RURAL ENGLAND
NETWORKING / RESEARCH / LEARNING

State of Rural Services 2025

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

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Report Summary

This is the fourth *State of Rural Services* report published by Rural England - first published in 2016 - and it returns to the format of the first two, which sought to collate and present information on a range of services available to residents and businesses in rural areas of England. This report focuses on presenting information that was available at the end of 2024 about the provision and access to a selection of services related to: 1) consumption and finance; 2) education, welfare and culture; 3) health; and 4) travel and communication. Sixteen specific types of service provision are examined in the report, namely:

- Retailing
- Banking and Access to Cash
- Primary and Secondary Schools
- Pre-School/Early-Years Child Care
- Further Education
- Employment and Welfare Benefits
- Food Banks and Pantries
- Warm Spaces
- Public Libraries
- Primary Health Care (GPs, Dentists and Pharmacies)
- Specialist and Emergency Health Care
- Private Transport
- Public Bus Services
- Community Transport
- Broadband
- Mobile Phone Services

In relation to the four groupings of these 16 services, the report's key findings include:

Consumption and Financial Services

Continued concerns remain about the closure of rural shops, although it appears that the number of rural convenience stores has been relatively stable in recent years, with some growth occurring during and after the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is evidence of a fall in the number of independent retail stores in the last couple of years, and that isolated convenience stores - where there is only one shop in a locality – have figured significantly within shop closures.

Supermarkets are concentrated in urban and in Town and Fringe Areas, with Co-operative and Spa stores being the predominant providers of supermarkets in rural and fringe areas. There is a clear lack of inter-supermarket competition within many rural areas.

There has been continued growth in the number of community-owned shops over the last three decades, with these stores exhibiting high survival rates and financial stability, despite facing pressures during the Covid-19 pandemic and from rising costs and supply chain challenges.

There have been marked declines in the number of rural bank branches and cash points, with rural areas disproportionately affected. The impacts of these closures may be lessened by a general decline in the use of cash payments, with debit and contactless payments becoming increasingly important. However, cash remains essential for many people, especially those who are digitally excluded or prefer in-person transactions, including many elderly people, of whom there are proportionately more in rural areas.

Educational, Welfare and Cultural Services

Concerns have also long been raised about the closure of rural schools, and there appears to have been a small decline in the total number of schools in rural England over the last decade. Rural schools are generally smaller than urban ones, and although there has been an increase in rural school size over the last decade, this has been less than in urban areas. There is a lower average staff-pupil ratio in rural schools than in urban ones, and there is some evidence to suggest that schools with small numbers of pupils perform well in Ofsted assessments.

School choice in rural areas can be significantly reduced by travel distances, which significantly increase for secondary schools and Further Education Colleges. Public transport times to schools and colleges are particularly extended for people living in sparsely populated rural areas, with minimum average journey times to the nearest Further Education institution being calculated as being an hour or more for young people living in villages or small hamlets/dispersed dwellings in a sparse setting. It appears that access to a car may be an important conditioner of participation in Further Education, although some Colleges have developed multiple-site campuses, and these could be an important mechanism to improve access from rural locations.

Sparsely populated and more rural areas may also have significantly lower levels of preschool or early-years childcare, although it is also evident that childcare provision has considerable localised variations, both in its overall accessibility and in terms of the availability of formal and high-quality provisions. Recent Government initiatives to increase the accessibility of early-years childcare have focused on reducing its costs and do not really address issues of geographical accessibility that may be critical to rural residents.

Job Centres, and their sequel, Job Centres Plus, have been located by design in central locations. Only 11 of the Job Centre Plus offices running in England in 2024 are in rural areas, with these all being located in Town and Fringe settlements and predominantly in a small set of relatively remote regions. The lack of rural Job Centre Plus offices might contribute to the low uptake of Universal Credit and other benefits that have been observed within rural areas.

The voluntary sector welfare provisions of food banks/pantries and warm spaces are much more widespread, although, again, there is a clear concentration of provision in urban centres and in larger and more accessible rural locations. These may not be the locations where there is the most need for food banks/pantries, given that these are the rural settlements where there is the strongest supermarket provision. The extent to which people who live in other rural settlements will be able to access these services if they are reliant on public transport is also a concern.

Food banks and warm spaces have often been developed by pre-existing voluntary/third sector groups and organisations, and are often conducted in established spaces of community activity. These spaces may be owned by voluntary/third sector organisations, but also frequently include buildings owned by public sector organisations such as schools, libraries and community centres.

Public libraries have long been multi-functional spaces, acting as spaces for information gathering, meetings, social interaction, quiet relaxation, refuge, civic identity and economic regeneration. They have, however, also been a service that has been impacted by closures, and are shown in this study to be predominantly located in urban areas, with Town and Fringe areas also figuring significantly. The majority of rural residents, therefore, have to travel to libraries or make use of digital forms of access. A few rural areas are served by mobile library services, but it appears that these have also been impacted by closures over the last decade. Spatial accessibility to libraries may be most limited in rural areas, which also have high proportions of the elderly, which is an issue of concern given that this group may be among those with the lowest levels of spatial mobility.

Healthcare

Issues of elderly populations, spatial mobility and closure of service provision are also major concerns in relation to rural healthcare. Rural areas as a whole have higher proportions of elderly residents, who tend to have higher healthcare needs and declining spatial mobility. Given this, it is concerning that many forms of primary and emergency healthcare appear to be quite concentrated in urban areas and selected types of rural areas. GPs, whilst being relatively higher in number in relation to the residential populations of rural areas compared to urban ones, are quite concentrated in less sparse rural areas, as are also dentists and pharmacies, who both also tend to be located in Town and Fringe settlements.

It is also evident that there has been a net decline in the number of GP surgeries in rural areas, and although this has been significantly less than reductions in the number of urban surgeries, it is likely to have appreciably increased the distances that many people in rural areas will have to travel to access a GP.

Closures, along with reductions in opening hours and an increase in temporary closures, have been identified as impacting pharmacy provision in England, albeit with evidence that rural areas may have been impacted rather more than urban areas.

The number of hospitals in rural areas appears to have declined by 35% over the last 15 years, with only 170 hospitals being rurally located in England as of November 2024. The majority of these are again located in less sparse Town and Fringe Areas, with these including both small, non-acute/non-specialist Community, District and Cottage hospitals, and some large acute and specialist hospitals constructed on greenfield sites with good transport links. Despite such links, in general, both travel and ambulance response times in rural areas are significantly longer than in urban areas.

Given the extended travel and ambulance response times, localised access to defibrillators is potentially of considerable significance in rural areas. It appears that these are indeed widely distributed across rural England and its various settlement types, although less widespread within areas classified as sparse.

Although registered care homes are located principally in urban areas, there were 1,706 sited in rural locations in December 2024, principally in Town and Fringe and Village settlements in less sparse rural areas. There were, however, some clusters of care homes in some relatively remote places and in coastal areas and locations close to aesthetically valued landscapes.

Concentrations of care homes in a locality can also result in increased demands being placed on NHS services within these areas, whilst a lack of these within an area can lead to elderly people having to move away from places where they have lived for many years.

There is a lack of spatially differentiated data related to mental health and associated healthcare facilities, which makes examination of the rural dimensions of both extremely difficult. Studies have highlighted anxiety and depression within households involved in the agricultural sector, particularly amongst women, and also issues of isolation and loneliness within wider rural communities. Attention has been drawn to the difficulties of accessing mental health services and support within rural areas, and how limitations in public transport and Internet access can act as barriers to engagement with these services.

It is clear that many rural areas lack any healthcare-related infrastructure, be this a GP surgery, a dentist, a chemist or pharmacy, a care home or a defibrillator, let alone a hospital. Even in town and fringe areas, where much of the rural healthcare infrastructure is located, many settlements have none. This means that many rural residents and workers are reliant on travelling to other locations to access healthcare services, or have to make use of digital or other modes of remote delivery**.**

Transport and Communication Services

Travel and digital modes of communication and delivery are not just of significance to healthcare, but have been shown to be of critical significance in accessing most of the services discussed in this report. Rural residents have been shown to travel further than their urban counterparts, with those in smaller settlements, such as villages, hamlets and areas of isolated rural dwellings, generally travelling the furthest, a pattern that potentially reflects the lack of services within many of these rural settlements.

The Covid-19 pandemic triggered significant reductions in travel and increases in the use of online modes of service delivery, as well as increases in homeworking. While there have been significant returns to pre-Covid practices in the post-pandemic period, it is also evident that there have been significant reductions in journey frequencies and overall distances travelled within rural areas.

Private vehicles continue to dominate rural travel, particularly in areas classified as Village and Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings, with buses constituting less than 1% of journeys undertaken by residents in these areas. There has clearly been a significant decline in the use of public transport within these areas since 2018. Passenger numbers fell during the pandemic and have not recovered to earlier levels, which in turn has led to significant reductions in the areas served by private bus operators, such that bus use and coverage have been seen to have reached a historic low. There has also been a decline in the proportion of people of pensionable age applying for concessionary fares, with areas of Rural Villages and Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings having both the lowest and the least level of recovery in numbers since the Pandemic.

Community transport has been promoted as a means to address limitations in access to key services emerging from the current structures of service and transport provision. While many community transport schemes appear to be run from urban locations, and those run from rural settlements are principally located in Town and Fringe areas, they may well seek to serve populations in other types of rural locality, as well as provide a means for their members to access health and social care services. While clearly of value, as currently developed, they seem insufficiently widespread and open to public use to be able to ameliorate the widespread decline in public bus services.

In the UK, post offices have declined in number since the 1960s, but the Post Office maintains that it continues to provide a level of access for rural populations in England that exceeds the Government's accessibility requirement that 95% of the rural population can access a post office outlet within three miles. It is clear that post office outlets are more widely distributed in rural England than many other forms of service provision, although a growing number of these outlets are provided through outreach and click-and-collect forms of provision.

Broadband and mobile connections are increasingly used within the delivery of services, and hence the provision of an infrastructure enabling these forms of communication is increasingly seen to be of central importance to the performance of everyday life as well as business. The Government has established obligations on broadband and mobile providers to provide particular, and improved, levels of service, and it is clear that both broadband and mobile infrastructures in rural England have improved in coverage and speed since the *2018 State of Rural Services* report. However, there are still significant disparities in broadband and mobile infrastructural provisions both between rural and urban areas, and within rural areas. Smaller rural settlements and rural areas that are sparsely populated, for example, tend to figure prominently amongst the locations that have not reached the government's accessibility broadband criteria in 2024, and also amongst the places with the lowest proportion of premises with higher speed ultra-fast and gigabit broadband. Indoor access to mobile signal is an issue across many rural areas, with the cessation of 3G network provision potentially making this issue worse unless there are significant improvements in the 4G and 5G networks.

Policy Implications

The report briefly considers some of the policy implications of its findings. Attention is drawn to the evidence of rural service decline and inequalities in accessibility identified in this report, and policy options to address these, including the establishment of accessibility requirements and the potential to foster multi-service delivery outlets.

The social consequences of public transport decline are also emphasised, along with calls for restructuring funding, the impact of community initiatives, and the need for policymakers to consider the rural impacts of any further reductions in public transport or public service provision

The presence of digital divides in broadband and mobile infrastructures is also highlighted. While there is clear evidence of significant infrastructural improvements across many parts of rural England, there is also evidence of continuing limitations in coverage in some rural areas, as well as a lag in speed improvements between rural and urban digital infrastructures. These two issues are still insufficiently addressed in contemporary government policies.

Rural Evidence Base

The report ends by reviewing its use of datasets and the availability of information related to rural services. It highlights the comments of the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2023) about the lack of information relating to mental health, before noting a wider lack of data differentiation into sub-national geographical areas, which often makes it difficult to distinguish between rural and urban areas across a range of services.. It is suggested that a key policy implication of this study is the need for greater use and dissemination of data at sub-local authority levels. Attention is also drawn to changes in the Rural-Urban Classification and how this may impact future identifications of intra-rural variations, as well as analysis of temporal changes in rural service provision. Finally, the report highlights both the value and limitations of data provision by third sector organisations involved in service provision**,** and recommends that improvements could be made in data dissemination by both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

1. Introduction

Purpose

This is the fourth *State of Rural Services* report published by Rural England CIC. Earlier reports were written in 2016, 2018 and 2021, with the last of these assessing the impacts of the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and the associated spatial lockdowns and economic and social restrictions that emerged from March 2020 and continued through 2021 and, indeed, into 2022. In the two years after this, there is evidence of both some 'bounce-back' to conditions pre-the pandemic, including processes of change that might adversely impact rural areas, and the fostering of new or considerably accelerated dynamics, including heightening use of online retailing and communication, increasing levels of home-working, rising prices and restricted supply chains (Colomb and Gallent 2022; Hamiduddin and Gallent 2024; Phillips 2024; Wilson et al. 2025). It therefore seems a reasonable time to return to the format of the first two *State of Rural Services* reports, where there was a focus on collating and presenting evidence about a range of services available to rural residents and businesses in the rural areas of England. Specifically, the *State of Rural Services 2025* report seeks to present information available as of the end of 2024, about the provision and access to a selection of economic, welfare, cultural, health, transport and communication services that provide important resources to people in their everyday lives and at key moments in these. The report also seeks to present evidence about changes in rural service provision that have occurred since the 2018 and 2021 *State of Rural Services* reports, and hence to provide some assessment as to the overall impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. Attention will also be placed on comparisons with service provisions in urban areas of England, to provide assessments as to the extent to which changes are common across urban and rural areas of England, or whether people and/or businesses in its countryside are being particularly disadvantaged or accruing relative benefits from the changes.

This report aims to provide an evidence base that can inform and stimulate debate about the delivery of services to rural communities. The report does not seek to outline specific policy proposals, although it does aim to provide policy-relevant information and highlight areas where policy developments may be of value as they could potentially improve the lives and businesses of populations living in rural England. A key proposition of this study is that the service needs of rural residents and organisations should be much more widely appreciated, not least because many of their needs appear likely to remain largely unfulfilled despite many new developments in modes of service delivery. Many contemporary developments, including those related to digital communication, hold clear potential to overcome some long-standing challenges in rural service delivery related to physical movement and often quite dispersed populations, but as this report shows, their development and/or operation often work to reinforce, and in some cases accentuate, existing social and economic barriers and differences in service accessibility. However, the report will also highlight how both top-down governmental initiatives and bottom-up voluntary initiatives have produced instances of improved service delivery.

Focus

Services can be defined as the provision of resources and support to achieve desired activities and outcomes, and they can be provided in a multitude of ways, including unintentionally and through a range of agencies that consciously seek to provide services. These agencies or service providers can operate as private sector organisations, but also are often public sector/governmental organisations, voluntary and community sector institutions and groups, and indeed sometimes individuals acting alone or as small collectives. Many service providers often work in partnership with each other, including cross-sectorally, so provision of a particular service may be delivered through a combination of public, private and voluntary agencies. The recipients or consumers of services are also diverse, being potentially businesses and organisations, but also individuals and households.

Given this diversity, it is not possible to address all aspects of service provision in rural England within a single document, and hence, as with earlier *State of Rural Services* reports, attention is focused on a narrow, but diverse, set of services. Specifically, this report will focus on services related to consumption and finance; culture, education and welfare; health; and travel and communication. Within these service areas, 16 specific types of service provision are examined, namely: retailing; banking and access to cash; primary and secondary schooling; pre-school/early-years childcare; further education; employment and welfare benefits; food banks and pantries; warm spaces; public libraries; primary healthcare, including GPs, dentists and pharmacies; specialist and emergency healthcare in hospitals; private transport; public bus services; community transport; and broadband and mobile connectivity. Of these services, 14 have been considered in previous *State of Rural Services* reports, but the study of childcare and warm spaces is being undertaken for the first time in this year's study, reflecting the significant concerns that have been expressed about early-years provision and the rising cost of energy over the last few years.

Methodology

This report has been constructed using existing sources that are largely publicly available, although the Warm Welcome Campaign also kindly shared some information that they have produced for themselves. Extensive use has been made of data published in association with the *Statistical Digest of Rural England*, produced by Defra in conjunction with the Government Statistical Service (e.g. Defra 2024, 2025), although this has only been presented after some further analysis. Indeed, much of the data used in creating this report has undergone some form of additional analysis, often in terms of creating more rural-focused datasets than those that have been published so far. Further details of how this has been done are provided in the following section.

Use has also been made of published research reports, policy statements, newspaper articles, online commentaries and some fieldwork observations, although no detailed original (or primary) research has been undertaken. Whilst this would have enabled more in-depth investigation of issues addressed in the report, the resources needed to have done this type of in-depth investigation research were beyond the scope and resourcing of this particular project. What the project has been able to do, however, is to provide, first, a general overview of the state of contemporary service provision in rural England, and second, some indications of potential challenges to and limitations in this provision. Thirdly, it has also identified some significant gaps in the current rural evidence base, which stem variously from relevant datasets not being produced, the unavailability of publicly accessible data, and/or a failure to produce or provide data in a spatially disaggregated form that enables the differentiation of rural from other types of space, such as the urban and/or the suburban, and also importantly, the identification of different forms or types of countryside. There is now quite a widespread recognition that the English countryside, like many others, is quite ‘differentiated’ (Hodge and Monk 2004; Murdoch et al. 2003; Smith et al. 2019), but it is often difficult to translate that recognition into the production of detailed and systematic empirical analysis. It is hoped that some of these evidence gaps could be addressed in future, either by Rural England or by other organisations.

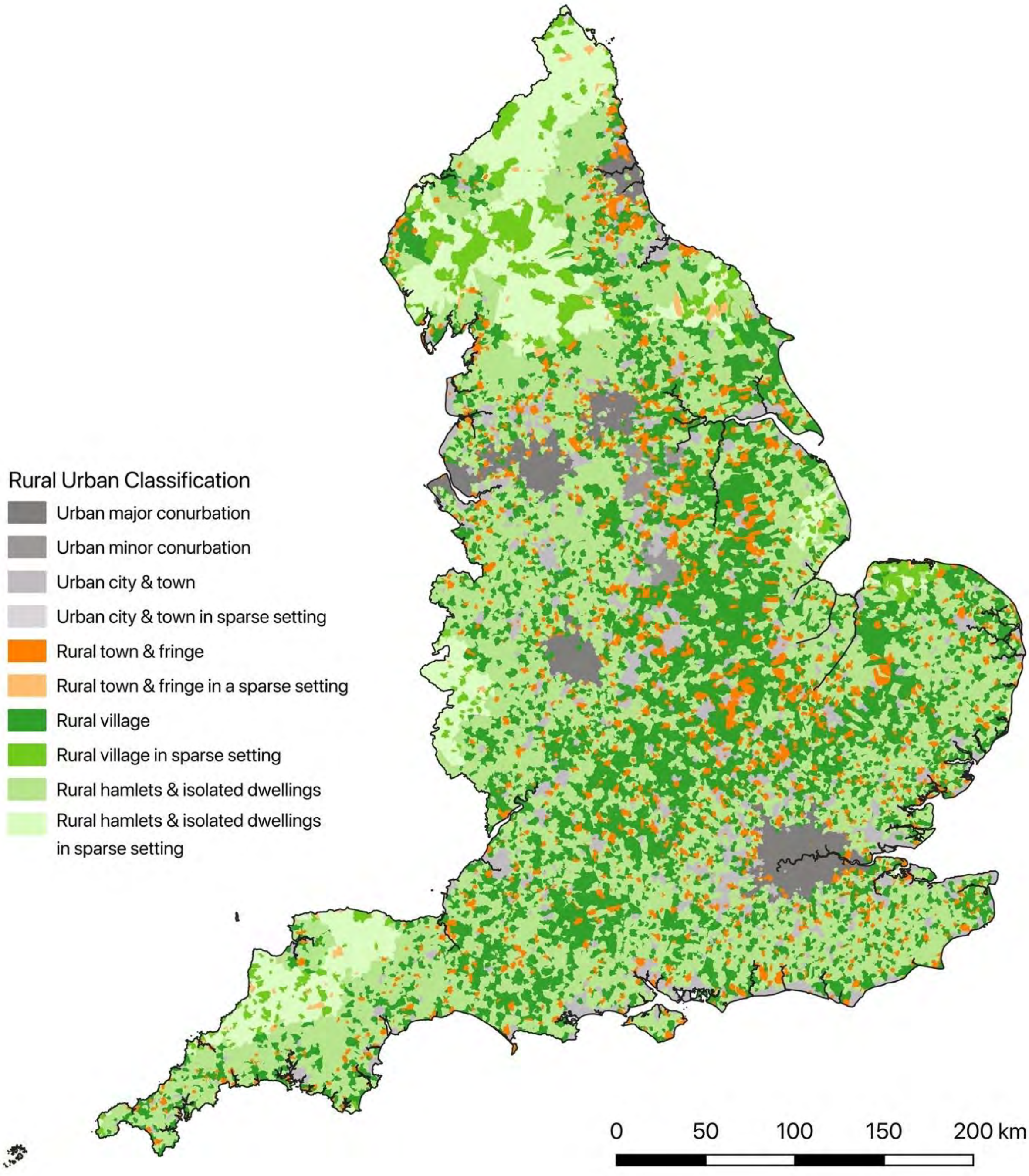
Definitions of Rural England

The delimitation of rural areas, and indeed, of different types of rural or countryside areas, has long been a subject of discussion and analysis (e.g. Bibby 2013; Cloke 1977; Cloke and Edwards 1986; Harrington and O'Donoghue 1998). This report has followed the practice of earlier Rural England *State of Rural Services* reports in making use, wherever possible, of official rural-urban definitions and classifications as established by Defra and the Office for National Statistics, working initially alongside the Countryside Agency, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and the Welsh Assembly (see Bibby and Shepherd 2004). These definitions and classifications were initially established for England and Wales in association with the 2001 Census and then updated in connection with the 2011 Census. When this research was commissioned by Rural England it had been announced that a revised Rural Urban Classification was under construction for use with the 2021 Census, but this was only released on the 5th March 2025, by which time this report had been largely drafted.

The Rural-Urban Classifications developed for the 2001 to 2021 Censuses were created at a series of different geographic levels, three of which are particularly important for this report. The most spatially refined and detailed versions were produced at the level of so-called '*output areas*', which are amalgamations of adjacent postcode areas which collectively contained a minimum of 100 residents and 40 households, with a recommended size initially of 125 households although in practice the average output area population was 297 in 2001, with this increasing to 309 in the 2011 Census (Office for National Statistics 2022). These output areas are classified as urban if the majority of their populations are calculated as lying within built-up areas with a population of 10,000 people or more, with all the other ones deemed 'rural'. The precise categorisation of these urban and rural output areas is then determined through measures of population density and sparsity. The former is used to differentiate what are described as settlement categories, with the urban differentiated into three categories (major conurbations, minor conurbations and cites and town) and the rural into three (town and fringe, villages, and hamlets and isolated dwellings). Although derived from population densities, this classification's categories have a strong morphological resonance in that it is possible to visualise how population densities connect to different-sized built environments. Sparsity, on the other hand, is a measure of the extent to which there are other population concentrations around a particular area, with there being a differentiation of this measurement into sparse and less sparse. The sparsity measurement and categories can be seen to be an indicator of the remoteness, or not, of an area. Bringing the measures of settlement type and sparsity together, the output area classification in 2001 and 2011 differentiated six types of rural areas and four types of urban areas (see Figure 1).

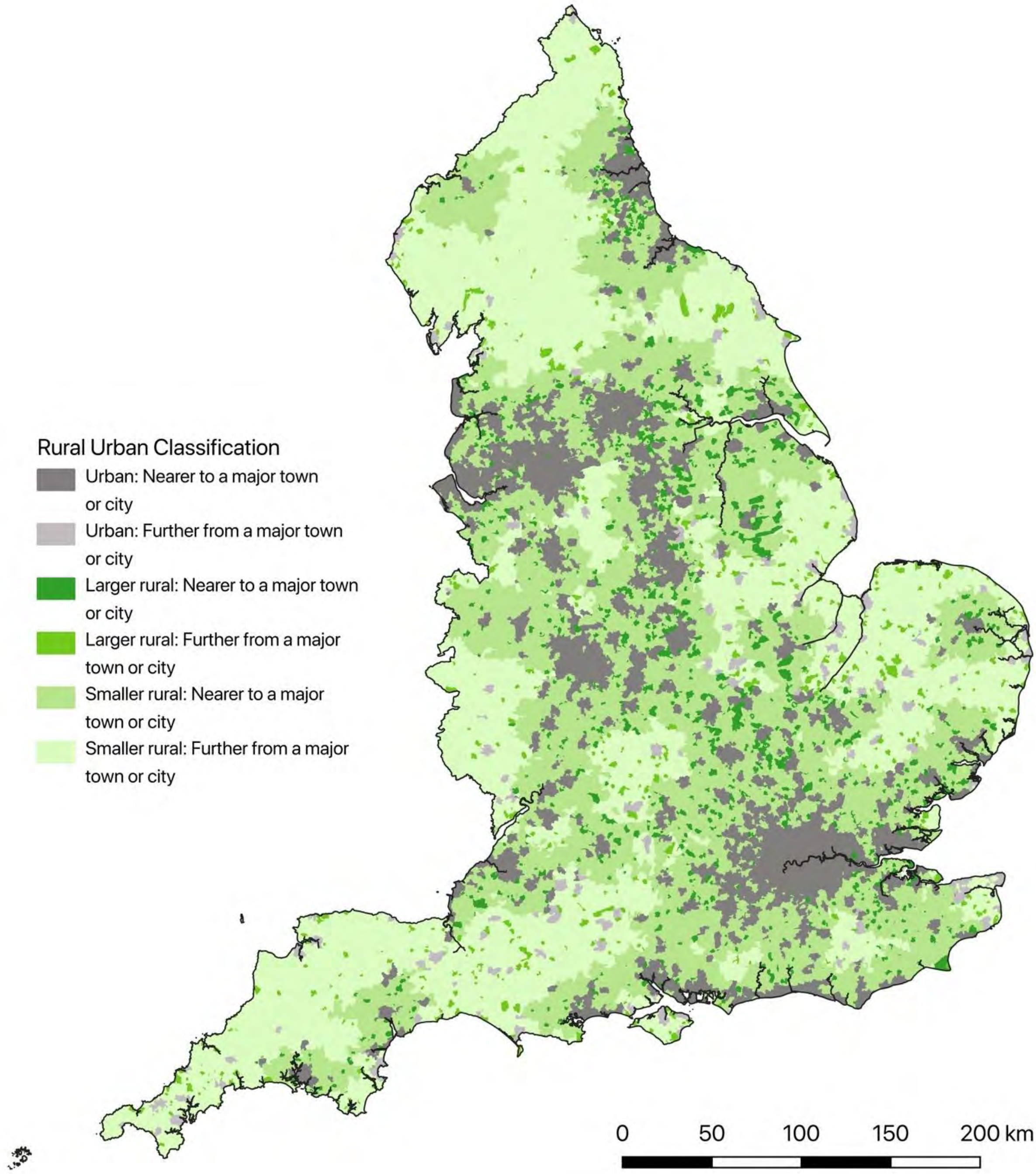
The recently announced Rural Urban Classification associated with the 2021 Census employs a significantly reduced number of categories at the output level: only two urban and four rural. This classification still draws on a 10,000-population threshold to differentiate the urban and rural output areas, although now linked to what are described as 'Amalgamated Built Up Areas' (or ABUAs). These newly designated areas are defined as amalgamations of built-up areas that lie within 200 metres of each other and have a road connection. The classification also retains population density measurements to differentiate different types of rural settlement, although now only into larger and smaller categories, which seem to rather lose the morphological resonance of the earlier classifications' differentiation of settlement types. A further change is that the sparsity measurement has been replaced by a completely new variable, entitled 'Relative access', which is an assessment of the extent to which an area is 'near', or not, to a 'major town or city'. Nearness is delimited temporally rather than by spatial distance and the major towns and cities are defined as built-up areas with 75,000 usual residents or more. Estimated travel times by private road vehicles of less or more than 30 minutes are used to distinguish between areas that are 'Nearer to a major town or city' or 'Further from a major town or city', with this categorisation then being integrated with the settlement classification to create a 6-fold categorisation of output areas, as illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 1: Rural-Urban Classification of Output Areas Derived from 2011 Census



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2016) Rural Urban Classification (2011) of Output Areas in EW (Newport: Office for National Statistics), https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/datasets/ed33e08c81244b77a15e00545be084e1_0/explore; accessed 6/2/25.

Figure 2: Rural-Urban Classification of Output Areas Derived from 2021 Census



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2025) Rural Urban Classification (2021) of Output Areas in EW (Newport: Office for National Statistics), https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/ datasets/ed33e08c81244b77a15e00545be084e1_0/explore; accessed 6/2/25.

A comparison of Figures 1 and 2 reveals that the Rural-Urban classifications associated with the 2011 and 2021 Censuses produce quite different images of rural England. The earlier classification presents an image of quite significant localised variability: very differently classified areas appear in close proximity to each other across large areas of England. The recently introduced classification, on the other hand, produced more regionalised patterns of differentiations, whereby urban areas near to major towns or cities are surrounded by adjacent zones of smaller rural settlements, which are also near to major towns or cities, with additional regions of small rural settlements further from these towns and cities being located in areas beyond these two zones.

Figure 3: The Output Level Categorisation of Rural and Urban Areas Employed in Relation to the 2001 and 2011 Censuses

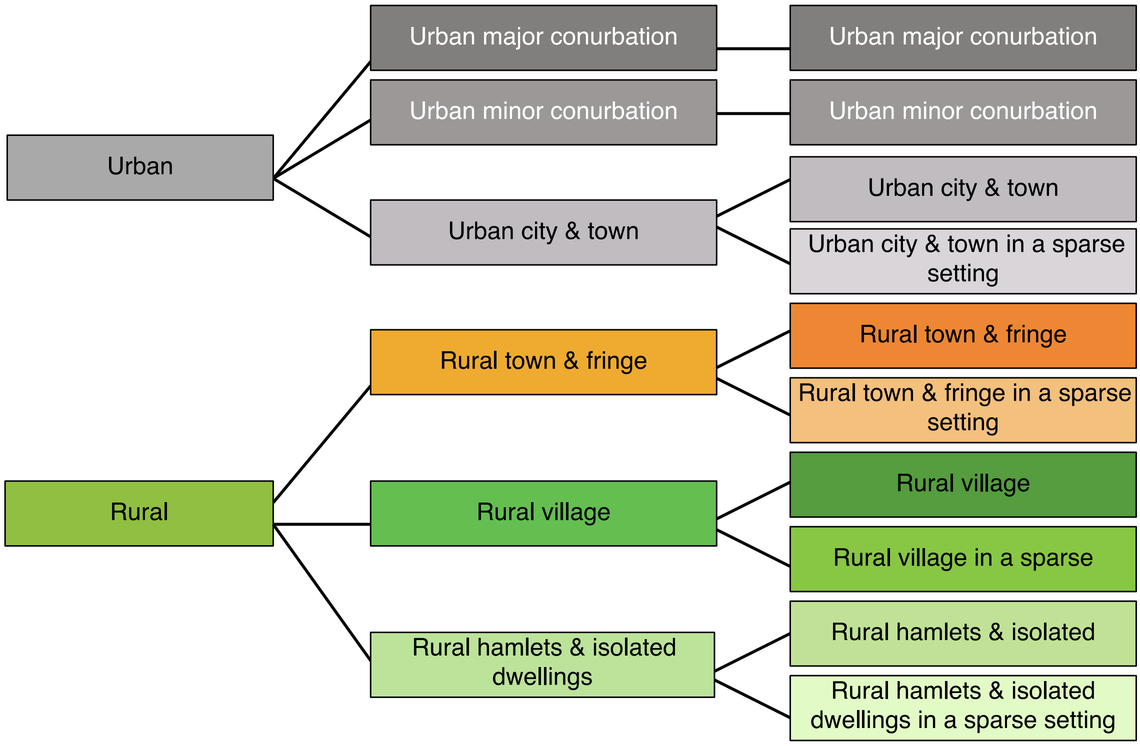


Table 1 shows how the categorisations of the two systems of classification relate to each other when applied to 2021 delimited Output Areas in England. It records how, as would be expected, most areas classified as Urban Major or Minor Conurbations in the 2011 derived schema would be classified as Urban in the new classification, while those classified as Rural Town and Fringe in the earlier classification constitute a large proportion of areas classified as Larger Rural in the new version. Those areas classified as Smaller Rural in the 2021 derived schema appear to draw principally from areas that would have been categorised as Villages or Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings, with these being roughly equally divided between the nearer and further categories in their less sparse variants. Areas classified as sparse in the earlier classification tended, as might be expected, to be associated with the 'further from a major town or city' category, although in this new category, areas that would have been classified as less sparse in the 2011 related classification predominated. Table 1 also illustrates how significantly fewer output areas are classified under the sparse categorisations, which often leads to data producers combining the sparse and less categorisation to produce a 6-fold differentiation of urban and rural areas, that could even be collapsed down to a rural-urban dualism (see Figure 3).

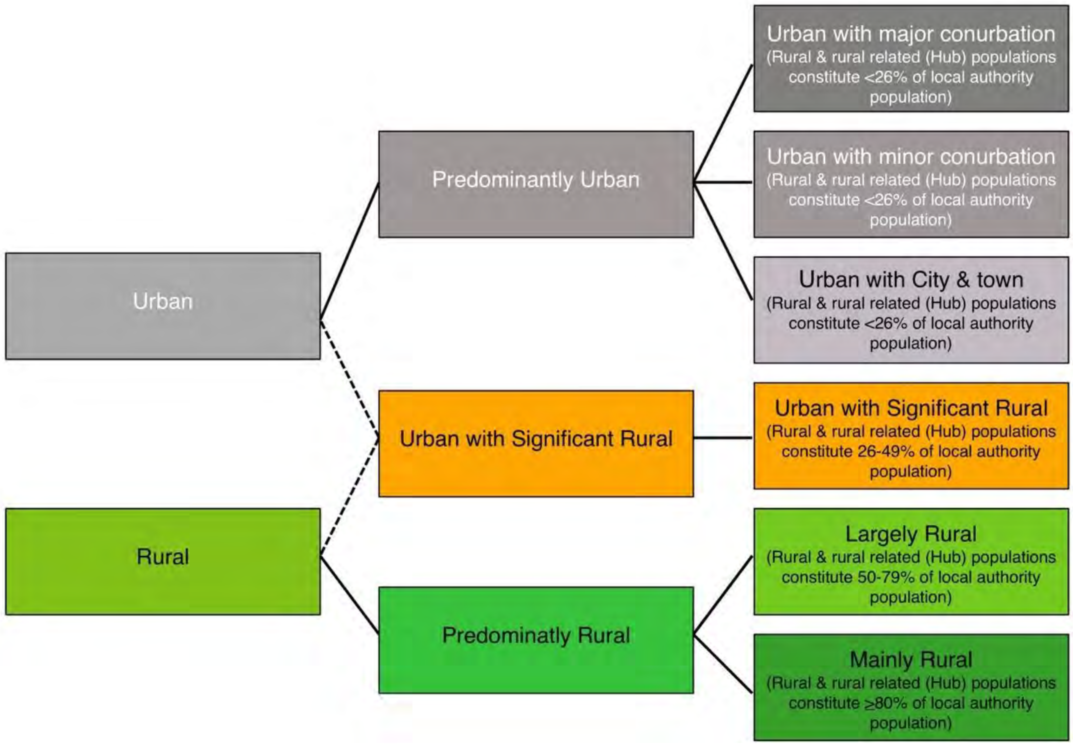
A second geographical level of units employed in the Rural-Urban Classifications associated with the 2001, 2011 and 2021 Censuses are those related to '*superoutput areas*'. These are spatial areas formed by combining groups of adjacent output areas, with there being two levels of aggregation undertaken to form so-called lower and middle-layer superoutput areas. These units, whilst providing less spatially refined analysis than available through output areas, are often employed by data providers when counts at output levels are quite small. As a result, some datasets are only available for use at one of the superoutput levels.

Table 1: Comparing the 2011 and 2021 Rural Urban Classification for Output Areas in England

Rural Urban Classification (2011) Categories	Rural Urban Classification (2021) Categories (% of Output Areas)					
	Urban		Larger Rural		Smaller Rural	
	Nearer to a major town or city	Further from a major town or city	Nearer to a major town or city	Further from a major town or city	Nearer to a major town or city	Further from a major town or city
Urban major conurbation	44.9	0.0	0.6	0.2	0.1	0.0
Urban minor conurbation	4.7	0.0	0.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Urban city and town	48.7	92.4	6.1	3.9	2.8	1.0
Urban city and town in a sparse setting	0.0	2.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Rural town and fringe	1.1	3.2	87.5	76.2	8.0	5.2
Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting	0.0	0.4	0.1	12.8	0.0	0.4
Rural village	0.3	0.7	4.0	5.0	54.6	46.2
Rural village in a sparse setting	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.8	0.4	7.8
Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings	0.3	0.9	1.4	1.0	33.8	31.3
Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings in a sparse setting	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	8.1

Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2016) Rural Urban Classification (2011) of Output Areas in EW (Newport: Office for National Statistics) and Office for National Statistics (2025) Rural Urban Classification (2021) of Output Areas in EW (Newport: Office for National Statistics), https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/ datasets/ed33e08c81244b77a15e00545be084e1_0/ explore; accessed 6/2/25**.**

Figure 4: Local Authority Level Categorisation of Rural and Urban Areas Employed in Relation to the 2001 and 2011 Censuses



A third geographical set of units employed in the Rural-Urban Classifications relate to local authority areas. These are administrative areas which are often directly or indirectly employed in the generation of data, and hence a capacity to link them to a Rural-Urban Classification is very useful. First introduced in 2005, the Rural-Urban Local Authority classification categorised lower-tier local authority areas, through which district, borough and unitary councils operate, into 6 types. These were constructed in the 2001 and 2011 Census related classification according to the relative proportion of the populations of these administrative areas calculated as living within urban built-up areas, which are again viewed as having a population of 10,000 people or more, or within built-up areas determined to be 'rural-related' and having a population of 10,000 to 30,000 (or so-called rural 'Hub towns'), or in other areas, which are deemed to be rural. The proportion of a local authority's rural and rural-related populations, relative to their so-called urban population, is then used to characterise their rural-urban character (see Figure 4), with the specific forms of urban then being determined by the dominant output area classification in terms of population numbers. As with the output and superoutput area classifications, the schema can be collapsed to produce fewer categories, including a basic urban versus rural. Although the 'Urban with Significant Rural' category could potentially be integrated into either of these two basic categories, they tend to be incorporated into the urban on the basis that at least 50% of its population is calculated to reside in this type of area.

The newly established Rural-Urban Classification linked to the 2021 Census also includes a local authority level categorisation. This is produced in a similar manner to the earlier local authority Rural-Urban classifications, except that there is no use of a rural related/Hub Town population and the relative access categorisation employed in the output level version of the 2021 derived classification, is also employed at the higher-level schema. The result is an 8-fold classification that has two 'Urban Majority' categories, one which incorporates a 'nearer to a major town or city' designation, while the other includes the descriptor 'further from a major town or city'. These relative access categorisations are employed across three other levels of assessment of urbanity/rurality, which are termed

Table 2: Comparing the 2011 and 2021 Rural Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England

Rural Urban Classification (2011) Categories	Rural Urban Classification (2021) Categories (% of Output Areas)							
	Urban		Intermediate Urban		Intermediate Rural		Majority Rural	
	Nearer to major town or city	Further from major town or city	Nearer to major town or city	Further from major town or city	Nearer to major town or city	Further from a major town or city	Nearer to a major town or city	Further from a major town or city
Urban with Major Conurbation (rural population. including hub towns, <26%)	44.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Urban with Minor Conurbation (rural population. including hub towns, <26%)	4.7	0.0	2.6	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
Urban with City and Town (rural population. including hub towns, <26%)	48.2	75.0	12.8	0.0	3.6	11.1	0.0	0.0
Urban with Significant Rural (rural population including hub towns 26-49%)	2.4	25.0	66.7	75.0	35.7	22.2	3.6	0.0
Largely Rural (rural population, including hub towns 50-79%)	0.6	0.0	15.4	25.0	53.6	22.2	25.0	21.7
Mainly Rural (rural population, including hub towns >=80%)	0.0	0.0	2.6	0.0	7.1	44.4	71.4	78.3

Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2017) Rural Urban Classification (2011) of Local Authority Districts in EN (Newport: Office for National Statistics) and Office for National Statistics (2025) Rural Urban Classification (2021) of Local Authority Districts in EW (Newport: Office for National Statistics), https://geoportal.statistics.gov.uk/ datasets/ed33e08c81244b77a15e00545be084e1_0/ explore; accessed 6/2/25

'Intermediate Urban', 'Intermediate Rural' and 'Majority Rural', based on respectively having 20-35% 35-50% and over 50% of their populations living in output areas classified as rural.

Table 3 illustrates how, although the urban-rural local authority level classifications were significantly different, the overall outcome was quite similar overall. The table shows, for example, that the local authorities that were classified under one of the categories associated with the broader Predominantly Urban group, were generally classified in the 2021 scheme as Urban. The local authority districts that would have been classified as Urban with Significant Rural in the earlier classification, figure predominantly in the Intermediate Urban category in the new classification, and to a smaller degree within the Intermediate Rural one. However, relatively more of this last group, at least when classified as nearer to major towns or cities, were drawn from locations that would have been classified as Largely Rural in the earlier local authority level classifications. The local authorities that would have been classified as Mainly Rural would be described as Majority Rural in the new classification, with this group being relatively consistently split between districts classified as 'nearer' or 'further' from a major town or city.

The publication of the new classification occurred too late to be integrated into the bulk of the analysis that has informed the writing of this report. The figures presented in Table 3, suggest that the analysis conducted at the local authority district level within the report would probably not be particularly different had the new Rural-Urban classification scheme been employed. However, at the output area and superoutput area levels of analysis, quite different findings may well have emerged. As mentioned earlier, the Rural-Urban classifications produced in relation to the 2001 and 2011 Censuses exhibit strong resonance with morphologically focused interpretations of rural areas, which stress the significance of the size and layout of physical settlements. By contrast, the classification associated with the 2021 Census adopts, through its focus on levels of accessibility to large towns and cities, a much more urban relational focus. The shift in the constituent elements of the classification is hence of considerable potential analytical significance, rather than just being an update on an earlier classification. One potential drawback of the new classification is the apparent loss of localised differentiations, some of which may play significant roles in determining service provision.

Report Structure

The remainder of this report is structured into four chapters that address services related, respectively, to consumption and finance; culture, education and welfare; health; and travel and communication. These chapters are then followed by a short concluding chapter that seeks to identify common themes and key issues raised in the four thematic chapters. Within each of these four chapters, a range of specific forms of service provision are examined, with attention being paid to the level of provision within rural areas of England and the access that people living in the different parts of the English countryside have to these services, whether provided within the countryside or only accessible in urban areas. While attention will focus in these chapters on distinct forms of service provision, it is important to recognise that services often interconnect with each other, both with respect to their use and also, in some instances, their provision. So, for example, a community group may act to provide not only a food bank, but also a warm space, a shop and travel services. Likewise, a library may provide not only a physical space to access books and other informational and recreational materials, but may also act as a place to access online information, communicate digitally, keep warm and socialise. Access to all these services, however, may be conditioned by the availability of transport services, so it is clear that some services act to enable or restrict access to others. The inter-connection between service provision is one of the themes considered in the final chapter of the report, and indeed is touched upon at various points within the earlier thematically focused chapters, although to avoid duplication and to retain a clear focus to each chapter, these discussions are kept to a minimum. The concluding chapter also outlines some of the policy implications of the report’s findings.

Acknowledgements

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2. Economic Services

Introduction

Many of the goods and services that people consume to sustain their everyday lives are accessed via market exchange, whereby people pay money, either in the form of cash or increasingly through some form of digitalised payment system. The ability to access such goods and services is conditioned by the provision of outlets to effect these market exchanges, such as retail stores, and to access sources of cash and finance, for instance, through bank branches or cash points. It is also, however, shaped by wider economic circumstances, such as access to employment, wage rates, benefits, the availability and cost of credit, and the prices charged for the goods and services offered for sale. The last few years have seen significant shifts in many of these wider economic conditions, in part stemming from international events such as the Covid-19 pandemic and wars in Ukraine and the Middle East, as well as the UK's exit from the European Union. Such events have seen increases in living costs, as well as falls in business confidence and government expenditure on public service provision. They may also have stimulated population movements into and out of the English countryside (Halfacree 2023; Shucksmith 2023), which in turn may have affected service provisions in the countryside via, for example, heightening the costs of rural housing, reducing the availability of employees willing to work in rural consumer service businesses, and, thereby, also reducing the number of people working, and spending money, in rural areas.

This chapter collates information about the contemporary character of rural retail service provision, focusing initially on the access that rural populations have to convenience stores and supermarkets. Collectively these stores provide a means for people to access goods consumed on a regular basis as part of sustaining their everyday lives, although these two sets of retail stores often differ considerably in size and location, including with respect to their likely prevalence within small rural locations: village shops, for instance, have long been taken as the archetypal rural convenience store, whilst supermarkets are often viewed as urban retail establishments. As will be shown, however, the value of such imagery in representing contemporary retail provision in some areas of the countryside might well be quite questionable. One rationale for this questioning relates to the sustainability of convenience stores located in rural areas, there being long-running concern that competition from supermarkets and, increasingly, online retailers, may result in the closure of many of these shops. However, many supermarket chains have also changed their retail offer, developing small convenience shops in addition to large retail stores. These stores have been viewed as one element in a 'relocalisation' of retailing, particularly in 'food shopping', which may foster movements from the use of "distant superstores" towards shops located in local communities (Wrigley and Wood 2019: 117-8). Another, rather different manifestation of relocalisation, is the emergence of alternative food networks and enterprises (Geary-Griffin and Phillips 2024; Goodman et al. 2012; Hendrickson and Heffernan 2002), and the actual or threatened closure of a village shop may also act as a stimulus to develop alternative, more community, forms of retail provision, such as a community shop (Calderwood and Davies 2013; Herslund and Tanvig 2024). This chapter, therefore, includes an examination of the significance of community-owned shops, as well as the use of online retailing.

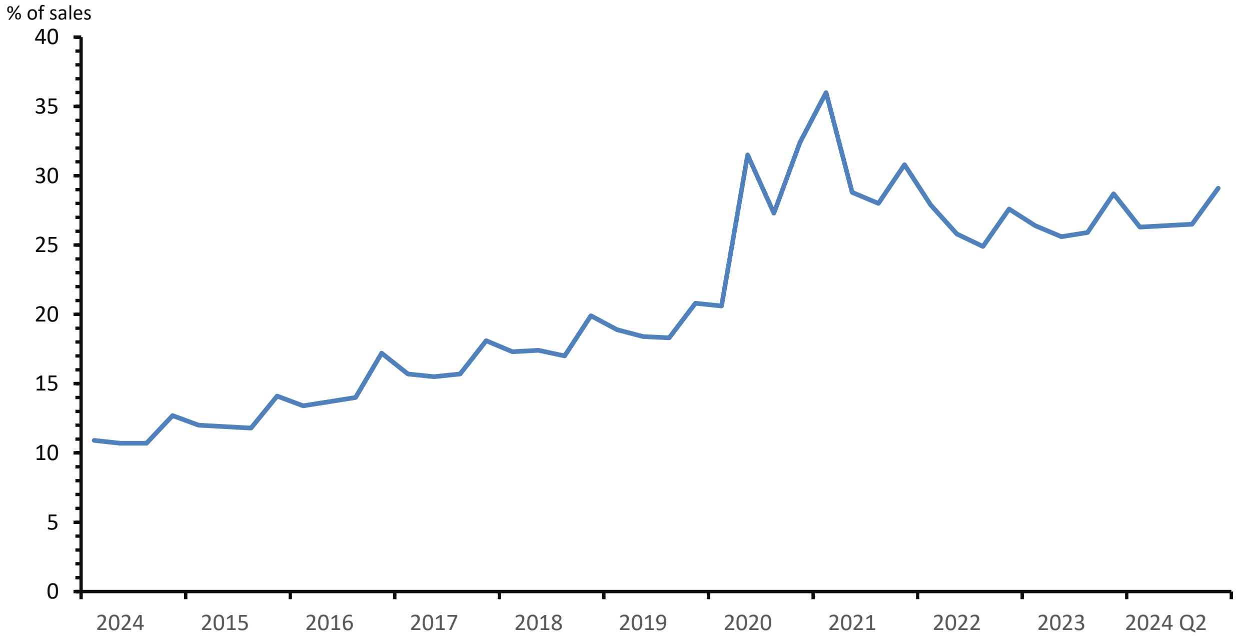
The chapter also addresses the provision of access to cash and finance, examining the availability of bank and building society branches and cash point machines (or ATMs) in rural areas. Considerable public concern has been expressed about the closure of bank and building society branches in Britain, and the impacts this may have on people and businesses in rural areas (Wilson

2022; Winchester 2025), and also about reductions in the number of cash machines (Rural Services Network 2018). Whilst the onset of significant reductions in the number of bank branches has been traced back to the early 1990s (French and Leyshon 2008), the Covid-19 pandemic has also been viewed as potentially providing a new impetus to branch closures (see Higgs et al. 2022) and also for the removal of cash machines as people moved to make greater use of cashless forms of payments. This chapter will also therefore consider information about access to cash points within rural England.

Rural Convenience Stores, Supermarkets and Internet Retailing

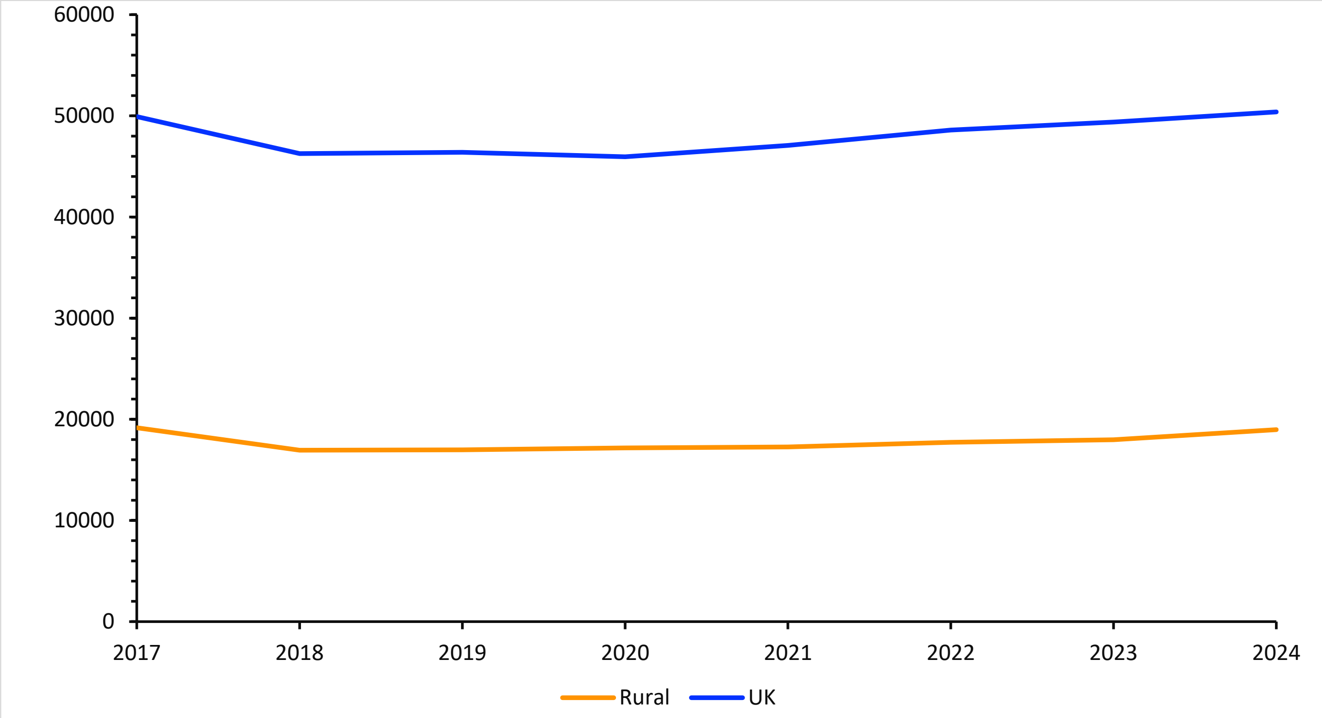
According to the Association of Convenience Stores, which carries out annual surveys of independent and multiple retailers, there were 18,969 of these stores located in rural areas in 2024, which represented almost 38% of those in mainland UK (Association of Convenience Stores 2025). Concerns have long been expressed about the closure of rural retail stores (e.g. Countryside Agency 2005; Harman 1978; Moseley and Spencer 1978), with the Covid-19 pandemic also seen as potentially heightening this decline. The previous Rural England (2022) *State of Rural Services* report, which was constructed to investigate the rural impacts of the pandemic, reported that 93% of rural residents had significantly increased their use of online services from the level they had been using before the Covid-19 pandemic, while 51% began accessing a service online for the first time and 28% indicated that they expected to have shopping delivered to their home more often following the pandemic. As Figure 5 illustrates, it is certainly clear that at a national level, internet sales have continued to be a higher proportion of total retail sales than they were before the pandemic, although it is also clear that they have not remained as significant as they were during the period of the pandemic and its associated restrictions on spatial movements. Unfortunately, these figures are not produced for sub-national areas, so it is not possible to evaluate whether the use of internet retailing is generally more significant in rural areas or not.

Figure 5: Internet Sales as a Proportion of Total Retail Sales, in Great Britain 2014-2024



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2025) *ONS Website, Statistical Bulletin, Retail Sales, Great Britain: January 2025*. (Newport: Office for National Statistics). www.ons.gov.uk/businessindustryandtrade/retailindustry/timeseries/j4mc/drsi; last accessed 7/3/25

Figure 6: Number of Convenience Stores in the UK and Rural Areas of the UK, 2017-2023

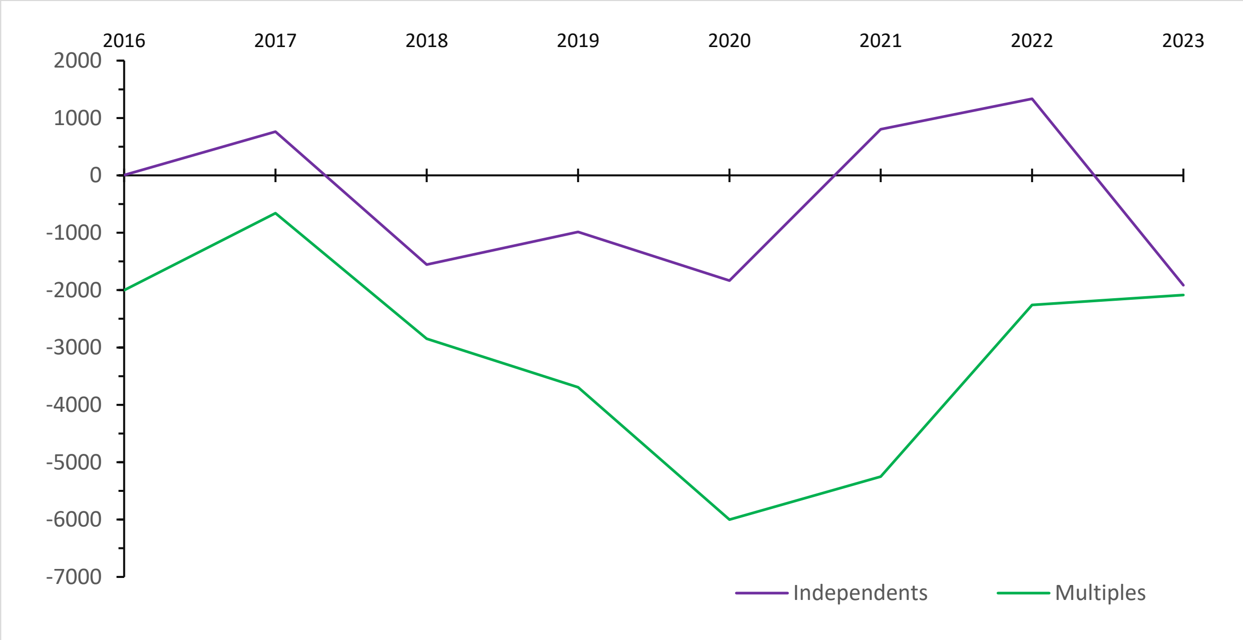


Source: derived from annual *The Rural Shop* reports of the Association of Convenience Stores for 2018-2024, and their *The Local Shop* reports for 2018, 2019 and 2024 (Association of Convenience Stores 2017; 2018a; 2018b; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024a; 2024b; 2025).

It is also far from clear that the rise of online shopping during and after the pandemic can be equated with any reduction in the number of rural convenience stores. Figure 6, for example, shows the number of these shops as recorded in annual surveys conducted by the Association of Convenience Stores between 2017 and 2024. These surveys suggest that there were falls in the number of convenience stores in the years preceding the pandemic, as illustrated in Figure 6 by the fall between 2017 and 2018, but the number of convenience stores in rural areas of the UK, and indeed more generally, increased in the two years prior to the outbreak of Covid-19 and this rise continued after the pandemic. Overall the number of recorded convenience stores located in rural areas did decrease between 2017 and 2024, by just over 1%, which compared to an overall increase in the number of such retailers by just under 1% over this period (Association of Convenience Stores 2018b; 2025), but the largest component of this decrease occurred between 2017 and 2018, with this then being followed by a gradual increase which continued through the pandemic period.

This image of decline, followed by recovery during the pandemic, is supported by data produced by the Local Data Company on the number of independent and multiple/chain retailers. As illustrated in Figure 7, their data suggested that there was a decline in both types of retailers through to 2020, with there actually being a greater fall amongst multiple/chain retailers than the independent sector, and also stronger signs of recovery, and even growth in store numbers amongst independent businesses, until 2023. This year, Local Data Company (2023: 21) argue, saw a "dramatic shift in the performance of GB independents", with a net decline of 1,915 units, which it is suggested reflected the "impacts of the energy crisis, high interest rates, staffing challenges and the end of business rates relief schemes", as well as a series of other testing changes, including rising living costs that were reducing consumer willingness to spend. Unlike the Association of Convenience Stores' figures, the Local Data Company analysis does not address urban-rural differentiations.

Figure 7: Net Change in Retail Business Units in Great Britain, 2016-2023



Source: derived from Local Data Company (2023) *H1 2023 Retail and Leisure Trends Analysis* (London: Local Data Company). Data based on first half-yearly figures.

The Association of Convenience Stores (2025) also suggests that just under half (49%) of these rural stores have no other retail outlets nearby, so can be described as the only outlet directly serving their community. This is a fall of 8% in the relative proportion of isolated convenience stores compared to those identified in 2017 (Association of Convenience Stores 2018b), which might suggest that this group of stores have figured prominently within the overall decline in rural convenience stores over this period. Examination of figures related to the Association of Convenience Stores' classification of shops into 'isolated', 'located on a small parade' (which means they have up to five other retail/services close by) and 'located on a larger parade or village centre' (which means they are located in rural areas with more than five other retail/services close by), certainly suggests a general decline in the relative significance of the first category and a relative increase in the second. Furthermore, it has been argued that small towns have seen a significant increase in 'corporate convenience stores' (Wrigley and Wood 2019) - or small supermarket stores owned by large corporate supermarket chains - over the last couple of decades.

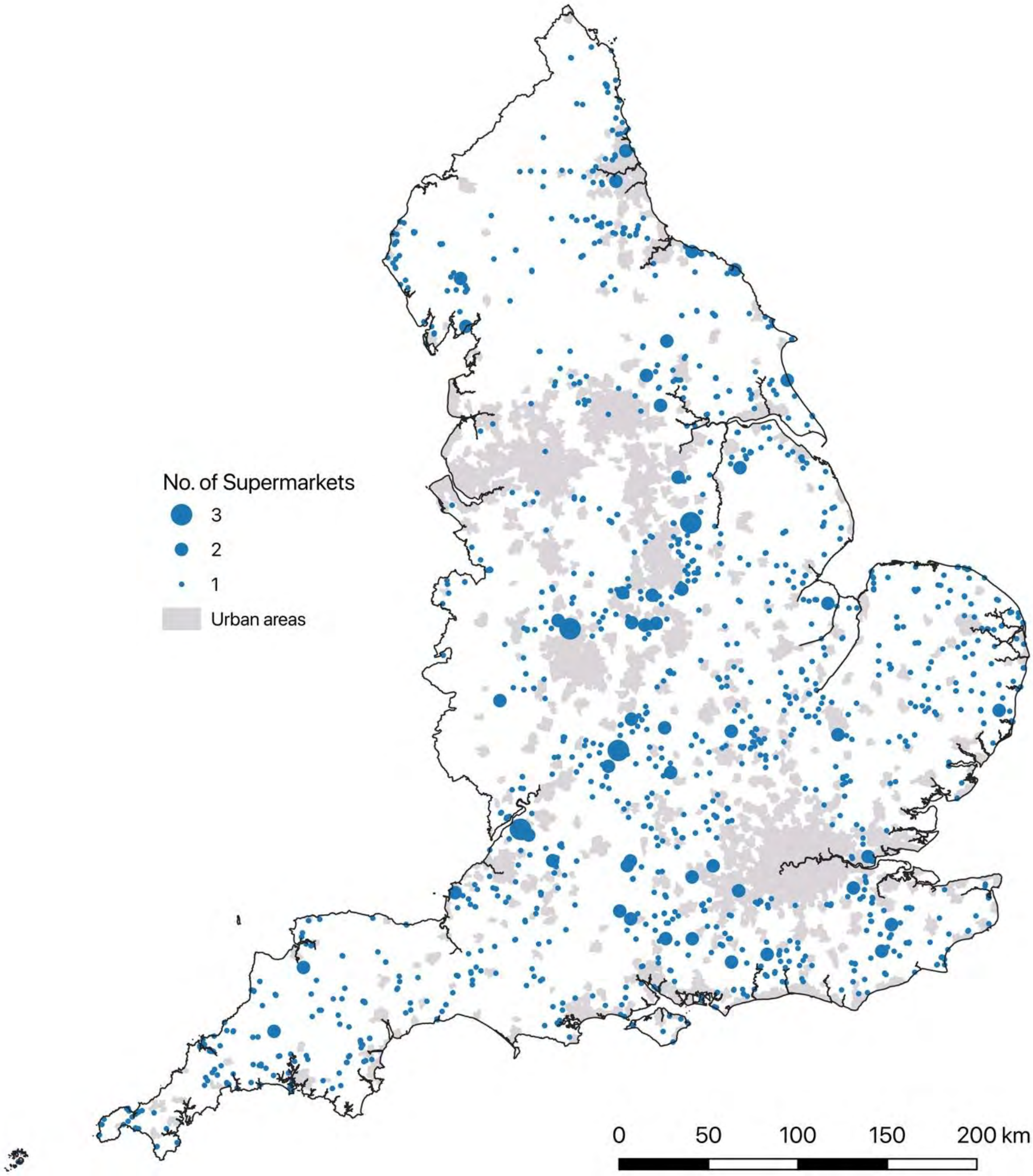
Table 3 and Figure 8 show the distribution of supermarkets in rural England, and also England as a whole in the former case, with both including corporate convenience stores and larger supermarkets. The Table indicates that no rural postcode areas in England contain more than 3 supermarkets, with over 96% of those with a supermarket having just a single store. Almost 62% of the rural postcodes with more than one supermarket were located in Town and Fringe Areas, and there were only just under 10% of postcodes in areas classified as sparse that had a supermarket of any kind located within them. It is also evident from Table 4 that the majority of supermarkets located in such areas, and indeed in rural areas more generally, were Co-operative or Spa stores. These collectively constituted approaching 54% of supermarkets located in rural areas, and over 62% of supermarkets in rural sparse settings. Both sets of stores operate quite differently from corporate convenience stores and supermarkets, which predominate in urban areas and only penetrate to a significant extent in Town and Fringe areas.

Table 3: Distribution of Supermarkets and Supermarket Brands in England, August 2024

Rural-urban character	No.	%	Co-Ops	Tesco	Morrisons	Spar	Sainsburys	M & S	Asda	Aldi	Lidl	Iceland	Waitrose
Major Conurbation	1333	19.9	195	272	103	43	173	88	90	78	68	68	42
Minor Conurbation	84	1.3	22	8	9	5	4	2	7	5	6	6	
City & Town	3786	56.5	726	610	434	273	270	201	207	241	242	221	120
City & Town in Sparse Setting	42	0.6	6	3	6	8	2	2	2	2	4	3	
Town & Fringe	941	14.1	403	114	77	143	43	25	27	21	17	3	17
Town & Fringe in Sparse Setting	107	1.6	39	9	7	19	7	3	2	2	7	1	3
Village	220	3.3	36	7	18	75	2	19	21	6	3		9
Village in sparse setting	29	0.4	12			14				1		1	
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings	143	2.1	16	4	7	17	5	35	18	8	4		14
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Setting	11	0.2	2	1	1	5							1
Grand Total	6696	100.0	1457	1028	662	602	506	375	374	364	351	303	206

Source: Derived from Geolytix UK Retail Points V33 August 2024 and used in accordance with Geolytix Ltd Open Data License, version 6, September 2021

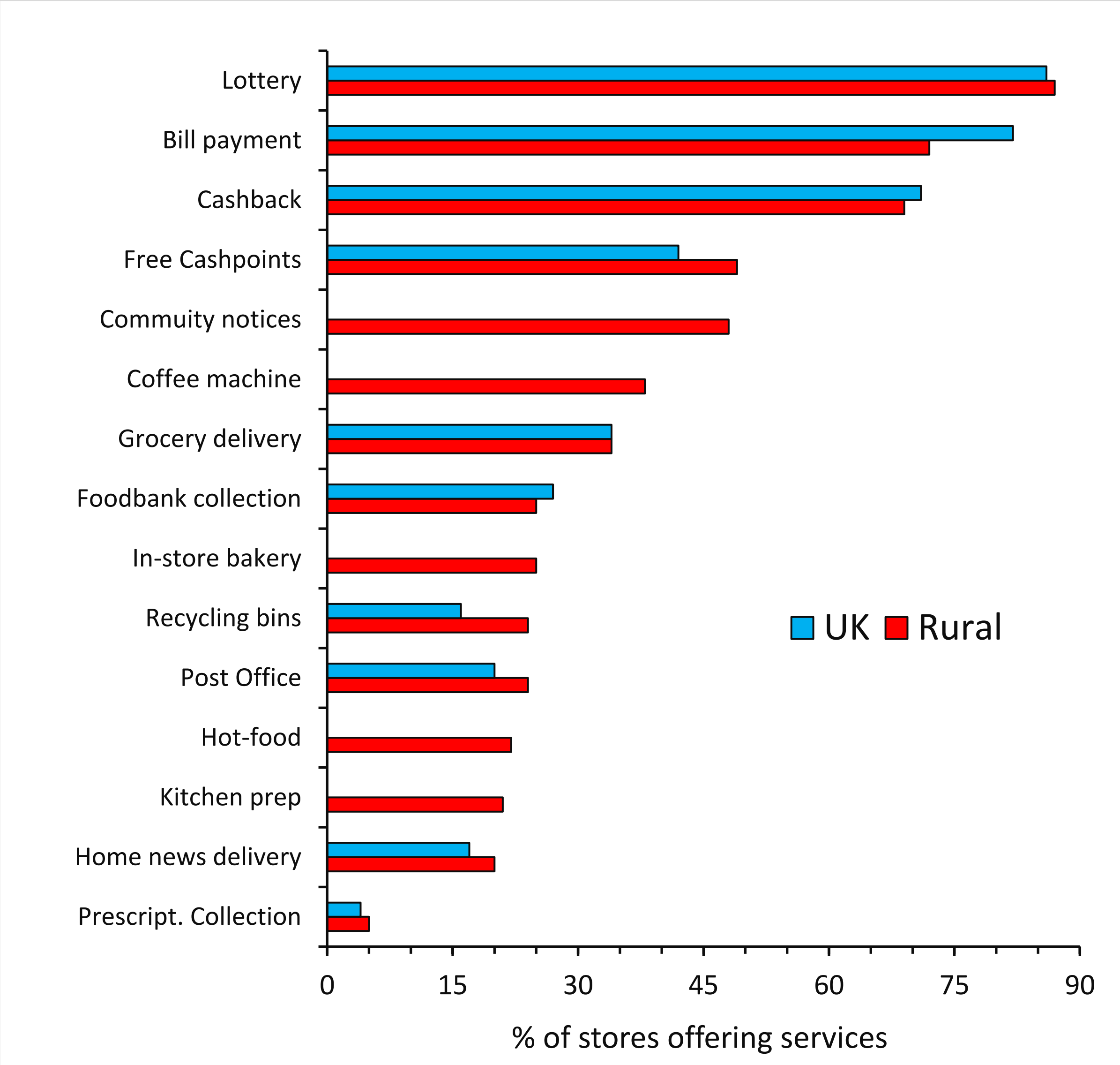
Figure 8: Distribution of supermarkets in Rural England, August 2024



Source: Derived from Geolytix UK Retail Points V33 August 2024 and used in accordance with Geolytix Ltd Open Data License, version 6, September 2021.

These findings suggest that independent convenience stores and co-operative supermarkets remain highly significant constituents of rural retailing. The Association of Convenience Stores (2025: 1), argues that rural convenience shops "increasingly act as miniature highstreets", providing a series of "services that would previously have been provided locally" by a range of different outlets, including banks, chemists and post offices. They also suggest these stores provide over 178,000 jobs in rural areas within the UK (Association of Convenience Stores 2025: 4).

Figure 9: Services available in Convenience Stores in the UK and Rural Areas of the UK

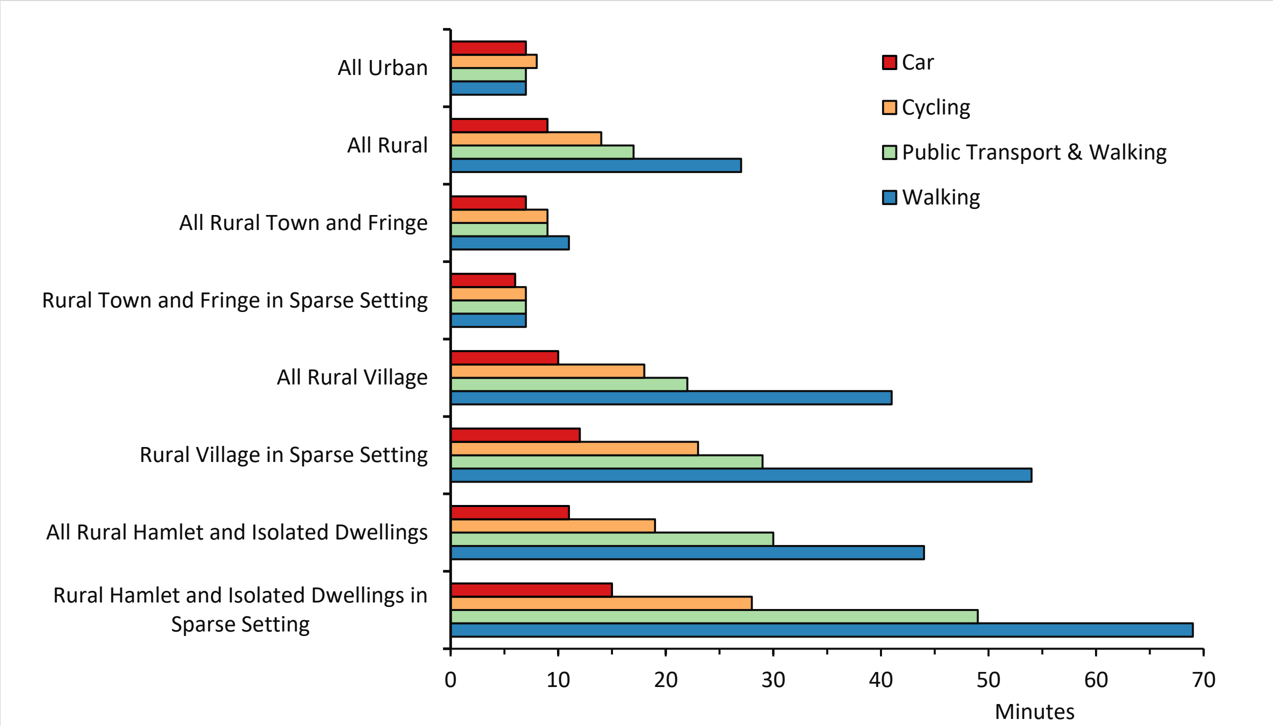


Source: derived from Association of Convenience Stores' (2024a) *The Local Shop Report, 2024* and (2024b) *The Rural Shop Report, 2024.*

Support for such claims can be identified in Figure 9, which shows the range of commodities and services available in rural and UK-based convenience stores. In some cases, such as community notices, coffee provided by machines, in-store bakeries, and hot and kitchen-prepared food, there was no UK data provided, but only figures relating to the proportion of rural convenience stores that provided these activities.

The Association of Convenience Stores (2025) also suggests that 54% of the customers using rural convenience stores travel to them by walking, with 76% travelling less than one mile, a distance that would have to increase to 2.93 miles if their local convenience store were to close. The Department of Transport's Journey Time Statistics for 2019 cited in Defra (2024), further suggest that under 30% of residents living in rural areas have a food store within a 30-minute walking distance (which equates to ¾ of a mile at a walking speed of 3 miles per hour). However, 83% are calculated to have such a store with an hour's walk, although the average minimum walking time to reach these was 27 minutes across rural areas, albeit with significance variations between types of rural areas, as demonstrated in Figure 10.

Figure 10: Average Minimum Time to Reach a Food Store, Rural and Urban Areas, 2019



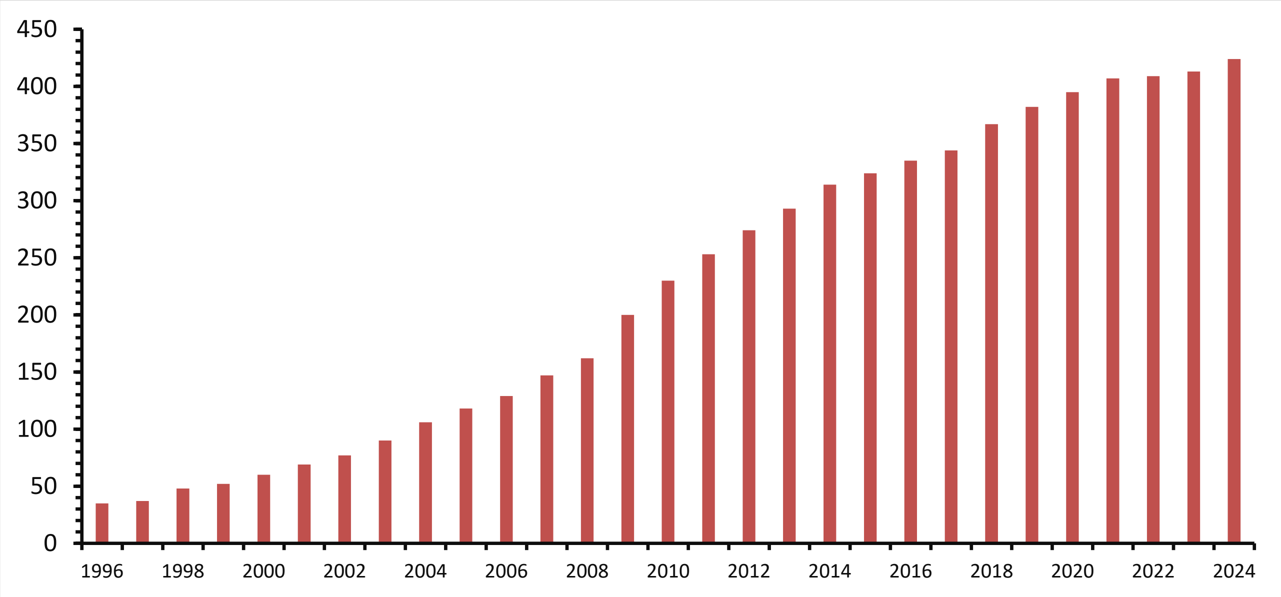
Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet DA: Average minimum travel time (minutes) to reach the nearest key services, by mode of travel and Rural-Urban Classification, England, 2019

Figure 10 reinforces the impression of significant differences in accessibility between Town and Fringe and other rural areas, with the former having average travel times to access food stores close to the average for urban areas. However, travel times across modes of transport increase significantly as one moves down the settlement hierarchy (i.e. from towns to villages and to rural hamlets and isolated dwellings) and also within sparsely built-up and populated areas beyond Rural Town and Fringe Areas, particularly in relation to walking and public transport use.

The Association of Convenience Stores (2023) argues that 76% of rural convenience stores in the UK are owned by 'independent retailers', although it also regularly reports on the number of community-owned shops, drawing on figures provided by the Plunkett Trust. According to the Association of Convenience Stores (2025), 424 community-owned shops were operating in the UK in 2024, while the Plunket Foundation states there were 409 such stores in 2022, according to its records (Plunkett Foundation 2024a). While both sets of figures relate to stores across the UK, the Plunkett Foundation claims that their records relate primarily to rural businesses (ibid.: 2). Figure 11 shows that there has been a steady increase in the number of these stores from 1996 through to 2024, with the Plunket Foundation reporting that the Covid-19 pandemic, energy costs and rising price inflation had not, as yet, led to any significant increases in "reported closures of community businesses", although in a survey of these organisations, 91% had indicated that they were adversely been impacted by these costs and price increases (Plunkett Foundation 2024a: 2-7).

The Foundation also argued that community and independent rural retailers were "let down by centralised wholesale systems" during the pandemic, with consumers often having to turn to supermarkets to access "the most basic goods and essential supplies" (Plunkett Foundation 2020: 2), although Rural England's (2022) *State of Rural Services* report argued that the pandemic and the restrictions of spatial movements that were associated with its management, may have led to an increased appreciation of the value of small, local retail outlets.

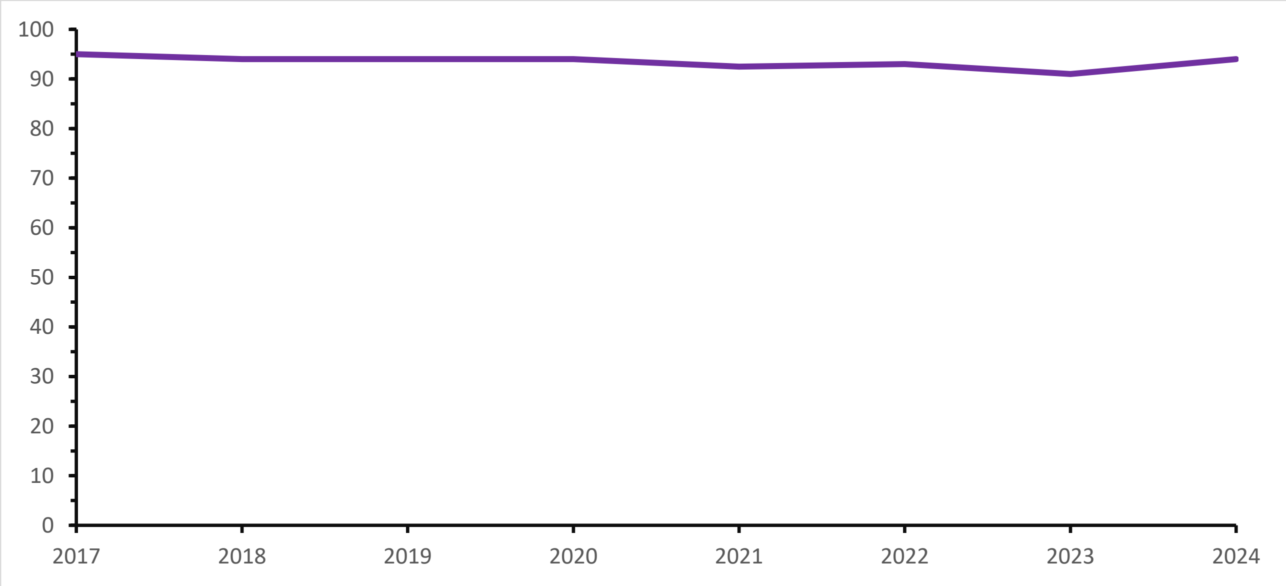
Figure 11: Number of Community-Run Shops Operating in the UK (1996 to 2024)



Source: derived from Plunkett Foundation (2024) *Community Ownership: a Better Form of Business* (Woodstock: The Plunkett Foundation); Plunkett Foundation (2022) *Community Shops: a Better Form of Business* (Woodstock: The Plunkett Foundation); Association of Convenience Stores (2024) *The Rural Shop Report 2024* (Farnborough: Association of Convenience Stores) and Association of Convenience Stores (2025) *The Rural Shop Report 2024 (*Farnborough: Association of Convenience Stores).

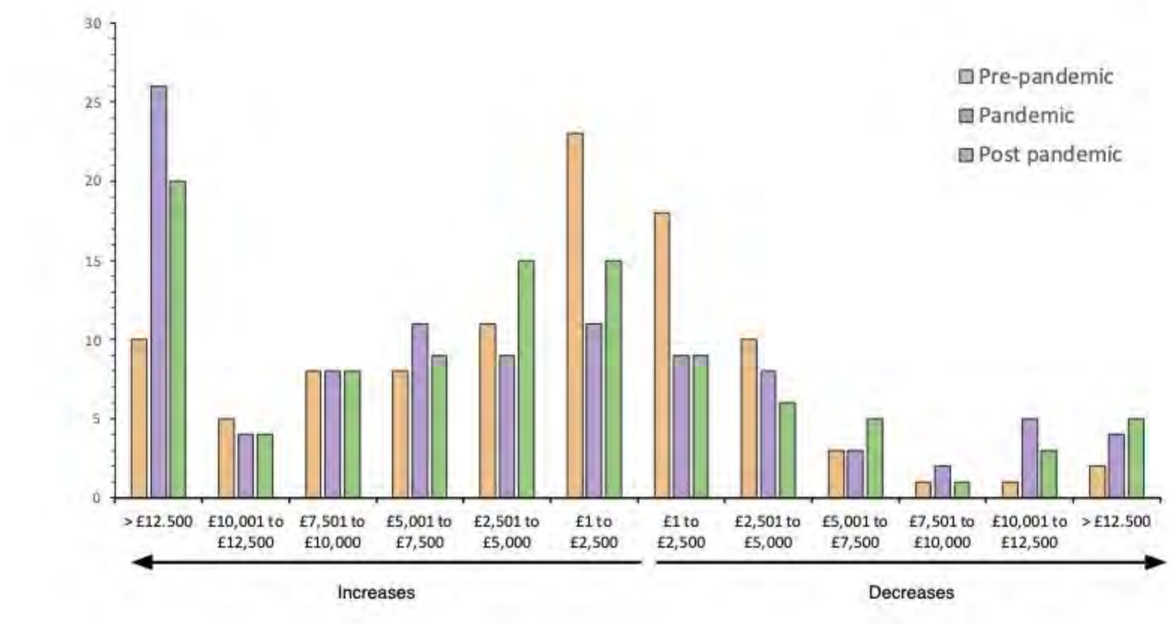
Plunkett Foundation (2024a) also reports that the geographical distribution of community shops has remained largely unchanged in England since 2020, with "the highest density … in South West England with an overall bias to Southern and Central England and progressively lower densities in English regions moving northwards, with low take-up in the North East". The Association of Convenience Stores' *Rural Shop Reports* also report on the survival rates of community-owned shops, drawing on records provided by the Plunkett Foundation. While there does seem to have been a slight decline in the reported figures in the second year of the pandemic and a couple of years after this (see Figure 12), the overall survival rates remained consistently high, and over double the rate calculated for small and medium-sized enterprises in general (Plunkett Foundation 2024b). The Plunkett Foundation also gathered publicly available financial information on Community Shops to assess the extent to which their financial fortunes had changed form before, during and after the pandemic (see Figure 13). The figures do not seem to suggest a clear and uniform impact of the outbreak of Covid-19, in that some community shops have seen significant increases in financial surpluses during as well as after the pandemic, whilst others experienced declining surpluses. Across all periods there were well over double the number of community shops exhibiting an improvement in their financial surpluses than those that saw this reduce in size, and indeed this number was highest after the pandemic, although this was also the period when the number of community shops experiencing declines of over £12,500 in their financial surpluses was at its highest. The average number of paid employees working in the community is stated as being 4-5 people in 2023, which compares to 4 people reported in the 2018 *State of Rural Services* report (Rural England 2019).

Figure 12: Survival Rates of Community Shops in UK, 2017-2024



Source: derived from annual *The Rural Shop* reports of the Association of Convenience Stores for 2018-2024 (Association of Convenience Stores 2018b; 2019; 2020; 2021; 2022; 2023; 2024a; 2024b; 2025).

Figure 13: Changes in Community Shop Surplus Before, During and After the Covid-19 Pandemic



Source: derived from Plunkett Foundation (2024) *Community Ownership: a Better Form of Business* (Woodstock: The Plunkett Foundation);

Overall, despite continuing concerns about rural shop closures, which were heightened by the Covid-19 pandemic and evidence of increased use of online retailing, it would appear that the number of convenience stores in rural areas may have been increasing over recent years, albeit perhaps after an earlier period of decline. It is, however, clear that economic conditions are generally quite challenging to retailers, and people living in many rural areas may have quite restricted access to both convenience stores and supermarkets, particularly if they do not have access to a private vehicle and live in smaller rural settlements, such as villages, rural hamlets or in isolated dwellings, or in less densely populated rural areas. It has also been argued that rural residents may have very limited choice over the convenience stores and supermarkets they use, with almost half of the former having no other retail outlets in their vicinity, while this proportion increases to over 96% for supermarkets in rural areas. There are, however, again important differences between different rural areas, with Town and Fringe being more likely to have more than one supermarket and to have stores from a wider range of supermarket chains. Community shops have been one response to the closure of rural convenience stores, and they appear to have continued to grow gradually in number and have a good survival rate, although they are also experiencing many of the challenges facing the wider retail sector.

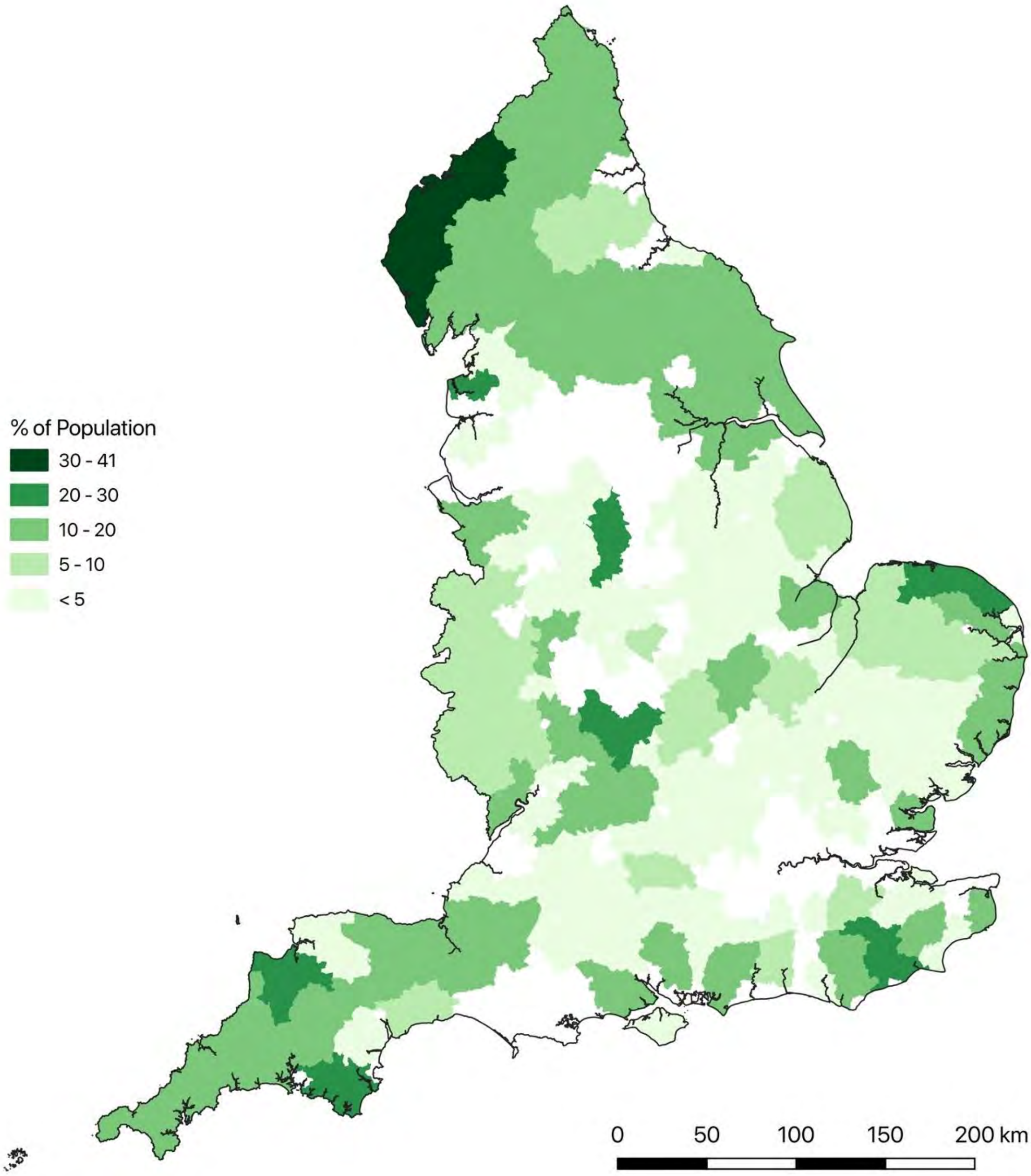
Access to Cash and Finance

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, many services are accessed in large part through money, and the availability of cash and finance is hence also of clear significance in the ability of people to access economic services. Considerable concern has indeed been expressed about the closure of bank and building society branches in many rural areas, which have been seen to potentially lead to the formation of financial or banking 'deserts' (Barca and Hou 2024; Van Leuven et al., 2024). It has also been argued that while bank branch closures in the UK "reached their peak in 2017", with a reported loss of 867 in that year, the reduction in branch numbers has continued to occur, with there being declines of 645 and 410 branches in 2023 and 2024, and a total of 4,057 branch closures between 2018 and 2024 (Wilson 2022). The FCA (2024) records that 210 branches of larger banks and building societies closed over the second quarter of 2023, with "the east and north of England and Yorkshire and Humber" being particularly affected. It has been argued that the UK now has "one of the lowest rates of bank branches per head in Europe" (Clark et al. 2024: 2), although FCA (2024) reports that 98.2% of the UK's rural population live within 3 miles of a free-to-use cash access point offering deposits, although this figure dropped to 70.7% within 1 mile. By comparison, the urban figures remained relatively quite similar across both distances, being 99.6% and 92.6% respectively.

While the FCA's phrase 'free-to-use cash access point offering deposits' does not equate completely with bank branches, as it includes mobile banking facilities and post offices providing cash deposit facilities, and in the latter case a range of other banking services, it does provide some indication of accessibility levels to banking facilities. Not only do the access figures provided by the FCA appear to be generally lower for rural populations than urban ones, but as Figure 14 indicates, the general figures can obscure significant variations, with many rural districts having significantly lower proportions of their rural populations able to access banking facilities where they can deposit cash within a one-mile distance. Rather surprisingly, it also indicates that access levels may be rather higher in districts that might be seen to be more sparsely populated, such as Cumberland, North Norfolk, north and south Devon and the Derbyshire Dales, while many urban fringe regions have relatively low access levels, potentially indicating that there is an increasing expectation in these areas that rural residents will need to travel into neighbouring urban areas to access bank branch facilities. It is certainly the case that Cumberland is one area where there have been moves to establish 'banking hubs' which are run by the Post Office in partnership with commercial banks (Young 2025).

Clearly, there have been movements away from in-person banking, with UK Finance (2024) recording that 87% of adults make use of what they term 'remote banking', which encompasses online and app-based banking, During the Covid-19 pandemic there was an increase in the use of cashless

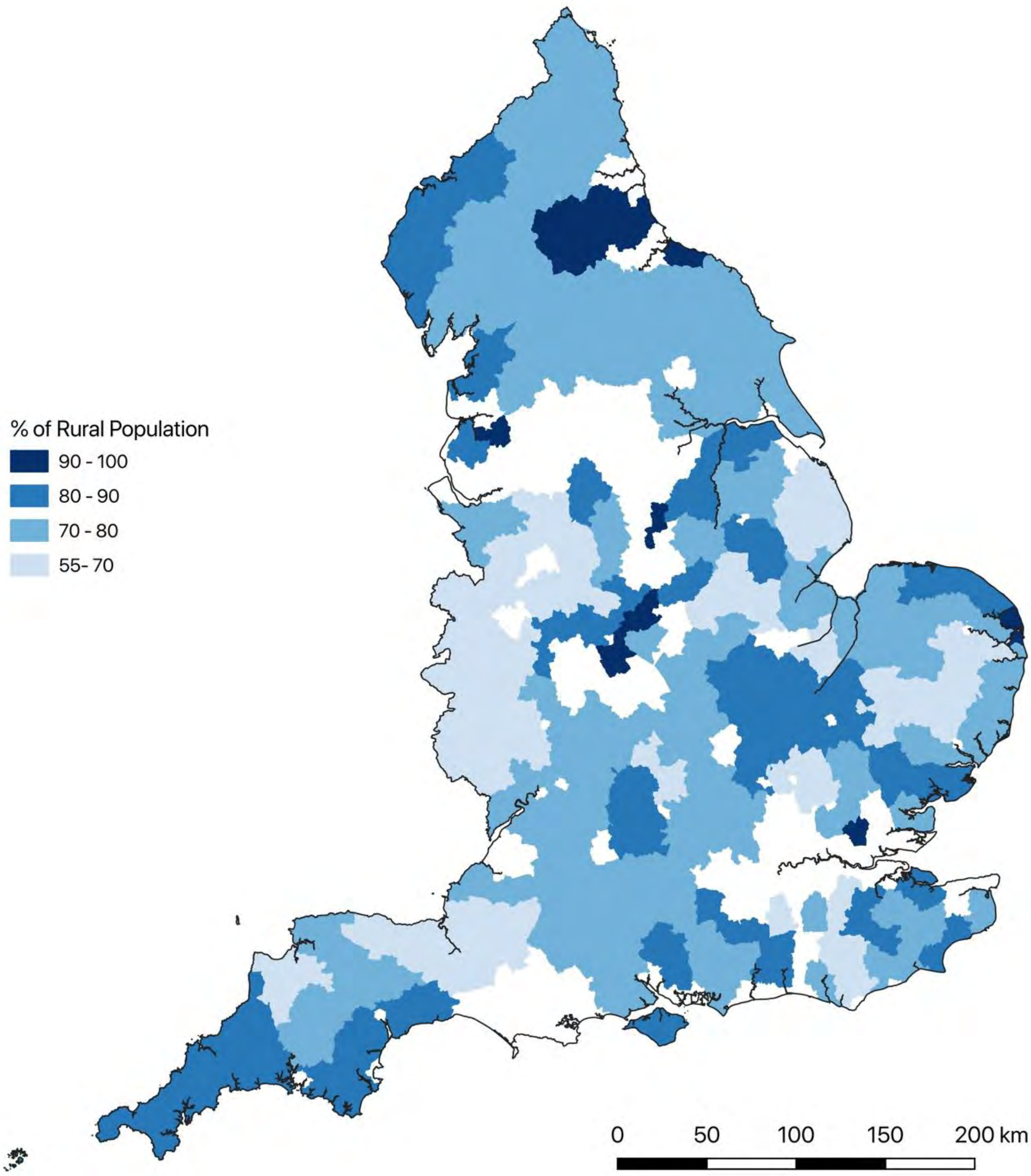
Figure 14: Proportion of Rural Residents Living within One Mile of a Large Bank or Building Society Branch, within Rural Local Authority, Second Quarter 2023



Source: derived from Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) (2024) Access to cash coverage in the UK 2023 Q2: dataset Figure 1 (London: Financial Conduct Authority).

payments (Rural England 2022; UK Finance 2023), although there is evidence that even before this the UK was witnessing movements away from cash payments and not only reductions in bank branches but also declines in other banking infrastructure, including cashpoints or ATMs (Clark et al. 2024; Panjwani 2024). It is calculated that cash now only accounts for 12% of all payments in the UK (UK Finance 2024), compared to 28% in 2018. However, cash remains the second most frequently used payment method, after the use of debit cards, which accounted for 51% of payments. Many of these, and credit card transactions, are made through the use of contactless payment, which represented 38% of all payments in 2023 (UK Finance 2024).

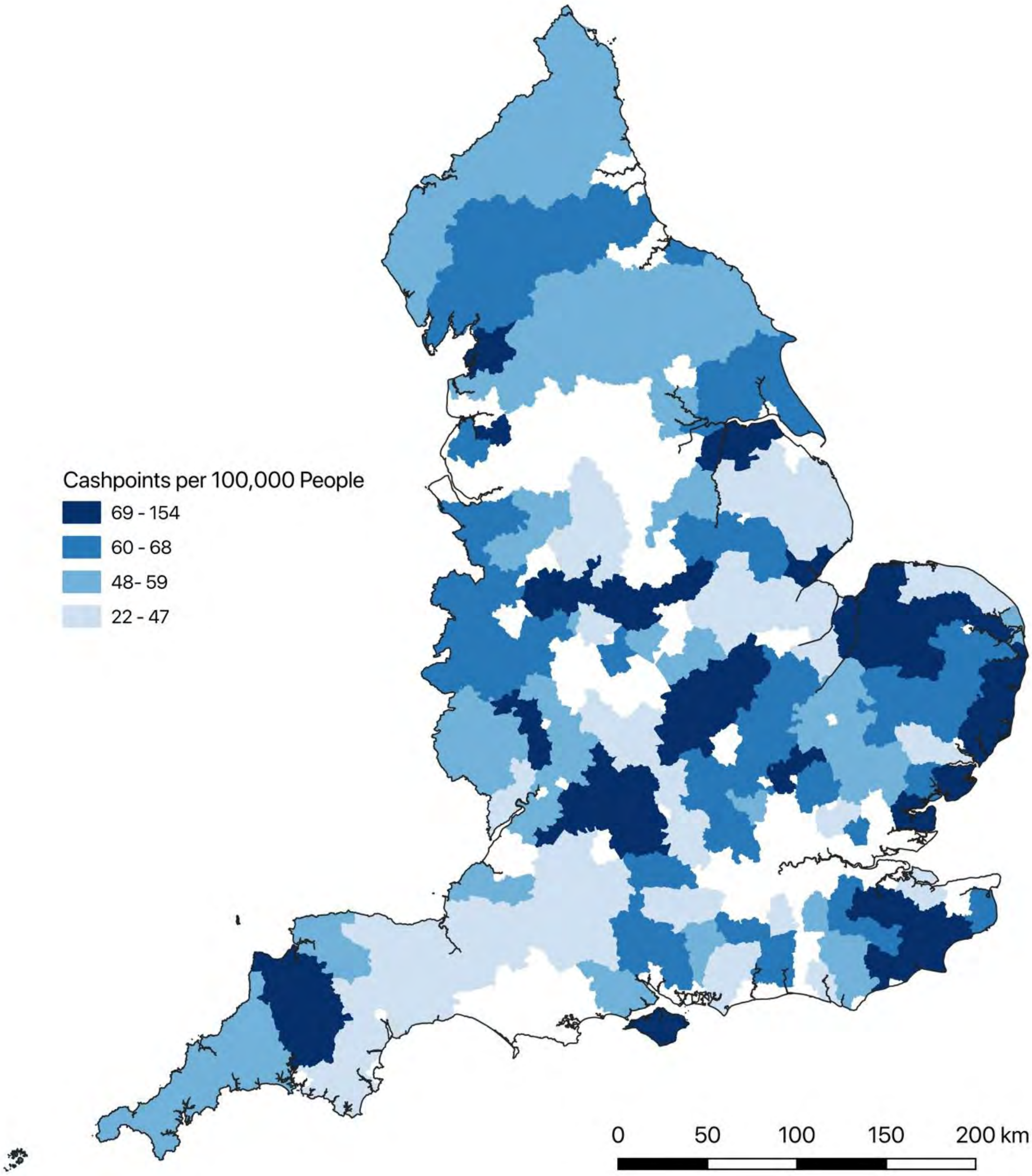
Figure 15: Proportion of Rural Residents Living within One Mile of a Free-to-Use Cash Access Point, within Rural Local Authorities, Second Quarter of 2023



Source: derived from Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) (2024) Access to cash coverage in the UK 2023 Q2: dataset Figure 1 (London: Financial Conduct Authority).

Decline in the use of cash has been associated with decreases in the frequency of ATM use (UK Finance 2024), although access to these machines, as well as bank branches or post offices with banking services, are often seen as essential to many people. FCA (2024) reports that access to some form of free-to-use cash access point, whether a "brick-and-mortar" or mobile bank or building society branch, an ATM or a post office, is available to 98.6% of UK rural residents within 3 miles of their home and to 99.3% of urban residents within 1 mile. Analysis of post office access is further discussed in Chapter 5. However, as with bank branches, national figures can obscure significant smaller-scale variations. Figure 15, for example, shows that there are significant differences in the proportion of residents living within a mile of free-to-use cash points across different local authorities categorised as rural using the 2011 Census-based classification. No only do the majority of these

Figure 16: Cash Points Relative to Population in Rural Local Authority Districts, 2023

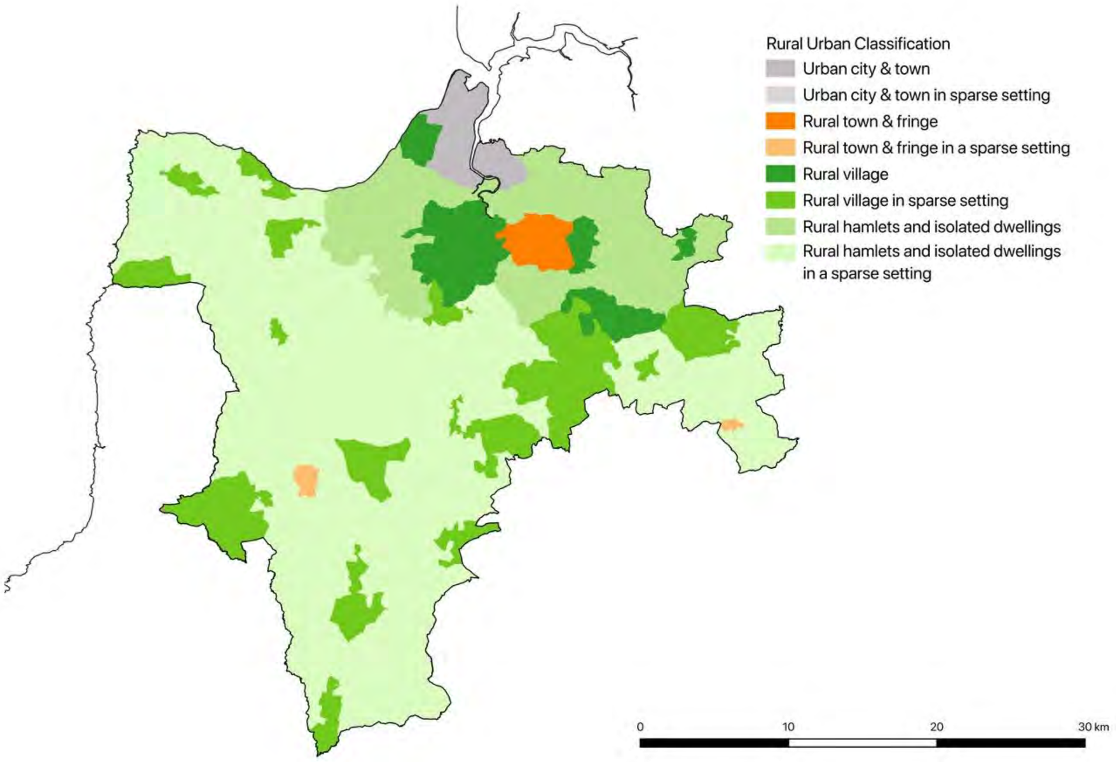


Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024a) Access to local amenities in England and Wales: October 2024; www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/accesstolocalamenities inenglandandwales/october2024

districts have well under the urban average of 99.3% of residents having access to a free-to-use cashpoint within a mile, but many of the Mainly Rural and Largely Rural local authority districts, rather than those classified as Urban with Significant Rural, have amongst the lowest proportion of their populations with this level of access. Areas such as north-west Devon, south Somerset, Herefordshire, Shropshire and Lincolnshire, for example, have amongst the lowest proportion of people with this level of accessibility. These districts all have extensive areas that appear as sparse in Defra's (2017b) output level classification (see Figure 1), reflective of a dispersed settlement pattern. In contrast, areas around London and major cities in the West Midlands and southern Midlands, which are classified as Urban with Significant Rural, are amongst the areas with the highest proportion of residents able to access a free-to-use cashpoint within a mile.

The Office of National Statistics (2024a) has also produced data on access to amenities at the local authority level, measured relative to population (see Figure 16). This highlights that highly populated areas do not necessarily have high cash point numbers relative to their populations, and that some areas with relatively low numbers of residents may appear quite well served in terms of ATM numbers. It is notable that north-west Devon, for example, whilst having amongst the lowest levels of free-to-access cash points accessible to residents within one mile, appears to be well-served in terms of its overall population size. This outcome could well reflect there being a concentration of cashpoints in a relatively small number of settlements, with Torridge District, for example, being notable for the small number of its settlements that are characterised as urban within Defra's (2017b) output level classification (see Figure 17). This example illustrates the significance of quite localised geographies of place when seeking to understand access to services and the challenges people living in some rural areas may face when accessing them.

Figure 17: The Rural-Urban Character of Torridge District, North-West Devon



Economic Service Provision and Access

This chapter has examined the provision of and access to food and everyday goods provided through convenience stores and supermarkets within rural England, and also the availability of cash and financial services provided by bank and building society branches and cash point machines. The provision of these key economic services within rural areas has been an issue of public and policy concern over several decades, but this chapter has sought to identify and review evidence related to recent changes in provision and current levels of access.

It has been shown that while there appears to be a relatively stable number of rural convenience stores, and indeed some signs of a slight recovery in numbers from earlier periods of decline, significant challenges to these service providers persist, particularly in more remote and sparsely populated rural areas. These areas are also amongst those least likely to have supermarket provision, and, indeed, rural residents are generally likely to be offered little choice within their supermarket provision, unless they live in urban fringe locations.

Banking service provision has also been shown to exhibit considerable intra-rural variability, which is often obscured through the use of a simple urban-rural binary in the presentation of information by organisations such as the FCA. Although it was only possible to develop this analysis at the local authority level, and hence significant geographical variations will still be obscured, this chapter has highlighted significant intra-rural variations in both access to bank branches and cash machines. These variations do not simply reflect population and spatial/temporal differences: some sparsely populated areas, like Cumberland, North Norfolk and North Devon appear to figure better in some indices of accessibility to bank/building society branches and cash machines than do many urban fringe locations, although care needs to be taken in translating these measures into assessments of the ease or difficulty that people living in these types of rural area may have in accessing these services. It is also clear that shifts have occurred in how people access and use banking services, with the Covid-19 pandemic providing an important, even if temporally quite brief, impetus for movements away from in-person banking and cash-based exchanges. However, not everyone has made, or is willing to make, these moves, so it is important to recognise that reductions in physical points of access to financial services and cash may have significant exclusionary impacts.

3. Educational, Welfare and Cultural Services

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the provision of educational, welfare and cultural services within rural areas of England. The delivery of these services tends to have a much stronger public sector involvement than is the case with those discussed in the previous chapter, and hence are all often described as public services, although, as will be shown in this chapter, agents from the private and voluntary sectors are also often heavily involved in their delivery. As with the economic services discussed in the preceding chapter, there have been considerable, and in many instances quite long-standing, expressions of public concern about the delivery of these services to people living in rural areas, as well as claims that this has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic and the expanded use of digital information and communication technologies (e.g. Noble et al. 2024; Shucksmith et al. 2023).

This chapter focuses on three groups of services, which are discussed in the following order. First, the chapter examines education, focusing on primary and secondary education, pre-school/early-years childcare, and further education. Second, it considers the delivery of support to people's welfare via governmental agencies providing employment and welfare benefits. Third, it evaluates the rural significance of voluntary actions to support people's welfare and well-being through the development of ‘food banks’ and ‘warm spaces’. Finally, it evaluates rural access to the informational and other support provided by public libraries, a further set of institutions widely viewed as impacted by programmes of closure and service decline.

Educational Services

Primary and Secondary Schools

Concerns have long been expressed about the provision of educational services in rural areas, with announcements of planned closure of rural schools often provoking local protests (Walker 2010; Walker and Clark 2010). Defra (2025) states that the number of schools in Predominantly Rural Parliamentary Constituencies has declined by 42 between 2015 and 2024, with there being just over 5,800 at the latter date. This may be seen to be a relatively small decline in number, although over this period the number of schools in Predominantly Urban Parliamentary Constituencies was said to have increased by 71, reaching a total of 13,360.

Table 4 shows the number of pupils attending infant, primary and secondary schools in England in the 2023-2024 academic year according to the broadest level of Defra’s (2017a) local authority Rural-Urban Classification. It indicates that there were significantly higher numbers of pupils attending infant, primary and secondary schools in Predominantly Urban constituencies than in either Urban with Significant Rural or Predominately Rural ones, and the average number of pupils per school was smaller, at 279, in Predominantly Rural areas than it was in Predominantly Urban areas, where it stood at 436 (Defra 2025). Over the period 2015 to 2024, average school size also apparently increased by 7.7% in Predominantly Rural areas and by 9.5% in Predominantly Urban areas, and the number of qualified teachers apparently also increased, albeit by only 2.9% and 3.2% respectively. In the 2023-2024 academic year, there were 87,300 full-time-equivalent (FTE) qualified teachers employed in Predominantly Rural Parliamentary Constituencies and 311,700 in Predominantly Urban ones (ibid.), with the pupil-to-teacher ratio being lower in the former areas (at 18.5 compared to 18.7

in Predominantly Urban areas). It was apparently "the first time over the 2014/15 to 2023/24 period that the pupil to teacher ratio had been lower in Predominantly Rural areas than in Predominantly Urban areas" (Defra 2025: 18). There had, however, been a significant increase in the employment of teaching assistants over this period, particularly in Predominantly Rural Parliamentary Constituencies, where numbers increased by 17.7% to 54,400 FTEs compared to a 7.7% increase to 194,000 in Predominantly Urban ones.

Table 4: Pupils in England 2023-2024 by School Level and Broad Rural-Urban Classification

Rural Urban Character	Infant		Primary		Secondary	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Predominantly Urban	989,157	63.15	2,561,412	62.0	2,041,105	60.5
Urban with Significant Rural	351,758	22.46	927,157	22.4	789,682	23.4
Predominantly Rural	225,464	14.39	645,007	15.6	544,211	16.1
All England	1,566,379		4,133,576		3,374,998	

Source: derived from Defra (2025) *Statistical Digest of Rural England: February 2025 Update, Education, Qualifications and Training* (London: Defra), Worksheet HA: Number of School pupils in by Rural-Urban Classification in England, academic years 2021/22 to 2023/24**.**

Table 5 shows the number of full-time-equivalent teaching-related staff at schools, differentiated again according to location at the broadest level of Defra's (2017a) Rural-Urban Classification. It indicates that the employment of teaching staff per pupil was very slightly higher in Predominantly Urban than in Predominantly Rural Parliamentary Constituencies, although it is noticeable that there are relatively fewer headteachers per school and teachers in rural schools than in urban ones. This may reflect the smaller size of schools in rural areas as mentioned earlier, as well as increasing use of practices such as shared headteachers and participation in multi-academy trusts, which have been promoted as a means for reducing staff costs in small rural schools (see Aldaba 2019; Hillyard and Bagley 2013).

Table 5: School Staffing in Schools in Rural and Urban Parliamentary Constituencies, 2024

Rural Urban Character	Staffing (Full-Time-Equivalents (FTEs)	
	Predominantly Rural	Predominantly Urban
Teachers	87,300	311,700
Headteachers	5,500	13,800
Teaching Assistants	54,400	194,000
Head Teacher per school	0.95	1.03
Teachers per Head Teacher	15.9	22.6
Pupils per Teacher	18.5	18.7
Teaching Assistants Per Teacher	0.6	0.6

Source: derived from Defra (2025) Statistical Digest of Rural England: February 2025 Update, Education, Qualifications and Training (London: Defra).

Small school size, whilst creating many financial, administrative and curricula delivery challenges, has also been identified as an important motivational influence on parental choice about sending children to rural schools (e.g. Walker 2010; Walker and Clark 2010), although perceived quality, type of school and occupation/social class have also been identified as strong influences (Bagley and Hillyard 2015; Smith and Higley 2012). Table 6 shows the distribution of school quality assessments as undertaken by Ofsted Inspectors in the year ending July 2023, differentiated into Rural and Urban Areas, Primary and Secondary Schools and assessments of income deprivation affecting children (or ICACI). The results suggest there are few clear differences in performance between Primary and Secondary schools at this broad level of rural-urban differentiation, beyond there being a slightly lower proportion of secondary schools classified as ‘Good’ in urban areas in comparison with primary schools. Across both rural and urban areas, and both types of schools, there were significant variations in performance related to the Index of Income Deprivation Affecting Children, with the more deprived areas (i.e. those appear in a quintile with a higher score IDACI score) tending to have smaller proportions of ‘Outstanding’ and higher relative numbers of schools assessed as ‘Inadequate’ or ‘Requiring Improvement’ than those that in the two deprived quintiles. It was also noticeable that across every deprivation decile, a higher proportion of schools had an Outstanding rating in urban areas than appeared in rural areas. This would suggest that, as a whole, urban schools may be performing better in Ofsted inspections than rural ones, once the factor of socio-economic deprivation is held in common.

Figures 18 and 19 show the proportion of primary and secondary schools in Predominately Rural Parliamentary constituencies that received an Outstanding Ofsted grading in the school year ending 31 July 2023. Comparisons between the maps highlight that higher proportions of secondary schools were assessed as Outstanding in some rural Parliamentary Constituencies than was the case for primary ones. There were, for example, no rural constituencies which had over 30% of primary school assessments graded as Outstanding, while 11 of these areas had exceeded this proportion in relation to secondary schools. There were also more rural constituencies which had between 20% and 30% of their secondary school assessments graded as Outstanding than was the case for primary schools. However, the number of rural constituencies with less than 10% of schools so assessed was very similar between primary and secondary levels (56 for primary schools and 55 for secondary ones). It was also evident that many of the same constituency areas figured in the low number of school assessments graded Outstanding: 29 rural constituencies had less than 10% of their primary and secondary school assessments classified as Outstanding, with many of these lying in coastal areas of north-west, eastern and southern England. By contrast, there was considerable variability in the constituencies performing highly in the proportion of Outstanding assessments at primary and secondary levels: while rural constituencies in the North East, South West and Kent all appear relatively high performers in terms of primary school assessments, it is rural constituencies in the south-west Midlands, North Yorkshire, East Midlands and east Norfolk that perform best in terms of secondary schools.

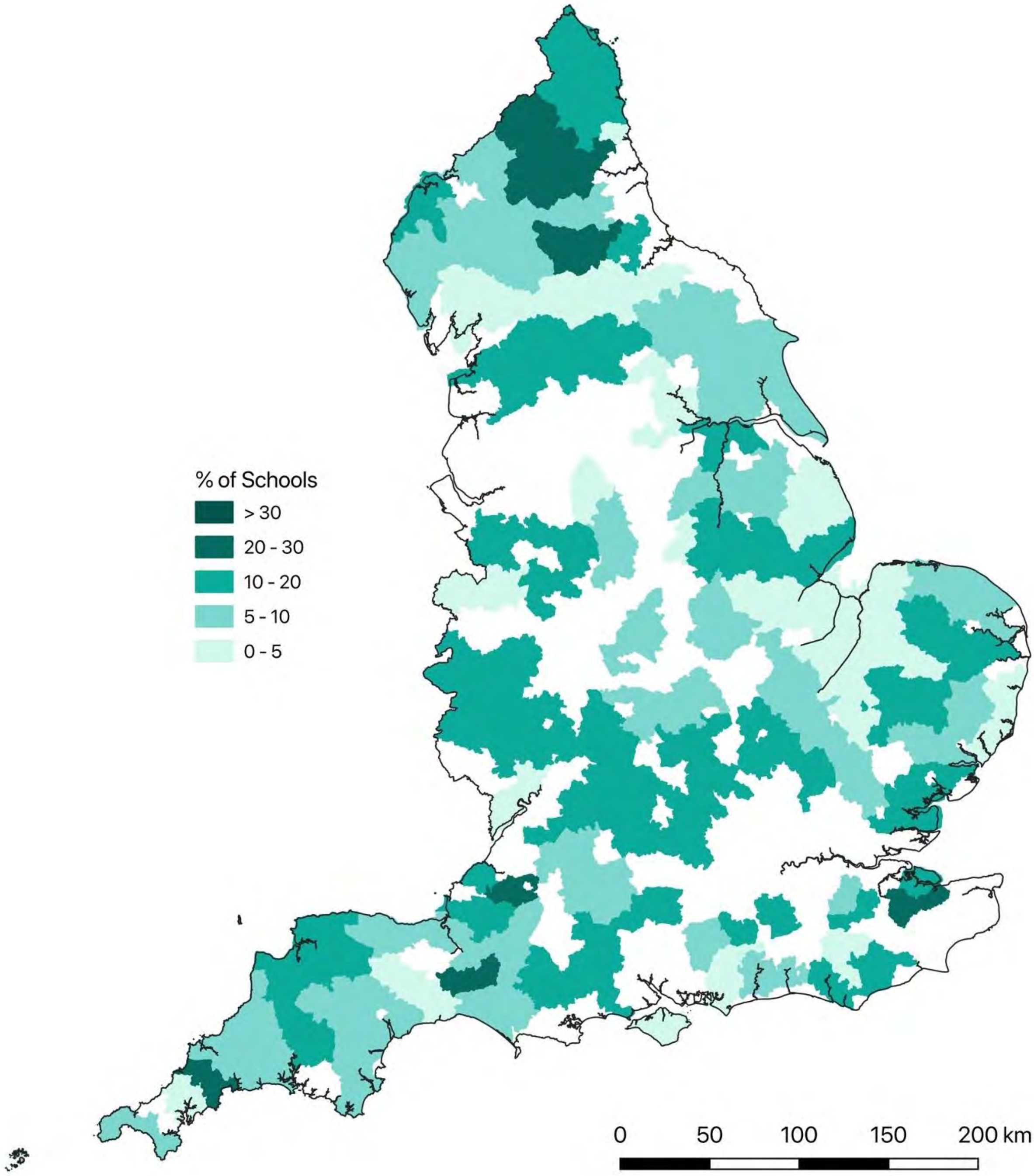
The analysis of primary and secondary schools so far has been conducted at the broadest level of Defra’s (2017a) differentiation of urban and rural, and it is hence likely that the analysis derived from them obscures important differences between rural areas. Table 7 shows the number of schools and associated pupils in rural and urban areas, plus Ofsted assessment gradings for the 12 months prior to the 31st July 2023, as distributed across areas defined by the more refined Defra (2017b) Urban-

Table 6: School Inspection Assessment for Primary and Secondary Schools located in Rural and Urban England, by Income Deprivation Affecting Children (IDACI), July 2023

<table>
<tr><th rowspan="4">IDACI Quintile</th><th colspan="16">Average % Ofsted Grades</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="8">Primary Schools</th><th colspan="8">Secondary Schools</th></tr>
<tr><th colspan="2">Outstanding</th><th colspan="2">Good</th><th colspan="2">Requires Improvement</th><th colspan="2">Inadequate</th><th colspan="2">Outstanding</th><th colspan="2">Good</th><th colspan="2">Requires Improvement</th><th colspan="2">Inadequate</th></tr>
<tr><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th><th>Rural</th><th>Urban</th></tr>
<tr><td>1</td><td>16</td><td>27</td><td>76</td><td>69</td><td>7</td><td>3</td><td>1</td><td>1</td><td>20</td><td>31</td><td>69</td><td>62</td><td>8</td><td>6</td><td>3</td><td>2</td></tr>
<tr><td>2</td><td>11</td><td>19</td><td>78</td><td>74</td><td>8</td><td>5</td><td>2</td><td>1</td><td>9</td><td>18</td><td>72</td><td>69</td><td>15</td><td>9</td><td>4</td><td>3</td></tr>
<tr><td>3</td><td>7</td><td>12</td><td>81</td><td>79</td><td>10</td><td>8</td><td>2</td><td>1</td><td>6</td><td>13</td><td>80</td><td>71</td><td>13</td><td>12</td><td>1</td><td>4</td></tr>
<tr><td>4</td><td>5</td><td>13</td><td>81</td><td>77</td><td>13</td><td>9</td><td>2</td><td>2</td><td rowspan="2">8</td><td>11</td><td rowspan="2">65</td><td>65</td><td rowspan="2">20</td><td>17</td><td rowspan="2">8</td><td>7</td></tr>
<tr><td>5</td><td>7</td><td>12</td><td>78</td><td>75</td><td>12</td><td>11</td><td>3</td><td>2</td><td>11</td><td>62</td><td>20</td><td>8</td></tr>
<tr><td>Total</td><td>12</td><td>15</td><td>78</td><td>76</td><td>8</td><td>8</td><td>2</td><td>2</td><td>13</td><td>16</td><td>72</td><td>66</td><td>12</td><td>13</td><td>3</td><td>5</td></tr>
</table>

Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet BD: School inspection outcomes, by IDACI quintile and Rural-Urban Classification of school location, as of 31 July 2023.

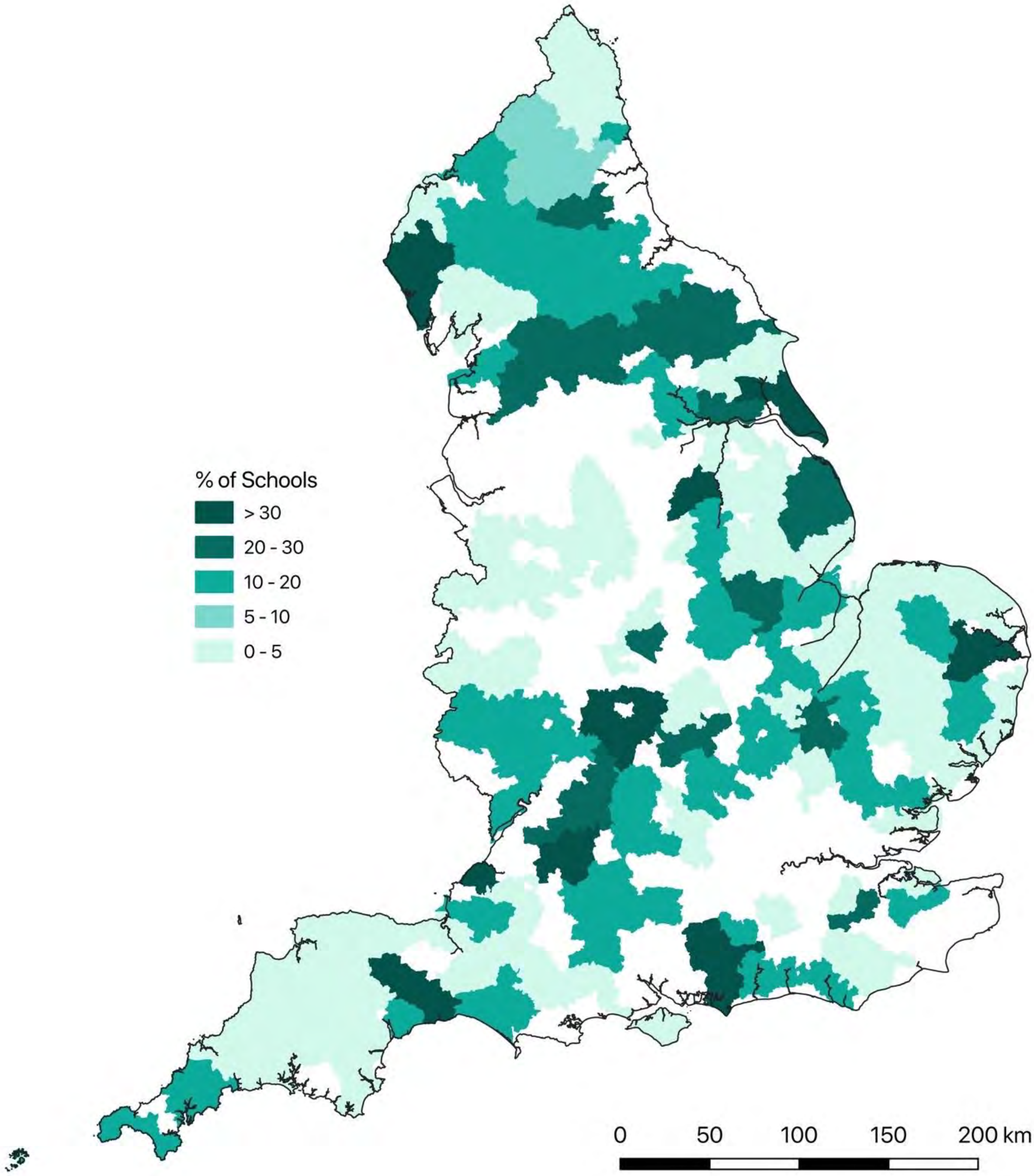
Figure 18: Proportion of Primary Schools Assessed as Outstanding in Rural Parliamentary Constituencies in England, July 2023



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet BB: Proportion of inspected primary and secondary schools achieving an "Outstanding" rating, by Parliamentary Constituency Rural-Urban Classification, as of 31 July 2023.

Rural classification. This information on school and pupil numbers draws on student residential locations rather than the location of the school, so its numbers are not directly comparable with the figures given earlier in this chapter (e.g. in Tables 4 and 6). However, there are similarities in relation to the assessment of Ofsted gradings, with there again being a noticeably lower proportion of secondary schools classified as Good in urban areas in comparison with primary schools, and also

Figure 19: Proportion of Secondary Schools Assessed as Outstanding in Rural Parliamentary Constituencies in England, July 2023



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet BB: Proportion of inspected primary and secondary schools achieving an "Outstanding" rating, by Parliamentary Constituency Rural-Urban Classification, as of 31 July 2023**.**

higher proportions of Outstanding grades in urban areas than in rural ones, although the difference was small in relation to secondary schools.

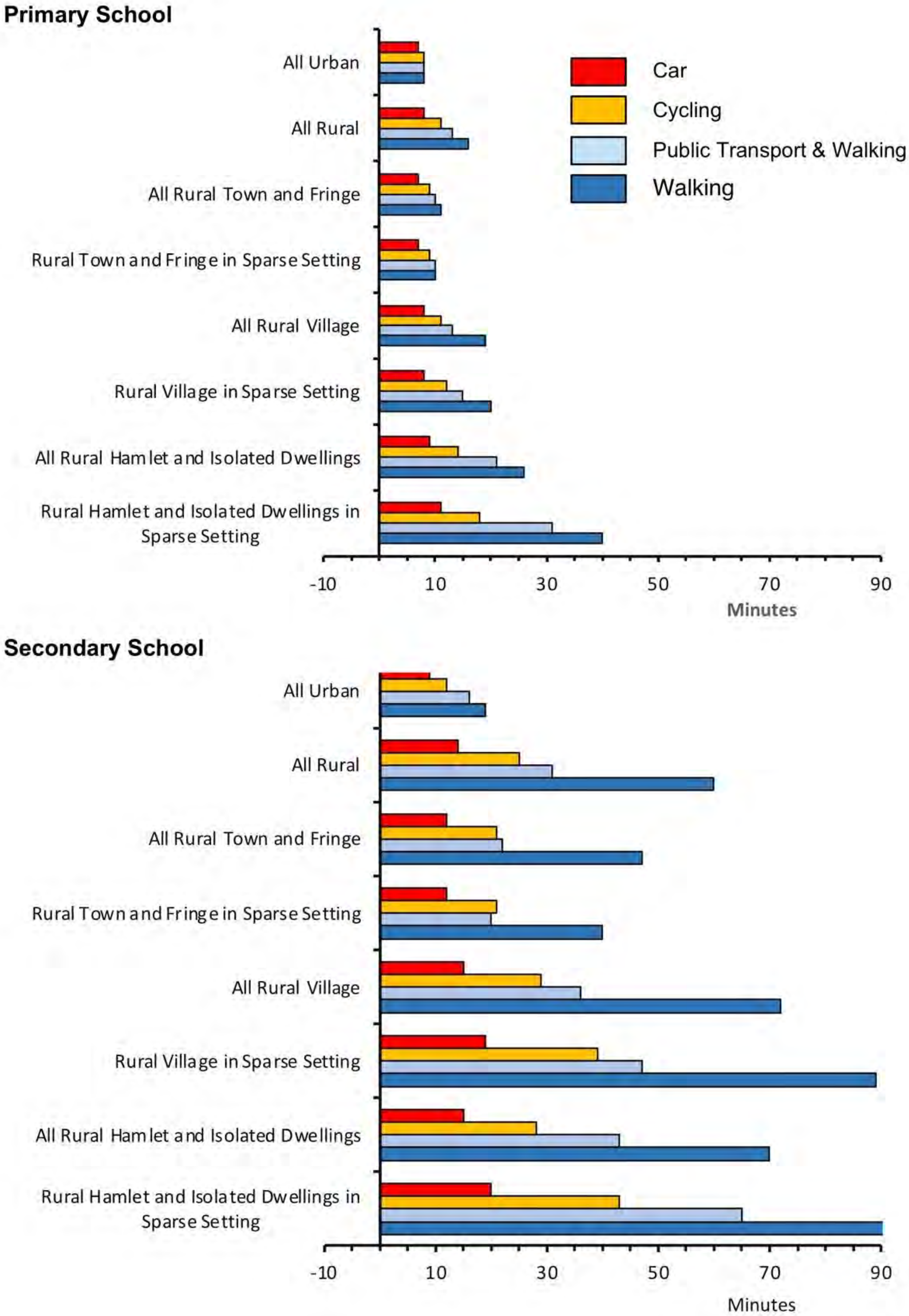
The more refined classifications of rurality employed in Table 8, however, highlight some further contrasts. It is, for example, evident that Outstanding Ofsted gradings were relatively more common in areas classified as major conurbations than they were in any other type of area, with the other urban areas performing very similarly to rural areas, with both primary and secondary schools in areas

Table 7: School Inspection Assessment for Primary and Secondary Schools located in Rural Areas of England, July 2023

Rural Urban Character	No. of Schools	No. of Pupils	% of Ofsted Grades: Primary Schools				% of Ofsted Grades: Secondary Schools			
			Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate	Outstanding	Good	Requires Improvement	Inadequate
Urban Major Conurbation	1,926	228,972	19	74	6	2	19	64	12	5
Urban Minor Conurbation	229	22,178	11	78	10	1	14	66	14	6
Urban City & Town	3,301	272,857	12	76	9	2	14	66	14	6
Total Urban	5,456	524,007	15	75	8	2	14	66	14	6
Rural Town & Fringe	2,560	53,443	10	79	9	2	13	71	12	4
Rural Village	2,199	29,068	12	77	9	2	11	72	10	7
Rural Hamlet & Isolated Dwellings	2,108	16,852	14	77	8	2	16	71	13	0
Total Rural	6,867	99,363	12	78	8	2	13	71	12	4
Total England	12,323	623,370	14	76	8	2	15	66	13	5

Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet BD: School inspection outcomes, by IDACI quintile and Rural-Urban Classification of school location, as of 31 July 2023

Figure 20: Average Minimum Time to Reach Primary and Secondary Schools, Rural and Urban Areas, 2019



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet DA: Average minimum travel time (minutes) to reach the nearest key services, by mode of travel and Rural-Urban Classification, England, 2019

classified as Rural Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings having the second highest levels of top assessments. It is notable that this group of rural areas also had the lowest numbers of children recorded in Table 7, perhaps providing some support for claims that small school size can help school performance, notwithstanding evidence of the resource and leadership challenge it may pose. No secondary schools located in these areas were apparently assessed as being inadequate. However, it is evident that across both urban and rural areas of England, the large majority of both primary and secondary schools were assessed as Good.

Whilst there has been considerable emphasis placed on the exercise of choice in school selection, for many rural residents this can be significantly constrained by geographical distance and transport availability and costs. The significance of distance is evident in Figure 20, which shows average minimum travel times to primary and secondary schools for people living in urban and rural areas in England. It clearly shows how these travel distances increase for accessing secondary schools, and whilst these are relatively small for people living in urban areas and travelling by car in rural areas, across many rural area types, journey times to secondary schools are well over double those to primary schools. It is also evident that travel times to smaller rural settlement categories in sparse areas are particularly extended for people travelling by public transport and/or walking, although in town and fringe areas these journeys were longer in less sparse areas, potentially suggesting that there may be many built environments in these areas without schools and/or good transport services.

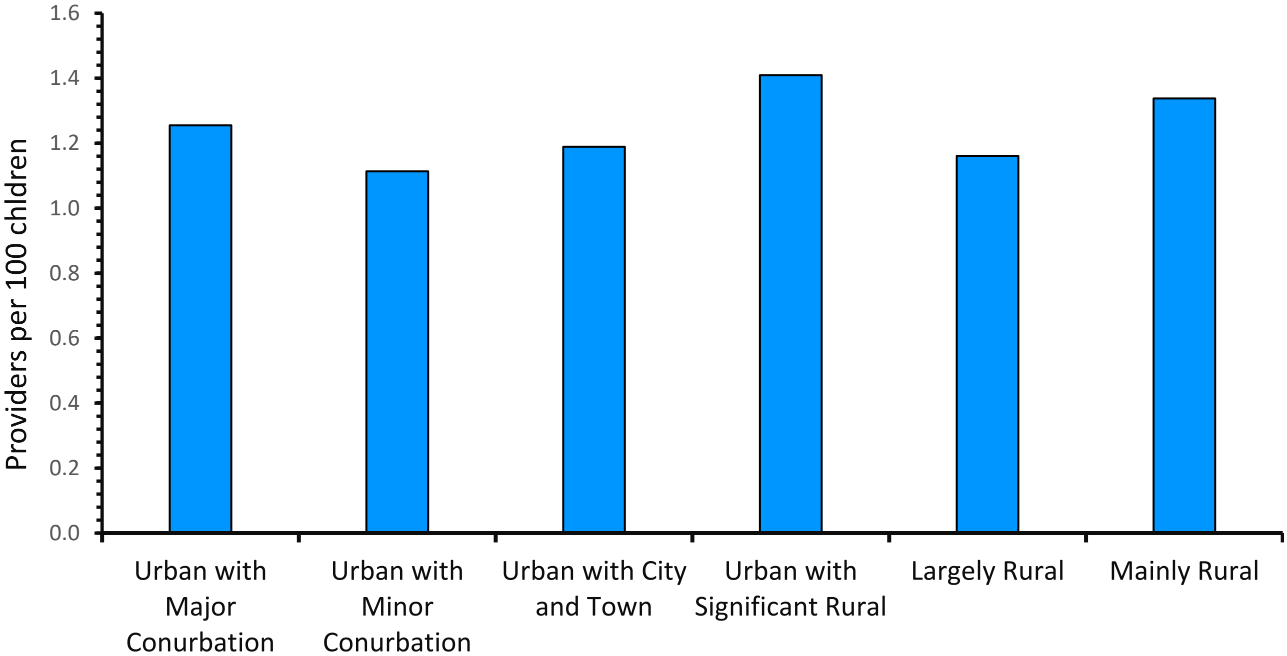
Early Years Education and Childcare

Before children reach the compulsory school starting age of 5, they often receive some form of pre-school or 'early-years' education and institutionalised childcare. The former is often provided through attendance at nurseries up to the age of 4 or 5 and a reception class for children aged between 4 and 5 years old, while the latter is provided via a range of means, including playgroups and nurseries provided by private, voluntary and independent organisations, as well as independent childminders. This last group constitute over 43% of childcare providers in England (Department for Education 2024b), with private group-based provision being the next most common (26% of providers), followed by nursery classes (17%). School, college and local authority provision constituted only 2% of the providers of childcare, although around 60% of primary schools in England offer so-called 'wraparound' childcare (Department for Education 2024c), which is focused on providing activities and care just before and after school for school-aged children.

Figure 21 shows the number of childcare providers in August 2023, per 100 children under 5 recorded in the 2021 Census, differentiated according to the rural-urban character of the local authority in which they are located. It indicates that the number of childcare providers per children under 5 was highest in local authorities classified as Urban with Significant Rural, where it stood at over 14 providers per 1,000 children under 5, with those classified as Largely Rural having the second highest proportion of child-care providers. However, local authorities classified as Mainly Rural scored significantly lower than other areas, having only just over 8 providers per 1,000 children under 5. Such levels of provision may account for why only 16% of local government officers reported that there was sufficient childcare available to families living in all the rural parts of their authority areas in a 2024 survey, a figure that had declined from 30% only a year earlier (Hodges et al. 2024).

Reed and O'Halloran (2024) record that there is statistical evidence of intra-authority variability in access to childcare, provided by the Office for National Statistics, which has calculated child accessibility scores based on the number of providers per children aged under 7 and including differentiations by different modes of transportation (driving and by public transport) and access to providers assessed as Outstanding or Good. Figure 22 maps the average general accessibility scores in rural areas of England, while Figure 23 shows the distribution of all the accessibility across both urban and rural areas of England.

Figure 21: Number of Childcare Providers per 100 children under 5, Rural and Urban Areas of England, August 2024

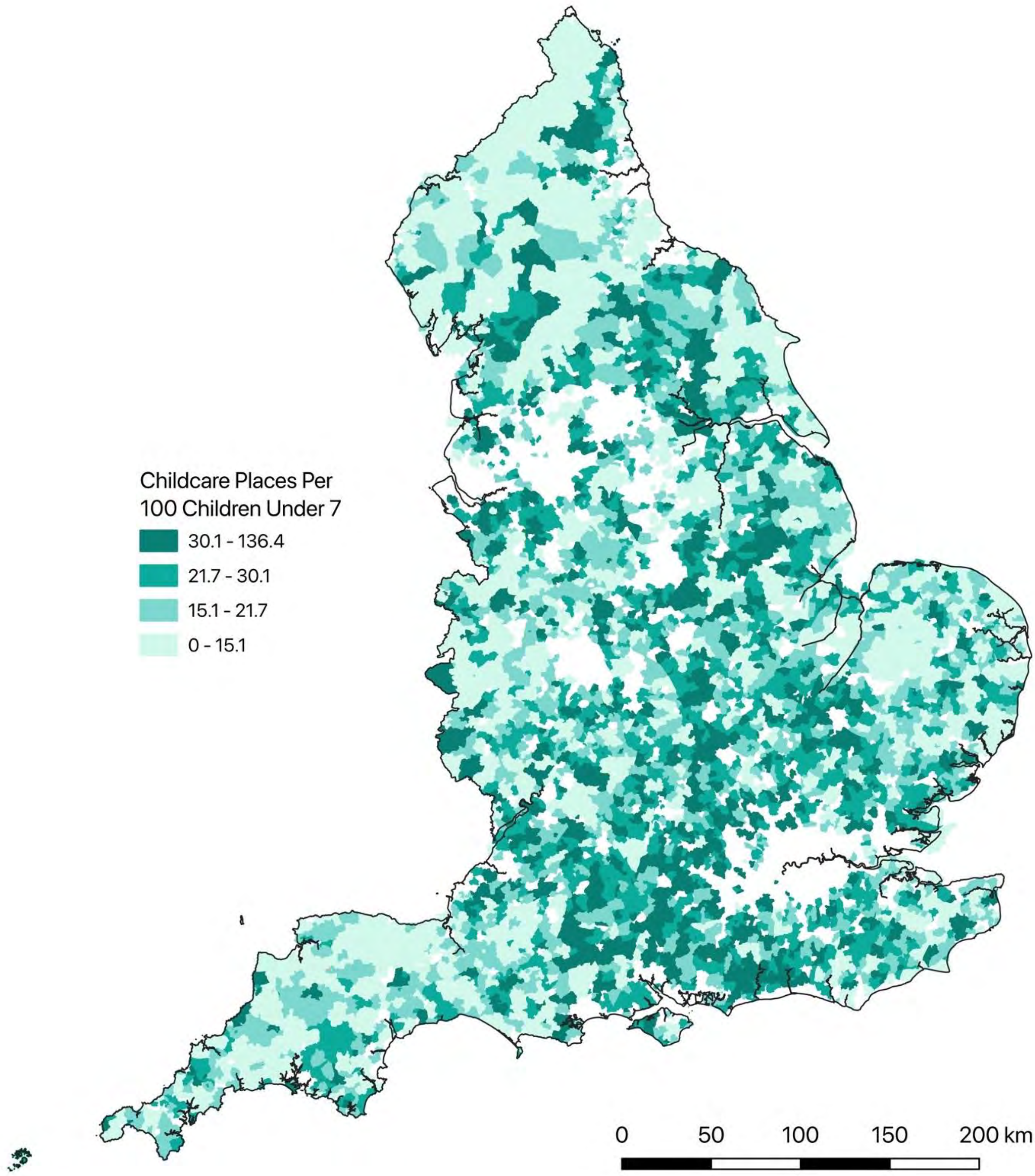


Source: Ofsted (2024) Childcare Providers and Inspections, 31 August 2024 (London: Ofsted), Table 2: Registered Childcare Providers and Places, by Regions and Local Authority, August 2024. https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/childcare-and-early-years-provider-survey/2024. Lasted accessed: 35/2/25

Figure 22 provides support to arguments about considerable localised variations in accessibility, it being clear that areas with high and low levels of access to childcare places often appear adjacent to each other, although there are also some regionalised concentrations both of high and low accessibility. Areas to the south and west of London, in the south-central Midlands, Lincolnshire and East Riding of Yorkshire figure as the areas with high numbers of places relative to the number of children under 7.

Reed and O'Halloran (2024: 6) focus particular attention on the geographical variations in access to private and voluntary childcare places, claiming, for instance, that some areas of the South West "have five times the average ratio of private and voluntary childcare places – while there are other parts that have no access to such provision". Drawing on an investigation of the Office for National Statistics (2024b) data for the South West, the North East and the West Midlands, they conclude that people living in "disadvantaged or rural areas are least likely to have good access to private and voluntary provision, and least likely to have good access to good quality provision" (Reed and O'Halloran 2024: 36). They further investigate this, drawing on a rural-urban classification established by Singleton et al. (2022) rather than any of the governmental rural-urban classifications, arguing that "rural areas have 31 per cent fewer places per child and 29 per cent fewer good places per child compared to inner cities and town centres" (Reed and O'Halloran 2024: 37). Applying this analysis to the 2011 Census-related superoutput level classification of Defra (2017b) produced a difference of over 38% between areas classified as Rural Village and Dispersed Dwellings in a Sparse Setting and those characterised as Urban City and Town, not in a sparse setting, and a difference of 27.5% between the same rural category and Urban Major conurbations. Figure 23 supports arguments about rural areas having lower levels of access to childcare places in providers assessed as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, which is also evident in Figure 24. The latter Figure also reinforces arguments

Figure 22: Accessibility to Childcare Places, Rural Areas of England, December 2023

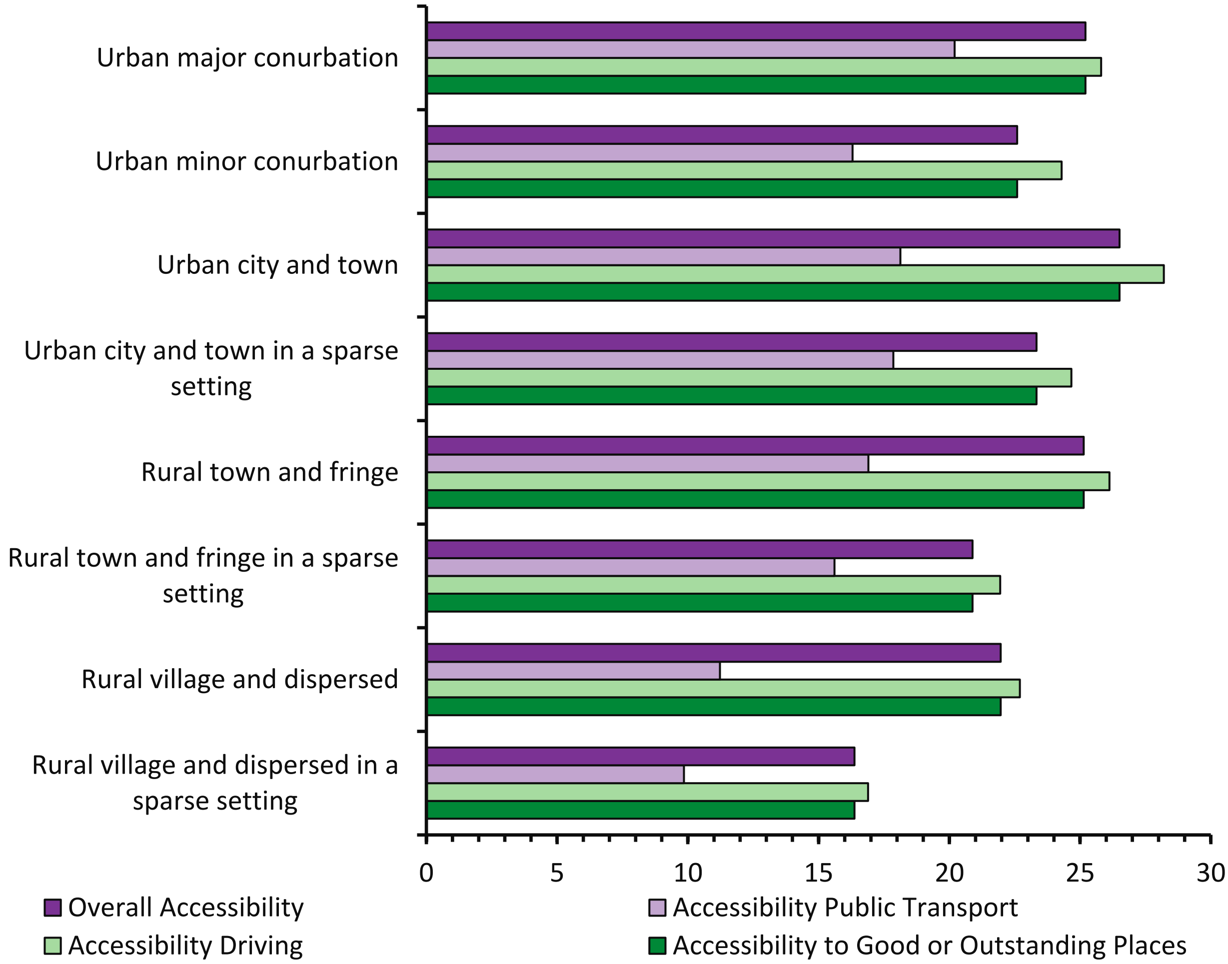


Source: Office for National Statistics (2024b) Childcare accessibility by neighbourhood dataset (London: Office for National Statistics), www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/ educationandchildcare /articles/childcareaccessibilitybyneighbourhood/2024-06-04; accessed 3/2/25.

about localised variability in provision.

Early years childcare provision will change significantly following alterations in central Government policy announced in 2023 and 2024. Access to free/Government-funded childcare is set to expand to 30 hours per week for all children from 8 months through to their school starting age. As Reed and O'Halloran (2024) record, this stemmed from growing recognition in successive central Governments that the household costs of paying for childcare were creating significant barriers to its

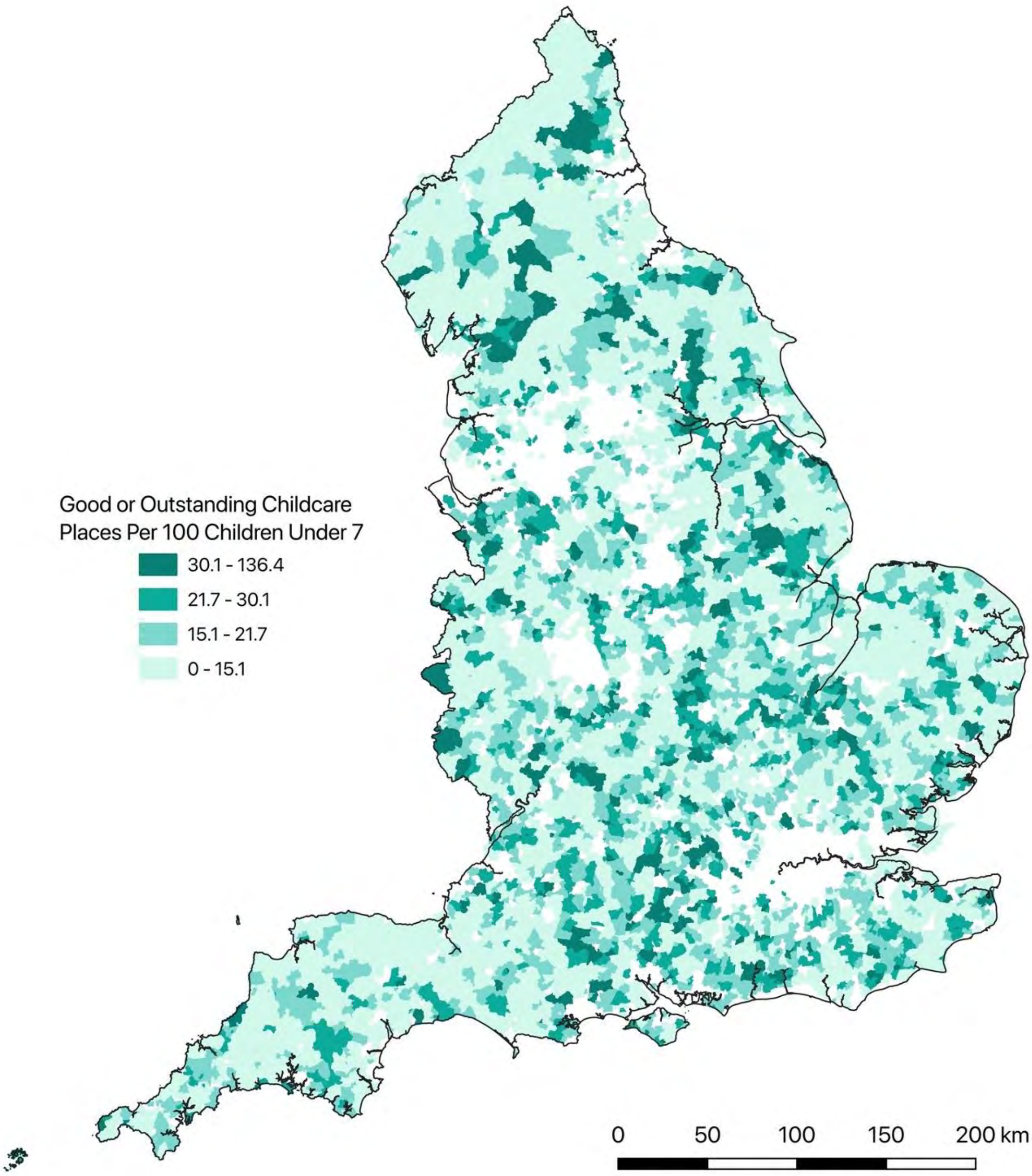
Figure 23: Accessibility to Childcare Places, Urban and Rural Areas of England, December 2023



Source: Office for National Statistics (2024b) Childcare accessibility by neighbourhood dataset (London: Office for National Statistics), www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/childcareaccessibilitybyneighbourhood/2024-06-04; accessed 3/2/25.

use, and for Governmental agendas to increase parental workforce participation. The costs of childcare were seen to have increased significantly over the last few decades, and particularly after the Covid-19 pandemic (Drayton et al, 2023). The Department for Education (2024) reported that 34% of parents with children aged under 4 stated that they were finding it difficult to meet the costs of their childcare when surveyed as part of their regular *Childcare and Early Years Survey of Parents*. At the time of this survey, a maximum of 15 hours of free childcare was made available by Governmental support, and parents who were looking for more care, perhaps to allow them to engage in paid employment or run a business, would have to cover the costs of additional hours themselves. The planned expansion in government-funded places will clearly be of financial benefit to such households, although the expansion in paid hours is only going to be enacted for parents who are deemed to be part of 'working families', with these being delimited as involving parent(s) whose weekly earnings are above 16 times the national living wage and have an annual income of below £100,000. As Reed and O'Halloran (2024: 17) record, these criteria mean that the extended childcare support will not be available to "households on the lowest incomes, as well as those on the highest".

Figure 24: Accessibility to Childcare Places Assessed as Good or Outstanding by Ofsted, Rural Areas of England, December 2023



Source: Office for National Statistics (2024b) Childcare accessibility by neighbourhood dataset (London: Office for National Statistics), www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare /articles/childcareaccessibilitybyneighbourhood/2024-06-04; accessed 3/2/25.

The exclusion of the former clearly raises questions about the social impacts of the new scheme, and whether it will effectively reproduce some of the inequities that have been identified in the current system of childcare support. Reed and O'Halloran (2024), for example, report that there are significant differences in the use of formalised childcare, with only 36% of households in the lowest 20% income bracket making use of this, compared to over 73% of households in the highest 20% band. Defra (2024) also notes that use of childcare away from homes rather than employing a childminder in parental homes has been increasing more in areas classified as Predominately Urban than in its rural equivalent, perhaps reflecting the difficulties rural parents may experience in accessing formalised childcare spaces. Recent Government initiatives to increase the accessibility of early childcare have focused on reducing its costs and do not really address issues of geographical accessibility that may also be critical to rural residents.

Concerns have also been raised about whether providers will be able to meet the expansion in demand, particularly within the level of funding being provided by the Government. A survey of local authorities, for example, indicated that:

> "Whilst there is strong appetite in the sector to offer places, far more barriers than facilitators were identified, with 90% of local authorities particularly concerned about the skills of a workforce in a sector already struggling to recruit and retain staff" (Hodges et al. 2024: 43).

This was the same survey that indicated that only 16% of local government officers felt that there was sufficient childcare available in all of the rural parts of their authority, so the future of childcare in rural England is clearly far from certain.

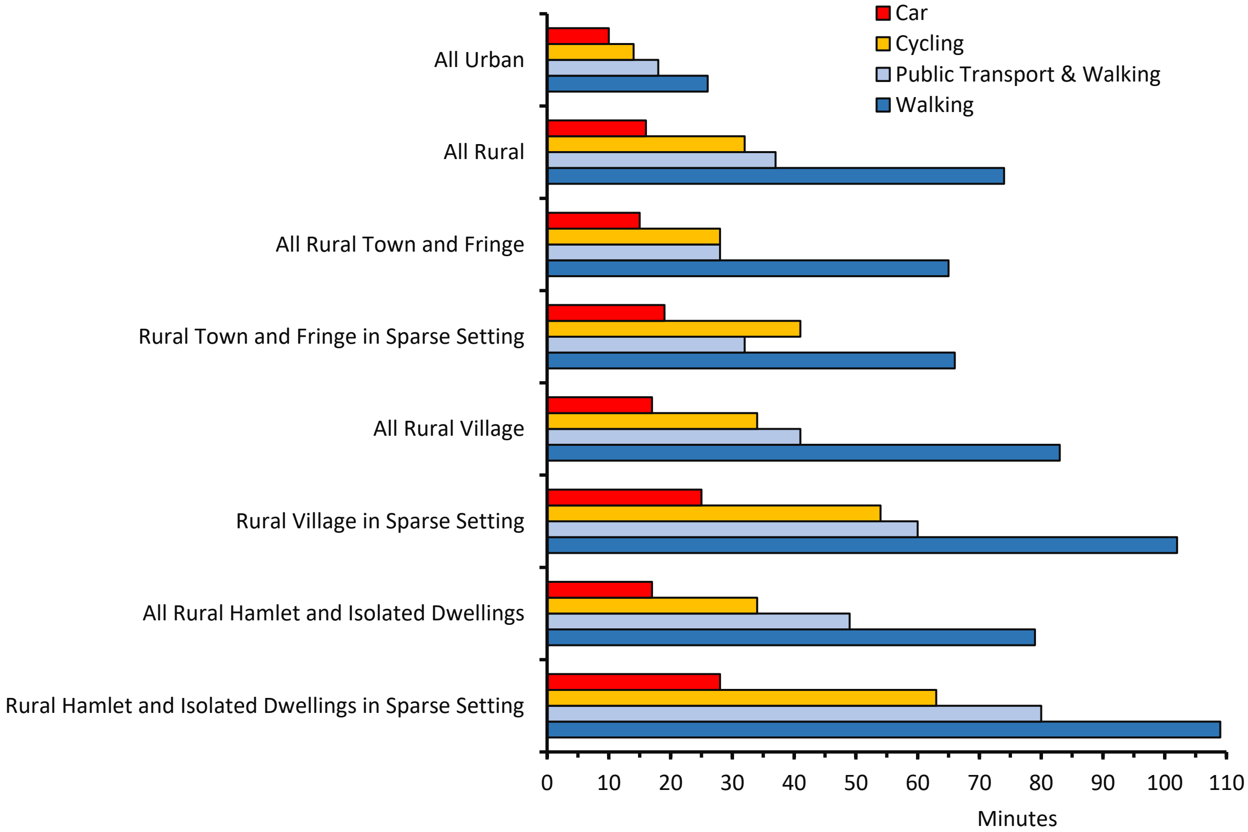
Further Education

Since 2015, young people in England are legally required to stay in full-time education or start an apprenticeship or spend 20 hours or more a week working or volunteering, while in part-time education or training. Figures for the end of 2023 indicate that over 72% of 16-18 year-olds in England remained in full-time education, with 4.6% undertaking apprenticeships or work-based learning, 3.7% undertaking employer-based training, 2.2% undertaking part-time education and 1% undertaking other education and training (Department for Education 2023). A further 8.3% were actually working in employment, while 8% were NEET, i.e. not in education, employment or training. Of the large majority who stay in full-time education, almost a third stay on in secondary state education, 37% go to a Further Education, Tertiary or Specialist college, 16% register with Higher Education Institutions and just under 7% attend a Sixth Form College (Department for Education 2023).

Not all secondary schools have a sixth form provision, and it is, therefore, likely that the length of travel journeys discussed in relation to these schools will be further extended for young people selecting this form of post-16 education. There are, however, no published datasets that enable detailed assessment of these journey lengths, although Defra (2023) states that 33% of 16-19 year olds living in rural areas can access a Further Education College within 30 minutes, by use of public transport and/or walking, with 15% able to access more than one college in this time period, although 52% have no access to any college within this timespan. Defra (2024) also provides an assessment of access to Further Education institutions, based on calculations of the average minimum time contained in the Department of Transport's Journey Time Statistics for 2019. A comparison of the results of the figures for journey times to nearest Further Education institutions (Figure 24) with those for secondary schools (Figure 20), demonstrates that the relative distribution of timings are quite similar, with journey times for people living in urban areas and travelling by car in rural areas being relatively short, with these journey times increasing by relatively short amounts as analysis moves towards smaller forms of rural settlement, although journey times in these cases are noticeably longer in sparse areas. Use of other modes of transport sees much starker urban-rural contrasts, with journey times extending beyond those for secondary schools, particularly in sparse areas of the countryside, where average minimum journey times using public transport are calculated as being an hour or more for young people living in villages or small hamlets/dispersed dwellings in a sparse setting.

The calculation of these times is based on travel distances and estimated journey speeds by different modes of travel, and does not take into consideration the precise timings of services, which is clearly of potential key significance when people need to arrive for classes at particular times. Travel costs can also be a significant barrier, given there are no statutory transport or concessionary fare schemes for 16-18 year-olds, although some local authorities, travel companies and Further Education institutions do offer forms of support, including subsidised travel cards and bursaries. Central Government bursaries are also provided for young people who are in receipt of Income Support, Universal Credit or some other benefit payments or have recently left local authority care.

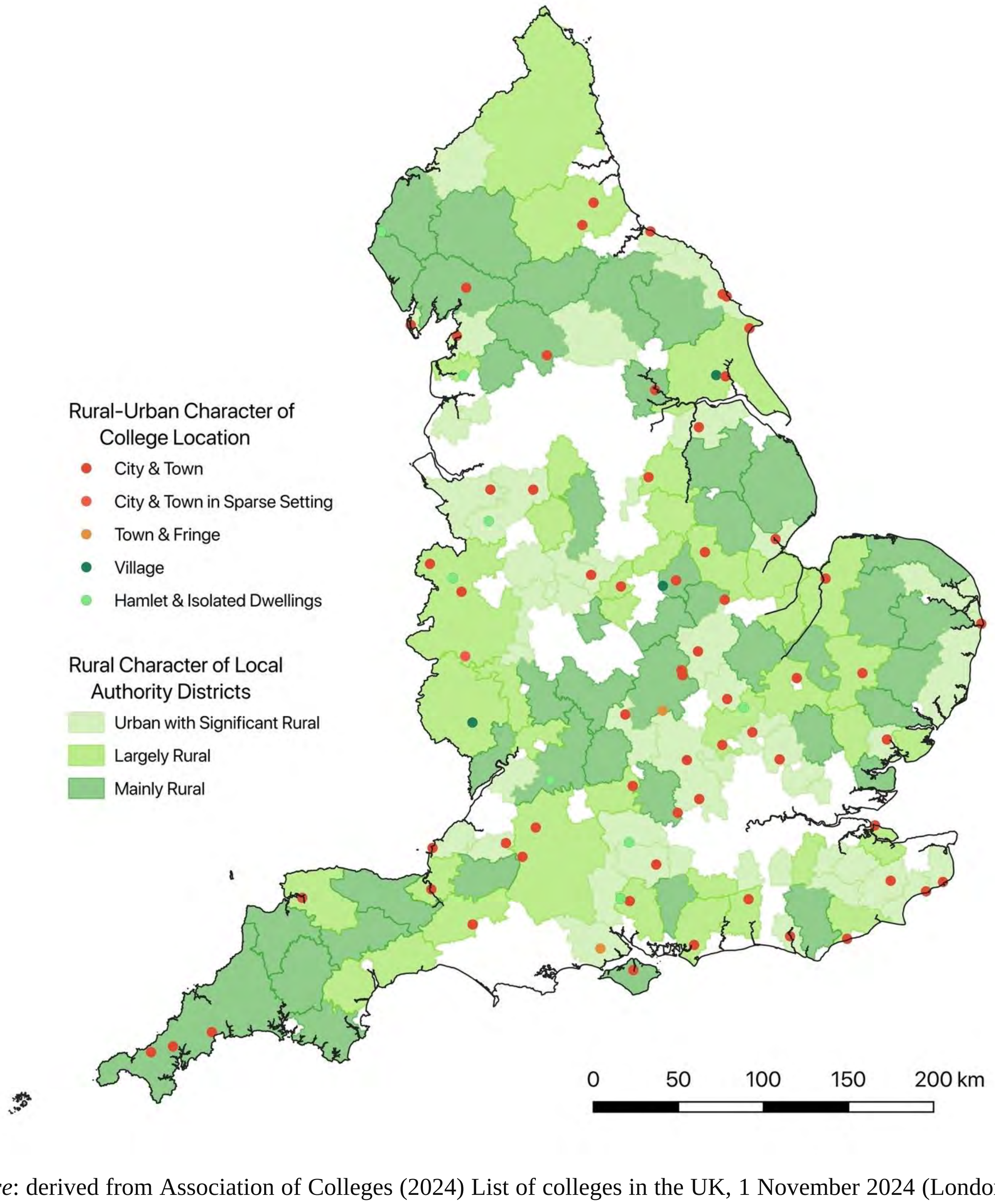
Figure 25: Average Minimum Time to Reach a Further Education Institution, Rural and Urban Areas, 2019



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet DA: Average minimum travel time (minutes) to reach the nearest key services, by mode of travel and Rural-Urban Classification, England, 2019

The extensions in calculated travel times can be seen to reflect the smaller number of Further Education establishments in comparison with schools with 6th forms: in 2022-23 there were a reported 1,989 schools with a sixth form capacity (Department for Education 2024a), compared to 170 general and specialist Further Education Colleges (Ofsted 2023). This college count is lower than

Figure 26: Further Education Colleges Located in Rural Local Authorities, 2024



Source: derived from Association of Colleges (2024) List of colleges in the UK, 1 November 2024 (London: Association of Colleges), www.aoc.co.uk/about/list-of-colleges-in-the-uk.

the 322 reported in Rural England (2019) *State of Rural Services 2018,* as listed by the Association of Colleges in April 2016, although as discussed in this report, calculating the number of colleges and sites is quite difficult, because there have been many amalgamations of institutions as well as the creation of multiple campuses. Analysis of the location of Further Education Colleges registered with the Association of Colleges in November 2024 revealed that only 13 were located in areas classified as rural using Defra's (2017b) Rural-Urban Classification. However, given that students are potentially likely to travel to colleges from surrounding areas, Figure 25 maps the location of Further

Education providers listed as registered with the Association of Colleges at the start of November 2024 that were located in rural local authorities as classified under Defra's (2017a) Rural-Urban Classification. It appears that Further Education Colleges located in rural local authorities largely fell in areas classified as Mainly Rural (32 Colleges) or Urban with Significant Rural (29 Colleges), with only 15 located in districts classified as Largely Rural. This suggests that there was not a clear tendency for Further Education Colleges to be located in the more urbanised forms of rural local authorities. It is also evident from Figure 25 that many local authorities that are classified as rural under Defra's (2017a) Rural-Urban Classification appear to contain no Further Education institutions. This may in part reflect some limitations in the data source, in that it is a list of Further Education providers registered as members of the Association of Colleges, but some further education providers are not members. The provision of Further Education may also well be impacted by the level of sixth-form provision within schools, which may in part be impacted by differences in local education authority policymaking.

Access to Further Education is clearly of considerable importance given that young people are now expected to remain in education, or participate in apprenticeships or training, until they are 18. It has been shown that Further Education Colleges are predominately located in urban areas, and where they are based in rural ones, these tend to have significant proportions of people living in urbanised places. As a consequence, it is unsurprising that people residing in rural areas generally have to travel significantly further to Further Education Colleges than do urban populations, with journey times likely to extend to well over an hour if public or walking is the only available mode of transport. Access to a car may hence be an important conditioner of participation in Further Education, although provision of transport or subsidised travel may be significant in some cases. Some Colleges have developed multiple-site campuses, and these may be an important mechanism to improve access from rural locations, particularly if opportunities are taken to develop some sites in smaller, more rural locations.

Welfare Services

As highlighted by Cloke et al. (2001), the provision of welfare support in the UK has undergone profound change over recent decades, which have been characterized in a range of ways by commentators, including as a transition from a welfare state to a welfare society (Rodger 2000) or from a welfare state to a workfare state (Jessop 1994). However the changes are characterised, it is clear, as Cloke et al. (2001: 494) note, that welfare delivery now frequently involves “a range of agencies drawn from public, private and voluntary sectors”. The following section will clearly illustrate this, examining three areas of welfare provision in rural England where distinct combinations of actors are involved. First, it will examine an arena of welfare provision where the government and the public sector have remained central actors, namely the provision of services designed to support people during periods of unemployment, and also often to encourage people into employment. Second, it will examine two forms of welfare provision where the voluntary sector has taken a leading role, arguably stepping in to address failures in governmental and private sector delivery of welfare support. Third, it will look at public libraries, institutions that have historically been closely associated with state governance, often as much at the local as the national level, but which have actually long been delivered by a range of non-governmental agencies. In all three instances of welfare provision, attention will focus on their delivery within rural areas and the accessibility rural residents, employees and businesses have to them.

Employment Services and Benefits

Since at least the early twentieth century, central Governments in the UK have sought to provide some financial support to people who are, at least temporarily, unable to work or run a business. In 1909, for example, the Labour Exchanges Act was passed to create offices where people could go to find out about job opportunities and in 1911 the National Insurance Act established a national system of unemployment insurance that could help cover living costs if people were unable to work due to illness or were laid off from employment. From 1920, the national UK Government began providing formalised unemployment benefits, and over the course of the twentieth century, a series of additional benefit payment schemes appeared, including housing benefits, income support, tax credits and disability allowances. Concerns are regularly expressed about the costs of providing these benefits, and there have been a series of reorganisations of the benefits system, including the introduction of *Universal Credit*, which was designed to integrate a series of forms of benefit payments. In addition to financial payments and tax credits, a series of forms of support have been created to help people during periods of unemployment and economic hardship. These have included the establishment of Job Centres, which perform many of the functions of the old Labour Exchanges in terms of providing information about job opportunities, although also, Cole (2007: 137) argues, promoting a more "socially integrationist discourse". Job Centres, and their sequel, Job Centre Plus, being established in prominent locations on "major high streets" and in shopping centres. Unemployment itself thereby became both more visible and normalised, with Job Centres becoming, by design, "one 'centre' among many" (Cole 2007: 137).

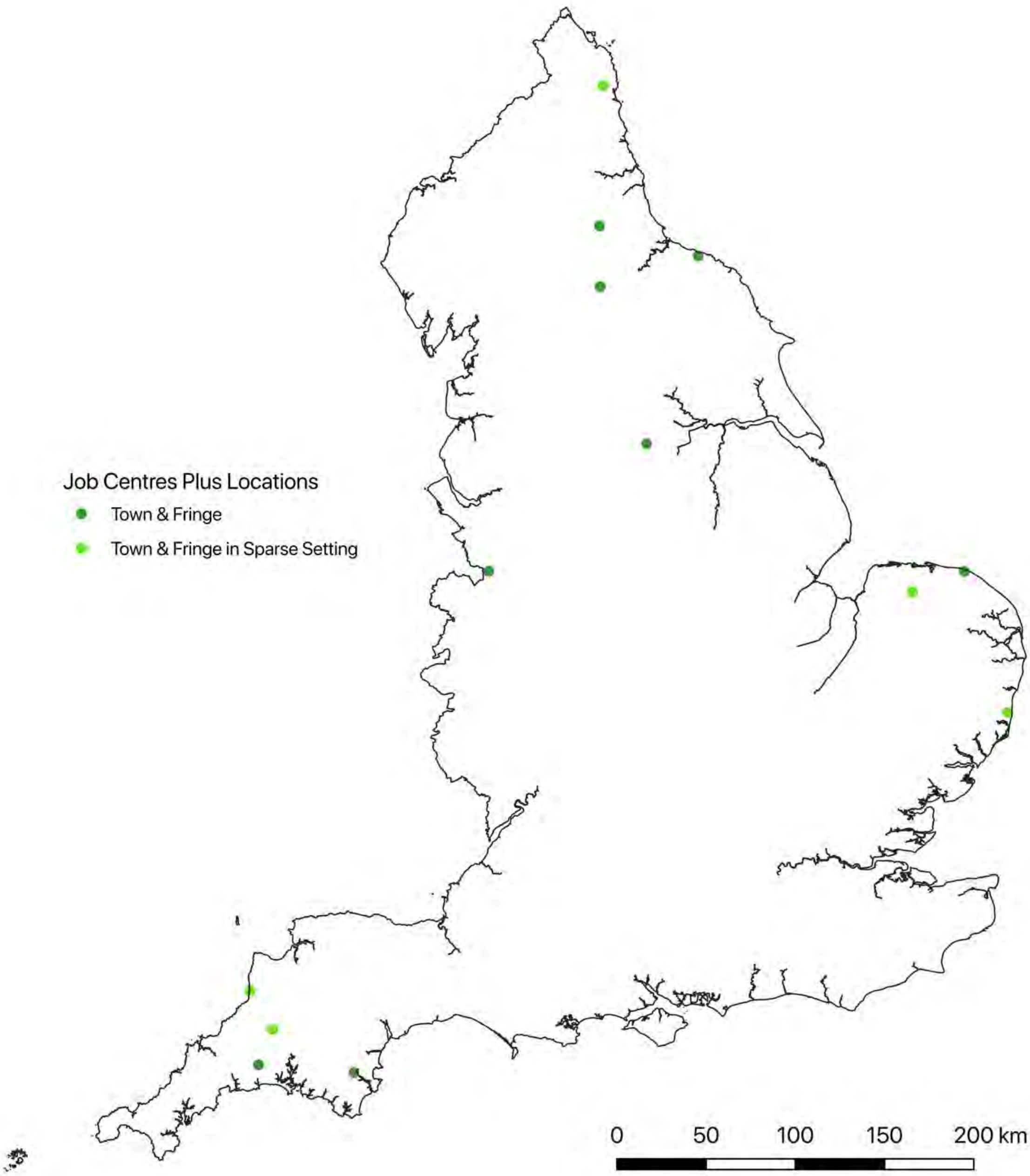
The normalisation was intrinsically urban - the 'high streets' and 'shopping centres' tended to be located in urban centres - although little research has been conducted on the geography of Job Centres (although see Griffin (2021) on the geographies of Unemployed Workers' Centres). However, an examination of the location of Job Centres Plus locations reveals that these are predominately urban in character, with only 13 of the 490 centres running in July 2023, being located in areas classified as rural (see Table 8). All these rural centres were permanent rather than temporary, and located only in Town and Fringe locations (other rural areas hence omitted from Table), implying that people living in less densely populated rural areas would all have to travel to access these centres.

Table 8: Job Centre Plus locations July 2023, in Rural and Urban Areas of England

Rural Urban Characteristics	Number of Locations with Job Centres		
	Established	Temp	Total
Major Conurbation	158	53	211
Minor Conurbation	19	3	22
City and Town	296	73	369
City and Town in Sparse Setting	4		4
Town and Fringe	8		8
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	5		5
All England	490	129	619

Source: derived from data provided by the Department of Work and Pensions, to a Freedom of Information request, made available at: www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/a_list_all_uk_job_centre_plus_of

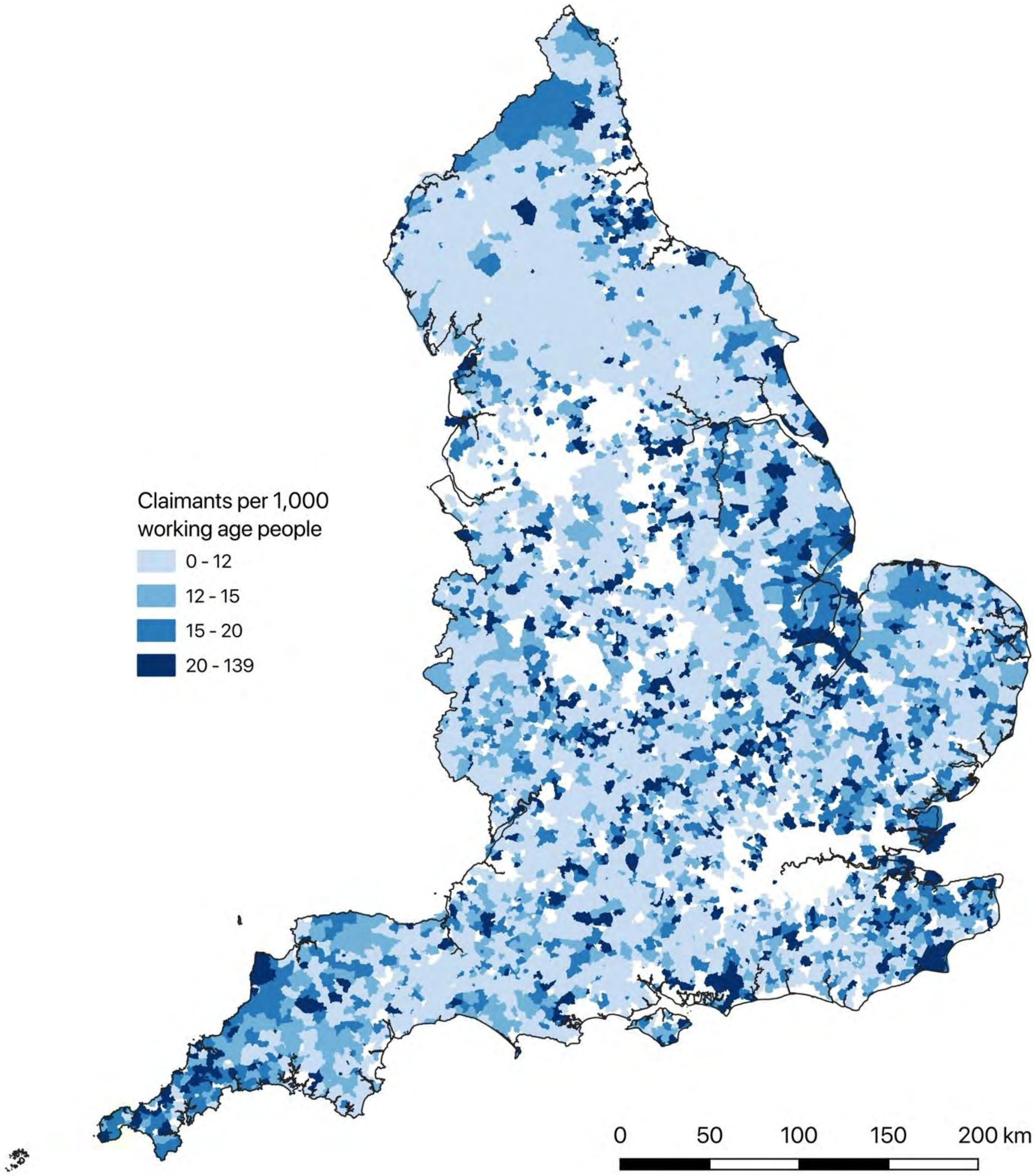
Figure 27: Rural Job Centre Plus Locations, 2023



Source: derived from data provided by the Department of Work and Pensions, to a Freedom of Information request, made available at: www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/a_list_all_uk_job_centre_plus_of

Furthermore, as Figure 27 demonstrates, these centres were located in a small set of regions, namely Cornwall, north Norfolk, north Shropshire and north-east England. These regions all contain extensive areas of relatively remote countryside with small numbers of large towns, which may be seen to account for why a few Job Centre Plus sites have been established outside of locations defined as urban. They are also, as illustrated by Figure 28, amongst the rural locations with the highest number of Universal Credit claimants relative to their working-age population. There were, however, also many other rural areas with similar levels of claimants but which were not served by rurally located Job Centre Plus offices.

Figure 28: Average Universal Credit Claimants per 1,000 Working-Age Population in Rural Areas of England



Source: derived from Department of Work and Pension monthly Claimant Counts for 2024, by Lower Layer Superoutput Areas. Data accessed through Nomis.

There have been relatively few studies of rural unemployment, which is quite surprising given the extent of research on issues of rural poverty and deprivation (e.g. Chapman et al. 1998; Cloke et al. 1995; Cloke et al. 1997; Milbourne 2004; Shucksmith et al. 2023). One issue that has been raised in several rural studies is the degree to which benefit claims in rural areas may be relatively low in comparison with the levels of poverty and hardship being experienced. Studies Bramley et al. (2000), Commission for Rural Communities (2007a; 2007b), Pugh et al. (2007) and Shucksmith et al. (1994; 1996, 2023), have all suggested that benefit take-up is lower in rural than in urban areas. A variety of causes for this have been identified, including: i) the complexity and temporal lag in the application process, which may make it particularly ill-suited for people who have some seasonality to their employment/unemployment, such as people working in the agricultural, tourism or hospitality sectors; ii) the significance of migrant labour in seasonal labour markets, which may mean the challenges of i) become intensified (see Fernández-Reino and Rienzo 2022; Thomson et al. 2018); iii) the presence of cultures of independency (e.g. Phimister et al. 2000; Vera-Toscano et al. 2020); iv) lack of a peer network, who can offer advice and support with benefit applications and procedures (e.g. Shucksmith 2000); and v) the physical distance between applicants and benefit and support access points such as Job Centres, which can make access information and quite difficult, particularly for people without access to private transport (see Shucksmith 2000). The lack of rurally located Job Centre Plus offices in Figure 27 lends support to this last argument.

It is also noticeable in Figure 27 that agricultural regions like The Fens, and coastal and tourist areas like Cornwall and the Kent, Lincolnshire and Yorkshire coasts, also figure highly in areas with high proportions of Universal Credit Claimants, alongside settlements in former coalfield areas, particularly in the North East and South Yorkshire/East Midlands.

Voluntary Welfare Service

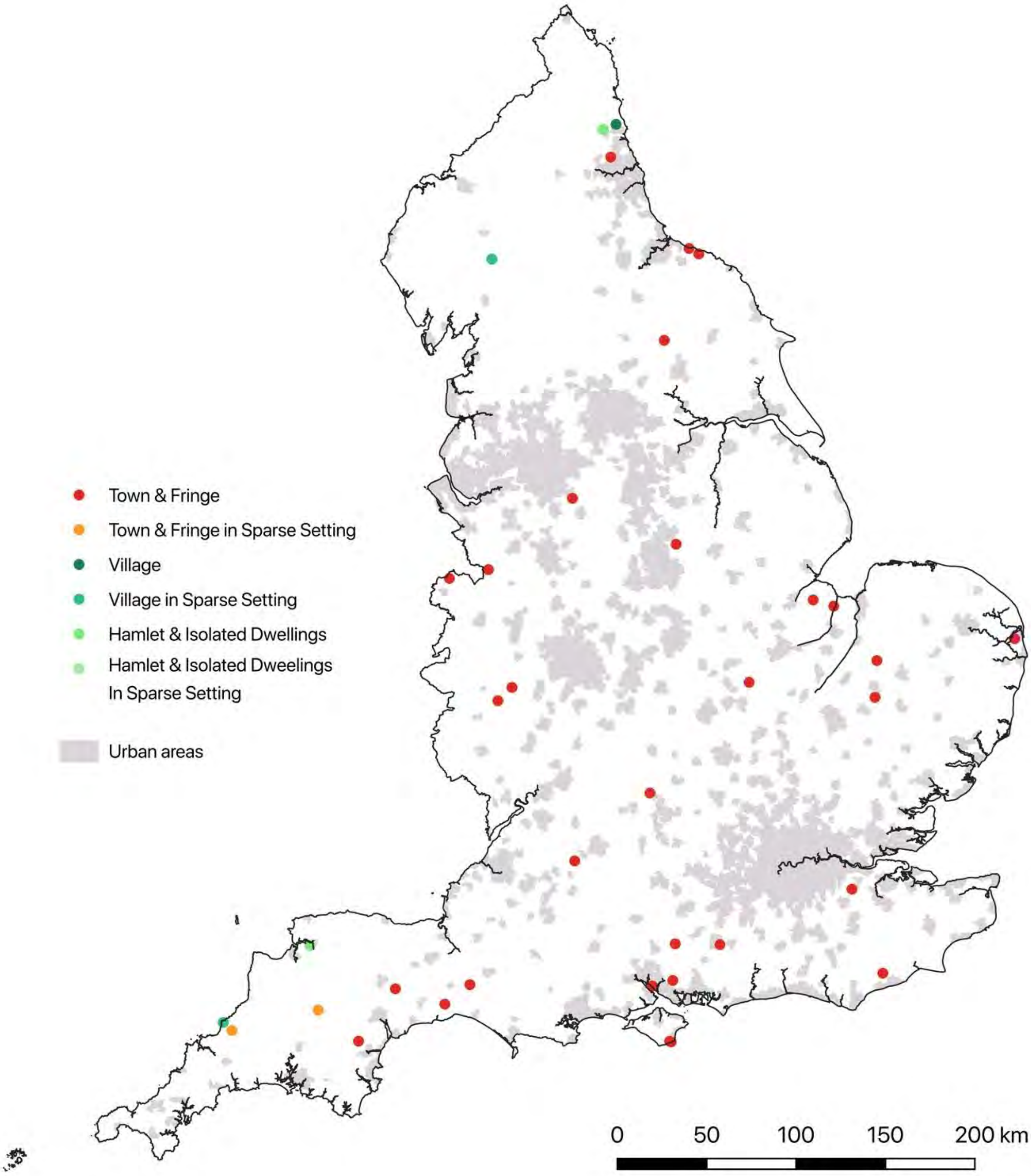
As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, there have been claims that the voluntary sector has become an increasingly important agent in the delivery of welfare services, often acting to provide support in areas where state or private sector delivery may have in the past been expected, but which is not being provided now. Two high-profile examples of this in recent years have been the establishment of food banks and warm hubs by voluntary organisations.

Food Banks

In the UK, the supply of food to people has largely been left to the private sector to deliver and this activity has clearly exerted a profound influence on the economies of rural areas. Despite the UK having one of the most productive agricultural sectors and one of the lowest relative consumer prices for food in the world (Our World in Data 2023), concerns have grown about the access that people on low incomes have to food, and many other goods and services, particularly in a period of heightened inflation. One response to this from the voluntary sector has been the establishment of food banks (see May et al. 2020; Riches and Silvasti 2014), which are groups and organisations that collect food from a range of sources to then redistribute it free to people who are assessed as being unable or struggling to purchase it from retail outlets. The number of food banks and food parcels has increased significantly since the establishment of the initial centre in 2000. There was a significant rise in the number of distributed parcels during the Covid-19 pandemic, which reduced in the immediate post-pandemic year, but then increased to over 3 million parcels in 2022-23 and 2023-24 (Trussel Trust 2024).

Figure 28 shows the provision of food banks in rural areas of England as indicated by Defra's (2017b) output level classification and membership of the Independent Food Aid Network, which is one collection of food banks in the UK. Town and Fringe areas predominate in the distribution of the food banks in this network, which means that people residing in smaller rural settlements might potentially struggle to access these voluntary sources of support. However, the Trussel Trust, which is a charity oriented to providing support to people in poverty and acute need, actually distributes food parcels from more locations than the Independent Food Aid Network (1,699 locations compared to 1,172 (Francis-Devine 2024)). Figure 29, therefore, does not encompass all of the food banks

Figure 29: The Distribution of Rural Foodbanks run by Members of the Independent Food Aid Network, 2024



Source: Independent Food Aid Network (2024) IFAN Members August 2024 (London: Independent Food Aid Network); https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/our-members; accessed 17/11/2024

running in rural England, but unfortunately, the Trussel Trust does not publish detailed information on the locational distribution of its food banks, although it does provide a breakdown by local authority districts (Trussel Trust 2024), which illustrates that over half of its food distribution centres and its food parcel deliveries originate in local authority districts with significant levels of rurality (see Table 9). Combining the figures calculated for the Trussel Trust with those derived from the Independent Food Aid Network would suggest that there are some 615 located in areas with significantly rural elements. May et al. (2020) undertook a similar analysis, although focused on local authorities classified as Largely Rural and Mainly Rural in Defra's (2017a) Rural-Urban classification

Table 9: Distribution of Food Distribution by Trussel Trust, March 2023-April 2024

Rural-Urban Character of Local Authorities	Food Distribution Centres		Food Parcels Distributed	
	Number	%	Number	%
Urban with Significant Rural	257	46.1	344647	47.9
Largely Rural	173	31.1	212021	29.5
Mainly Rural	127	22.8	162678	22.6
Total Number England	557		719346	

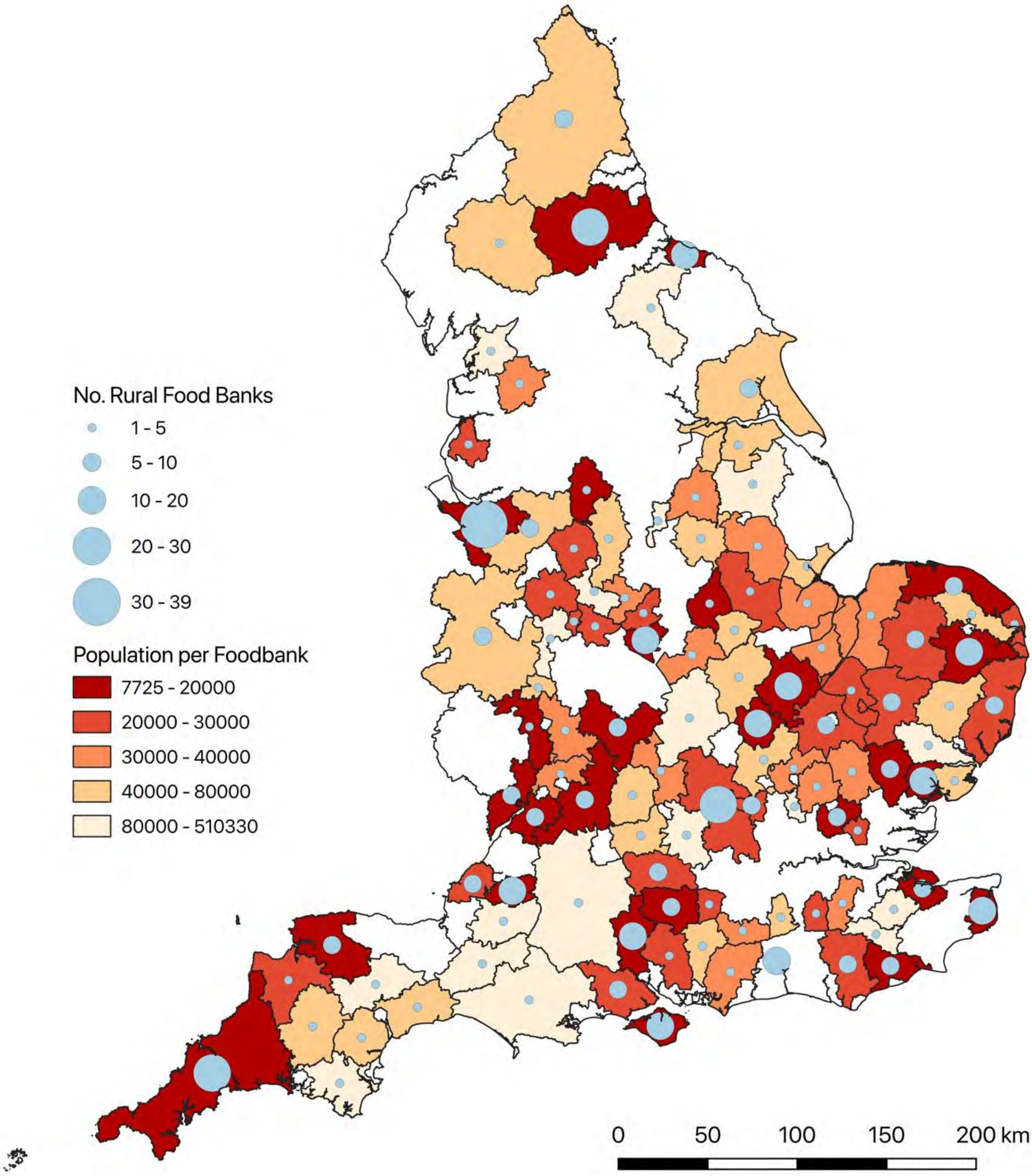
Source: derived from Trussel Trust (2024) *End of Year Statistics, 2024* (London: Trussel Trust) and Defra's (2017a) *The 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Local Authority Districts in England* (London: Government Statistical Services).

and identified 355 food banks located in these areas based on 2018 data. Applying this focus to the 2024 data employed in Figure 29 and Table 9 produces a figure of 336, although it should be noted that the figures related to the Independent Food Aid Network were based on a much finer-grained level of analysis than employed by May et al. (2020), so it is likely than their figures include distribution centres that were classified as urban in the analysis conducted here

May et al. (2020) commented on the uneven geographical distribution of rural food banks, both in absolute numbers and in relation to population size, noting, for example, that whilst the county of Devon had a high number of food banks, it was amongst the lowest in relation to population numbers, while County Durham had both a high number of foodbanks and a high density of provision, while Cumbria had both very low numbers and a low density of food banks in relation to population. Figure 30 shows a similar, although more spatially extensive and refined analysis based on local authorities classified as 'Predominantly Rural' (which equates to the Mainly and Largely Rural categories employed in Table 9) or 'Urban with Significant Rural'. The areas with the lower population per food bank have in effect a greater density of these food distribution centres relative to their population (and hence are shaded darker), whilst areas with a lower level of provision have the higher population per bank figures (and are shaded lighter). As with May et al.'s (2020) analysis, County Durham figures as an area with a high absolute number of food banks (illustrated through the proportional circles), and a high density of provision per its population. The rural local authority Districts in Devon each have a small number of foodbanks, but it is noticeable that south Devon has a significantly lower density of foodbanks for its population, as indeed do the Districts in Dorset, South Somerset and Wiltshire. The only District in Cumbria that appears in Figure 29 is that of Eden,[1] with the claim of May et al. (2020: 416) that this region has both a "very low number of food banks, and very low density of provision", appearing to have persisted into 2024. Other Predominately Rural Districts which are notably absent from Figure 30 are East Lindsey in Lincolnshire; Ryedale in North Yorkshire; Somerset and Taunton in the South West, and the County of Herefordshire.

May et al. (2020) suggest that the distribution of foodbanks may particularly impact people in need of food support in more sparsely populated rural areas, as these are the areas where supermarkets, which often provide the cheapest retail source of food, are frequently absent, meaning people often have to make use of high costs outlets or travel to potentially quite distant towns or

Figure 30: The Distribution of Foodbanks run by members of the Independent Food Aid Network and the Trussel Trust in Rural Local Authorities, 2024

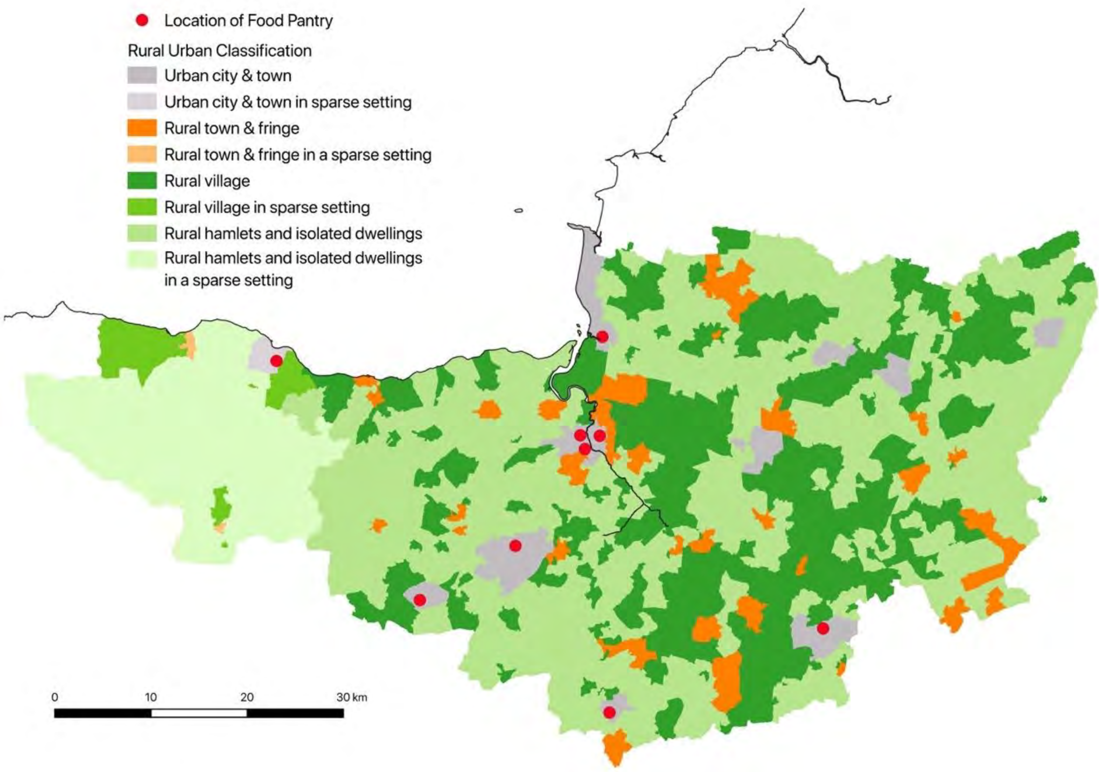


Source: derived from The Trussell Trust (2024) *End of Year Statistics, 2023/24* (London: The Trussell Trust) and Independent Food Aid Network (2024) IFAN Members August 2024 (London: Independent Food Aid Network); https://www.foodaidnetwork.org.uk/our-members; accessed 17/11/2024

cities, which itself consumes time and money. The analysis of supermarket distribution and travel times conducted in Chapter 2 provides support for these claims about the geographical distribution of these stores, as well as highlighting the lack of inter-supermarket competition in many rural locations. May et al. (2020) further suggest that food banks, and also the agencies that provide referrals for people to access food banks, are also largely located in towns and cities, although they note that some food banks have developed different modes of operation to address issues of rural accessibility, including the use of a series of distribution centres, often linked to sites of other service delivery such as doctors' surgeries and schools (see Baker et al.(2024) on the latter), which open at different times during a week and are serviced by a central food bank or distribution centre. Mobile and 'pop-up' food banks have also been created to help enable the distribution of food support to areas geographically distant from town and city locations. An example of the former is the 'Hope on the Go' mobile food hub, which distributes emergency food parcels to villages across south Cambridgeshire, using an electric van (Gardner 2024).

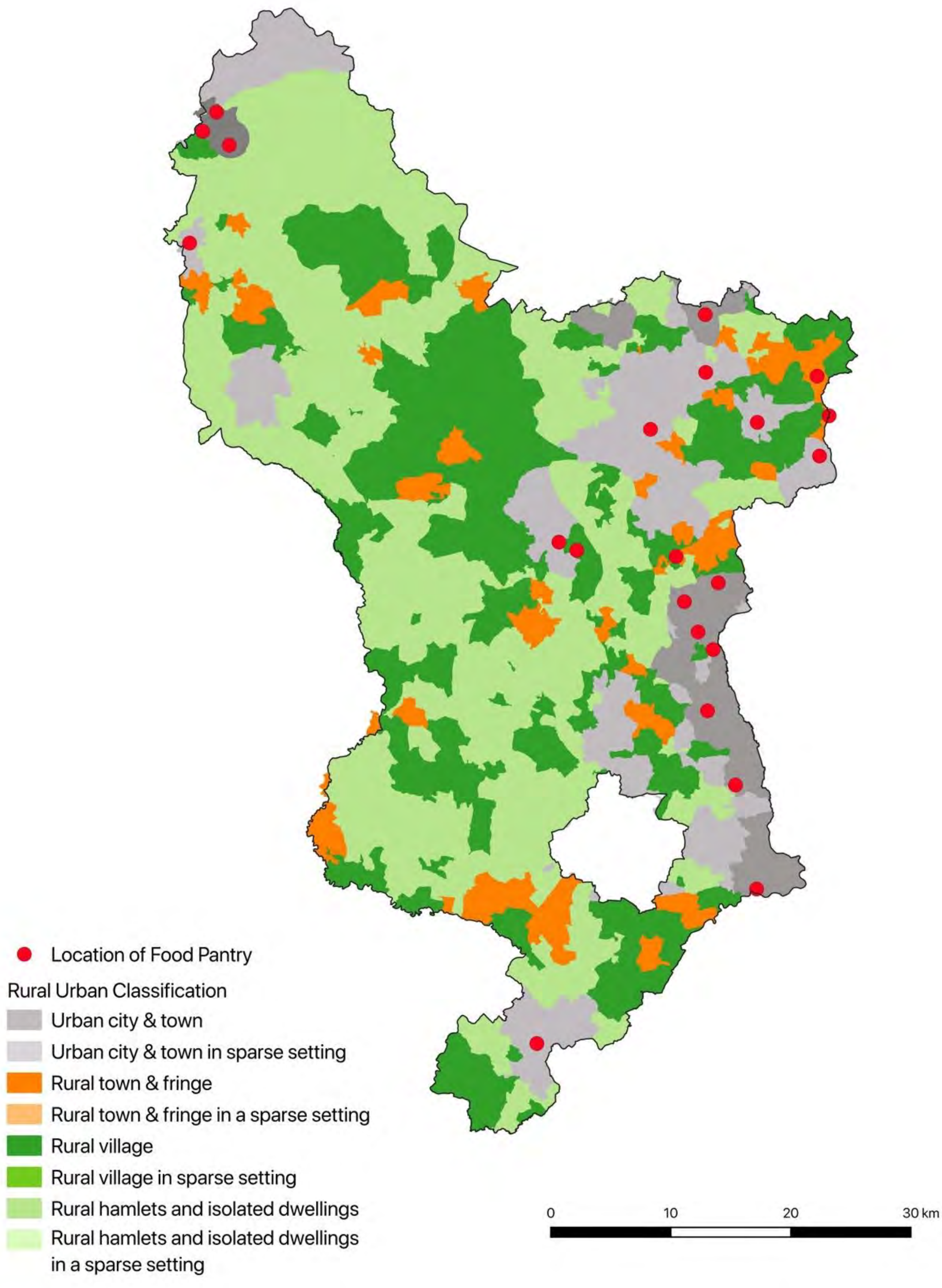
Food banks focus on the provision of emergency support, which whilst clearly of great significance to people, has been criticised for failing to address longer-term determinants of food poverty (Baillie et al. 2024). In response to this, a range of further voluntary responses have emerged, including the establishment of an increased number of 'food pantries'. These involve the provision of a range of forms of food support, including food products, that are distributed to people who pay a low-cost membership fee, rather than being free. As Baillie et al. (2024:2) note, these forms of food provision have received less research attention than food banks, which means that there is currently a lack of knowledge on their operation and "whether they address, or potentially reproduce, existing limitations in emergency food provision or generate new/alternative concerns". Aitchinson et al. (2024) claim that there are 121 food pantries in the UK, that provide support to around 13,000 members who have undertaken approximately 270,000 visits over the preceding year. They further suggest that there are clusters of these in Newcastle, Liverpool, Merseyside, the West Midlands and Portsmouth, although it is clear that there are examples of food pantry development in some counties with significant areas of countryside, such as Derbyshire and Somerset (see Figures 30 and 31).

Figure 31: Food Pantries in Somerset, 2024



Source: Somerset County Council (2025) *The Local Pantry Network - Somerset* (Taunton: Somerset County Council), www.somerset.gov.uk/health-safety-and-wellbeing/the-local-pantry-network-in-somerset/; last accessed: 15/3/25

Figure 32: Food Pantries in Derbyshire, November 2024



Source: derived from Rural Action Derbyshire (2025) Feeding Derbyshire Map - November 2024 (Matlock: Rural Action Derbyshire) www.ruralactionderbyshire.org.uk/foodbanks; last accessed 15/3/25

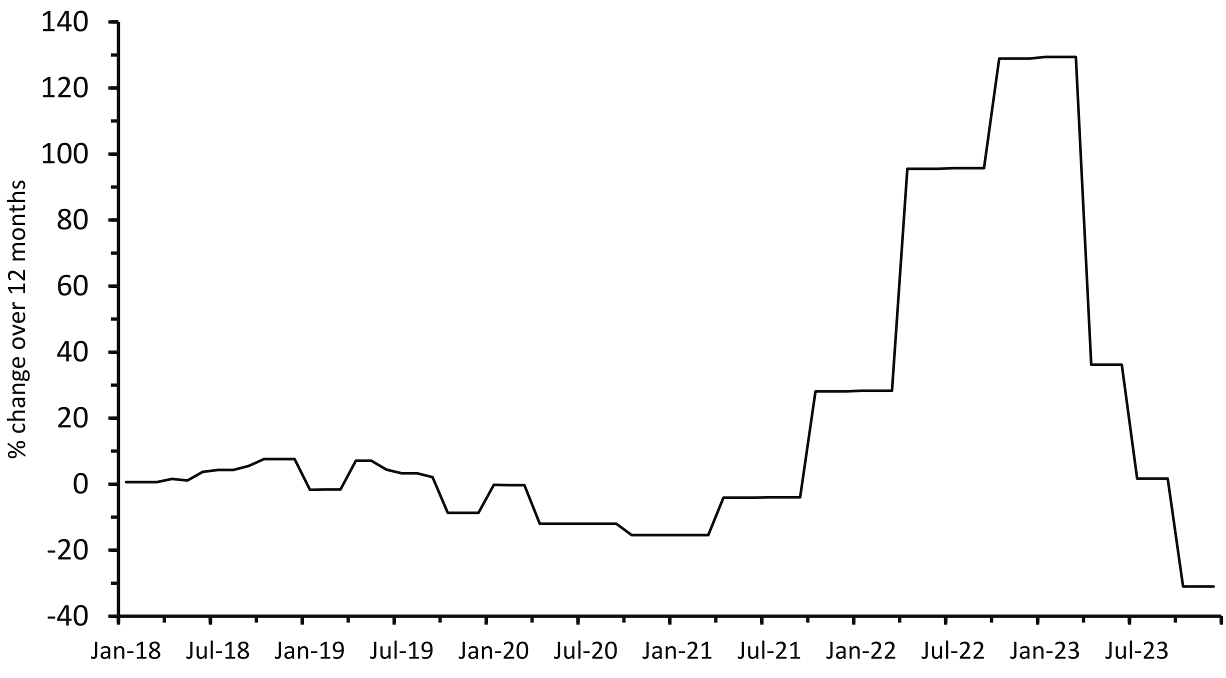
These Figures demonstrate that in the two counties, the food pantries that have been established are, with one exception in Derbyshire, located in settlements classified as urban, although they have many surrounding areas of more rural settlement. The distribution of food pantries, therefore, appears to be very similar to that identified for food banks, and therefore raises similar questions about their accessibility for people living in rural settlements, particularly if these are quite distant from urban settlements and/or people are reliant on public transport or modes of transport such as cycling or walking.

Warm Spaces

A further focus of recent activity within the voluntary sector has been the development of 'Warm Spaces', or as they are also termed, 'Warm Hubs' and 'Warm Banks'. These were established as a response to rapidly rising energy prices, particularly in 2022 (see Figure 33), and associated concerns over rising fuel poverty and the practice of people turning their domestic heating off to reduce their energy bills, but thereby also putting their health at risk. It has, for example, been estimated that in 2023, 6.6 million households in England were living in energy poverty, up from 4.5 million households in 2021 (see Hastie et al. 2025), although this has fallen slightly to 6.1 million by the end of 2024 (National Energy Action 2025). A further impetus was also concern over social isolation, and a feeling that bringing people together has a series of additional benefits beyond simply enabling a cost-effective way of providing warmth to people. Many of these warm spaces were created within existing properties used for the provision of community care and support, such as community centres and cafes, foodbanks and libraries (see Hastie et al. 2025), and hence their distribution is largely determined by that of these existing forms of provision, although there were cases where new groups emerged to develop warm space provisions and some local authorities provided financial and other support to assist in their development, which is also likely to have impacted on their overall geographical distribution.

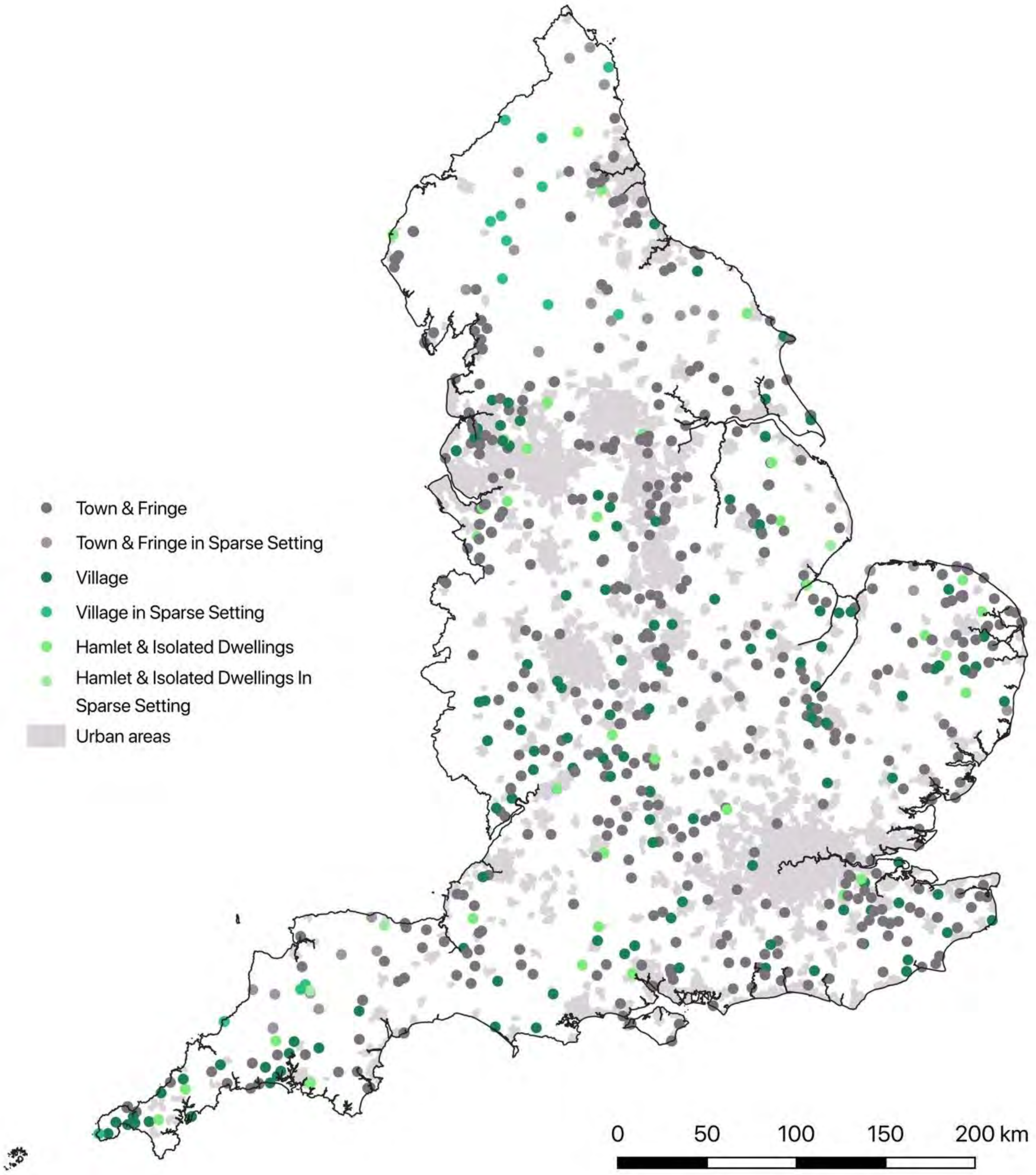
Although established largely on an individual basis by voluntary groups, a series of local and wider networks of warm spaces have emerged, with the most extensive appearing to be the Warm Welcome Campaign. Figure 34 shows the distribution of members of this network of warm space providers located in areas defined as rural within Defra's (2017b) Rural-Urban output level classification. The distribution echoes that established for food banks and food pantries, in that there is a concentration of provision in town and fringe areas, which again raised questions about the accessibility of these services to people in smaller rural settlements. There is, however, good coverage

Figure 33: Changes in UK Consumer Gas Prices, 2019-2023



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024c) Cost of living insights: Energy (Newport: Office for National Statistics) www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/costoflivinginsights/energy; last accessed: 2/3/25.

Figure 34: Rural Warm Spaces in the Warm Welcome Campaign, 2024



Source: derived from data on location of warm spaces provided by the Warm Welcome Campaign.

across England, which may well reflect that establishing these spaces has often been undertaken via their incorporation into many existing forms of provision rather than being an activity that has required the creation of a distinctive organisational form. Hastie et al. (2025: 8) not only highlight this connection to pre-existing provisions, but also suggest, drawing on interviews conducted in a small rural market town in Devon, that voluntary organisations were encouraged by the local Town Council to work together to create collaborative and joined-up provisions. For example, volunteers from groups were encouraged to provide support to other groups if they had a more suitable venue, rather than acting to duplicate provision or simply develop provision in their existing premises. In the specific case of this rural market town, for instance, volunteers from a church that was "a big, colder building … costly to heat" (interview, quoted in Hastie et al. (2025: 8)) worked to create a warm space within the local public library.

Public Library Services

The use of a public library as a warm space, highlights how these institutions, which are often considered principally as a location to go to borrow books, often perform many other functions as well. They are, for instance, not only a place where books are lent out to people to read, but are also an important source of many other types of information, including magazines, newspapers, audio/video recordings and online resources. This material may be of practical use, with many libraries often hosting citizen advice bureaux and tourist information (Schloffel-Armstrong et al. 2021), as well as encompassing specific materials for educational learning and research. Libraries also act as important social spaces, where people may meet up in friendship or community groups, or act as spaces of quiet relaxation or as a refuge from work, home or life on the street or open spaces of the countryside (Adams and Krtalić 2022; Colibabaa and Skinner 2019; Hodgetts et al. 2008). Defra (2023) identifies public libraries as playing "a vital role" in sustaining social networks within rural areas, and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2024) specifically acknowledges that many libraries became involved in 'warm hubs/space' initiatives.

Libraries may also act as important markers of identity, with many public ones being explicitly constructed as expressions of local civic character, and more recently as material signifiers of regeneration activities (Schloffel-Armstrong et al. 2021). The latter are, however, often highly urban in focus and there has been widespread concern about the loss of public libraries across many areas of the UK, with the level of real terms spending on public libraries by local authorities said to have fallen by 47% between 2009/10 and 2022/23 (Department for Culture, Media and Sport 2024). It has been claimed that across the UK, 180 council-run public libraries have either closed or been handed over to volunteer groups to run in the UK since 2016 (Lynch et al. 2024). It is, however, evident that a significant number of people engaging with libraries now do so digitally, with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2024) reporting that 12% of adults in England had engaged with a public library in a digital manner during 2022-2023, while 25% had done this through a physical visit. Libraries are not exclusively public in form, with there being private and specialist libraries, including within firms, schools and universities. However, in the remainder of this report, public libraries will form the focus of attention, as they have been in earlier State of the Countryside Reports.

In these earlier reports, it has not been possible to provide assessments of levels of access to libraries in rural England as a whole due to limitations of nationwide data. However, the Office for National Statistics has now produced local authority-level assessments classified according to Defra's (2017a) Rural-Urban Classification, which enables the calculation of a broad-level analysis of the distribution of static public libraries in rural and urban parts of England (see Table 10). This data suggests that although there is a clear predominance of libraries located in local authorities in urban conurbations, which account for almost 32% of the England total, there is not a simple urban-rural difference in provision. It is, for example, noticeable that there are smaller numbers of libraries located in local authorities classified 'Urban with Minor Conurbations' or 'Mainly Rural' in character. It is also evident that the number of libraries per 100,000 population is higher in the two most rural categories and significantly lower in areas classified as urban with major conurbations.

Table 10: Rural/Urban Distribution of Static Libraries in England, 2024

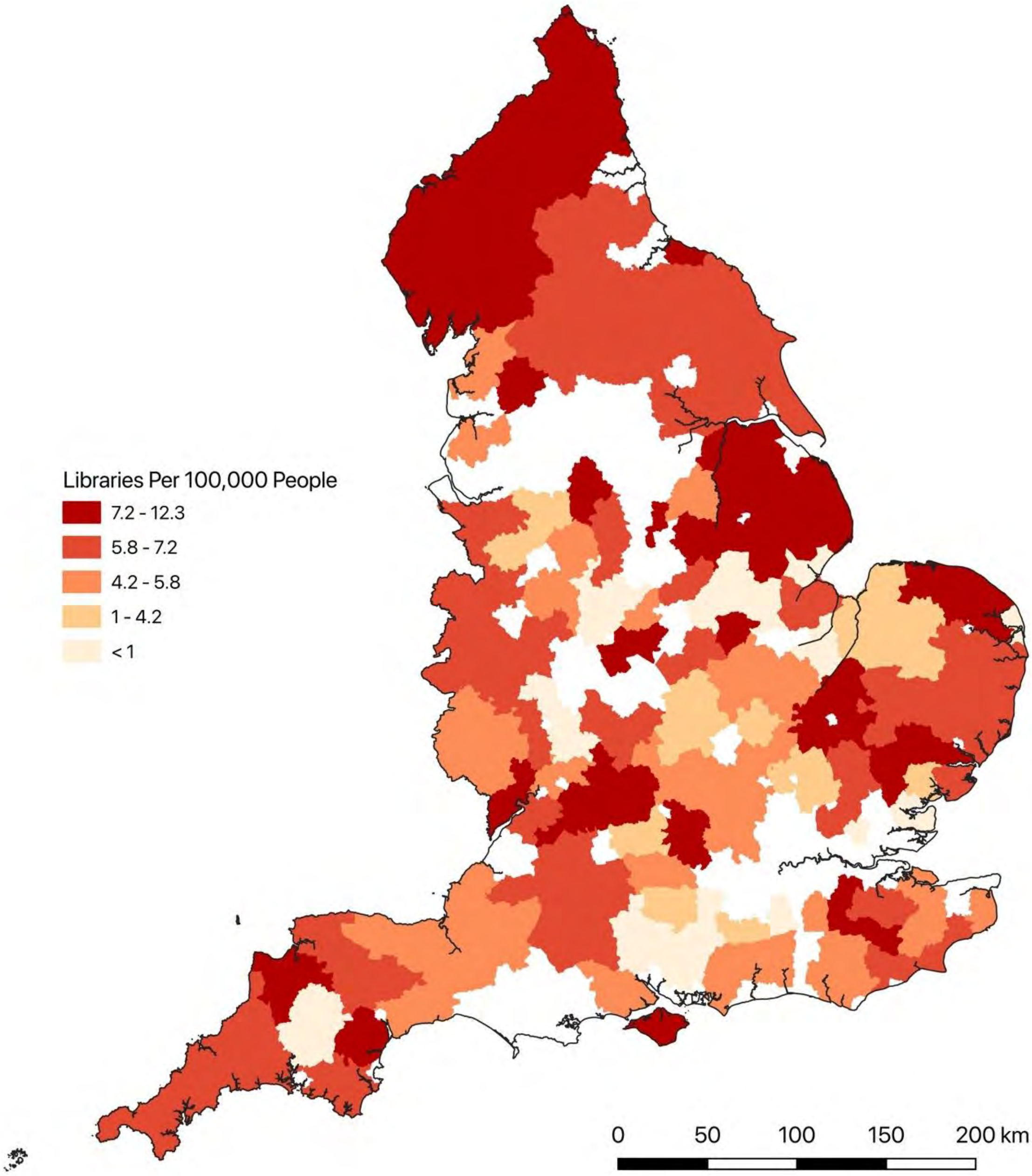
Rural-Urban Character	Number of Libraries	Libraries per 100,000 people
Urban with Major Conurbation	865	4.5
Urban with Minor Conurbation	115	5.6
Urban with City and Town	623	5.2
Urban with Significant Rural	347	5.5
Largely Rural	547	6.6
Mainly Rural	238	7.4
All England	2735	5.8

Notes: The dataset excluded local authorities that had less than 5 libraries, which means the total number of libraries indicated is lower than the actual national total.
Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

Figure 35 shows the Office for National Statistics' data for local authorities classified in the two rural categories, and highlights how the average figures represented in Table 10 obscure significant variations in levels of library provision within these. Many of these local authority areas have provisions well below the rural averages of 6.6 and 7.4 libraries per 100,000 population, with 19 rural authorities having counts of below 5, with the precise figures then being suppressed by the Office for National Statistics to respect confidentiality. Ten of these lay in the Urban with Significant Rural category, 6 in the Mainly Rural Category and only 3 in the Largely Rural Category. There are also clearly some rural local authority areas where the number of libraries in relation to population numbers is well above the rural averages, with many of these being relatively sparsely populated areas, such as Cumbria, Northumbria, North Lincolnshire and North Devon. In these areas, relatively low population density rather than strong library provisions may be significant in accounting for the relatively high proportions of libraries per 100,000 residents. However, it is also evident that rural areas which are more densely populated and contain extensive urban fringe areas, such as Braintree, South and East Cambridgeshire, Sevenoaks and South Oxfordshire were also among the districts with the highest levels of libraries relative to their populations.

The Office for National Statistics has also produced data assessing the accessibility of public libraries to rural residents within local authority areas (see Table 11). This is important, because public libraries are often located within urban areas, even within local authorities that are classified as largely or mainly rural. The dataset also recognises that local authorities classified using one of Defra’s (2017a) urban categories may also contain populations living in rural areas within these governmental districts. It is, however, evident from this Table that virtually all of these populations would have a public library within a 1-hour walk, or within 3 miles. However, many residents in rural areas of the three more rural categories of local authorities (i.e. those classified as Urban with Significant Rural, or Largely or Mainly Rural) do not have this level of accessibility to a public library, and almost 46% of the residents living in rural parts of local authorities classified as Mainly Rural do not have a library within a 30-minute walk. Three local authorities classified as ‘Urban with Significant Rural’ have more than half of their population able to access a library in less than 15 minutes, with two of these being in Kent in South East England (Office for National Statistics 2024a),

Figure 35: Number of Libraries per 100,000 Population in Rural Local Authorities, 2024



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

with the third being Redcar and Cleveland, in North Yorkshire.

The Office for National Statistics datasets from which Tables 10 and 11 were produced are themselves derived from one produced by the Arts Council in 2023, which whilst not so up to date does enable employment of Defra's (2017b) more disaggregated Rural-Urban Classification. Table 12 and Figure 36 show the results of employing this classification, with the former showing types of libraries across urban and rural areas, whilst the latter shows just the location and type of libraries located in Town and Fringe, Village, and Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings areas. The types of libraries shown in both the Table and Figure include archives, local history libraries and prison libraries, as well as mobile and static libraries.

Table 11: Access to Libraries in Rural and Urban Areas of England, 2024

Rural-Urban Character	Average Percentage of Residents Able to Access a Library Within a Walk of		
	15 minutes	30 minutes	1 hour
Urban with Major Conurbation	54.7	92.2	99.8
Urban with Minor Conurbation	42.6	79.1	97.1
Urban with City and Town	39.8	80.2	97.5
Urban with Significant Rural	31.2	64.6	86.5
Largely Rural	31.9	60.2	82.2
Mainly Rural	29.9	53.5	73.1
All England	38.4	71.6	89.4

Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

The category of mobile libraries was not included in the figures shown in Table 11, although this category of library has long been associated with rural areas. Bensted et al. (2004: 40), for example, claimed that just over a decade ago, library service delivery to rural communities was "dominated by use of mobile libraries", although this study highlighted movements away from the use of vehicular libraries to employment of other forms of delivery, including hosting of libraries in venues such as village/community halls, cafés, health centres, post offices, shops and schools, as well as use of voluntary home library services and the growth of online access. Overall, only three mobile libraries are recorded as being in operation within rural areas within the Arts Council dataset: two in Town and Fringe Areas (one in a sparse setting and one less sparse) and only one in an area classified as Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings in a Sparse Setting. Seven further mobile library services are listed in Lincolnshire and two in Wakefield, but no address given to enable more detailed geolocation. The dataset does, however, also record the closure of mobile libraries in five counties of England between 2016 and 2023, suggesting that there has been a significant decrease in mobile library provision over the last decade. It is, however, important to note that the Arts Council Dataset is compiled by responses from local authority library services, and that these may not always have been complete. So, for example, the returns for Warwickshire make no reference to any mobile provision, despite the county having a mobile library service that apparently stops at 250 locations in the county and has recently adopted the use of electric vehicles (Warwickshire Country Council 2025).

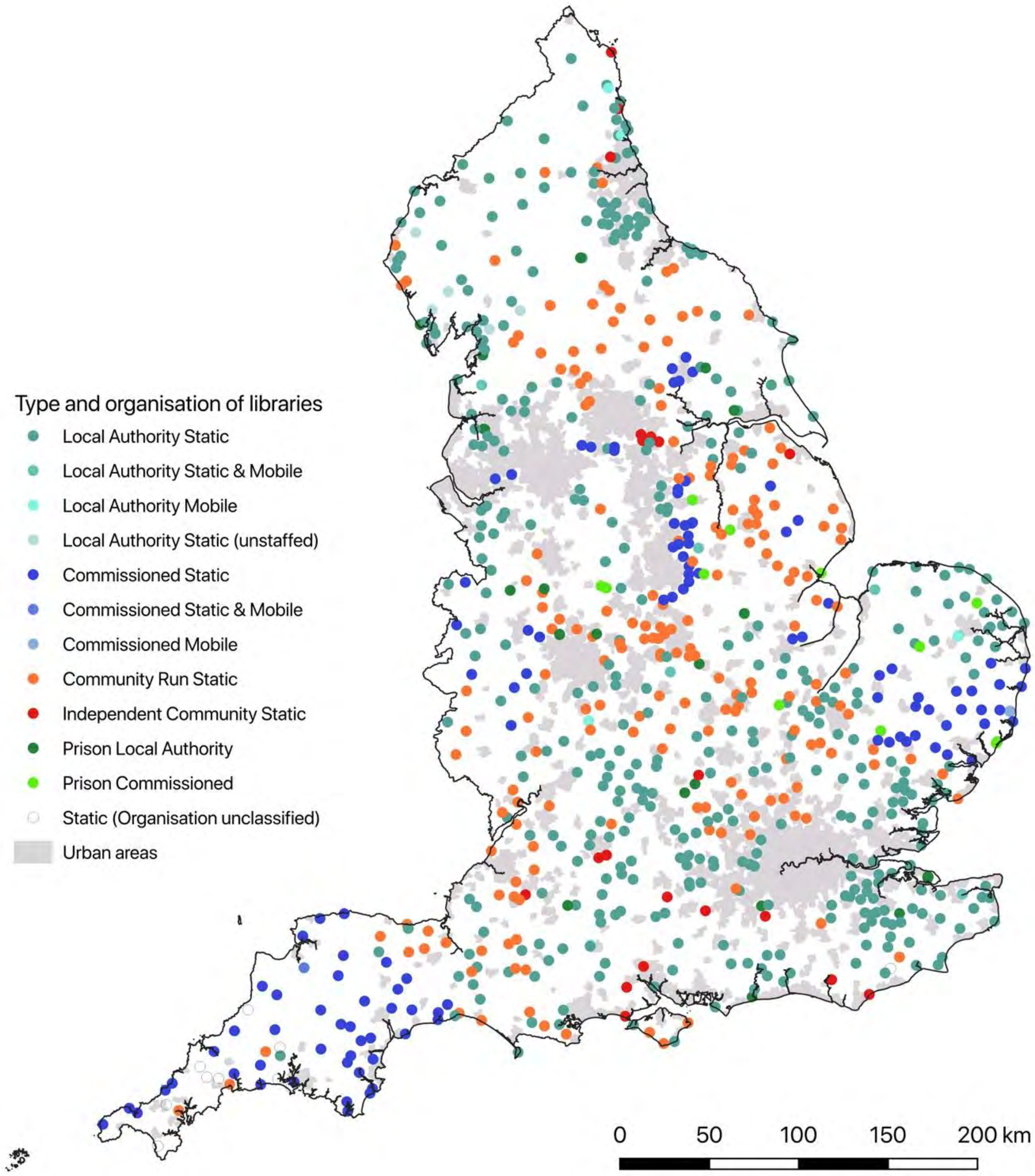
In relation to the distribution of libraries overall, Table 12 reinforces claims about the dominance of urban locations, which account for approaching 75% of the libraries in England, with a further 23 % being located in Town and Fringe Areas in non-sparse settings. Just under 2 % of libraries are located in the four most rural categories. Table 12 and Figure 36 also indicate that libraries in rural areas included 38 prison-based ones, with 24 of these being directly run by local authorities and 14 by community groups commissioned by local authorities. A balance of local authority and community run libraries broadly continues for static public libraries, with local authorities apparently directly running 402 of these in Town and Fringe, Village and Hamlets, and Isolated Dwellings areas, while 193 are commissioned to be run by community groups for the local authorities and a further 20 are

Table 12: Types of Libraries 2023 in Rural and Urban Areas

Rural-Urban Characteristics	Type of Library					All Libraries	Percentage of libraries
	Static	Mobile	Prison	Archive	Local History/Studies		
Major Conurbations	895	11	7	35	26	974	29.7
Minor Conurbations	113	2		2		117	3.6
City and Town	1223	86	17	38	14	1378	42.0
City and Town in Sparse Setting	8			2		11	0.3
Town & Fringe	639	18	1			658	20.0
Town & Fringe in Sparse Setting	46	1				47	1.4
Village	33		24			57	1.7
Village in Sparse Setting	13					13	0.4
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings	17	1	14			32	1.0
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Setting	2	1				3	0.1
Total All England	12990	114	63	77	40	1373	100

Source: derived from Arts Council England (2023) Libraries Basic Dataset 202 (London: Arts Council England) https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-arts-museums-and-libraries/supporting-libraries; last accessed 23/2/25)

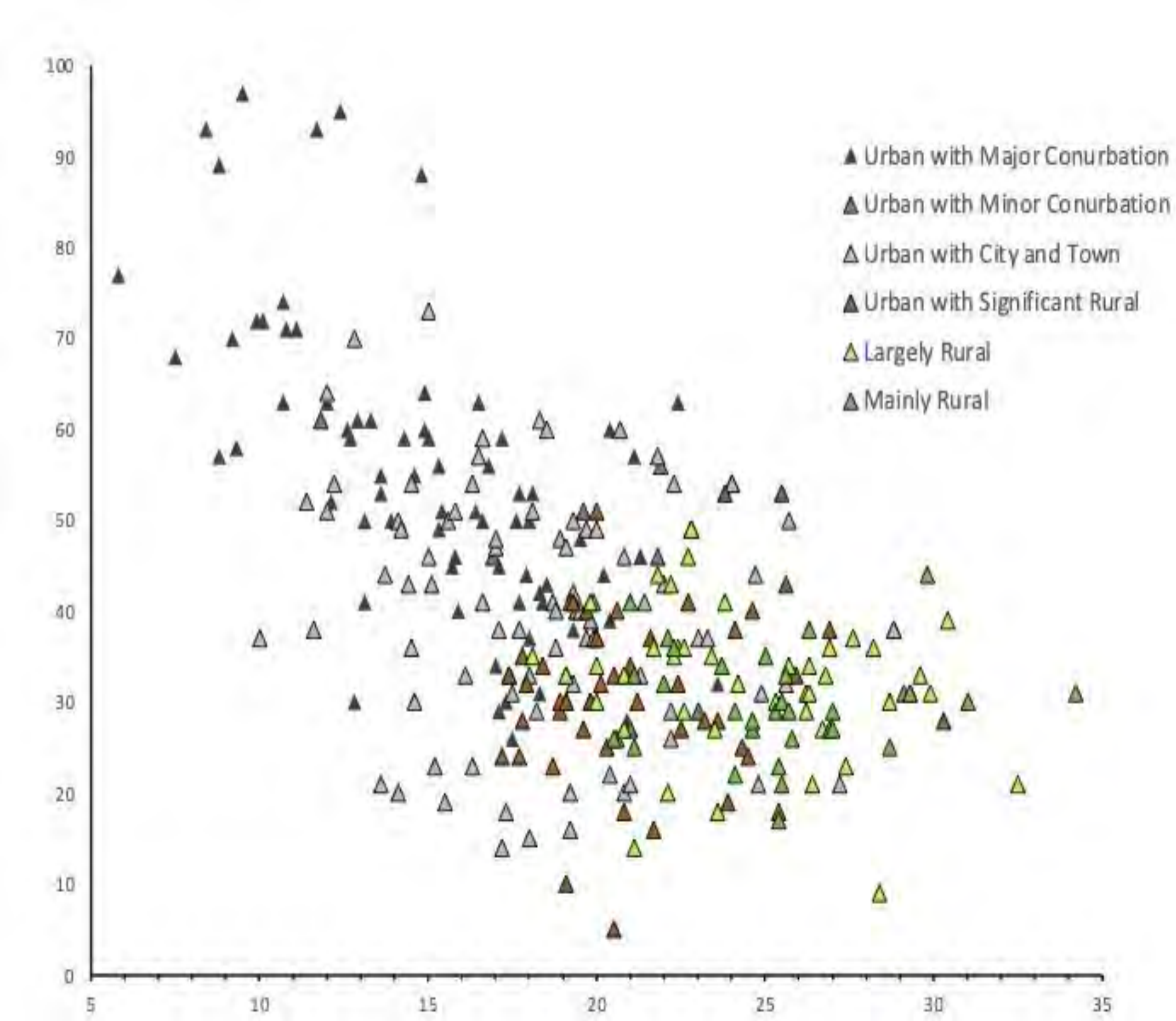
Figure 36: Types and organisation of libraries in Rural Areas of England



Source: derived from Arts Council England (2023) Libraries Basic Dataset 202 (London: Arts Council England) https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/ supporting-arts-museums-and-libraries/supporting-libraries; last accessed 23/2/25)

run by a community group independent of a local authority. Figure 36 indicates that community-run libraries that had some form of local authority support were particularly prevalent in the Midlands, central northern areas and Somerset, while those that were run independently were focused in the southern counties of Hampshire, Surrey and Sussex. Commissioned libraries, which are run by independent trusts, social enterprises and businesses for local authorities, were particularly evident in the South West, Nottinghamshire and Suffolk.

Figure 37: Percentage of Populations Over 65 and Able to Access a Library Within a 15-Minute Walk in 2024 in Rural and Urban Authorities of England, 2024



Source: produced from Office for National Statistics (2024) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

The Office for National Statistics' (2024a) dataset also includes calculations of the distribution of libraries against the proportion of residents aged 65 and over. Figure 37 shows this information as a scatterplot, which indicates that local authorities that are most rural in character tend to have both higher proportions of residents over 65 and lower proportions of people able to access libraries within a 15-minute walk. Table 13 indicates similar trends were apparent when looking simply at overall averages amongst different categories of urban and rural local authorities. These analyses imply that people living in rural areas are likely to find it hardest to access libraries, particularly if they are unable to drive or live in areas with low levels of public transport provision. For such people, mobile libraries, libraries at home services and local book-sharing schemes may be of considerable value, as indeed may be online forms of access to libraries, although such services may provide fewer opportunities for social interactions and affective experiences that may be important to some people visiting a public library.

Table 13: Residents Aged 65 and Over Against Access to Libraries 2024 in Rural and Urban Areas of England, 2024

Rural-Urban Character	Average of Percentage of Residents	
	Aged 65 and Over	Within a 15-minute walk of a Library
Urban with Major Conurbation	15.3	54.7
Urban with Minor Conurbation	19.5	42.6
Urban with City and Town	18.6	39.8
Urban with Significant Rural	21.4	31.2
Largely Rural	24.5	31.9
Mainly Rural	25.6	29.9
All England	20.8	38.4

Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

It has been reported that use of public libraries in England increased from 24% in 2022-3 to 30% in 2023-2024, with approaching one in three adults visiting one of these institutions in the latter period, a figure that had increased by 6% over the previous year (Department of Culture Media and Sport 2024). However, it is clear from the analysis presented here, that a large proportion of libraries are located in urban areas, with almost a third sited in urban conurbations, although relative to population size, rural areas on average figure better than their urban counterparts, although there is considerable urban-rural variation. The importance of spatial accessibility has also been highlighted. Given the concentration of libraries in urban areas, many rural residents will have to travel to access these institutions, and for almost 46% of the residents living in rural parts of local authorities classified as Mainly Rural, this journey will be at least a 30-minute walk away. Clearly, many rural residents will have the opportunity to travel by car or public transport, but these modes of transport may be inaccessible to some social groups, including the elderly and those on very low incomes. Online access, as well as community libraries, library at home and book borrowing, can help widen library access for such groups, although it is important to also recognise that libraries often perform many other functions than simply the provision of public, and free-of-charge, information. Declines in the number of libraries, and also restrictions on their opening hours, can hence significantly impact on local social networks, including those in rural areas.

Multi-Dimensional Inclusions and Exclusions from Educational, Welfare and Cultural Services

This chapter has examined educational, welfare, and cultural service provision in rural England. It has highlighted that whilst these services are widely described as public services and their provision seen to involve strong public sector engagement, their contemporary delivery often involves a range of private and voluntary agencies. This range of agencies is clearly evident in the discussion of the provision of education, which began with an examination of state provision of primary and secondary education, but then examined pre-school/early-years child-care provision, where it was shown that private and voluntary provisions have come to predominate, albeit with growing financial state support. It was also shown that the voluntary sector is playing a key role in developing a series of new forms of welfare support, including food banks, food pantries and warm spaces. It is important to recognise that many of the voluntary sector activities are undertaken in partnership with local authorities, and associated institutions such as public libraries, and often draw some governmental funding.

Whilst this chapter has highlighted the range of agencies involved in the delivery of educational, welfare and cultural services, it has also highlighted that irrespective of the agencies involved in their delivery, there are often common patterns in the geographies of delivery and (in)accessibility. It has been shown, for instance, that across most of the services discussed in this chapter, there has been a tendency for points of delivery to be predominantly located in urban areas, or where they are present in rural areas, for these to often be larger rural settlements in urban fringe locations. The cumulative impacts of these patterns of service provision suggest that many settlements in rural England will contain no points of access to these services, meaning that their resident populations will need to physically travel to make use of them, unless they are made available through remote modes of access, such as through the Internet. Populations that lack access to good levels of personal mobility or internet access will clearly be severely restricted in their access to many of the services discussed in this chapter.

4. Health Services

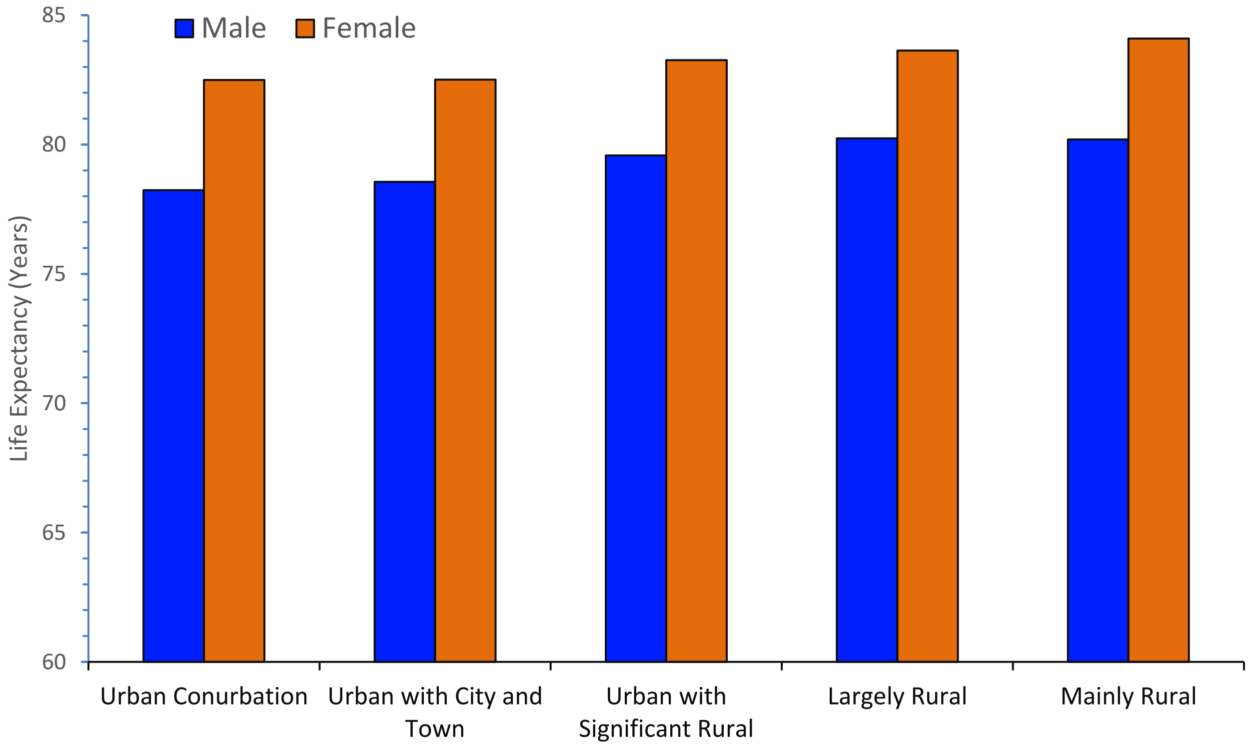
Introduction

Many of the welfare services discussed in the preceding chapter have clear relevance to issues of health: reference, for instance, has already been made to the potential health risks associated with energy poverty, and concerns have also been expressed about those connected to food poverty (e.g. Briazu et al. 2024; Sosenko et al. 2022). Disquiet has also long been expressed about variations in levels of provision and service accessibility within rural areas and the degree to which rural residents experience significant levels of disadvantage in comparison with the healthcare services available to urban populations (e.g. Bentham and Haynes 1986; Farmer et al. 2012; Jordan et al. 2004). It has also been argued that the provision of healthcare has become more challenging over recent decades because of demographic trends such as the growth of an elderly population, a series of fiscal constraints linked to dealing with the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic (see OECD 2021), and political decisions about desirable levels of state expenditure and employment levels. Healthcare provision has also clearly been impacted by Brexit, both in a short-term decline in staff employed in the National Health Service (hereafter NHS) and longer-term shortages in staff working in selected specialist areas (see McCarey et al. 2022). These constitute general challenges to healthcare, but concerns have been raised about the extent to which the needs of rural populations are sufficiently considered in the development of responses to these, and indeed whether selected responses might exacerbate rural-urban inequalities in health service provisions.

This chapter will consider healthcare provisions within rural England by, initially, examining the level of general, or primary, healthcare provided to rural residents. Healthcare is initially often self-administered, through people undertaking a range of preventive and responsive actions to maintain and improve their health and respond to minor illnesses and injuries. Such actions may potentially be influenced by many of the educational, welfare and cultural services discussed in the previous chapter, and it is important to acknowledge the health contributions such services can deliver. However, here attention will focus on when people specifically seek to engage with individuals and organisations that explicitly address issues of ill-health and injury. For many people, this engagement is initiated through contacting an NHS General Practitioner or GP, although a dentist or pharmacist may also take on this role. After evaluating access to these points of primary healthcare, attention will then turn to accident and emergency health services, which focus on providing care to people who are injured or seriously ill. Specifically, the chapter will consider the access to hospital provision in rural areas and the length of time that it takes for rural populations to access these institutions, either when travelling there using private or public modes of transport or if they are being taken to a hospital by an ambulance.

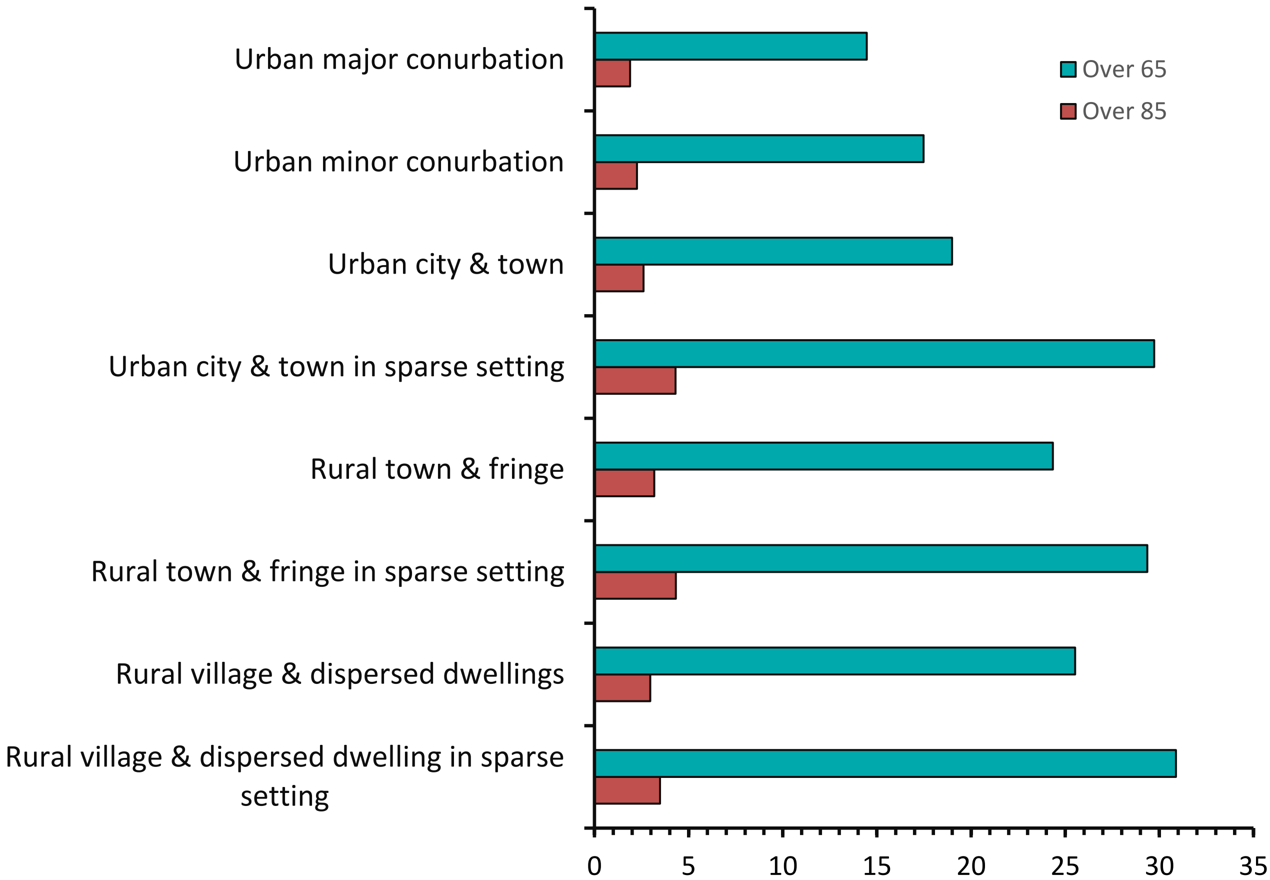
The chapter principally focuses on access to healthcare services by a general population, but it ends by considering access to healthcare services by the elderly and those with mental health issues. As mentioned above, the growth of an elderly population, itself driven by improvements in healthcare that enable people to live longer, has been seen to create a generic challenge to the NHS. However, this challenge has very significant rural dimensions, not least because, as illustrated in Figures 38 and 39, there are relatively more people over 65 living in rural areas of England and they are living, on average, slightly longer in these areas than they are in urban ones.

Figure 38: Life Expectancy in Rural and Urban Areas of England 2020-2022



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet AB: Life expectancy at birth for Local Authorities as of April 2021, by sex, in England, 2020-22.

Figure 39: Proportion of Residential Population Over 65, in Urban and Rural Areas, 2021



Source: derived from Census 2021, TS007A Age by five-year age bands, accessed via NOMIS, 24/2/25

It has also been argued in a report from a House of Commons Committee that rural areas exhibit some specific dynamics with regard to mental health, being both a space where people can gain access “to nature” that has been “consistently identified as beneficial for people’s mental health” but also often be a place of “isolation” that often acts as “a significant challenge to the mental health of adults, children, and young people living in rural areas” (House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee 2023: 3). This report further claimed that the needs of rural communities are currently “not fully reflected in mental health policy and services and national NHS planning”, and that NHS mental health services often being “not fairly accessible for rural communities, with services largely centred in towns and cities creating barriers to access, compounded by the limitations and weaknesses of rural public transport and digital connectivity” (ibid.; 3-4). However, it is also remarked that information about mental healthcare and outcomes in England’s countryside is extremely limited, with there being a marked lack of information that “is differentiated between urban and rural areas. This report therefore makes use of some accounts that have highlighted areas of rural differentiation in mental health and its care, although it is very evident that the issue of a lack of geographically differentiated information as identified by the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee does provide a major barrier to investigating mental healthcare provisions in the English countryside.

Primary Healthcare

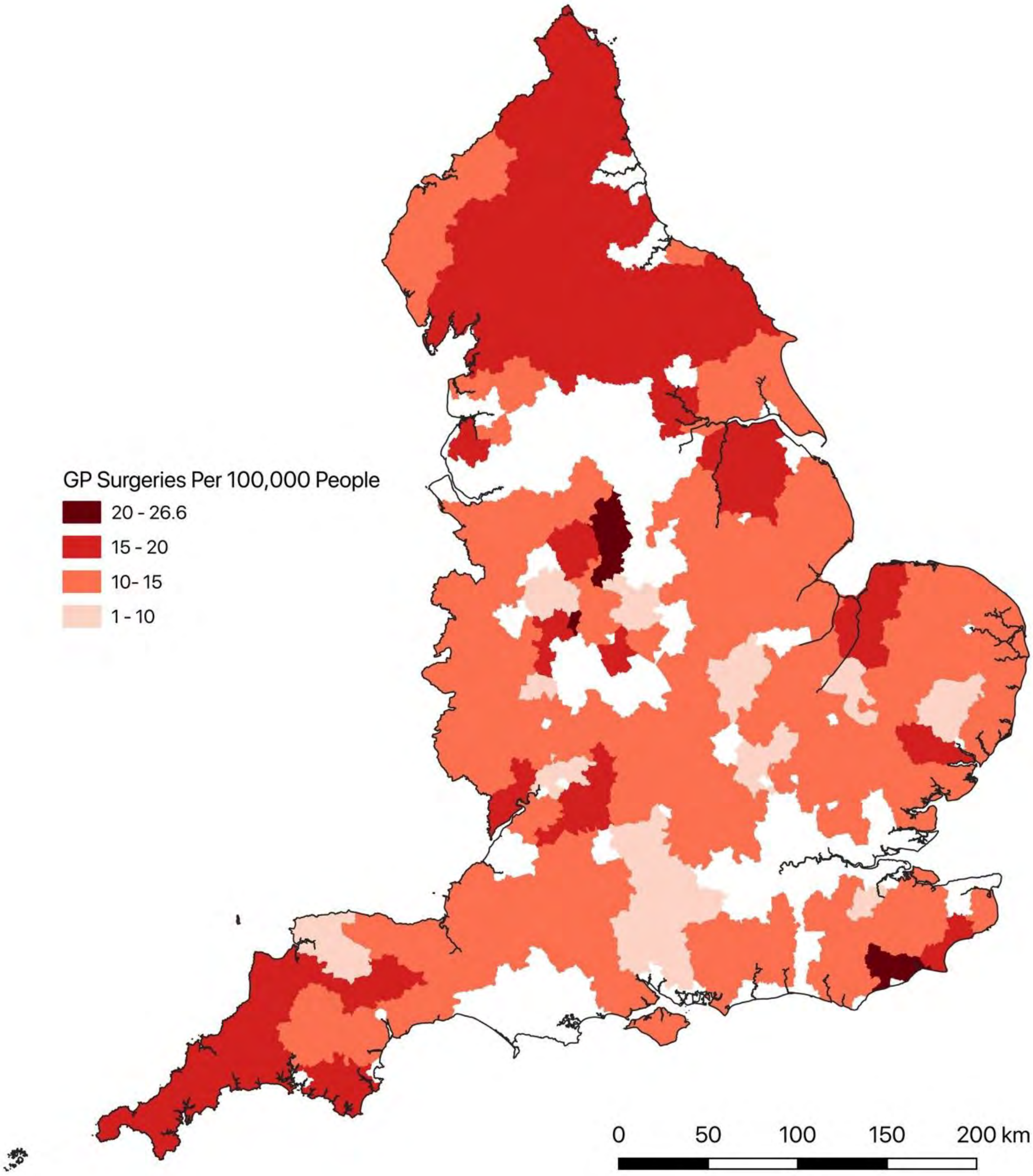
Access to a GP

As mentioned earlier, initial engagement with an explicitly focused healthcare service is often undertaken through accessing an NHS GP. Throughout most of the history of the NHS, this access has been undertaken principally through a physical visit to a GP surgery, although in the Covid-19 pandemic there was a significant rise in remote consultations (Green et al. 2022a). However, the number of these represented on average only just over 6% of registered patients in May 2024 (NHS England 2024).

Figure 40 shows the distribution of GP Surgeries per 100,000 people in rural local authority areas as identified in Defra’s (2017a) Rural-Urban Classification. While Defra (2024) indicated that there were generally more full-time equivalent GPs per patient in rural local authority areas than in urban ones (6.1 per 10,000 patients compared to 5.6), Figure 38 suggests that there are large variations within rural authorities, with some having well over double the relative number of surgeries per capita than do others. There are no clear regional patterns to these variations and also no clear tendency for more rural or urban authorities to figure in either the most or least number of GPs per 100,000 residents. This, in part, may stem from the use of a local authority level classification, which may obscure important localised variations.

Figure 41 more precisely shows the location of GP surgeries operating in August 2024, using their postcode to locate them both geographically and as rural as determined by Defra's (2017b) output level Rural-Urban Classification. It is clear that the large majority of rural postcode areas with a surgery only contained one, although 16 locations had two or three surgeries. These were generally areas, such as Grimethorpe, where a health centre had been established with a series of different GP surgeries located there (see Figure 42). Table 14 shows the distribution of GP surgeries in different types of rural and urban areas, and indicates that the rural postcodes that had more than one surgery

Figure 40: GP Surgeries per 100,000 population in Rural Local Authority Districts, 2024

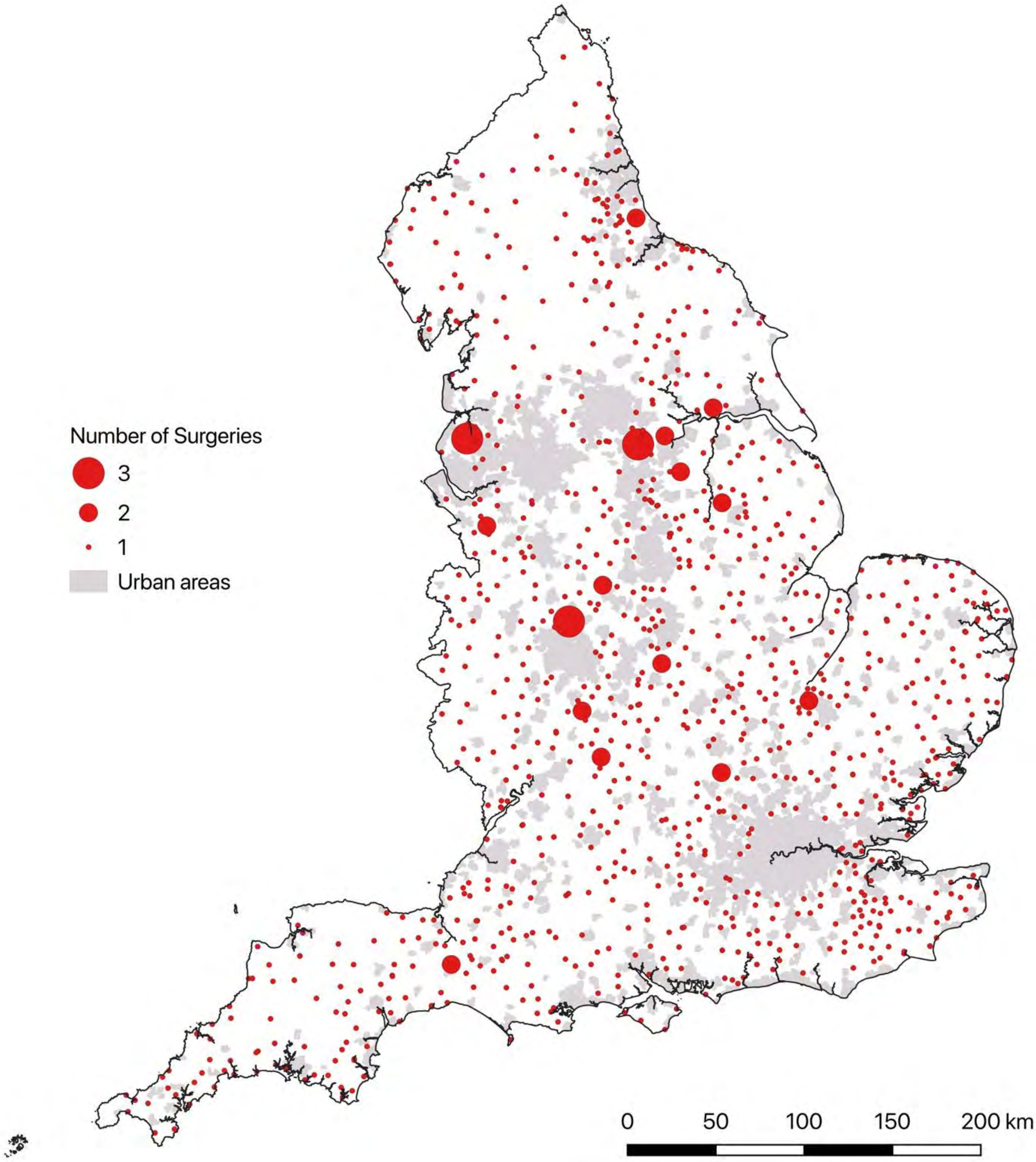


Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024a) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

all lay in Town and Fringe locations, plus indicates that sparse areas had much lower numbers of GP surgeries than the less sparse areas. This would suggest that people living in these areas will have longer distances to travel to access GP services, which is born out in figures on minimal travel times produced by Defra (2024a), which, as illustrated in Figure 43, indicated that travel times across all rural settlement categories are not only longer than in urban areas, but are also higher within those in sparse settings for all but Rural Town and Fringe areas.

While residents in urban areas on average only need to travel 8 minutes to reach their nearest GP surgery, this increases to an average across rural areas of 11 minutes, but there is considerable variation within rural areas, with travel times by car being on average only 9 minutes in Rural Town and Fringe areas, but increasing to 15 minutes and 17 minutes in areas classified as Village and Rural

Figure 41: Distribution of GP Surgeries in England, 2024



Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), GP Practices in England and Wales. File epaccur. (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service /data-search-and-export/csv-downloads/gp-and-gp-practice-related-data

Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Settings respectively. For people travelling by public transport and/or walking, these differentials increased even more markedly, with urban residents having travel times of 11 to 13 minutes, which were only slightly longer than by cars, but for people living in Rural Villages and Rural Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings, the travel times were at least 57 minutes and rose to 72 and 83 minutes in these settlement areas located in sparse settings. As mentioned earlier, the calculation of these times does not take into consideration the sparsity of public transport in many rural locations, which may mean that this mode of transport may run quite infrequently during a day, so actual travel times may well be even longer in many instances. Jo et al. (2021: 4), for example, calculated that in England in 2020, only 7.5% of people in rural areas had

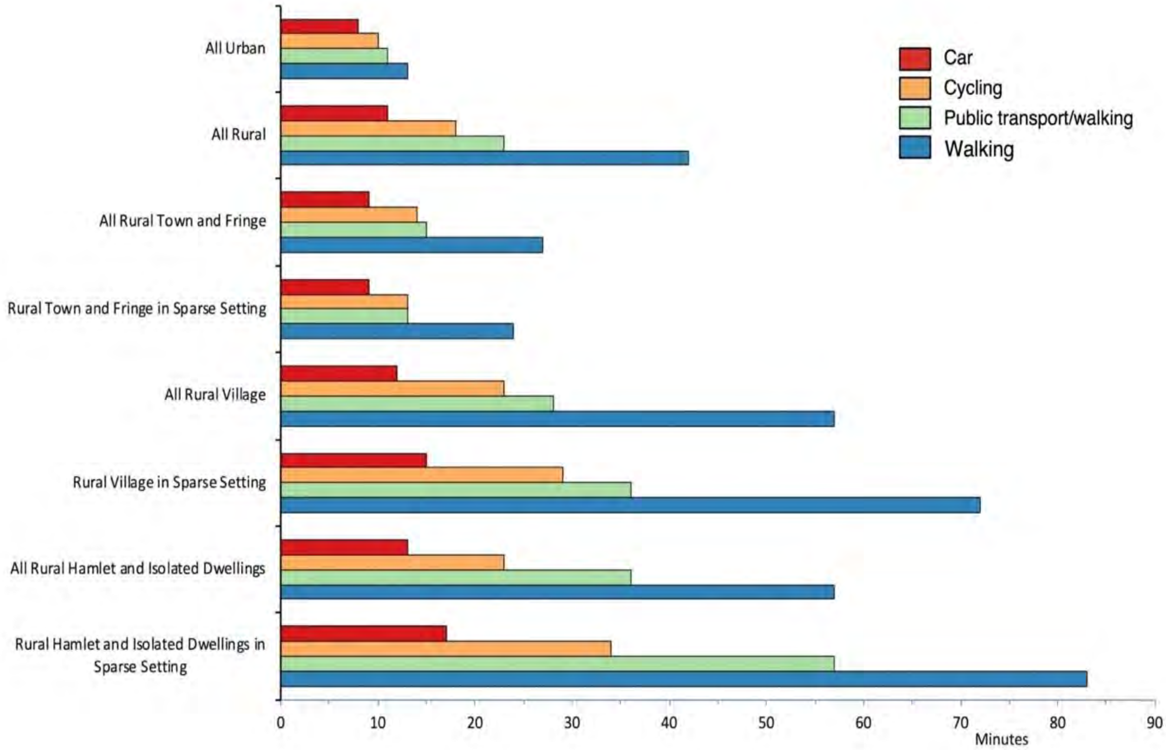
Figure 42: Heath Centre with Multiple GP Surgeries

Table 14: Number of GP Surgeries in Rural and Urban Postcode Areas, August 2024

Rural-Urban Character	Number of Surgeries in Postcode Area 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	Total Locations	Total Surgeries
Major Urban Conurbation	2079	188	38	14	4	0	0	2323	2645
Minor Urban Conurbation	210	13	3	0	0	0	0	226	245
City and Town	2064	123	23	4	1	0	1	2216	2407
City and Town in Sparse Setting	8	1	0	0	0	0	0	9	10
Town and Fringe	653	13	3	0	0	0	0	669	688
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	47	0	0	0	0	0	0	47	47
Village	176	0	0	0	0	0	0	176	176
Village in a Sparse Setting	22	0	0	0	0	0	0	22	22
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings	34	0	0	0	0	0	0	34	34
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Setting	2	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	2
Total	5295	338	67	18	5	0	1	5724	6276

Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), GP Practices in England and Wales. File epaccur. (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service/data-search-and-export/csv-downloads/gp-and-gp-practice-related-data.

Figure 43: Average Minimum Time to Reach Nearest GP Surgery, 2019



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet DA: Average minimum travel time (minutes) to reach the nearest key services, by mode of travel and Rural-Urban Classification, England, 2019

access to a high-frequency bus service (more than 4 bus movements per hour), 15.2% had access to a low-frequency service and 72.2% had no immediate access to a bus service.

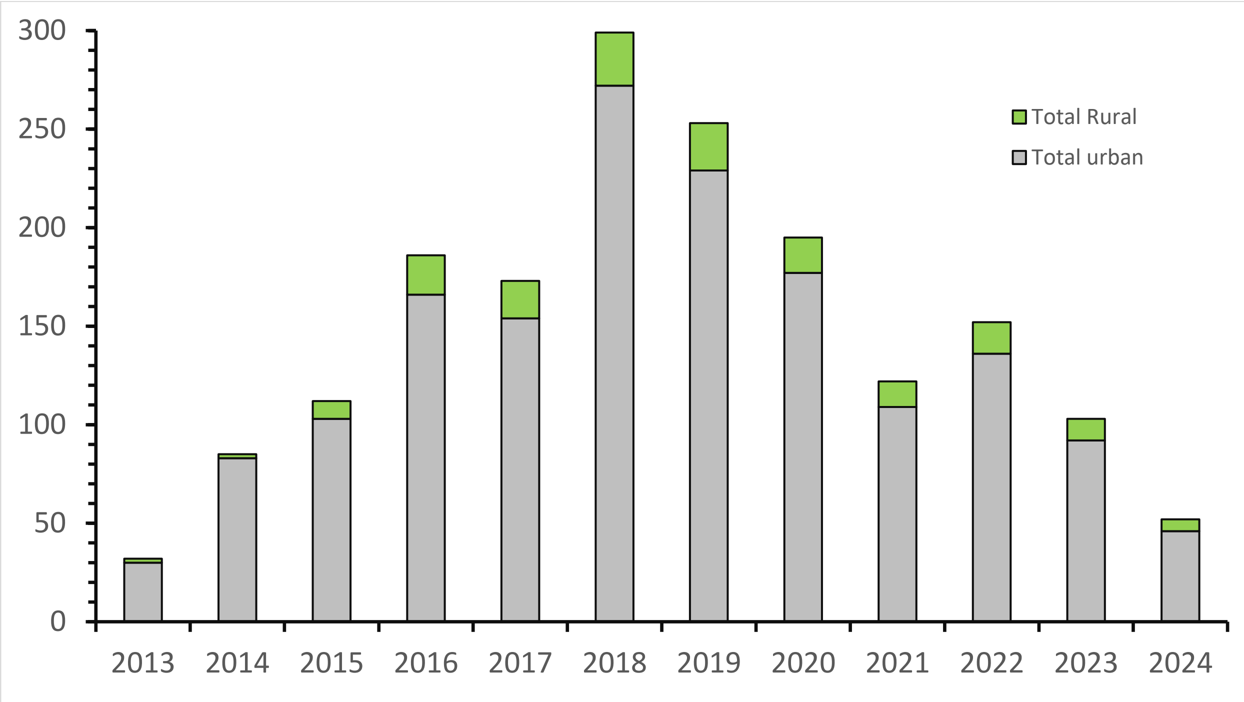
The travel times indicated in Defra (2024) were also rather higher than those presented in Rural England's (2019) *State of Rural Services 2018*, which were derived from Defra (2018). The travel times presented in Defra (2024) were themselves derived from Department for Transport Journey Time Statistics for 2019, so are now quite dated. This is particularly unfortunate given these statistics predate the Covid-19 pandemic, which created significant challenges to health service provision in England, which had already undergone significant restructuring since the Health and Social Care Act of 2012. The impacts of the changes introduced by this Act have been seen to include a "permanent loss of capability from the NHS" (Darzi 2024 : 120). It is certainly evident from Table 15 and Figure 44 that there have been reductions in the number of GP surgeries in urban and rural areas between 2013 and 2024. Over this period, and indeed in earlier decades, there have been many expressions of concern about the closure of rural surgeries, although as Table 15 and Figure 44 indicate, there has been a larger net decline in absolute terms within urban areas. There have indeed been larger relative declines in all the urban categories, apart from City and Town areas, than in rural areas, with the exception of Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Settings, although the small number of surgeries in these areas means that any closures have very large relative impacts. Overall, it appears that there was a 15.5% net decline in the number of surgeries in rural areas between 2013 and 2024, which although less than the 31.8% reduction in the number of urban surgeries, can be seen as potentially having considerable impact, not least in further increasing the distance some people in rural communities may have to travel to access a surgery beyond those presented in Figure 43.

Table 15: Net Reduction in Number of GP Surgeries 2013-Aug 2024, in Rural and Urban Areas

Type of area	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	Grand Total	As % of currently active GP surgeries
Major Conurbations	13	48	47	67	49	120	97	74	50	55	44	13	677	25.5
Minor Conurbations	3	0	6	7	13	7	9	7	7	5	8	0	72	29.4
City and Town	14	35	50	92	91	145	123	95	52	76	40	33	846	31.8
City and Town in Sparse Setting	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	10.0
Town & Fringe	1	0	6	15	11	20	20	17	11	13	6	3	123	16.4
Town & Fringe in Sparse Setting	0	0	1	1	1	5	0	0	1	0	1	1	11	12.5
Village	0	2	1	3	3	2	2	1	1	0	4	0	19	10.4
Village in Sparse Setting	0	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	0	1	0	0	6	17.1
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	1	5	12.5
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Setting	0	0	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	3	42.9
Grand Total	32	85	112	186	173	299	253	195	122	152	103	52	1764	26.4

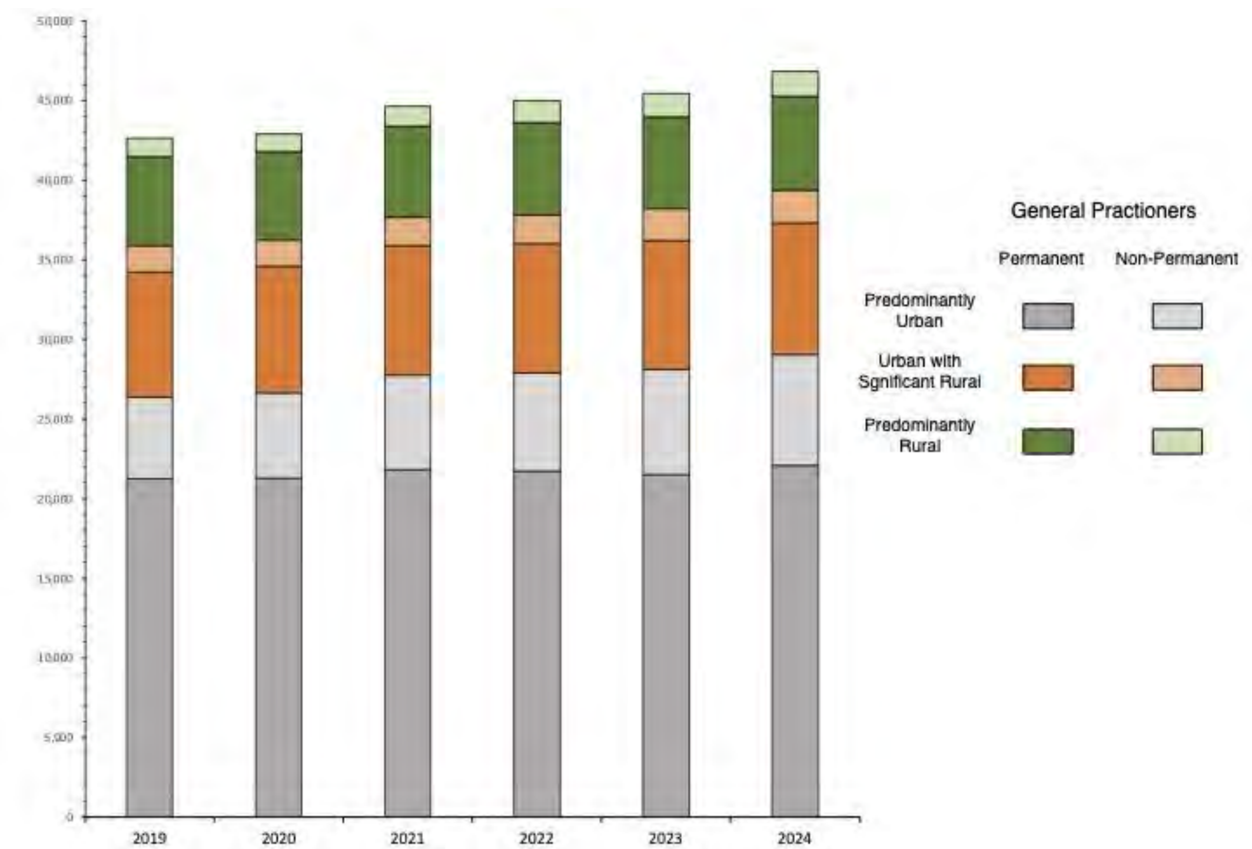
Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), GP Practices in England and Wales. File epaccur. (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service/data-search-and-export/csv- downloads/gp-and-gp-practice-related-data.

Figure 44: GP Closures in Urban and Rural England, 2013-2024



Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), GP Practices in England and Wales. File epaccur. (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service/data-search-and-export/csv- downloads/gp-and-gp-practice-related-data.

Figure 45: Full-Time Equivalent GPs in Urban and Rural Areas of England, 2019-2014



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet Worksheet DC: NHS General Practitioners (GPs) Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) statistics, by Sub-Integrated Care Board (sub-ICB) Rural-Urban Classification in England, as at March of each year, 2019 to 2024

Decline in the number of GP surgeries does not, however, necessarily equate to a decline in accessibility to healthcare, with some of the surgery decline being linked to the merging of surgeries rather than simply closure. Clearly, such mergers can impact spatial accessibility, but they may also allow for more efficient and even expansions in the delivery of healthcare. Defra (2024) records that the number of full-time equivalent GPs in areas classified as Predominantly Rural increased by 3% between 2019 and 2023, in comparison with a 1% increase in Predominately Urban Areas. Figure 44 indicates that this was not a simple story of linear growth, with there being some points of decline, particularly in terms of full-time numbers in 2022-23, as well as increases. Defra (2024) also records that only 15 GPs in Predominantly Rural local authority areas remained in the same position between 2019 and 2023, compared to 89 in Predominantly Urban ones, which reflected only 0.3% and 0.4% respectively of the total permanent GPs in these two locational categories. Such figures highlight how patients across both rural and urban locations may well find that they see different GPs even when they attend the same surgery.

Dental Services

Concerns have also recently been raised about access to dental services, it being claimed, for example, that in 2022, 90% of NHS dental practices in the UK were unwilling to accept new adult patients for non-private treatment, with a third of the UK council areas having no dental practices that would accept new adult patients (Green et al. 2022b). According to Defra (2024), in the two years preceding the end of June 2023, 38% of adults living in Predominantly Rural areas had seen an NHS dentist compared to 45% of adults in Predominantly Urban areas. These figures may well reflect the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, when access to general dental services in the UK was suspended between March and June 2020, and restrictions on access and expected levels of service delivery continued into 2022. Not only may Covid-19 and the restrictions on dental services have led to more people deciding to avoid seeing a dentist, but also the interruptions in dental provision during and after the pandemic created a backlog in inspections and treatments that resulted in extended waiting times and actions to suspend the acceptance of new patients. No specific explanation is given for the lower proportion of adult visits from residents in Predominately Rural areas in Defra (2024: Chapter 3, 28), although the report does record that in 2022/23 there were “50 dentists per 100,000 population in Predominantly Rural areas compared with 59 dentists in Predominantly Urban areas”, so the lower level of visits could well reflect differences in the availability of dental services.

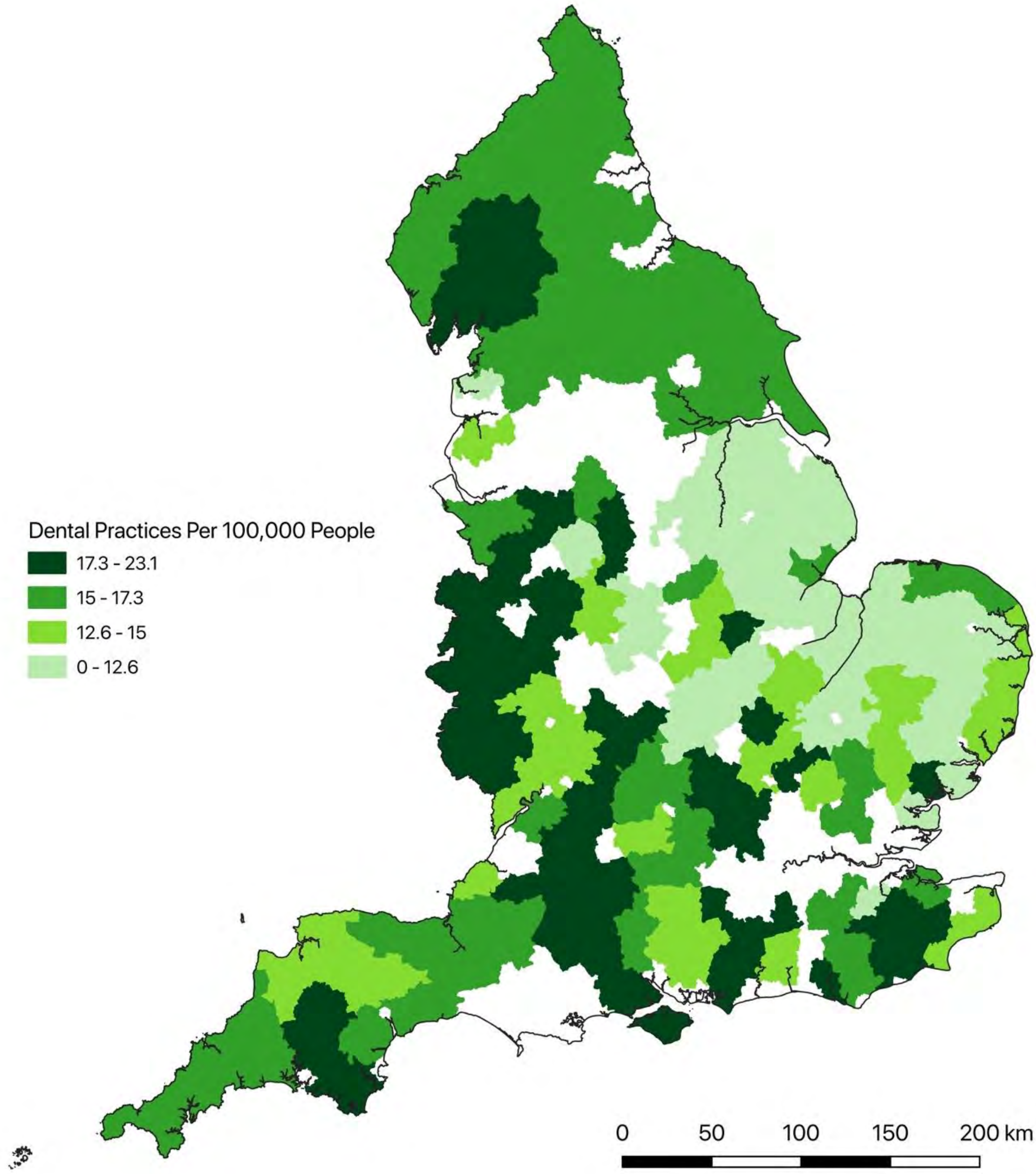
Table 16: Rural-Urban Distribution of NHS Dentists, 2023-2024

Rural-Urban Character	Number of NHS Dentists	% of NHS Dentists	Dentists per 100,000 people	Population per Dentist
Predominately Urban	19,610	66.1	56.0	2,241
Urban with Significant Rural	6,035	20.3	46.2	2,166
Predominately Rural	4,034	13.6	44.6	1,764

Source: Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet CA: Number of NHS Dentists (total and per population), by sub-Integrated Care Board (sub-ICB) Rural-Urban Classification in England, for years ending 31st March, 2019/20 to 2023/24

Table 16 shows the relative distribution of NHS Dentists between rural and urban areas, and

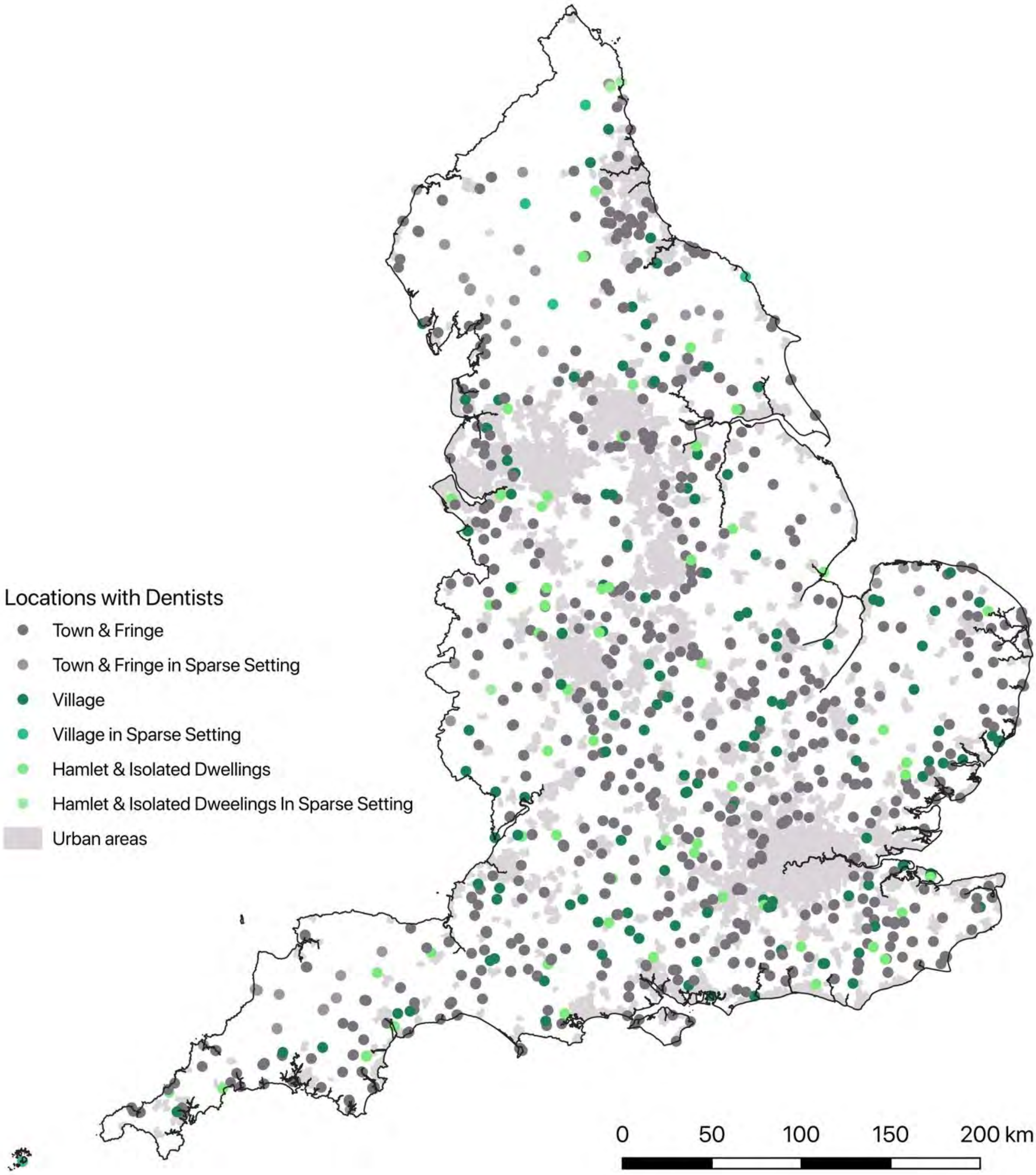
Figure 46: Distribution of Dentists in Rural England, 2024



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024a) *Access to Local Amenities in England and Wales: October 2024* (Newport: Office for National Statistics).

includes a calculation of the population that might potentially be served by a single dentist. This is a statistic derived by dividing the population in Integrated Care Board sub-areas by the number of dentists each contains. It does not equate with the actual number of people registered with a dentist: many people are not registered with any dentists and people also register with non-NHS dentists. However, it is a statistic that does provide a general indicator of the level of dental provision in urban and rural areas. The figures in Table 16, for example, indicate that while urban England has around two-thirds of NHS dentists, the relative availability of dentists is actually better in more rural areas.

Figure 47: Distribution of Dentists in Rural England, 2024



Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), General Dental Practices in England and Wales. File egdppac. (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service/data-search-and-export/csv- downloads/gp-and-gp-practice-related-data.

The figures in Table 16 are produced at a very broad level of spatial analysis, namely via the NHS Integrated Care Board a dentist is contracted to and the subgroup area the dentist is located in, with these areas then being classified as urban or rural according to Defra's (2017a) general Rural-Urban classification. Such analysis, whilst presenting a broad sense of rural-urban differentiation, precludes detailed analysis of differences in provision within these areas. The Office for National Statistics, however, has produced data on the number of dental practices per 1000,000 people by local authority area, as illustrated by Figure 46. This highlights that there are significant variations in the number of dental practices relative to population within rural local authority areas. There are, for instance, many Mainly Rural local authority areas in eastern England that had below 12.5 dental practices per 100,000 population, as well as a broadly similar number of districts classified as Largely Rural with comparable numbers of dental practices relative to population. Conversely, 15 local authority areas had over 17 dentists per 100,000 population, with all of these being classified as Urban with Significant Rural, which would suggest that the presence of a significant urban-located population may have an impact on levels of dental provision within local authorities classified as having significant rural elements.

Figure 47 shows an even more detailed analysis of the distribution of NHS dentists in rural England based on the postcodes of dentist provision and the classification of its rural character using the output area classification of Defra's (2017b) Rural-Urban classification. It provides further support for the argument that there may be more dental practices in areas with significant urban populations, with 80% of the rural dental practices being located in Town and Fringe areas, a feature also highlighted in the analysis of GP surgeries. One implication of these analyses is that while the figures produced by Defra (2024), as shown in Table 16, suggest that there are higher numbers of dentists relative to population in more rural areas than in urban areas, populations in many of the smaller rural settlements are likely to have to travel at least to town and fringe areas if not to urban areas to access dental care. Unfortunately, there do not seem to be any publicly available figures showing travel distances to dental practices from different types of urban and rural areas.

Pharmacies

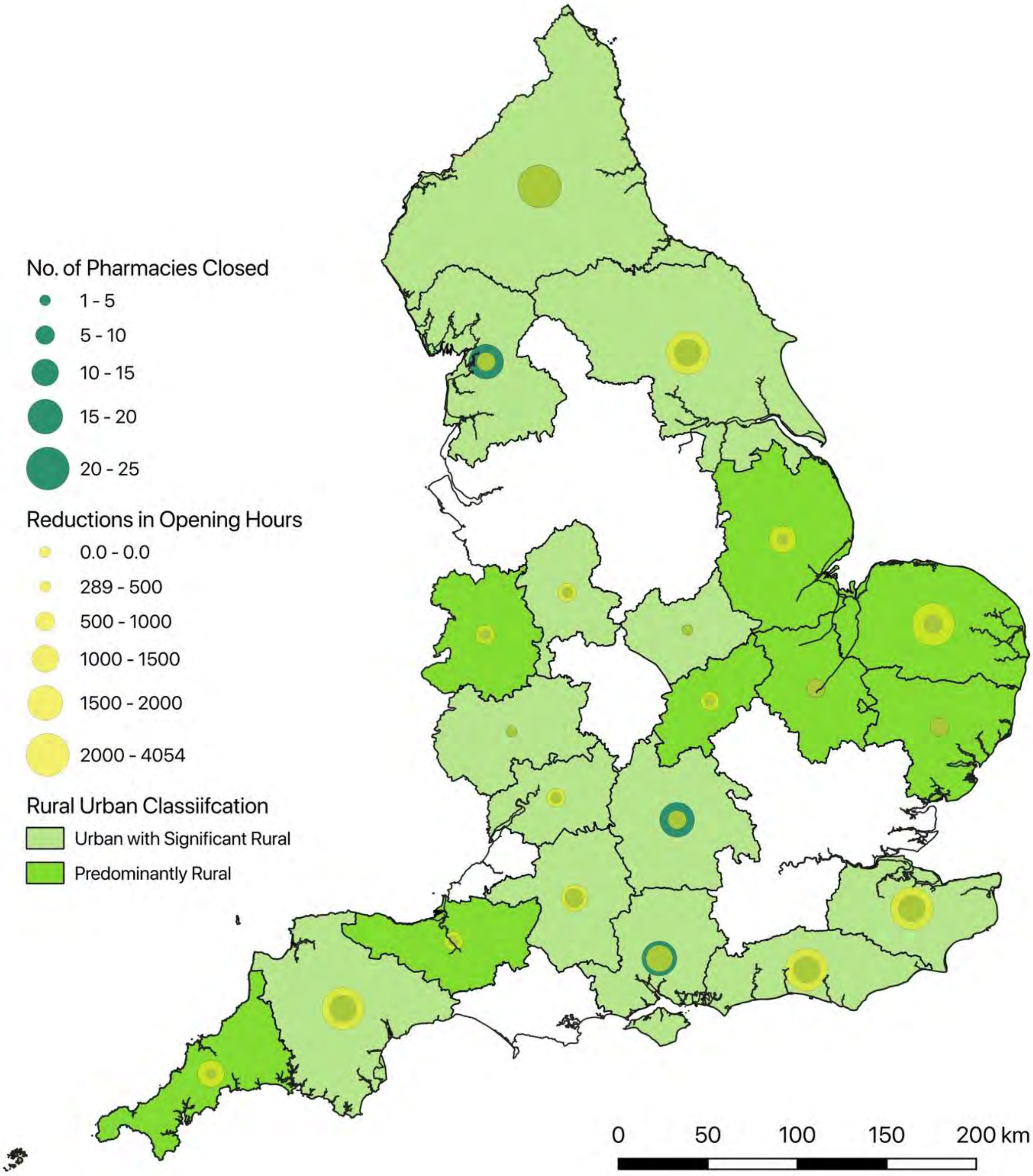
Pharmacies provide another important element of primary healthcare, acting not only as a source of medication but also of health advice and, increasingly, to some services previously conducted in GP Surgeries, such as blood pressure checks and vaccinations. Pharmacies, for example, provided key agents in the delivery of Covid-19 vaccinations and subsequent campaigns to increase the uptake of flu vaccinations. However, concerns have emerged about the impacts of funding reductions and workforce challenges on the economic sustainability of pharmacies, it being argued that 436 pharmacies in England had ceased trading in 2023, and a further 13,863 had reduced their opening hours (Healthwatch 2024). It has further been claimed that higher closure rates and hour reductions were recorded in rural areas (Healthwatch 2024). Table 47 presents analysis of the data produced by this study, which draws on a Freedom of Information request to NHS Integrated Care Boards in England, and it can be seen that the number of pharmacies reducing their opening hours and the number of hours being lost were collectively higher in Boards containing significant proportions of people living in rural areas (i.e. those characterised as Predominantly Rural or Urban with Significant Rural), although the number of complete closures is higher in the most urban areas.[2]

Table 17: Pharmacy Closures and Opening Hours Reductions in England, 2023

Rural Urban Classification of Integrated Care Boards	No of Pharmacy Closed	No of Pharmacies Reducing Opening Hours	Total Reductions in Opening Hours	Hours Reductions per Pharmacy
Predominantly Urban	251	5,652	16,169	2.9
Urban with Significant Rural	150	5,976	21,342	5.6
Predominantly Rural	35	2,235	9,312	8.6
Total	436	13,863	46,823	4.9

Source: Healthwatch (2024) *Pharmacy Closures in England* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Healthwatch England)

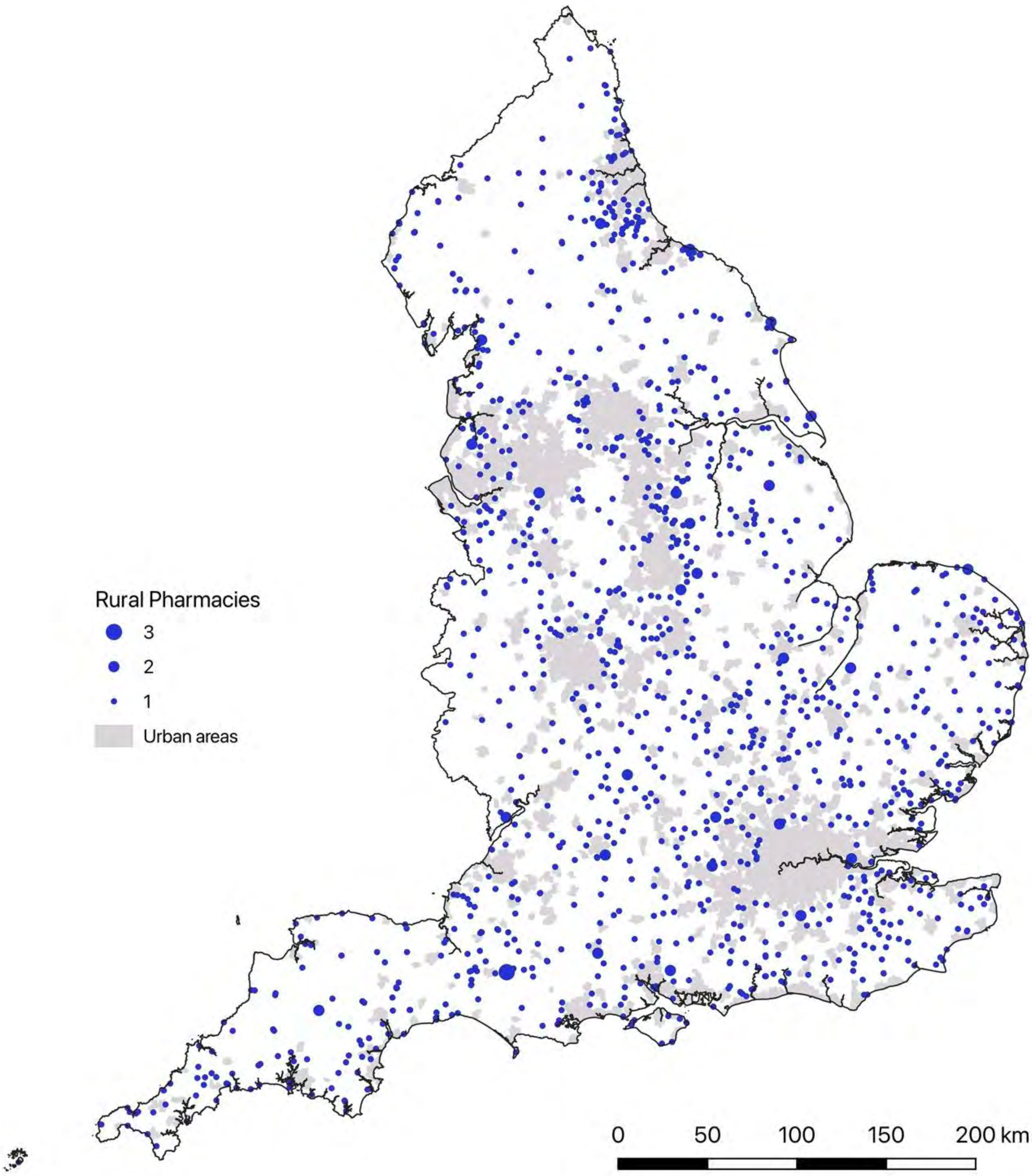
Figure 48: Pharmacy Closures and Opening Hours Reductions in Rural Care Boards, 2023



Source: Healthwatch (2024) *Pharmacy Closures in England* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Healthwatch England)

Figure 48 shows the results of the same study of pharmacy closures and opening hour reductions in 2023, focusing on the Care Boards classified as Predominantly Rural and Urban with Significant Rural. It highlights that Care Boards in the latter category included ones with the highest numbers of closures, with those of North East and North Cumbria; Lancashire and South Cumbria; Hampshire and Isle of Wight; Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire and Berkshire West; Surrey and Devon seeing over 12 pharmacies close in 2023. This group of Care Boards encompasses areas such as Cumbria and

Figure 49: The Distribution of Pharmacies in Rural England, 2024



Source: derived from General Pharmaceutical Council (General Pharmaceutical Council 2024) List of Registered Pharmacies, 30 December 2024 (London: General Pharmaceutical Council,) ttps://assets.pharmacyregulation.org/files/2025-01/20241231_Registered_Premises.xlsx.

Northumbria, which may be seen to encompass quite remote rural areas, but also many areas in the South East of England that may be seen as closely integrated with urban areas. Many of the same Care Boards also had amongst the highest levels of lost opening hours.

The analysis of Table 17 and Figure 48 is conducted at the level of NHS Care Boards, which are very extensive areas that actually encompass a wide range of rural and urban locations. Figure 49 and Table 18 are based on more spatially refined data, and focus on the pharmacies in operation in 2024.

Table 18: Number of Pharmacies in Rural Postcode Areas, 2024

Rural-Urban Character	Number of Pharmacies	Number of Postcode Locations
Town & Fringe	1,096	1,072
Town & Fringe in Sparse Setting	73	72
Village	74	73
Village in sparse setting	7	7
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings	56	54
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Setting	2	2
Total Rural	1,308	1,280

Source: derived from General Pharmaceutical Council (General Pharmaceutical Council 2024) List of Registered Pharmacies, 30 December 2024 (London: General Pharmaceutical Council) https://assets.pharmacyregulation.org/files/2025-01/20241231_Registered_Premises.xlsx.

They illustrate how, despite the evidence of closures, there were 783 pharmacies located in postcodes that may be viewed as rural according to Defra's (2017b) output level classification. Pharmacies are evident across all of the rural Integrated Care Boards shown in Figure 47, although it was noticeable that the Herefordshire and Worcestershire and Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin Integrated Care Boards only had 4 and 8 pharmacies located in rural areas within them respectively.

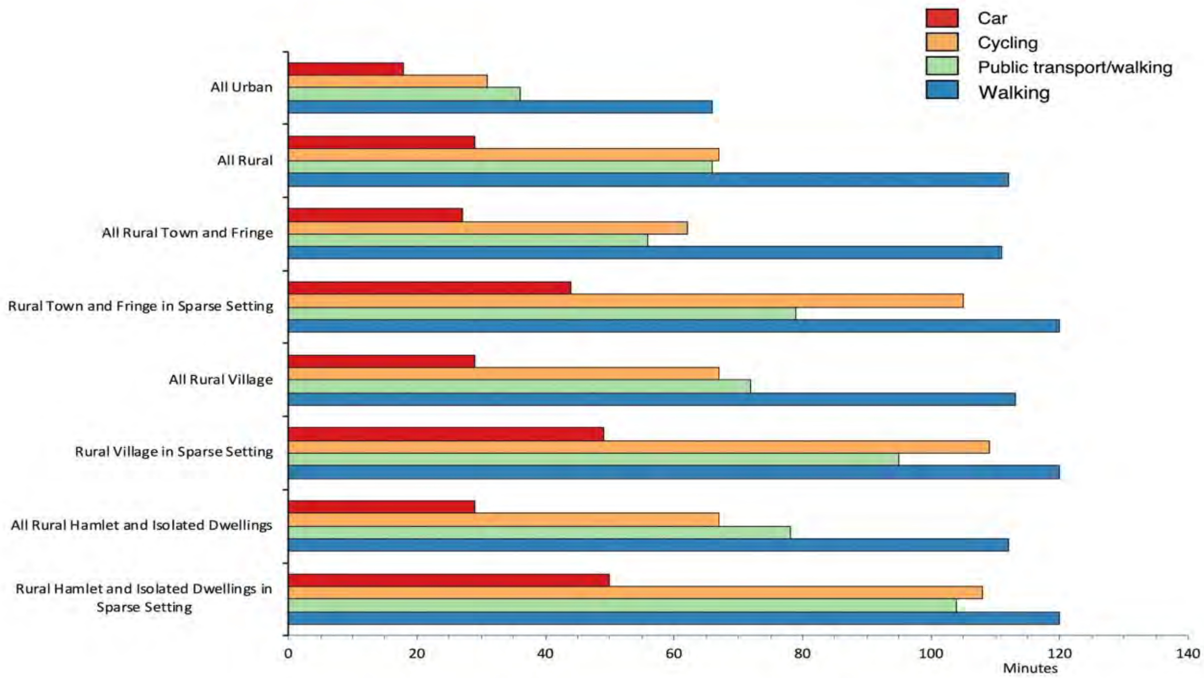
Table 18 also indicates that the rural pharmacies are predominantly located in the areas classified as Town and Fringe, with 22 of these having two pharmacies and one, in Sherbourne in Dorset, having three, although there were 58 pharmacies located in areas classified as Hamlets and Isolated Dwellings. All but four of the postcode areas with more than one pharmacy were located in the less sparse variant of the Town and Fringe category, with only two areas classified as Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling similarly appearing in the sparse version. These findings indicate that more densely populated rural settlements were much more likely to have a pharmacist than smaller, and more dispersed, settlements.

It is clear that many people living in rural areas will need to travel to access pharmacies located in Town and Fringe areas, if not an urban centre, reproducing many of the issues of accessibility observed in relation to NHS GPs and Dentists. A further issue identified in this section has been reductions in pharmacy opening hours, which are seen to be particularly significant in rural areas, and have been identified by Healthwatch (2024) as causing particular frustrations for people who have had to travel significant distances to pharmacies. Their report suggests that better information about opening hours and the identification of alternative pharmacy locations that might be used, would help reduce patient frustration, although it also states that structural issues related to staffing need to be addressed, arguing that the chief cause of reductions to opening hours has been the difficulty of recruiting "locum pharmacists to fill shifts" which appears to be most challenging "in less populated and well-connected areas" (Healthwatch 2024: 9).

Rural Access to Hospital and Emergency Services

Residents in rural areas not only often have to travel to access dental services and undertake longer journeys to access GPs than do urban populations, but as shown in Figure 50, they are also likely to have to experience more extended trips should they need to access a hospital. As with travel to GP surgeries, travel times across all rural settlement categories are longer than in urban areas, with there also being longer journeys for residents in all the sparse rural settings. The journey times to hospitals are also clearly longer than those to GPs, with these again being noticeably higher in all the sparse rural categories. It was again also evident that journey times for people without access to a car were over one hour in all the categories of rural areas, with the exception of Rural Town and Fringe areas, which was just below an hour for people travelling by public transport and walking, although in the sparse variants of these areas travel times increased to just over an hour. It should also be noted that patients are often required to make visits to specific hospitals, which provide particular medical services and courses of treatment, rather than attend the nearest hospital to their place of residents. Consequently, the travel times shown in Figure 50 may significantly underestimate the actual travel times rural residents experience.

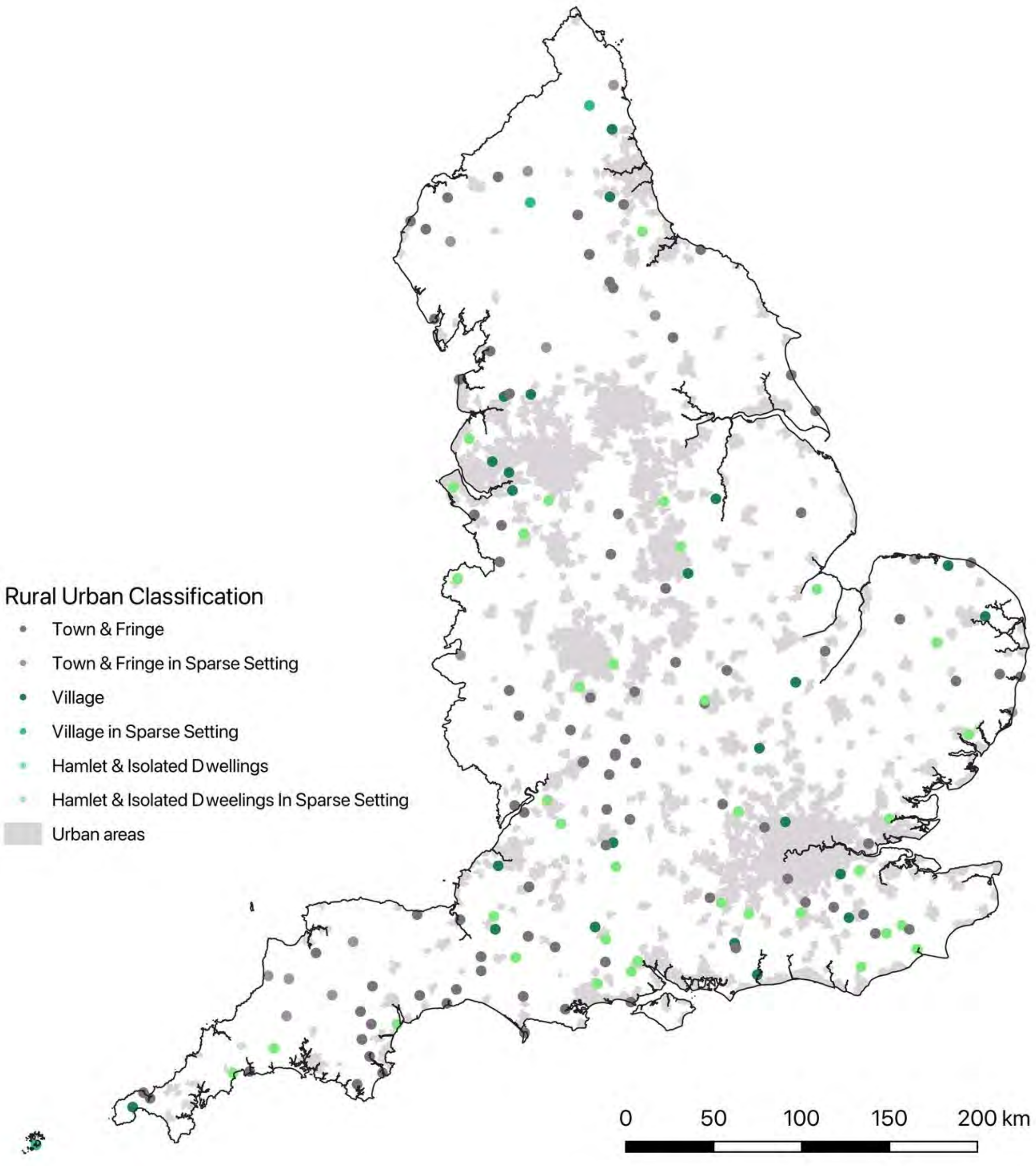
Figure 50: Average Minimum Time to Reach Nearest Hospital, 2019



Source: derived from Defra (2024) *Statistical Digest of Rural England* (London: Defra), Worksheet DA: Average minimum travel time (minutes) to reach the nearest key services, by mode of travel and Rural-Urban Classification, England, 2019

Despite their deficiencies, the travel times shown in Figure 50 do highlight some significant issues. The longer travel times to hospitals compared to GPs, for example, clearly reflect the smaller number of these establishments, with published data suggesting that in 2023 there were 704 hospitals in England (Interweave Healthcare 2024), compared to over 6,311 registered GP surgeries. Furthermore, the majority of hospitals are located in urban areas: analysis of the hospital postcode locations by Defra's (2017b) Rural-Urban Classification suggests that only 170 are located in rural areas, with almost 62% of these being located in less sparse Town and Fringe areas (see Figure 51 and Table 19). The figure for the proportion of rurally located hospitals is broadly comparable to that

Figure 51: Location of Hospitals Operating in November 2024 in Rural Areas as Classified by Defra's (2017b) Rural-Urban Classification



Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), NHS Trust Sites. File ets (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service/data-search-and-export/csv-downloads/other-nhs-organisations

established by the Commission for Rural Communities (2010), which stated that 11.1% of England's hospitals were sited at a rural location, while the proportion of rural hospitals located in Town and Fringe locations was identical. However, the earlier report put the total number of hospitals in 2010 at 1,923 and the rural figure at 213. These figures would suggest that there has been a 20% decline in the number of rural hospitals over the last 15 years, although the balance between rural and urban locations has not shifted significantly in relative terms, nor has the relative significance of Town and Fringe locations within the distribution of rural hospitals.

Table 19: Hospitals Operating in November 2024 in Rural Areas as Classified Defra's (2017b) Rural-Urban Classification

Rural Character	Number of Hospitals
Town and Fringe	92
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	13
Village	23
Village in Sparse Setting	3
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	39
Total Rural	170

Source: derived from NHS Prescription Services (2024), NHS Trust Sites. File ets (London: NHS Prescription Services) https://digital.nhs.uk/services/organisation-data-service/data-search-and-export/csv- downloads/other-nhs-organisations

Of the 170 hospitals identified as located in rural areas, 40 were titled Community, District or Cottage hospitals, implying that they were serving relatively small geographical areas and often providing non-acute/non-specialist services such as health checks, clinics, minor surgery and convalescence after discharge from main hospitals. There were, however, examples of large hospitals with acute and specialist service provision located in Town and Rural Fringe Areas, such as the Great Western Hospital located on the edge of Swindon (see Figure 52).

Figure 52: Great Western Hospital, located in Town and Fringe Area outside Swindon

Photo © Brian Robert Marshall (cc-by-sa/2.0)

Table 20: Ambulance Response Times, April 2023, Calculated by Liberal Democrats

Rural-Urban Character	Ambulance Response Times for Category 1 and 2 incidents			
	Average times (minutes: seconds)		% slower than urban	
	Category 1	Category 2	Category 1	Category 2
Predominantly urban	8:40	52:34		
Urban with significant rural	10:17	58:17	19	11
Predominantly rural	12:31	61:20	45	17

Source: derived from Liberal Democrats (2023a) 2023-04-11 Ambulance Waiting Times FOI. Available at https: //docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18JLhyhzXB3Hy6v2xOXebWGIlaiip_u9k/edit?gid= 401656079#gid=401656079 (Last access date: 11/2/25)

A rationale for edge-of-town locations for hospitals such as the Great Western is accessibility, with this hospital being located close to Junction 15 of the M4. The hospital has a large urgent and emergency care provision, serving not only Swindon but also surrounding towns and rural areas. Rural residents will often be served by hospitals located in urban areas, particularly for acute or specialist treatments. Clearly, travel distances to these hospitals are a highly significant issue, and as highlighted earlier, are often much longer for rural than urban residents. However, when people are injured or seriously ill, they may be taken to hospital by ambulance rather than rely on personal modes of transport. Since 2017, the Government has outlined expected levels of ambulance response times in England, whereby ambulance trusts are expected to respond to life-threatening 'Category 1' incidents in seven minutes on average, and to 90% of these within 15 minutes, while in relation to so-called emergency 'Category 2' calls, the required standards are 18 minutes and 40 minutes respectively (Department of Health and Social Care 2025). However, it has been argued that, "Since early 2021 … ambulance response time targets have consistently been missed" (Nuffield Trust 2024) and many concerns have been raised about long wait times for ambulances, including within rural areas. The Liberal Democrats (2023b) produced data on ambulance response times in April 2023, which they suggest indicated that patients in rural areas "wait 50% longer for ambulances" than those in urban areas, with wait times for life-threatening calls being "45% longer in rural areas than urban ones". This information was produced through the submission of Freedom of Information requests to ambulance trusts, with seven out of 10 of these providing information.

The analysis created by the Liberal Democrats again makes use of the most generalised Rural-Urban classification produced by Defra (2017a) to classify NHS ambulance trusts, as illustrated in Table 20, but it is possible to make use of the more detailed variant of this classification (see Table 21). This more detailed analysis highlights how response times appear significantly longer in NHS Trust areas classified as rural, compared with those found in major conurbations, as well as being significantly longer than the standards established by the Government. Category 1 average response times appear to be over two-thirds longer than the required average for ambulance trusts classified as 'Largely Rural' and approaching 89% longer in those classified as 'Mainly Rural', while for Category 2, the excess approaches 240% and 255% respectively.

Table 21: Ambulance Response Times, Calculated Using Defra (2017a) Local Authority Level Urban/Rural Classification, April 2023

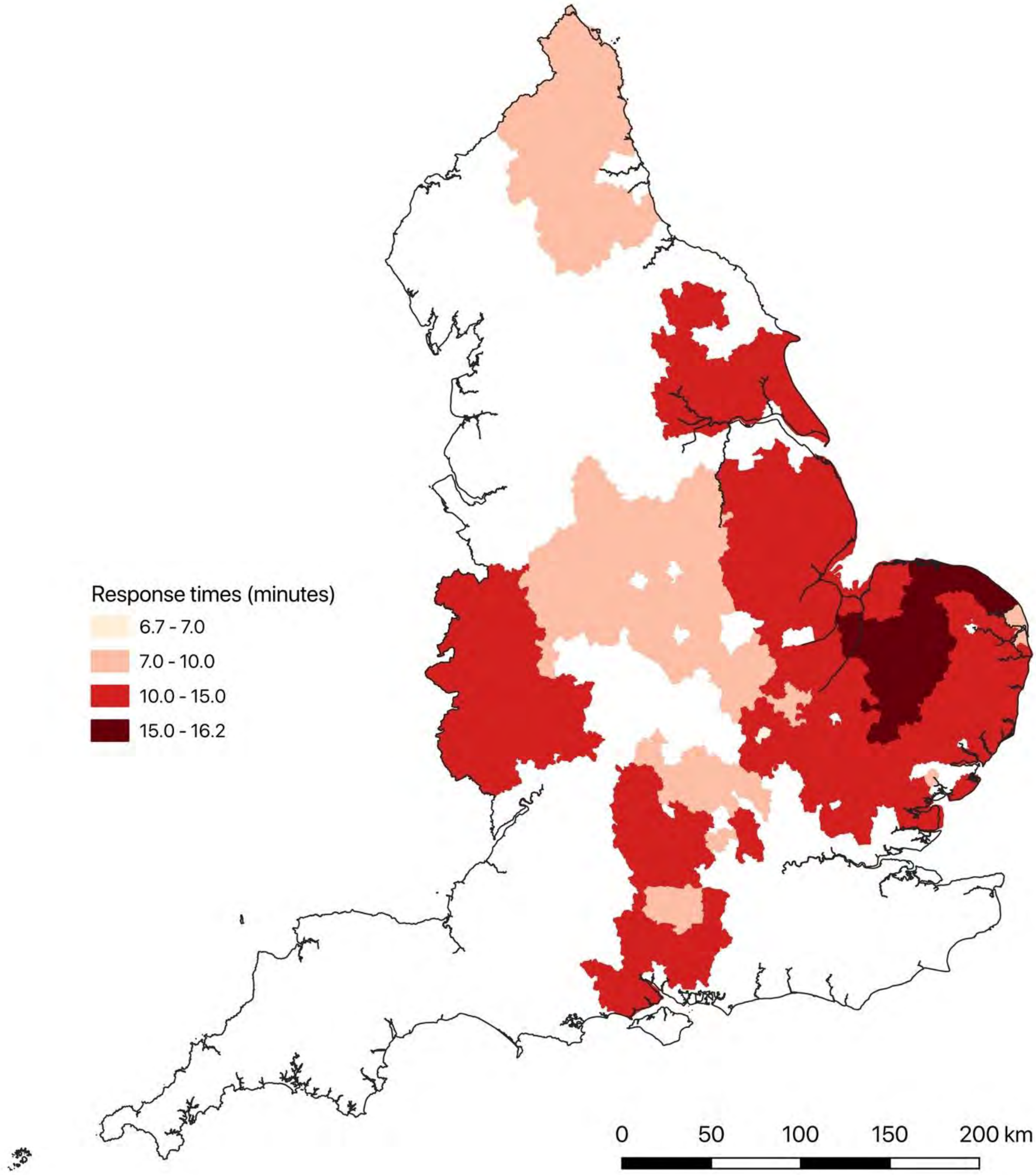
Rural-Urban Character	Ambulance Response Times for Category 1 and 2 incidents			
	Average times (minutes)		% beyond target average	
	Category 1	Category 2	Category 1	Category 2
Urban with Major Conurbation	8.5	50:1	20.9	178.3
Urban with Minor Conurbation	10.1	48.6	43.6	169.7
Urban with City and Town	8.7	55.6	24.5	209.0
Urban with Significant Rural	10.6	58.2	51.8	223.2
Largely Rural	11.4	61.1	62.8	239.5
Mainly Rural	13.2	63.8	88.6	254.6

Source: Liberal Democrats (2023) 2023-04-11 Ambulance Waiting Times FOI. Available at https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/18JLhyhzXB3Hy6v2xOXebWGIlaiip_u9k/edit?gid=401656079#gid=401656079 (Last access date: 11/2/25)

It should be noted that even in Table 21, the characterisation of ambulance trusts is undertaken at a very high level of spatial aggregation, with there being significant amounts of rural-urban differentiation within trust areas. This is clearly illustrated in Figure 53, which provides a map of the NHS Trusts classified as Mainly or Largely Rural or Urban with Significant Rural, along with their average response time to Category 1, Life-Threatening, callouts. While the map does indicate that many areas with extensive areas of countryside have the longest response times – e.g. counties such as Norfolk, Suffolk, Lincolnshire, Hampshire and Shropshire all figure in areas with average response times to Category 1 callouts of over 10 minutes – these areas also clearly include many urban settlements. It is also very evident from the map that many rural areas were omitted from the analysis because the dataset created did not include information from the South East Central, South West and North West ambulance services. Despite such limitations, it is clear that people in rural areas are likely to have to wait longer than the minimum expected standards as established by Governments from 2017.

Ambulances and hospitals are not the only forms of public emergency healthcare, with publicly accessible automated defibrillators also being an important element, not least because treatment within 3-5 minutes of a cardiac arrest is seen to significantly increase survival rates (Brown et al. 2022). Even though England's ambulance services attended around 80,000 out-of-hospital cardiac arrests in 2021, the median response time was 7 minutes across England as a whole, and "significantly longer in more rural areas" (Brown et al. 2022: 29). It has, however, also been argued that in this same year, almost 64% of publicly accessible automated defibrillators were located in urban areas, although over double the number of rural areas (76.3% of rural LSOAs) had one of these machines than did urban ones (35.5% of LSOAs) (Brown et al. 2022).

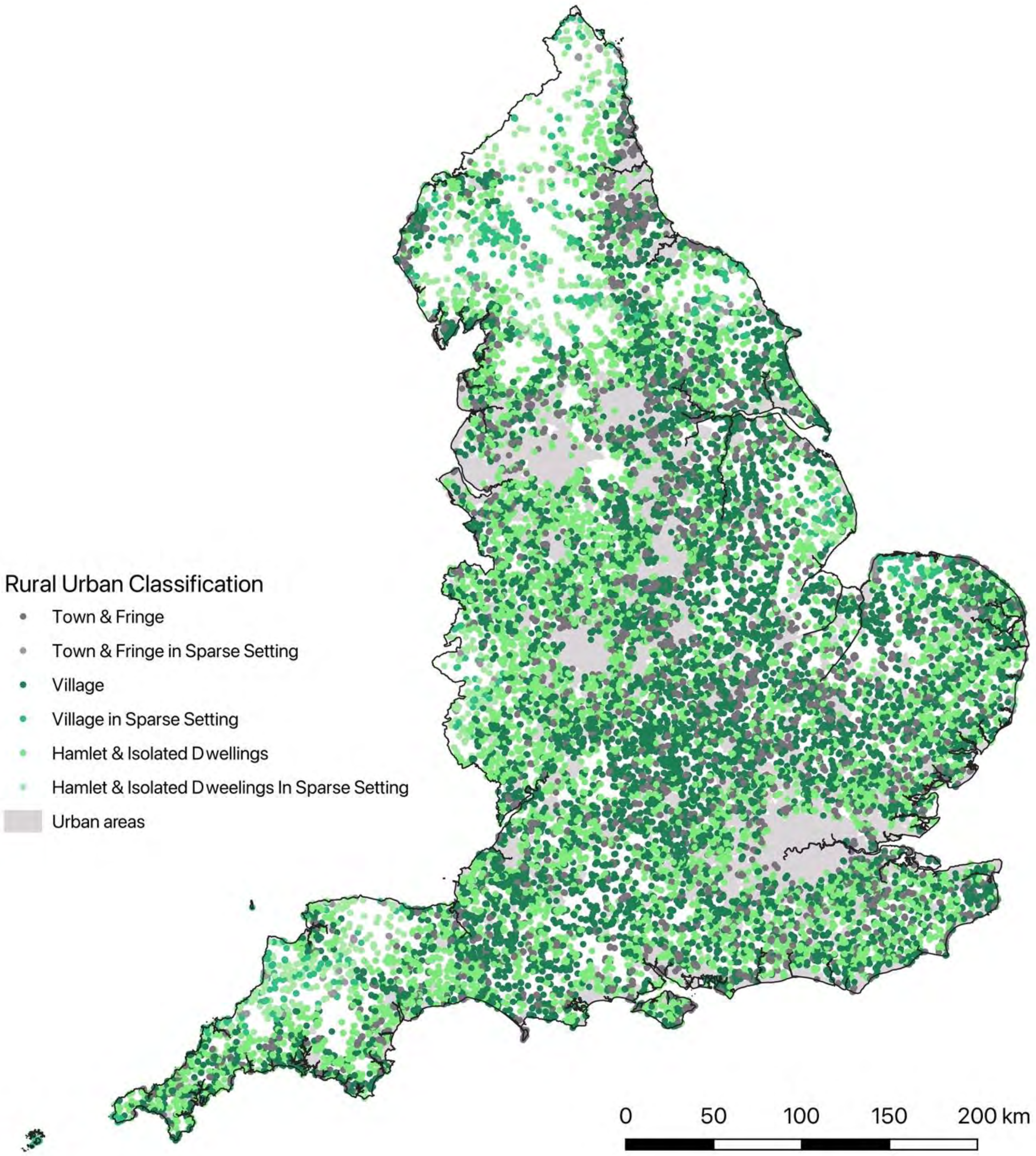
Figure 53: Average Response Times to Life-Threatening Incidences, Rural NHS Ambulance Trusts, April 2023



Source: Liberal Democrats (2023) 2023-04-11 Ambulance Waiting Times FOI,. Available at https:// docs. google.com/spreadsheets/d/18JLhyhzXB3Hy6v2xOXebWGIlaiip_u9k/edit?gid=401656079#gid=401656079

Figure 54 shows the number of defibrillators in June 2024, as recorded on The British Heart Foundation's National Defibrillator Network, The Circuit. The Figure confirms the widespread distribution of defibrillators across rural areas of England, although there are areas with limited numbers, including north and central Devon, Northumbria and parts of Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, Lancashire and Yorkshire. These are areas that might be seen as areas of quite remote countryside, and Figure 54 and Table 22 show the type of rural areas the defibrillators are located in, according to

Figure 54: Defibrillators in Rural England, June 2024



Source: derived from British Heart Foundation (2024)Defibrillator Data File, 5th June 2024, The Circuit, National Defibrillator Database (London: British Heart Foundation) https://www.bhf.org.uk/defibdata

Defra's (2017b) output level Rural-Urban Classification. Both indicate how less sparse rural locations predominate in the distribution of defibrillators, which are located relatively evenly across settlement types within these areas. Rural areas categorised as sparse contain many fewer defibrillators, and it is also notable that in hamlets and isolated areas in a sparse setting, the proportion of these machines made accessible without restrictions reaches almost 90%. This potentially reflects awareness of their generally limited availability in these areas, as well as perhaps the limited number of businesses operating within such locations, who might provide access to defibrillators focused on their workforce and customers rather than made available for public use without restrictions.

Table 22: Distribution of Defibrillators in Rural England, June 2024

Rural Character	No of Defibrillators			% Publicly Accessible
	Publicly Available	Restricted accessibility	Total Number	
Town and Fringe	5,686	1,616	7,302	77.9
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	403	104	507	79.5
Village	6,991	1569	8,560	81.7
Village in Sparse Setting	549	98	647	84.9
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	5,236	1,382	6,618	79.1
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling in Sparse Setting	615	69	486	89.9
Total Rural	19,489	4,838	24,318	80.1

Source: derived from British Heart Foundation (2024)Defibrillator Data File, 5th June 2024, The Circuit, National Defibrillator Database (London: British Heart Foundation) https://www.bhf.org.uk/defibdata

The evidence of generally widespread availability of defibrillators in rural areas of England, and high levels of public accessibility, is a welcome finding, particularly given the evidence concerning rural accessibility levels to hospitals and ambulance response times, although the presence of significantly low numbers of defibrillators in some rural districts is concerning. There clearly are what might be described as rural 'defibrillator deserts'.

Healthcare for the Rural Elderly

Whilst access to health services is of crucial significance for people of all age groups, the demand people make upon health services generally increases as people become elderly, with adults over 65 apparently accounting for over 40% of hospital admissions as well as being the most frequent general users of health and social care services (British Geriatrics Society 2023). Close to 50% of people over 85 are said to be living with frailty, with access to health being particularly significant for this group of people (British Geriatrics Society 2023). It is also reported that almost 49% of people over 50 were concerned about their ability to access their GP, and 42% were concerned about their access to hospitals and accident and emergency services (Boulton 2024).

It has already been shown that there are significant differences in levels of access to healthcare between rural and urban residents, but as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, rural areas as a whole also have higher proportions of residents over 65, and over 85, than do urban areas, as well as slightly higher life expectancies (see Figures 38 and 39). Settlements in sparse settings, including areas classified as Urban City and Town, also tend to have higher proportions of residents over 65 than do less sparse areas, which likely reflects both retirement and pre-retirement migration to coastal and areas with high landscape amenity value (Phillips 2024b) and also out-migration of younger people from more remote locations, which increases the relative balance of the elderly within the overall population distribution. Whatever the cause, a high proportion of elderly residents is likely to increase demands on health services in these areas, given the evidence of their greater need to access these services. This is likely to pose challenges given the evidence presented earlier in this report about the general level of health service provisions within rural areas, particularly those beyond Town and Fringe Locations.

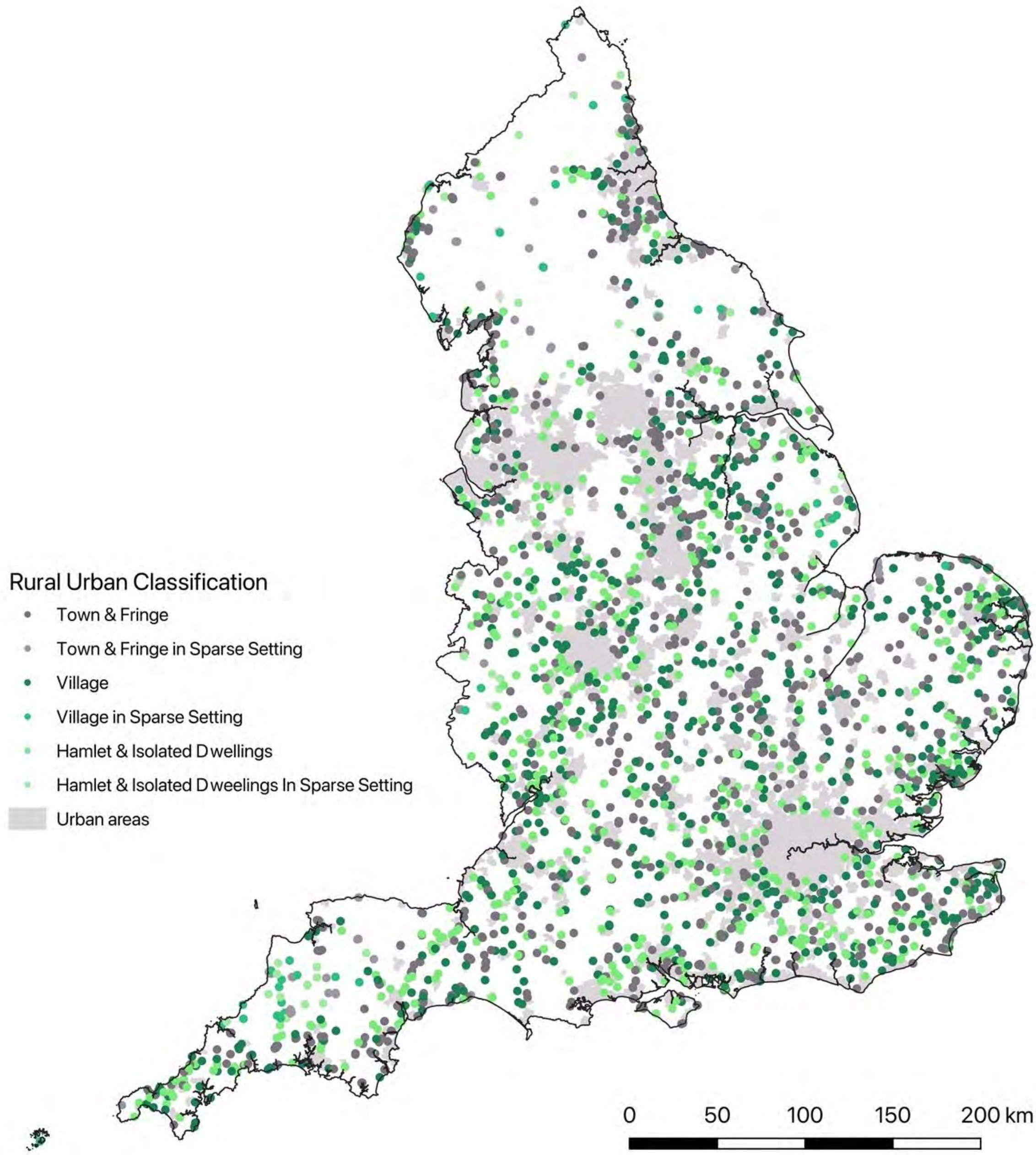
Over 80% of England's population who are 65 years old and over, live in owner-occupied properties, with just over 13% living in socially rented accommodation (Office for National Statistics 2023a) and around 2.5% living in care homes (Office for National Statistics 2023b). While almost 80% of registered care homes active at the end of 2024 appear to be located in urban areas, as Table 22 indicates, 1,706 were located in rural areas, with 45% located in Town and Fringe areas in non-sparse settings and 26% in Villages, again in non-sparse areas. Sparse areas again figure as areas with notably low levels of provision, although as Figure 54 indicates, some quite remote regions, such as around Workington and Whitehaven in north Cumbria, along the Tyne valley west of Newcastle and Devon and Cornwall, appear to have relatively high numbers. Coastal areas and areas in proximity with, although not necessarily in, aesthetically valued landscapes, such as National Parks and National Landscape Areas, also figured prominently, as they did in small towns with high proportions of elderly populations (see Phillips 2024b). While care homes provide health support to their residents, concentrations of these in a locality can also result in increased demands being placed on NHS services within these areas, while a lack of them within an area can lead to people having to move away from regions where they may have lived for many years in order to gain access to a care home.

Table 23: Distribution of Active Registered Care Homes in Rural England, December 2024

Rural Character	Number of Registered Care Homes	% of Rural Care Homes
Town and Fringe	1,333	45.4
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	83	2.8
Village	777	26.4
Village in Sparse Setting	39	1.3
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	670	22.8
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling in Sparse Setting	37	1.3
Total Rural	1,706	100.0

Source: derived from Care Quality Commission (2024) Active locations for providers registered under the Health and Social Care Act (HSCA) (London: Care Quality Commission) https://www.cqc.org.uk /about-us/transparency/using-cqc-data#directory.

Figure 55: Active Registered Care Homes in Rural England, December 2024



Source: derived from Care Quality Commission (2024) Active locations for providers registered under the Health and Social Care Act (HSCA) (London: Care Quality Commission) https://www.cqc.org.uk /about-us/transparency/using-cqc-data#directory.

Rural Mental Health Services

A final area of health services provision that this report will briefly consider relates to mental health. In 2023, the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee produced a report on an inquiry it had been running since November 2021 related to the availability and uptake of mental health services in rural areas within England (House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee 2023). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, this report argued that the countryside was a location with both potential benefits and disbenefits for mental health, and also that the needs of rural residents were not being fully recognised in mental health policies or service provision, with the latter being concentrated largely in urban areas. It also highlighted that there was a significant lack of information on rural mental health provisions and outcomes, with much of the data around these issues making no use of any rural-urban differentiation.

This lack of information severely limits the extent to which this report can address issues of mental health service provision and access. Many of the mental health services provided by the NHS are accessed via more general healthcare providers, such as GPs and hospitals. As a consequence, many of the limitations in the distribution and access to these services identified earlier in this chapter are equally relevant to mental healthcare. It was, hence, unsurprising that the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2023: 43) reported that much of the evidence it had received as part of its enquiry had "highlighted concerns that NHS mental health services are often not easily accessible to rural communities", with there being "repeated" references to the "lack of rural transport" being "a key barrier", although there were also accounts highlighting the difficulty of recruiting sufficient staff in rural areas. The report also highlighted the use of online healthcare, but mentioned that broadband and internet provision in rural areas act as a "barrier to NHS organisations providing services to rural areas" (House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee 2023: 43).

The Committee also discussed the impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic on rural mental health, arguing it accentuated existing stresses and caused new "anxieties and pressures" (House of Commons Environment Food and Rural Affairs Committee 2023: 12). The Committee also stressed the presence of significant mental health issues within the farming community, making reference to a survey conducted in 2020/21 involving 15,000 farmers, farmworkers, contractors and associated family members. A third of respondents to this survey reported mental well-being levels that were of concern, and 21% and 15% were assessed respectively as being probably and potentially depressed. It was also reported that 47% of respondents were experiencing "some form of anxiety", and 6% and 12% were suffering from extreme and moderate levels of anxiety respectively. Levels of depression and anxiety were reported as being significantly higher for women than men, which were seen to reflect the pressures of combining business activities with childcare and domestic responsibilities, as well as isolation when partners are working long hours on the farm. It was also reported that mental health was often significantly poorer in livestock farming than in arable, reflecting both the physical and economic challenges of this form of agriculture. Across all forms of agriculture, regulation, compliance and inspection were seen to be the principal sources of stress.

The charity Mental Health Matters sought to follow up on the Committee's work by developing research addressing mental health needs amongst rural residents, drawing both on data produced through its own helpline and from a survey of 120 people, largely living in the North East and South West of England, conducted between early July and mid-September 2024. Findings from the research included:

i) Isolation and loneliness were the principal mental issues raised by callers to the helpline;

ii) 73% of respondents to the survey stated that their mental health had declined in the previous 12 months, with only 65% of these people stating that they had tried to access support to address this decline;

iii) Almost 48 % of respondents to the survey said they found it difficult to access services to support their mental health, because of where they lived, with the same number indicating that public transport links made it hard to access support and just under 41% indicating that poor access to the internet and technology were significant barriers;

iv) Improving access to services, more local support events, increased community support and awareness raising were the most widely mentioned improvements in mental health services that respondents saw as being of value to people living in rural communities.

Overall, although there is, as the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2023) stressed, a significant lack of data available on mental health and mental healthcare service provision in rural areas of England, the limited amount of information currently available does point to there being both significant mental health needs and limitations in provisions and access to appropriate mental healthcare services within many areas of rural England.

Health Service Provision in England's Countryside: the Overall Picture

This chapter has examined healthcare provision within rural England, focusing initially on primary healthcare provided to rural residents by GPs, dentists and pharmacists, before turning to accident and emergency services available via hospitals, ambulances and defibrillators. It ended by considering healthcare provisions for two specific groups of potential patients: the elderly and people suffering with poor mental health. Across all the different types of services examined, a persistent theme has been the limited services available to many rural residents, particularly those living in sparsely populated or smaller rural settlements.

Table 24: Number of Rural Postcode Areas without any Health Service Provisions

Rural Character	Number of Rural Postcode Areas with no medical services located within them	% of Rural Postcode Areas with no medical services located within them
Town and Fringe	174,578	55.8
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	10,062	43.1
Village	134,989	44.3
Village in Sparse Setting	9,009	35.9
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	117,320	51.9
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling in Sparse Setting	11,058	44.9
Total Rural	45,716	50.4

Table 24 shows the number of postcode areas in locations classified as rural using Defra's (2017b) output level Rural Urban Classification that have none of the health services discussed in this chapter located within their boundaries: that is, they have no GP surgeries, dentists, pharmacies, hospitals, care homes or even a defibrillator. This table shows how reliant rural populations in England are on travelling to other locations to access health services or making use of digital or other modes of remote delivery. It also highlights that even in Town and Fringe areas there are 184,640 postcode areas without this health service infrastructure, which is more than in rural areas with smaller settlements, although many areas with villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings also lack these health service provisions.

5. Transport and Communication Services

Introduction

As mentioned in the conclusion to the previous chapter, many people living in rural areas have to travel to access in-person health services because these are increasingly located some distance from their place of residence. This need to travel to access services has also been a message that has appeared in the earlier chapters on economic, educational, welfare and cultural services. Given this, transport services are clearly of crucial significance in enabling people to access a series of other services to support them during their everyday lives, and also in receiving goods and services that may be distributed to rural populations by providers who may be located in some potentially quite distant urban locations. Reference has also been made across the earlier chapters to the growing significance of digital communication, and to challenges its use may pose within rural areas.

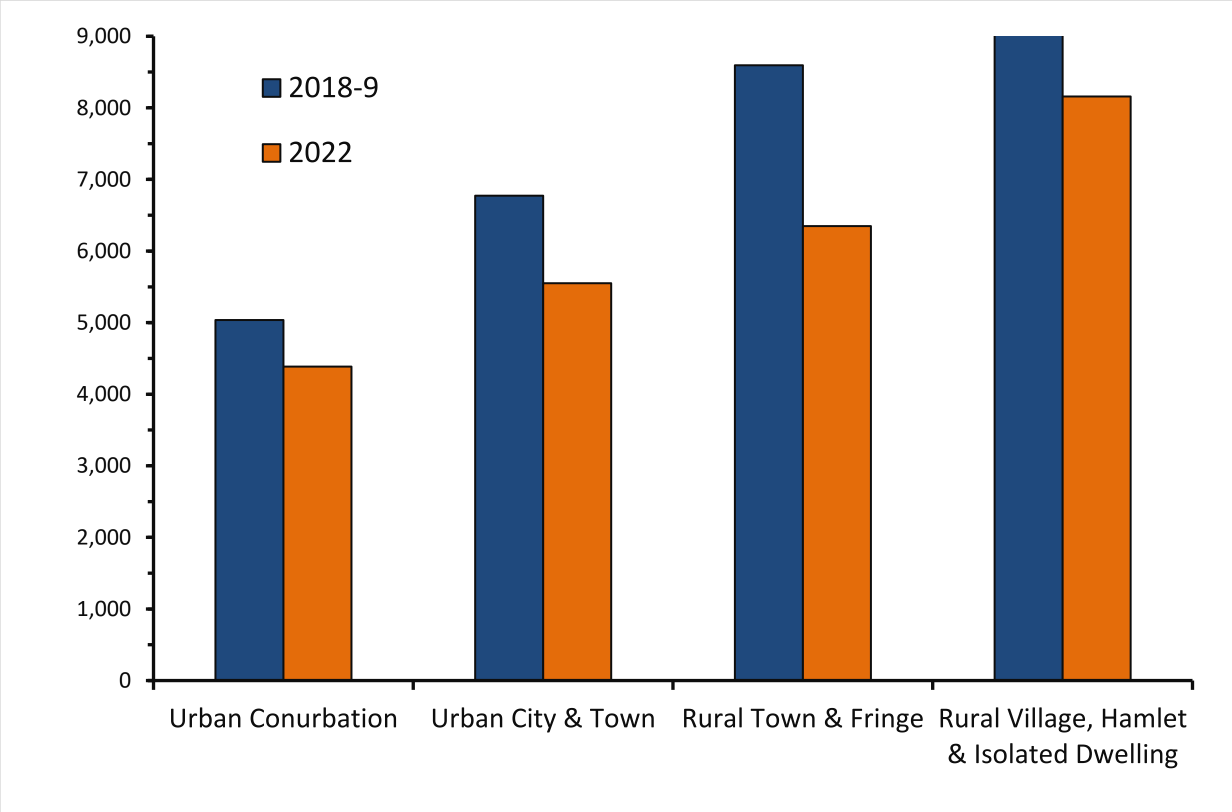
This chapter will examine the provision of transport and communication services in rural areas, focusing initially on the levels of spatial mobility, and hence service accessibility, afforded to people by different modes of transport, including private vehicles, public bus services and community travel schemes. Service access often does not solely operate through personal movements, but also frequently involves transfers of information and products. This chapter, therefore, also considers access to postal services, which have been important in the transfer of goods and services in England since the 17th century (see Gregory 1987). It also examines broadband and mobile infrastructures that have become increasingly significant modes of communication and service delivery, in the process often creating challenges to companies and organisations involved in the off-line circulation of information and goods, including post offices. Questions have also been raised about the availability of broadband and mobile services within rural areas, and the degree to which people with no or poor access to and/or understanding of these modes of communication experience increasing levels of service exclusion (e.g. Philip et al. 2017).

Patterns of Personal Travel

The National Travel Survey (NTS), managed by the Department for Transport, produces statistical data on patterns of travel across England, including disaggregations according to place of residence classified through Defra's mid-level Rural-Urban classification (i.e. it does not include the sparse/non-sparse distinction). As Figure 56 illustrates, it has long been evident that rural residents travel on average more miles than their urban counterparts, with there being a clear relationship between settlement size and average distance travelled, with residents living in areas with small rural settlements (i.e. villages, hamlets and isolated rural dwellings) travelling an average of 8,160 miles in 2022, which was 3,774 miles further than the average distance travelled by people living in the large urban conurbations.

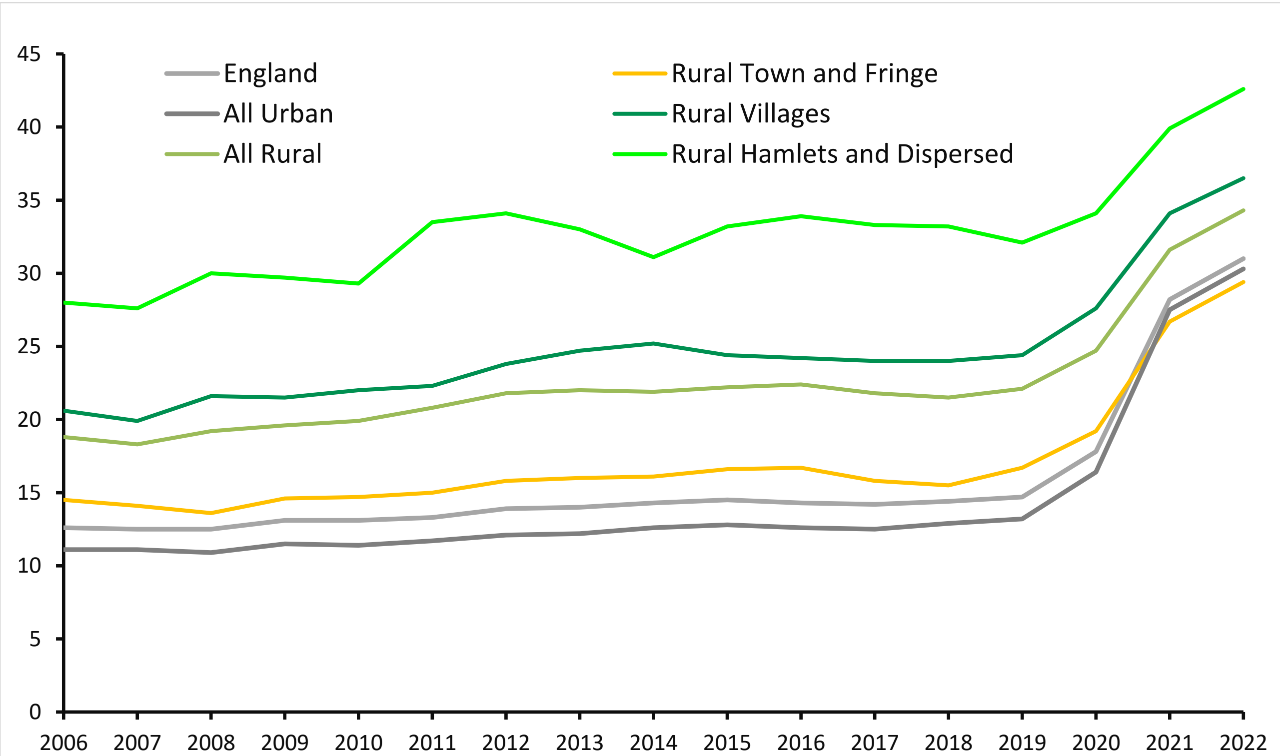
Figure 56 further suggests that distances travelled across all area types have reduced since 2019, a finding that potentially relates to increases in the practices of working from home and the rise of internet shopping during the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise in homeworking over 2020-2021 is certainly evident in Figure 57, which shows the percentage of residents who were recorded as homeworking in National Travel Surveys conducted between 2006 and 2022. This figure also illustrates how home-workers have formed a higher proportion of the workforce in rural areas in comparison with urban ones across this period, with this practice being particularly significant in rural hamlets and dispersed settlements, potentially reflecting both limited employment opportunities

Figure 56: Average distance travelled (in miles), annually by all transport modes per resident in 2018-9 and 2022, by area type



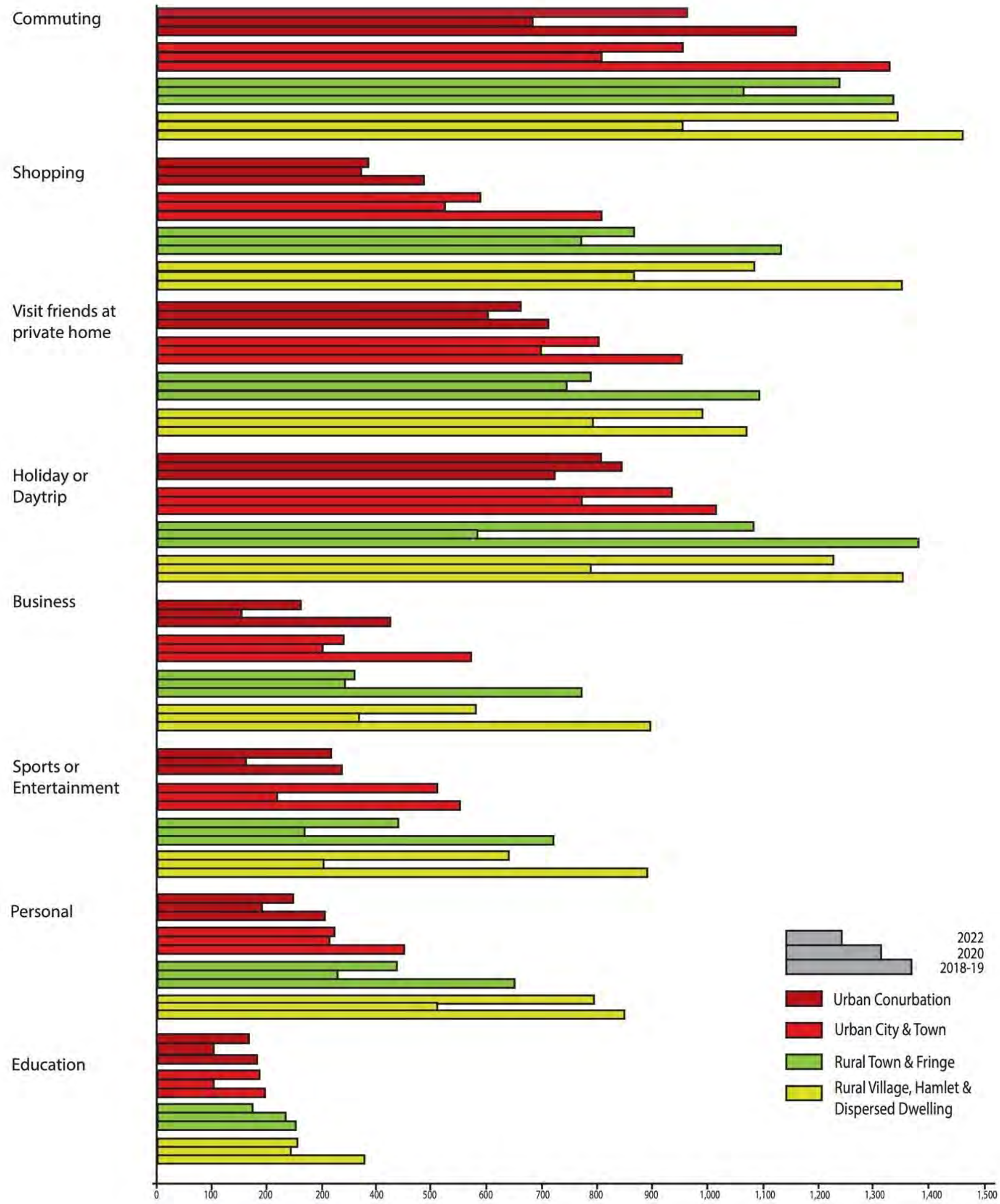
Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023b) National Travel Survey, NTS9904: Average distance travelled by mode, region and rural-urban classification of residence (miles per person per year): England, 2002 onwards (London: Department for Transport).

Figure 57: Proportion of Urban and Rural Residents Working from Home, England, 2006-22



Source: derived from Defra (2025) Statistical Digest of Rural England: February 2025 Update, Connectivity and Accessibility Supplementary Data Tables (London: Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs).

Figure 58: Average distance travelled (in miles), annually by all transport modes per resident in 2022, 2020 and 2018-19, by purpose and area type



Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023b) National Travel Survey, NTS9904: Average distance travelled by mode, region and rural-urban classification of residence (miles per person per year): England, 2002 onwards (London: Department for Transport).

in these locations and the longer distances residents living in such places may face in travelling to work.

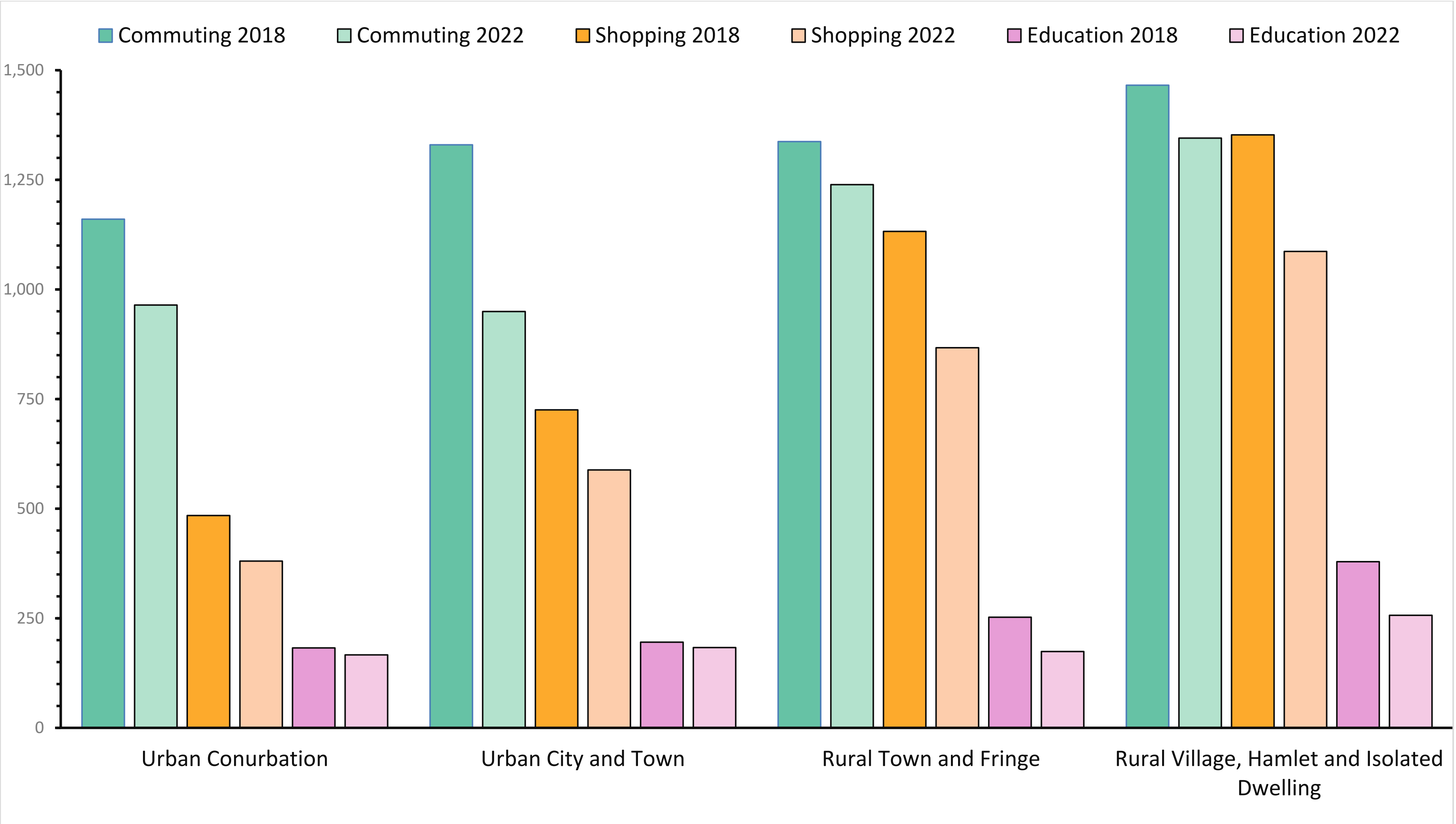
Figure 58, which shows average travel distances for different types of journeys, certainly indicates that distances travelled to work, or for commuting, were longer for residents living in villages, hamlets and dispersed dwellings than they were for urban residents in both 2019 and 2022.

In 2021 there was a noticeable decline in commuting distances travelled from these locations, reflective of the impact of Covid-19 travel restrictions and the ability of professional workers, who often constitute a high proportion of residents in smaller rural settlements (Phillips 2011), to work from home. Declining travel distances for 2020 can be seen across almost all journey types and areas, and whilst journey distances generally increased between 2021 and 2022, they have tended not to return to 2018 levels, particularly in relation to areas classified as Rural Town and Fringe and Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings. This is also evident in Figure 59, which focuses on differences in average number of journeys people undertook through a year for work, retailing and education, in 2018 and 2022. This shows that educational journeys decreased by over 30% in both Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings and Rural Town and Fringe areas, whilst journeys for work fell between these dates by less than 8% in these areas. Journeys for retailing decreased by around a fifth across all categories of urban and rural areas, perhaps reflecting the rise of online retailing discussed in Chapter 2.

Of particular significance in rural areas is the availability, or not, of public transport, it being evident that while many rural residents make extensive use of private vehicles – principally cars, but also vans and motorcycles – to travel to work and to access a whole range of services, there are also rural residents who lack access to these vehicles and are hence dependent on a range of other modes of transport to access services, which, as has been shown in earlier chapters, may lie at some distance from their place of residence. Figure 60 shows how dominant private vehicles are in terms of the percentage of journeys conducted by residents in rural areas, with journeys undertaken through driving or as a passenger in a car or van, constituting almost 87% of the recorded journeys undertaken in 2022 in Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling areas, when walks of under 1 mile are excluded. The proportion of journeys undertaken in cars or vans was slightly lower in Rural Town and Fringe Areas in 2018, although these had fallen slightly in significance by 2022, with there being a doubling in the number of journeys undertaken through walking. It was noticeable that the proportion of journeys made as a car or van passenger was similar across rural and urban locations, so it was trips as drivers that were undertaken with more frequency in the rural areas, a finding also evident in the analysis conducted in the *2018 State of Rural Services* report (Rural England 2019).

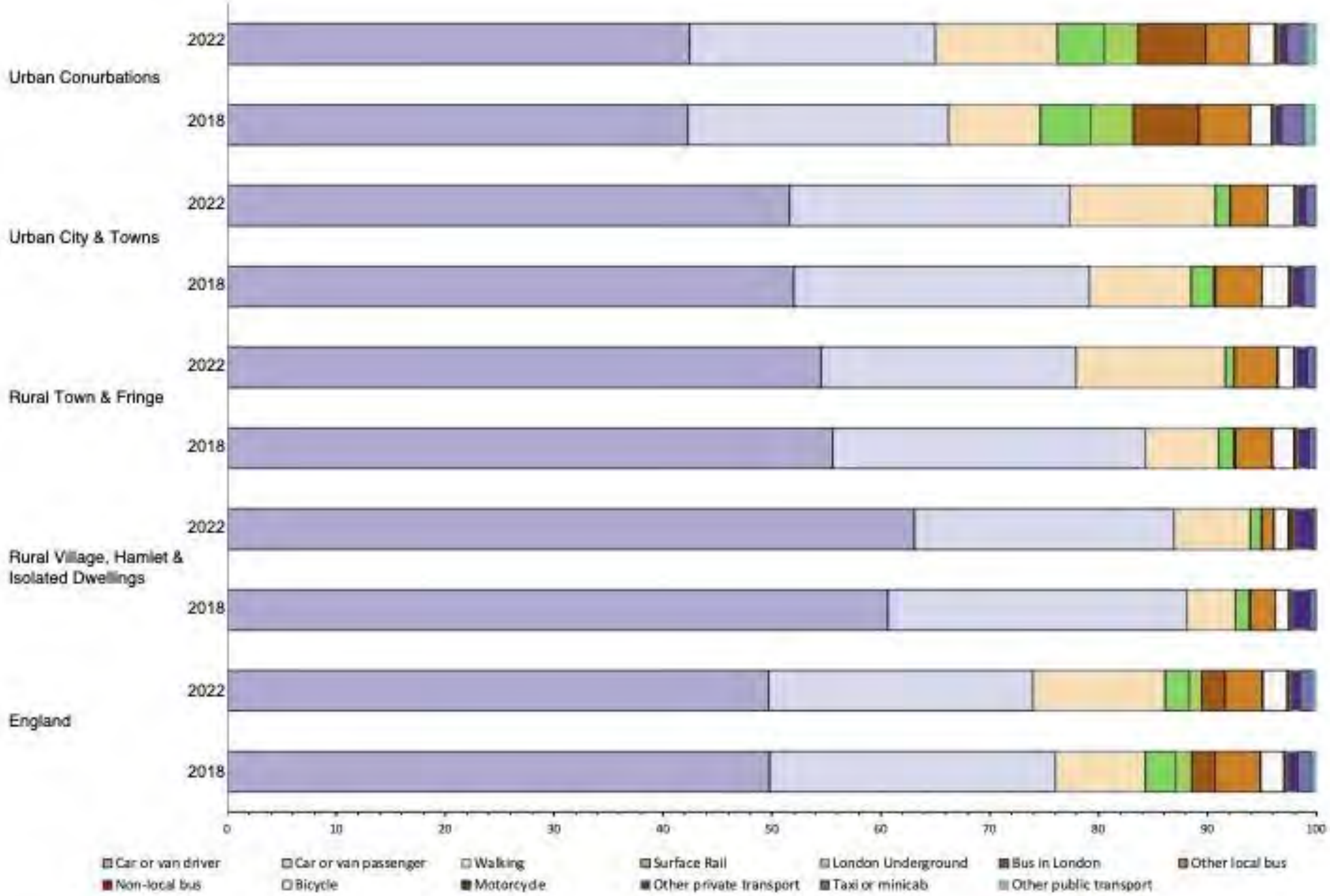
Public transport, be this via buses or trains, constituted a much lower proportion of journeys in rural areas than in urban conurbations, although Urban City and Town and Rural Town and Fringe areas had similar percentages of journeys undertaken using these modes of transport. Of note is the low use of local buses in areas classified as Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling areas, which represented just over 1% of the recorded journeys in 2022. This was under half of the proportion recorded for these areas in 2018 and almost a quarter of the proportion of trips undertaken in Urban Conurbations and Urban City and Town areas. This image of temporal decline and lowest levels of use in rural areas is supported by Figure 61, which shows the annual number of passenger journeys on local buses in metropolitan, non-metropolitan urban and rural areas in England, from 2005 to 2023. It indicates the higher numbers of passenger journeys undertaken in urban areas through this period, as well as the declines that occurred across urban and rural areas during the Covid-19 pandemic. It is also evident that journey numbers, particularly in rural areas, had not returned in 2023 to anywhere close to pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 59: Average Number of Journeys Per Person Per Year for Work, Retailing and Education, Rural and Urban England 2018 and 2022



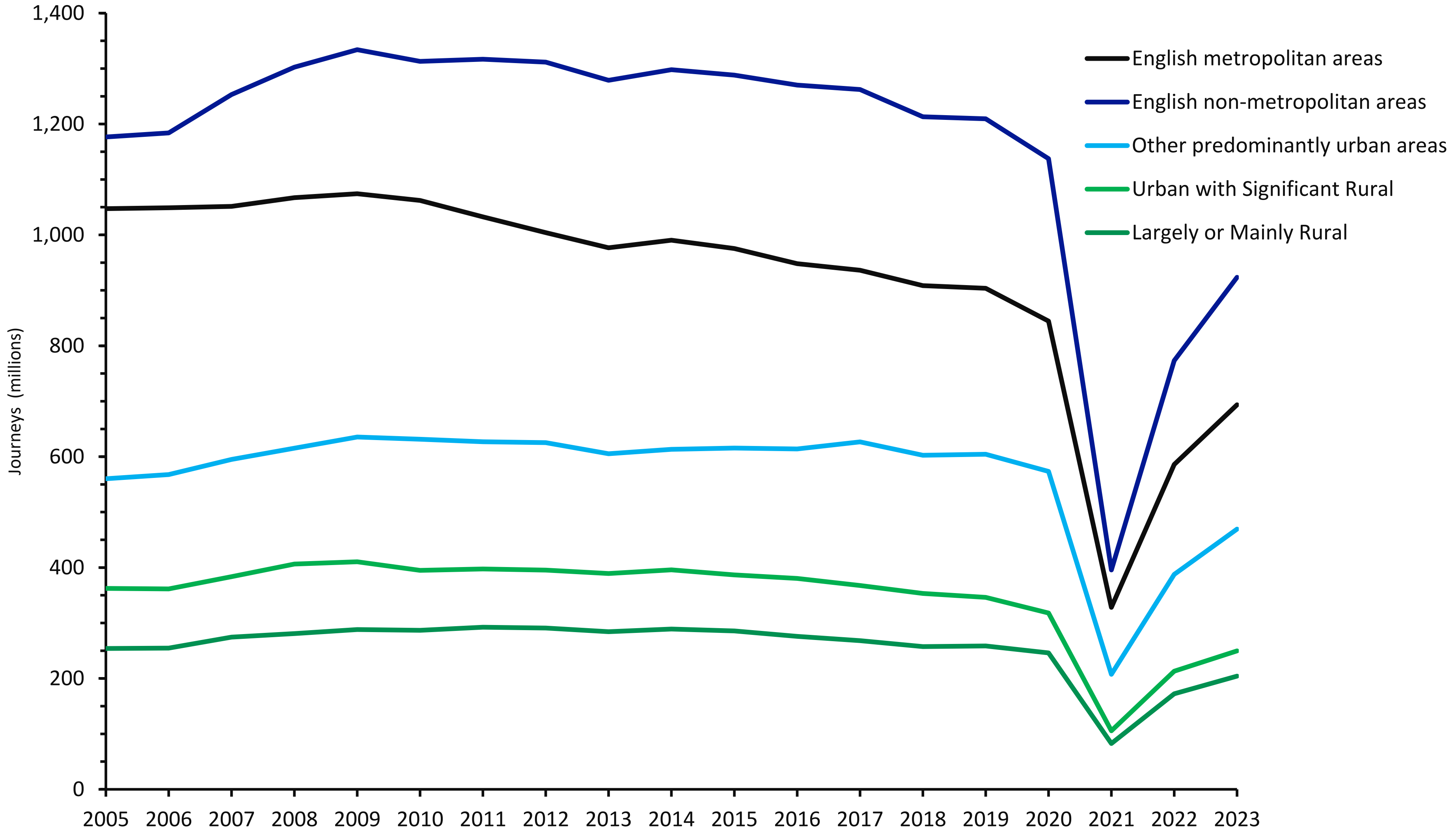
Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023d) National Travel Survey, NTS9918b: Average number of trips by trip purpose, ethnic group and rural-urban classification of residence (trips per person per year): England, 2002 onwards (London: Department for Transport).

Figure 60: Average Percentage of Journeys by Principal Mode of Transport, Rural and Urban England 2018 and 2022



Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023a) National Travel Survey, NTS9903b: Average number of trips by main mode and rural-urban classification of residence (trips per person per year): England, 2002 onwards (London: Department for Transport).

Figure 61: Bus Journeys, Metropolitan, Non-Metropolitan and Rural England, 2005-2022



Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023e) National Travel Survey, Table BUS01a: Passenger journeys on local bus services by metropolitan area and urban-rural status, region and country: Great Britain, annual from year ending March 2005 (London: Department for Transport).

The County Councils Network commissioned a study of local bus services in the post-pandemic period, which stated that whilst local authorities had sought to retain bus services in this period, passenger numbers had declined by 236.6 million from their 2018-19 figures (County Councils Network 2023). It is further argued that this decline in passenger numbers has adversely impacted private bus companies, who responded to declining revenues by reducing service provisions, including significantly reducing the number of routes they operate on. The County Councils Network report suggests that commercially operated services reduced their network length by 15.6% between 2019 and 2022, which meant both "bus services usage and coverage had reached a historic low"(County Councils Network 2023: 5).

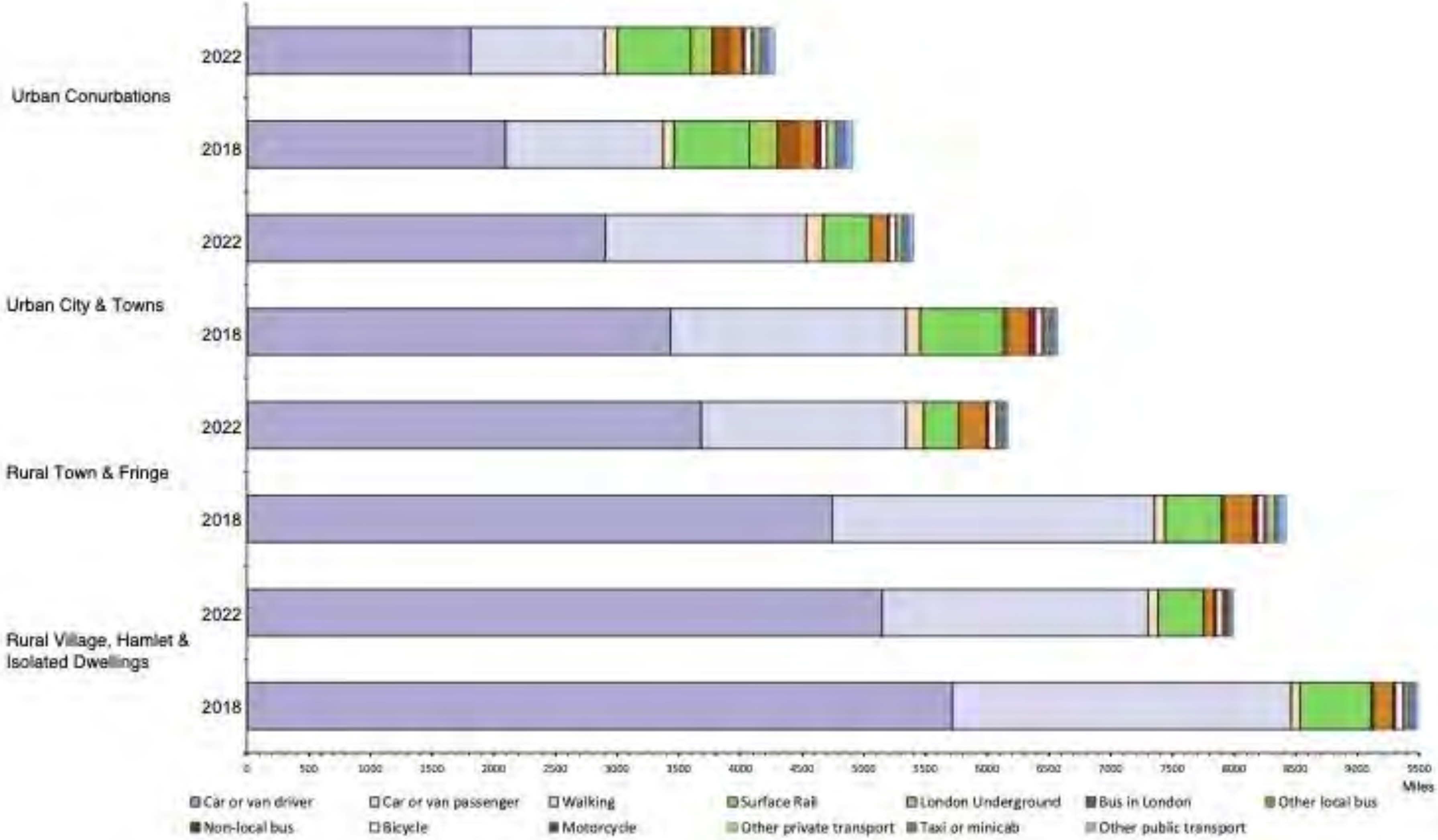
Figure 62 shows that the average distances people travelled by local bus did indeed decrease between 2018 and 2022, with the decline being most marked in areas classified as Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings. In these areas, average annual per capita travel distances decreased from just over 152 miles to just over 78 miles, a decline of almost 74%. The decrease was least in areas classified as Rural Town and Fringe (an 18% decline from 234 miles to 216 miles), whilst even in Urban City and Town and Urban Conurbation areas, there were declines of just under 50% and just over 40% respectively. Figure 62, however, also shows that travel distances, in general, decreased significantly across both urban and rural areas between 2018 and 2022, as well as showing how residents in rural areas travelled significantly further than those in urban areas (the difference in per capita travel distances across all modes of transport was 90% longer in areas classified as Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings than in Urban Conurbations).

The County Councils Network (2023) report also recorded that there had been a significant decline in travel by people on concessionary fares, which includes many young and elderly people, who are also groups who have the least access to private vehicles. This argument is supported by Figure 63, which shows the proportion of people older than the pensionable age for women who had taken up a concessionary pass. It shows clearly that there had been a decline in the proportion of people of pensionable age with a concessionary bus pass during the Covid-19 pandemic across both rural and urban areas. There has also been some increase in the post-pandemic period, particularly in areas classified as Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated Dwellings and Rural Town and Fringe. However, the proportion in the former set of areas is still markedly lower than that found in urban areas, which is particularly significant given the significance of elderly populations within these areas (see Figure 38) and the absence of many services within them, as demonstrated in preceding Chapters.

The issue of low uptake of concessionary fares within rural localities is discussed briefly in the County Councils Network (2023) report, it being argued that the limited post-Covid recovery in pass adoption rates may reflect the levels of savings available through these fares. The concessionary fares are provided by local authorities under the 2000 Transport Act, and budgetary restrictions and other demands, have meant it has often been difficult to maintain highly discounted fares. It was claimed that many local authorities were effectively only "'covering the cracks' with the issues on the bus network" and an increasing number of rural residents were "being impacted by poor or cut services" (County Councils Network 2023: 33). It is argued that the rural bus network needs to be supported by new, long-term, central government funding of local authorities.

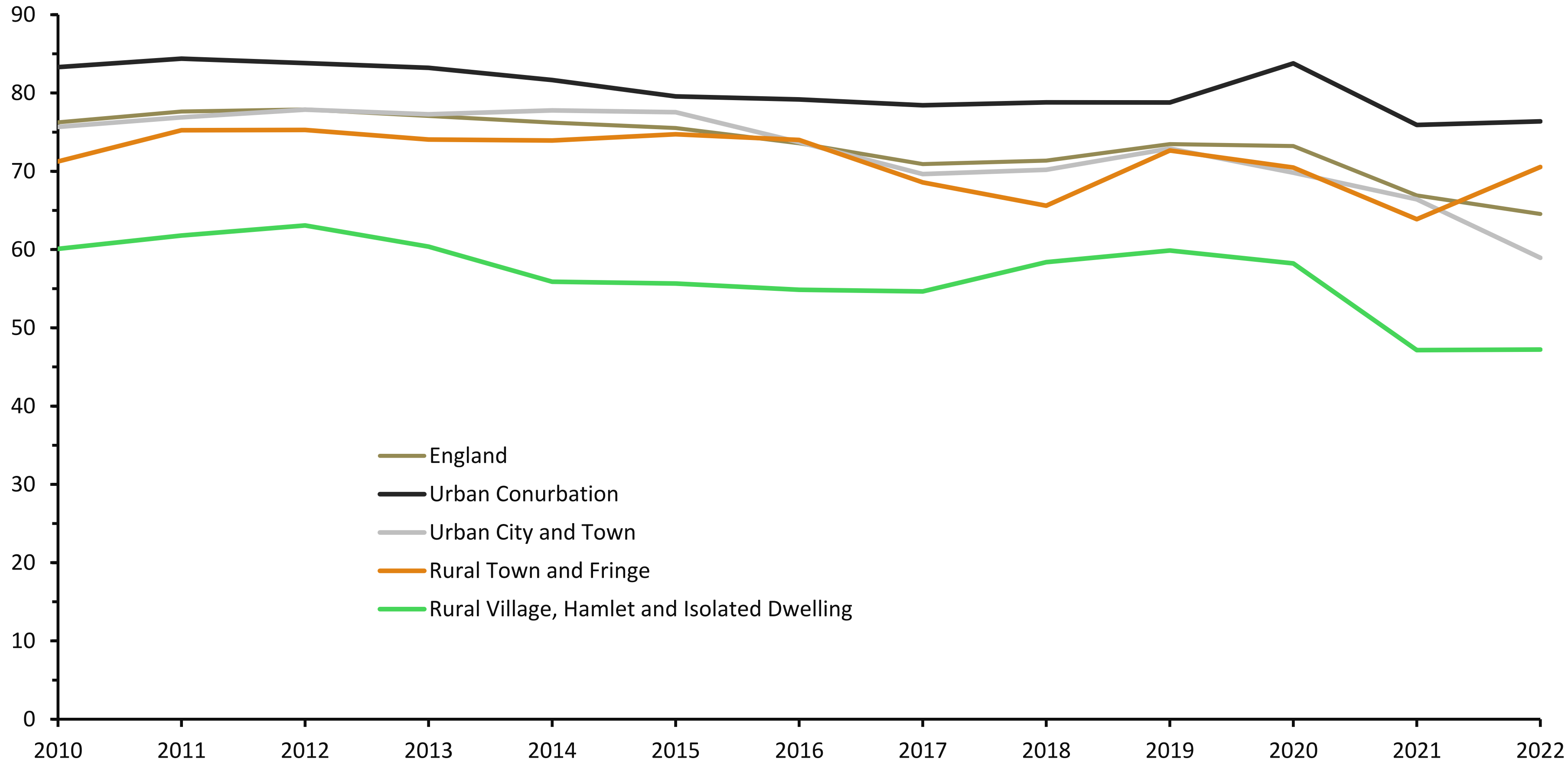
Limitations in public transport services in rural areas have long been viewed as encouraging higher private vehicle ownership in rural areas, as is evidenced in Figure 64, which shows the proportion of households in 2021 who owned or did not own a car or van in urban and rural areas. It indicates that ownership of cars and vans is significantly higher in Rural Village, Hamlet and Isolated

Figure 62: Average Distance Travelled per Person Per Annum, by Principal Mode of Transport, Rural and Urban England 2018 and 2022



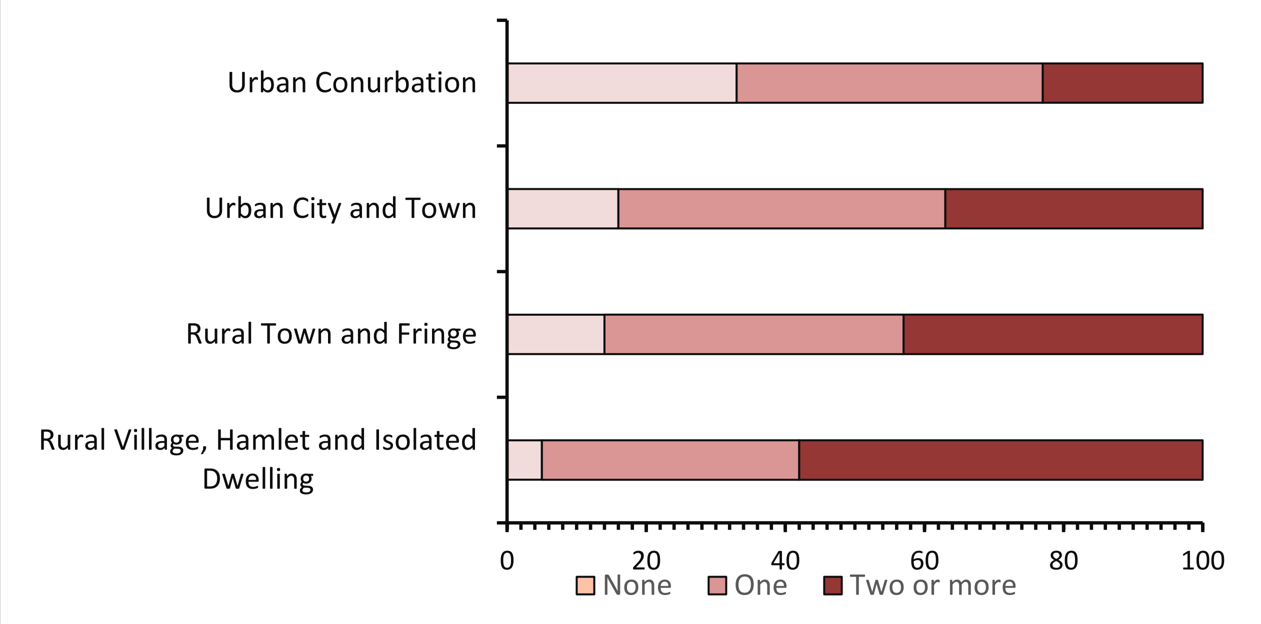
Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023e) National Travel Survey, NTS9904: Average distance travelled by mode and rural-urban classification of residence (miles per person per year): England, 2002 onwards (London: Department for Transport).

Figure 63: Percentage of Eligible Pensioners Using Concessionary Fares, 2010-2022



Source: derived from Department for Transport (2023c) National Travel Survey, NTS9915b: Take-up rate of concessionary travel schemes by rural-urban classification of residence: England, 2002 onwards (London: Department for Transport).

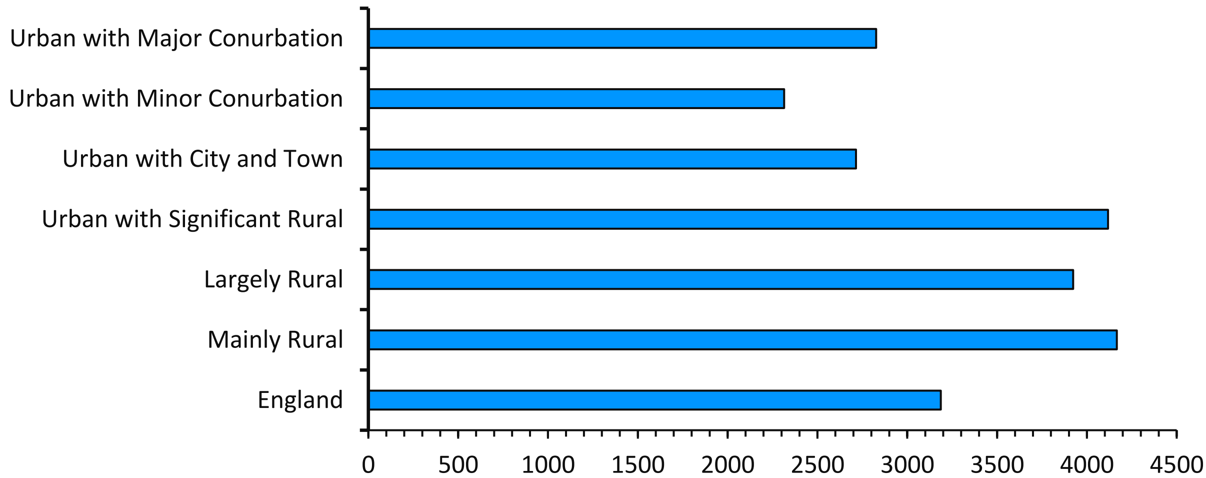
Figure 64: Percentage of Households Owning Cars or Vans in Urban and Rural England, 2021



Source: derived from Defra (2025) Statistical Digest of Rural England: February 2025 Update, Connectivity and Accessibility Supplementary Data Tables (London: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs).

Dwelling areas, where only 5% of households do not own at least one of these vehicles and 58% own two or more. In Rural Town and Fringe areas, levels of vehicle ownership are significantly lower, with 14% of households not owning a car or van. These differences may well reflect the greater availability of services in these settlements compared with those in areas of smaller rural settlements, where access to a private mode of transport may effectively be viewed as necessary to access services on a regular basis. It should, however, be noted that even in these areas, one in 20 households do not own a car or van.

Figure 65: Number of EVs owned per 100,000 Households, England 2023



Source: derived from Defra (2025) Statistical Digest of Rural England, Worksheet CC: Number of privately owned electric plug-in cars per 100,000 households, by Rural-Urban Classification, England, 2011-2023.

Table 25: Public Electric Charging Points in Urban and Rural England, April 2024

Rural urban classification	No. Publicly Accessible Charging Points		% of Charging Points	% of Charging Points ≥ 50kW
	Total	≥ 50kW		
Urban Major Conurbation	25,614	2837	49.8	11.1
Urban Minor Conurbation	983	297	1.9	30.2
Urban City & Town	17,149	4276	33.4	24.9
Urban City & Town in Sparse Setting	112	20	0.24	17.9
All Urban	43,858	7430	85.3	16.9
Rural Town & Fringe	2,880	846	5.6	29.4
Rural Town & Fringe in Sparse Setting	342	80	0.7	23.4
Rural Village & Dispersed	3,906	1169	7.6	29.9
Rural Village & Dispersed in Sparse Setting	440	49	0.9	11.1
All Rural	7,568	2144	14.7	28.3
All England	51,426	9574	100.0	18.6

Source: Department for Transport (2024) Electric vehicle public charging infrastructure statistics: April 2024 (London: Department for Transport) https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/electric-vehicle-public-charging-infrastructure-statistics-april-2024

Recent years have seen growing use of electric vehicles (hereafter EVs), although concerns have been expressed about their value in rural areas due to the extended distances of travel often undertaken by rural residents (see Figure 62) and the lower availability of charging points. However, Figure 64 indicates that EV ownership is relatively higher in rural areas than in urban ones, although Table 25 illustrates the lower levels of publicly accessible EV charge points in rural areas, in comparison with those in urban areas. However, the proportion of these which are 50KW or above is rather higher than in urban areas for all rural categories, apart from Village and Dispersed in a Sparse Setting.

Overall, it is clear that patterns of travel in England have undergone significant changes, at least in part as responses to the Covid-19 pandemic and associated restrictions on personal mobility and the growth of more remote forms of working and service delivery. These changes have led to declines in the frequency and distances travelled, as well as increases in homeworking, changes that have continued beyond the end of the pandemic and created a series of challenges to public transport provision, which appear to have particularly impacted rural areas and fostered even stronger reliance on private transport within these areas. A further area of transport change, which is likely to increase significantly in the future, is the use of EVs, with ownership levels of these being slightly higher relative to population size in rural areas, even though public charge point provision is significantly lower. Despite these changes, many long-standing patterns of transport remain, including rural residents generally travelling further, and for longer time periods, than urban residents, both for work and to access a series of services. Given this, access to transport is clearly of major importance to the quality of life of rural residents, and whilst many rural residents rely on private forms of transport, particularly cars, in some instances, there have been community responses to declines in rural public sector transport provision, as discussed in the next section.

Community Transport

The Community Transport Association (2024) has estimated that some 13 million people travelled on a transport service provided by one of its members in 2024, with the average number in rural areas being roughly half of that found in urban areas (1,943 and 3951 per month respectively, for organisations whose primary purpose was road passenger transportation). Community transport organisations are not-for-profit organisations that provide transportation services under the Transport Act (Amendment) Regulations 2019. They can take many forms, ranging from small voluntary groups focused on providing transport services within particular local areas, through to organisations such as schools, universities and local authorities that have other principal priorities but seek to run transport services in support of these, through to a few businesses aiming to provide transportation services across a series of locations. Over 34,000 permits have been granted to enable organisations to offer community transport services between 2019 and 2021, with members of the Community Transport Association, which is apparently the largest designated body in this field, accounting for over 5,000 of these (Community Transport Association 2024).

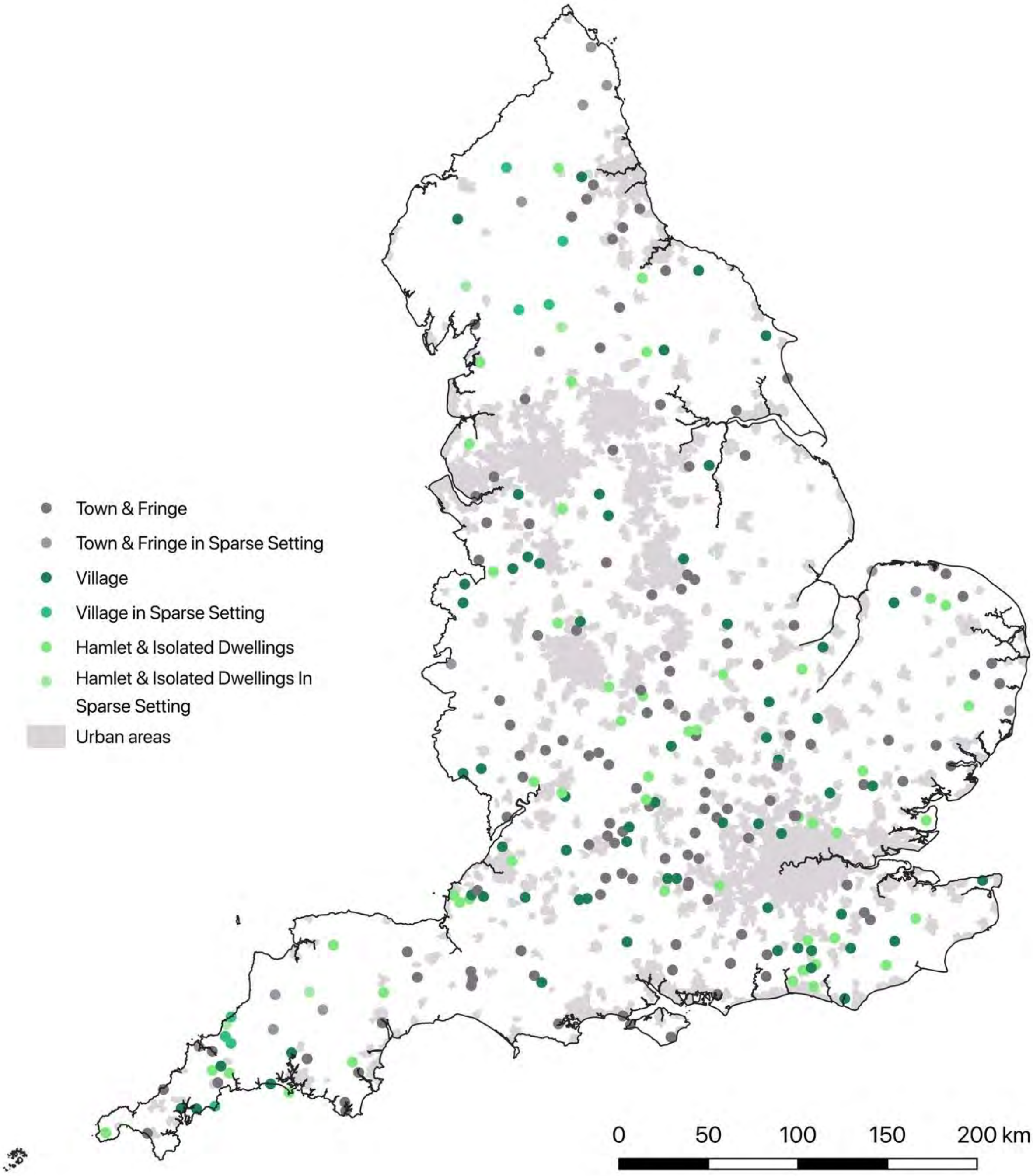
While there are many non-member organisations involved in community transport provisions, analysis of the Community Transport Association membership does provide some indication of the distribution of these service providers across urban and rural areas. Table 26, for example, highlights how 65% of the community transport schemes organised by members of the Community Transport

Table 26: Rural-Urban Distribution of Members of Community Transport Association, 2024

Rural Urban Character	Community Transport Schemes	
	No.	%
Major Conurbations	160	21.6
Minor Conurbations	15	2.0
City and Town	303	40.8
City and Town in Sparse Setting	4	0.5
All Urban	482	65.0
Town and Fringe	124	16.7
Town and Fringe in Sparse Setting	14	1.9
Village	61	8.2
Village in Sparse Setting	8	1.1
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling	49	6.6
Hamlet and Isolated Dwelling in Sparse Setting	4	0.5
All Rural	260	35.0
All England	742	21.6

Source: Community Transport Association (2024) *Mapping England: State of the Sector Report 2024* (Manchester: Community Transport Association)

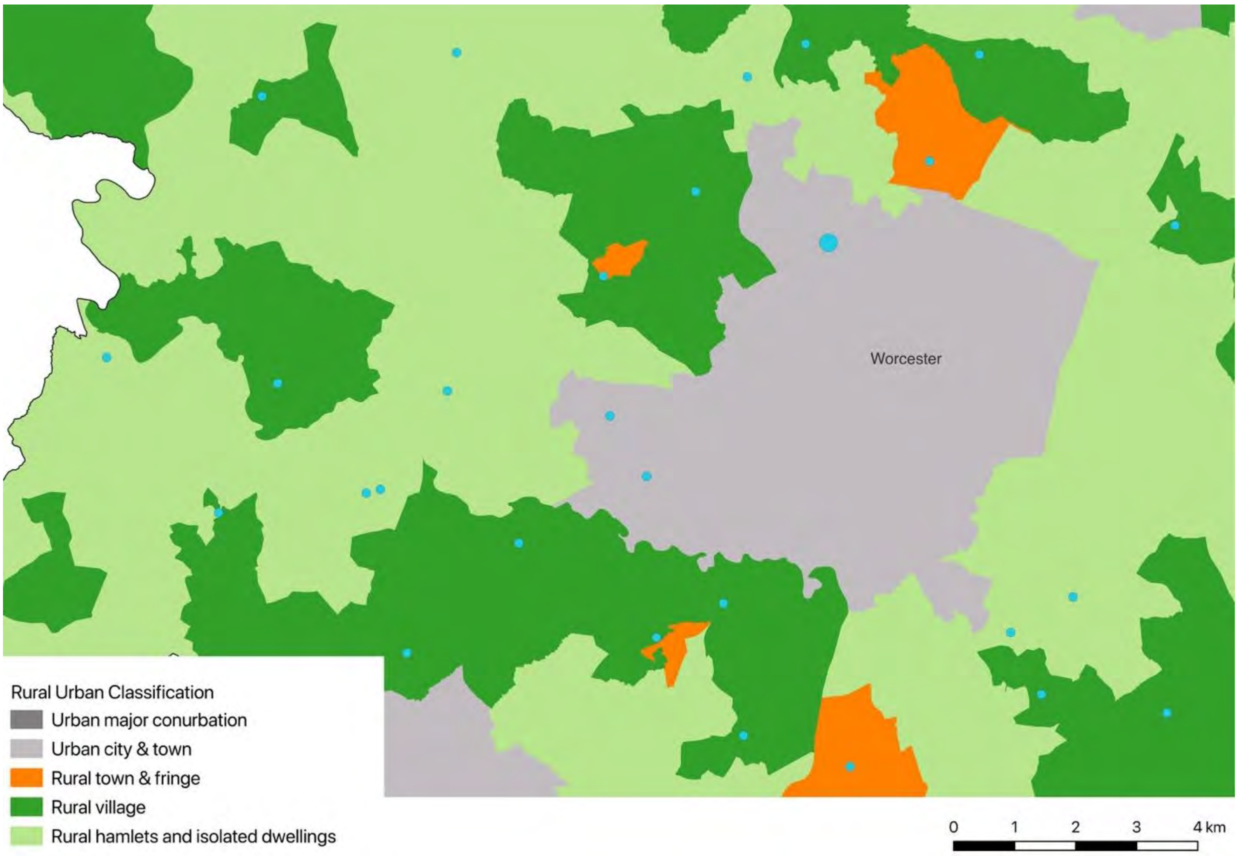
Figure 66: Community Transport Association Members located in Rural Areas, 2024



Source: derived from Community Transport Association (2024) *Mapping England: State of the Sector Report 2024* (Manchester: Community Transport Association)

Association were run from urban locations, principally from places classified as City and Town, and of those located in areas described as rural, over half were in Town and Fringe areas. Figure 66 also illustrates the dominance of Town and Fringe areas in the distribution of community transport initiatives run from areas classified as rural, as well as indicating that these schemes are distributed across much of the country, albeit with a strong presence across south central England.

Figure 67: Locations Served by Worcestershire Wheels Community Minibus Service, 2024



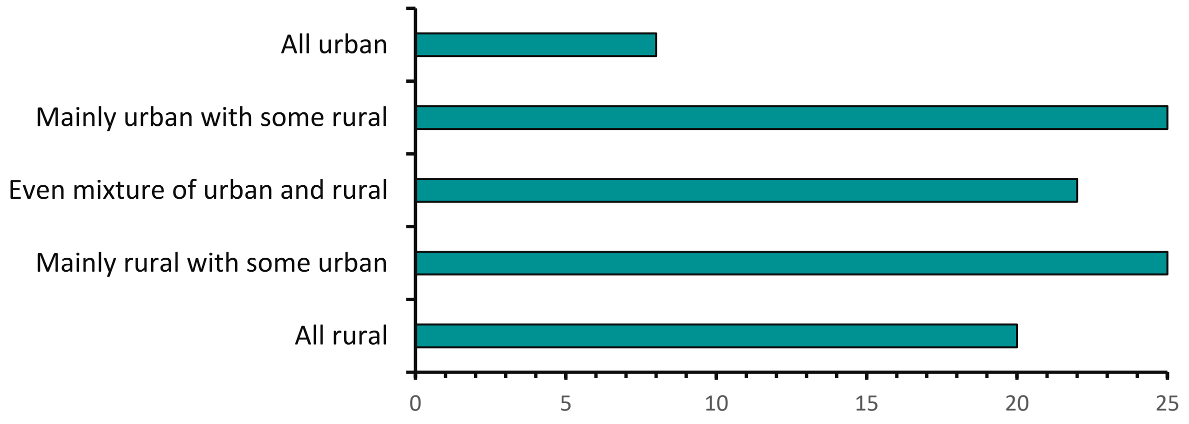
Source: derived from Community Transport Association (2024) *Mapping England: State of the Sector Report 2024* (Manchester: Community Transport Association)

The locations listed for these community transport schemes do not reflect all of the areas connected to them, but often are simply a central administrative centre or central location served by the transport service, as illustrated in Figure 67, which shows the locations served by a community transport scheme in Worcestershire. Consequently, the urban dominance evident in Table 26 and the concentration of Town and Fringe locations within rural areas, as shown in both this Table and Figure 66, should not be taken to imply that other areas are necessarily poorly served by such schemes. Indeed, a survey of members of the Community Transport Association indicates that respondents overall perceived their operations as having a slightly stronger rural than urban focus (see Figure 68), although also clearly indicates that they often spanned both types of areas.

Community transport services take a range of forms, including regular minibus service provision as shown in Figure 67, through to car-based dial-a-ride services, which run only in response to requests from potential travellers. The services are also run by a series of different organisations, many of which often focus on a particular group of users. Of the 742 organisations that are listed as members of the Community Transport Association, 124 are educational establishments, which include state and private schools, university student unions and educational trusts. The Community Transport Association (2024) also reports that 68% of its community travel organisation members make journeys to health-related destinations and 60% travel to social care service locations.

It is clear, therefore, that there is a strong emphasis overall on seeking to address limitations in access to key services that emerge from the current structures of service and transport provision within

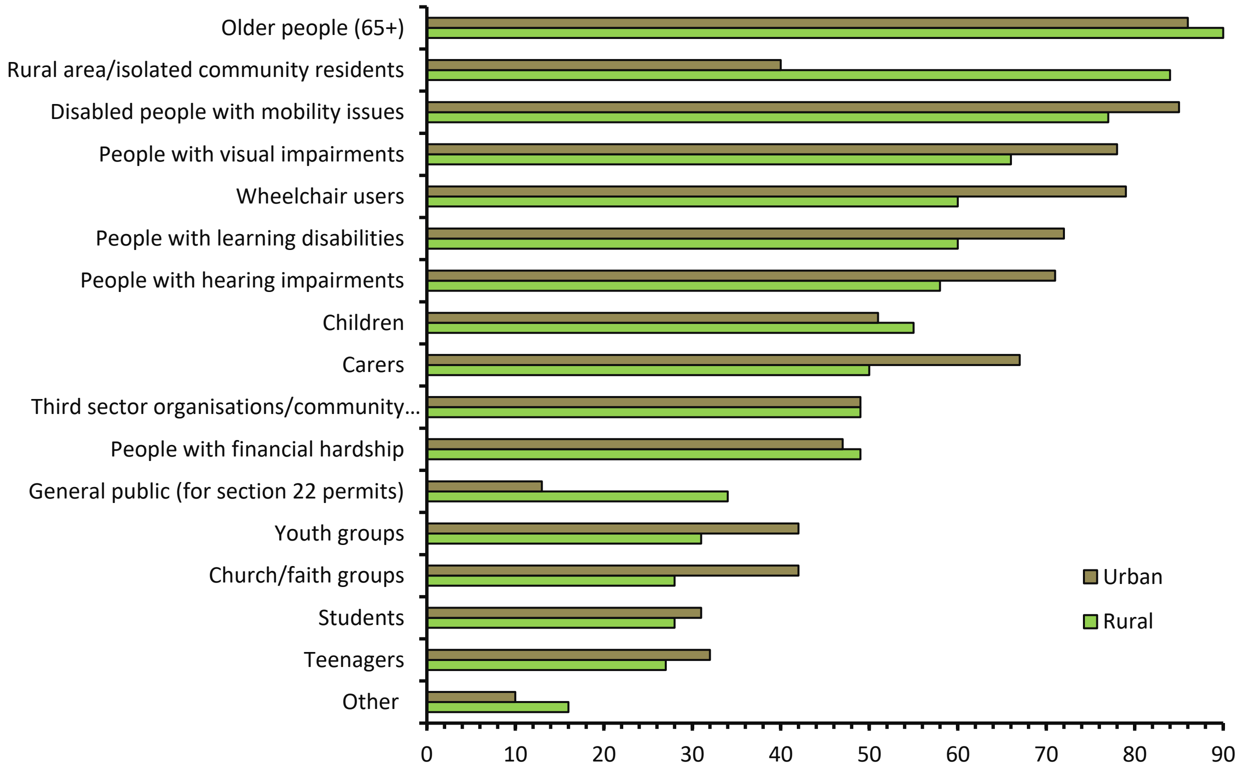
Figure 68: Perceived Character of Areas of Operation of Community Transport Schemes



Source: derived from Community Transport Association (2024) *Mapping England: State of the Sector Report 2024* (Manchester: Community Transport Association)

England. Almost 97% of the permits issued to allow organisations to carry people for a fee without needing a public service vehicle (PSV) operator license were apparently issued as Section 19, which means they could only carry people who had become members of a scheme, as opposed to the 3% of Section 22 permits issued to allow organisations to transport anybody in the general public (Community Transport Association 2024). The Community Transport Association (2024) records that 24% of respondents to a survey of its membership organisations indicated that they were running services under Section 22 permits and that this type of licence was viewed as being "more likely to be run by CTOs operating in rural areas", as illustrated in Figure 68. This survey also indicates how

Figure 69: Perceived Users of Community Transport Schemes, 2024



Source: derived from Community Transport Association (2024) *Mapping England: State of the Sector Report 2024* (Manchester: Community Transport Association) older people were seen to be the principal group of users of community transport in rural areas (see Figure 69), exceeding even the perceived use of the services by residents from rural areas or isolated communities. It is also clear that the services were widely seen to be used in both rural and urban areas by people with a range of disabilities, as well as by a range of young people, carers and social/faith groups.

The Association's report also indicates that the number of Section 22 licences had increased in absolute numbers since 2018, suggesting that this was potentially due to community transport provisions being established to address "transport need following the withdrawal of bus routes" (Community Transport Association 2024: 6). Figures included in the report also reveal that the relative proportion of Section 22 permits was lower in 2017-2018 than it was in 2022-23.

Overall, it appears that community providers are delivering an important mode of transport for their members and, in a relatively limited number of cases, to a wider general public. Many of the members using these services appear to be drawn from social groups that may have problems accessing private modes of transport, including the young and the elderly, as well as many people living in spatially isolated rural areas. Whilst there appears to have been some growth in services that are accessible to any member of the public under Section 22 permits, which may reflect declines in public bus services, the extent of the increase appears quite limited given the evidence of declines in public bus routes and services.

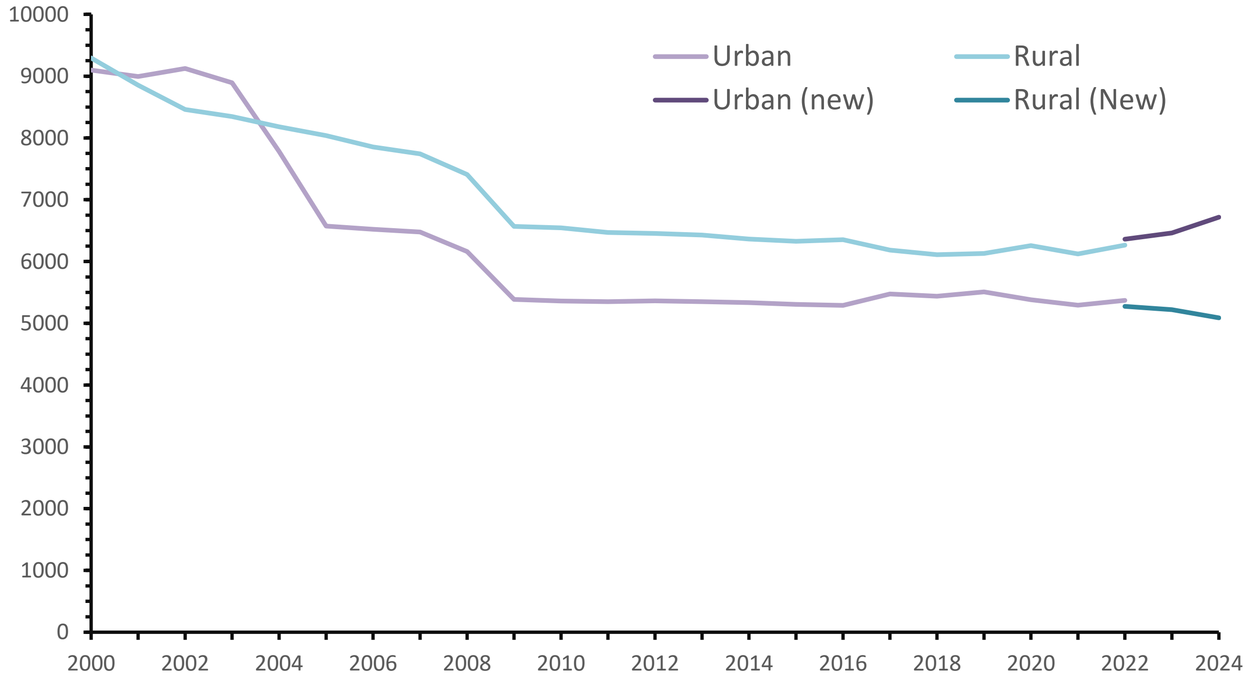
Beyond the Movement of People

Post Offices

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, service accessibility often involves much more than ease of physical access to a place of provision, with there often being a need to gain information about the character and availability of services prior to any visit, as well as increasing use of depersonalised forms of service delivery. Whilst depersonalised forms of communication and service delivery are often seen as quite recent developments associated with the rise of digital technologies such as computers, the Internet and mobile phones, as mentioned in the chapter introduction, they can be seen to have a much longer history, with postal services emerging in England in the 17th century and providing a means to circulate information and products across most of England by the early 19th century, albeit with some significant urban-rural differentiations in its mode and speed of operation (see Gregory 1987). Growth in the number of postal offices in the country has been seen to have continued until the mid-1960s, after which there has been a "year-on-year reduction" (Hamilton 2016: 387). Closure programmes in the early 2000s explicitly targeted urban as well as rural areas, but there have been continued concerns expressed about the level and impacts of rural post office closures (see Comber et al. 2012; Hamilton 2016; Langford and Higgs 2010).

Figure 70 indicates that the number of post offices in both rural and urban areas has continued to decline through the 2000s and early 2010s, although since then, there have been some fluctuations, including some apparent increases. The changes in numbers, and apparent switching between the level of rural and urban post offices after 2022, reflect a change in how the Post Office defined rural areas, but this change does make it difficult to interpret transformations over the last few years. It is also likely that some of the apparent increases in post office numbers after 2016 reflect the inclusion of 'outreach' and 'drop and collect services' in the number of recorded branches. These forms of services are often viewed as quite different to, and indeed a significant 'downgrading' (Langford and

Figure 70: Number of Post Offices in UK 2003-2024, by Urban or Rural Location



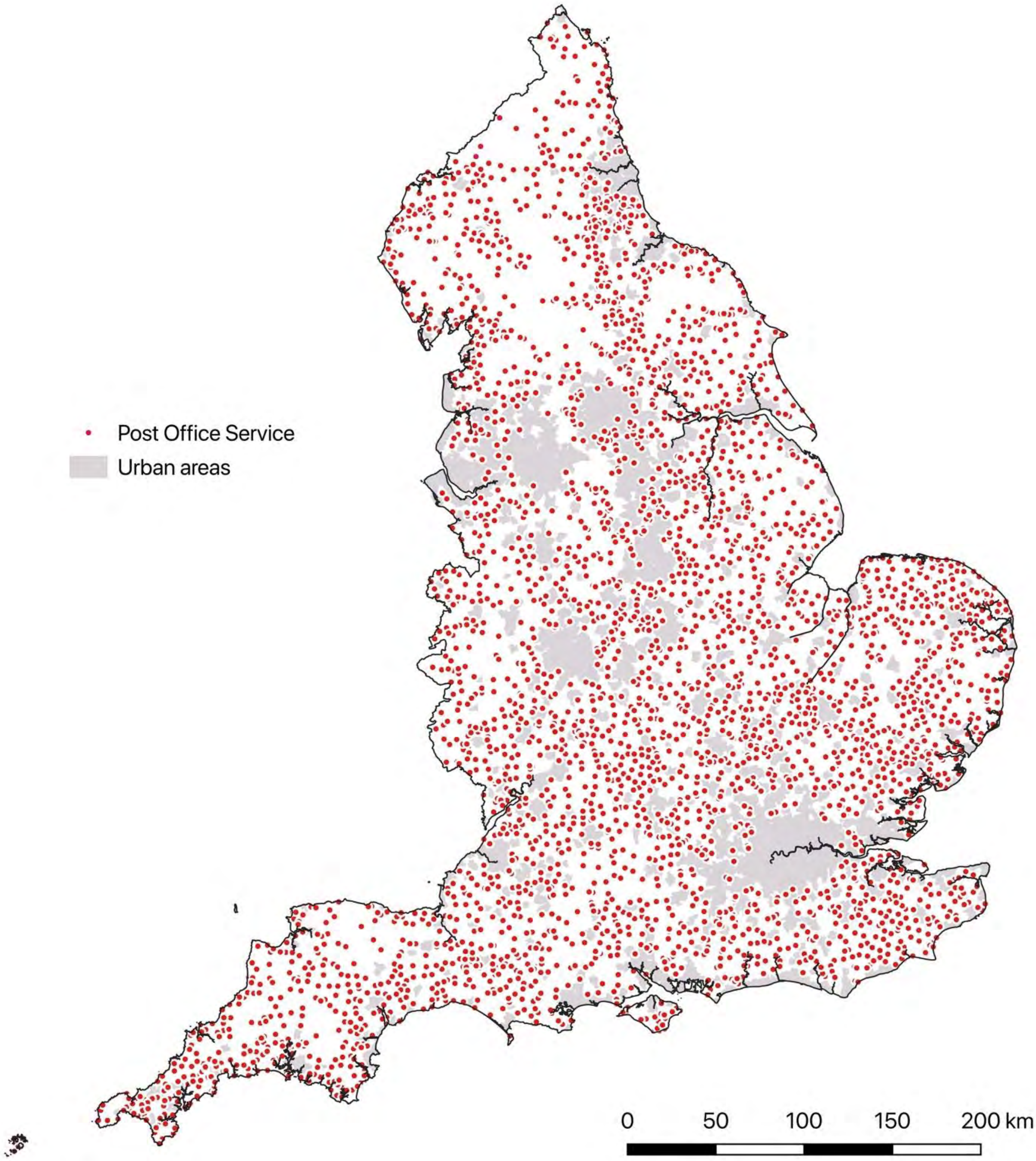
Source: based on Booth, L (2025) Post Office Branches: Statistics and Developments (London: House of Commons Library); datafile with trends for numbers of post office branches, accessed from https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN02585/CBP02585-data-file-for-publication.xlsx

Higgs 2010: 587) from, those provided by a post office branch, but the numbers of these are said to have expanded significantly in number since 2000, with outreach services apparently accounting for 16% of total recorded post office 'branches' (Booth 2025: 16).

Figure 71 shows the distribution of post office 'branches' located in rural areas that were operating in September 2023. It indicates that, despite long-running trends of closure, post office services are available across many more parts of rural England than are many of the other services examined in this report. Table 27 also indicates that they are distributed in rural areas fairly evenly between Town and Fringe and Village settlements in non-sparse areas, which together contained 32% of post offices in England. Again, relatively few sparse areas appear to contain these services, and while there are relatively few post offices in areas classified as hamlets and dispersed dwellings, there were still over 450 of these areas with some post office services. However, it is also very evident in Table 27 that there was only one post office in England's rural areas being directly managed by the Post Office, which was located in Liskeard, Cornwall.

The Post Office has claimed that it has maintained a post office network that exceeds the Government's established accessibility requirements, which include ensuring that 95% of the UK's rural population can access a post office outlet within three miles. The Post Office has produced figures that indicate that from 2018 through to 2024, 98% of the UK's rural population lives within this distance (Booth 2024). Table 28 and Figure 72, however, show data from the Office for National Statistics (2024a) relating post offices to populations of local authorities, focusing on those classified as rural. This analysis suggests that there are significant differences in the relative number of post office branches within rural authorities, with many of the more rural local authorities having rather more post offices per 100,000 than those with more urban components, a finding that potentially links

Figure 71: Location of Rural Post Offices, September 2023



Source: derived from UK Post Office Branch Locations file produced by Datadaptive from data released to Robert Whittaker by Post Office Ltd in October 2023 as a result of a request under the Freedom of Information Act and Re-Use of Public Sector Information Regulations Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0. Accessed from https://www.datadaptive.com/?pg=17

to Langford and Higgs' (2010) claim that many post-office branch closures have occurred in urban areas, although they note that rural areas have been most impacted in terms of losing access to any branches within a settlement. It has also been argued by Citizens Advice (2024) that rural areas have been particularly impacted by the temporary closure of post offices, which frequently occur when a replacement person is required to take over from a postmaster who has decided to retire or leave a particular location. It also suggested that rural areas have been impacted by the rising use of outreach

Table 27: Distribution of Post Offices across Rural and Urban England, September 2023

Rural-Urban Character	Directly Managed Branch (% in brackets)	Other Post Offices	Total Post Offices	% of Post Office Services	% of Directly Administered Branches
Major Conurbations	59	2011	2070	23.0	61.5
Minor Conurbations	2	252	254	2.8	2.1
City and Town	34	3008	3042	33.9	35.4
City and Town in Sparse Setting		13	13	0.1	0.0
All Urban	95	5284	5379	59.9	99.0
Town & Fringe	1	1386	1387	15.4	1.0
Town & Fringe in Sparse Setting		71	71	0.8	0.0
Village		1491	1491	16.6	0.0
Village in Sparse Setting		204	204	2.3	0.0
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings		354	354	3.9	0.0
Hamlets & Isolated Dwellings in Sparse Setting		98	98	1.1	0.0
All Rural	1	3605	3605	40.1	1.0
England	96	8888	8984	-	-

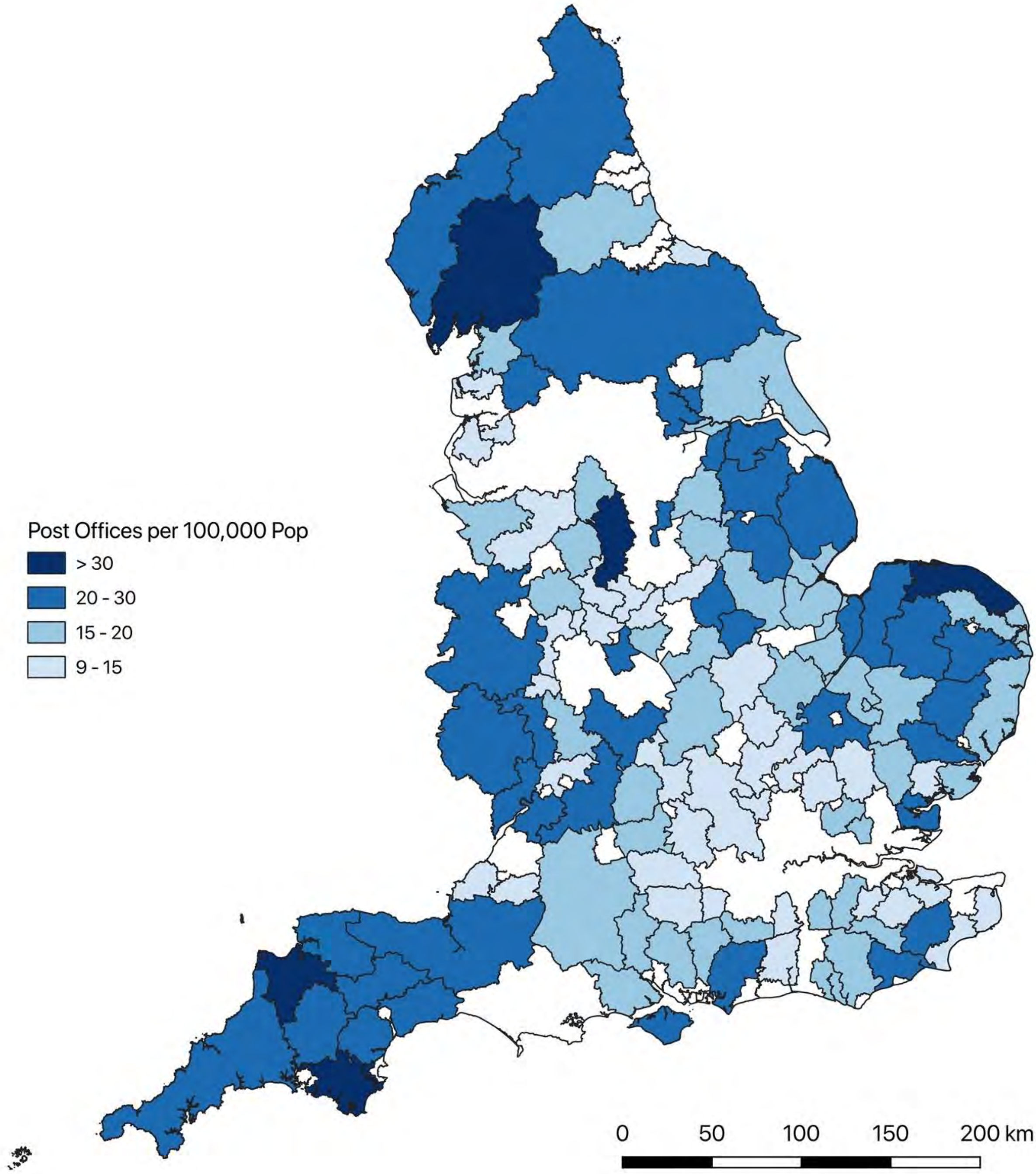
Source: derived from UK Post Office Branch Locations file produced by Datadaptive from data released to Robert Whittaker by Post Office Ltd in October 2023 after a request under the Freedom of Information Act and the Re-Use of Public Sector Information Regulations. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government License v3.0. Accessed from https://www.datadaptive.com/?pg=17

Table 28: Average Number of Post Offices per 1000,000 People in Rural Local Authorities, 2024

Rural-Urban Character	Average of Post Offices per 100,000 people
Urban with Significant Rural (rural including hub towns 26-49%)	14.8
Largely Rural (rural including hub towns 50-79%)	18.6
Mainly Rural (rural including hub towns >=80%)	22.8
Rural England	18.4

Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024a) Access to local amenities in England and Wales: October 2024; www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/accessto localamenitiesinenglandandwales/october2024

Figure 72: Number of Post Offices per 100,000 Population in Rural Local Authorities, 2024



Source: derived from Office for National Statistics (2024a) Access to local amenities in England and Wales: October 2024; www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/bulletins/accesstolocalamenities inenglandandwales/october2024

services rather than full-time branches, it being claimed that these are "open on average just 7 hours a week" (Citizens Advice 2024).

Overall, while post offices remain geographically more widespread than many other services across rural England, and the Post Office's evidence that it is more than meeting its accessibility requirements despite long-running practices of post office closures, there is clear evidence suggesting that the apparent maintenance of a comprehensive rural post office network may obscure significant levels of service provision decline through the transformation of comprehensive post offices into much more limited outreach provisions as well as periods of interrupted services through temporary closures.

Broadband Connectivity

As discussed in the introduction to this chapter, and in preceding chapters, there have been significant changes in the modes through which people can access services, with digitally enabled modes of communication becoming of increasing significance to both businesses and in the performance of everyday living by rural residents. Reflecting this, a 'universal service obligation' was implemented in 2020 through Ofcom, which required BT, and KCOM in Hull and parts of East Yorkshire, to provide, on request, "a decent and affordable broadband connection" (Ofcom 2019: 2) to all residential and business premises. The definition of a 'decent' connection was set as a download speed of at least 10 megabits per second and upload speeds of at least 1 megabit per second. The UK Government has also committed to achieving 85% gigabit per second coverage across the UK by 2025, and at least 99% by 2030 (Clark 2024).

Assessments of broadband coverage in 2024 by Ofcom suggest that only 54% of rural residential premises in England had access to gigabit coverage, compared to 88% of urban ones, with the proportions being higher for so-called 'superfast' of 30 megabits per second download speeds, where 99% of urban residential premises were said to have access and 90% of rural ones (Ofcom 2024a). Defra (2024) provides a slightly more positive assessment of rural gigabit coverage (see Table 29), although also highlights variations within rural areas both in relation to gigabit access and in the proportion of premises that do not yet have even the 'decent' level of broadband access of 10 megabits per second. While the levels recorded for the latter are significantly lower than the 11% reported in Rural England's *2018 State of Rural Services* report (Rural England 2019), they are significantly higher for local authorities classified as Urban with Significant Rural and Largely Rural than they are for other, more urban ones.

Table 29: Proportions of Premises with Gigabit Broadband or Without 'Decent' Broadband Service Access in Rural and Urban Areas of England, January 2024

Rural-Urban Classification	% of Premises	
	With Gigbit Broadband Access	Unable to receive 10 Mbits/s
Urban with Major Conurbation	87.6	0.3
Urban with Minor Conurbation	88.8	0.3
Urban with City and Town	84.7	0.4
Urban with Significant Rural	71.5	1.0
Largely Rural	67.8	1.3
Mainly Rural	57.1	2.2
England	79.3	0.7

Source: based on Defra (2024) Statistical Digest of Rural England (London: Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs), Chapter 5 - Connectivity and Accessibility, Supplementary Data Tables, Tables AA and AB

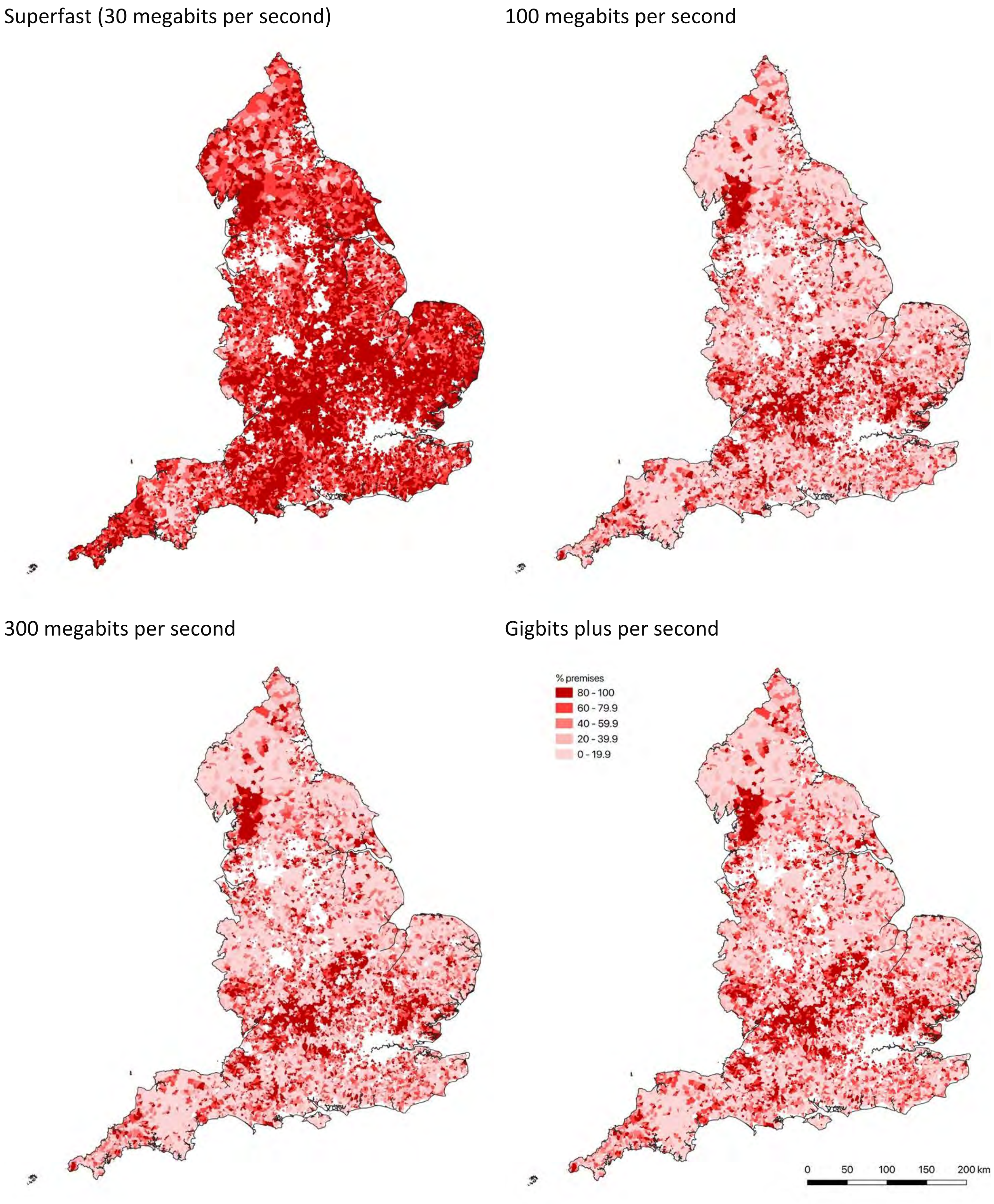
Local authority figures themselves mask significant intra-authorities rural-urban differentiation, as is evident when local authority information is contrasted with analysis conducted with output areas, as illustrated in Table 30 and Figure 73. Table 30, for example, indicates how the proportion of premises with broadband access speeds lower than those specified in the Universal Service Obligation was significantly higher in rural areas with small settlements, such as villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings, and also in areas classified as sparse. These areas also have significantly higher proportions of premises without superfast (30 megabits per second) access, and indeed, with even lower levels of broadband access. These figures, as well as the maps in Figure 73, illustrate how contemporary broadband access no longer equates to a singular divide between those with and without broadband access, but rather reflects a complex series of divisions, including ones related to levels of access to diverse modes of engaging with and employing the Internet, including via a wide range of mobile devices in addition to computers. The capacities of devices and infrastructures are rapidly changing, reflected in the identification of different 'generations' (e.g. 4G, 5G) as well as different forms of broadband (e.g. superfast, ultrafast). Whilst there has clearly been an expansion in broadband coverage across England, as demonstrated by the falling percentage of premises in rural areas without 'decent' broadband access, there have also been claims that areas with already high-speed connections are getting faster at a faster rate, meaning the "'faster' areas … are getting 'faster, faster'", and hence fostering further entrenchment of existing urban-rural divides (Philip et al. 2017: 387).

Table 30: Proportion of Premises with Different Broadband Access Speeds in Urban and Rural Areas, May 2022

Rural Urban Classification	Average % of premises			
	Below Universal Service Obligation	Unable to receive 5Mbit/s	Unable to receive 10Mbit/s	Unable to receive 30Mbit/s
Urban major conurbation	0.0	0.1	0.2	1.6
Urban minor conurbation	0.0	0.1	0.2	1.0
Urban city and town	0.0	0.1	0.2	1.4
Urban city and town in a sparse setting	0.0	0.1	0.2	2.7
Rural town and fringe	0.1	0.1	0.3	2.4
Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting	0.1	0.1	0.3	2.6
Rural village	0.7	1.6	2.8	9.7
Rural village in a sparse setting	1.4	2.4	4.4	11.8
Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings	2.3	6.4	11.0	26.5
Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings in a sparse setting	5.9	13.6	22.2	40.1

Source: derived from Ofcom (2022) *Connected Nations 2022: Data downloads* (London: Ofcom), file 202205_fixed_oa_performance _r02.csv

Figure 73: Proportion of Premises with Different Broadband Access Speeds in Rural Areas of England, May 2022



Source: derived from Ofcom (2022) *Connected Nations 2022: Data downloads* (London: Ofcom), file 202205_fixed_oa_performance _r02.csv

Such arguments can be examined through comparing the maps shown in Figure 73. It is clear that many more rural areas have good levels of 'superfast' broadband access than 100MB and faster speeds, but the differences in geographical coverage are much less marked between these faster speeds. There hence appears to be a significant divide between superfast and 100MB provision, with areas with good levels of access to the latter also highly likely to have a high proportion of premises with 300MB and gigabit access.

Figure 73 also highlights that there are significant regional variations in higher-speed access. It is, for example, evident that many areas with high proportions of premises with download speeds in excess of 100 MB are located in south-central England, spanning parts of counties such as Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Oxfordshire, West Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire and Essex. These areas have significant levels of urban as well as rural settlements. Many regions with more extensive areas of rural settlement, such as Devon, Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Shropshire and north Cumbria, figure as areas with low proportions of settlements with high broad access levels. However, the divisions between high and low-speed availability does not simply equate to distinctions between areas of accessible urban-rural fringe areas and more remote and dispersed countryside areas – or what Philip et al. (2017: 387) identify as 'shallow' rural areas and 'deep' rural areas, with broadband infrastructural improvements, they argue, tending to be focused in the former. There are, for example, some remote, sparsely populated rural areas where relatively high proportions of premises are connected to high-speed broadband, such as in South Lakeland and the Forest of Bowland. These areas have both been subject to broadband infrastructural improvement initiatives.

South Lakeland, for example, is an area encompassed within Cumbria, which has been pursuing a partnership between Cumbria County Council and BT since 2013, focused initially on improving levels of access to superfast broadband, and since 2020, gigabit broadband (Cumbria County Council 2020). Targets of 99% of premises having superfast access and gigabit access by 2025 have been established (Cumbria County Council 2020), with South Lakeland being one of the areas where access improvements for both broadband forms were evident from a much earlier date (South Lakeland Council 2107). A more recent focus on gigabit broadband development has been undertaken through participation as a pilot area within the UK Gigabit Programme, with Building Digital UK (hereafter BDUK) awarding a £108.5 million contract to Fibrus in 2022 to provide 59,000 so-called 'hard-to-reach premises' in Cumbria with gigabit level broadband (Building Digital UK 2023).

The Forest of Bowland is another area receiving support from BDUK, it being announced in August 2014 that Openreach would work as part of a new phase of Project Gigabit to increase access for remote rural premises in the region (Building Digital UK 2024). However, the area has also seen more bottom-up, community-led initiatives, including Broadband for the Rural North (hereafter BR4N). This Community Benefit Society (CBS) was formed in 2011 and has received support from the Forest of Bowland AONB, although its activities include areas in Cumbria and Lancashire. It turned down support from BDUK (Gerli and Whalley 2016) and has been seen to embody "an 'activist' approach" (Ashmore et al. 2017: 412), which is both "community-centric" and stresses independence from state and market mechanisms of delivery, epitomised by a focus on delivering its network through digging trenches across farmland for which it makes no payments for access or rents. It is clear from Figure 73 that across this area, a high proportion of premises had gigabit access even before the Project Gigabit initiative was announced, although it has been widely acknowledged that providing high-speed access to the 'final few' per cent of premises can be extremely challenging, and may indeed require use of rather different technologies than employed for the large majority of premises and areas (Philip et al. 2017).

While broadband infrastructure has expanded considerably across rural England, and hence a divide between those with and without digital access might be seen to be of declining significance, it is clear that many forms of digital divide are significant, including the degree to which a minority of premises in smaller and more sparsely distributed settlements continue to remain digitally disconnected, as well as wider divisions in the broadband speeds that residents and businesses can access in particular regions and types of rural settlement. It is clear that actions can be taken to improve broadband even in quite remote and sparsely populated rural areas, and that change can involve both governmental programmes and community self-help initiatives.

Mobile Connectivity

While broadband connections to premises have widely been seen as key to the development of digital service provisions, there has also been extensive growth in the use of mobile digital devices, which enable people to communicate and access internet information and services whilst on the move or away from premises, or indeed in place of using a broadband connection. In the UK, the provision of mobile connectivity has been driven by private sector companies, with there currently being four mobile network providers: BT EE, Three, Virgin Media O2 and Vodafone. The activities of these companies have, however, been regulated through Ofcom, which has established a series of license obligations on the network providers, including ones related to the type or generation of services to be provided and the expected spatial coverage of their delivery. Successive Governments have also sought to coordinate actions between network providers, establishing a series of programmes and initiatives.

In relation to the delivery of rural mobile services, a key programme has been the *Shared Rural Network*, which was launched in 2020 by the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. This programme was established to support an increase in 4G mobile network coverage from 91.4% of the UK landmass to 95% by December 2025. It involves BDUK working with the four mobile network operators through Digital Mobile Spectrum Limited, which is jointly owned by the four network companies. The Department is predicted to have spent £501 million by 2040 on the programme, which seeks to not only extend overall mobile network coverage to reduce so-called 'total not spots' where no mobile signal can be obtained, but also to reduce 'partial not spots' where there is access to at least one mobile network, but not all four. The overall 4G coverage of England, as a proportion of land area, has been seen to have increased for rural areas from 81% to 88% between September 2020 and the same month in 2024, in comparison to an increase from 97% to 99% for urban areas (Defra 2024: 28).

It has been estimated that the *Shared Rural Network* programme would overall produce "quantifiable benefits of £1,352 million", although the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2024: 11) commented that there was limited evidence available on the specific benefits created by "extending mobile coverage into the more remote or sparsely populated areas … where building masts may be more difficult or expensive, or where there may be an impact on the environment". It also raised questions about the situation within the planned 5% of the UK's land area that would remain without 4G coverage beyond 2025, including whether the communities in these areas "would lose out forever" (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2024: 11). The Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, however, argued that a "95% coverage of the UK landmass would still mean that 99% of UK premises would be reached", as well as that the cost-benefit analyses for 4G infrastructural provision in "really remote areas …. 'fell off a cliff' beyond 95% coverage"(House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2024: 1).

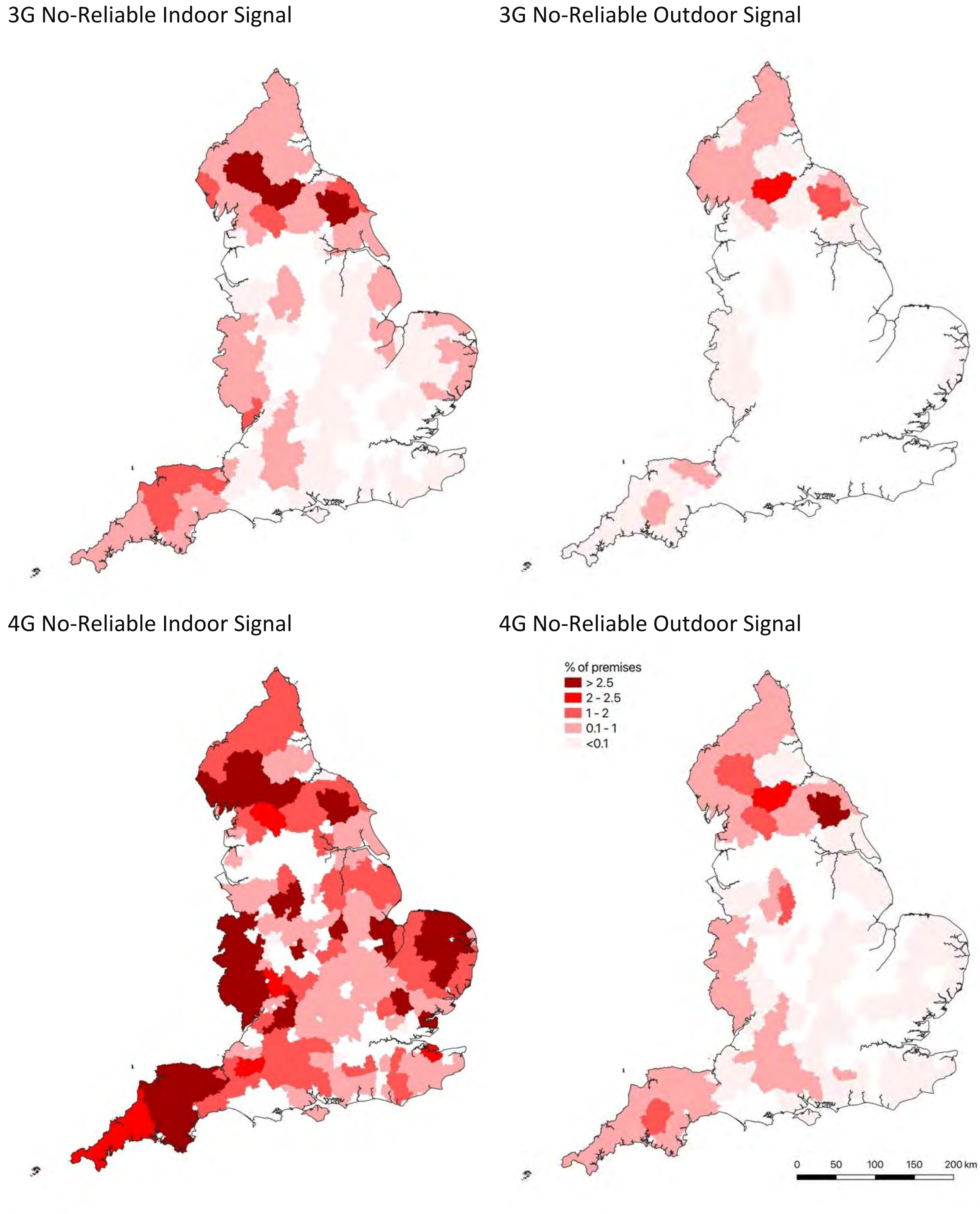
As with broadband, it has been argued that rather different technologies, including low-orbit satellite provisions, might provide a more cost-effective solution to the "final few" not-spot areas (Philip et al. 2017; Williams et al. 2016). Ofcom reports also indicate that rural England has much lower proportions of 'total not spot' land areas than do the other nations of the UK (e.g. see Ofcom 2024b). However, the situation with respect to the roll-out of an improved mainstream mobile network may still be quite challenging. The level of access to reliable 4G coverage, for example, was calculated as being at 93.2% in 2024 (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2024), with only just over a year to go before the 95% target is due to be reached. Furthermore, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2024) report stated that three of the four mobile network operators had advised BDUK that they were each unlikely to meet their Ofcom licence obligation to increase their respective 4G coverage to 88% of the UK landmass by June 2024 and, hence, wanted an 18-month extension. However, Ofcom reports in October and November 2024 indicated that all the providers had achieved the required level of coverage (Ocom 2024b; 2024c). The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2024: 5) also commented, "The mobile coverage reported by Ofcom does not always reflect the actual level of service that businesses and consumers experience, and which may sometimes be significantly worse than reported". Reference is made to the significance of building materials, topography and trees in impacting signal reception, with people often experiencing "worse coverage inside premises" and in some cases only receiving "a 3G signal indoors, despite getting a 4G signal outside" (House of Commons Public Accounts Committee 2024: 14). This situation is potentially of major significance given that mobile network providers have been switching off their 3G networks over recent years, which may result in people being unable to access any mobile signal when inside a building.

The differences between indoor and outdoor coverage, and the potential significance of the switch-off of 3G networks, can be considered through Figure 74, which shows the proportion of premises with no reliable connection in rural local authority areas as calculated by Ofcom in 2022. It is clear from these images that within many of these rural authorities, the proportion of premises with no reliable connections is higher for indoor reception than outdoors. This difference is evident across both 3G and 4G provisions, but there are higher proportions of premises with poor 4G connections, although care is needed in interpreting the low responses in 3G access, as this could reflect either a cessation of 3G provision or that reliable 3G provision is available in all premises. It is also evident from Figure 74 that rural local authorities in northern and western England have more premises without reliable outdoor access to both 3G and 4G networks, potentially reflecting the significance of upland topographies and sparsely distributed populations.

However, in relation to indoor access, the relative number of premises with unreliable 4G access is more evenly distributed, reflecting how issues such as building construction may play a significant role across many rural areas. The more widespread distribution of premises with unreliable mobile 4G connection is also evident in Table 31, which further indicates that rural local authorities have notably higher average percentages of such premises than are evident in urban authorities.

Table 31 also presents information on variations in other aspects of mobile coverage, including differences in connectivity for voice calls and data transfers and the proportion of premises that can access all four networks. There are clear urban-rural differentiations across all these dimensions of mobile connectivity, and particularly concerning 4G inside connectivity. It is also evident that Largely, and especially Mainly Rural, authorities not only had significantly higher proportions of premises without reliable connections to a 4G network, but also higher percentages of premises that

Figure 74: Proportion of Premises in English Rural Local Authority Areas with Unreliable Mobile Connections Indoors and Outdoors, September 2022



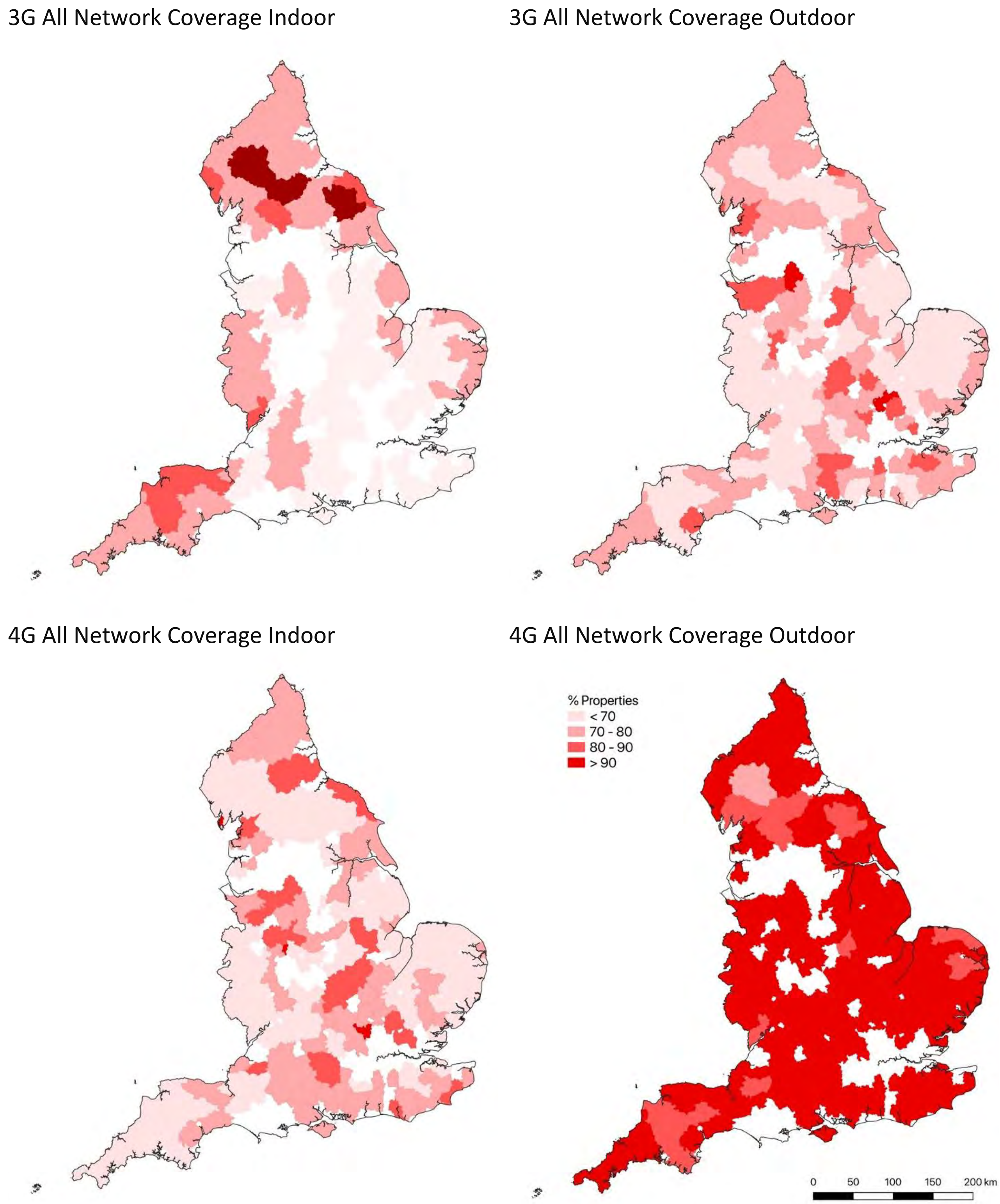
Source: derived from Ofcom (2022) *Connected Nations 2022: Data downloads* (London: Ofcom), file 202209_mobile_laua_r01.csv

Table 31: 3G and 4G Mobile Coverage in Urban and Rural Local Authority Areas in England, September 2022

		% of Premises in Urban and Rural Local Authorities					
Characteristics of Mobile Coverage	Location	Urban with Major Conurbation	Urban with Minor Conurbation	Urban with City and Town	Urban with Significant Rural	Largely Rural	Mainly Rural
3G Not Reliable	Outside	0.0	0.0	-	0.2	0.0	0.4
	Inside	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.7
4G Not Reliable	Outside	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.4
	Inside	0.1	0.1	0.2	0.7	1.5	2.8
4G Coverage All Networks	Outside	99.9	99.8	99.7	97.8	96.1	92.1
	Inside	94.9	88.4	89.2	76.6	69.9	62.1
No Reliable Voice Services	Outside	-	0.0	-	0.1	0.0	0.3
	Inside	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.2	0.5
Voice Services All Network	Outside	100.0	99.9	99.9	99.3	99.0	97.0
	Inside	99.1	97.0	97.5	91.2	88.5	80.3
No Reliable Data Services Outside	Outside	-	0.0	-	0.0	0.0	0.2
	Inside	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.1	0.1	0.4
Data Services All Networks	Outside	100.0	100.0	100.0	99.9	99.8	99.1
	Inside	99.9	99.8	99.8	98.5	97.6	93.1
Geographic Services from	Outside	98.3	95.9	97.1	90.4	87.1	82.8

Source: derived from Ofcom (2022) *Connected Nations 2022: Data downloads* (London: Ofcom), file 202209_mobile_laua_r01.csv

Figure 75: Proportion of Premises in English Rural Local Authority Areas with Indoor and Outdoor Access to All Four Mobile Networks, September 2022



Source: derived from Ofcom (2022) *Connected Nations 2022: Data downloads* (London: Ofcom), file 202209_mobile_laua_r01,csv

did not have coverage from all four networks, particularly inside, with these locations also tending to have poorer connectivity to make voice calls.

Differences in levels of access to networks are also evident in Figure 74. The maps clearly illustrate how the percentage of premises without access to all four mobile networks is markedly higher for 4G users in comparison with 3G coverage, particularly inside buildings. The map of 4G indoor coverage also reinforces the argument about the more widely distributed character of connectivity limitations, as it is clear that lower proportions of premises with all network access are evident across many rural authorities.

Given the dispersed character of limitations in 4G coverage, it is unfortunate that data on mobile connectivity is publicly accessible only at very spatially aggregative scales: the data used in Tables 31 and Figures 74 and 75 is local authority level, while information presented in Defra's Statistical Digest of Rural England (Defra 2024; 2025) is at the level of Parliamentary Constituency. There will likely be significant localised variations in accessibility that are not evident in the maps presented in Figures 74 and 75, and it could be potentially revealing to explore the similarities and differences in access levels to mobile and broadband connectivity. While poor access to one form of digital connectivity might be potentially compensated by employment of the other, locations with poor broadband and mobile activity may be seen as particularly significant 'not-spots'. The significance of digital connectivity has been further heightened by the decision by phone providers to undertake a digital switch-over by the end of January 2027, which will mean that all telephone calls will be undertaken through a digital phone or communication device (e.g. computer or tablet) using a Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP). This means that anyone wishing to use a landline rather than make a mobile network call will require a broadband connection, although these can be low broadband speeds of around 0.5 Mbps. Although, as indicated in Table 31, the percentage of people unable to reliably make a voice call through a mobile is low, if these premises are also without a reliable broadband connection, then the consequences of this change to VoIP may be significant.

It is clear that there have been significant expansions in mobile coverage, as well as movements towards later generations of mobile service provision. In the context of rural England, there has been a clear shift from the 2G network, which was a focus of discussion in the *2018 State of Rural Service*s report (Rural England 2019), to 3G and particularly 4G provisions. Coverage by 5G networks remains much more limited within rural areas: in September 2024, apparently only 72% of the rural landmass had 5G coverage from one or more operators, in comparison with 96% of urban areas (Defra 2025: 29). This lower rural coverage for the most recent generation of mobile infrastructures, points to the continuing presence of urban-rural digital divides, and this section has highlighted a series of others, as well as intra-rural digital divides, related to the higher presence of 'partial not spots', poor indoor connectivity and the potential impacts of the movement to VoIP telephone networks. Given the expanding use of digital service provisions, then the continuing presence of rural digital divides is clearly of concern, particularly when their contours may in many ways mirror those related to both the provision of broadband and public physical transport.

Transport and Communication Services in Rural England

The provision of transport and communication infrastructures and services is highly important to people and businesses, and as has been argued at the start of this chapter, may be of particular and increasing significance because of reductions in the number of places in rural areas to access services in person. This chapter has explored patterns of transport use, highlighting how rural residents tend to travel further than urban residents, although distances reduced both during and subsequent to the Covid-19 pandemic. It is clear that private vehicles dominate rural travel patterns, and that use of public bus services has declined significantly over recent decades. The Covid-19 pandemic saw a major decline in bus use, and bus passenger numbers have so far failed to return to pre-Covid levels, which has created pressures for reductions in route coverage, which may significantly impact rural localities. Community transport services have been created to address public transport declines, and they appear to be frequently used to access services of particular value to people who may have limited access to car transport, such as the elderly and young people. However, while community transport services are clearly of considerable value, they have tended to be quite localised, unevenly distributed and member-focused, and as a result are currently insufficient to counteract the wider impacts of public bus service decline.

This chapter has also considered the rural dimensions of communication and transport provision related to the movement of information and products, focusing on postal, broadband and mobile service infrastructures. It has identified that despite long-running practices of post office closure, rural post office provision has apparently remained above the level set in the Government's accessibility requirements, although this appears to be achieved through an increased reliance on outreach and drop and collect services. The post office network may hence have seen significant reductions in service provision even if the apparent number of post office branches appears to have been maintained. Broadband and mobile provision, in some contrast to public bus and post office networks, has clearly seen some infrastructural expansions and improvements, although this chapter has highlighted the persistence of a series of urban-rural and intra-rural divides in terms of access to higher speeds and generations of service.

6. Some Policy Relevant Conclusions

Introduction

This report has sought to present an overview of the contemporary availability to rural populations in England of a range of services spanning retailing, banking and access to cash, education and childcare, employment and welfare benefits, food banks and warm spaces, healthcare, transport, and communication through postal, broadband and mobile networks. This final chapter will outline some of the key issues that have been addressed in the report and consider some of their implications on contemporary policymaking.

Rural Service Declines and Inequalities in Accessibility

Repeated themes in the report have been declines in rural service provisions and the presence of both urban-rural and intra-rural inequalities in the distribution of access points to these services. It has been argued, for instance, that a whole series of services are all predominantly located in urban areas and then focused on Town and Fringe areas of the countryside, including supermarkets, food banks/pantries, warm spaces, public libraries, GPs, dentists, pharmacies, hospitals, care homes and community transport. Concerns have been raised about the closure of rural access points for many of these services, although others, such as supermarkets, food banks/pantries and warm spaces have arguably seen limited expansion into rural areas.

A series of other services that appear to have a wider distribution across rural areas, such as convenience stores and post offices, also exhibited some important intra-rural variation, with there being evidence that the former have experience greater closure rates amongst stores that are the sole retail outlet in settlements, while the apparent maintenance of a widespread distribution of post offices appears to have been achieved through the increasing use of outreach services.

The concentration of services into urban and Town and Fringe areas raises questions about how people living in other settlements access them, and indeed how people in Town and Fringe areas without these services, or some of them, are able to make use of them? One widely enacted option is for people to physically travel to locations beyond their place of residence, and this report has highlighted that people in rural areas travel longer distances to access services. These journeys are predominantly undertaken by car, with car ownership being particularly high in rural areas that lie beyond Town and Fringe areas.

This reliance on private vehicles raises environmental issues in an era of anthropologically driven climate change, even given the evidence of growing electric vehicle ownership in rural areas, notwithstanding the lower availability of public charging points. However, of longer-standing concern has been the social impacts of the reliance on private vehicles, and particularly how people without or with only limited access to this means of transport can access services which are increasingly concentrated in urban areas or a relatively small number of rural settlements. This report has clearly illustrated that these concerns are still highly relevant to rural England in 2025, and, indeed, the concentration of many services has increased since the examination presented in the *2018 State of Rural Services* report (Rural England 2019).

There clearly have been some policy interventions that have sought to address this issue, such as the establishment of accessibility requirements on the Post Office, but given the range of bodies involved in the delivery of many services, this approach may not be appropriate to employ more widely. Attention might, however, be given to the extent to which service outlets that are relatively widely distributed across rural England, such as post offices and convenience stores, could be employed to deliver a wider range of services, building on the Association of Convenience Stores (2025: 1) notion that these shops might be seen as often acting as "miniature highstreets". It has also been shown in the discussion of warm hubs that many voluntary organisations adopt a multi-service focus, and potentially a greater policy emphasis on supporting such developments might help widen the coverage of service provision in smaller rural settlements.

The impacts of service concentration on rural populations with limited access to private vehicles is clearly also influenced by the availability of public transport. This report has suggested that there has been a significant decline in rural public bus services in the post-pandemic period, with both passenger numbers and network coverage being significantly reduced from pre-Covid levels, such that they might be viewed as having reached a "historic low" (County Councils Network 2023: 5). This situation appears likely to significantly increase inaccessibility to services for rural residents unable to drive a private vehicle, notwithstanding the efforts of community transport schemes to improve access to a range of key health, social care and educational services. The County Council Network has claimed that there needs to be a significant restructuring of funding to prevent future erosions in coverage and frequencies in rural bus networks, although there clearly are many other demands on both central and local government finances. It is important that the impacts of reductions in public transport on service access are recognised within policy discussions, along with the rural dimensions of decisions concerning further changes in public service provision.

Digital communication via broadband and mobile devices has been viewed as a potential means to ameliorate declines in physical accessibility to services, and it is clear that there has been an expansion in their use within a range of forms of service delivery, including retailing, banking, education, healthcare, welfare and libraries. Such modes of service provision may lack some of the social network-building outcomes associated with some in-person modes of service delivery, and concerns have also been raised about the presence of digital divides in their social and spatial accessibility. This report has indicated that although there have been significant improvements in the coverage and speed of both broadband and mobile infrastructures, there are significant limitations in both within some areas of rural England. The presence of premises with no or unreliable broadband or mobile connections will clearly impact access to online services, and slower speed connections may significantly limit access to some forms of service delivery (e.g. use of guidance videos, video calls). While broadband and mobile infrastructures may be improving, with there being clear instances of bottom-up community-led improvements as well as government/regulator-led initiatives, there is also a clear possibility that many rural areas will remain relatively excluded as speeds and services expand faster in already well-connected places. The House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (2024: 17-18) has criticised the *Department for Science, Innovation and Technology* for lacking plans both in relation to the areas that lay outside of the 4G network and for how the 5G network should be best developed, including whether it will support its development in places "where the market is unwilling to deliver", such as locations which are not "populated places". Addressing such issues would clearly be of considerable significance to the future of digital service delivery across rural England.

Improving the Rural Evidence Base

Although this report has collated a series of datasets relating to 16 areas of service provision, it is clear that the evidence base is stronger for some service topics than for others. One of the areas where a lack of information was most evident related to mental healthcare, with the House of Commons

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2023) explicitly reporting their concerns about this issue. As outlined in their report, and confirmed in this one, one area of concern is that datasets often contain insufficient granular detail to enable the identification of provisions and needs.

One aspect of this lack of granularity is the omission of data differentiation by any sub-national geographical areas, which makes it impossible to evaluate rural-urban differentiations. This was an issue not only in relation to mental healthcare data, but also with regard to many other forms of service provision. While in mental health there was often no sub-national differentiations in datasets, in many other areas of service provision there was some geographical differentiation of data, but this was done only at the level of local authorities or even broader units such as National Health Integrated Care Boards. This report has demonstrated many instances where analysis using such units of analysis obscures significant urban and rural differences within these aerial units. The release of data at units such as postcodes, output areas or superoutput areas, in addition to local authority level, would help produce stronger awareness of the degree to which there are differences in levels of service infrastructure or delivery within various types of rural, and indeed urban, settlements. The significance of such forms of analysis has been clearly illustrated through the repeated identification of significant variations in levels of service provision, and hence accessibility, between Rural Town and Fringe locations and those present in less populated rural settlements. Such variations, which seemed to cut across many of the different forms of service provision examined in the report, would not have been identified without the use of some sub-national geographical referencing. A key policy implication of this report is to recommend greater use and dissemination of data at sub-local authority levels.

The significance of the Rural Town and Fringe category across a range of different services, also raises questions about the changed basis of the 2021 Rural-Urban Classification. As outlined in the introductory chapter, the 2021 Census-derived classification represents a significant departure from the format of the two earlier Rural-Urban classifications. The timing of the release of the 2021 Census derived classification precluded its use within the current analysis, but it was noted in Chapter 1 that it seems to create a much less differentiated image of rural England, which is potentially of concern given the significance given to intra-rural differentiations in service provision that has emerged in the current analysis which has drawn on the 2011 Census based Rural-Urban Classification. The movement to a quite different classificatory form will also clearly limit temporal analysis, and hence evaluations of trends in service provisions that have also been an important component of this report. It is possible to link the earlier schema to more recent datasets, as undertaken within this report, but these classifications will clearly increasingly fail to reflect the character of many rural areas.

This report has made use of datasets produced by governmental bodies such as the Office for National Statistics, Defra, the Department of Transport and NHS England, but also data produced by charities and voluntary organisations and networks. The latter have helped shed light on a series of recently expanding developments, such as the growth of community transport, defibrillators, food banks, food pantries and warm spaces, but tend to focus on information drawn from members of these organisations and networks. As a result, they probably under-enumerate the provisions of these services, and datasets may not always be made available for analysis or produced in the most useful formats to enable rural-focused analyses. Dataset improvements could hence usefully be made across both governmental and non-governmental organisations.

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Notes

[1] The analysis in Figure 29 employs the local authority boundaries as they existed in 2021, when the latest Census was conducted. There have been subsequent local government reorganisations, with the District of Eden being incorporated into the local authority District of Westmorland and Furness.

[2] Healthwatch (2024) state that their analysis indicated that rural areas had “Higher rates of both permanent and temporary closure”, but their analysis actually focused on the latter, and although they employed a different method of classifying the urban-rural character of Care Boards, the results about the pattern of reductions in opening hours of pharmacies is similar.

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