Framing Rural

How **language** can help or hinder
the case for **rural investment.**

NICRE
National Innovation Centre
Rural Enterprise

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Contents

Executive summary

How rural issues are framed is critical to gaining public support for investment in rural areas. Depending on the frame and language used, people can be either convinced or suspicious, empathetic or disinterested. Below are the key findings from the project.

1. Framing affects how well a message lands:

- Talking about fairness is effective, but people need to know how inequalities can be addressed and who is responsible for doing so.
- Focussing solely on economic opportunities can raise suspicions if not handled sensitively.
- Romanticising the countryside may land well with some people who live there, but others can find it patronising, and it risks sounding archaic.
- Rural places as centres of green regeneration can be an engaging idea as long as this is linked to the global challenges of climate change.
- People connected strongly with the idea of communities already helping themselves but needing extra help to do more.
- Focussing on innovation in rural areas only engages people if it rings true and does not create a divide with urban areas.

2. People engage most with the issues when:

- Using direct and straightforward language.
- Problems are acknowledged yet solutions are also offered.
- People are told who is responsible for addressing the problems.
- Misconceptions are met head-on, acknowledging and offering alternatives.

3. Get it right, and people can be supportive:

- Earlier in 2024, YouGov polled 3,559 adults across England. Participants were shown one of four positive framing statements and then asked about their views on government investment in rural areas. 76-77% of people we polled supported investing more resources into rural England, compared to 1-4% who opposed it.
- Even where the trade-off between rural and urban investment was explicit, almost three times as many people supported (40-44%) as opposed (14-16%) rural investment.

4. The strongest support came from appealing to general principles:

- The idea that essential services should be available wherever you live in the country was supported by 86% of people and opposed by just 2%. This may suggest the case for rural investment is strongest when it is linked to the general principle that basic services should be available to everyone, everywhere.

Introduction

Rural England is home to more than 10 million people. It has a thriving economy contributing more than £250 billion to the UK, with businesses as diverse as any city.[1] Rural enterprises are often more resilient and may have to be more resourceful than those in urban settings.[2] There is capacity for far more growth in the countryside, too, but a lack of investment and infrastructure is holding it back.[3] Many organisations are making this case, yet they say they struggle to capture the imagination of policymakers or the public. Is the reason for this the way the challenges are framed?

Framing is a way of positioning an issue so as to connect emotionally with your audience. It can make the difference between winning support or indifference, not through manipulation but by tapping into beliefs and values that people already hold.

In Framing Rural, we wanted to examine how this concept could inform approaches to building a case for support for rural investment. We spoke with people campaigning for rural England and asked them what misconceptions they regularly come up against. We then looked at common ways of talking about rural places and asked members of the public how they felt about them. From this, we learnt how best to frame a case for investing more in rural places and then applied those insights when we polled more than 3,500 people.

The polling results suggest that, if the framing is right, people support rural investment. But the strongest support was for the idea that everyone should have access to basic services, regardless of where they live in the country. This may imply that when it comes to making a case for rural investment, it could be most persuasive to appeal to people's sense that everyone should have access to basic services regardless of where they live.

Approach

When designing this project, we drew on tools and previous projects by the Frameworks Institute[4] and Public Interest Research Centre[5], as well as previous thinking on how to frame rural issues.

Desk research p 9	A long list of rural stakeholders was narrowed down to those with the most influence and focus on rural issues. We then combed their websites and recent publications to pull out framing statements representing how each organisation made their case for support. These were then grouped by frame, highlighting the core ideas behind the statements. We also devised, researched, and explored with an artificial intelligence (AI) large language model, potential new frames that had not come up in our research.
Stakeholder interviews & frame design p 6-8	We held interviews with six key rural stakeholders to ask what issues they were trying to address, what perceptions they were trying to shift, and how they considered framing in doing so. This gave us the detail around which to structure the framing statements. In collaboration with the NICRE team, we narrowed down the frames to six that could be taken forward to focus group testing. We then wrote summary paragraphs for each frame, based on those used by the Frameworks Institute, that followed a similar structure; an underlying value, supporting evidence, and concluding with an 'ask' for support.
Focus groups p 11-23	We held four focus groups with a total of 21 participants, enough to likely uncover 80-90% of relevant themes.[6] We used three different recruitment methods: organic Facebook marketing; paid, targeted Facebook advertising; and a recruitment agency to fill in the demographic gaps. We asked demographic selection questions, and whether people consider the place they live or grew up in to be rural or urban. We then manually sorted the applicants to find participants who were roughly representative of the English population, with an over-representation of rural participants. This approach was inspired by the Sortition Foundation principles.[7] After a brief introduction, the groups were shown each of the six framing statements and asked for their gut reaction, followed by more in-depth discussion. At the end of each group, each participant was asked what they considered the most and least compelling frame.

![NICRE logo]

Interpretation
p 24-26

We transcribed the groups and pulled out quotes that illustrated key ideas and discussion points. We then coded these for positive or negative sentiment and ascribed them to either a rural or urban participant.

We used these quotes and the facilitator's understanding of how well the groups connected with each idea, to review participants' emotional and rational connections to the frames. This is reflected as a 'temperature gauge' of connection.

The focus groups also highlighted some generic uses of language that influenced how well the frame would land (e.g. stating the problem and the solution, and using straightforward language).

Polling
p 27-32

The findings from the focus groups were used to design versions of four framing statement that were likely to land well and that were as comparable as possible.

These statements were then included in a YouGov poll from 25 to 28 January 2024. Each recipient was asked to reflect on one of the four framing statements and then answer three questions.

The questions were included in two successive waves of YouGov's omnibus poll reaching a total of 3,359 people in England, representative of the population. Of these, around 359 were in rural areas. As well as reporting on more common demographics, we could, therefore, also track any differences between rural and urban respondents.

Statistical analysis was used to look for differences between the frames, and between different demographic groups.

More on our approach

Throughout this report, you will find more detail on the approach we have taken highlighted next to the relevant section.

The challenge: do rural areas need more investment?

Rural communities in England are up against many of the same problems as those in towns and cities. A lack of affordable housing, the cost of living, low wages and cuts to services are not unique to the countryside. We wanted to understand what made rural life different. So, before looking at the language around rural investment, we interviewed stakeholders who work or campaign on rural issues. We asked them how the challenges affecting communities differ or are exacerbated in the English countryside, and what they would like to see happen to turn things around.

The challenges cited by the interviewees are summarised in Table 1. More detail about the interviews can be found in Appendix 1.

Table 1: Stakeholder interviews: summarising the challenges facing rural areas

The calculation used to allocate funds to local councils is skewed. It awards more money per person to more densely-populated areas, reasoning that high density increases the costs of delivering services. In fact, the inverse is true.
Poverty in rural areas is genuine, but hidden by local and regional statistics. There is much inequality in rural areas, so dispersed disadvantage and pockets of deprivation are masked by wealthier neighbours when looking at regional averages.
Policies aimed at tackling these societal issues are often unsuitable. For example, in rural areas, most new housing developments are for fewer than ten houses, so developers aren't required to include a quota of affordable homes.
There is a lack of support. If you live in a city and you are struggling, there are places and people to help. You can go and use the library's internet, access a food bank, or visit a recruitment centre. This support is not available in the same way in rural areas.
And a lack of opportunity. Young people living in rural areas do not have access to the same education or training opportunities, particularly post 16. This is reflected in their long-term prospects and the range of opportunities available to them.
Rising costs can be compounded by rurality. For example, fuel cost rises affect everyone, but they can hit harder in rural areas where housing is often older and more expensive to heat, and there is more reliance on cars for getting to work and school, plus people travelling greater distances.

Solutions: how could these challenges be addressed?

Tackling these challenges will need government investment, and this will require public support. When asked what else would help address the challenges facing rural areas, the stakeholders cited the following:

- Equitable funding to local councils.
- Equality of policy, with measures designed specifically to work in rural areas, rather than rural needs considered as an afterthought.
- Equality of opportunity, particularly around education, training and careers.
- Devolution: communities having more agency over their own development.
- Recognition of community-level action and seeing it joined up with national agendas, e.g. net zero.

Stakeholder interviews: how do people think about rural places?

Successful framing relies on connecting with people's existing values. To understand people's beliefs about rural England, we asked rural stakeholders about the ideas they regularly come up against and how they use language to shift perceptions closer to the realities of rural life. The findings are summarised in Table 2.

Table 2: Shifting beliefs

Existing belief	Frame or technique used to shift
On average, people in rural areas are doing ok.	Explain that there is enormous inequality between the 'country set' and the 'rural poor', and that regional statistics hide this.
Everyone in rural areas is living the countryside idyll. It is all Sunday afternoon drives and chocolate box cottages with roses around the door. Communities are tight-knit and supportive, and everyone drives a 4x4.	Not all rural areas are the same. Showing rather than telling and using case studies of thriving communities who are tackling their own challenges.
Funding rural areas is more expensive. You get more bang for your buck by investing in cities.	Rural areas have untapped economic potential. They present opportunities, not a drain on resources.
The countryside is there to be protected. NIMBYism. We need to protect rural places, rather than rural people.	Communities deserve agency rather than protection. Some are crying out for development. Investing in a rural area which needs jobs and services does not mean 'ruining' it.
Rural people are traditional and have never left the village.	Using case studies that challenge these stereotypes.
All rural businesses are land-based, and everyone in the countryside is a farmer.	Presenting quantitative evidence to the contrary.

Desk research: what frames are used to talk about rural places?

Below are summaries of the most common frames that we found were currently used to talk about rural issues. Each includes an underlying value (e.g. equality) and an example of the frame in use. More detail about the frames can be found in Appendix 2.

1. **A fair society**
   Value: Equality
   "Rural areas have been woefully under-resourced and left behind. It's not fair for people to be disadvantaged due to where they live. The government should consider the 'rural dimension' to allocate funds and services that are equitable, not just even. This will revitalise neglected rural areas."

2. **Untapped potential**
   Value: Opportunity
   "Rural areas are rich in human, economic, and natural potential. In today's world, you can run a financial services company from the top of a remote valley just as well as from a town or city. With investment and access to services, we can unleash rural opportunity and ramp up rural productivity."

3. **Community resilience**
   Value: Agency
   "Rural communities have incredible strength and resourcefulness. When a community steps up and takes control, rural enterprise can tackle isolation and loneliness, as well as provide jobs and boost the local economy."

4. **Thriving, resilient, innovative**
   Value: Something to offer
   "Enterprises from all sectors are the cornerstone of rural economies and help support thriving rural communities. Many rural businesses don't acknowledge they're innovative and we want to dispel that myth."

5. **Quality of life**
   Value: Freedom to choose where to live
   "Rural England is a fantastic patchwork quilt of countryside. A good quality of life comes from an open, quieter countryside that runs in its own rhythm compared with the hustle and bustle of a congested city."

Less commonly-used frames that we considered also warranted investigation and included the following.

1. **Green powerhouse**
   "Our future depends not only on finding innovative solutions to the many challenges we face, but in regenerating what we have lost. Rural communities hold the key to regenerating our landscapes, rebuilding biodiversity, and bringing back a way of life that has been lost in urban centres."

2. **Ahead of the curve**
   "There are challenges inherent to being based rurally – poor connectivity, distance from suppliers, a smaller recruitment pool – that mean rural businesses need to be ahead of the curve if they are to compete. Likewise, with less outside support, rural communities need to be more resilient and creative to solve their problems. We can all learn from people living and working in rural areas."

3. **Community ownership**
   "The challenges we are facing go beyond what can be fixed by voting once every four years. By working together, communities can solve many of the day-to-day problems they face."

4. **Cultural heritage**
   "Rural England is where our roots lie. People in rural communities hold traditional knowledge, so if we lose rural life, we lose something of ourselves."

Focus groups: how do the frames make people feel?

Approach

In the next phase of the research, we wanted to understand how these different frames resonated with people who were not rural advocates or policymakers. What values do people most strongly connect with? Do some ideas turn people off? What language do people turn towards, and what makes them shut down? To test this, we selected six of the frames outlined above, which were the most that we could discuss in a 90-minute focus group discussion. The frames were summarised into approximately 100-word statements that followed a consistent structure.

We then held four focus groups with a total of 21 people. The participants were roughly representative demographically of the English population. We held one group of participants who self-identified as urban, one that was mostly rural, and another two that were mixed. The groups were presented with each of the six frames in turn. They gave a gut reaction to each, and then a more in-depth discussion followed. Participants were encouraged to share their opinions on each frame, and the facilitator remained neutral throughout. The order of the frames was changed between groups.

Testing rural investment versus universal access

To investigate how people reacted before and after they knew the discussion was about rural investment, the participants were not told the subject of the focus groups during recruitment. That was only revealed after they were shown the first frame, which was a generic 'fairness' frame that did not mention rurality. We asked for the groups' opinions about fairness and then revealed that the disadvantaged areas referred to in the frame were rural. This was designed to explore how, when campaigning for rural investment, reference to investment in rural areas might sit alongside wider principles around universal provision. For example, how do people respond to the propositions "rural areas need better internet connections", or "broadband should be sufficient to support online learning wherever you live in the country".

Analysis

The following pages summarise how the focus groups responded to each frame. The full framing statement is included, as shared in the groups. There is then a summary of how the frame was received, followed by a temperature gauge of how strongly both rural and urban participants connected with the frame emotionally and agreed with it rationally. The scores shown are our qualitative assessments, on a five-point scale, based on analysing the focus group transcripts.

1. A fair society

"It is not right that people are disadvantaged due to where they live. Yet, there are parts of England where people have less access to services, higher housing and transport costs, and fewer opportunities. When income is averaged out, these areas look to be doing OK, but the statistics are hiding pockets of deprivation. If we want a better society, we should share resources fairly."

Analysis

The consensus around this was that it is hard to argue with – people should be treated fairly. However, the lack of detail raised suspicions, and most people found it hard to connect strongly with the statement because it is so general. Most people agreed but had little emotional connection.

Rural sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Urban sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Figure 1: Sentiment for Frame 1 – a fair society

Positive sentiment

Generally, people supported the frame. It was hard to argue against without more context:

"The first thing when you read it, you think, 'Oh, that's a pretty fair comment'."

Rural participant: mixed group 1

Negative sentiment

Some people did not like the term "It is not right". They found it divisive, as if it was presenting opinion as fact or telling them what to think.

Some found it too vague to have any impact:

"It sounds like a good idea, but it's very difficult to work out what it means."

Rural participant: rural group

Many didn't like the negative language.

A couple of people were suspicious of the mention of statistics. Others were suspicious that it was hiding something:

"It always seems these days when someone begins to offer something that seems fair and right, there always seems to be something hiding behind that."

Urban participant: mixed group 2

And a couple had concerns about meritocracy:

"I think that on a societal level, regions should be equal, but… I then think on a personal level, people should be rewarded for what they put into society."

Urban participant: urban group

2. Unlocking potential

"Everyone should have access to the opportunities they need to reach their potential. When they do, we are all better off. When gifted young people can access specialist training courses, the world will see their talents. And if superfast broadband helps a business grow, then we all benefit from the jobs and wealth they create. Investing in rural places could unlock their potential and add billions to the UK economy."

Analysis

This generally went down badly with rural participants but better with the urban group. Although people liked the examples and positive language, the main criticism was that it felt political, and people disliked equating people's lives with economic value. The positive tone and emphasis on a return on investment appealed to the urban group.

Rural sentiment:

Emotional
Rational

Urban sentiment:

Emotional
Rational

Figure 2: Sentiment for Frame 2 – unlocking potential

Positive sentiment

Some people could relate to the specific examples in this frame. Using stories or examples of people's lives went down well:

"I like the phrase … 'when gifted young people can access specialist training courses, the world will see their talent', that works for me."

<div align="right">Rural participant: mixed group 1</div>

Some liked the positive language:

"Yeah, I connect with it quite well. It's generally quite positive, and I… can't not agree with what is said."

<div align="right">Urban participant, mixed group 2</div>

Some people liked the idea of demonstrating a return on government investment. People liked that it offered straightforward solutions:

"Before the problems seemed insurmountable, whereas this gives you, this is a solution."

<div align="right">Urban participant, urban group</div>

The urban group generally liked fairness of opportunity:

"I think the most important thing for me is … fairness of opportunities."

<div align="right">Urban participant, mixed group 2</div>

"This is doing what I would consider the fairest thing, which is giving everybody the opportunity to do whatever they want to do and invest whatever time and effort that they want to do in whatever they want to do."

<div align="right">Urban participant, urban group</div>

Negative sentiment

Most people in the rural group were suspicious of this frame. It felt political, or like they were being sold something;

"I think if you're going to reach out and connect with people, it's got to have a sense of relevance, a sense of reality. This is more like a political statement such as you know, 'Believe in Brexit because...'"

<div align="right">Rural participant, rural group</div>

Equating people's lives with financial opportunity did not go down well:

"When it's saying 'could add billions to the UK economy' and stuff that is quite for economic gain and economic gain only, but it's kind of adding things that you should consider to be right to make you kind of go along with it."

<div align="right">Rural participant, mixed group 1</div>

3. Countryside custodians

"England takes pride in its countryside; our national identity is inseparable from our landscapes. But many people in rural England are being left behind. Most love where they live and want to stay. But many are being forced out by soaring costs, second homes, and a lack of opportunities. To continue to care for the places we treasure, rural communities and businesses need our support."

Analysis

This went down well in the rural group, but not so well in the urban group. People liked that it was positive and not too leading, but some in the rural group found it patronising. Among the urban group some felt overwhelmed by the scale of the problem, and felt drawn to examples of other communities which are struggling. Others thought it felt archaic and did not represent modern English culture.

Rural sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Urban sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Figure 3: Sentiment for Frame 3 – countryside custodians

Positive sentiment

People in the rural group generally felt like this was an inclusive, positive statement:

"I think the use of like collective pronouns like, us and we and stuff, it kind of sees you as one together so it's kind of like considering everyone, I think this sounds the most sort of reasonable one so far in a way."

Rural participant, rural group

Many participants found it easy to empathise with rural communities after reading this statement:

"What this is actually saying it appears [is] 'we all think it's wonderful, but we need to support the people so they can exist there and can afford to live there', so it doesn't end up being the wasteland for millionaires and industrial farming."

Urban participant, urban group

People liked that it wasn't too leading;

"I think this is the one that's the most sort of doesn't feel like it's pushing you in a particular direction other than to say actually 'this situation isn't great'."

Rural participant, rural group

Negative sentiment

Someone found it patronising and thought it perpetuated a stereotype:

"It seems like it's… very much through the lens of a visitor… I kind of feel that there's a whole audience of the folk living in the rural area that are kind of missed out of this, and to me, it feels a little bit patronising, that you know. 'You people that visit have to make it better for the people that live there'."

Rural participant, rural group

Some thought it seemed more about the past than the future. And others thought culture can be defined differently by different people:

"I think that it's this idea of like national identity being inseparable from the landscape feels a little bit archaic to me. It feels quite old-fashioned, and I think especially when you consider what a diverse, you know, society and culture that we have these days, is the idea of our national identity being inseparable from landscapes really going to resonate with everybody who identifies as English?"

Urban participant, mixed group 1

Some people found it hard to sympathise with rural communities when we focus on the beauty of the place:

"You can make anywhere a home and make it beautiful. But we don't have to sympathise with them because they're living there because it's peaceful, but they have to get ways to earn a living."

Urban participant, mixed group 1

One person felt it created an unnecessary divide:

"So there shouldn't be a kind of identity separation. Because we are all part of England."

Urban participant, mixed group 1

4. Green powerhouse

"Rural areas are at the sharp end of climate change, from flooding to changing weather patterns. Dealing with these challenges has bred fresh ideas and urgency. If we want to tackle climate change and build a thriving economy for the 21st century, we should listen to rural communities and learn from their experiences."

Analysis

Creating an 'us and them' was seen almost exclusively as a bad idea – everyone preferred talking about similarities rather than differences. In the urban group, people thought focusing on solutions to rural climate problems like flooding was treating the symptoms rather than the cause and felt like tinkering around the edges of the problem.

Rural sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Urban sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Figure 4: Sentiment for Frame 4 – green powerhouse

Positive sentiment

Some people, particularly in the rural group, found this frame empowering for rural communities:

"I think it will help encourage the people… in rural areas if we talk about them as innovative rather than there's quite an idea that people in rural areas are quite behind the times and that all of the innovation is in cities."

<div align="right">Rural participant, rural group</div>

Some found it piqued their interest:

"Yeah, yeah. I like this …better than previous ones. It's full of hooks. And therefore, you want more detail, more information."

<div align="right">Rural participant, mixed group 1</div>

Some participants liked that it focussed on the positives rather than 'the problem':

"I think the notion of a green powerhouse is something that is positive."

<div align="right">Rural participant, rural group</div>

Negative sentiment

Some people thought it sounded biased and disingenuous:

"But for somebody that's inquisitive like me, I would also think and see that there is some bias there in trying to not look at the urban areas and also see that as a point of fostering green economy."

<div align="right">Rural participant, mixed group 1</div>

It creates a divide between rural and urban that many people found unhelpful;

"I think it does create a bit of a divide and maybe a bit of blame as well for the people who live there."

<div align="right">Rural participant, mixed group 2</div>

Amongst the urban group, the overriding sentiment was of tinkering around the edges of climate change and that focusing on rural experience would keep us treating symptoms rather than cause;

"I think the danger is with rural and small communities becoming too tribal and defensive, whereas climate change is actually a problem that needs global ideas and global action to be solved."

<div align="right">Urban participant, mixed group 2</div>

"[The problem] in 'rural areas getting flooding' 'is it's not talking about you know, 'let's … take grand action on … fossil fuels and emissions from companies and plastic pollution, etc.'"

<div align="right">Urban participant, urban group</div>

5. Community action

"Communities can be incredibly resourceful and often find far better solutions than those prescribed by government. You see this in rural towns and villages, often tight-knit but neglected and underfunded by central government, which have found ways to pull together and help themselves. Instead of treating this as an excuse to ignore them, governments should make sure they have the power and support they need, and look to learn from their example."

Analysis

This frame was well-received by both urban and rural participants. People could connect with the communities which were already helping themselves, appreciated the positivity, and did not mind the "us and them" between community and government.

Rural sentiment:

Emotional	
Rational	

Urban sentiment:

Emotional	
Rational	

Figure 5: Sentiment for Frame 5 – community action

Positive sentiment

Generally, people were very positive about this frame:

"I think that this framing statement… is absolutely on the nail."

Rural participant, mixed group 2

The fact that it demonstrated people helping themselves made people more likely to be supportive too:

"There is so much collaboration already in these rural areas, so more support would mean more, more improvement… it helps you, you make sure you want to invest in them."

Rural participant, rural group

Most people liked that it lays responsibility on government:

"I would say that I connect with this one the most so far… it's actually highlighting that the problem is a legislative and government one, and it also I think gives credit to [the places] who do an awful lot for themselves. And I think that it changes the rhetoric a little bit from sounding like, 'oh, let's bail them out' to 'let's support the work and effort they're already doing'."

Urban participant, mixed group 2

Most people found the idea of communities coming together relatable and a strong message:

"They, of course, have power to make decisions that permeate down through councils to everybody but they are unwilling sometimes to take good ideas that bubble up from below and the idea of communities being tight-knit is forced on smaller towns and rural towns and villages because of the geography, but it does give them a cohesiveness."

Urban participant, mixed group 2

Negative sentiment

Some people found the undemocratic nature of community action a problem:

"I think where my dad lives, the difference is potentially that he doesn't necessarily always see eye to eye with his community and some of them definitely already have… a bit [too much] power."

Rural participant, rural group

Some people thought leaving out the "problem" was an issue:

"I think it's more honest to state the problems as well."

Rural participant, rural group

Some people found it overly emotive. One person questioned whether giving support would interfere with the communities' resourcefulness:

"I think this is just the cynic in me, but who's to say you give them the support … and they now don't need to work as hard."

Urban participant, urban group

Some people were suspicious of abandoning all government intervention for community-based projects, or of government using it as an excuse:

"The government has a responsibility to figure stuff out. It shouldn't always be put on communities to do for themselves."

Urban participant, mixed group 1

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6. Ahead of the curve

"The rural economy looks a lot like that of a city. You're just as likely to find an architecture firm in rolling hills as in a skyscraper. Yet, from broadband to fashion, the common perception is that cities thrust ahead, while rural areas lag behind. In many cases though, the reverse might be closer to the truth; the countryside is bursting with innovation."

Analysis

Generally, people found this a bit confusing and needed more detail or story to hook into it. It also creates a rural-urban divide. which was received badly by most participants.

Rural sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |

Urban sentiment:

| Emotional |
| Rational |
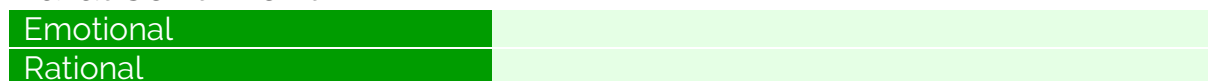
Figure 6: Sentiment for Frame 6 – ahead of the curve

Positive sentiment

Focusing on the positives went down well with some:

"Yes, so, I think it's encouraging to see this aspect of rural areas. And also to know that there are some positives, I think, like industrial growth and advancements."

Rural participant, rural group

Some people found it rang true because of personal experience:

"I can remember living up in Durham when the demise of the local bus services led to people developing new and certainly more flexible ways of offering public transport."

Rural participant, mixed group 1

Negative sentiment

It was seen to create an 'us and them' between rural and urban:

"There's almost a negativity suggested from this towards the cities."

Rural participant, mixed group 2

People felt that it oversimplified things:

"The picture that I get in my head is like lots of people in like a high-rise office kind of with some sort of problem, not being able to do it just going 'we need to call the countryside'."

Rural participant, rural group

The biggest criticism was that it did not ring true and went against common perceptions;

"It seems like it might be true but it feels like it's got no base in what I know."

Urban participant, mixed group 2

"I don't … totally agree that you're more likely to find an architecture firm in a skyscraper than you are in some rolling hills. However, I do not think that that means that the countryside is devoid of innovation."

Urban participant, mixed group 1

"I think it's quite relative because what we consider innovative, it depends on the starting point. What's considered innovative in the city where there's already such a magnitude of innovation is going to be very different from what we considered innovative, you know, in rural area is."

Urban participant, urban group

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Focus group findings: how to frame a case for public support for rural investment

Some findings held true across all the frames and strongly influenced whether or not a statement was likely to resonate with the audience. These are not all specific to rural issues.

Use straightforward, accessible language

Stick to the facts rather than trying to convince people with rhetoric:

✖ People found overly emotive language, unsubstantiated opinions, and hyperbole to seem manipulative. It was more likely to turn people off than persuade them.
"The one thing that slightly turns me off [is the] words 'neglected and underfunded' because I feel like they are emotive words, that aren't really quantified."
<div align="right">Urban participant, urban group</div>

✖ Anything that felt too 'political' raised suspicions:
"It's more rhetorical… It was too abstract. I really feel suspicious, and I'm thinking you're going to build a warehouse in the field opposite me or something!"
<div align="right">Rural participant, rural group</div>

✓ Sticking to open, straightforward language that gave the facts without trying to persuade landed best. Striking a balance between not being overly technical without dumbing down was important, too.

State the problem and offer a solution

Positivity is well-received, but do not shy away from explaining problems:

✖ When presented just with a problem, most people logically agreed that it was wrong, but they didn't connect emotionally. To some, it felt overwhelming, they could not see how it would ever be overcome.
"I think the whole society is underfunded, really. Services across the country are failing. So, I don't think that that's something that's particularly unique to rural areas without it being actually quantified."
<div align="right">Urban participant, mixed group 1</div>

✖ To others, it just drew their attention to groups which arguably suffer more. It became one more unsolvable problem.
"A lot of people need a lot of different kinds of support and it's just one of those things of 'We'll draw attention to this one issue'. There are 10 of those [issues] in these 10 other places."
<div align="right">Urban participant, urban group</div>

- There also was not much connection when presented with just positivity. It mostly invited intellectual analysis rather than an emotional response, and made people suspicious. It felt like something was being hidden from them.

- ✓ The best-received frames did not shy away from the issues but gave practical, measurable solutions – not just "more investment" but "investment into rural broadband".

Clearly state who is responsible

Responsibility is important. Frames that didn't assign anyone responsibility left people unsure what to feel.

- ✗ When people felt a frame laid responsibility on them, by using statements such as "we need to…", or "England should…", they tended to turn off. Some felt they didn't have the necessary tools or information:

  "It kind of feels out of my possibility like. And it needs addressing. And that makes you sort of pull back from it. So, if there's nothing I can do to fix it, what am I gonna do."

  Urban participant, mixed group 2

- ✗ People also did not think responsibility should be laid on the community to sort out their own problems.

- ✗ Wherever they lived, people were particularly sensitive to anything they felt created a divide between rural and urban communities:

  "See what I found interesting it's almost like it puts a divide there that's not necessary. You know not 'let's all work together' …it's kind of 'them and us' almost there."

  Urban participant, mixed group 1

- ✓ Clearly stating that the government had a responsibility to address the issues was important, but the most successful frames coupled government responsibility with examples of communities that are already helping themselves.

  "The government has a responsibility to figure stuff out. It shouldn't always be put on communities to do for themselves."

  Urban participant, urban group

Dealing with stereotypes and misconceptions

The frames used different methods to attempt to shift existing beliefs with varying results.

- ✘ People found that stating the opposite of a commonly held belief, without acknowledging doing so, was defensive and inaccurate. They felt they were being corrected or argued with – even if the belief was one that they did not consciously support. E.g. "rural places are behind the times".

    "The picture that I get in my head is like lots of people in a high-rise office kind of with some sort of problem, not being able to do it just going go 'we need to call the countryside.'"

    Rural participant, rural group

- ✘ People seemed intrinsically mistrustful of statistics, especially on an issue that goes against their beliefs. They may play a role in an otherwise persuasive case, but cannot be relied on to shift misconceptions.
    "Statistics can lie, lie, and lie again."

    Rural participant, mixed group 2

- ✘ Using examples was important to bring the statements to life, but risked being seen as an exception proving the rule when they went against common beliefs.

- ✓ Acknowledging a belief exists and that it is sometimes based in reality while explaining that it is not the whole picture was the most successful way of convincing people. However, one conversation or document is unlikely to shift firmly-held beliefs.

Who are you talking to?

Sentiment was generally more positive among rural participants, particularly in the solely rural group. This was true for all of the frames except the economic potential one. Mixed groups tended to be more balanced. This might suggest that different messages are needed for rural and urban audiences, and that when testing messaging, we ask urban audiences for their feedback to avoid creating a 'rural echo chamber'.

Polling: what happens when we get it right?

Approach

The findings from the focus groups informed a poll by YouGov of a representative sample of 3,559 people in England.

The poll tested four versions of an introductory statement that made the case for rural investment, focused respectively on fair access to services, economic opportunity, heritage and community enterprise.

To ensure the statements were as comparable as possible, the supporting evidence remained consistent across all statements (in purple), with one or two additional sentences (in green) used to summarise each frame as follows:

"*Rural England is home to one in five of us, and we all rely on rural businesses for far more than food and green energy. A strong rural economy benefits the whole country. Most people in the countryside like where they live. Yet rural communities have higher costs, lower wages, less access to services and support, and pockets of hidden deprivation…*

1. *Rural local authorities also receive less investment, despite the higher costs of delivering services. It is not right that people are disadvantaged due to where they live. It will help people have the same opportunities wherever they live in this country if …*

2. *Rural enterprises in England contribute around £250billion each year. But there is untapped growth and resilience in the countryside, being held back by a lack of infrastructure. We will all benefit if…*

3. *The countryside is central to our culture and heritage, and the destination for more than 350million trips a year. It helps rural communities to be able to care for the places we treasure, if…*

4. *Some have found their own solutions, setting up shops, pubs or services run by the community. These projects can seem small but have a big impact. It helps more places take the initiative like this, if…*

…government invests in affordable housing, broadband and transport in rural areas."

The following pages report the findings from the poll. As the participants were shown one of four statements, the results are represented as a range eg. 76-77%. An average of these results is used in figures 7-11.

Poll questions

The poll asked all respondents the following questions, introduced by one of the four framing statements:

Q1. Thinking about the information you have just read, to what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose each of the following?

a. The government investing more resources in rural areas of England than it currently does
b. The government making a commitment to providing the same basic services of healthcare, education, water and broadband everywhere in England, regardless of whether you live in an urban or rural community
c. The government investing in infrastructure specifically for rural businesses.

Q2. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view?

- The government should increase investment in rural areas, even if that money would benefit more people if it was instead invested in urban areas
- If money would benefit more people in urban areas then it should be invested there, even if it means decreasing investment made in rural areas
- Neither
- Don't know

Overall support

The polling results suggest that, when framed engagingly, people are supportive of rural investment. Responses were similar across the four statements. All elicited strong support for rural investment and minimal opposition. The four introductions were sufficiently distinct and proved equally persuasive.

When asked to what extent they supported or opposed investing more resources into rural England, 76-77% were supportive, compared to 1-4% who opposed (Figure 7). Even where a trade-off between rural and urban investment was explicit, almost three times as many people supported (40-44%) as opposed (14-16%) rural investment (Figure 8).

High levels of support are not unusual when a convincing statement is presented about a topic on which people do not have particularly strong views. While the strength of support therefore cannot be assumed in other contexts, it suggests that people are potentially receptive to the case for rural investment.

While the strongest support was from rural participants, at 84-88%, those living in urban areas were also strongly supportive, at 73-75%, as were those in towns and fringe areas, at 79-82% (Figure 11). The level of opposition, however, stayed relatively constant, at 3% in urban areas and 2% in rural areas. Support was also consistent across the political spectrum based on who respondents voted for in the last election. This suggests that rural investment is a 'safe' issue for politicians to campaign on and, as long as it is well-framed, is unlikely to alienate the main voter groups.
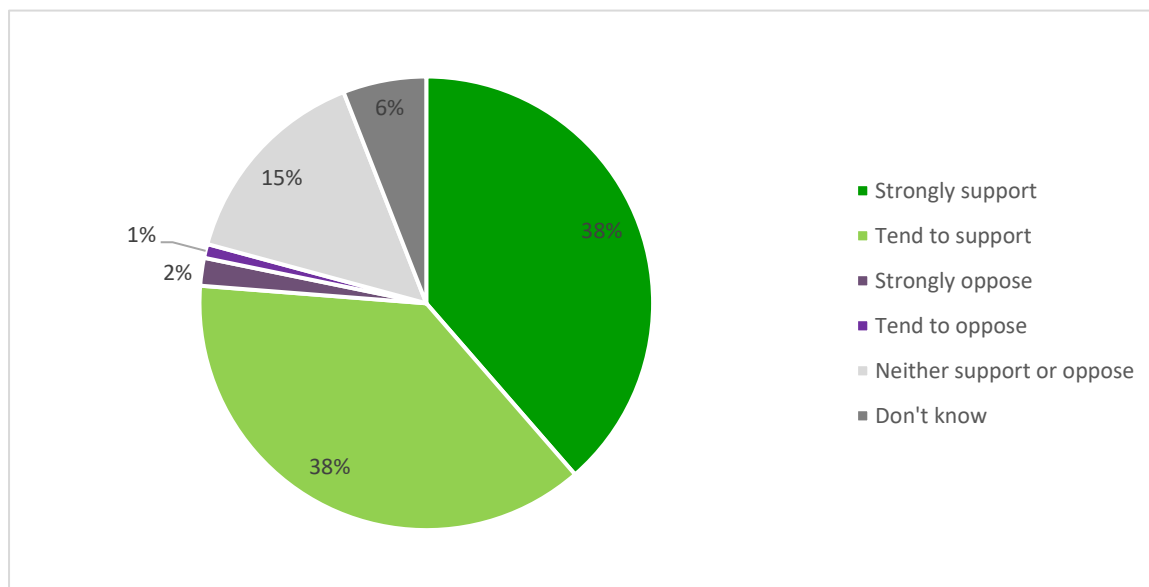

Figure 7: Q1.a. To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose the government investing more resources in rural areas of England than it currently does? Average of results over the four frames.
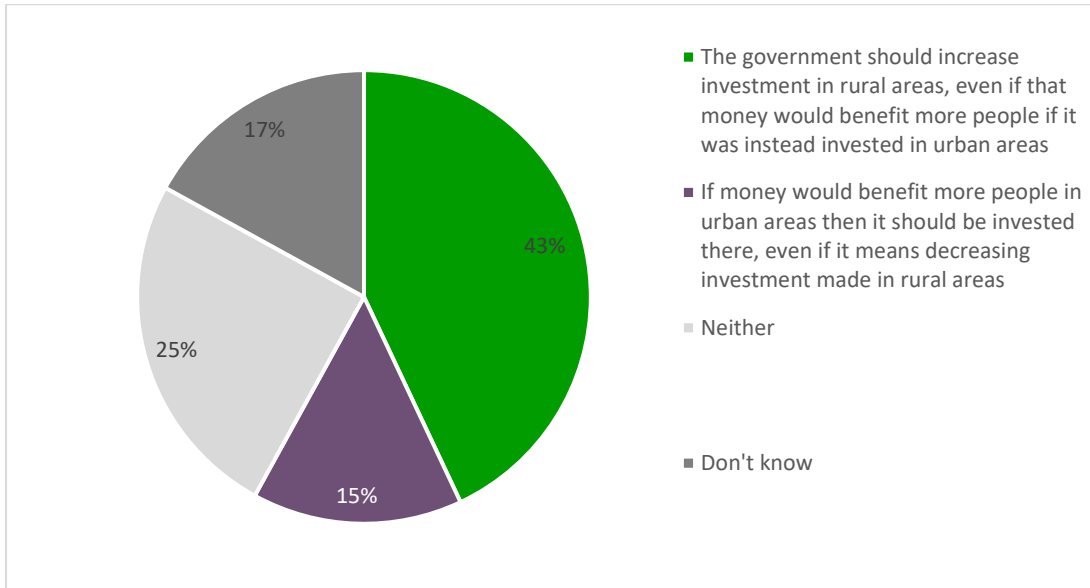
Figure 8: Q2. Which of the following statements comes closest to your view? Average of results over the four frames.
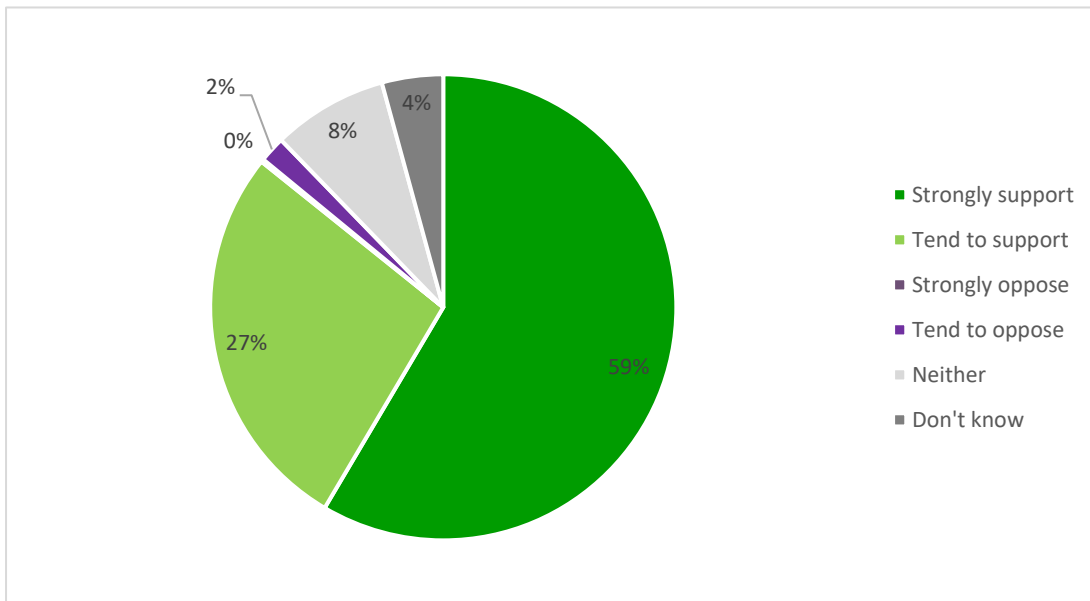

Figure 9: Q1.b. The government making a commitment to providing the same basic services of healthcare, education, water and broadband everywhere in England, regardless of whether you live in an urban or rural community. Average of results over the four frames.
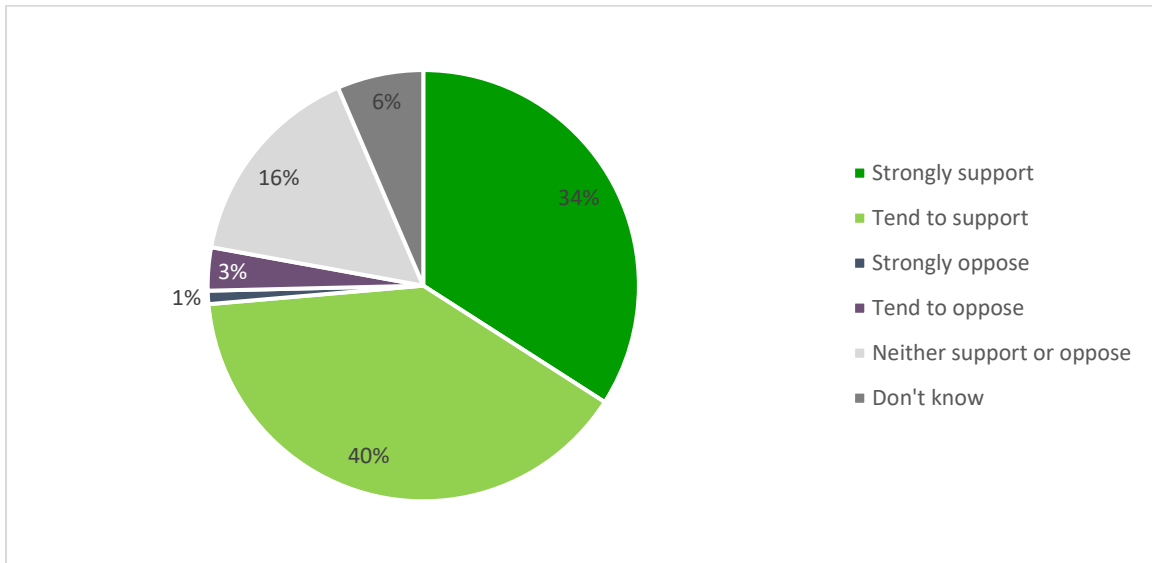
Figure 10: Q1.c. To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose the government investing in infrastructure specifically for rural businesses? Average of results over the four frames.
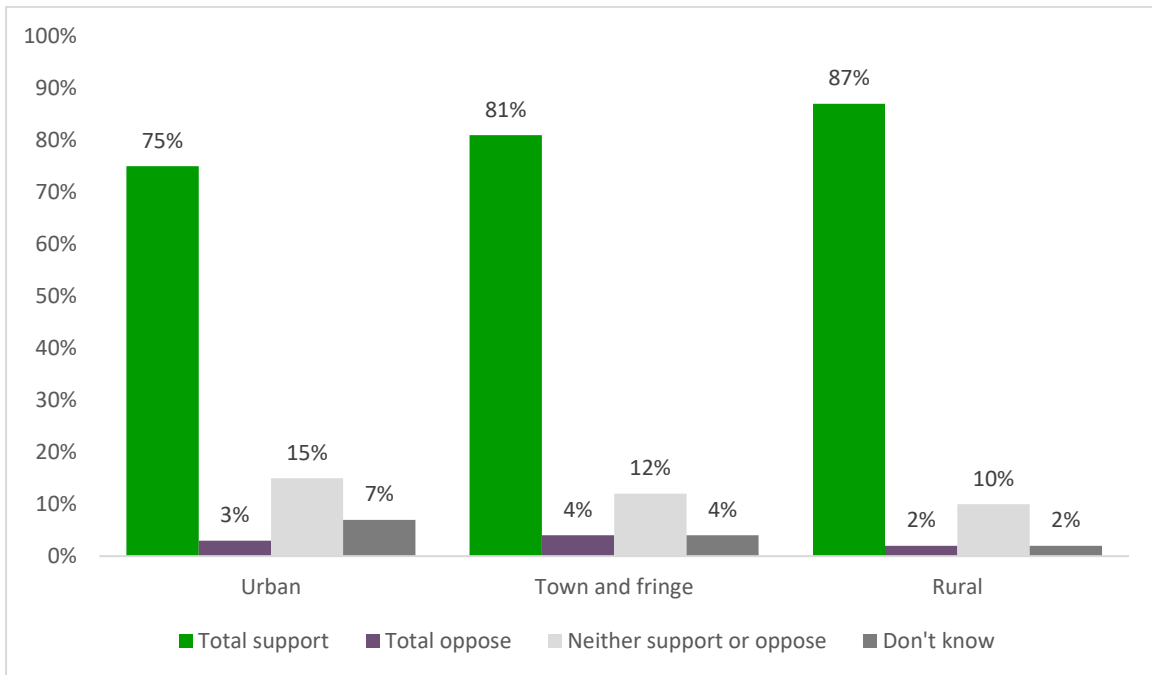

Figure 11: Q1.a. To what extent, if at all, do you support or oppose the government investing more resources in rural areas of England than it currently does? Average of results over the four frames, showing split by whether respondent's postcode falls into an urban, town or fringe, or rural area.

Does it help or hinder to single out rural areas?

Support for universal service provision ("The government making a commitment to providing the same basic services of healthcare, education, water and broadband everywhere in England, regardless of whether you live in an urban or rural community") was stronger than for investment specific to rural areas or rural businesses (Figures 7 and 10), with 84-87% supporting and just 1-3% opposing (Figure 9). This was true across the political spectrum, rather than an issue that divided previous Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat voters.

That this statement elicited the strongest support could suggest that appealing to universal principles could be more convincing than singling out rural places as uniquely 'in need' for investment.

The focus groups could offer some insight into this finding;

- Suggesting a divide between rural and urban communities was a very strong 'turn-off' for most participants, regardless of where they live. Whether explicitly stated or not, singling out rural areas for investment implies less investment into urban areas.
- One participant said that when you highlight the needs of any one group it automatically draws your attention to others that are equally, or even more, in need. This is likely even more the case for rural communities, which according to the stakeholder interviews, many people perceive as relatively well-off.
- Drawing people's attention to a new 'problem' can lead to them becoming overwhelmed and switching off. As one participant put it, "rural poverty becomes 'one more problem to solve.'" Whereas a more general 'levelling up' frame works with people's existing knowledge and beliefs.

What might this mean in practice?

Rural places face a unique set of challenges. They also have a lot to offer the country, both economically and socially. Communicating this complexity is the important role of rural policymakers and campaigners. Doing so without mentioning rural at all would be impractical, if not impossible, in terms of successfully delivering and targeting investment. This finding does not suggest anyone should stop talking about rural, but rather that we should be aware of how singling out 'rural need' lands with the wider public.

In practical terms, this might mean, depending on the intended audience, reconsidering statements such as 'rural areas have been neglected', and instead choosing framing such as 'everyone deserves access to basic services, wherever they live'.

Highlighting common cause with urban places that have similar needs would be another way to emphasise the universal rather than exceptional grounds for rural investment.

Conclusions

How we frame matters

The language used and the frames chosen impact how well people connect with the challenges facing rural places.

People are receptive to rural issues

If the framing is right, people appear willing to support the investment that could drive change for rural areas. Even if they live in an urban area themselves.

Showing common cause may strengthen the case

In some circumstances, making a case on the grounds of a clear principle that could apply to rural or urban places, such as 'levelling up' or ensuring universal access to services, may be more effective than singling out rural places as 'in need'. Showing common cause will be more engaging than arguing that rural places are exceptional.

This suggests that when it comes to making a case for rural investment, it could be most persuasive to appeal to people's sense that everyone should have access to basic services regardless of where they live. It could also be helpful give examples of rural and urban places that share similar challenges, needs or opportunities.

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Appendix 1: Stakeholder interviews

In order to understand why rural organisations use certain framing language, we held interviews with key stakeholders. From a long list of organisations, we focussed on those with the most influence and focus on rural issues. The objectives of the interviews were to understand what the organisations were trying to achieve with their communications, in particular, what issues they were trying to address, what beliefs they wanted to shift, and how they used language to try and do this.

Organisation type	No. of interviews
Rural advocate	2
National government	1
Local government	1
Within NICRE	2

The challenge

The interviewees agreed that people in rural areas struggle with common issues:

- Lack of transport and internet connectivity
- Access to affordable housing
- Low incomes: rural jobs (rather than those which involve commuting to cities) pay less than urban ones.
- Paying more for products and services

However, none of these are unique to rural places. So, we asked how these challenges differ in rural areas.

Rural advocate 1:

Funding to rural areas is unfair. The calculation used to allocate funds to local councils awards more money to more densely-populated areas, reasoning that it costs more to deliver services in urban areas. In fact, the inverse is true. The government has acknowledged that this is incorrect, and rural councils should be getting millions of pounds more, but changes to the formula have been frozen since before Covid/Brexit/etc. E.g. council tax is 20% higher in rural areas due to underfunding.
"Unlocking these changes is our biggest priority right now."

Hidden deprivation. Poverty in rural areas is covered up by regional statistics. There is huge inequality in rural areas, so pockets of deprivation are masked when looking at regional averages.
"The government needs to drill down further to understand rural poverty."

Inequality of policy. Policy is created by people in cities and is often unsuitable for rural areas. E.g. dropping affordable home requirements for developments of less than 10 houses. Rural communities are an afterthought, and the rural proofing team in Defra do not have the resources, or teeth, to make a real difference.

Rural advocate 2:

Compounding of issues. Rural communities experience the same issues as those in cities but they are compounded by their rurality. E.g. fuel cost rises affected everyone, but they hit harder in rural areas where housing is often older and more expensive to heat, and there is more reliance on cars for getting to work and school, plus people travel greater distances. Similarly, there is a lack of affordable housing in both rural and urban areas, but there is more choice in cities, and moving to a new area of a city does not mean having to change jobs, schools, etc. Then there is the second home issue in beauty spots.

National government:

Lack of support. If you live in a city and you are struggling, there are places and people to help. You can go and use the library's internet, you can access a food bank, or a recruitment centre. This support is not available in the same way in rural areas.

Local government:

Lack of opportunity. Young people living in rural areas do not have access to the same education or training opportunities, particularly post 16. This reflects in their long-term prospects and the range of opportunities available to them.

Appendix 2: Review of current frames

We investigated stakeholder websites and recent publications to identify key themes. Going through each document, we highlighted framing statements. They were then grouped by theme, and a paragraph was pieced together using phrases and language that summarised the main frame used in each case. The summary paragraphs used in our main report are composites drawn from the original excerpts below.

The following frames identified through this desk research.

1. A fair society

"Rural areas have been woefully under-resourced and left behind. It's not fair for people to be disadvantaged due to where they live. The government should consider the "rural dimension", to allocate funds and services that are equitable, not just even. This will revitalise neglected rural areas."
Rural Services Network, Revitalising Rural Report *https://rsnonline.org.uk/revitalising-rural*

"The productivity rate in rural areas has fallen behind the England average. While there is an even spread of talent, the same cannot be said of opportunity. Levelling up would mean a young person in the rural Yorkshire Dales should have the same opportunities, be it career prospects, access to education, public services or connectivity, as someone in Leeds or Manchester."
Defra, Delivering for Rural England *Delivering for Rural England – the second report on rural proofing (publishing.service.gov.uk)*

2. Untapped potential

"Rural areas are rich in human, economic, and natural potential. In today's world, you can run a financial services company from the top of a remote valley just as well as from a town or city. With investment and access to services, we can unleash rural opportunity and ramp up rural productivity."
Defra, Unleashing rural opportunity *Unleashing rural opportunity*

3. Community resilience

"Rural communities have incredible strength and resourcefulness. When community steps up and takes control, rural enterprise can tackle isolation and loneliness, as well as provide jobs and boost the local economy."
Plunkett Foundation, https://plunkett.co.uk/who-we-are/

"A brighter future is possible. One where all rural communities are well-served, thriving, and welcoming places to live and work. Local communities can be the driving force behind this change. But communities need to be backed by government and have the services they need."
Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE) vision statement, https://acre.org.uk/our-vision-for-rural-communities

4. Thriving, resilient, innovative

"Enterprises from all sectors are the cornerstone of rural economies and help support thriving rural communities. Many rural businesses don't acknowledge they're innovative and we want to dispel that myth."
NICRE, *National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise | NICRE*

"England's rural areas play an important role in the national economy. Economic activity in rural areas is diverse, it is also becoming increasingly dynamic. Flexible, home-working is more prevalent in rural than in urban areas and tends to involve higher skilled, higher wage roles. We want to boost rural productivity for the prosperity of those living in rural areas and for the benefit of the UK economy overall."

Defra, Towards a one-nation economy, 2015 - *Towards a one nation economy: A 10-point plan for boosting productivity in rural areas (publishing.service.gov.uk)*

5. Quality of life

"Rural England is a fantastic patchwork quilt of countryside. A good quality of life comes from an open, quieter countryside that runs in its own rhythm compared with the hustle and bustle of a congested city."
Defra, Unleashing rural opportunity *Unleashing rural opportunity*

"England's rural areas are a distinct part of our national character. Flexible, home-working is more prevalent in rural than in urban areas, and tends to involve higher skilled, higher wage roles."
Defra, Towards a one-nation economy, 2015 - *Towards a one nation economy: A 10-point plan for boosting productivity in rural areas (publishing.service.gov.uk)*

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Other publications are available on the NICRE website https://nicre.co.uk/publications/

The views expressed in this report represent those of the authors and NICRE.
For further information about NICRE:

Email: nicre@newcastle.ac.uk
Visit: www.nicre.co.uk
Twitter: @NICRErural
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