



State of Rural Services 2025



A Report for Rural England CIC by Professor Martin Phillips, School of Geography, Geology and Environment, University of Leicester

Executive Summary



About This Report

This report provides an updated picture of how people in rural areas across England access and experience essential local services. It draws on official statistics, national datasets, and service-specific evidence captured up to the close of 2024 to track changes since 2018. The research has been undertaken by Rural England CIC, an independent, non-political research organisation focused on the wellbeing of rural communities.

The aim of this report is to support evidence-based decision-making. It is written for use by councils, public service providers, national and regional agencies, charities, researchers and indeed anyone with an interest in rural England.

Access to rural services continues to be shaped by low population density, physical distance from services, an ageing population profile, transport constraints, and digital connectivity gaps. This report helps illustrate how these factors combine across different service areas.



The full State of Rural Services 2025 report can be downloaded from the Publications section of the Rural England CIC website.

[Download the full report here.](#)

Highlight Insights

This year's report presents clear and consistent evidence of differences in how easily people in rural and urban areas can access key services, with challenges typically greater in the most remote communities.

Rural residents are more likely to find it difficult to access almost every major service.



10% of rural residents report difficulty accessing hospital services, compared to 3% in urban areas.



13% of rural respondents reported difficulty accessing GP services, compared to 10% in urban areas.



Public transport and shops all show similarly wide gaps.

These differences in access show that challenges for rural residents are not confined to a single service area, but can have combined effects on health, wellbeing, opportunities, and social inclusion.

Rural Issues

1

22%

of premises in England's most remote rural areas (Isolated Dwellings) do not have access to a 10 Mbps broadband connection.

2

57

The average minimum travel time to reach a GP surgery by public transport/walking for people living in Rural Villages, Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings is at least 57 minutes.

3

75%

of libraries are located in urban areas, leaving many rural residents reliant on travel or mobile services.

Health and Social Care

The report highlights persistent differences in access to health services between rural and urban areas. Rural residents are less likely to live near hospitals, and the number of rural hospitals has fallen by 35% over the last 15 years.

10%

of rural respondents reported difficulty accessing hospital services, compared with 3% of urban respondents.

The average travel time to reach a GP in rural areas by walking and/or public transport (where it exists) is at least 57 minutes in Villages and Rural Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings, which is much longer in hamlets or isolated dwellings

Older adults are more prevalent in rural areas and often face difficulty accessing social care.

There are just **1,706** registered care homes located in rural England, the majority of which are in less sparsely populated areas. This limited distribution can create serious access issues for older rural residents, especially those in more remote locations where public transport and care-at-home options are also constrained.

Transport and Mobility

Fewer supported bus routes and reduced service frequencies affect residents of all ages, with the greatest impact on those without access to a car.

1%

In hamlets and isolated dwellings, buses account for less than 1% of journeys.

Bus usage in rural areas is seen to be at a historic low in terms of service use and coverage.

Finding show that only **50%** of eligible pensioners in the most rural areas now use concessionary bus passes (nearly 70% in Urban Conurbations). They have faced reductions in the concessions being provided, as well as declines in overall bus service provision.

Libraries and Local Support Services

Library provision in rural areas has declined in recent years, with some facilities closing or reducing hours.

While mobile libraries and community-managed hubs have helped maintain some access, the majority of libraries are located in urban areas — around 75% of all libraries. This leaves many rural residents reliant on travel or mobile services where available, with access particularly limited for those without private transport in more remote settlements.

Support services such as warm spaces and food banks are more widespread but remain concentrated in urban centres and in larger or more accessible rural settlements. This distribution may not align with the areas of greatest need, particularly given that these locations often have stronger supermarket provision. Limited public transport can further restrict access for residents in smaller or more remote rural communities.

Retail and Access to Local Services

Rural communities rely on a network of over 18,900 convenience stores, many acting as vital service points. However,

49%

of rural convenience stores are the only shop in their community.

96%

of rural postcodes with a supermarket have just one such store, reducing local choice.

83%

of rural residents can walk to a food store in under an hour — but less than 30% can do so in under 30 minutes.

The number of rural community shops in the UK reached over **420** in 2024, showing strong survival rates.

Employment

Rural economies are diverse, however,

13

Only 13 Jobcentre Plus offices are located in rural settlements across England, limiting access for residents in more remote areas.

Digital-only services can exclude people who lack the access or confidence to use them.

Digital and Mobile Connectivity

Digital inclusion has improved, however is still uneven in rural areas. 54% of rural premises can now access gigabit broadband (compared with 88% in urban areas), however,

22%

of premises in rural hamlets and isolated dwellings do not have access to a 10 Mbps broadband connection.

Children and Young People's Services

Access to childcare and youth services remains more challenging in rural areas. Long travel times, fewer providers, and staff shortages are common barriers.

The number of formal early years and preschool childcare places per 100 children under five is lower in rural areas than in urban ones, with particularly limited provision in sparsely populated locations. Accessibility varies considerably between and within localities, as shown by significant differences in provision on a community-by-community basis. While recent government initiatives have focused on reducing costs, they have not directly addressed the geographical accessibility issues faced by rural families.

Where provision is available, a lower proportion of rural childcare places are rated Good or Outstanding by Ofsted compared to urban areas, further compounding access challenges.

Conclusion

The 2025 State of Rural Services report provides a comprehensive overview of rural service access in England today. It shows how multiple gaps in provision add up to substantial disadvantage for rural residents.

While communities are often resilient and creative, gaps in infrastructure, funding and access remain a barrier to equal opportunity.

The report aims to support better understanding and planning to ensure all places are well served.

For More Information

Visit www.ruralengland.org to download the full report and explore other Rural England research.



[Download the full report here.](#)

Supporters

