

THE PRINCE'S  
COUNTRYSIDE  
FUND

# Recharging Rural

Creating sustainable communities to 2030 and beyond



## Executive Summary

July 2018



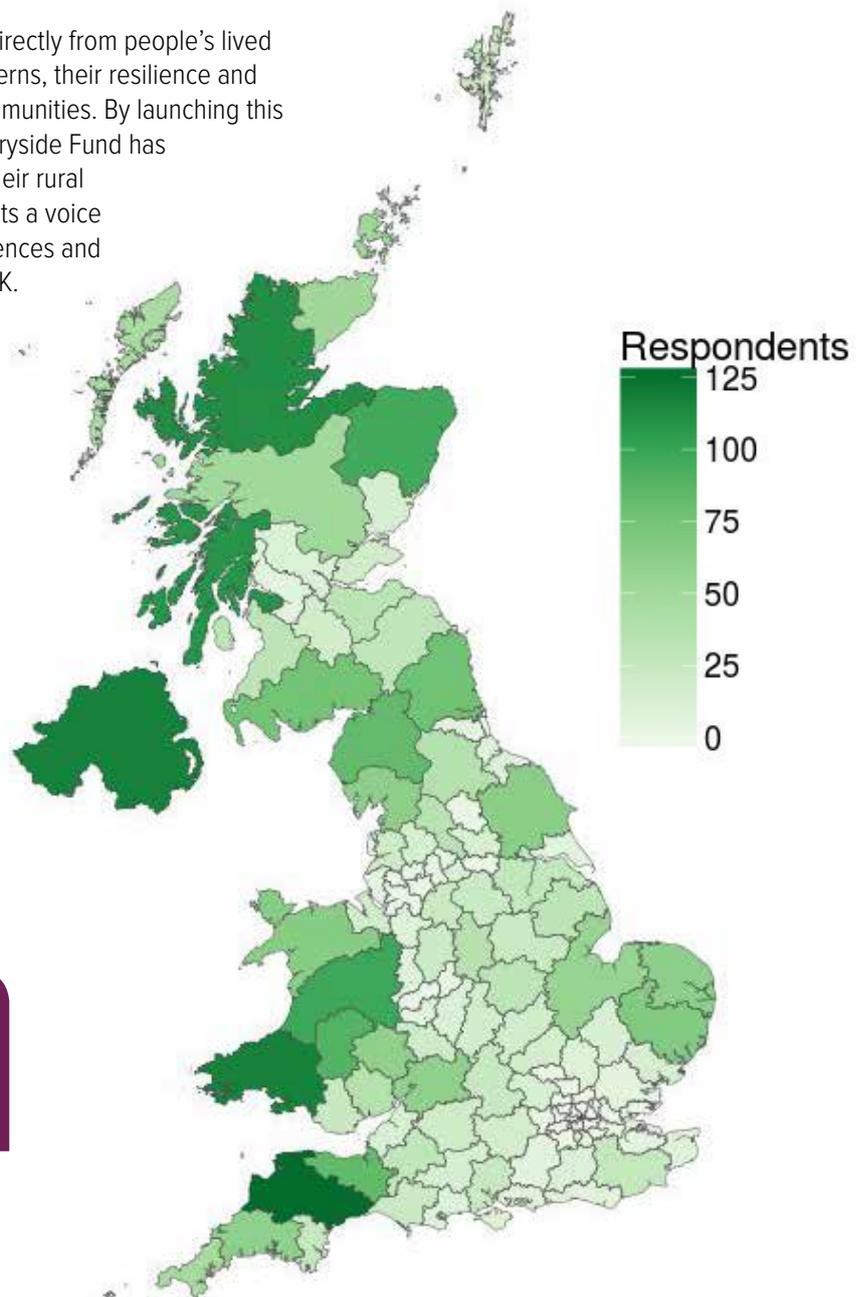


# Introduction

In commissioning this research, The Prince's Countryside Fund wanted to understand how rural communities can be helped to be self-sufficient and viable into 2030 and beyond. This will assist the Fund to plan and deliver its future support to rural areas through grant giving, advocacy or enabling delivery. Through the process, it was hoped to identify case studies and examples of best practice, highlight key areas of opportunity for future policy consideration and make recommendations for rural communities to consider in order to ensure a resilient and sustainable future.

The UK-wide #HaveYourSay online survey took place throughout March and April 2018, gaining a total of 3098 responses (England: 1846; Scotland: 723; Wales: 411; and Northern Ireland: 118). This level of response gives us confidence that we are covering the breadth and depth of issues from across rural UK.

We now have a wealth of new evidence directly from people's lived experience. In this, we see people's concerns, their resilience and their ideas for the future of their rural communities. By launching this #HaveYourSay survey, The Prince's Countryside Fund has clearly tapped into people's passion for their rural communities and areas, giving respondents a voice and channel to communicate their experiences and recommendations for the future of rural UK.



## What is the experience of “Remote Rural”?

People’s experiences of “remote” and “very remote” rural UK show a layering of geographical and personal factors. This means that map-based labels of remoteness are important but limited, because they hide individual experiences.

Thousands of people from across “remote rural” UK stated that a car is needed to access anything, that infrastructure is limited or poor, and that this is coupled with poor digital connectivity. More detailed descriptions show that these “disabling” characteristics of remoteness are further combined with geographical and physical aspects, particularly in the islands.

Poor infrastructure, including roads that are no longer in a fit state to support the rural economy because they have been worn away (particularly following severe winters), as well as poor paths, public transport, ferries, and limited access to utilities combine to make life more challenging.

Survey respondents describe how very limited access to, or absence of, services remains a problem, including very basic or no shops, leisure facilities, physical and mental health services or the NHS, libraries, social and self-help groups, and schools. Furthermore, the issues associated with housing and homelessness, and social isolation and exclusion are key concerns for both younger and older people, linked to poverty which is often hidden.

Rural remoteness is a process; indeed, remoteness has increased over the past 10 years for the majority, although a small number see some improvements in broadband and mobile coverage, and in opportunities for community empowerment through asset/land purchase, particularly in Scotland through empowerment and land reform legislation.

The overwhelming majority, however, report that remoteness is happening to them, through increasing loss and decline, with one loss feeding another. Such losses include no affordable housing, especially for young people; declining numbers of rural businesses with employment prospects affected by the rise in zero-hours contracts; service centralisation which leads to a downward spiral in health and wellbeing; and community breakdown associated with commuting and mass housing developments.

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*Very remote is usually thought of as a geographic thing, but everywhere is a long way from somewhere, so remote is really a state of mind, not of location. A state of mind that says I feel I’m missing out.*

(Scottish island)

*Poverty is hidden: the beauty of the surroundings means decision-makers only associate the area with wealthy people.*

(Wales)

## What are the barriers and challenges facing rural communities?

The top three barriers that exist right now for thousands of people across rural UK are poor broadband and mobile phone coverage, poor road and transport networks and a poor variety of employment opportunities with little or no scope for progression. Outmigration of young people is a “top 5” issue across rural UK, being seen as a natural result of this mix of poor job prospects and weak digital connectivity.

The issues repeatedly stressed by respondents to the survey show that future challenges reflect these current barriers, and that those living in remote rural areas do not see these barriers being removed, creating a snowball effect of decline.

When looking to the future, respondents agree that the top challenge is the lack of affordable housing because it is fundamental to everything else. A lack of investment in services, transport infrastructure, and broadband and mobile in turn are driving growing social isolation, rural poverty, and the rural youth exodus.

## How are rural communities valued?

An underlying challenge described across rural England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales is a lack of joined up rural policy because rural is largely “invisible” or “off the radar”.

This “invisibility” is also experienced in relation to how the “general public” value rural communities. Although a very small minority feel that the general public does fully value remote rural – its landscapes and scenery (particularly in tourist areas), and its role in the production of food - the majority of respondents feel that their rural communities are not valued in the sense of being fully understood by the general public.

Three main reasons are given: that people value landscapes and places, not communities and their skills; that remote rural living is seen as a choice, so rural people feel “blamed” for any difficulties they experience; and that the majority of real rural issues are hidden from view, because “green space” equates to peace, holidays and relaxation, not poverty, deprivation and service centralisation.

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*People who have lived in the community for their whole life are becoming increasingly isolated, especially when they can no longer drive.*

(Wales)

*I think it is difficult for young people who aren't from a farming background to find long term, financially viable work in rural areas. I am 24 and commute 80 miles a day to work in a town because there are no jobs locally..*

(England)

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*I'm not convinced the wider public thinks much about remote rural, other than as a backdrop to much of the holidays or countryside recreation.*

(England)

## How are these problems being tackled?

Communities are taking action themselves to address these barriers and challenges, and their top priority is to keep young people in rural areas. Communities are trying to make sure the right “mix” of factors is present, including genuinely involving young people in decision-making, while also knowing there must be affordable housing and transport, accessible services, education and training, and meaningful paid employment.

There is also a focus on maintaining and creating inclusive, diverse, open communities, connecting people, and making links between issues such as housing and employment in order to solve them. Solutions identified by communities include involving the private sector more, and campaigning to achieve change and reduce poverty.

Respondents state that others should be taking action to support communities and making significant change at strategic levels, for example through the provision of funding instead of being reliant on volunteers, or making certain that policy is fit for purpose in rural areas backed up with strategy to ensure action, such as treating rural people as you would a “minority”, leading to fairness and social justice.

Communities are also aware of the need to lead on and deliver projects to help remove the barriers, with a strong focus on bringing all people together. Of the 550 projects reported, the most common are physical community hubs. These provide many different services and have many different functions, acting as a focal point for the community and encouraging a sense of pride. Other common projects include those to help overcome loneliness, and projects that address people’s isolation by including the harder-to-reach in society, with a focus on mental wellbeing and the elderly.

Communities are also focused on connection, leading on transport schemes to act as the ‘glue’ in rural areas, as well as community broadband projects and websites which help to connect people locally and with the ‘outside world’.

Many projects typically deliver multiple outcomes, such as arts activities also increasing personal confidence and community connections, food projects also focusing on linking people with the land and with each other. Community land ownership (in Scotland) also delivers to diverse goals including affordable housing, economic activities, repopulation and raising school roll numbers.



*People already are working together on a huge variety of initiatives including keeping toilets open, fundraising for community assets, volunteering to keep community resources open like the village hall, gritting roads, sharing transport, fundraising for training courses, children’s facilities, and natural and cultural heritage conservation.*

(Scotland)



*To get involved in the first place, people need to know what’s happening. Not everyone is linked to the church or community groups, and many voices go unheard. Places such as the local pharmacy or GP surgeries should be used to disseminate information.*

(Northern Ireland)

## What are the future opportunities?

There is a strong desire to harness the possibilities that new technologies bring. First though, rural areas must be given reliable, resilient, high-speed broadband and universal mobile coverage. If this happens, rural people will innovate and then there can be a “bright future of digital possibilities”, including access to remote services; attracting businesses to the local rural area; networking and connecting (locally and beyond); communal fuel buying to help those in fuel poverty; or even e-cars, e-buses and e-charging points. Though keen to seize this potential, communities realise they must make sure those without technology are not excluded, and that both digital training and offline channels must be provided.

While communities are being active themselves, they also recognise that certain parts of the “bigger system” must change and specific resources are needed for rural communities to be sustainable to 2030 and beyond.

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*Maximise the opportunities from technology. Enhance skills from all to use technology, as it can be used to overcome barriers to access services like healthcare, employment, and education.*

(Northern Ireland)

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*Entrepreneurs live everywhere, and our rural communities are alive with multi-talented, highly experienced business folk.*

(Scotland)

The top three changes communities say they need across rural UK are a reduction in the closure of key services such as banks, post offices, and pubs, fairer funding for rural areas that compensates for higher costs of improvements, and to improve rural broadband and mobile coverage.

To achieve this, thousands of #HaveYourSay respondents pointed to the priorities of investment in digital connectivity, rural issues becoming more of a priority on the public policy agenda, and greater joined-up thinking. This is because it is clear to respondents that the spectrum of challenges that they face as remote rural communities are all interlinked.

## Building on the respect and listen agenda

Individuals and communities across rural UK have a breadth and depth of experience, wisdom and knowledge that they wish to share, both with other communities and with those creating policies that affect rural areas, communities and businesses.

Rural communities wish to be listened to, understood and respected, with action taken to feed into coherent policies designed for rural areas. The diversity of communities must be recognised – some lead the way, with all the skills they need to navigate and seize all the opportunities available; others will need support to develop their capacity and confidence to navigate uncertain futures.

Those providing policy and practical support will need to enhance their understanding of, and respect for, rural communities, building communities’ lived experience into their decisions and approaches. This rich evidence-based report provides a valuable starting point to do just that.

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*Some things can be – and are – addressed locally by local people (if they can find funding) but many other things require thought and action at government level. No amount of local initiatives will change how local authorities or the health service are funded.*

(England)

# Report Recommendations

## a) Recommendations for The Prince's Countryside Fund

- i** Bring together local, regional and national stakeholders and policy makers in a UK-wide Connected Communities Forum to examine the barriers, challenges, required resources, changes and recommendations described in this report to identify and prioritise action areas and responsibilities;
- ii** Identify how the next generation can be further engaged and supported to create sustainable rural communities through access to employment, training and skills development by consulting with young people;
- iii** Develop a Village Survival Guide: designed as a practical guide with resources including case study examples to assist rural communities in building their resilience and a top ten resilience checklist;
- iv** Work together with wider stakeholders on effective communication of clear, balanced and evidence based messages about 'remote rural' showing the challenges, contributions and opportunities;
- v** Continue with vital funding of community-led initiatives, using the Recharging Rural evidence base to guide future interventions across 'remote' and 'very remote' rural UK;
- vi** Bring together technical and rural expertise to explore ways in which digital technologies can be further harnessed to address isolation and remote rural service delivery, strengthen and attract rural business and drive the economy, e.g. Rural Apps for on demand shared shuttle services, mobile apps for local delivery from local shops, pharmacies and other services; connecting to web based resources such as business advice and learning;
- vii** Investigate opportunities to provide further training and skills in rural areas for digital including linking in with other providers.

## b) Recommendations for rural stakeholders

- i** Foster improved knowledge exchange and learning between remote rural communities across England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales;
  - ii** Raise greater awareness and clarity of the ways in which 'remote rural' contributes to the UK as a whole;
  - iii** Rural stakeholder organisations to review their organisation's current strategy and service delivery by examining the barriers, challenges, required resources, changes and recommendations described in this report;
  - iv** Identify 'remote rural' champions in individual stakeholder networks to help to build a rural talent pool across the UK;
  - v** To maximise impact, consider and identify roles in the rural sector and how to join up with other organisations across the UK. Reflect on the individual opportunities available in each jurisdiction in the light of current policy context;
  - vi** Involve the private sector, regional, and national enterprise agencies in specific ways with their innovative ideas, experience, and commitment;
  - vii** Work creatively with partners to make local spaces multi-use, e.g. doctor's surgeries by mums and toddler's groups, pubs as libraries and shops, schools used by after-school clubs. Share examples through the UK network where this has been achieved.
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## c) Recommendations for policy makers

- i** Review current mapping and definitions of rural and remote rural, to reflect evidence of “experience of remoteness”, in order to inform policy development;
- ii** Consider the implications of the sustainable necessities of rural life – car/transport, broadband and mobile and affordable housing;
- iii** Working with rural stakeholders and communities, drawing on evidence from the Report, to review indicators of rural community well-being;
- iv** Respond to the Recharging Rural survey respondents’ desire for (i) cross-sectoral “joined up” rural vision and strategy within each UK jurisdiction and at local government levels, plus (ii) act on evidence around tailoring national policies to rural realities;
- v** Review current funding and service delivery (rural-proofing) within rural UK jurisdictions to include consideration of the interlinked effects of service reduction, plus the social, economic, environmental, cultural and wellbeing contributions of countryside;
- vi** Recognise the contribution of volunteers and make sure they are supported.

## d) Recommendations for rural communities to be sustainable and build their resilience

- i** Be active in sharing community achievements with others in ‘remote’ and ‘very remote’ rural communities in the UK including how to effectively engage with the harder to reach or ways in which isolation and loneliness has been tackled in your area;
  - ii** Proactively use knowledge and learning from other remote rural communities and case studies through national and regional bodies, networks and online discussion groups;
  - iii** Include young people fully in community decisions, drawing on strengths of inter-generational mix and helping to train future rural leaders;
  - iv** Be innovative in considering community assets with opportunities for “pop ups”, use of new technologies, flexible multi use spaces, and mobile services;
  - v** Work with stakeholders to identify creative and ambitious approaches to a “joined up” future for services, seeking specialist advice and guidance where necessary.
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### How do the responses chime with the body of evidence?

The research literature on resilient rural communities, while not totally in agreement, broadly states that communities live in a context of disruptive change (rapid or slow burn), with communities and individuals having varying degrees of control or “agency” over what happens.

There are some general principles of community resilience: the ability to learn, adapt, reorganise and change; create a positive direction of travel; able to “bounce forward” creatively; function in the midst of crisis, mobilise community resources at multiple levels; and collaborate with relevant stakeholders within and beyond the community.

There are some interlinked factors that support community resilience: social, economic and cultural capital; natural, built, political and financial resources; people-place connections; values and beliefs; knowledge, skills and learning; social networks; diverse and innovative economy; leadership and community infrastructure; equitable and sustainable resource use.

Community resilience is seen as a process, where positive resources are balanced with vulnerabilities. “Human agency” is key to this balancing act, with people being able to imagine, dream, plan, and make deliberate choices for their individual or collective futures.

The #HaveYourSay survey answers echo key features of community resilience: Context of both rapid and “slow burn” disruptive change: rural remoteness is a process that is happening to people as they experience loss and decline in services and infrastructure (“slow burn”); while technology-enabled change gives opportunities for a “bright future of digital possibilities” that many wish to seize and innovate around, whilst also sensing that if infrastructural investment is not made in remote rural areas, communities will quickly lose out and fall further behind (rapid).

Vulnerabilities include: growing social isolation and multi-layered remoteness; rural poverty; economic/business decline; and infrastructural weakness through loss and service centralisation; plus low capacity in some communities. Resources include: human agency in action; great awareness of change; excitement and readiness for change; connections deliberately created for social inclusion; mobilisation of community and external resources for action; building skills and capacity; protecting assets; imagining futures with creative openness; plus awareness and mobilisation of multiple collaborations locally and externally to strengthen remote rural communities.



# Recharging Rural

## A report to The Prince's Countryside Fund

July 2018

### About The Prince's Countryside Fund

Established by HRH The Prince of Wales in 2010, The Prince's Countryside Fund aims to enhance the prospects of family farm businesses and the quality of rural life. We believe that the British countryside is our most valuable natural asset and its contribution to our everyday life cannot be underestimated.

To help support and secure the future of the countryside we:

- Provide more than £11m each year in grant funding to projects across the UK thanks to support from our partners, events and donations
- Celebrate and promote the value of the countryside
- Lead projects to strengthen farm businesses, such as The Prince's Farm Resilience Programme
- Commission research into issues affecting farming families and rural communities
- Bring together individuals and businesses to help tackle current challenges
- Help communities in crisis through our Emergency Fund

To find out more and download the full report please visit [www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/research](http://www.princescountrysidefund.org.uk/research)

### About Scotland's Rural College

Scotland's Rural College – winners of the Queen's Anniversary Prize 2017 – supports innovation and sustainable development in agriculture and the rural sector in Britain and internationally. It is one of the UK's leading agriculturally-focused higher education institutions, offering a unique blend of research, education and consultancy.

SRUC's research and education activities operate from six campuses and eight farms and research centres across Scotland. Its consultancy arm, SAC Consulting, supports more than 12,000 farms and rural businesses across the UK from 25 consultancy offices and eight veterinary disease surveillance centres.

Professor Sarah Skerratt, Director of Policy Engagement, SRUC.

Rural Policy Centre [www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre](http://www.sruc.ac.uk/ruralpolicycentre)

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