

Housing and Employment:

A Survey of Rural Residents' Experiences and Opinions

A summary of findings from a 2018 online survey managed by the Countryside & Community Research Institute (University of Gloucestershire), with support from Rural England CIC.

Survey response

The survey achieved 714 complete responses from residents living in rural areas of England. This sought to obtain responses from a broad cross-section of rural residents, though there was an over-representation of those aged 55 to 74 and, to a lesser extent, of females.

Length of residency: 33% of respondents were long-established in their area and had lived at their current address for more than 20 years. 27% of respondents fell into a group that included recent arrivals, having lived at their current address no more than 5 years.

Housing tenure: 83% of respondents lived in a home that they or their family own, either outright or with a mortgage. 12% of respondents lived in a home that was rented. The remaining 5% were mainly respondents who shared someone else's accommodation.

Household structure: just over half (53%) of respondents were individuals who lived alone or with a spouse/partner, but who had no children living there. Almost a quarter (24%) of respondents had children living with them, including a sizeable minority with adult children.

Employment status: 56% of respondents were employed (18% being self-employed and 38% employees). 40% of respondents were retired, reflecting the over-representation of older age groups. Half of the self-employed respondents worked mainly from home.

Financial security: just over half (52%) of respondents described their financial position as either 'fine' or 'good' (with enough for some extras and savings). 10% of all respondents described their financial position as either 'not managing' or 'just about managing'. This figure rose to 20% among those aged 16 to 34 and to 38% among those in rented housing.

Key survey findings

House building: respondents' perspective on new housing developments taking place in their local areas can broadly be split into two groups. 42% took a positive perspective, either viewing some development as needed or actively welcoming it as beneficial. 46% had a more negative perspective, either viewing it as threatening the area's rural character or just seeing it as inevitable.

This pattern of responses held broadly true across different age groups. However, length of residence affected responses, with those who had lived longer at their current address being

more positive about new housing development. Tenure was also important, with those living in rented housing more likely to be positive about new housing development.

Housing priorities: respondents were also asked about their preference for new housing in their area. There was a strong first preference for housing that is either affordable (38%) or is for local people (35%). The preference for new housing to be affordable housing was particularly strong among the 16 to 34 age group and among the 'other' tenure category (which mainly consists of people who share someone else's accommodation).

"Rural property is not affordable even when allocated as such and local jobs don't keep up with rents either. No local kids I grew up with can afford to stay. The whole town I grew up in is now rich, retired and it's killing communities." (Quote from survey respondent)

Housing solutions: when asked about the best solution, respondents again particularly favoured developing housing for local people (32%). Other fairly popular solutions were encouraging local house builders (17%), building more houses (11%), setting rent controls for private landlords (11%) and charging second home owners higher council tax (10%). Many of the younger group, aged 16 to 34, favoured provision of a lump sum towards a mortgage deposit (24%).

A generation gap: asked their view about there being a 'generation gap' between younger and older people, the majority of respondents (57%) felt this was an unhelpful way to talk about issues. This view was most strongly held among older age groups.

Overall, just 22% instead took the view that there was a generation gap with older people having more opportunities. However, this was the most popular response (46%) for those in the 16 to 34 age group.

"There have been three major developments in my village. Each was required to make provision for affordable housing. One development has not (to my knowledge) provided affordable housing and another has built fewer affordable homes than was initially proposed." (Quote from survey respondent)

Although the survey found some differing opinions according to age, it also showed that older respondents had a great deal of sympathy for the situation faced by younger people. An analysis of comments on the survey forms indicated that older respondents tend to hold the state (at both national and local levels) largely responsible for housing concerns and look to it for action. Younger people were more likely to blame those who make money from the housing market (though many also see local authority responses as deficient).

The comments received indicate considerable dissatisfaction with the current model for rural development and they could be interpreted as indicating support for the state to restrain or steer more strongly the housing market.

Rural residents survey panel

The Countryside and Community Research Institute, who are partners of Rural England CIC, ran this online survey on housing and employment during summer 2018. They largely went back to people who had agreed to join a Rural Panel the year before. However, further panel members were recruited in 2018 to improve its age balance. Nonetheless, it should be noted that, compared with England's rural population as a whole, the panel contains a disproportionate number who are aged 55 to 74 and who are female. There also appears to be some skew towards the financially better off.

That said, as a tool offering a snapshot of views from a cross-section of rural residents in England it is useful. The summer 2018 survey attracted 887 responses, of which 714 were complete and from rural residents. It is these which are reported on by this summary note.

Context for the 2018 survey

The particular focus of the 2018 survey reflects the high profile of housing as a topic within the rural policy debate. House purchase prices are high in most rural areas and local wages are often low. Figures show that house prices are more than eight times annual average wages. The situation for low income households may be made harder still as a result of there being limited social rented housing in rural areas (especially in villages).

In some places, with high quality or protected landscapes, the scope for new house building is constrained. Nonetheless, data shows that a considerable share of new house building has recently taken place in predominantly rural areas. Housing development on green field sites can be a controversial and emotive issue, especially if it is seen as going to 'incomers' or to second-home owners. In addition to landscape or environmental impacts resulting from development, there are often concerns about added pressures on local infrastructure e.g. roads, health services.

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