



HM Government

Unleashing rural opportunity



Foreword from the Secretary of State

I am proud to have represented a rural community since 2010. I regularly see the strength of our rural communities, the beauty of our natural landscapes carefully guarded by the stewardship of our farmers and environmental enthusiasts, and the sheer entrepreneurial spirit that people show to grow their businesses and overcome rural challenges like sparsity and distance.

All this peppered with a good quality of life that comes from an open, quieter countryside that runs in its own rhythm compared with the hustle and bustle of a congested city.

I have long campaigned for a fair deal for the countryside, so these challenges are recognised, and so that both public and private services help, not hinder, rural people. While we have made much progress in supporting rural communities to prosper since 2010, some disparities still remain.

Now as the Secretary of State for Rural Affairs, I remain passionate about improving quality of life for people living and working in the countryside. Defra has an important role to play in this regard, including the £3.2 billion of public money a year flowing into the UK rural economy through our schemes that support sustainable and productive farm businesses.

Right across the UK, we have a fantastic patchwork quilt of countryside and landscape cherished by market towns and villages that together makes our country so special though often with very different needs and opportunities. Therefore, as well as our nationwide schemes, it is right that we have smaller, targeted support like the £110 million of grants from the Rural England Prosperity Fund, or the Platinum Jubilee Village Hall fund or the Community Ownership Fund. These funds can be the extra help which makes a real difference to what communities can achieve and to boost people's quality of life.

While Defra is the champion within government for rural affairs, the needs of rural communities are considered right across government, as reflected in our annual "rural proofing" report. For example, in today's world you can run a financial services company or an architectural practice from the top of a remote valley just as well as you can in a town or city, subject to good enough broadband and mobile coverage and that is because of policy and funding decisions made by this Government. I want to make sure that anyone can access opportunities to better their lives, wherever they live in this country, and that is a mission shared across government. Growing the economy is one of the Prime Minister's 5 priorities and that means tackling the barriers in the rural economy as well as in towns and cities.

Having the opportunity and tools to run a modern business from rural areas is good for the local economy and for quality of life. A rural business can train and employ local people, who can develop their skills and find work close to where they live, rather than having to factor an expensive or longer commute into their day.

Despite the progress made in agricultural transition and enhancing connectivity, I know there is much more to do to unleash rural opportunity and ramp up rural productivity. The most recent challenges which people have faced– from Covid to high energy and food prices in the wake of Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine – have been somewhat exacerbated in the countryside. Complementary to our annual rural report, this document sets out our initiatives to unleash rural opportunity so that those living and working in rural communities can thrive.

The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs



Introduction

The countryside makes up over 90% of the UK's land mass, it is home to millions of people, and contributes over £250 billion to our economy in England alone. This government is committed to putting the needs of people and businesses in rural areas at the heart of policymaking, including through our rural proofing policy and levelling up agenda, so that departments take account of rurality when designing and implementing policies and consider factors like sparsity, distance and connectivity.

Our aim is to keep improving the quality of life for people living and working in the countryside. Rural areas are rich in human, economic and natural potential with strong communities and entrepreneurial businesses. Recent experience during the pandemic has shown once again that rural communities and businesses are adaptable, resilient, and full of energy and drive. We also recognise though that rural areas can face challenges, including those connected with sparsity and distance from key facilities. We want to go further in unleashing the inherent potential that exists to grow the rural economy and support people in rural areas to build a prosperous, sustainable future as we transition to net zero.

That is why we are launching *Unleashing Rural Opportunity*, based on four broad priorities that are key for rural areas to thrive. These are already being supported by many existing policies and this document underlines our commitment to further improving the quality of life for rural people by setting out additional initiatives we will undertake. The four priority areas are:

Growing the rural economy

We will support rural areas so they can prosper, including by boosting opportunity through jobs and skills.

Connectivity

We will continue to deliver gigabit broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas and increase access to public transport.

Homes and energy

We will facilitate the building of more homes for local people to buy where local communities want them, powered by secure and resilient energy supplies.

Communities

We want rural communities to continue to be places where people want to live and work. We will improve access to high quality health and social care and take further action to tackle rural crime.

The beauty of our natural landscapes, alongside farmers producing world class food, are at the heart of a living, thriving countryside. We are already working to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. Farmers and land managers have a key role to play in helping the UK achieve net zero. We will continue to support our farmers whilst restoring the environment through our new farming schemes. For rural areas to prosper, farming needs to prosper. It gives life to our rural communities and our landscapes.

With £3.2 billion a year in support for farmers across the UK, in England the government is investing £2.4 billion a year to enhance the environment and improve productivity. By investing in the foundations of food security, we will enable thriving businesses, resilient food production, and will support farmers – the original friends of the earth. In our Farm to Fork Summit last month (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/outcomes-from-the-uk-farm-to-fork-summit>) we outlined how we would further support a thriving UK food industry.

This document shows what we are already doing to level up rural communities and underlines our commitment to a thriving rural future by setting out further actions we will take. It complements our annual Rural Report, to be published later this year, which provides a more comprehensive account of rural proofing across government as well as updates on this package. While those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland benefit from initiatives in this document such as digital and energy, there are elements that relate only to England such as housing.





Growing the rural economy

We will support rural areas so they can prosper, including by boosting opportunity through jobs and skills.



Supporting growth, jobs and education in rural communities is a top priority for this government and is fundamental to levelling up our countryside. Rural areas now contribute over £250 billion of our national GDP, testament to the hard work and creativity of so many rural enterprises.

The Prime Minister has made growing the economy and tackling inflation two of his top priorities for the country. We recognise that rural areas can face specific challenges. As shown in Figure 1, earnings and employment can vary widely between different parts of the country. On average, however, productivity, earnings, and ease of access to further education are all lower in rural areas compared to urban areas. We need to close these gaps by going further.

We are laying the foundations for investment and innovation through our measures to improve digital connectivity and transport links, secure energy supplies and increase the availability of affordable housing in rural areas to grow the rural economy. This will help rural businesses to seize emerging opportunities in areas like the knowledge economy, biotechnology, other green industries and net zero.

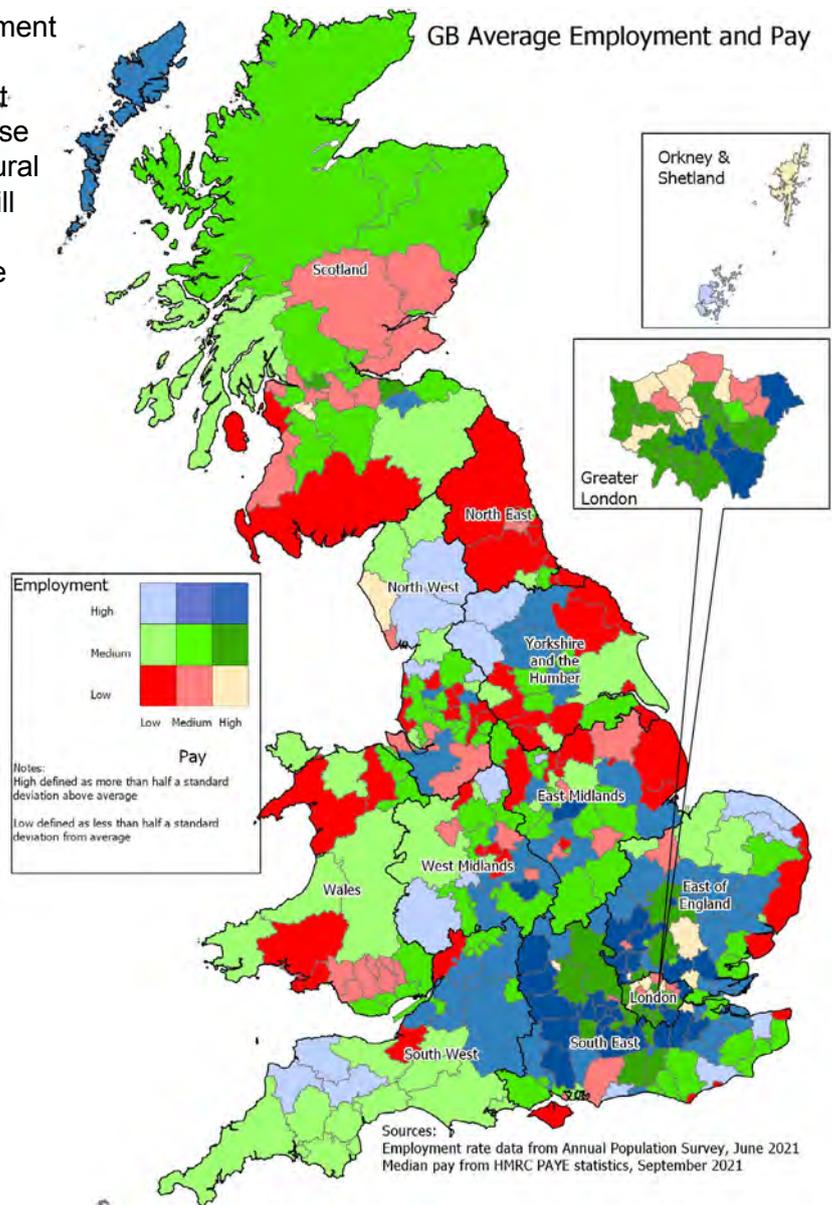


Figure 1: Employment and pay

We are also supporting traditional rural industries like farming, forestry, and tourism to grow. We will continue to focus on removing barriers to enterprise and investment, and to equip rural communities with the necessary skills and workforce to take full advantage of our transition to a greener, more sustainable future.

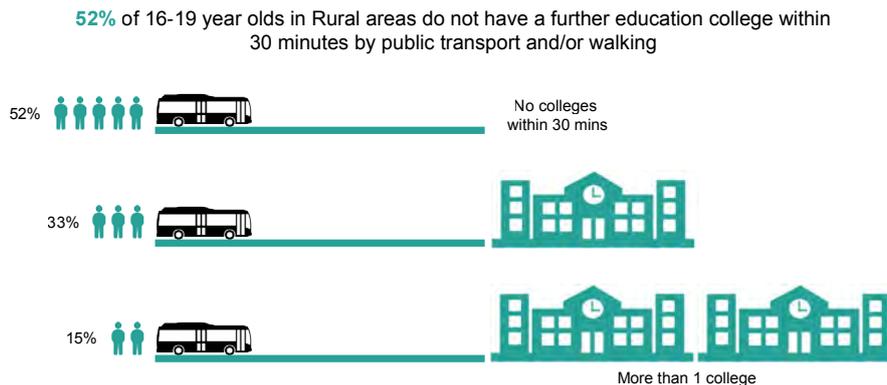
We are:

- Investing £110 million through the Rural England Prosperity Fund in initiatives such as farm diversification, projects to boost rural tourism, and community infrastructure projects including electric vehicle charging stations. This funding will also help people start local businesses and create employment opportunities for rural areas.
- Supporting the development of rural skills including through Skills Bootcamps, sector-based Work Academy Programmes and our £1.5 million Forestry Training Fund. There are now more than 1,000 Skills Bootcamps available across the country, including in rural areas, and at Spring Budget 2023, a further investment of £34 million in financial year 2024-25 was announced meaning more adults will be able to get the skills they need.
- Providing funding to Public Practice, a not for profit company which supports the development of placemaking leadership capability, to expand their associate programme to support more local authorities. We have also increased and extended our bursary scheme through the Royal Town Planning Institute to improve the number of planners in the system. This is part of a wider programme of support to help planning authorities attract, retain and develop skilled practitioners.
- Investing £3.2 billion a year across the UK (£2.4 billion in England) into the farming sector through schemes that support sustainable and productive farm businesses to produce the food we need and improve the state of nature.
- Building on our recent Farm to Fork summit by helping our farmers and food producers in rural communities to capitalise on the enormous global demand for British food and drink through our export support packages, investment in global trade shows and support for key exporting sectors.
- Providing over £50 million funding for our Farming in Protected Landscapes programme and extending it with additional funding until March 2025 to enable farmers in National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty to deliver more projects that promote nature and make the landscape more inclusive for visitors. This is in addition to the current 15% increase in funding to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and £4.4million one off increase we provided to National Parks last year.
- Working with businesses and the British Tourist Authority to showcase our inspiring rural landmarks, countryside, market towns, villages and dramatic coastline, growing the economy, reducing the travel industry's impact on the natural and built environment and working with local tourism businesses and communities to help them thrive.
- Making sure that rural communities have the right childcare provision to support hard-working parents and care givers. This includes investing £289 million in a new childcare 'pathfinder' scheme to help deliver wraparound childcare before and after school. We will discuss with rural local authorities to better understand how they support wraparound and meet their sufficiency duty.
- Increasing our funding for bursaries for 16-19s by 10% for the 2023-24 academic year, benefiting those who travel furthest to college each day.

We will:

- Launch a consultation shortly on possible changes to permitted development rights which support agricultural development and rural diversification. This will look at changes to the current rules to make agricultural development more flexible for farmers so they can amend their existing agricultural buildings to make them more productive without having to go through onerous planning processes to grow the rural economy.
- Consider with the Planning Advisory Service, who provide training to local planning authorities, whether there is a need for more training specifically on the needs of the rural economy.
- Consult widely with industry on the co-design of a new fund to help smaller abattoirs to improve productivity and enhance animal welfare, with the aim of opening the fund for applications later this year, recognising the importance of smaller abattoirs to more remote farming businesses.
- Streamline and improve customer interactions with Defra's agencies, and the services they offer, to make it easier for rural communities to engage with them.
- Review and build understanding of how deprivation in rural areas is measured, so that policies can be better designed to tackle it.

Figure 2: Access to further education colleges





Connectivity

We will continue to deliver gigabit broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas and increase access to public transport.



Digital connectivity

Good digital connectivity is the bedrock of business growth and is crucial for full participation in the economy and many aspects of daily life. Conversely, it can be a source of frustration to many when they cannot communicate easily with their family, friends and colleagues – whether at home or on the move.

We have made significant strides in improving broadband and mobile coverage in rural areas. The proportion of rural premises in England with access to superfast broadband with speeds of 30 Mbit/s has risen from 17 per cent in 2012 to 88 per cent in 2022. Total monthly mobile data traffic in rural areas has increased from 52 petabytes (a unit of information equal to one thousand million million or 10^{15}) in 2019 to 137 petabytes in 2022. Further improvement is a top priority, as our 10 point plan for rural connectivity published as part of the Wireless Infrastructure Strategy in April demonstrates.

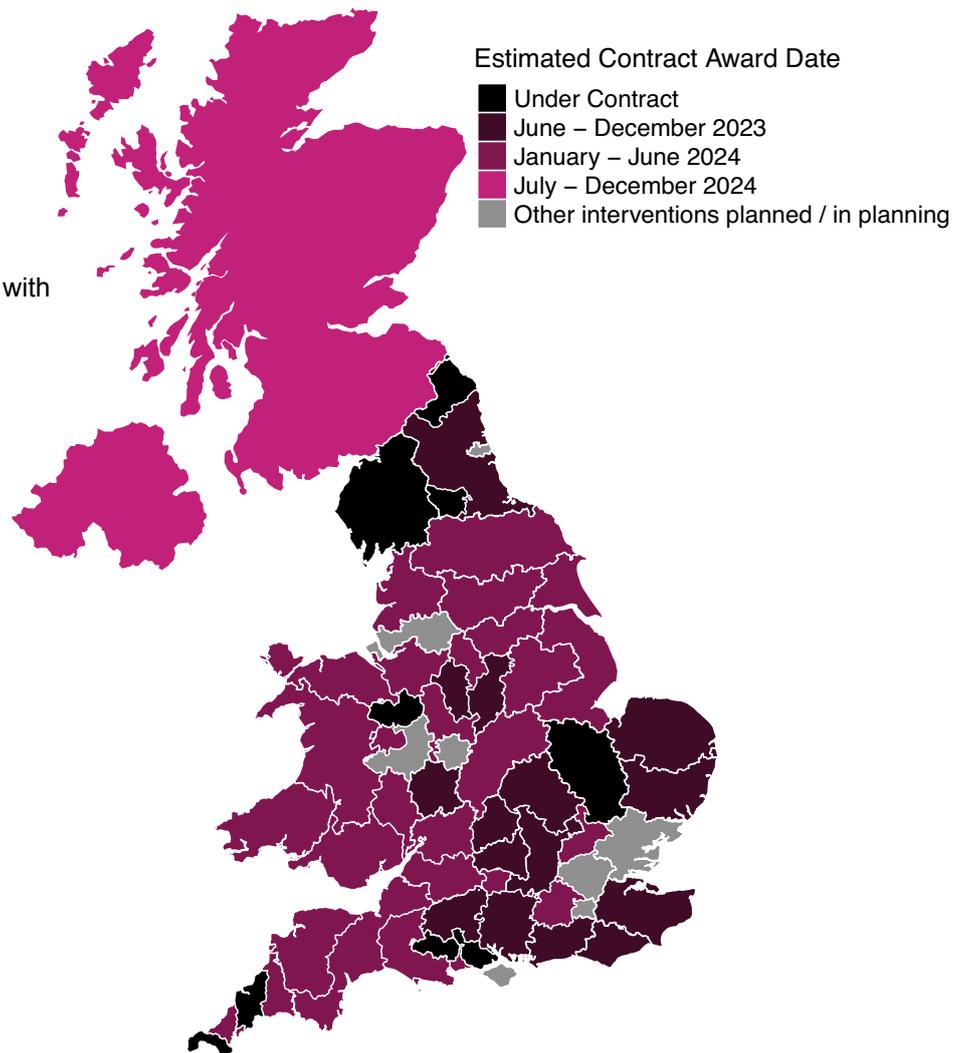


Figure 3: Project Gigabit map with broadband roll-out dates

Case study

Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme in action: Elvington Scout Group

Elvington Scout Group, based near York, helps children and young adults reach their full potential, and develop skills including teamwork, time management, leadership, initiative and self-motivation.

Since April 2023, thanks to the Gigabit Broadband Voucher Scheme, the Scout Group can now access a fast, reliable broadband connection. What is more, independent internet service provider FACTCO is providing the Scout Hut with two years of full-fibre broadband free of charge, with broadband speeds up to 30 times faster than before.



Cub Scout Erin McEwan-Wright, 8, is one of 85 scouts who benefit from the full-fibre connection. She said: “I use my iPad for Times Table Rockstars which helps me learn my times tables. I also use my laptop for playing horse games; the quicker the internet is, the quicker I can feed and groom my horses!”

Deputy Group Scout Leader Tracy McEwan says that having fast and reliable internet is vital for the Scout Hut and the Elvington community. She added: “With several badges

dedicated to Scouts using the internet safely, managing cyberbullying, protecting themselves online and other tips and tricks, relying on quality internet is crucial. We also rely on the internet to download large files, such as videos, and not waiting for downloads saves us a lot of time.”

We are:

- Investing £5 billion through our Project Gigabit programme to rollout access to gigabit-capable broadband in areas not served by suppliers' commercial plans. This provides rural properties across the UK with access to the fastest internet connections which the commercial market would not otherwise provide.
- Providing over 1.5 million premises with access to gigabit broadband by December 2025. We have already started work, with nine contracts signed and suppliers starting to deliver. Delivery will start to accelerate rapidly, with fibre being laid up and down the country.
- Investing, jointly with industry, over £1 billion in the Shared Rural Network to improve 4G mobile coverage throughout the UK to reach 95% geographic coverage by the end of 2025.
- Delivering satellite broadband connectivity to our most remote properties, with trial sites on remote islands in the Shetlands, through to historic abbeys in deep valleys.
- Maximising the economic benefits of 5G and future technologies through the implementation of our Wireless Infrastructure Strategy, including in rural areas, with £40 million of investment in 5G Innovation Regions.
- Launching an £8 million fund to provide capital grants for the up-front costs of installing satellite broadband to up to 35,000 of the most remote, very hard to reach premises. Applications for this scheme will launch this Autumn.

We will:

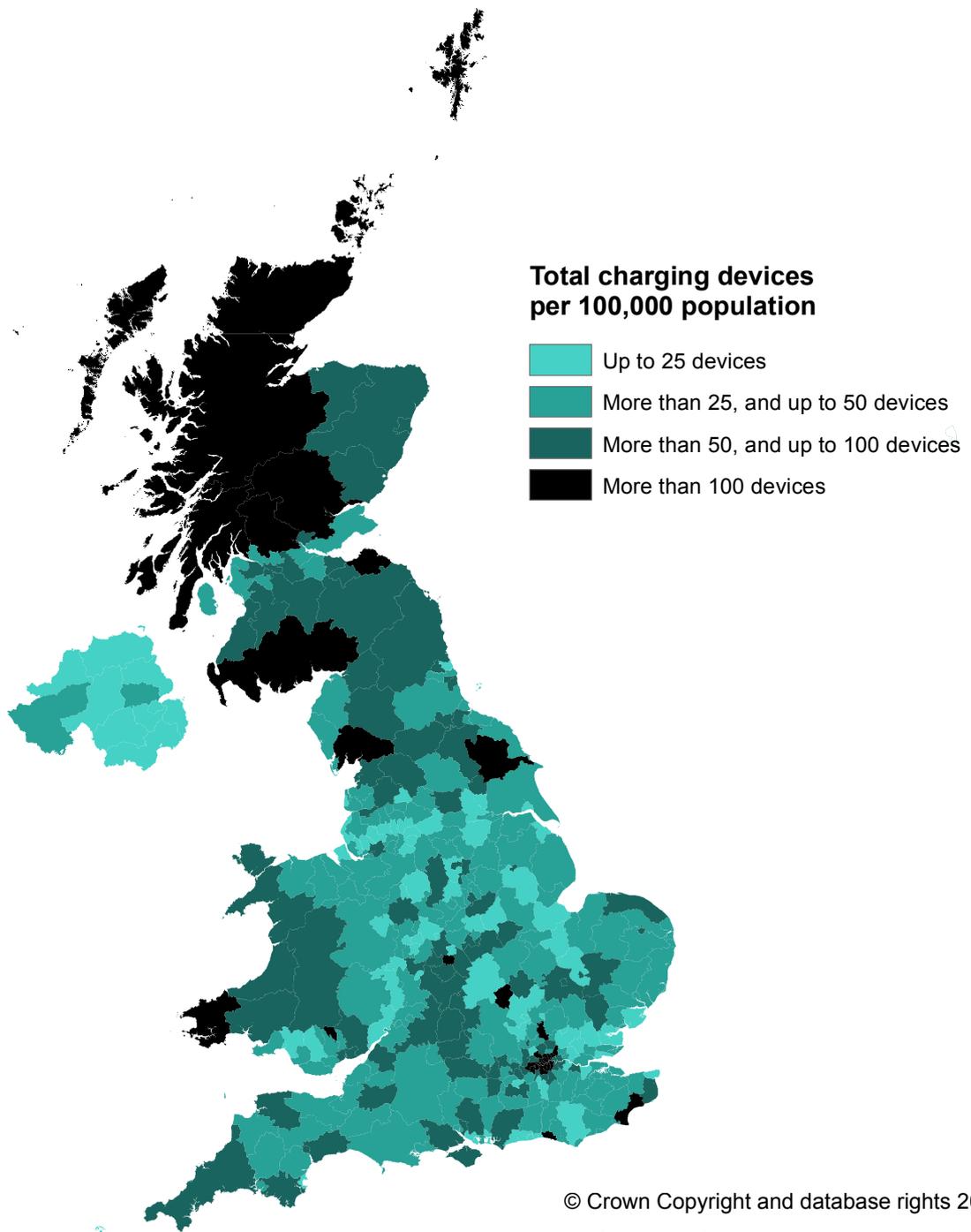
- Continue to deliver Project Gigabit at pace. We expect to procure all regional contracts in England by the end of 2024. This means that areas from Cornwall to Northumberland will soon benefit from faster connections.
- Provide £7 million for a trial of rural mesh networks (satellite and fixed wireless) in particular for agriculture use cases. This will test out new ways to bring together satellite, wireless and fixed line internet connectivity, helping support farmers and tourism businesses to access lightning fast, reliable connectivity in remote areas for the first time.
- Launch a consultation on improving broadband for very hard to reach premises during the summer, including proposals on service requirements, how to address barriers to industry delivery and how to continue supporting very hard to reach areas, such as by encouraging the provision of fixed wireless access and satellite services.

Access to transport

We want rural communities to have access to transport that meets their needs. People living in rural areas often have further to travel for school or work, or to access personal and professional services such as healthcare and banking. Extra travel time and costs can strain personal finances and contribute to lower rural productivity. Limited transport options can also threaten social inclusion and wellbeing, especially for those who are young, elderly or disabled.

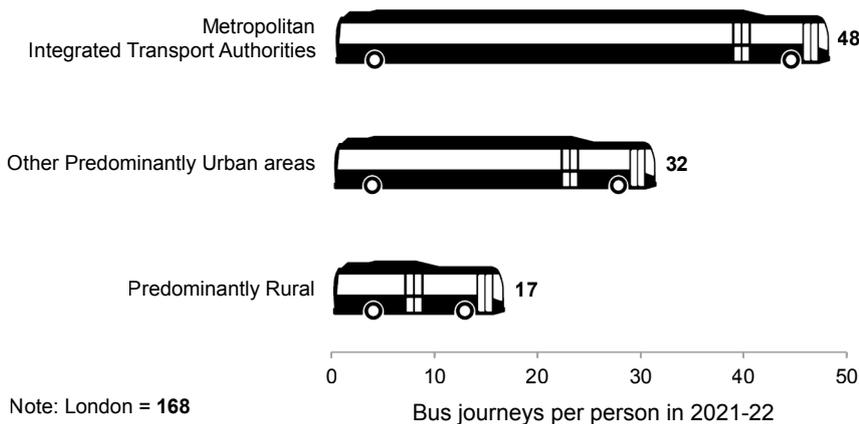
To address these challenges, we are using government funding to incentivise private providers to provide better transport options for rural areas, including reliable bus services capped at £2 until October, while also exploring emerging alternatives, like demand-responsive transport services and a robust electric vehicle (EV) charging network.

Figure 4: Electric vehicle charging points in Predominantly Rural areas



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Figure 5: Bus journeys per person



People in Predominantly Rural areas tend to take fewer journeys by bus. In 2021-22 the average was 17 journeys per person compared with 48 journey in metropolitan areas.

We are:

- Providing over £900 million a year over the 3 years 2022-23 to 2024-25 for local highway maintenance across England outside of London and city regions Sustainable Transport Settlements.
- Using £70 as an approximate cost to fill a pothole, providing rural councils with enough extra funding this year to fill the equivalent of 1.1 million potholes.
- Supporting 34 local transport authorities to improve the reliability, frequency and cost of bus services with over £1 billion of funding through Bus Service Improvement Plans. In addition, over £330 million has been provided to deliver zero emission buses.
- Extending the £2 bus fare cap outside London until the end of October 2023 to help passengers with cost of living pressures, and then continuing the bus fare cap at £2.50 until November 2024. This will predominantly help rural areas where bus fares tend to be more expensive due to the higher cost of running services. For example, the bus fare cap will reduce the normal bus fare from Lancaster to Kendal from £14.50 to £2.50.
- Providing £300 million of new government investment to protect bus services into 2025 and keep travel affordable.
- Trialling 16 innovative-demand responsive minibus services in 15 local authority areas supported by our £20 million Rural Mobility Fund.
- Supporting EV uptake in rural areas across the UK through our infrastructure grants which support small accommodation businesses and charities, whilst working with industry through our EV strategy and programmes to deliver EV infrastructure in rural areas.
- Working to transform the availability of EV charging for drivers without off street parking through the Local EV Infrastructure (LEVI) Fund launched in March. Every local authority in England has been allocated a portion of £343 million capital and £37.8 million resource funding, with rurality a factor in that allocation.

Figure 6: Access to a town centre by public transport and or walking

47% of households in Rural areas do not have a town centre within 30 minutes by public transport and or walking



We will:

- Publish a Future of Transport Rural Strategy setting out principles to support new innovative technologies in improving access to services, tackle isolation and increase access to jobs in rural and remote areas.
- Following our recent consultation, do further evidence-gathering on the entitlement for drivers who passed their car test to drive a light lorry or van (C1 entitlement) without the need for a separate test, just as anyone who received their licence prior to 1997 can already do. Our consultation showed 73% of respondents said they would support the removal of the requirement to obtain a D1 licence test to drive a minibus.
- Consult soon on reform of bus funding, including options to better support rural areas and stimulate new routes where there is little or no coverage.



Homes and energy

We will facilitate the building of more homes for local people to buy where local communities want them, powered by secure and resilient energy supplies.



Sufficient housing for local people to buy is essential for rural economic growth and flourishing communities. People want to be able to stay in their communities near family and friends while employers need a locally based workforce. Ensuring opportunity is spread across the country is key to levelling up.

We also recognise concerns around the high cost and limited availability of housing in some rural areas, including barriers to home ownership. In 2022, the average lower quartile house price was 8.8 times the average lower quartile earnings in rural areas compared with 7.6 times in urban areas.

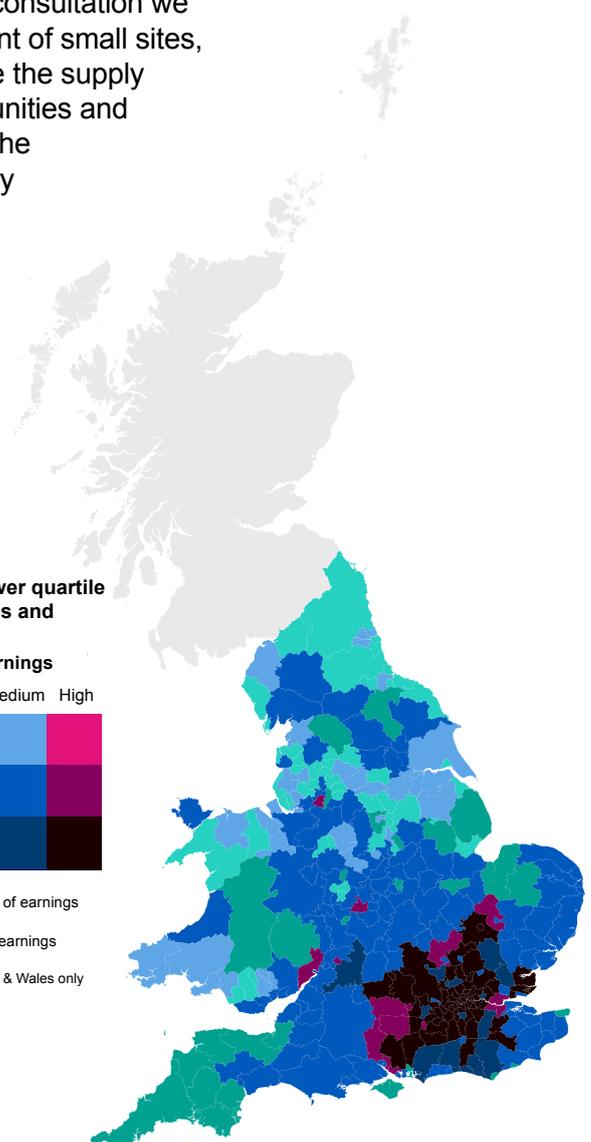
We have already seen how small sites can deliver housing. That is why in our recent National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) consultation we asked what more can be done to support the development of small sites, particularly for affordable housing. Our goal is to increase the supply of housing in rural areas, catering to the needs of communities and empowering local residents to own their own homes, all the while preserving the essential character and extraordinary beauty of our rural landscapes.

Figure 7: House prices and earnings in Predominantly Rural areas

Comparison between lower quartile residence-based earnings and house prices



Notes:
"Low" is defined as the bottom 25% of earnings or house prices.
"High" is defined as the top 25% of earnings or house prices.
Comparable data available for England & Wales only



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Figure 8: Additions to affordable housing stock



3.2 additions to affordable housing stock per 1,000 households in Predominantly Rural areas



2.1 additions to affordable housing stock per 1,000 households in Predominantly Urban areas

We are:

- Supporting the provision of rural homes for local people through our Rural Exception Sites policy which allows for the development of small affordable housing sites in rural areas where housing would not normally be permitted, with the majority of housing on these sites being available to local people in perpetuity.
- Aiming to deliver as much affordable rural housing as possible through the Affordable Homes Programme. Homes England's new Strategic Plan sets out its mission to create high-quality homes and thriving places across England, bringing together its relationships, skills and expertise, statutory powers, land and financial support.
- Introducing a power for local authorities to charge up to double the council tax on second homes to help manage the impacts of second homes in their communities.
- Consulting on planning changes and a registration scheme that would give local areas the tools they need to address concerns about the proliferation of short term lets in certain areas and the impact this can have on the sustainability of communities and the availability and affordability of homes for local people, whilst recognising the positive role that they can play in a vibrant and competitive tourism industry.

We will:

- Fund a network of Rural Housing Enablers across England with £2.5 million. This will boost the supply of new, affordable housing by identifying development opportunities, supporting site owners and community representatives to navigate the planning system and securing the support of local communities for developments.
- Launch a consultation on whether to change existing permitted development rights to make it easier for farmers to change their existing agricultural buildings to homes. Separately, we are consulting on providing local authorities with greater control over the change of use to short term holiday lets.
- Consider, as part of our wider review of the National Planning Policy Framework what more can be done specifically to support rural small sites for affordable housing.
- Explore with stakeholders whether there could be a greater role for permission in principle to unlock more small-scale rural housing.

Secure, sustainable, and affordable energy

A secure and sustainable source of energy is crucial for both rural businesses and households. Our recent Net Zero Growth Plan set out plans for a fair and affordable low carbon transition. Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine has driven high energy prices around the world, affecting both rural and urban parts of the UK. However, we recognise that those living off the gas grid, mostly in rural areas, face additional challenges, including retrofitting energy efficiency measures in some rural houses.

Our policies will continue to take into account the particular needs of rural households and businesses when it comes to energy.

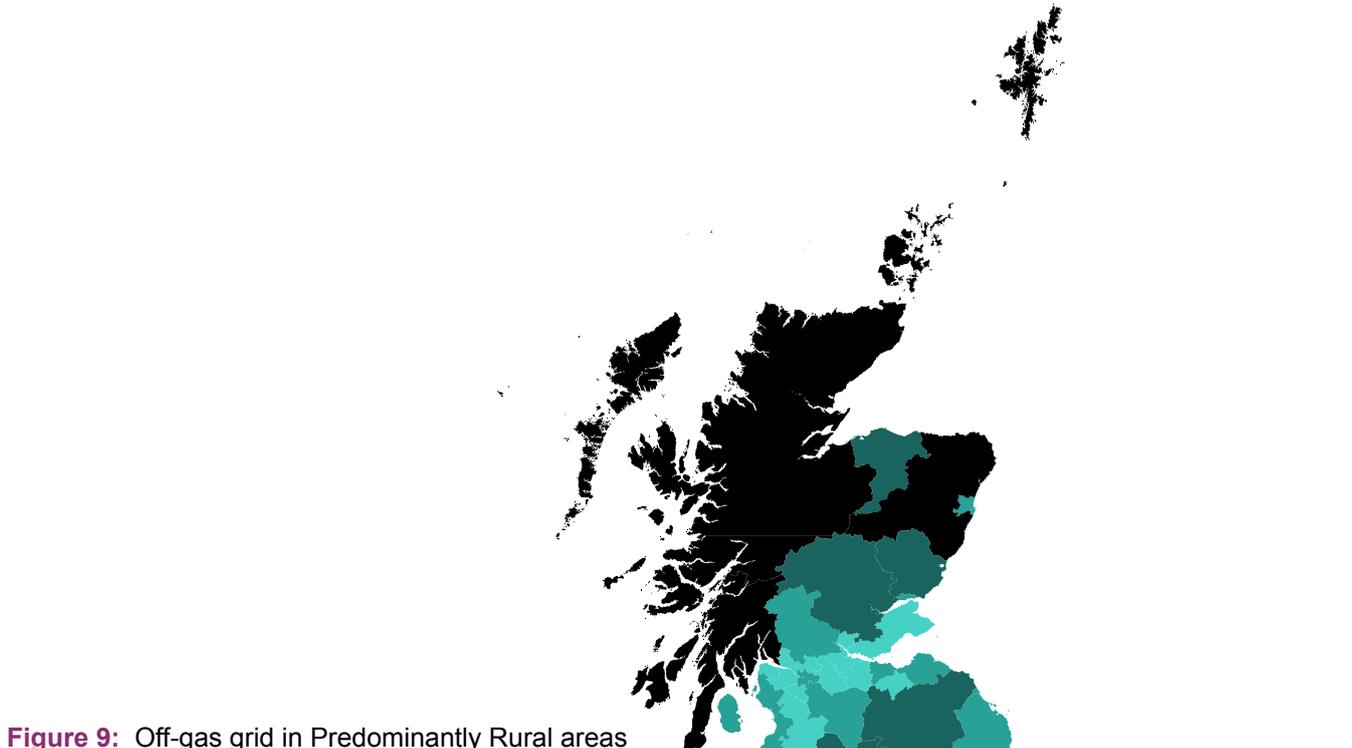
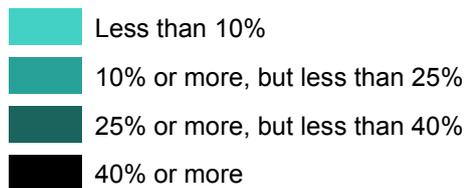


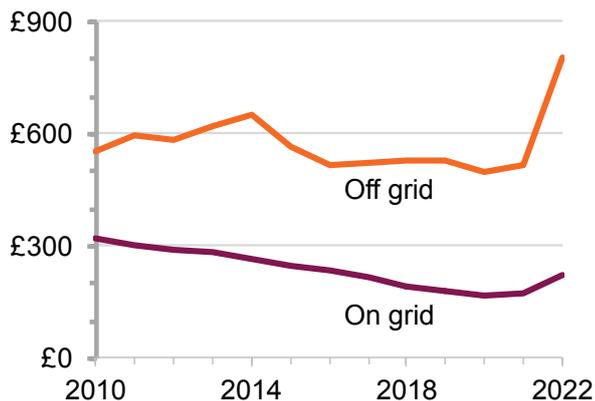
Figure 9: Off-gas grid in Predominantly Rural areas

Proportion of properties not on the gas grid



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Figure 10: The annual average fuel poverty gap for those on and off-grid households that are fuel poor



The fuel poverty gap measures the depth of fuel poverty and it is the additional income needed to keep their house warm without bringing their remaining income below the poverty line.

We are:

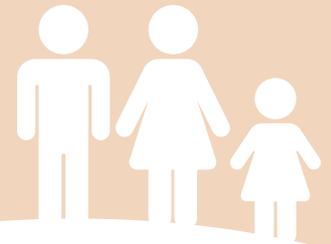
- Providing £378 million in grants, ring fenced for rural areas, to fund energy efficiency and clean heating upgrades for low-income households living off the gas grid in England through the Home Upgrade Grant Phase 2. This funding will be delivered from April 2023 to March 2025.
- Supporting households to move from fossil fuel heating systems to heat pumps and, in limited circumstances, biomass boilers through the Boiler Upgrade Scheme, now extended to 2028. In year 1 of the Scheme (2022-23), 58% of all grants paid were towards installations in rural properties in England and Wales.
- Introducing the Great British Insulation Scheme to provide support for low-income and vulnerable households in receipt of means tested benefits, as well as those living in Council Tax bands A-D in England, with an Energy Performance Certificate rating of D-G.
- Consulting on community benefits for onshore electricity transmission network infrastructure.
- Reducing electricity connection costs by reducing the costs charged to connecting customers where distribution network reinforcement is required to accommodate new and upgraded connections.

We will:

- Publish a Connections Action Plan jointly with Ofgem this summer to progress work on accelerating electricity network connections by releasing network capacity and improving the connection process.



Communities



We want rural communities to continue to be places where people want to live and work. We will improve access to high quality health and social care and take further action to tackle rural crime.

High quality health and social care

Everyone deserves access to good quality health and social care, wherever they live. Living in the countryside offers unique benefits with the beauty of our natural landscapes nearby and close-knit communities. However, we understand that distances that need to be travelled can add to the challenges of delivering and accessing health and social care services. We will continue to work for better and more accessible care in rural areas, such as rolling out community diagnostic centres which are often in market towns so people do not have to travel as far.

Figure 11: Access to General Practice Surgeries by public transport and or walking

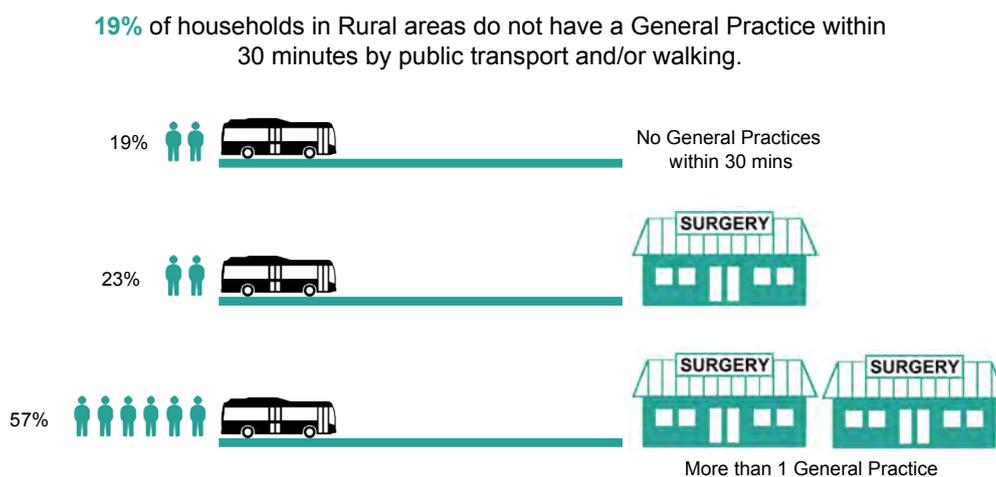
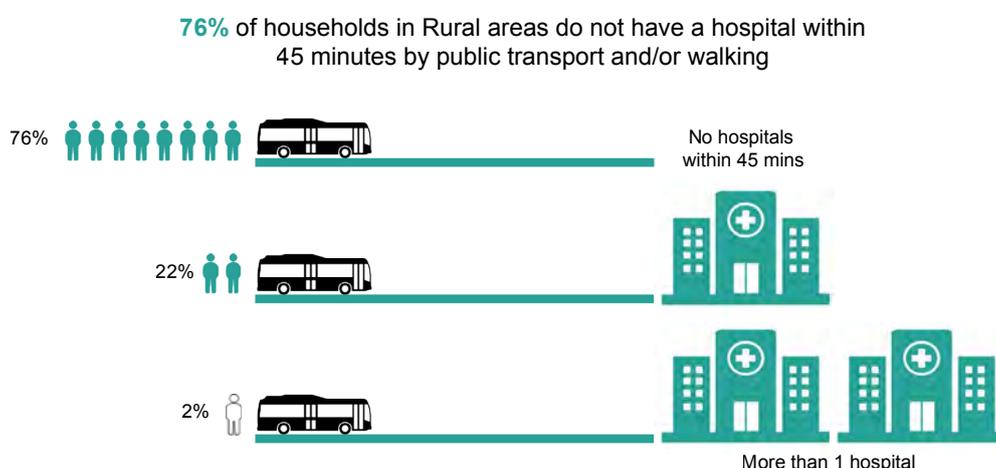


Figure 12: Access to hospitals by public transport and or walking



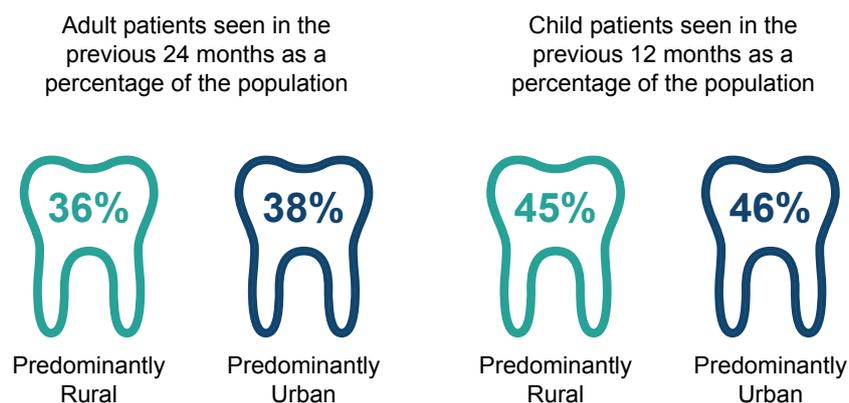
We are:

- Taking action to increase the number of doctors in under-served areas through the Targeted Enhanced Recruitment Scheme for GP trainees.
- Supporting community pharmacies in areas that are more sparsely served through the Pharmacy Access Scheme.
- Addressing the challenges of primary care provision, including those in rural areas, through our Delivery Plan for Recovering Access to Primary Care.
- Supporting farmers' mental health and wellbeing as an outcome of our Future Farming Resilience Fund, which supports farmers and land managers during the early years of agricultural transition, alongside the £2.3 billion extra a year being invested into the expansion and transformation of mental health in England.

We will:

- Publish a Dental Plan shortly which will set out further reform to improve access to NHS Dentistry, including in rural areas which may find it particularly hard to recruit and retain dentists and other dental care professionals.
- Publish an NHS England Workforce Plan which will look at the mix and number of staff required and will set out the actions and reforms across the NHS that will be needed to reduce supply gaps and improve retention across England including in rural areas.

Figure 13: Patient access to dentistry



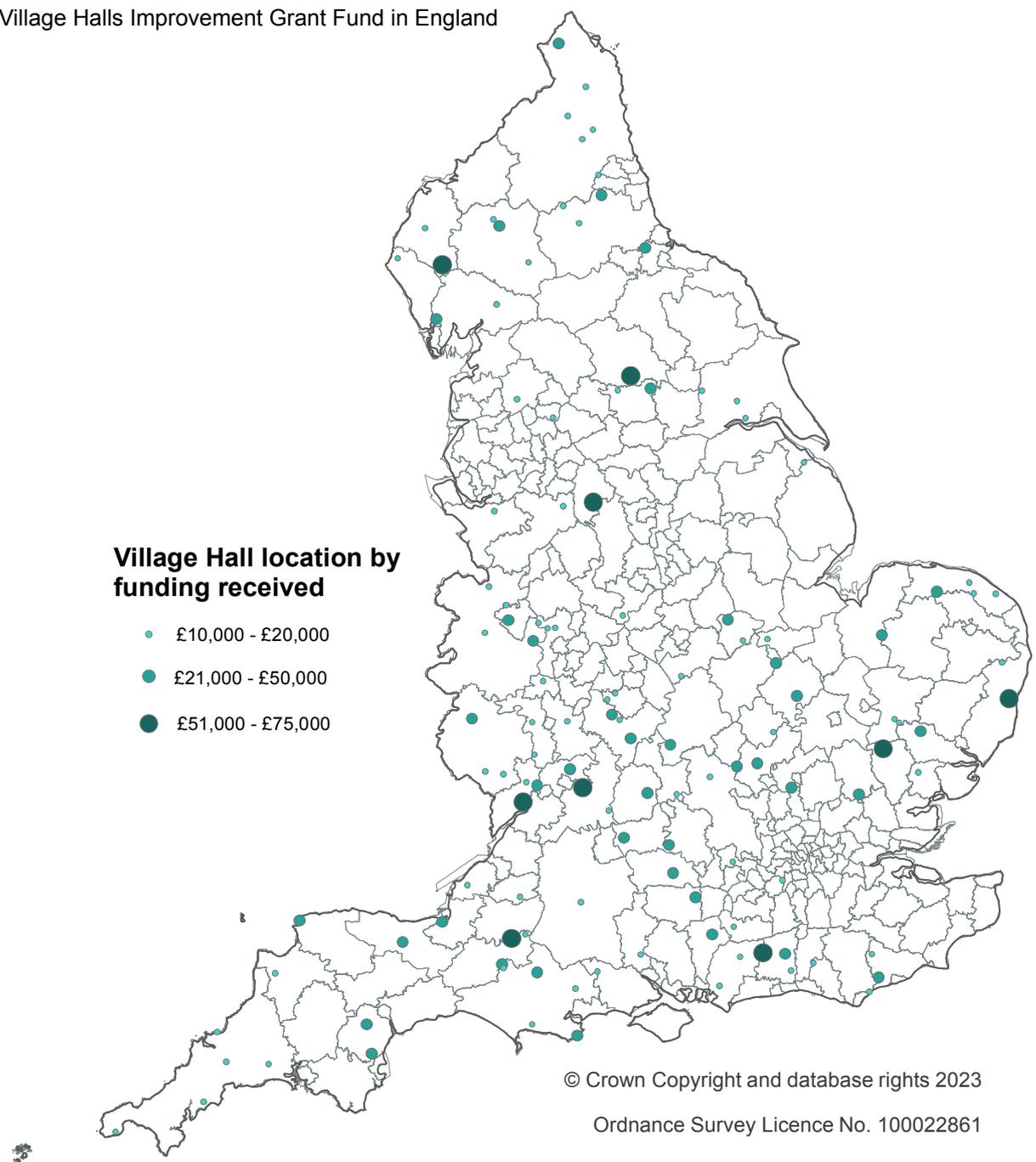
Thriving communities

Rural areas are rich in the communal spirit and strong social networks which contribute enormously to the unique joy of rural life. Community hubs such as village halls and public libraries play a vital role in sustaining these networks, and the pandemic demonstrated their adaptability and resilience. We have seen innovation in rural libraries provision, like Suffolk and Devon's library services being spun out from the council and run as public sector mutuals, allowing them to take a more entrepreneurial approach.

We will continue to support these hubs to offer a range of activities and volunteer-led support services to meet local needs and bring people together, including through targeted funds and sharing best practice.

Overall levels of crime tend to be lower in rural areas, but we recognise that certain types of crime are a blight on rural life – including theft and vandalism of farm equipment, livestock worrying, and environmental crimes such as fly tipping. We are committed to cracking down on crime wherever it takes place.

Figure 14: Village Halls Improvement Grant Fund in England



We are:

- Funding improvements to village halls to help rural communities to retain locally accessible hubs for essential service delivery and social and recreational activities, addressing loneliness and social isolation and supporting community cohesion.
- Supporting the work of ACRE (Action with Communities in Rural England) through its network of member organisations across England, with a grant of £1.7 million this year.
- Supporting community ownership of vital rural assets such as pubs and shops through the £150 million Community Ownership Fund. To date, £23.9 million has been allocated to 98 projects across the UK including, for example, £299,500 to enable East Boldre Community Stores in Brockenhurst, Hampshire, to purchase their chapel premises and open a community run shop and post office.
- Providing up to £29 million from the Know Your Neighbourhood Fund to widen participation in volunteering and tackle loneliness in 27 disadvantaged areas across England, including 5 predominantly rural local authority areas.
- Tackling anti-social behaviour, including fly-tipping through the Action Plan the Prime Minister launched in March.
- Cracking down on the theft of high value agricultural machinery through our support for the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Bill.
- Supporting the National Police Chiefs' Council to establish a new National Rural Crime Unit (NRCU) to support forces nationally in their response to rural crimes, such as the theft of farming or construction machinery, livestock theft, rural fly tipping, rural fuel theft and equine crime.

We will:

- Provide £200,000 in funding from the Home Office for the new National Rural Crime Unit. In addition, Defra will fund a post within the National Rural Crime Unit to explore how the police's role in tackling fly-tipping can be optimised.
- Progress delivery of legislation to tackle livestock worrying by improving powers to enable the police to respond to livestock worrying incidents more effectively - making it easier for them to collect evidence and, in the most serious cases, seize and detain dogs to reduce the risk of further incidents.
- Lay regulations by July to increase flytipping and litter penalties, consult with key stakeholders on ringfencing use of fixed penalty receipts released through fines.
- Publish a new public libraries strategy for England in 2024, which will cover how we can improve library service and provision including in rural areas. This will be informed by Baroness Sanderson's upcoming review, expected in Summer 2023, which will cover library provision in rural areas including digital inclusion, home library services and the use of partnerships to boost access.
- Work with the Local Government Association, Arts Council England and Libraries Connected to share best practice on rural libraries.
- Extend the scope of the Platinum Village Halls Fund from Autumn 2023 by lowering the minimum threshold of grant that can be applied for to £2,000 - making the funding more accessible to smaller scale projects.

Case study

Village halls play a significant role in supporting rural communities by providing a venue for essential services provision, wider social and recreational activities, and in bringing people together.

Recognising the importance of these vital community hubs, Defra is providing £3 million in capital funding through the Platinum Jubilee Village Halls Fund which will help support rural communities retain these vital assets. This fund builds on the success of the predecessor Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund which ran between 2019 and 2022 and supported 125 village hall projects.



One such project was Eardisland Village Hall in Herefordshire, which received £21,794.00 from the Village Hall Improvement Grant Fund in February 2021 to carry out essential capital improvements. The project included insulation to walls and roof, replacement windows, rewiring, repairs and renewal of external walls and the creation of a larger new kitchen.

These improvements to the village hall have helped to create a functioning and welcoming space for all members of the local community to access and take part in the many activities now available within the village, which include pilates and tai-chi classes, quiz nights, various craft events, sewing club, cookery club and monthly lunch club.



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