



Exploring Rural Vulnerability

through a Public Utilities perspective

Fred Dunwoodie-Stirton, Janet Dwyer and Brian Wilson, 12th Jan 2022

Focus of the study

Research sponsored by 5 Utility Companies* operating in the midlands, south and west of England and Wales, and Defra, co-designed and delivered by Rural England and CCRI in 2021.

AIMS:

- to explore the lived experience of vulnerability among Utility customers in rural areas
- to assess how rurality acts as a factor compounding vulnerability
- to identify how more or better-designed support could be provided

****Cadent, GEUK, Southern Water, Wales and West Utilities, Western Power Distribution.***

Context – the sponsors' interest

Utilities sector has a legal duty to support customers in potentially vulnerable situations, especially when (temporarily) left without electricity, gas or water - due to a fault at home or in the supply network. Customers meeting specific eligibility criteria can sign up to their Utility supplier / network operator's **Priority Services Register (PSR)**, offering access to extra help and support.

To be listed on the PSR, customers must:

- have household members with listed attributes (eligibility criteria), e.g. older people, those with chronic medical conditions, with disabilities such as poor eyesight or hearing, etc.
- ask / agree to be included on the register, by their Utility provider(s).

Utility providers and Defra were keen to understand in what ways rurality affects issues of vulnerability, and whether that should influence their actions, obligations or other policy measures.

Approach: Case study areas for interview / survey, plus document + data review

Five rural communities selected in rural England, in areas served by the sponsoring Utility companies

A broadly representative range of different geographic, demographic and socio-economic characteristics, analysed by document + data review

Within each Case Study area:

- a transect of degrees of rurality used to target **c.10 PSR households for interview / survey** – from market town fringe, to hamlets and remote and isolated dwellings
- **c.5-10 local voluntary / community / social enterprise / public sector interviews**

Interviews mostly Zoom / phone, some survey



Rural vulnerability – data and document review

National data suggests **residents in rural England**, compared to the national average:

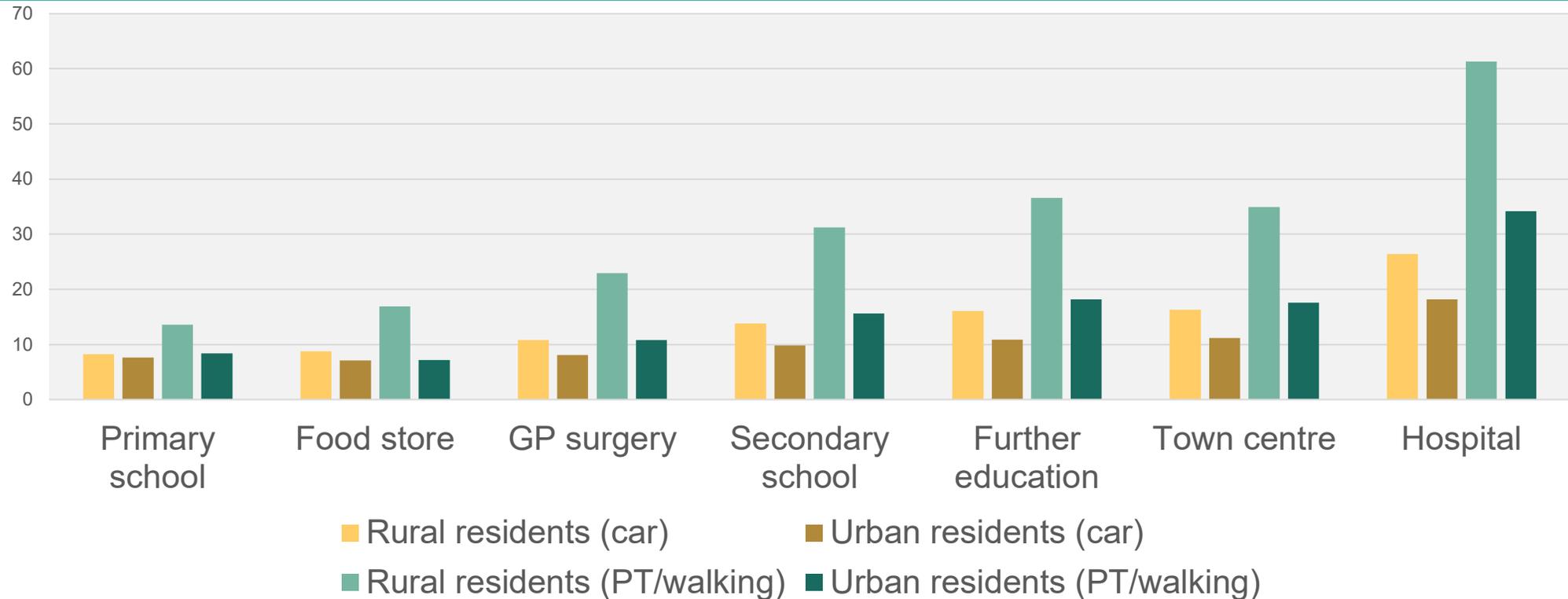
- **are older**, with fewer very young children,
- have **similar levels of overall health** and welfare,
- have higher levels of those factors of **vulnerability particularly associated with age, isolation and basic service infrastructure** (e.g. poorer transport, worse communications, higher costs).

ALSO

- the proportion living with **sight loss** is relatively high in rural areas, reflecting the older age profile
- within rural areas, **mental ill-health** is higher in most sparsely populated rural areas, with specific concern among farming communities. Rural areas have relatively fewer support services including early intervention teams, crisis teams, outreach, day care and therapists
- 12% of rural compared to 10% of urban households are categorised as **in fuel poverty** (BEIS, 2020a). The **average fuel poverty gap is £690 in rural areas**, more than double the national average of £334 for fuel-poor households, reflecting higher utility bills in rural housing.

Access issues increase vulnerability

Average travel time to reach key services by car and public transport (PT) or walking



- In 2019, 10% of rural households could not access the internet, compared to 7% of urban households, and speeds are generally much slower in rural areas.

Findings - PSR household interviews

Rurality is a factor in vulnerability

- Evidence that remoteness of location, in particular, is a factor increasing vulnerability – both direct and indirect
- Some evidence of resilience borne of a perspective / experience that it is more necessary, in rural areas

Compounding and inter-linked Vulnerabilities

- Remote location
- Living alone
- Getting older
- Health conditions
- Caring responsibilities

Environment / Climate Change – additional concerns and awareness

- Many interviewees had already experienced negative impacts of weather disturbance (floods, drought, storm damage)
- Strong expressed desire to make changes to adapt and mitigate, but these require more support, information and / or direction

Findings – rural heating and utility provision



58%
Gas (mains)



18%
Electricity



Difficulties keeping property warm



18%
Oil



7%
LPG



25%
Solid fuel
(wood/coal) fire

'You probably understand if you've got two different forms of energy, if one goes down you've always got the other ... and living where we do that is quite important.'

'I've very good neighbours, and I have a very good network of friends that, yes, I could always call upon to help'

Findings - VCSE and Public Sector views

Information needs

- Interviewees highlighted a lack of available information for the potentially vulnerable
- noted that many vulnerable households have poor IT skills, poor access to IT equipment, face complex billing systems

Poverty, in the Context of Utilities

- most frequent issue raised, in these interviews

- ***New or transient poverty*** caused initially by effects of COVID-19. This new group may be less likely to know about or access established means of support
- Concern also for ***hidden poverty***, with COVID affecting incomes, and visibility

‘We do a Holiday Hunger Fairshare.

What was seen as your lower 10% accessing it, we have seen an increase in demand from the lower 30-40%.

That would transmit across to utilities for people who are really struggling. They are using minimum [utility consumption] now, but go back a few months and it wouldn’t have been a thought’

Findings - VCSE and Public Sector views

Rurality as a factor in vulnerability

Those in more rural areas face additional vulnerabilities:

- Higher energy bills
- Lack of accessible support services

‘so many services have become [major town] centric. We do have the advice bureau but if you were looking for advice and support it can be difficult ...

If all those services are in town and you can't afford to get there you are cut off. If you don't have internet access then there is an element that the public agencies are too remote and people are cut off. If you pick up the phone it can be difficult to speak to someone.'

‘with rising prices and legislation combined with reduced income, it is a great concern’.

Findings – lived experience of vulnerabilities

Rates of feelings of vulnerability or concern were higher among people with **health issues, disabilities** and/or **caring responsibilities**

- a respondent from [B] said the household had to keep the property warm, as her *'husband [is] on Warfarin & feels the cold more'*, so any stoppage to their heating would be troubling.
- for a respondent near [P], disruptions to the gas or electricity would be difficult to deal with: *'especially in winter time as I am undergoing some treatment for cancer and I feel the cold a little more than I used to,'*
- *'Living on my own, it is a big worry because I sort of have to get a chair and climb on the chair to check that all my switches are all in the right place, and things like that. But what else can you do, you know, if the power goes out, the power goes out.'*

Rural location makes utility stoppages/ challenges more likely, also support is more difficult to receive

- Being on the 'end of the line' of overhead electricity cables meant **frequent electricity cuts**, for some.
- **Some could not be contacted** during an electricity outage, as they were left without a mains telephone or internet and had poor mobile phone coverage, thus were unable to contact others or be contacted.
- *'we are not on mains water supply or sewage. We need electricity to draw up water from our private well. Without power, we cannot even flush the toilets or fill a glass of water once the tank in our loft is emptied'*

Findings – challenges of ageing, rurality, climate-energy transition

‘Danger of being left with no form of telephone or internet access, poor broadband speeds, danger of being cut off due to fallen trees blocking narrow lanes, danger of flooding from the river, possibility of being snowed in, lack of police presence, long waits for emergency services, necessity of own car to access any shops, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, banks, post office, hospital, public transport links or schools. Likelihood that age will force us to vacate the property for all the above reasons.’

‘The other major change is the increase in temperatures when the weather heats up as it has over the last 3 years. My poor lungs are really not up to high day temperatures of 32 degrees that then barely reduce at night, even with all our fans going. My asthma has been well managed with a daily maintenance puffer but the hot humid nights mean taking Ventolin as well and taking puffers in the middle of the day rather than my normal low dose am & pm. In the recent heat and the temperatures going on for not just days but weeks, it is the first time in about 20 years that I have really started to feel frightened about what I would do if I had a real asthma attack’

‘I feel quite annoyed that we have to lean on oil for heating, but we don't have gas here which again is another one that you don't really want any more. But I'm a bit wary of turning everything over to all electric ...it's not constant as they do have outages- basically, because you've got nothing else that you can fall back on.’

PSR support: what it means, and what we found

PSR Core Services are much appreciated by recipients

- Advance notice for any planned stoppage to supply, alerting the household and providing opportunity to raise specific concerns or needs at that point.
- During a stoppage, providing alternative heating and cooking facilities, deliveries of bottled water, additional support for people reliant on electrical medical equipment or aids, as required (depending on individual circumstances, e.g. heated blankets, additional communication equipment, visits in person to offer help, etc.).
- Outside of a utility disruption, specific communication assistance, such as accessible information for those with specific needs; and a nominated family member or friend to act as a point of contact.

BUT - Limited knowledge of PSR and of the benefits that it offers

- Mixed knowledge, even among those already on the register(s)
- Generally low knowledge among local VCSE providers : key immediate support services were not aware of it
- Willingness to register / to promote registration, once informed

➤ **Merits broader promotion and sharing of positive experiences / good practice**

Study Recommendations

Utility companies

1. **More actively promote the PSR via local, rural VCSE and public sector bodies-** e.g. parish magazines, village halls, housing associations, food banks. **Cascade information via key networks** e.g. ACRE, WI, Village Agents
2. **Regularly remind existing customers of the PSR and its benefits**
3. **Offer more bespoke advice and in-person visits for PSR households** in planning and managing outages
4. **Produce more guidance on managing energy transition** (net zero), tailored to rural concerns/ needs
5. **Consider fuel poverty as a cause for more targeted support and advice**, learning from PSR experience

Government

1. **Ensure support services for vulnerable households are accessible even in remote areas**, e.g. more mobile advice units, cheaper (e.g. subsidised equipment) rural broadband for those on low incomes
2. Better enable rural residents' access to support via **a national digital inclusion strategy, and rural-proofed Bus Service Improvement Plans**
3. **Plan for energy transition in rural areas which is sensitive to rural vulnerabilities**, efficiency challenges and the wish to maintain a diverse range of sources; offer advice and support to those in higher risk situations. **Rural-proof the 2021 Heat and Buildings Strategy, offer more help for low-income and vulnerable households**