active lincolnshire

HW Lincs
Engagement to Insight



Rurality Research

August 2026

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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank:

- **Active Lincolnshire for the opportunity to carry out this project.**
- **All those who took the time to share their views.**

Executive Summary

Context and rationale

This research sought to develop a rich, evidence-based understanding of how rurality affects daily life in South Holland, with a particular focus on Sutton Bridge, Long Sutton and Holbeach. HWLincs was commissioned as an independent organisation to conduct this work on behalf of Active Lincolnshire. The insight gained will be used to inform future policy, service delivery, and investment decisions.

Methodology

A mixed methods approach was utilised for this research, whereby over 550 people shared their experiences of rural life. The approach consisted of:

- A survey (both digital and paper) - 428 responses
- Community conversations - 14 conversations engaging 129 people
- Case studies (tbc)

Key findings

What is it like living in a rural area?

Experiences of rural living varied, with both benefits and challenges frequently being highlighted.

- The natural environment of wide open, green spaces was seen as peaceful and relaxing, positively impacting on health and wellbeing.

- In contrast, the limited (and often lack of) public transport and access to services were identified as key challenges.

- Many aspects of rural life were highly connected and should not be viewed in isolation. For example, to access essential services including groceries, leisure facilities and healthcare services, individuals often had to travel to neighbouring towns, which was deemed impossible by public transport. Therefore, being able to drive was seen as essential, otherwise rural life could become incredibly isolating.

- A lack of social, education and employment opportunities for younger people was highlighted.

- Experiences of other aspects of rural life were mixed, with conflicting views on community spirit. However, staying connected and reducing isolation were motivators for staying active.

Executive Summary

Staying active in a rural area:

- The main reasons why residents wished to stay active included: to improve fitness, physical and mental health, and to spend time outdoors in nature.
- Individuals faced many interconnected barriers to staying active spanning challenges with infrastructure, transport, cost, health needs, and availability of local activities.
- Consequently, residents identified multiple areas where support is needed; often directly correlated to the identified barriers.
- Therefore, to effectively support people to stay active in rural areas, multiple factors need to be addressed. Efforts should focus on improving awareness of activities, diversifying and increasing the offer of local opportunities, and improving local infrastructure to support walking and cycling. Consideration should also be given to the cost of activities, their location, and the travel burden.

Recommendations

- Residents should be at the heart of efforts to improve access to opportunities to stay active in rural areas.
- Continue partnership working to influence and advocate for improvements to infrastructure, better public transport, and a reduction in the financial barriers that stop people from being active.
- Audit existing activities and collate into a directory.
- Increase the promotion of activities through both digital and non-digital channels.
- Diversify the type, timings and structure of activities offered e.g. more activities at the weekends, for younger people and different health needs.
- Explore opportunities to bring activities into communities, reducing the travel burden

Introduction

South Holland is a predominantly rural district where some communities experience significant geographic isolation. Anecdotal evidence suggests that residents in the most remote villages face barriers relating to access to services, transport, healthcare, education, and social opportunities. These issues may have profound impacts on individuals' health, wellbeing, and life chances.

This research sought to develop a rich, evidence-based understanding of how rurality affects peoples lived experiences. This included how rurality influences:

- Physical and mental health
- Access to physical activity opportunities
- Social isolation and community connection
- Access to services (health, education, employment, retail, leisure)
- Transport and mobility

Those living in the most remote and underserved villages in South Holland were the main focus of the work, especially those living in Long Sutton, Sutton Bridge, and Holbeach. The insight gained will be used to inform future policy, service delivery, and investment decisions.

HWLincs was recruited to support this work, due to its established role in capturing public voice and delivering independent evaluation across systems and sectors.



Methodology

A mixed-methods approach was utilised for this research, consisting of a survey (both digital and paper), conversations in the community, and case studies.







A series of core questions were developed which were then adapted to be used as a survey and for conversations in the community.

Survey
The survey consisted of both quantitative questions to gather simple metrics, followed by qualitative questions to capture experiences in more detail. To encourage honest and constructive feedback, respondents were free to decline answering any individual question, and could submit their responses anonymously. The survey could be completed online or via a paper version.

Conversations in the community
A series of open-ended question were used to support conversations on the ground with local communities to gather insight into what it is like living in a rural area. A full breakdown of the locations and number of participants in the community conversations can be seen in Appendix Table 1.

Engagement method	Location(s)	Collection period	Number of participants
Survey	South Holland	10th - 28th July 2026	**428**
Conversations in the community	Sutton Bridge, Long Sutton, Holbeach and surrounding villages	7th - 30th July 2026	**14 conversations 129 people**

Disclaimer

Whilst over 550 people shared their experiences of living in a rural area, we recognise that their views may not fully reflect or be representative of all residents as participation was voluntary. A strength of the findings was that, regardless of location or demographics, there appears to be many universal themes, benefits and challenges of living in a rural area.

- All questions were voluntary. A valid response to the survey required at least one question to be answered.

- Throughout the findings section, you may read, N = followed by a number. This shows the number of survey respondents who answered that question e.g. N = 321 means 321 survey respondents answered that question.

- A percentage followed by a number in brackets e.g. 45% (234), shows the proportion of survey respondents who selected an answer option and the number of people it corresponded to in the brackets.

- Quotes have been left verbatim, only filler words such as “um” or repeated words have been removed to improve readability without altering meaning.

Analysis:

- The analysis in the findings section is purely descriptive, so any differences between groups should be viewed with caution and may be due to chance.

- Generally, themes did not differ greatly between different groups e.g. ages, geographical location and health needs. Instead, there appears to be many universal themes, benefits and challenges of living in a rural area, with certain issues amplified for some groups e.g. those unable to drive, younger or older people.

- In the findings section, often the percentage who agreed or disagreed with a statement is reported. These figures have been calculated as follows, e.g. % agree = sum of those selecting ‘strongly agree’ and ‘agree’ / Total x 100

Who shared their views?

This demographic information relates to survey respondents, for whom it was voluntary to share this information.

When sharing your views, whose experiences are you thinking about?

86% (367)
My own

26% (110)
My family's

4% (19)
A child or young person

4% (19)
Some I care for

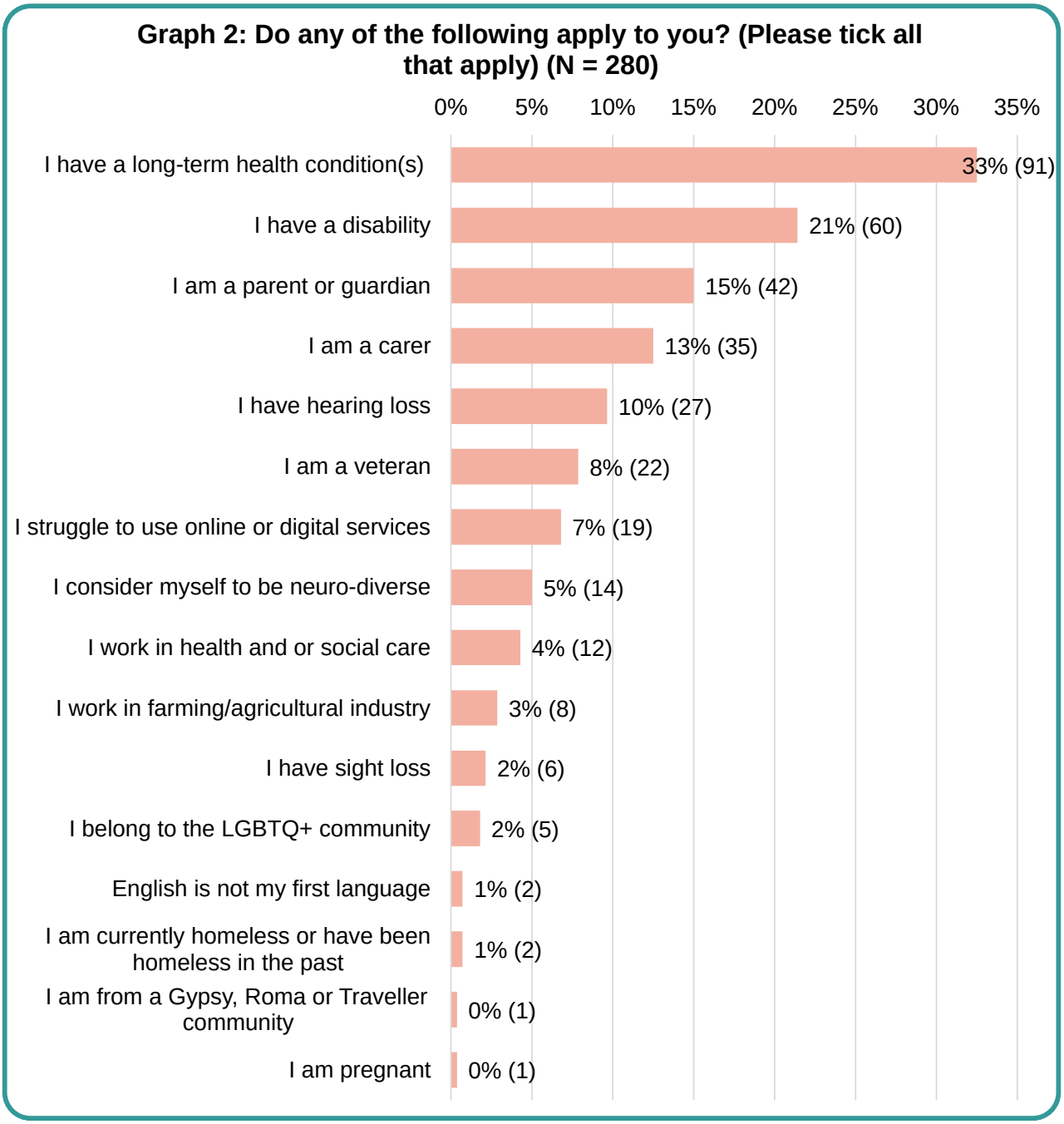


Graph 1: Age of respondents (grouped into the categories used in Active Lincolnshire's Places Profiles). A full breakdown of ages can be see in Appendix 1 Table 2.

Demographics

- 93% (270) White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh
- 68% (198) identified as female
- A third of respondents had a long term health condition, and over 1 in 5 had a disability (Graph 2)

Who shared their views?



Graph 2: The characteristics of the individuals who responded to the survey.

A full breakdown of the demographics of survey respondents can be seen in Appendix 1 Table 2.

Findings

557 people shared their views;

428 survey responses

129 people took part in community conversations

Structure of the findings section:

The findings from the survey and community conversations are presented together, as both forms of engagement explored and highlighted the same themes. Quantitative metrics are presented first to provide an overview of a topic which are then followed by and often explored further through the rich qualitative insight gathered, providing a comprehensive understanding of what it is like to live in a rural area.

Whilst we heard from individuals across a range of ages with different characteristics, living in different towns and villages, there appeared to be many shared, universal themes associated with rural living and staying active. Issues tended to be amplified in the smaller villages and for certain groups. Differences in themes between the engagement methods and different groups are acknowledged where relevant.

The findings section is split into two sections:

- **Section one:** What is it like living in a rural area?
  - Explores the benefits and challenges associated with rural living, covering themes such as health and wellbeing, transport, and access to services.
- **Section two:** Rural living and staying active: a closer look
  - Residents reflections on their motivations for staying active are discussed alongside the barriers they face to staying active. The section closes by presenting the support residents need to stay active.

Findings



Section one: What is it like living in a rural area?

What is it like living in a rural area?

It was clear that there were both perceived benefits and challenges associated with living in a rural area; indeed benefits and challenges were frequently mentioned together, suggesting rural life involved balance and potential sacrifices. By far the greatest benefit identified was the positive impact on health and wellbeing. Experiences and opinions were mixed in relation to the impact of rural living on social connection and community. In contrast, access to services and public transport were repeatedly discussed as challenges to living in a rural area; this sentiment was shared across different age groups and characteristics, suggesting these are key aspects of rural life.

What is it like living in a rural area?



72% agreed it has a positive impact on health and wellbeing



51% agreed it helps them stay active



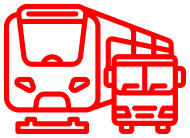
Opinions were **mixed** on whether it helps them stay connected with others



58% disagreed it facilitated active travel (by foot or bike)



66% disagreed it gave them good access to services

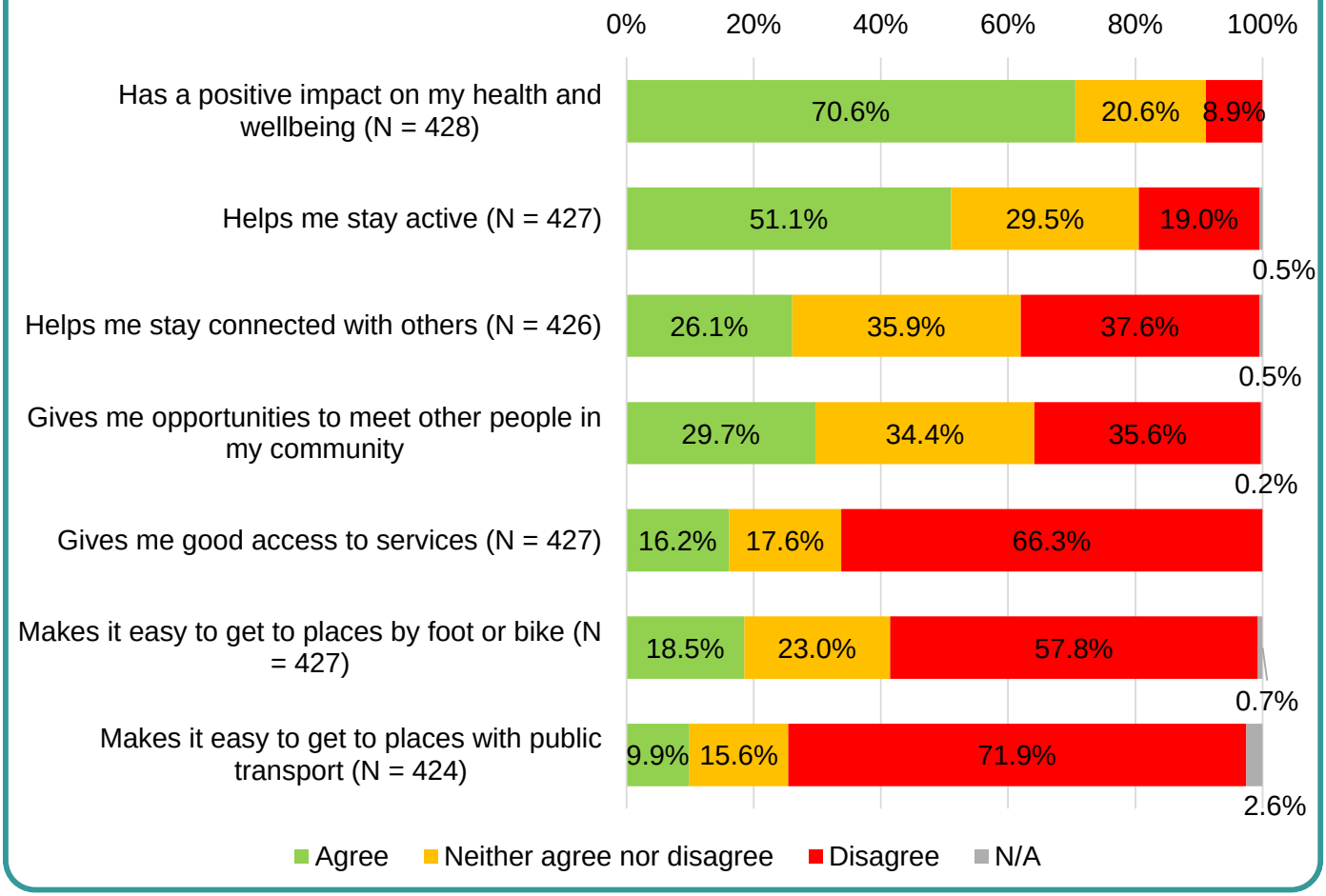


72% disagreed it made it easy to get to places by public transport

A full breakdown can be viewed in Graph 3.

What is it like living in a rural area?

Graph 3: When thinking about what it is like to live in a rural area, how much do you agree with the following? Living in a rural area...



Graph 3: Perceptions of the impact of rural living on a variety of factors including health and wellbeing, staying connected, public transport and access to services.

The qualitative findings explored some of these perceptions further as well as highlighting other areas, providing a deeper understanding of rural life in residents' own words. The key themes from this insight are presented in section 1.1; whilst the key themes of rural living are discussed separately below, it is critical to recognise that the themes were interlinked, with themes not being experienced in isolation. Residents often discussed multiple issues together or contrasted elements of rural living.

What is it like living in a rural area?

1.1 Health and wellbeing

The positive impact of rural living on health and wellbeing was attributed to several factors including the slower pace of life, peace and quiet, wide open green spaces and being close to nature. Individuals commented on rural areas being less crowded, having more space, and being able to afford bigger houses. A perception of reduced pollution and better air quality were also highlighted.

"The peace and quiet is excellent for helping unwind, the big wide open spaces are great for helping to feel connected to wildlife and our environment. It's always lovely to spend a day in a city but even better to get home to rural life. Only this week I took an early morning walk and came across a deer, a fox, a hare and lots of birds - a perfect moment."

"The open space, greenery, open fields and places to walk around the village are great for mental health."

"Space and a sense of peace and calm. More wildlife to watch and care for."

In contrast, some felt that certain aspects of rural living, such as the lack of public transport and difficulties accessing services (especially healthcare services), promoted isolation and negatively impacted health and wellbeing.

"It is quiet and community oriented but it can be isolating from services."

"Nice and peaceful but can feel really cut off at times."



What is it like living in a rural area?

1.2 Transport

The lack of public transport dominated discussions, appearing to be one of, if not the biggest challenge of rural life. People frequently discussed both the complete lack of public transport or the limited service e.g. one bus a day, no service in the evenings or weekends. Often people had to travel to get to a bus stop or train station. Discussion tended to focus on the limited and lack of service as opposed to cost, although, the high cost of taxis was mentioned by some.

A lack of public transport negatively impacted multiple aspects of daily rural life including staying active and connected with others as well as being able to access services (e.g. shops and leisure facilities). Additionally, attending healthcare appointments, both at local GP surgeries and the main hospital sites by public transport, was deemed challenging, if not impossible.

Due to this having a car and being able to drive was repeatedly identified as an necessity for rural life. Those unable to drive (either for medical, personal or financial reasons), alongside younger people were particularly affected by the lack of public transport and its resultant consequences. Being unable to drive was highlighted as isolating. Those unable to drive had to rely on others e.g. parents, partners, voluntary car schemes, or Call Connect services, limiting their independence and ability to go about daily life.

Many were concerned how they would manage day to day life in a rural area if they were no longer able to drive; it appeared to be a looming concern for many, particularly as they grew older.



What is it like living in a rural area?

1.2 Transport

Residents in their own words:
Lack of or limited public transport

"Getting to public transport is difficult - I have to get driven to the bus stop, so have to plan my entire day around other people's availability. And some places, that are only an hour away in the car, can be four hours away on public transport."

"Living in a rural location is wonderful but public transport can be limited or unreliable, slow to get to a location or require several changes. You need a car!"

"No public transport nearby, nearest bust stop 2km away."

"Very poor public transport - 1 bus a day 10 am in morning and returns at 2pm!"

"Public transport is sparse. Our nearest hospitals are difficult or sometimes impossible to access by public transport. The same is true for many other services and for cultural events."

"Public transport links in the evening and weekends are difficult to non existent."

The importance of being able to drive

"Not enough public transport to towns especially at weekends for young adults who don't drive to get about without having to ask parents to run them around."

"If are not a car driver living rural people will find very difficult to access all services."

"I am disabled and if I couldn't drive I would be totally stranded."

What is it like living in a rural area?

1.2 Transport

"No hope for people who do not drive."

"Car is pretty essential living here. Public transport is poor and taxis very expensive."

"Without transport it is very difficult to get anywhere. Public transport is limited and it can be isolating as I get older and less mobile. I have to rely on other people for lifts etc. Sometimes I use the volunteer car scheme but that's only for medical appointments. Looked into call connect but not suitable as I would have to walk a mile to the pick up stop to be collected and not able to walk that far these days."

"I love that I can be part of a community. However, hard to access services such as Dentists & hospital appointments when you don't drive. Difficult to go out in the evening as buses stop early. No trains on a Sunday."

The looming sense of concern;

"However, as I age, my biggest worry is about how I could function if I were no longer able to drive, either through health or fuel cost/scarcity, because of the lack of public transport and local amenities. I know from talking to peers that this is a common concern. It's a cloud on the horizon that taints the present joy of living rurally."



What is it like living in a rural area?

1.3 Access to services

Access to essential services including healthcare, shops, and leisure facilities was also a key challenge of rural living; with multiple factors making access difficult.

Firstly, villages often lacked essential services including post offices, supermarkets, healthcare services, as well as leisure and entertainment facilities. To access such services, it was common for individuals to have to travel considerable distances to neighbouring towns. Consequently, day to day activities such as grocery shopping have to be planned. Accessing hospital services frequently required an even greater journey to Boston, Peterborough, or Kings Lynn.

Therefore, access to essential services was closely linked and dependent on transport. As previously discussed, accessing essential services via public transport was challenging due to the lack of or limited services. The importance of being able to drive was again reiterated, if unable you became isolated from services.

However, even after overcoming the barrier of distance and travel, upon arrival at bigger towns, they too had limited services (e.g. supermarkets, clothing shops and entertainment opportunities). There were also concerns that services are already limited, yet the population continues to rise with new houses being built. This growth is not mirrored in services, especially healthcare services. Struggles accessing NHS dental care and appointments at GP surgeries were noted with concerns that this would only worsen.

Residents in their own words

"You have to plan ahead for food and anything you may need. Our little town is not great for clothes or emergency supplies. Corner shops are not here so it's town."

"It's a drive to a well stocked supermarket, gym, swimming pool etc."

"Driving is important to get to hospital or vets or just to a supermarket."

"Very little choice in buying clothes for family, very few facilities for teens where parks are concerned, very few NHS dentists, no good doctors surgeries!"

What is it like living in a rural area?

1.3 Access to services

"The lack of local facilities such as post office, bank, efficient bus services are a definite disadvantage to living in a rural area. Distances from public transport such as trains to London make car ownership essential but if driving is no longer possible one can be completely isolated. The absence of a village hall, for instance, is another road to loneliness. Too many villages have lost amenities that made life pleasant."

"It's beautiful, lots of fresh air but you have to commute to everything which adds time to every activity. Especially if you have multiple family members with different activities, I.e. two jobs in different directions, children at different schools, clubs or social activities. Even meeting friends requires travel time. You spend a lot of time driving to make your day efficient. Walking or cycling just isn't an option."

"Nearest supermarket is 13 miles away each way. Doctors is 4 miles away."

"Healthcare is terrible and Hospitals 20 mile up to 50 miles away."

"Being sent to hospital miles away when you don't drive is extremely difficult."

"It is remote with a car you screwed, 3 miles to my nearest shop. Can't get an appointment with my doctor, there is no dentist available, nearest hospital is in Boston 20 miles."



What is it like living in a rural area?

1.4 Infrastructure

Poorly lit and unmaintained pavements alongside roads with potholes were highlighted as concerns. The poor maintenance of footpaths and cycle paths was also discussed; appearing to make active travel difficult.

Residents in their own words

"Roads are a nightmare never fixed pot holes huge."

"The village is poorly lit at night and the edges of the roads where there are fields have pot holes so it can be difficult to cycle."

"Some areas do not have pavements, making walking the dog dangerous or taking children to school."

"Pavements are extremely damaged and never repaired."

"Although you may be surrounded by fields and greenery, it's not usually accessible as they are privately owned or farmland. Not many of the roads have footpaths and those that do are not very easily navigated due to subsidence, cracks or they are too narrow. Walking or cycling on country roads with no footpaths can be dangerous."



What is it like living in a rural area?

1.5 Community connection

Whilst it was clear that rural living positively impacted health and wellbeing and negatively impacted aspects such as being able to access public transport and services, experiences of other aspects or rural life varied considerably. The greatest variation in experiences and opinion was seen in relation to community connection.

Significant proportions of both those who had lived in the area their whole live and those who had recently moved to the area praised the sense of community in a rural area, noting everyone knew and looked out for each other, with people being friendly. However, this was not a universal experience and others felt very differently.

Other newcomers discussed villages as being insular and unwelcoming, whereas those who had lived there their whole life felt that community spirit was being lost due to the increased population. Many discussed feeling isolated and lonely. Residents highlighted the lack of local social opportunities, especially for younger people, and access to existing opportunities was hampered by poor public transport and a reliance on being able to drive. A resultant impact of this was a perception of a rise in anti-social behaviour.

Residents in their own words

Positive experiences

"People are friendly and know their next door neighbours. Everyone looks out for each other."

"A very positive community feel to living in a village. People look out for one another and gives me a sense of belonging. Moved here over 10 years ago and was made to feel very welcome. I have become an active member of the community and church (St Mary's Gedney)."

Negative experiences

"I found it very difficult to meet and socialise with others. It seems rural Lincs has a close knit population of mostly farm and agricultural communities that do not particularly enjoy outsiders or townies. Will be moving again sadly."

"Rural places don't stay rural for long. Once people find them, and start liking living there, they build more houses to make money from their land. Communities are diluted and the very thing people moved to the area for are lost forever."

What is it like living in a rural area?

1.6 Younger people: a closer look



IIrrespective of their own age or whether they were a parent, many individuals spoke of the lack of social, educational, and employment opportunities for younger people in rural areas.

Children often have to travel miles for secondary education, again highlighting the challenges of distance and access to services alongside limited
public transport.

Consequently, many young people move away from the area when they get the chance, leaving behind an ageing population.

Whilst parents generally noted that rural areas felt safer to raise children, the sacrifice was the limited opportunities.

"It was incredibly isolating as a teenager, this has lessened as I've gotten older, but I really struggled as a teen not having easy access to go places independently."

"My kids are desperate to leave due to lack of job opportunities and opportunities for meeting other young people."

"But there's not much to do round here. Especially for children.

It seems that youngsters are bored and this is causing anti social behaviour."

"Difficult with teenagers who want access to education and social life."

What is it like living in a rural area?

1.7 Expectations and realities

Amongst those who had lived in an area their entire life, there was a perception that newcomers were attracted to the area due to affordable property prices, however, they (newcomers) had a limited understanding of the wider realities of rural living including isolation, limited opportunities, public transport, services and amenities. Some newer residents directly acknowledged that they had not considered these aspects before relocating.

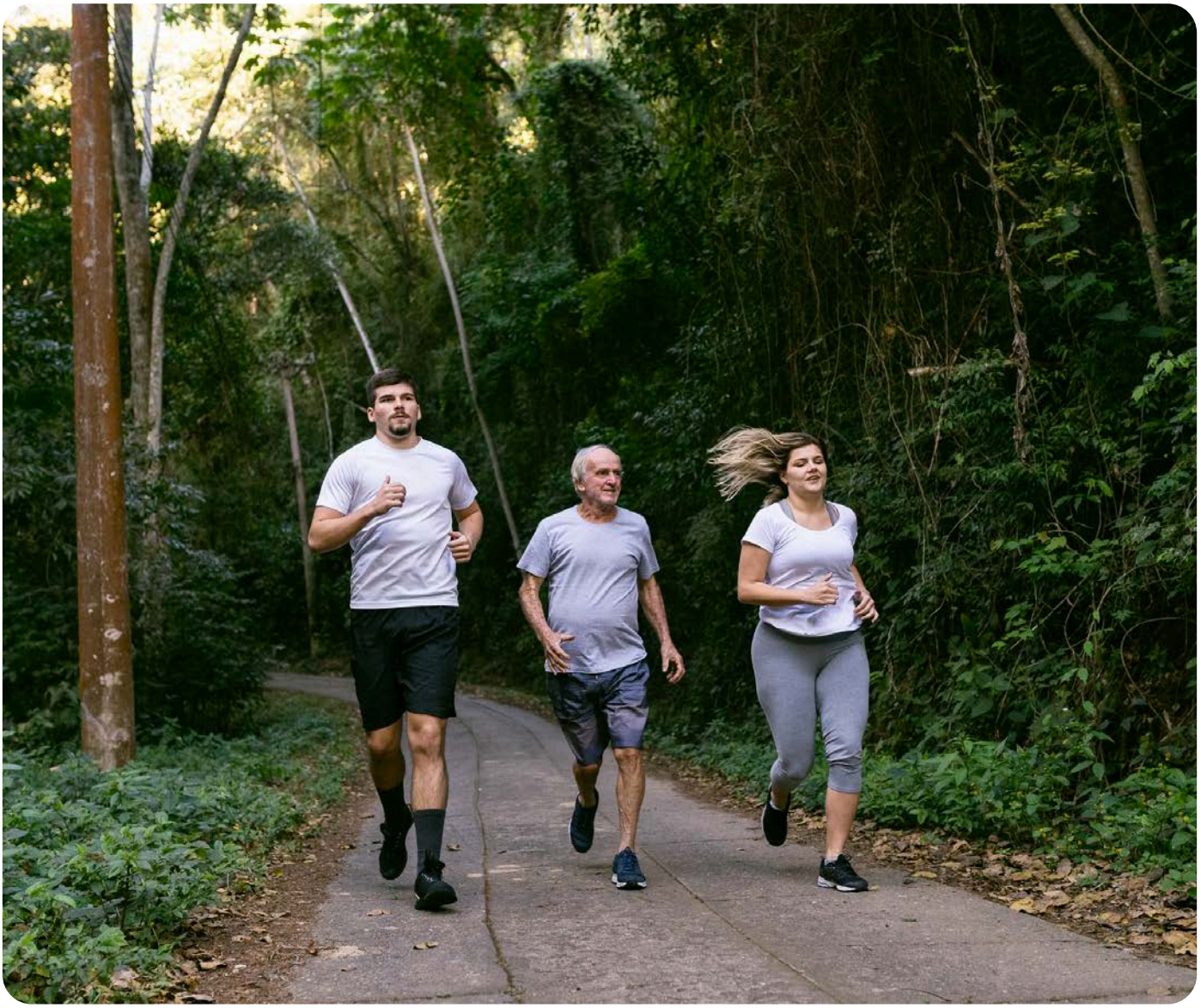
1.8 Staying active

The impact of rural living on being able to stay active was rarely discussed by residents when asked what it is like to live in a rural area. Some did briefly mention the challenges of poor infrastructure (e.g. lack of cycle routes) and the lack of local facilities (e.g. gyms and swimming pools).

Staying active in a rural area was explored through an additional set of questions, with the findings presented in the next section.



Findings



Section two: Rural living and staying active - a closer look

Reasons for staying active

2.1 Why would/do people like to stay active?

Individuals wished to stay active for a variety of reasons, evidenced by the fact that 11 reasons were selected by over a third of respondents (Graph 4). However, there appeared to be four key motivators, each selected by over 55%. Three of these related to health and wellbeing, suggesting the latter is a key motivator for individuals to stay active. This in turn implies that individuals were aware that staying active positively impacts health and wellbeing.

Reasons for staying active (Top 4)



- **64% (222) - To improve my fitness**



- **61% (212) - To improve my physical health**



- **61% (211) - To improve my mental health**



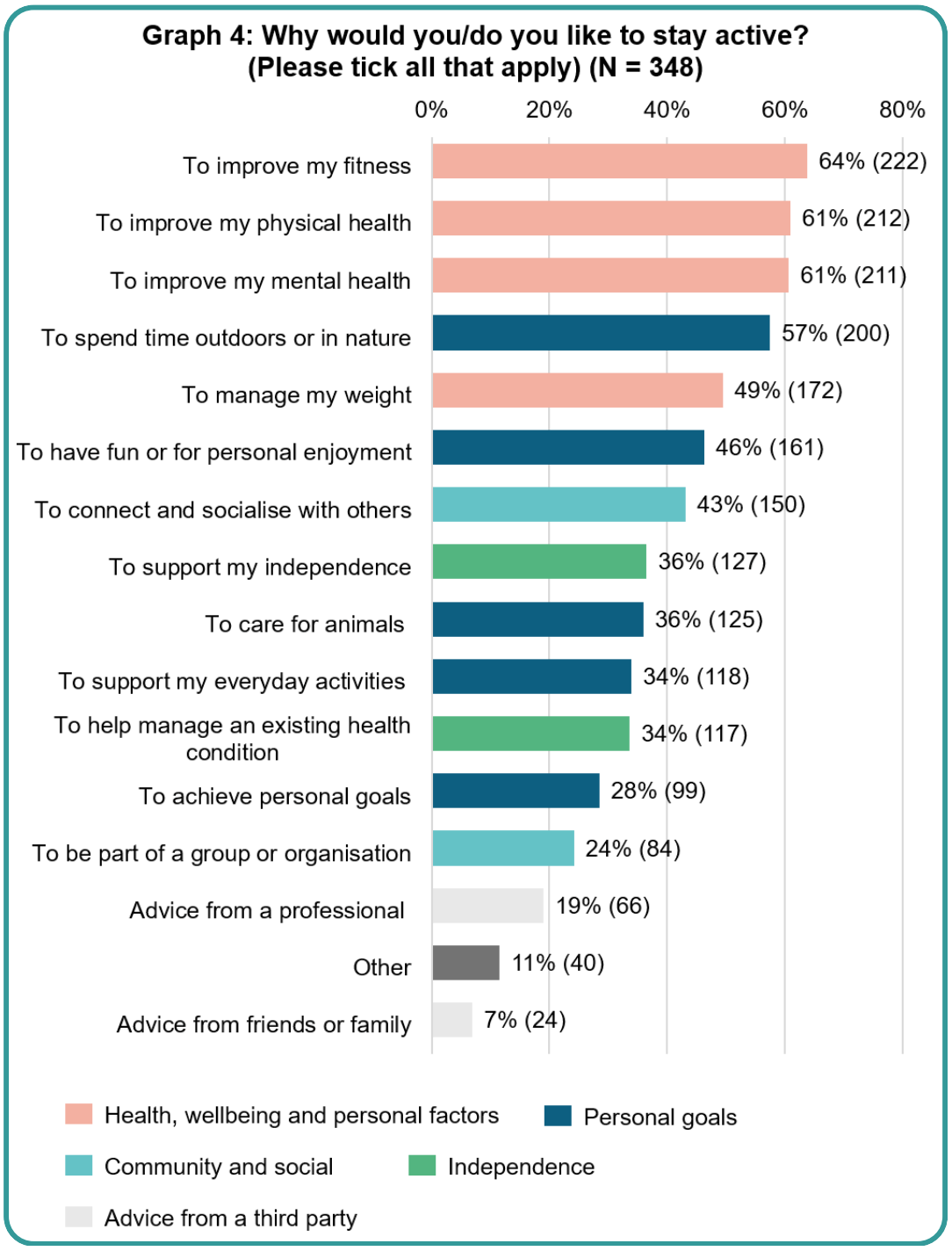
- **58% (200) - To spend time outdoors in nature**

There was minimal variation in the reasons for staying active between different ages groups and characteristics of those who responded to the survey e.g. carers or those with a long term health condition. The top four reasons were the same, just shifting in order slightly, suggesting their universal importance. The main exception to this was the response regarding supporting independence. 51% of those aged 65+ selected this as a reason to stay active compared to 23% of those aged 35 - 64. This could suggest that staying active to maintain independence becomes a key motivator with age.

The community conversations, also highlighted that individuals wished to stay active for reasons relating to health and wellbeing. However, from these conversations, staying active to reduce isolation appeared to be one of the biggest motivators.

Reasons for staying active

2.1 Why would/do people like to stay active?



Graph 4: Why would/do you like to stay active? The graph showcases the reasons why individuals wished to stay active in order of frequency. The individual reasons have been grouped to provide some broader key themes including health, wellbeing and personal factors, community and social and independence.

Reasons for staying active

2.1 Why would/do people like to stay active?

Residents in their own words;

"[As a parent I want] to keep up with my children and be around for them for as long as I can and keep myself well, mobile and independent.

[I want my children to stay active] so that they don't get bored, have something to do other than spending all their time on their laptops/mobiles etc."

"Want to stay independent for as long as I can and not feel isolated or forgotten about."

"I care for my seriously ill husband so I have to stay fit as I can."

"Being able to play with their grandchildren when they visited such as kicking the football around in the garden or going on a family walk."

"Important both for my mental and physical health."

"To stay health and fit."

"Keeping well on a day to day basis so that you do not need to go to the doctor / hospital as often."



Barriers to staying active

2.2 What stops people from being active?

Just over 1 in 5 felt nothing stops them from being active. However, the majority appeared to be facing multiple different but often interrelated barriers to staying active (Graph 5), as seen by the fact that six were selected by at least a quarter of respondents. Barriers could be grouped into broader themes, including health, wellbeing and personal factors, infrastructure, cost, awareness and information. The top six challenges, related to four different themes, suggesting being able to stay active is influenced by a diverse range of factors.

Barriers to staying active (Top 6)



- **35% (121) - An existing health condition**



- **34% (116) - Poor condition of paths, roads and pavements**



- **30% (104) - Cost of activities or participation**



- **30% (100) - Lack of activities or groups close to where I live**



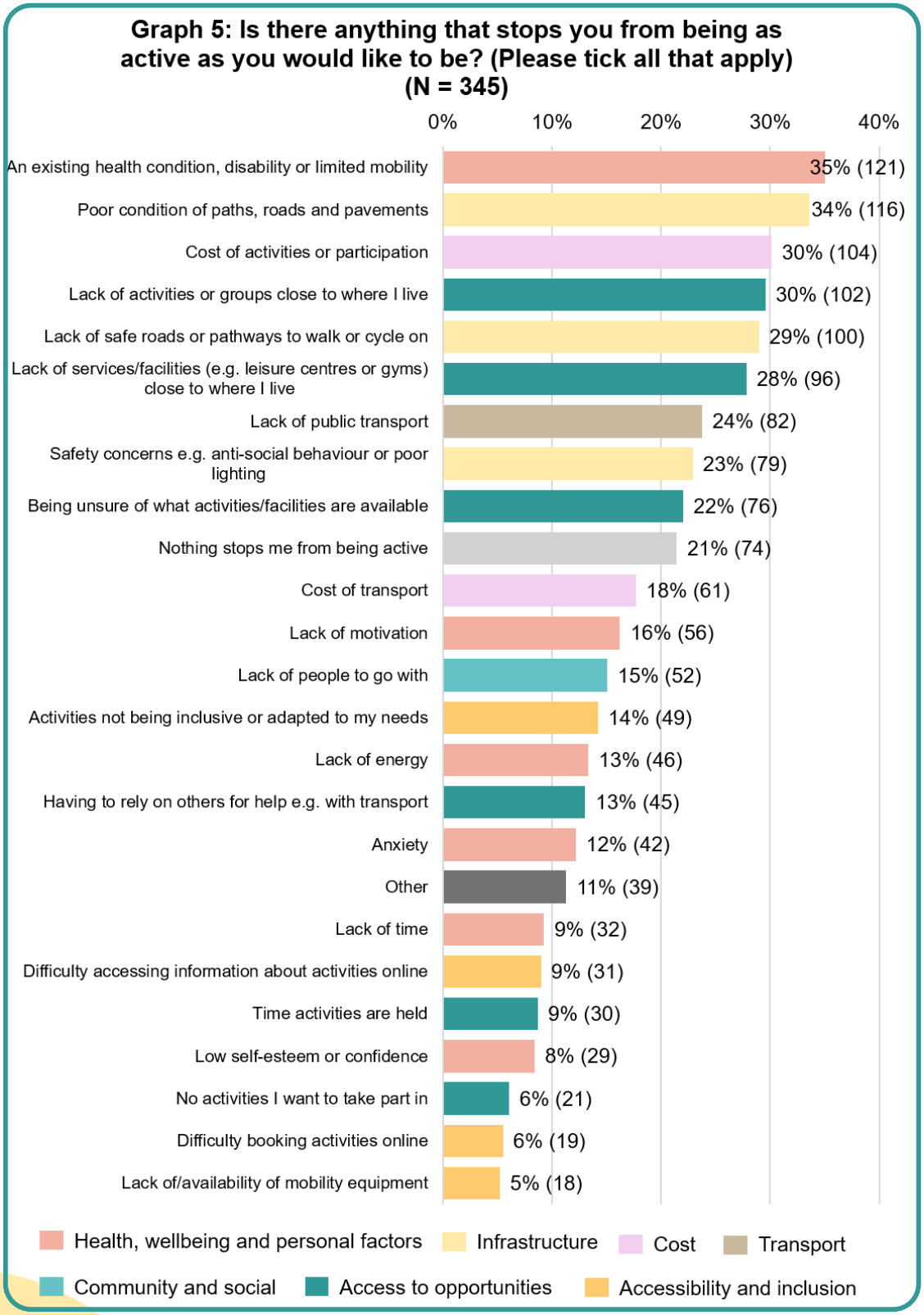
- **29% (102) - Lack of safe roads or pathways to walk or cycle on**



- **28% (96) - Lack of services/facilities (e.g. leisure centres or gyms) close to where I live**

Barriers to staying active

2.2 What stops people from being active?



Graph 5: What stops people from being as active as they would like to be? The graph showcases the barriers to staying active in order of frequency. The individual reasons have been grouped to provide some broader key themes including health, wellbeing and personal factors, access to opportunities and accessibility and inclusion.

Barriers to staying active

2.2 What stops people from being active?

The qualitative narrative explored many of these issues in more detail and how barriers were often interconnected, having a compounding effect. For example, people discussed that they often had to travel elsewhere to take part in activities due to the lack of local opportunities and services (e.g. swimming pools and gyms). This was challenging due to the lack of or limited public transport (especially at weekends). Also, having to travel to access activities, regardless of method, took time, planning, and came at an additional cost to any participation fees. These factors all limited how regularly you could take part or attend. Furthermore, the cost of participation, regardless of the location of the activity, was identified as a barrier to staying active.

When discussing free activities, such as walking locally, this was made difficult by the local infrastructure. The poor maintenance of footpaths was highlighted, as well as sometimes their complete absence. Safety concerns including poor street lighting and traffic exacerbated these challenges. The same issues made cycling difficult.

In conjunction with these challenges, a lack of awareness of activities was also a barrier. This was noted during the community conversations and over 1 in 5 survey respondents indicated they were unsure of what activities/facilities are available.

Residents in their own words:

"Offered balance clinic, but nearest was in Spalding which on public transport is a three hour round trip and a 4 mile walk. Taxi or voluntary transport service (if available) £15-£70 for each session so huge disincentive to attend.

Pavement/road walking is only feasible outdoor activity without use of a car and highway maintenance poor for this. In areas with good pavement surfaces, pavement crossings to private drives tend to be sharp gradients leading to stumbles. Have fallen over twice while street walking, one requiring an ambulance.

Anti social behaviour in the Suttons is a worry for vulnerable lone walkers."

"I love swimming but hard to access as I don't drive. Although I could go to municipal pool the buses are unreliable & I can't stand for long."

Barriers to staying active

Residents in their own words:

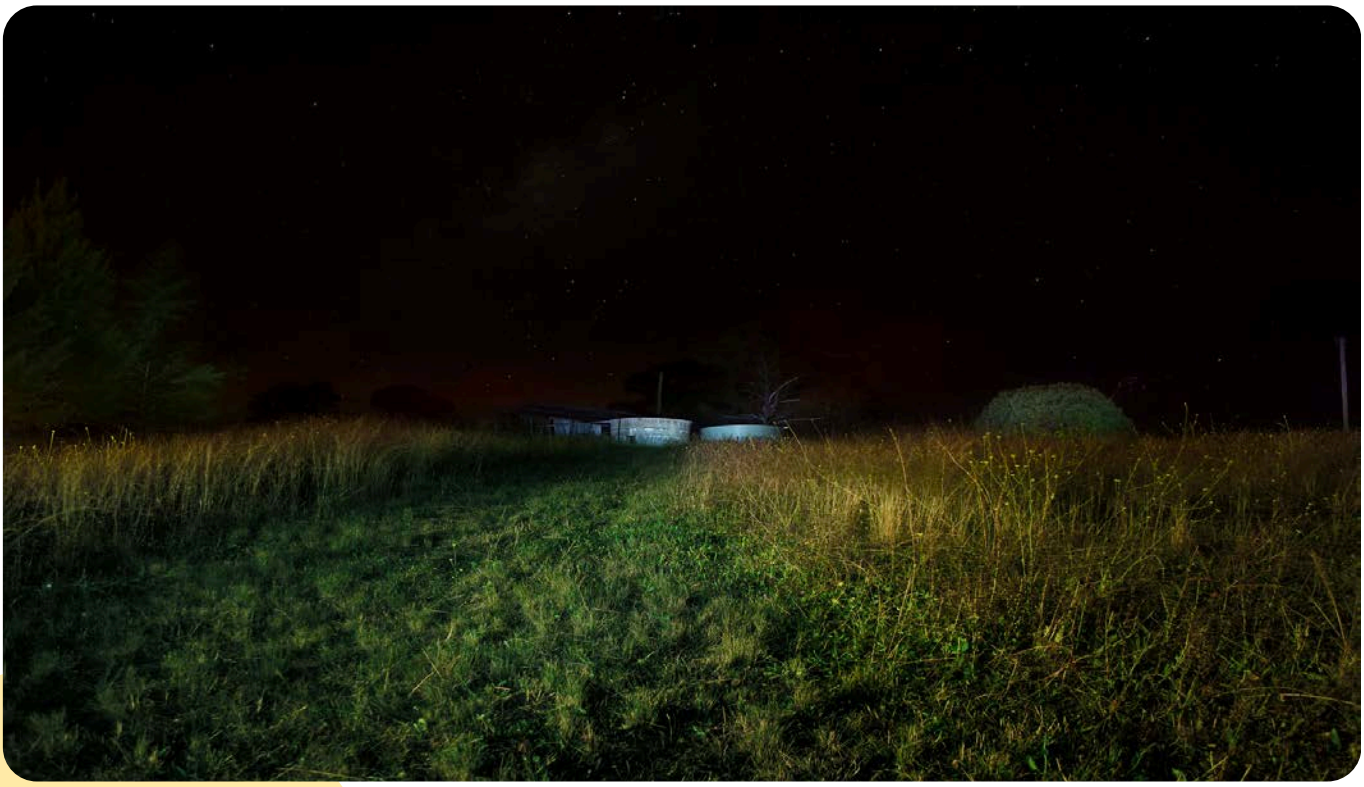
"Everything seems to be removed from a rural area and an expectation that you will travel further. There is the cost of travel and entry as well as membership fees etc."

"I would like to try Paddle but there are no courts in Spalding and it is too costly to travel to Boston or Peterborough were there are courts."

"Roads near to me are poorly lit so am afraid to walk or cycle when dark. Roads have too many pot holes to cycle safely. Boy racers make evening walks unpleasant."

"Some areas I would like to walk are over grown, some roads don't have paths and cars speed down them. Bikes on paths as they don't even feel safe cycling in the road."

"Public and road transport are the main issues. Lack of safe footpaths to walk and use. Few rural cycle routes."



Impact of inactivity

2.3 What is the impact of not being able to stay as active as they would like?

Overall, 31% felt that not being able to stay as active as they would like had no impact on their physical health and wellbeing. Despite this, some of these individuals, along with the majority, identified multiple consequences of inactivity.

It was apparent that individuals felt there was no single dominant consequence of inactivity, instead it negatively impacted multiple aspects of life (Graph 6); this included on health, wellbeing and personal factors, as well as not being able to stay connected with others. This again highlights that individuals are both aware of the importance of staying active and the consequences of inactivity. As acknowledged by some individuals, it is important to note the cyclical nature of staying active. For example, many wished to stay active to improve their fitness or manage a health condition; however, their level of fitness or health condition was often a barrier to staying active in and of itself. Furthermore, respondents highlighted that not being able to stay active negatively impacted their health.

Impact of inactivity (Top 3)



- **36% (115) - Feeling less healthy or fit**



- **33% (105) - Spend less time with others**

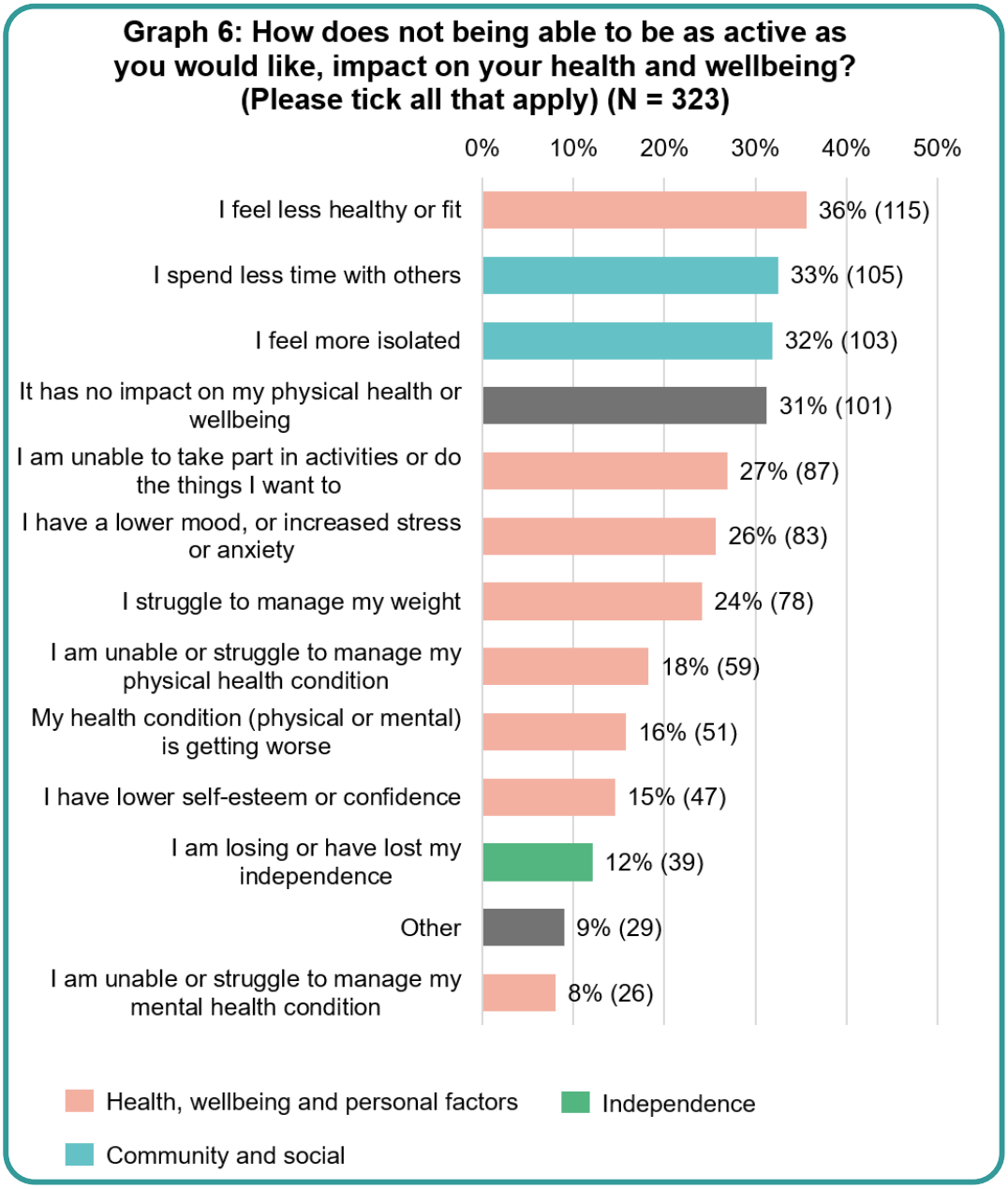


- **32% (103) - Feel more isolated**

For those with a disability, their top consequence of inactivity was ‘being unable to take part in what I want to’, with 46% selecting this compared to 27% of overall respondents. Those with a long-term health condition and or disability appeared to be particularly affected by the consequences of inactivity. For the top three barriers identified overall, the proportion of those with a long-term health condition and disability selecting these barriers was around 10% higher than respondents overall. For example, overall 36% identified they felt less fit as a result of inactivity, compared to over 46% for these two groups.

Impact of inactivity

2.3 What is the impact of not being able to stay as active as they would like?



Graph 6: How does not being able to stay as active as they would like impact on health and wellbeing? The graph showcases the impacts in order of frequency. The individual reasons have been grouped to provide some broader key themes including health, wellbeing and personal factors, independence and community and social.

Support to stay active

2.4 What would help people stay or get more active?

It was clear that a range of support addressing multiple different areas, from access to opportunities, infrastructure, and cost, was needed to support individuals to stay active (Graph 7). Indeed, the support needed often directly addressed/correlated to the barriers identified in section 2.2, such as improving roads and pavements, reducing participation costs, and increasing the number of local activities. It was also important that opportunities were well promoted, through both digital and more traditional methods (e.g. parish magazines).

What would help people stay or get more active? (Top 6)



- **43% (131) - Better promotion of what is on offer**



- **40% (120) - Better maintained paths or cycling routes**



- **40% (120) - More activities/facilities closer to home**



- **38% (114) - More affordable activities**



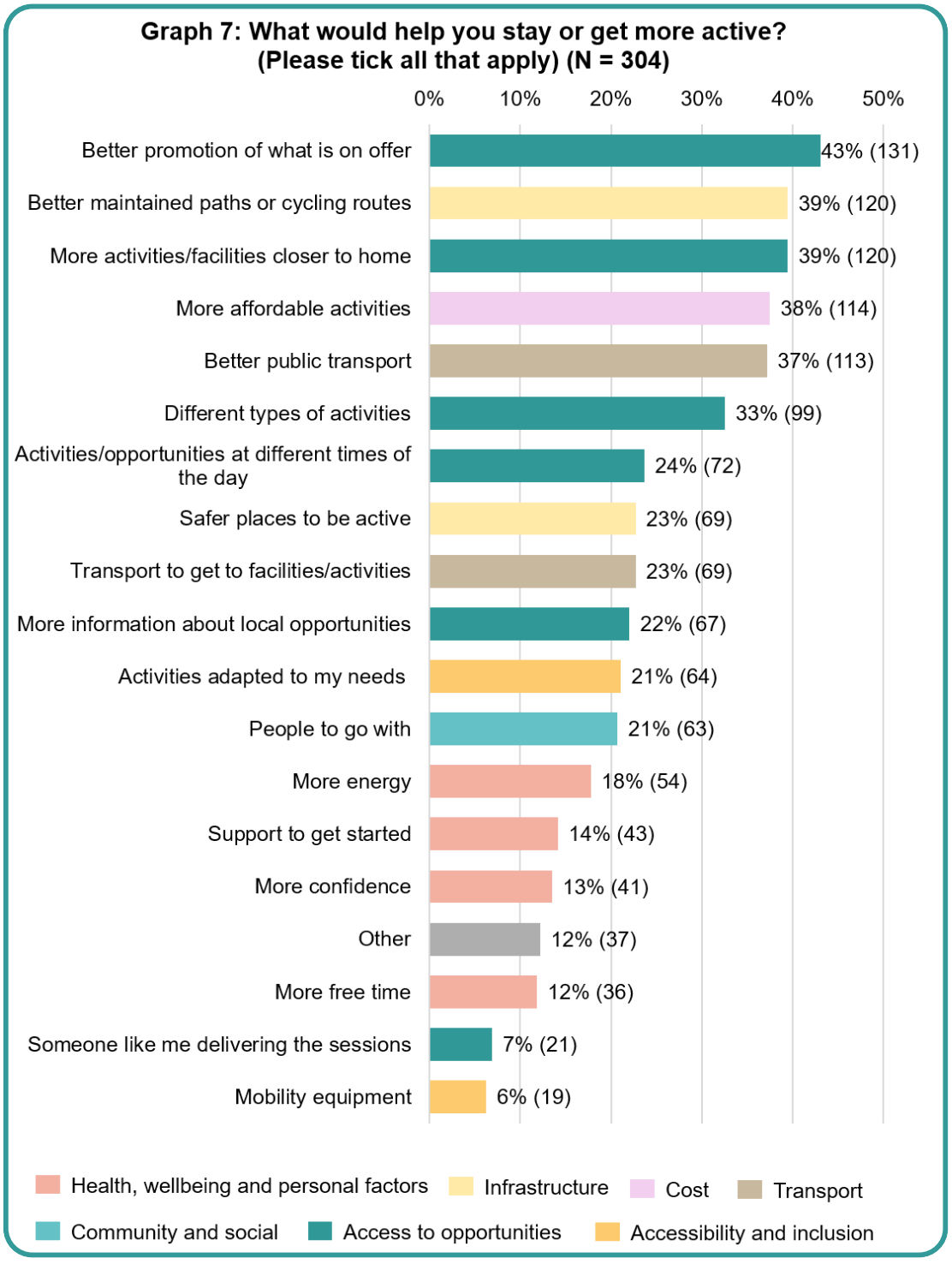
- **38% (113) - Better public transport**



- **33% (99) - Different types of activities**

Support to stay active

2.4 What would help people stay or get more active?



Graph 7: What would help people stay or get more active? The graph showcases the support needed in order of frequency. The individual reasons have been grouped to provide some broader key themes including infrastructure, access to opportunities and accessibility and inclusion.

Support to stay active

2.4 What would help people stay or get more active?

The importance of addressing multiple different areas to support people to stay active was reiterated during the community conversations and free comments. Individuals once more highlighted the importance of lower participation fees and improving infrastructure to be able to walk or cycle locally. Bringing activities into the local area would reduce the travel burden, facilitating regular participation. It is crucial that there is variety, both in terms of the activities available and the times they take place (e.g. provision is needed during the evenings and weekends). Activities need to be available for different ages and be adapted to different activity levels and health needs. Ensuring these activities are thoroughly promoted via a range of channels, not just digitally, is critical too.

Residents in their own words;

"Local activities at low cost. I am living on a pension and a very small private pension so I do not have lots of money."

"If there were specific stops to transport to a fitness group or centre this would help."

"Friendly and local so within a reasonable travelling distance that I could walk to, cycle to and a short drive."

"More events that are geared towards working age people. I am not interested in bingo or line dancing."

"Activities being adapted for people like me with long term conditions with limitations on our physical abilities. Especially with limitations on coordination and mobility. Ease to get to and the cost needs to be reasonable."

"Many activities are during the day which doesn't help if you work and again balancing work and time available is difficult."

"Presence of more parks or forests, more opportunities to walk."

"More accessible open spaces."

Support to stay active

2.4 What would help people stay or get more active?

Residents in their own words;

"Having a good choice of activities for different ages groups (children) and locations that did not involve long and costly journeys. Activities that a family could do together as well as those for individual interests. Logistics of getting people to different things at different times and then the cost."

"Difficult to know what's going on - the Parish Magazine is a good source and is delivered to all the homes in the Parish / village. You can get it sent out electronically but I like to have the magazine as I find that easier to manage than trying to use the computer these days."

"Signposting of activities - there are activities out there but you do not always know where and when they are and they are hard to find as they are not in one place."



Getting involved

2.5 How do people want to get involved in shaping what is available for their area?

To facilitate inclusive community involvement, there needs to be multiple ways to get involved, including both digital and in-person options (Graph 8). The top two preferred ways to get involved were:

- 39% (108) - An online survey
  - *12% (34) still wanted paper surveys, highlighting the importance of providing both options.*
- 27% (74) - Attend meetings or drop-in in the community

There were also other key considerations including providing informal e.g. one-off sessions opportunities and allowing people to take part anonymously.

19% (52) shared they did not wish to be involved, due to a variety of reasons including lack of time and apathy. However, the main reason, particularly highlighted during the community conversation amongst older members of the community, was that they were already highly involved in community life, volunteering for local organisations and serving their community. These individuals discussed they did not have any time to get further involved and some were looking to scale back.



Conclusion

Over 550 people shared their experiences of living in a rural area. Overall, rural living was described as having both benefits and challenges. The natural environment of wide open, green spaces was seen as peaceful and relaxing, positively impacting on health and wellbeing.

In comparison, the limited and often complete lack of public transport, as well as access to services were identified as key challenges. Many aspects of rural life were highly connected and could and should not be viewed in isolation. For example, access to services was made even more challenging by limited public transport; as a result being able to drive was seen as an necessity for daily life.

Experiences of other aspects of rural life were mixed, e.g. community connection. However, staying connected and reducing isolation were motivators for staying active.

The benefits of staying active on health and wellbeing were also key reasons as to why people wished to stay active. However, the majority encountered a diverse range of interconnected barriers when trying to do so. Challenges spanned existing health conditions, poor infrastructure and transport, cost of and lack of local activities. Therefore, to have the greatest impacting in supporting individuals in rural areas to stay active, many of these barriers need to be addressed.



Recommendations

From the experiences shared and intelligence gathered, we outline a series of evidence-based recommendations and considerations to improve outcomes around accessing physical activity for those living in rural areas. We would welcome the opportunity to coproduce the final version of the recommendations with you, to maximise their benefit and impact.

We recognise that control and responsibility for these areas span multiple organisations and levels of governance. However, it is critical that residents are involved at every stage, from influencing to shaping the development of new opportunities.

Partnership working, collaboration and influencing

Residents highlighted multiple barriers spanning different areas that need addressing to support them to stay active. This included improvements to infrastructure, better public transport links and reducing participation costs (p. 29 - 31). These issues cannot be addressed by one organisation or sector alone.

We recommend Active Lincolnshire to continue their partnership working to influence and advocate for:

- Improvements to infrastructure to promote active travel including:
  - The maintenance and creation of pavements, footpaths and cycle routes
  - Safer routes such as quieter lanes and traffic calming measures where appropriate
  - Street lighting and other measures that improve residents' sense of safety when walking or cycling

- Better public transport links considering:
  - Evening and weekend provision
  - Connectivity with services e.g. healthcare services, gyms, and swimming pools

- Reductions in the financial barriers preventing people from being active exploring:
  - Ways to make leisure facilities more affordable e.g. concessions, subsidies, or pay-as-you-go options
  - Better promotion of existing free and low-cost opportunities
  - Improvements to infrastructure to facilitate walking and cycling
  - Partnership and community funding opportunities to provide lower cost or free activities

Recommendations

Better promotion of opportunities to stay active

There needs to be greater visibility and promotion of the local activities available to stay active (p.35). Residents discussed that activities should be thoroughly promoted through a range of channels, not just digitally (p. 37).

We recommend:

- Auditing existing physical activity opportunities including groups, facilities, local walking and cycling routes, to develop a comprehensive understanding of current provision, working with residents to further understand gaps and areas of unmet need
- Considering the development of both an online and printed directory, collating information about local opportunities available to stay active, locations, timings, and cost
- Improving the promotion of local activities via channels such as a centralised website and social media accounts alongside utilising, for example, parish magazines, community notice boards, libraries, community centres, and local organisations

Increase and diversify the activities available

Residents expressed a desire for greater variety in the activities offered (p. 35). This related to not only the type of opportunities, but also their timing and structure (p. 37).

We recommend exploring:

- Providing activities at different times of the day and throughout the week including evenings and at weekends
- Expanding the opportunities aimed for children and young people
- Informal activities that do not require regular participation
- Adapting actvities for different levels of fitness, mobility and health needs to facilitate inclusive participation
- Offering innovative activities, beyond traditional sports

Recommendations

Bring activities to the community

Residents often had to travel outside of their local community to access opportunities to stay active. This was especially challenging for those unable to drive as public transport is extremely limited. For all, this also required planning and incurred additional costs on top of participation fees. All these factors limited regular participation (p. 20, 35 & 37).

We recommend:

- Exploring the opportunities to bring activities into communities (especially to the most rural and disconnected villages) to reduce the travel burden and facilitate participation
- Improving the use of community spaces to host activities e.g. village halls, schools, and parks
- Considering the use of mobile, outreach, or community-based approaches where there are no permanent facilities available
- Supporting local groups to work together to share facilities and resources



Final reflection

This final quote from a resident best reflects and summarises the sentiments raised through this research.

"Living in a rural location can be idyllic. However, there are also challenges that people who don't live in rural areas may not fully understand.

One of the biggest issues is transport. If you don't have access to a car, getting around can be very difficult. Public transport is often infrequent or unavailable, and while services such as CallConnect exist, the way they operate means they are not always practical for appointments, as they cannot guarantee arriving at a specific time.

Access to sports and leisure facilities can also be limited. Many activities seem to be aimed either at young children or older adults, leaving teenagers, younger adults and middle-aged residents with fewer affordable opportunities to stay active. Smaller villages in particular often feel overlooked when new initiatives are introduced, such as outdoor gyms or community fitness equipment.

Many rural roads have no pavements, making walking or running unsafe, particularly where traffic travels at higher speeds. During the winter months, the lack of street lighting can make it even more difficult and discourages people from being active outdoors.

Where activities are available, they are often privately run and require payment. While these classes provide valuable opportunities, not everyone can afford to attend regularly. Greater investment in subsidised or free exercise and wellbeing classes held in local village halls or schools would make a significant difference, helping people of all ages to stay active, improve their health and reduce social isolation.

Rural living offers many benefits, but improving transport, infrastructure and access to affordable activities would make these communities healthier, more connected and more inclusive for everyone."

Appendix 1: Community conversations

Table 1: Community conversations: Locations and number of participants are included

Date	Activity	Number who participated
07.07.2026	U3A Open Event, Curlew Centre, Sutton Bridge	7
07.07.2026	Community Larder, Sutton Bridge	3
10.07.2026	Community Cuppa, Long Sutton	10
16.07.2026	St Mary Magdelen Church, Gedney	10
16.07.2026	Community Library, Holbeach	3
21.07.2026	Gatsby Tearoom, Long Sutton	1
21.07.2026	Walking group, Sutton Bridge	12
21.07.2026	Community Library / Market House, Long Sutton	12
22.07.2026	Night Light Cafe, Long Sutton	6
24.07.2026	Friendly Connect Coffee Morning, Curlew Centre, Sutton Bridge	12
27.07.2026	Love Fleet Activity Day, Fleet Hargate	25
28.07.2026	Lonewolf Taekwondo, Gedney	1
29.07.2026	Art Group Curlew centre, Sutton Bridge	15
30.07.2026	Men's Shed, Long Sutton	12

Appendix 1 - Demographic Data

Table 2 - Demographic breakdown of survey respondents

Demographic	Percentage	Number
Age 14 and below	0%	0
15-19	2%	5
20-24	1%	2
25-29	2%	5
30-34	2%	6
35-39	2%	7
40-44	2%	7
45-49	4%	12
50-54	6%	17
55-59	11%	31
60-64	13%	37
65-69	17%	51
70-74	17%	50
75-79	12%	36
80-84	4%	13
85-89	2%	7
90 and over	0%	0
Prefer not to say	2%	6
Sex assigned at birth		
Female	68%	198
Male	31%	90
Prefer not to say	1%	4
Gender identity		
Female	68%	198
Male	30%	87
Prefer not to say	1%	4
Prefer to self-describe	0%	1

Appendix 1 - Demographic Data

Table 2 - Demographic breakdown of survey respondents

Streetlist.co.uk has been used to approximately map survey respondents postcodes to towns and villages.

Postcode	Geographical area	Percentage	Number
PE11	Spalding	5%	14
PE11 1	Spalding (west)	6%	16
PE11 2	Spalding (east)	6%	15
PE11 3	Spalding, Pinchbeck, Deeping St Nicholas	2%	6
PE11 4	Surfleet, Quadring, Donington & Gosberton	17%	46
PE12	Holbeach and surrounding areas (inc Moulton, Gedney, Fleet)	14%	37
PE12 0	Sutton St James, Gedney Hill and Holbeach Drove	8%	20
PE12 6	Whaplode and Moulton	4%	10
PE12 7	Holbeach (and surrounding villages)	12%	31
PE12 8	Holbeach, Fleet and Holbeach St Matthews	12%	33
PE12 9	Long Sutton, Sutton Bridge and Lutton	14%	36
PE13 5	Boarder villages or Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire	0%	1

Streetlist (2026) Streetlist UK. Available at: https://www.streetlist.co.uk/ (Accessed 5 August 2026)

Appendix 1 - Demographic Data

Table 2 - Demographic breakdown of survey respondents

Demographic	Percentage	Number
Ethnicity		
Black / Black British: African	0%	1
Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups: Asian and White	0%	1
Any other Mixed / Multiple ethnic groups	0%	1
White: British / English / Northern Irish / Scottish / Welsh	92%	270
White: Irish	2%	5
White: Gypsy, Traveller or Irish Traveller	0%	1
White: Roma	0%	1
White: Any other White background	2%	5
Prefer not to say	2%	6
Not known	0%	1
I have a long-term health condition(s)	33%	91
I have a disability	21%	60
I am a parent or guardian	15%	42
I am a carer	13%	35
I have hearing loss	10%	27
Prefer not to say	10%	27
I am a veteran	8%	22
I struggle to use online or digital services	7%	19
I consider myself to be neuro-diverse	5%	14
I work in health and or social care	4%	12
I work in farming/agricultural industry	3%	8
I have sight loss	2%	6
I belong to the LGBTQ+ community	2%	5
English is not my first language	1%	2
I am currently homeless or have been homeless in the past	1%	2
I am from a Gypsy, Roma or Traveller community	0%	1
I am pregnant	0%	1

Appendix 1 - Additional Data

Table 2 - Demographic breakdown of survey respondents

Demographic	Percentage	Number
Religion		
Christian	52%	150
Buddhist	1%	3
No religion	26%	74
Prefer not to say	16%	47
Other	6%	16
Sexual orientation		
Asexual	3%	8
Bisexual	1%	3
Gay man	0%	1
Heterosexual / Straight	72%	208
Lesbian / Gay woman	1%	2
Pansexual	1%	2
Prefer not to say	19%	55
Prefer to self-describe	3%	9
Nationality		
British	57%	150
English	39%	104
Scottish	1%	3
Irish	1%	3
European	1%	2
North Irish	1%	2
Welsh	0%	1

HW Lincs

Engagement to Insight

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