

Hidden Hardship: Everyday Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Barriers to Wellbeing in Rural Britain

A Report for Policymakers and Community Leaders



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Find out more about the Hidden Hardship research and access further resources at <https://hiddenhardship.coventry.ac.uk/>



The jigsaw of rural hardship

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

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Executive summary

- This report is written for national and local policymakers and community leaders to better understand hardship in the North Cotswolds: experiences of rural hardship, coping strategies, and barriers to improved wellbeing.
 - The report is based on participatory research with people experiencing and/or responding to hardship in the rural North Cotswolds in south-west England.
 - Rural hardship in the North Cotswolds is often hidden because of the relative affluence experienced by the majority, and the high levels of tourism in the area. Associated with this, some participants felt stigma and shame in hardship.
 - The research found that hardship can be defined as struggle and tough times, reflecting daily struggle more than one-off 'emergency' situations. Rural hardship is not the same as urban hardship.
 - The causes of rural hardship can be summarised as 'lacks of' including government support and investment, employment, transport.
 - In people's coping strategies, huge importance was given to informal support networks with friends and families, in addition to support offered by local groups although these could be difficult to access with limited transport options and a fear of stigma.
 - Barriers to improved wellbeing were to some degree perceived as outside of people's control, which makes it difficult for people to envisage hardship improving. These included problems with transport, lack of government support and investment, and stigma/shame linked to inequality.
 - The report concludes with five implications for national and local policymakers and community leaders. See section 6.1 for the associated recommendations.
1. Rural and urban hardship are not the same and each pose different challenges.
 2. People's experiences of hardship often reflect ongoing daily struggle, rather than one-off 'emergency' situations.
 3. Many of the research participants living in hardship experienced challenges with their physical and/or mental health. Many had difficulty accessing medical appointments to improve their health.
 4. Rural hardship in the North Cotswolds is often hidden for the wealthier majority. This is played out in the contradiction of the strength and support of rural communities but with people in hardship experiencing or fearing stigma and shame.
 5. The 'lacks of' that cause and affect rural hardship need to be addressed in local and national government planning.



1. Introduction

Hidden Hardship is a research project aiming to understand the experiences of people living in hardship in the rural North Cotswolds in and around Gloucestershire in the UK. It seeks to understand their everyday experiences, coping strategies, and barriers to wellbeing. This report presents the research findings, implications, and recommendations for national and local policymakers and community leaders.

Rural hardship is a problem in the UK: 17% of rural households in England are experiencing relative poverty (income below 60% of the median income) after housing costs¹. Rural hardship can be more hidden than urban hardship particularly in picturesque tourist areas and where there are not obvious signs of hardship such as rough sleeping. Where hardship is hidden or the area does not rank as a high deprivation area this can mean that attention is not given to understanding the nature and response to hardship in these areas.

However, evidence shows that rural areas of the UK are ‘coldspots’ for social mobility and areas of entrenched deprivation meaning that it is difficult for people in rural areas to move out of poverty². Compared to urban areas, people living in rural areas experience more problems of low paid, seasonal work, unaffordable housing, and issues accessing services³. The impact of austerity in rural areas has been overlooked⁴, yet the combination of Covid-19 and austerity is set to further entrench poverty.

Rural isolation is a problem for children and young people because it affects their future life chances and prospects. For example, disadvantaged young people in remote rural areas are 50% less likely to gain two or more A-levels or enter university than their counterparts in the UK’s major cities⁵. For the working

age population, living in rural areas limits access to employment opportunities for example due to poor transport links, the high cost of childcare, and low pay⁶, whilst elderly people may struggle with limited transport links. If rural poverty is not addressed, it will remain a generational problem because as the Social Mobility Commission argues in their 2021 report, “where you live matters”⁷.

Language: poverty and hardship

This research has purposely chosen to use the language of hardship over poverty. This is because the language of hardship is arguably less stigmatising than poverty. This was particularly important in undertaking participatory research including conversations that required asking people who the researcher had only recently met about their experiences of hardship. Linked to stigma, hardship was arguably an easier term for people to identify with than poverty and to ‘admit’ to experiencing in an area where hardship is hidden, thereby increasing the accessibility of research participation. As section 3 of this report shows, part of this research’s aim has been to develop a definition of rural hardship from participants’ experiences.

Urban areas have been the dominant focus of social science research into UK poverty and hardship. However, it cannot be assumed that research into urban hardship is transferable to rural contexts because rural areas present their own challenges and coping mechanisms which need to be understood. May

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1. UK Government (2019) Poverty, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/828072/Poverty_-_August_2019.pdf accessed 05/03/2020
 2. Social Mobility Commission (2017) State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf accessed 05/03/2020
 3. May, J., Williams, A., Cloke, P. & Cherry, L. (2019) Welfare Convergence, Bureaucracy, and Moral Distancing at the Food Bank. *Antipode*, 51, 4, 1251-1275
 4. Ibid.
 5. Social Mobility Commission (2017) State of the Nation 2017: Social Mobility in Great Britain, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/662744/State_of_the_Nation_2017_-_Social_Mobility_in_Great_Britain.pdf accessed 05/03/2020
 6. Ibid.
 7. Social Mobility Commission (2021) ‘Annual review and business plan 2020 - a year of innovation and collaboration’ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-mobility-commission-unveils-annual-review-2020/annual-review-and-business-plan-2020-a-year-of-innovation-and-collaboration> accessed 10/10/2023

et al. (2020)⁸ argue that there are three main reasons why UK rural poverty has received less attention than urban poverty:

1. There is less data available on rural poverty.
2. Rural poverty appears relatively invisible to the public gaze compared to urban poverty.
3. Rural areas are often associated with a discourse of rural idyll that does not sit with rural poverty.

This research addresses each of these reasons: it gathers data on rural poverty through a participatory methodology in the North Cotswolds which is an area often associated with wealth and rural idyll, making its rural poverty hidden.

1.1. The research area: The North Cotswolds

The North Cotswolds are situated in the south-west of England crossing the counties of Gloucestershire, Oxfordshire, and Warwickshire (see figure 1 for the location of the Cotswolds). It forms the northern part of the Cotswold District. The Cotswolds is not an ethnically diverse region with over 96% of residents White British⁹. Reflecting the number of people who retire to the area, the average age of the Cotswolds is 49 years which is higher than the UK national average of 40 years¹⁰.

The Cotswolds is not an area associated with deprivation: it is the 2nd least deprived district in Gloucestershire¹¹ and has no neighbourhoods that are amongst the 20% most deprived in England¹². In the rural town in this research, 11% of children are living in poverty, compared to 17% across England¹³ and more people than the national average are living with a limiting long-term illness (20% compared to 18% across England)¹⁴.



Figure 1. The location of the Cotswolds (in green). © Natural England copyright 2012. Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2012, CC BY-SA 3.0

1.2. Structure of the report

The next section of the report explains how the Hidden Hardship research was undertaken. Then, in sections 3 to 5 the report outlines the key findings: everyday experiences of hardship, coping strategies, and barriers to wellbeing. Finally, section 6 presents the conclusions, implications, and recommendations of the research for policymakers and community leaders.

8. May, J., Williams, A., Cloke, P. & Cherry, L. (2019) Welfare Convergence, Bureaucracy, and Moral Distancing at the Food Bank. *Antipode*, 51, 4, 1251-1275

9. Office for National Statistics. (2021) How life has changed in Cotswold: Census 2021 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000079/> accessed 06/04/2023

10. Office for National Statistics. (2021) How life has changed in Cotswold: Census 2021 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000079/> accessed 06/04/2023

11. Gloucestershire County Council. (2019) The English Indices of Deprivation: Cotswold District Summary https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2095684/iodfact2019_cots.pdf accessed 04/07/2023

12. Data and Analysis Team, Gloucester County Council. (2019) Indices of Deprivation 2019 – Gloucestershire, Gloucestershire County Council https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk/media/2094524/gloucestershire_deprivation_2019_v13.pdf accessed 16/04/2023

13. Reference amended to maintain anonymity - <https://www.gloucestershire.gov.uk>

14. Ibid.

2. Researching hidden hardship

The research took place in a rural town and a rural village in the North Cotswolds. At the request of some of the research participants, the town and village are not named in this report. The chosen town and village are largely representative of towns and villages in the North Cotswolds. All fieldwork was carried out January 2023 to August 2023.

The research was formed of two stages:

1. Time spent at community groups and gatherings with interviews undertaken with people experiencing and/or responding to hardship.
2. Go-along interviews and diaries written by people experiencing hardship.

These stages are explained in more detail in sections 2.1 and 2.2 below.



Figure 2: The Hidden Hardship fieldwork elements and participants

All of the research participants were fully briefed about the research and gave their consent to take part. It was optional for all of the organisations and people to take part in the research. People and organisations' real names are used in this report with their permission or pseudonyms are used. People's roles are referred to as correct at the time of their interview. The research gained ethical approval from the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University.

2.1. Community groups and gatherings

The project's researcher Dr Stephanie Denning made 17 visits to community groups and gatherings in a rural town and rural village in the North Cotswolds between January 2023 and May 2023. These included visiting:

- North Cotswold Foodbank¹⁵
- A community gathering to support people seeking paid employment
- A toddler group
- A warm place (free lunch gathering started in the context of rising fuel bills)
- A housing advice and support charity
- Cotswold Friends'¹⁶ offices
- A community forum
- An online interview with a Home Start Cotswolds¹⁷ volunteer

The groups and gatherings were chosen in order to meet people attending targeted responses to hardship such as the foodbank, but also groups in which there were a mix of people such as the toddler group for other ways in which people navigate hardship in their daily lives.

At the groups and gatherings Stephanie observed and participated in activities, and kept a diary to record her observations and reflections from each visit. At the groups and gathering she undertook 22 interviews with people experiencing and/or responding to hardship. The majority of interviews took place in-person with others on Zoom. Interviews covered people's experiences of (responding to) hardship, coping strategies, and reflections on the future. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for thematic analysis.

15. For more information visit <https://northcotswold.foodbank.org.uk/>

16. For more information visit <https://www.cotswoldfriends.org/>

17. For more information visit <https://home-start-cotswolds.org.uk/>

2.2. Households experiencing hardship

The second stage of the research involved working more closely with three households experiencing hardship. Two of the participants had already completed more formal interviews in stage one, whilst Stephanie was put in touch with the third through a local community leader. In each household an adult kept a diary for a month to record their everyday experiences of hardship and their reflections.

They also each completed three go-along interviews. A go-along interview is an informal conversational interview that takes place whilst going about an activity with the interviewer¹⁸, in this case a daily activity that reflected their experience of hardship. Go-along interviews included trips to the supermarket, a crafting session, visiting local charity shops, and visiting a phone box converted into a library. During each interview we discussed the activity and the implications of life on a tight budget. These interviews were also audio recorded and transcribed for analysis alongside the formal interviews from stage one and the diary entries.

The vast majority of research participants had lived in the area more than 5 years, with many having lived in the area more than 10 years and/or having moved back to the area. Participants shared that they liked living in the area because of the good way of life, strong sense of community, and access to the countryside and to nature. In particular, the strong sense of community meant that people stayed living there even when life was tough experiencing hardship. However, what people disliked about living in the area included the lack of public transport, the high cost of living, and the lack of services and amenities.



18. For more information see Kusenbach (2003) 'Street Phenomenology: The Go-Along as Ethnographic Research Tool', *Ethnography*, 4, 3, 455-485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146613810343007>

3. Key findings: everyday experiences of hardship

3.1. Defining rural hardship

What did hardship mean for the research participants? Hardship was overwhelmingly defined by people experiencing and responding to **hardship as struggle and tough times**. This was drawn out in different ways. First, hardship was referred to as struggle following a difficult change in circumstances or something going wrong, which Holly candidly referred to as a **“sh*tuation”**. A foodbank volunteer shared that they see people experiencing hardship when there is **“very little resistance when things go wrong”**, or in other words when someone does not have the financial, emotional, or logistical resources and support available to them to respond to a situation. Secondly, local resident Jan emphasised that hardship was not just about financial resources because it also related to practical struggles and isolation:

Not just money. The hardship of living in isolation, not knowing where to go to turn to. That’s a hardship.

(Jan, local resident, interview, 2023)

Jan and others shared that rural hardship involved isolation and a feeling of being trapped, particularly from poor access to amenities and services including a lack of public transport. Thirdly, others emphasised financial rural hardship with a high cost of rural living. Participants shared how they could not always afford basic essentials including food and heating, and/or having to choose between these. Finally, a former farm worker reflected in an interview on the hardship of working in agriculture:



Hardship in farming

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

What comes to mind from the word hardship? The job that I had working in agriculture, being on the farm it was a lot of hard graft. You’re outside in all weathers and the days are long. My days would start through the winter time at 3.15am in the morning, I’d still be there at 7pm/8pm at night.

(Local resident, interview, 2023)

Participants’ definitions of hardship – from their own experiences of hardship and of responding to hardship – therefore revolved around struggle. This reflects the effort involved in hardship in rural life, drawn out in the following sections of how people experienced hardship.

3.2. Awareness of rural hardship

Did local people in the North Cotswolds know when people are experiencing hardship? The vast majority of research participants knew or saw others experiencing hardship. However, this was because of their own experiences of hardship and/or of responding to hardship. They shared that for many local residents and tourists in the North Cotswolds hardship remains hidden. Claire, a local resident who experienced hardship herself, volunteered at the foodbank, and ran the local warm place shared:



The cost of rural living

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

Numbers increasing at the food bank, numbers increasing at warm place, just the general wellbeing of people as now I'm around during the day, you notice... I'm noticing people more. ...You notice those people who are going around [the supermarket] just buying the yellow stickers, or walking around with a calculator.

(Claire, local resident and volunteer, interview, 2023)

Claire reflected how she saw the hidden hardship more now that she was not working elsewhere everyday (due to her health): noticing local hardship to some degree revolved around being in the right place and at the right time. However, there is also a significant degree of **inequality** in the North Cotswolds. A local vicar in the North Cotswolds, Revd Canon Dana Delap reflected on this:

I dislike the inequality, the experience of some people living in this area is a mystery to others. So, the very rich don't see the very poor and the poor don't see what life is like for the very rich.

(Revd Canon Dana Delap, vicar, interview, 2023)

Inequality was therefore another reason that some people's hardship remained hidden to others. Revd Dana shared that as a vicar she was more able to ask questions to people of how they were, and if they were keeping warm, adding:



Hidden hardship amongst the elderly

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

Poverty among the elderly, really hard to see. People wear big coats and woolly jumpers and so on, so it's difficult to tell when people are getting skinny.

(Revd Canon Dana Delap, vicar, interview, 2023)

People's awareness of hardship therefore revolved around their own situations and their work/ volunteering activities. Others' hardship could remain largely hidden to many, behind the visual appearance of idyllic Cotswold villages, wealthy residents and celebrities, and the number of tourists and tourist facilities.

3.3. Participants' experiences of rural hardship

Each person's experience of hardship was unique. This section aims to balance each participant's individual experiences with the commonalities in experiences to give an overview of what it is like to experience hardship in the rural North Cotswolds.

A common theme in participants' experiences was the fact that their hardship was often **hidden to onlookers**, and that when people were aware or they had to ask for help – such as attending the foodbank – there was a sense of **embarrassment, damaged pride, and fear of stigma**. For many participants, attending the foodbank was a last resort. This is not to put blame on groups such as the foodbank. Instead, it reflects the stigma in society of experiencing poverty.

It's embarrassing... in the area that we live in, I think to put your hands up and say, I'm really struggling here... you feel judged. Whether you are or not, I don't know.

(Julie, local resident, interview, 2023)

For Julie, her embarrassment of experiencing hardship was heightened by this not being the experience of the majority of people living in the North Cotswolds: this is an area of inequality. Julie also shared the reality of the challenge of looking after her family on a low budget. Her experience typifies that of others: daily trying to balance a high cost of living from limited local shop choices (many being tearooms with high tourist prices rather than everyday shops for local residents), having limited employment opportunities locally but a high cost of owning and running a car to drive to access work elsewhere, her income not matching the rising cost of living, and health struggles to complicate this further. Despite this Julie showed strong resilience in facing these challenges to try to build a more comfortable future for her family.



The reality of daily hardship

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

My daughter asked if it was payday – picked up a packet of dates because she wanted to try them. It wasn't. Feels sh*t to say no to a child that thinks it's a treat to try dates for heaven's sake and I had to say wait. Most kids ask for toys!!

(Julie, local resident, diary, 2023)

Julie's account echoes others' accounts in the stresses and struggle of life on a low income – whether from (seasonal and/or low paid) employment and/or government benefits and pensions. For example, David another local resident shared: **“We don't have disposable income but it's how it is.”**

Ultimately low incomes resulted in people needing to **make daily choices to cut down spending**, be that turning off the heating in winter (and therefore being cold), not being to use the washing machine, or missing meals:



Hardship and hunger

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

I often found it cheaper to just buy powdered milk and cereal for myself which made me feel quite low... Have struggled to sleep some nights because I've been hungry. Soup and shakes aren't always very filling.

(Kate, local resident, diary, 2023)

Kate and others in the research put a huge amount of thought into their daily expenditure as a result of limited budgets. Go-along interviews with two participants for their food shopping included careful meal plans and shopping lists, with attention to the price per unit in each food item, and little room for choice or spontaneity in purchases (as also shown above in Julie's diary extract).

Another common theme in participants' accounts of hardship was the **difficulties experienced in transport**. Public transport was limited, unreliable, often did not run at the times that were needed for example to access employment, and trains in particular were expensive. Universal Credit claimants needed to travel to Cheltenham – over 20 miles away – regularly for the nearest Job Centre for compulsory appointments at considerable cost financially and in time. Transport options also made it harder to access larger, cheaper shops if someone does not have their

own car or cannot afford petrol. Maintaining a car was highlighted by participants as a difficult cost on a limited budget which caused stress. However, if it could be afforded then a car was important for navigating rural life in order to give options for amenities and employment that could not be accessed by public transport.

A significant number of research participants shared that their hardship was both caused and affected by their **poor physical and/or mental health**. For example, there is a higher cost for food items for medically necessary diets such as gluten free products. This affected people's capacity to work and in turn limited their incomes. Poor public transport affected people's ability to attend medical appointments, with some (notably women) sharing that they did not always go to the doctors when they were unwell because of this.

3.4. Causes of rural hardship

In participants' interviews and accounts of hardship it could be difficult to differentiate between their experiences of hardship and the causes of hardship because the two were so intertwined. For example, the lack of public transport both caused hardship for example in making it difficult to access employment, but also was central to people's experiences of hardship. Figure 3 shows the different causes of rural hardship from participants' accounts. Cumulatively these refer to **'lacks of'**:





Figure 3. The causes of rural hardship from research participants' accounts



The cost of living crisis
 Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

3.5. Rural and urban hardship

This research was not a formal comparison between rural and urban hardship. However, this comparison was an interview question for research participants. Whilst one participant commented that hardship is difficult anywhere, the majority of participants reflected on how **rural hardship was exacerbated compared to urban hardship by isolation**, there being less support in rural areas for people experiencing hardship, and it being considered more expensive to live in rural areas:



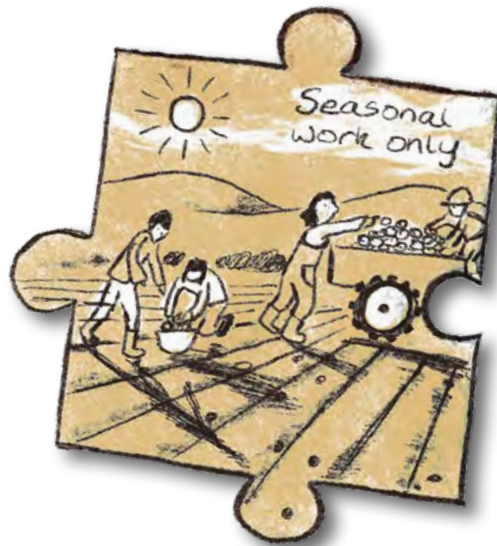
The cost of rural hardship

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

Just everything costs more. Everything costs more from fuel... and also because it just costs more to heat rural houses because you just haven't got everything squished together. Transport, what little there is here, and that's the issue. There is very little public transport. It's very irregular, you can't depend on it. And then that means it's harder to find work, to travel for work. ...life is just harder.

(Foodbank volunteer, interview, 2023)

Others reflected on how investments by the government and elsewhere have focussed on urban areas more than rural areas, making it harder to experience hardship in a rural than urban area. However, it was also acknowledged that rural areas could have a stronger sense of community, which as the next section shows was vital for how people coped with hardship.



4. Key findings: coping strategies for hardship



Careful budgeting

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

4.1. Help in tough times

What helped people experiencing hardship through tough times? Participants' responses fall into two main categories: family and friends, and local groups for support. Sections 4.2 and 4.3 examine these in more detail.

Overall, participants displayed a great deal of **resilience and perseverance**, especially when “**tough times**” had existed for a significant amount of time and showed little sign of abating. Community spirit was important to people's coping strategies and wellbeing, with this not necessarily being through organised groups but often found informally amongst neighbours and friends. Many participants took one day at a time in order to cope with their hardship, including with a daily careful eye on their bank balance

and an eye on the date for when they would next be paid. Pets also provided important emotional support during difficult times. Extending to farming, a former farm worker interviewed shared that his pride in the livestock under his care helped him cope in the hardship of long hours working for low pay.

Formal initiatives for support found across participants' experiences included reduced utility tariffs for people on low incomes or in receipt of government benefits. However, people needed to know about these to request them from their utility provider and to have the confidence to do this. One participant referred to this as needing to be “**savvy**” in their budgeting, which extended to applying for grants for example from trade unions although many would not have known these were available.

More **informal coping strategies** shared by participants included accessing different ‘markets’ including buying second-hand items from charity shops, food surpluses from supermarkets, free items shared on Facebook groups, reward cards when shopping or in cafes, and selling second-hand items on Vinted. Other informal coping strategies included low cost or free hobbies including walking in the countryside, and arts and crafts activities both of which participants indicated were positive for their mental health. One go-along interview featured visiting a phone box which was had been converted into a community library for anyone to take or leave a book. Such hobbies and initiatives (and rural community spirits) helped people through tough times and were a benefit to all in the local community whether they were experiencing hardship or not, showing the benefits of rural community life.

4.2. Family and friends

The support of family and friends was **overwhelmingly important** for how research participants coped with rural hardship. However, this was juxtaposed with some participants also fearing being a burden to their family, and not wanting to share their situation with friends due to shame or a fear of stigma. The support of family and friends fed into the rural community spirit which participants commonly referred to, yet this was in contradiction to the inequalities, stigma, and affluence of others that was also found: support and care was not universal across the rural communities in the North Cotswolds.

Research participants who had moved to the area more recently reported less on the strength of support of friends and community spirit than those who have lived in the area for longer. This perhaps reflects the difference where several generations have lived in one rural area and therefore have established connections in the community.

Local resident and warm place leader Claire experienced hardship herself but was also at the centre of numerous informal support networks including her “**help yourself freezer**”:



The ‘help yourself freezer’

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

I have friends who are in a similar boat and we just help each other. When one of us gets money in, we’ll go and buy something for them. In my house, I was given off one of my mates... we call it our help yourself freezer. So, one drawer has all my gluten free stuff, one drawer, my friend has, and then the rest of the drawers are help yourself. So, any of my neighbours or my friends who need stuff... One of my friends works at Aldi, so when she does a late shift, any of the meat that is going out she grabs at 75% off and then she just fills the freezer. So, it’s just creating... we’re all in the same boat. We all need to help each other.

(Claire, local resident, interview, 2023)

Claire’s extract shows how the support of family and friends was vital for how many of the research participants coped in their daily experiences of hardship. This included both emotional and practical support: for example, gifts, borrowing money, a listening ear, and a lift to places and amenities including the GP for appointments and the foodbank. People were more likely to share their experiences of hardship with close family and friends than more widely in the community – with hardship therefore often remaining hidden to others. In this way there were instances in participants’ stories of how wealthier neighbours, friends and/or family, might help them out but in other instances could have little understanding of hardship. The relative affluence could therefore be

a source of support, but also a space for 'othering', stigma, and hiding one's own experience of hardship. In addition, several people shared that they were given strength to cope in their situation for the sake of their children.

Finally, Christian faith and support from priests and friends made through church congregations arose in several participants' accounts. The Cotswolds is remarkably non-diverse in terms of religious faith: in the 2021 census almost 56% of respondents identified as Christian, almost 37% no religion, and only 1.8% Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, or Other (the remaining 6% gave no answer)¹⁹. Moving beyond statistics, local churches are often physically and metaphorically central in rural Cotswold communities. As well as a place of worship, they are often community meeting places, organisers, and signposting to other community gatherings, people and connections. For example, in this research a foodbank client shared that his Christian faith gave him daily strength to face being homeless, and Kate was glad to have re-found her Christian faith and the support of a welcoming church community including meeting people when she moved to the area:

I was on my doorstep and I heard the bells going and something just told me to come to church one day, and I just came into the service, and I met Beth and she introduced me to everybody. Then I met everybody else and it's just... Yeah, that's how I've become part of the community really, through church.

(Kate, local resident, interview, 2023)

In addition to Kate, several participants shared that church leaders and other members of church congregations supported them with financial gifts, transport to access amenities, and a significant degree of emotional support.

Overall, the support of family and friends was a significant part of how people coped with rural hardship on a daily basis in the North Cotswolds.

4.3. Local groups for support

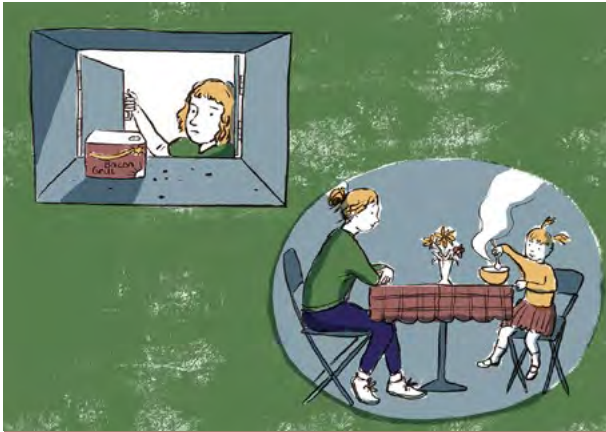
There are multiple local groups for support, with more in the rural town in this research than in the village. Examples of local groups for support when people are experiencing hardship include:

- North Cotswold Foodbank (non-perishable goods plus eggs, bread, and a vegetable box)
- The local warm place
- Job clubs for support in applying for employment
- A housing support charity
- Toddler groups (often run by or in association with local churches)
- Cotswold Friends including their community transport scheme
- Social groups such as community lunches
- Social prescribers (including access through local GPs)
- Home Start befrienders
- Support in schools
- Local trusts and foundations for financial grants (although people need to know about these to apply, and many do not)

As a list this looks like a large number of local groups taking place to support people experiencing hardship. This is potentially true, but people can struggle to access groups due to the lack of public transport unless they have their own car, or the groups are in walking distance (which they often are not). This was particularly difficult for people living in the smaller

19. Office for National Statistics. (2021) How life has changed in Cotswold: Census 2021 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/censusareachanges/E07000079/> accessed 06/04/2023

villages to access groups in the rural towns. There could also be an issue of people not knowing that this support was available, or feelings of stigma or shame preventing people asking for help. An encounter with Holly shows the problem of access alongside the vital support that groups can provide:



The emergency tin

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

I was opening the cupboards and I've had the same emergency tin of bacon grill in there for about four months and I'm saving that for a really bad time, and then I'm like, okay, it is really bad times.

(Holly, local resident, interview, 2023)

A young Mum Holly arrived at the warm place with her young daughter. The little girl had soup and bread but Holly said she wasn't hungry and just wanted to make sure her daughter had something to eat. She was given two vouchers for a local tearoom to have free tea and a teacake another day this week and exclaimed **"If I'd known how much help was available I wouldn't have struggled for years."**

(Researcher's field diary, 2023)

Holly's experience shows the importance of local groups in providing support, and how attending one group can snowball the known support that is available – that morning Holly had attended the foodbank initially, and there had been told about the warm place where she could spend time being warm and have a free lunch, and then at the warm place she was given two vouchers for free tea and a teacake at a local tearoom (a gift donated by the tearoom). Local groups could therefore be important in signposting people to other support available. However, Holly also said she had **"struggled for years"**. The reasons for Holly struggling were complex. She was widowed in her 20s, losing not only her husband but also the breadwinner for her young family. The limited hours of childcare paid for by the government combined with her now effectively being a single Mum meant that Holly found it difficult to find reliable work. She shared that she experienced pride in wanting to cope on her own, and that (fear of) stigma had affected Holly accessing the foodbank, with concern in a close-knit community of **"who am I going to see there?"** (Holly, interview, 2023). The complexity of Holly's experience mirrors that of others, and shows the multiple factors at play in needing and accessing local groups for support.

Family and friends, as well as local groups where therefore vital for how people coped living in hardship: tough times were often daily rather than a one-off emergency. The next section turns to the anticipated future and barriers to wellbeing.

5. Key findings: barriers to wellbeing



Barriers to wellbeing

Credit: Hidden Hardship and Beth Waters

5.1. Hopes for the future

Participants experiencing hardship were asked in interviews about their hopes for the future. Whilst this was intended as a positive closing interview question, some responded that **“I don’t see anything different for the future”** (Local resident, interview, 2023) because of their current situation of struggle and hardship, or **“Have I even thought about that? No. ... I just have to try and get through each day, and each week.”** (Julie, interview, 2023). Others shared hopes that they would be able to work again, that things would change, and that they would be happy and **“To just be financially secure. I don’t even want to be comfortable. Just secure and go to the shop and not be adding up what everything costs.”** (Holly, interview, 2023).

5.2. Factors stopping hardship from improving

What stops hardship from improving for people living in areas like the rural North Cotswolds? Kate’s reflection sums up the experiences of many participants in this research:

I absolutely love this village and it’s supportive, friendly community but I would like to do so much more, to better my finances, my mental health and my physical health but I am very limited as to what I can do because I don’t have my own transport and public transport in villages is very limited.

(Kate, local resident, diary, 2023)

Kate's experience of living in a rural village in the North Cotswolds shows the juxtaposition of loving where she lives and the strength of community support, and yet at the same time being **restricted by its location and amenities**. This experience is reflected in others' accounts: the most common responses for what stops hardship from improving were:

- Services including transport stopping
- The lack of government support (including low benefit rates)
- A sense of individuals not wanting to ask for help due to shame, stigma, and/or a lack of confidence

The government has left rural areas, a lot of people have felt they have been left alone. I mean the DWP is proof of that, the DWP only offer support to town areas, people living in towns, if you don't live in town you have to travel all the way, so that in itself is proof that at the government level, people have been made disadvantaged. So political decisions definitely play a big part.

(Volunteer, interview, 2023)

Other responses that people gave for what stops rural hardship from improving included:

- Not seeing anything that could change to improve rural hardship
- The cost of living including high tourist prices in local shops
- The lack of secure employment available locally
- Debt
- A lack of affordable housing (to rent or buy)

To some degree factors that stop hardship from improving were perceived as outside of people's control, which makes it difficult for people experiencing hardship and others to envisage their situations improving.

5.3. Rural hardship changing over time

Has rural hardship in the North Cotswolds changed over time? The majority of participants thought that hardship and its causes have changed over time, but there was not universal agreement over how. Several interviewees thought that hardship had got worse due to the impact of the financial crash and austerity, there being fewer jobs available, and the **"breakdown of rural communities"** (Foodbank volunteer, interview, 2023). However, others thought that hardship had been harder in the past, or that hardship would get worse yet. Finally, all participants asked thought that how people negotiate hardship has changed over time due to:

- People can borrow more money now than in the past
- People moving into the area are wealthier than in the past
- People now ask for help more, and it's now more socially accepted to be struggling
- People not growing their own food or keeping livestock as much as in the past

What this perhaps most clearly shows is that how hardship is perceived depends on a person's past and current life experiences.

6. Conclusions, implications and recommendations

In conclusion, this research has taken a participatory approach with local residents to understand people's experiences of rural hardship, coping strategies, and barriers to wellbeing in the rural North Cotswolds. The research focussed on one rural town and village, kept anonymous at the request of some participants. The chosen town and village are largely representative of towns and villages in the North Cotswolds. However, this research cannot claim to represent everyone's experiences.

The research has found that **hardship can be defined as struggle and tough times**: struggle following a change in circumstances, struggle financially and in other ways including from rural isolation, and everyday struggle including as a result of a high cost of rural living. However, rural hardship in the North Cotswolds is often hidden because of the relative affluence experienced by the majority, and the high levels of tourism in the area. People were therefore largely only aware of hardship if they experienced it themselves, or if they worked or volunteered at a gathering or group where they met people experiencing hardship. This relative affluence of the majority means that the North Cotswolds can be a space of inequality: people experiencing hardship shared that this meant that they on occasion felt embarrassment, damaged pride, and a fear of stigma if others knew of their situation. **People's experiences of hardship** reflected daily struggle (meaning hardship was more often ongoing rather than a one-off 'emergency' situation) with people making daily decisions to reduce their spending (including skipping meals). Hardship also related to difficulties with rural transport through limited and unreliable public transport but high costs of private transport, and hardship caused/exacerbated by poor physical and/or mental health.

The **causes of rural hardship** can be summarised as 'lacks of': a lack of support from the government and low benefit rates, poor mental and/or physical health, limited and low paid local employment opportunities, poor transport, the high cost of rural living, a lack of investment in rural areas, difficult family situations, and inadequate affordable housing. These experiences of hardship and causes of hardship were all relative to rural isolation, meaning that they present different challenges than urban hardship.

In people's **coping strategies**, huge importance was given to informal support networks with friends and families in addition to support offered by local groups. Some research participants made use of formal strategies such as reduced energy tariffs or applying for grants. However, people needed to know that these were available (which they often did not) and have the confidence to apply. Informal strategies could be more important day-to-day such as cheap or free hobbies and accessing informal markets such as surplus food from supermarkets. The support of friends and family and the strength of rural communities was vital for how people coped with hardship, including emotional, financial, and practical support. However, this was juxtaposed by stigma and shame making a contradiction in rural areas of them being places of care and stigma. Local groups were also important for support, but people can have difficulties accessing these due to limited transport options and rural isolation, and/or a fear or reality of stigma in a small community.

Finally, turning to **barriers to greater wellbeing**, people's hopes for the future were often eclipsed by daily struggle in the present. To some degree factors that stop hardship from improving were perceived as outside of people's control, which makes it difficult for people experiencing hardship and others to envisage their situations improving. These included problems with transport, lack of government support and investment, and stigma/shame linked to inequality. There was not universal agreement amongst participants over how rural hardship, its causes, and coping mechanisms have changed over time. This reflects how perceptions of hardship relate to people's own past and present experiences.

6.1. Implications and recommendations

This report closes with five implications and associated recommendations for local and national policymakers and community leaders:

1. Rural and urban hardship are not the same and each pose different challenges.

- 1.1. Local organisations often recognise this and adapt accordingly.
- 1.2. There need to be more tailored national government and national voluntary sector responses to rural hardship.

2. People's experiences of hardship often reflect ongoing daily struggle, rather than one-off 'emergency' situations.

- 2.1. There need to be more formal strategies to respond to people's daily struggles through the government and voluntary sector to provide ongoing formal support in addition to people's informal coping strategies.
- 2.2. More support is needed for individuals experiencing rural hardship including within the welfare state to address the high cost of rural living.
- 2.3. Regular Job Centre benefit appointments need to either take place at a location closer to where people live than the nearest city, or have the option to be carried out remotely for example over the phone.

3. Many of the research participants living in hardship experienced challenges with their physical and/or mental health. Many had difficulty accessing medical appointments to improve their health.

- 3.1. People need support accessing transport to get to medical appointments at GP surgeries and hospitals, particularly from villages where there is no GP surgery in the village or in walking distance.
- 3.2. It would be advantageous for the health of small rural communities and villages if local GP practices/branches re-opened and/or stayed open in these communities.

4. Rural hardship in the North Cotswolds is often hidden for the wealthier majority. This is played out in the contradiction of the strength and support of rural communities but with people in hardship experiencing or fearing stigma and shame.

- 4.1. Local organisations could raise awareness in the general population in rural areas such as the North Cotswolds that people are experiencing hardship, and sensitively give a voice to people experiencing hardship to share their experiences (anonymously if requested).
- 4.2. Local organisations can host the Hidden Hardship research exhibition to raise awareness of hardship – for more details see <https://hiddenhardship.coventry.ac.uk/index.php/next-steps/>
- 4.3. Within the above, faith groups and faith leaders (notably the Church in rural areas) can play a crucial role in raising awareness and challenging false stereotypes of hardship.

5. The 'lacks of' that cause and affect rural hardship need to be addressed in local and national government planning.

- 5.1. These need to be shown to local residents to be possible to change and influence, rather than being outside of people's control making it difficult to envisage a more positive future.
- 5.2. The particular issue with the lack of and unreliable public transport needs addressing. Whilst there are several local community transport schemes, on the whole participants in this research did not refer to making use of these. Further research is required to understand why this is, and how to improve the situation.
- 5.3. More national government investment is needed in rural areas, including more affordable housing and investment in amenities and infrastructure.

