Supporting young people in rural areas

A review of issues faced by young people in rural areas in the UK and interventions to support their mental wellbeing and access to employment and training

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June 2023

1. About this brief

NPC conducted a light-touch literature review focused on the challenges faced by young people in rural areas. Our research also aimed to identify evidence-based interventions that can effectively enhance the mental well-being of rural youth and improve their access to training and employment opportunities.

In this brief paper, we present key findings from a substantial body of research that sheds light on the unique challenges faced by young people growing up in rural areas. Additionally, we provide insights into the existing but limited evidence available on effective approaches to supporting this demographic to access education, training and employment.

The [Youth Futures Foundation](#) (YFF) funded this review as part of an evaluation capacity-building project delivered in partnership by [Ipsos](#) and [NPC.](#) The project involved the provision of evaluation capacity building support to organisations that help young people to access training and employment. Originally tailored for a YFF-funded organisation, this review has been adapted to cater to a broader audience of researchers and practitioners. It is one among several learning outputs from the capacity-building project, which aim to capture and share knowledge and insights from the initiative.

> **About Youth Futures Foundation**
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> Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change.

2. Challenges facing young people in rural areas

This section provides an overview of the key issues facing young people in rural areas relating to transport, education, employment and training, social isolation and wellbeing, access to services, housing and digital connectivity.

What is a rural area?

The official definition or classification of rural settlements in England are settlements which, at the time of the 2011 Census, had a resident population of less than 10,000. These include small towns, villages, hamlets, and isolated dwellings. A further categorisation is used at local authority level which defines a local authority as 'predominantly rural' when at least 50% of residents live in rural settlements.[1]

Transport

Research by the Commission for Rural Communities (CRC)[2,3] points to transport as the most significant barrier for young people in rural areas to accessing education, employment and training opportunities. In many rural parts of the country, public transport is expensive and infrequent and may not align with education, work or training hours. The lack of a statutory requirement for free transport post-16 can restrict the range of educational opportunities that young people take up. A reliance on car use and ownership also reinforces disadvantage amongst those without access to a private means of transport within their household.[4]

Education

Educational inequalities are heightened in rural areas. Analysis by the Centre for Education and Youth[5] finds a stronger link between poverty and low pupil

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[1] ONS, Defining rural areas. March 2017
[2] Commission for Rural Community (2006), Rural Disadvantage: Reviewing the evidence.
[3] Commission for Rural Communities (2012), Barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas.
[4] Glass, J., C. Bynner and C. Chapman (2020). Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.
[5] Centre for Education & Youth (2019). Breaking the Link? Attainment, poverty and rural schools. 5th April 2019.

attainment in rural schools, as well as lower pupil progress than their urban counterparts. Young people in rural areas often face a limited range of post-16 options, which can result in the uptake of courses which do not meet their needs or aspirations.[6] The Social Mobility Commission finds that young people are twice as likely to go to university from a social mobility 'hot spot' when compared with a remote rural 'cold spot'.[7]

Employment & training

Rural youth face distinct challenges in the labour market. Research has highlighted the importance of personal networks and contacts for securing work in rural areas, where small firms often dominate.[8] This can be a barrier to some young people who lack contacts, or who may experience discrimination or stigma due to family reputation.[9]

Seasonal, insecure, low-paid and part-time work also characterise many of the opportunities available in rural areas.[10] Alongside the high numbers of small employers, these factors diminish opportunities for training or progress, creating a context where work is often readily accessible but sustainable careers remain out of reach to many. Joseph Roundtree Foundation (JRF) research also highlights how the link between skills and jobs in rural areas can be weaker, as demand for advanced qualifications or experience in a particular sector will often be dispersed over a wide geography.[11]

Fewer opportunities to build skills or progress can contribute to 'fractured transitions'[12] to adulthood, which are thought to be more prevalent in rural areas, whereby a young person's pathway to independence is non-linear and protracted – characterised by a series of low paid, low skilled jobs, punctuated by spells of unemployment. Evidence also indicates lower

[6] Commission for Rural Communities (2012), Barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas.

[7] National Youth Agency (2021). Overlooked: young people and rural youth services. https://static.nya.org.uk/static/d15ff8e9b33bd4cff7b138043e50a358/Overlooked-Report-NYA-Final.pdf

[8] Culliney, M. (2014) 'Going nowhere? Rural youth labour market opportunities and obstacles', Journal of Poverty and Social Justice, 22 (1): 45–57.

[9] Glass, J., C. Bynner and C. Chapman (2020). Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

[10] Cartmel, R. and A. Furlong (2000). Youth unemployment in rural areas. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York. https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/1859353126.pdf

[11] Cartmel, R. and A. Furlong (2000). Youth unemployment in rural areas. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York. https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/1859353126.pdf

[12] Shucksmith, M. (2010). How to promote the youth of rural areas? Report for the European Union, Directorate-General for Internal Policies: European Parliament.

uptake of benefits among young people in rural areas, linked to the complications of claiming with seasonal or irregular work.[13]

Social isolation & wellbeing

A lack of venues, activities, transport, and poor digital connectivity can lead to heightened levels of social isolation among rural youth.[14] Research also highlights the stigmatisation of some families in small communities, often related to issues such as mental health or substance abuse, which can further impact and isolate the most vulnerable young people.[15] A sense of powerlessness has been documented among young people in rural areas where populations may skew towards older age groups and young people may find little on offer for them locally. This can also result in inter-generational tensions. Outmigration of many young people can also impact on the aspirations and wellbeing of 'those who stay'.[16]

The link between rural areas, mental health and risky behaviour is less clear. Young people in predominantly rural areas score better than average on school exclusion and mental health needs indicators, while reporting worse than average scores on levels of risky behaviour, alcohol consumption, smoking and being bullied.[17]

Access to services

Specialist health or support services are often inaccessible to rural communities or limited to those who can access private transport. The increased costs of delivering services in remote areas can also result in fewer or lower quality services being delivered.[18] For instance, the CRC[19] describes how rural schools are more likely to offer online-only careers services, meaning pupils lack the personalised support which is often deemed most effective.

[13] Commission for Rural Communities (2012), Barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas.

[14] Glass, J., C. Bynner and C. Chapman (2020). Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

[15] Cartmel, R. and A. Furlong (2000). Youth unemployment in rural areas. Joseph Rowntree Foundation: York. https://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/default/files/jrf/migrated/files/1859353126.pdf

[16] Commission for Rural Community (2006), Rural Disadvantage: Reviewing the evidence.

[17] National Youth Agency (2021). Overlooked: young people and rural youth services. https://static.nya.org.uk/static/d15ff8e9b33bd4cff7b138043e50a358/Overlooked-Report-NYA-Final.pdf

[18] Asthana S, Halliday J. (2004). What can rural agencies do to address the additional costs of rural services? A typology of rural service innovation. Health Soc Care Community. 12(6):457-65.

[19] Commission for Rural Communities (2012), Barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas.

Many young people in rural areas have little access to youth services. According to the National Youth Agency,[20] youth service spending in rural areas is around 25% lower per head than in urban areas. This is compounded by the higher costs associated with delivering services in remote locations, while low population density makes differentiating programmes or activities by age or need more challenging. Research also points to the reluctance of some young people in small communities to engage with confidential services, such as sexual health or mental health support due to concerns around privacy.[21,22]

Housing

Housing is a critical issue for young people in many rural communities and particularly acute in areas of the country, such as Cornwall, with high levels of second home ownership.[23] The high cost of housing and a lack of availability of social housing or single person dwellings, limit young people's housing options, which can have severe impacts on their wellbeing.

Digital connectivity

While there have been significant improvements, online access is still an issue in some rural parts of the country. By 2020, 93% of rural premises had access to basic broadband, 84% could access superfast broadband, and 46% of rural premises had access to a 4G connection indoors on all four mobile networks.[24] The online shifts accelerated by the pandemic mean that fast internet connections are now essential in accessing many education, training and work opportunities. A recent study found that among rural young people who wanted to move away, 76% said poor digital connectivity was a factor in their decision.[25]

[20] National Youth Agency (2021). Overlooked: young people and rural youth services.
https://static.nya.org.uk/static/d15ff8e9b33bd4cff7b138043e50a358/Overlooked-Report-NYA-Final.pdf
[21] Black, N., K. Scott, M. Shucksmith, (2019) 'Social inequalities in rural England: Impacts on young people post-2008', Journal of Rural Studies, 68: 264-275.
[22] Hodges, C., M. O'Brien, & P. McGorry (2007) 'Headspace: National Youth Mental Health Foundation: Making Headway with Rural Young People and Their Mental Health,' Australian Journal of Rural Health 15 (2): 77–80.
[23] Hoolachan, J., K. McKee, T. Moore & A. Mihaela Soaita (2017). 'Generation rent' and the ability to 'settle down: economic and geographical variation in young people's housing transitions', Journal of Youth Studies, 20(1): 63-78.
[24] Rural England; data cited from Ofcom 2020.
[25] CPRE, The countryside charity (2021). Outpriced and overlooked: Survey on why young people feel forced to leave rural areas.

3. Supporting young people in rural areas

While there is significant research on the issues facing young people in rural communities in the UK, we found little evidence around effective support programmes for these young people. Research into innovation in service design in rural areas has tended to focus on infrastructure or enterprise (for example, NESTA[26] or NICRE[27]). There is a strong body of evidence from North America and Australia around mental health interventions for young people in rural areas, however these rural contexts differ significantly from the UK.

Researchers also point to the lack of attention given to rurality as a factor in youth provision and policy in the UK:

"Most youth policies ignore 'rural', and most rural policies ignore 'youth'".

Shucksmith (2010)[28]

Much of the literature on issues facing young people in rural areas emphasises the importance of policymakers, practitioners, and academics differentiating and understanding the distinct needs of rural youth in order to develop appropriate responses.[29]

Our review found several models which were cited as potential solutions to overcome some of the barriers facing young people in rural areas, particularly around alternative transport provision. The CRC highlights the effectiveness of the Wheels to Work programme in supporting individuals in rural areas to access employment and training opportunities, through the loan or supply of a personal mode of transport, such as a bike, e-bike, moped or car.[30] Community transport models were deemed less effective for

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[26] NESTA (2007). Rural Innovation. London: NESTA. https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/rural_innovation.pdf
[27] https://nicre.co.uk/publications/
[28] Shucksmith, M. (2010). How to promote the youth of rural areas? Report for the European Union, Directorate-General for Internal Policies: European Parliament.
[29] Glass, J., C. Bynner and C. Chapman (2020). Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.
[30] Commission for Rural Communities (2012), Barriers to education, employment and training for young people in rural areas.

young people as their timetables are often unsuitable for accessing work or education. The effectiveness of volunteer-run patient transport schemes in enabling access to healthcare for those without private transport options may also provide lessons for youth service delivery. Schemes in Cornwall have shown how the benefits of such volunteer-led provision extend beyond practical outcomes to enhancing social connections amongst beneficiaries and volunteers.[31]

More research is needed into other models for delivering support to young people in rural areas. The CRC highlights shared apprenticeships, whereby two or more businesses partner to support an apprentice, as an effective way to overcome the obstacles small rural employers face in delivering workplace training. Evidence around detached youth work may also be useful in understanding effective models for service delivery in remote areas.[32] There is a growing body of evidence around nature-based approaches to improve mental wellbeing, which could also inform approaches in rural areas by building on existing assets. Similarly, research from North America and Australia focuses on leveraging the close social networks often present in rural communities, to build effective support mechanisms for those experiencing mental health problems.[33,34]

3.1. A framework for developing positive outcomes for rural children and young people

A framework developed by researchers from Scotland's Rural College (SRUC)'s Rural Policy Centre[35] brings together individual, community and external factors which underpin the wellbeing of children and young people in rural areas (see Figure 1 overleaf). It provides a useful lens for understanding the elements of a holistic approach to youth support in more remote settings. This includes:

- Building a wide range of skills and experience which help young people navigate and build resilience to non-linear transitions

[31] Asthana S, Halliday J. (2004). What can rural agencies do to address the additional costs of rural services? A typology of rural service innovation. Health Soc Care Community. 12(6):457-65.

[32] National Youth Agency (2021). Overlooked: young people and rural youth services. https://static.nya.org.uk/static/d15ff8e9b33bd4cff7b138043e50a358/Overlooked-Report-NYA-Final.pdf

[33] Hodges, C., M. O'Brien, & P. McGorry (2007) 'Headspace: National Youth Mental Health Foundation: Making Headway with Rural Young People and Their Mental Health,' Australian Journal of Rural Health 15 (2): 77–80.
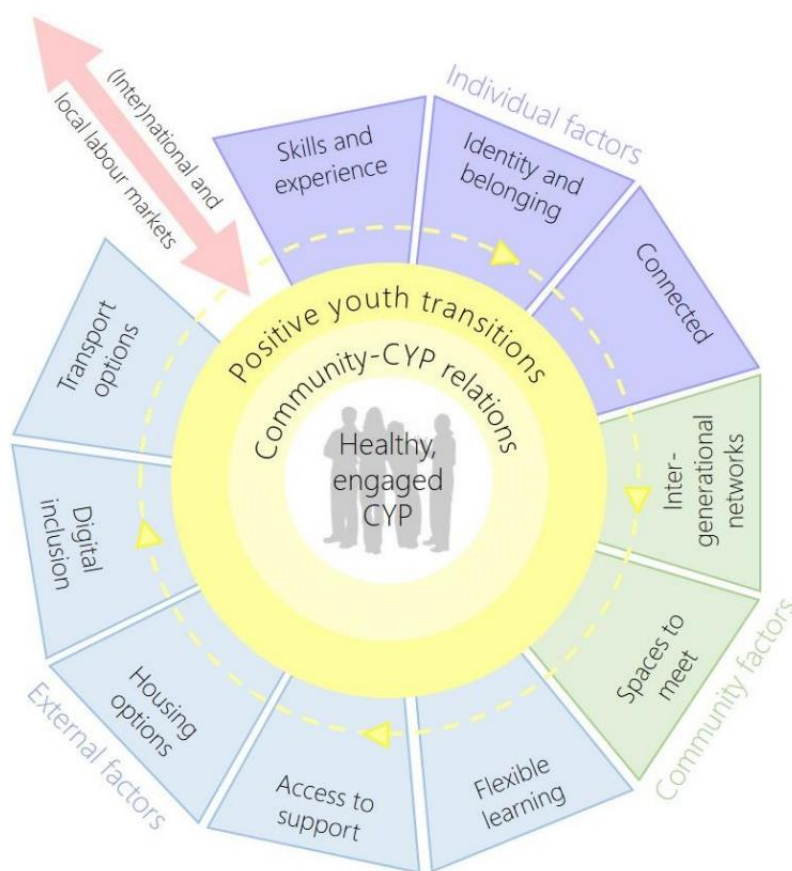
[34] Moore, M. & B. Walton (2013) 'Improving the Mental Health Functioning of Youth in Rural Communities,' Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal, 5 (1): Article 6.

[35] Glass, J., C. Bynner and C. Chapman (2020). Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

- A focus on building positive place-based identity and belonging for young people, with more equal power relations between older and younger residents

- Building connections to strengthen young people's support and opportunity networks

- Co-ordinating access to a range of services through a single point of contact

Figure 1: A Conceptual framework for developing positive outcomes for rural Children and Young People[36]

Individual factors	Community factors	External factors
Skills and experience → *Resilience to non-linear transitions* Identity and belonging → *Address marginalisation and visibility issues* Connected → *Strong personal network in the community*	Inter-generational networks → *Embedding young people in the idyll* Spaces to meet → *Opportunities to socialise and reduce isolation*	Flexible learning → *Increase opportunities* Access to support → *Health, employment* Housing options → *Accessibility/cost* Digital inclusion → *Infrastructure and devices* Transport options → *Public/private*

36 Glass, J., C. Bynner and C. Chapman (2020). Children and young people and rural poverty and social exclusion: A review of evidence. Glasgow: Children's Neighbourhoods Scotland.

4. Summary and next steps

This review has explored the key challenges and barriers facing young people in rural areas in accessing education, training and employment, and the potential benefits of youth programmes that aim to address these. However, more evidence is required to understand how support for young people in remote areas can be delivered effectively.

Wider questions emerging from this review for future research therefore include:

- How can programmes be designed that help overcome the barriers facing young people in rural areas e.g. transport, housing, digital connectivity, lack of services and isolation?

- How can young people in rural areas be supported to manage fractured or non-linear transitions?

- How can youth programmes leverage the assets of working in a rural location as part of their approach? What value does this bring to their users and what other approaches can be draw on?

We hope this review provides a useful lens to inform the design of youth programmes in rural contexts, and how rurality acts as a factor in programme design, delivery and impact. The lessons learnt could help strengthen the impact of rural youth programmes, as well as addressing the lack of evidence on delivering effective support to young people in rural settings in the UK.