



The State of the Town Centres in English Small Rural Towns: Interim Findings

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Structure of Talk

- Background to Study
- The Rural England Study
 - Methods
 - What is a small town?
 - Small town engagement with Government initiatives
 - No lack of challenges
- Concluding Comments

Anatomy of rural gentrification: how Bruton became hip

A Somerset town has been hailed as the most fashionable place in Britain. Roland White, who was at school there in the 1970s, asks the locals what they make of all the fuss

Roland White Published: 21 September 2014

Comment (2) Print



Bruton's 12th-century church now preside over a rather different set of locals (Adrian Sherratt)

The Telegraph

Why Britain's small cities are leading the post-coronavirus property boom

Not everyone is fleeing metropolises for village life. Savvy buyers are heading to regional cities for the best of both worlds

By Liz Rowlinson

15 December 2020 - 6:00am



Savills is selling this Grade II listed townhouse on Wells' Cathedral Green for £895,000

When it comes to cities in the post-Covid world, it seems that small is beautiful. Urban dwellers may be hankering after more space, but for many of them rural isolation is not the answer.

House price data suggests that our appetite for a “middle way” – something between village calm and metropolitan buzz – means that some small cities are in higher demand than a year ago.

The
Guardian

'It will affect all of us': how bank closures have hit one UK town



► Tony Bird of Birds Traditional Butchers in Sandbach, Cheshire, where NatWest is closing the last bank in the town in February. Photograph: Christopher Thomond/The Guardian

In a week when several big banks announced they were axing branches, we talk to locals concerned over effect on elderly and vulnerable people

● **Lloyds and Halifax to close 40 bank branches in England and Wales**

"I've been with them since I left school. I'm really sad it's going - where do we go now?"

BBC

Bank closures causing cash shortages in Bromyard, traders say



| Lloyds was the last bank in Bromyard, before it closed its doors eight months ago

Traders in a market town in Herefordshire have described being left short of cash and forced to travel miles with their takings, months after the last bank branch closed.

The towns with NO banks: Fury that communities have been 'cut adrift' by cull of more than 5,000 branches since 2015 with some now 15 miles from their nearest bank - as Lloyds and Halifax announce 40 more closures

MailOnline



High streets can no longer rely on shops – Grimsey review



The Telegraph

The British high street that became a ghost town



In the first of a new weekly series charting the fortunes of our national high streets, Rosa Silverman visits one town centre struggling to survive...

The British high street is in crisis. Over the past decade, a string of big chains have disappeared (Woolworths, BHS, Toys R Us, Maplin, to name a few), while others have closed stores, or announced plans to do so, in an effort to survive (Mothercare, House of Fraser and Debenhams, among numerous others). In May, Marks & Spencer said it would be shutting another 110 stores nationwide, while profits at John Lewis plunged last year amid challenging trading conditions.



The pandemic has been the death knell for many retailers (Image: Southport Visitor)

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- ROYALS
- MONEY

Death of the High Street: Biggest retailers to disappear during Covid pandemic crisis

High Street retailers continue to crumble under the pressure of extended closures brought on by the coronavirus, with some of the biggest household names falling victim in 2020

The High Street Report



Ministry of Housing,
Communities &
Local Government



**Build
Back
Better**
High Streets



HM Government

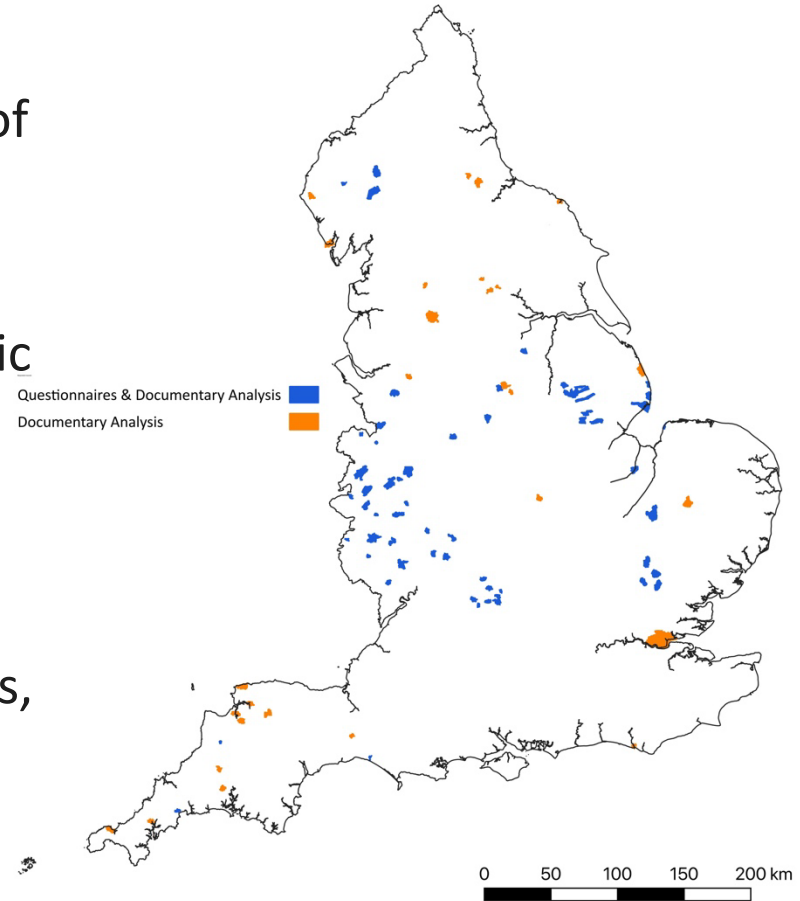


Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

OUR LONG-TERM PLAN FOR TOWNS
OCTOBER 2023

The Rural England Study: Methods

- Study of the socio-economic conditions of small rural towns, drawing on the 2021 Census
- Questionnaire of local authority economic development officers, town and parish councillors)
- Analysis of policy reports and plans
- Interviews with local government officials, councillors and leaders of business and community groups

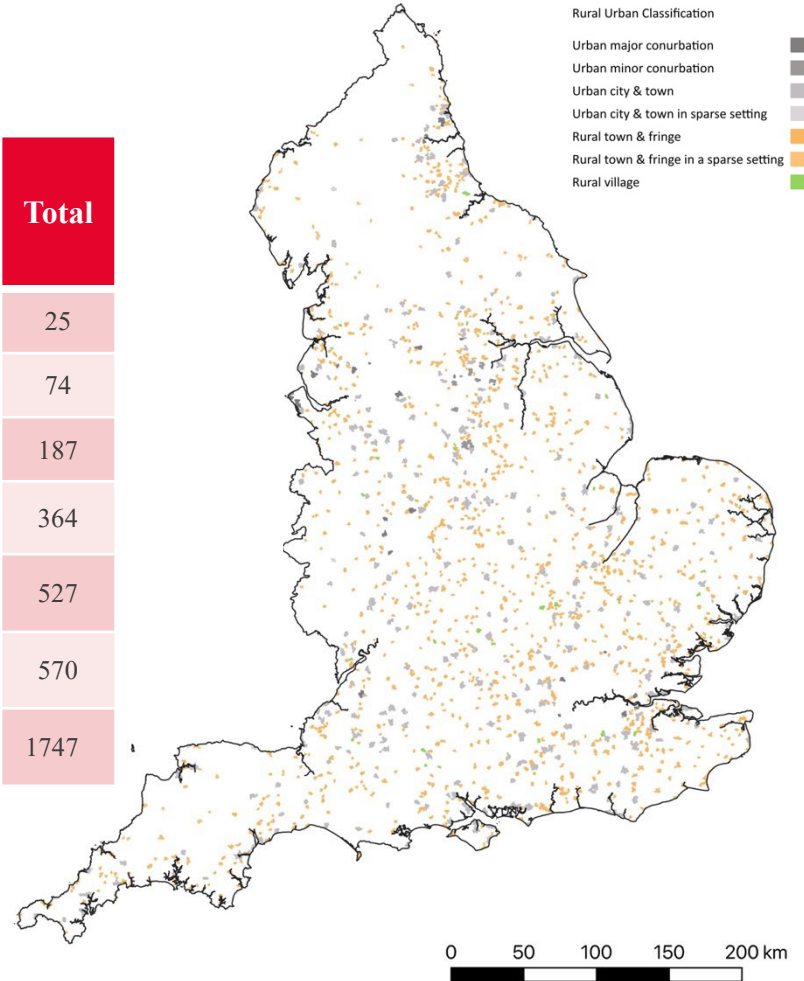


What is a small rural town?

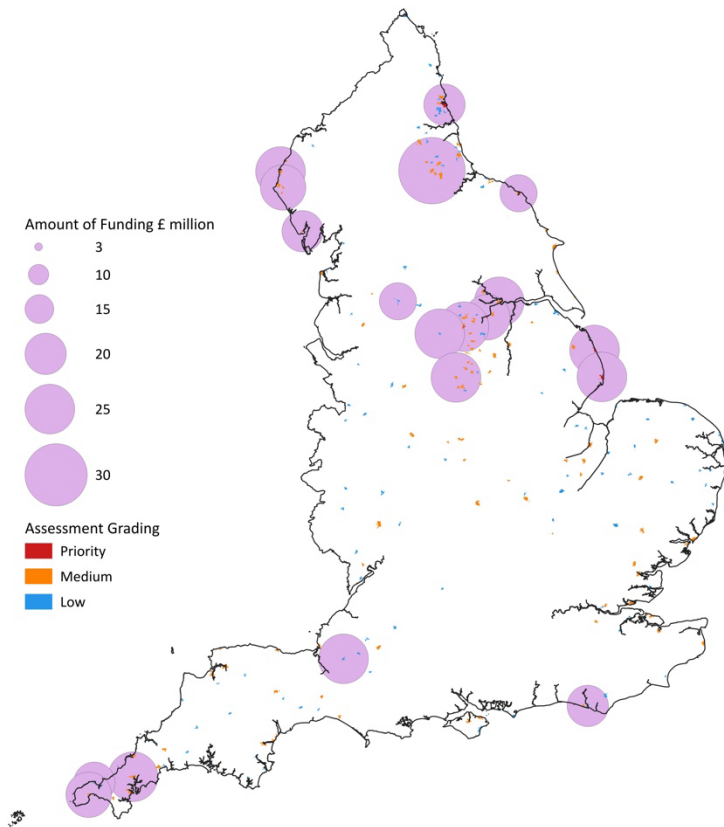
- Defra/ONS Urban Rural Classification (2017) delimits 'rural settlements' as having population below 10,000, but local authority variant (Defra 2017) identifies rural 'hub towns' of 10-30,000, acting as business and service centres for rural areas
- DETR/MAFF (2000) identified settlement sizes of 2,000-20,000 as 'rural market towns'
- House of Commons Library (Baker, 2018), small towns had 7,500 to 24,000 residents
- ONS (2019), small towns 5,000-20,000, but criticised by Rural Service Network (2021: 5) for excluding “small Market Towns with a population of 5000 or less”, which “are essential employment and service centres in many rural areas”.
- Shepherd (2009) defined 'built up areas' of 1,500 and 40,000, which encompassed 1,607 locations across England.
- Employing similar methodology for 2021 Census identified 1,747 'small towns' within England

The urban-rural distribution of 'small towns'

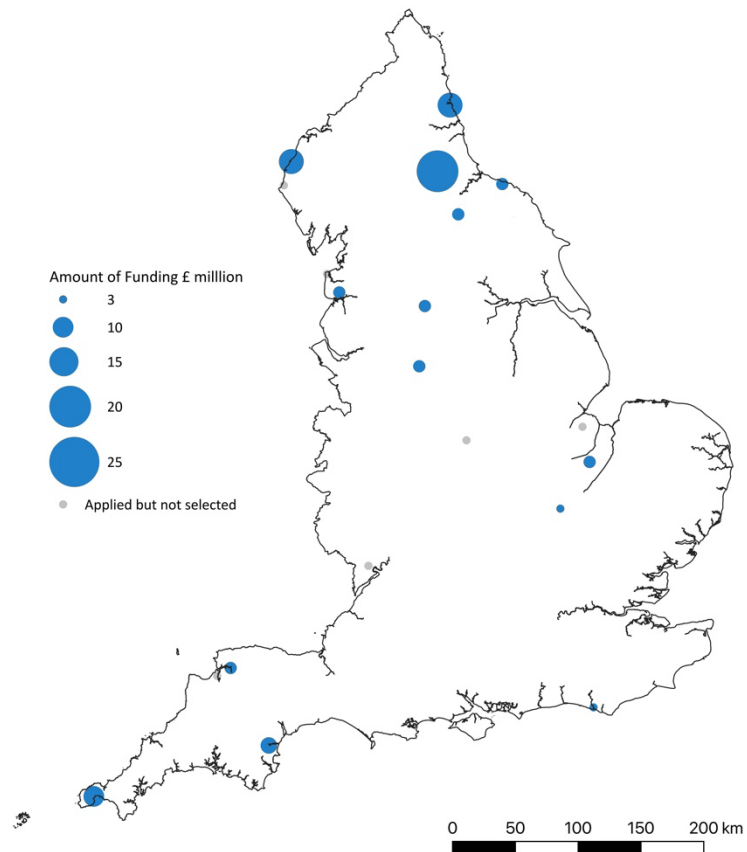
Population	Urban major conurb.	Urban minor conurb.	Urban city & town	Rural town & fringe	Rural village	Total
30,000-40,000	1		24			25
20,000-29,999	6	2	66			74
10,000-19,999	6	5	160	16		187
5,000-9,999	8	6	66	282	2	364
2,500-4,999	8	1	61	452	5	527
1,500-2,499	2	2	49	495	22	570
Total	31	16	426	1245	29	1747



Towns Fund



Future High Streets Fund



Issues

- Few small towns received funds (29 across both schemes, 5 dual awards)
- Success rate?

"approach used by MHCLG to rank town for the Towns Fund was patently unfair towards smaller (rural) towns ... 37% of the (1,082) towns that were initially ranked by ONS and MHCLG were located within predominantly rural local authority areas. However, only 18% of the towns that were subsequently invited to submit a funding proposal to the Towns Fund were in predominantly rural local authority areas" (Rural Services Network 2021: 5-6).

"Most schemes seem to be unfairly weighted towards bigger projects in larger towns and cities".

"Future High Street Fund useless, no account of small rural towns, aimed totally towards bigger and urban areas ... need to appreciate how small towns work and stop just assuming that what applies to urban area will work in rural areas. Sometimes wonder if people who set up these funds have ever visited a very rural area".

Issues

- Few small towns received funds (29 across both schemes, 5 dual awards)
- Success rate?

Towns Fund (Success Rate (%))		
Assessment Level Given by Ministry Official	Small Towns	All Towns
Priority	100.0	100.0
Medium	8.3	12.9
Low	4.2	6.6
Overall	7.6	16.8

Future High Streets Fund	
Status of Application	% Small Town
Selected to develop application	20.8
Successful Application	20.8
Unsuccessful Application	20.7
Applications as proportion of small towns	1.2

Issues

- Low level of applications

Funding Scheme	Successful	Applied	Success Rate of Applications (%)	Applications as % of responses
UK Shared Prosperity Fund	5	7	71.4	23.3
Future High Streets Fund	1	6	16.7	20.0
Rural England Prosperity Fund	3	4	75.0	13.3
Towns Fund	2	NA	NA	NA
Reopening High Street Safely Fund	0	1	0.0	3.3
Welcome Back Fund	1	2	50.0	6.7
Levelling Up Fund	0	1	0.0	3.3
Growth Corridor Initiative	0	1	0.0	3.3

Issues

- Low level of applications

"Current Government regulations prevent access direct to government funding by town/parish councils. This means local councils are wholly dependent on principal authorities to passport funds (often just not done) and prevents them from delivering or exercising responsibility on behalf of their communities".

"There should be a duty on unitary authorities to engage town and parish councils (as the second tier of local government in their area) in significant policy and decision-making".

No Lack of Challenges

78% of respondents stated small rural towns faced 'major' economic and social challenges', with 60% suggesting these had changed in last decade

"Government measures to prevent the spread of the virus may have led to the closure of businesses. Increased numbers of empty units have a detrimental effect on the appearance and atmosphere of the towns ... perceived health risks reduced footfall in towns and at events in the towns. The impact of illness created temporary shortages in the workforce".

"The pandemic exacerbated a pre-existing trend of High Street and Main Street decline (largely attributed to reduced footfall and online shopping outcompeting the traditional retail offering) ... Cornwall Council launched a 'Resident Impact Survey' in late May 2020 ... From the responses, it was clear just under half of respondents (42%) felt their wellbeing had been adversely impacted by the pandemic whilst 45% were worried about the future. Furthermore, 25% of business owners had to close, compared to only 7% nationally".

"During the pandemic fewer people wanted to use the bus to get into the towns due to social distancing worries and since then we have seen a reduction in services" .

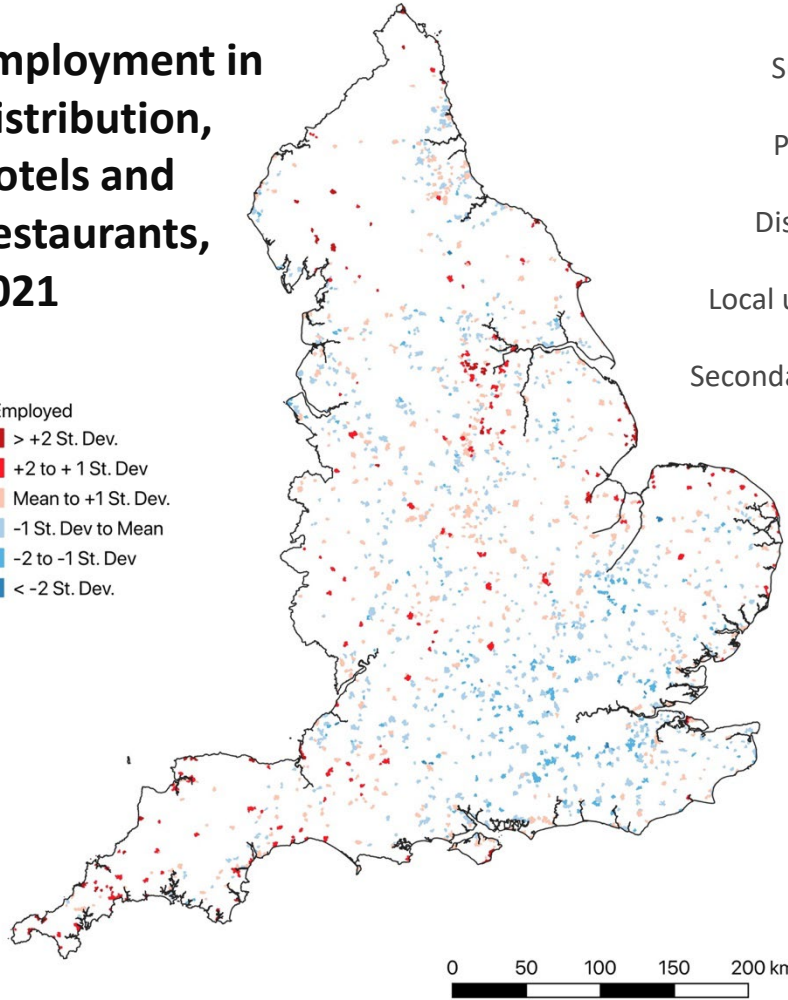
No Lack of Challenges

- ❑ Covid 19: short term impacts, and exacerbation of longer-term challenges
- ❑ Post-pandemic recovery, but ...
 - Slowed rather than reversed longer-term challenges
 - Some sectors and places struggled to recover

"We have previously seen many overseas visitors to our towns, this has reduced since the pandemic".

"Stansted Mountfitchet relies on commuter spend with a prominent fast food shop economy so has struggled post-covid with less people travelling into central London".

Employment in Distribution, Hotels and Restaurants, 2021



Based on data provided by the Consumer Data Research Centre, an ESRC data investment, under project ID CDRC 498-01, ES/L011840/1; ES/L011891/1.

"Affluent residents like to support local independent traders rather than going to 'clone towns'. The mix of an attractive town setting and a good range of shops has made the town successful".

No Lack of Challenges

- ❑ Covid 19: short term impacts, and exacerbation of longer-term challenges
- ❑ Post-pandemic recovery, but ...
 - Subsequent events have limited/reversed recovery

"Thanks to generous government grants, most businesses were not directly affected. In fact, in the immediate aftermath there was a flurry of investment in specialist shops and food and beverage offerings. However, increasing interest rates and spiralling inflation has resulted in the number of vacancies increasing again".

"inflationary pressure on spend. Hospitality and discretionary spend especially badly hit".

No Lack of Challenges

❑ Town Centres seen to impacted by:

- Shop vacancies, disrepair and shrinkage

"Three premises in the town have been converted from a commercial entity into residential accommodation since 2019, with a possibility that two more will follow suit ...The retail centre ... is amongst the smallest in Shropshire, with just 36 commercial enterprises in operation" (Shropshire Council, 2021b: 1-3).

- Vacant and dilapidated public buildings
- Declining public service provision
- and public transport

Vacant and dilapidated public buildings

“Wychavon District Council has freehold ownership of the Public Hall, a proud Grade II listed building ... [and] has committed £3.9 million to refurbish the building to create a new events venue and home for Evesham Arts Centre Association” (Wychavon District Council, 2022: 73).

"Wesleyan Chapel ... iconic listed building ... in a key location near to the hub of the town centre. The building is in disrepair and needs significant investment ... been derelict for a number of years and has been in a number of different ownerships but no viable scheme has yet come forward. The building and associated site have the potential to be converted into a number of commercial, office, residential or other uses" (RoseRegeneration, 2021: 22-33).

"relocate the Police and Fire Stations ... [enables] existing site to be redeveloped as a mixed retail/housing scheme. It should also improve operational efficiency, make revenue savings and deliver an improved service to the public" (RoseRegeneration, 2021: 22).



"Market House and Market Apron Revitalisation ... would deliver significant benefits in terms of the community and tourism offer, and support a stronger, more diverse and resilient High Street retail offering ... and create a central focus to the Town Centre ... It will attract greater footfall within the Town Centre, supporting 6+ independent coffee/ tea rooms" (RoseRegeneration, 2021: 35).

"the refurbishment and repurposing of the Market Hall would reclaim one of the most attractive and important spaces in Kington, underpinning footfall and creating a visible anchor for the town's visitor economy ... A refurbished building could provide a real focal point for the town centre and could be used to hold a wider range of regular markets as well as other events and activities including craft fairs, events and festivals" (RoseRegeneration, 2021: 14-32).



"Scope to ... increase the Town Market and other attractions including festivals ... support local producers through expanded market and increased visitor numbers through expanded Market and other activities – festivals etc." (RoseRegeneration; 2022a: 5-17).



"Britain's traditional retail markets ... are at a critical juncture, on the one hand in decline but on the other, a focus for redevelopment along gentrified lines" (Gonzalez and Waley 2013, p. 965).



Declining public service provision

“10 years ago the local Borough Council was open to the public 5 days per week. Now it only opens 1 day per week on a limited basis”.

“The police are less responsive, less present in the area and therefore less respected by the community”.

“Lack of dentists, increasing waits for doctors, school classrooms expanding ... More funding [needed] for public toilets, footpaths and cemeteries, as councils are cash strapped and these services really suffering”.

“It has 540 under 16 year olds who have limited access to activities and opportunities” (RoseRegeneration, 2021b: 4);

“economic challenges ... [include the] loss of good quality public sector jobs as it withdraws from communities, impacting spend and loss of public services, with particular adverse impacts on digitally excluded and vulnerable cohorts”.

Declining public transport

"public transport provision from the parishes into the town centre has been in decline for some years, particularly recently with declining subsidies, and public transport for out of town journeys is currently too infrequent or too expensive to provide a viable alternative to the car for many people ... the bus station ... has seen a decline in use by local bus companies and a lack of investment in its maintenance".

"suffered from recent county-level cuts in bus services to parts of the town. This coupled with reduced East Midlands Railways (EMR) services, caused significant hardship to residents and travellers".

"For many people the car is the principal mode of travel for journeys into town from the surrounding parishes. In the summer months, and especially on market days and for town events, traffic can be particularly heavy leading to major congestion, increased pollution, and extended journey times" (Bridport Town Council, 2020: 31).

No Lack of Challenges

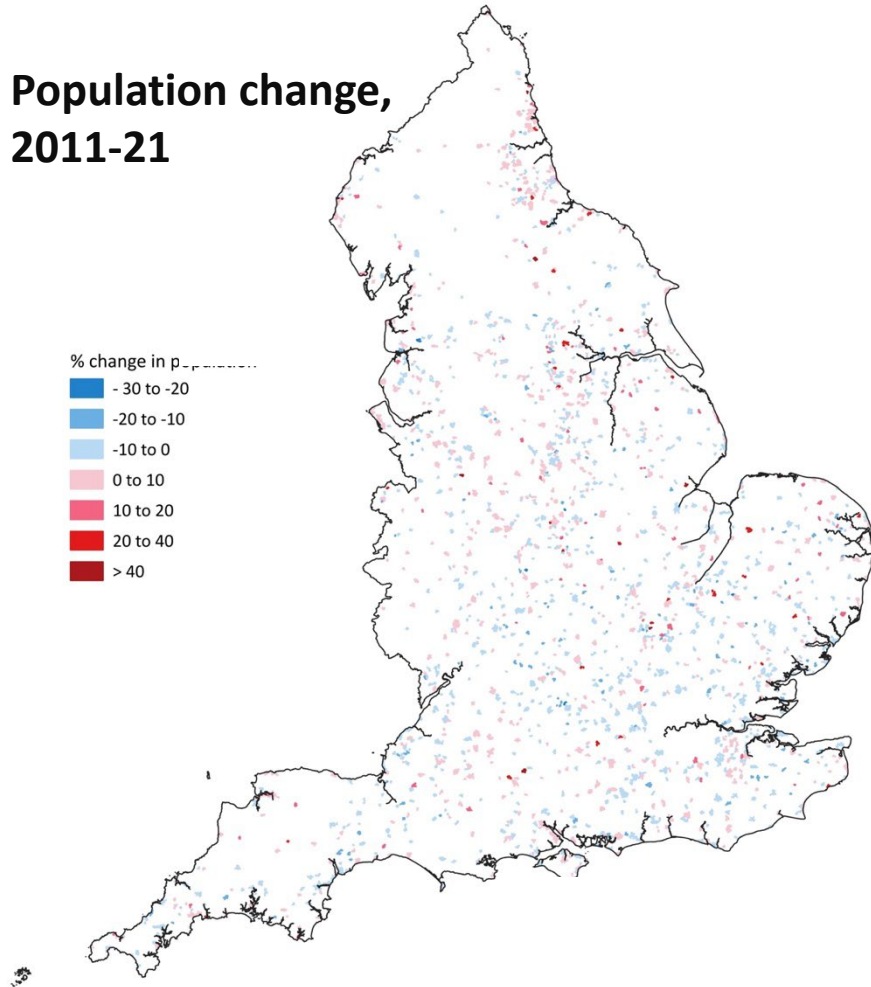
- ❑ Not simply challenges for 'struggling towns'

"parking capacity has been an issue in many of the towns ... for some years resulting in congestion. There are a number of District and County Council led initiatives looking at how the pressure on the existing car parks can be reduced, i.e. Active Travel schemes ... to make it easier to access the town centre on foot or cycle and also the reduction in car parking times to increase turnover".

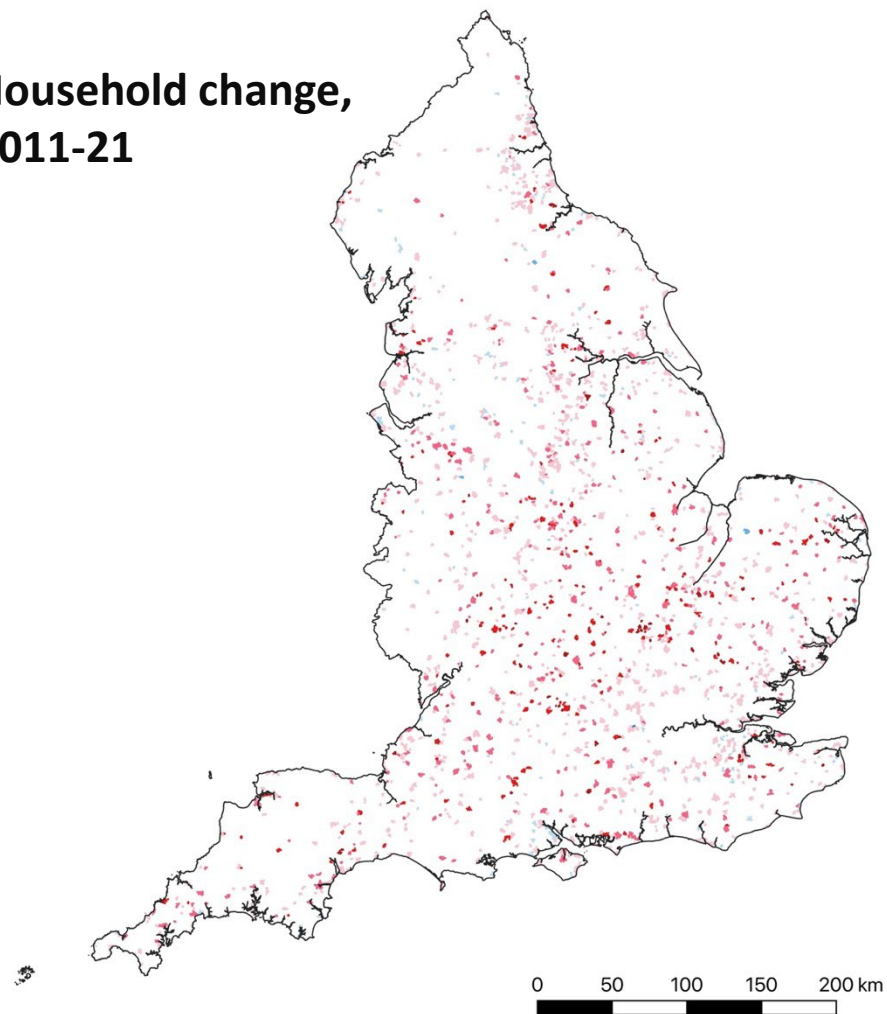
"Although there is a supply of new homes on the open market, evidence shows that most households would need to triple their income to buy a modest house on a mortgage, and that to rent privately would take at least half their income" (Bridport Town Council, 2020: 45).

"Town is rapidly expanding faster than amenities can keep up ... Lack OK dentists, increasing waits for doctors, school classrooms expanding, more congestion, lack of park space".

Population change, 2011-21

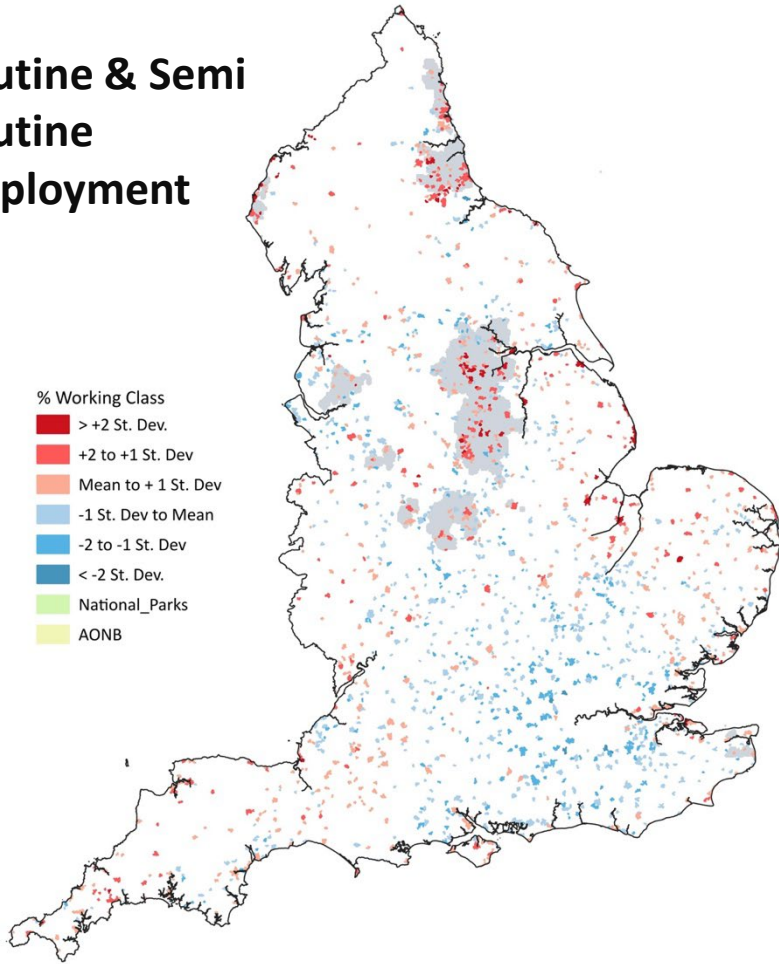


Household change, 2011-21

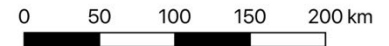
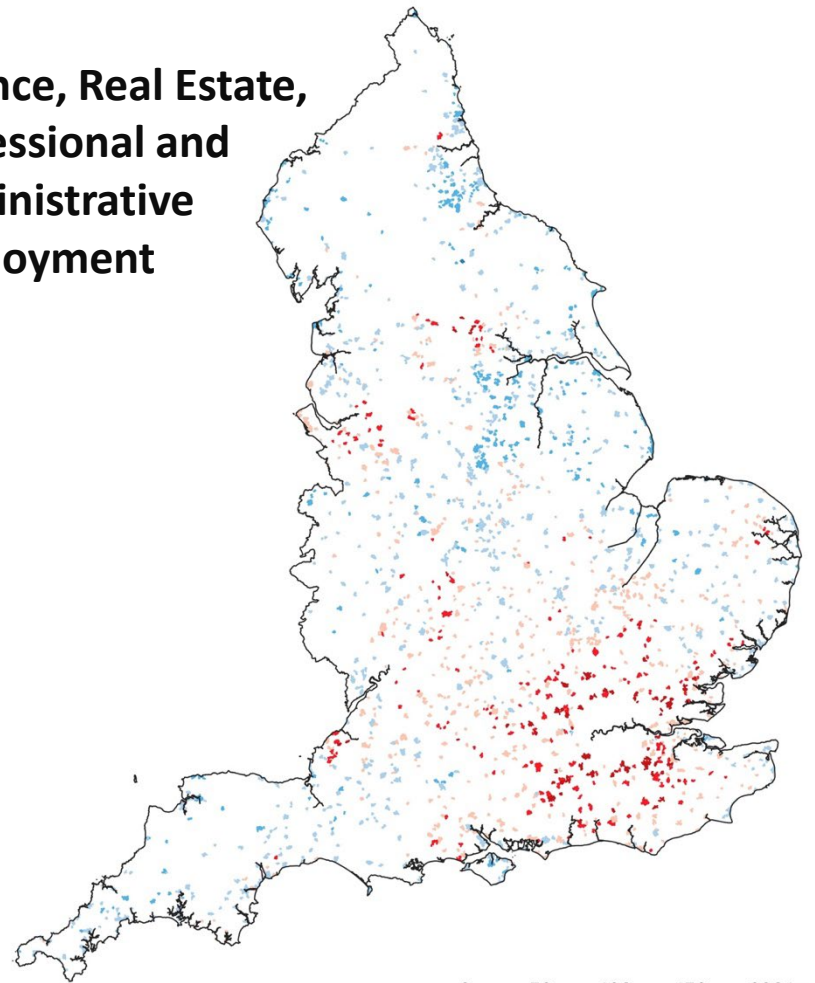


Routine & Semi Routine Employment

% Working Class



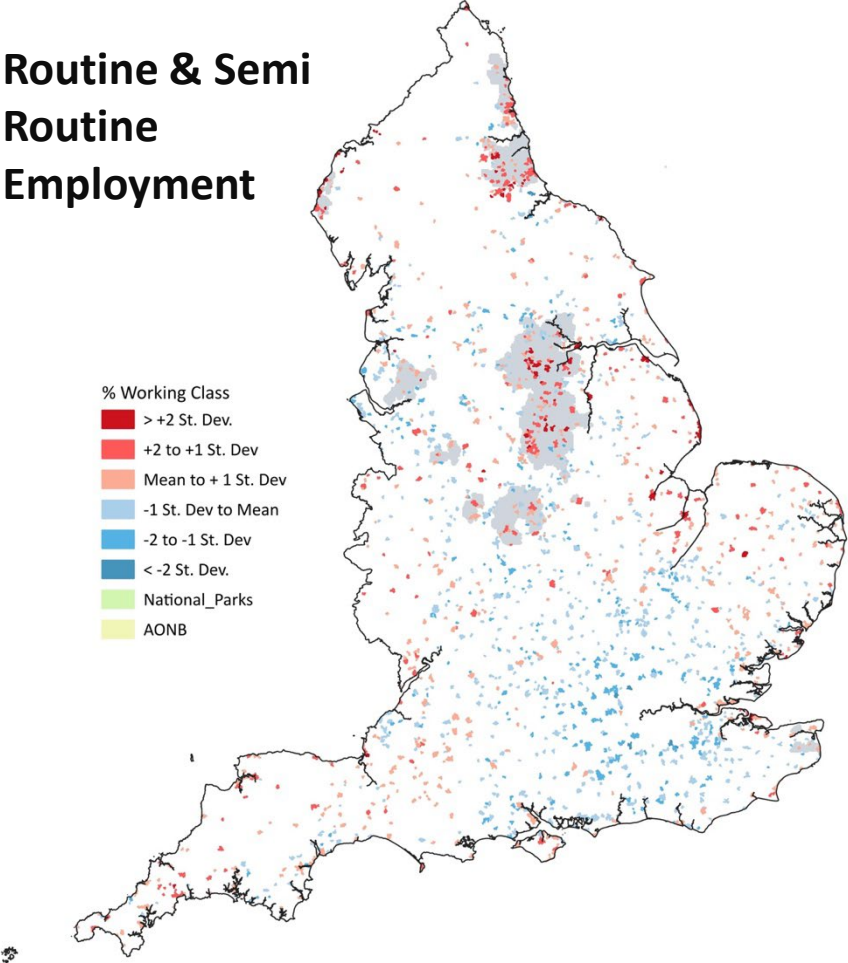
Finance, Real Estate, Professional and Administrative Employment



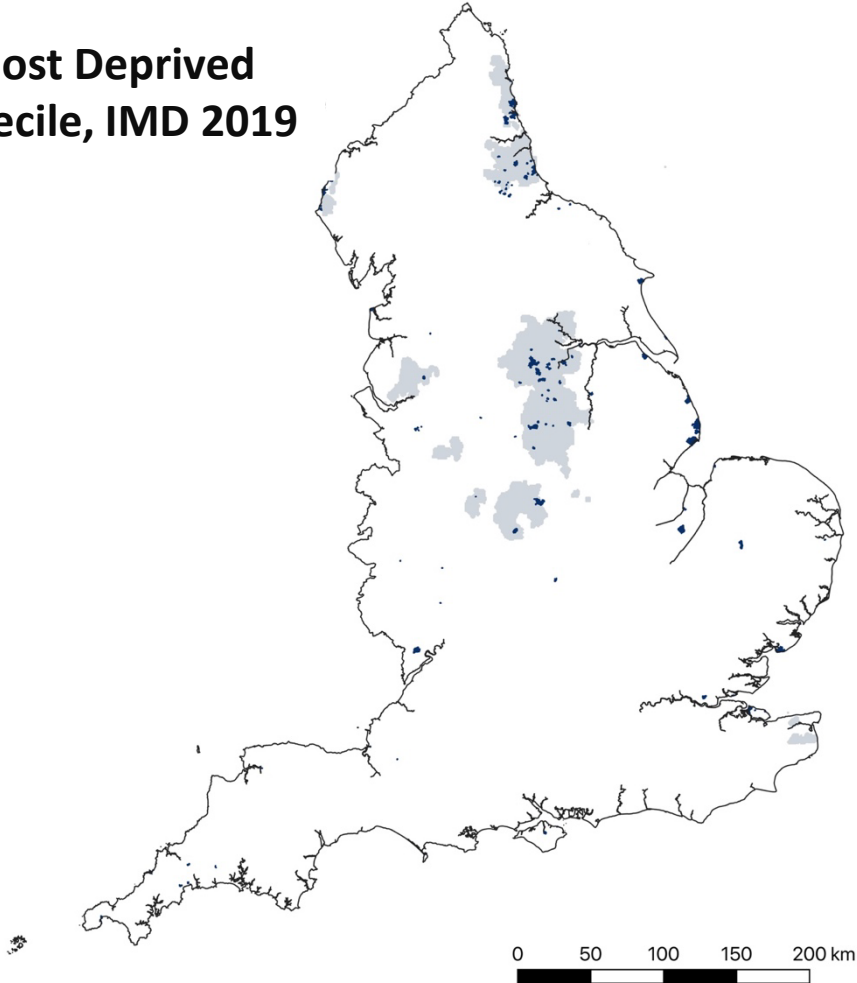
Routine & Semi Routine Employment

% Working Class

- > +2 St. Dev.
- +2 to +1 St. Dev.
- Mean to +1 St. Dev.
- 1 St. Dev. to Mean
- 2 to -1 St. Dev.
- < -2 St. Dev.
- National_Parks
- AONB

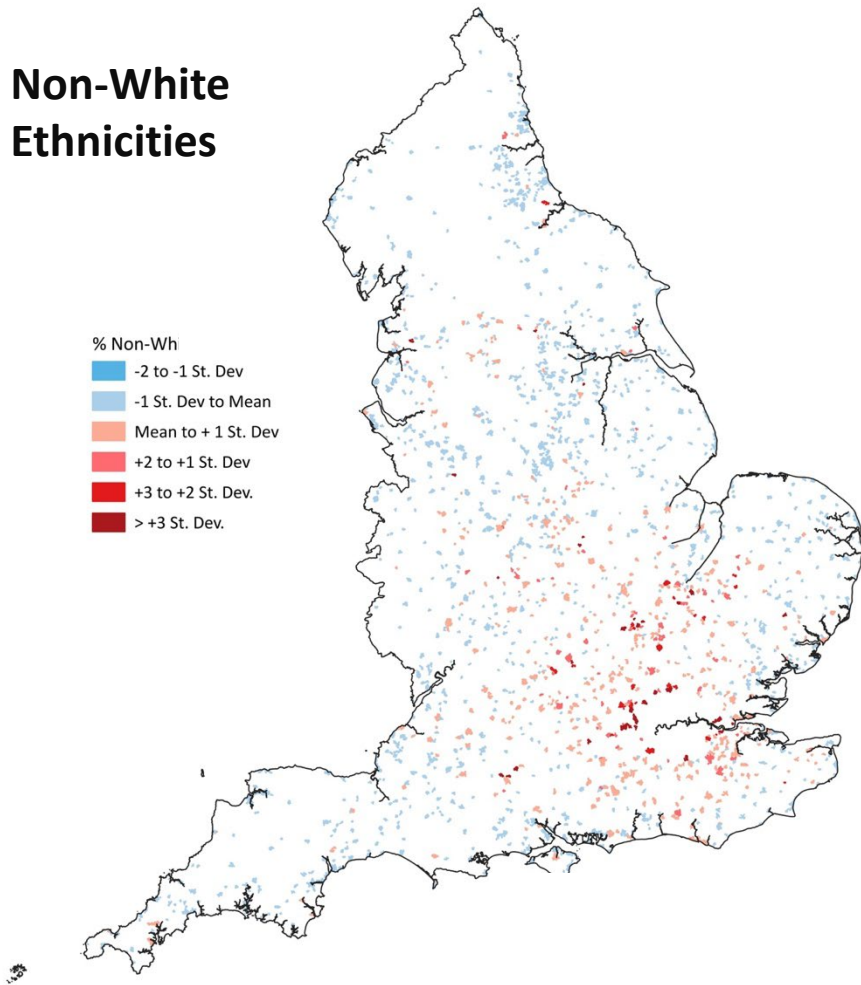


Most Deprived Decile, IMD 2019

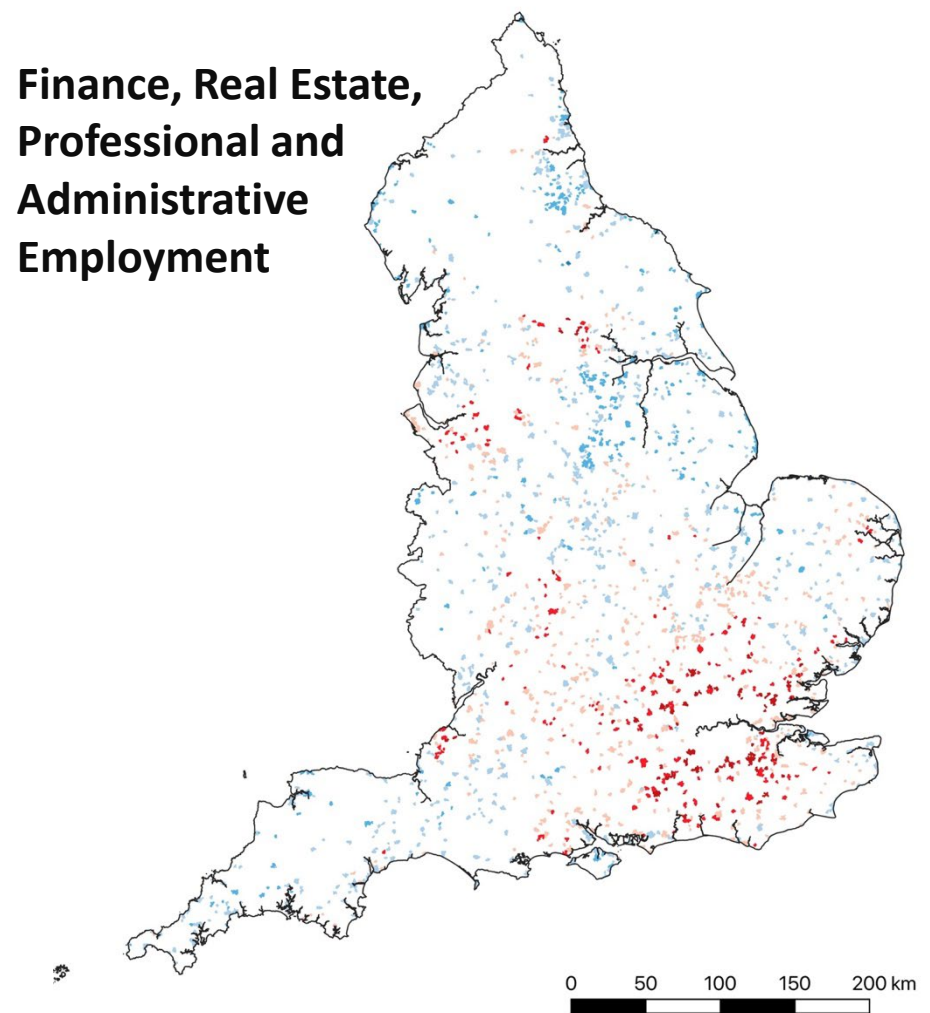


Non-White Ethnicities

% Non-Wh

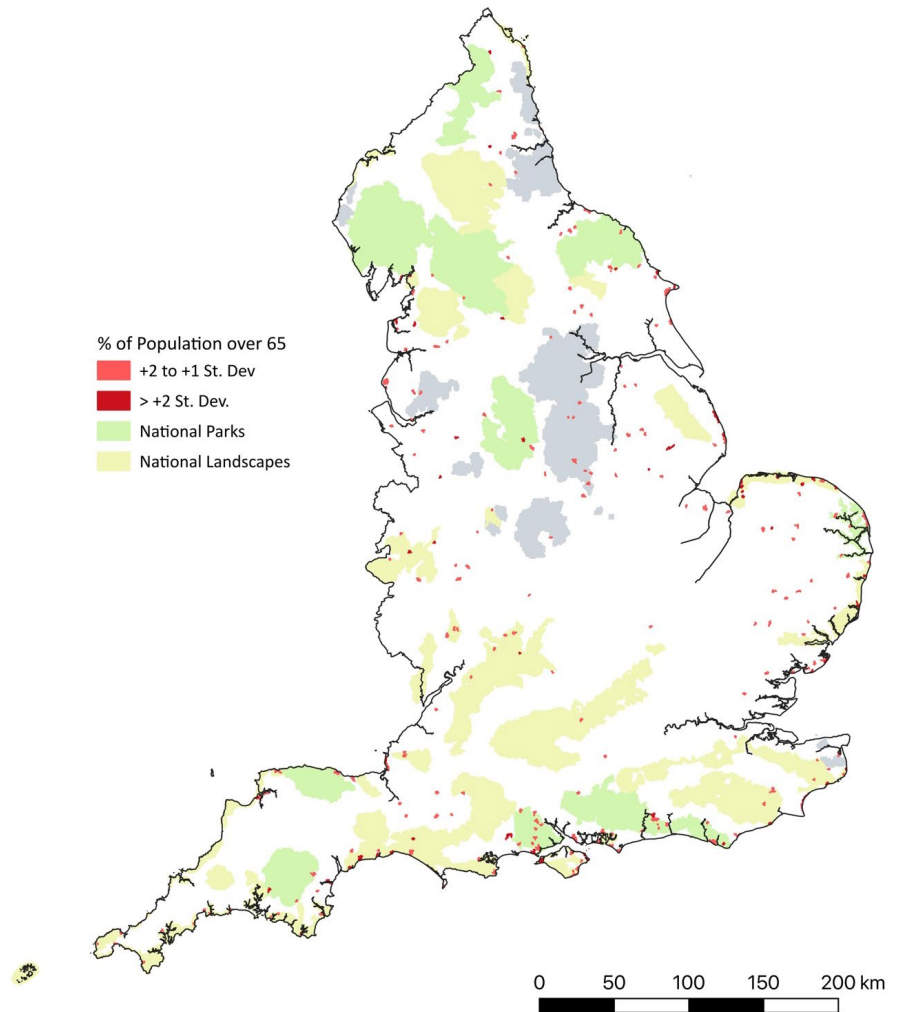


Finance, Real Estate, Professional and Administrative Employment



"principal challenges ... relate to scale and functionality, and a skewed demography in terms of economic workforce ... Relatively low job density, a declining jobs market in the town (pre-covid) with comparatively high levels of out-commuting, combined with a high proportion of over 65s renders the town vulnerable to the persistence of this imbalance between scale, functionality and demographics" (Rose Regeneration 2021b, 5))

"The care sector is important to the town with many jobs in health and social care and there is a need to recognise the skills needs in this sector as demand continues to increase linked to an ageing population" (Rose Regeneration 2021a, 10)





"ambitious new target to become zero carbon and nature rich by 2030 ... and will work in partnership with its communities, businesses and the Herefordshire Climate & Nature Board to achieve this" (Rose Regeneration 2022: 7)

Concluding Comments

- Small towns are a diverse set of settlements, experiencing considerable change and challenge
- Change and challenge recognised by Government, but investment reaching a small number of small towns
- Covid 19 pandemic exacerbated many on-going changes and challenges
- Recovery may have slowed rate of change but challenges to town centres continue