper supermarkets and best price deals as their urban neighbours.

# CHAPTER TWO: INCOME, HIDDEN POVERTY AND FINANCIAL SECURITY

Standard measures of income, employment and deprivation **systematically understate poverty and financial insecurity in rural areas**. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government's (MHCLG) latest IMD in Rural Areas report made clear that measuring and identifying poverty and deprivation in rural areas is difficult.

The IMD's reliance on what's termed the Lower Layer Super Output Area (LSOA) aggregation is not fit for purpose in measuring rural deprivation. Rural poverty's dispersed nature means that affluent and deprived households often share the same LSOAs, creating averaging effects that mask individual household disadvantage<sup>14</sup>. This true extent of rural deprivation and poverty is therefore masked or hidden within official statistics.

If the data and analysis are wrong from the get-go, it means that policy initiatives and investment are not targeted at communities or areas in need - and only more densely populated areas see the benefit from investment decisions.

What's more, DEFRA's Communities and Households Statistics for Rural England shows that households in rural areas had higher disposable incomes than urban households; in 2022/23 - weekly disposable household income was £890 for rural households and £804 for urban households<sup>15</sup>. However, this data defines 'disposable income' as simply any income left after tax, and therefore does not account for the cost of essential household expenditure. But, as we have seen in the earlier section of this report, rural costs are significantly higher and this is a critical oversight.

Evidence from Marjon University's Pretty Poverty Report indicates that many rural households only fall into poverty after taking into account housing, transport and energy costs<sup>16</sup>. Analysis by the Fabian Society shows that poverty rates in rural areas are higher after housing costs are taken into account, indicating that **housing costs pull many households into poverty once these costs are included in income calculations**. They point out that 13% of rural households are in poverty after housing costs, which is two percentage points higher than the rate before housing costs (11%).

As Professor Mark Shucksmith, of Newcastle University, notes "*poverty measures take no account of the higher cost of living in rural areas (beyond housing costs), which can be significant - particularly in remote rural areas*"<sup>17</sup>. Therefore, the widely used measure of poverty - household income net of housing costs - ignores other elements of the cost of living. When income is used as the primary measure of poverty, this substantially understates the hardships faced by rural communities.

At the same time, headline employment figures can give a misleading impression of financial security. DEFRA's quarterly statistics point to lower headline rural unemployment rates than urban areas, meaning proportionally fewer people claim Universal Credit or Jobseeker's Allowance in rural areas. However, these figures again mask the realities of rural living, as they capture only those who *claim* benefits. It is well documented that **benefit take-up rates are significantly lower in rural areas**, despite clear evidence of financial need.

<sup>14</sup>Tanya Ovenden-Hope, Victoria Brown and Elpida Acharidou, *The Pretty Poverty Report: Cornwall Rurality Matters* (research paper by Plymouth Marjon University & Diocese of Truro, 2025)

<sup>15</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, *Statistical Digest of Rural England – Communities and Households* (official statistics, published 10 December 2025).

<sup>16</sup>Government Office for Science, *Future of mobility: inequalities in mobility and access in the UK* (evidence review, 8 March 2019).

<sup>17</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, *Key Findings, Statistical Digest of Rural England* (official statistics, updated 14 January 2026)

Professor Shucksmith uses Pension Credit as a clear example of this disparity: while 35% of eligible claimants in urban areas fail to take up the benefit, this figure rises to 42% in rural areas and reaches 54% in villages and hamlets. Submissions from RABI similarly point to *“significant under-claiming of benefit entitlement in farming communities”*, alongside a lack of statutory services to help rural residents understand and access available support. RABI’s institutional data demonstrates the scale of this issue; the organisation’s regional support staff have helped farming families access £1.75 million in previously unclaimed benefits since 2020.

Reasons for this low take-up are wide and vast, including: limited access to advice and support services, digital exclusion and distance from face-to-face support - factors that all simultaneously increase cost-of-living pressures. Professor Mark Shucksmith also notes *“the stigma of claiming benefits in small communities”* is a uniquely rural challenge.

In principle, the financial insecurity experienced by many rural households would be expected to increase reliance on the social security system as a vital safety net. However, the evidence presented to this inquiry suggests the opposite: lower benefit take-up in rural areas means that many residents are unable to access the support they are entitled to, further entrenching poverty and financial insecurity. Nottinghamshire Rural Community Action’s submission rightly concludes that rural poverty is not always characterised by low income, but often by *“constraints on access, capacity and confidence”*.



## CONCLUSIONS

Rural poverty is simply not captured by traditional measures of deprivation, income, employment.

Higher living costs, insecure and low-paid work, fluctuating incomes and persistently low benefit take-up combine to leave many rural households financially vulnerable despite appearing relatively prosperous on paper.

The result is a form of hidden poverty that remains poorly understood and insufficiently addressed by current policy frameworks.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: INCOME, HIDDEN POVERTY AND FINANCIAL SECURITY**

- 7.** Spatial aggregation misrepresents rural poverty, therefore smaller geographic units (e.g., parishes and Output Areas) should be used and variability measures incorporated within units (e.g., educationally isolated schools).
- 8.** Government should use the Rural Strategy to develop and prioritise uptake of benefit and financial support in rural areas - working with farming communities, charities, churches and community anchors to do so.

# CHAPTER THREE: EMPLOYMENT, WORK AND RURAL ECONOMIES

Over the past fifty years, **the nature of work in rural Britain** has changed fundamentally. Where many rural communities once supported a wide range of local, stable jobs, today employment is increasingly scarce, insecure, or located far from where people live.

Almost every submission received for this report commented on the precarity of the rural labour market. Yet, as we discussed in the previous chapter, headline employment rates in some rural areas can appear relatively resilient<sup>18</sup>. As before, these figures mask a long-term erosion in the availability, quality and accessibility of local work, and do not reflect the lived experience of rural communities.

From the mid-twentieth century onwards, rural employment was closely tied to land-based and industrial activity. Agriculture, forestry, fishing, mining, quarrying and small-scale manufacturing formed the backbone of many village and coastal economies. Since the 1970s, however, these sectors have undergone sustained contraction, with the contribution of agricultural, forestry and fishing industries falling from 1.3% in 1990 to 0.6% in 2005, and remaining close to this since<sup>19</sup>. Mechanisation and technological change have dramatically reduced the need for agricultural labour, while consolidation in farming has meant fewer, larger holdings employing fewer people overall.

This structural shift is reflected in official statistics. DEFRA figures show that even in the last few years these industries have continued to decline. In 2024 the agriculture sector employed 452,900 people, accounting for just 1.3% of the UK workforce<sup>20</sup>. While these

figures capture the scale of change, they do not fully convey its local impact: in many rural communities, the decline of land-based employment removed not only jobs, but the economic foundations on which local labour markets depended.

Similar patterns are evident across other rural industries. Fishing communities, for example, were affected by quota systems, rising costs and consolidation, while mining, quarrying and rural manufacturing largely disappeared altogether. In many villages, the loss of a single major employer triggered wider economic decline, reducing local job opportunities and increasing dependence on commuting, seasonal work or insecure employment elsewhere.

As traditional rural industries declined, **new forms of employment** did emerge, but often with very different characteristics from the jobs that were lost. Growth has been concentrated in sectors such as tourism, hospitality, social care, seasonal agriculture and self-employment, which are more likely to be lower paid, less secure or characterised by irregular hours. As the Poverty Alliance notes, tourism and service-sector jobs, which are dominant in many rural areas, “*often offer low wages, variable hours and limited progression*”. Academic research highlighted by Professor Shucksmith confirms this preponderance of low-paid, low-skill, precarious jobs, which are often unstable and seasonal in rural communities<sup>21</sup>.

Our focus group findings reinforce these findings. Participants highlighted the insecurity of local employment patterns and the tension created by tourism-driven economies, where rising prices are not matched by local wage levels. One participant from Wales observed:

<sup>18</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Key Findings, Statistical Digest of Rural England](#) (official statistics, 14 January 2026)

<sup>19</sup>Office for National Statistics (ONS), [GDP output approach – low-level aggregates](#), (official statistics, 22 December 2025)

<sup>20</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Farming Evidence Pack: A High-Level Overview of the UK Agricultural Industry – Key Statistics](#) (official statistics, updated 23 October 2025).

<sup>21</sup>Shucksmith M. Glass J, Chapman P, Atterton J, [Rural Poverty Today: experiences of social exclusion in rural Britain](#), (research paper by Bristol: Policy Press, 2023)

*"We seem to be a bit behind other areas... People don't necessarily pay for your services as much as they would in Cardiff or Bristol".*

A Northumberland resident, who submitted individual evidence to our inquiry, similarly noted: *"My family relies on tourism for employment but salaries struggle to meet costs of living"*. These conditions create fluctuating incomes and undermine financial security - as reflected in earnings data. Statistics highlighted by Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) in their submission show that, in 2024, average earnings for those working in rural areas (£34,600) were lower than for those working in urban areas outside London (£36,200), despite rural households facing higher-than-average costs for essentials such as transport, energy, food and services.

MHCLG's IMD statistics attempt to reflect the reality of these modern rural employment patterns. The recently updated methodology notes that *"employment deprivation in rural areas has been found to be associated, at least in part, with issues including: underemployment and seasonal employment; 'in-work poverty' caused by lower wages and lower average incomes; more restricted job opportunities; and inadequate access to jobs by public transport"*<sup>22</sup>.

**'In-work poverty'** was described within our focus groups, with one rural Welsh focus group participant explaining: *"It just feels like at the moment you have to work so hard just to make ends meet. It feels challenging just to meet basic needs"*. People were telling us that hardship is experienced not as the absence of work for them personally, but rather that their employment was poorly paid, insecure, and dependent on long-distance travel relative to local costs.

For those who continue to bolster the traditional agricultural jobs that for many define rural existence, income is just as



Secretary of the LRRG, David Smith MP, in Chatton, Northumberland.

unstable. The National Farmers' Union (NFU) outlines that *"the impact of volatile incomes on farmers is stark, any decrease in income jeopardises future business planning"*. Therefore, whilst modern labour market changes have profound implications for rural individuals, they also dramatically impact the resilience of rural businesses and local economies.

There remains a disconnect between the number of rural businesses and the employment they generate. DEFRA statistics reveal that, in 2023/24, the 'agriculture, forestry and fishing' sector had the largest proportion of business numbers in rural areas (14% of all businesses for the area type) but only accounted for 8% of all employment for the area type, with the 'Education, health and social work sector' having the largest proportion of employment for the area type (16%)<sup>23</sup>.

This reality was reflected within our focus group sessions, where employment types among our rural participants varied from plastering, hair and beauty, nursing and rail - with only one rural Welsh resident working in the traditional agricultural sector. Overall, 94% of those who participated in our focus groups

<sup>22</sup>Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [English Indices of Deprivation 2025: Rural Report](#) (official statistics, 30 October 2025).

<sup>23</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Key Findings, Statistical Digest of Rural England](#) (official statistics, updated 14 January 2026).

were not employed in roles that were directly linked to agriculture or the rural economy.

**Rural employers** also reported facing higher operating costs and increasing difficulty in recruiting and retaining workers. A business owner from the Hebrides who submitted individual evidence to our inquiry stated: *“It gets more and more difficult to recruit rural employees...or to help on the farm or gardens.”* According to a National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE) survey, roughly 52% of rural businesses reported challenges recruiting or retaining suitably skilled workers, compared with 47% of urban firms<sup>24</sup>. This reaffirms the suggestion that job markets in rural areas are weaker and more precarious.

At the same time, evidence from Countryside Alliance highlighted the vital role rural businesses play both within local economies and the wider social fabric. Yet, there are real concerns for many rural businesses about the impact of rising energy prices, general inflation and reduced disposable incomes on the viability of rural businesses that target discretionary spending, such as those in the tourism and hospitality sectors<sup>25</sup>.

This is especially true given that, following the changing nature of employment in rural areas, rural residents are more likely to be employed in businesses with fewer than 50 employees than their urban counterparts<sup>26</sup>. These businesses are frequently community-run, family businesses who cater to, and best understand, local need. Locality, rurality and jobs are tightly intertwined.

This imbalance has made it increasingly difficult for working-age people to remain in rural communities. According to the survey results published by Virgin Media O2 in July 2024, over a third of rural residents said they were *“likely to consider”* moving away to an urban area in the next 12 months, with around

66% of 18- to 24-year-olds considering leaving. Crucially, the survey data revealed that 57% of people were concerned that this exodus could make areas less desirable to people and businesses<sup>27</sup>. This creates a vicious cycle whereby young people move away from rural areas for better job prospects, further reducing rural economies' access to labour which is then exacerbated by older populations' relative economic inactivity<sup>28</sup>.

## CONCLUSIONS

Despite all of these challenges, there is enormous untapped potential in rural areas. With the right policies, rural economies could achieve significantly increased productivity and growth, and create an additional £9-19 billion per year in tax revenue<sup>29</sup>.

At a national level, this represents a missed opportunity for growth. Parliamentary analysis shows that service-sector job growth since the 1980s has been overwhelmingly urban-focused. The concentration of employment, investment and public services in urban centres has constrained the productivity potential of rural areas, limiting their ability to contribute fully to the UK's growth agenda.

<sup>24</sup>National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE), [State of Rural Enterprise Report No 7: Labour and skills availability – impacts on rural enterprise](#) (Research report, February 2024).

<sup>25</sup>Countryside Alliance, [Briefing Note: Closure of High Street Services in Rural Areas](#) (briefing paper, February 2025).

<sup>26</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Statistical Digest of Rural England - Rural Economic Bulletin](#), (official statistics, 15 January 2026).

<sup>27</sup>Virgin Media O2, [“Countryside in crisis: rural areas could lose over a third of residents in the next twelve months”](#) (news release, 9 July 2024).

<sup>28</sup>House of Commons Library, [Employment of people living in rural and coastal communities](#) (research briefing, 30 January 2024).

<sup>29</sup>Pragmatix Advisory, [Reigniting Rural Futures: A supporting analysis report for The Rural Coalition](#), (research report, May 2024)

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: EMPLOYMENT, WORK AND RURAL ECONOMIES**

**9.** Ensure that the new High Street Strategy - which will be undertaken by Government in 2026 - has an explicit rural focus. This needs to target market towns and rural areas that suffer from unique challenges that if not addressed will further hold back employment opportunities in rural areas. This new strategy creates a real opportunity to provide targeted support to rural businesses facing structural cost pressures.

**10.** Reform in-work support to reflect fluctuating incomes in rural areas. The existing pilot of the DWP JobsPlus model could be adapted to fit rural areas. The JobsPlus model is a community-led employment scheme that aims to help people into work through tailored employment services, community support, and financial incentives. It aims to take jobs and careers support out of the “Job Centre” and take it to people and communities - this model could be adapted to fit rural Britain, by taking employment support, careers coaching and wider financial support into the community - working with farming communities, rural charities, rural church networks and community anchors.

# CHAPTER FOUR: EDUCATION, SKILLS, SEND AND LIFE CHANCES

Education, skills, SEND provision and life chances in rural Britain are not merely under pressure – they are being systematically undermined by national policy frameworks that continue to prioritise funding and intervention based on urban density and efficiency, over fairness, access and need.

Despite repeated warnings from regulators, parliamentarians and rural organisations, successive Governments have failed to adapt education and skills systems to rural realities. The result is a quiet but deepening injustice: children and young people growing up in rural communities face fewer opportunities, weaker support and higher barriers at every stage of their lives.

**Rural schools** sit at the sharp end of this failure. Funding models designed around large pupil cohorts and economies of scale systematically disadvantage small, dispersed schools, leaving many operating on the brink of financial collapse. This injustice has been repeatedly highlighted by the f40 Group campaign, which represents some of the lowest-funded local authorities in England and has consistently warned that rural and coastal areas are short-changed by national school funding arrangements<sup>30</sup>. They highlight that the continuation of unfair School and High Needs funding results in some schools receiving £5,700 less per pupil in Dedicated Schools Grant (DSG) funding than others - this disparity disproportionately affects schools in rural areas. A comparison between the lowest- and highest-funded local authorities, meanwhile, shows a gap of £999 per pupil in core funding and £3,831 per pupil in SEND funding.<sup>31</sup>

At the same time, declining pupil numbers have become one of the most serious and

destabilising challenges facing rural schools in England. Falling birth rates, rising housing costs and long-term demographic change mean fewer young families are able to live in rural and coastal communities, leading to sustained drops in school rolls. The Department for Education (DfE) school census data shows that total pupil numbers in England fell by around 59,600 (0.7%) between 2023–24 and 2024–25, with national pupil projections indicating further declines ahead<sup>32</sup>. Rural areas are particularly affected due to ageing populations and limited affordable housing, a trend confirmed by ONS population data<sup>33</sup>.

In rural communities, the loss of a school often removes the last remaining public service from a village, forcing children to travel long distances for basic needs and weakening community cohesion. Yet current national policy offers little protection for small schools facing demographic decline, treating falling rolls as a justification for contraction rather than a challenge requiring intervention.

However, this could be turned into an opportunity - if policymakers were to grasp the chance to use this additional capacity to tackle the SEND crisis. Declining pupil numbers in rural primary schools are already creating spare physical capacity on the school estate. With strategic planning, this space could be used to expand SEND provision within existing school buildings, creating dedicated specialist units embedded in local schools. This would allow schools to attract additional funding, strengthen inclusive provision and reduce the need for children to travel long distances for support. This opportunity is time-limited and requires urgent action. Without it, capacity will be lost through closures rather than repurposed to meet one of the most pressing crises in the education system.

<sup>30</sup>f40 Group of Education Authorities, [Campaign Update 2021](#) (briefing paper, February 2021).

<sup>31</sup>f40 Group of Education Authorities, [School Funding and Rural Education](#) (briefing paper, January 2026).

<sup>32</sup>Department for Education, [School Pupils and Their Characteristics, Academic Year 2024/25](#) (official statistics, June 2025)

<sup>33</sup>Department for Education, [National Pupil Projections: July 2025](#) (official statistics, 20 October 2025).

Rural families also face longer waits for diagnosis, assessment and support because specialist services are thinly spread, under-resourced and increasingly difficult to staff. Educational psychologists, speech and language therapists and occupational therapists are in short supply, with local authorities covering vast rural geographies unable to compete for staff. One rural English focus group participant spoke of her struggle to find a place for her autistic son at a specialist school; *“We’re trying to find him a place. He’s going to struggle at a mainstream school. To get him a place at a school that’s more suited for him we’re looking quite far out of town. For a child with autism that creates plenty of issues itself.”* We are in no doubt that the phrase “quite out of town” will be an understatement, and will likely mean hours-long round trips to provide for their child.



Source: Department for Education

**Post-16 education and skills provision** in rural areas is similarly constrained. Provision is heavily concentrated in towns and cities, forcing rural young people to travel long distances to access colleges, sixth forms, apprenticeships and training providers. One English focus group participant explained: *“You’ve not got as many options for colleges and apprenticeships [here]. There’s not going to be as many companies offering a specific*

*route into a line of work the further you go away from the main cities.”*

Employer evidence reflects the consequences of this mismatch. In 2024, Skills England reported that businesses in rural areas within the North East, South West and West Midlands were more likely to report difficulty in hiring and retaining suitably skilled workers than urban areas in these regions<sup>34</sup>. As highlighted in the previous chapter, NICRE similarly found that rural businesses were disproportionately affected by skills shortages and labour gaps<sup>35</sup>. CPRE suggests that this is, in part, down to the *“greater fragmentation of rural communities...has contributed to a reduction in services including education provision.”*

This is not a marginal inconvenience; it is a structural barrier that shapes life chances. Public transport cuts, high travel costs and long journey times exclude those without access to a car – disproportionately affecting low-income families and young people with additional needs.

Ribble Valley Borough Council explained that local young people *“struggle to access after school activities and social activities with friends due to strict school bus services and relying on parents”*. A sentiment shared by North Yorkshire Council, who noted that *“school holidays are pressure points for low-income families, especially in rural areas where childcare options and enrichment activities are scarce”*.

This was again echoed by a Northumberland resident who submitted individual evidence to our inquiry, noting that there were very few school buses, or late evening buses, severely limiting access to after school activities, which subsequently led to *“no independence for young people who cannot drive.”*

<sup>34</sup>Department for Education, [Skills England: Driving Growth and Widening Opportunities](#) (policy report, published 2024).

<sup>35</sup>National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE), [Skills and Labour Shortages Hinder Rural Business Performance and Growth](#) (research report, 26 February 2024).

<sup>36</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Key Findings, Statistical Digest of Rural England](#) (official statistics, updated 14 January 2026).

National data from the ONS shows that rural young people are more likely to leave their communities altogether in order to study or work<sup>36</sup>, accelerating skills drain and hollowing out local economies. For those who stay, options are narrower, ambition is constrained, and progression is harder. A Northumberland resident summarised this reality: *“education and choice of schools is very limited and our local high school has been failing for decades. So many local children travel 30 miles to school with an hour's journey each way...made worse by lack of transport links to access educational sites further away.”*

## CONCLUSIONS

Rural children are expected to travel further, wait longer, accept less support and make do with fewer opportunities than their urban peers – all while being told the system is fair. This is not an accident; it is the consequence of political choices that repeatedly sideline rural England in education, skills and SEND reform.

Without a fundamental shift in funding, workforce planning and service design that explicitly recognises rural disadvantage, life chances in rural Britain will continue to be determined not by talent or effort, but by postcode.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: EDUCATION, SKILLS, SEND AND LIFE CHANCES**

- 11.** Amend and improve the National Funding Formulae to ensure the fair distribution of school and SEND funding, enabling flexibility in how funding is utilised. Historic proxy factors that lock in funding for some areas whilst capping others from receiving more should be removed.
- 12.** Work with primary schools in rural locations where declining populations mean that additional school capacity will open up in the next few years. This additional capacity from declining numbers creates the opportunity to provide additional, dedicated learning spaces for new SEND support and provision inside existing school settings – allowing schools to bid for more funding, whilst providing additional, dedicated SEND units inside the school building. This is an opportunity that cannot be missed, and planning should begin urgently to maximise the opportunity it could create.

# CHAPTER FIVE: HEALTH, DISABILITY, ISOLATION AND MENTAL WELLBEING

As with many other measures of deprivation, the true extent of the barriers rural communities face in accessing health and social care is often masked by official data. National metrics often fail to capture the realities of dispersed populations, long travel distances and service withdrawal. As the Local Government Association (LGA) and Public Health England stated in their 2017 report: *“We don’t know enough about the health of people living in remote farming areas, in the small market towns and in the coastal villages that make up much of what we think of as ‘the countryside.’”*<sup>37</sup>. Similarly, the Countryside Alliance has highlighted that the *“twin challenges of lower population densities and longer travelling times to access services mean apportioning resources across the country on a strictly numerical basis would inevitably lead to rural areas being left behind”*.

These limitations in measuring access and usage translate into real and persistent barriers to healthcare and mental health support. Evidence from NHS Primary Care Networks, local authorities and rural charities shows that **rural residents must travel further to access GP surgeries, hospitals and specialist services**, with older and disabled residents disproportionately affected. Centralisation of services, workforce shortages and fragile transport links compound these challenges.

As the LGA and Public Health England's report also outlines: *“longer distances to GPs, dentists, hospitals and other health facilities mean that rural residents can experience ‘distance decay’ where service use decreases with increasing distance.”* This was echoed repeatedly in focus group evidence. One rural Welsh focus group participant explained: *“Our local hospital just seems to be losing more and*

*more of its service...They’re finding it hard to staff, they’re finding it hard to get people. Then services are having to go much further afield. If you’re someone who isn’t lucky enough to have a vehicle it’s not easy. That’s possibly UK-wide, but I do feel that in deprived areas the services are especially over-stretched”*.

Shortages in primary care, dentistry and mental health services further restrict access in rural areas, while limited public transport compounds exclusion. Evidence submitted by Ribblesdale Primary Care Network illustrates how efforts to improve efficiency through service centralisation can have unintended consequences for rural communities. They described instances in which Integrated Care Boards and hospital trusts have consolidated provision - such as complex wound care services - into fewer locations. While clinically efficient, this approach disproportionately excludes rural and isolated patients, many of whom are frail, unable to drive and reliant on infrequent or unreliable public transport. As a result, delayed treatment and increased risk of injury-related complications become more likely.

These structural barriers were echoed in lived experience. A focus group participant from the Forest of Dean, described her struggle to register with an NHS dentist locally, ultimately remaining with a practice near a former address because no alternative was available. She explained: *“access to NHS services is very difficult. It’s hard to get into any NHS dentist. For the whole of Bolsover we’ve only got one dentist. We were having to look at going to the other side of Sheffield.”*

Together, these examples highlight not only the difficulty rural residents face in accessing essential healthcare, but also the wider

<sup>37</sup>Local Government Association & Public Health England, [Health and Wellbeing in Rural Areas](#) (research report, December 2017).

challenge of attracting and retaining medical professionals in rural areas. A resident from the Hebrides noted: “*The local hospitals are very good – but they cannot recruit specialists due to their rural location*”. A lack of specific medical equipment, transport infrastructure and a higher proportion of cancelled appointments, all function to discourage medical professionals from residing outside of major towns and cities, reinforcing workforce shortages and service fragility.

These access challenges are also intensified by demographic change. As ACRE highlights, rural populations are, on average, older than those in urban areas and are ageing at a more rapid rate. Over a quarter (27%) of residents of rural settlements were aged 65 and above, compared with a lower share in most urban areas<sup>38</sup>. This increases demand for healthcare while simultaneously reducing the ability of residents to travel to increasingly centralised services. For older rural residents, particularly those no longer driving, long distances, limited transport and service withdrawal result in delayed care, missed appointments and poorer health outcomes. Combined with higher heating and care costs, reduced independence and greater reliance on informal support, ageing not only amplifies healthcare access inequalities in rural areas, but also deepens the risk and severity of rural poverty.

Evidence submitted from Nottingham Rural Action Network reinforces this picture, highlighting how rural residents frequently postpone or are unable to schedule medical appointments, with volunteer staff observing declining attendance at support groups and increasing isolation among older residents. These challenges were predominantly attributed to the lack of dependable transport options, which limits both access to healthcare and opportunities for social connection.

**Social isolation** therefore emerges as a defining feature of rural disadvantage and a major driver of poor mental health. According

to the Campaign to End Loneliness: “*Rural areas have a unique set of circumstances that can exacerbate the social isolation of older residents, leading to poor health, loss of independence and lower quality of life*”<sup>39</sup>. These include lower per capita expenditure on social care and greater reliance on car ownership for basic activities such as visiting family or shopping.

Research from West Devon Community and Volunteer Service, submitted to this report, links isolation and loneliness directly to worsening mental health outcomes and reduced access to informal support networks, particularly in communities where services have been withdrawn and social infrastructure is weak. Their survey, of just under 250 local residents, found that over two-thirds of respondents ‘*hardly ever/never*’ or only ‘*occasionally*’ feel they belong within their communities, whilst 42% of respondents saw transport as the top barrier to engaging with local/community activities or groups. This pattern was reflected in the lived experiences shared with the inquiry. One resident from Northumberland explained that “*loneliness is a massive problem in rural communities... several members of our family suffer anxiety and don’t have access to groups or mental health services.*” Ribble Valley Borough Council noted that limited opportunities to access services and socialise contribute to loneliness, loss of confidence, poorer physical health and reduced mobility - fundamentally adding strain to the NHS.

**Nowhere is the rural mental health crisis more acute than in the farming community.** Farming is characterised by long hours, financial uncertainty and physical isolation, with many farmers spending prolonged periods working alone and often reluctant to seek help. As highlighted by the NFU’s submission, farmers face a unique combination of pressures including volatile incomes, rising costs, animal health concerns, extreme weather, global market instability and post-Brexit changes

<sup>38</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Key Findings: Statistical Digest of Rural England](#) (official statistics, updated 14 January 2026).

<sup>39</sup>Campaign to End Loneliness, [Loneliness and isolation in rural areas](#) (webpage, accessed 5 February 2026).

affecting labour supply and financial security. These stresses are largely outside individual control but have a profound impact on wellbeing.

The scale of this challenge in agriculture is stark. RABI's Big Farming Survey found that 36% of people working in agriculture are probably or possibly experiencing mental ill health<sup>40</sup>. Meanwhile, the NFU's 2024 survey reported that 91–94% of farmers identify poor mental health as one of the most significant hidden issues facing agriculture today, rising to 94% among younger farmers<sup>41</sup>. Research consistently shows that suicide rates in agriculture are significantly higher than in many other occupations, reflecting the cumulative impact of isolation, financial pressure, long-term stress and exposure to uncontrollable risks such as weather and disease.

Despite growing awareness, stigma remains a major barrier to support in rural areas. Cultural norms around self-reliance and privacy mean that farmers and rural residents are less likely to engage with formal mental health services, particularly crisis provision. RABI's submission described a strong "*culture of self-reliance*" within farming communities, where individuals may be reluctant to seek support due to social expectations and perceptions of their role as providers. Addressing this requires a shift away from urban-centric service models towards approaches that embed mental health support into trusted, everyday rural settings.

Effective support must therefore be delivered through routine rural touchpoints such as farm assurance visits, veterinary services, agricultural advisers and local charities. Trusted intermediaries - including vets, agronomists and machinery dealers - should be trained to recognise signs of distress and confidently signpost support. Crucially, these conversations are more likely to succeed in

informal, relationship-based settings rather than clinical or bureaucratic environments.

As RABI and other rural charities emphasise, mental health interventions cannot succeed in isolation from the financial realities driving distress. Talking therapies alone are insufficient where anxiety is rooted in debt, income instability and business insecurity. Mental health support must be paired with practical economic help, including advice on benefits, debt management, business planning, and support to access grants and entitlements. The central principle is clear: in rural Britain, and particularly in farming communities, mental health support must go hand-in-hand with meaningful financial resilience support if it is to be effective.

It is important, however, not to overlook the positive health attributes of rural living. **Average life expectancy is higher in rural areas than in urban areas.** Between 2020 and 2022, life expectancy in predominantly rural areas was 80.1 years for males and 83.7 years for females, compared with 78.1 years and 82.3 years respectively in predominantly urban areas<sup>42</sup>. Infant mortality rates also tend to be lower in more rural areas. These outcomes point to the significant health benefits associated with access to green space, lower pollution and closer connection to nature.



<sup>40</sup>Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI) and led by the Centre for Rural Policy Research at the University of Exeter, [Big Farming Survey](#), (survey report, published 2021).

<sup>41</sup>National Farmers' Union, '[Stop and look out for ourselves and each other](#)' – Mind Your Head Week, (NFU news, 10 February 2025).

<sup>42</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Statistical Digest of Rural England: Health and Wellbeing](#) (official statistics, 10 September 2025).

As CPRE's evidence suggests, health policy must therefore take a long-term perspective that both protects these benefits and addresses the structural barriers rural residents face in accessing care and support. Rural policy should centre the lived realities of rural communities, while ensuring that urban populations can also share in the health and wellbeing benefits of England's rural landscapes. Without such an approach, the advantages of rural living risk being eroded by the very inequalities that currently prevent residents from meeting their most basic needs

The Government has a real opportunity to improve health outcomes in rural areas, by ensuring that the new 'Neighbourhood Health Service' works for and in rural Britain. There is an opportunity here to fundamentally reimagine and redesign how the NHS works for rural areas - by bringing care closer to home and away from hospitals that are more often located in or near urban areas. It is vital that rural areas are targeted in the rollout of these new neighbourhood health services - giving people easier access to the right care and support in their area.

## CONCLUSIONS

Poorer access to health and social care in rural areas is not the result of lower need, but of structural barriers that are poorly captured by national data and inadequately addressed by current policy. Distance, service centralisation, workforce shortages, ageing populations and social isolation combine to produce worse experiences of care and significantly poorer mental health outcomes, particularly for older residents and farming communities.

At the same time, the overall health benefits associated with rural living – including higher life expectancy and lower infant mortality – underline that rural places themselves are not inherently disadvantaged. Rather, it is the failure of policy frameworks to recognise and respond to rural realities that risks eroding these advantages. Without a shift towards place-sensitive funding, workforce planning and service design, rural residents will continue to face avoidable harm, and the health benefits of rural living will be increasingly undermined.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: HEALTH, DISABILITY, ISOLATION AND MENTAL WELLBEING**

**13.**

Ensure that rural areas are included and prioritised in the rollout of the new 'Neighbourhood Health Service'. There is an opportunity here to fundamentally reimagine and redesign how the NHS works for rural areas - by bringing care closer to home and away from hospitals that are more often located in or near urban areas.

**14.**

Improve and invest in better mental health services for rural areas - taking care into the community (and out of hubs). A More flexible delivery model could include:

- Outreach services and mobile provision
- Telephone and digital support (with recognition of connectivity gaps)
- More flexible hours, that recognise that providing service 9am -5pm doesn't suit a workforce in our rural areas. This is true not just for farming, but for many other jobs that are prevalent in rural Britain – across the care sector, retail, and tourism – which tend to have different and longer working hours that make accessing support more difficult.

# CHAPTER SIX: HOUSING, ENERGY AND LIVING ENVIRONMENT

**Rural housing affordability** has deteriorated sharply in recent years and has emerged as one of the most significant drivers of rural poverty. Evidence submitted to this inquiry, alongside focus group testimonies, consistently identified housing costs as a central pressure shaping financial insecurity, demographic change and economic resilience in rural communities.

The scale of the affordability challenge is clear. MHCLG's latest affordable housing supply data shows that in 2024-25, just 17,506 units were delivered in local authorities classified as rural compared with the 47,256 delivered in those classified as urban<sup>43</sup>. This represents a 2% decrease in rural delivery and a 2% increase in urban delivery compared with 2023-24.

This geographic imbalance in affordable housing supply was also demonstrated within the Fabian Society's submission. They found that *"the average home in 4% of rural councils is affordable for those on the average incomes [when purchasing a property], compared to 10% of urban local authorities"*.

These figures raise fundamental questions about how affordable housing is defined. Directly relating to the evidence discussed in the second chapter of this report, income-based metrics of poverty that do not include housing costs within their calculations will fail to reveal the reality faced by low-income households in rural areas. To this point, CPRE has called for the planning policy definition to be reformed so that affordability reflects what people on average or below-average local incomes can realistically pay, *"rather than allowing homes rented at up to 80% of market rates to be classed as affordable in high-cost rural markets"*.

Yet, the shortage of affordable housing is not down to a lack of need or demand. Instead, submissions consistently pointed to under or poor investment in rural development. Focus group participants described how new housing is often delivered in isolated pockets near larger towns, with little regard for local need or the supporting infrastructure required to make communities viable. In particular, participants highlighted the absence of accompanying investment in transport, GP provision and schools. As a result, new developments frequently cater to higher-income or investment buyers rather than addressing local housing insufficiencies, thereby perpetuating rural poverty rather than alleviating it.

This represents a significant missed opportunity. Recent YouGov polling - commissioned by CPRE - showed that people are half as likely to oppose new housing in their area if the homes are locally affordable (dropping from 41% to 20%)<sup>44</sup>. This aligns with the findings from the LRRG's first report 'Understanding Rural Britain' which found that *"65.2% of all rural voters polled agree that development in their area should proceed, as long as it is delivered thoughtfully, and with consideration for local needs and identity"*<sup>45</sup>. Resistance to development in rural areas, therefore, is not inherent but driven by concerns about affordability, design and infrastructure.

The failure to deliver modern, purpose-built housing has left many rural communities reliant on an ageing and poorly insulated housing stock. Evidence submitted by Devon County Council and NHS Primary Care Networks indicates that rural households are more likely to live in energy-inefficient homes and face higher heating costs, with older and disabled

<sup>43</sup>Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [Affordable housing supply in England: 2024 to 2025](#), (official statistics, 20 November 2025).

<sup>44</sup>Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), [Opposition to development halves if new homes are affordable – poll finds](#) (press release, 20 February 2024).

<sup>45</sup>Labour Rural Research Group, [Understanding Rural Britain](#), (survey report, August 2025).

residents disproportionately affected. These local insights are reinforced by national analysis. The Fabian Society reports that “44% of private rental dwellings in rural areas are non-decent, more than double the national average (21%)”.

Poor housing quality has direct consequences for both living standards and public health. Analysis by the Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit estimates that homes with low energy efficiency ratings could collectively pay up to £3.7 billion more in energy bills each year than if minimum efficiency standards were met<sup>46</sup>. Cold homes and inadequately heated homes are also estimated to cost the NHS over £1 billion annually through increased respiratory, cardiovascular and other cold-related conditions<sup>47</sup>. As a result, substandard rural housing not only exacerbates fuel poverty, but also places significant additional pressure on health and public services.

Worryingly, there seems to be an increasing trend amongst some social housing providers who are selling off their rural housing stock, rather than refurbishing or retaining it, resulting in the permanent loss of affordable homes in villages. These same housing providers argue that they are using the funds from the sale of these old home to build new, higher quality homes in other areas - but too often these homes are built away from rural communities, often nearer towns and cities. In many parts of rural Britain, we are now witnessing the retreat of housing providers entirely from our villages and market towns.

This recent and growing trend is compounded by the fact that over decades past, many social homes in rural communities have been sold through Right to Buy and not replaced at the same rate, leading to a net reduction in the number of affordable homes available to rent locally.

Official and parliamentary analysis shows that **rural areas have a much smaller share of social and council housing than urban areas**. Rural areas already started with much smaller proportions of social housing; around 12% of rural housing stock is social rented compared with approximately 19% in urban areas<sup>48</sup>, underscoring the limited availability of genuinely affordable homes in rural locations.

Unsurprisingly, private renting has grown rapidly in rural and county areas. Analysis by the County Councils Network indicates that rental growth in rural and county areas has been significant, with overall renting (private and social) increasing by 19% between 2011 and 2021, and private renting specifically rising by 3% – surpassing growth in London and major cities. Yet support through Housing Benefit or the housing element of Universal Credit is capped by Local Housing Allowance (LHA) rates, which were designed to control public expenditure rather than fully cover market rents. Because LHA rates have historically lagged behind rising rents, many rural households face a widening shortfall between benefit support and actual housing costs, increasing the risk of arrears, overcrowding and homelessness.

These dynamics are reflected in rising – but often hidden – rural homelessness. MHCLG’s IMD Rural Report notes a rise in homelessness in rural areas in recent years, driven in part by the scarcity of social housing<sup>51</sup>. Rural councils and charities report increasing use of temporary accommodation, overcrowding and informal arrangements such as sofa-surfing. Because homelessness in rural areas is more dispersed and less visible than in cities, it is frequently underreported and poorly addressed by urban-focused policy responses.

Finally, the pressures on rural housing affordability are further compounded by the

<sup>46</sup>Energy & Climate Intelligence Unit (ECIU), [Millions of uninsulated, cold homes face £385 bill ‘hit’ this winter... or switching off](#) (press release, 1 October 2024).

<sup>47</sup>Ibis

<sup>48</sup>House of Commons Library, [Rural housing: context and issues for England](#) (research briefing, 25 June 2024).

<sup>49</sup>County Councils Network, [“Number of renters in rural areas increased faster than London over the last decade, as new report calls for a long-term plan for housing”](#) (press release, 23 March 2024)

<sup>50</sup>House of Commons Library, [Local Housing Allowance: changes in rates and policy](#) (briefing paper, 15 March 2024).

<sup>51</sup>Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [English Indices of Deprivation 2025: Rural Report](#) (official statistics, 30 October 2025).

**growth of second homes and holiday lets,** which inflate prices beyond what local wages can sustain and reduce the supply of homes available for permanent residents. Evidence submitted to this inquiry consistently highlighted the role of the visitor economy in distorting rural housing markets.

The Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI) noted that *“in regions with strong visitor economies such as coastal areas and national parks, the proliferation of second homes and properties used as holiday lets further reduces housing supply and challenges the year-round prosperity and sustainability of communities.”*

This impact is particularly acute in areas where housing supply is already constrained and demand from non-resident buyers is strong. The Fabian Society’s submission reinforces this analysis, finding that *“the proportion of second homes in rural local authorities is three times higher than in urban areas outside London.”*

As Professor Mark Shucksmith observed, this creates a situation in which *“in many rural areas of the UK, local residents are forced to compete in the housing market with more affluent incomers, whether for permanent occupation or for holiday homes.”*

## CONCLUSIONS

Decades of under-delivery of social and genuinely affordable housing in rural areas – compounded by the loss of stock through Right to Buy, the sale of social housing homes by housing associations, and the growth of second homes and the expansion of holiday lets – have fundamentally undermined housing affordability.

Without a step change in how affordability is defined, delivered and regulated, housing will continue to act as a central driver of rural poverty, demographic imbalance and economic fragility.



## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: HOUSING, ENERGY AND LIVING ENVIRONMENT**

**15.**

Expansion of rural exception sites to deliver genuinely affordable homes for local people. Rural Exception Sites are small sites located on the edge of existing rural settlements. They allow land to be provided below market value for residential development – provided it is used to build affordable housing for local people. Rural Exception Sites are allocated outside of the local authority’s development plan – so homes delivered via Rural Exception Sites represent additional affordable housing for the local community.

**16.**

Tackle the ability of social housing providers to be able to sell (often at auction) their housing stock, in order to build new homes elsewhere - this often takes vital housing stock from our rural areas and moves it into urban areas to tackle and support urban housing waiting lists - but compounds a growing social housing crisis in rural Britain.

**17.**

Invest in rural retrofitting and energy efficiency programmes to tackle the growing gap in energy efficiencies of rural homes vs urban homes.

# CHAPTER SEVEN: CRIME, SAFETY AND RURAL RESILIENCE

Rural crime and safety in the UK represent a growing failure of public policy and policing priorities. While headline crime statistics suggest that rural areas experience lower overall crime rates than their urban counterparts<sup>52</sup>, these figures mask the nature, severity and impact of crime in rural contexts. As with other areas of rural disadvantage, reliance on aggregated national data obscures lived experience and entrenches policy blind spots.

This is partly because “*rural crime*” is not defined in legislation or Government guidance. Instead, it is an informal term used to describe offences that are particularly prevalent in rural areas or that take on distinct characteristics due to isolation, geography and limited policing presence. As a result, rural crime is not consistently recorded or analysed as a discrete category, and comprehensive national statistics are not routinely published. For too long, this has allowed rural areas to be treated as low-crime, low-risk environments, enabling serious and organised criminal activity to expand with limited scrutiny.

What is clear from national crime data and sector evidence is that **crime targeting farms and rural businesses is widespread and increasingly sophisticated**. Agricultural machinery, vehicles, fuel, tools and GPS equipment are systematically stolen by organised criminal networks operating across police force boundaries. These are not opportunistic crimes: they are planned, professional and highly profitable.

The NFU has repeatedly warned that rural crime costs the farming sector hundreds of millions of pounds each year, yet enforcement remains patchy and reactive. In their submission, the NFU highlighted that, in 2024,

*“the estimates for the value of stolen agricultural vehicles were £7 million, with tractors seeing a 17% increase in thefts from 2023”*. For farmers, a single theft can halt operations, jeopardise income and threaten the viability of a business built up over generations. Livestock theft and illegal slaughter also continue to blight rural areas, particularly where isolation and sparse policing reduce the likelihood of detection. Beyond the immediate financial loss – estimated by the NFU to be upwards of £3.4 million in 2024 – these crimes cause acute distress, raise serious animal welfare and biosecurity risks, and deepen the perception that rural communities are left to fend for themselves. For many victims, the psychological impact far outweighs any compensation received.

**Environmental crime** is another area where rural communities bear disproportionate harm. Fly-tipping is overwhelmingly concentrated in rural locations, where isolated roads, gateways and farmland are used as dumping grounds for household, commercial and hazardous waste. DEFRA statistics show that there has been a 6% increase in fly-tipping incidents in England in 2023/24 compared to the previous year, marking a total of 1.15 million incidents<sup>53</sup>.



<sup>52</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Communities and Households Statistics for Rural England](#) (statistical release, 10 December 2025).

<sup>53</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Fly-tipping statistics for England: 2023 to 2024](#) (statistical release, updated 13 January 2026).

CPRE has warned that these figures exclude incidents on private land, meaning the true scale of rural fly-tipping is likely to be significantly underreported. Ultimately, local authorities and landowners are left to absorb the associated costs, while perpetrators face minimal risk of prosecution. A survey by the Country Land and Business Association (CLA) highlighted that over 75% of its members said that fly-tipping had a significant fiscal impact on their business, whilst over 90% believe local authorities need increased resourcing to tackle the issue<sup>54</sup>. Despite being highly visible and deeply corrosive to quality of life, fly-tipping continues to be treated as a low-priority offence.

As highlighted by the CLA's survey, these crimes are compounded by **chronic under-policing of rural areas**. Large geographic beats, reduced officer numbers and the closure of local police stations have stripped away visible policing and stretched response times. As ACRE has observed, *"crime, and the fear of crime, can easily be both 'out of sight and out of mind' in rural areas, whilst also presenting genuine operational difficulties for police and other agencies, due to the dispersed nature of the population"*. For these reasons, rural areas often struggle in the competition for scarce resources within the police and criminal justice system.

The public's confidence in policing reflects this reality. ONS data from the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) shows a continued decline in confidence and satisfaction with the police nationally over the past decade<sup>55</sup>. Rural-specific surveys reveal even sharper concerns. The Countryside Alliance's Rural Crime Survey found that 96% of respondents saw crime as a significant issue in their area, however 45% of respondents said they do not believe that their police took rural crime seriously<sup>56</sup>. One

Herefordshire resident who submitted individual evidence for this report similarly outlined that: *"seeing a police vehicle, let alone a policeman/woman is a novelty - we last saw one in our lane about three years ago"*.

This lack of confidence feeds directly into under-reporting, which further reduces the reliability of national data sets. House of Commons research has shown that in predominantly rural areas, police recorded crime rates were less than half that of the most urban areas outside of London - 59 crimes per 1,000 population in rural areas compared with 99 per 1,000 in urban areas outside London<sup>57</sup>. This disparity, however, is not the result of a lack of crime in rural areas but an unwillingness to report crimes to rural authorities.

According to a Countryside Alliance survey, 32% of rural crimes are never reported, with many respondents citing a perceived lack of police action as their rationale for failing to report<sup>58</sup>. DEFRA's own rural crime survey revealed that, when asked whether police can be relied on when needed, less than half (47%) of respondents in rural areas agreed, whilst only 44% of respondents believed police would deal with local concerns<sup>59</sup>. When crimes are slow to be attended, poorly investigated or quietly written off, underreporting becomes inevitable – further masking the true scale of rural crime and reinforcing a cycle of neglect.

**Violence, domestic abuse and antisocial behaviour** are also present in rural areas but are frequently hidden by isolation, stigma and limited support services. The National Rural Crime Network (NRCN) has shown that domestic abuse lasts, on average, 25% longer in the most rural areas<sup>60</sup>. ACRE suggests that this is exactly a result of geography, with *"rurality and isolation deliberately leveraged by abusers"*. Whilst, tight-knit communities can

<sup>54</sup>Country Land and Business Association (CLA), ["Mountains of fly-tipping as latest figures show more than one million incidents – CLA asks: where's the promised crime strategy?"](#) (news release, 13 January 2026).

<sup>55</sup>Office for National Statistics, [Perception and experience of the police and criminal justice system](#), England and Wales: latest (statistical release 2025 edition).

<sup>56</sup>Countryside Alliance, [Rural Crime Survey 2024](#) (survey report, March 2025).

<sup>57</sup>House of Commons Library, [Crime in England and Wales: police recorded crime rates and trends](#) (research briefing, 6 January 2026).

<sup>58</sup>Countryside Alliance, [Rural Crime Survey 2024](#) (survey report, March 2025).

<sup>59</sup>Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, [Communities and Households: Rural England](#), (statistical release, 10 December 2025).

<sup>60</sup>National Rural Crime Network, [Captive & Controlled: Domestic Abuse in Rural Areas – Isolated, Unsupported and Unprotected, Victims Failed by the System, Services and Those Around Them](#) (research report, June 2025).

further inhibit disclosure, particularly where victims fear lack of anonymity or mistrust local professionals, such as GPs, who are well known within the community.

When victims of domestic abuse do seek help, rurality again compounds risk. Longer travel distances, dependence on cars or infrequent public transport, and service withdrawal make it harder to access refuge, healthcare and crisis support – especially at night or in emergencies. Transport cuts and centralisation of services have therefore turned rural isolation into a direct risk factor for harm.

Elsewhere, emerging threats underline how exposed rural communities have become. Illegal hare coursing brings intimidation, criminal damage and violence to landowners and residents. Organised crime groups exploit darkness, distance and poor surveillance. As ACRE has warned: *“Some rural communities, especially in rural areas that are accessible from urban areas via fast road and rail links, live in fear of crime and criminals whose origins are clearly in urban areas and who see rural communities as an easy target or source of criminal income. This includes the well-known ‘county lines’ drug distribution networks, highly threatening activities such as hare coursing, and raids on isolated premises such as rural post offices and cash machines”.*

## CONCLUSIONS

This evidence demonstrates that inconsistent data collection and chronic under-resourcing have allowed organised, environmental and hidden crimes to proliferate in rural areas where detection is harder and response times are longer. Restoring confidence will require more than rhetoric. Government must formally recognise rural crime within national policing frameworks, improve rural-specific data collection and reporting, strengthen cross-force coordination to tackle organised networks operating across boundaries, and ensure rural forces are funded to reflect geographic scale and operational complexity. At the same time, victim support services – particularly for domestic abuse – must be designed with rural realities in mind, including transport barriers and service centralisation.

Without targeted intervention, under-reporting will continue to mask harm, communities will disengage from the justice system, and rural areas will remain disproportionately exposed to exploitation. With the right policy shift, however, rural communities can be made not only safer, but more resilient and confident in the institutions meant to protect them.

## **POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: CRIME, SAFETY AND COMMUNITY RESILLIENCE**

- 18.** Embed tackling rural crime into a new rural strategy - and ensure that improved reporting initiatives and data gathering sit at the heart of it.
- 19.** Modern technologies, including drone technology, can be used to great effect in rural areas, and should be considered by rural policing in order to quickly deploy and respond to harder to reach areas.
- 20.** Ensure access to victim support services in rural areas - with targeted domestic abuse pilots to reach out into rural areas - using community groups, rural church networks, rural charities and partners to reach underserved communities and harder to reach victims.

# CHAPTER EIGHT: THE CONNECTIVITY DESERT

Mobile phone and internet connectivity in rural Britain represent one of the clearest examples of political failure in modern infrastructure policy. Despite repeated strategies, announcements and coverage claims, large parts of rural England, Scotland and Wales continue to experience unreliable mobile signal, slow broadband and persistent “not spots”. This is not a technical failure, but the result of political choices that have allowed commercial priorities to override universal access.

Britain now lags behind comparable nations in 5G rollout, with the slowest deployment among the G7. This matters not only for rural inclusion, but for national growth: Government analysis suggests that widespread high-quality 5G adoption could generate up to £159 billion in gross value added by 2035. Meanwhile, geographical coverage targets have not been matched by clear definitions of what in practice constitutes high quality 5G coverage (known as 5GSA). Too often, this has resulted in poor service in rural communities, despite mapping tools suggesting 5G is available.

Official data already shows a clear rural–urban divide. Ofcom’s 2024 analysis of broadband coverage and speed found that access to full-fibre connectivity remains significantly lower in rural areas than in urban ones, and that average broadband download speeds in rural locations lag well behind those available in towns and cities<sup>61</sup>. DEFRA’s Deprivation in rural areas report notes that, in 2021, average rural download speeds were recorded at 51 Mb/s compared with 84 Mb/s in urban areas<sup>62</sup>. These gaps persist despite years of Government-backed rollout programmes, calling into question the reliability of headline coverage claims.

The Electronic Communications Code (ECC)<sup>63</sup>, introduced in 2017 to accelerate mast deployment, was designed for a market in which mobile operators largely owned their own infrastructure. That market has since changed: most sites are now controlled by Wireless Infrastructure Providers (WIPs), which are not subject to the same coverage and rollout obligations as operators. Sharp reductions in land rents have disincentivised cooperation and increased litigation between WIPs and landowners, slowing deployment – particularly in rural areas where mast access depends on negotiated agreements. The expansion of operator powers without implementing a promised complaints mechanism risks further undermining trust and delaying rollout in areas that can least afford it.

As with other essential services, rural communities also face far more limited choice of broadband and mobile providers. Where connectivity is available, plans capable of meeting minimum digital living standards are often more expensive than those offered in urban areas. One Northumberland resident who submitted personal evidence described having “*very limited provider options, no access to fibre broadband, and reliance on significantly more expensive satellite alternatives.*” North Yorkshire Council similarly noted that, despite substantial investment, the challenge of reaching dispersed rural properties via fibre and wireless infrastructure continues to hinder universal access.

The consequences of this digital exclusion are serious and far-reaching. As physical access to services declines, rural residents are increasingly expected to rely on digital alternatives to meet basic needs. Yet poor connectivity makes it harder to access online

<sup>61</sup>Ofcom, [Connected Nations 2024: Coverage and Speeds](#) (statistics report, updated 11 November 2025).

<sup>62</sup>Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, [English Indices of Deprivation 2025: Deprivation in Rural Areas](#) (statistical release, October 2025).

<sup>63</sup>Ofcom, [Electronic Communications Code](#) (guidance on telecoms infrastructure policy and regulation, accessed January 2026).

GP services, NHS appointments, mental health support and SEND provision. Given it is exactly these services which rural communities struggle to physically access - due to their remote location and the unreliability or lack of rural transport - without strong and stable internet access, rural communities are left to fend for themselves.

Evidence from the NFU highlights how acutely this failure affects rural enterprises. While rural businesses are just as digitally dependent as their urban counterparts, reliable connectivity is significantly harder to secure. In a recent NFU survey, 97% of respondents said mobile signal is important to their business, yet only 54% felt their coverage was sufficient to meet operational needs. This demonstrates how increasing reliance on digital systems risks deepening rural disadvantage where connectivity remains unreliable, unaffordable or unavailable.

This failure stands in stark contrast to Ireland, which has treated rural connectivity as essential national infrastructure rather than a market afterthought. Faced with the same geographic challenges, the Irish Government intervened decisively through its National Broadband Plan<sup>64</sup>, committing long-term public investment to ensure high-speed broadband reached the most remote rural communities first, not last. Mobile mast deployment was actively supported rather than obstructed, and delivery was driven by a clear political understanding that rural exclusion would damage national cohesion and economic resilience. As a result, many rural parts of Ireland now enjoy faster, more reliable broadband and mobile coverage than comparable areas of rural Britain.

There is, however, opportunity on the horizon. New and emerging technologies are already transforming connectivity in rural areas across the globe. Private investment, through programmes such as Amazon Leo (formerly Project Kuiper) - Amazon's upcoming low-Earth orbit (LEO) satellite internet service - aims to provide high-speed, low-latency broadband to

underserved, rural, and residential customers worldwide. The service plans to roll out widely in 2026, with initial enterprise tests beginning in late 2025, directly competing with Starlink.

These new technologies provide a real chance for rural Britain to connect to the technology grid, but this requires Government support, not least to ensure that rollout takes place at speed, but so too that it ensures that the lowest income households do not miss out on the opportunity to be part of this new technological revolution.

## CONCLUSIONS

It is clear that digital exclusion in rural Britain is not inevitable, nor is it simply a matter of geography. It is the product of policy choices that have prioritised commercial return over universal access. Connectivity is not a luxury; it underpins participation in modern life, from employment and education to healthcare and public services. Without reliable and affordable mobile and broadband infrastructure, rural communities are placed at a structural disadvantage that compounds every other inequality identified in this report.

Yet the emergence of new technologies, including low-Earth orbit satellite networks and expanded fibre deployment, presents a genuine opportunity to close this divide. If the Government treats rural connectivity as essential national infrastructure - backed by targeted investment, regulatory support and protections for low-income households - rural Britain can move from digital exclusion to digital inclusion.

<sup>64</sup>National Broadband Ireland (NBI), [National Broadband Plan: Rollout Plan](#) (official programme information, accessed 2026).

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: THE CONNECTIVITY DESERT

- 21.** Ensure that rural connectivity plan is taken forward in a Rural Strategy by the Government - ensuring that connectivity is at the heart of progress and improvement.
- 22.** Implement Section 70 of the Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act, which would establish a statutory complaints procedure. This was the only explicit safeguard for landowners in the legislation and was intended to provide a fair, proportionate mechanism to challenge unreasonable behaviour and rent reductions. Bring together and launch a Great British Rural Connectivity Taskforce, modelled on the Irish NBI programme, established by Granahan McCourt. This Taskforce should be overseen by Government, and convene communication providers, local authority leaders, and technology experts. Funding should be given to it to oversee the delivery of improved technology and connectivity.
- 23.** It is now vital that the Government supports and adopts the satellite technology programmes, by those including Amazon Leo and other providers. This new technology could be a game-changer for rural Britain, but we must ensure that it is price competitive, easy to access, and supports the communities that need it most.
- 24.** Government must set a clearer definition of what constitutes high quality 5G (5G SA) in practice, to ensure that headline coverage measures match the experiences of rural customers.

# FINDINGS AND PRIORITIES FOR GOVERNMENT

Evidence submitted to the Labour Rural Research Group (LRRG) presents a consistent picture: rural poverty is not a marginal issue affecting a small minority, nor a problem that can be understood through national averages. It is a structural and cumulative form of disadvantage shaped by how services, infrastructure and markets operate outside towns and cities. Across every chapter, the evidence points to the same underlying pattern: rural households are expected to travel further, pay more and cope with fewer alternatives – while policy frameworks continue to assume urban density, economies of scale and easy access.

Our focus group findings brought this to life with clarity. Rural poverty was described less as isolation from opportunity, and more as isolation from systems – transport, healthcare, education, housing and digital connectivity. These pressures are mutually reinforcing. When transport is unreliable, access to NHS care, post-16 education, work and even social connection becomes more difficult. When housing is unaffordable or non-decent, living costs rise, health worsens and young families are pushed out. When employment is insecure and local wages lag behind living costs, households become more exposed to shocks – yet benefit take-up is lower and support is harder to access. The result is a form of hidden hardship that is dispersed, undercounted and too often dismissed.

None of this is inevitable. Rural communities repeatedly expressed that they do not expect special treatment – they want systems that work. The policy recommendations set out in this report are therefore not “rural add-ons”, but essential reforms to make national strategies fair and effective across the whole country. Without a deliberate shift towards rural-aware funding, workforce planning and service design, rural disadvantage will deepen: accelerating skills drain, weakening local economies, eroding community resilience and undermining public confidence. Tackling poverty everywhere must include tackling rural poverty.

With it, rural Britain can become not an overlooked periphery, but a full contributor to national wellbeing, growth and social cohesion. With the right policy choices, rural areas can retain young people, strengthen local labour markets, reduce preventable pressures on public services, and unlock growth that benefits the whole country. Rural Britain already has deep assets – resilient communities, a strong civic fabric, land-based industries, market towns and natural capital – and this report shows that when national systems are designed to work beyond cities, those assets can be converted into better life chances, stronger local economies and more sustainable public services.

# **APPENDIX: CALL FOR EVIDENCE RESPONDENTS**

- **Devon County Council**
- **Cornwall County Council**
- **Ribble Valley Borough Council**
- **North Yorkshire Council**
- **Ribblesdale Primary Care Network**
- **Durham Community Action**
- **Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire**
- **West Devon Community and Volunteer Service**
- **Action for Communities in Rural England (ACRE)**
- **Countryside Alliance**
- **The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE)**
- **National Farmers Union (NFU)**
- **Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution (RABI)**
- **Stagecoach**
- **Transport East**
- **The Fabian Society**
- **Citizens' Advice**
- **Poverty Alliance**
- **Marjon University**
- **Professor Mark Shucksmith**
- **Countryside and Community Research Institute (CCRI)**
- **J. Yorke (Tewkesbury)**
- **P. Wilitts (Northumberland)**
- **C. Blades (Scarborough)**
- **C. Struthers (Hebrides)**



# Rural Poverty in Britain

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