

Research undertaken in 2023 by AMP (formerly NYMAZ)
into musical opportunities in rurally isolated England.
Funded by Youth Music.

Gone in the Air

A young person with long, wavy red hair is shown from the chest up, playing a black acoustic guitar and singing into a microphone. They are wearing a red and black plaid shirt over a white t-shirt. The background is a softly lit room with a microphone stand and a microphone visible.

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The programming and research that informed this report was conducted in our previous incarnation, NYMAZ. We have since relaunched as AMP in spring 2024, and this research will continue to inform our work around rural isolation.

In 2015, NYMAZ launched *Gone in the Air*, a campaign to improve out-of-school music education so that children in rural England have equal life chances. Based on experience and expertise gathered from across England, the original *Gone in the Air* report identified six Calls to Action:

1. We call upon Arts Council England and youth music organisations to value and support the role of non-formal, inclusive music provision as part of a rounded music education, in rural areas.
2. We call upon youth music organisations and Music Education Hubs to invest in workforce development in rural areas and make young people aware of employment opportunities within the creative industries.
3. We call upon youth music organisations and Music Education Hubs to test and invest in appropriate digital technology solutions.
4. We call upon more funders and stakeholders to take account of higher-than-average per unit costs for activities in rural areas, have the confidence to invest in less attractive elements like transport costs and offer multi-year funding agreements.
5. We call upon all music leaders and youth music organisations working under the umbrella of Music Education Hubs in rural areas to take responsibility for signposting children, young people and their parents/carers to quality musical progression opportunities.
6. We call upon youth music organisations to enhance and support parental engagement in activities and advocate about the benefits of participatory music for children and young people in rural areas to more parents and carers.

Introduction

Since 2015, a lot has changed. The past eight years have seen widespread changes in society, with factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and challenging economic circumstances having a huge impact on many areas of life, including the music education sector.

“Music and the performing arts were one of the sectors most affected by the pandemic”

Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre¹

Reflecting on these calls to action eight years later, it is clear that the musical landscape of 2023 might be different, but many of the challenges of delivering better music education opportunities for young people in rural England remain. This new research demonstrates that there has been more progress in some areas than others. For example, the pandemic accelerated the use of digital solutions to musical participation, bringing work pioneered through projects such as Connect: Resound² into the mainstream. Yet in other areas, such as policy change or the availability of quality musical progression opportunities for those in rural areas, change has been slow or non-existent.



The music education sector continues to evolve, with forthcoming developments such as the new Music Hub Investment Programme likely to have a significant impact on musical opportunities for young people. Within this, it is important that the voices and experiences of young people in rural England and those who work with them are heard.

This report aims to build on the original *Gone in the Air* research to explore:

1. **Where are we now?** – by offering a snapshot of the rural youth population, their needs and current music provision.
2. **What needs to change?** – by highlighting the barriers to more equitable rural music provision.
3. **What next?** – by using a stronger evidence base to make recommendations for how policymakers and music delivery organisations including AMP can improve music provision in rural areas.

Methodology

Research was carried out by Bloom Arts consultancy (Helen Mahoney) and the team between May and October 2023. Primary data was gathered through a series of online interviews and questionnaires involving key stakeholder groups from across rural England. This included local, regional and national music organisations, music education hubs, funding bodies and schools. Information was gathered from young people living in rural areas through questionnaires, interviews and creative workshops delivered through AMP and partner organisations. This included young people who are regularly participating in and out of school music activities and those who are not regular participants. We have sought to include young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), those in receipt of free school meals and those who are home educated within the data. Sources of secondary data are listed in the Appendix; where statistics are included we have used the most up-to-date we have been able to identify.

What do we mean by rurality?

Our working definition of rurality is based on the Rural-Urban Classification used by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra)³ and Youth Music. Stakeholders consulted in this research are based in, work in or have in-depth knowledge of areas of England that are Predominantly Rural. However, we acknowledge that definitions of rurality used by these stakeholders in their own working practices may vary.

1. Where are we now?

Life in rural England in 2023

“In 2020, 12 million people lived in a Predominantly Rural area, 21.3% of the England population.”

Defra⁴

Although more than a fifth of the English population live in rural areas, their experiences are often poorly understood. Living in the countryside can have many advantages, but the disadvantages that it poses for young people are often overlooked.

Some of the key factors affecting young people’s life chances include:

Economic challenges

Socio-economic deprivation statistics show rural areas of the UK to be some of the most affluent in the country. However, this hides a much more complex picture. Current statistical measures (such as Indices of Multiple Deprivation) identify deprived places not people. This often renders areas of rural poverty invisible, as it tends to be more scattered than in urban areas and can be disguised by averages that include very wealthy people living near those with very low incomes. This not only affects individuals living in this situation whose needs are not being met, but leads to policy decisions that overlook the nuances of rural life and fail to allocate funding accordingly.

Evidence from the Centre for Mental Health⁵ also demonstrates that the close proximity of deprived and affluent areas in rural communities is felt more acutely and can lead to social exclusion and detachment – especially for young people.

Incomes in rural areas are typically lower than those in urban areas. For example, in 2020, median workplace-based earnings in Predominantly Urban areas (excluding London) were £25,400 while Predominantly Rural areas were lower at £22,900⁶. Living costs also tend to be higher:

“People in rural areas typically need to spend 10–20% more on everyday requirements than those in urban areas. The more remote the area, the greater these additional costs.”

Joseph Rowntree Foundation⁷

The current cost-of-living crisis has only increased this “rural premium”⁸, resulting in rural families having even more stretched budgets.

Access to services

The concept of ‘Left Behind Britain’ indicates the existence of pockets of rural life insufficiently served with transport, economic and social infrastructure, education, personal mobility, and health.”

[Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre⁹](#)

Rural England may appear to be a beautiful, healthy place to live, and access to the countryside is often cited as beneficial to mental health. However, local people who live there year-round often lack access to basic services such as mental health support which can have significant consequences for their wellbeing:

“NHS mental health services are often not fairly accessible for rural communities, with services largely centred in towns and cities creating barriers to access, compounded by the limitations and weaknesses of rural public transport and digital connectivity...Far too much avoidable demand ends up at the door of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in rural areas because of a fundamental lack of social infrastructure and youth services.”

[Environment, Health and Rural Affairs Committee¹⁰](#)

In terms of specific youth provision, continuing cuts to public services since austerity measures were introduced have had a huge impact on young people’s services across the UK. For example, since 2010/11 there has been a 71% reduction in Local Authority spending on youth services¹¹. Within this, there is significant variation in spending on children’s support across the country. In 2017/18 predominantly rural local authorities received 36% less funding per head for their public health duties than predominantly urban authorities¹². Spend per child in urban areas is also slightly higher than in rural areas¹³.

The lack of community facilities and organised activities in many rural and remote areas is well documented. These are not just ‘support services’, but the things that young people in urban areas might take for granted, such as clubs, cinemas, shops, libraries, and cafés. This has implications for social connectedness, physical health, wellbeing, and mental health. There is a perception from rural areas that these are assets which urban populations ‘take for granted’ (Education Authority, 2019, Country APPG, 2017). Where local social or group activities do exist, they do not always offer the range of choices which young people need...

[Centre for Mental Health¹⁴](#)

Where everyday services that contribute to young people’s wellbeing and life chances, such as youth services, cultural services and libraries have been cut, it has a disproportionate effect as these services are so thinly spread within rural communities to begin with. They are also often reliant on small, grassroots organisations to deliver them.

Social isolation

Living in a rural area does not necessarily mean that young people are lonely or isolated; however, rurality can be a significant factor in exacerbating loneliness. Young people may be the only person of their age living in their village, face a long taxi ride to and from school with no opportunity for social contact during these times, and miss out on after-school activities due to home-to-school travel arrangements. Office for National Statistics figures show that 11-16 year olds in rural areas travel twice as far to school as those in urban areas.¹⁵ Loneliness is more prevalent amongst young people with SEND¹⁶, who will be particularly affected by these rural factors due to the sparse distribution of special schools.

Rural areas have an above average proportion of older people, so young people make up a relatively small section of the population¹⁷. This means there are likely to be less services and spaces designed specifically for them. Combined with a living environment that often consists of close-knit, traditional communities, this can make some young people feel they are “living in a goldfish bowl”¹⁸. This can be particularly hard for young people who feel “different” due to being LGBTQ or in other marginalised circumstances.

Education

Overall, school pupils in rural England have higher levels of educational attainment than those in urban areas. However, this does not translate into more young people accessing higher education in fact, the rate of full-time entry to higher education institutions by 18 to 20 year olds in 2016/17 was lower amongst those from Predominantly Rural areas than amongst those from Predominantly Urban areas¹⁹. Additionally, disadvantaged pupils who attend more isolated schools have been found to have lower attainment rates than equivalent pupils in less isolated schools²⁰.

The sparse provision of further and higher education within rural areas can make accessing these opportunities difficult and expensive. For example, travel costs to get to the nearest college can be prohibitive for some families:

“It is not unusual for 16–18 year olds to pay in excess of £600 p.a. just to access education.”

Rural Services Network²¹

Fewer than half of people living in rural areas have access to places with 5,000 or more jobs within 45 minutes, compared with around 90% of those living in urban areas²². This results in many young people having to leave their home area at the start of their working lives.

Transport

Transport has long been identified as key to rural inequalities – in 2020, in the most rural areas 90% of travel was made using a car (as a driver or passenger) compared with 72% in the most urban areas²³. The lack of access to public transport in rural places acts as a significant barrier to young people accessing all sorts of opportunities – not least because the majority are not old enough to drive. The availability of rural public transport has declined in recent years, from an already minimal service.

“There are signs that transport services are getting worse for many remote communities. In some cases, this is due to local authorities reducing subsidies and private companies withdrawing from unprofitable routes.”

Centre for Mental Health²⁴

In total, more than a quarter of bus routes in rural and county areas have been lost in the past decade²⁵. Since the pandemic, this decline in services has accelerated. Research from the County Councils Network found that in terms of vehicle miles, bus journeys dropped over 14% in one year to 2021/22. It appears that the National Bus Strategy, brought in to address these issues, has mainly benefited urban areas:

“The 37 largest county and rural authorities – submitted Bus Service Improvement Plan bids which collectively totalled £3.6bn, but these councils only received 10%...of the funding requested, with urban areas receiving £739m.”

County Councils Network²⁶

Digital access

We had previously identified significant gaps in service delivery that could be addressed in rural areas through using digital, and our Connect: Resound project was developed to pioneer digital programming to overcome these gaps. Since then, the widespread social change that the pandemic brought has accelerated digital provision across the board. This increased digital programming has revealed that rural audiences do still have an appetite for in-person events too, and do not want digital to be their only option. We believe that a hybrid model of work could overcome barriers while also balancing the significant need for in-person interaction.

Additionally, despite this progress, an urban/rural digital divide still exists. Evidence shows that improvements in digital access in rural areas have only kept pace with those in urban areas, which means that the underlying gap between them has persisted²⁷. This affects both mobile and broadband coverage. 62% of rural areas can get 4G reception from all operators, compared with 97% of urban areas and 5% of the UK gets no mobile coverage at all²⁸. Broadband speeds are typically slower, due to poor infrastructure and less availability of superfast connections²⁹. A new study ‘Connecting the Countryside’ was commissioned by Vodafone UK and published in November 2023. This revealed the gap between urban and rural areas is growing when it comes to reliable connectivity. It has found almost half (46%) of rural deprived areas have no 5G coverage, compared to only 2.7% of urban, deprived communities. With increasing amounts of data being used and more essential services moving to online-only, this puts people living in the most remote areas at a significant disadvantage.³⁰

Demographic factors

Rural areas are typically much less ethnically diverse than other areas of England:

“In 2020, the ‘white ethnic’ group accounted for 96.8% of the rural population, compared with 81.7% in urban areas.”

Defra³¹

This means young people growing up in rural areas often have relatively little interaction with people from different ethnic backgrounds; while young people from such communities can feel very isolated.

The rural population is older than their urban counterparts, and the average age has increased faster in recent years³². Services currently tend to be skewed towards catering for this older demographic for this reason.

However, there are signs that the demographic make-up of the countryside is changing. Since 2008/9 there has been an increase in the rate of net migration to rural areas, mainly in 30–39 year olds who are likely to have or start young families³³. During the Covid-19 pandemic, there was a much publicised “*escape to the country*”³⁴, which may drive an increasing demand for young people’s services in the future.

In conclusion

There are a mixture of overlapping circumstances that affect the opportunities available to young people growing up in the countryside. A lack of awareness about these factors has far-reaching consequences for people living in rural areas. Despite recent political focus on regional “*levelling up*”, this inequality between rural and urban places is often ignored in policy and funding terms:

“Commitments to redistribute funding more equitably across the country are potentially (still) focused on a metropolitan model, which may entrench or exacerbate inequalities between and among urban (inner city, suburban, towns) and rural/coastal areas.”

House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee³⁵



Musical participation for young people

What do young people think?

Overall, the young people who contributed to this research were very positive about living in the countryside. They told us they value the peace and quiet, clean air, wildlife and nature, safety, being able to go for walks and play outside. Some young people also highlighted a sense of community and being close to their wider family.

“I like that I have the countryside at my doorstep. I am a country girl and I have family that live on a farm, so I go there to help out.”

However, young people also described some of the disadvantages of country life:

- A lack of public transport – *“I like the space but I can’t be independent because I don’t drive yet.”*
- Being far away from shops and everyday activities like swimming or bowling.
- Living far away from friends – *“I don’t necessarily like that there isn’t many people that are your friends that live near you. For me personally I am the only year 7 in my area.”*
- Loneliness due to rural isolation, which means there are few opportunities to meet young people with similar interests – *“(there are) no other musical kids.”*
- Not having opportunities to try new things or develop new skills.
- The countryside can be idyllic but can also be *“smelly”, “busy in summer and market days”* and *“cold”* in the winter.
- There are few cultural organisations based in rural areas. Even those that are, are not accessible to everyone: *“I would like to take part in a local youth opera but (regarding) the closest one... we are outside its 25 mile limit to take part (we are over 30 miles away).”*
- Music tuition, ensembles, gigs and events are hard to get to – or simply don’t happen in their area.

A survey of young people in one of the most sparsely populated areas of England showed that:

- Listening to music is one of the most popular spare time activities.
- Only just over 10% of these young people had attended a concert or gig.
- Money and transport factors had the biggest impact on whether they could attend music and creative activities.

Young people told us that they don’t want to leave rural life behind – but they do want to have better opportunities to make music.

What sort of musical participation is happening in rural areas?

For some young people, music is already very much part of their lives: *“Nothing is getting in the way of me and music, and I’m very glad of that!”*

However, the musical offer for young people varies greatly across the country. Not all rural areas are the same, and provision is often patchy and highly dependent on local grassroots organisations and volunteers.



The most frequently mentioned types of activities young people told us they could access include:

- School ensembles and school music lessons.
- Ensembles led by music education hubs, often in larger settlements and sometimes on a county-wide basis.
- Brass bands.
- Church or cathedral-based activities e.g. choir.
- Music festivals and competitions in local towns.
- Private music tuition at home – sometimes online.
- Local voluntary music groups, such as choirs, musical theatre groups or orchestras. These groups are often aimed primarily at adults.
- Bands in the local pub – although again, this is primarily an adult activity which some younger people said was out of reach as a result.
- Events in local village hall or village green.
- Youth theatre groups.
- Many young people also mentioned the importance of Spotify and playing computer games to their experience of music.

Community music organisations specifically offering activities for young people are valued where they are available, but provision appears to be patchy. For a small proportion of young people, national ensembles and Centres for Advanced Training are part of their musical experience. These often require them to travel significant distances to participate.

How is rural music education currently delivered?

Locally based music organisations, from youth music charities to amateur and grassroots musical groups, are delivering activity that reaches a wide range of ages, from early years to young adults. Activities often take place in community venues, such as libraries, community centres and schools, rather than purpose-built facilities. There are a variety of different models for reaching young people across a wide area including providing transport to a “central” base or working with clusters of schools or services for young people. Touring performances and projects, including rural touring models, exist in some areas, but these are not always aimed at young people. Creative solutions to address some of the challenges of rural delivery include using pop-up venues and digital solutions such as online choirs.

Intergenerational music-making appears more prevalent in rural areas, including types of music-making where this is an intrinsic part of its tradition, such as brass bands.

Festivals are an important part of rural life. This can range from local community-led events to specialist festivals with an educational or outreach element. Large annual outdoor music festivals often offer tickets to local people, and bring economic benefits to the wider area. However, their amount of integration with or contribution to the local music infrastructure is variable, and while many festivals support charities directly these are often not locally based. The role of music festivals in local rural music scenes is something that would benefit from further exploration and understanding.

This research mainly focusses on musical participation outside the school curriculum. However, schools are very important to rural music delivery, as there are fewer other providers of music activity compared to urban/suburban areas. The offer from different schools is highly variable and dependent on their resources and ability to attract specialist teachers to work in a rural area.

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Many school leaders reported that in the last few years they had decided to reduce the extent to which they were subsidising instrumental lessons, because of wider pressures on school budgets. Others had stopped providing instrumental and vocal lessons. Approximately half the primary schools visited did not currently offer any instrumental or vocal lessons.

Ofsted³⁶

The ability of Music Education Hubs to meet the challenge of reaching all young people in rural areas also varies. There are some examples of excellent practice, where hub lead organisations are being creative about reaching young people in a variety of different ways that are sympathetic to rural barriers. Others don't have the resources to do so, leaving some young people without the opportunities to begin or progress their music-making.

"The senior orchestra is one hour away by train, in a different county."

Young person

Overall, the emphasis tends to be on more traditional music education methods and musical genres. There are fewer opportunities for young people to access music technology and activities such as recording, production and DJ-ing. Some activities try to redress this imbalance, or are themed around the local context e.g. exploring local folk music - or try to redress this imbalance. All types of organisations reported some issues around recruiting and maintaining a musical workforce in rural areas. This inevitably has an impact on the breadth, quality and sustainability of their offer for young people.

In some rural areas, music and arts organisations based elsewhere deliver projects in more isolated communities, including national organisations. Some organisations have a wide "catchment" area that includes both urban and rural areas, and are making the effort to adapt their activity for the needs of these different places. The proportion of music organisations' work that reaches rural communities therefore varies from less than 5% to 100%.

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How do young people find out about music activities?

Organisations consulted for this research often found reaching young people in sparsely populated areas challenging. Schools play a central role in getting information to young people; and some young people mentioned the music education hub as a source of information. Many young people also cited parents and carers seeing information and encouraging them to attend, demonstrating how parental support plays a key role in their ability to participate. Social media and local media are also key, as they would be in many areas, but also through informal local networks and word of mouth. More "traditional" methods such as flyers and posters in a local music shop were also mentioned. Some music organisations are working in partnership with youth organisations, where they are available, to target young people.



After Covid-19, how are children, young people and music organisations making use of digital delivery?

Our findings show that the mass turn to digital musical participation that occurred during the pandemic has not been sustained. Music delivery organisations learned a lot about online delivery during the pandemic, but they are split over how much of it is continuing and how fundamental this approach will be to their work in future. Many are now finding hybrid models a useful way of working. For example, some organisations are making good use of live streamed performances to bring live music to areas without music venues, whilst prioritising face-to-face work for participatory musical experiences. This echoes AMP's findings through the Connect: Resound project that online musical activity can remove barriers and improve inclusion in a variety of contexts, particularly when used as part of a hybrid approach:

“For young people and their families, online delivery...increased engagement of young people, including autistic pupils and those with social anxiety or sensory differences.”³⁷

Organisations told us that digital is best when the technology is used creatively, and activities are shaped by young people's interests and preferences.

Alongside this, many organisations were keen to highlight that young people have been denied vital social contact during the pandemic so the need for in-person activities is more important than ever.

“For us, face to face is really, really important. There is a place (for digital) somewhere along the line. But...we had many conversations about the issues around latency with music, and digital isn't a magic bullet.”

Rural music delivery organisation

This largely reflects what young people told us:

- 95% of young people surveyed who are already engaging in music said they preferred in-person delivery.
- 83% of a wider group of young people also preferred in-person.
- Technical difficulties and a need for more social contact were the main reasons for this – *“it can make it less fun!”*
- A minority of young people said that online options might make it easier for them to attend music activities more often.

Digital solutions have been proposed as key to improving rural inequalities to access to music, but our latest research suggests this is only part of the answer with current access and technology. Some technical issues remain, however new developments in latency reducing technologies and improving digital connectivity could further develop this aspect of the sector in future. Delivery organisations are currently seeking to balance the advantages that digital participation can provide in terms of accessibility, reduced travel, reduced costs and innovation, with the need for more social contact for young people generally.

How inclusive is the rural musical offer?

The organisations we spoke to were keen to make their offer as inclusive to as many young people as possible, but acknowledged that this was particularly challenging in the rural environment:

“Offering quality bespoke provision is often costly and prohibitive making the drive for accessible and inclusive participation harder to deliver in a rural area - especially when the number of interested beneficiaries is small.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Some organisations working with young people in alternative education provision did not see rurality as a particular disadvantage, as this work typically involves working with very small numbers of young people regardless of location and so was tailored accordingly. However, young people attending special schools can face particular barriers to accessing after school music activities as home to school journey times are typically even longer than for those at mainstream schools. In some areas, digital solutions are being used to enable the inclusion of young people with SEND alongside those who might struggle to access an activity because of rural transport issues.

How is rural music participation supported at policy level?

Arts Council England (ACE)'s priorities are becoming increasingly focussed on place-based delivery. Within *“Let’s Create”*³⁸, their strategy for 2020–2030, there is explicit mention of villages and towns as part of the ambition for Cultural Communities, but they do not see the need for a specific rural strategy. Instead, ACE has a Rural Positioning Statement³⁹ which describes how a “rural-proofing” approach based on Defra guidance was used when selecting organisations to join the National Portfolio of cultural organisations (NPO). **This has not yet translated into an equitable distribution of funding between rural and urban areas however. The latest available statistics from 2018 show that only 4.6% of NPOs were based in a rural settlement, representing 2.6% of the portfolio’s total value – compared to 21.7% of the population that live in rural areas.**⁴⁰

For project-based ACE grants, there are proportionally fewer applications from rurally based organisations and individuals, and these applicants typically apply for smaller grants. The success rate for these grants is slightly below those from urban areas, with the gap widening for larger grants:

“The Arts Council Grants for the Arts over £15,000 investment strand has made a lower proportion of awards to rural areas and there is some evidence that rural projects find it harder to raise matched funds. Alongside substantially decreased investment from local authorities and lower amounts of contributed income and sponsorship, Arts Council and partners may need to give further consideration to best ways of supporting particular rural locations where there is a convergence of these factors.”

Arts Council England⁴¹

The Grants for the Arts scheme was replaced by National Lottery Project Grants in 2018, but more recent data is not yet available.

ACE has started to address these geographical imbalances in investment, by identifying *Priority Places* where there are historically low levels of arts investment, high socio-economic need and opportunities to grow the arts economy. This has included some rural areas. However, it would be unlikely that the type of rural areas with little infrastructure, and needs that are primarily around lack of services rather than socio-economic factors, would fit this criteria and be able to benefit. The Creative People and Places and Great Places programmes also include some rural areas and could provide valuable learning about how best to support culture in more sparsely populated places in the future.

Youth Music base their approach to funding on identifying “cold spots”, areas of the country that have the lowest levels of musical participation. They try to do this in a nuanced way, that includes looking at areas that have had the least investment from other funding sources as well as their own, alongside demographic data, social mobility and other factors. 12% of their targeted investment for 2022/23 is in local authority areas classified as Predominantly Rural; and a further 5% in areas classified as Urban with Significant Rural⁴². Youth Music take a needs not numbers approach, which assesses applications on quality rather than number of participants. However, another key aspect of their funding criteria is how supported organisations and individuals can link with others to provide further opportunities and progression for young people. This is something that can be challenging for those in rural areas with little infrastructure, where they might be the only music provider.

In terms of local authority support, between 2010 and 2017, cultural spending by local authorities declined dramatically across the UK. However, these cuts were not equally distributed:

“Rural arts and culture investment and infrastructure has been disproportionately hit by reductions in local government spending. ‘Predominantly rural’ areas experienced the greatest decline in cultural spend, at 32.7%, while ‘predominantly urban’ and ‘significantly rural’ areas experienced falls of 25.5% and 25.4%, respectively.”

Arts Council England⁴³

This has inevitably had an impact on what music providers in rural areas are able to achieve.

The power of music to change lives: a national plan for music education was published by the UK government in 2022. This sets out their vision for music education in England and how this can be achieved through partnerships with schools, music hubs, the music and creative sector, and others. It describes how music hubs should support all young people to engage with a range of musical opportunities in and out of school, *“whether a child lives in a large city, a bustling town, or a remote village”*⁴⁴. However this is guidance rather than a statutory duty. The plan acknowledges that there are particular challenges faced by those working in a rural context, but offers few solutions other than using technology and forming wide partnerships.

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Since 2012, each local authority area in England has a Music Education Hub, which is funded by the Department for Education via ACE. Each hub consists of a partnership headed by a lead organisation, who are collectively responsible for enabling access to music education activity for all young people. Hubs are able to design their services to address local needs. However, the current funding formula is calculated on a per pupil basis and doesn't account for the additional costs of rural delivery, such as much higher travel costs for peripatetic teachers reaching small schools across a wide geographic area.

"We are budgeting £87,000 for mileage this year and spend 76 hours per week travelling between schools, driving over 1200 miles per week. Obviously, time that we are paying music teachers but that we are not earning anything... our funding doesn't take account of this. To add to that, is that the council upped our expenses (for mileage) over the cost-of-living crisis but this has now come back down..."

Head of Music Hub Lead Organisation

This means that some hubs based in the most rural parts of England struggle to secure the resources they need. They also may tend to have less opportunity to raise additional funds from other sources.

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"It is worth noting that MEH activity within the most rural areas tended to be funded slightly differently; in predominantly rural areas, income from parental contribution and Youth Music grants was significantly higher than elsewhere. Conversely, in predominantly urban and significantly rural areas, school contributions were higher."⁴⁵ (*music education hub)*

Arts Council England

A new round of Music Hub investment is currently underway, with new Hub Lead Organisations co-ordinating larger, more strategic hubs from 2024. This means the number of Hubs will fall from 116 to 43⁴⁶, with many already large rural areas merging with neighbouring localities. The implications of this for the most sparsely populated areas is currently unclear.



? What needs to change?

It is clear that many young people in rural areas love where they live, but are missing out on the benefits of musical participation that are available to their counterparts in larger towns and cities. The music organisations and individuals who are trying to provide those opportunities identified a range of barriers to addressing this need. Many of the issues with the wider music sector also play out in rural communities, but may manifest differently. Additionally, there are other challenges that are unique to the rural context.

Perception and profile

There is a lack of accurate data that paints a true picture of music education in rural areas. For example, some funders don't collect information on how much of their money is spent in rural versus urban areas, making it hard to identify the "cold spots". ACE have used Defra rural-proofing techniques to try and ensure their support is fair to rural areas, but acknowledge that the methodology has not been updated since 2013 and their rural statistics are out of date. Similarly, ACE's Rural Stakeholders group is the main tool for consulting with the rural music and arts sector but hasn't met since 2019. Smaller funding bodies may not have any expertise around rural issues. This lack of information feeds into strategy and policymaking that doesn't accurately reflect the situation on the ground.

National statistics and misconceptions around rural life can give the impression that everyone in rural England is affluent. This can mean that both areas of rural poverty and the fact that lack of services affects young people's life chances in rural areas are overlooked.

"I think about a place like here...it's not so rich that it can sort itself out. Nor is it so poor that it can appeal to the better half of people's thinking. So I sometimes wonder if (they) think well there are problems here but there are bigger problems elsewhere..."

[Rural music delivery organisation](#)

When resources are scarce and so much funding is tied to addressing disadvantage, this makes these areas less able to attract grant funding – whilst the lack of existing infrastructure makes other types of investment also difficult to access.

"Fundraising (is a barrier) – rural isolation not being 'counted' as deprivation by some funders... Appreciation (is needed) of rural isolation as a significant barrier to young people's life chances (among funders other than Youth Music!), including within school deprivation statistics, (so) that more funding can be brought into rural areas, including schools."

[Rural music delivery organisation](#)

A lack of a unified voice for the sector. There appears to be a lack of urgency in addressing rural inequality in access to opportunities including music. The dispersed nature of rural music organisations, which means there is not currently a strong, united presence to lobby for change, is likely to contribute to this. This also means that good practice in rural areas is rarely celebrated or shared beyond the local area – and therefore remains low-profile.

Rural issues are therefore often a low priority for policymakers, and this includes access to music. Funders we spoke to were keen to emphasise that they don't want to impose a "one size fits all" model for supporting rural areas. However, there are often common features of musical participation in these communities – such as lower numbers of participants, and less cultural infrastructure to build on – which make rural projects look different. Furthermore, there are specific rural barriers related to structural factors identified in this report which urban areas don't have to contend with. When urban/suburban ways of working are always seen as the default, rural organisations are automatically at a disadvantage. This leads to a situation where rural music-making is poorly understood, translating into a lack of support at policy and strategic levels.

Infrastructure

Transport is the number one barrier that comes up in any discussion of rural musical participation. It is well-documented that public transport options are often poor in rural areas. Compared to urban areas, rural public transport is not just time-consuming, inconvenient or expensive – in many cases it is non-existent. Even those areas that do have some public transport options may have a "skeletal" service, such as one bus a day, which is not practical for many activities, and is not integrated with other transport options. Therefore, using multiple forms of transport to make a journey is often unrealistic.

This is a situation that has deteriorated since the last report. As described above, rural areas have been disproportionately affected by cuts to bus provision and funding to restore services following the pandemic have mainly benefited urban areas:

"Urban areas were allocated two-thirds of the funding to improve bus services, despite rural routes declining faster."

The Guardian⁴⁷

Young people told us how reliant they were on parents or carers driving them around, which creates a barrier for those young people who parents are unable or unwilling to do so. The reliance on long car journeys is also incompatible with the urgent need to improve environmental sustainability of cultural activities.

"In the past, we've provided transport to and from our activities, our annual transport bill itself is around £18,000 pounds. So it's quite a substantial bit of our budget."

Small rural charity

Lack of investment in rural areas. Rural areas have seen a historic lack of financial investment in both arts and cultural provision and basic services and infrastructure. This affects all areas of rural life, making it more difficult to start new businesses and projects, and sustain those that already exist. Continued inequitable distribution of resources to rural areas means that they have little chance of "levelling up" with their rural counterparts.

Did you know that in the Local Government Finance Settlement for 2022-23:

- Rural areas in 22/23 will still receive some 37% (£105) per head LESS in Settlement Funding Assessment grant than their urban counterparts.
- Rural residents will pay, on average, 21% (£104) per head MORE in Council Tax than their urban counterparts due to receiving less government grant.
- Rural residents will get 14% per head LESS in social care support overall.

Rural Fair Share⁴⁸

Venues. Our consultation with young people in rural North Yorkshire showed that more music spaces are needed, to both create music and experience gigs.

Band rehearsal space and performance venues that are suitable for young people to use as performers or audience members are particularly lacking. Venues such as pubs are not accessible to younger performers, and dedicated music venues, from grassroots to medium and larger scale spaces that host touring bands, are rarely located within easy access of rural areas. This means that young people not only miss out on opportunities to perform, but also to experience live gigs and concerts that provide inspiration. This lack of physical infrastructure for music is challenging not just for local musicians and organisations, but also larger organisations who want to bring activity into rural communities. The smaller nature of rural schools often means they lack space for music teaching or performance.

Sustainability of activities in low infrastructure areas. Funders typically want to support youth music activity that is sustainable and offers further opportunities for young people to continue or progress their music-making. This is hard to demonstrate in areas where there may only be one provider and little established infrastructure.

“Building sustainable infrastructure around people rather than buildings (is needed) People need to be mobile in a rural area. And that, you know, if people can’t come to us, we should go to them.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Access to instruments and equipment. Without central hubs or venues, access to instruments or equipment can present a barrier to engagement.

Digital infrastructure. As described on p9, despite progress there are still many rural areas where broadband and mobile signal availability is not adequate for the demands of modern life. This affects how much music organisations can make use of the advances in digital delivery.

Practical barriers

Sparse populations of young people. It is more challenging for organisations to find a “critical mass” to make their activities work in sparsely populated areas.

“If you’re working in a village, there may only be four teenagers.”

Rural music delivery organisation

For those young people, trying new activities without a group of friends requires a lot of confidence and this can present a real challenge for some. It can also be very isolating for young people who are interested in making music but have no-one nearby who shares their passion.

“Intellectual isolation – often only one or two music makers in a rural environment (village) and they are not necessarily likely to be of the same mind re. music interests and ability, so it’s a big pressure on getting to larger scale stuff – which again has to cope with rural recruitment.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Delivery models that work in urban/suburban areas, such as countywide ensembles, are therefore often very challenging to run successfully and inclusively in the rural context. Some delivery organisations are proactive in looking for flexible solutions to these issues, but it can be hard to innovate when organisations themselves are relatively isolated and struggling to secure resources to cover the basics. As a result, many young people in rural communities are simply missing out on these types of opportunities.

Constraints on timing. Music organisations in any community often have to time their activity carefully to work around school times, exam periods etc. Organisations and young people we spoke to highlighted that the seasonality of rural life meant they had to factor in many other considerations. From some areas becoming completely inaccessible in the winter months, to tourist season in the summer, there are only limited windows of opportunity where activity can take place and this is often very locally specific.

“There is also higher pressure on a large number of our students in farming communities to be working on the farms before and after school at pinch points throughout the year, harvest, lambing etc.”

Music teacher

As well as time constraints throughout the year, day to day factors such as long journeys to school can make after school activities very difficult to deliver.

Reliance on parents and carers. Young people who could access out of school music activities said that they were very reliant on their parents to transport them. This means that the logistics of parents’ own long commutes or pressures of self-employment (which is more common in rural areas) also create challenges.

“Many young people have long journeys extending the school day, need part-time jobs and have associated chores to do linked to home and family business activities.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Organisations told us that parents are more stretched than ever due to factors such as the cost-of-living crisis. When engagement with music is only available to those whose parents are supportive and also have sufficient time and money, this poses serious challenges for inclusive delivery.

The importance of school. These issues around travel and availability, in addition to the lack of services in rural villages, means that school is often the only place where young people can participate in music-making. This creates issues if schools don’t have strong music provision, young people struggle at school or just want to be in a different environment. As a much higher proportion of young people in rural areas travel on school buses, after school activities on school premises are hard to access. In these cases, there was some evidence that young people may find it easier to attend local community ensembles rather than stay after school – but as highlighted elsewhere, these ensembles are often not aimed at young people.

Financial barriers. These challenges often translate into higher costs, which can make some activities uneconomical to provide or too expensive for young people to access:

“My experience is that the cost of just about everything is significantly higher...if we wanted to run an after school club event for children, and we wanted to provide some food, if I buy that food locally, it’s probably going to be one and a half, two times the cost of if I went to a big supermarket...If a charity is operating in premises, most of the premises in rural areas tend to be an older stock. And it’s hard to heat and it’s hard to keep dry, and all those other things. Whereas if you’re in an area with lots and lots of choice in offices and things like that, your costs are probably going to be lower...there’s all sorts of things that are maybe not there on the surface. But if you dig down a little bit, they all impact on the cost and the straightforwardness of delivering the services.” Funding organisation

Rural poverty is often a hidden phenomenon, but many organisations and individuals we spoke to brought this up as a significant barrier to accessing their services:

“Rural isolation exacerbates negative effects of other barriers – economic, disability, and mental health – and exacerbates contrasts in region, with pockets of child poverty as local families are challenged by cost-of-living, pushed up by second homes and tourist-focussed low-paid jobs. The pandemic and cost-of-living-crisis have increased societal polarization in our coastal region (more working-from-home professionals/holiday homes).” Rural music delivery organisation

“What I don’t like about it is that they should have FREE access to music lessons if they really want to play.” Young person

“I have only been able to have the education I have due to charities’ generous help.” Young person

Quality and diversity

Lack of diversity in the musical offer. Having access to a diverse range of different musical styles, genres and experiences is a key part of providing a quality music education. However, those young people in rural areas who do have access to participatory music-making often have few choices:

“Being in a rural area the only option is one choir or no choir.”

Young person

This can put young people off starting their musical journey altogether, and hamper young people’s ability to progress with their music-making as they are not exposed to different ideas and experiences.

Focus on Western classical genres and traditional methods of musical participation. The musical offer in rural areas therefore tends to be very “mainstream”. Our evidence shows there is a particular gap around more informal types of music-making. Young people, organisations and artists all highlighted a lack of spaces and opportunities for young people to come together to experiment with music. There are fewer organisations able to support young people with interest in genres such as rock or hip hop, activities such as DJing or less popular instruments. There are also very few organisations operating rurally who cover other areas of the music industry such as production.

“I’d like to start a band. Me and my friends have come up with this idea and are hoping to start one but we don’t know how.”

Young person

Research carried out by Wiltshire Music Connect⁴⁹, who serve a number of rural areas found that:

“Young people really value having places where they can make music informally with their peers. This includes using practice rooms at school during lunchtimes and using other rehearsal spaces to play in bands. They also want more opportunities to perform to an audience.

Children and young people who are doing lots of music-making outside of school have an appetite to do more. They want to explore a wider range of ensembles and performance opportunities, and to try new instruments. Their experiences of music-making gives them greater perceptions of what is possible.

The progression of young people whose musical interests are outside of western classical music and the school music curriculum, does not appear to receive the same support from music educators as young classical musicians receive.”

Lack of age-appropriate activity. Due to demographic factors, many community music opportunities are multi-generational or aimed at older adults. This can work in some contexts – for example, brass bands have a long tradition of intergenerational working – but for others, activities are just not suitable for young people in terms of content or the practicalities of getting involved.

“He can now attend the weekly local adult orchestra (he is Year 6). This is only a few miles away, but finishes late, so is very tiring.”

Parent

“There are a lot of music opportunities – orchestras, drama groups and choirs – for adults in my area but very few for children and none nearby. Some of the ones for children also run straight after school so we can’t actually get to them from my school on time.”

Young person

While in some areas community-based amateur music groups are responding to this challenge, there are still many gaps. Young people want more musical activities that are designed with and for young people, that reflect their musical interests.

“There is a tendency to play to the traditional young person’s provision. Youth Theatre, Show Choir, Musical Theatre Group, for example. These are popular areas perhaps but less and less appropriate for the growing number of self-taught and technology-based, alternative genre or niche music makers/producers.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Lack of progression opportunities. There are issues around musical excellence and progression as well as first access to music. Organisations we spoke to are signposting young people to opportunities to further develop their music-making – but in many cases, these opportunities are simply not available.

For young people who want to access specialist activities, this often involves travelling long distances including out of their region. Even if young people can get there, restrictions resulting from local authority boundaries or geographical limits set by some organisations can mean that they are not eligible to participate. Some national musical ensembles invest in outreach work to engage more young people from rural areas, but there are a number of barriers which make them less likely to be able to participate. More experienced young musicians who live in rural areas struggle to access appropriately challenging musical opportunities and repertoire, which can hinder their musical development compared to their urban peers. This can include being able to access local teachers for specific instruments, bigger ensembles or other people of a similar standard to play with and learn from. Some young people described this as an isolating experience:

“I have missed out on having friends who enjoy what I enjoy. And even now as a young adult, when I am in musical situations it is hard to find people that I can relate to because I am so different. I have had to fight for every opportunity I have been able to have. I take every audition and then evaluate whether I can afford to do it. Even if it is a free opportunity, travel costs can be a lot and push me out of being able to participate...I managed to pay my fees for the year, but then after that I had to pay train fares across the country because courses are all held in the south. The cost even with financial assistance is too much.”

Young people who participated in this research also told us that they want to do things locally, and use their musical skills to be involved in their own community.

Quality and inclusiveness of provision. All these factors make it challenging for music delivery organisations to create high quality musical opportunities that are accessible to young people in rural areas. The young people who tend to participate are therefore more likely to come from families with resources to deal with the many challenges of accessing patchy provision, or who have a strong existing desire to prioritise music-making for their children:

“A lot of the young people we see in our community who access music are those who are from more affluent families. And that tends to be something that we see a lot, or families where it’s like a generational thing... Mum plays the piano, so we play instruments or whatever.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Many of the workforce issues described in the next section also have a direct impact on the quality of provision that is available for rural young people.

“It can be a frustrating environment to work in. As someone who grew up in a city, I can clearly see the inequality in access to consistently high-quality music-making. Ultimately funding needs to be sourced to support the current teachers in the area, or to bring in more teachers to deliver worthwhile musical experiences”.

Music teacher

All music providers consulted described the difficulty of finding suitable staff locally. Some organisations make good use of volunteers, but they can only do so much; music leading requires specific skills and experience. The issues are particularly acute for specialised provision – for example, early years practitioners – as there is often not a sufficient quantity of work for them in sparsely populated areas. Visiting artists can be a valuable part of the musical offer, but transport costs mean that this cannot be relied upon. There is a particular shortage of younger music leaders who can become relatable role models for young people. As a result, young people in rural areas often miss out on the cultural diversity of the UK music scene and the inward and outward flow of new ideas that creates a vibrant musical culture.

Workforce development. This also means that there are fewer experienced music leaders in an area to help train the next generation. This can result in music delivery organisations becoming overly reliant on the same practitioners, which can result in the offer becoming stale or new leaders not coming through.

“Because we are not based in a rural area, we would have to travel a long way to visit and observe sessions, so we have to rely on Music Leaders that are experienced, proactive and would cope with a light-touch approach from us. We’d like to meet more emerging leaders in rural areas and train them to work inclusively.”

Music delivery organisation covering urban and rural areas

Additionally, the proliferation of small businesses and charities within the rural music sector makes it challenging to offer apprenticeships or career progression opportunities.

Retaining the musical workforce. The unstable funding situation for many music activities can make it difficult for organisations to hold on to the staff they do have. Freelance musicians and music leaders generally have a portfolio career, which is very hard to sustain in rural areas where there may be only one or two sources of relevant work.

Outward migration of young people. As further education and job prospects are more limited in rural areas, there is currently a trend of outward migration of young people who often feel that they need to move away to achieve their ambitions.

“(I miss out on) access to more funding and therefore experiences, equipment and teaching. Access to better venues and experiences. I would need to move away to get better experiences, further my knowledge.”

“I think there is also a north south divide too. Funding is more for the south so as I get older will have to move down there.”

This has a knock-on effect on the musical workforce pipeline.

“Those fortunate to attend university often stay away to follow career options due to the lack of quality well paid jobs with progression prospects in this area.”

Rural music delivery organisation

“There are currently no Further Education courses in the county to encourage good quality music teachers to remain in the area and as a result many young people move away, have families and don’t return to support the next generation of music leaders.”

Rural Music Education Hub



Funding of musical activity

Pressure on funding sources. Due to wider economic conditions, many music funding organisations have less cash to go around and more demand than ever. Some funders reported that they are increasingly being asked to “fill gaps” left by what were previously statutory services. This increased demand for trusts and foundations to fund the basics inevitably affects music provision across the country. However, in rural areas where there is a greater need to subsidise elements such as travel alongside the core costs of a project, this situation makes it harder for delivery organisations to make the case for these costs as essential.

Funding criteria based on urban/suburban delivery models.

Funders often say that quality is more important than quantity when it comes to music delivery but this does not match up with the experiences of the rural music organisations we spoke to, who felt frustrated by systems that appear to penalise them for trying to work within the types of rural constraints described in this report.

“We have to just make sure that we’re really clear when we’re applying for funding that actually, you know, six children and young people on an activity or 12 is absolutely brilliant. But, you know, for some of the smaller towns that we can only expect five or six children and young people and that has to be factored in.”

Small rural charity

This can be a “hard sell” to funders who could reach more young people elsewhere, in addition to the fact that economies of scale can make these smaller projects relatively expensive to deliver.

“All our provision tries to address these challenges but attracting financial support is becoming increasingly difficult.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Disproportionate effects of funding cuts in rural areas.

Widespread issues with funding for youth music activities are well documented. However, these can have a more significant or different impact in rural areas. For example, cuts to local authority funding for youth services and culture provision have been worse in rural areas. This has affected an already fragile infrastructure, and reduced availability of strategic support through services such as arts development teams that could help rural music organisations become more resilient.

Lack of sustainable and core funding. The difficulty of covering core costs is something that affects music organisations in many areas. However, this was highlighted by several rural organisations as a particular challenge when costs such as utilities and transport are proportionately higher. Short-term, project-based funding makes it particularly difficult for rural areas to maintain momentum for their activity– and a workforce:

“We were coming towards the end of a big project. And we asked whether we could do a back-to-back project application. And they said, no, we expect you to spend a period of time learning from your current project before you submit another project. So they’re looking for a gap...there’s an issue that we won’t be able to retain the project staff. And we will lose those people to other organisations or projects, which might mean that those people have to move away for that other work.”

Rural music delivery organisation

Access to contacts and expertise. The rural music landscape mainly consists of small and grassroots organisation, who often don’t have extensive fundraising expertise. Opportunities to bid for larger sums of money, such as ACE’s Creative People and Places scheme or UK Strategic Prosperity Funds often require a consortium approach which is difficult for isolated organisations to achieve. In terms of philanthropy, rural music-making is often a less attractive proposition for high-net-worth individuals to support than more “prestigious” city-based institutions. Such individuals are less likely to be present or visible within rural communities, and there is a lack of the type of networks that larger organisations may be able to tap into in cities to connect with donors and sponsors.

Networks and skills. The rural music landscape is populated by small, grassroots groups and charities who are less likely to have the contacts and expertise necessary to access funding, build partnerships and develop than larger urban organisations. Such organisations often don't have access to the type of networks that exist in urban areas to share information and build connections. This results in organisations working in isolation and a lot of useful learning being lost. They may also struggle to recruit local board members with relevant skills and experience.

The role of external music organisations. There are examples of national and regional organisations delivering music activities in rural communities where their input is welcomed and adds to the local offer. In other cases, such behaviour is seen as a cynical "parachuting in" of organisations who don't fully understand the local context. Funding opportunities offered by ACE or government priorities in a certain place can lead to a "honeypot" effect, where providers flock to an area for their own benefit and don't engage with local communities and organisations. This can apply to many different types of places, but in rural areas where existing arts and culture infrastructure is often quite weak, this type of intervention can be destabilising and have few long-term local benefits.

Lack of local partners. Partnership working is key to rural delivery – but finding suitable partners can be difficult. Isolated organisations may struggle to find local partners who can help them achieve their aims, and certain types of partnership are rarer in rural areas. For example, higher education institutions are less likely to be involved. This can mean missing out on certain types of opportunity and expertise.

Communication. Marketing activities to parents and young people can be challenging in sparsely populated areas; organisations may need to find ways to communicate with multiple, relatively isolated communities in different ways. Building new audiences and participants is hard in these circumstances, and can be demoralising and time consuming.

The decline of music in rural schools. As explained above, schools are often the core or only music providers for young people in rural communities. While the focus of this research has been on music outside the school curriculum, changes to this curriculum are bound to have an impact of young people's overall ability to access music. Access to music in schools has been declining in recent years due to factors such as budget cuts and a focus on EBacc subjects⁵⁰. As young people in rural areas have fewer choices over which schools and further education providers they can attend, they often have no choice but to drop subjects like music if they are not available in the local area.

"The current decline in arts-based subjects offered on the curriculum and decreasing A Level and alternative qualifications for post-16 are further pushing those young people to attend more urban provision or take an apprenticeship."

Rural arts organisation



Pressures on rural schools. Connected to this, the numerous pressures on schools mean they have less capacity to signpost young people to external music activity, as well as less money to spend on music overall.

“Most of the schools with pupils aged 11 to 18 that we visited were not currently offering music at key stage 5. In several schools, leaders had decided in recent years to remove music from the curriculum at key stage 5. The most common reason for this was that they could not afford to run courses with low numbers of students.”

Ofsted⁵¹

This particularly affects inclusion, as budgets to subsidise areas such as tuition for young people from low-income families or in care are reduced.

“The educational landscape in schools is challenging at this time due to rising costs and falling (in real terms) budgets. We are seeing local schools now refusing to have a remissions policy for instrumental teachers again limiting access to provision for hard up rural families.”

Teacher

Attitudes. In rural areas, there is often a focus on traditionalism which can result in initial resistance to new things, and a slower pace of life. Young people whose experiences of musical participation have been very limited because of lack of access may not know what is possible. This can present problems to those who are trying out new ways of working – not least because a project-based approach to funding means that activity often has a limited time period to demonstrate success.

Wider societal issues. The isolation of Covid-19 has exacerbated many of the challenges around a lack of chances to socialise for young people in rural areas. Demand for mental health services is growing, but lack of service capacity in rural areas means less support for referrals to music and wellbeing programmes that are designed to help. Organisations have found it difficult to restart some activities after the pandemic, and young people have missed out on years of social contact and development which has affected their confidence and ability to engage with music activities. More recently, high inflation and the cost-of-living crisis has added yet more economic challenges into the picture.

Slow pace of change. Due to all these factors, even when they are acknowledged as a problem, progress towards change is slow. *“In reality, not that much has changed over the last 20+ years”*



3. What next?

Recommendations

Recommendations for funders, policymakers and strategic organisations

1. Take a proportionate response to addressing the inequality in access to high quality musical participation experienced by young people in rural areas.
2. Recognise that rurality itself can be a driver of inequality due to the lack of access to services that are often taken for granted in urban areas – and that this is often hidden by statistics that focus solely on socio-economic deprivation.
3. Develop a more strategic approach to supporting activity in rural areas, so that urban and suburban models are not the default and rural organisations have to spend less time justifying their approach.
4. Make it clear in grant-making criteria when funders are happy to consider the higher per-head costs of delivering rural music activity and cover elements such as transport.
5. Take into consideration that rural activity may need to start on a very small scale and build up over a long period of time.
6. Consider that not all successful rural projects can be scaled up and support more high-quality, small-scale activity that has a big impact on a small number of young people. Where funders already take a “needs not numbers” approach, show organisations how they can demonstrate the value of their work in a more qualitative way.
7. Funders could support the innovation needed to improve rural music opportunities by allowing organisations to make mistakes and learn from them, without being penalised or excluded from further funding which jeopardises overall progress.
8. Focus more attention on rural cold spots and target those areas with support to help grassroots organisations develop their activity. Actively build relationships with those who are working in this space to encourage more funding applications from rural areas.

9. When considering the diversity of decision makers within strategic organisations, include people with lived experience or a strong understanding of rurality.
10. Take account of the fact that core costs faced by music delivery organisations in rural areas are likely to be higher than their urban counterparts.
11. Recognise that some of the barriers to rural participation, such as poor public transport, are unlikely to be easily solved. As a result, some organisations will need ongoing subsidy to work effectively in these conditions.
12. Revive and build on existing networks for rural music and culture as a matter of urgency. The work of the Rural Culture Forum ceased in 2018. At the time, there was an ambition for a Rural Creative Industries Consortium with an advocacy role to be created, but this hasn't progressed. The ACE Rural Stakeholders Group appears to be the main way of co-ordinating rural arts strategy in England but the bi-annual meetings were paused four years ago. This group should be diversified and reconvened to begin addressing some of the issues highlighted in this document.
13. Use these networks to gather up-to-date knowledge about the reality of rural music practice to make policy that works for the sector. Existing information should be updated. For example, the information in ACE's Rural Positioning Statement pre-dates their current 10-year strategy which began in 2020. If more research is commissioned, it needs to focus on practical solutions and be led by people with experience of rurality.
14. Promote and celebrate excellence in rural music practice to raise the profile of this work nationally.
15. Consider how funding streams could be used to help build underlying musical infrastructure (which may involve people, systems, and digital practice rather than buildings) in those places where it is lacking.

Recommendations for Music Delivery Organisations

1. **Provide more informal opportunities for young people to make music and socialise**

Respond to young peoples' need for more informal opportunities to explore music and socialise with their peers through participatory activities that are less project focussed, such as drop-in music workshops or jam sessions.

2. **Use digital participation to address rural barriers as part of a hybrid offer to young people**

Organisations can make use of the learning about digital delivery developed during the pandemic and through work such as Connect: Resound to tailor the use of digital methods to their local context. Our findings show that used carefully, online activity can be a way of addressing some barriers to rural participation. However, young people also want more face-to-face opportunities to make music and be with other young people. Hybrid models that give young people the choice of multiple ways of interacting can offer a solution.

3. **Develop a distinctive rural practice that responds to the local context**

"Our model is progressive, it's down to leadership which is not wedded to historical model of what a hub is. Working on a local level in a smaller way, instead of bringing everyone into the towns – its more accessible. Responding to need is key."

Rural music education hub

Be open to trying ways of working that are different to how music delivery typically works in more urban areas. This might involve working seasonally, or focussing on the experience for young people rather than the method of delivery. For example, musical activities that require critical mass, such as larger ensembles, are challenging in the most rural areas and therefore something that many rural young people are missing out on. Are there smaller scale activities that could provide similar experiences such as playing in a group, performing and tackling more challenging repertoire?

4. Explore a wider scope of partnerships to support work in areas where there are few music or cultural organisations

This could involve finding partners who share similar aims but may operate in different sectors or be outside county boundaries. Such partnerships could also help demonstrate sustainability and further opportunities for young people to funders. For example, outdoor festivals are often the largest and most high-profile musical presence in rural areas but currently many appear to operate in a “different world” to local youth music delivery organisations. Although most festivals are annual events and may not be based in a rural community year-round, there may be scope to make connections.

5. Listen to what young people in rural areas want

Youth voice is important to all work with young people, but especially in situations where they are not well served and there is a lack of understanding about their interests. Taking time to connect with rural young people and design music delivery around their ideas and interests would help music delivery organisations become more effective and sustainable. This is particularly relevant for community-based music organisations who are open to all ages but want to attract the next generation of members.

6. Be proactive about developing a future workforce who are equipped to work in the rural context

Consider how a local musical workforce might be made more sustainable – such as by co-ordinating employment or internships with other local organisations, by packaging work together to offer longer term contracts or by supporting the existing workforce to develop new skills. This could be achieved by making use of existing expertise through mentoring, and using opportunities such as the Youth Music Incubator Fund to design development programmes.

“We try and address this through running a skills ‘cascade’ and training young people from age 16 to become professional leaders, and training a pool of music leaders through long term mentoring, shadowing and supported leadership schemes. We have been talking to Music Hubs, and local partner organisations trying to set up more co-ordinated employment opportunities for leaders across multiple organisations, so as to provide more stable, sustainable employment for music leaders in the region.”

Rural music delivery organisation

7. For music organisations based elsewhere who want to work in rural communities, local consultation is vital

Building strong relationships and understanding the local context are key to success. Organisations which cover both urban and rural areas could consider whether rurality is a barrier that is affecting some young people’s ability to participate and how their activities could be “rural-proofed” to address this.

8. Consider hyper-local approaches that “go where young people are”

This might mean delivering activity at very small scale, with mobile equipment/venues/activity. Activities such as taster sessions in isolated places can be a good way of reaching young people, provided consideration is given to how participants might then access a regular activity in a larger town or village. Promoting a local approach to music-making, where young people have better opportunities to participate in music in their own communities, could also have environmental benefits.

9. Explore co-location and hub approaches to transport issues

Rural transport infrastructure is not an issue that is going to be solved by youth music organisations alone, but getting to know the detail of what the local transport issues are and trying to mitigate this by working with existing timetables or siting activity carefully could make a difference to who can participate. Cluster and hub approaches are successful in some rural areas. For example, people are often more familiar with and able to travel to local market towns rather than other villages. Building on existing patterns of behaviour and co-locating music activity with other services may help address travel issues.

10. Help develop a louder voice and higher profile for rural youth music

Look for opportunities to promote and share success outside the local area, to raise the profile of rural good practice. Consider how local and regional networks could be built and used as a forum for sharing skills and finding solutions to the challenges of rural delivery. Existing structures such as Local Cultural Education Partnerships could form the basis of this. Developing a more unified voice as a sector is an important part of advocating for rural areas and the role they play in England’s musical ecosystem.

Examples of successful rural engagement

A Music Education Hub covering both rural and urban/suburban areas

“As we work countywide, around 50% of our activity with young people and families is carried out in a rural setting. We employ a variety of different strategies to engage our rural communities including co-creation of projects, digital hybrid offers, bespoke project work in localities, stakeholder/youth advisory board consultation and ensuring our offer is relevant, inclusive and engaging for our children and young people.

(Rural barriers) are addressed by offering an inclusive offer that has multiple interaction opportunities whether that be in person or digital. Our variety of locality-based ensemble offers and strong partnership network enables young people to access high quality music-making opportunities from a variety of providers to minimise on the impact to transport issues and rural isolation. Our digital offer has grown from strength to strength in recent years and our Music Hub Partnership Network enables support to be localised but underpinned by National Partners to further minimise the rural isolation.

To enable full participation in our large-scale events programme, we do tend to offer these in the summer term to minimise disruption to travel arrangements. We always offer a digital alternative to any event that is not school based. These digital and in-person opportunities are offered to all children and young people whether they be school based, home educated or in specialised settings. Our offer with the exception of instrumental tuition is free at the point of access although a full remissions strategy sits behind this to support those families experiencing economic deprivation.

(To address workforce issues) We run a gap year and work experience opportunity and regularly signpost young people to opportunities with other organisations locally. There are a number of arts organisations offering opportunities to support careers in the arts but there currently seems to be a gap in preparation for music teaching specifically. We are currently working with another music delivery organisation to develop an apprenticeship scheme to support young people into careers in teaching and are working with various Further Education organisations across the region to identify ways in which young people can obtain the skillset they require to go in to a career in music teaching.

We are currently looking into ways in which we can partner to acquire a transportable venue e.g. Sinfonia Viva’s Inflatable Venue as a way of even further increasing hyper-local engagement.”

A national music organisation working in a rural area

“In half term our team (Learning & Engagement) worked with a conservatoire to offer a two day song-writing and band skills intensive held at a school in rural Yorkshire. We had good connections with three secondaries in the area and located the activity at one of these schools. Late in the day a music teacher at one school let us know that pupils were going to struggle to attend as it was a 40-minute drive from their school to our event. So we arranged a group taxi with a school-approved taxi provider to collect the young people and take them back on both days, to make sure that they could take part. The other school involved did not report the same issues – their parents were more able/available to drive the distance, and this partly seemed to be related to their outlook on wider opportunities and to socio-economic factors. It was only through working closely with teachers when we are not a local organisation that we were able to react quickly to this need.”



A rural music delivery organisation

“It’s fair to say that 98%(+) of our work is with children and young people from rural areas.

We reach them through a combination of highly developed partnership work with formal and informal education sector as well as local authority departments. Maintaining a relationship with staff and carers. Keeping an up-to-date social media profile, and ongoing networking with partner and new organisations working with children and young people.

Main issue is (perhaps inevitably) one of travel so we make sure that either our activity is taking place ‘where they are’ or that transport and travel are simplified and budgeted for wherever possible. Wherever we can we try to piggy back existing travel arrangements and schedule sessions to suit children and young people’s other commitments (i.e. no ‘if you can’t get here then, you can’t do it’).

We run:

1-2-1 and small group sessions for children and young people excluded or not attending formal education. These take place either in the setting (Pupil Referral Unit) or at our studio. Another project is similar to above but for the NEET (not in education or employment) sector. Almost exclusively delivered at our recording studio (some online delivery).

Gamelan and Global Music Residencies are participatory projects touring to secondary schools and community venues. Some performance work but chiefly process based. Large group work (30 at a time approx.).

A Writing, Composition, Production project for young aspiring ‘studio’ musicians focussed away from formal education but feeding into some formal activity.

Inter-generational Community Music projects, both touring and in house.”

A rural community arts centre

“Our ambition when opening our venue was to give people access to the same resources that are available in urban arts centres, but from a rural setting. We have achieved this through a holistic, community centred approach. We think music, creativity and art can change the world for the better – that is the thread we hold on to. We want to affect social change through our art, but we acknowledge that our art cannot be the only tool we use.

One of the things that has connected us to the more dispersed rural communities is that we have a community fridge which means people can access the building to get free food. There is also a Pay As You Feel café, where again they can access food without charge if they need to. In our café we have also opened up the space for social services, Early Help and support for young carers to have an informal and neutral space to meet with families, which can be made available to them for private appointments. This enhanced connection has meant that these organisations are happy to extract what they need, but also signpost people to us, which connects us with children and young people e.g. through social prescribing to the music and art projects we deliver in the building.

Adults who use the space for the food services we provide know it is a safe and trusted space that they can send their children to for music and art activities. The fact it is in a publicly accessible venue gives the sense that it is ‘official’ and can be trusted. We engage with people, listen to them authentically and observe, work with other community organisations and host a community alliance each month to share ideas amongst local organisations about how to best engage with the local community. This means that we sometimes work in much broader context, e.g. taking on advocacy roles for community members liaising with the council, as people who engage with us and trust us feel that we have a voice that will be listened to, and we can broker positive connections that will result in change.

It’s also about cohesion – if we want to do a music project that benefits mental health and wellbeing, and that is being eroded because children are hungry, we need to address that. We can do that by offering our food services to the community as well as music activities. It ties in with our ambitions to be a green organisation and be environmentally sustainable, and allows us to access support from a broader range of funders. Funding is a particular challenge in rural areas as funders do not often want to support organisations that reach lower numbers due to smaller communities, but the work is no less impactful.”



Appendix 2

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