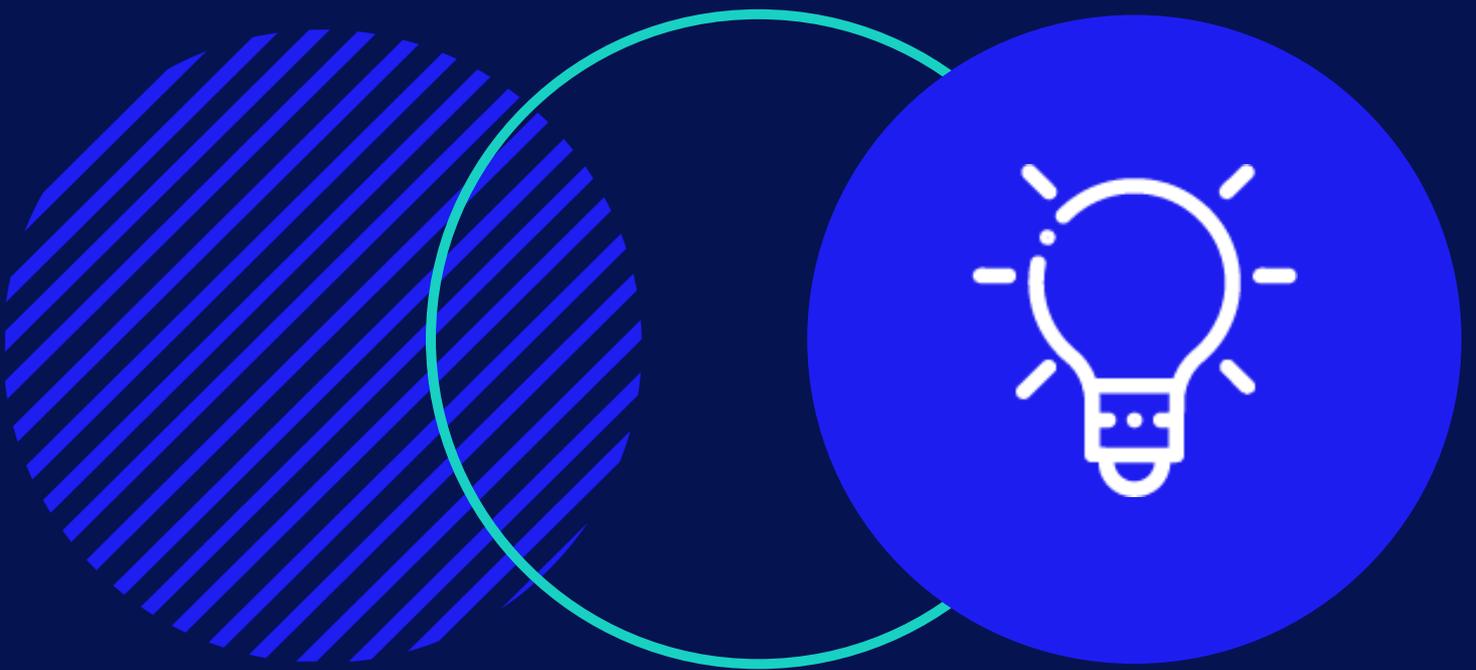


**Reed** in Partnership

# Challenges and opportunities for rural jobseekers in Scotland

Reed in Partnership research report



**November 2021**

[reedinpartnership.co.uk](https://reedinpartnership.co.uk)

**Policy & Research**

# Introduction

**As Scotland's economy recovers and rebuilds, vacancies are at record levels. Key sectors are experiencing workforce shortages, especially those that have had to rebuild rapidly after the lockdowns earlier this year, seen EU citizens leave or face long-running demographic challenges. The demand for people in sectors such as hospitality, care and construction is only getting stronger, while ongoing skills shortages in sectors such as digital continue.**

On the other hand, the claimant count remained 48% higher in Scotland in August 2021 than it was before the pandemic<sup>1</sup>. The number of payrolled employees, while continuing to recover, remains down on February 2020 levels in Scotland<sup>2</sup>. It is hoped that the majority of the 80,000 people in Scotland who remained on the now-closed furlough scheme at the end of September 2021 will return to a job, but some will not. In addition, Scotland's economically inactive population of around half a million (excluding students or retired people) includes many who would like to work, such as those needing support to manage a health condition or parents wishing to return to the labour market.

## Matching people and jobs

While there may be vacancies, matching individual jobseekers to these is a key recovery challenge. Mismatched or insufficient skills are a crucial part of this, but so are the geographical logistics, particularly in Scotland, with its vast distances, remote areas and regional concentrations of economic activity. As Nora Senior, Chair of the Enterprise and Skills Strategic Board, told a hearing of the Scottish Parliament's Economy and Fair Work Committee<sup>3</sup>, looking forward: "there will be job vacancies, but people will not be in the right locations to take up the opportunities."

## Rural opportunity

Supporting jobseekers into the right role for them can be particularly challenging in rural areas because skills mismatches are exacerbated by challenges around connectivity - both digital and transport - that can shut down career options one by one.

That is why Reed in Partnership has been taking a closer look at how we support jobseekers in rural and poorly-connected areas. This programme of work includes some research focusing on rurality in England<sup>4</sup>, as well as this report on Scotland. Some of the common themes emerging so far have been:

- the need to support small, rural towns and coastal places which often had labour market difficulties prior to the pandemic;
- the importance of timely public transport in enabling people to find work. The incompatibility of bus timetables and shift start and finish times is a major theme, especially for key workers; and
- the need to widen the choice of jobs for rural residents, as well as supporting lower-skilled jobseekers to gain the skills to progress and widen their options.

Ideas for change include:

- increased partnership working between employers, transport providers, local

government and support services locally to problem-solve transport logistics around sites;

- closer strategic work between transport and labour market policy-makers and planners;
- fully exploiting the potential of digital employment support for rural residents, alongside practical steps to reduce digital exclusion; and
- working with employers to explore and expand the range of non-professional roles that can be done flexibly or at home.

Throughout all these themes, place-based collaboration between local/regional government, community organisations, employment support and skills providers has been crucial in supporting rural communities throughout the pandemic and is no less important for the recovery.

## This report

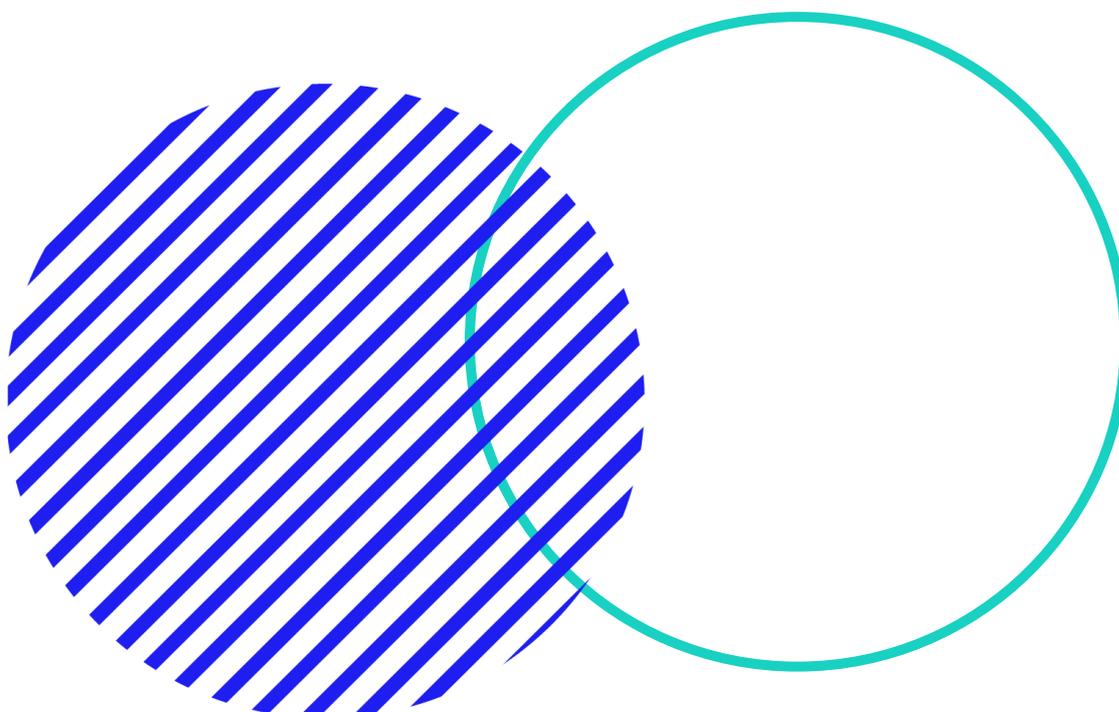
This report starts by looking at where the greatest support needs in rural areas are, through an analysis of the claimant count

and other evidence. Then we review job postings data to look at the jobs available in rural areas.

The second part of our report uses input from a panel of our advisers in Scotland, plus insights from stakeholders, to highlight some of the key challenges for rural jobseekers. It looks at how we can work together to overcome these challenges and highlights some key labour market opportunities for rural areas going forward.

Clearly there are a range of inter-related wider factors that are key to maximising labour market opportunity for rural jobseekers, not least affordable housing, access to wider support services such as health or support for business growth.

Despite the logistical challenges for jobseekers in rural Scotland, there are exciting opportunities for job creation looking ahead, not least as part of Scotland's effort to reach net zero by 2045.



# Key findings

## Rural labour markets in Scotland

1. Unemployment is highest in urban areas, but rural local authorities such as **East and South Ayrshire**, that have had the highest unemployment rates for many years, continue to do so, albeit much lower so far than they were after the 2008 downturn.
2. **Pockets of higher claimant count unemployment** (and underemployment) are scattered across Scotland. The largest number are in East Ayrshire, but there are around 200 rural/small remote town Data Zones in Scotland where the claimant count is above the Scotland average.
3. Places categorised as **very remote small towns** - with fewer than 10,000 people and very much part of the rural areas that surround them - stick out as needing support in the economic recovery. They showed an average claimant count rate (4.6% in August 2021) not much lower than major urban areas (5.3%).
4. In the short term, **online job postings** for rural local authorities look strong, showing growth of around 35% over the past six months, just the same as for urban local authorities.
5. With the regional skills assessment for rural local authorities published by Skills Development Scotland suggesting that Scotland's rural economies may face a **lack of jobs expansion** (other than replacing those leaving) over 2024-2030, policy and investment will be critical to support job creation, especially given demographic challenges.

## Challenges and opportunities for jobseekers

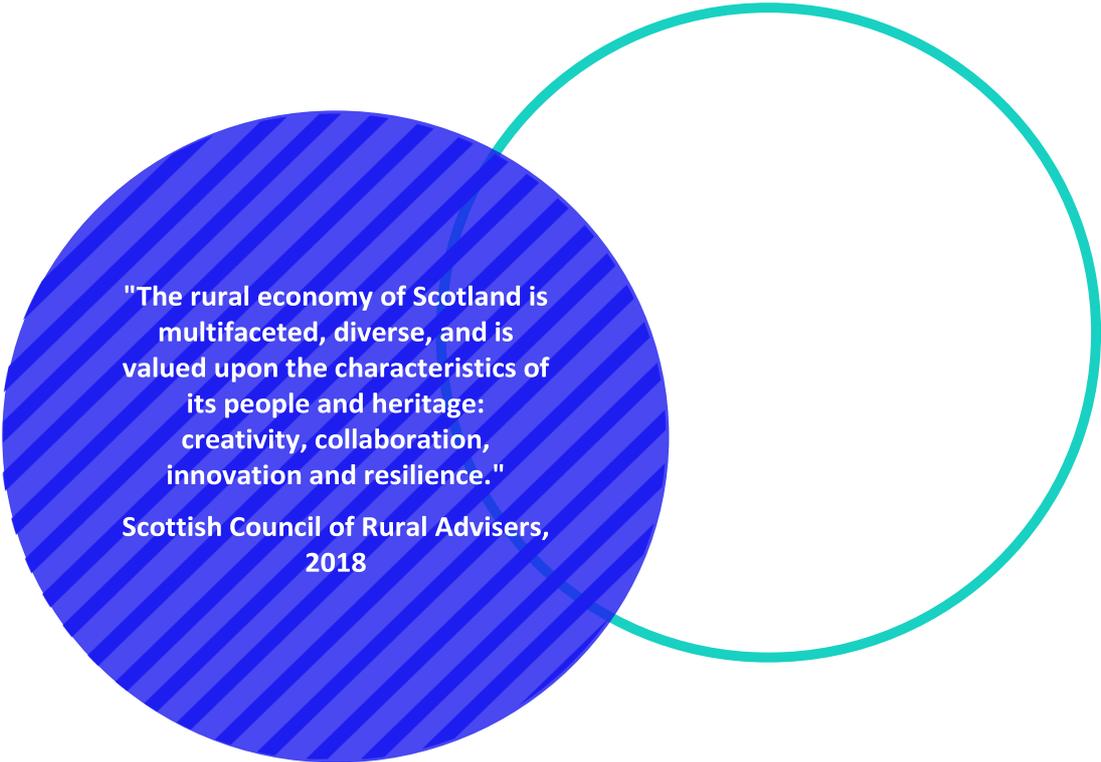
6. The high level of vacancies makes the need to **tackle connectivity barriers for rural jobseekers** in Scotland even more urgent, to connect people to jobs.
7. Low-income jobseekers are less likely to own a car and see their job choices drastically restricted by infrequent bus services. Partnership work with employers and transport policymakers, such as **demand-responsive transport and car share schemes**, could increase options for jobseekers as well helping Scotland to meet its environmental targets.
8. Tackling **digital exclusion** is a major priority that can improve employment prospects for jobseekers in all sorts of ways, from getting a better job to being able to work from home.
9. Action to improve **access to affordable childcare** in rural or remote areas would both improve access to work for jobseekers with children but could also make a big difference in engaging "economically inactive" parents in rural areas - who may have found this barrier too insurmountable to consider regular, paid work.
10. Analysis of job postings in rural local authorities compared to urban shows that eight out of the top ten jobs in rural areas cannot usually be performed at home, while this is only true of one out of 10 in urban areas. More analysis and piloting is needed of ways to **support more lower-paid workers to work flexibly or from home** in rural areas.

# Defining rural

This report uses two main ways of classifying rural and urban. At local authority level, it uses the method set out in Skills Development Scotland's data matrix<sup>5</sup> (based on a classification devised by the Scottish Government's Rural & Environment Science & Analytical Services), which identifies the following local authorities as predominantly rural: Na h-Eileanan Siar, Orkney Islands, Shetland Islands, Argyll & Bute, Highland, Perth & Kinross, Moray, Aberdeenshire, Dumfries & Galloway, Scottish Borders, East Lothian, East Ayrshire, South Ayrshire, Angus and Clackmannanshire.

It has also used Scottish Government's Urban Rural Classification<sup>6</sup> at Data Zone level (each representing around 500-1,000 residents). We have used the most detailed (eight-fold) of these classifications because it enables distinction between different types of rural area and captures remoteness as well as rurality. Generally, we have grouped areas defined as "remote" or "very remote" small towns as part of rural Scotland, given that they have many of the same connectivity issues as entirely rural places, are very much intertwined with the local rural economy and generally have far fewer than 10,000 inhabitants.

The map on page six uses these categories to show the percentage of population in each local authority area that live in areas in any of the following five categories: remote small towns, very remote small towns, accessible rural areas, remote rural areas and very remote rural areas.

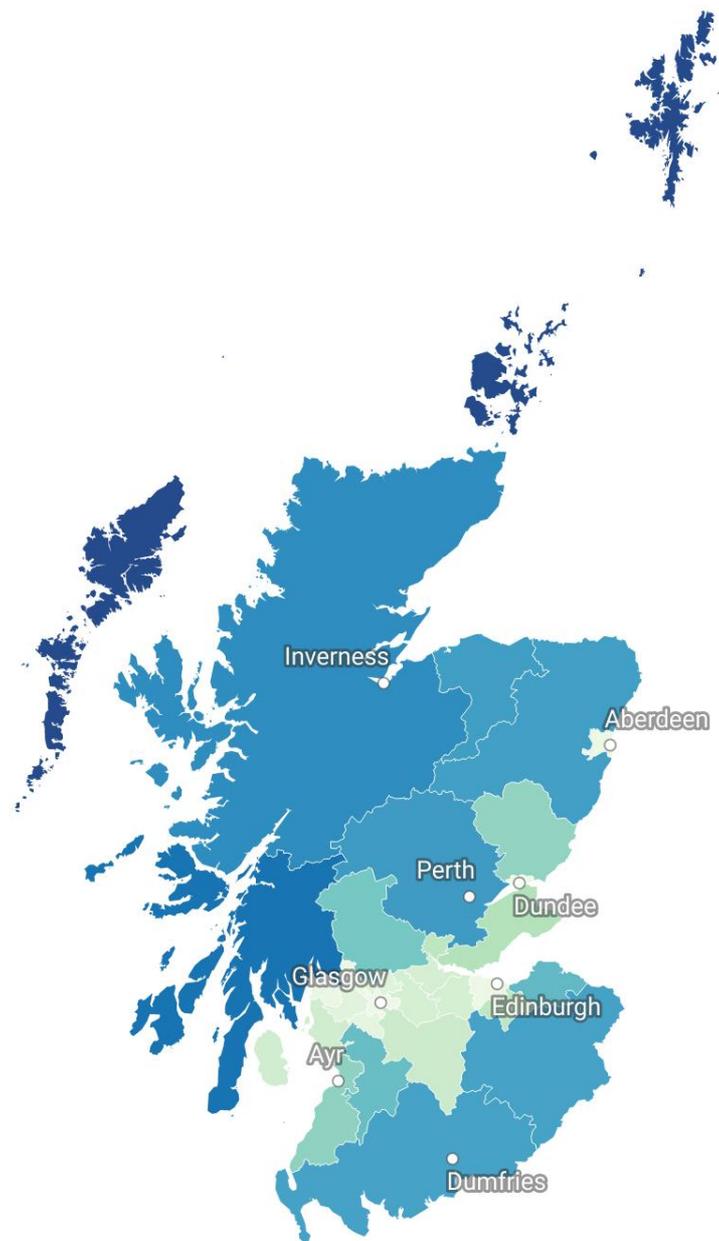


**"The rural economy of Scotland is multifaceted, diverse, and is valued upon the characteristics of its people and heritage: creativity, collaboration, innovation and resilience."**

**Scottish Council of Rural Advisers,  
2018**

# Relative rurality, Scottish local authorities

Where 100% = most rural



*% of areas within each local authority area that are classified in categories 4 to 8 of the 2016 Scottish Rural Urban Classification (remote small towns to very remote rural)*

Map data: © Crown copyright and database right 2019 • Created with Datawrapper

# 1. Rural labour market outlook

While the economic impact of the pandemic continues to hit places and sectors in a very different way from previous downturns (such as city centres and the travel sector, for example) it is also the case that places with a history of labour market challenges have tended to see unemployment rise the most. East Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and Clackmannanshire are the rural counties that have had the highest employment rates since before the 2008 downturn, and that pattern continues. It is positive that the Ayrshire and Stirling & Clackmannanshire Growth deals have such a major focus on skills, inclusion and maximising economic opportunity for all.

Table 1 shows a snapshot of indicators for the 15 local authorities identified as rural in Skills Development Scotland's Rural Scotland Regional Skills Assessment. While the claimant count is now treated as an experimental indicator and can be influenced by changes to the benefits system, it remains a useful small-area guide to approximate numbers of people who may need some help with getting a job via Jobcentre Plus. At local authority level, this shows that:

- The only rural local authorities with a claimant count above the average for Scotland in August 2021 (5.4% in August using the non-seasonally adjusted measure) were East Ayrshire and South Ayrshire.
- Looking at the unemployment rate (for April 2020 to March 2021) this also flags up East and South Ayrshire, but shows that Clackmannanshire, Angus and Dumfries & Galloway also had an unemployment rate above the average for Scotland over that period (4.6%).
- East Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and Clackmannanshire also have the highest proportions of residents in the most

deprived 10% of the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation. The link between pre-pandemic deprivation and higher levels of post-Covid unemployment is a theme that also came out of our analysis of rural England.

- Looking at the overall economic activity rate, this flags up the Orkney Islands as having seen a significant fall in economic activity over the past year, while the rates for South Ayrshire and Dumfries and Galloway are also below the average for Scotland.

Table 1 also shows a measure of economic vulnerability calculated by Oxford Economics for Skills Development Scotland, to give an alternative context to labour market challenges going forward. This sought to identify the impact of Covid-19 on economic diversity, business environment, and digital connectivity. Largely because of rural challenges around digital connectivity and economic diversity, it found that rural local authorities dominated the list of the most economically vulnerable areas of Scotland. Argyll and Bute, the Orkney Islands and the Scottish Borders were seen as the top three most economically vulnerable areas of Scotland in recovering from the pandemic.

These headline indicators illustrate the places in Scotland where pre-pandemic labour market challenges persist (East and South Ayrshire) as well as areas where the pandemic has revealed significant economic resilience challenges for the recovery, such as Argyll and Bute or the Orkney Islands. While Angus has a slightly higher unemployment rate than the Scottish average, it is ranked as the seventh-most resilient local authority area. It is not clear what is behind the fall in economic activity in the Shetland Islands, but the hit to self-employment seen during the pandemic may be playing a part.

**Table 1: Rural local authorities compared**

Local Authority	Percentage of population in most deprived 10% (SIMD)	Claimant count, August 2021	Unemployment rate (April 2020 to March 2021)	Economic activity rate (April to March 2021)	Economic vulnerability/resilience post-Covid (1=most vulnerable)
East Ayrshire	14%	6.5	5.1%	75.5%	15
South Ayrshire	9%	5.7	4.8%	72.2%	6
Clackmannanshire	10%	5.2	4.8%	77.5%	26
Angus	1%	4.5	4.7%	74.8%	7
Dumfries & Galloway	5%	4.3	4.7%	72.0%	5
Scottish Borders	2%	4.3	4.3%	76.8%	3
Argyll & Bute	4%	4.2	3.9%	77.7%	1
East Lothian	1%	4	4.1%	79.2%	14
Moray	1%	4	4.3%	74.8%	8
Highland	4%	3.7	3.8%	79.2%	12
Na h-Eileanan Siar	0%	3.6	3.7%	85.7%	11
Perth & Kinross	2%	3.6	4.3%	76.8%	13
Aberdeenshire	1%	3.1	3.6%	79.6%	4
Shetland Islands	0%	2.5	3.3%	70.1%	9
Orkney Islands	0%	2	3.1%	88.0%	2

Sources: Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2020, Claimant count, unemployment rate & economic activity rate, Nomis, SDS and Oxford Economics vulnerability index, cited in Skills Development Scotland, Rural Scotland Regional Skills Assessment, July 2021.

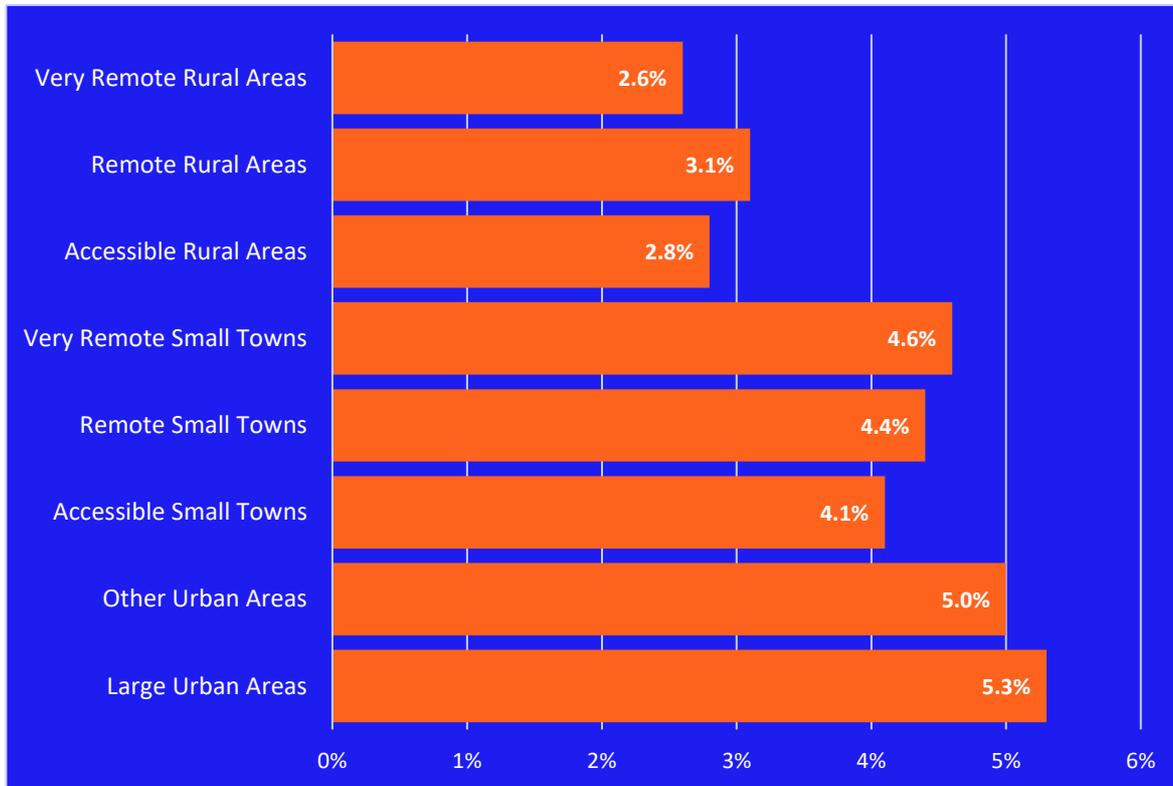
## Claimant count “hotspots”: remote small towns stick out

As most local authorities are a mixture of rural and urban places, analysis at local authority level has limitations when looking at rurality or remoteness. Unlike unemployment, the claimant count can be analysed at Data Zone level, as a rough guide to where people seeking to move from unemployment (or on very low hours or wages) may be.

Chart 1 shows the claimant count (August 2021) at data zone level by eight rural/urban categories. Unsurprisingly, urban areas have the highest claimant counts as a proportion of working-age population overall. Analysis of the Data Zones with the highest claimant counts (more than 10%) reinforces this picture. Of the 674 Scottish data zones with a claimant count higher than 10% in August 2021, 95% were in urban areas or accessible small towns. In one area of Glasgow, 525 people of a working-age population of 762 were claiming unemployment-related benefits.

While urban Data Zones have the highest claimant count rates and rural areas have the lowest, Chart 1 shows that "remotes small towns" and "very remote small towns" have a significantly higher claimant count than the most rural areas.

**Chart 1: Claimant count (% of working age population), August 2021 by rural/urban category of data zone**



**Source:** Reed in Partnership calculation using mid-2020 population estimates and claimant count (not seasonally adjusted), Nomis and Scottish Government 8-fold rural urban classification.

### Case study: finding work in Thurso, Highland

Thurso is classed as a very remote small town and is one of the most Northern places on the British mainland. According to local jobs posting data from labour market intelligence service Emsi Burning Glass, hiring is relatively strong, with 738 unique job postings over the past six months. These include jobs with the council and NHS, as well as demand for electricians, engineers, van drivers and financial administrators. For jobseekers without private transport, however, it is challenging to reach other places and the jobcentre is in Wick, almost an hour by bus in the morning.

Reed in Partnership worked with Thurso resident Graham, who was referred to the JETS service in Scotland from Wick Jobcentre. Graham got help with his CV and took part in a variety of online training courses, such as identifying and working on his transferable skills and a course on interview skills, that helped him with presenting online as well as preparing questions. As Graham said “When I am in an interview I get nervous; I move my hands and give out the wrong signal to my future employer. Since I’ve done the course, it boosted me with confidence and given me knowledge on what to do and not to do for an interview.” He was successful in finding a local job in the hotel/catering sector, one of the sectors building back relatively rapidly after the pandemic.

The online support Graham received enabled him to use his time effectively and access a wide range of courses and support, as well as the personal interaction with and support from Caitlin, his adviser.

Caitlin explains that they discussed jobs in Wick as well as Thurso, but this was heavily reliant on good bus schedules and job start times as Graham did not have a car.

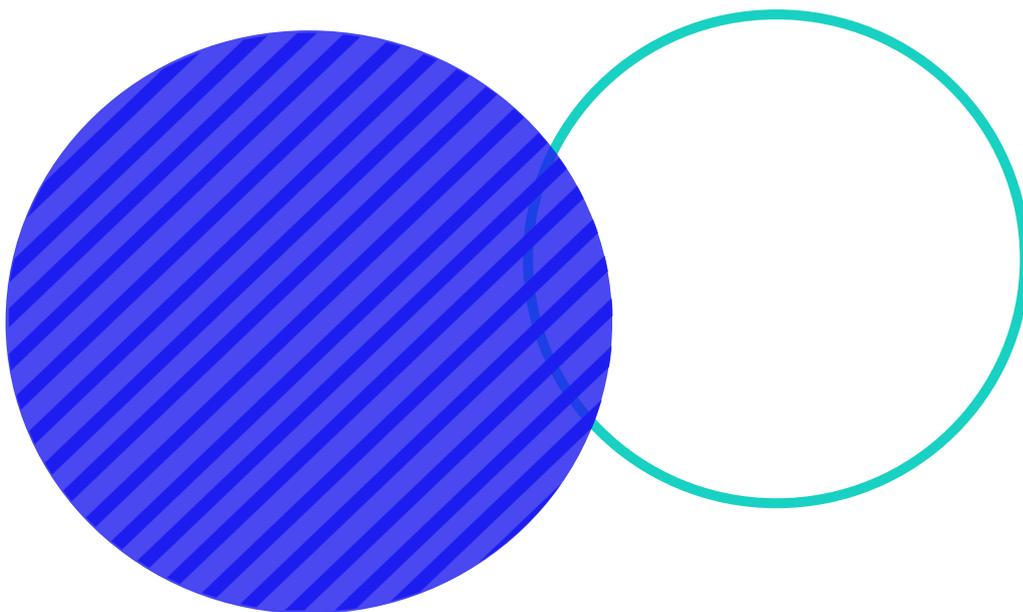
She considers that it was Graham's proactive and flexible attitude that was the key to him finding work. He approached a wide range of local businesses including the petrol station, hotels, butchers, supermarkets and was willing to consider a wide range of occupations, from cleaning, carpentry or refuse collection to bartending, housekeeping or maintenance.

She points out that if someone is restricted to the occupations/sectors available in a very small area and the opportunities in that sector change or shut down, "they have to turn their hand to something else very quickly." This illustrates that flexibility and transferable skills are important for rural residents.

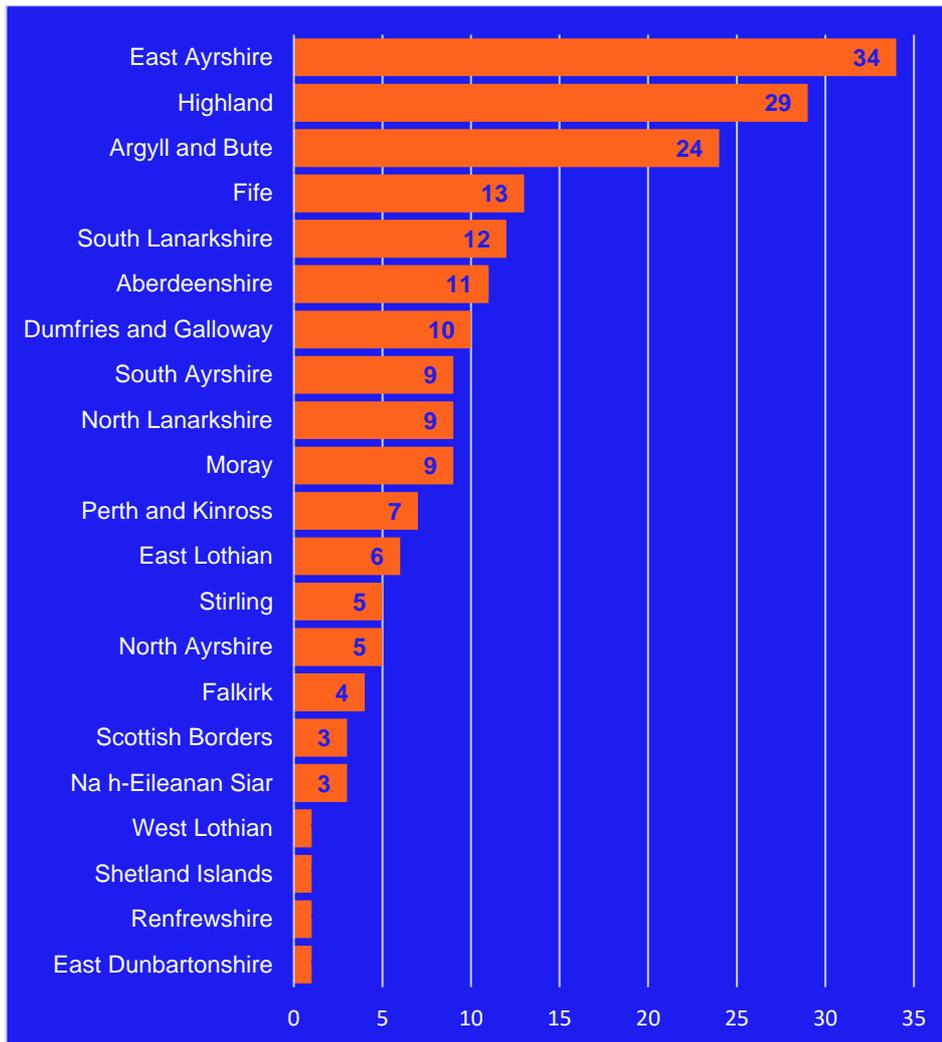
## Hidden rural needs spread across Scotland

Around 200 rural data zones in rural Scotland (including remote/very remote small towns) had a claimant count above the average for Scotland (5.4%) in August 2021. Chart 2 shows where they are. They are mainly in rural local authorities with some exceptions - there are 13 in rural parts of Fife, for instance.

Many are in local authorities that have a relatively high claimant count overall, such as East Ayrshire, there are significant numbers in others - such as Highland and Argyll & Bute - that do not. Clearly, not everyone seeking a job will be claiming unemployment benefits, and some research suggests that stigma around claiming unemployment benefits may be higher in rural areas<sup>6</sup>. However the analysis above suggests that some local authorities that look to have a relatively low level of people claiming unemployment benefits do have rural areas where a far higher proportion are doing so. For example, while the claimant count across Highland is well below the average for Scotland at 3.7% (August 2021), there are 29 rural/remote small town data zones with above average claimant count and six (all on the coast) where the claimant count ranges from 11% to 15%.



**Chart 2: Number of rural or remote small town Data Zones with above-average claimant count (August 2021)**



## Job opportunities

Skills Development Scotland’s recent Regional Skills Assessment for rural Scotland<sup>7</sup> sets out the outlook for key sectors and occupations in rural local authorities in Scotland, predicting demand based on both expansion (or contraction) of demand for people in occupations or sectors and the numbers of people needed to fill replacement demand.

Over the shorter term (2021-2024) roles in retail, hospitality, health and social work and land-based sectors are expected to see the highest demand. While strong replacement demand is expected to continue in rural areas over the longer term (2024-2030) - reflecting demographic drivers - expansion demand is less positive than Scotland as a whole. In fact it is expected to shrink by 5,800 people over this period, despite expansion growth in some sectors such as health and care.

As the report states, however, “national and local policy, investment and initiatives could all influence the long-term outlook presented”. The role played by rural Scotland in meeting the Net Zero challenge, for example, could be one of these policy drivers.

In the shorter term, it is critical to support unemployed people into jobs as soon as possible to both avoid the scarring effects of unemployment and meet the immediate demands of the Scottish economy. So what do recent trends in job postings suggest about the outlook for rural Scotland?

Table 2 shows the number of unique job postings that appeared over the past six months for each rural local authority, their growth over that period and the median advertised salary. Job postings data is very changeable, and often throws up anomalies that may be due to changes in online recruitment methods or other factors, especially during the current period of economic upheaval.

However the graph below shows how strong demand for people has been over the past six months. Even if the outlier of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar is excluded, job postings grew by 35% in rural Scotland between April and September 2021, the same as in more urban areas of Scotland (also see Table 3 on page 17 for an occupational breakdown).

**Table 2: Online job postings in rural local authorities, Scotland, April to September 2021**

Local Authority Name	Unique Postings from Apr 2021 - Sep 2021	% Change (Apr 2021 - Sep 2021)	Median Advertised Salary
Highland	29,719	37%	£25,056
Aberdeenshire	13,951	43%	£23,648
Perth and Kinross	13,330	30%	£24,288
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	12,998	2,551%	£35,808
Dumfries and Galloway	11,370	35%	£24,544
Scottish Borders	10,942	49%	£24,000
Argyll and Bute	7,699	10%	£22,976
East Lothian	7,424	24%	£24,032
South Ayrshire	6,725	29%	£23,488
Moray	5,726	22%	£22,976
Angus	5,698	19%	£22,976
East Ayrshire	5,209	32%	£25,696
Shetland Islands	2,775	255%	£28,480

Source: Emsi Burning Glass ([economicmodelling.co.uk](http://economicmodelling.co.uk))

## 2. Challenges and opportunities

One of the strategic goals of Skills Development Scotland<sup>8</sup> is that: “All people in Scotland have the skills, information and opportunities they need to succeed in the labour market.” That is also a good summary of how employment support aims to support the jobseeker, helping them to overcome barriers, build skills and make the most of every opportunity that they can. Many barriers are common to people wherever they live, such as low confidence, ill health or a low level of skills.

In rural areas, however, there can be an additional layer of barriers that relate to connectivity - especially transport and digital barriers - which disproportionately penalise people on low incomes, disabled people, single parents and young people.

We gathered feedback from a panel of 16 Reed in Partnership employment advisers working with people in rural areas of Scotland to explore these barriers. We also include examples of organisations working to overcome these barriers and expand the choices open to rural jobseekers.

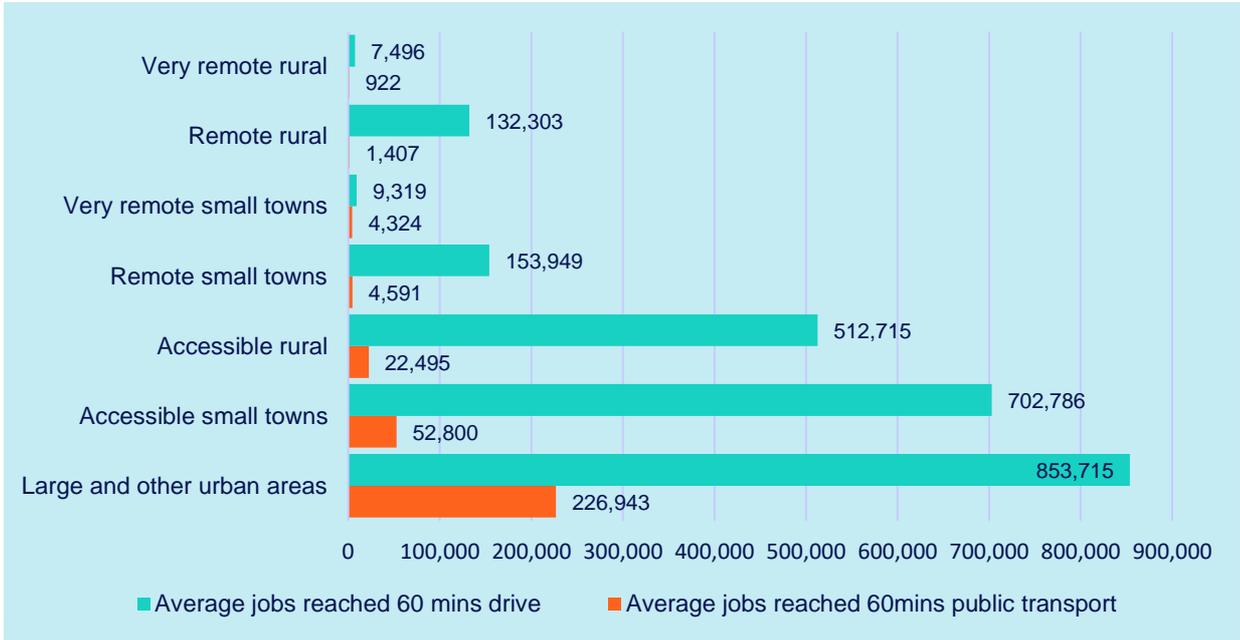
### 1. Transport

While increased travel by public transport is desirable for environmental reasons, access to a car in Scotland can hugely increase access to jobs, as well as access to support services and training opportunities.

Think tank Onward<sup>9</sup> has recently published a new dataset that shows how many jobs are reachable by car and public transport in every small local area in Britain. Chart 2 below uses this dataset to show how many jobs on average are accessible within one hour (door to door) by public transport or car for Scottish Data Zones in each of eight rural/urban categories. In rural areas that are considered accessible, for example, a person could in theory reach areas with an average number of 22,495 jobs by public transport. In a car, however, they could potentially reach more than half a million jobs.

People seeking to return from unemployment to work are far more likely to be both on a low income and not have a car. The latest Scottish Household Survey<sup>10</sup> showed that 60% of households with an annual net household income lower than £10,000 have no access to car (51% for household income between £10-£15,000) compared with just 3% of households with an average income of more than £50,000. Disabled people are less likely to have a car available to their household than non-disabled people (52% compared to 77%), even when age and income effects are disregarded. Young people are also particularly penalised: a survey of young people in rural areas by Scottish Rural Action<sup>11</sup> found that almost half (48%) had been prevented from going to work because of the expense of travel.

**Chart 2: Number of jobs accessible within an hour by public transport or car, Scottish Data Zones by rural/urban category**



Source: Onward Network Effects dataset (github), analysis by rural/urban classification by Reed in Partnership.

All but one of the employment advisers who took part in this research had found that a participant living in a rural area has been unable to apply for or accept a job role because of transport difficulties. As we found in our research on rural jobseekers in England, the biggest issue by far was the incompatibility of timetabled buses with the hours or shifts required to work in most major sectors, from retail, hospitality to catering or health and care.

For example, one adviser says: ““I have a participant who applied for a janitor role for schools with his local council. He was offered the role but was unable to make the required start time (7am) because of no public transport before 8am.” Another described a participant from Dunshalt, Cupar, who had been

“Younger participants living in rural areas e.g. Falkland, Cupar, barely have any opportunities to apply for within a one-hour public transport area. Younger people are already up against more experienced applicants and often younger applicants have a lower level of skills, making it even harder to find a job. Younger applicants rely mostly on public transport. Due to the low frequency of public transport in rural areas it is more difficult for them to attend early morning job role warehouse operatives where the shifts usually start by 6:00am or even earlier. They often get demoralised very soon due to lack of opportunities and transportation links.”

Percy Anklesaria, Reed in Partnership employment adviser, Edinburgh

applying for numerous roles in Fife in several different sectors, while improving his employability significantly (for example gaining a bar management qualification). Despite this, his adviser reports that he had received many job rejections “as he can't work until late hours due to the lack of public transport”.

"Employers heavily favour those with a car."

Employment adviser supporting participants in Highland

Two advisers remarked that bus services still appeared more restricted in Summer 2021 than they had been prior to the pandemic, restricting the geographical areas that participants with no car could consider. While another, supporting participants in the Scottish Borders, suspected that some employers rejected applicants when they saw their postcode and assumed that the applicant would have difficulty getting to work on time and might be unreliable, regardless of the participant's willingness to undertake the travel.

**Encouraging employers to get involved in transport:** Many organisations across Scotland are working on solutions to improve transport for jobseekers and employees in an environmentally sustainable way. These include CoMoUK, a charity that promotes the environmental, economic, health and social benefits of shared transport. As CoMoUK says in a recent report: “Shared mobility can also make communities more sustainable, particularly Scotland’s diverse rural communities and can help tackle a range of socio-economic barriers such as transport poverty, by offering lower cost options of getting around.” Its action kit<sup>12</sup> for employers includes case studies of employers that have successfully introduced a different way of supporting employee transport, including a case study of Highland Council, which saved £900,000 by switching to a car club.

**Putting employment needs at the heart of transport planning:** Discounted public transport for people seeking work and travel support offered by employment support providers help with affordability in the short term, while employment support providers also work with employers to encourage car shares or other solutions. However at a policy and planning level, there is great potential in more extensive partnership work between local government, communities and employers to improve transport connectivity for rural job seekers. Some projects around demand responsive transport, for example, are being piloted as part of the Scottish Government’s Strategic Transport Projects Review<sup>13</sup>, which has as one of its objectives to “increase sustainable access to labour markets and key centres for employment, education and training.”

## 2. Digital connectivity

While broadband access rates in Scotland have improved in recent years, access to the speeds necessary for employers and home workers are a well-reported labour market barrier, inhibiting inward investment, small business growth and the ability to work from home. For example, Scotland’s Rural Youth Project found that while 97% of young people consider digital connectivity essential to their future, only 13% say they can access high-speed broadband<sup>14</sup>. As the Skills Action Plan for Rural Scotland from Skills Development Scotland points out, access to ultra-fast broadband is particularly limited, as are important supporting technologies such as mobile phone coverage.<sup>15</sup>

**Tackling digital exclusion in rural Scotland:** As well as action being taken by government and help from employment support services (with access to devices and digital skills) there are a wealth of community and local government organisations taking action to improve access to digital devices and improve digital skills in Scotland. For example, the Forres Area Community Trust’s Forres Online Project<sup>16</sup> works not just in Forres but in the surrounding rural areas to support people to increase their digital skills as an essential tool to participation in everyday life. At the start of October 2021 it had supported 2,895 people, targeting those over 50 and the long-term unemployed but helping people of all ages, offering both remote support and outreach sessions in nearby rural communities.

### 3. Childcare

For all parents but single parents in particular, the logistics of combining a childcare drop-off with getting to work by public transport add another barrier to getting a job (see Reed in Partnership, *Supporting jobseekers in rural areas*, for a more detailed discussion). As one adviser explained: “For many single parents it is simply not feasible for them to travel to childcare and then travel to their employment as these two facilities may be up to 50 miles apart in some areas.” In many rural areas there is also a scarcity of affordable childcare (worsened by the pandemic) which can mean women in particular being unable to work or work only minimal hours.

**Funding, transport and innovation:** A recent Government report<sup>17</sup> suggests that childcare should be a priority if women’s access to work and pay rates are to be improved in rural Scotland. It highlights that: “Several providers stated that it is women who transport children and are limited to part-time and low-paid work as a result.” It points to some innovative models of providing childcare in remote areas, that are often run collaboratively with parents, third sector providers or the council. But says that better transport and funding are needed to support the sustainability of the sector.

### 4. Job choice and remote/flexible working

Rural economies are hugely varied in their sectoral make-up<sup>17</sup>, but the choice of sectors and job roles can be restricted by connectivity and remoteness. There tends to a narrower range of entry-level jobs and fewer skilled jobs without significant travel. There is also a much higher share of microbusinesses in rural areas, which can provide opportunity for jobseekers but there can be challenges around training and progression<sup>18</sup>.

Expanding choices for rural jobseekers involves many factors - not least the work to increase access to training and skills development opportunities outlined by Skills Development Scotland<sup>19</sup> - but a further issue to examine may be whether more homeworking or hybrid working could open up roles to people in more remote communities. Reed in Partnership employment advisers taking part in our research report are supporting people to do this and see it as a major opportunity for rural residents, but Table 3 illustrates how challenging it can be because of the nature of jobs available. It shows the occupations advertised in online job postings between April and September 2021, comparing 15 Scottish rural local authorities with the most urban local authorities (Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee).

With two exceptions (sales/business development managers and administrative occupations) the occupations advertised in rural areas are mainly key worker roles that usually require presence at a place of work, while this is only true of one role from urban occupations (nurses).

**Table 3: Top ten occupations in job postings in rural/urban local authorities, April to September 2021**

Rural local authorities	Urban local authorities
1. Nurses	1. Programmers & software development professionals
2. Care workers and home carers	2. Sales accounts/business development managers
3. Cleaners and domestics	3. Finance/investment analysts & advisers
4. Kitchen and catering assistants	4. Nurses
5. Van drivers	5. Business/financial project management professionals
6. Chefs	6. Other administrative occupations
7. Other administrative occupations	7. Management consultants & business analysts
8. Sales & retail assistants	8. Bookkeepers/payroll managers/wages clerks
9. Sales accounts/business development managers	9. Business and related associate professionals
10. Primary & nursery education teaching professionals	10. HR & industrial relations officers

Source: Emsi Burning Glass, 2020 ([economicmodelling.co.uk](http://economicmodelling.co.uk))

**Transferable skills:** While increasing overall skills levels amongst rural residents is a priority, for many people living in small or remote places, transferable skills are important in increasing someone's ability to find a new job near to where they live, as Graham's story in Thurso (page nine) illustrates.

**Homeworking** will not be an option for many frontline care, NHS, logistics, transport or retail workers, but there may be more non-professional/managerial roles that could potentially be done at least partially from home than at present. Currently, most of rural Scotland has rates of homeworking that are below the UK average.<sup>20</sup> There is also a need to widen access of flexible working amongst rurally-based employees, in particular to improve labour market prospects for single parents and disabled people in rural areas.

## 5. Continued access to remote support

While the return of face-to-face support for jobseekers has been much needed, continued remote, flexible support is emerging as having an important part to play in supporting rural jobseekers. For rural residents, having different ways to access learning or support can be crucial. The South of Scotland Skills and Learning Network, for example, is setting out to increase access to learning through a digital and physical "hub and spoke" network to provide access to a wide range of learning and skills opportunities with a clear focus on regional skills gaps in sectors such as energy and engineering, construction and care.

In employment support, remote support can mean that:

- time can be shortened between different stages of the process (for example between the referral of a participant from Jobcentre Plus and enrolling them on support) enabling people to receive speedier active support;
- participants can access a wide range training and support from outside their geographical area;
- participants can spend time they may have taken travelling to engage in activities such as training or jobsearch; and
- local employers can engage more closely with groups of jobseekers remotely, when they may not always have had the time to come and visit people face-to-face.

With the important proviso that providing digital employment support must go hand in hand with tackling digital exclusion, building on the delivery innovations made during the pandemic has the capacity to continue to improve reach, personalisation and choice in employment support for the rural jobseeker.

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**Reed** in Partnership

