



The
countryside
charity

Outpriced and overlooked

Survey on why young people feel
forced to leave rural areas

October 2021



Summary

If the government is to truly achieve its ambition to level up and build back better, government ministers need to ensure that those who have been most affected by the pandemic - including our young people - are not left behind. Young people are unquestionably our future and, given their diverse range of talents, unbounding enthusiasm and fresh ideas, they have huge amounts to offer communities.

Yet they are constantly omitted from political discourse. Their needs are overlooked and the problems they face left to worsen, particularly in rural areas.

CPRE, the countryside charity, has therefore commissioned a survey of over 1,000 young people, between the ages of 16 and 25 years, living in 'rural' or 'town and fringe' areas to examine the experiences of young people living in rural areas in England.

In 2018, The Prince's Countryside Fund identified the movement of young people out of rural areas and into more built-up, urban areas as a 'top five' issue across the UK countryside.¹ All too often, young people feel driven away from their local communities as a result of significant everyday challenges, such as poor public transport or lack of affordable housing, that contribute to rural disadvantage.

Now, young people are also facing an increasingly precarious future as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Already faced with the historic challenges associated with rural disadvantage, the disruption to school and further education, uncertainty surrounding their future employment and growing issues with mental health following successive national lockdowns, young people in rural areas have few incentives to stay. If the government's levelling up agenda is to mean anything, then young people need to be put front and centre of government policy - not just for the sake of the young people themselves but to truly level up and secure the future of our rural communities.



About the survey

On behalf of CPRE, the countryside charity, YouGov conducted this unique online survey of 1,019 16-25 year olds living in 'rural' and 'town and fringe' areas in England. This survey is the first of its kind commissioned by CPRE, examining the experiences of young people living in rural areas in England. The data was collected during June 2021.

Key findings



- **Affordable housing**

Of those surveyed, 72% of young people living in rural areas say affordable housing is their top concern. 84% of those who want to leave say it is an important factor in making their decision.



- **Transport**

86% of the 16-25 year olds who want to leave rural areas surveyed cite infrequent and unreliable public transport as an important concern.



- **Connectivity**

More than three-quarters (76%) of young people who want to move away surveyed say that poor digital connectivity has influenced their desire to leave their rural area.



- **Loneliness**

84% of those wanting to move away surveyed cite loneliness and isolation as important reasons.



- **Decision makers**

Shockingly, fewer than 1 in 10 (8%) feel listened to by decision makers as a young person living in a rural area.



- **Future**

Just two in five young people (43%) in rural areas surveyed anticipate staying living in a rural area within the next five years. Worryingly, only 18% of the 16-25 year olds in rural areas surveyed think that the future looks bright for them; 63% are more pessimistic.

Next steps

Following this survey and the harsh realities it has uncovered for young people living in rural areas, we as CPRE, the countryside charity, will be campaigning to make rural communities a better place for young people to live and work, helping to achieve our vision for thriving and sustainable rural communities.

Freya, 18, Northamptonshire



Motivated by a lack of representation of young people amongst decision makers, Freya became one of the youngest parish councillors in the country. She works tirelessly for her local community, also sitting on the Youth Crime Commission.

Freya is deeply fond of her local rural area and would love to stay, but that's not an option for her.

‘It’s just really hurtful. I put quite a lot into the village... and it feels like I’m being pushed out. I don’t want to go. I really like staying here but there’s just no option for me.’

As a councillor, regularly dealing with planning applications, Freya is all too aware of the housing pressures facing rural areas. The lack of truly affordable housing, particularly for first-time buyers, is all too apparent.

‘I don’t think that’s something that’s available. It’s only accessible if you’ve already been on the property ladder... There is no way, when I eventually move out of my parents’ place, that I’ll be able to afford to stay in the village. I’m going to have to look at moving into more urban areas to hopefully get a better salary so that I’ll be able to move back to a rural area. I don’t really want to move out but it’s just not affordable for me.’

Further, slow internet speeds are stifling Freya – and so many of her rural counterparts.

‘In rural areas one of the key challenges these days is internet connectivity – and the lack of it. Our internet connection is really poor... during lockdown, obviously I wasn’t at school and both my parents are teachers, so the three of us were trying to use the internet at the same time and it was just awful.’

Poor digital connectivity is also leading to feelings of loneliness and isolation for Freya, and this is made even worse by poor public transport services too.

‘Because public transport is so poor it also brings in the issue of loneliness and isolation. If we’re isolated because our internet is so slow and you can’t really connect by social media, you also struggle to meet up with people physically because you don’t have the public transport links to get to see your friends. You’re stuck relying on your parents until you can learn to drive.’

Sitting on her Parish Council, it is quite clear to Freya that young people in rural areas are being forgotten about by decision makers.

‘I’ve noticed, being on the council, that I sort of have to jog people’s memories that we do actually exist and we are people that need to be taken care of by our parish council.’

Freya’s call to central government is simple:

‘Bring us back up, to level us up with urban areas. Living in rural areas shouldn’t come with being disconnected and being left behind.’



Housing

Affordable housing tops the list of important issues for young people in rural areas.

- 72% feel that a lack of homes that people can afford is a key problem affecting young people in rural areas.
- 9 in 10 (92%) young people wanting to stay living in a rural area surveyed say affordability of housing is an important factor in making their decision.
- 84% of the 16-25 year olds wanting to leave surveyed cite affordable housing as an important problem that has influenced their desire to leave.

Many young people are feeling the pull of urban areas in search of employment and accommodation, draining rural areas of vital skills and knowledge.

“There is no way that I’ll be able to afford to stay in the village . . . as house prices go up you just won’t have families, you won’t have young people being able to stay.”

Freya, 18, Northamptonshire



Transport

- Two-thirds of those surveyed (66%) agree that a lack of frequent and reliable public transport is a problem for young people living in rural areas.
- Only 7% of young people wanting to stay living in a rural area surveyed say that frequent and reliable public transport is not at all important to them.
- 86% of the 16-25 year olds who want to leave rural areas surveyed cite infrequent and unreliable public transport as an important concern.

Effective and reliable public transport can grant the twin benefits of decarbonising road traffic, which in 2019 emitted a staggering 110.7 million tonnes of carbon dioxide in the UK,² while providing a means of physical and social mobility for those who need it most.

“If you don’t own a car you can’t go anywhere . . . Buses were pretty terrible when I had to take one to and from college . . . there was one bus every two hours between the hours of eight and five. So, it was not like you were able to study or hang out with friends, unless you’ve got parents to pick you up or you can afford a taxi or something like that.”

Jack, 22, Somerset

Maisie, 16, North Devon



Deeply passionate about climate, public transport, and mental health, Maisie is a champion for young people in her local rural area. But, she's feeling the effects of a lack of transport, overpriced housing and the climate emergency.

‘Life’s good . . . But if I had good public transport, or alternative transport systems that I could use at affordable, sensible prices, that would just make it ten times better.’

At just 16, Maisie is already the Member of Youth Parliament for North Devon. She is grateful to live in the countryside, but recognises the reality that with the lack of these basic services, she, like so many young people, will have to move away from the rural community she grew up in.

‘I’m sat in my garden overlooking fields and I’ve got the sun on my face... it’s really nice to be able to have that and I’m lucky... Maybe if transport actually was better and affordability of houses was better, then it might be a viable option to keep living in the countryside.’



Isolation

- Nearly two-thirds (63%) of young people surveyed agree that feelings of loneliness and isolation is an important issue facing young people living in rural areas.
- 84% of those wanting to move away surveyed cite loneliness and isolation as important reasons.
- 80% of the 16-25 year olds who want to stay in their rural area surveyed say living close to family and friends is an important factor in making that decision.

Hampered by limited public transport options and poor digital connectivity, young people in rural areas already have their hands tied behind their backs when it comes to tackling isolation.



Nature

- Easy access to the countryside is important for 87% of young people who want to stay in rural areas surveyed.
- Only 43% of the 16-25 year olds wanting to leave the countryside surveyed cite a lack of outdoor activities.

Given the enormous difficulties that many have experienced during the recent pandemic and the associated lockdowns, access to nature, green spaces, and our precious countryside has remained a vital lifeline for many, offering much-needed opportunities to find calm in this tumultuous year.



Connectivity

Despite an increase in the flexibility of many people's working arrangements as a result of the coronavirus pandemic, poor digital connectivity – including slow internet speeds and patchy phone reception – remains a key challenge for many in rural areas.

- More than three quarters (76%) of young people who want to move away surveyed say that poor digital connectivity has influenced their desire to leave their rural area.
- Good digital connectivity is important for 87% of those young people who want to stay in rural areas surveyed; 47% deeming it 'very important'.

With home working being a welcome change for many, the digital disparities between urban and rural have been brought into even sharper focus than previously.

- Fewer than a quarter of 16-25 year olds surveyed (23%) want to go into the workplace full-time, highlighting the need for strong digital connectivity for those wishing to work from home.

“My internet is between 8 to 18 megabytes per second – but if you can get that speed you can't get it stable... Connectivity issues are huge and it's not an impossible solution – I'm pretty sure I remember reading that the Outer Hebrides has the best internet speed of anywhere in the country. I don't think politicians take it seriously.”

Jack, 22, Somerset



Employment opportunities

To create and nurture thriving rural communities, young people need motivation and reasons to stay, so that they can contribute to their local economies and make sure those communities have the skills and knowledge they need.

- 84% of the 16-25 year olds who do not want to stay in rural areas surveyed say a lack of wider employment opportunities, outside of land-based or coastal-based jobs, is an important factor. This includes local, opportunity to work remotely.
- More than 4 in 10 (41%) feel that opportunities for wider employment have decreased as a result of the pandemic.



Decision makers

- 62% say decision makers do not pay enough attention to rural areas.
- Just 13% say they pay the right amount of attention.
- Fewer than 1 in 10 (8%) feel listened to by decision makers as a young person living in a rural area.

Despite the indisputable importance of young people in rural areas, two-thirds actively feel that they are not listened to by those in power. There's huge potential for decision makers to win the support of young people, if only they give them the time and attention they deserve.

“Young people are often the voices of the future, and in most cases can offer fresh eyes on situations, leading to solutions to problems which leaders may never have thought of.”
Lucy, 16, Shropshire

Josh, 26, Bedfordshire



Josh loves the countryside, and has, so far, been able to stay living in his village in rural Bedfordshire.

‘The benefits of the countryside are fresh air, greenery... the fact that it’s not too far to go... within five or ten minutes you can be in open space with really nice, lovely views. And also, health and wellbeing. It is kind of a great way to just reconnect.’

But, despite that, he speaks about the lack of opportunity he faced growing up, and finds it can be lonely living in a rural area as a young person.

‘The disadvantage is there wasn’t many opportunities growing up. As I got older, it seemed the demographics changed with people moving away for various reasons. Most people I grew up with have moved away. I’d probably say of the 10 people I used to hang out with, there’s only three or four left. It’s a bit lonely, I find that sometimes there’s very few people around.’

It is clear to Josh though, that these are problems that can be solved. If only decision makers would pay attention.

‘I’d say what would definitely improve things is better broadband connectivity. Another would be investment in facilities, encouraging people in cooperative communities to set up partnerships... coming together for a common goal. I’d say those are two things you could do that I would have thought would be important in retaining people in the countryside.’

Endnotes

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,019 16-25 year olds. Fieldwork was undertaken between 16 and 24 June 2021. The survey was carried out online.

The case studies in this report were gathered independently by CPRE, the countryside charity, during September 2021. The young people who feature in the case studies were contacted using CPRE's own networks and through a separate survey that was shared publicly by CPRE in August 2021. This survey asked young people their views of living in a rural area and for them to share their contact details should they be interested in sharing their story.

References

1. Skerratt, S. Recharging Rural, Report to The Prince's Countryside Fund 2018. The Prince's Countryside Fund.
2. Hinchliff C and Taylor I (2021) Every village, every hour: a comprehensive bus network for rural England. Report for CPRE based on research and modelling by Transport for Quality of Life.



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