

Rural Philanthropy in the UK: Building the field of knowledge and practice

December 2025



Introduction

While ‘rural philanthropy’ is a significant area of study and practice in the USA,¹ the needs of rural communities and rurality as an intersectional issue in the UK have been largely overlooked. This proposal sets out an approach to establish a new field of study and practice on rural philanthropy in the UK.

The problem

Although there is strong experiential evidence of significant socio-economic need within rural communities,² that need is often more dispersed and less visible than its urban counterpart.³ For example, rural deprivation has often been overlooked in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) because individuals experiencing deprivation are frequently scattered among more affluent households, and the IMD does not capture several defining features of rural deprivation, such as inadequate public transport.⁴ Furthermore, while rurality can be understood as a form of disadvantage, it is rarely presented as an intersectional issue, thereby compounding other potential disadvantages.

What is far less clear is the extent to which philanthropy reaches and supports rural communities equitably. Although determining exactly what ‘equitable’ might entail in this context is not straightforward. Initial internal data analysis by Community Foundations in Devon and Somerset suggests that rural communities may be underserved by philanthropic investment.

There appears to have been no systematic research exploring how philanthropy can best serve people living in rural communities in the UK. Few funding programs recognise the unique characteristics of rural communities and how assets and resources can be most effectively mobilised to facilitate social change in the countryside. There is no equivalent to the ‘fair funding’ campaign aimed at Government funding to local authorities, for example.

In contrast, rural philanthropy is a well-established field of study and discussion in the USA. Although the context may differ significantly from that of the UK, having a recognised field enables targeted research and provides a platform for discussion and awareness-raising. This approach could also be beneficial here in addressing the points mentioned above.

There is an opportunity to build the field of knowledge and practice about rural philanthropy in the UK. This document outlines a research plan to achieve this.

¹ See for example, the work of the [Rural Philanthropy Institute](#) and [Rural Philanthropy Initiative](#)

² Socio-economic need refers to people lacking essential resources, opportunities, or support due to unfavourable social and economic circumstances. Social factors include: Neighbourhood deprivation, community safety, limited social networks, discrimination, and unequal access to public services such as education, healthcare, and justice. Economic factors include: Low income, unemployment, debt, and a lack of access to affordable housing, energy, transportation and other basic necessities.

³ Lister, R. (2021). *Poverty (2nd Edition)*. Polity Press: Cambridge.

⁴ Ovenden-Hope, T., Brown, V., and Achтарidou, E. (2025) The Pretty Poverty Report: Cornwall Rurality Matters. Plymouth Marjon University, Plymouth, UK.

Research objective

To better understand and highlight the importance of rural philanthropy in the UK and how philanthropic funders can most effectively invest in rural communities.

Research questions

1. Understanding the broader context:
 - Based on international literature, what are the typical defining features of rural philanthropy?
 - How should we define rural philanthropy in the UK?
 - What is currently known about rural philanthropy in the UK, and where are the gaps in our knowledge? (Likely to include a high-level summary of the distinctive issues faced by rural communities in the UK)
 - What has been written about the intersection of rurality with other more widely recognised aspects of disadvantage, and how to respond to that?
2. Understanding the nature and extent of flows of philanthropic funding based in and directed to rural communities in the UK
 - What do our current funding systems and datasets allow us to determine, and what are their limitations?
 - What level of funding is invested in rural communities? From whom? To where? For what? How does it vary between regions? How does this compare with urban communities?
3. The experience of rural communities and organisations
 - Based on what we know about the nature and extent of socio-economic need in rural areas, what would a 'fair' allocation of philanthropic funding look like?
 - What does taking action to address socio-economic need look like on the ground in rural communities?
 - What experiences do rural communities and organisations have when it comes to accessing philanthropic funding?
 - How can philanthropic investment support socio-economic need most effectively?
4. Understanding grantmakers' strategies and practices in rural philanthropy
 - What distinctive strategies and grantmaking practices are used by UK philanthropic funders to address socio-economic need in rural areas? How do these vary between different kinds of funders?
 - What challenges do UK philanthropic funders encounter when pursuing rural philanthropy?
5. Moving forward
 - What can be done to improve how philanthropy serves rural communities in the UK, and to what extent does it require a distinctive approach?
 - What further research is required to improve understanding of the needs of rural communities and how philanthropic funding can address them?

Project management group

The research project will be overseen by a small project management group with members listed in the table below. IVAR will be responsible for project management and leading the research, with the Devon Community Foundation providing additional research support and expertise.

| Role | Person |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Chair | Justin Sargent, Chief Executive, Somerset Community Foundation |
| Project supervisor | Ben Cairns, Director, IVAR |
| Project manager and researcher | Chris Mills, Research Associate, IVAR |
| Researcher | Nicola Frost, Head of Impact, Insight and Learning, Devon Community Foundation |

Project reference group

The research will be supported by a reference group comprising project funders and other key stakeholders with knowledge and interest in rural philanthropy. Their role will be:

- 1) to assist with project set-up, on commencement of the project;
- 2) to review project findings and assist with sensemaking, after all data collection and analysis is complete; and,
- 3) to review a draft report and contribute ideas to dissemination, before publication.

Members of the reference group currently comprise the following organisations:

- Action with Communities in Rural England (ACRE)
- Association of Charitable Foundations
- CCLA
- Community Foundation Wales
- Local Trust
- Northamptonshire Community Foundation
- Rayne Foundation
- The Royal Countryside Fund
- UK Community Foundations

Contact

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