

Mapping Social Connections of Diverse Young People in Rural Scotland – Project Report

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1. Introduction:

The **Mapping Social Connections of Diverse Young People in Rural Scotland project** explores young people's social connections in rural places, their role in fulfilling young people's economic, social, and emotional needs, and the impact on young people's desire to stay in or return to rural places. Youth out-migration in Scotland’s rural communities remains a significant concern, and [increasing levels of youth retention](#), in-migration, and return are seen as key to longer-term population sustainability. While youth outmigration in rural places is often linked to [limited employment and housing opportunities](#) and constraints of services in rural places, evidence also shows that experiences of [belonging](#), and [family connections](#) along with [higher education and career development](#) are important in shaping young people's mobility patterns. This project therefore provides novel insights into the functionality of social networks among young people (16 – 24) and their role in supporting their economic, social, and health needs and well-being in rural Scotland. In particular, this project aims to:

- Learn about **patterns of young people’s social networks** in rural places and their role in facilitating or hindering staying or returning to rural places (sections 4.1 and 4.4)
- Understand **the role and type of young people’s social connections** and their role in supporting the fulfilment of their economic and social needs, access to social services (e.g. housing), and emotional well-being (sections 4.2 and 4.3)
- To provide new qualitative insights into **particular characteristics of social networks that young people have** in their possession, with a particular focus on their level of trust and reciprocity (sections 4.1)

- To assess **barriers** in developing social networks among young people and how these impact their sense of belonging and desire to stay in or return to rural areas (section 4.3)

The research team comprises Dr Emilia Pietka-Nykaza and Dr Rosie Alexander from the University of the West of Scotland, and Helen Baillot and Leyla Karloff from Queen Margaret University in Edinburgh. The data collection for the project took place in three towns (Aness, Dingwall, and Fortrose) in the Inner Moray Firth of the Scottish Highlands and in the Orkney Islands, an island group situated off the North coast of Scotland, between March and May 2024. To generate data, 6 participatory workshops were conducted with young people aged 16-25, with the overall sample including 21 young people aged 16 -18 in the Inner Moray Firth area and 9 young people between 16 and 25 in Orkney.

2. Social connections and mobility patterns in a rural context:

Migration is an integral part of rural communities and [rural living](#). Growing diversities of rural mobilities including labour migration, transnational and internal 'lifestyle' migration, return migration, and the resettlement of humanitarian refugees. [These mobilities](#) re-shape the ethnic and national composition of the rural communities and have an impact on community relations in rural.

Scotland faces significant population challenges, particularly, but not exclusively in rural and island communities. Rural depopulation means that many rural communities are growing smaller in absolute numbers but also aging as younger populations are leaving the area, local birth rate is declining, and residents aging. Scotland is not alone in experiencing depopulation, as almost two-thirds of [rural regions are shrinking](#). In addition to demographic changes in rural areas in Scotland, growing experiences of [poverty in rural places](#) with [limited access to welfare services](#) put more emphasis on the role of social and community networks in maintaining the economic, social, and emotional needs of rural communities. These social, economic, and demographic changes within rural places are especially important in the case of young people who remain central to rural livelihoods. While youth outmigration from rural places is often linked to [limited employment and housing](#) opportunities and constraints of services in rural places, the role of social relationships has had relatively limited focus. At the same time, the role and importance of [family connections](#) and a [sense of 'belonging'](#) have been identified as important factors motivating staying and returning behaviours. Further, some studies have illustrated how outmigration from rural places plays a strong part in young people's [transition into adulthood](#) and that young people's migration patterns [are embedded in local contexts and cultures](#), such that outmigration may be [part of the life course of individual migrants](#), and does [not preclude later return mobility](#).

This research sought to provide greater insights into the nature of young people's social connections in rural areas and their role in shaping young people's attachment to rural place and their (im)mobilities. This research draws on extensive tradition and evidence of the role of social connections in shaping the experiences of international migrants, with a particular focus on the role of social networks in shaping [migrant's experiences following migration](#) as well as [their embedding and integration](#) experiences. Such literature identifies how [social networks can provide important assets](#) in providing instrumental support, assistance, and connection to welfare services in rural contexts. At the same time limited access to social networks can result in [social isolation and loneliness](#)). In this research, we applied the concept of [mobility](#) to recognise fluidity, the complex and ongoing character of young people's mobility patterns in rural places (e.g. moving out/staying/returning).

3. Project Methodology:

The study focused on one accessible rural area in Scotland: the Inner **Moray Firth area** of the Scottish Highlands, and one remote rural area: **Orkney**. To generate the data, 6 participatory workshops (3 in each location) with young rural residents aged 16 -24 were conducted. The overall sample included 21 young people aged 16 -18 in the Inner Moray Firth area and 9 young people aged 16-24 in Orkney.

The design of participatory workshop was adopted based on innovative [methodology for mapping social connections](#) that combine participatory activities and group discussions. The participatory tasks include number of problems-based scenarios where participants are asked to identify specific people and organisations that they perceive as important in providing emotional and practical help and access to public services. In the workshops for this project, young people were asked about the kinds of people or organisations that they would approach for help in three different scenarios: looking for a job, finding a place to live, and if they were concerned about a friend or family member's wellbeing. The social connections generated in this way were used as a proxy indicator for the range of connections perceived as pertinent by each participant group to fulfil their economic and emotional needs, as well as supporting access to support services.

Sample selection:

- In Orkney, information about the project was circulated online and via local media (including through an interview with the local radio station). This generated interest from five participants. In addition the research team approached a local youth support organisation, and a third workshop took place with four participants connected to this organisation.
- In Inner **Moray Firth area** information about the project was circulated online and via local Facebook groups. In addition the research team approached a local youth support organisation and local schools and as result three workshops were conducted with 21 participants in Fortrose, Dingwall and Alness.

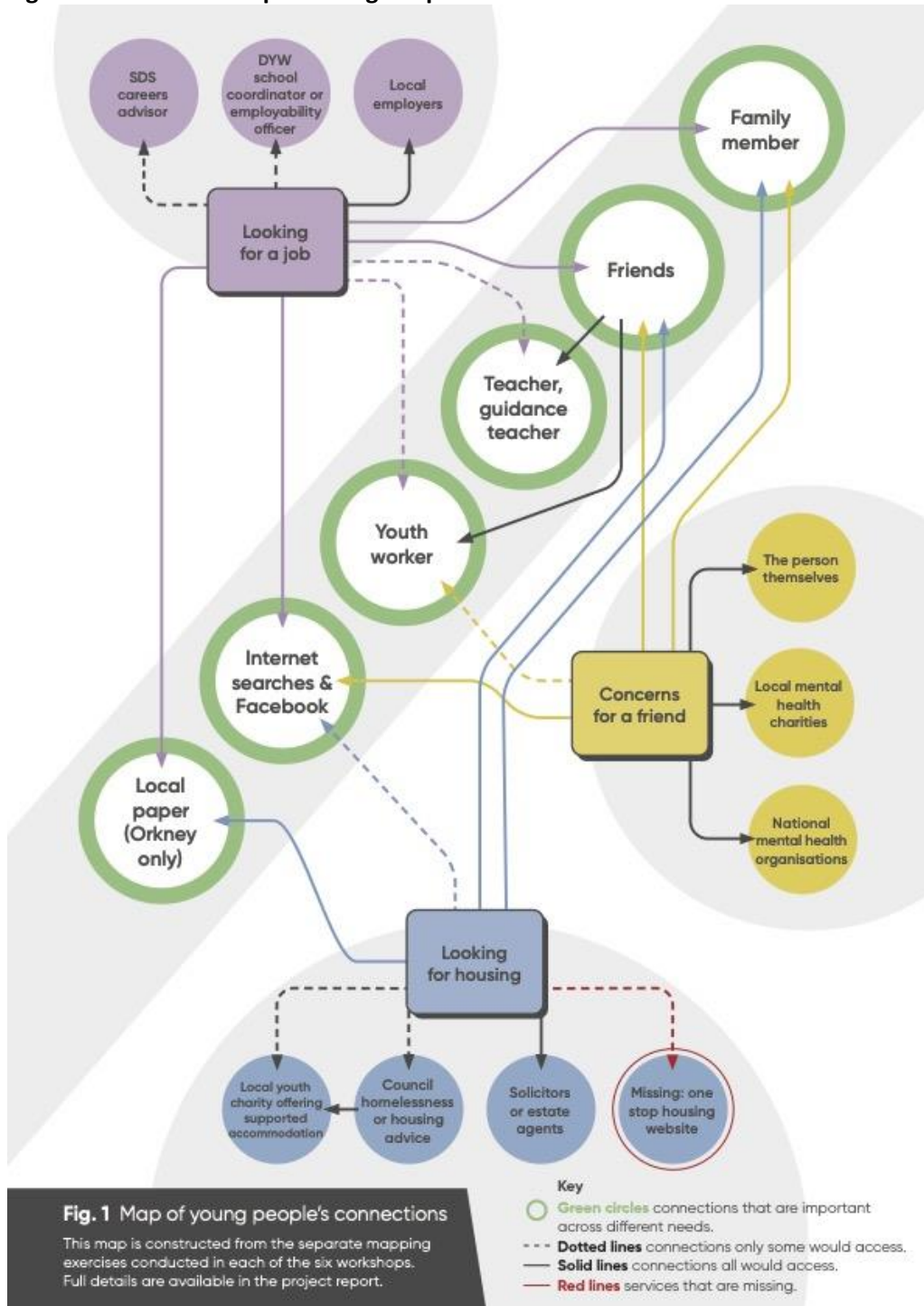
4. Data Discussion

4.1 Patterns of young people's social connections in rural Scotland.

The social connections of young people in rural places tend to be **small, dense, and homogenous** and are more likely to be based on **kinship and personal friendships**. The key three social connections that young people identified as most trustful but also key in providing their multiple forms of support were **family members (including extended family members), friends, and professional adults**¹. These connections tend to be characterised by **multiplexity**, with key individuals playing multiple roles in providing a range of social, economic, and emotional support as illustrated by Figure 1. These connections not only have been identified as fundamental in supporting young people's multiple social, economic, and emotional needs but also, they played an important role in connecting young people to other important resources within or outside rural places.

¹ By professional adult we mean adult in professional occupation including teachers or youth workers that support young person with their personal, social and educational development.

Figure 1: Combined Map of Young People’s Social Connections²



Family relatives and kinship relations are key sources of support in finding work, housing opportunities, and other practical aspects of life. Family and friends were often preferred sources of

² SDS – Scottish Development Scotland; DYW – Developing the Young Workforce

support because of the established relationship young people had with them, and the information they could provide through their extended networks:

I'd go to a family member because they've done it beforehand and they would be people that I could talk to'

'yeah they probably have more connections than I would do.' Orkney participants

Family also links young people with wider service infrastructure in rural places, helping young people to access the wider support they need in their lives. However, the value of family connections varied, with some families having fewer resources than others. These resources include both material resources and knowledge or connections to wider service infrastructure. The quality of family social connections resonates with material inequalities (e.g. access to transportation infrastructure, jobs, housing, and finance) and has an impact on the capacity of the family to provide support to young people. While for a number of participants family relations provided multiple roles in supporting them economically and emotionally, some of our participants had fewer family relatives living in close proximity or identified relations with parents (rather than extended family members or siblings) as problematic and therefore rely more on other social connections including friendships or professional adults. The barriers to developing and maintaining social connections are further discussed in section 4.3.

Strong family relationships and **friendships** impact how young people feel about their communities. Friendships were not only key in providing young people with **emotional assistance** but also important practical sources of support with finding work (where to search, who to ask for career advice, vacancies) or other practical aspects of life. Peer groups, in comparison to family relatives, **provide more age-appropriate information and advice** with practical examples or recommendations on how to access relevant support. As such they played an important role in shaping young people's perceptions and attitudes toward wider service infrastructure:

I didn't know about this [Citizens Advice Bureau] until, like, my friend recommended them. They told me that they were good and took me there. They took me there and show how things work. Participant 2, Fortrose

However, some of our participants accessed fewer social spaces and had more limited social circles than others. Finally, **Professional Adults** were frequently identified as one of the key social connections providing social, emotional, and practical support to young people. Youth workers, but also subject teachers or guidance teachers (see figure 1) link young people into the wider service landscape within the rural places, as explained by Participant 3:

Participant 3 (Alness): This is a place where we can meet together and meet others.

Interviewer: What makes the place special?

Participant 3(Alness): Dedication towards helping young people. This is where you meet other people, chat and learn

Youth centers, as explained by Participant 3 of the Alness workshop, were seen as safe spaces where practical information is being exchanged, where young people connected to their peers but also trustful adults either via dedicated activities or informal regular gatherings. Regular, interpersonal relations with professional adults provide young people with the feeling of being valued and listened to. Exactly which professionals young people would approach varies, the important factor is who young people feel comfortable with:

The youth café, for those that go to it regularly it is very important to them, but to others that don't it isn't.... and with teachers it just depends on how comfortable you are with them' – Participant 1, Orkney

Our participants typically referred to particular individuals by their names, rather than their place of work or professional affiliation, when providing examples of useful social relations.

We have Caroline here, she is our person. Participant 3, Fortrose

In-person and regular contact was crucial to develop trustful and supportive relations with young people. Trust was the key factor in who young people would approach, with many describing feeling very cautious about approaching formal sources of support.

I have a ton of trouble talking to people I'm not too sure of. Participant 2, Orkney

Our research however shows that while positive relations with adult professionals who could link young people into the wider service landscape help address inequalities in access to services, it does not compensate for material inequalities (e.g. access to transportation infrastructure, jobs, housing, finance) that impact on the ability of young people to establish independent lives.

While young people's connections tend to be characterised by multiplexity, they are also **lacking diverse social links** with public institutions. Services provided by public institutions were often perceived by young people as not being accessible, mainly due to geographical distance but also not being useful or helpful in fulfilling their economic or social needs. While young people were able to identify relevant public services that may support them in fulfilling their economic needs, they tend not to access them as they were unsure about what they do or how to access them:

I guess, Jobcentres. I don't know if they're a big thing anymore, but they should be. Participant 3, Alness.

I dunno, I mean, like, I would assume that like Right There is a place that you can get housing, but I don't think someone would go there directly normally, I think you would have to get a referral. Participant 3, Orkney

Section 4.4 discusses further the barriers to development and maintaining social connections.

4.2 Role and function of young people's social connection

The **diversity and breadth of social connections** that young people have access to **vary**. While our participants were able to identify and access multiple sources of support in seeking employment, this was not the case in terms of access to housing. The following session provides a more detailed discussion on the type and mechanism of support that social connections offer to young people in rural contexts.

Economic needs:

Our participants were able to identify a range of social connections that were useful in answering their economic needs. These include family relatives (including both parents and extended family members), friends, important professional adults such as Young Workforce Officers (YWO) or Developing Young Workforce School Coordinators (DYW) in Orkney, subject teachers/guidance and youth workers, careers advisers at Skills Development Scotland, dedicated websites including 'Indeed',

'MyJobScotland' or local online groups on Facebook and finally local businesses. These connections played different roles in supporting young people in planning their careers, accessing information and practical advice on career opportunities, accessing information about local vacancies, or accessing the vacancies themselves.

While websites and local newspapers (in Orkney only) were important sources of information about available jobs, social connections were often more important in providing advice and support. These sources of information provide personalised recommendations based on their knowledge of the young person and of the labour market:

Mostly guidance teachers, careers advisers as well, you could ask a teacher in general what job would suit you . Participant 1, Orkney

Our participants in both locations tend to identify family members and friends as key sources of support in fulfilling their economic needs. It was because family relatives provide multiple forms of support including emotional support and motivation to pursue a dedicated career pathway, provide information on available local career opportunities or available vacancies, practical advice on CV development or job application, facilitate access to vacancies through personal recommendations or link to access to other important individuals or organisations. Such experience was reflected by one of the participants of the Alness workshop:

To find a job, my dad will employ other boys that he knows, and it always works like that. And I think that's the best example I could probably use to illustrate how to find jobs here. Participant 3, Alness

In addition to a family, friends were considered useful in sharing 'good practices' in developing CVs or learning about available vacancies through informal 'word of mouth'. Peer-to-peer support was perceived by our participants as particularly useful in directing young people to other services that were considered useful or helpful in advancing their knowledge and skills in finding employment. Friends were also an important source of advice about which employers would recruit young people, and where to find part time evening or weekend work.

Further to these, our participants identified careers advisers, young workforce officers (YWO) or developing the young workforce in Orkney, or particular subject teachers or guidance teachers as useful in providing them with information on their opportunities following completion of high school. These often relate to Higher Education opportunities but also apprenticeship opportunities³ within local businesses. Some of our participants indicated how the school was proactive in inviting local businesses to the school or sharing information about local vacancies with young people via newsletter, school Facebook, and Google Classroom. Our participants tend to indicate that access to apprenticeships or vacancies within local businesses was often negotiated via personal context including family members or school. Finally, young people also rely on a number of online websites including 'Indeed', 'My Job Scotland' or local online groups on Facebook, in search of a list of local vacancies.

If you know what Facebook pages to check you get tons [of job vacancies] – Participant 2, Orkney

³ Gender imbalance in opportunities for apprenticeship with more opportunities being available to young men.

Access to services: Housing

Our participants identify very limited sources of support in accessing housing services in rural places. These include friends who could refer to online platforms to look for rental accommodation including 'Rightmove' or 'Facebook marketplace'. Council housing was perceived by young people as not accessible due to the scarcity of council houses and strict assessment criteria. Not only were our participants able to identify very limited support services in relation to housing in rural areas, but they also perceived these services as lacking in value and relevance because they could not compensate for very limited housing possibilities (due to cost/availability). Almost all of our participants were living with their parents and did not see such arrangements changing in the near future due to the scarcity of available housing:

I'm living with my parents, and I don't think it will change in the near future as there are no affordable houses here, Participant 1, Alness workshop

The only problem with housing, it's not the help, it's the actual quantity of it, there isn't enough housing in general for everyone to move out as and when they want to. Participant 4, Orkney

The only young people living independently were in the older part of our sample, and were living with partners. For the younger participants, they were generally living with their family relatives and did not see such arrangements changing, unless migrating out from rural places to Higher Education:

If you go to Uni, you will have greater chances to find a place to live, Participant 1, Alness workshop

The pathway for accessing housing outside of family support often means moving away from the local community to study. While young people were able to identify a diverse range of social connections that fulfil their economic needs, in terms of other services, and particularly housing, young people predominately rely on family support.

Emotional support and sense of belonging

Again, family relatives, and friends played an important role in providing emotional support for our participants. Such support was often in the form of companionship, motivation, provision of practical advice on how to address challenging situations, empathy, active listening, or being available. For those participants who experienced problematic relations with their parents, peer support and youth workers were often important sources of emotional support. Our participants highlighted the important role of the school along with diverse youth clubs such as youth work, sports clubs, and music or art clubs in providing them an open space for dedicated activities, social conversations, and conviviality. Our participants tend to highlight how regular contact and participation in common activities help them develop friendship relations that often anchor them to their place of living:

All my friends come here [youth centre], we meet here. Participant 2, Dingwall

By offering young people a free space to choose whether and when to get involved, take part in activities, or simply spend time with others, these local clubs offered many young people an important place to feel safe and belong. These open, social, localised places were important spaces within rural places where social connections were developed. Exactly where social relationships are formed, and which spaces are accessed depends on where young people feel comfortable. For many but not all,

schools were a key place where they developed friendships and connected with professionals (youth workers, careers advisers, guidance teachers):

I would say school, this is where I met my friends.... Some of the teachers here are great.
Participant 2, Fortrose

For others, but not all, youth clubs were important locations:

The youth place is my place, I like coming here, Participant 3, Alness

Social connections do not just arise, instead, they are developed in localised spaces that young people attend regularly and where they feel comfortable. These spaces played an important role in challenging the feeling of loneliness and developing strong friendships. Ensuring a diversity of activities that were suitable for young people, and which were accessible (bearing in mind transport infrastructure, especially for those in the most rural parts of a community) was something that young people felt was important:

I think school is definitely a big part but even outside clubs, the non-school clubs as well I think that can also help and are important for young people to have a place to socialise and not feel lonely, Participant 2, Dingwall

Further to offering a safe place for social gatherings, local schools or local youth clubs connect young people to professional individuals who provide important sources and access to the wider service landscape within rural places. These relations were of high level of trust that was built by consistency in service provision and long-term personal relations. Such personal relations with professionals who deliver the service were important in developing trustful and meaningful relations:

I think it has to be more personal. Just I feel like the person has to like that. You have to meet someone that they know that you're comfortable with. Like. It's just strange. This is a kind of trust. Participant 3, Alness workshop

While our participants were aware of other range of third-sector organisations including Action for Children, Women's Needs, Mikeysline, James Support Group, or other public services like NHS Scotland or Social Work that may offer emotional support to young people, they had little or no direct experiences of engaging with them:

I learned about Women's Aid in school, we did a project about them. They could help in specific circumstances but I don't know I never used them. Participant 2, Fortrose workshop

4.3 Barriers to development and maintaining young people's social connections in rural places

This section will discuss in more detail barriers in relation to accessing, developing, and maintaining social connections in rural places.

Perceptions and attitudes toward accessing wider public services

Local and national organisations and services are significant sources of support for rural young people. As discussed in section 4.1, family and friendship relations along with personal relations with professional adults were the key social connections that our participants rely on in fulfilling their

economic, social, and emotional needs. While these connections were also helpful in linking young people to a wider service landscape, our participants were cautious about accessing wider services outside of their circle of connections. As explained by our participants, accessing some public services outside of the community and family ties come with a certain amount of stigma:

I just can't imagine, that some people in Alness would go to the Jobcentre for help, Participant 1, Alness workshop

Young people were much more likely to access services when they had been provided with additional information and encouragement by adults or peers. As discussed in sections 4.1 and 4.2, peer groups provide more age-appropriate information and advice with practical examples or recommendations on how to access relevant support. For our participants, some services were known of, but they were unsure about their value or how to access them:

Perhaps Jobcentre could be helpful but I don't even know where that is. Participant 3, Fortrose workshop

The stigma of using public services along with little knowledge about the service itself were important predictors of young people's behaviours in seeking help. Such attitudes along with a high expectation of rural communities to self-help may further hinder the access to public services. Over-reliance on kinship and community networks with little access and connection to the wider landscape of public services or institutions is problematic and can generate further inequalities through '[secondarily impact austerity](#)'. This is because young people can directly experience the limited ability of their family and community to offer them support due to austerity measures. However, our participants were much more likely to access services when they had been provided with additional information, encouragement, or recommendations from professional adults or their peers. Both peer support groups along with school guidance teachers and youth workers were particularly important sources of information and encouragement that were considered by young people as trustful and resourceful.

Young people had often been referred to additional support as a result of either seeking help or being identified in school settings as requiring additional help:

I kind of got into youth work, because we have a school youth worker, and we were picked up as people who would benefit from that kind of work, Participant 1, Orkney

This raises questions about the accessibility of services for those who do not present themselves for support or are not identified as requiring support in the school context. Greater consideration of how services can reach young people who can benefit from them would therefore be valuable. This could include greater engagement of peer groups to ensure age-appropriate information and advice along with trusted professionals.

Transport

The spaces that young people form relationships within, and the services that they seek support from, need to be accessible. Our participants highlight the necessity to travel to access essential services, employment, or education. In this project, issues of accessibility particularly arose for young people in rural communities outside of the main towns. Bus services were perceived as infrequent and sometimes unreliable; in Orkney, a lack of buses running in the evening to rural areas was particularly highlighted. For those in the outer isles of Orkney, limited ferry connections also posed challenges. Our participants highlighted how many social activities took place during evening hours, and access to

employment in some occupations also included late evening finishes, such that access was often conditioned by limited accessibility and inadequate public transportation with infrequent bus timetables, no bus stops, or unreliable timetables. While young people in rural are entitled to [under 22 bus passes](#) which provide them an opportunity to use public transport for free, they may not be able to exercise such right with no or little available public transport options in their local area.

Poor quality of local roads with no pavement for pedestrians creates additional route hazards as described by one of Alness's workshop participants:

There is only one road and no bus stop. There are no streetlights so you don't want to walk there at night. Participant 1, Alness workshop

As indicated above, rural villages and their surrounding areas may not have the infrastructure required to support active travel, and narrow lanes and no pavements or limited streetlighting contribute to safety concerns. As a result, driving was perceived as the most reliable and convenient option to move between places. Indeed, those living in rural areas [are more likely to drive to key services](#) however, because of the cost and age limitation it was not an accessible option for many of our participants. Young people in rural communities were reliant on family and friends to provide lifts:

Everything happens in Kirkwall and Stromness and you rely on boats and buses...my life relies on buses and the 'dad-express'. Participant 1, Orkney

Without access to a car, they are unable to access dedicated services or employment. Again, in Orkney, issues of ferry transport for those from the outer isles means that activities held on the mainland are often impossible to access, and a lack of parity between bus and ferry services means that where buses are free for young people, ferries are not.

Limited diversity of localised places and activities for connection

As discussed in section 4.2, relationships are formed in places, and through activities that young people engage in on a regular basis over a prolonged period of time. Having spaces that young people feel comfortable in, and where they are engaged in activities they enjoy helps to build trustful relationships with both peers and professionals. For all young people in this project, key relationships were developed in spaces dedicated to young people, including youth club settings, youth projects, or schools. For school-age young people, schools were key sites for forming relationships with friends and professionals. These included teachers and guidance teachers, but also careers advisers, employability officers, and youth workers. However, not all young people found the school environment positive, and some did not develop strong relationships in this setting. Others choose youth clubs but again these are not always experienced positively by young people. And still others connect with peers through including sports, art, or music clubs:

From my experience the school isn't that helpful.... They could have done more. Participant 7, Orkney

I don't really talk to many youth workers, they talk to me! But it's not like a thing that I do much
Participant 3, Orkney

Exactly where relationships are formed and which spaces are accessed depends on where young people feel comfortable. However, the availabilities of diverse settings for young people in rural places are rather limited and contribute to [their spatial marginalisation](#) already well evidenced in the

literature. This marginalisation is likely to be more acute for some young people compared to others. While at school, many young people have frequent contact with teachers and other young people, others may access (or be directed to) other support services including youth workers. Such arrangements however change once a young person leaves school, for those who access youth centres, these sites can remain important places where relationships are formed, including with trusted adults. Other young people may rely on their existing friendships or the social networks they develop in workplaces or in places where they engage in sports or other hobbies. To support older young people once they leave school, better signposting of the existing support services following the completion of school may support young people navigate of wider service landscape within the rural places. Further, focusing on creating a wider range of activities and spaces which are accessible to young people is likely to support them to develop a wider range of social connections and help them to connect with others in their community. The lack of such activities is very commonly articulated in our research as a barrier:

This is not like really many clubs and stuff here or events going on for like people so you are bored in the house. Participant 1, Dingwall

'People need more activities to connect with people, to make connections... most of the things we said, you get things through connecting with people.... And you don't get that unless you have a place to hang out and talk, because you don't really have an opportunity just to talk at school', Participant 1 Orkney

Despite feeling at home in their locality, a number of young people reflected that they felt socially isolated as they lacked a dedicated space to 'hang out'. Young people in this project reflected on the need for a wider range of activities and localised spaces that cater to the diversity of their interests. Recognising that different young people feel 'at home' in different environments and responding by offering a more diverse range of spaces and activities available for young people to socially connect would address both a sense of limited opportunities in rural areas and enable young people to strengthen and extend their social networks.

'There's not a lot of activities, places to relax... youth café and picky are the only two buildings you can go to after school to relax, and most people don't because they don't feel comfortable when they get in there....'

'people find other alternatives, like you see a lot of people hanging around Tescos, or you see a lot of young people hanging around the bus station', Participants in discussion, Orkney

Accessibility and availability of the service

Services providing support and advice are only perceived as useful in opportunity-rich contexts – so for example housing advice, or job-search advice are perceived as not useful if there is limited housing or limited jobs available. While our participants identified a great deal of support for finding work and understood the support as valuable in navigating the labour market, they identified very few possibilities for finding housing outside of the family arrangements. The very restricted availability of support services, accentuates the stigma of accessing help - with help felt to be available only for those who were in extremely difficult circumstances:

This is very embarrassing that you need to admit that you are homeless to be considered for council house Participant 3 Alness

A very limited availability of council housing means that young people turn to the private, renting sector. However, such a service is too expensive for young people, which means that most have never even considered where they might look for advice or support. Our participants express little awareness of where to turn for help when seeking advice and guidance on housing opportunities and rights. This is significant because being able to live independently is an aspiration of many young people, but a lack of opportunities impacts their ability to achieve this. The exception is leaving home to go to university, as the provision of financial and other support as reflected by one of the participants in the Alness workshop:

Like, if you go to uni or you're going to college, you obviously get access to SAAS, but if you're not in study, you don't get money, right? Like grants bursaries or loans. Participant 3, Alness workshop.

Additional support for higher education means that university is perceived as a key means for being able to leave home, which is much more difficult to achieve otherwise. However, entering university is also a step that not all feel able to achieve, requiring a level of academic achievement, confidence, and often some financial resources.

Not only our participants were able to identify very limited support services in relation to housing in rural areas, but they also perceived these services as lacking in value and relevance because they typically identified very limited housing possibilities (due to cost/availability) beyond family homes. Our research shows that while social connections are important in shaping how young people access help but also feel about their communities, they cannot compensate for wider structural issues, in terms of availability and affordability of housing. Compensating for structural issues, families become the only or primary source of material support, with significant issues of inequality between families in the support they can offer.

4.4 Young people's social connections and future mobility intentions.

As discussed in section 4.1, young people's social connections of young people in rural places tend to **be small, dense, and homogenous** and are based on **kinship and personal friendships**. These connections also tend to be characterised by **multiplexity**, in terms of multiple roles played by key individuals including **family relatives**, friends, and professional adults who are the key source of economic, social, and emotional support. The strength of young people's social connection impacts how they feel about their community and place of living. Family, kinship, and friendship relations were identified by our participants as a key source of economic, social, and emotional support and were also a primary reason why people remain in their local areas or consider returning to rural places (often following completion of a higher degree):

My community, I mean my friends and family, these are the reasons that keep me from leaving. Even if I go to Uni, I will see, but I would like to return to my community. Participant 3, Alness

While kinship relations supported young people economically, and emotionally and provided the link to wider social connections in rural places, the structural property of family ties and thus capacity of the family to provide diverse forms of support varied:

If your family is like that alcohol or drug abuse, you kind of want to go away from that lifestyle... Family is very helpful if family is a safe space for you. Participant 2, Alness

Honestly it just depends on how helpful [family] are with the information you need, and just the relationship you have with them....Participant 7, Orkney

For those participants with less extensive family relatives or less close family connections, there was less of a pull to remain or potentially return to a local area. However, leaving rural areas requires economic resources thus some young people may not be able to afford to leave despite their desire to do so:

So let's put it that way, people may not be able to go away because they sometimes can't afford school, rent, food, and bills among other stuff. So, moving away also requires resources.
Participant 1, Alness

While kinship and friendship relations had an impact on how young people felt about their community, their impact on young people's considerations about staying, leaving, or returning is more complex. While lack of social connections contributed to young people's isolation expressed in their experience of rural places having few opportunities for young people, **leaving** rural places requires economic assets and thus **is not available to all young people**. Consistent with other research, for our participants leaving is almost entirely [associated with entry to higher education](#). All participants who considered leaving, did so in relation to entering higher education. As such, higher education is a motivation for mobility, and also a means for mobility as it provides access to additional resources that could allow independent living, that are difficult to secure otherwise.

Mainly young people just go away for university, Participant 4, Orkney

However, this raises questions of inequality and mobility, with some young people not equally able to access higher education, depending on their educational qualifications, aspirations, their circumstances, and their resources. Where young people had aspirations to move but did not feel like university was a suitable pathway for them, they were typically less clear on how, when, or even whether mobility would be possible:

I don't know, I want to do something with sports coaching, maybe at College here? I don't know yet Participant 1, Dingwall workshop

However, higher education is not necessarily associated with permanently 'leaving' with young people reflecting on how they may wish to return after completing a course of study, often linked to returning to family or their friends. Our participants' aspirations with regard to their mobility plans were not fixed. As one of the participants from the Alness workshop indicated, leaving a rural area to study is not necessarily associated with a permanent move. Our participants express a desire to return to rural areas following their study but condition it to available employment and job opportunities. Barriers to accessibility and availability of social connections already discussed in section 4.4 may play an important role in shaping that decision. The narratives discussed in this report also indicate that the decision about staying, leaving, or returning to a rural place is a complex and ongoing one, highlighting how [staying and leaving are not permanent decisions but are negotiated and renegotiated over time](#).

As discussed in sections 4.1 but also 4.2, **family, friendships, and in-person relationships with the wider community** played crucial roles for young people to feel connected to their local communities. These interpersonal relations create important connections to rural places and thus are important pull factors in young people's mobility decisions. Our findings discussed in sections 4.2 and 4.3 also illustrated the important role of dedicated, localised rural spaces (including school youth clubs, sports clubs, art clubs music clubs) that cater localise young people's social connection that anchor to them to rural places and shape their sense of belonging and attachment. While our research focused on



young people's plans and intentions, rather than experiences of staying, leaving, or returning, existing studies already highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging and identity triggering return or [roots migration](#).