

**Reed** in Partnership

# Supporting jobseekers in rural areas

Reed in Partnership research report



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Policy &  
Research

# Supporting jobseekers in rural areas

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## Introduction



Supporting people in rural areas has long been a challenge for employment support services because of distance, poor transport links, low population density and a range of connectivity issues.

Perhaps the most typical story is of someone who is offered a job but cannot take it, because they do not drive and the first of two expensive buses needed to reach work departs two hours after their 7am start time.

Reed in Partnership works to support residents access employment and training in some of the most rural locations in the UK - from the Southern part of Northern Ireland to Northumberland, Shropshire, and Cornwall.

Covid-19 exacerbated these rural connectivity problems, while also exposing the scale of digital exclusion. However, the remote delivery of employment support services involved much innovation and learning. We have the opportunity to put that learning into practice now to improve the labour market prospects of rural residents across the UK.

One proviso to this report is that successive studies<sup>1</sup> have illustrated just how diverse the UK's local labour markets are: what works for rural Kent is different to what works in County Durham. Moreover, many of the worst effects of the pandemic have been felt by the most disadvantaged people in society wherever they live.

Local places themselves are the experts on what is needed to improve skills and employment opportunities in their communities and regions: this report seeks to support this local effort. Firstly, it seeks to get a better understanding of which parts of rural England are having the most challenging labour market difficulties. Secondly, it collates insights from our frontline staff and stakeholders working in very different rural places across the UK on challenges and solutions for rural jobseekers.

<sup>1</sup>For example see Localis, [In Place of Work: Influencing Local Labour Markets](#), 2017.

# Key findings

## Which rural areas are of most concern?

- 1 While big cities have seen the biggest rises in unemployment as a result of Covid-19, a minority of rural local authorities had a claimant count rate above the average for England in February 2021. On average the claimant count is much higher around rural-related towns than in more remote areas.
- 2 The most concerning areas are places that had labour market difficulties predating the pandemic: Tendring in Essex, East Lindsey on the Lincolnshire coast, the Isle of Wight, and Swale, Kent. A further list of rural places have local, rural pockets within them with a high proportion of people claiming unemployment benefits. These are: Redcar and Cleveland, County Durham, Wakefield, Northumberland, Cornwall, and to a lesser extent Shropshire and the East Riding of Yorkshire. Coastal areas, whether rural or urban, stand out as needing support.
- 3 Some rural places like the Lake District and Derbyshire Dales have seen high use of the furlough scheme, particularly to support businesses in the visitor economy, but in most of these areas the proportion of people claiming unemployment benefits is currently quite low. These places will need careful support during the critical transition as the visitor economy opens up and the furlough scheme is withdrawn in order to prevent unemployment increasing.
- 4 There is a gendered aspect to both the furlough and claimant count statistics. Women were more likely to have been furloughed in almost all rural areas at the end of March 2021, while the gender split in cities was more even. In contrast, across nearly all rural and urban areas the claimant count is higher for men than women.

## What are the main barriers for jobseekers in rural areas as we emerge from the lockdown?

- 1 Rural transport is by far the biggest barrier for jobseekers as they seek to get to interviews, support services, training or further education and a potential new job. More than nine in 10 (92%) of Reed in Partnership employment advisers surveyed report that a participant they have been supporting in a rural area has been unable to consider or accept a job because of transport.

- 2 This logistical challenge is most severe for lower-earners and those who also face other sources of disadvantage. For young people, many disabled people, parents and particularly single parents, poor transport connectivity interacts with other issues - the complications of a childcare drop off, the lesser likelihood of being able to drive amongst younger people, a mobility disability or anxiety about transport, for example.
- 3 Workers in key frontline roles in care, warehousing, retail, or the NHS usually need to get to work outside the hours of rural bus services. As well as the clash between bus timetables and shift times, the cost of rural bus travel is prohibitive to someone on a low income.
- 4 Digital exclusion is a significant barrier for jobseekers in rural areas, relating to access to devices and data as well as broadband infrastructure.
- 5 The narrower choice of jobs in rural areas is a big issue for building back rural economies better, as well as supporting lower-skilled jobseekers to gain the skills to progress. In Reed in Partnership's adviser survey, a more limited range of jobs and sectors in rural areas was rated only second to transport as a barrier to employment.



## What can help improve opportunities for rural jobseekers?

- 1 Accelerate place-based working and collaboration.** While the pandemic has seen more collaboration at place level between government, the community and voluntary sector and employers, there is huge potential in going further, with employment support services aligned with local recovery plans and “no wrong door” for people needing support.
- 2 Put labour market concerns at the heart of rural transport planning.** More rural bus services are welcome, but they need to be at the right times to enable workers to be able to get to their jobs on time.
- 3 Employers can play a greater part in supporting employee transport in rural areas.** Funding minibuses or other transport options may be feasible for some employers but other options include supporting the development of car-share schemes or getting involved in local transport planning.
- 4 Fully exploit the potential of remote support for rural residents.** Face-to-face employment support is essential but continued use of remote support through a blended approach can strengthen our support for rural jobseekers in the long term.
- 5 Employers could consider whether there are more entry-level jobs that could be done at home in rural areas.** Homeworking will not be an option for most frontline care, NHS, logistics, transport or retail workers, but there may be more lower-skilled or lower-paid roles that could potentially be done at least partially from home.

Homeworking is not an option for most frontline care, NHS, logistics, transport or retail workers

# The impact of Covid-19 and the outlook for rural labour markets

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This chapter looks at what the claimant count and furlough statistics can tell us about the outlook for rural labour markets as they begin to open up again.

The analysis below focuses on England only, because the nations of the UK use different ways of defining urban and rural places. It looks at the claimant count at both local authority and Lower Super Output Area (LSOA) level<sup>2</sup>. It then uses the two different ways of categorising urban and rural areas at these two geographical levels: the Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authority

Districts<sup>3</sup> and the different categories used at LSOA level<sup>4</sup>. There are many ways of classifying rural and urban areas, none of which are perfect, but looking at LSOA level enables the identification of higher claimant count “hotspots” in local authorities where the overall claimant count might be low.

LSOAs are small units of Census geography that contain between 1,000 and 3,000 people. The claimant count – the number of people claiming unemployment benefits principally for the reason of being unemployed<sup>5</sup> – is far from a perfect indicator of unemployment as it is sensitive to changes in the benefits regime. It also captures some people who are unemployed but with a very low income and/or low hours. However, it is useful to highlight the relative numbers of people who may need assistance of some kind to get into a sustainable job.



<sup>2</sup> The claimant count figures are taken from Nomis and are not seasonally adjusted.

<sup>3</sup> ONS/DEFRA, *2011 Rural-Urban Classification of Local Authority Districts and Similar Geographic Units in England: A User Guide*, 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Government Statistical Service, *The 2011 Rural-Urban Classification for Output Areas in England*, January 2017.

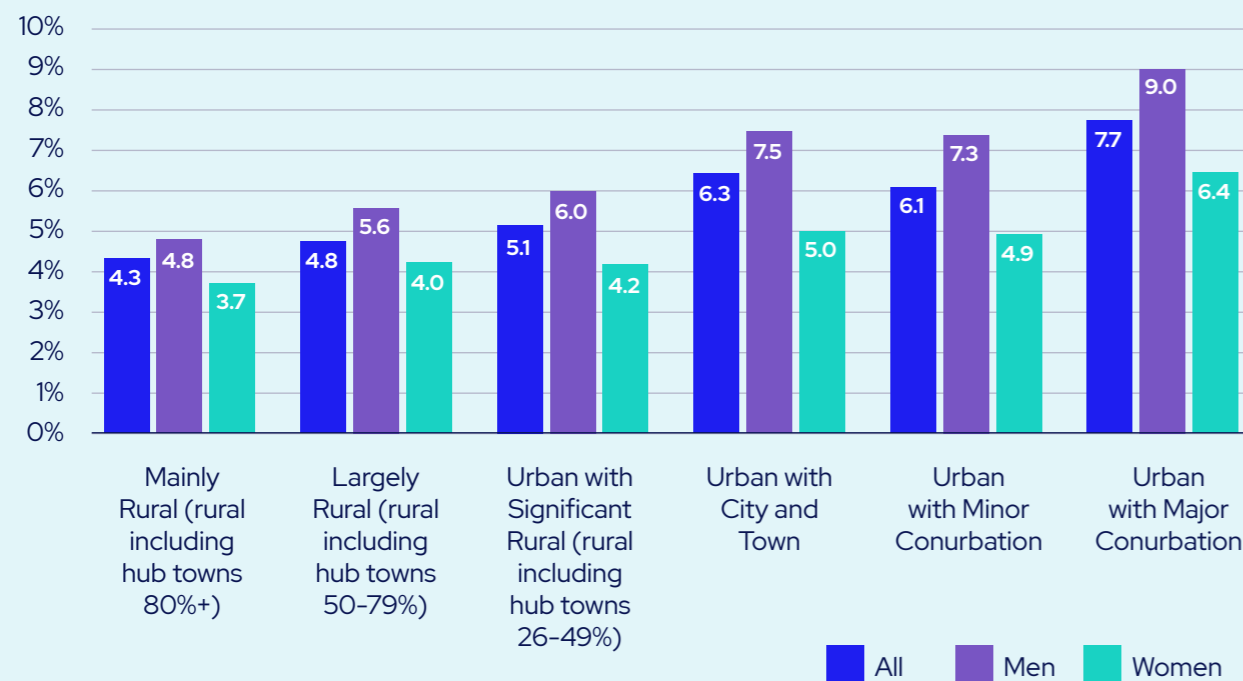
<sup>5</sup> Currently, this is a combination of claimants of Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) and claimants of Universal Credit (UC) who fall within the UC “searching for work” conditionality.

## The rural/urban context

The labour market statistics suggest that, overall, cities and towns are faring worse than most rural areas in terms of rising unemployment. Everywhere has been negatively impacted by the pandemic in some way, with the claimant count rising across the country. But it is important to be aware that cities have been hit particularly badly, as well as smaller towns reliant on

particular sectors such as air travel, like Luton or Crawley, where, as the Centre for Cities notes<sup>6</sup>, the claimant count is continuing to rise in 2021 in contrast to other places where it has stabilised. By February 2021, the proportion of working-age people claiming unemployment-related benefits was 7.7% in the big cities, compared to 4.3% in mainly rural local authorities (see Chart 1).

Chart 1 - Claimant count, percentage of working age population by local authority rural/urban classification, February 2021

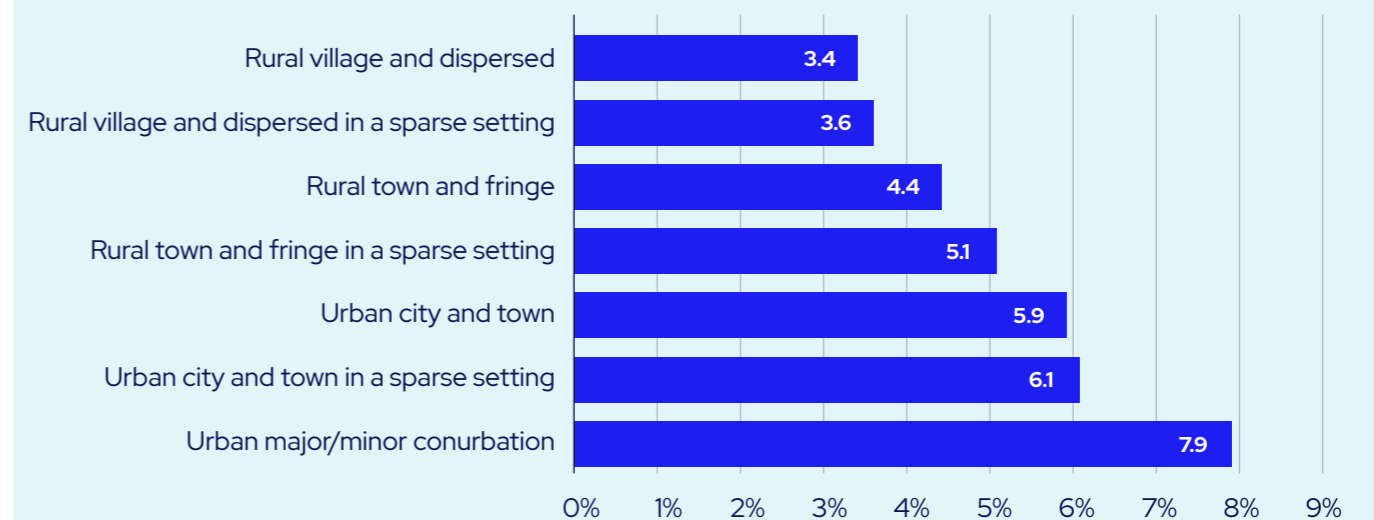


ONS, claimant count, February 2021

At small area level, the highest claimant counts are found overwhelmingly in urban areas, but small rural towns show higher claimant count rates than more remote areas. At LSOA level, the pattern of higher claimant counts in the most urban areas becomes even more pronounced (Chart 2). In fact, of the 5,552 LSOAs in England where one in 10 or more working age residents were

claiming unemployment-related benefits in February 2021, a striking 99% are categorised as urban. However, the difference between areas categorised as “rural town and fringe” and bigger towns is not that wide, with rural towns in a sparse setting seeing an average claimant count of 5.1% compared with 5.9% for urban towns.

Chart 2 - Average claimant count at LSOA level, February 2021



Calculated using Nomis, claimant count February 2021 and population estimates, mid-2019.

## Where exactly are rural claimant count hotspots?

There are a small number of rural local authorities with above-average claimant counts such as Tendring or East Lindsey. But there are other local authorities where there are claimant count hotspots at LSOA level, such as County Durham.

- Tendring in Essex;
- East Lindsey on the Lincolnshire coast;
- the Isle of Wight; and
- Swale in Kent.

At local authority level, there are only four council areas that are classified as “mainly” or “largely” rural and have a claimant count rate that was higher than the average for England (6.6%) in February 2021. These are:

These are coastal areas with labour market and skills challenges that predate the pandemic, as well as relatively high levels of deprivation (see more on p9). A further list of places that have significant rural populations but are counted as “urban with significant rural” – Great Yarmouth, Folkstone and Hythe,

<sup>6</sup> Centre for Cities, [One year on: what has been the impact of the pandemic on different parts of the country?](#), March 2021

Redcar and Cleveland, Bedford, and Boston – also have higher claimant counts than the English average in February 2021. For some of these local authorities, however, notably Bedford and Boston, higher claimant counts are almost exclusively in urban areas when you look at LSOA level.

Looking at the rural LSOAs with the very highest claimant counts, they are concentrated in a surprisingly small number of local authorities. The very highest is in Easington Colliery on the County Durham coast, where almost one in four (23.7%) of the working age population were claiming unemployment benefits in February 2021 – four times the average for England. In fact, County Durham accounts for 16 of the 58 rural LSOAs with a claimant count of 10% or higher.

An analysis of all rural LSOAs with a claimant count that was higher than 6.6% – the average for England in February 2021 – shows that of the 461 rural LSOAs in this category, more than one in four (27%) were in County Durham, Cornwall or Northumberland. The other local authorities most likely to contain rural areas with a high claimant count include Redcar and Cleveland, East Lindsey, Wakefield, East Riding of Yorkshire, Shropshire, and the Isle of Wight.

Putting these two analyses together, the local authorities of most concern in terms of high rural claimant counts – either across the authority as a whole or in a significant number of rural LSOAs – are shown below. While some have claimant counts that are overall below the average for England, they are included because they have quite a few LSOA areas with high claimant counts.

**Table 1: Rural or partly rural local authorities with high claimant counts or a number of rural claimant count “hotspots”**

Local authority	February 2021 claimant count at local authority level	Number of rural LSOAs with above average claimant count	% of population counted as rural (including rural hub towns)
Great Yarmouth	9.0%	7	35%
Tendring	8.3%	8	63%
Folkestone and Hythe	7.5%	5	39%
Redcar and Cleveland	7.3%	13	33%
East Lindsey	7.2%	11	100%
Isle of Wight	7.0%	9	100%
Swale	6.7%	4	64%
County Durham	6.3%	62	61%
Wakefield	6.2%	9	24%
Northumberland	6.0%	20	71%
Cornwall	5.8%	44	83%
Shropshire	4.6%	9	75%
East Riding of Yorkshire	4.5%	9	60%

## Spotlight on Northumberland

**In very few areas is the distinction between rural and urban labour markets clear cut. An analysis of Northumberland at a smaller geographical level provides a good example of this.**

**Northumberland is classified as a “largely rural” county. Its rural population is 46%, rising to 71% if the population of towns considered to be rural-related hub towns (such as Ashington, Berwick-Upon-Tweed, Hexham, and Morpeth) are included. The county is vast, with remote areas including the National Park, while the south east corner is more populated and deprived, especially around the ex-coalfield areas and small coastal towns such as Blythe.**

**In February 2021, the proportion of the working-age population claiming unemployment-related benefits was 6%, roughly 11,300 people across the county. In more than one in 10 of the county’s 197 Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA), however, the claimant count was 10% or more, reaching 16% or 17% in some neighbourhoods on the coast of the county.**

**The 15 LSOA areas with the highest claimant counts (12% to 17%) are all classified as “urban city and town” but are in the small towns of Blyth and Ashington, the latter which is classified as a “rural-related town”. But there are then a mix of rural and small-town areas with significantly high claimant count rates, such as in Guidepost or Woodhorn on the outskirts of Ashington, where claimant counts still tend to vary from 10% to 11%. Those places classified as “rural towns” have almost as high claimant count rates as those counted as “urban city and town.”**

**More remote areas have much lower rates of people claiming unemployment-related benefits. But there are quite a lot of these areas, and when you add up the numbers of people who are claiming unemployment-related benefits and may need the support of services to find a job, that adds up to more than 1,000 people in areas classified as “rural village and dispersed” or in a “sparse setting” as well as a further 400 in urban settlements in a “sparse setting”.**

**Both the claimant count and unemployment rate may not be capturing the number of people in need of either benefits or employment support as effectively as in towns.** The recent Rural Lives report<sup>7</sup>, based on research with communities in Northumberland and Scotland, suggests strong levels of benefits stigma in rural areas, digital exclusion as a barrier to applying for help, and particular difficulties around accessing health assessments for disability benefits. The report notes some of the likely reasons:

“In rural areas fewer of those eligible are social housing tenants who would receive relevant information and support from their landlords; accessing advice and information offered in distant urban centres is problematic; there are stronger cultures of independence and self-reliance in rural areas, allied to different subjective assessments of poverty and hardship; and there is more visibility and less anonymity in small communities with more potential for stigmatisation of receipt of certain benefits.”

<sup>7</sup> Rural Lives: [Understanding Financial Hardship and Vulnerability in Rural Areas](#), March 2021.

Moreover, during the pandemic, we know that many people have not been “seeking work” given the shut-down of so much economic activity during lockdowns. This may be more likely in rural areas where the choice of sectors may be more limited.

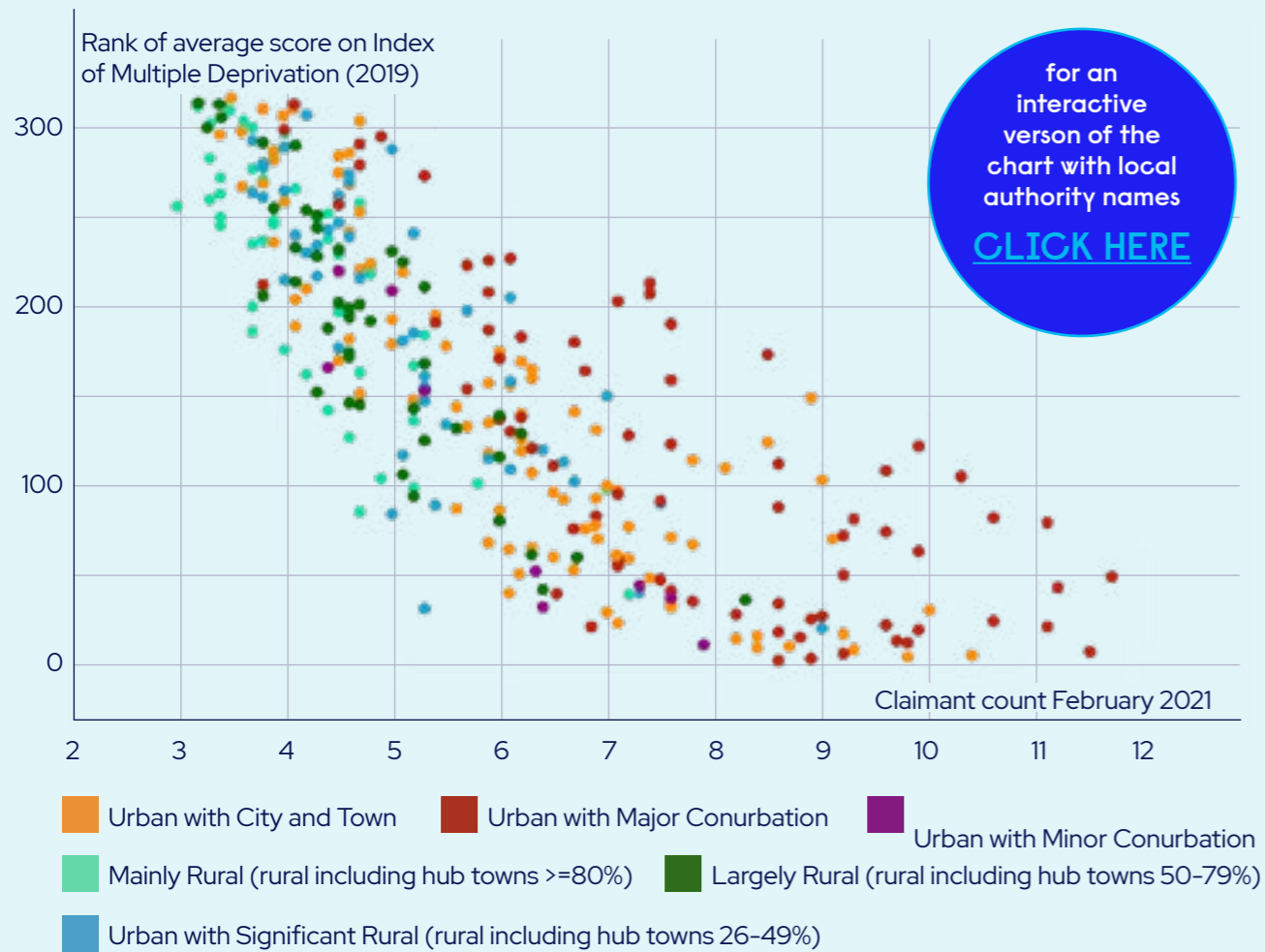
**Coastal areas – both urban and rural – stand out on any measure as places needing social and economic support. To tackle the worst rural unemployment hotspots, we need a focus on “left behind” rural coastal places as well as towns.**

One feature of the rural areas with higher claimant counts in table 1 is that, with the

exception of Shropshire, they are all on the coast. Coastal areas have been singled out in a number of analyses of towns as needing particular attention as we begin to recover from the economic impact of the pandemic<sup>8</sup>.

Places like Tendring (Essex), East Lindsey (Lincolnshire), Swale (Kent), and the Isle of Wight need focused support, alongside their more urban counterparts such as Blackpool, Hastings or Hartlepool. There is a strong link with deprivation here, as shown in Chart 3, while all the places above have a strong need for skills support, which lag behind the national average.

**Chart 3 – Local authorities by claimant count (%) and average scores on Index of Multiple Deprivation**



Source: English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2019 and claimant count, ONS. Created with [Datawrapper](#)

<sup>8</sup> For example see Resolution Foundation, Local differences Responding to the local economic impact of coronavirus, June 2020.

## Unemployment and poverty in coastal Essex

The local authority district of Tendring has a 36% rural population, or 63% when the rural-related population of two hubs towns is included. In one tiny area of Jaywick<sup>9</sup>, near Clacton-on-Sea, more than one in four (22.4%) people of working age were claiming unemployment-related benefits in February 2021. On the 2019 English Indices of Deprivation this area of Jaywick is ranked number one out of all 32,844 LSOAs in England.

Jaywick is classified by ONS as a rural, rather than urban area, but it is on the edge of a run of small coastal towns such as Clacton-on-Sea and Frinton-on-Sea and is not the sort of area people picture when they think of rurality in the UK. However, the connectivity challenges are similar. Using the National Audit Office’s Transport Accessibility to Local Services tool<sup>10</sup>, it takes more than an hour to get from Jaywick to anywhere classified as a large employment centre.

## The furlough scheme and the rural visitor economy

**Rural places with a strong visitor economy face a critical transition from lockdown when furlough ends.** The furlough scheme has been very important in supporting jobs in rural areas where the visitor economy is important, such as the Derbyshire Dales or the Lake District. A slightly higher proportion of predominantly rural local authorities (35%) had more than the average for England (14%) of eligible employments furloughed at the end of March 2021 than predominantly urban local authorities (31%)<sup>11</sup>.

The highest rates of employments on furlough in March 2021 in rural parts of England were in South Lakeland (24%) and Eden (21%), the Isle of Wight (19%) then North Norfolk, Cornwall and Allerdale (all 18%).

There is a strong link with the accommodation and food services sector:

- Half (49%) of predominantly rural local authorities have a proportion of furloughed workers from hospitality that is higher

than the UK average, compared to 25% of predominantly urban ones.

- Almost two-thirds (65%) of the local authorities where more than one in three workers on the furlough scheme work in hospitality are predominantly or mainly rural local authorities.

With the exception of the Isle of Wight, claimant count rates are currently low or below average in these areas. If the hospitality sector is able to recover strongly this summer (accommodation and food sector accounts for almost half of the employments furloughed in Eden, for example) a significant increase in unemployment may be avoided. The current strong growth in hospitality vacancies in these areas bodes well. There is a potential red flag for rising unemployment, however, if support ends before tourism-related businesses can open up as much as hoped.

**Women were far more likely to have been furloughed in rural areas, while men are**

<sup>9</sup> A lower super output area, Tendring 018A.

<sup>10</sup> Can be found at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/other/transport-accessibility-to-local-services-a-journey-time-tool/>

<sup>11</sup> Calculations based on HMRC, [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics](#), 6 May 2021.

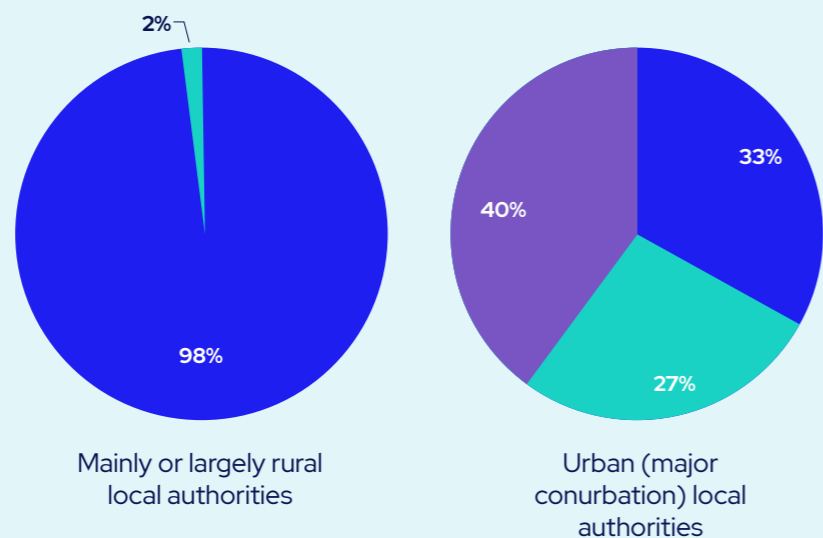
**more likely to have been furloughed in cities.** As the Chart on page 12 shows, in almost all (98%) predominantly rural local authorities, a higher proportion of eligible women than men were furloughed at the end of March 2021. There are no rural local authorities where a higher proportion of men than women were furloughed. The corresponding figure for the most urban areas of England was 33%.

In contrast, across nearly all local authorities – rural or urban – the claimant count is higher for men than women. Employment support providers need to be mindful of these gender differences as furlough support comes to an end, as we could see the claimant count rising amongst women if furloughed women do not return to their jobs.

### Chart 4 - Furlough take-up by gender, rural v. city local authorities

As at 31 March 2021

- Women more likely to be furloughed than men
- Same rates of furlough take-up by gender
- Men more likely than women to be furloughed



Source: HM Revenue & Customs CJRS statistics, May 2021

Employment support providers need to be mindful of these gender differences as furlough support comes to an end

# Transport, digital and labour market connectivity: challenges and solutions

Wherever they live, jobseekers have common barriers such as confidence, health problems, or not possessing the skills needed for the jobs that are available. But in rural areas, an additional layer of barriers relate to connectivity – particularly transport, but also digital.

Related to these connectivity and distance challenges, a third issue is that labour market options for jobseekers can be more limited in rural areas, both in terms of the quality and choice of jobs available.

This section examines these three challenges, using the findings from a pre-pandemic survey Reed in Partnership carried out with its frontline adviser staff (supplemented with some post-pandemic feedback from staff and stakeholders), plus case studies of some of the ways in which local communities are seeking to overcome these barriers.



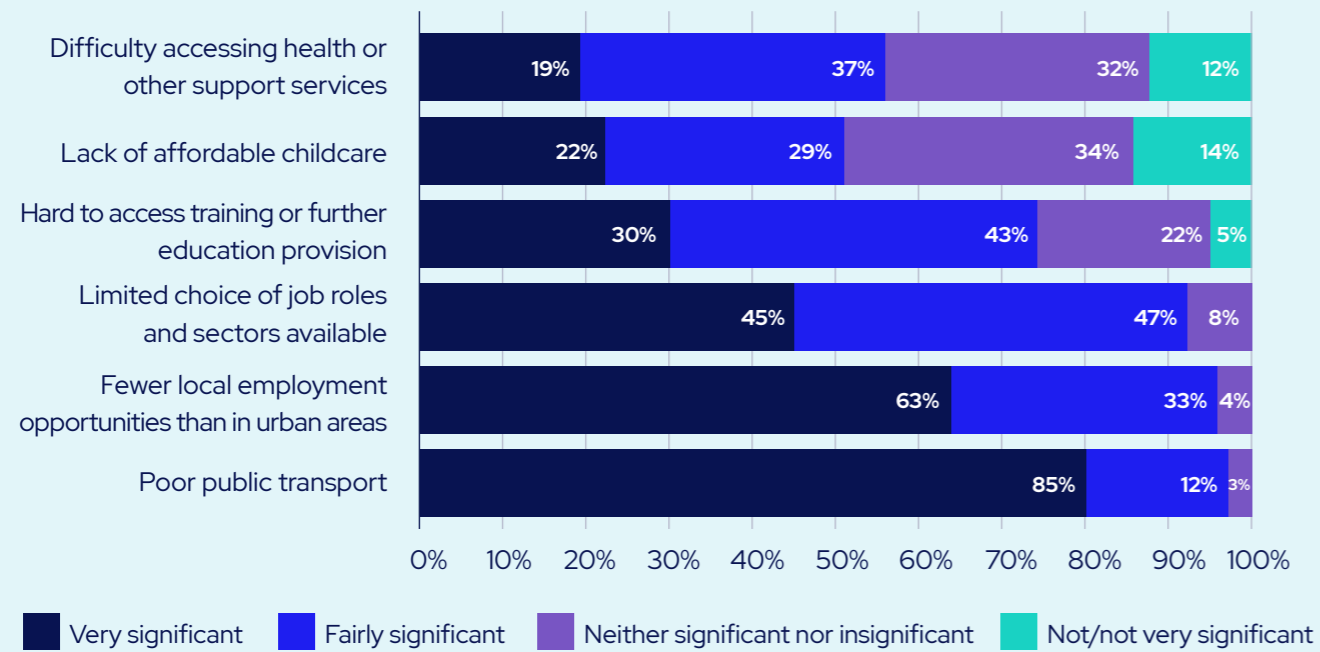


## Transport

Just before the pandemic, we asked Reed in Partnership employment advisers for their views on the challenges and solutions to

unemployment in rural areas. The issue at the top of the list was poor public transport in rural areas.

**Chart 5 - Barriers to employment in rural areas, rated by importance**



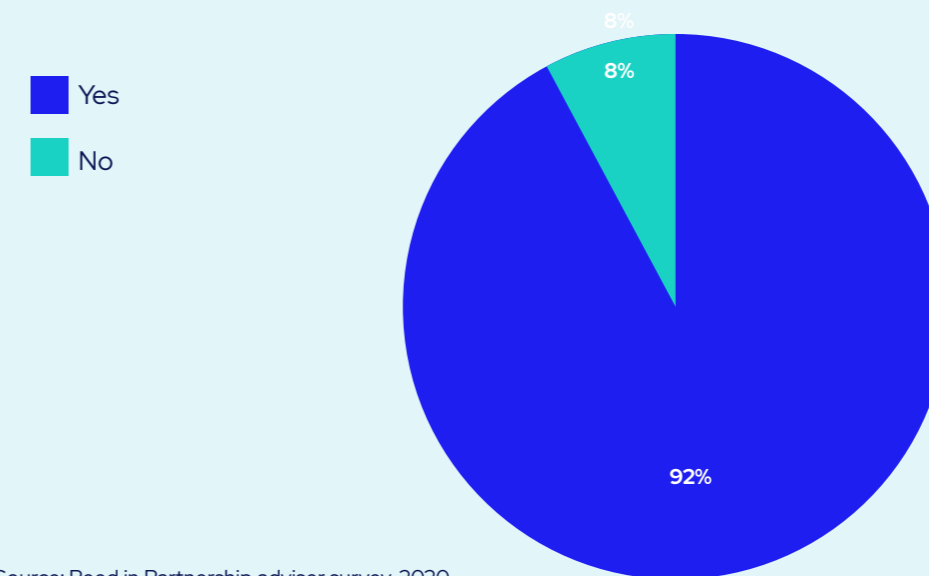
Source: Reed in Partnership adviser survey, 2020

**Better public transport is the number one priority, alongside more funding for community transport and demand-responsive transport services.** While the inadequacy of rural public transport is well-documented, a survey of Reed in Partnership employment advisers highlights the dramatic way in which poor transport narrows choices for unemployed people and prevents them finding work. As many as 92% of advisers said that they had worked with participants who were unable to consider or accept a job because of transport.

**“In rural areas, local authority-supported bus provision declined by 54% between 2011/12 and 2019/20, while commercial services increased by only 3% over the same period.”**

**Campaign for Better Transport, Response to DfT consultation on Future Transport Strategy, 2021**

**Chart 6 - Have you ever found that a participant living in a rural area has been unable to apply for or accept a job role because of transport difficulties?**



Source: Reed in Partnership adviser survey, 2020

**Poor public transport in rural areas makes other inequalities much worse.** For groups with other sources of labour market disadvantage, poor transport worsens them

and narrows job choices and chances of progression. We need joined-up efforts to tackle this. For example:



**Young people** are less likely to have access to a car and more likely to get a job that requires unsocial hours work. For example, only 35% of 17-20-year-olds and 62% of 21-29-year-olds hold a full driving licence, with the cost of learning to drive highly prohibitive for many. Poor transport connectivity also greatly inhibits young people’s participation in further education and training - which will be key to tackling youth unemployment over the coming years. The Rural Services Network illustrates how an urban young person would on average have a choice of four further education providers within a 30-minute public transport trip, compared to one for a rural young person<sup>12</sup>.



**Single parents** are more likely to need travel and working hours that make both childcare and work possible. While transport makes this difficult, advisers also report more difficulty in finding genuine hours flexibility in rural than in urban areas. One adviser in Herefordshire reports: “I believe single parents struggle to find an employer that will work around appropriate times for childcare. There is not enough choice of workplaces that will accommodate this for more rural areas.” While single parents are more likely to live in towns, they make up 12% of the rural population in Essex, for example.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Rural Services Network: *Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision*, March 2021.

<sup>13</sup> *Opportunity for Innovation: The Opportunity for innovation in rural transport*, Catapult/FutureGov, 2017



For all **parents**, availability of childcare is also a key issue. In Bridgenorth, Shropshire, one adviser noted: "A participant was offered job in care, but couldn't get back for school pick up due to transport/working hours. [There is a] lack of childcare in the area."



**Disabled people** face vastly more inaccessible travel and narrower travel choices wherever they are in the country. As one employment adviser in Chesterfield noted: "The terrible public transport makes it harder still for those with disabilities."



**Households on a low income** are much less likely to have access to a car (35% of households in the lowest earnings decile own a car compared with more than 90% in the top four deciles<sup>14</sup>), are far more reliant on public transport to get around and are more likely to be on irregular working patterns with late notice of shifts, for instance.

### Trip-chaining and working women in rural areas

In her book, *Invisible Women: Exposing Data Bias in a World Designed for Men*, Caroline Criado-Perez explores the concept of trip-chaining, or journeys with separate stages for different purposes, such as dropping off a child at nursery on the way to work and doing food shopping on the way back, for example. Criado-Perez reports that women are 25% more likely to trip-chain than men, with this figure rising to 39% if there is a child older than nine in the household.

While gendered travel patterns are recognised to some extent by policy makers, most research into gender and transport has been done in towns and cities, not in rural areas. Without a car (or a reliable lift-share), trip-chaining is virtually impossible in remote rural areas and areas on town outskirts with poor transport connectivity. Community transport solutions offering scooter or bike hire, for example, may be a lifeline for some but are unlikely to work for parents doing a childcare drop-off. With the expansion of demand-led transport, these sorts of practical considerations for jobseekers and workers need to be built in to planning.

During the pandemic we have relied upon key workers in sectors such as social care, retail, warehousing, and food manufacturing who cannot work at home. But in rural areas these are the people for

whom bus timetables are most incompatible with unsocial hours and shift patterns. The next page shows some of our employment advisers' comments and their frustration with local bus services.

<sup>14</sup> ONS, Percentage of households with cars by income group, tenure and household composition, January 2019.



**Travel in rural areas has been even more difficult during the pandemic than it was before.** Feedback from our advisers a year on from the survey suggests that rural transport has been hugely challenging since March 2020, with many rural bus routes suspended during the pandemic, making it more difficult for key workers in rural areas to get to work. Research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation<sup>15</sup> with low-income families about their experience of the pandemic concluded that: "Covid-19 and lockdown created a sharper divide between households with a car and those without one, presenting what could be described as a new type of disadvantage."

One adviser in the North East explains:

"Already strained public transport links have been put under further pressure by a requirement to limit passengers. This, coupled with a distrust and anxiety around social contact, has made those roles in sectors such as retail and warehousing more inaccessible, particularly as these sectors tend towards earlier, and more inflexible, shift start and finish times."

This is confirmed by a study carried out by the County Councils Network in December 2020<sup>16</sup>, which details the steep decline in rural bus provision over the past decade. It cited findings from the Network's Autumn 2020 Budget survey, suggesting that pressures on council budgets meant that only 20% could foresee any investment in bus subsidies or local transport schemes over the coming year, with 24% anticipating further cuts.

**Working people in rural areas need the Government's new bus strategy need to deliver tangible improvements urgently,**

**especially given the further damage done to the viability of rural transport by Covid-19.**

The publication of the Government's national bus strategy, "Bus Back Better"<sup>17</sup>, has been widely welcomed in its recognition that the current configuration of how bus services outside London are run on such a commercial basis is not working, and its support for the expansion of demand-responsive transport in areas with low population density. A recognition that bus ticket prices are too high and that multi-operator ticketing is needed should also mean a better deal for rural residents, who too often have to buy multiple (and expensive) tickets from different operators to cover a short distance to their place of work.

Alongside the national bus strategy, 17 local councils have been awarded funds from the Rural Mobility Fund, designed to pilot demand-led and other forms of local transport to better serve rural communities. While low population density will always make the business case for expanding rural public transport challenging, the projects approved for funding by the Rural Mobility Fund hold great potential and should be rolled out further once evaluated.

**Community transport services play a vital part in helping rural jobseekers get to work and deliver huge social value for their communities.** All over the UK, small community transport organisations, often staffed by volunteers, work hard to support people in remote areas or with mobility difficulties to travel to the shops, health services and to work.

Across Rydale, York, Scarborough, and Selby, for example, Rydale Community Transport has a car share scheme with almost 800 members and a Wheels2Work scheme that loans mopeds for people who need it to get to work, with financial support available through a local credit union. In West Norfolk, Go to Town operate volunteer car drivers & dial-a-buses, providing transport links for some of the most isolated rural communities in West Norfolk to get to work, school, health services or the shops.

The social impact of these services beyond transport - reducing isolation, engaging volunteers and making savings to the public purse, for example - is clear. One study estimated that for every pound invested in community transport by the local council, almost £9 was spent in the local economy<sup>18</sup>.

Community transport organisations have long been under-funded, while cuts to support for the Wheels2Work scheme meant that many local authorities could not continue to support it. While community transport organisations have been essential during the pandemic in delivering food parcels or taking people to their vaccination appointments, it has meant the suspension of many activities more closely related to the labour market, such as driver training for people using moped hire schemes, for example, for much of the past year. It is vital that these organisations are given the support they need, both to enable them to continue playing such a strong part in rural community resilience and support disconnected residents to get to work.

## Rural Mobility Fund projects on demand-led transport

On 15 March 2021, the Government announced the names of the 17 local authority areas that were successful in bidding for a tranche of the Rural Mobility Fund<sup>19</sup>. Two of the successful councils were:

- **Nottinghamshire County Council, where the Rural Mobility Fund will support the expansion of demand-responsive transport services with eight new vehicles in three areas, including services to link the sparsely populated areas of North East Nottinghamshire with local towns and the rural western area of Rushcliffe District, both linking up with onward links to Mansfield and Nottingham. Another part of the service will link the suburban areas of Mansfield to the centre. The idea is to complement, and integrate with, conventional public transport services and enable a lower-cost, demand led solution for areas of lower population density, where current services are either non-existent or too infrequent to meet everyone's needs. Crucially, it will help sustain bus services during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. Such services are expensive however: the total cost of the project is £5,486,000, of which £1,497,000 will come from the Rural Mobility Fund.**
- **Hertfordshire County Council, where a Demand Responsive Transport project will see better connections between rural areas and town centres in North and East Hertfordshire, bookable by an app or telephone. It will focus on the small market town of Buntingford, but also connect residents up to major towns surrounding the area, such as Royston, Hitchin, or Stevenage.**

<sup>15</sup> Joseph Rowntree Foundation, *Staying afloat in a crisis: Families on low incomes in the pandemic*, March 2021.

<sup>16</sup> County Councils Network/County Council APPG, *Reversing the Decline in Rural Buses*, December 2020.

<sup>17</sup> *Bus Back Better: National bus strategy for England*, March 2021

<sup>18</sup> Cited by *Community Transport Association*.

<sup>19</sup> *Rural Mobility Fund: Successful bids*, Department for Transport, 15 March 2021.

## Digital connectivity

**Covid-19 put digital connectivity for rural England centre-stage. Unreliable broadband and mobile networks are not just holding back local rural businesses and economies but also individual jobseekers in a “digital by default” world.** Digital access is a big issue in holding rural economies back<sup>20</sup>. As the Rural Services Network says: “digital connectivity is a key enabler of business innovation and an important driver of productivity growth. Rural based businesses in all economic sectors and of all sizes (including the self-employed) need access to fast and reliable broadband and mobile networks if they are to thrive, compete and reach new markets”<sup>21</sup>. Moreover, digital and mobile access is now essential for all aspects of the job search process, as well as securing necessary benefits and other support.

In the most remote rural settings, the proportion of premises not able to access a decent fixed broadband service is 35% compared to 1% in urban areas<sup>22</sup>. The Rural Services Network cites Ofcom statistics showing that mobile network coverage is much poorer in rural areas, with 30% of rural properties lacking access to all four of the mobile networks compared to 3% of urban properties<sup>23</sup>.

There are ambitious plans afoot for improvement, including the rollout of Project Gigabit that will see up to 510,000 homes and businesses in rural areas of Cambridgeshire,

Cornwall, Cumbria, Dorset, Durham, Essex, Northumberland, South Tyneside, and Tees Valley benefit, with delivery planned for the first half of 2022.

**Rural digital exclusion is as much about affordability of devices as infrastructure.** Speaking to rural stakeholders, many report that it is the affordability of a useable device and paying for data that is a greater barrier for jobseekers than digital infrastructure. While our pre-pandemic adviser survey did not ask about this issue, when Reed in Partnership surveyed operational staff during the first national lockdown in 2020, we found that just under one in three of all participants had difficulties accessing a device, broadband or data. This proportion was higher amongst participants on services primarily designed to support disabled people or those with health conditions. For example, on our Work and Health Programme in the North East, the proportion struggling to access a device or data was nearer to 50%. In Hertfordshire and other home counties where we deliver a Work Routes service that has a greater proportion of participants with fewer barriers to work, it was nearer 25%.

## Tackling digital exclusion amongst older jobseekers

Reed in Partnership employment advisers, as well as many of our stakeholders, report higher levels of digital exclusion – both in terms of access to devices and skills – amongst older jobseekers in rural areas. Many local projects have been helping people to gain access to devices, while Reed in Partnership’s services also loan tablets and laptops to people who need them.

“Project Digital, run by Barnsley Metroborough Council, has enabled participants aged 50+ to have free rental of a laptop and 3 months internet access. This has made a significant difference in the participants’ ability to find and apply to jobs and training and also to edit their CVs, as this can be very difficult on even the largest of smartphone screens.”

Reed in Partnership Employment Adviser, Barnsley

**While the return of face-to-face support is much needed, continued remote support is emerging as having an important part to play in rural employment support.**

Employment support advisers are motivated by helping people to change their lives and are keen to return fully to meeting everyone face-to-face. Moreover, the scale of digital exclusion in some communities means that face-to-face contact is essential. However remote support has proved highly effective and will remain an important element of a blended approach in future. Remote support for jobseekers in rural areas has meant 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 participants to receive active support sooner;
- Participants can meet a wider range of employers (for example see the Cornwall Hospitality Jobs Fair on the next page) and access training or 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.

<sup>20</sup> For a summary of the issues and developments see [Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision: Rural Digital Connectivity](#), Rural Services Network, March 2021.

<sup>21</sup> Rural Services Network quoted in RSN and the Institute of Economic Development, [Rural Economy Toolkit](#), March 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Statistical Digest of Rural England, Defra, February 2021.

<sup>23</sup> [Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision: Rural Digital Connectivity](#), Rural Services Network, March 2021.



## Work Routes Cornwall's online hospitality jobs fair

On 21 February 2021, the day before the Prime Minister announced the Government's Roadmap, Reed in Partnership's Cornwall Work Routes Recruitment Manager, Sarah King, and her team held an online jobs fair. It focused on the hospitality sector in the knowledge that Cornwall's hospitality employers would be starting to prepare to open up later in the Spring.

In order to make the event engaging for participants and employers, the team were able to secure Cornwall hotelier and TV presenter Alex Polizzi to speak, as well as restaurateurs Dan Henry and James Cochran, who also helped to promote the event.

With 15 large Cornwall employers attending and participants able to "visit" them in different online "rooms", the event has so far resulted in 115 vacancies to fill, for which interviews are continuing to take place.

One employer commented of the event: "Would do this again even after the pandemic as it worked so well." One participant said: "The employers were so helpful and approachable" while another commented: "I visited five employers, ones that I knew I would be able to get to the job by bus... I got some good advice and information from some of the employers. I think it was a brilliant idea, with things being the way they are now. I will definitely be applying to some of the jobs when I receive the list."

## Job quality and choice

**The narrower choice of jobs in rural areas is a big issue for building back rural economies better, as well as supporting lower-skilled jobseekers to gain the skills to progress.** In Reed in Partnership's adviser survey, a more limited range of jobs and sectors in rural areas was rated only second to transport as a barrier to employment.

Rural economies are hugely varied in their sectoral make-up. While for some areas agriculture is a core sector, such as the Fenland District in Northern Cambridgeshire, Norfolk, or Shropshire, tourism is critical for many, while manufacturing and construction are also slightly more important to rural economies than urban ones (see box on p21). As a whole, however, rural areas do tend to offer a narrower range of entry-level jobs and fewer skilled jobs without significant travel.

Rural employers are much more likely to be small firms, while pay and levels of adult skills are slightly lower for rural than urban residents.

**Job postings data from Emsi for March 2021 suggests that after nurses (which topped the list of most commonly advertised job role in both rural and urban areas) the top roles in rural areas were care roles, warehouse roles, sales/business development managers, and van drivers, while in urban areas the most common job postings were all for professional roles.**

March 2021 was far from a typical month in the labour market. With some sectors reopening following periods of prolonged closure, online advertised vacancies have taken off in all areas of the country. But the data provides a useful snapshot as to the jobs in demand in rural and urban areas.

Table 2: Comparing job postings in rural/urban areas, March 2021

Rural local authorities	Urban local authorities
315,045 unique job postings Median advertised salary £12.91ph	1,540,454 unique job postings Median advertised salary: £15.62ph
Top ten occupations	
1. Nurses	1. Nurses
2. Care workers and home carers	2. Sales accounts and business development managers
3. Elementary storage occupations	3. Programmers and software development professionals
4. Sales accounts and business development managers	4. Primary and nursery education teaching professionals
5. Van drivers	5. Finance and investment analysts and advisers
6. Primary and nursery education teaching professionals	6. Business and financial project management professionals
7. Metal working production and maintenance fitters	7. Care workers and home carers
8. Programmers and software development professionals	8. Bookkeepers, payroll managers and wages clerks
9. Cleaners and domestics	9. Human resources and industrial relations officers
10. Other administrative occupations	10. Other administrative occupations.

Source: Emsi, accessed April 2021

While the job vacancies in predominantly rural local authority areas tend to be of a lower skills level (with the exception of nurses and teachers who are in demand in both) it also shows the importance of some sectors to the rural economy where growth has been accelerated as a result of the pandemic, such as warehouse, storage, and driving roles. The most in-demand jobs illustrate the greater demand for higher-skilled, professional jobs in towns and cities. Programmers and software

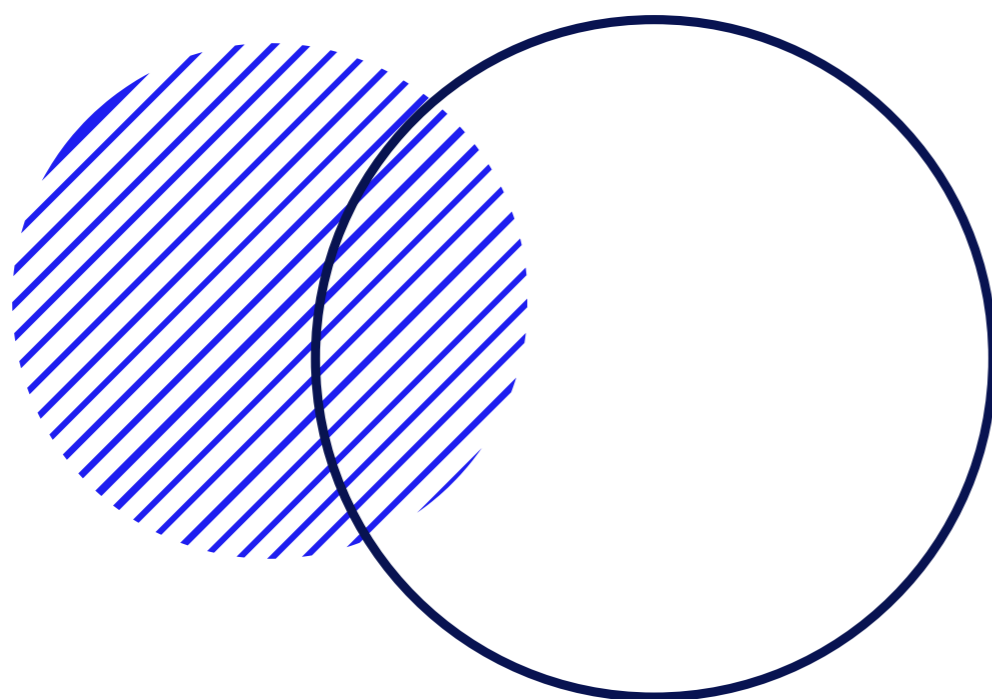
developers appear on both lists, but much higher up the urban list.

The data also illustrates the importance of reliable, rural public transport in getting to frontline roles in rural areas, which overwhelmingly cannot be done at home and mostly involve travel early and late in the day or at night, when rural buses services rarely run.

While the expansion of working from home as a result of the pandemic could provide a real opportunity to improve access to good jobs in rural areas, this is not frequently an option open to lower-paid workers. Research from the ONS has found that employees earning a higher wage are much more likely to be able to work from home<sup>24</sup>.

While Reed in Partnership advisers in some areas of England report an increase in job vacancies for roles that can be done remotely, anecdotally it is reported that this has been relatively minimal compared with the expansion of remote working for people already in a job. While this is partly because many of the job roles that Reed in Partnership participants enter are key worker roles that require physical presence, advisers note other barriers. For example, some call centre or customer care roles that can be performed from home require the participant both to have their own laptop or PC and a sufficiently fast broadband speed, illustrating the way in which digital connectivity is essential for widening rural employment prospects.

While work insecurity and low pay are challenges across the UK economy, they are particularly acute in areas dependent on tourism in coastal and rural areas, where there is a seasonal nature to demand and jobs in these sectors have been devastated by Covid-19. In many remote areas, research points to a high level of polarisation between higher-skilled rural residents who tend to commute to nearby cities and towns (or work at home) to perform high-paid professional roles and local jobs and those who are in lower-paid work closer to home. The Rural Lives project, which released its final report in March<sup>25</sup>, looks at this issue in three rural communities, finding that the precariousness of many rural incomes in tourism or other service sectors is a key source of insecurity for many, interacting with limited transport and childcare options. As the recovery plans of many local government stakeholders highlight, the quality and security of entry-level jobs in rural areas is a key priority.



<sup>24</sup> ONS, *Which jobs can be done from home?* 21 July 2020.

<sup>25</sup> *Rural Lives: Understanding financial hardship and vulnerability in rural areas*, Mark Shucksmith, Polly Chapman, Jayne Glass and Jane Atterton, March 2021

## How are rural labour markets different?

- **Small firms** play a bigger part in rural economies. When employment is measured by where a business unit is based, 83% of rural employment is with an SME, with 31% based in microbusinesses (fewer than 10 employees).
- **By sector**, rural economies are just as diverse as urban ones. Land-based sectors such as agriculture or forestry make up a higher proportion of employers in rural areas, but 85% of rural businesses are not land-based. A greater proportion of jobs in rural areas are in construction and manufacturing than in urban areas, while a higher proportion of jobs in urban areas are in education or health, professional services, or administration.
- **Tourism-related employment** makes up a slightly higher proportion of jobs in rural areas (14%) than urban (11%), rising to 22% in more sparsely-populated rural areas.
- **Pay is lower** on average for jobs in rural areas. Analysis of workplace-based earnings shows that median gross annual earnings were £22,500 for jobs in predominantly rural areas in 2019 compared to £24,500 in urban areas (excluding London, where they were £36,800). By place of residence, average earnings are higher for people living in rural areas than urban, but this reflects people travelling to urban areas for higher-paid jobs.
- The same pattern is true of **adult skills**. While the proportion of people with intermediate or higher skills is higher among people living in rural than in urban areas, those working in urban areas have a significantly higher level of skills. The proportion of people with at least NVQ level 4 is much higher in urban (47.8%) than rural (37.3%) workplaces, reflecting the greater proportion of higher-skilled jobs available in urban areas.
- **Homeworking** was much common in rural than urban areas before the pandemic. In 2019, more than one in five people (22%) described their place of work as home in rural areas compared to 13% in urban areas, rising as high as 32% in the most rural locations. But aside from agriculture, which accounted for one in ten homeworkers in rural areas, the sector profile of homeworking is quite similar, with construction and professional, scientific & technical roles prominent in both settings.

Sources (unless otherwise specified): [Defra: Rural Economic Bulletin](#) (December 2020) and [Statistical Digest of Rural England](#) (February 2021).

# Ideas to support rural jobseekers as we come out of lockdown



So far, this report has discussed what labour market statistics tell us about rural labour markets, exploring some of the barriers for jobseekers and some of the interventions that are working to improve labour market outcomes in rural areas.

A huge amount of work has been done by rural stakeholders to outline what is needed to drive rural economies forward, such as the recent *Revitalising Rural*<sup>26</sup> report published by the Rural Services Network and the work done by community and local government

stakeholders all over the UK. In terms of supporting individual jobseekers to overcome specifically rural barriers to finding a job, the findings in this report suggest that the following actions are needed:

- 1 Accelerate place-based working and collaboration.** While the pandemic has seen more collaboration at place level between government, the community and voluntary sector and employers, there is huge potential in going further, with employment support services aligned with local recovery plans and “no wrong door” for people needing support. Both remote and in-person outreach will be essential. The latter can help support the sustainability of community buildings and small community organisations in rural areas.
- 2 Put labour market concerns at the heart of rural transport planning.** More rural bus services are welcome, but they need to be at the right times to enable workers to be able to get to their jobs on time. Plans for the expansion of demand-responsive transport through the rural mobility fund hold potential, while community transport organisations need sustainable support and funding to continue their valuable work.
- 3 Employers can play a greater part in supporting employee transport in rural areas.** Funding minibus or other transport services can be expensive, but for employers who struggle to recruit staff and are poorly served by public transport the benefit may outweigh the cost. Other options include getting involved in transport planning or supporting the organisation of car share schemes amongst employees. Some large employers, such as Amazon, are taking an active approach to employee travel and there is potential for many more firms to take action to both support employees and fill vacancies more easily.

<sup>26</sup> *Rural Services Network, Revitalising Rural: Realising the Vision*, February 2021.

- 4 Employment support and other services should fully exploit the potential of remote support for rural residents.** Face-to-face employment support is essential but continued use of remote support through a blended approach can strengthen our support for rural jobseekers in the long term. It can increase time spent on impactful activities rather than travel, facilitate contact with employers and speed up the administrative side of the job support process.
- 5 Employers should investigate whether there are more entry-level jobs that could be done at home in rural areas.** Homeworking will not be an option for many frontline care, NHS, logistics, transport or retail workers, but there may be more lower-skilled or lower-paid roles that could potentially be done at least partially from home. There is also a need to widen the availability of flexible working amongst rurally-based employers, in particular to improve labour market prospects for single parents and disabled people in rural areas.

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