

Homelessness and Rough Sleeping in The Countryside: Challenges, Collaboration, and Creative Solutions

Dr Carin Tunåker (University of Kent)

Martin Collett (English Rural)



Section 1: The Challenges

The Reality of Rural Homelessness



+24% rise in rural rough sleeping in a single year.



- **The 'Hidden' Nature:** Unlike urban centres, you rarely see people sleeping in doorways. Homelessness is often concealed in the landscape.



- **Where are they?** Sleeping in cars, barns, tents in woodland, or 'sofa surfing' with friends. These locations are out of sight and often overlooked.

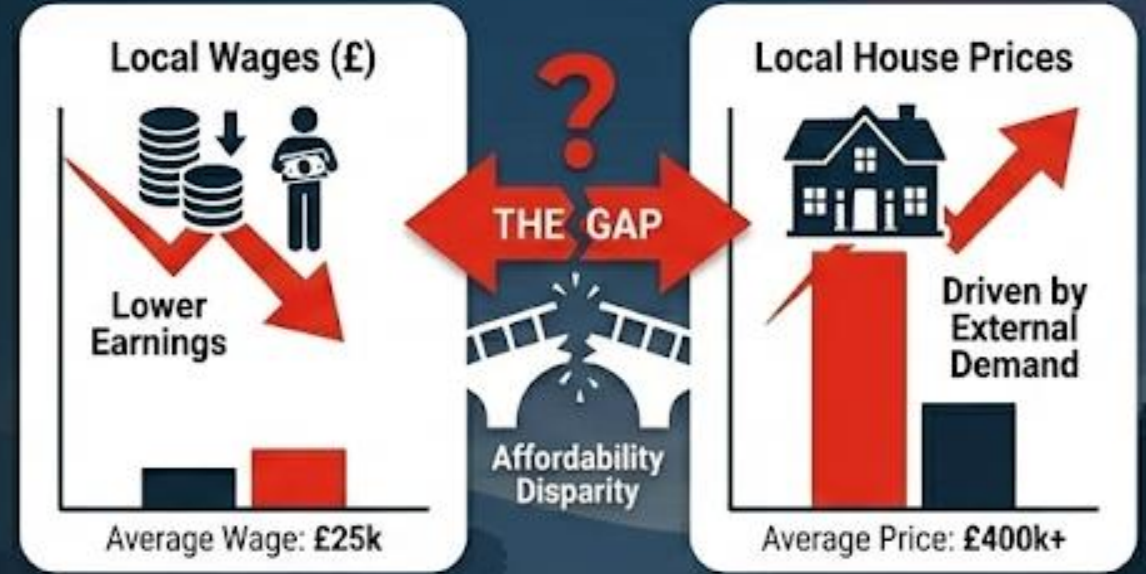


- **The Stigma:** In small communities, shame is a massive barrier. Everyone knows everyone; admitting homelessness is seen as a personal failure.



Section 1: The Challenges

Challenge A: The **Affordability** Crisis



- **The Gap:** Rural earnings are often lower than urban averages, yet house prices are driven up by external demand from second-home owners, retirees, and commuters.



- **Supply Shortage:** There is a severe lack of social housing properties in rural parishes.



- **Private Rented Sector:** High competition and few protections create a 'revolving door' of tenancy failures.



Section 1: The Challenges

Challenge B: Access to Services (The 'Distance Decay')



- **Transport Deserts:** Irregular or non-existent bus services make reaching a Job Centre or shelter nearly impossible without a car.



- **The Catch-22:** To get support, you must travel to the city. If you move for support, you lose your local support network and connections.



- **Digital Exclusion:** Poor broadband and mobile signals in remote areas hinder Universal Credit applications and housing searches.



Section 2: Collaboration

Strategic Partnerships: HAs and Local Authorities



- **The Statutory Gap:** Local Authorities have the duty to help but often lack the specialised rural reach.



- **Housing Associations (e.g. English Rural):** Act as long-term stewards, providing the physical assets and specialised management.



- **Rural Exception Sites:** Utilising unique planning rules to build affordable homes for local people on land not normally available for development.



Section 2: Collaboration

Community Collaboration: The Eyes and Ears



- **Local Intelligence:** Farmers and neighbours often identify rough sleepers (e.g. someone in a barn) before official services do.



- **Sharing Information:** Breaking the silence through trusted local channels to encourage people to seek help.



- **Overcoming NIMBYism:** When communities are involved in the design, they are more likely to support housing meant for their own neighbours.



Creative Solutions: Housing First – The Rural Pilot



-  • **The Concept:** Provide a **permanent home first**, then **wrap the support** (mental health, addiction services) around the individual.
-  • **Pilot Success:** Research in East Kent shows this works, provided support workers are mobile.
-  • **The Adaptation:** Requires '**Floating Support**' where workers travel to scattered rural properties rather than working in a centralised hub.



Creative Solutions: Mobile Support & The Turning Tides Bus



- **Taking Services to the User:** Bringing housing advice, health checks, and Wi-Fi to remote villages.



- **A Neutral Space:** Reduces stigma; entering a 'health and wellbeing' bus feels less exposing than a homeless shelter.



- **Multi-Agency Hub:** Allows different professionals (Council, NHS, DWP) to meet clients in their own locality.



Creative Solutions: Heated Hubs & Warm Spaces



- **Village Hall Utilisation:** Using existing assets to provide warmth and internet during the cost-of-living crisis.



- **Soft Entry Points:** People attend for heat or coffee, allowing support workers to build trust and offer preventative advice.



- **Preventative Reach:** Identifying people at risk of eviction before they reach a crisis point.



Section 4: What Should Government Do?

Strategic Thinking: Critiquing the New Rural Strategy



- **The Urban Bias:** Funding formulas based on 'economies of scale' penalise low-density areas.



- **Missed Opportunities:** The strategy often treats rural homelessness as a small-scale urban problem rather than a distinct issue.



- **The Need for 'Rural Proofing':** Ensuring all national housing policies are tested for rural viability before rollout.



A Call to Action: The Statement on Rural Homelessness



Specific Recognition: Government must define rural homelessness as a distinct category with dedicated, ring-fenced funding.



Ring-Fencing: Rural areas receive roughly 65% less funding per capita for homelessness—this disparity must be closed.





Local Connection: Empowering councils to prioritise local people in social housing to prevent community displacement.



Conclusion: Making the Invisible Visible



-  **Recognise** the hidden nature of the crisis.
-  **Collaborate** locally to identify need.
-  **Innovate** delivery through mobile support.
-  **Fund** specifically for rural geography.

***“We cannot solve a problem we refuse to see.
It is time to make the hidden crisis visible.”***

