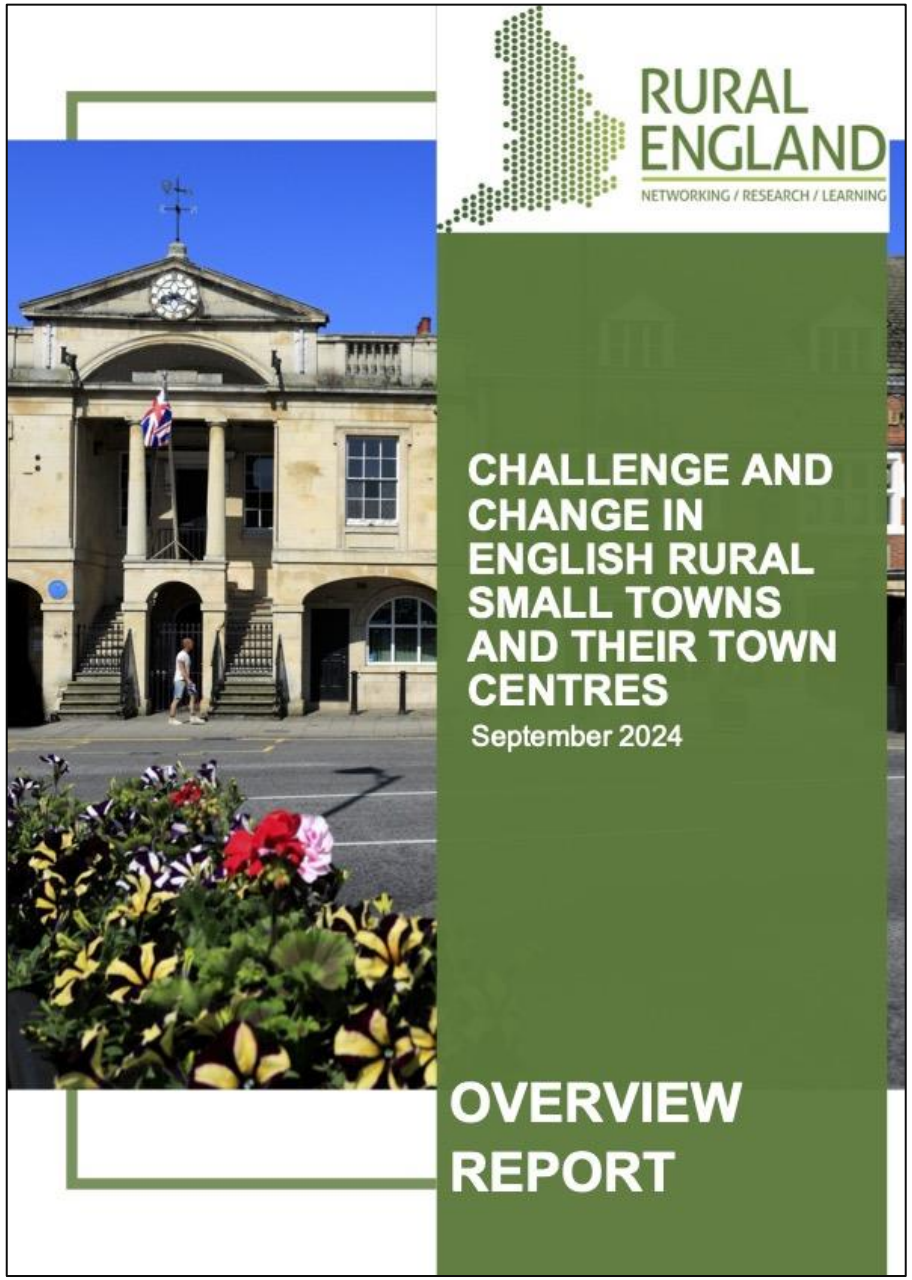
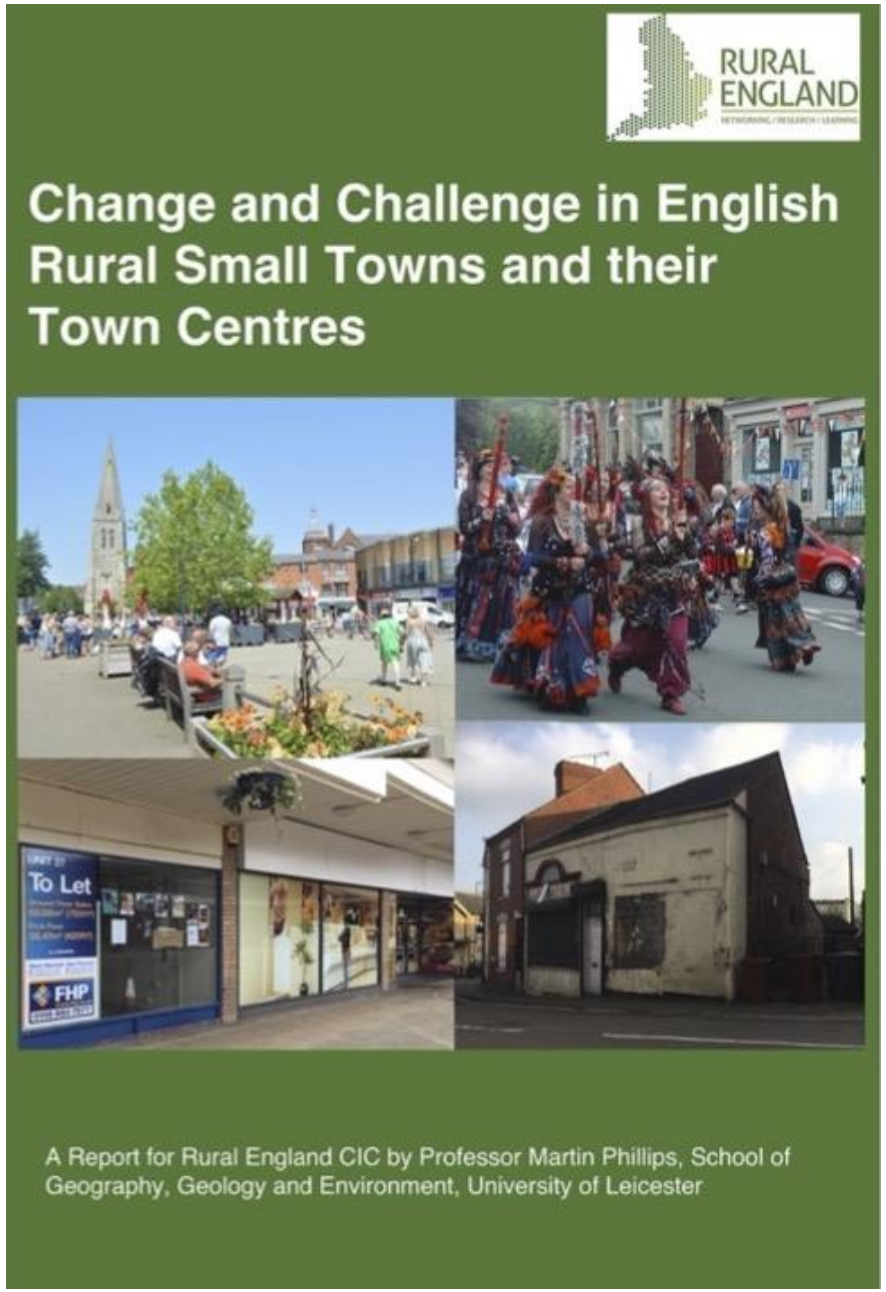
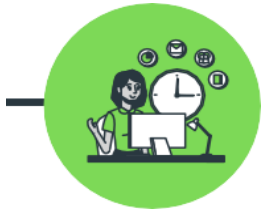

RURAL
ENGLAND
NETWORKING / RESEARCH / LEARNING
CHALLENGE AND CHANGE IN ENGLISH RURAL SMALL TOWNS AND THEIR TOWN CENTRES
September 2024
OVERVIEW REPORT


RURAL
ENGLAND
Change and Challenge in English Rural Small Towns and their Town Centres
To Let
FHP
A Report for Rural England CIC by Professor Martin Phillips, School of Geography, Geology and Environment, University of Leicester

REPORT OBJECTIVES

- **Understand contemporary socio-economic conditions and challenges** facing rural small towns in England, with a focus on their central areas.



- **Assess the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic** on these towns, especially concerning retail and service provision.

- **Evaluate the engagement of local authorities, businesses, and community groups** with central government funding initiatives.

- **Identify local policies, initiatives, and actions** that have emerged to address the challenges facing small rural towns and to capitalise on their assets and potential.

RURAL ENGLAND
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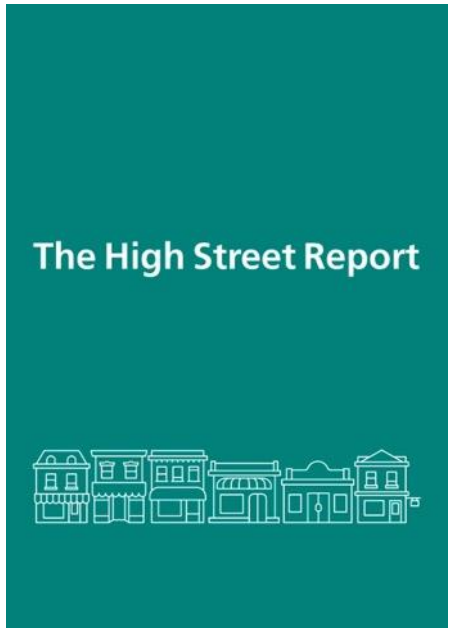
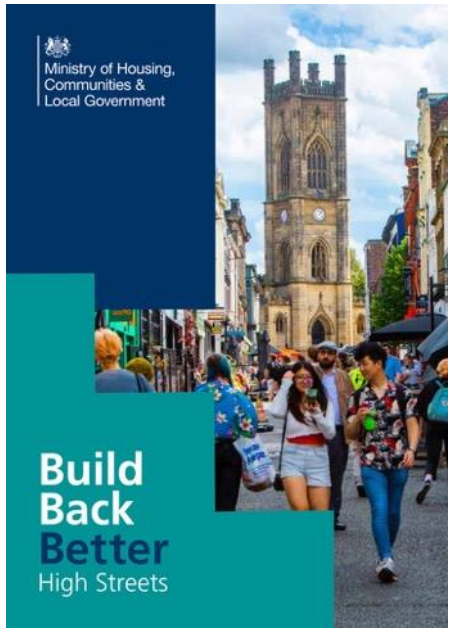


HM Government

Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

OUR LONG-TERM PLAN FOR TOWNS

OCTOBER 2023



Labour

Labour's 5-point plan to breathe life into Britain's high streets

Under the Conservatives, Britain's high streets are on the decline.

There are now 3,710 fewer fruit and veg shops, butchers, and newsagents than there were in 2010.

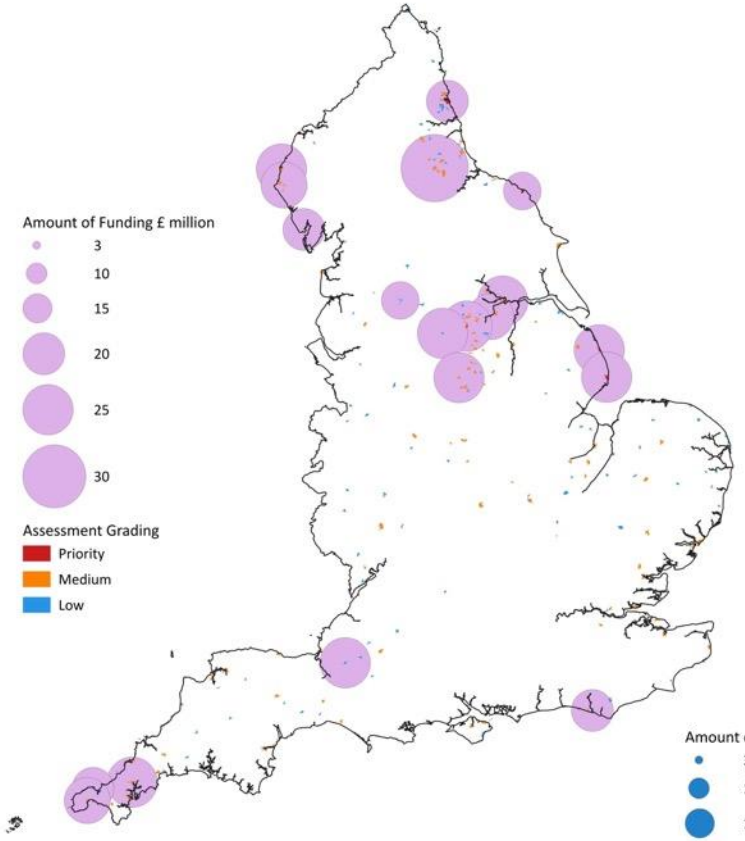
Rishi Sunak's recession has hammered small business and consumers alike, with the soaring cost of living, eye-watering mortgage and rent payments contributing to businesses closing and shops boarded up.

And since 2022 alone, an additional 385 towns have seen their last bank branch close, or announce that they will be closing imminently. This has left local people and businesses without any options to bank locally.

The decimation to small business is coupled with record levels of shoplifting – up more than 30 per cent in a single year – and persistently high levels of antisocial behaviour, with a third of the public witnessing or experiencing it in their local area over the past 12 months. This is leaving shops and shoppers crippled by crime in their communities.

As part of Labour's missions to get Britain building again and take back our streets, we will work to rejuvenate our high streets and bring economic growth back to towns across the country.

- TACKLE ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR AND SHOPLIFTING
- ROLL OUT BANKING HUBS
- REPLACE BUSINESS RATES
- STAMP OUT LATE PAYMENTS
- REVAMP EMPTY SHOPS, PUBS AND COMMUNITY SPACES



BARRIERS AND LIMITATIONS

Exclusion of Small Towns:

- 63% of ‘small towns’ defined in this study has a population of under 5,000, which was the lower threshold for inclusion in the Towns Towns

Political Bias and Selection Process:

- Strong focus on former coalfield and coastal small towns, with high levels of deprivation, but many towns with similar levels were not selected for awards

Lack of Direct Access for Local Councils:

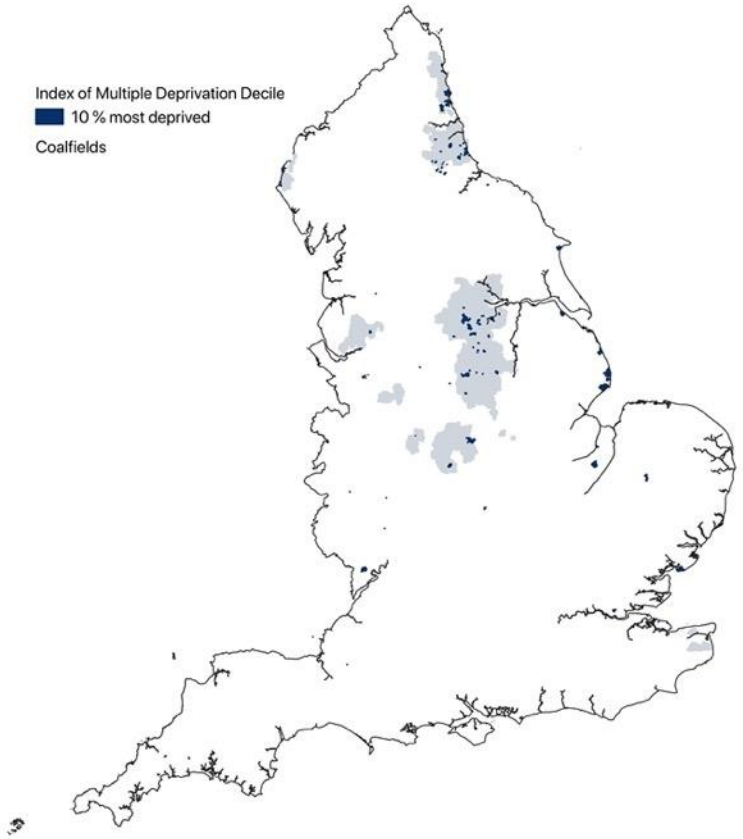
- Town and parish councils rely on higher-tier local authorities to apply for many funds, who may not always prioritise the needs of small towns.

Inadequate Recognition of Deprivation:

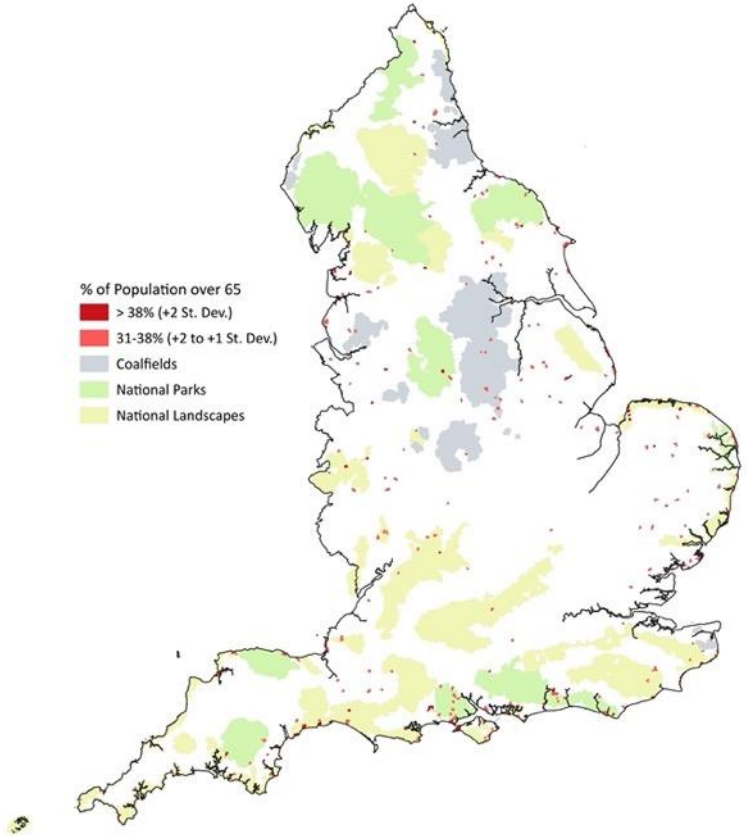
- Existing indices of deprivation used to allocate funds often fail to capture the unique challenges faced by small rural towns (e.g. accessibility to services and employment, seasonality in labour and housing markets, impacts of affluent populations)

Social Inequalities, Deprivation and Demographic Change

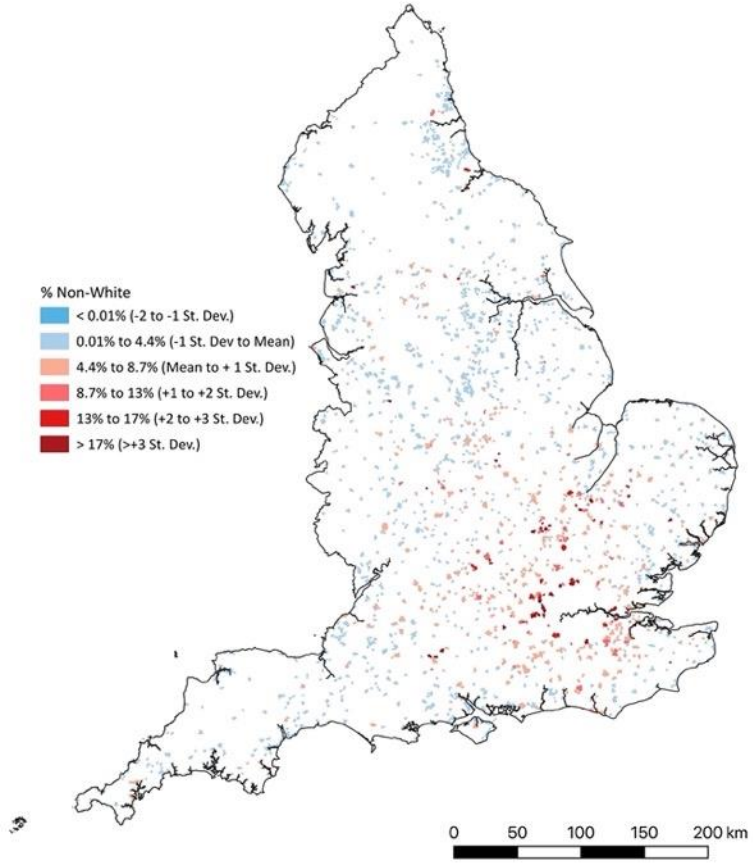
Most Deprived Decile



% of Population Over 65

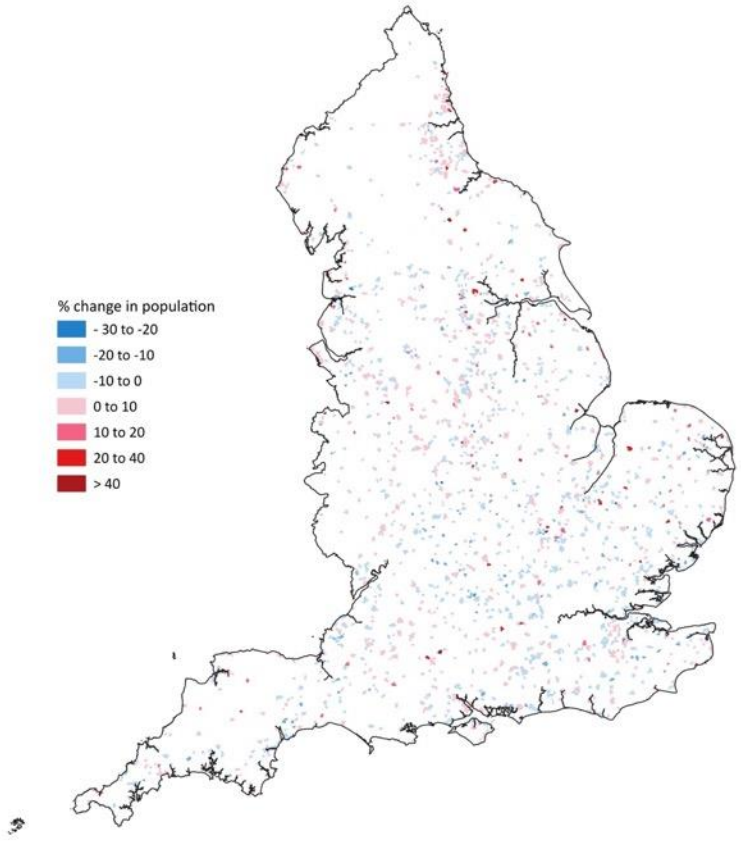


% Non-White

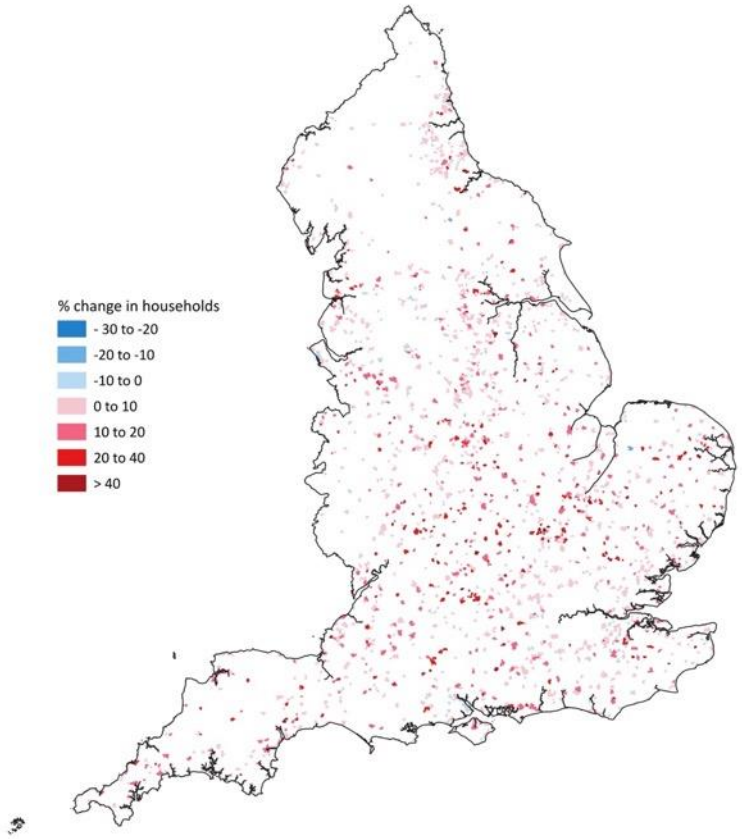


Social Inequalities, Deprivation and Demographic Change

Change in Population, 2011-21



Change in Households, 2011-21



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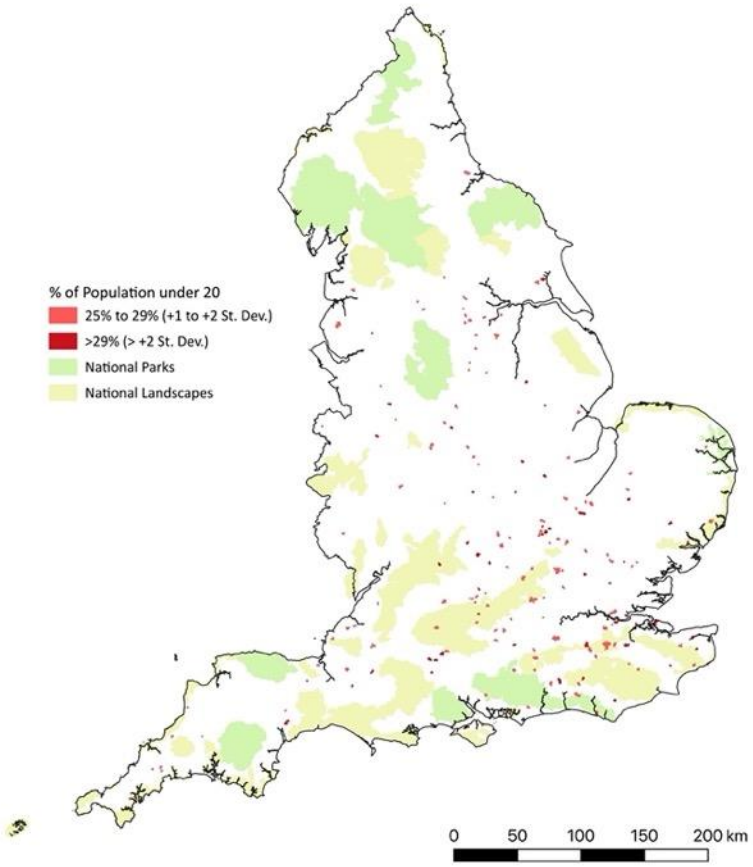


co.uk

Declining Public Services

“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”.

“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”.

Retail Change

- 67% of the retail centres in small towns are take ‘indie high streets’ and over 71 are ‘small local centres’.(Source: Consumer Data Research Centre)

  ”the pandemic … impacted footfall and spend in the High Street … 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 … 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 … The impact of illness created temporary shortages in the workforce … The tendency to shop online increased and consequently we’ve seen reductions in footfall to physical stores. People working from home reduced footfall in the towns … the tourism industry shut down during the pandemic and whilst we have seen signs of recovery the number of international visitors are unlikely to reach pre-pandemic levels until next year “(Collective response from Council Officers, South East England);

  “towns have seen a decline in footfall in high streets/main streets, which has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 Pandemic … 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) … 25% of business owners had to close, compared to only 7% nationally” (County Council Policy Officer, Cornwall).

Retail Change

Retail Change

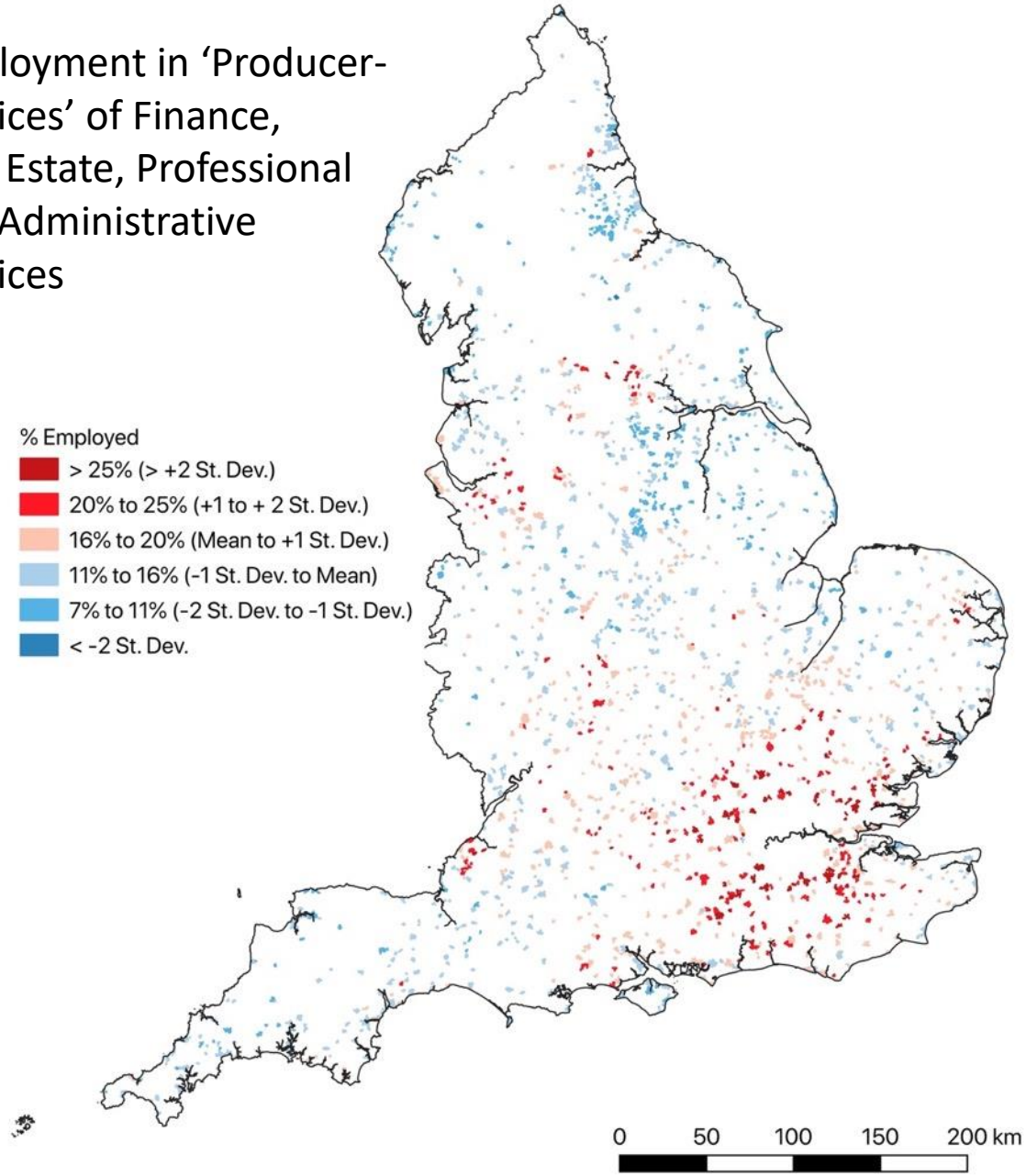
“Scope to … increase the Town Market and other attractions including festivals … support local producers through expanded market and increased visitor numbers through expanded Market and other activities – festivals etc.” (RoseRegeneration; 2022a: 5-17).

“will provide the setting for great farmers’ markets and be a hive of activity on market days, both within the Town Centre and providing a wider leisure offer alongside the River Avon” (Wychavon District Council (2022b: 53).

Storage
SPAR

"Our vision is rooted in our location in some of Britain's most beautiful countryside and in our ambitions to connect to the advanced industries and services in engineering, green technology, agri food, digital and circular economies which are emerging on our doorstep and to lead the way in artisan food and drink tourism" (RoseRegeneration, 2021a: 2).

Employment in 'Producer-Services' of Finance, Real Estate, Professional and Administrative Services



Inclusive Funding Policies:
There is a critical need to revise funding policies to ensure that small rural towns, especially those with populations under 5,000, are not excluded from central government support. More flexible and inclusive criteria would help address the specific needs of these communities.

Targeted Economic Development:
Policies should focus on fostering economic diversification in small towns. This includes supporting creative and green economies, enhancing digital connectivity, and encouraging local entrepreneurship to build resilient local economies.

Addressing Social Inequalities:
Efforts to tackle social inequalities should include improving access to essential services, affordable housing, and public transport. Policies must also recognise and address the hidden nature of rural poverty, ensuring that deprived areas receive the attention and resources they need.

Community-Led Initiatives:
Empowering local councils and community groups to lead development initiatives can foster more effective and context-sensitive solutions. This involves providing adequate funding and decision-making powers to local authorities and ensuring meaningful community participation in planning processes.