Older people should be able to thrive whether they live in the countryside or in towns. They should be able to access essential services and live active lives.

Key issues

The number of older people living in rural locations is growing, and whilst life in the country can offer many benefits it can also exacerbate the challenges older people face. The characteristics of rural areas, with low population densities and large distances between residential and/or commercial centres, impact on the cost and quality of services available to older people. Key issues include poor transport options, social isolation and loneliness, difficulties accessing essential health and social care services and banks or post offices.

Key statistics

- **46.6%**
  Of England’s rural population are 50+ and nearly a quarter (24.3 percent) are 65+.

- **37%**
  Increase in the 65+ population in predominantly rural areas between 2001 and 2015, compared with 17 per cent in predominantly urban areas.

- **5.5 years**
  The average age in rural areas in 2016 was 5.5 years older than in urban areas, an increase from 3.4 years in 2013.
Social care
Rural areas can face difficulties providing services to the same standard and level of costs compared to urban areas, particularly where services involve a high degree of travel. This is known as the ‘rural premium’. Providing effective, integrated and preventative care in rural areas is a significant challenge for commissioners. Age UK believes there is scope to develop more innovative and creative methods.

Banks and post offices
Over 1,500 bank branches have closed since 2015, many of these in rural areas. We can expect to see a continued programme of branch closures as banking moves online for many. This is particularly challenging for rural areas where customers may have to travel significantly further to reach a nearest branch, and where internet connection for online banking is not guaranteed. Older people continue to be major users of the Post Office, which offers some banking services, and Government investment has improved the sustainability of post offices so that over half remain in rural locations. Research from Citizen’s Advice found the more rural a community, the more vital local post offices are for withdrawing cash, buying retail goods and accessing community services.

Rural Homes
Due to the high number of solid-wall and off-mains gas properties in rural areas, household energy bills are on average 27 per cent higher than in urban areas. Nearly 14 per cent of rural households were in fuel poverty in 2017 compared to 10.8 per cent in urban areas. Those living in rural or isolated areas may be at particular risk in the event of floods or other weather crises. An estimated 1.8 million people in the UK are living in areas at significant risk of river, surface water or coastal flooding. In November 2016, the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee called for greater safeguards for local communities and improvements to flood insurance coverage. Some households may benefit from a new Flood Re scheme, which caps the cost of flood insurance for households in high-risk areas.
There continues to be a lack of affordable and appropriate housing for older people living rurally. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Housing and Care for Older People conducted an inquiry into the challenges faced by older people in rural settings in accessing housing and home care and support. The report published this year, found that older people’s housing in rural areas is neglected and made some ‘rural proofing’ recommendations.

Travel in rural areas
One in three older households in rural areas have no access to a vehicle and we know that a high proportion of older people use the concessionary bus pass scheme. Thirty per cent of people in Britain aged 60+ use a local bus service at least once a week. But in rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings, less than half the households (49 per cent) live within 13 minutes' walk of a regular (hourly) bus. Due to low density populations, buses can be infrequent and vulnerable to cuts. Funding for bus services has been cut by 33 per cent since 2010, and in the last year over 5,000 routes were reduced or completely withdrawn.

Hospital transport
Nearly 1.5 million people aged 65+ struggle to get to hospital appointments, with the oldest old, those 80+, finding it the hardest. In rural areas, the problem is exacerbated by distance to travel and the lack of integrated hospital transport services. Age UK launched a ‘Painful Journeys’ campaign around Hospital Transport in 2018.

Rural isolation or countryside spirit?
Over a million older people across England suffer persistent chronic loneliness and 12 per cent feel cut off from society. When older people take part in activities which promote their health and independence they feel less isolated and more likely to feel their community is a good one to grow old in. But rural older people often struggle to take part in these activities due to their geographical isolation and the limitations of local services to provide remedies.

There can be strong community spirit in rural communities, at the heart of which are older volunteers. In many rural areas, Village Agents act as local points of contact for older people, providing support, information and advice and helping to develop community initiatives. Over 30 per cent of people aged 65+ in rural areas volunteer at least once a year compared to 20 per cent of older people in urban areas. However, while community action can provide some solutions, it cannot do it alone or at no financial cost, even when carried out largely by volunteers. Local authorities and businesses have an opportunity here to work with existing community centres and hubs, to deliver vital services from them in more innovative ways, which both protects the service and improves accessibility for older people.

You can see how your local neighbourhood fares using Age UK’s loneliness heat maps here: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/loneliness-maps/
Role of Government

The government has issued guidance on how public sector bodies can ‘rural proof’ their policies, with a focus on broadband and mobile coverage and protecting the Post Office network. Their 2017 manifesto pledged to ensure all premises have access to high speed broadband by 2020 - a vital gateway to information and services for older people living rurally.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) recognises the ageing demographic of rural areas in their Strategy plan for 2020, but their social investment objectives concentrate on education, training and working age populations. There is an increasing focus on ‘rural vulnerability’ and ‘rural wellbeing’ from some rural alliances, councils and ministers who are considering strategies for rural health, care and community needs under these umbrella terms. However, these welcome initiatives could be undermined by the pressure on public spending, particularly by local government.

Age UK would like to see strategies from all levels of government more explicitly address the issues faced by older populations in rural areas, particularly around maintaining access to essential services, improved planning for delivery of health and care services, suitable housing and transport provision.
Public Policy Proposals

- Policy from all levels of government needs a strategic approach to rural ageing. Any decision that may affect rural areas must recognise that they are ageing more quickly than urban areas and the needs of older people should be a priority.

- The government must work with local authorities to better integrate health and social care services in rural areas, and to increase investment in prevention programmes. Local authorities can look to the various models of integrated care that have been implemented across the country when considering how best to support their own older rural populations.

- Government should support local authorities in rural areas to explore innovative ways of providing vital services to older people. These could include outreach services, or community hubs that bank and post office services can be accessed from.

- Building capacity in communities requires initial and sustained investment in voluntary and community organisations. Rural local authorities should ensure they hear the voices of older people when planning local priorities and services.

- Rural local authorities should understand levels of fuel poverty in their areas and develop plans to tackle excess winter deaths. Health authorities should recognise the link between cold homes, poor health and pressure on health systems, and design preventative strategies.

- Local authorities and agencies they commission – such as social care providers – should offer support to vulnerable older people before, during and after extreme weather events, ensuring that emergency plans take full account of older people’s needs.

- Cross-government working is needed to ensure that departments recognise the transport needs of rural communities and reflect them in the development and implementation of their programmes, policies and funding allocations.

- Where public transport does not fully meet the needs of older people who do not have access to private transport, local authorities should provide alternatives such as financial support towards community transport or taxis.

- The Government, under the Minister of State for Health, should conduct a review into hospital transport services.

- There needs to be a balance between government policy interventions and local community action to ensure the best outcomes for older people in rural areas.
Want to find out more?

Age UK has agreed policy positions on a wide range of public policy issues. Our policies cover money matters, health and wellbeing, care and support, housing and communities. There are also some crosscutting themes, such as age equality and human rights, age-friendly government and information and advice.

Further information

You can read our policy positions here: www.ageuk.org.uk/our-impact/policy-research/policypositions/
Individuals can contact us for information or advice here: www.ageuk.org.uk/informationadvice/ or call us on 0800 169 8787

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v Rural post office use, Citizens Advice, November 2017
vi Consumer use of post offices, Citizens Advice, July 2017
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ix Later Life in Rural England, Age UK, 2013
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xxii Department for Environment and Rural Affairs rural-proofing-guidance.pdf March 2017
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