
RURAL ISOLATION IN OXFORDSHIRE SURVEY REPORT



March 2022

communityfirst **100**
oxfordshire years

Supported by:

healthwatch
Oxfordshire

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1. About Community First Oxfordshire and Healthwatch Oxfordshire

[Community First Oxfordshire](#) is a community development charity which helps diverse communities and individuals to identify issues that affect them and find their own solutions. We support volunteer-led actions such as running community halls, transport schemes, community planning activities and community shops.

[Healthwatch Oxfordshire](#) is the county's independent health and social care watchdog. We collect your opinions and experiences to inform and influence those who run your health and social care services.

2. Introduction

Community First Oxfordshire (CFO) - on behalf of Healthwatch Oxfordshire - was commissioned to carry out a survey and community engagement exercise to better understand the levels of isolation felt in rural communities.

Oxfordshire is a rural county and for many rural communities accessing services physically (and in some places online) is an ongoing issue. With many key services remaining online as a consequence of the pandemic, it is important to understand the extent of rural isolation felt by individuals living in rural communities.

A survey was designed to gather anonymous information on aspects of isolation. The survey included both quantitative and qualitative questions on place, access to services, and respondents own experiences. The online and hardcopy survey was carried out in December 2021 and was supported by focus group discussions and interviews carried out in January 2022.

The survey results provide an initial benchmark on the levels of rural isolation felt in rural communities. Healthwatch Oxfordshire, where possible, will take forward the learnings made in this report.

This report will be published by Healthwatch Oxfordshire and will be promoted across relevant media channels and with all stakeholders.

A special thank you must be given to all who took part in the survey, the focus groups and interviews.

3. Methodology

In November 2021, CFO and Healthwatch Oxfordshire designed the rural isolation survey using Survey Monkey software. The link to the survey was promoted with all known contacts within a rural setting - these included all parish and town councils, housing associations, Good Neighbour Schemes, Healthwatch Oxfordshire's contacts, the voluntary and community sector database of contacts, and Oxfordshire's Local Authorities. Social media was also used

to promote the survey throughout November and December. The deadline for responses was 20 December 2021.

To ensure we gathered views from people who may not be online, we offered hardcopies and support filling out the survey if needed. In addition, we held two online focus groups with Good Neighbour Scheme coordinators and housing association residents, along with several interviews held with five youth groups, a member of the Transport Access Group, and Vale Community Impact (an independent advice centre based in Wantage). The focus groups and interviews were held with young and old people who were linked with supporting other more vulnerable people in their communities (i.e. Good Neighbour Schemes, Transport Access Group, Vale Community Impact and housing association residents acting as community ambassadors).

The focus group discussions and interviews were recorded and notes were taken. The main points from these discussions are included separately under Key Findings in this report.

To aid the survey design and the discussions we used a **working definition of rural isolation**, as set out below:

Isolation is often defined as having little to no social contact, whether that is family, friends, access to services or community involvement. It can be both a physical and mental feeling. Social isolation can lead to loneliness, though this is not always the case. Rural isolation can be made worse by a lack of access to key services, e.g. poor transport services and/or key services that are based in urban areas rather than rural places.

4. Executive Summary

Isolation is felt by many people of all ages, living in both rural and urban settings. As set out in the working definition above, isolation can be both a physical and mental feeling. The findings in this survey do not necessarily show that isolation is felt more strongly in a rural setting. However, the feeling can be exacerbated *by* a rural setting if physical access to services is an issue and the individual does not feel part of the community in which they live.

Oxfordshire is a rural county, and although some villages and towns have relatively good public transport services and the majority of rurally-based residents own private cars, there are households in almost all rural communities across the county that do not have access to a private car.¹ At the same time, there are rural communities with little to no public transport options, which hinders residents in households without private cars from physically accessing services. The data derived from this survey must be considered as a piece of the picture, not the whole, on rural isolation.

It is also important to understand the local differences between rural and urban classification when assessing the key findings here. The main difference can be seen in the demographics;

¹ Oxfordshire Insight, ONS Census 2011 table KS404 (on households with cars by parish) from www.nomisweb.co.uk

older people are more likely to live in rural communities than younger people - 42% of the county's population aged 65+ live in rural Oxfordshire,² which brings its own distinct opportunities and challenges to rural isolation.

Key Findings

488 people replied to the survey and a further 40 individuals took part in the focus groups and interview work. **In total, 528 people participated in this survey work.**

The key findings of the survey and engagement work are placed under subheadings:

- **Place and Access to Services**
- **How You Feel**
- **About You**

The key findings are based on the responses to each of the 19 questions in the survey. Not all respondents answered every question and several questions offered multiple choice responses for each respondent.

The key points from both the survey and outreach activity are set out below.

Place and Access to Services

- There was a near even split in respondent numbers and where they lived in the four rural districts in the county. Of these respondents, the majority (369) said that they lived in a village and 40 lived in a rural hamlet or farm.
- Overwhelmingly, respondents used their own vehicles as their main form of transport (402), however, 14 respondents had no access to private or public transport and 12 respondents used community transport.
- Different forms of transport are used by respondents to access key services. The most common mode was their own vehicles. However, buses, walking and taxis were also noted. Online usage was cited as the second or third choice for accessing shop/groceries, social/leisure facilities, pharmacist/chemist and banking.

It is important to mention that for all 13 services listed some respondents noted that they 'can't access' these services. This ranged from 1 respondent for shop/groceries to 19 respondents for sports activities/gym.

- Most respondents lived between 6-10 miles or further from services such as a college, work, hospital/outpatients and a bank. Apart from primary schools,

² Oxfordshire Insight (ONS 2015), https://insight.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/system/files/documents/Older%20People%20JSNA%202018%20Oct18%20v2_0.pdf

respondents lived between 1-5 miles from their nearest GP surgery, pharmacists, dentist, post office and sport activities/gym.

- Out of 435 replies, 427 had access to the internet. 7 respondents said they had access but no device to use it and 1 participant had no access to the internet. Reasons for not having access were due to poor internet connection (12) and preferring face to face contact (10). Comments in the interviews and focus groups noted that most people had some form of access to the internet, but affordability and knowledge on how to use the internet was an issue for a small number of individuals.
- Internet use was important for participants to connect with family and friends (389), online banking (370), online shopping (355), exploring/researching online (345) and booking GP appointments (215).
- The two common forms of localised social media used by respondents were Facebook groups (243) and community websites (193).

How you feel

- Respondents stated that they either knew their immediate neighbours reasonably well (217) or very well (120). 88 respondents said that they did not know their neighbours very well (85) or not at all (3).
- Most respondents experienced face to face contact daily (187) or a few days a week (149). However, 54 respondents experienced face to face contact on a weekly basis and 35 respondents experienced this on a fortnightly, monthly, or less often basis.
- Respondents were involved in a wide range of activities. A good number of respondents said they were involved in the community through volunteering (147), online through local social media channels (142) and exercise/sports classes (107) and through social groups (97).
- In contrast, some respondents cited work responsibilities (108), a lack of confidence (63), physical health reasons (56) and transport availability (50), which prevented them from getting involved in the wide range of community activities. 24 respondents cited caring responsibilities as the reason for not getting involved.
- The most varied response to the four statements on socialising and belonging to the community, was the first statement 'I find it easy to meet with people locally who share my hobbies or interests'. 119 respondents disagreed and 42 respondents strongly disagreed. Asking a neighbour or contact for help in an emergency, speaking regularly to people and feeling you belonged where you live, saw a higher number of respondents agreeing with these statements.

- When asked if they ever felt lonely, 132 respondents stated they sometimes felt lonely, and 44 respondents stated they often felt lonely.³
- There were 206 comments were put forward by respondents on their experience of rural isolation, and all were specific to the individual, which highlights the individuality of the feeling of isolation (and loneliness). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that despite the high numbers of car ownership, the most common experience shared (by 63 respondents) was regarding the lack of bus services/transport as affecting the sense of isolation. 11 respondents cited that volunteering in their community helped them feel involved.

About you

(Age, gender, and disability)

- The majority of the survey respondents were aged between 50 and 70 (208) or over 70 (137). 59 respondents were aged between 30-50 and only 9 cited the age range of 18-30 and 1 respondent was under 18 years of age. A higher number of survey respondents were female (280).
- Most respondents did not cite a disability, however 55 said they had a physical or mobility impairment and 51 cited a long-term condition. 31 survey respondents cited a mental health condition.

Focus Groups and interviews – key points and comments

Two focus groups and seven interviews were held with Good Neighbour Scheme volunteers, a group of housing association residents, five visits to rurally based youth groups and clubs (to gain a young perspective), a member of the Transport Access Group and Vale Community Impact (an independent advice centre based in Wantage).

- Poor access to services because of a lack of public transport was the most common issue raised in the focus groups and in the interviews. Young people were often reliant on their parents who work for transport, which limited their ability to get out to where their friends and activities were.
- There was discussion about how people who felt isolated were identified, and the difficulty in reaching people who were often invisible either because they were house-bound, lacked confidence to use services near them or chose to not get involved or reach out themselves.
- Youth club members highlighted the lack of things for them do and the difficulty in fitting in to an older person's community or one in which has activities for older people or young families but not for those in their late-teens/early-20s.

³Oxfordshire Insight, Oxfordshire County Council 2021,
https://insight.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/system/files/documents/JSNA_Final_20210331.pdf

- Many young people felt they had no informal places to meet up. The significance of 'informal' spaces was an important point. Some young people talked about the need for community events, like car boot sales, which brought people of all ages together.
- Some younger women and a single man were concerned about their safety when they were out. The safety issue meant that at times they felt isolated.
- Many interviewees thought the topic of isolation was complex, and there was no one solution that would fit all. Support for people feeling rural isolation should be tailored to their specific needs.
- There were several comments made about communities or groups within communities, where exclusion or a lack of belonging was felt. This was often because of a difference in culture or education and/or because of a lack of diversity and wealth disparities. These differences exacerbated the sense that some individuals had a lack of voice in the community.
- Many interviewees liked living in a rural area and enjoyed the sense of community despite some of the limitations. Several interviewees had immediate and wider family and friend networks because they had lived in the community for many years. Some interviewees mentioned the impact of new housing developments to their communities and how it sometimes destabilises the existing community or communities.

Comments made by focus group attendees and interviewees included:

“The bus service is where lonely people can have a conversation”

“Allow people to get together who can relate to each other.... benches”

“There is a class divide in Oxfordshire – isolation is for the have nots”

“A lack of confidence can impact access to services”

“Support needs to be tailored to the individual... even three solutions won't catch most people”

“Everyone has been isolated by Covid”

“It’s difficult to navigate information about services and groups. Information needs knitting together”

“A welcome group is important...British culture can be isolating as there are fewer social gatherings and events [for younger people]”

5. Conclusions and Learning

The survey and interview data provided here offers only a partial understanding of rural isolation. The survey work was not exhaustive, and there are people that we did not or could not reach within the scope of this project. However, the response rate to the survey and engagement work was relatively extensive and has highlighted the broad and complex nature of rural isolation.

When understanding the complexity of rural isolation, we must take account of many factors which can lead to different forms of isolation. We also need to understand that rural isolation is felt differently by everyone in different ways and at different times in their lives.

With the above in mind, we have four learnings for which should be acknowledged by local authorities, Public Health teams, health practitioners and by the voluntary and community sector as an approach to take when strategizing and/or working in rural areas.

The four learnings are:

- 1. A multifaceted approach:** the symptoms and causes of rural isolation are complex, are often felt differently by each person and may not be visible at first glance. Therefore, it is important to spend time understanding what the issue is before sourcing a solution. Instead, the approach should be long term and build in time to map and understand what the issue is, the place, and the people before designing solutions. This approach is strengthened when the lived-experience and local voice is at the centre.
- 2. Public transport and local planning:** there are people in every rural community without access to their own vehicle and who are reliant on public or alternative transport. Accessible and affordable public transport appears to be a key factor in reducing people’s perceived isolation, despite high levels of car ownership. Parish and town councils could be brought into discussions on local transport plans and local development plans at an earlier stage to help connect the local voice and knowledge within the planning system.
- 3. Support local community solutions:** The survey data highlighted the breadth of community activities and groups. These formal and informal groups offer a link in for people feeling socially isolated either directly or indirectly. The majority, if not all, of

these groups and activities are volunteer-led and without overbearing them, they should be supported to continue to adapt and thrive.

- 4. Accessible information and services:** the survey data showed that information and services are accessed in multiple ways (face to face, online, through local groups within the community and hard copies on notice boards and through doors). It is, as a result, essential that multiple ways to access key information and key services are made available for all people to access their services.

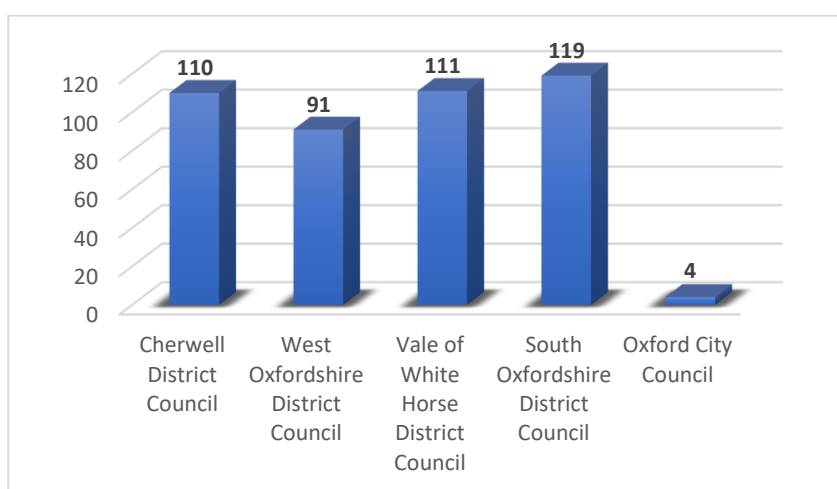
6. Data analysis of survey responses

- The total number of online survey respondents was **488**, however not all respondents answered all questions.
- 476 respondents gave permission for their anonymous comments to be shared.
- Therefore, the report gives the number of respondents who actively engaged with each question (highlighted in green underneath each question heading).

Questions about place and access to services

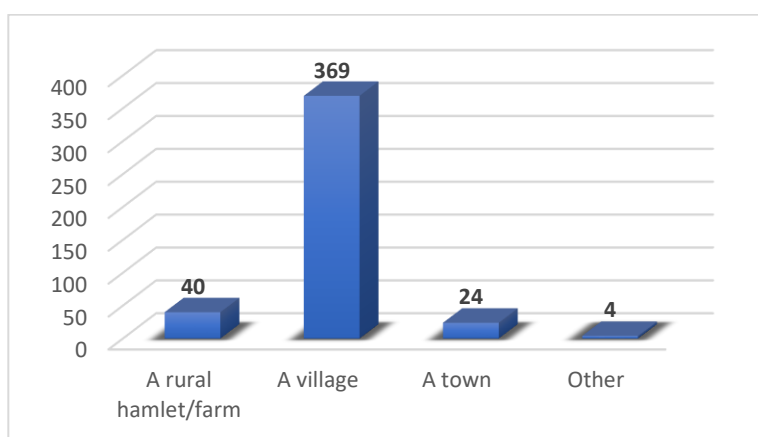
1. Within which District Council area are you based?

(435 RESPONDENTS)

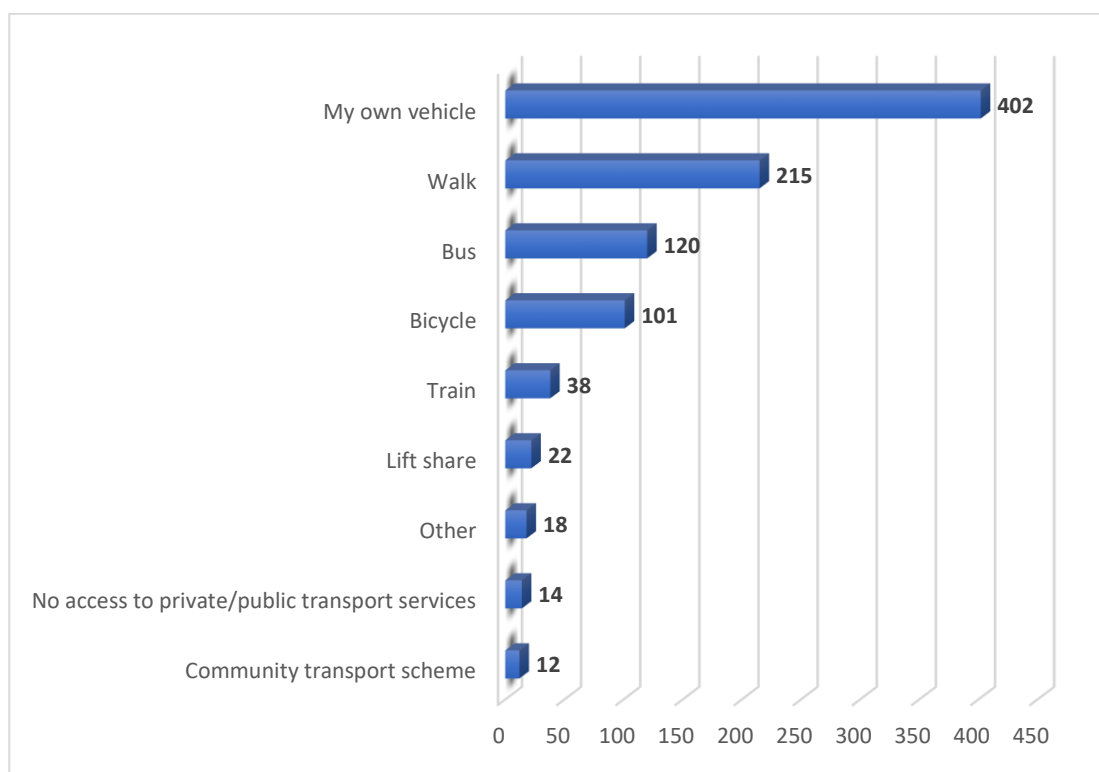


2. Where do you live?

(437 RESPONDENTS)



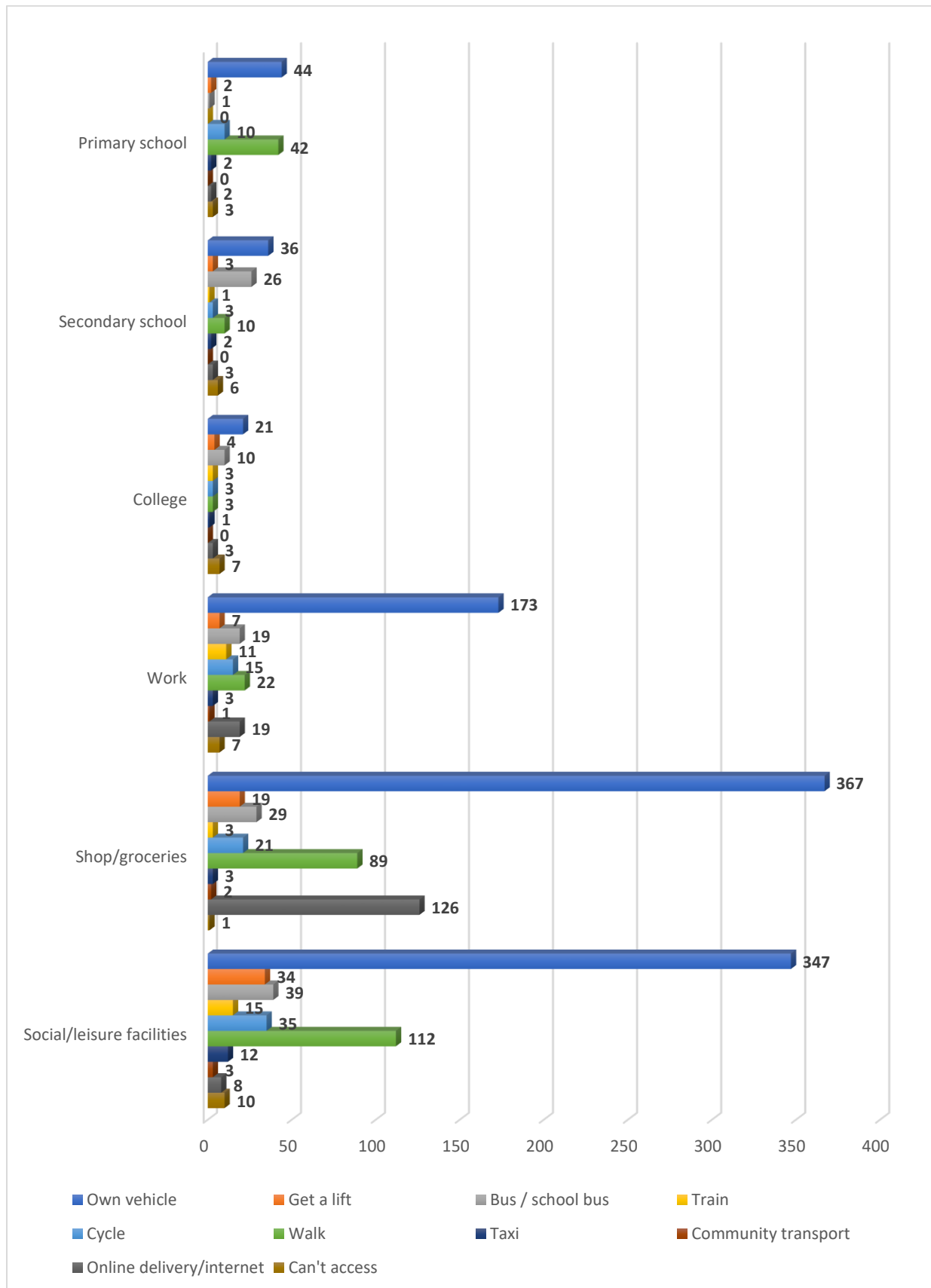
3. What form of transport do you use where you live?
(437 RESPONDENTS – 942 TOTAL CHOICES)

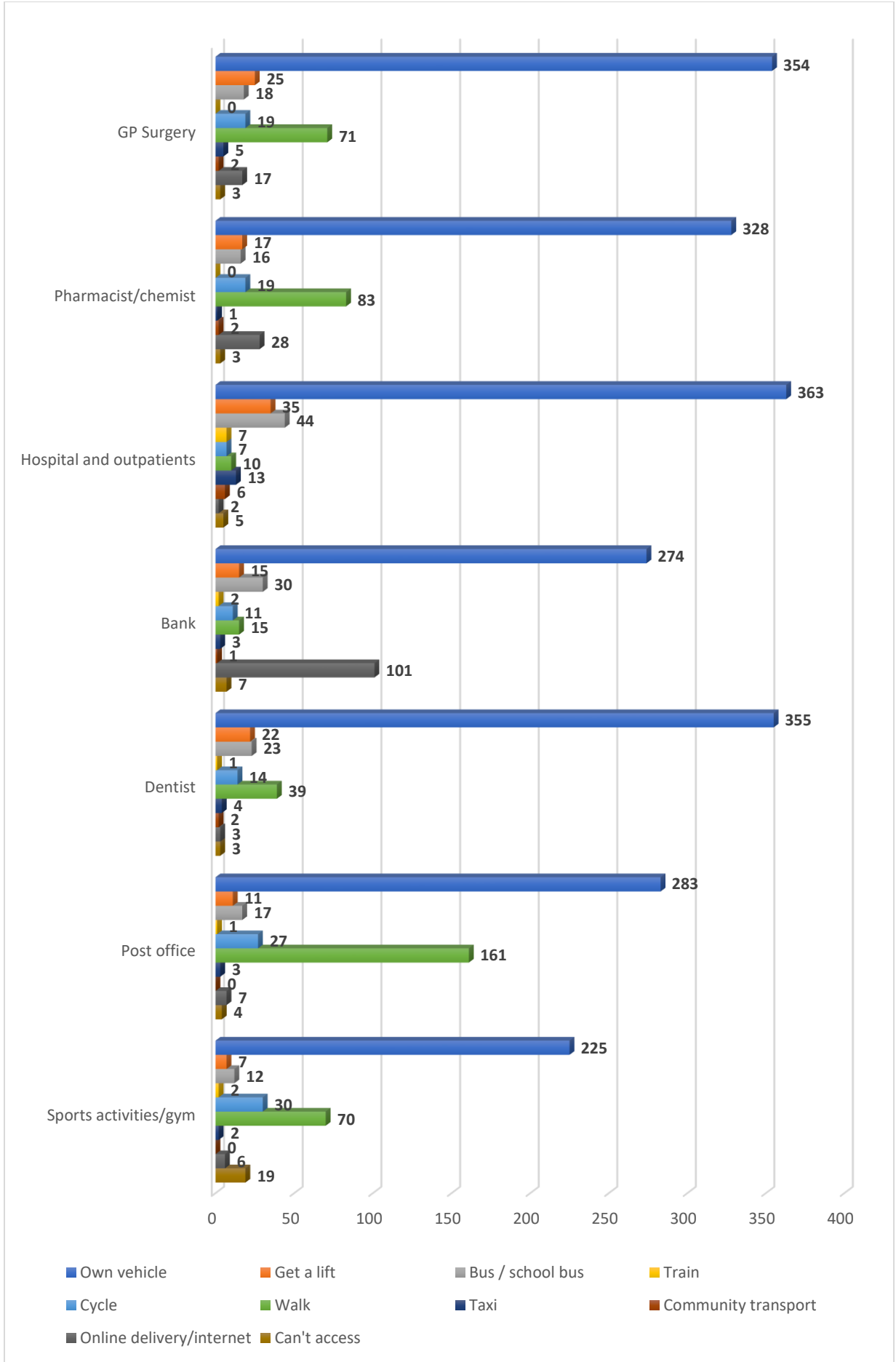


Other – 18 respondents:

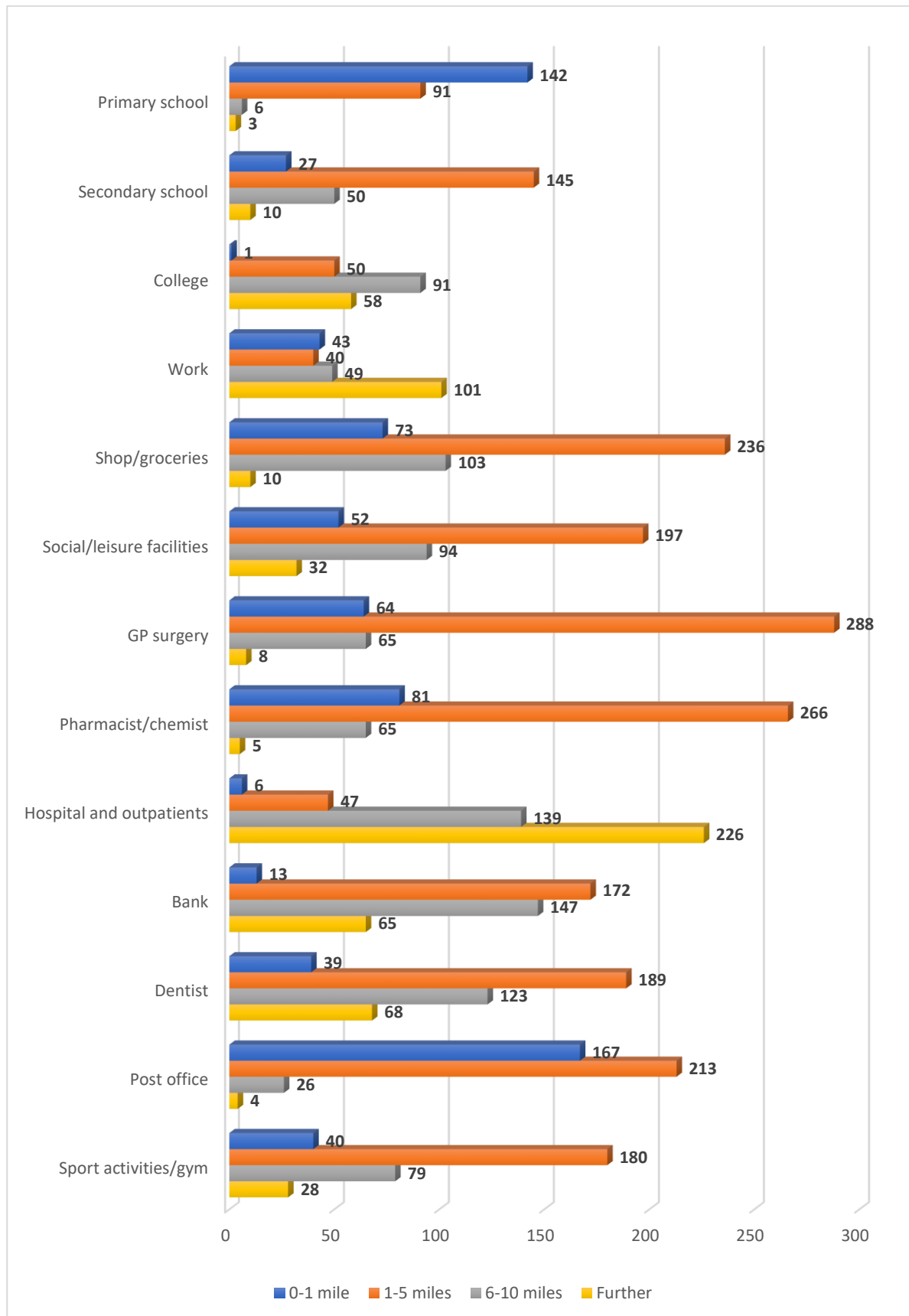
Lift from family/friends	7	Taxi	3
No buses locally	2	Bus route no longer supported by council	1
Park and ride	1	Hospital transport	1
Wheelchair / e-scooter	1	Volunteer driver	1
Horse	1		

4. What services/places do you use and how do you access them?
 (435 RESPONDENTS - GRAPH SPLIT OVER TWO PAGES)

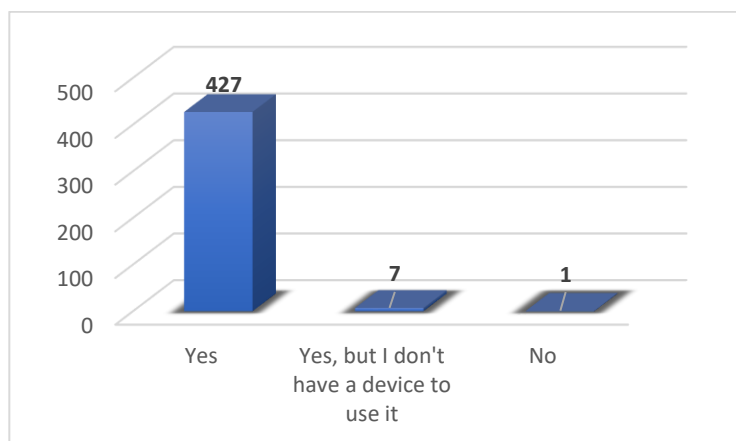




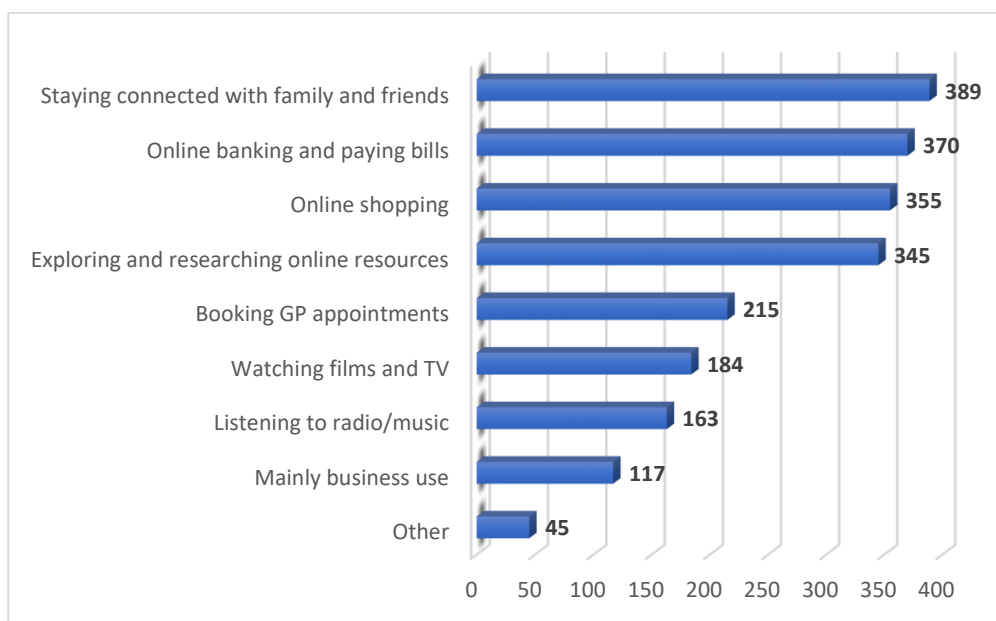
5. How far away are these services/places from where you live?
(433 RESPONDENTS)



6. Do you have access to the internet?
(435 RESPONDENTS)

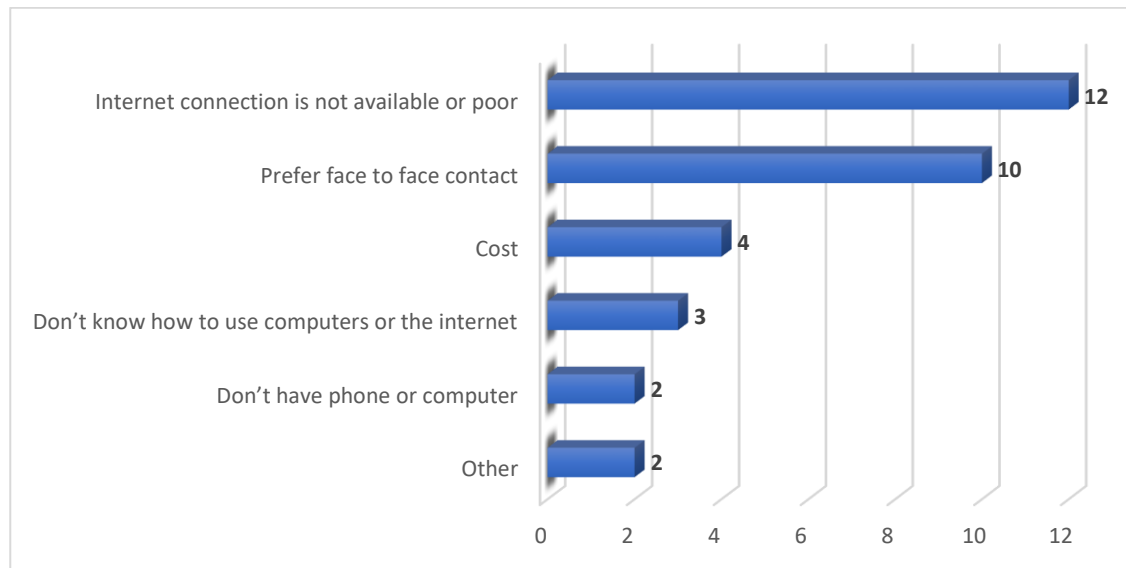


7. If you have access to the internet, what do you normally use it for?
(431 RESPONDENTS – 2183 TOTAL CHOICES)



Other – 45 respondents:			
Volunteer/charity work	9	Gaming	4
Checking e-mails	3	News and weather	3
Parish Council business	3	Hobbies	3
Booking other appointments	3	Travel information	2
Online pharmacy/prescriptions	2	Online teaching	2
General information	2	Online education	1
Academic seminars/conferences	1	Legal/official business	1
Health research	1	Making/creating websites & blogs	1
Church meetings/services	1	Arranging football matches	1
Rsearching family history	1	Booking holidays	1
Photo storage	1	Adult content	1
Everything	1	Daughter uses it on my behalf	1

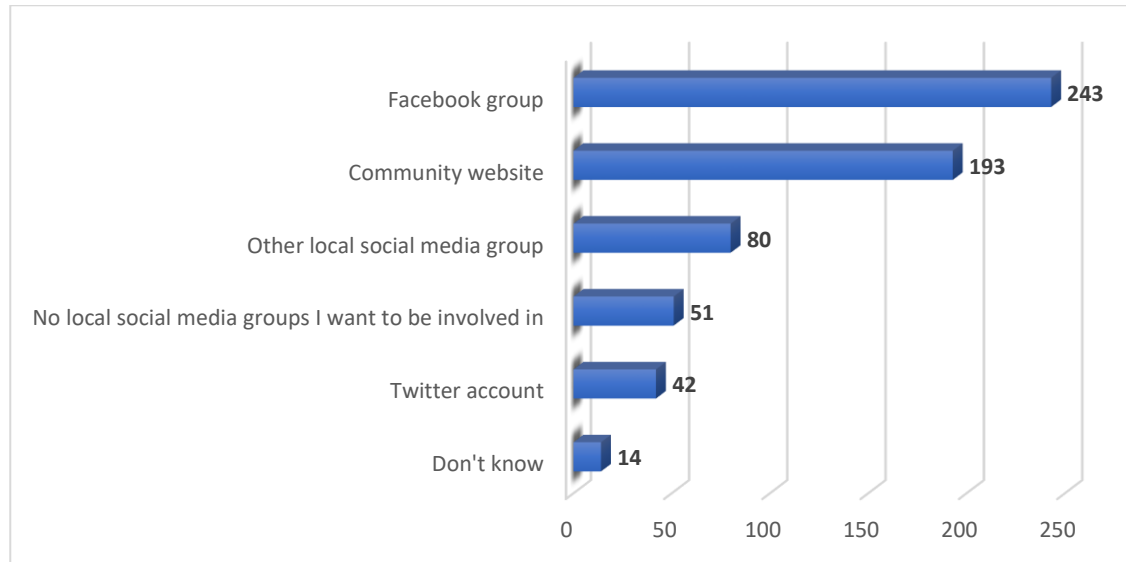
8. If you do not have access to the internet, what are the reasons that you do not?
(22 RESPONDENTS – 33 TOTAL CHOICES)



Other – 2 respondents:

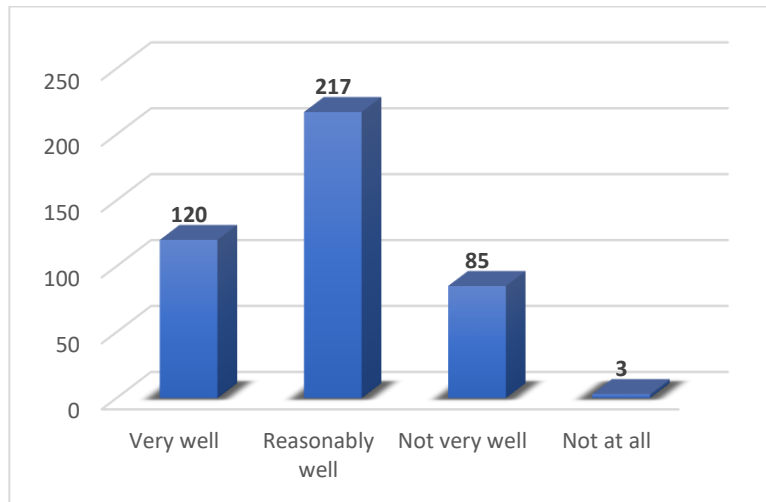
Only have access through phone	1	Partially sighted	1
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9. Do you use local social media outlets and, if so, which?
(392 RESPONDENTS – 623 TOTAL CHOICES)

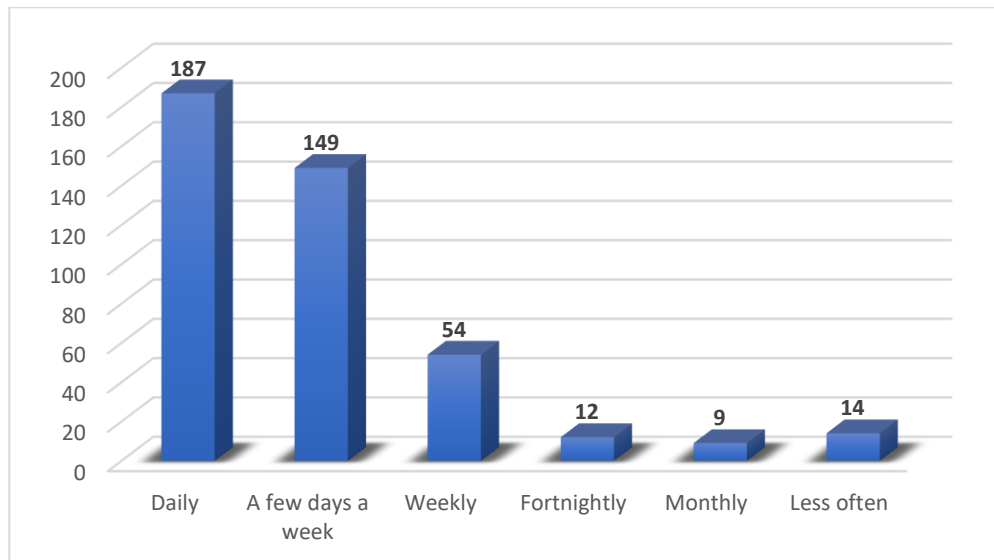


Questions about how you feel

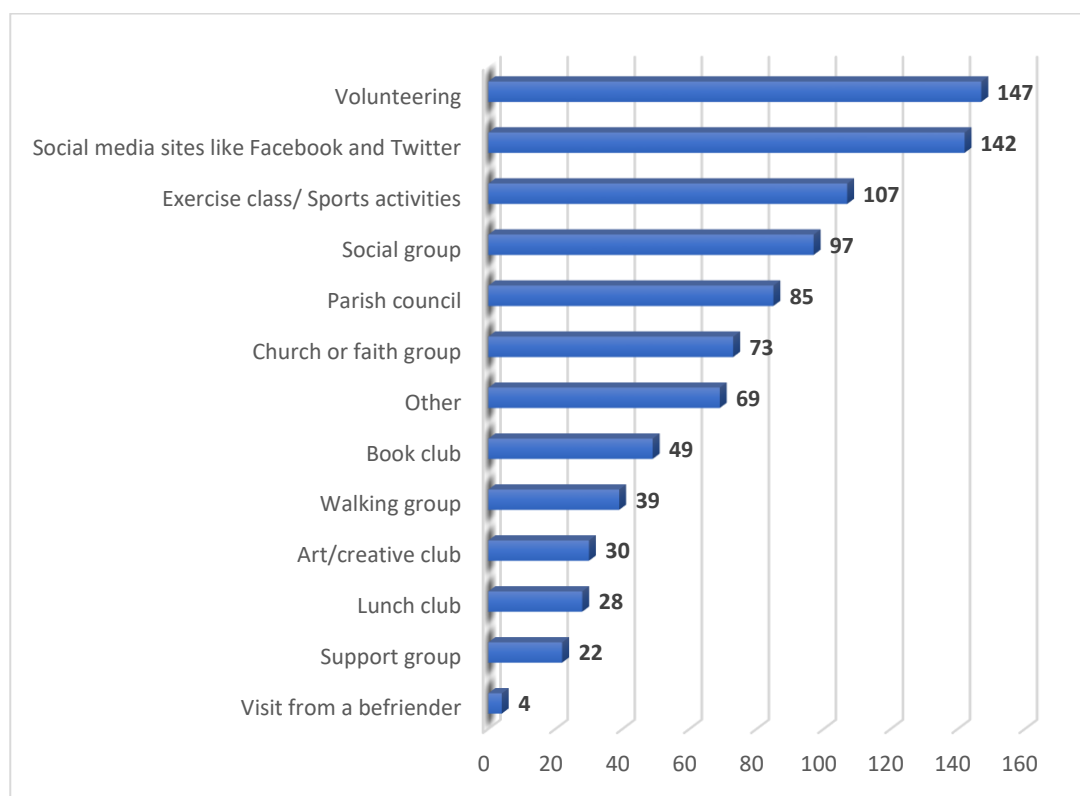
10. How well do you know your immediate neighbours?
(425 RESPONDENTS)



11. How often do you usually have face to face contact with other people (e.g., friends, relatives, acquaintances, neighbours)?
(425 RESPONDENTS)



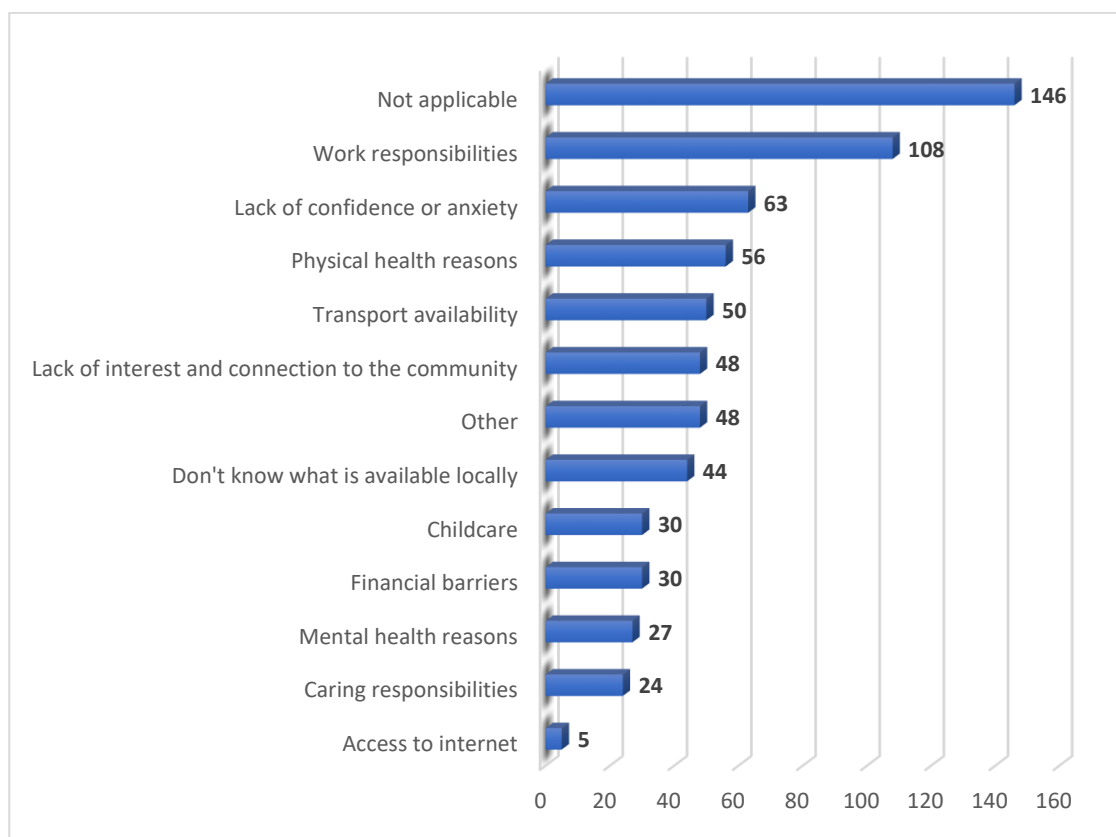
12. Are you involved in any activities in the community?
(326 RESPONDENTS – 892 TOTAL CHOICES)



Other – 69 respondents:			
Village Hall Committee	9	Film club	5
Garden club	4	WI	4
City/District Council	3	Local newsletter/magazine	3
Pub/lunch visits	3	Charitable Trust	2
Local communities	2	WhatsApp group	2
Community garden	2	History group	2
Bellringing	2	Local politics	1
Running community events	1	Writing group	1
Nature group	1	Conservation group	1
Climate group	1	Archaeology group	1
Wine club	1	Road safety group	1
Bikesafe	1	Dog walking group	1
Toddler group	1	Youth club	1
Village society	1	Local band	1
Life drawing	1	Scouting	1
CAG	1	Heritage railway	1
Community choir	1	Slimming World	1
Age Concern	1	Litter picking	1
Horse riding	1	Cricket	1
Swimming	1	Social events	1
Wargames	1	Church events	1
Library	1	Village market	1
NFU	1	CLA	1

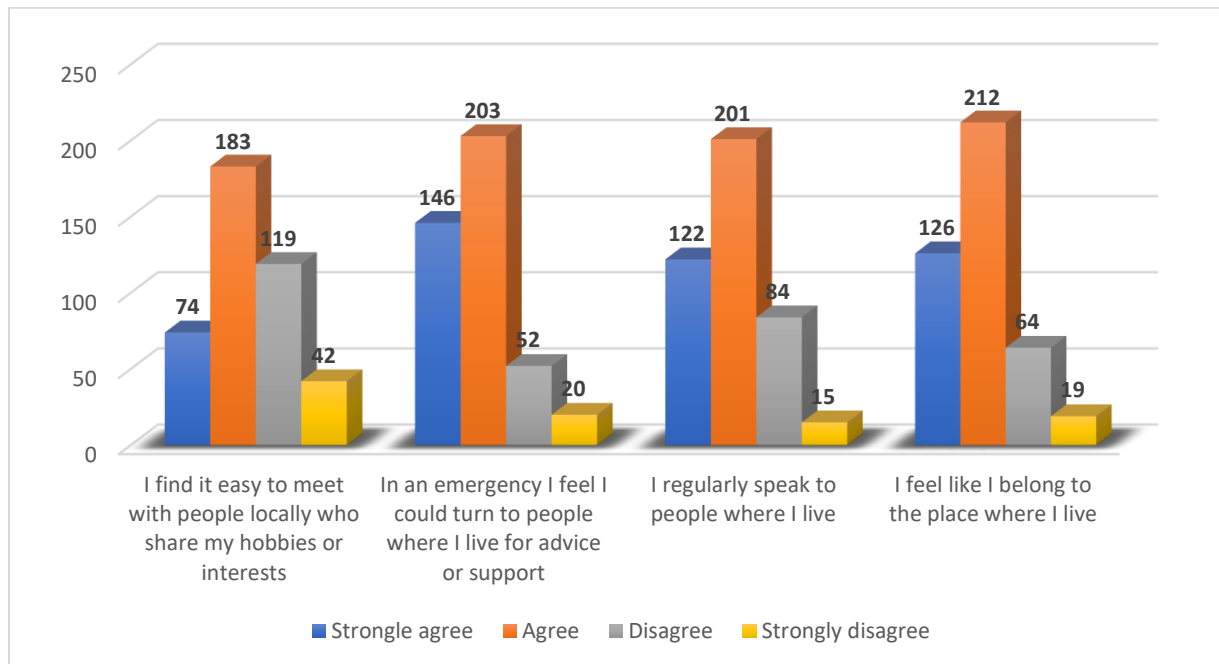
13. What do you think are the main things that prevent you from getting involved in community activities where you live? (Please tick three main reasons).

(412 RESPONDENTS – 679 TOTAL CHOICES)

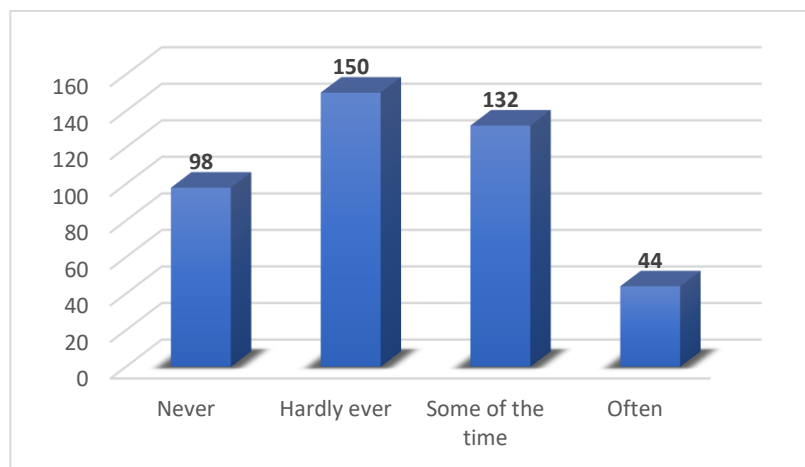


Other – 48 respondents:			
Lack of time	12	Not much going on of interest	6
COVID	4	Get involved as much as want to	3
Don't feel welcome in community	2	Prefer my own company	2
Age	2	Lack of regular bus service	2
Always have to travel to venue	1	No safe cycle routes	1
No car	1	Class divisions	1
People	1	Changing social dynamic of community	1
Too many old people not involving other age groups	1	If I want activities, organise them myself	1
Not enough volunteers	1	Make own arrangements	1
Focal point for meeting up	1	Pub closed	1
When you don't have children there are unseen barriers that prevent involvement	1	Wife not interested	1
Not got round to it	1		

14. To what extent do you agree with the following statements?
(424 RESPONDENTS)



15. How often do you feel lonely?
(424 RESPONDENTS)



16. Please make any other comments about your experience of rural isolation or what supports you to stay connected and not feel isolated.
(206 RESPONDENTS)

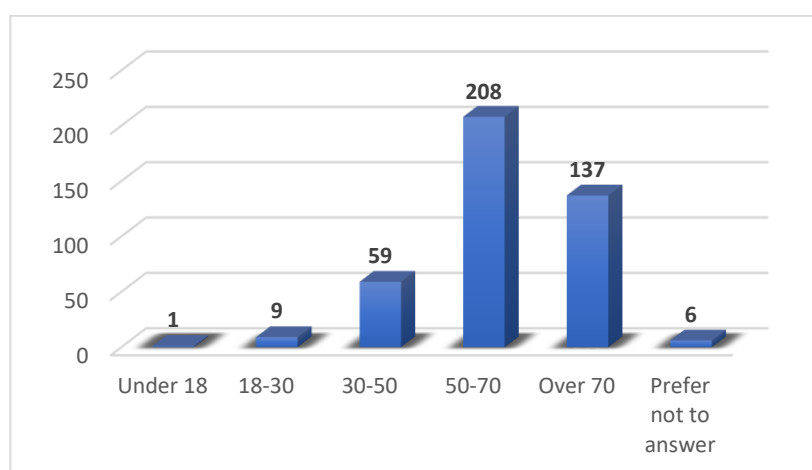
Note: respondents were free to make any comment they felt appropriate. In most cases, we have placed similar and recurring comments under a single-themed comment (e.g. lack of bus service/public transport).

Comments – 206 respondents / 231 thoughts:			
Lack of bus service/public transport increases isolation	63	Volunteering helps me feel involved in the community	11
Live in a friendly busy village with sense of community/groups	8	COVID restrictions have had an impact / lockdown has been isolating	7
Local café/shop would help	7	Poor internet/mobile connection	7
Rural life should be preserved for those who choose to live there	7	Living with partner is huge help	6
Would be hard without a car	5	Enjoy my own company	5
Keeping busy prevents me feeling isolated	4	Internet connection is the key	4
Can be more isolation in towns/cities than the countryside	4	Physical issues/old age now limit my activities	4
Walking the dog helps	4	No-one lives near me/don't know many people	4
Recently widowed	3	If struggling financially it can be hard to fit into affluent villages	3
Lack of finances	3	Need better cycle paths/footpaths	3
You get out what you put in	3	Have friends/family close by	3
Poor access to healthcare	3	No activities in my village	2
Activities tend to be focused on retired people/parents	2	If not born and bred in the village, difficult to become part of it	2
Health issues make it hard to form and maintain friendships	2	Need to maintain landlines due to poor mobile signals	2
Good neighbours are a big help	2	Pub/churches are significant as meeting places	2
My faith keeps me strong	2	Rail service good but expensive	1
Lack of sports facilities	1	Local pub gone	1
Problems on local roads can make you feel isolated	1	Working from home can make you feel isolated	1
The need to travel can prevent getting involved	1	When I had teenagers they found rural life isolating and frustrating	1
It is assumed everyone uses Facebook which excludes those who don't	1	Farmers are isolated	1
Activities can seem close but still out of reach due to distance/time	1	Village activities run by same people, often cliquey and wealthy	1
People often too busy/cliquey	1	Village is unfriendly	1
Hard to fit in when you first move somewhere	1	People move into village and take over, excluding existing residents	1
Friends my age have own family lives	1	Communities need to be less structured	1
Loneliness not just lockdown but due to personal situations	1	When wife is at work I feel like a prisoner in my own home	1

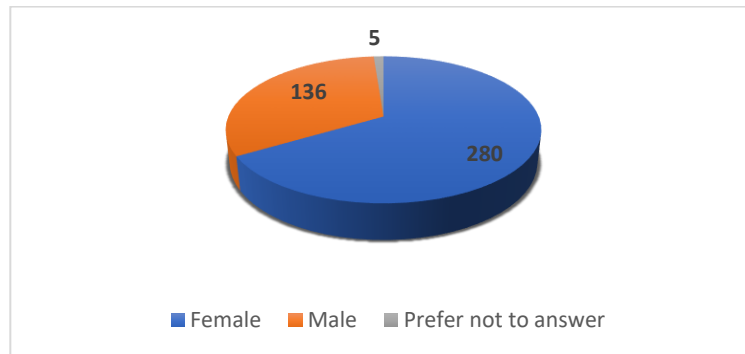
Unsure about busy venues once lockdown ends	1	Not many other older people in the village	1
Village is growing which makes it hard to keep 'local' feel	1	Rural location makes it difficult to find carers for our son	1
Carer for disabled child so difficult to meet people	1	Cancer treatment means not leaving the house	1
Major interests lie outside the village	1	Not due to location but lack of interest in getting involved	1
People helpful at start of pandemic but then faded away	1	Will participate more once retired	1
Run a seniors group and many members feel isolated	1	Difficut to access COVID booster due to travel barriers	1
Volunteer groups support the village	1	After being widowed, I joined groups to feel involved	1
Village newsletters/magazines are important for information	1	Rural communities have become self sufficient which lockdown showed	1
Important to have cultural activities in rural locations	1	Challenge is to find stimulating intellectual activities	1
Easier in summer	1	Having jobs which keeps you connected helps	1
When lived in London had Taxicard which helped keep me connected	1	People in rural areas treated like second class citizens but seen as lucky	1
Lack of understanding about difficulties facing rural people	1	County/District Councils have very little interest in villages	1
Government don't seem concerned about village life and do best to ruin it	1		

About you

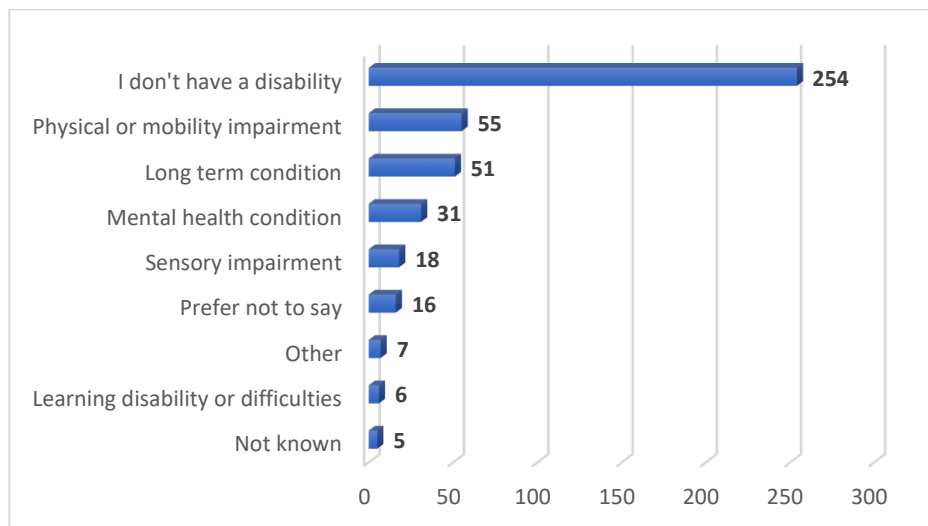
17. What age group are you in?
(420 RESPONDENTS)



18. What gender do you identify with?
(421 RESPONDENTS)



19. Do you have any of the following disabilities?
(374 RESPONDENTS – 443 TOTAL CHOICES)



Other – 7 respondents:			
Hearing difficulties	3	Dyslexia	2
Epilepsy	1	Broken knee	1

7. Appendix

Focus groups and interview questions

These questions were used during the focus groups and interviews as a means to guide conversations and not to restrict conversations.

1. What do we mean by rural isolation?

Working definition: Isolation is often defined as little to no social contact with family or friends; access to services or community involvement. It can be both a physical and mental feeling. Social isolation can lead to loneliness, though this is not always the case. Rural isolation can be made worse by a lack of access to key services e.g., poor transport services and/or key services that are based in urban areas rather than rural places.

Is this what rural isolation means to you? Does it mean something different?

2. How would you describe where you live?

- What services do you have access to in your community?
- How do you access services in and out of your community?
- How do you stay connected to others in your community (physically/virtually)?
- Who would you turn to in your community if there was an emergency?

3. Do you feel like you 'belong' to the/a community in your village/town?

4. Do you feel isolated sometimes?

5. What would improve any feelings you have of isolation?

6. Is there anything else you want to add/highlight/question?

8. Contact details

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W: www.communityfirstoxon.org

Follow us on [Twitter](#) | Find us on [Facebook](#)

Registered in England Company no. 2461552 Registered charity no. 900560

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P: 01865 520520

W: www.healthwatchoxfordshire.co.uk

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Registered in England Company no. 8758793 Registered charity no. 1172554