

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

YOUTH
MUSIC

Gone in the Air

Full report available at:
amp-music.co.uk

Connecting
young people
with sound
opportunities

AMP

The programming and research that informed this report were conducted in our previous incarnation, NYMAZ. We have since relaunched as AMP in spring 2024, and this report's 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. Since then, a lot has changed, with factors such as the Covid-19 pandemic, Brexit and difficult economic circumstances having a huge impact on many areas of life. However, despite progress in some areas such as digital delivery, many of the challenges of delivering better music education opportunities for young people in rural England remain.

This new research aimed to build on the original *Gone in the Air* report to explore where we are now, what needs to change and what needs to happen next. We found 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. By providing recommendations for both music delivery organisations, and funders and policymakers, we hope that this report will be a catalyst for change.

Summary Report

Life in rural England

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

Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (Defra)¹

Living in the countryside can have many advantages, but the disadvantages that it poses for young people are often overlooked, including:

- Incomes in rural areas tend to be lower and living costs higher.
- Lack of access to basic services that those living in more populated areas take for granted.
- Social isolation *"(there are) no other musical kids"*.
- Lack of access to a range of education and work opportunities.
- Poor public transport, which has got worse in recent years.
- Digital access that still lags behind urban areas.
- Older and less diverse rural populations overall mean fewer services designed for young people's needs and interests.

The rural musical offer

- The musical offer for young people is patchy, varies greatly across the country and is often dependent on grassroots organisations and volunteers.
- Opportunities for musical progression, access to less *"traditional"* musical genres and music activities designed by and for young people are some of the areas that tend to be much less accessible to young people in rural areas.

A survey of rural young people showed:

- Listening to music is one of their favourite activities but only just over 10% had attended a concert.
- Money and transport were the main factors that affected their engagement in music.

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 in their own communities.

- Digital options provide a vital route to access provision when there are barriers to in-person delivery, and they can also offer innovative solutions to engage and create music. The pandemic accelerated the use of digital delivery of musical activity. Many music delivery organisations are now finding hybrid models a useful and impactful way of working.

"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 Foundation²

- In total, more than a quarter of bus routes in rural and county areas have been lost in the past decade.³
- 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 all.⁴
- Despite recent political focus on regional *"levelling up"*, inequalities between rural and urban places are 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 Committee⁵

- However, young people have missed out on vital social contact during the pandemic so the need for in-person music activities is more important than ever. 83% of rural young people who took part in our survey said they preferred in-person delivery.
- In 2018, only 4.6% of Arts Council England's National Portfolio Organisations 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.⁶
- Local authority cuts to arts and culture have not been equally spread: *"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 England⁷
- The current funding formula for music education hubs is calculated on a per pupil basis and doesn't account for the additional costs of rural delivery, such as much higher travel costs.
- *"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."* Head of Music Hub Lead Organisation

Barriers to rural delivery

Perception and profile

- National statistics and misconceptions around rural life can give the impression that everyone in rural England is affluent.
- A lack of a unified voice for the sector results in a low profile.
- Rural issues are often a low priority for policymakers, including access to music.

Infrastructure

- Transport difficulties, which have worsened since the previous report.
- Challenges around sustaining youth music activities in low infrastructure areas.
- Inadequate digital infrastructure.

Practical barriers

- Sparse populations of young people.
- Constraints on timing of activities.

Quality and diversity

- Lack of diversity in the musical offer.
- Lack of age-appropriate activity.
- Quality and inclusiveness of musical provision.

Musical workforce

- The challenge of finding suitable local staff.
- Retaining the existing rural musical workforce.
- Outward migration of young people.

Funding

- Funding criteria based on urban/suburban delivery models.
- Disproportionate effects of funding cuts in rural areas.
- Lack of sustainable and core funding.

Organisational

- Access to networks and skills.
- Communication in sparse communities.

Social

- Capacity pressures on rural schools, often the only providers of youth music activities in rural communities.
- “Traditional” attitudes, meaning new projects need time to develop.
- Slow pace of change: *“In reality, not that much has changed over the last 20+ years.”*
Rural music delivery organisation

“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.”

Teacher



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.

References

1. Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (2022). Statistical Digest of Rural England – August 2022. www.gov.uk/government/statistics/statistical-digest-of-rural-england
2. Smith, N., Davis, A., and Hirsch, D. (2010) A minimum income standard for rural households. Joseph Rowntree Foundation. www.jrf.org.uk/report/minimum-income-standard-rural-households
3. County Councils Network (2023) The State of County Buses: Recovering Services Post-Pandemic. www.countycouncilsnetwork.org.uk/rural-bus-services-at-a-historic-low-as-new-report-reveals-urban-locations-received-two-thirds-of-flagship-government-funding/

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.

For Music Delivery Organisations

1. Provide more informal opportunities for young people to make music and socialise.
2. Use digital participation to address rural barriers as part of a hybrid offer to young people.
3. Develop a distinctive rural practice that responds to the local context.
4. Explore a wider scope of partnerships to support work in areas where there are few music or cultural organisations.
5. Listen to what young people in rural areas want.
6. Be proactive about developing a future workforce who are equipped to work in the rural context.
7. For music organisations based elsewhere who want to work in rural communities, local consultation is vital.
8. Consider hyper-local approaches that “go where young people are”.
9. Explore co-location and hub approaches to transport issues.
10. Help develop a louder voice and higher profile for rural youth music.

4. House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee (2019) An Update on Rural Connectivity, Seventeenth Report of Session 2017–19. [Rural broadband and digital only services \(parliament.uk\)](http://rural.broadbandanddigitalonly.services.parliament.uk)

5. House of Commons Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee (2022) Reimagining where we live: cultural placemaking and the levelling up agenda. Third Report of Session 2022–23. committees.parliament.uk/publications/31429/documents/176244/default/

6 – 7. Arts Council England (2019) Arts, culture and rural communities – how the Arts Council works in rural England. www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/our-research/investing-rural-communities

Research was carried out by Bloom Arts consultancy (Helen Mahoney) and the AMP team between May and October 2023.