

# Key Rural Issues, Northern Ireland 2023



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

***Sustainability** at the heart of a  
living, working, active landscape  
valued by everyone.*

<b>Key Rural Issues 2023 - Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
Key Findings	3
Urban/Rural Statistics – Infographic	5
<u>Key Rural Issues 2023</u>	
Introduction, Background and Aim	6
Urban/Rural Populations and Definition	7
<u>Urban/Rural Statistics by Policy Area</u>	
Education	10
Employment	12
Industry	18
Tourism	22
Connectivity	26
Access to Services	31
Health and Wellbeing	33
Crime	38
Household Income, Housing and Poverty	45
Further Information	50

## Key Findings

### Population and Education

- Population growth in rural areas from 2001-20 has outstripped that in urban areas by a factor of almost 3 to 1 (20% to 7%).
- Young people from rural areas are more likely to leave school with 5 or more GCSEs at A\* to C (83%, 74% in urban areas)
- Those from rural areas leaving school are also more likely to enter higher education (48%) than their urban peers (41%).

### Employment and Industry

- Rural people of working age are more likely to be in full-time employment (59%), and less likely to be economically inactive than those living in urban areas.
- Average public sector earnings are substantially higher in urban areas (£30,523, £24,656 in rural areas), with a much smaller difference between private sector earnings in rural compared with urban workplaces.
- Workers from rural areas report being more highly skilled (58%) and are more likely to report high job satisfaction than urban workers (84% to 77%)
- More than half (58%) of NI businesses are in rural areas, yet rural businesses account for less than a quarter (21%) of employees and around a quarter (25%) of total business turnover.
- Rural businesses predominantly engage in agriculture, forestry, fishing and construction (57%), with urban businesses more widely spread across a variety of sectors.

### Tourism and Connectivity

- Rural workers (90%) were also much more likely to use their own transport to commute than those from urban areas (82%), though this gap has narrowed.
- In 2021, workers from rural areas had an average commute almost double that of urban-based workers, travelling on average more than 600 miles more during the year to get to work.
- In 2022, six of the top ten most visited paid attractions in NI were in rural areas.
- Broadband availability and speeds in rural areas continue to increase rapidly, with full-fibre services available to 82% of rural NI households in 2023 (from 65% in 2022).

## Health and Wellbeing

- People living in rural areas are consistently more likely to rate their happiness and life satisfaction as high, and their anxiety levels as low.
- In 2023, life expectancy is higher in rural areas (80.3 years for males, 83.7 years for females), a slight decline on 2022. Rural dwellers will wait longer for emergency services than their urban counterparts.

## Crime

- People from rural areas are less likely to directly experience several crime types than those in urban areas (including burglary, vandalism and violent crime).
- The number of recorded crimes with a sectarian motivation increased in both urban and rural areas in 2022-23. Racially and sexual orientation-motivated crimes declined overall, but there was an 8% increase in racially motivated recorded crimes in rural areas from the previous year.

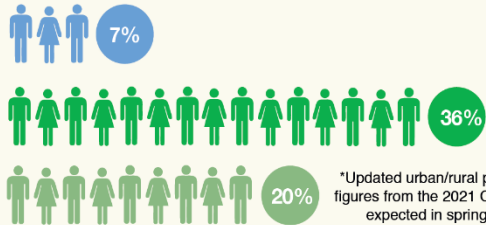
## Poverty, Housing, and Household Income

- Similar proportions of urban and rural households are in relative poverty (16% urban, 19% rural) or absolute poverty (11% urban, 15% rural).
- Rural pensioners are more likely to experience relative poverty than their urban counterparts (19% in rural areas, 13% in urban areas).
- Levels of home ownership are higher in rural than in urban areas (85% to 66%), with house prices in rural areas continuing to outstrip those in towns and cities.

# Northern Ireland Urban-Rural Statistics

● = Urban   ● = Mixed   ● = Rural

## Population Growth, 2001-2020

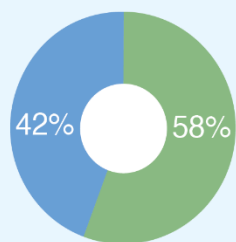


\*Updated urban/rural population figures from the 2021 Census are expected in spring 2024

## Job Quality 2022



## Businesses 2023



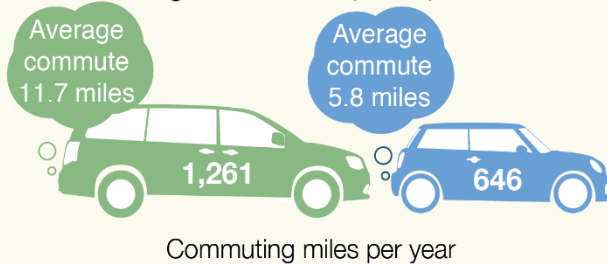
## Tourism Expenditure 2019



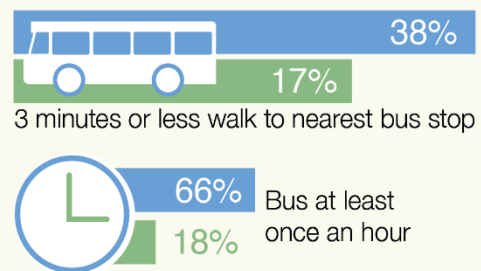
## Median Annual Salary 2023



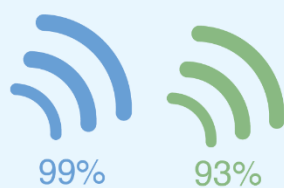
## Average Commute (miles) 2021



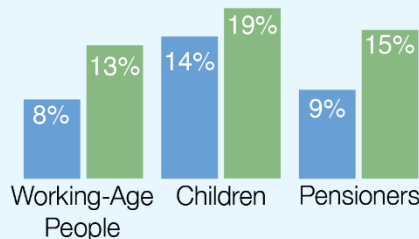
## Public Transport 2021



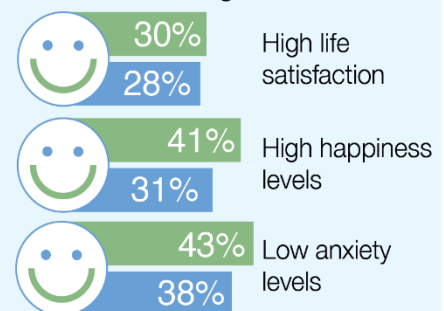
## Coverage of Superfast Broadband 2023



## People in Absolute Poverty 2021/22



## Wellbeing 2022-23



## Introduction

NISRA's 2020 mid-year estimates of population suggest that more than a third (36%) of Northern Ireland's (NI) population lives in a rural area. Despite similarities in many aspects of urban and rural life, there are also challenges which tend to be more pronounced in rural areas outside of Belfast.

The nature of rural industry and employment differs from that of towns and cities. Difficulties with access to services, and issues with connectivity, social and digital, tend to have a disproportionate impact on rural dwellers.

The cost of living also tends to be higher in rural areas, and rural households are more likely to experience fuel poverty. Despite the unique challenges presented by rural life, those living in rural areas on average enjoy a better self-reported quality of life than their urban counterparts, in terms of health, happiness and life satisfaction.

## Key Rural Issues – Background and Aim

A considerable amount of data is regularly collected across Government Departments, from both survey data and administrative sources. This publication will present relevant, already publicly available data from a unique urban/rural perspective, in order to highlight key urban/rural differences and disparities across a range of domains.

In doing so, the publication will provide a robust evidence base to inform the future direction of rural policy in NI, to underpin the Rural Needs Act (2016), and to support the equitable treatment of rural communities in policies and programmes across Government.

Changes to the collection of statistical data across Government as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic continues to have a substantial impact and, in some instances, updated urban/rural data has been limited or has not been available for this report. This will be clearly indicated and for the latter, the most recent data available will be provided instead.

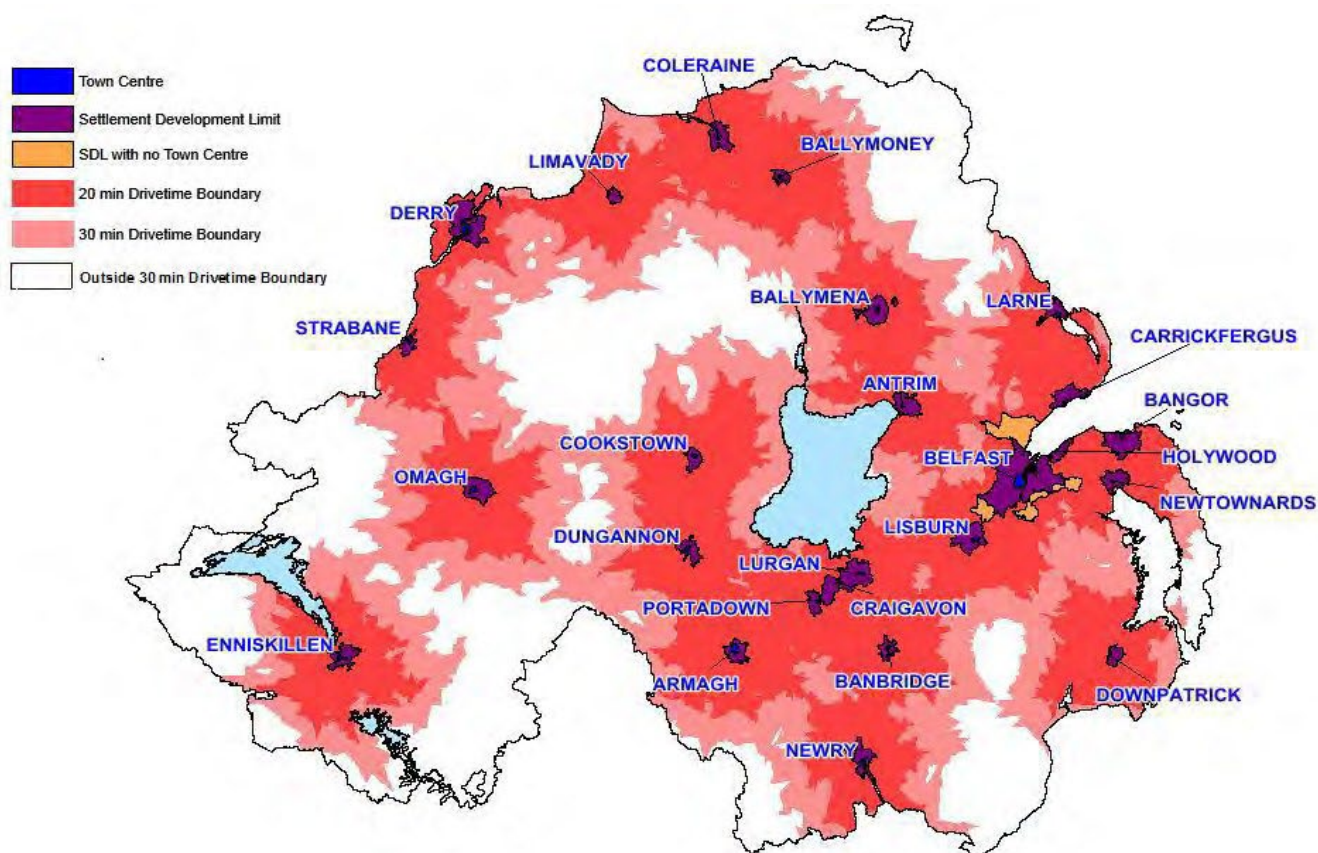
The domains explored in this publication, in terms of urban/rural comparison, include:

- Population
- Education
- Employment
- Industry
- Travel and Tourism
- Crime and Poverty
- Connectivity and access to services
- Health and Wellbeing
- Household Income, Housing and Poverty



## Urban/Rural - Populations and Definition

**Figure 1: NI Urban and Rural areas with 20 and 30 minute 'drive time' boundaries from settlements with a population of 10,000 or more**



© Crown copyright and database rights NIMA MOU207.2

Source: *Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2015*

The Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) carried out a review of settlement classification in 2015<sup>1</sup>, which recommended a default urban/rural boundary at a population level of 5,000.

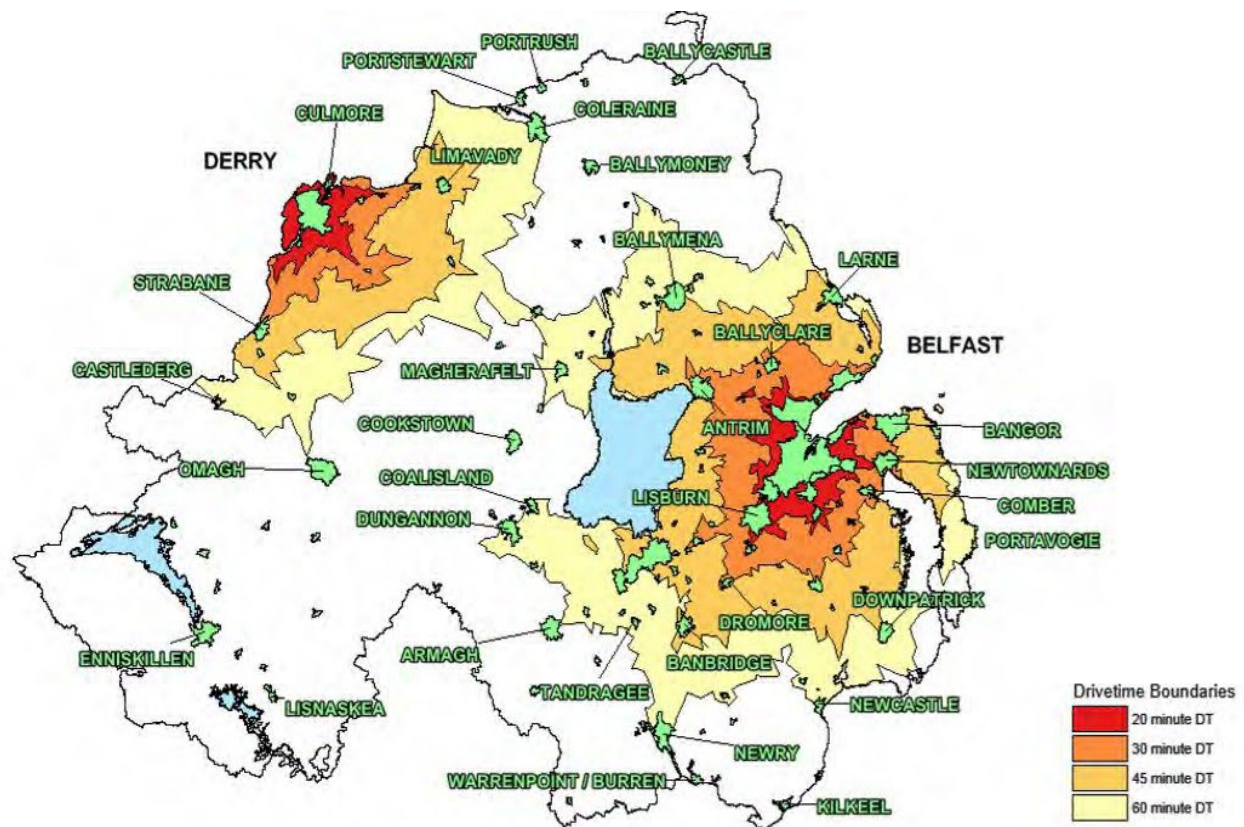
All settlements with a population of less than 5,000, and areas of open countryside, were defined as rural. The classification also incorporated measures of distance to settlements with a population of 10,000 or more. These measures were intended as proxies for accessibility, as previous research had indicated that towns of this size are large enough to

<sup>1</sup> *Review of the statistical classification and delineation of Settlements, NISRA 2015*  
<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/publications/review-statistical-classification-and-delineation-settlements>

provide access to all key services, and that rural areas in their vicinity are likely to thrive. Market towns are likely to have connections with city regions, and linkages between urban and rural areas are beneficial to both.<sup>2</sup>

Figure 1 shows rural and urban areas of NI as defined by the review, as well as 20 and 30 minute drive time boundaries to urban settlements, above the 10,000 population threshold. In 2018, 41% of the rural population in NI live further than 20 minutes from a settlement of this size.

**Figure 2: Drive-time boundaries to Belfast and Derry/Londonderry**



© Crown copyright and database rights NIMA MOU207.2 Source: Review of the Statistical Classification and Delineation of Settlements, Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2015 <https://www.nisra.gov.uk/sites/nisra.gov.uk/files/publications/review-of-the-statistical-classification-and-delineation-of-settlements-march-2015%20%281%29.pdf>

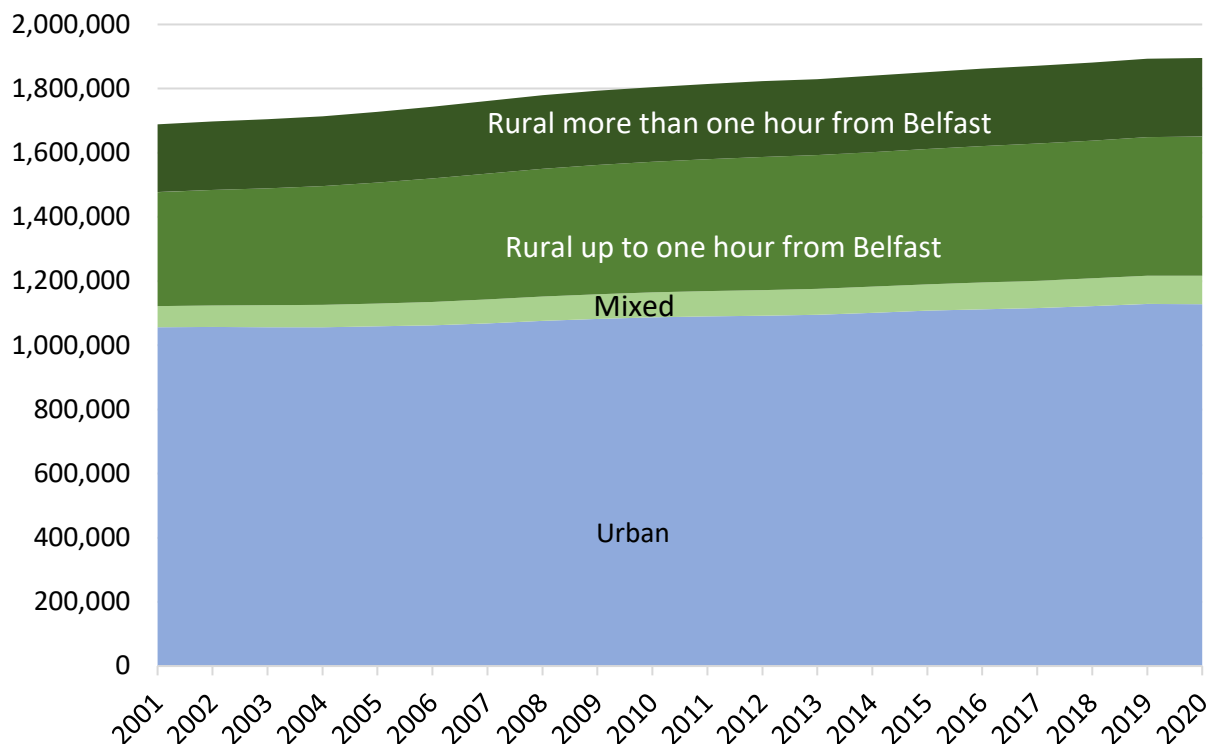
The 2015 settlement classification also incorporated specific drive times to Belfast and Londonderry, as the two major urban centres in NI (Figure 2). Belfast is regarded as the main regional economic driver, most important employment centre, and focus for

<sup>2</sup> Rural Policy and Evidence. A report prepared for the Rural Policy Division, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, Sally Shortall, QUB, 2010



administration and commerce in NI<sup>3</sup>. More than a third (36%) of the rural population in NI live more than a 60 minute drive from Belfast.

**Figure 3: Urban and Rural Population Growth, 2001-2020**



Source: NISRA Mid-year Population Estimates 2020  
<http://www.ninis2.nisra.gov.uk/public/Theme.aspx?themeNumber=74&themeName=Population>

Under the 2015 settlement classification definition, more than 80% of the NI land mass is rural. Although more than a third of NI’s population lives in a rural area, the rate of population growth in rural areas is higher than in urban areas.

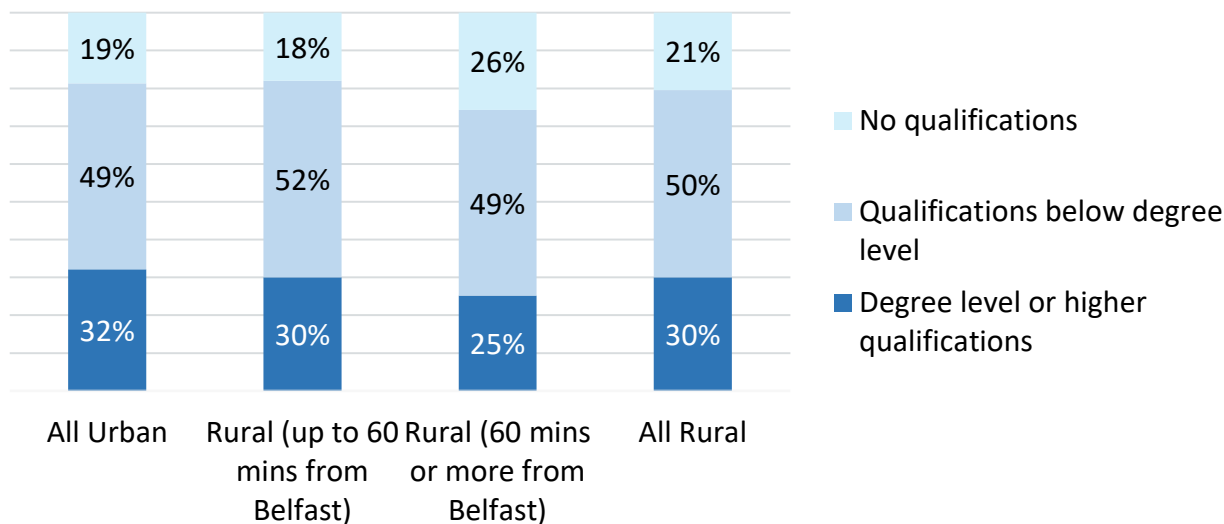
Between 2001 and 2020, the population of rural areas rose by 20%, compared to an increase of just 7% for urban areas. As a result, the rural share of the overall NI population grew from 34% to 36%. Areas with fastest growth were those close to urban centres, either in mixed rural/urban areas (36%) or less than an hour’s commute from Belfast (22%).

At the time of publication, updated mid-year population estimates (which are based on Census data) are being produced at urban/rural level using data from the 2021 Census and are expected to be publicly available via the NI Census website (<https://www.nisra.gov.uk/statistics/census/2021-census>) in Spring 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Regional Development Strategy 2035, Department for Infrastructure NI  
<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/regional-development-strategy-2035>

## Education

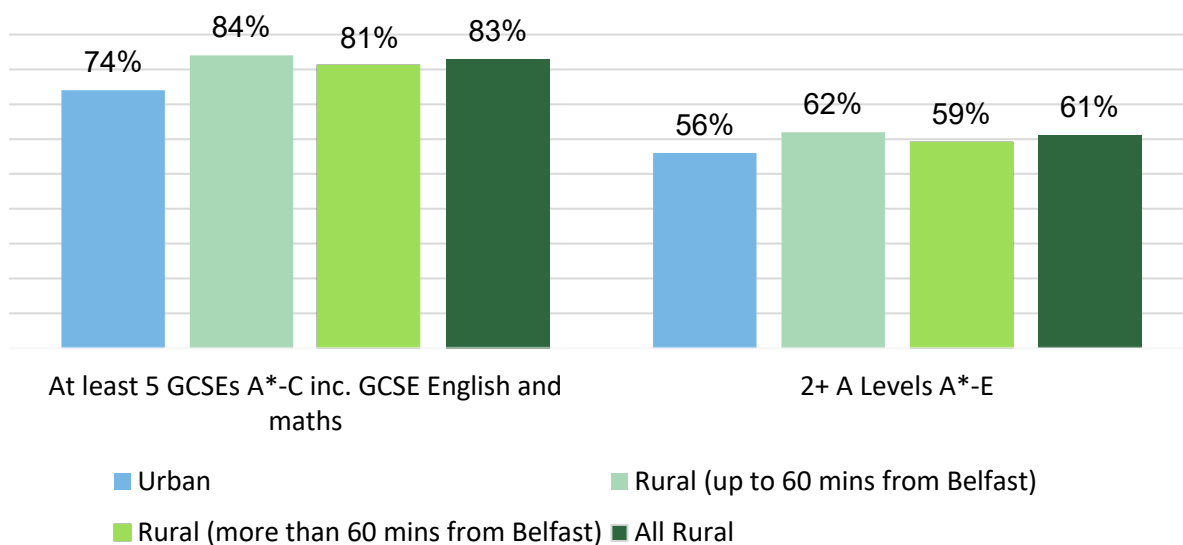
**Figure 4: Highest Educational Qualification (persons aged 18-69), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021-22**



Source: Continuous Household Survey (NISRA), 2021-22

In 2021-22, the adult populations of rural and urban areas were similar in terms of overall educational attainment. However, there are clear intra-rural differences in qualification levels. In 2021-22, rural dwellers who live more than an hour's drive from Belfast were less likely to have achieved 'degree level or higher' qualifications (25%) than their urban counterparts (32%), and were more likely to have no formal qualifications (26% compared to 19%).

**Figure 5: Qualifications of School Leavers by Pupil Residence, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021-22**

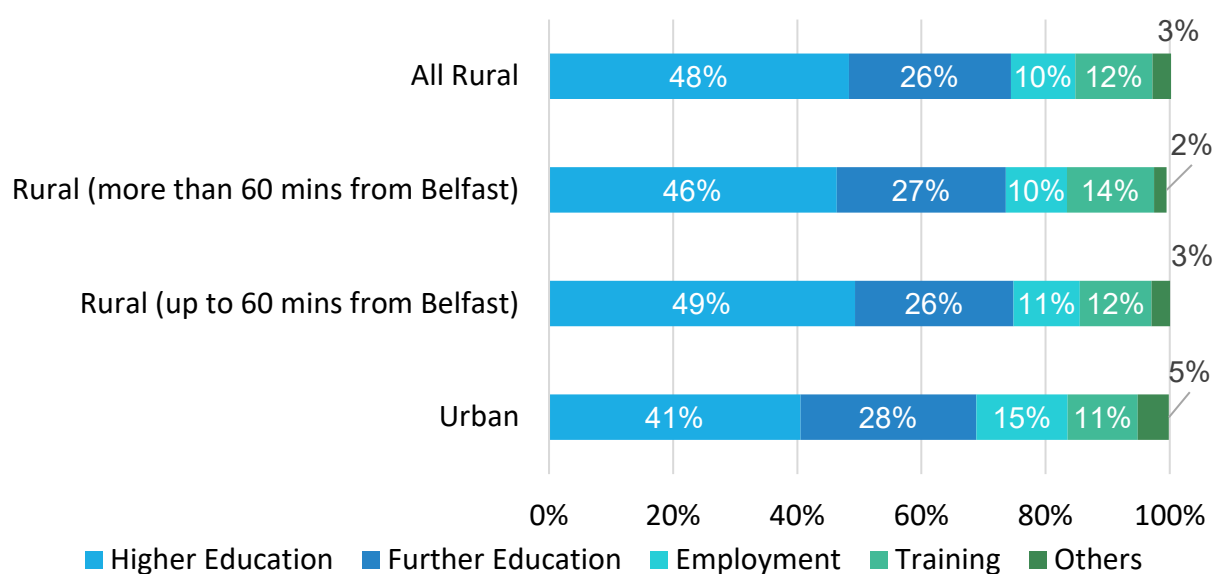


Source: NI School Leavers Survey, Department of Education (DE), 2021-22

In 2021-22, GCSE students from rural areas were somewhat more academically successful on average, than their urban counterparts. More than three quarters (83%) of students from rural areas left school with at least 5 GCSEs including English and Maths, compared to 74% of students from urban areas (Figure 5).

The urban/rural attainment gap at A-level was less pronounced, with 61% of rural school leavers having achieved two or more passes, compared to 56% of urban school leavers.

**Figure 6: Destination of School Leavers by Pupil Residence, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021-22**

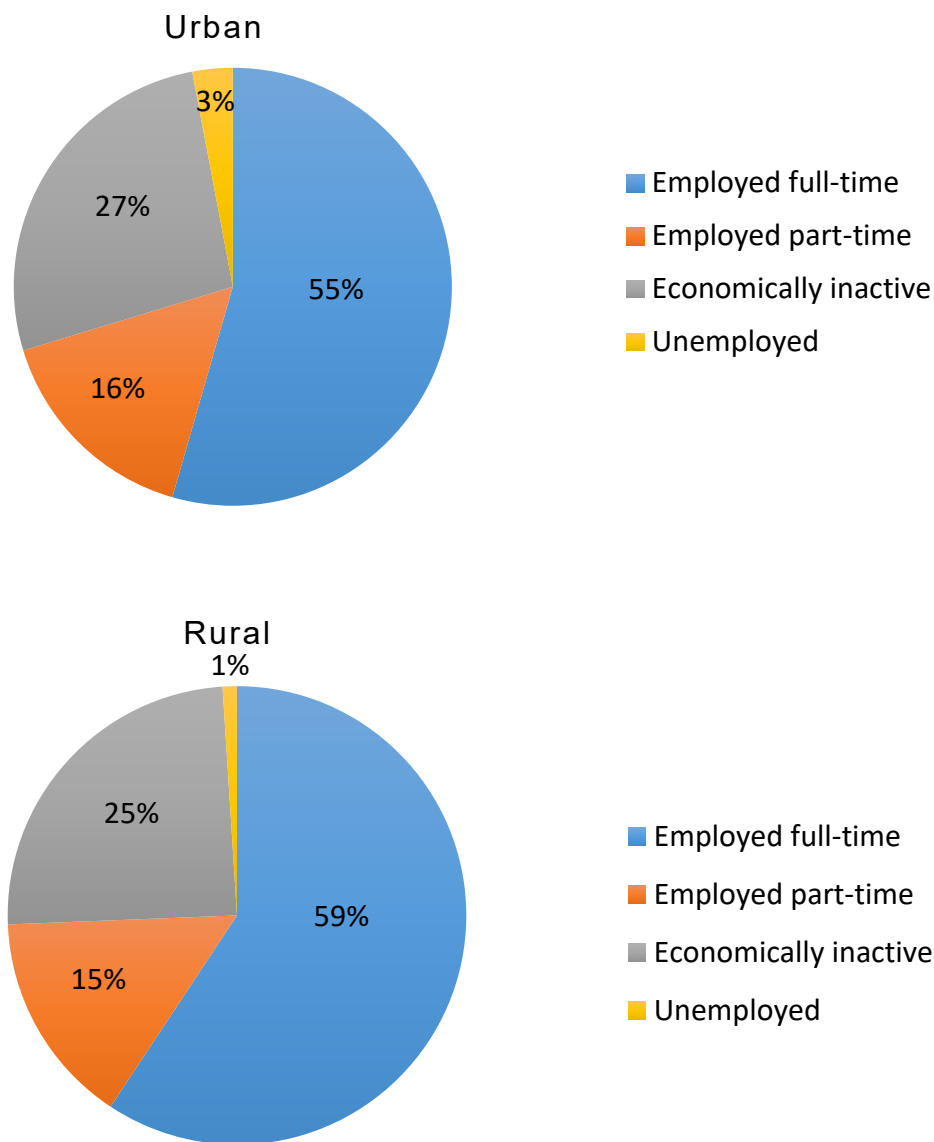


Source: NI School Leavers Survey, Department of Education (DE), 2021-22

In 2021-22, school leavers from rural areas were more likely than those from urban areas to enter higher education, with the gap between urban and rural having widened since 2020-21. Almost half (48%) of pupils living in rural areas proceeded to higher education in 2021-22, compared with 41% of school leavers from urban areas.

## Employment

**Figure 7: Economic Activity Status of NI Working Age Population, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022**



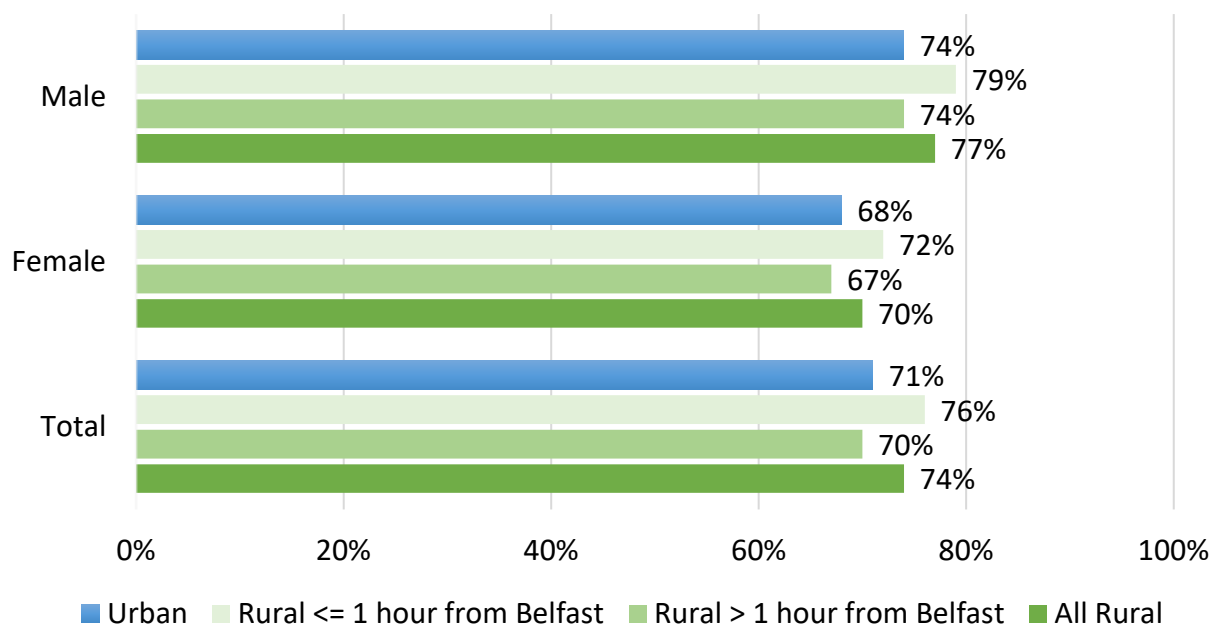
*\*Economic inactivity is defined as “people who are neither in employment nor unemployed as determined by the ILO measure. This group includes all those who are looking after a home, are long term sick or disabled, or are students, or retired.”*

*\*\*Percentages may not sum due to rounding*

Source: NI Labour Force Survey, January-December 2022

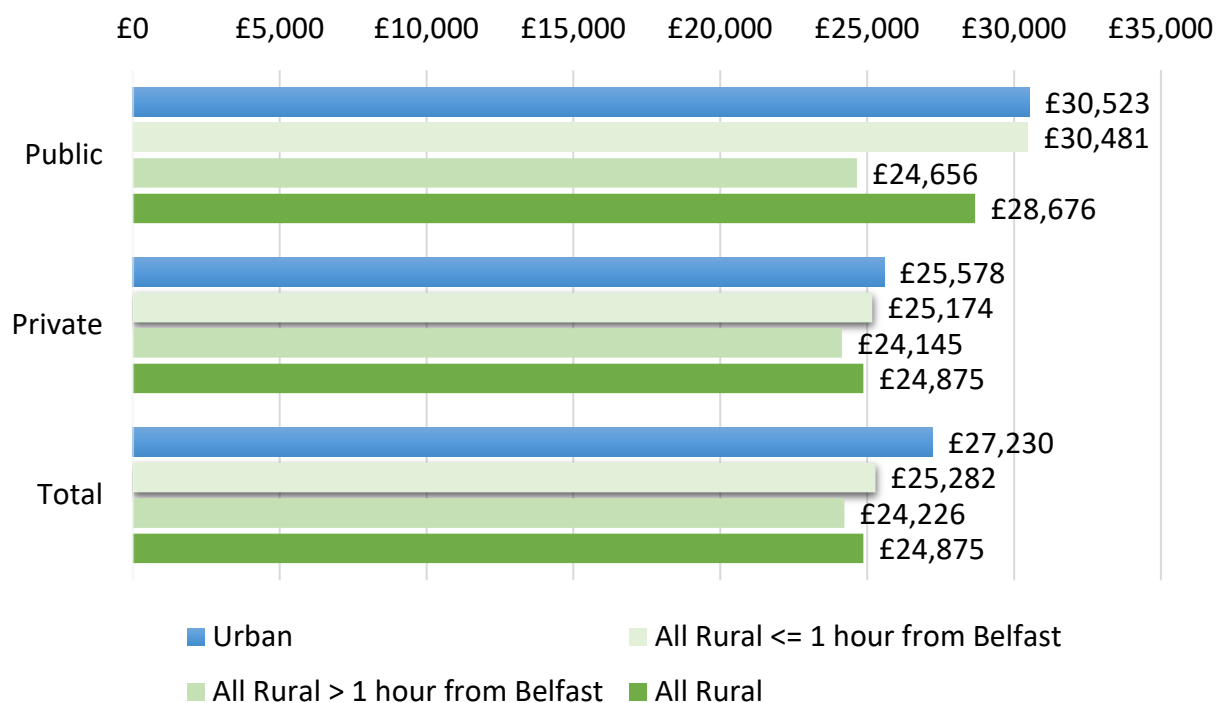
In 2022, people living in rural areas were more likely to be in employment, with almost three quarters (74%) employed either full or part-time. Similarly, this group was slightly less likely to be economically inactive compared to those living in urban areas (Figure 7). Overall employment levels for both men and women were higher in the rural than the urban population, and employment was highest among those living in rural areas within an hour’s commute of Belfast (76%, Figure 8).

**Figure 8: Percentage of Working Age Population in Employment by Sex, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022**



Source: NI Labour Force Survey, January-December 2022

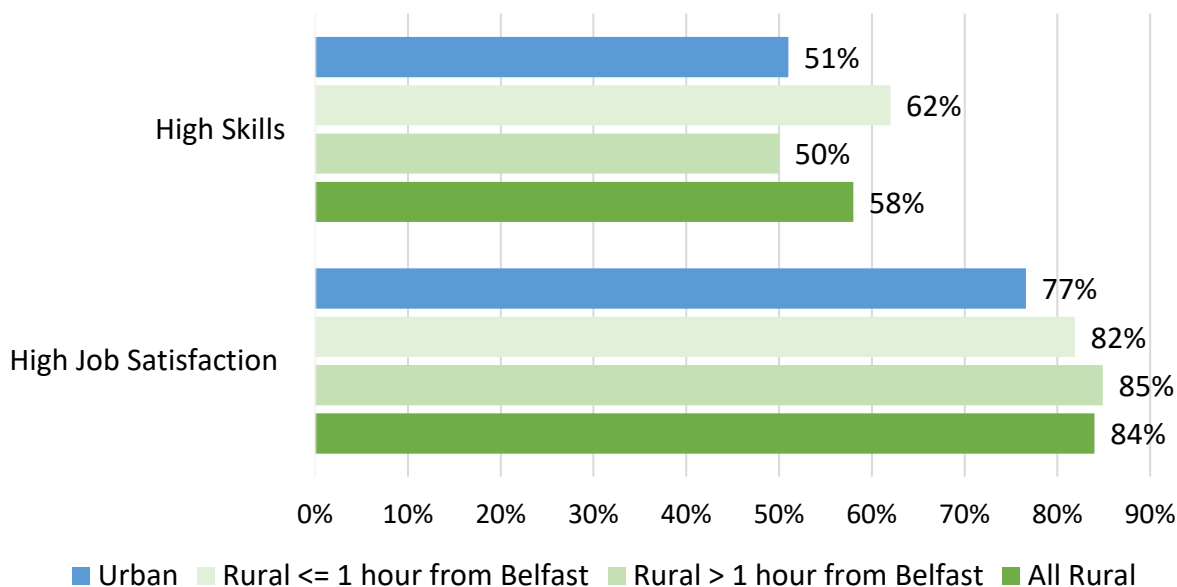
**Figure 9: Median Annual Salary by Workplace Address/Sector, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2023**



Source: Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings (ASHE - provisional) 2023, NISRA

In 2023, the average annual earnings of public sector workers were just under £2,000 higher in urban than in rural areas, while for those in the private sector, the difference in median annual salaries in rural and urban workplaces was less than £1,000 (Figure 9).

**Figure 10: Job Skills and Job Satisfaction, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022**



*Notes: Based on employee address. Skills level figures exclude self-employed and those who did not state a skills level. High job satisfaction defined as score of 4 or 5 out of 5.*

*Source: NI Labour Force Survey, January-December 2022*

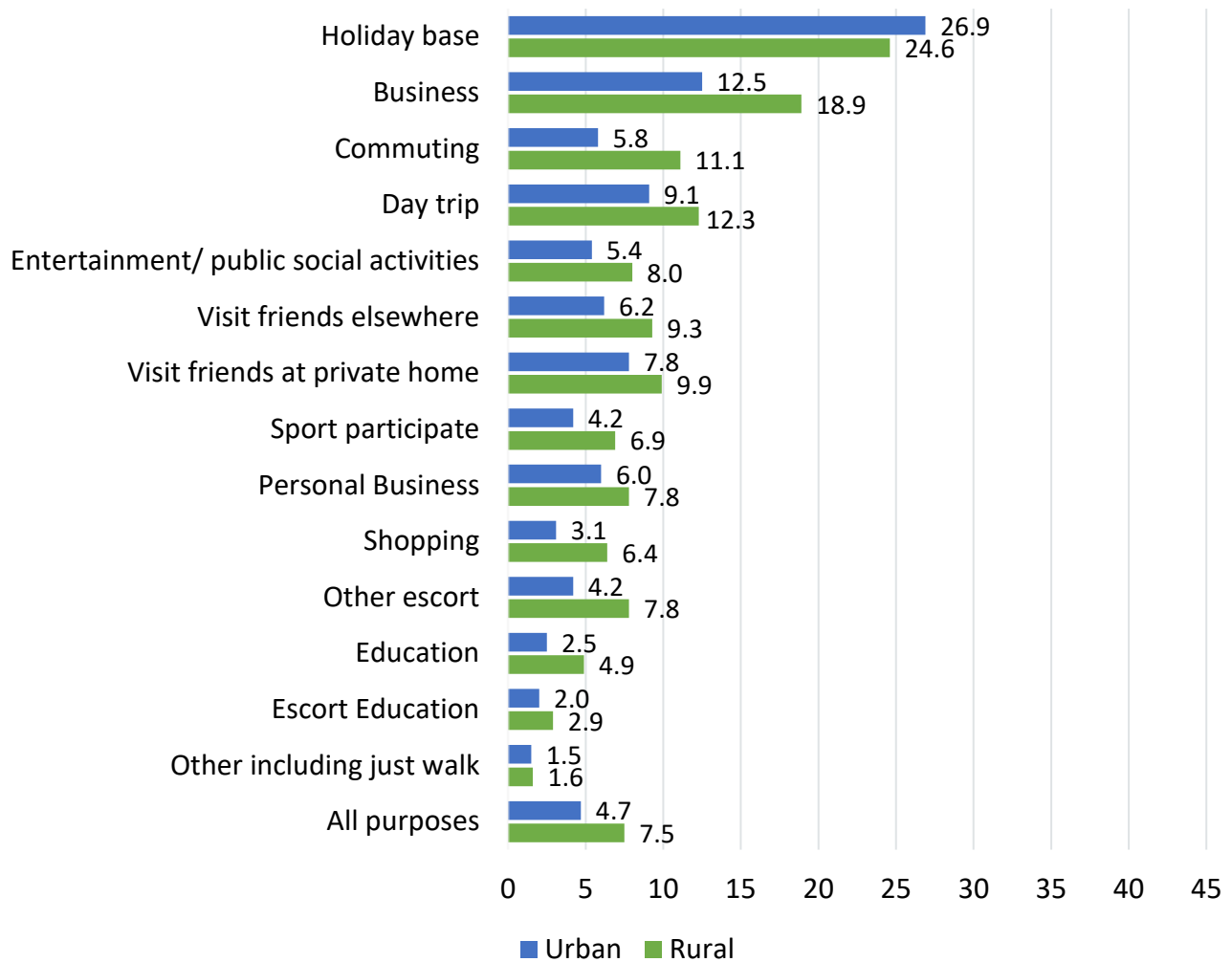
Figure 10 provides an urban/rural comparison of the skill level of workers in 2022, and self-reported job satisfaction levels. In 2022, workers who lived in rural areas were substantially more likely to have ‘High Skills’ and more likely to report greater job satisfaction (84% of rural respondents reported high job satisfaction) than their urban counterparts (77%).

In 2022, more than three quarters (84%) of those in rural areas reported high levels of job satisfaction, with job satisfaction levels in each rural sub-category, as well as in urban areas, increasing since 2020.

It is important to note that this information is based on the home address rather than the work address of respondents. Workers may commute long distances for more highly skilled and better paid employment than is available locally - this data reflects the quality of jobs in areas where people work, rather than live.



**Figure 11: Average Distance Travelled (miles) for Business and Leisure, by purpose of journey, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021<sup>1</sup>**



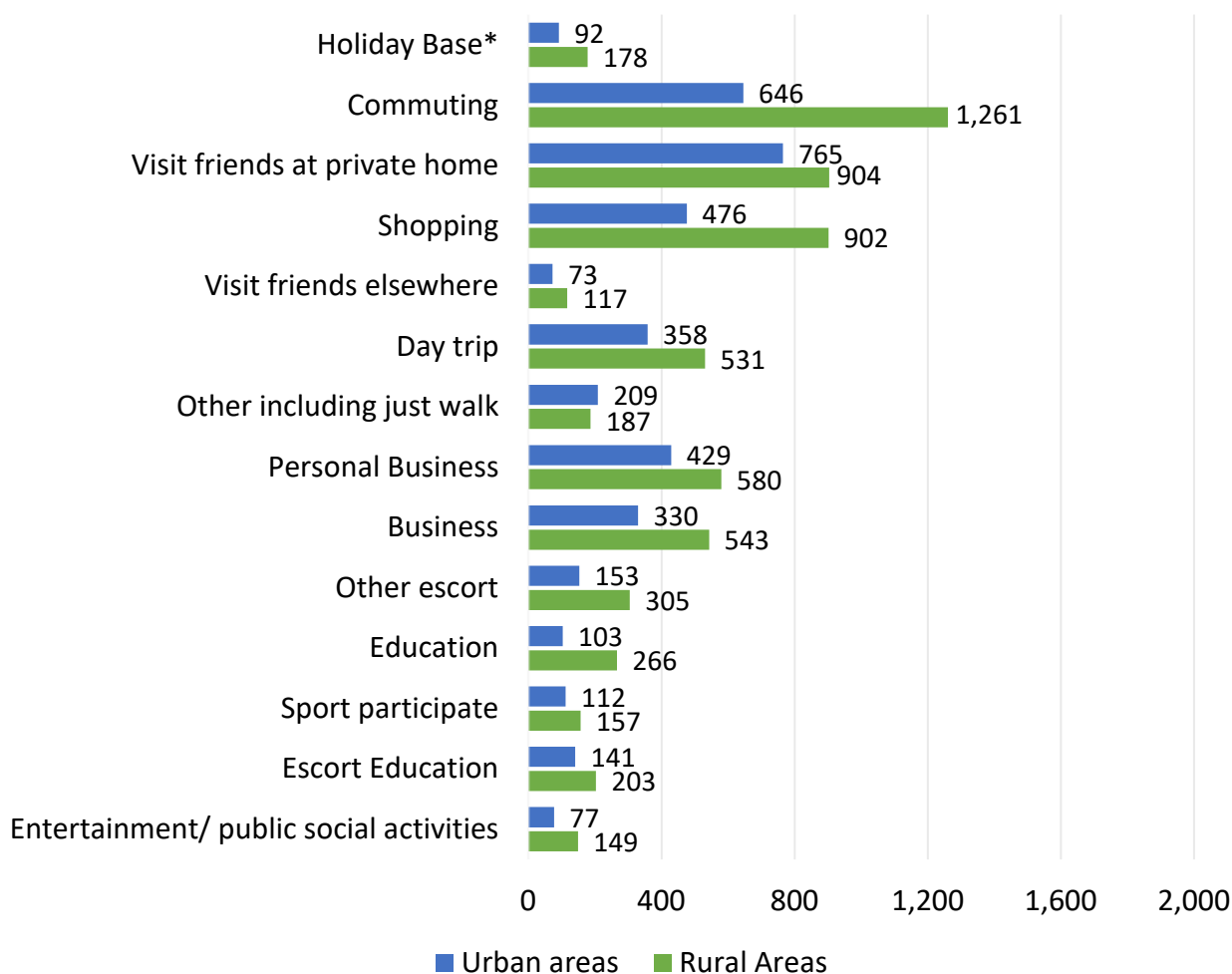
Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

*1 Due to significant changes to the survey methodology because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 survey estimates are reported as a single year instead of the usual three years combined and the results are not directly comparable to those from previous years. Further information is available at:*

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/travel-survey-northern-ireland-tсни-depth-report-2021>

The Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) for 2021 revealed that workers from rural areas had an average commute of more than double that of workers in towns and cities (Figure 11), and travelled on average more than 600 additional miles per year to their workplace (Figure 12). It is important to note that these figures may have been impacted both by changes in survey methodology and increased flexible working following the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly for urban workers. As an increasing number of employers introduce hybrid working models, there is scope for further divergence in these trends in future analysis.

**Figure 12: Total Miles Travelled (per person per year), by Journey Purpose, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021<sup>1</sup>**



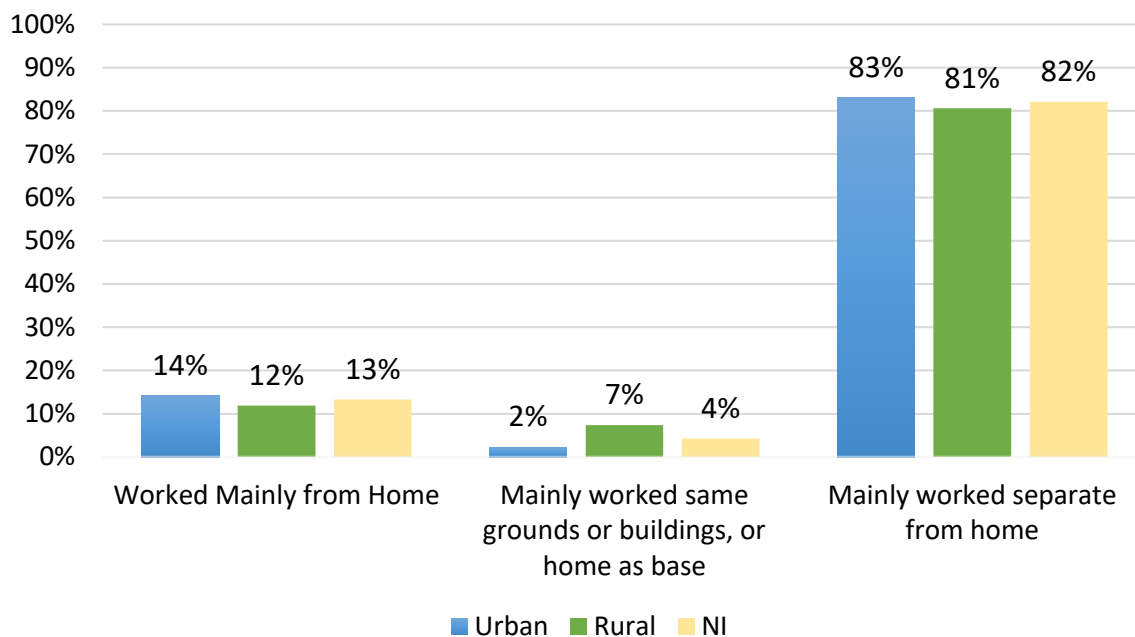
Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

*1 Due to significant changes to the survey methodology because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020 and 2021 survey estimates are reported as a single year instead of the usual three years combined and the results are not directly comparable to those from previous years. Further information is available at:*

<https://www.infrastructure-ni.gov.uk/publications/travel-survey-northern-ireland-tсни-depth-report-2021>

The 2022 UK Labour Force Survey revealed an increase in the proportions of rural (12%, from 6% in 2020) and urban (14%, from 8%) employees in NI worked exclusively from home (Figure 13). It may be reasonable to assume that these figures have been influenced by recent changes for public and private sector workers to alternative working patterns including home and flexible working, following their introduction during the Covid-19 pandemic.

**Figure 13: Physical Location of Main Job, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2022**

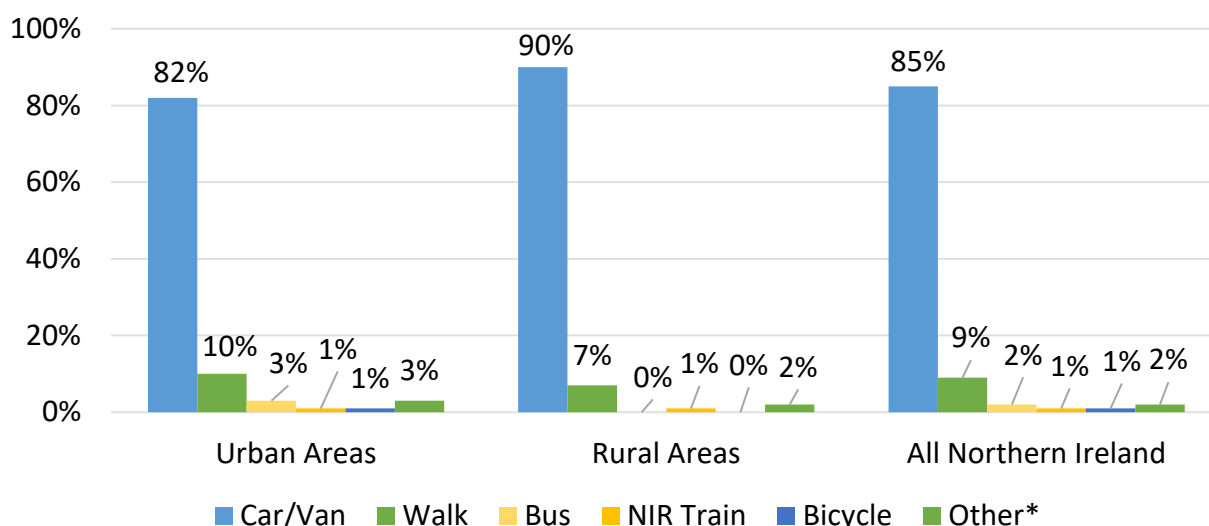


Note: Employed persons aged 16-64

\*Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Source: NI Labour Force Survey January-December 2022

**Figure 14: Method of Travel to Work, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison, 2021**



\*Other includes Taxi, Minicab, Scooter, Motorbike and Moped

Source: Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI

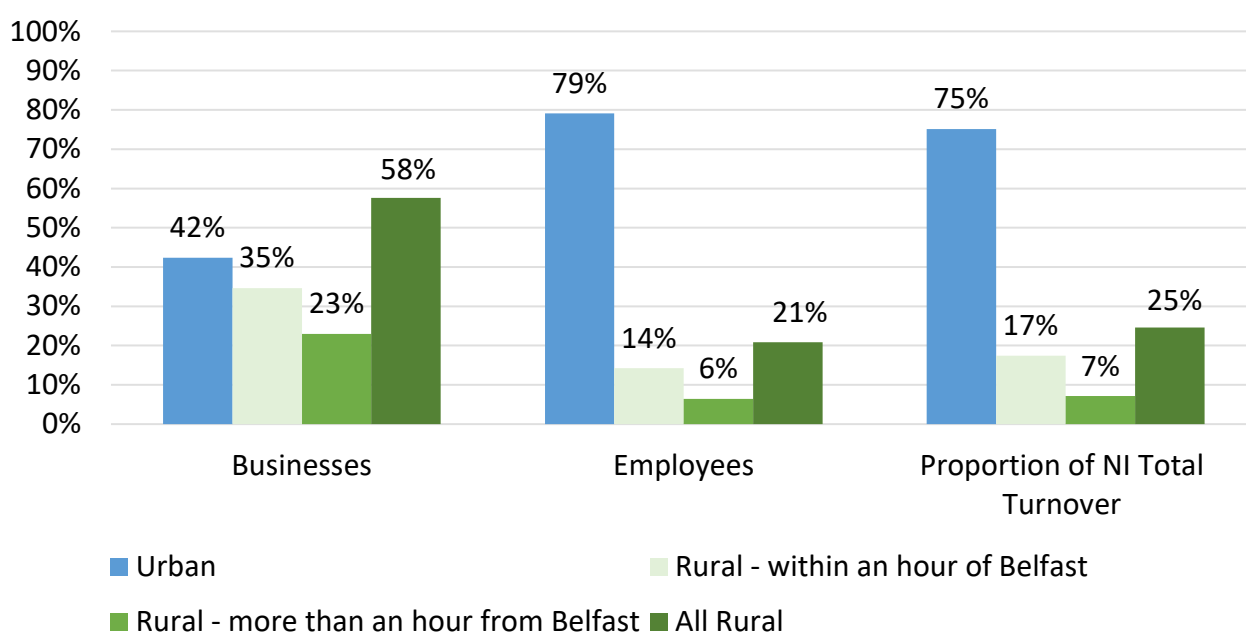
In terms of commuting methods, private car or van was still by far the most common in NI, for both urban and rural residents, according to the most recent data from the 2021 Travel Survey NI (Figure 14). The preference of a large majority of rural (90%), and more than three quarters of urban (82%) workers for private transport may be influenced by longer average journey distances, and reduced availability of public transport in rural areas.

Urban workers are more likely to walk to work (10%) or to travel by bus (3%) than those from rural areas (7% and 1% respectively).

## Industry

In 2023, more than half (58%) of NI businesses are located in rural areas, yet rural businesses account for just 21% of employees, and around a quarter (25%) of all business turnover (Figure 15).

**Figure 15: Urban and Rural Businesses, Employees, and Turnover, NI, 2023**

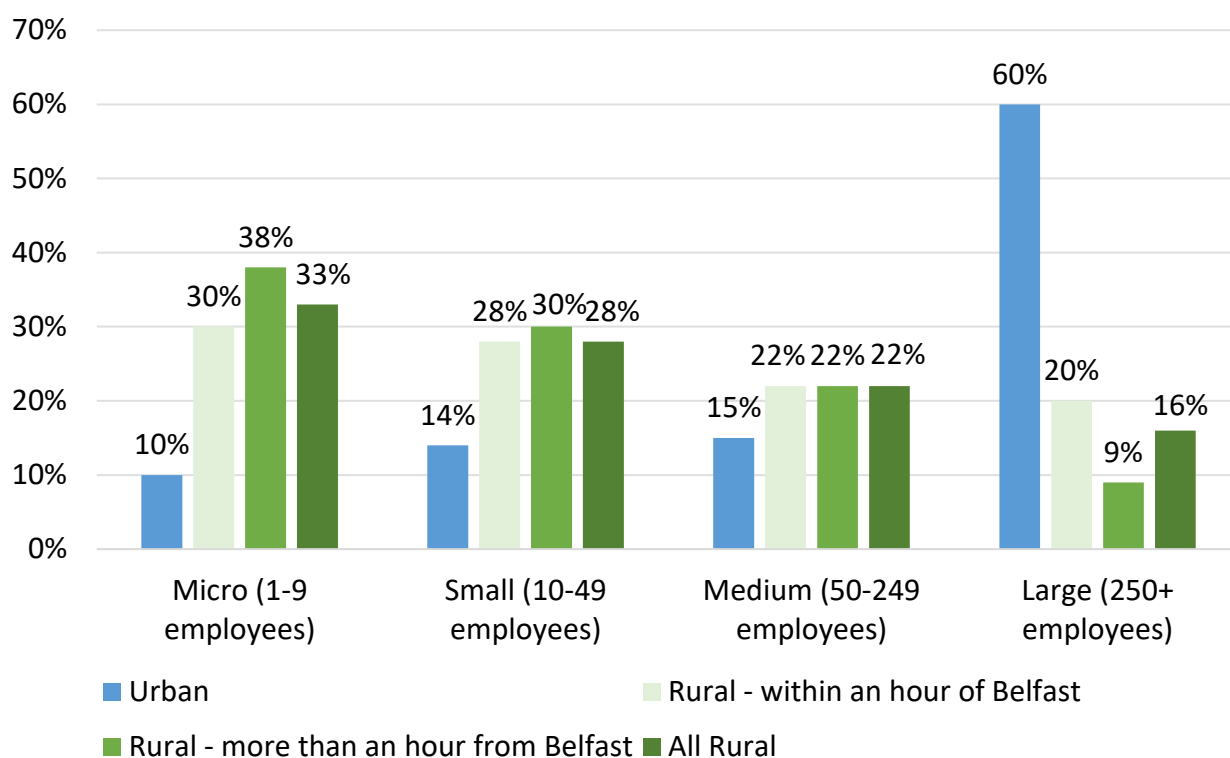


Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2023, DoF

Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Rural businesses in 2023 were typically small - around a third (33%) of all rural businesses are classed as 'micro', and have between one and nine employees, with just 16% of rural businesses qualifying as 'Large' (i.e. having 250 or more employees), compared to 60% of urban businesses (Figure 16). Consequently, urban businesses account for approximately 75% of all business turnover in NI.

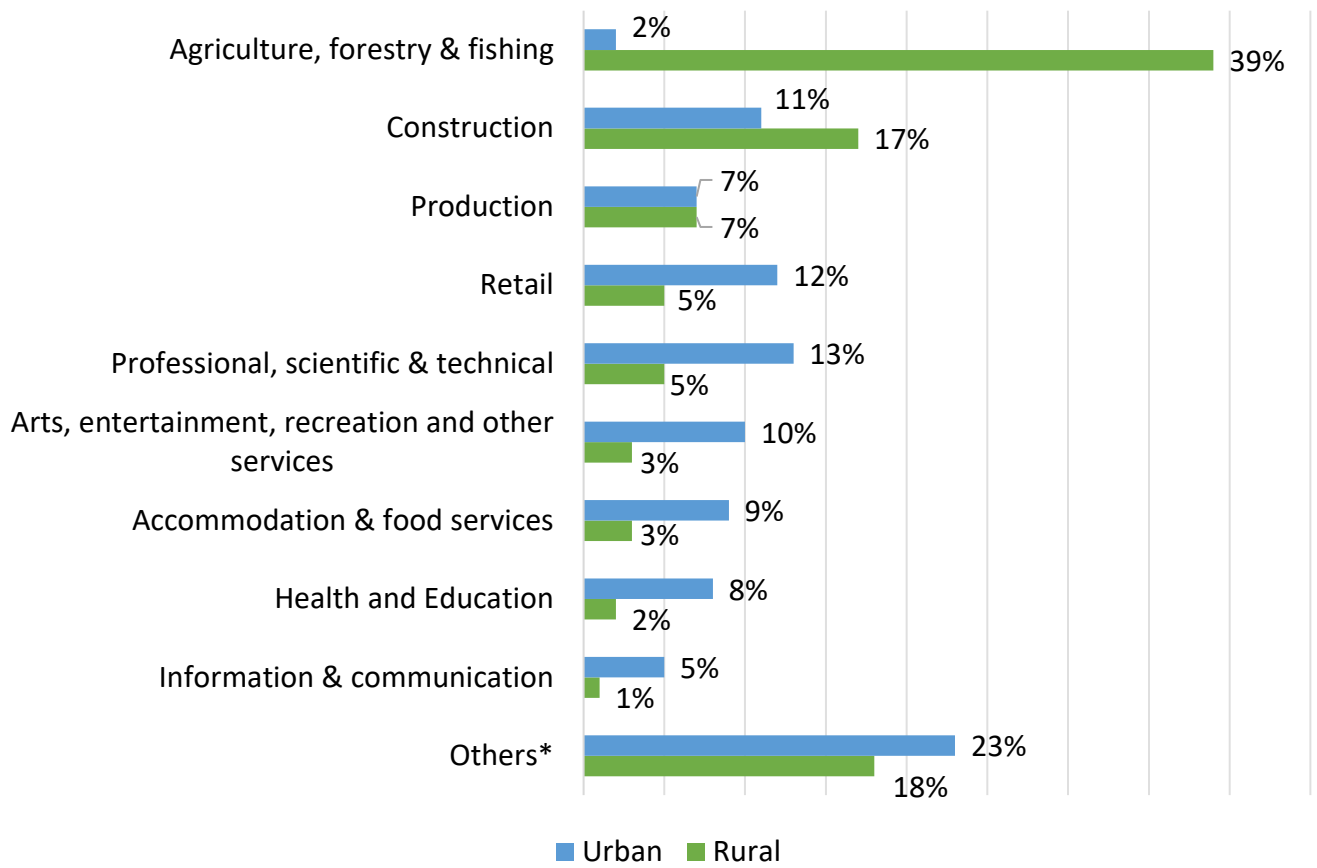
**Figure 16: Business Size (Number of Employees), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023**



Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2023, DoF

In 2023, as in 2022, the rural and urban economies also differ substantially in terms of dominant sectors (Figure 17), with 39% of rural businesses belonging to the agriculture, forestry and fishing sectors, followed by construction (17%). Urban businesses are diverse, and spread across a variety of industries, with professional, scientific and technical businesses (13%) the largest, closely followed by retail (12%), construction (11%), and arts, entertainment and recreation (10%).

**Figure 17: NI Industry Sector Representation, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2023**



*\*'Others' include Finance, Insurance, Property, Public Administration, Transport and Storage*

*Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2023, DoF*



The predominance of agriculture businesses is even more pronounced in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast. Almost half (46%) of all businesses in these areas are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing, with a further 17% in construction (Table 1).

**Table 1: Businesses by Industry Group, Urban and Rural, 2023**

Broad Industry Group <sup>(1)</sup>	Urban	Rural			Total
		Rural - up to an hour from Belfast	Rural - over an hour from Belfast	All Rural	
Agriculture, forestry & fishing	2%	35%	46%	39%	<b>24%</b>
Production	7%	8%	6%	7%	<b>7%</b>
Construction	11%	17%	17%	17%	<b>14%</b>
Retail	12%	5%	5%	5%	<b>8%</b>
Accommodation & food services	9%	3%	3%	3%	<b>6%</b>
Professional, scientific & technical	13%	6%	3%	5%	<b>8%</b>
Health and Education	8%	3%	1%	2%	<b>5%</b>
Arts, entertainment, recreation and other services	10%	4%	3%	3%	<b>6%</b>
Others*	23%	19%	16%	18%	<b>23%</b>
<b>All Industries</b>	<b>33,280</b>	<b>27,550</b>	<b>18,400</b>	<b>45,950</b>	<b>79,235</b>

1 For full description of standard industrial classification (2007) see Office for National Statistics:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/methodology/classificationsandstandards/ukstandardindustrialclassificationofeconomicactivities/uksic2007>

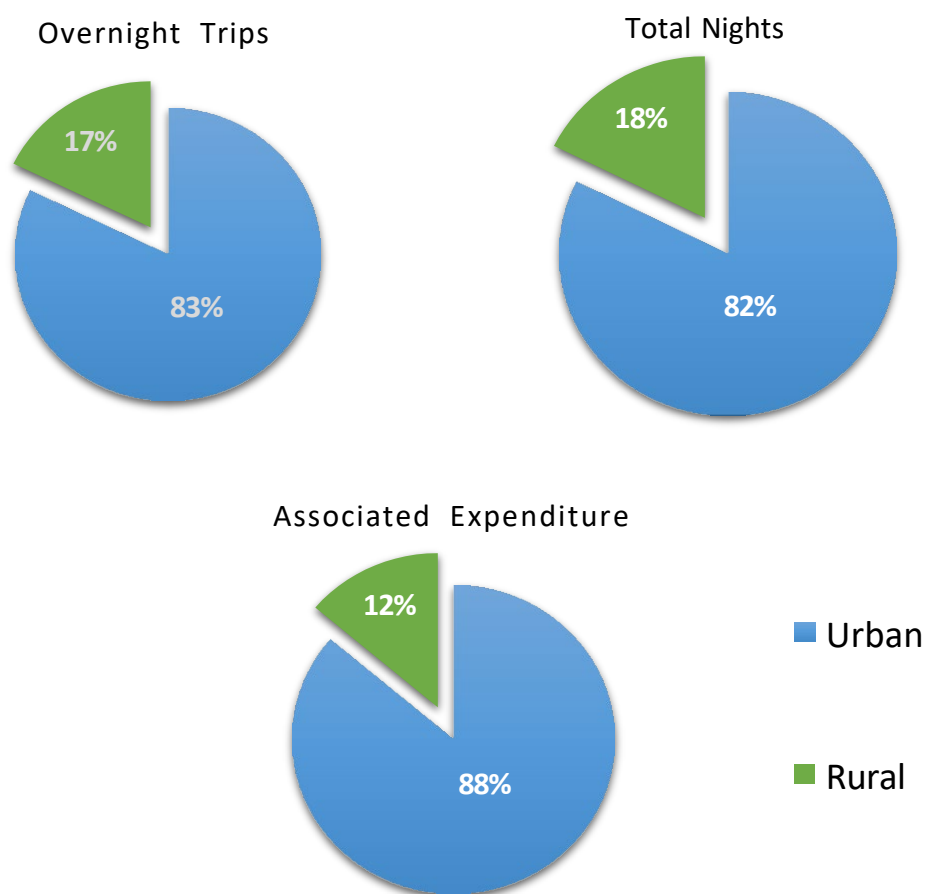
\*'Others' include Finance, Insurance, Property, Public Administration

Percentages may not sum due to rounding

Source: Inter-Departmental Business Register 2023, DoF

## Tourism

Figure 18: Overnight Trips to NI (Visits to Urban and Rural Areas), 2019<sup>1</sup>



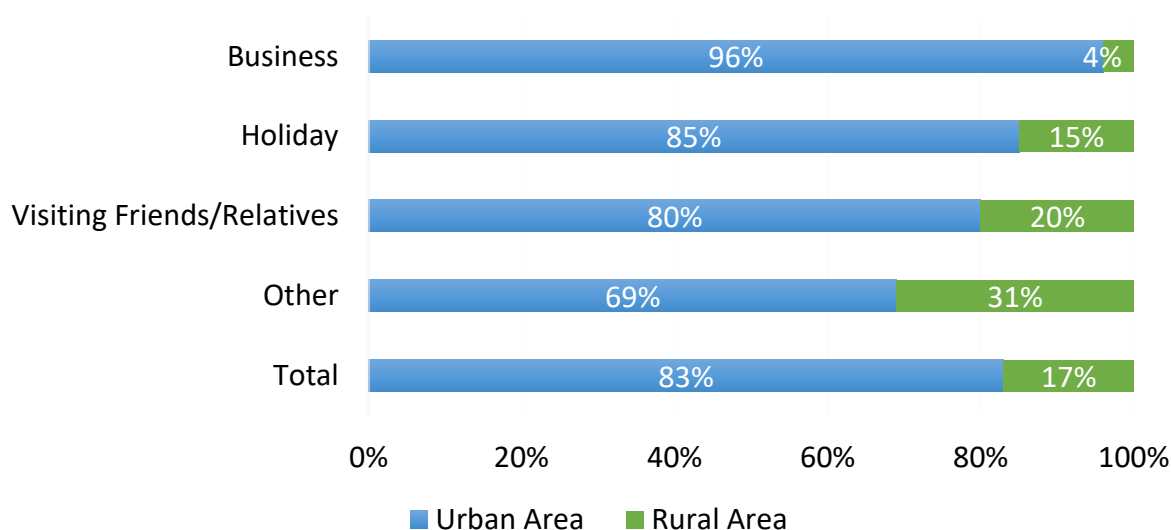
*1 Tourism data is derived from a variety of sources. The COVID-19 pandemic has had significant effect on these sources and due to issues with data collection associated with these, NISRA is not in a position to publish the full range of statistics, including trips, nights and spend. Data collection recommenced during 2021, but quality assurance is ongoing, and sources outside of NISRA are still experiencing issues, meaning that these will not be available for 2021 or 2022. 2019 data is provided as the most recent available.*

*Sources: NI Tourism Statistics (NISRA) 2019, Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS), NISRA, Continuous Household Survey (CHS), NISRA, Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT), Failte Ireland, Household Travel Survey (HTS), Central Statistics Office (CSO)*

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on the availability of updated data for Figures 18 to 20. The most recent available data on overnight trips, nights and expenditure from 2019 is provided - it is hoped that 2023 data will become available in 2024.

In 2019, just 17% of all overnight visits to NI, and 12% of associated expenditure, occurred in rural locations (Figure 18). These figures include visits within NI by people that live here, as well as by visitors from other countries. Total tourist expenditure on overnight trips in rural areas in 2019 was much smaller than in urban areas - £129m compared to £835m, perhaps unsurprising given the predominance of urban settings as tourist destinations.

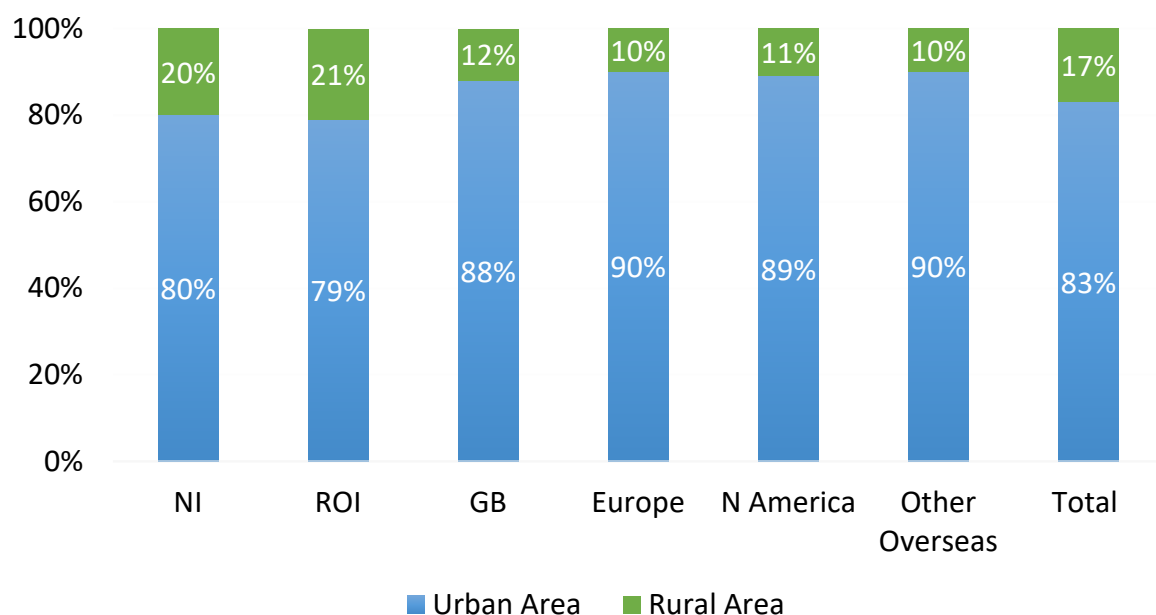
**Figure 19: Overnight Trips to NI by Purpose of Visit, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019**



Sources: NI Tourism Statistics (NISRA) 2019, Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS), NISRA, Continuous Household Survey (CHS), NISRA, Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT), Failte Ireland, Household Travel Survey (HTS), Central Statistics Office (CSO)

In 2019, 17% of all overnight visits were to rural areas, with a similar proportion of overnight visits (20%) comprising visits to friends and relatives. Just 4% of trips for business purposes were to a rural area, a decrease from 10% in 2018 (Figure 19).

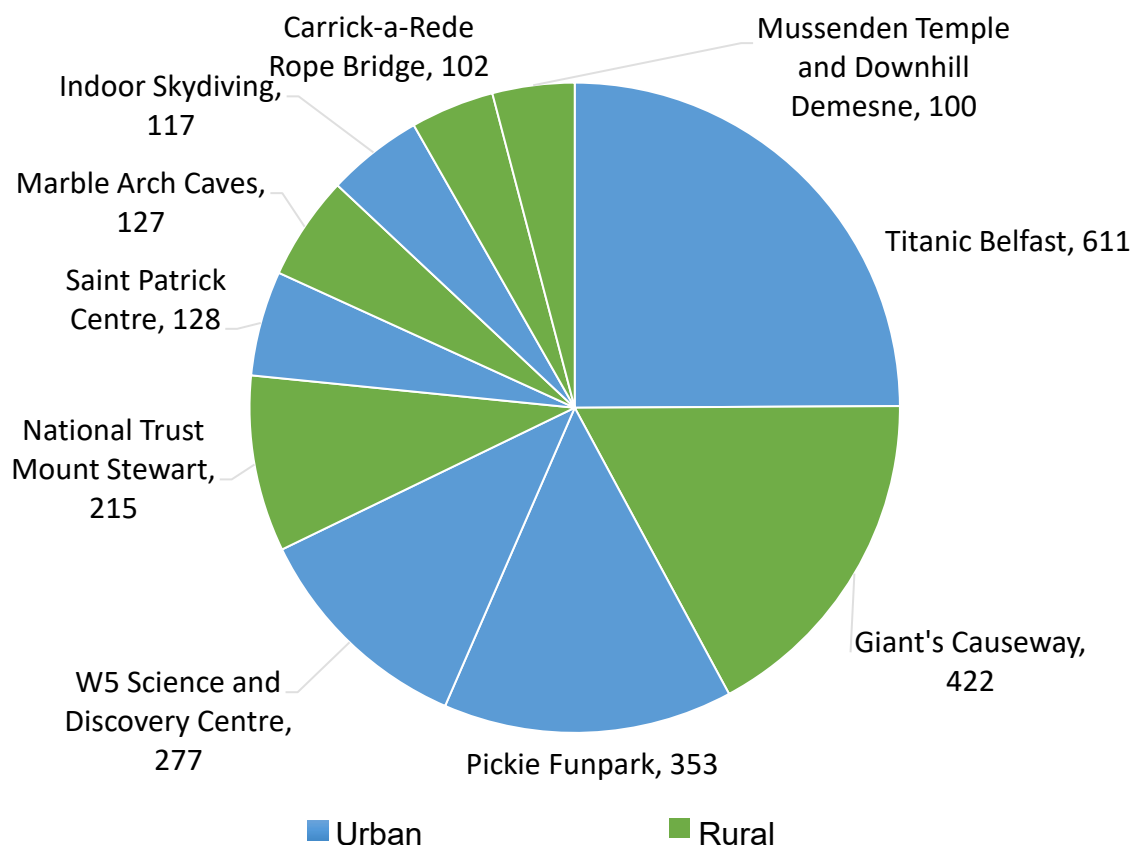
**Figure 20: Overnight Trips to NI by Country of Residence, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019**



Sources: NI Tourism Statistics (NISRA) 2019, Northern Ireland Passenger Survey (NIPS), NISRA, Continuous Household Survey (CHS), NISRA, Survey of Overseas Travellers (SOT), Failte Ireland, Household Travel Survey (HTS), Central Statistics Office (CSO)

20% of overnight trips by NI residents were to a rural location, a decline of 3% from 2020, with a similar proportion (21%) of visitors from the Republic of Ireland making overnight trips to rural areas (Figure 20). Visits made by those coming from outside the island of Ireland were much less likely to be to a rural location.

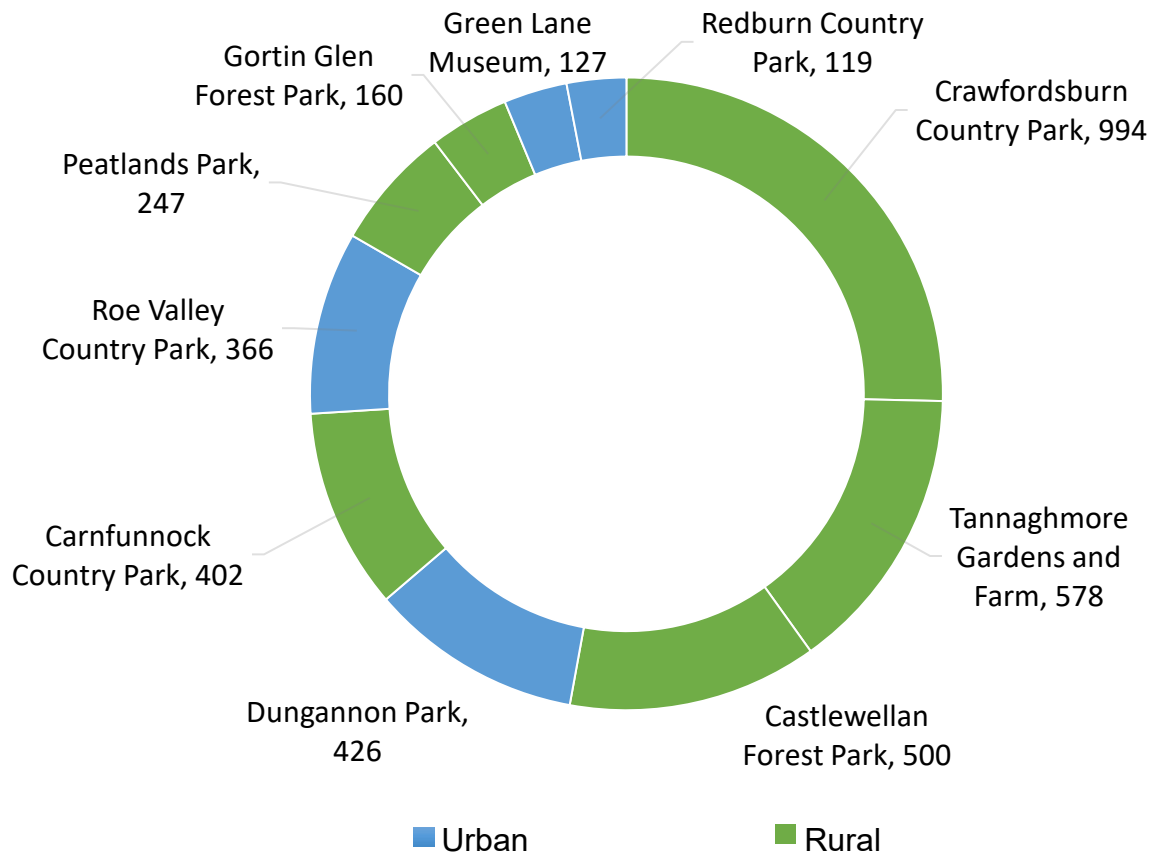
**Figure 21: Number of Visits (000s) to the Top 10 Paid NI Attractions (Urban and Rural), 2022**



Source: NI Visitor Attraction Survey (NISRA) 2022

In 2022, 39% of all visits to the top ten tourist attractions in NI (Figure 21), were to attractions in rural locations. Five of the top ten paid attractions overall in 2022 were located in rural areas. 74% of all visits to the top ten country parks, forests and gardens were to those in rural areas (Figure 22).

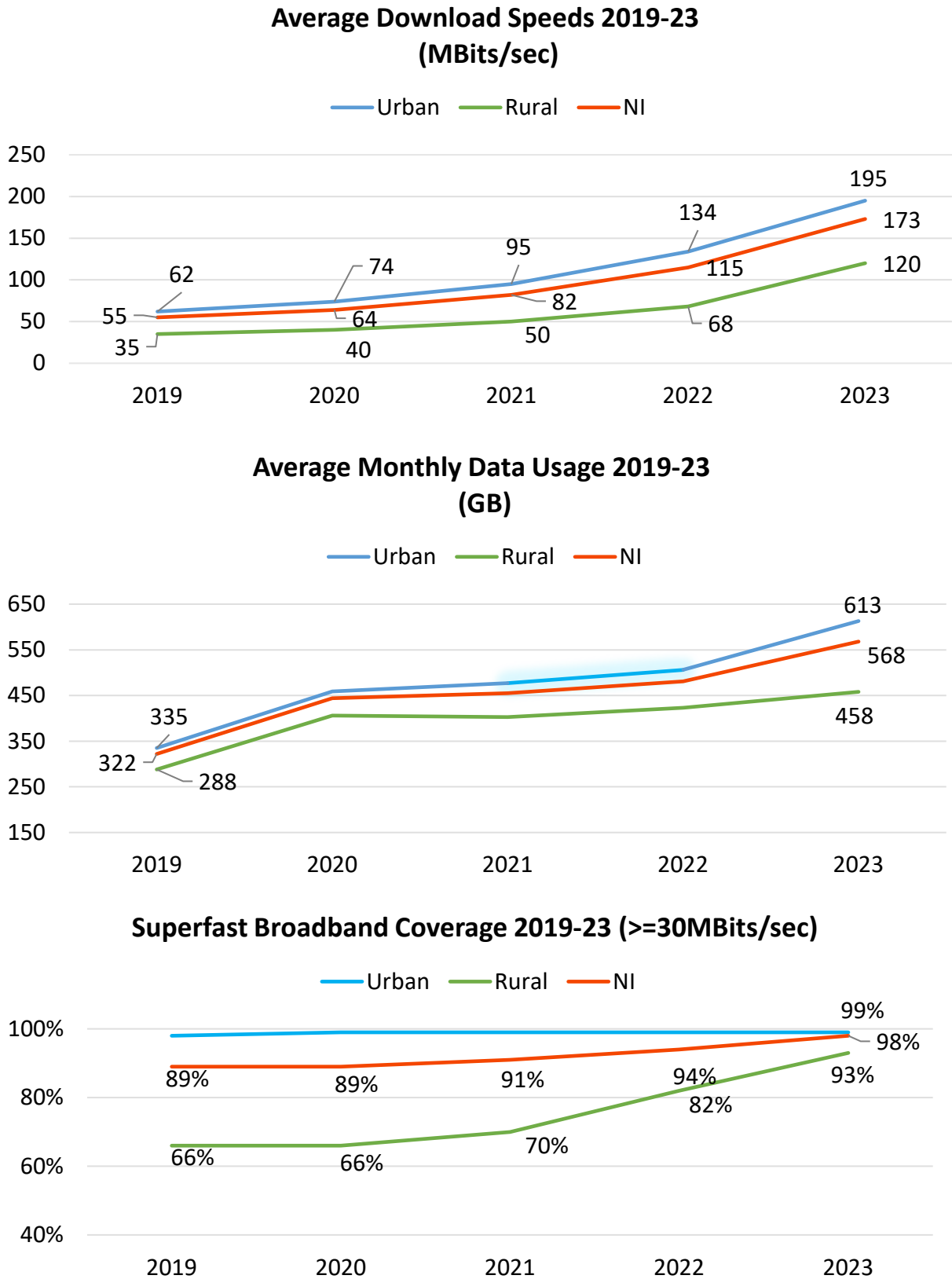
**Figure 22: Visits (000s) to Top 10 Parks, Country Parks, Forests and Gardens (Urban and Rural), 2022**



Source: NI Visitor Attraction Survey (NISRA) 2022

## Connectivity

Figure 23: NI Average Broadband Download Speeds, Average Data Usage and Superfast Broadband Coverage, Urban/NI/Rural Comparison, 2019-23



Source: Connected Nations Report 2023 (Northern Ireland), Ofcom

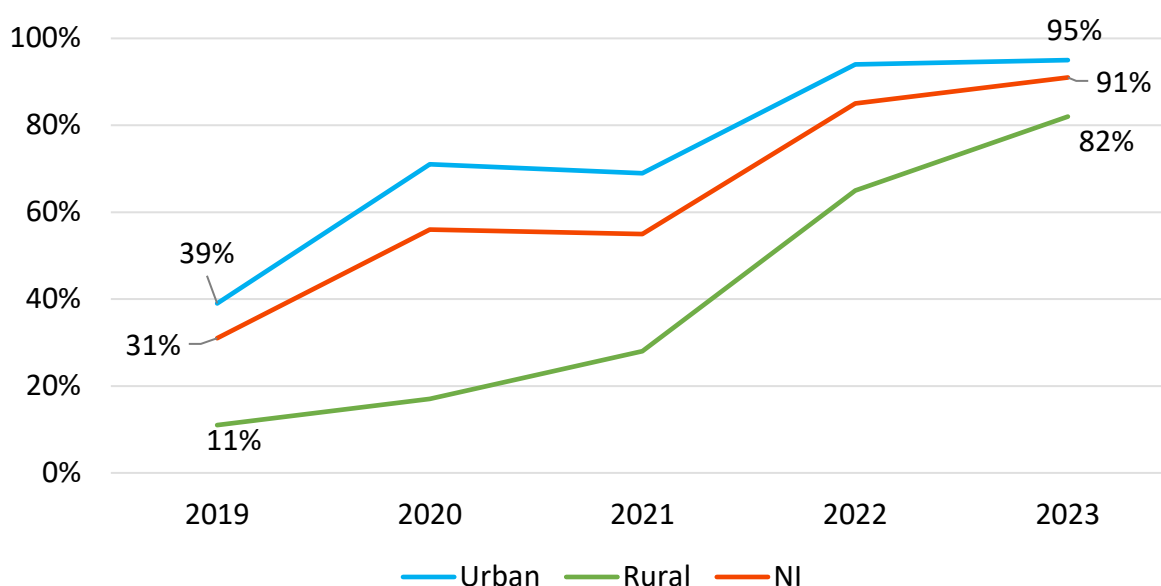


Broadband availability and average download speeds have increased dramatically in recent years (Figure 23), largely due to the ongoing rollout of Project Stratum. This joint initiative by DAERA and DfE aimed to extend Next Generation Access (NGA) to premises across Northern Ireland. The project has enjoyed remarkable success – in 2023, Northern Ireland has the highest availability (91% of premises) of full-fibre services in the UK, ahead of England (56%), Scotland (53%) and Wales (55%).

This investment in digital infrastructure has narrowed the urban/rural gap in broadband availability considerably in the last number of years. In 2023, 93% of rural homes in NI had access to superfast speeds, an increase from 82% in 2022.

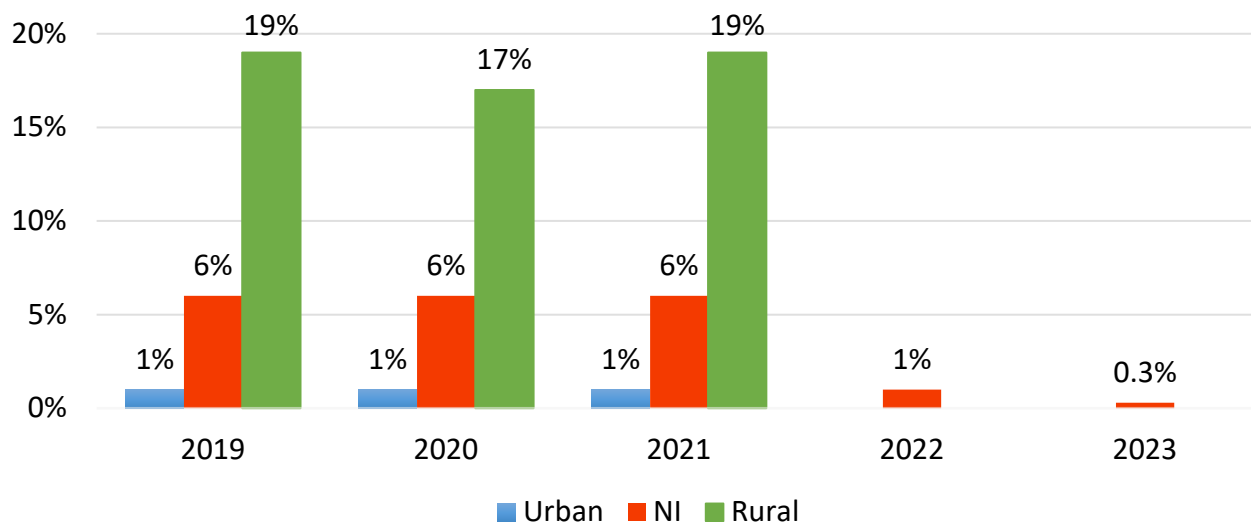
Access to full-fibre broadband connections has increased rapidly in both urban and rural areas since 2018. In 2023 this is approaching full coverage with 95% of residential properties able to access this service, and 82% of NI rural households having access to a full-fibre connection, an increase from 65% in 2022 (Figure 24).

**Figure 24: Coverage of Full-Fibre Broadband, Urban/Rural/NI Comparison (% of residential properties) 2019-23**



<sup>4</sup> Defined by Ofcom as at least 10Mbit/s download and 1Mbit/s upload speeds, *Ofcom, 2021: Connected Nations 2021, Northern Ireland report*

**Figure 25: Percentage of NI Properties Unable to achieve a 'Decent' broadband service, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019-23<sup>1</sup>**



*1 Urban/Rural breakdowns are not available for 2022 and 2023 due to small sample size*

*\*Decent service is defined by Ofcom as at least 10Mbit/s download, and 1Mbit/s upload speeds  
Based on 'Locale' classification of Urban and Rural*

Source: Ofcom Connected Nations 2018-23, Northern Ireland Reports

[https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0032/249287/connected-nations-northern-ireland.pdf](https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0032/249287/connected-nations-northern-ireland.pdf)

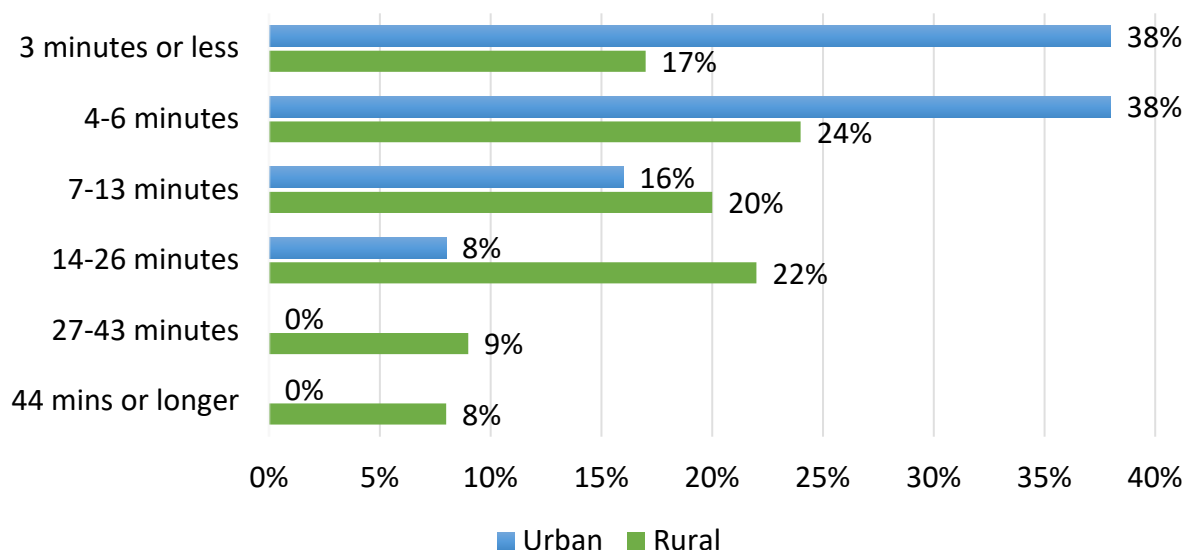
There has been a substantial drop in the number of properties unable to achieve a 'decent' broadband connection from either a fixed or fixed wireless access (FWA) network. Ofcom estimates that in 2023, the NI figure is approximately 3,000 premises (residential and commercial), or approximately 0.3% of all premises (Figure 25).

## Physical Connectivity and Public Transport

Access to public transport in rural areas is often considerably more difficult when compared with towns and cities, and crucial rural bus services are under increasing threat due to decreasing profitability and reductions in subsidies.

Data from the Travel Survey NI 2021 revealed that just 17% of rural dwellers live within a 3 minute walk of the nearest bus stop, compared with 38% of those living in urban areas – with 8% of rural dwellers living a 44 minute or longer walk to their nearest stop (Figure 26).

**Figure 26: Walking time to nearest bus stop, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021**



Source: *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI*

This may account for the large majority of adults living in rural areas who report holding a full driving licence (91%, compared with 78% of urban dwellers). More than half (52%) of rural households reported ‘never’ using bus services.<sup>5</sup>

Distances to railway stations tend to be even longer for rural dwellers. When asked about walking distance from a railway station, an overwhelming majority (92%) of rural dwellers responded either that they would have to walk for 44 minutes or more, or that the distance was so great that the question did not apply.

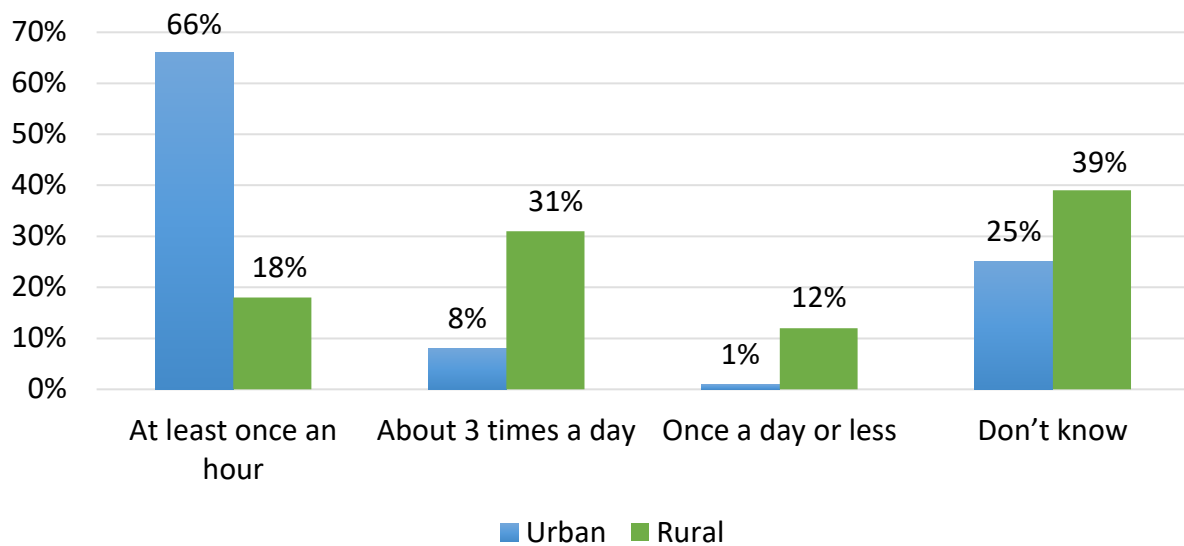
The frequency of public transport services also differs greatly between urban and rural areas. More than two thirds (69%) of urban dwellers reported a bus service frequency of at least once an hour, compared with 19% of those who live in rural locations (Figure 27). The frequency of rail services may be of less significance to the rural population, as railway stations tend to be concentrated in urban areas.

<sup>5</sup> Jack, C and Patten, N. *The contribution of key basic services to rural dwellers’ quality of life in Northern Ireland; a baseline review, Agri- food and Biosciences Institute, 2014.*

Distances to railway stations tend to be even longer for rural dwellers. When asked about walking distance from a railway station, an overwhelming majority (90%) of rural dwellers responded either that they would have to walk for 44 minutes or more, or that the distance was so great that the question did not apply.

The frequency of public transport services also differs greatly between urban and rural areas. Around two thirds (66%) of urban dwellers reported a bus service frequency of at least once an hour, compared with 18% of those who live in rural locations (Figure 27). The frequency of rail services may be of less significance to the rural population, as railway stations tend to be concentrated in urban areas.

**Figure 27: Bus Service Frequency, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021**

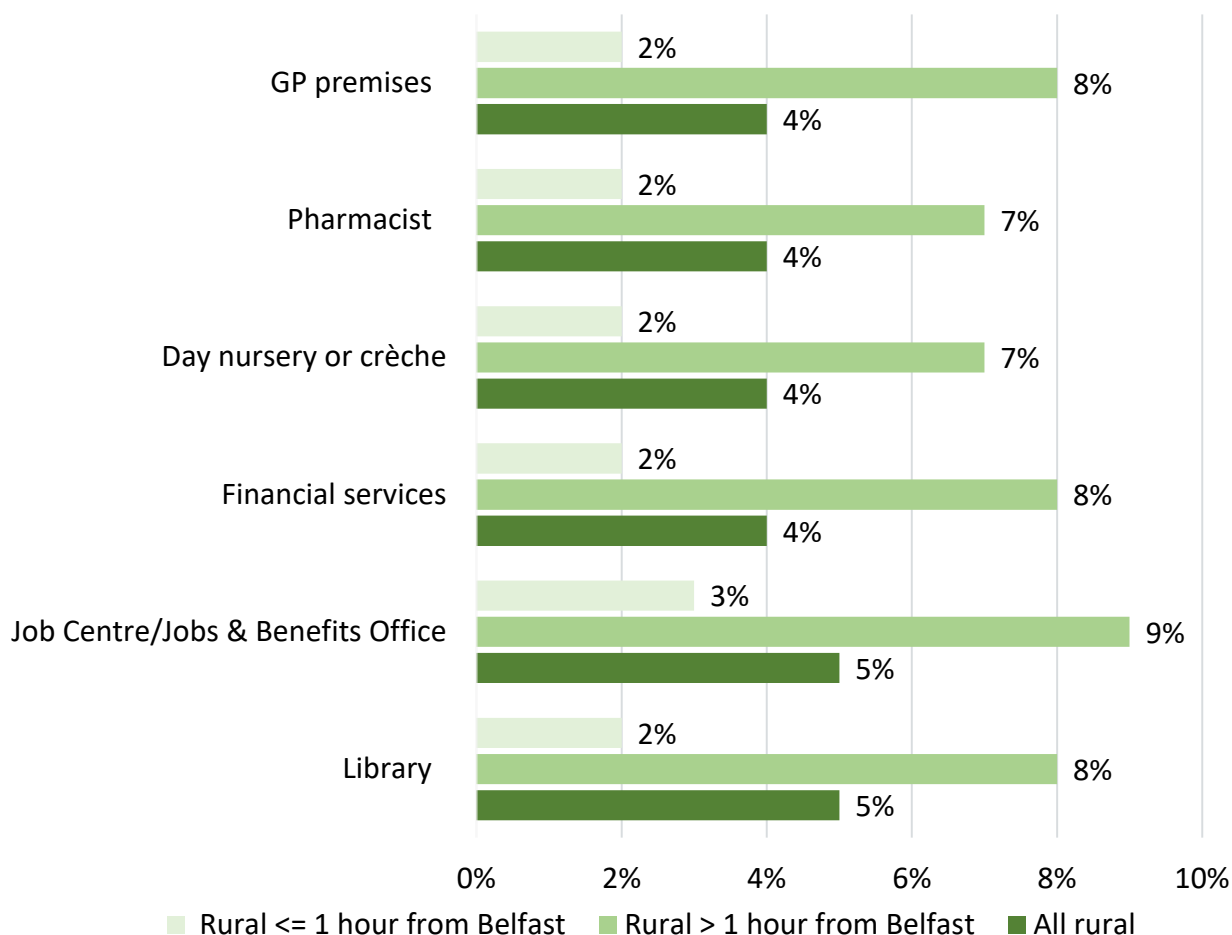


Source: *Travel Survey for Northern Ireland (TSNI) 2021, DfI*

## Access to Services

Access to key services can be a marker of disadvantage for people in rural communities, particularly for those living in more remote areas and for those without private transport. In rural areas more than an hour from Belfast, NISRA's Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM, developed in 2017) indicates that access to key services by public transport is particularly poor (Figure 27) - while for others, journeys made by public transport may simply be impractical due to a combination of journey length and remote location.

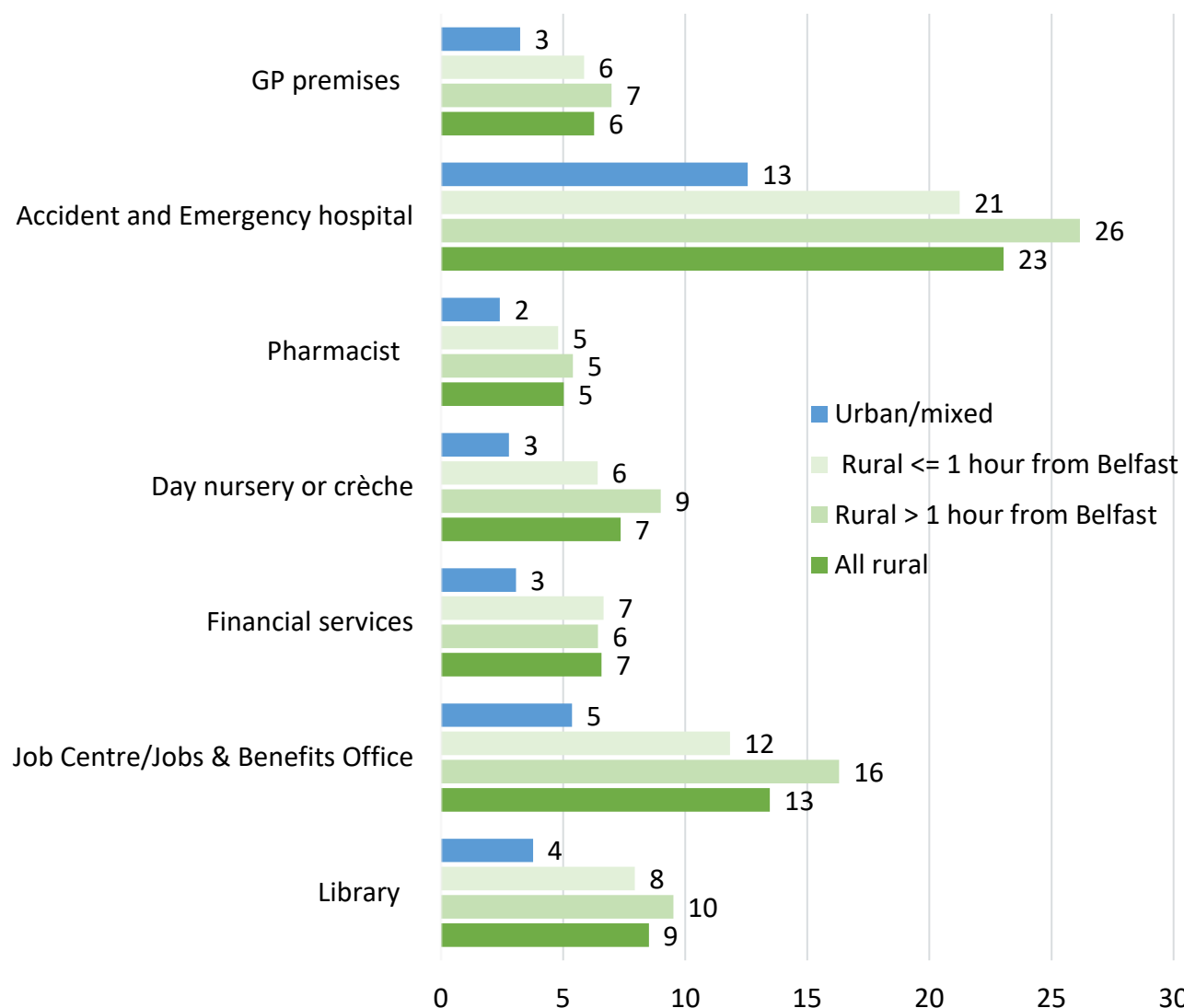
**Figure 28: Proportion of Small Areas without Public Transport Access to selected services, 2017**



*Note: 'Financial Services' includes ATMs, banks, building societies and credit unions.*

*Source: Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM), 2017*

**Figure 29: Average Journey Times (in minutes, by car) to selected services, 2017**



Notes: 'Financial Services' includes ATMs, banks, building societies and credit unions.

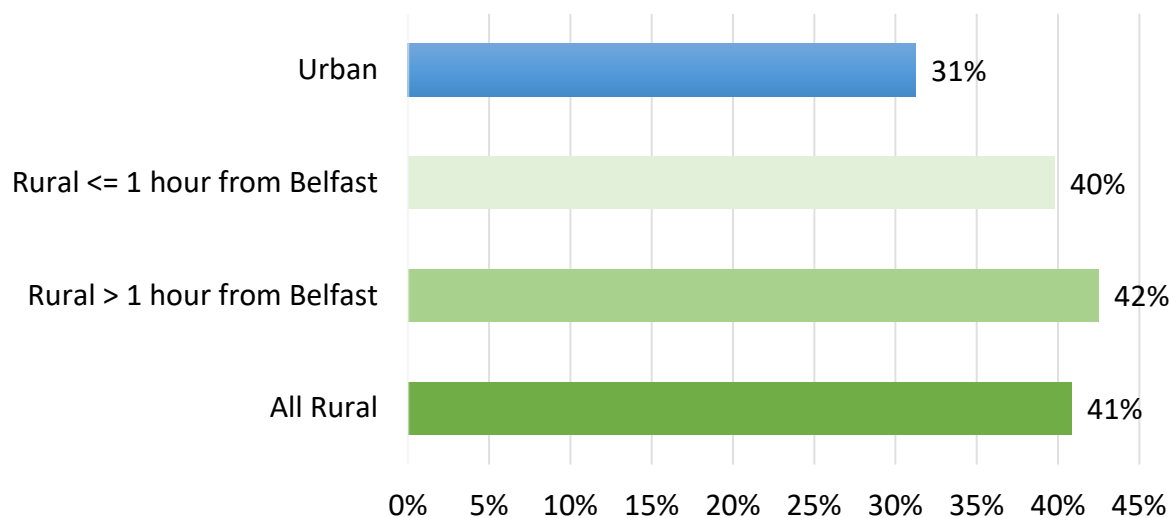
Source: Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure (MDM), 2017

For those living rural areas travelling by car, journey times to key services are substantially higher than for those living in towns and cities, sometimes double or greater. This disparity is again more pronounced in those rural areas further from Belfast.

The greatest urban/rural disparity in travel times are to hospitals with an accident and emergency facility, and to job centres/jobs and benefits offices. Those living in rural areas more than an hour from Belfast, are on average, a 26 minute drive away from an Accident and Emergency Department, compared to an average 13 minute drive time for those living in urban areas (Figure 29).

## Health and Wellbeing

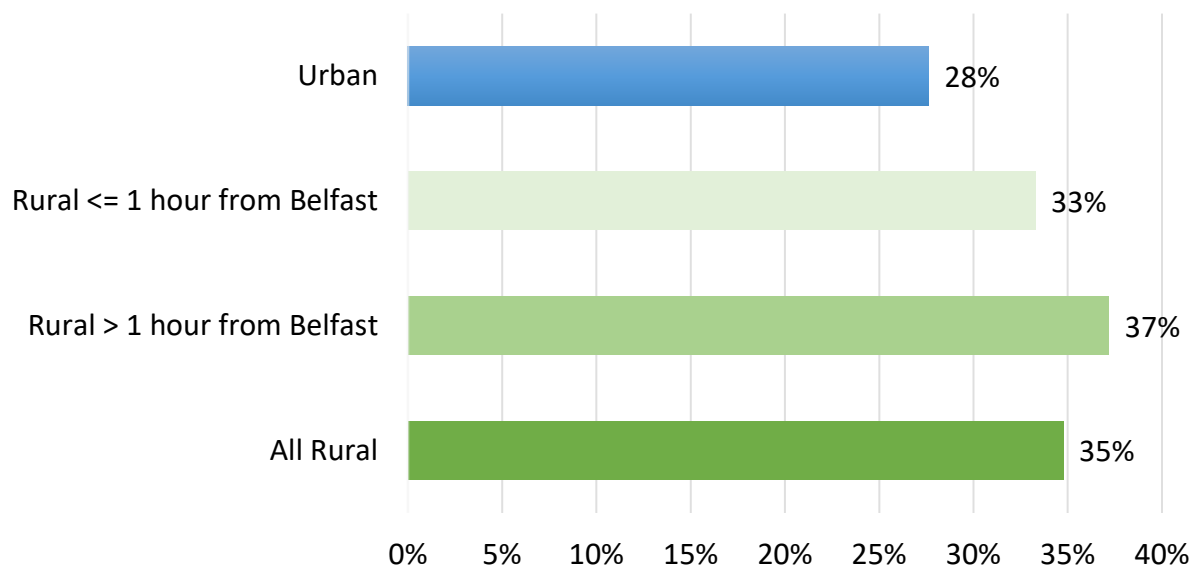
**Figure 30: Self-Reported 'High' Personal Happiness, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



*Note: Based on those scoring 9-10 on the question: 'Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is 'not at all happy' and 10 is 'completely happy'.*

*Source: Continuous Household Survey, NISRA 2022-23*

**Figure 31: Self-Reported 'High' Life Satisfaction, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



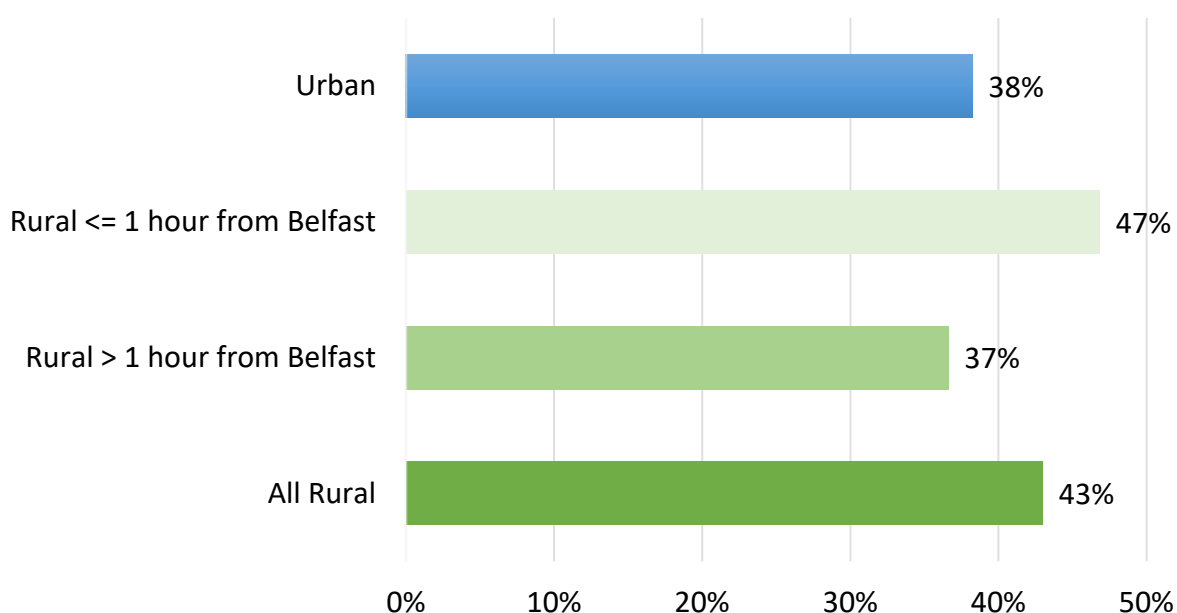
*Note: Based on those scoring 9-10 on the question: 'Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays? Where 0 is 'not at all satisfied' and 10 is 'completely satisfied'.*

*Source: Continuous Household Survey, NISRA 2022-23*

The data source for Wellbeing urban/rural comparisons changed in 2020 from the ONS Annual Population survey, to the NISRA Continuous Household Survey (CHS). In 2022-23, the survey found that people living in rural areas were consistently more likely to report high happiness levels (41% compared to 31% in urban areas, Figure 30) and high life satisfaction (35% compared to 28% in urban areas, Figure 31).

Similarly, rural dwellers were more likely to report lower anxiety levels than their urban counterparts (43% to 38%, Figure 32). However the proportion of rural respondents reporting low anxiety has decreased by 5% from 48% in the 2021-22 survey.

**Figure 32: Self-Reported 'Low' Anxiety, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**

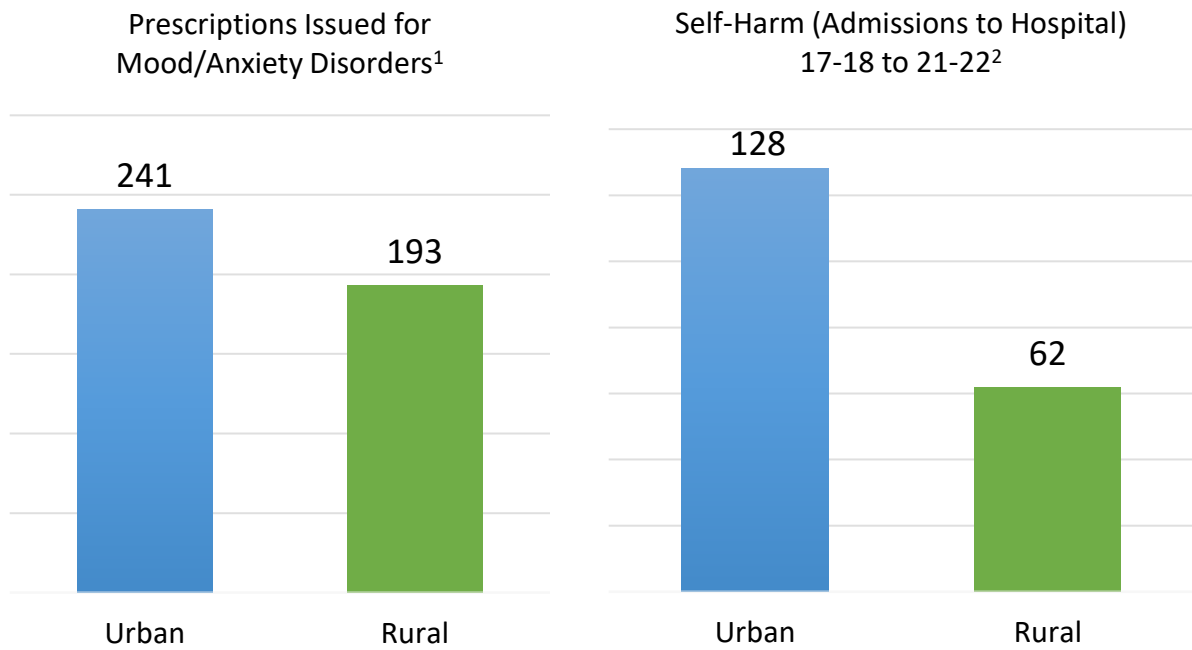


*Note: Based on those scoring 0-1 on the question: 'Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday? Where 0 is 'not at all anxious' and 10 is 'completely anxious'.*

*Source: Continuous Household Survey, NISRA 2022-23*



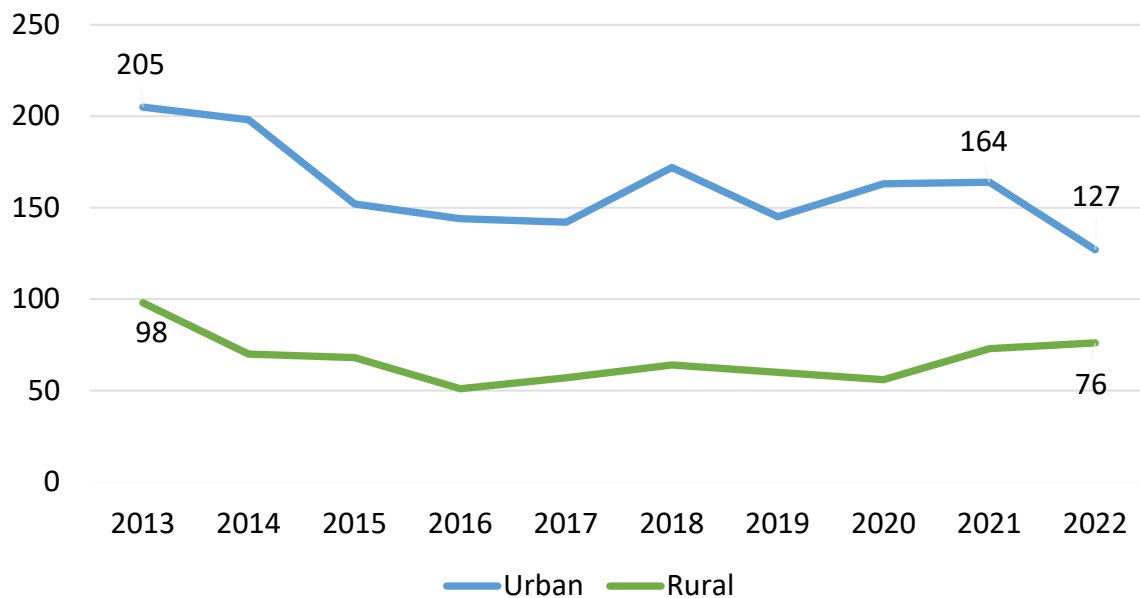
**Figure 33: Prescriptions Issued for Mood Disorders (2021), Hospital Admissions for Self-Harm (to 2021-22), Urban/Rural Comparison**



Notes: 1. Persons prescribed per 1,000 population, 2. Per 100,000 population

Source: Health Inequalities Monitoring Report 2023, Department of Health (DoH)

**Figure 34: Number of Deaths Registered by Suicide in Northern Ireland, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2013-22**



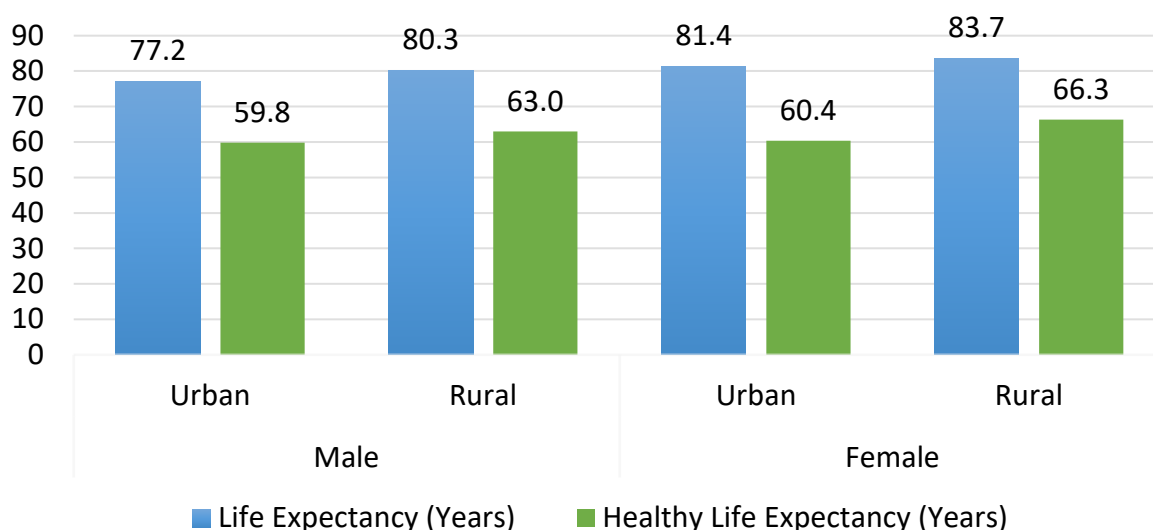
*Note: All deaths data supplied by NISRA Vital Statistics Unit is based on the year of registration rather than the year of occurrence unless otherwise stated. Events such as suicide are likely to be referred to the coroner. This can take some time, therefore deaths recorded each year may have occurred prior to the registration year.*

*Source: NISRA Vital Statistics Unit (DoF), 2023*

Up to 2021-22, the rate of hospital admissions due to self-harm in rural areas is less than half that in urban areas (Figure 33). Similarly, the number of prescriptions issued for medications to treat mood and anxiety disorders (per 1,000 population) in rural areas, is around 20% lower than in urban areas.

Fewer deaths by suicide are registered annually in rural areas, with the number of registered suicides in rural areas declining by (43%) between 2013 and 2020 (Figure 34). However, this figure rose sharply between 2020 and 2021, from 56 to 73, an increase of 30% in a single year, increasing further to 76 deaths in 2022.

**Figure 35: Life Expectancy at Birth, and ‘Healthy’ Life Expectancy<sup>1</sup> (Years), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2019-21**



1. This is the average number of years a person can expect to live in good health. HLE provides an estimate of lifetime spent in 'Very Good' or 'Good' health, calculated using respondents' perception of their own health according to the Health Survey Northern Ireland (HSNI).

Source: Health Inequalities Monitoring Report 2023, Department of Health (DoH)

Health inequalities monitoring data from DoH (covering 2019-21) suggests that life expectancy is notably higher in rural areas in NI, than in urban areas. Males living in rural areas can, on average, expect to live more than three years longer, and females over two years longer, than their urban counterparts.

This disparity is further emphasised in the projected ‘healthy’ years of life – rural males can expect around an three additional years of ‘healthy’ life, and females almost six years more on average, than their urban counterparts (Figure 35).

**Table 2: Median Emergency Service (Ambulance and Fire) Response Times (Minutes and Seconds), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2018-22**

Ambulance	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Urban	00:11:32	00:13:14	00:15:01	00:22:45	00:20:59
Rural	00:18:15	00:20:33	00:22:34	00:28:46	00:27:53
Fire Service	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Urban	00:07:00	00:07:02	00:07:04	00:07:22	00:07:27
Rural	00:14:11	00:14:36	00:14:09	00:14:33	00:14:52

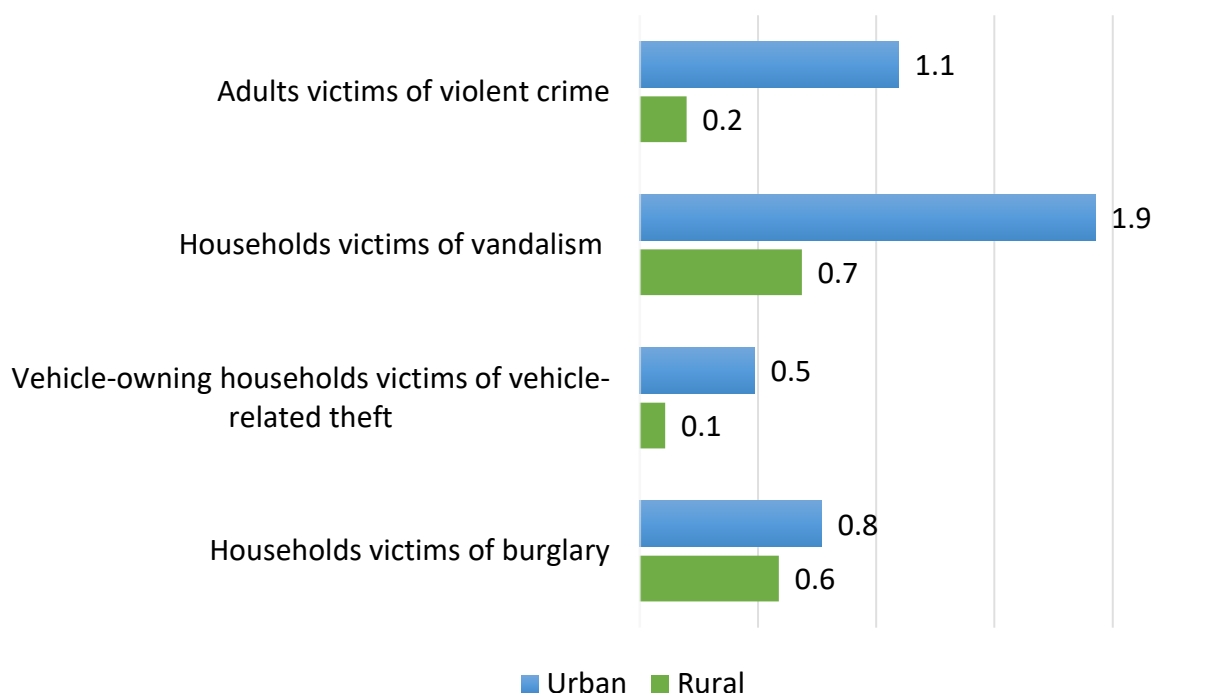
Source: Health Inequalities Monitoring Report 2023, Department of Health (DoH)

In terms of access to emergency services, ambulance and fire service response times were substantially longer in rural than in urban areas (Table 2). Average response times for ambulances in particular have been lengthening, in both urban and rural areas, between 2018 and 2021 – however average waiting times reduced slightly from 2021 to 2022, in both urban and rural areas.

In 2022, people living in rural areas waited on average almost 7 minutes longer for an ambulance, and almost twice as long for fire service response, than those living in urban areas.

## Crime

**Figure 36: NI Crime Victimization Rates (as % of those surveyed), Urban/Rural Comparison 2021-22<sup>1</sup>**



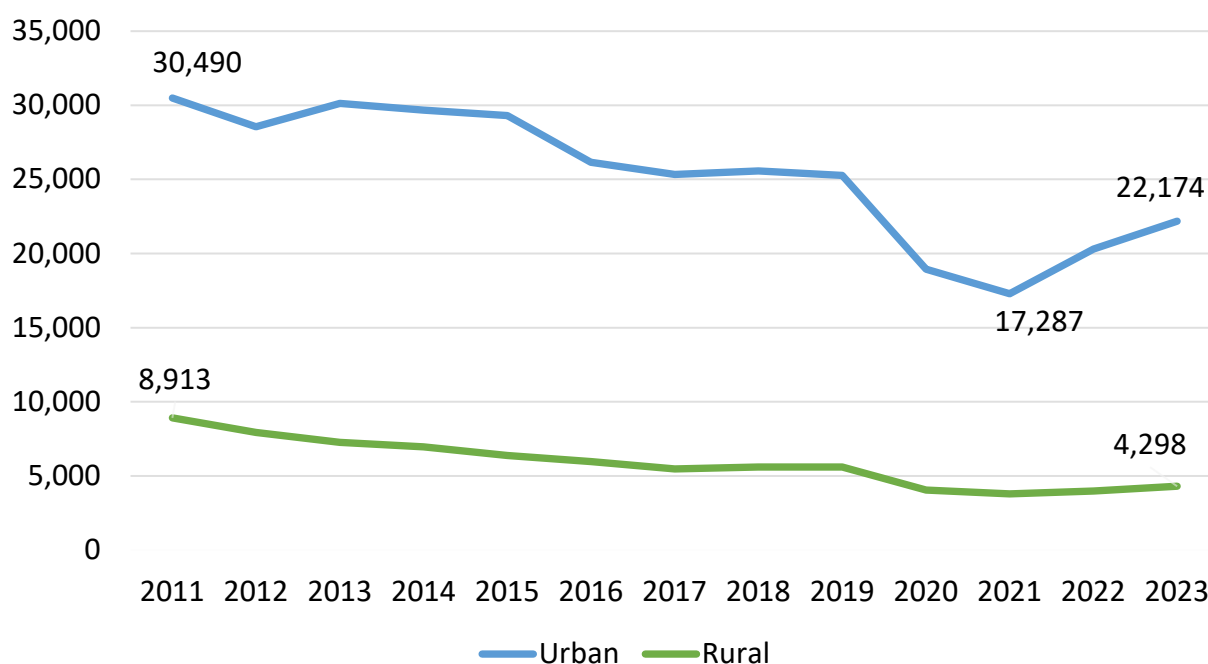
\*Bases for vehicle-related theft will be lower as they are based on vehicle owners only.

<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, the NISCS has been a face-to-face interview survey. Following government advice on Covid-19, however, face-to-face interviews were suspended in March 2020 and interviews were subsequently conducted via telephone for the 2020/21 and 2021/22 survey years. The 2020/21 and 2021/22 surveys will therefore be considered as discrete survey years and referred to as the 2020/21 and 2021/22 Northern Ireland Safe Community Telephone Survey (NISCTS) respectively.

Source: NI Safe Community Telephone Survey (DoJ), 2021-22

The 2021/22 NI Safe Community Telephone Survey results suggest that people living in urban areas are much more likely to experience certain types of crime than their rural counterparts, although the proportion of those surveyed experiencing each crime type was generally low. Urban households were almost three times more likely to experience acts of vandalism, with urban adults more than five times more likely to experience domestic burglary, than their rural counterparts (Figure 36).

**Figure 37: Trends in Burglary, Robbery and Theft Offences, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2011 to 2023**

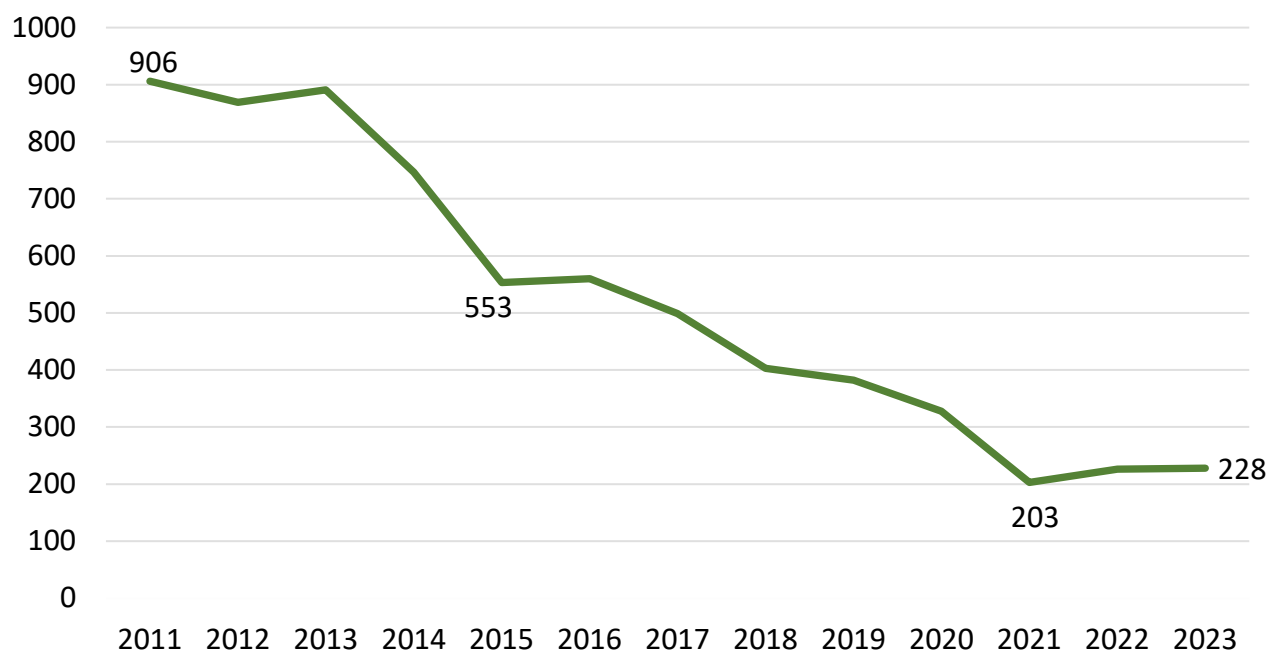


Source: *Agricultural and Rural Crime in NI Bulletin (PSNI), January 2024*

There had been a steady decline in the numbers of recorded burglary, robbery and theft offences in NI overall from 2011 to 2021. The rate of decrease has slowed since 2016/17 but decreased markedly between 2019 and 2020 in both rural, and especially urban areas, potentially due to limits on outdoor activities as a result of Covid-19 restrictions. The number of recorded offences in rural areas has seen little change between 2021 and 2023, while recorded offences in urban areas have increased by almost a quarter (22%) over the same period.

Between 2011 and 2023, the number of burglary, robbery and theft offences recorded in rural areas fell by more than half (52%, Figure 37).

**Figure 38: NI Trends in Agriculture Crime (Burglary, Robbery and Theft Offences for Agricultural- based Activity), 2011 to 2023**

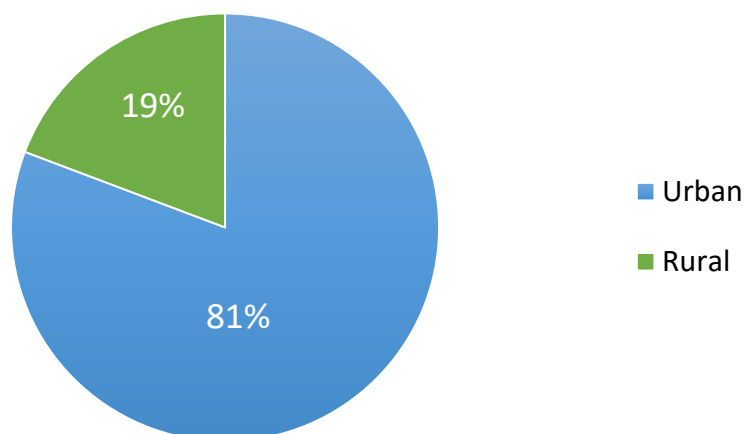


Source: *Agricultural and Rural Crime in NI Bulletin (PSNI), January 2024*

Over the period 2011 to 2021, the numbers of recorded offences relating to agricultural crime (burglary, robbery, and theft offences from agricultural premises) has declined by more than three quarters (78%), from 906 in 2011, to 203 in 2021 (Figure 38).

However, there was a notable increase (12%) in recorded offences between 2021 and 2023. It should be noted that agriculture-related crimes occur mainly, but not exclusively, in rural areas.

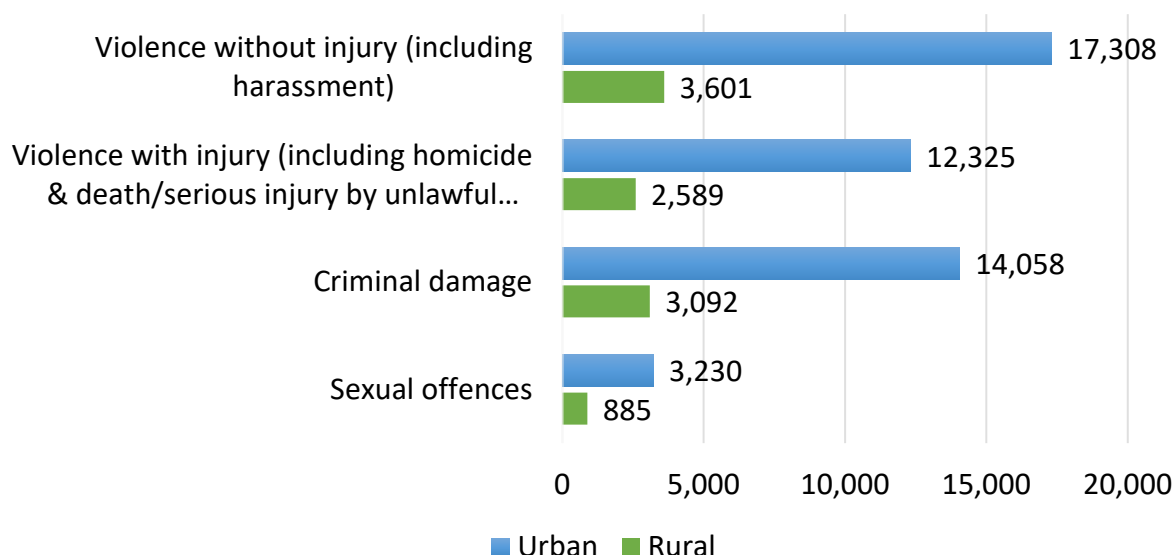
**Figure 39: Police Recorded Crime (all offences), Urban/Rural Split, 2022-23**



Source: PSNI, 2023

The 2022-23 Police Recorded Crime statistics from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI) revealed that more than three quarters (81%) of all recorded offences occurred in urban areas, with 19% of all recorded offences occurring in rural areas, a figure unchanged from 2021 (Figure 39).

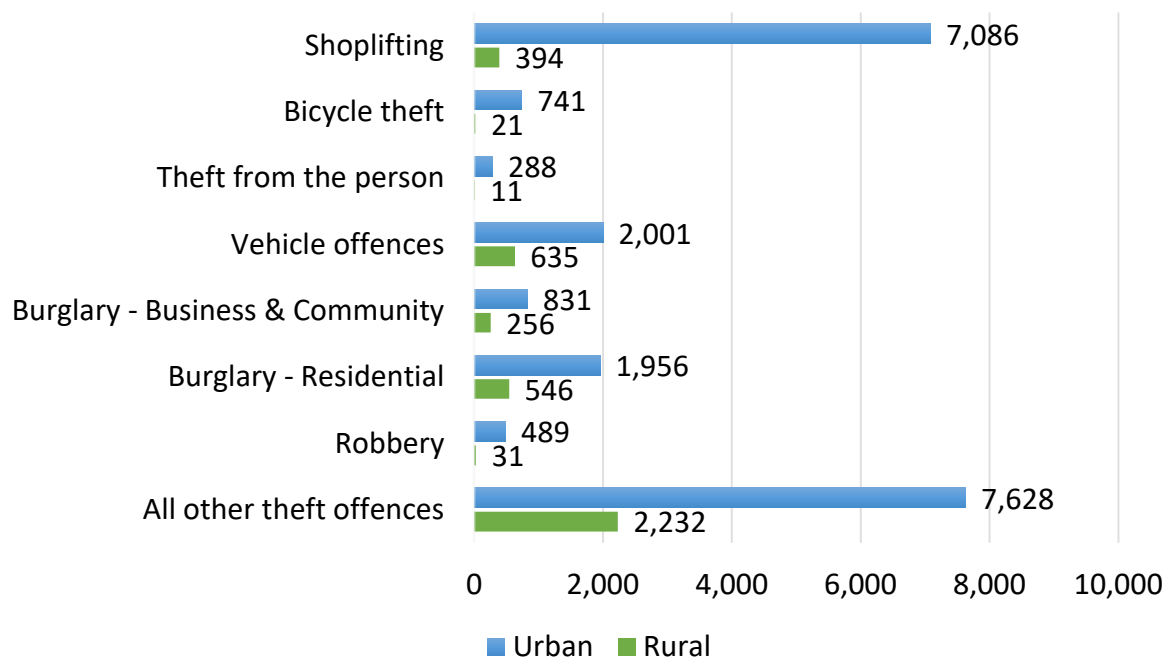
**Figure 40: Police Recorded Crime (violent crime, criminal damage and sexual offences, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



Source: PSNI, 2023

Violent crimes, criminal damage and sexual offences, are much more likely to be recorded in urban areas. In 2022-23, the numbers of recorded offences in these categories mirror the overall urban/rural split – with approximately five times as many offences recorded in urban areas. The gap narrows in terms of sexual offences, where just over three quarters (78%) were recorded in urban areas (Figure 40).

**Figure 41: Police Recorded Crime (Robbery, Burglary and Theft Offences), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



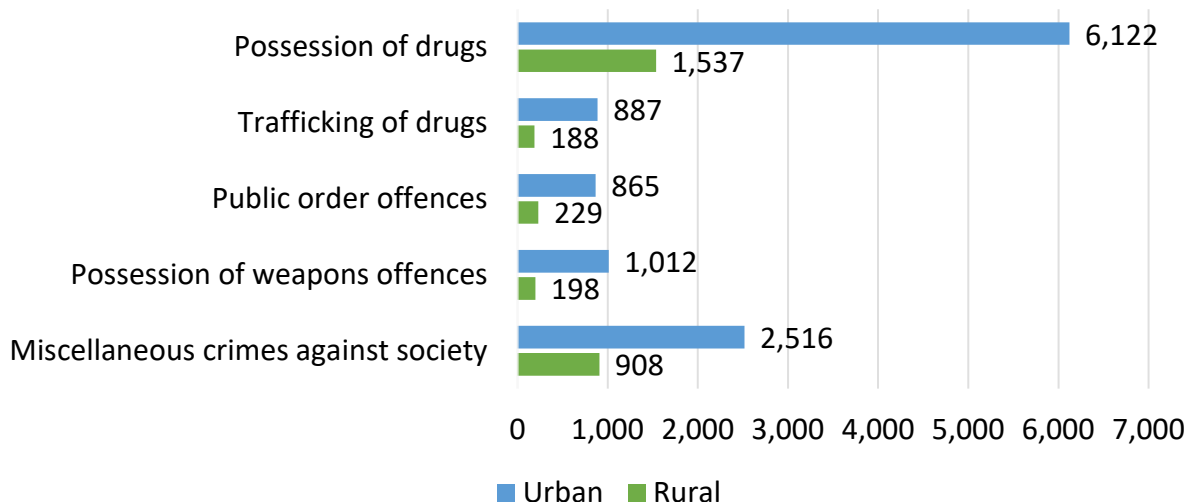
Source: PSNI, 2023

Robbery, burglary and theft offences were substantially more likely to be recorded in urban areas in 2022-23 (Figure 41). Shoplifting offences in urban areas dwarfed the total for rural areas, with 95% of these occurring in urban areas – however, this shoplifting offences increased by almost half (42%) in urban areas from the previous year, and by more than half (56%) in rural areas.

Recorded residential burglaries however, decreased across the same period by 17% in urban areas and by almost a quarter (21%) in rural areas.



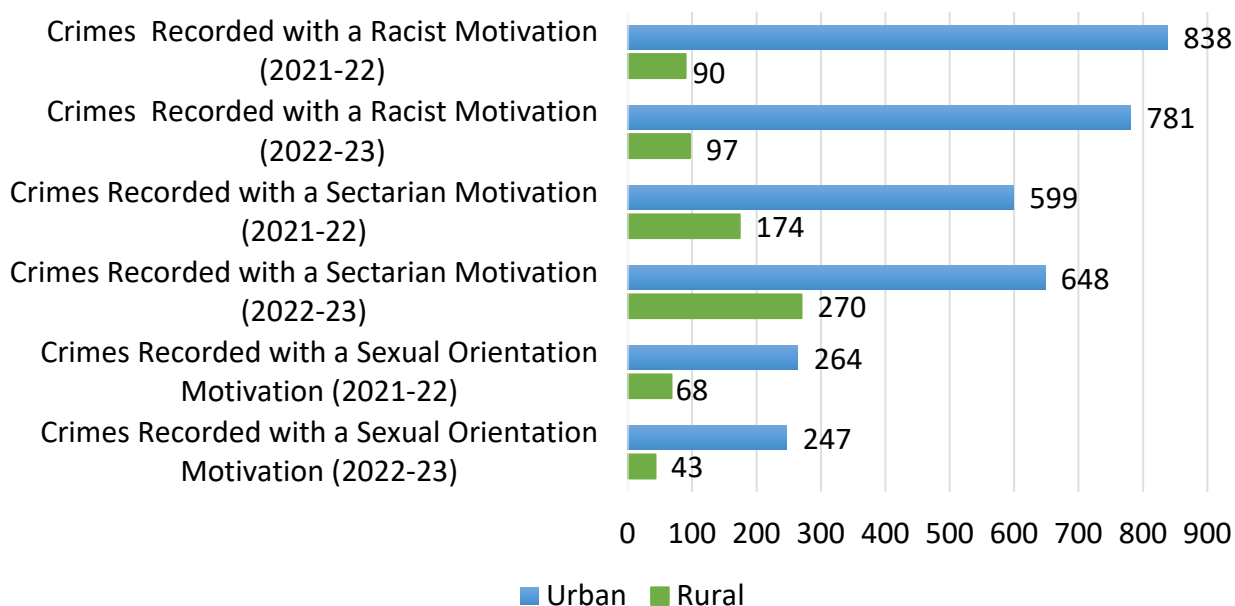
**Figure 42: Police Recorded Crime (Drugs, Weapons, Public Order and Miscellaneous Offences), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



Source: PSNI, 2023

Recorded offences for drugs, weapon possession, public order and miscellaneous crimes again show a strong affinity with urban areas, however 20% of drug possession offences in 2022-23 were recorded in rural areas (Figure 42).

**Figure 43: Recorded Crimes with a Hate Motivation, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021-22 to 2022-23**



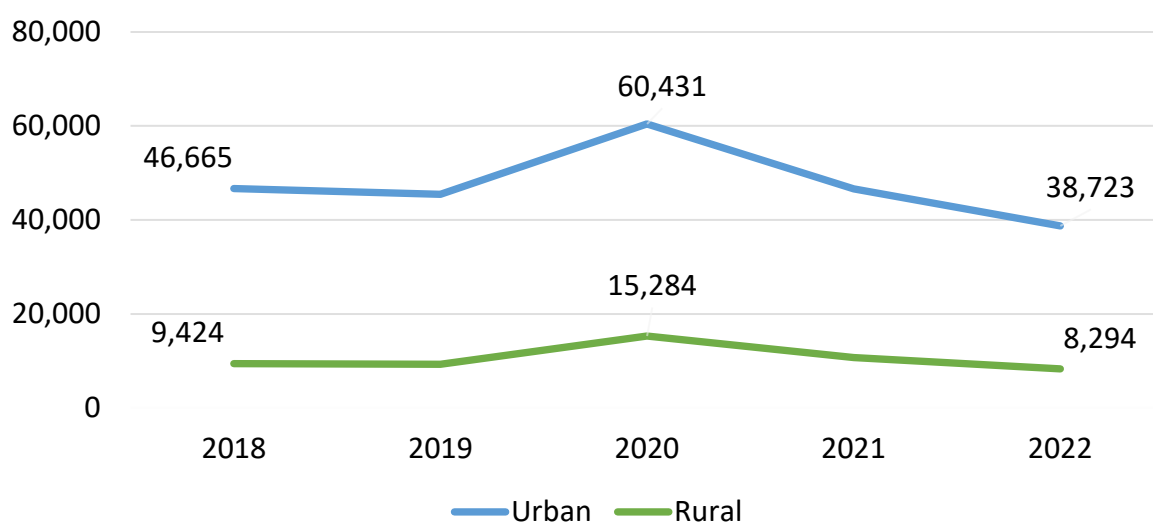
Source: PSNI, 2023

Hate crime remains a significant issue in NI society. An urban/rural comparison of the number of recorded offences with a racist, sectarian or sexual orientation motivation reveals mixed results across the three types of offence in both urban and rural areas between 2021-22 and 2022-23.

During this period, recorded racially motivated crimes decreased by 7% in urban areas, but increased to a similar extent (8%) in rural areas. Recorded crimes with a sectarian motivation increased by 8% in urban areas, with a much more dramatic increase of more than half (55%) over the same period in rural areas.

Recorded crimes with a sexual orientation motivation showed a decline in both urban and rural areas between 2021-22 and 2022-23, with the rural decline in recorded crimes particularly pronounced (37%, Figure 43).

**Figure 44: Recorded Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) Incidents, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2018-22**



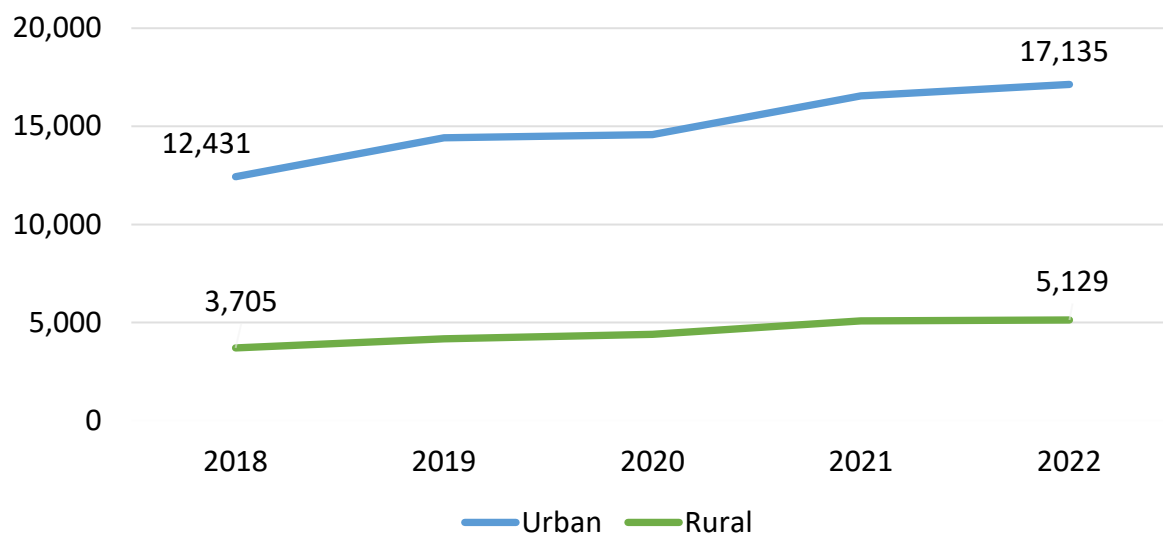
Source: PSNI, 2023

The number of anti-social behaviour (ASB) incidents recorded by PSNI had seen a decline in both urban and rural areas between from a peak in 2020, and then decreasing considerably to 2022. While the vast majority (82%) of these incidents were recorded in urban areas in 2022, they are not an exclusively urban phenomenon.

From 2020 to 2022, recorded ASB incidents in urban areas decreased by more than a third (36%), with recorded incidents in rural areas over the same period dropping by almost half (46%, Figure 44).

Conversely, the number of crimes recorded with a domestic abuse motivation has increased markedly over the five-year period 2018-2022 in both urban and rural areas. Domestic abuse crimes have increased by a similar factor, more than a third (38%), in both urban and rural areas over the period (Figure 45).

**Figure 45: Crimes Recorded with a Domestic Abuse Motivation, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2018-22**

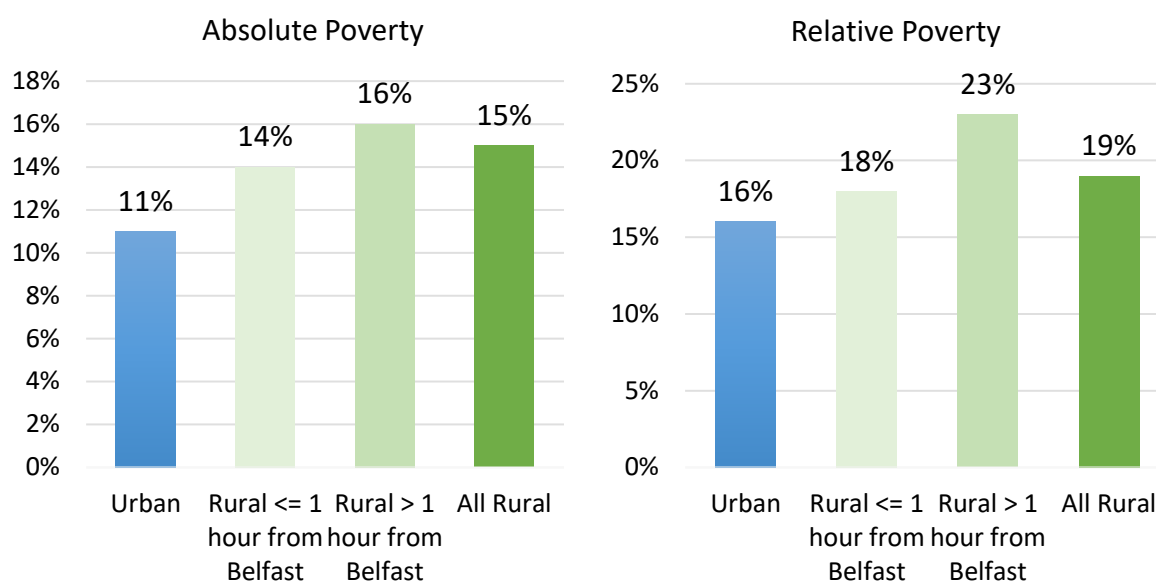


Source: PSNI, 2023

## Household Income, Housing and Poverty

Rural households are just as likely as those in urban areas to fall below either relative or absolute poverty levels. However, overall figures for rural areas disguise intra-rural differences in the experience of poverty. In 2021-22, poverty levels in households in rural areas which are more than an hour's journey from Belfast were higher than those of rural areas closer to the city (Figure 46).

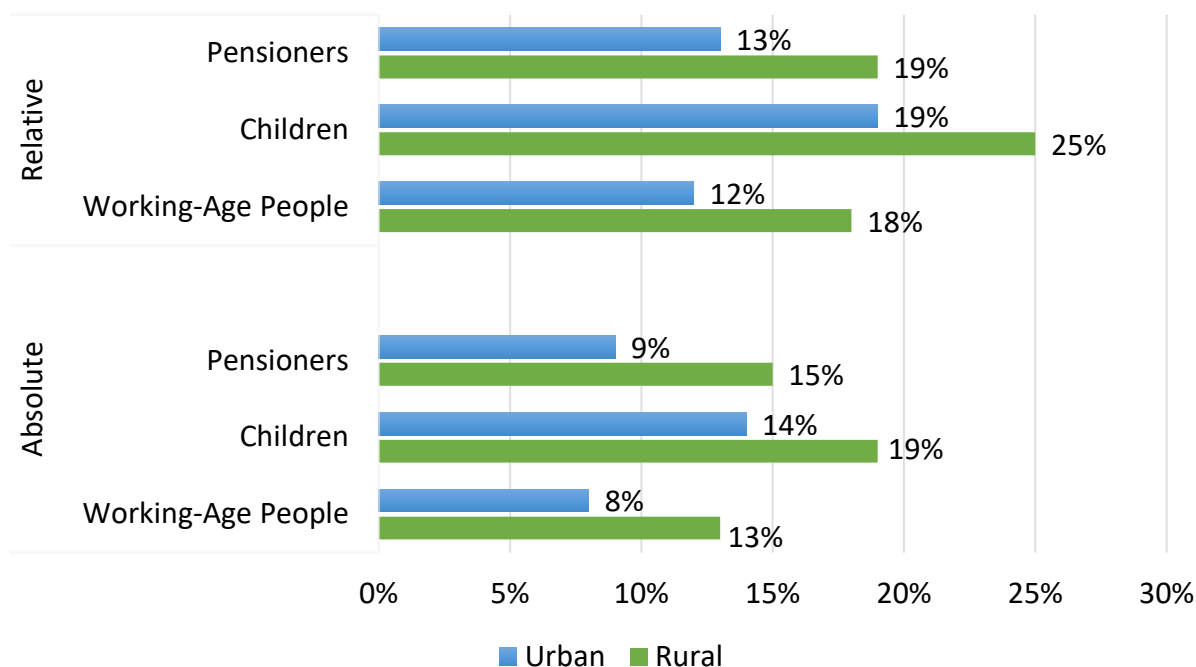
**Figure 46: Proportion of Households in Poverty (after Housing Costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021-22**



Source: *Poverty and Income Inequality Report (PII), Department for Communities (DfC), 2021-22*

In 2021-22, a greater proportion of the 'children' group was in poverty in rural areas compared with urban areas, with a quarter (25%) of the rural 'children' group experiencing relative poverty. This trend is mirrored in the both 'working age' and 'pensioner' groups across both poverty types – those in rural areas were substantially more likely to be in relative or absolute poverty than their urban counterparts (Figure 47).

**Figure 47: Proportion of Individuals in Poverty (after Housing Costs), Urban/Rural Comparison, 2021-22**



Source: Poverty and Income Inequality Report (PII), Department for Communities (DfC), 2021-22

**Table 3: Social Welfare Benefit Claimants/Recipients, Urban/Rural Comparison, August 2023**

	DLA Recipients	PIP Claimants	ESA Recipients	Carer's Allowance Recipients	Income Support Claimants	Pension Credit Claimants	Universal Credit Claimants
<b>Urban</b>	48,530	134,980	67,280	32,690	9,780	38,590	102,080
<b>Rural</b>	23,460	58,320	27,820	15,390	3,110	21,240	33,980
<i>Unknown</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>400</i>	<i>30</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>40</i>	<i>450</i>
<b>NI Total</b>	<b>72,030</b>	<b>193,700</b>	<b>95,130</b>	<b>48,100</b>	<b>12,910</b>	<b>59,870</b>	<b>136,520</b>

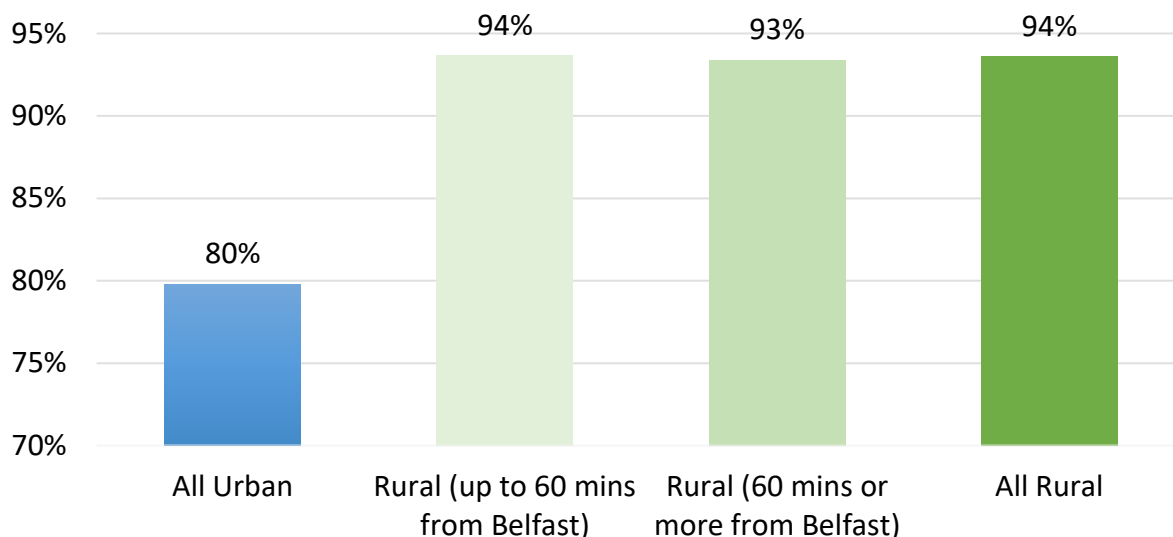
All figures have been rounded to the nearest ten. Totals may not sum due to rounding. In producing this analysis, individual records were attributed to a LGD or as Urban/Rural on the basis of their postcode. Not all records can be correctly allocated using this method, and some cannot be allocated at all.

Source: Professional Services Unit (PSU), Department for Communities, 2023

The number of Universal Credit (UC) claimants living in rural areas had declined by 10% between 2021 and 2022, but from 2022 to 2023 has increased by 16% to 33,980. The number of those claiming Personal Independence Payment (PIP) in both urban and rural areas has increased notably from 2022 to 2023, by 9% and 8% respectively.

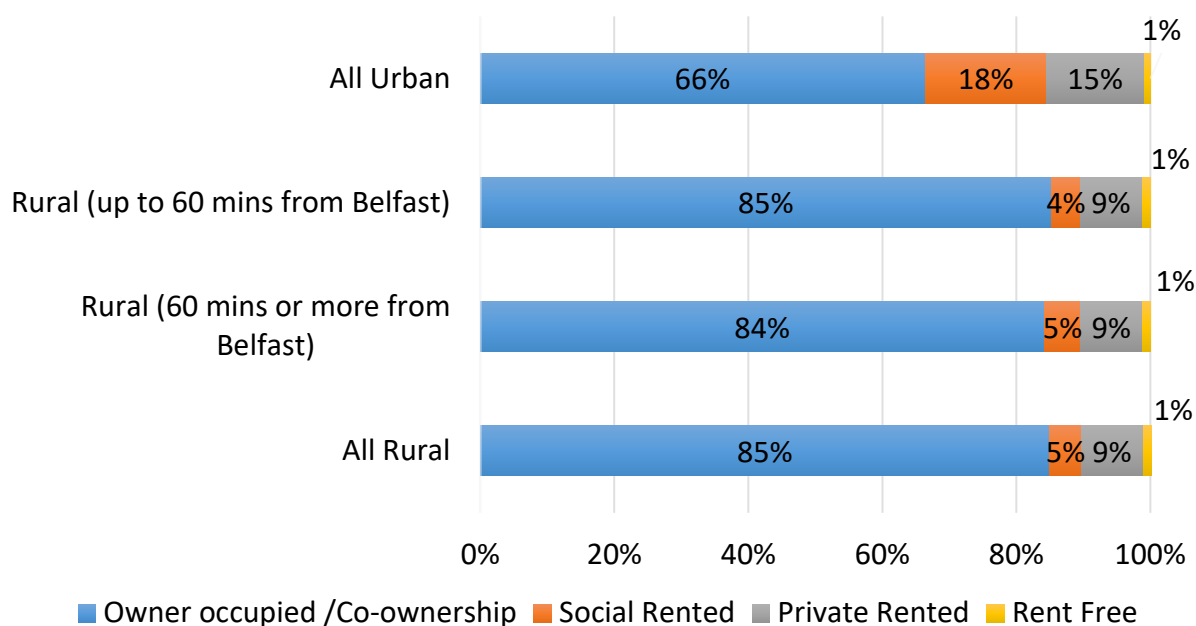
Private transport is also a necessity in many rural areas in terms of access to employment and basic services – 94% of rural households had access to at least one car or van in 2022-23 (Figure 48). As a result, vehicle ownership and running costs may consume a greater share of available household income.

**Figure 48: Household Car/Van Ownership, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



Source: Continuous Household Survey 2022-23, NISRA

**Figure 49: Housing Tenure, Urban/Rural Comparison, 2022-23**



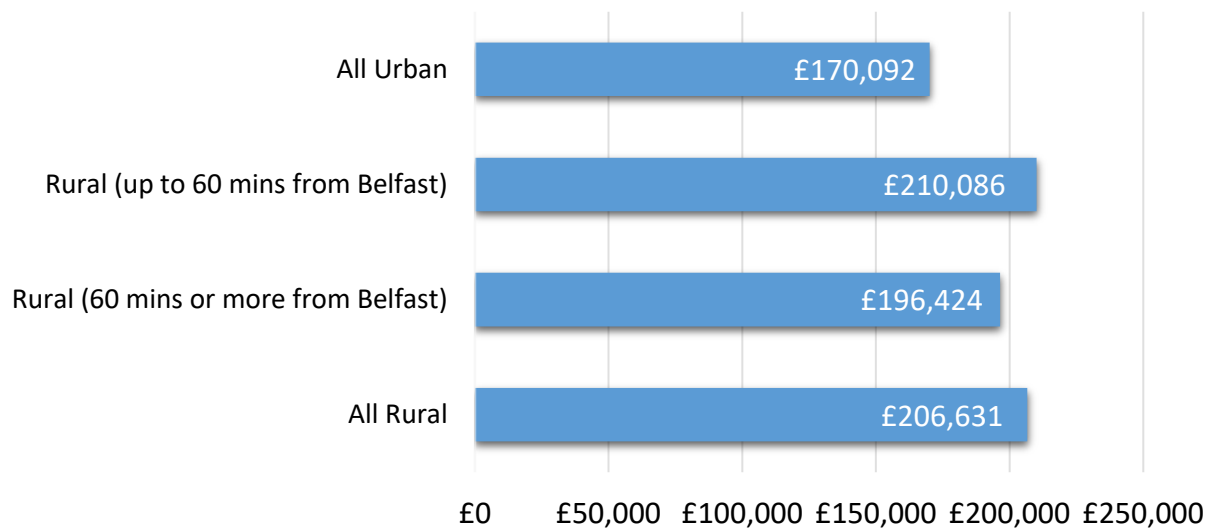
Source: Continuous Household Survey 2022-23, NISRA

Access to social housing is much more limited, and rates of owner-occupation are substantially higher in rural (85%) than urban areas (66%, Figure 49).

As of Quarter 3 in 2023, average house prices are substantially (18%) higher in rural than in urban areas, with property in rural areas within an hour's drive of Belfast most expensive of all (Figure 50).

This trend was doubtless influenced by higher demand for properties in rural areas resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic, although a combination of high demand and relatively low supply continues to drive prices upward in both urban and rural areas. It remains to be seen whether this trend will continue in the post-pandemic period.

**Figure 50: Average House Prices (NI), Urban/Rural Comparison, Q3 2023**



Source: NI House Price Index, Land and Property Services (LPS) NISRA, Q3 2023

## Further Information

This publication provides an overview of the wide range of information collected across Government to support the development of rural policy. Further sources of information on rural NI are provided below.

### **DAERA Rural Statistics**

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/articles/rural-statistics-and-farmer-equality-indicators>

### **Rural Development**

*Management and implementation of the Rural Development Programme and the Rural White Paper Action Plan*

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development>

### **Rural Needs**

*Advice and guidance for public authorities in relation to their duties under the Rural Need Act (NI) 2016*

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development/rural-needs>

### Bespoke Research

#### **Farmer Equality Indicators**

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/publications/equality-indicators-report>

*Contains information on the farming population and rural/urban comparative data on demography, households below average income, the economy and labour market, earnings, industry, tourism, telecommunications, investment, health, education, housing, travel and transport, wellbeing and experience of crime*

#### **‘Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation’**

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/topics/rural-development/tackling-rural-poverty-and-social-isolation>

#### Lead Statistician

Des Muldoon

Statistics and Analytical Services Branch

Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs,

Clare House

303 Airport Road West

Belfast BT3 9ED

Telephone: 028 9052 4144

Email: [ruralstats.PED@daera-ni.gov.uk](mailto:ruralstats.PED@daera-ni.gov.uk)



## Other Research Reports

Skills, Education and Training: Results from the AFBI farm household survey: Jack, C, Anderson, D, Patten, N and Miller, C, AFBI, 2014

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/skills-education-and-training-results-from-the-afbi-farm-household-survey-2014.pdf>

On-Farm and Off-Farm Returns to Education among Farm Operators in Northern Ireland: A Non-Technical Summary and Policy Discussion Document: Jack, C and Wallace, M, AFBI, 2011

<https://www.daera-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/dard/returns-to-education-report.pdf>



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

Policy, Economics and Statistics Division  
Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs  
Clare House  
Airport Road West  
Sydenham Intake  
Belfast  
BT3 9ED



Department of  
**Agriculture, Environment  
and Rural Affairs**

[www.daera-ni.gov.uk](http://www.daera-ni.gov.uk)

**INVESTORS IN PEOPLE**<sup>®</sup>  
We invest in people Standard