active lincolnshire

HW Lincs
Engagement to Insight

Rurality Research

Summary Report
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank:

- **Active Lincolnshire for the opportunity to carry out this project.**
- **All those who took the time to share their views.**

Disclaimer

Whilst over 550 people shared their experiences of living in a rural area, we recognise that their views may not fully reflect or be representative of all residents as participation was voluntary. A strength of the findings was that regardless of location or demographics, there appears to be many universal themes, benefits and challenges of living in a rural area.

All questions were voluntary. A valid response to the survey required at least one question to be answered. Quotes have been left verbatim, only filler words such as “um” or repeated words have been removed to improve readability without altering meaning.

Introduction

South Holland is a predominantly rural district where communities face barriers accessing services, transport, healthcare, and social opportunities; the latter may have profound impacts on individuals' health, wellbeing, and life chances.

This research aimed to develop a rich, evidence-based understanding of how rurality affects physical and mental health, access to services, transport, community connection, and staying active.

The study focused on South Holland, especially Sutton Bridge, Long Sutton, and Holbeach, with the intelligence gathered to inform future policy, service delivery, and investment decisions.

HWLincs was recruited to support this work, due to its established role in capturing public voice and delivering independent evaluation across systems and sectors.

Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was utilised for this research, consisting of a survey (both digital and paper), conversations in the community, and case studies.

Survey

Community conversations

Case studies

557 people shared their views

Engagement method	Location(s)	Collection period	Number of participants
Survey	South Holland	10th - 28th July 2026	**428**
Conversations in the community	Sutton Bridge, Long Sutton, Holbeach and surounding villages	7th - 30th July 2026	**14 conversations 129 people**

Participants represented a range of ages, different villages and backgrounds. We heard from individuals who were carers, whilse some respondents had a long-term health condition and/or a disability.

Key Headlines

What is it like living in a rural area?
Experiences of rural living varied, with both benefits and challenges frequently being highlighted. Discussions focused on a series of interlinked key themes:

Theme	Impact	Commentary
Health and wellbeing	**Positive**	• Peaceful with a slower pace of life • Green spaces and close to nature
Transport	**Negative**	• Public transport is very limited, if not completely lacking (especially in the evenings and at weekends) • Being able to drive is essential, otherwise it is hard to access essential services and can become isolated
Access to services	**Negative**	• To access essential services you have to travel to bigger towns (to access hospitals you have to travel even further) • Even after travelling, service provision (e.g. supermarkets, leisure, clothes shops) is limited • Lack of appointments at GP and dental services • Growth in new houses is not mirrored in service provision • Limited services and public transport contributed to communities feeling forgotten
Infrastructure	**Negative**	• Roads, footpaths, and cycling routes are poorly maintained or non-existent
Younger people	**Negative**	• Lack of education, employment, and social opportunities means many young people leave the area as soon as they are able
Community connection	**Mixed**	• Sense of community spirit and neighbours looking out for each other • Some felt villages were insular and unwelcoming, and community spirit is waning

Key Headlines

What is it like living in a rural area?
Residents in their own words...

"The peace and quiet is excellent for helping unwind, the big wide open spaces are great for helping to feel connected to wildlife and our environment. It's always lovely to spend a day in a city but even better to get home to rural life. Only this week I took an early morning walk and came across a deer, a fox, a hare and lots of birds - a perfect moment."

"Living in a rural location is wonderful but public transport can be limited or unreliable, slow to get to a location or require several changes. You need a car!"

"Nearest supermarket is 13 miles away each way. Doctors is 4 miles away."

"Getting to public transport is difficult - I have to get driven to the bus stop, so have to plan my entire day around other people's availability. And some places, that are only an hour away in the car, can be four hours away on public transport."

"It's beautiful, lots of fresh air but you have to commute to everything which adds time to every activity. Especially if you have multiple family members with different activities, I.e. two jobs in different directions, children at different schools, clubs or social activities. Even meeting friends requires travel time. You spend a lot of time driving to make your day efficient. Walking or cycling just isn't an option."

"My kids are desperate to leave due to lack of job opportunities and opportunities for meeting other young people."

"It is quiet and community oriented but it can be isolating from services."

"I found it very difficult to meet and socialise with others. It seems rural Lincs has a close knit population of mostly farm and agricultural communities that do not particularly enjoy outsiders or townies. Will be moving again sadly."

Key Headlines

Staying active in a rural area:

Top reasons for staying active

To improve fitness

To improve physical and mental health

To spend time outdoors

Individuals faced many interconnected barriers to staying active. Therefore, to effectively support people to stay active in rural areas, multiple issues need to be addressed. In order of frequency:

Top six barriers to staying active
1. An existing health condition
2. Poor condition of paths, roads and pavements
3. Cost of activities or participation
4. Lack of activities or groups close to where I live
5. Lack of safe roads or pathways to walk or cycle on
6. Lack of services/facilities (e.g. leisure centres or gyms) close to where I live

Top six areas where support is needed
1. Better promotion of what is on offer
2. Better maintained paths or cycling routes
3. More activities/facilities closer to home
4. More affordable activities
5. Better public transport
6. Different types of activities

Key Headlines

Staying active
Residents in their own words...

"Everything seems to be removed from a rural area and an expectation that you will travel further. There is the cost of travel and entry as well as membership fees etc."

"Offered balance clinic, but nearest was in Spalding which on public transport is a three hour round trip and a 4 mile walk. Taxi or voluntary transport service (if available) £15-£70 for each session so huge disincentive to attend.

Pavement/road walking is only feasible outdoor activity without use of a car and highway maintenance poor for this. In areas with good pavement surfaces, pavement crossings to private drives tend to be sharp gradients leading to stumbles. Have fallen over twice while street walking, one requiring an ambulance."

"Roads near to me are poorly lit so am afraid to walk or cycle when dark. Roads have too many pot holes to cycle safely. Boy racers make evening walks unpleasant."

"Some areas do not have pavements, making walking the dog dangerous or taking children to school."

"Having a good choice of activities for different ages groups (children) and locations that did not involve long and costly journeys. Activities that a family could do together as well as those for individual interests. Logistics of getting people to different things at different times and then the cost."

"More events that are geared towards working age people. I am not interested in bingo or line dancing."

"Signposting of activities - there are activities out there but you do not always know where and when they are and they are hard to find as they are not in one place."

Conclusion

Over 550 people shared their experiences of living in a rural area. Overall, rural living was described as having both benefits and challenges. The natural environment of wide-open green spaces was seen as peaceful and relaxing, positively impacting on health and wellbeing.

In comparison, the limited (and often lack of) public transport and access to services were identified as key challenges. Many aspects of rural life are highly connected and should not be viewed in isolation. For example, access to services was made even more challenging by limited public transport; as a result being able to drive was seen as an necessity for daily life.

Experiences of other aspects of rural life were mixed, e.g. community connection. However, staying connected and reducing isolation were motivators for staying active.

The benefits to health and wellbeing by staying active were also key reasons given by people who wished to stay active; however, the majority encountered a diverse range of interconnected barriers when trying to do so. Challenges spanned existing health conditions, poor infrastructure and transport, cost of and lack of local activities. Therefore, to have the greatest impact in supporting individuals in rural areas to stay active, many of these barriers need to be addressed.

Recommendations

From the intelligence gathered, we outline a series of evidence-based recommendations and considerations to improve outcomes around accessing physical activity for those living in rural areas. We recognise that control and responsibility for these areas span multiple organisations and levels of governance. However, it is critical that residents are involved at every stage, from influencing to shaping the development of new opportunities. To do this it is essential to work with partners that are can reach into and engage with communities.

1. **Partnership working, collaboration and influencing**

   We recommend Active Lincolnshire to continue their partnership working to influence and advocate for:

   - Improvements to infrastructure to promote active travel
   - Better public transport links
   - Reductions in financial participation barriers

2. **Better promotion of opportunities to stay active**

   - Auditing existing physical activity opportunities
   - Considering the development of both an online and printed directory, collating information about local opportunities
   - Improving the promotion of local activities via both digital and non-digital channels

3. **Increase and diversify the activities available**

   - Providing activities at evenings and at weekends
   - Expanding the opportunities aimed for children and young people
   - Adapting activities for different health needs
   - Offering innovative activities, beyond traditional sports

4. **Bring activities to the community**

   - Exploring the opportunities to bring activities into communities to reduce the travel burden and facilitate participation
   - Improving the use of community spaces to host activities
   - Supporting local groups to work together to share facilities and resources

5. **Share learning**

   - Widely share the findings from this research with stakeholder to aid their understanding of communities
   - Establish a feedback loop, showing communities how their experiences have shaped decisions

Final reflection

This final quote from a resident best reflects and summarises the sentiments raised through this research.

"Living in a rural location can be idyllic. However, there are also challenges that people who don't live in rural areas may not fully understand.

One of the biggest issues is transport. If you don't have access to a car, getting around can be very difficult. Public transport is often infrequent or unavailable, and while services such as CallConnect exist, the way they operate means they are not always practical for appointments, as they cannot guarantee arriving at a specific time.

Access to sports and leisure facilities can also be limited. Many activities seem to be aimed either at young children or older adults, leaving teenagers, younger adults and middle-aged residents with fewer affordable opportunities to stay active. Smaller villages in particular often feel overlooked when new initiatives are introduced, such as outdoor gyms or community fitness equipment.

Many rural roads have no pavements, making walking or running unsafe, particularly where traffic travels at higher speeds. During the winter months, the lack of street lighting can make it even more difficult and discourages people from being active outdoors.

Where activities are available, they are often privately run and require payment. While these classes provide valuable opportunities, not everyone can afford to attend regularly. Greater investment in subsidised or free exercise and wellbeing classes held in local village halls or schools would make a significant difference, helping people of all ages to stay active, improve their health and reduce social isolation.

Rural living offers many benefits, but improving transport, infrastructure and access to affordable activities would make these communities healthier, more connected and more inclusive for everyone."

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