

Rurality & Young People: JSNA



**Report on engagement with young people
aged 16-24 in rural areas of Somerset
focusing on their quality of life in the
countryside**

February 2015

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Background

SRYP was commissioned by Public Health through a tendering process to produce a piece of engagement work for its Joint Strategic Needs Assessment (JSNA). The JSNA has a focus on rurality for 2014/15 and the objective was to look specifically at the quality of life for young people aged 16 – 24 years old currently living in the countryside.

Method:

Somerset Rural Youth Project used existing contacts with young people, partner organisations and its social media streams to recruit young people to participate in small (maximum eight participants) focus groups across the county.

SRYP over-recruited to this piece of work - with 90 young people expressing an interest and indicating attendance; final attendance numbers were 64 young people (from a target number of 80); the shortfall in recruitment numbers is related to the time of year (Christmas) and the unexpected non-attendance of young people (unexplained, work, coursework pressure, family situation etc). Gender split was 29 male, 35 female. Of the participants, 18 were at school, 38 at College, 26 in part-time employment, 3 in full-time employment (including one Apprentice) and three currently unemployed.

Focus groups were held in 'neutral' and young people-friendly venues (including a pub function room, community rooms, youth centre etc). Two venues per district council area were selected to ensure adequate geographical coverage and SRYP provided transport as necessary. Senior staff from SRYP conducted the focus groups and created an inclusive, safe, secure and confidential environment in which young people could contribute freely. Additional resources (signposting related information) was available for participants, if needed.

All participants were aged 16-24 and living outside Somerset urban conurbations - i.e. in communities of less than 10,000 population.

Coverage:

Staff provided some background on Somerset's JSNA and outlined its purpose to give as much useful information as possible to decision-makers who organise services to support our health, wellbeing and social care. Staff explained the focus of this year on rurality. Staff also gave reassurance that all information provided through the focus groups would be anonymised.

Sessions began with a post-it note exercise: focusing on the three main things that young people like and dislike about living in the countryside (in rank order):

Like

Beautiful / scenery / views: 42

Peace / tranquility / quiet: 41

Safer: 25

Open space: 21

Wildlife: 20

Sports / Open Air / Outdoor Activities: 20

Less pollution (noise, light, roads): 19

Sense of community / nice people / know a lot of people: 16

Less traffic / quieter / safer roads: 11

Few people / less busy: 9

Atmosphere - friendlier / calmer / cheerful / less stressed): 7

Food: 3

More comfortable: 3

Good internet (fast broadband, lower number of users off the exchange box): 3

Hunting: 2



Dislike:

Lack of transport / time to travel / unreliable public transport: 60

Lack of services / shops / facilities: 39

Poor / No broadband / mobile phone signal: 37

Lack of jobs / low pay: 12

Extreme weather: 8

Not many young people: 5

Friends are miles away: 5

Quiet / remote: 3

Prejudice & racism: 2

Poor roads / lack of streetlights: 2

Not many pavements

Lack of arts / culture

Badger cull

Hills

Assumption (from rest of country) that all Somerset residents are farmers or related!

Pheasants / road kill



Animals Expense



The following results are headed by extracts from the facilitator guide used in all the focus groups.

Education, employment and housing

The Somerset County Council “County Ticket” to Further Education students: costing £650 / year and gives almost unlimited access to the public bus network in Somerset. Who knew of it, had used it?

Young people had an awareness of the County Ticket - including some users; most had friends that they knew used it. The majority of their thinking was positive about the concept of the County ticket although tempered with a sense of “reality-checking”. Comments were that it is expensive (especially if it has to be paid for all at once) and that public transport in rural areas is patchy at best. Bus times often do not serve the needs of young people and a lot of participants need transport to get to the bus stop. Buses are then perceived as unreliable - and there were eight young people who had experience of buses not stopping for them.

Young people questioned the cost against the costs of driving lessons / running a car and balanced that against the greater independence the latter offered. There were comments related to cashflow (being able to pay for it in installments), that it was not affordable for families on lower incomes (amplified by households with more than one young person). Young people spoke about the need to better educate bus companies on the needs of young people, training drivers to be more young-people

friendly and whether the scheme could be scaled up - to allow access to bus services operating more widely (outside Somerset)

Employment: Somerset has jobs that employers find hard to fill (for example in sectors like health and social care).

Focus: access to information and the influence this would have on choice of study.

Young people had a mixed experience of receiving information about employment gaps, describing a lack of careers advice that was locally targeted. Young people felt that most school-based advice was focused on them staying in education (i.e. progression to college) and offered very little in the way of personalisation (longer-term aspiration / ambition).

Young people felt that schools spoke mostly about qualification gaps - informed by the national picture (science, maths engineering) - and this did not particularly relate to local employment prospects.

Some young people reflected that early information would have helped them decide what to study at college and would, in the longer term, inform both decisions and the ability to stay within Somerset to work. Young people did have experience of colleges coming in “fairly regularly” from Year 10 but felt that the focus was on the college offer, with little relation to local job / career opportunities in the longer term; the focus was more on progression to University. Young people did feel that they had an opportunity to discuss individual needs with college representatives, but that they would have welcomed more time and a confidential discussion.

Focus: would young people like to work in their local area or within Somerset?

A majority of young people stated that they had a sound idea of their future career - and the majority (60%) expressed a desire to remain in Somerset if possible, but were also realistic about the need to travel to secure employment. Some young people (8%) described themselves as “self-limiting” in this,- preferring to stay in low pay / progression employment if it meant they were able to remain living in the countryside.

Young people were aware of the need to leave the county to access full-time university provision and many had friends / family that had done this. Young people spoke about the likelihood of then not returning to Somerset after university. Overall, the majority of young people spoke about the ‘need’ to move away at some point in their education / career development (65%).

When it came up (three focus groups), EDF and Hinkley was not seen as an incentive for young people,- either in direct employment or returning post-university employment. Young people (50%) recognised that the cost of housing in Somerset is high with many reflecting the difficulty of relocating (with fear of the unknown, isolation in large cities) being the primary factor. They recognised that there is lower pay in Somerset - with a few (six) stating that their parents had changed jobs to be able to stay in their local area.

Key comments:

“I want to stay local if I can - I grew up here and everything I know is here”

“I would love to be able to make a difference here and stay with my family - but I know I might not be able to”

“The proper jobs are in the cities”



Focus: the importance of being able to stay in Somerset.

For the majority of young people (55%) family was the primary factor of being able to stay in the county. Ten young people spoke about their happiness in the countryside and wanting to bring up their own children here in the future. Other young people recognised the limitations of rural living and expressed a desire to travel for new experiences, meeting people and “understanding the world better”.

Key comments:

“I can always come back, can't I?”

“I just love country living” (Exmoor)

“The job comes first - so I might have to get used to living somewhere else”

“I'll earn less money here - but it's worth it, isn't it?”

“I want to stay local to support my family - I have elderly grandparents and a younger sibling who needs me”

Focus: Housing aspirations and reality.

Young people overwhelmingly had ambitions for owning their own home ideally with a garden / outdoor space but recognised the reality of their situation and that they were more likely to seek rented accommodation, at least initially. Young people were aware of the expense involved in living independently,- not least the cost of mortgage deposits. Most young people indicated that they would move out from home (parents / carers) as late as possible and would probably move into shared accommodation.

Many young people had no long term plans beyond college and indicated that they would benefit from more support in terms of learning to live independently. Six young people had experience of “sofa-surfing” (two directly).

Most young people recognised the limits of their earning potential in the short-term and the impact this has.

Key comments:

“The only way I'll own my own house is through inheritance”

“I would prefer to buy but can't afford it - it's a vicious circle: finance is tight so I can't save for a deposit. I'd have to get a second job to do that”

Focus: Housing help / information.

Young people indicated that they received no housing advice at school but some spoke of discussions with tutors (trusted teachers) that they felt comfortable with. Most spoke of receiving advice from parents primarily. They felt they could go to Citizens Advice Bureaux / housing associations / estate agents / Job Centre for advice. There was a feeling that colleges should be more directly providing housing advice and information.

Young people also recognised that information on how to get on the property ladder would be beneficial, as would clear advice on the full cost of independent living (not just rent, but including agent fees, utilities, food, furniture etc). A few (four) young people indicated that a website listing cheap housing with young people-friendly

landlords would be ideal (also for post-university students returning). They felt that councils / colleges would be well-placed to provide this.

Digital

Technology, in all its forms: what technology are you using (and what for)?

All young people had access to technology in one form or another: for the majority, primary technology was a mobile phone, followed by laptops, then tablets. Young people use technology a lot; everyone described it as 'daily' usage at least, with a number describing their use as 'constant'. Specific usage does depend on location and signal availability.

Key comments:

“I left my phone at home on Friday - it was traumatising”

“I use it [phone] for everything. All the time”

“There’s no broadband at home so my phone is my lifeline”



Focus: mobile phone signal / broadband access and speed in rural areas and the impact on your life.

Young people describe themselves as massively affected by poor phone signal / broadband availability / speed. They spoke about feeling out of touch with both their immediate lives (social life, friends) and the wider world. A number of young people spoke about being frustrated at the assumption that is now made that everyone can

get online: this is affecting all areas of their lives including school / college work (sent out and submitted online, research, peer learning), leisure and recreation (knowledge of what is on and where), financial (banking, shopping) and personal (social life, personal issues).

Key comments:

“I feel massively behind - it’s ridiculous how far behind I am all the time; so out of touch”

“We use technology more in rural areas because we’re more isolated”

Focus: where young people are going to access phone signal / broadband and day-to-day impact.

Most young people have access at school or college; this can be sporadic. In West Somerset, students spoke about walking to McDonalds to use their free wifi when the college wifi was unavailable (this has a cost impact too). Many young people are using village pubs for internet access. In some schools, BYOD (Bring Your Own Device) is encouraged for use in lessons but not every pupil has a phone / tablet so this can involve other young people sharing their devices in order to be inclusive. Young people are creative, using apps on their devices to bypass school / college web-filtering systems: but this carries an element of risk (which they are aware of) both to themselves in terms of school disciplinary sanctions and in accessing inappropriate material etc.

Young people use other people’s phones (parents, siblings, friends) as a router, especially when those phones are on contracts, sharing their signal wirelessly to other devices. This is significant as a high number of young people, whilst having access to smartphones, are not paying anything to mobile phone companies (through contract or pay-as-you-go) - they are simply using the device to access any wifi signal they can find.

There is a high level of frustration amongst rural young people that they do not have access to high speed broadband and they are aware that this has been promised “for years” and is still not a reality. With ‘everything’ online, this is a huge issue.

Key comments

“I can get a signal if I perch in the kitchen window”

“I used to use the library but with reduced hours it’s now shut by the time I get home”

“I walk to the next village to get a phone signal & do everything from there”

Focus: benefits and risks of technology.

Young people are clear on the benefits of technology in their lives, from communications to acquiring knowledge, all young people described an affinity for using technology. A reasonable number (22) considered it essential for career

progression (both working from home and finding new opportunities). Every young person described their use of technology as a key component of their social life, amplifying the frustration felt by rural isolation when they cannot get a signal / broadband access.

In terms of risk, young people were clear that their situation can prompt a risk to the quality of coursework - so much learning is online and requires good access that they feel that they can be "off the pace" compared to their peers in school / college.

Young people clearly expressed the physical risks of technology - breaking it, losing it, having it stolen and spoke about the price of replacement (and of keeping up with the pace of change in devices, coupled with peer pressure to have the latest item). Although all young people had access to technology, their ability to use all its functionality is limited though poor online access. Young people also described the fear of cyber-bullying and identity theft, along with the sense of being too available (contactable), trackable and an inherent lack of privacy.

Young people were vocal about a negative impact on emotional health and wellbeing, speaking of arguments raised on social media; isolation within the family / house (with the family in the same room but all looking at phones / tablets); the impact of bullying online and physical isolation, which can result in (a fear of) addiction to devices.

Every young person indicated that they do not habitually (if ever) turn their phone off.

Key comments:

"There's not much else to do - so I'm isolated, on my phone all the time - it affects my sleep, affects my schoolwork"

"No one can see online bullying - people say things they wouldn't normally. People are more concerned about short internet 'fame' than anything real"

"Some people withhold technology in order to extort the working class"

"It's expensive and they use child / slave labour to make it. It's not right"

"You've got to remember that work can check your personal life"

"There are plenty of weirdos on Facebook"

Financial

Focus: money, we all need it – some people have a lot, some enough, some a little, some none at all...sources of information / advice.

Most young people felt they did not receive financial information and advice through school / college; they learnt most from parents, friends and personal experience. Young people used trusted internet sources, the Money Advice Service and high street banks but noted that many banks have shut / are shutting branches in the

smaller towns and they would miss the human interaction (which inspires trust and confidence) in automated banks.

Many (55%) young people stated that they are not confident with money and that they do not feel that they are managing money in the longer term: they are spending it or saving it for something they want rather than having any kind of financial plan.



Focus: what do you think it is worthwhile to spend money on - is it easier to spend (more expensive?) in the countryside?

Young people throughout the groups initially focused on disposable income related to leisure, recreation and socialising: with food (takeaways), pub, entertainment and hobbies (including riding / competing, hunting, shooting) all featuring as well as clothes and trips to the cinema / town also included. There was a shared understanding that all activities are more expensive for young people in the countryside because of additional costs related to transport / travel to access leisure, recreation and social opportunities.

Retail shopping has a varied approach: all young people acknowledged the ease of internet shopping (once a reliable signal is obtained) - that it is "too easy" to spend online. Internet shopping is used increasingly because of lack of local shops / cost (money, time) in accessing town-based shopping.

Young people are certain that prices are higher in rural areas, with young people in West Somerset / Exmoor comparing prices within supermarkets (Minehead / Taunton) as well as reflecting that local shops (including franchises e.g. Budgens, SPAR) are expensive but essential because of the lack of alternatives for day-to-day necessities.

In the older age band (19+) participants focused also on the basic costs of shelter (rent, including payment to parents), heat, food, savings and travel (including going to university).

Key comments:

“I always budget for the basics - home, heat, food and cider”

“I ask myself, do I need to buy it - has someone else got it?”

“If I lived in town I would go shopping all the time”

Focus: feelings about debt.

There was overwhelming consistency in participants' feelings about debt: young people were quick to articulate their concerns about getting into debt, citing a desire to avoid debt completely if possible (55%) but with a recognition that, sometimes, debt can be unavoidable or part of a longer-term life plan (e.g. university, a mortgage).

Young people feel that there is a lack of advice targeted at them around issues of debt, although they were largely aware that they could access information from banks, CAB, parents and friends. In relation to banks, young people again, valued human interaction, being able to talk to someone about the reality of loan agreements etc – but the lack of branches and staffing has an impact.

Generally, young people stated they would prefer to save for something and buy it when they could afford it outright, avoiding the “buy now, pay later” approach.

The majority (60%) had personal experience of debt either through family or friends - and their reflections were entirely negative. A small number (five) young people stated that they are in debt (outside of family) and all were keen to pay it off as soon as possible (and were actively working to do so).

Key comments:

“Debt would make me depressed - really bad, it can throw your whole life up”

“Constant stress and worry - I've seen that with my mum. We used to have to hide when the doorbell rang in case it was the loan man”

“It can be hard to cope - I've seen my parents crying and crying”

“I would rather earn and save or not have whatever it is”

“I will never get into debt - apart from College”

“It's terrifying - but I'm pretty sure I'll get into debt at some point”

Focus: understanding of the risks of getting into debt & how to avoid debt.

Young people can clearly articulate multiple risks around debt, including immediate risks (repossession, high interest rates, stress) and the longer-term (paying back

debts over long periods of time, bad credit rating affecting ability to get a mortgage later). There was also an understanding of practicalities, that sometimes debt is unavoidable (especially for young people on low incomes). An example cited was if a car breaks down and you need it repaired for work (amplified by not being able to buy a 'good' car because of low income).

To avoid debt, young people are keen to work more, earn more, plan better and live at home for as long as possible. The majority of young people would try to borrow money from family in the first instance. 10% (six) young people said they would not go to university because of the debt involved.

Key comments:

"If you get into debt you want a life you can't afford"

"I would try to earn as much as I could - work as many hours as possible – and save more"

"I would cut out luxuries to avoid debt"



Focus: volunteering , have you volunteered, would you volunteer and why?

Young people understood the value of volunteering, indicating that it would build their profile and CV and increase their experience and confidence. They stated that it would be enjoyable, and prompt a sense of satisfaction, and could lead directly to a job. There are practical barriers to volunteering that arise from living in the countryside, travel to the volunteering placement can be impossible / costly and limiting to choice.

A smaller number of young people questioned the value of volunteering, doing so in the context of them as earning currently, and lack of spare time to volunteer. Some young people (seven) indicated they are under pressure to earn money (within the family) and this limited their ability to consider volunteering.

Key comments:

“I would happily volunteer - but only if I’m not getting any paid work”

“It helps other people and makes me feel good about myself and making a difference”

“Sometimes people make too high expectations”

“Why would I do something I’m good at for free when I could be paid for it?”

“I would love to volunteer but I don’t get home from college until late on the bus - how would I get back to anywhere to volunteer - and then home again?”

Volunteering opportunities mentioned as desirable:

- a good cause
- animals (8)
- fundraising (3)
- art-related
- sports-coaching (3)
- office / admin (3)
- outdoor education (3)
- youth work (5)
- health & social / elderly
- working abroad (4)
- activism for equality
- conservation (5)
- magistrate
- RNLI
- charity shop (2)
-



Focus: promoting volunteering to young people.

All young people had a number of ways that could be used to promote volunteering opportunities to young people, indicating that more young people would be likely to get involved if they knew about opportunities available to them. Generally, peer 'advertising' was considered the best approach: using young people for marketing, giving presentations in schools and conveying the sense of fun that can be an initial attraction to a volunteering opportunity.

Social media was repeatedly mentioned as a key vehicle for raising the profile of volunteering - use of Facebook, Twitter activists and videos - to show the experiences of other young people and how it has positively changed them. This content should be actively used in schools / colleges to promote volunteering and "big brands" could get involved to support this. Interestingly, young people also saw value in using more 'traditional' methods of advertising / marketing: newspaper adverts (local / national), billboards, posters, flyers etc

Key comments:

"Give some incentives - guarantee an interview for every volunteer applicant?"

"Use videos - show the fun side"

"Some taster sessions would help - and transport"

Health and wellbeing

Focus: how you are, how you feel and how where you live affects your health and wellbeing.

Overall, young people articulated that they feel healthy in the countryside for a number of reasons, some of which are the positive side of previously-stated negative issues: lack of transport can mean that young people walk more (and are more active); there is less fast food available, so they eat more healthily; less traffic means less pollution and cleaner air. Young people enjoy and value the quieter, more peaceful life of rural living (the positive side of rural isolation) and enjoy the outdoors more.

Negative feelings around health and wellbeing were focused on lack of opportunity - boredom and isolation can prompt drinking. Further mental health issues were flagged and linked to isolation, and practical statements related to accessibility to health and wellbeing advice; schools and colleges are proactive in promoting health (physical and mental) but it is not generally easy to get to a doctor (and reliance on parents for transport can be problematic in relation to confidentiality / privacy).

Key comments:

"I can't get to the surgery in time before it closes - so I have to miss college [work]"

"Some negative attitudes are passed down from older generations"

“It can be really challenging emotionally to always be apart from your friends”

“In winter, it’s dark so I get fat because I’m not outside”

“Living in a city must be depressing - you just get to look at buildings”



Focus: the importance of looking after your health; access to information

Young people, in the majority, thought they should take responsibility for looking after their own health. Smokers were in the minority (15 self-declared); some young people (non-smokers) had not heard of ‘vaping’ (using an electronic cigarette). Access to doctor / dentist can be problematic (issues of transport and confidentiality as above).

Key comments:

“I’ve got a pretty active lifestyle - cycling, walking, riding”

“I’m not too worried about what I eat - I’m young enough to burn it off out here”

“I try to get to regular check ups”

Young people, again, cited a range of sources that they use for information about health and lifestyle, including parents, teachers, friends (more for support than information). Media is useful, including TV adverts (e.g. New Year, new lifestyle).

Young people are wary of the internet and look for trusted sources online especially on issues of the effects of drugs (prescription and recreational), researching illness (for self-diagnosis), and locations of physical activities. Young people also trust print media (magazines).

A number of young people (13) stated that they use the NHS helpline (via phone / internet) before going to the doctor. Talk to Frank (drug advice) was mentioned as useful and accessible (three young people).

About a quarter of participants (16) stated that they access a gym regularly and get access to further health information there.

Key comments:

“I really like how McDonald’s print calorie information on all their food now”

“I use my phone to track my fitness”

“We talk [friends] about our health a lot”

Anything else/other issues about life as a young person in the Somerset countryside:

“Potholes - they fill my journeys with woe when they should be filled with tarmac”

“Living in the country is so much nicer than living in a city - I go to College in Bristol every day and can’t wait to get home”

“Trust nature”

“I am so happy here - views, ponies and smelling the fresh air!”



The Public Health team would like to express their thanks and appreciation to all the young people who took part in the focus groups and who provided such interesting and often inspiring comments in the course of the conversations. Our thanks also go to the Somerset Rural Youth Project for organising the groups and writing the report.