

Challenges facing rural 16-18 year olds in accessing appropriate education and work based learning



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Introduction and summary of findings

This research looks at the challenges facing 16-18 year olds living in rural areas in accessing appropriate opportunities for education and work based learning. It also considers the possible implications of accessibility constraints on students' attainment and on social mobility.

The research refers to a variety of published research and statistics. It is also informed by responses to an on-line survey, replies to a questionnaire and a small number of more in-depth telephone interviews. Whilst this research makes no claims that participants' observations are necessarily statistically representative of rural England as a whole, a number of key themes emerge which trigger concern and strongly suggest the need for more extensive research.

The findings indicate that, whatever route rural young people take after compulsory school leaving age, three interrelated factors leave many of them at a disadvantage compared to their more urban counterparts. Those factors are:

- choice
- accessibility
- cost

There is surprisingly little reliable information about the choices made by rural young people at 16+, and none that the author can find about the choices they might have liked to have made if they had had the opportunity so to do. Such statistical information as is available is generally aggregated at a geographical level, such as local authority level, that distorts the rural picture by including urban students. For example, statistics for Devon on destinations at Key Stage 4 will include students from the city of Exeter and a number of sizeable market towns. The opportunities available to young people from isolated homes, rural hamlets and small villages are very different and the challenges they face are often much more acute.

“ All young adults must stay in training or education until they reach 18+ but no thought was given to how this was going to be implemented with many schools not facilitating a sixth form and many families living in rural areas with no transport...We all want our children to obtain the best they can and be the best they can be but we are not always in a position to offer them these choices.” Parent, Cambridgeshire village.

Key finding from this research include:

- Many rural young people can realistically access only one school or college and, particularly in areas without school sixth forms, even that may present difficulties.
- Provision of school sixth forms, sixth form Colleges and Further Education Colleges differs widely across the country so rural students can find it hard to access the type of course they want.
- Access to vocational courses can be a particular challenge.

- A smaller percentage of students leaving schools or colleges located in predominantly rural areas go on to Higher Education compared to leavers from urban based institutions.
- There is typically a very limited choice of apprenticeships in rural areas.
- Rural young people in apprenticeships have often found these informally either proactively, by asking potential employers, or by being approached by employers direct.
- Often apprenticeships lead on from holiday/casual/ Saturday jobs or from work experience.
- Travel to a preferred option may be impossible or extremely difficult. Journey distances of 30+ miles, or over an hour and a half in duration, are not uncommon.
- Buses, where available at all, are often inconvenient and necessitate 'whole day out' trips
- Complex journeys are common.
- Reliance on parents providing lifts at least part of the way is the norm.
- Travel is expensive. Many pay around £200 a term or even more.

Choices made at 16 can shape a person's future life chances. That many rural young people face such constrained opportunities at 16+ raises important questions about fairness both for the individual (who cannot move to access better options, has limited if any income, and whose choices are significantly dependent on the ability and willingness of parents to provide, or pay for, transport), and more generally for social mobility within rural communities.

"... the new social mobility coldspots in our country are concentrated in remote rural or coastal areas and in former industrial areas, especially in the Midlands. There, youngsters from disadvantaged backgrounds face far higher barriers to improved social mobility than those who grow up in cities and their surrounding hinterland. Perhaps unsurprisingly only... 14 per cent in remote rural coldspots progress to university compared with 27 per cent in hotspots. Many of these places combine poor educational outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds with weak labour markets that have a greater share of low-skilled, low-paid employment than elsewhere in England"

Social Mobility Commission (2017) Social mobility in Great Britain: fifth state of the nation report.

By highlighting the real challenges experienced by rural young people and their families it is hoped that this research will stimulate debate about these issues and encourage opportunities for positive policy intervention.

Chapter 1. The requirement for 16-18 year olds to undertake education or Work Based Learning

This introductory chapter summarises the options open to 16-18 and provides an indication of the choices made.

The law

The Education and Skills Act 2008¹ changed the law to incrementally increase the age at which young people are required to participate in education or training (known as ‘the participation age’) beyond the school leaving age of 16.

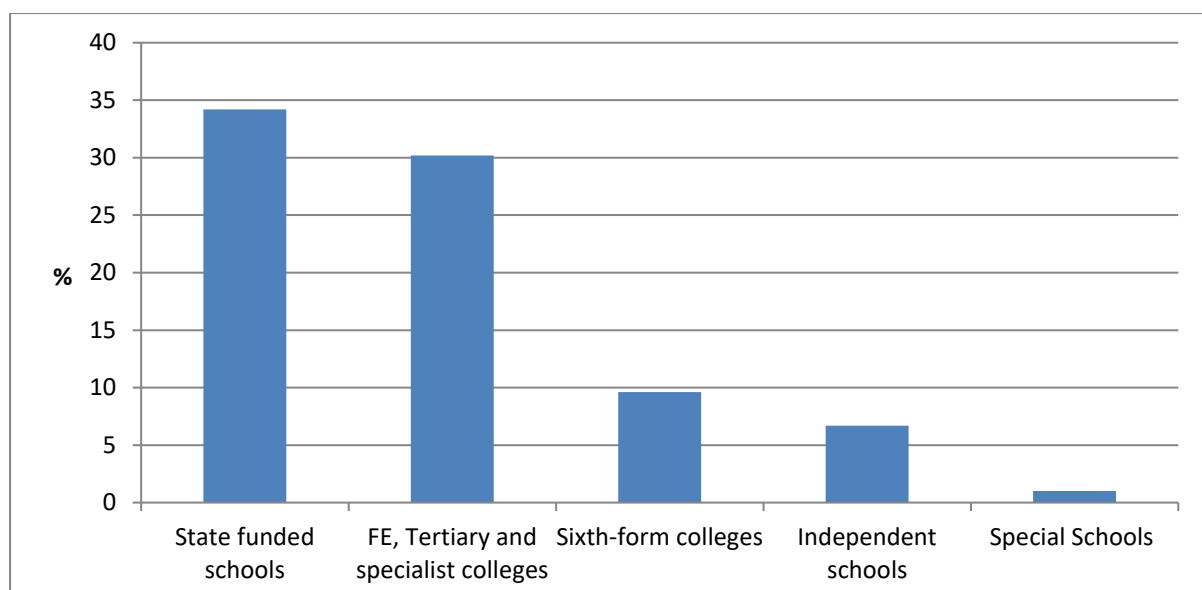
Young people may still leave school at the end of the summer term after they turn 16 but now must do one of the following until they’re 18:²

- stay in full-time education, for example at a college
- start an apprenticeship or traineeship
- spend 20 hours or more a week working or volunteering, while in part-time education or training

Staying in full-time education

“An ever higher proportion of 16 and 17 year olds have decided to stay in full-time education over time. The proportion in full-time education has more than doubled since the mid- 1980s, rising from 40%, to 65% in the mid- 1990s, to around 70% by the mid- 2000s and again up to 82% at the latest count in 2017. This growth has been more or less evenly split between school sixth forms, Further Education (FE) and sixth-form colleges, and independent schools, each of which now accounts for around twice the share of young people as in 1985.”³

At the end of 2017 the percentages of 16 and 17 year olds in full time education studying in different institution types was as shown below.⁴



Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships combine practical training in a job with study.⁵

Apprentices work alongside experienced staff to gain job-specific skills. Participants earn a wage and also get time for work-related study. The minimum wage for under 19s on an apprenticeship is currently (April 2019) £3.90 per hour.

Apprenticeships take 1 to 5 years to complete depending on their level (see appendix A). There have now been 1,233,900 apprenticeship starts [all ages] reported to October 2017 since May 2015 and 3,611,500 starts reported to October 2017 since May 2010.¹⁰ However the same source indicates a decrease of over a quarter in the number of apprenticeship starts in the year from Q1 2016/17

Statistics on pupil destinations after completing key stage 4 from state funded mainstream schools show that apprenticeships were taken up by 5% of the cohort comprising 4% taking level 2 and just 1% taking level 3 or higher.⁶

Traineeships

Government guidance⁷ explains that traineeships are “designed to help young people aged 16 to 24 who don’t yet have the appropriate skills or experience, traineeships provide the essential work preparation training, English, maths and work experience needed to secure an apprenticeship or employment.

Traineeships can last up to a maximum of 6 months and will include:

- work preparation training provided by the training organisation
- English and maths support if required, provided by the training organisation
- A high-quality work experience placement with an employer”

Data reported for the first quarter of the 2017/18 academic year⁹ show that there were:

- 6,800 traineeship starts, a decrease of 6.5 per cent from 7,300 in Q1 2016/17, of which 5,500 were under 19, an increase of 4.3 per cent from 5,300 in Q1 2016/17
- 2,000 traineeship completions, a decrease of 27.5 per cent from 2,700 in Q1 2016/17, of which 1,300 were under 19, a decrease of 12.8 per cent from 1,500 in Q1 2016/17
- 1,000 traineeship progressions to a job, apprenticeship, further full time education or other training, a decrease of 24.9 per cent from 1,400 in Q1 2016/17, of which 800 were under 19, a decrease of 41.6 per cent from 900 in Q1 2016/17

Employment or Volunteering combined with part-time study

Some 3% of Key Stage 4 leavers from state-maintained schools took this route in 2017⁶.

Requirements are:

“• To count as full-time work, the job must be for 8 or more weeks consecutively and for 20 or more hours per week. The 20 hours employment can be undertaken with more than one employer....

- The 20 hours volunteering can be undertaken with more than one organisation....
- Part-time education or training alongside full-time work must be at least 280 planned qualification hours per year. There is no set pattern for how these hours should be taken and in meeting the 280 per year hourly minimum there may be periods of time when a young person might not be undertaking education or training. Part-time education or training pursued alongside full-time work must constitute education or training leading towards relevant regulated qualifications. This education or training may be provided directly by an employer or by another organisation.”

Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) and Not in Education or Training (NET)

The proportion of 16 year olds not in education or training (NET) was 4.2% at the end of 2017⁴ and the comparable figure for those aged 17 was 8.3%. For both age groups there has been a general downward trend in the proportion NET since the mid- 1990s although for the 17 year olds there has been a discernible recent increase between 2010 and 2017.

Comparative figures for overall NEET (not in education, employment or training) for 16 year olds were 3.9% and 4.8% for 17 year olds.⁴

The requirement to study both maths and English

Government funding of education institutions includes certain requirements for continued study of maths and English. Insofar as those provisions relate to 16-18 students, those who have not attained a grade 9-4 GCSE pass in both maths and English are required to continue to study those subjects¹⁰.

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Chapter 2. Attainment and destinations at the end of Key Stages 4 and 5

Approximately 256,750 young people aged 16 and 17 live in predominantly rural local authority areas¹. They comprise some 2.22% of the total population of those local authorities, which is only marginally above the national average of 2.21%.

Attainment and destinations at end of Key Stage 4

Attainment

There are different measures for attainment at the end of Key Stage 4. One which is commonly used is the English and Maths GCSE pass rates.

In addition, the Department for Education also records Progress 8 and Attainment 8 data. Introduced in 2016, progress 8 “aims to capture the progress a pupil makes from the end of primary school to the end of secondary school. It is a type of value added measure, which means that pupils’ results are compared to the actual achievements of other pupils with similar prior attainment.”² The ‘progress 8’ and ‘attainment 8’ measures also allow both GCSEs and English Baccalaureate (EBacc) results to be taken into account. This is important because “in 2018, 35.1% of pupils in all schools and 38.4% of pupils in state-funded schools entered the EBacc.”³

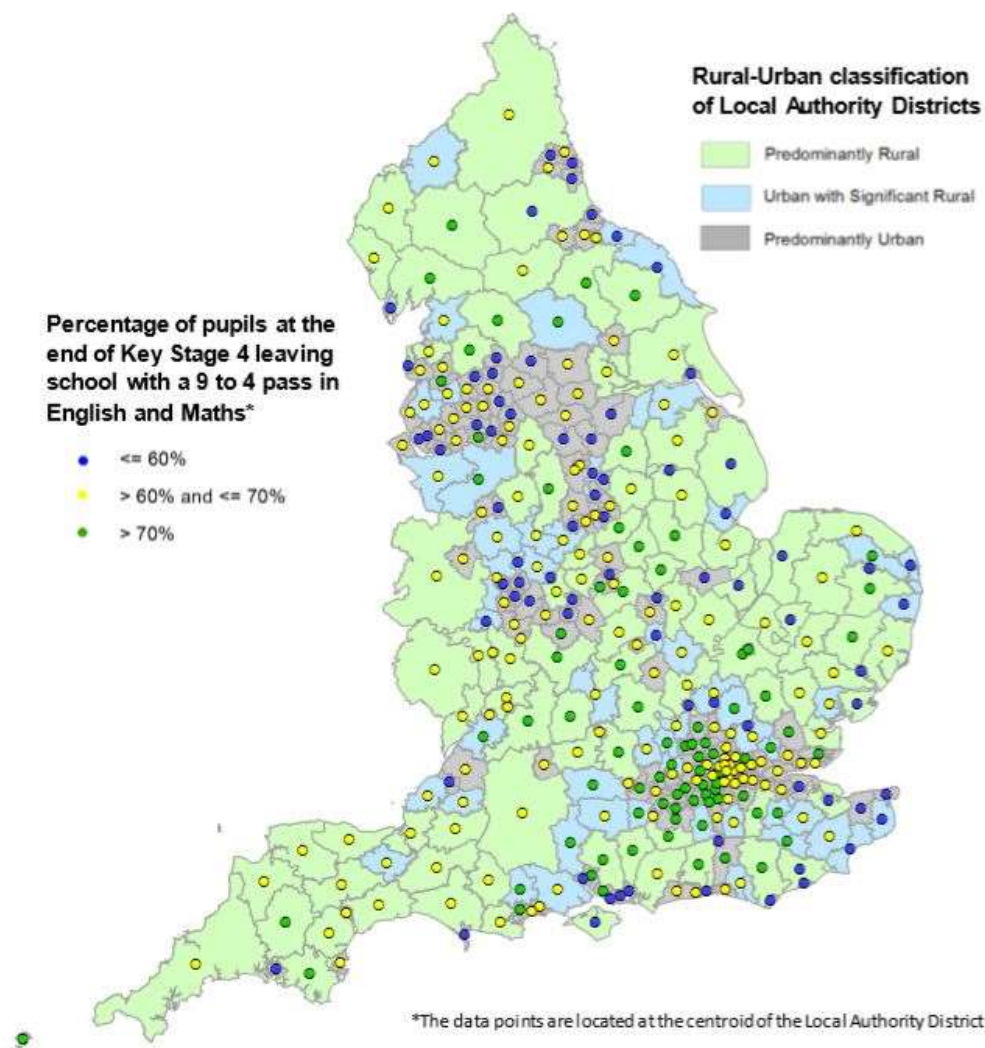
Government statistics⁴ show that:

- In the 2016/17 academic year, 69.7 per cent of pupils living in rural areas left school with English and Maths GCSEs at A* to C grade or equivalent. This was higher than for urban areas (63.2 per cent) and England overall (64.3 per cent). See table 1.
- In 2016/17 the proportion of pupils attending schools in rural areas who left school with English and Maths GCSEs at grades A* to C or equivalent was higher than in urban areas.
- For a given level of deprivation, the attainment levels of pupils living in rural areas were lower than for pupils living in urban areas with a similar level of deprivation. See table 2.
- There is a wide variation in the English and Maths GCSE attainment results for Local Authority District (LAD) areas.

Table 1. Percentage of pupils at end of KS4 with English and maths GCSE A*- C or equivalent based on residency of pupils in England 2016/17⁴

Rural areas	69.7
- Hamlet and isolated	72.8
- Rural village	72.4
- Rural town and fringe	67.2
Urban areas	63.2
- City and town	62.7
- Minor conurbation	59.6
- Major conurbation	64.1
England	64.3

Local Authority English and Maths 9 to 4 pass attainment levels based on location of pupil, by settlement type, in England (2016/17)



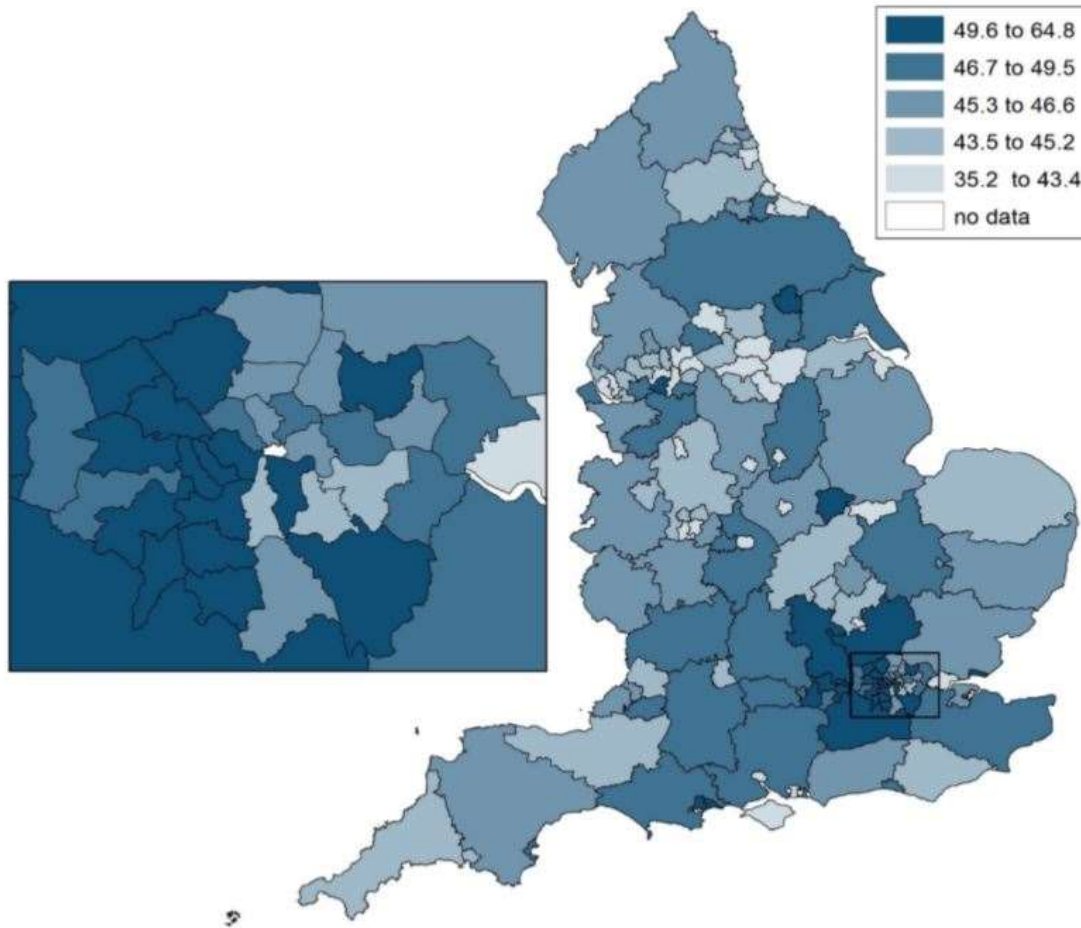
Other published data on GCSE and similar achievements for local authority areas⁵ shows that of the 21 predominantly rural local authorities 12 had a higher than national average percentage of pupils who achieved a standard 9-4 pass for English and maths. However when looking at 'strong 9-5 passes' in English and maths only 7 of the 20 predominantly rural local authorities for which that data is published exceeded the national average.

Table 2. Achievement of English and maths GCSE at 9-4 pass in England based on Income Deprivation Affecting Children Indices (IDACI) deciles.

	Most deprived									Least deprived
	0-10	10-20	20-30	30-40	40-50	50-60	60-70	70-80	80-90	90-100
England	48.0	52.7	57.1	59.9	64.1	67.2	70.7	73.7	76.9	81.6
Urban	48.0	52.8	57.2	60.2	64.4	67.3	71.0	74.0	77.3	82.3
Rural	46.8	48.5	55.5	57.5	62.9	67.0	69.8	73.0	76.0	79.5

Provisional data for average Attainment 8 score per pupil shows that the highest performing local authorities in 2018 were concentrated in London and the South³

Average Attainment 8 score per pupil by local authority England, 2018

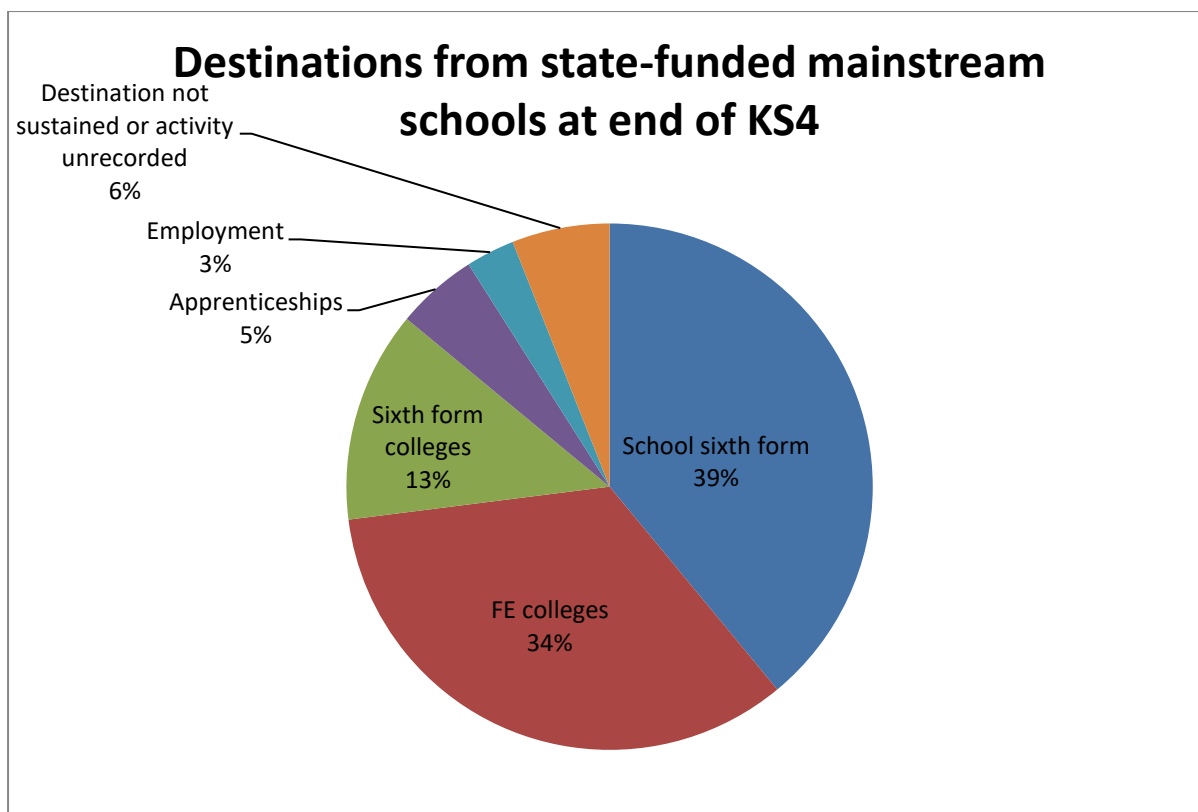


Source: Key stage 4 provisional attainment data

Published GCSE data⁵ shows that, for 2016/17, 12 of the 21 predominantly rural local authorities had average 'Attainment 8' scores below the national average, two equalled the national average and 7 exceeded it. In respect 'Progress 8', 16 predominantly rural local authorities had lower scores than the national average, one equalled it and just 4 exceeded it.

Destinations at end of Key Stage 4 (KS4)

Nationally, and looking solely at the destinations of key stage 4 pupils leaving state funded mainstream schools, some 86% went on to a sustained education destination⁶ as illustrated below.



Almost 64% of 16 and 17 year olds in full-time education were studying for a level 3 qualification, the equivalent of 2 'A' levels, as their highest qualification aim⁴

Destinations of pupils completing KS4 from schools in predominantly rural local authority areas showed similar percentages⁶ (between 80% and 89%) continuing in education. However, the choice of establishment varied widely between individual predominantly rural authorities. For example, those going to a further education college or other FE provider ranged from 22% to 51%; to school sixth form 11%-51%; and to sixth form college 0% to 41%.

Proportionately rather more pupils from schools in predominantly rural local authority areas went on to apprenticeships⁶ with only 4 of those local authority areas being below the national average. Cumbria and the East Riding of Yorkshire had notably high proportions taking apprenticeships at 11% and 8% respectively, including 4% and 3% at level 3 and above (compared to 1% nationally).

Department for Education (DfE) data for the proportion of 16 -17 year olds recorded as not in education, employment or training (NEET) at the end of 2016⁹ shows a geographically mixed picture. Using the measure of the 'proportion NEET including activity not known' 6 predominantly rural local authorities exceed the national average of 6%. Those are: Lincolnshire (10.4%); Shropshire (10.3%); Suffolk (7.5%); North Yorkshire (7%); Cornwall (6.9%); and Herefordshire (6.5%). Using the alternative measure of 'known to be NEET', 8 predominantly rural local authorities exceed the national figure of 2.8%: Durham (4.1%); Suffolk (3.9%); Norfolk (3.8%); Northumberland (3.8%); Herefordshire (3.3%); Devon (3.1%); Cornwall (3.0%); and Somerset (3.0%). Notably three Herefordshire; Suffolk; and Cornwall exceed the national average on both criteria.

Attainment and destinations at the end of 16-18 study

Attainment

Nationally (2017/18) some 80% of level 3 students in state funded schools achieved at least 2 substantial level 3 qualifications. Of those taking A levels, 76.9% achieved at least 2 A levels and 13.7% achieved grades of AAB or better. Technical level students had an average points score (APS) of 28.11 per entry and applied general students had an APS of 28.43 per entry.

Table 3. The number of predominantly rural local authorities, above or below national average for the state funded sector (NA) on the following measures⁸

	above NA,	below NA	no data/no entries
Average points score (APS) of level 3 students	11	9	1
APS per A level entry, best 3	12	8	1
Tech level students APS per entry	9	10	2
Applied general students APS Per entry	9	10	2

Amongst the predominantly rural local authority areas, students in Rutland and Cambridgeshire scored highly on the academic achievement measures; technical students in Dorset, Lincolnshire, Cumbria and County Durham had APS of distinction; and APS distinction scores were achieved by applied general students in County Durham, the East Riding of Yorkshire and Shropshire.

Notably, those predominantly rural areas whose technical and applied general students achieved high APS scores were also those with above average percentages of pupils taking up apprenticeships at the end of KS4.

Destinations after Key Stage 5

Destinations of students after leaving key stage 5 (KS5) state-funded schools and colleges⁶ are as shown below:

Destinations from state funded mainstream schools and colleges KS5

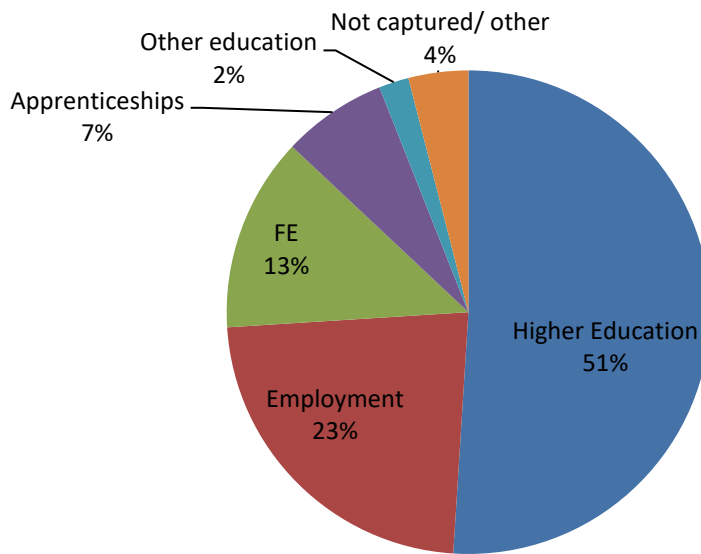


Table 4. The number of predominantly rural local authorities, above or below national average for the state funded sector (NA) on the following measures⁶

	above NA	NA	below NA
% of student destinations			
Further education	10	3	8
Higher Education	6	1	14
Sustained apprenticeships	14	5	2
Sustained employment	13	1	7

2016/17 destinations of 2015/16 cohort

The below average percentage of students leaving KS5 and heading to Higher Education from state-funded mainstream schools and colleges in predominantly rural local authority areas is particularly concerning. Secondary analysis of the official statistics⁶ shows that only 45.5% of such students go on to Higher Education compared to 50.9% from state-funded mainstream schools and colleges in predominantly urban areas, and 50% nationally.

It is difficult to reconcile these statistics with those from an alternative official source⁴ which implies that rural urban differences are more marginal “the rate of full-time entry to higher education institutions by 18 to 20 year olds in 2016/17 was slightly lower in predominantly rural areas than in predominantly urban areas (141 compared with 142 entrants per 1,000 18 to 20 year olds

respectively).” However the two set of data are not directly comparable for a number of reasons including:

- The first set of data⁶ relates to the location of the schools/colleges whereas the second⁴ is based on where the students are living prior to the commencement of Higher Education. The first data set will not, for example, include students from rural homes who attend urban schools/colleges.
- The first set of data relates only to those students at leaving mainstream state-funded schools/colleges at the end of KS5 but the second refers to rates per 1,000 18 -20 year olds regardless of whether or not they participated in KS5 mainstream state-funded education. The second data set will, for example, include students who previously attended independent schools/colleges.

Nonetheless, the apparent lower levels of entry to higher education from rural state funded mainstream schools after KS5 does seem to merit further exploration. Destination by Local Authority table L13⁶ shows regional differences in the percentage of students leaving KS5 for higher education from state-funded mainstream schools/colleges with the North West, Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands, and West Midlands all above the national average; North East equalling the national average; and East of England, South East and South West below the national average at 48%, 46% and 41% respectively. There are wide variations too at local authority level but influences such as cross-border travel to school/college and/or small numbers of schools and colleges can have a significant effect at that geographical level.

Whilst their research did not directly consider rural and urban comparisons, researchers for the Social Mobility Commission⁷ found that:

- “Students can choose whether to attend school sixth forms, sixth form colleges or further education (FE) colleges. This choice is, in part, geographically shaped by quite idiosyncratic variation in institutional provision. For example, students in London are able to choose between large numbers of providers with exceptionally high access to school sixth forms. The North West has high levels of provision in sixth form colleges, unlike the North East and East Midlands. Students in the North East and South West have the lowest levels of choice of provider.” P5
- Their research also reveals stark geographical inequalities in the choices of institutions available to young people. It finds that there are 20 areas of the country with little, or no, school sixth form provision within a commutable distance. In these areas, there are significantly lower percentages of pupils studying academic qualifications at 16, attending a top university or studying for a science or maths degree compared to similar areas.
- “In general, it seems that living in an area with no school sixth forms has significant effects on the types of post-16 courses studied by students across the attainment distribution. It also lowers university participation for higher attainers.” p40
- “We can only speculate as to why areas without school sixth forms see progression into less academic post-16 routes, on average, and also have slightly less successful higher education progression for the most able students.” p41
- “We find that living in an area with no sixth form college has no overall effect on levels of post-16 participation, but it does affect the types of courses that students study. There are

significantly lower percentages of pupils studying at least 2 level qualifications (73.5% versus 75.5%), at least level 3 qualifications (59.9% versus 63.0%) and at least level 3 academic qualifications (40.0% versus 43.2%). The largest impacts are for those in the middle prior attainment group who are much less likely to study for 3 A levels.”

Despite the relatively limited choice of apprenticeship opportunities in many rural areas, which is considered in more depth in the following Chapter, statistics⁶ show that proportionately more students leaving KS5 from mainstream schools and colleges in predominantly rural local authority areas choose this option than the national average. In only 2 predominantly local authority areas, Central Bedfordshire and Wiltshire, was the proportion of students entering apprenticeships below the national average, and even in those cases the percentage was only slightly lower (both 5%). The highest percentages of students choosing apprenticeships were Durham (11%); Cumbria (11%) and Somerset (10%). It would seem likely that apprenticeship figures are likely to be affected predominantly by the availability, accessibility, and attractiveness of local apprenticeship opportunities, i.e. the proximity of major employers, but the influence of other factors, such as the scarcity of local education options, is unknown.

Nomis labour market statistics¹⁰ for the claimant count for 18 -21 year olds in April 2019 shows percentage figures significantly in excess of the GB average (3.9%) in Northumberland (6.4%); Durham (6.0%); the Isle of Wight (5.3%) and Shropshire (4.6%). Oxfordshire (1.3%); Cambridgeshire (1.7%); and Central Bedfordshire (2.0%) have notably low percentages of claimants in that age range. This suggests that regional patterns and sparsity are major factors.

Any correlation between claimant counts for 18-21 year olds and NEET 16-17 year olds seems comparatively weak. Of the 11 predominantly rural local authority areas with a higher than GB average claimant count for 18-21s, 7 also had higher than national average figures for at least one of the measures of NEET 16-17 year olds, but 5 did not. However, it seems likely that the challenges facing the two age groups in terms of accessing appropriate, or at least acceptable, employment or education may be very different. For example:

- Under 18s seldom have any choice in their residential location and, at least until/unless they learn to drive, they may have extremely limited travel options. Once those constraints are lessened do they have more opportunities?
- Depending on the particular characteristics of the local economy, some 16-18 year olds who have actively participated in education or training may find that there are no suitable jobs available locally post 18. Alternatively, there may be comparatively good post 18-job opportunities but limited work based learning (WBL) options for younger people.

There are also questions about the effects of seasonal work opportunities which may well distort the above comparison.

Whilst more detailed exploration of any relationship between NEET young people and unemployment amongst young adults is beyond the scope of this research it is a topic that surely warrants separate, more detailed, investigation not least because of the potential impacts on social mobility.

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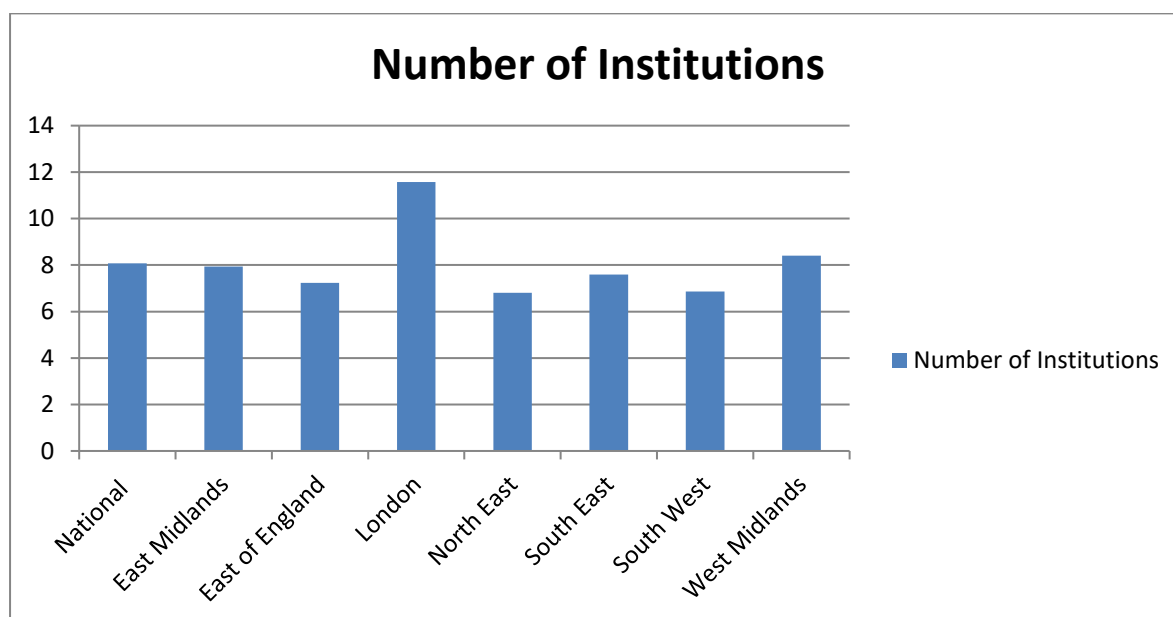
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3. Choice and aspirations

Choice of post-16 education

Research by the Social Mobility Commission¹ reveals stark geographical inequalities in the choices of institutions available to young people aged 16-19. “The number of institutions, which measures the overall amount of choice available and will clearly be relatively highly correlated with population density. Thus, it is highest in London and lowest in the South West and the North East.”

Choice set availability by region¹



It¹ “identifies the North East and the South West as having the fewest institutions for young people to choose from, which may be a significant factor in why post-16 and destinations outcomes are so poor in these regions. Whilst young people growing up on London have, on average, 12 post-16 institutions to choose from, those in the North East and the South West only have an average of 7 colleges or sixth forms they could commute to.”

That research¹ identifies choice sets based on the number of different institutions actually attended by pupils from individual Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOAs) [areas with, on average, about 7,200 total population]. Accordingly, because the figures are presented regionally, this will obscure the finer grain picture of much more constrained choices available to many students living in the more rural parts of each region. Nor will it take account of the extreme challenges some rural students endure in undertaking long or complex commutes.

42% of rural respondents to an online survey on access to education and work based learning, carried out by the Rural Services Network in 2018, stated that 16-18 year olds in their communities had no choice of accessible colleges/ schools (i.e. only one such establishment was accessible) and a further 28% indicated that there was a choice of only two colleges or schools.

Rural students and their families frequently identify the lack of choice and poor accessibility as significant issues:

“I am happy with the range of ‘A’ level options at Launceston College and with the particular courses I have chosen...that’s just as well really because it is the only school or college that I could feasibly travel to” Annie, 17, living “in the middle of nowhere”, Devon/Cornwall border.

“Cumbria has remote secondary schools and students aspirations are limited by practical issues like transport...” Survey respondent

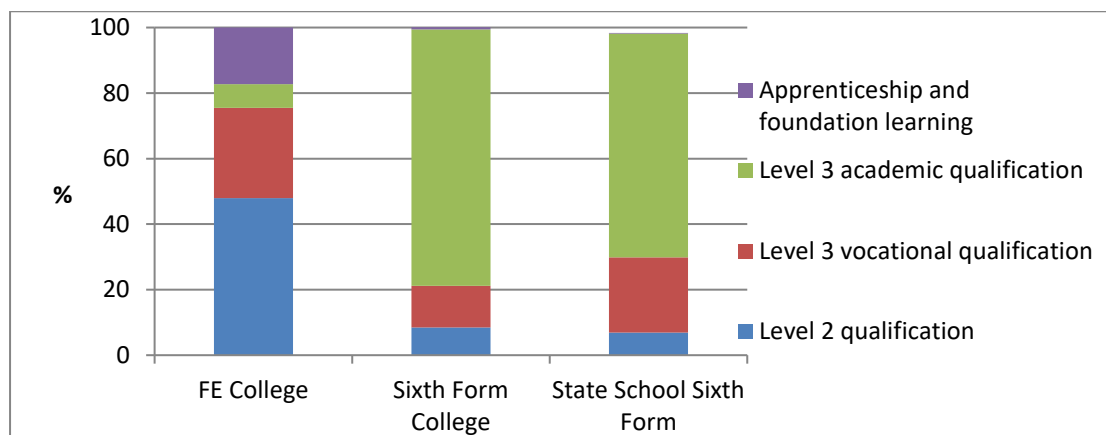
Types of post 16 education

Choice is not only a case of the number of accessible post 16 education establishments but also the range of types of institution available.

Choice of school 6th form/ 6th form College or FE is “geographically shaped by quite idiosyncratic variation in institutional provision”¹. School sixth forms are typically smaller with between 50 and 150 students in a cohort whilst FE Colleges and Sixth Form Colleges are generally larger with typically 500-1000 students. It is therefore to be expected that FE and sixth form colleges tend to be located in larger urban centres which are often impracticable for rural students to reach. Moreover, not all smaller secondary schools, which are often those serving more rural areas, are able to support a sixth form which compounds accessibility issues.

Accessibility to different types of institution is an important consideration as they tend to cater for different student needs as illustrated in the chart below.

Proportions of students studying different types of courses by institution type¹



The poor ‘fit’ of available and accessible educational options to the student’s aspirations is a major issue for many rural young people.

“The Community College [approx. 8 miles away] did offer a lot of different A level subjects, and a few level 2 vocational courses, but I really wanted to focus on Sports Science which

they didn't provide. Exeter College [35 miles away] was the only possible option for me to take the level 3 course that I wanted to do" Emma, 19 rural Devon.

"I think a lot of youngsters end up studying for A levels, even though they may not be appropriate for them, simply because there is nothing else available... It's a case of take what's available locally or sort it out yourself." Parent, Cumbria

"The lack of a diverse curriculum can be a problem. The nearest school sixth form is likely to be the most accessible but often they offer a restricted and academic curriculum which is not always what the student needs or wants." Council Officer, Somerset

The Social Mobility Commission research¹ further identified "20 areas of the country with little, or no, school sixth form provision within a commutable distance. In these areas, there are significantly lower percentages of pupils studying academic qualifications at 16, attending a top university or studying for a science or maths degree compared to similar areas." A disproportionate number of those areas are rural.

Digital learning has potential to unlock accessibility issues for some students but poor internet speeds and reliability in some areas can still present difficulties.

"The NVQ course on Creative and Digital Media run by Yeovil College was ideal and well-related to my apprenticeship. I learned some very valuable skills and the tutors were always accessible if I was unsure about anything. They even visited me to make sure that everything was going well. It was great that the course was delivered digitally because I couldn't have travelled to Yeovil. I don't understand why there aren't more courses available through distance learning." Mia, rural Devon.

"Very poor internet reception makes digital learning very challenging and frustrating" Young person, isolated location, Somerset

Apprenticeships

Nationally, some 28% of all apprenticeship starts in 2017/18 were from people under 19³, up from 25% the previous year. However, as the total number of apprenticeships reduced markedly between 2016/17 and 2017/18, the actual number of apprenticeship starts by 16 year olds were down 13%, by 17 year olds down 15% and by 18 year olds down 12% on the previous year.

Some 5% of pupils leaving Key stage 4 from state funded mainstream schools in England go on to start apprenticeships⁴. Of those some 80% start apprenticeships at intermediate level (level 2) equivalent to 5 GCSE A*-C and around 20% at advanced level (level 3) which is equivalent to 2 A levels.

Whilst statistics at a County Council and Unitary Council level⁴ show that proportionately rather more pupils from schools in predominantly rural areas went on to apprenticeships those figures disguise issues of lack of choice at a more local level. By way of illustration, the following are examples of the apprenticeships advertised on GOV.UK on 8 May 2019:

- There were 104 apprenticeships advertised within 5 miles of Exeter but just 1 within 5 miles of Okehampton.
- There were 55 apprenticeships advertised within 5 miles of Lincoln but only 1 within 5 miles of Market Rasen.
- There were 56 apprenticeships advertised within 5 miles of Norwich but only 6 within 5 miles of Swaffham.

Unsurprisingly, it seems that rural young people who find apprenticeships often do so through existing contacts. More typical were the following responses from young people in rural Devon:

“My apprenticeship is on the farm where I used to do casual work in the school holidays”
Craig

“The farmer [neighbouring farm] asked if I wanted to work for him” Greg

“I was offered a hairdressing apprenticeship in the salon where I’d been a Saturday Girl”
Kirsten

“I’d done work experience there [from school] and they asked if I was looking for an apprenticeship after GCSEs” Mia

There are also issues around the range of apprenticeships available in rural areas both in terms of employment sectors and the levels of apprenticeships available. Even in those rural areas with a seemingly large number of apprenticeships it is not uncommon for there to be a single dominant employer (such as a power station) but only limited, if any, opportunities within other sectors. Similarly, the typically smaller scale of rural employers seems to not only limit the number of apprenticeships available but also severely restricts opportunities at level 3 and above. In this context, analysis by Henehan⁵ shows that larger firms who pay the apprenticeship levy have 40% of their starts at level 2, whilst small non-levy payers offer 47% at that level.

There are challenges too for the further education providers:

“The result of the relationship between quality and value for money, in a competitive but highly regulated marketplace, risks potentially reduced access to apprenticeship provision and consequently poorer social mobility. The reason for reduced access is that further education leaders may be required to streamline their offer related to demand and viability. ... The reality is that the majority of level two and three apprenticeship programmes run on a lower surplus than full-time further education, and significantly lower than higher education. The impact on rural colleges is greater given the travel times and costs to remote, and often small, workplaces.” Jo Maher⁶

Dated, but still relevant, research by the Commission for Rural Communities⁷ identified a number of factors which make it more difficult for young people in rural areas to access apprenticeships and training.

- “Smaller businesses (with fewer than 50 employees) play a relatively strong role in rural areas, accounting for over half of employment in rural areas compared with around a quarter in urban areas. Conversely, large firms employ a relatively small share of labour in rural areas compared to urban areas. There is also a greater proportion of sole traders in rural areas compared to urban.”
- Limited range of job opportunities
- Greater than average prevalence of part-time working
- Seasonalised / casualised labour markets meaning there is little incentive for investment in training
- Importance of informal networks in accessing employment
- Relatively low wage levels
- Difficulty in getting between centres of population in rural areas: getting to the main town is usually challenging but journeys between villages are almost impossible

For school leavers particularly, travel to work is often an insurmountable hurdle.

“We do actively look for apprentices from rural areas because that’s where we operate but it’s difficult to recruit anyone straight from school because they really need to be able to drive” Manager, Utilities Company

Whilst it is unclear whether low work based wages are a widespread disincentive to prospective apprentices, one interviewee commented:

“I’d already completed one apprenticeship and they expected me to do a second. I did start it, but £3.50 an hour at 19 is just ridiculous! ... I was doing far more than should reasonably be expected of an apprentice - so I decided to quit. Fortunately, I found another employer who was keen to take me on and pay me properly... I really enjoyed working with her and I was pleased to be able to successfully finish the second apprenticeship.” Mia, Devon

Employment, traineeships and volunteering

These routes can also be very difficult for rural young people to access as a number of traditional employment possibilities are declining. “Even in medium sized towns there is a lack of opportunities of all kinds whether career-driven or ‘first-step/entry level jobs’ This is especially the case for office based or retail sector roles”¹⁰. Even young people who wish to continue in a family farm can face difficulties as, for example, with longer life expectancy some farms cannot support a third generation¹⁰.

Traineeship opportunities appear to be very scarce. A search of ‘GOV.UK Find a traineeship’ carried out on 22 May showed:

- 4 traineeships advertised within 10 miles of Exeter but none within 10 miles of Okehampton
- 1 traineeship advertised within 10 miles of Lincoln but none within 10 miles of Market Rasen
- No traineeships advertised within 10 miles of either Norwich or Swaffham.

Young people’s offers to volunteer are not always successful. “Often they don’t even get an acknowledgement” CEO Youth support organisation, Somerset.

Whatever route they might wish to follow after school leaving age the opportunities for young people from rural areas are severely constrained. These constraints especially affect those from small and remote communities and/or from disadvantaged families. This is significant factor limiting social mobility.

The following case study illustrates both the challenges and responses in one area with particularly low social mobility

Tackling social mobility in West Somerset

West Somerset is the lowest ranking district in the whole of England in the Social Mobility Index, a measure that compares the chances that a child from a disadvantaged background will do well at school and get a good job. It is designated as an Opportunity Area, part of the government's national plan for dealing with social mobility through education, and is the only rural area in the scheme.

Post-16 educational attainment in West Somerset is of concern. Whilst attainment 8 scores of pupils at the end of Key Stage 4 is in line with the national average, a smaller proportion (49.8%) of 19 year olds attain a level three qualification compared to the national average (57.1%) . This limits opportunities to access degree level education. Also the percentage of 19 year olds qualified to level 2 in English and maths (2016) is lower at 58.8% compared to Somerset (70.9%) and nationally (71.3%). Amongst disadvantaged pupils the comparative figures for English and maths are West Somerset 38.8%; Somerset 46.4%; and 52.8% nationally.

Many vocational options post-16 require students to travel out of the area but travel is difficult and it is recognised that “long travel times are often the main reason why some pupils drop out of post-16 education.”

“Limited aspirations and lack of choice of learning opportunities means that some young people find it difficult to reach their full potential.”

Two people actively involved with the delivery of Opportunity Area priorities, a Post-16 Advisor at Somerset County Council and the CEO of ‘Young Somerset’, provided the following insights into the issues facing local young people:

- There is a lack of a diverse curriculum locally.
- Travel is a major issue. Journey times of 90 minutes to 2 hours are not uncommon to access vocational courses or apprenticeships. The tracking of early leavers from education courses shows that at least a third found transport difficult.
- The cost of travel is high, £795 for a travel card. If discretionary bursaries are reduced as a result of school and college funding pressures the position will worsen further. Travel costs affect not only full-time students but also apprentices “how does a 16 year old on less than minimum wage get to work?”
- Raising aspirations has been an issue particularly where there is a history of family unemployment.

- A significant and probably increasing number of young people need support before they are ready to enter the world of work.
- Widening horizons is also important. “We work with young people who have never left Somerset.”
- Apprenticeships are not as well taken up as they might be. Most local businesses are small and “many one and two man bands are not equipped or confident to take on an apprentice”. An initiative to encourage small firms to take apprenticeships by providing help with accessing funding and with administration has recently commenced.
- A range of apprenticeship opportunities exists at Hinkley but there are often travel issues and/ or the offer is not well understood.
- Would be volunteers face transport issues as bus routes are very limited. Opportunities are limited and sadly “many young people don’t even get an acknowledgement” when they try to gain experience in this way.

The Delivery Plan⁸ proposes a number of measures including:

- Widening the offer at West Somerset College by adding vocational courses
- Increasing participation in National Citizen Service programmes to help young people develop life skills and raise aspirations.
- The Careers and Enterprise Company providing activities that provide an understanding of the world of work, including work experience, with local employers such as Butlins.
- Ensuring every young person at Key Stage 4 has an action plan setting out their pathway for education and career goals.
- The National Development Team for inclusion will bring together key partners to help young people with special needs plan for employment after they finish education.
- Developing a campaign to increase employment opportunities for local people by prioritising apprenticeships and training programmes.
- Establishing an apprenticeship hub to provide information and encourage take-up and completions.
- Encouraging Universities, in their widening participation activities, to help the progression of young people from West Somerset into higher education.

Clearly travel can be a major factor limiting opportunity and choice for many rural 16-18 year olds. Travel issues are examined in more detail in the following chapter.

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4. Travel Issues

“...rural isolation can have major consequences for youth social mobility, as it limits access to further education, higher education, and a range of inspiration and support activities from employers, universities and charities. In remote rural and coastal areas, disadvantaged young people are half as likely to gain two or more A-levels (or equivalent qualifications) and half as likely to enter university as those in our country’s major cities.”

Social Mobility Commission. State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain.

“All school-age children [to end of KS4 at 16+] qualify for free school transport if they go to their nearest suitable school and live at least

- 2 miles from the school if they’re under 8
- 3 miles from the school if they’re 8 or older”¹

Crucially, the Education and Skills Act 2008 which required young people above compulsory school age but below 18 years to participate in full-time education or training made no statutory provision for those young people to receive free or subsidised transport. Those not inconsiderable costs must therefore be borne either by the young people themselves, or more likely by their parents or carers.

Travel challenges

In this section travel challenges are considered in terms of transport availability and convenience; distances travelled and time taken; and cost. It is not uncommon for individual rural students to face all three challenges concurrently.

Availability and convenience

The availability of transport directly affects choice and, as explored in chapter 3, 16-18 year old students from rural areas typically have a much more restricted choice of educational institution than do urban students of the same age and other young people have more limited employment options.

As noted in the preceding chapter, continuing into the sixth form (assuming it has one) of the nearest Secondary school is often the most convenient, and potentially the only available option, for many rural 16 year old students because of the likelihood of there actually being a public transport option, at a cost, via the school bus. However, even that option is not available to everyone as some 28% of rural respondents to an RSN survey² stated that 16-18 year olds from their communities could not get to any school or College by a public or school bus.

Accessing other options, if not entirely impossible, often requires quite exceptional levels of determination.

“He leaves here just after half past six. I take him to a fellow student’s farm for 7 a.m. and her father then drops them both at the bus stop [about 3 miles away] so they can catch the

[Landex] college bus at around 7.30 a.m. That bus takes over an hour to get to College. Same thing in reverse coming home...He usually gets home at about 6.30p.m. very tired...no wonder he's desperate to learn to drive!" Mother of James, (apprentice), Devon village .

"Getting to Exeter College from the village was a bit of a nightmare involving catching the 06.55 bus from the main road [10 minute walk from village]As it was the only bus I didn't dare miss it... It was horrible-there wasn't even a bus shelter so I'd often have to wait in the pouring rain and spend the whole hour and a half journey completely soaked.... Sometimes I arrived at College hours before my first session was scheduled...The return journey wasn't much better and I had to wait until 17.10 regardless of when my last session finished".
Emma, Devon village

"... a number of buses need to be taken-there is not one single bus that goes through the village direct to any school/ college in the area" Parent², village in Cambridgeshire

Young apprentices can face even greater transport challenges than those continuing in education. Journeys between rural locations are typically not practicable by public transport, and even journeys from a rural location to the nearest town may not be possible, especially if there is a need to fit around set working hours. Also, the possibility of sharing lifts with others is less likely.

Cuts to public bus services are exacerbating the problem. The Campaign for Better Transport also records that, outside Greater London and metropolitan areas, 393 subsidised bus services were withdrawn, reduced or altered in 2016/17 alone³.

"Removal of the local bus service means that 16-18 year olds can only get to and from their place of full time education if their parents are able to transport them or if, when old enough, students are able to drive themselves" RSN survey respondent², village in Hampshire

This research also confirms the observation by the Young Foundation⁴ that "facets that influence rural pupil's aspirations specifically include willingness or ability of parents to subsidise travel or to transport pupils to and from education, training or employment"

"For students with SEND there is no option other than parents taking students to their setting each day." Parent, village in Northamptonshire²

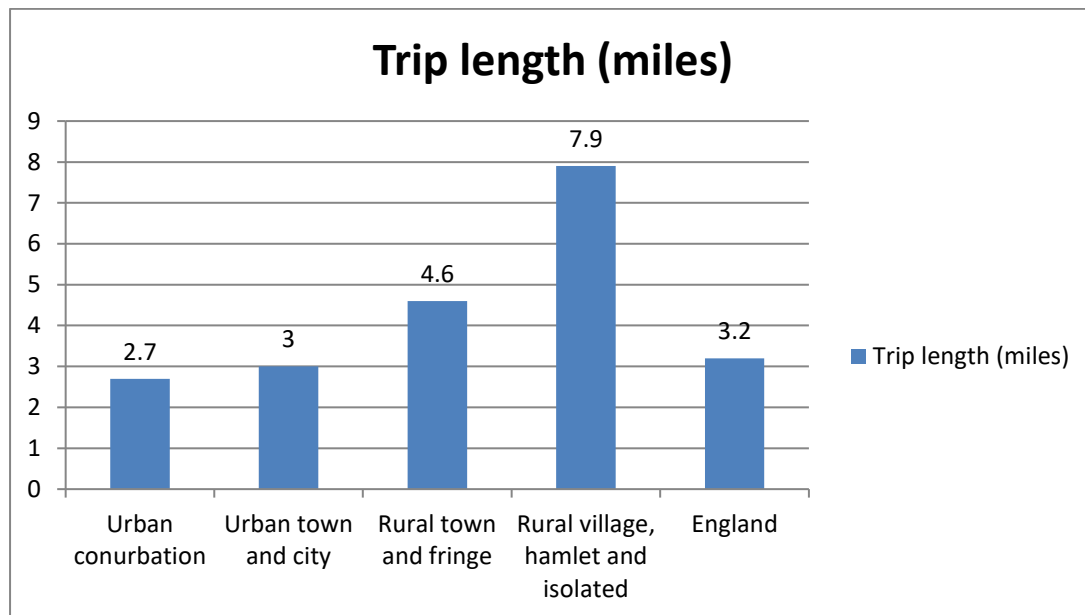
"In order that Lynn could attend Kendal College I drove her there. That involved a 45 minute journey in each direction daily, one which would have taken well over an hour on the infrequent bus service. It is fortunate that we were able to do so and could afford it". Parent, Cumbria

"If I had not been able to take my daughter and son to their apprenticeship placements/colleges they would not have been able to complete the courses" Parent, village in Somerset²

It is unknown how many potential students and apprentices have had their aspirations thwarted because of travel constraints. It seems probable that these impacts will be greatest on the least affluent. Those same families are also the ones least likely to be able to afford the purchase and running costs of cars when their children reach 17+ further disadvantaging young people from poorer rural families to the detriment of social mobility.

Distance and time

The National Travel Survey⁵ provides the following data on the average length of 11-16 year olds journeys to school 2016/17:



Whilst the above data shows that the most rural pupils are travelling almost three times as far as their most urban counterparts, the averaged data hides the extreme journey lengths that some rural pupils must undertake. In this context, 16% of rural respondents to a RSN survey² said the nearest school or college offering courses to 16-18 year olds was more than 10 miles away and unpublished data collected by 'The Key'⁶ indicates that over a third of all the rural secondary schools they surveyed had pupils travelling up to 20 miles and almost a quarter had pupils travelling over 20 miles.

Since not all rural schools have sixth forms, and sixth form colleges and FE Colleges are far fewer in number, it is probable that distances to the nearest post-16 education provider will be significantly longer than for 11-16s. For those wishing to take vocational or specialist qualifications travel distances may be greater still.

“it is not unusual for students to have to travel upwards of 90 minutes each way to access FE colleges” CEO youth support organisation, Somerset.

Travel costs

The higher costs of travel to education in rural areas is illustrated by the wide variation in costs to local education authorities of providing travel to school for pupils in compulsory education [to end of KS4 at 16+]. Because a higher percentage of school pupils living in rural areas meet the free school transport criteria, and also because their journeys are on average longer, “the average costs for home to school transport was £93 per rural child in 2017 compared to £10 in cities and towns”⁷. (The highest costs per pupil being in North Yorkshire (£204); Cumbria (£160) and Devon (£152)). An even higher differential in travel costs will exist in relation to post-compulsory education, due to the dispersed nature of rural providers, but the associated costs fall to the student, or more probably his/her parents.

The Campaign for Better Transport⁸ calculated that, in 2016, only some 30% of Local Education Authorities provided any free transport to over 16s and that percentage will have diminished further as Councils’ budgets continue to be cut. As might be expected those costs are highest in the most rural areas with bus fares of £200 or more per term not uncommon.

A County ticket for students aged 16-25 in Somerset costs £795 p.a.⁹

“The taxi of mum and dad has to be deployed. But note that, at a conservative cost of 40p/mile, use of the taxi is not cheap” Parent, isolated location, East Yorkshire

“The paid for school bus costs £50 a month”. Parent, small town, North Yorkshire

Whilst there are government funded bursaries of up to £1200 available to students in defined vulnerable groups, the criteria for eligibility are very stringent and relate only to the personal circumstances of the particular student and not to the financial circumstances of parents. There may also be discretionary grants available from the education or training provider but the provider decides how much, if any, is given and how it is delivered. There is concern that, as budgetary pressures on providers increase, such discretionary funding may reduce.

Travel costs can be a significant burden on a family budget and this raises questions about both intergenerational and urban: rural fairness

“The iniquity of a national, funded, concessionary fare scheme offering free travel for elderly yet young people on apprenticeships earning as little as £3.30 [now 3.90] per hour paying the full fare, is evident”.⁸

Young people living in urban areas have generally shorter and less costly commutes to education or employment (and indeed 16 and 17 year olds living in London have free travel on buses and trams).¹⁰ Given that the legislation requiring young people under 18 to participate in education or work based learning applies nationally is it really reasonable that young people from rural areas must spend so much more to comply?

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To protect the identities of participating young people and their families, real names have not been used, nor have precise residential locations been divulged.

Rural England CIC, July 2019