

Hidden Somerset

Rural Isolation



Rural Realities

According to the 2011 census, 48% of people in Somerset lived in a rural area, compared to 18% in England as a whole

40% of Somerset's population live in England's 20% most deprived areas for geographical barriers

The proportion of households without a car in Somerset is less than 1 in 5

In the Somerset Joint Strategic Needs Assessment of 2015 only 5% of women felt that they were able to spend their time as they liked

Somerset is one of the most rural counties in England, with a population density of 1.5 people per hectare, compared to a national average of 4.1

88% of Somerset's roads are categorised as 'rural' compared with 64% in Great Britain as a whole

94% of young people consulted in 2015 stated that transport was their number one barrier to accessing opportunity*

The ability to access online services has been attributed to the growth in young people's loneliness being higher than any other age group



Introduction

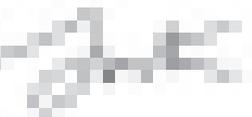
Hidden Somerset is a series of short reports looking at aspects of life in Somerset that are often hidden from view. They are designed to stimulate debate, understanding and, in particular, help inspire new and better philanthropy.

We have consciously started with an issue that cuts across so many others but has been a recurring theme in our work: rural isolation. Rural isolation is a form of disadvantage in its own right, but it also exacerbates the hardships and difficulties many people face. Perhaps it is the ultimate 'hidden' issue. Can you really see or measure, for example, how living in the so-called rural idyll amplifies a person's mental health condition?

Somerset Community Foundation is well placed to produce these reports. We are producing them to lift the lid on important issues and help illustrate the special role philanthropy can play in our county by tackling serious disadvantage and poverty.

Our independence and cause-neutrality means we can look at different issues objectively. We can draw on the insights of local organisations working on the frontline in the heart of our communities, to complement – and maybe sometimes contradict – official statistics.

Finally, we have prepared this report from a particular perspective; it is important to acknowledge that, for the majority of people, the upsides of rural life far outweigh the downsides, and indeed many of the best initiatives that help people overcome isolation are born out of vibrant communities.



Justin Sargent

Chief Executive, Somerset Community Foundation

The Rural Idyll?



There are many good things about living in the countryside: the natural environment, a sense of community, feelings of safety, and a lack of traffic noise and pollution all appeal.

According to the 2011 census, 48% of people in Somerset lived in a rural area, compared to 18% in England as a whole. With a population density of 1.5 people per hectare, compared to a national average of 4.1, Somerset is one of the most rural counties in England. In the west of Somerset, the density decreases further to just 0.5, and over one third of Somerset council wards have a population density of less than 1 per hectare.

The rurality of Somerset is key to its beauty. The diverse geography, from the wilds of Exmoor, to the dramatic north Somerset coastline, to the tranquillity of the levels and the beauty of the Mendip Hills, are key attractions for those who live here.

However, the beauty of the landscape masks the challenges faced by those who live in rural areas. Roughly 40% of Somerset's population live in England's 20% most deprived areas for geographical barriers. Most 'Lower Layer Super Output Areas' (LSOAs) in the district are among the 20% most deprived in the country for barriers to housing and services.

The Somerset Joint Strategic Needs Assessment in 2015 focused on the impact on the health and wellbeing of those who live or work in rural areas. While the challenges they identified are unlikely to be a surprise, it is telling that four years later, our survey – which asked recipients to identify and rank drivers of isolation – indicates that little has changed. Living rurally is a life choice for some and a family heritage for others, but the barriers to accessing essential services affect people of all ages and, to some extent, all backgrounds. These barriers have an acute impact on an individual's socio-economic status, life chances, health and wellbeing. Rural isolation and loneliness can affect anyone, regardless of age or social status.

Challenges for those living or working in rural areas¹

- Social isolation
- Poor mobile signals or broadband
- Reliance on private or community transport
- Difficulty in accessing services and for service providers to reach the people
- Lack of appropriate housing, especially for young people who wish to stay in Somerset
- Fuel poverty and higher upfront costs for fuel and transport which has a major financial impact on the less well-off
- Lower expectations of work and further education prospects
- Increased vulnerability to effects of shrinking public sector budgets

¹ Identified by the Somerset Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, 2015

Drivers of isolation in rural areas²

- Lack of transport
- Lack of services and local amenities
- Financial hardship
- Health
- Care obligations
- Housing/house prices
- Poor broadband or mobile phone signal for many

² Identified by Somerset Community Foundation's Hidden Somerset Survey, 2019

Causes of Isolation

The challenge of getting around

Transport is consistently stated as the principal barrier to improved quality of life for people living in rural areas. Unsurprisingly, improving access to transport is seen as the best way to do this.¹ With a poor public transport infrastructure there is a compelling need for a privately owned vehicle. The proportion of households without a car in Somerset is less than 1 in 5 in most of the countryside, although of course not all members of the household will have access to it at once. Communities in the rural western region of Somerset, for example, are particularly isolated. In parts of Exmoor, households can be on average around 40 minutes by public transport from their nearest food store and 50 minutes from a GP.

There are around 2,700 women and 900 men aged 65 or over living in rural villages with no access to transport. Only 5% of women in Somerset felt they were able to spend their time as they liked and widowed women are often left unable to drive once their spouse or partner dies. The issue also affects young people in rural areas who are seeking to access employment or education. 94% of young people consulted in 2015 stated that transport was their number one barrier to accessing opportunities.

Combined with the difficulty in accessing alternative transport are the implications of its cost. Although over 65s are entitled to free bus travel, young people who need to access key county towns such as Taunton, Yeovil or Bridgwater for apprenticeships have to pay full price, and this cost can be prohibitive for those on low incomes or who have families.

“I have been chairman of Evercreech Friendship Club for over 15 years and lack of transportation is my number one problem. If I can get transport to pick up the elderly (even those who live a short distance away) I could straight away increase the number of members, especially those who are on their own (current membership is 40). We could then also support the surrounding villages at our meetings. We use Mendip Community Transport (at a cost of £28 per journey) but they can only pick up members on a dedicated route so as to arrive at the meetings on time.”
Survey respondent



“In most of the villages we support there is no transport available. There is a local minibus service but children aren’t allowed on these. In the other areas we support, transport is a limited bus service which isn’t beneficial to use in order to access work or social activities, and is often too expensive for a family to use.”

Survey respondent

Much of rural Somerset relies on community transport schemes – which offer minibus provision or lifts from volunteer drivers – and neighbourly offers of help. However, there remain many gaps and a lack of coordination. Our survey for this report suggests that existing transport – public and community – excludes many community members because of the times of the day it runs, its cost, the routes it takes and restrictions on age of passenger.

Feedback from VCSE organisations in our survey indicates that creative solutions, often community led, are needed. In one small community in the west of Somerset, public bus services have been cut completely. The community believes that not having access to private transport has psychological and logistical impacts on residents. The village of Roadwater, like many other villages in Somerset, has its own thriving community shop to try to bring services back into communities. This, they believe, could be developed further.

“We are committed to improving services within the village to further develop our own economy. We would like to think of a future in which we could also develop link transportation for a number of people in an environmentally conscious fashion.”
Survey respondent from Roadwater

¹ Hinkley Point C Mitigation Fund Research and Consultation 2017, The Community Council for Somerset & Clarity CIC.

² Somerset Joint Strategic Needs Assessment, 2015

³ Rurality and Young People, Somerset Rural Youth Project, 2015

Causes of Isolation

The loss of local services

The lack of services and amenities was, according to our survey, the second biggest driver of isolation. According to Office for National Statistics data, there are 110 fewer pubs – acknowledged community hubs – in Somerset, than in 2001.

Reduced budgets within the public sector have meant that local services have faced cuts or closure: the economics of providing a service for 30 people in a town, compared to two people in a village, being insurmountable obstacles for policymakers. Bringing these services back to communities through the voluntary sector was seen as a solution. Creating shared ways to deliver services and pool organisational resources could be a way of meeting needs and managing the inevitable financial costs. Other respondents felt that better use could be made of existing community facilities, such as village halls, which could be utilised to provide support.



These approaches are not unusual and they are effective. Nationally and internationally we have seen the increase of community libraries in unused spaces to replace public services; telephone boxes often become the vessel for donated books which people take and replace at their leisure. They are run on trust and dependent on goodwill. While not a 'mobile library', they are illustrative of the social capital and resources that exist within every community and can be mobilised with support.

Far away from opportunity

A lack of opportunity within rural areas for learning and employment is a barrier that can seem too great to be overcome, not only to those transitioning into further education or first employment. For adults seeking to develop their skills or improve their job chances, the opportunities to access local education opportunities are limited. A report by the Local Government Association in 2017 points to evidence being examined at the University of East Anglia that suggests that there may be hidden unemployment and under-employment in rural areas with higher levels of low-paid seasonal work. Young people living in rural areas appear to have been disproportionately affected by unemployment following the financial crisis of 2007.

Many of the organisations we surveyed felt that providing opportunities to overcome the barriers of access are key to their beneficiaries. Solutions to help reduce isolation could include better work opportunities and improved wages and childcare, allowing and encouraging more parents to work. Adult learning and employment

opportunities, social activities and engagement, and access to better services would all encourage families to move to, or remain in, the area, instead of it perhaps becoming somewhere that is seen as a location in which to retire in older age. A Somerset university could encourage students, workers and employers to migrate to the area and would be aspirational for local young people.

Therefore, it is not only a lack of access to learning and employment opportunities. The need for social engagement opportunities is something cited by many. There is a need to build rural communities, relevant for all ages, that will attract and retain a younger demographic. The gradual decline of community, as families and young people are forced to move closer to services and amenities, is one of the big risks of rural isolation.

If barriers prevent people accessing these elsewhere, they have to be provided within the community, for the community and by the community. The voluntary and community sector is uniquely placed to facilitate this.





Cut off from contact

Interestingly, poor broadband or mobile signal was bottom of the list of drivers of isolation, according to those VCSE organisations who responded to our survey. Although reflective of the communities and areas in which respondents to the survey work, it could be seen to signify a shift in opinion, and perhaps indicates the success of various public and private initiatives to improve signal and broadband speed. Ofcom reports that between 2014 and 2017 the number of broadband connections in Somerset under 2mbs more than halved with the number of connections under 10mbs dropping dramatically. The number of connections over 30mbs

has more than tripled and now represents over 60,000 connections in the county. Although 'black spots' still remain, and consistent coverage is not always guaranteed in rural areas, further consultation and shared feedback from the West Somerset Opportunity Area indicates that the majority of people feel that broadband speed and mobile signal quality have drastically improved. However, digital exclusion remains. Its focus has now shifted to the cost of accessing these services, whether that is paying for data on your mobile phone or the ability to access Wi-Fi for free. Many young people, for example, depend on going to cafés and

other places to do this. There are online distance learning opportunities available at local colleges, and many of them are free to access. Yet if amenities allowing access to free Wi-Fi do not exist in rural areas, and young people are unable to access employment and skills opportunities in order to derive an income to pay for mobile data, digital exclusion will remain an issue in rural areas of the county.

When asked what else could improve isolation for the communities they worked with, one organisation identified the need for young people to be able to access services and the dangers of them feeling 'out of touch'.

“Young people’s emotional wellbeing is being affected. Figures show the growth in young people’s loneliness is higher than any other age group.”

Survey respondent

Community Solutions

Exmoor Young Voices

Entrepreneurial survivors

“We set up Exmoor Young Voices around five years ago because the National Park Authority wanted to understand the issues that young people were facing. Through our work with young people we’ve identified three key challenges that they face when it comes to access to services:

1. Connectivity, which extends to transport, internet access, and access to knowledge;
2. Housing, which centres on the affordability of both renting and buying;
3. Low wages, which results from limited employment opportunities.

To provide some context to these challenges, there are 5,500 homes on Exmoor, but 1,000 are owned by absentee landlords. In addition, many homes are holiday lets and B&Bs. The number of young people living here is declining and we think there are now around 960 people aged 18–30 left. Outward migration from the National Park has been going on for some years, and is an issue repeated in National Parks in other parts of the country. This decline has led to schools closing and the increasing isolation of those young people who do remain. I would characterise the young people left in the Park

as ‘entrepreneurial survivors’ who are working multiple small jobs in the rural and tourism sectors. They work long hours, but remain dependent on their parents for their accommodation. We’re told that the housing waiting lists are not that long, but that’s because systems like Homefinder are often difficult to navigate and most young people have no expectation of getting a house and don’t even try to register.

We’re working to educate both young people and local stakeholders about these issues. The voices of young people are now being heard by decision makers at various levels, agendas now reflect issues that we raise, and we’re beginning to see some real partnerships developing. However, we need to find a way for other bodies to say ‘yes’ to the needs of young people if we’re going to change the pattern of outward migration.

One example of this is some relaxation around the local planning regulations and our work on self-build, as one solution to young people’s housing needs. We’re hoping in the future to be able to help young people with deposits for plots of land so they can begin to build their own homes.”

Leslie Silverlock,
Exmoor Young Voices

Creative Innovation Centre CIC (CICCIC)

The power of art transforms people’s lives

“CICCIC will bring a variety of arts and cultural events to the communities of the Blackdown Hills. We’ll provide a friendly, exciting and safe environment where families, the elderly and the vulnerable can meet locally, building community cohesion and developing peer support networks, with all the attendant health and wellbeing outcomes that this can bring to a predominantly isolated, older population.

Activities, events and projects will include art workshops, theatrical shows and live music; day-time recreational workshops connecting with other support organisations; opportunities for intergenerational knowledge exchange activities, such as digital workshops; and developing community peer support projects such as transport share schemes, singing for the brain, and shopping buddies.

Initial meetings with local groups such as the Blackdown Support Group, Wellbeing Centre, Alzheimer’s Society and Taunton Dementia

Action Alliance all concluded there was significant value in intergenerational events and activities where families could come together, reducing rural isolation issues and overcoming transport problems. Working with these organisations we will reach over 500 people. One area where we need to do some more thinking, is how we reach those groups who are in care. Our project manager will be visiting many care homes in our area, to see how this can be resolved.

We also anticipate we will create two new full-time equivalent roles, employing local artists and performers. These jobs will be targeted at young people living in the parishes where we are delivering our work.

This social investment has given us a great boost, giving us the tools to work effectively towards our stated goals. All in all we are in a much better position.”

Mark Bond, Manager,
Creative Innovation Centre
CIC





Wiveliscombe Area Partnership Enabling community connections

“Wiveliscombe Area Partnership (WAP) was established in 2002 to connect an area known as 10 parishes. WAP is based in Wiveliscombe Community Office and acts as a hub for the community, housing police and town councillor surgeries, the Village Agent, Wivey Cares (a voluntary organisation that connects volunteers and micro-provides to local people) and a free legal clinic. It also has community and tourist information, newspapers, photocopying and printing services, produces the bi-monthly publication Wiveliscombe Messenger and organises the regular street market and bi-ennial 10 Parishes Festival.

“The community wanted to keep their library and WAP was there and able to be pro-active”

WAP describes itself as a “supporter and enabler” for its community, illustrated by the recent library closure threat. Funding cuts meant that the library’s future was under threat. At a local community meeting, strong support was expressed for keeping the library open and WAP stepped in. WAP also plans to use the library as a venue for events for the community.

The merger of two local GP surgeries also shows how WAP is a voice for the community. When local people raised concerns about how they would get to their new surgery and collect prescriptions, WAP raised the issue with Somerset Partnership NHS Trust. The result was funding for another vehicle to provide a weekly service delivering prescriptions and transporting patients to the main surgery.

WAP also supports local enterprise by convening a local business group, and supports new community initiatives.

“There is a lack of transport so without Wiveylink many people can’t get to their hospital appointments, hairdressers, GP surgery, shops or to visit family and friends”

WAP established the Wiveylink Community Transport service which now covers 26 parishes, including Taunton, Wellington, Wiveliscombe and the surrounding area. There are over 600 people registered to use Wiveylink and the service is not only about connecting people to services, but also connecting people to each other. Mobility problems can mean it is difficult to leave the house, which can lead to isolation.

“The community thinks WAP is theirs”

Not only do the volunteer drivers get to know regular Wiveylink users, the regulars themselves have become friends and often book journeys out together. Wiveylink runs days out in the summer months which are always booked up well in advance. The loss of local bus services has left people of all ages without transport. The fact that Wiveylink can offer transport that is accessible to those with significant mobility issues is invaluable. Although the majority of passengers are older people, Wiveylink is for all ages.

WAP is very connected to the community and was established to respond to their needs. It is heart-warming when we receive thank you cards from people who use WAPs services, and we were recently delighted to be left a legacy which enabled us to purchase a new vehicle for Wiveylink. Everyone at WAP enjoys giving to their community and bringing people together, and gaining the appreciation expressed in return.”

**Pauline Homeshaw,
Chair, WAP**

Village Agents – Community Council for Somerset Building resilience

“Transport remains the biggest challenge we encounter, which is related to low incomes; whatever journey you take costs money. But we’ve also seen an increase in ‘signposting culture’, where services are set up to direct an isolated person to a service in the community. This just isn’t a solution if you have, for example, mental health problems, drug or alcohol issues, or have suffered domestic abuse. Basic needs must be addressed first, and we find many people need to build their confidence before they can be signposted elsewhere.

The approach of our Village Agents is quite different. We take a personalised approach each time we meet someone and work with them to identify networks and support already in their community. Many of the people we identify together do not see themselves as volunteers but can and will help. The role of the Village Agents is therefore often to reconnect, or ‘re-friend’, people where networks have broken down, for example

after a bereavement or loss of a job. In this way we are not turning people into service users, we’re turning them into resilient members of their own community. It all starts with a simple question: what matters to you?

We currently have fifteen Village Agents embedded in various communities. Their focus on relationships can often be quite time consuming and so we would like to have many more. Ultimately, the aspiration is to have an Agent for every 10,000 people in Somerset. Unfortunately, it has been a struggle to find funding for the Village Agents project as each outcome is very personalised and not always immediately obvious; however, their work prevents a lot of problems escalating through the simple act of building relationships.”

**Raj Singh,
Deputy Chief Executive,
Community Council
for Somerset**

Looking Ahead

Overcoming the challenges that many people face as a result of rural isolation is not easy. Transport to centralised services will remain important, of course, but there is more we can do to encourage projects to reach out into rural areas and enable more 'home-grown' initiatives to emerge. Building on the ingenuity and commitment of local people, and making the most of the assets that lie in each community (or creating new ones), is undoubtedly key.

Like so many aspects of our work this is a complex issue, but we have drawn out three areas we could look at in more depth within our future grant making.

Thinking and acting locally

Small, local initiatives – formal and informal – have an increasingly important role in building stronger and more inclusive communities. Often these might seem quite modest, but if they help people overcome isolation and loneliness they can prevent or delay more serious problems emerging, and they are worth supporting.

We need to think about how we might fund the informal voluntary sector with micro-grants, share examples of good practice to inspire others, develop partnerships between small local charities, and public and business services, to increase the impact and reach of their work, and continue making the case for supporting essential community services.

Social Enterprise

One of the hallmarks of our rural communities is the close proximity of affluence and poverty. This creates opportunities for social enterprises – from village shops to art projects – to trade and, in doing so, increase access for all to services and opportunities on a more sustainable basis.

We need to continue developing an approach to social investment that works in small, rural communities. This might include looking at how we help people with start-up enterprises.

Infrastructure

While access to high speed broadband is an infrastructural issue, there are still some areas with poor provision. The greater challenge is giving people the opportunity to make the most of developments in digital technology.

We need to look at how we can support existing community infrastructure in rural areas: village halls, churches and schools, for example, to provide a hub for digital access for all local residents. We also need to enable inspirational initiatives to reach out beyond the urban centres into more rural areas in creative ways.

That is what we think...but we are interested in hearing from you. Contact justin.sargent@somersetcf.org.uk with your thoughts and ideas.





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Get in touch

Address: Yeoman House, The Royal Bath & West Showground,
Shepton Mallet, Somerset BA4 6QN **Call:** 01749 344949
Email: info@somersetcf.org.uk **Website** www.somersetcf.org.uk

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