An evidence briefing on young people's access to employment in rural communities



A partnership of

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Background

The Kailo programme works with young people, within their local area, to determine what matters to them about their mental health and wellbeing and then identify changes that can be made to address these factors [1]. This work begins with discussions with young people and local groups in a ‘small circle’ to develop a better understanding of local priorities [2]. The Kailo Northern Devon small circle identified that employment and career opportunities are a key driver of young people’s wellbeing in the area. Understanding what prevents and supports access to employment in rural or geographically isolated communities may be important for developing interventions seeking to improve young people's wellbeing.

What did we aim to find out?

The aim of this evidence briefing is to synthesise existing evidence on what prevents and supports access to employment for young people aged between 16 to 25 years living in rural communities. The following questions will be addressed:

1. What are the wellbeing related benefits of employment?
2. What prevents and supports access to employment opportunities in rural communities?

How did we answer these questions?

For question one we conducted a search to consolidate findings from research publications and grey literature including third sector and government reports and briefings. For question two, we conducted a review of systematic reviews, using a small number of search terms, looking at factors that prevent and support youth access to employment opportunities in rural communities.

We initially aimed to include systematic reviews published after 2005, and then widened our criteria to include non-systematic reviews and reports published after 2000, due to the dearth of evidence available on this topic. Search concepts for question two focused on four overarching categories: participants (e.g., young people, adolescents), employment (e.g., jobs), outcome (e.g., barriers, facilitators), and study type (e.g., systematic review, meta-analysis). To obtain information specific to Northern Devon, we consulted with the Kailo team for information on factors preventing and supporting employment for young people in Northern Devon based on discussions with young people in the small circle.



What did we find?

1. What are the wellbeing related benefits of employment?

Employment has many wellbeing related benefits. Having a job has been found to be associated with a higher sense of autonomy, better wellbeing, lower anxiety and depression, increased resilience, and new opportunities for self-development [3]. Similar findings have suggested that employment is a key determinant of mental health, and further still, that 'supported employment' (i.e., helping people to find and succeed in jobs) should be incorporated into mental health treatments [4].

Supported employment could help many people with serious mental health disorders by providing an achievable purpose and a higher quality of life, whilst also reducing reliance on formal mental health systems [4]. Additionally, unemployment has been found to adversely affect wellbeing in all groups regardless of age, gender, geographical location, or level of education. Young people were found to be more vulnerable to the effects of unemployment, especially when this is long-term [5].

Studies show that when people transitioned from unemployment to employment their wellbeing increased. This is especially true for those with mental health difficulties, who have been shown to have positive and long-lasting improvements in their subjective wellbeing when engaged in paid employment [6]. Notably, receiving financial subsidies in place of employment did not contribute to individuals' wellbeing as much as did regular employment. This highlights that regular employment offers wellbeing related benefits beyond financial advantages, one element of which may be increased independence [7].

There may be a bi-directional relationship between mental health and employment, where individuals with mental health difficulties or low wellbeing are often at higher risk of unemployment [8]. This highlights the imperative need to explore targeted employment interventions for these specific groups.



2. What prevents and supports access to employment opportunities in rural communities?

What prevents access to employment?
Several factors that prevent access to employment for young people in rural areas have been identified. These can be organised under four main themes: availability of employment opportunities, availability of education and knowledge, practical factors and remuneration.

Availability of Employment Opportunities

In rural areas, there may be fewer employment opportunities overall, and those that are on offer may be of a limited range or not suited to developing a sustainable career [9, 10]. For example, one study found that in parts of rural Scotland, there was either a shortage of employment opportunities altogether, or jobs were on a seasonal basis so developing a sustainable career was not possible [11]. Larger employers and businesses are often not centred in rural areas, further reducing the amount and types of jobs on offer [12].
Due to the smaller range of jobs, local opportunities may not match the interests of young people in a particular area. In Northern Devon, young people particularly reported that creative industries were not represented in the local area and due to this, young people would have to consider leaving the area to pursue their interests if they wanted to develop a career in creative industries.

This pattern is mirrored in a lack of work experience opportunities in rural localities [10], which is an important stepping-stone into employment. Employers are more likely to take on applicants who have some experience of being in the workplace or have been involved in part-time work during studying [9]. Being unable to develop skills through such opportunities may then further hinder the employment prospects of young people in rural areas.

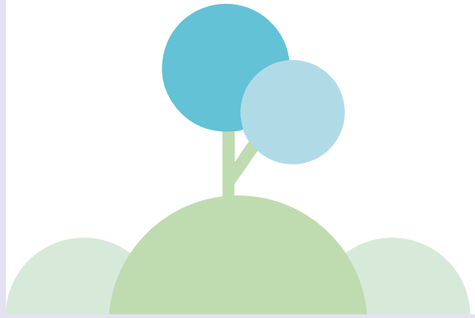
Education, Knowledge and Skills Related to Employment

Education is a common theme across numerous studies examining employment in rural areas. Schools in rural areas follow a national curriculum but, in some cases, they lack the resources or financial support to be able to implement the curriculum as well as schools in urban areas [13]. Young people who attend rural schools may therefore experience lower-quality education than their counterparts in urban areas, which could affect their skills and employability.

In the UK, education on careers and employment guidance is often not tailored to the local market [10]. This means that in rural communities, careers guidance may not match up with the employment opportunities that are available locally, so young people in these areas are unaware of how to secure work that is within their local area [12, 14]. In Northern Devon, there were strong views that the careers support currently provided is outdated, not engaging, and not relevant to the local market. Young people in rural areas have a perceived lack of choice about their future opportunities.

This may be in part due to a lack of options available in the local area (see above section), but could also be because they have a lack of knowledge about what opportunities are available more widely, including how to access higher-paid roles outside of the locality, and often have to rely on family or friends to give advice, which may not always be accurate or up to date [9].

The general careers information given to rural youth often lacks key practical information on how to access opportunities further afield, such as guidance on transport or relocation which would not be as essential to urban youth. This may mean young people are unsure what skills are required for certain roles, or whether they have those skills and, if not, how to acquire them. Additionally, a lack of information means that rural young people do not know what to expect in workplaces, or what might be expected of them [9], and therefore may be more nervous or reluctant about entering the workforce altogether as they fear they are not capable.



Practical Factors

Given the nature of rural areas, transport infrastructure is a key issue. It has been highlighted that youth employment possibilities are prevented by poor public transport and lack of housing provision [11]. Additionally, some employers are reluctant to employ young people who are required to make long or complex journeys to work. One further complication that reduces access to work is the limited availability of childcare for young parents and carers, leaving them with limited options in terms of employment [11].

Remuneration

Low pay has also been found to prevent access to employment in rural areas. It has been reported that young people in rural areas are paid less than their counterparts in urban areas [12, 14]. Young people often also face lower wages compared to older adults living in rural areas, as the latter are more likely to be able to access work outside of the locality, which brings with it higher earnings [12].

What supports access to employment?

Factors that support access to employment for young people can be broadly categorised into themes spanning education, work experience, and local services.

Education

Schools have the potential to improve future employment opportunities for young people by prioritising relevant skills development through high quality education, curricula, and instructors [11, 15]. Technical and vocational training accompanied by financial help can create opportunities for start-ups among rural youth, encouraging them to create their own businesses and job roles [14]. Employment skills training combined with initiatives such as life skills development can improve employment and earning prospects for rural young people [14]. The involvement of employers in delivering careers education, such as by sharing information on how workplaces operate, in terms of hierarchies and workday structure, can also help rural youth to increase their career knowledge and confidence to enter the workplace [9].

Work Experience

Prior work experience and internship programmes are a significant supportive factor in improving employment prospects [10, 11, 14, 15]. They can complement educational training, and employers can be encouraged to work in collaboration with schools and teachers to reach out to youth [9]. Work experience can increase awareness of work settings and what employers expect, as well as provide practical abilities [15]. This increased awareness of what is on offer can, for some young people, instil a sense of productivity and eagerness for the future, especially if the work experience is in an area that is new and interesting to them [16]. Of course, the work experience that is available within a particular location will be limited by the local market.

Local Services

Making the best use of local opportunities is crucial for youth employment in rural settings [10]. For example, being introduced to available informal networks, collaborating with local stakeholders, providing means to cultivate social capital, and utilising regional hubs [10, 11, 15] can significantly contribute to youth employment.

Additionally, programmes that focus on strengthening ties with local employment settings and available community services for marginalised youth have been found to increase employment levels [15]. Employment matching services in local areas such as job fairs can also facilitate finding employment for rural youth and increase their earnings [14].

What are the implications?

It is crucial for interventions to focus both on increasing access to employment for rural youth in their local areas [10], and on increasing access to opportunities further afield. On a practical level, improving rural public transport connections, lowering transport costs or provision of a 'mobility grant' may facilitate access to jobs by improving the mobility of rural youth [11, 14, 17].

These interventions may help to address the issue of young people in rural areas facing higher general living costs such as transport [18], and yet lower earnings than their counterparts in urban areas [12]. Improving access to infrastructure such as free or low-cost high-speed internet could make remote working opportunities more accessible for rural youth [17], however this would need to work in conjunction with upskilling opportunities to be effective. Increased quality of education and providing work experience could improve future youth employment prospects, especially when skills taught and gained can be applied to a wide range of areas [11]. There is also the need to increase the availability, awareness, and uptake of local opportunities, which would simultaneously provide a boost to local economies [10, 11, 15].

This could be achieved by encouraging a wide range of local businesses to provide opportunities for young people, in terms of work experience, apprenticeships and/or paid positions.
In the context of emotional wellbeing, youth mental health services could integrate educational and employment support to tackle vocational requirements and promote recovery [16]. This would help to ensure that rural youth affected by poor mental health do not face further barriers to employment.

It is notable that evidence around how parental and wider community attitudes and perceptions may impact young people's access to employment does not appear in this review. Young people in the Kailo Northern Devon small circle highlighted the importance of the support from parents/family and the influence this can have on them, and the need for more education, awareness, and support for parents/carers. It is possible that these factors may have an influence on young people's choices and decision making but have not been explored explicitly in previous research. Studies included in this review tended to examine more practical factors that could prevent or support access to employment, rather than the attitudes of others.

How does this apply to Northern Devon?

The findings of this evidence briefing mirror the work of the Kailo Northern Devon small circle, in that young people discussed how the challenges of public transport, awareness of employment opportunities, and the availability and quality of careers information could prevent access to employment. The small circle also felt that employers do not value the importance of diverse skills and experiences when they are recruiting into roles, all of which has been identified by the small circle as preventing young people from accessing jobs, opportunities, and careers in Northern Devon.

Young people living in rural communities face a challenging decision if they would like to pursue careers that are not reflected in their local community. Young people in Northern Devon highlighted that creative careers are not reflected locally, which may mean young people must decide whether to relocate in order to pursue this line of work, which brings with it the possibility of moving away from friends and family. For rural communities such as Northern Devon, an optimal outcome would be for young people to be supported to pursue their interests, whether it be something reflected in local industry, or something further afield, without necessarily needing to relocate. It is even more essential in these areas that local businesses are encouraged to offer opportunities for young people to broaden the scope of what is on offer. Mentoring schemes could also help facilitate knowledge sharing between older people based in Northern Devon who have careers in industries outside of the locality, to provide young people who are interested in these types of careers with information on how to access different industries further afield.





In addition to ensuring there is access to transportation to enable young people to access jobs that are further afield, it may be possible for young people in rural communities to take advantage of remote working opportunities for national employers, which have rapidly increased in recent years, and this may additionally help young people to access higher-paid roles without necessarily feeling they have to leave Northern Devon to do so, also benefitting the local economy. We note that, despite the increase in remote working opportunities in recent years, young people are not necessarily aware of which jobs may be available on a remote basis. This type of information could be a key consideration for careers services.

Key considerations for Northern Devon therefore include access to transportation, such as ensuring that regular public services are available for young people to reach neighbouring towns or nearby cities with a higher availability of jobs, or higher-paid roles. This would need to work in conjunction with education programmes to better inform rural youth of their options both in and around Northern Devon, as well as further afield, and how to develop the skills they would need to access, for example, secure employment outside of seasonal work. Better links between local employers and businesses to young people and their schools could especially help to facilitate this, such as by advertising their available job opportunities and skills required. Considerations also need to be made as to how local employers can be more accessible and inclusive to young people in their areas. Additionally, careers support, information and guidance needs to be updated so that it is locally relevant to Northern Devon, matches the job and labour market, and is relevant and accessible to young people with a diverse range of needs. Ensuring rural youth are aware of their options and know how to access secure local employment, but also have the opportunity to gain the skills needed for higher-paid job roles outside of their area if they wish, can therefore help to improve prospects for young people and support rural employment.

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Our vision is a world where all children and families are supported effectively to build on their strengths and to achieve their goals in life. Our mission is to close the gap in wellbeing and mental health by advancing, translating, delivering and sharing the best science and practice with everyone who impacts the lives of children and families.

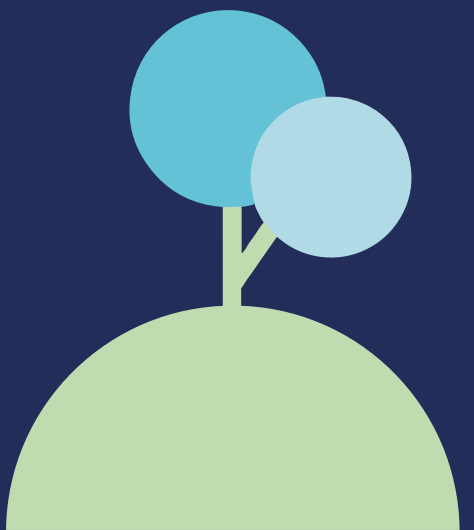
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Kailo

The Kailo programme aims to help young people and their communities find local solutions for better mental health in the UK. It will develop, test and scale an evidence-informed framework that will support local partnerships to co-design strategies that address the underlying drivers of poor adolescent mental health.

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