UNIVERSITY OF LEICESTER

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

Unpacking Experiences of Hostility: Full Report 1

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Content Warning

This report contains hate speech, abusive language and references to racism which individuals may find offensive or distressing.

This research was funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant reference: RPG-2023-010)

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Acknowledgements

This research would not have been possible without the generosity and courage of all the individuals who shared their experiences, insights and hopes for a more inclusive rural England. We are deeply grateful to every participant who contributed their time and expertise. We also express our gratitude to the Leverhulme Trust, who funded this project (grant reference: RPG-2023-010).

We would also like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the many community groups, charities and organisations who supported this work by facilitating connections, hosting conversations and providing invaluable insight. In particular, we wish to recognise and thank the following organisations, who were happy to be named and acknowledged for their role in shaping this project:

- Anti-Racist Cumbria
- Black Body Heart Mind Consultancy
- Black Girls Hike
- British Trust for Ornithology
- Black Voices Cornwall
- Devon Development Education
- JSCN – Jewish Small Communities Network
- Natural England
- Portland Global Friendship Group
- Tiny Travels Cultural Education CIC

Their commitment to equity, inclusion and racial justice in rural spaces is an inspiration, and their partnership has enriched this research in countless ways. Finally, we acknowledge all those working, often quietly and without thanks, to challenge racism and build belonging in rural communities across the country.

This report is dedicated to you.

Thank you.

Executive Summary: Unpacking Experiences of Hostility

This executive summary presents the core findings from the "Unpacking Experiences of Hostility" stream of The Rural Racism Project. This strand explores how racism is experienced, expressed, and navigated by minoritised individuals in rural England, and suggests ways of creating a more inclusive countryside.

Context and Rationale

Despite growing recognition of racism in rural England, persistent inequalities remain, including experiences of racial violence, fear of discrimination and limited cultural visibility. By centring the lived experiences of minoritised individuals, this report provides an evidence base for those committed to making the countryside a more inclusive and anti-racist space.

Methodology

115 semi-structured interviews and numerous informal conversations were conducted with minoritised individuals, White rural residents and White allies actively engaged in anti-racist work across England to:

- understand how racism is experienced by people from minoritised backgrounds living in or visiting rural England
- examine the impacts of rural racism
- explore attitudes of white rural residents towards diversity and inclusion
- highlight examples of inclusion and anti-racism in rural communities

Their diverse life histories, ethnic backgrounds, geographic locations and relationships to rural spaces provided a rich tapestry of perspectives.

Key Findings

1. **What is rural life like?**
    - Rural life is both enriching and exclusionary. It offers access to nature but can be marked by social and material challenges such as lack of transport and economic inequalities.
    - Nature plays a central role in physical and mental well-being regardless of ethnic or racial background. However, cultural knowledge and intergenerational experience shape access, with many minoritised individuals disclosing a lack of appropriate gear and knowledge of how to access rural spaces preventing true inclusion.
    - Community connections are strong among White British populations, but experiences of belonging vary widely, with minoritised individuals experiencing exclusion, racism and institutional harm.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

- A lack of diversity in rural England can lead to isolation for minoritised residents and visitors, reinforcing perceptions of rural Whiteness. Subtle social norms signal who rural spaces are “for”, often excluding those outside dominant identities.

2. **What does rural racism look like?**
    - Rural England is often perceived as a predominantly White space. This is communicated through exclusionary narratives and gatekeeping which foster a sense of not belonging for minoritised individuals.
    - **Interpersonal racism** is expressed through persistent and aggressive staring, hostile body language and deliberate isolation as well as through more overtly threatening behaviours such as name calling, racial slurs, physical intimidation and threats.
    - **Everyday microaggressions** include being questioned about one’s origins, being subjected to positive and negative stereotypes about one’s identity and feeling scrutinised in rural spaces. These experiences are often unreported, reinforcing the idea that such behaviour is tolerated and fortifying feelings of being an outsider.
    - **Racism in rural schools** was frequent. Children from minoritised backgrounds regularly face racial slurs and physical violence, demonstrating how racist attitudes are learned from a young age.
    - Reports of **structural racism** include institutional bias in schools and workplaces. The ethnocentric curriculum is often seen as ill-equipped to address racism, while local authorities and institutions routinely dismiss or minimise the perspectives of minoritised individuals.

3. **What are the impacts of rural racism?**
    - Rural racism takes a significant emotional, physical and economic toll on households and communities. For minoritised individuals, it results in chronic stress, anxiety, fear, exhaustion and anger. These feelings stem from direct experiences and the psychological burden of anticipating racism and navigating predominantly White spaces.
    - Racism disrupted research participants’ careers, forced businesses to close and prompted relocation to urban spaces. This therefore weakens rural economies by deterring diverse talent and reducing the amount of money that minoritised communities spend and invest in rural spaces.
    - Racism also shaped identity and belonging. Participants described how they altered their behaviour, appearance or speech to avoid discrimination. Cultural assimilation became a survival strategy which reinforced the message that minoritised groups do not belong and that conformity to White British norms was the condition for acceptance.

- Racism affects also White communities more broadly. It corrodes trust, reinforces social divisions and limits opportunities for connection.

4. **Why does rural racism happen?**
    - **Fear**: Rural racism is often rooted in a pervasive fear of change and difference. Tight-knit communities may perceive newcomers, especially those from racially or culturally different backgrounds, as threats to local identity. This fear is intensified by economic insecurity and a strong sense of localism or nationalism.
    - **Ignorance**: Many rural residents lack knowledge about minoritised groups and the harms of racism, often because of limited education on these issues and the social homogeneity of their community. This ignorance is sometimes maintained deliberately to avoid taking responsibility for racism.
    - **Learned Behaviour**: Racism can be learned and passed down through families and reinforced by monocultural environments and education systems that avoid critical engagement with Britain's own history of racism and colonialism.
    - **Populism**: Nationalist and exclusionary ideas about British identity are commonly reinforced by right-wing populism, which frame minoritised individuals as outsiders. This increases the normalisation and legitimacy of racist attitudes.

5. **What are the compounding challenges?**
    - **Barriers to reporting** include access to support and reporting mechanisms. A lack of culturally appropriate services, low institutional trust, and rural isolation all contribute to under-reporting and unaddressed harm.
    - **Personal barriers to seeking support** include individuals trivialising their experiences or fearing retaliation if they spoke up. Even when people did report, the responses were often limited to performative gestures, leaving victims feeling disillusioned.
    - **Geographic and social isolation**: Limited exposure to diversity due to geographic isolation allows myths and stereotypes to flourish unchallenged. The lack of direct contact with minoritised groups leads to suspicion, scapegoating and the persistence of exclusionary attitudes and behaviours.
    - **Barriers to anti-racism**: Attempts to challenge racism often provoke backlash. Anti-racism efforts were frequently dismissed as 'political' or 'divisive', and participants described being harassed or excluded for speaking out. Others highlighted that being perceived as racist or losing social status led to inaction. This fear often manifests in performative anti-racist gestures rather than real change.
    - **Discomfort about anti-racism**: White participants expressed anxiety around 'getting it wrong', resulting in silence. Others disclosed a lack of

awareness and understanding around subtler forms of racism, and how to appropriately respond.

6. **How can we make the countryside more inclusive?**
    - **Structural change and policy reform:** Inclusive rural policy that actively promotes diversity as part of rural regeneration and community well-being is key to generating change. This should be supported by intersectional investment that addresses overlapping forms of disadvantage, with inclusion as a guiding principle.
    - **Representation in decision-making:** Diverse voices, especially those with lived experience of exclusion, must be included in leadership and decision-making roles across rural institutions. Public sector policies and local planning must embed transparency and protections for minoritised groups.
    - **Accountability and leadership:** Clear, transparent frameworks are needed to track progress and enforce anti-racist policies. Accountability must be built into institutional mandates whereby every decision-maker, not just senior leaders, must take responsibility for driving and sustaining change.
    - **Making rural spaces welcoming and accessible:** Facilities and services should reflect the needs of diverse communities, making rural spaces genuinely welcoming. Safety and cultural sensitivity must be considered from the outset in rural planning and infrastructure to increase accessibility for all.
    - **Building meaningful connections:** Facilitating positive and healing experiences in nature helps to foster a sense of belonging for minoritised individuals. Positive rural experiences, when shared, can encourage wider participation and counteract exclusionary narratives.
    - **Empowering allies:** Education and learning are key to challenging racism and fostering greater cultural understanding. This can be facilitated through celebrations of diversity to build connection and belonging, and through the prioritisation of honest dialogue, where people can speak freely, and learn from one another.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary: Unpacking Experiences of Hostility ***3***

1. Introduction ***9***

Background to the project 9

How prevalent is racism? 10

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside 11

A note on terminology 15

A note on well-being 15

2. What is Rural Life Like? ***17***

The positives of rural life 17

The challenges of rural life 23

3. What Does Rural Racism Look Like? ***31***

Interpersonal racism 31

Structural racism 36

How does racism differ in rural spaces? 39

4. What are the Impacts of Rural Racism? ***42***

Impacts on emotional well-being 42

Impacts on physical well-being 45

Impacts on economic well-being 46

Impacts on personal well-being 48

5. Why Does Rural Racism Happen? ***51***

Fear 51

Ignorance 54

Learned behaviour 56

Populism 58

Media 59

6. What are the Compounding Challenges? ***62***

Barriers to reporting 62

Barriers to anti-racism 66

7. How Can We Make the Countryside More Inclusive? ***74***

Structural recommendations 75

Interpersonal and community recommendations 80

Reflection: research on rural racism 88

1. Introduction

Background to the project

This report summarises the findings of *The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside* (2023-2025), funded by the Leverhulme Trust. The project seeks to re-story popular depictions of rural life by challenging urban-centric frameworks for understanding the nature and impacts of racism, which are routinely overlooked, minimised and unchallenged.

Although rural racism is discussed in the media,[1] it remains under-researched and poorly understood. Foundational studies from the early 2000s[2] provide a starting point, but much has changed in the decades since. The COVID-19 pandemic, shifts in work-life patterns, and the rising appeal of rural living have led to increasing diversity in some countryside areas. Yet persistent inequalities remain. People from minoritised groups continue to be underrepresented both as rural residents and as visitors. Barriers including the rising cost of living, fears of discrimination, limited cultural visibility, and a lack of inclusive infrastructure which restricts access and belonging.

For some communities, like Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, these exclusions are deeply entrenched despite their historical presence within rural England. Portrayals of the countryside as peaceful and apolitical often mask the realities of racism. For many, rural spaces are not easy places to be in: they are exclusionary and contested[3].

At a time when conversations about race and national identity are fraught with tension and division, this project provides an evidence-base to inform public discussion. It explores how rural spaces are being reshaped by inequality and exclusionary behaviours. It places the voices of minoritised individuals at the centre, whether they have deep local roots, have relocated recently, or are just visiting. It is important to note that White rural voices were also sought and included in this report. In doing so, we aim to understand not only how racism manifests, but also how it is rationalised and/or challenged within rural communities. Our approach is deliberately broad, allowing participants to self-define what 'rural' means to them, whether that's a remote hamlet, a market town, or a seasonal tourist spot. In doing so, we aim to reveal the complexities of rural England.

---

[1] BBC (2021) 'Muslim hikers say abusive comments won't stop them'. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/newsbeat-59812399
Mistlin, A. (2021) 'Racist attack on English Heritage exhibition celebrating black lives'. https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2021/oct/16/racist-attack-on-english-heritage-exhibition-celebrating-black-lives?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other

[2] Chakraborti, N. and Garland, J. (2004) *Rural Racism*. London: Routledge.

[3] Collier, B. (2019) 'Black absence in green spaces'. https://theecologist.org/2019/oct/10/black-absence-green-spaces

How prevalent is racism?

Racism remains a common feature of life in contemporary Britain, affecting individuals and communities in both urban and rural settings. According to the Home Office statistics for the year ending March 2024, police in England and Wales recorded 98,799 race hate crimes, making up 70% of all hate crime offences.[4] While this represents a 5% decrease from the previous year, the overall number remains high, and these figures are widely considered under-representative due to widespread underreporting.

Over the course of this research, certain events have underscored the volatility and persistence of racism in the UK. The summer of 2024 saw the most significant social unrest since 2011, with a wave of anti-immigration riots in 27 towns and cities across England and Northern Ireland.[5] These riots, sparked by misinformation and fuelled by far-right groups, targeted mosques, hotels housing asylum seekers, and businesses owned by immigrants. Hundreds were arrested and charged, but the riots left a lasting impact on community trust, a sense of safety, and perceptions of who belongs in the UK.

The broader political climate has also contributed to the normalisation of racist rhetoric, both domestically and further afield. In particular, a rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, the mainstreaming of divisive language[6] and the emboldening of far-right movements continue to have damaging implications for minoritised communities and their sense of security and belonging.

While national narratives often frame racism as an urban issue, this report demonstrates that rural England is by no means immune. In fact, rural contexts can intensify the impacts of racism, creating unique contexts for it to develop. Understanding the nature of racism in rural areas is essential for developing effective responses to it. This report aims to bring visibility to the lived realities of racism that are too often ignored or dismissed in national conversations, and to situate rural experiences within the wider social and political landscape.

---

[4] UK Government (2024) Hate Crime, England and Wales, Year Ending March 2024 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024/hate-crime-england-and-wales-year-ending-march-2024

[5] House of Commons Library (2024) Policing response to the 2024 summer riots https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/policing-response-to-the-2024-summer-riots/

[6] Keate, N. (2024) Donald Trump emboldened UK racists, says Labour minister https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-united-kingdom-racists-emboldened-angela-eagle/
Senk, K. (2025) Could Trump's Election Bolster Reform UK's Momentum? https://blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog/2025/01/24/could-trumps-election-bolster-reform-uks-momentum/

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside

The Rural Racism Project is a large-scale research project into the nature of racism in rural spaces in England. Conducted by Prof. Neil Chakraborti, Prof. Corinne Fowler, Dr Amy Clarke, Dr Rachel Keighley, Dr Adrian Yip and Dr Viji Kuppan, and supported by Mulka Nisic, working with numerous contributors, the two-year project (2023-2025) collected data from 115 people, 20 Community Research Partners and eight case studies of online abuse to understand the nature and impacts of racism on minoritised individuals and communities. This report is part of a three-part series which summarises the most significant findings from the project and which provides evidence-based insights to challenge racism and make the countryside an inclusive environment for all.

Aims of the project

The study spans three interconnected work strands, each designed to explore a distinct dimension of rural racism. Together, they provide a comprehensive and layered understanding of how it is experienced and expressed in rural contexts.

- To assess the ways in which minoritised groups are included and excluded in rural environments, and the impacts that this has on individuals and communities.
- To explore the historical, cultural and symbolic expressions of racism in rural locations through arts-based media to produce more inclusive narratives about rural life.
- To identify the underpinning factors that trigger hostile reactions to the exposure of rural racism through the analysis of public reactions to issues of 'race' within rural environments.

The project provides a comprehensive empirical basis for understanding racism in rural spaces, highlighting *why* racism is likely to occur, but also *how* we can prevent racism and make the countryside a more inclusive place. By understanding the nature, impacts and responses to racism, we hope that these reports will provide pathways to effective community and structural responses to racism. Each of the three strands to this project are described below.

Underpinning our approach to each strand is the belief that individuals who experience rural life first-hand, particularly those from racialised and minoritised communities, are uniquely positioned to illuminate the realities of rural racism. Rather than treating participants as mere data sources, this project embraced them as knowledge holders whose lived experiences shaped the research process. Their insights influenced not only the topics discussed but also how findings were interpreted and contextualised within the broader landscape of rural racism. This collaborative approach ensured that

the research remained nuanced and grounded in the everyday realities, challenges and complexities of rural life. Moreover, through an arts-based approach that included creative writing, poetry and photography, participants examined how racism in the countryside is not only experienced socially but embedded in its historical legacies, cultural narratives and symbolic landscapes. These creative practices exposed the ways in which exclusion is woven into rural heritage, while also offering alternative visions of belonging and memory. In doing so, participants did not merely document harm; they actively resisted it, reclaiming rural space as a site of voice and visibility.

1. **Unpacking experiences of hostility**

This strand of research captured the lived experiences of racism in rural environments through 115 semi-structured interviews[7] and informal conversations with minoritised individuals, White rural residents and White allies actively engaged in anti-racist work across England. These participants were recruited through local networks, snowball sampling[8] and community organisations. Their diverse life histories, ethnic backgrounds, geographic locations and relationships to rural spaces provided a rich tapestry of perspectives.

Interviews were conducted both online and in person; some were supplemented by ethnographic walking fieldwork in local areas. Participants shared stories of belonging, exclusion, microaggressions, institutional harm, community support, resilience, resistance and joy. This strand prioritised everyday experiences of rural life, documenting not only moments of harm but also acts of solidarity and allyship.

2. **Unpacking expressions of hostility**

This strand of the research examined cultural, historic, and symbolic expressions of racism embedded within the English countryside. We recruited 20 community research partners from a range of ethnicities, communities, age groups, and rural settings across England. The community research partners responded to an open call for research volunteers with relevant experience and through snowball sampling. These partners produced a wide range of artistic and reflective work, including poetry, podcasts, film, photography and creative writing. Their contributions were shaped through reflection on personal experience, encounters with rural places and ongoing dialogue with the research team. This strand was complemented by also drawing from interviews and informal conversations with the community research partners and White allies across England. The work revealed how rural spaces can simultaneously offer welcome and exclusion, and how powerful cultural forms can influence the boundaries of belonging.

[7] A semi-structured interview is a qualitative research method using a pre-prepared list of open-ended questions whilst exploring responses further with probing questions. This approach allows for in-depth exploration of topics, while also ensuring consistency across interviews.

[8] A recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential participants.

3. Unpacking the backlash

This strand of investigation explored online discussions about race in rural environments to identify the underpinning factors that trigger hostile reactions to discussing or evidencing rural racism by examining the social strategies deployed to dismiss people's experiences. Methodologically, we focused on analysing public discourse and attitudes towards rural racism and, using #LancsBox and Critical Discourse Analysis, highlighted how language is used to construct, reinforce, or deny racism in rural contexts. The research team collected approximately 193,000 words of user-generated content from news websites (e.g. *Daily Mail*, *Breitbart News*, *The Mirror*) and social media platforms (e.g. Facebook, Reddit, TikTok, YouTube, X). Rather than preselecting platforms, the corpus was tailored around eight themed case studies designed to unpack specific examples of the backlash against identifying or addressing racism in the countryside. These themes included the countryside's colonial history, rural identity, gardening, The Muslim Hikers walking group, National Trust controversies, pub names, Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, and the removal of statues.

Together, these three interconnected strands of investigation provide a holistic account of rural racism as (i) experienced in daily life (Unpacking Experiences of Hostility); as (ii) embedded within histories and cultures of the rural (Unpacking Expressions of Hostility); and (iii) as spoken about in public discourse (Unpacking the Backlash). This layered approach enables an intersectional understanding of racism that attends to language, identity, memory and space. This report shares the key findings from the first work stream, Unpacking Experiences of Hostility.

Unpacking experiences of hostility

This report seeks to explore experiences of hostility within rural spaces in England through 115 semi-structured interviews and many more informal conversations with minoritised individuals, White rural residents and White allies actively engaged in anti-racist work across England. **Figure 1** shows the general geographic distribution of participants. Participants were engaged through social media advertising, local networks, snowball sampling and community organisations.

The objectives of this work stream were:

- To understand how racism is experienced by people from minoritised backgrounds living in or visiting rural England;
- To examine the impacts of rural racism;
- To explore attitudes of white rural residents towards diversity and inclusion; and
- To highlight examples of inclusion and anti-racism in rural communities

Throughout the report, the narrative and quotations used represent the wider bank of evidence that we are drawing from to illustrate a pattern in experiences. Where there are discrete experiences, these are made clear to show the commonalities and distinctions between lived experiences in rural England. By representing a diverse range of voices, the subsequent sections of this report highlight some of the key findings into the dynamics of rural racism and its impact on individuals and communities.

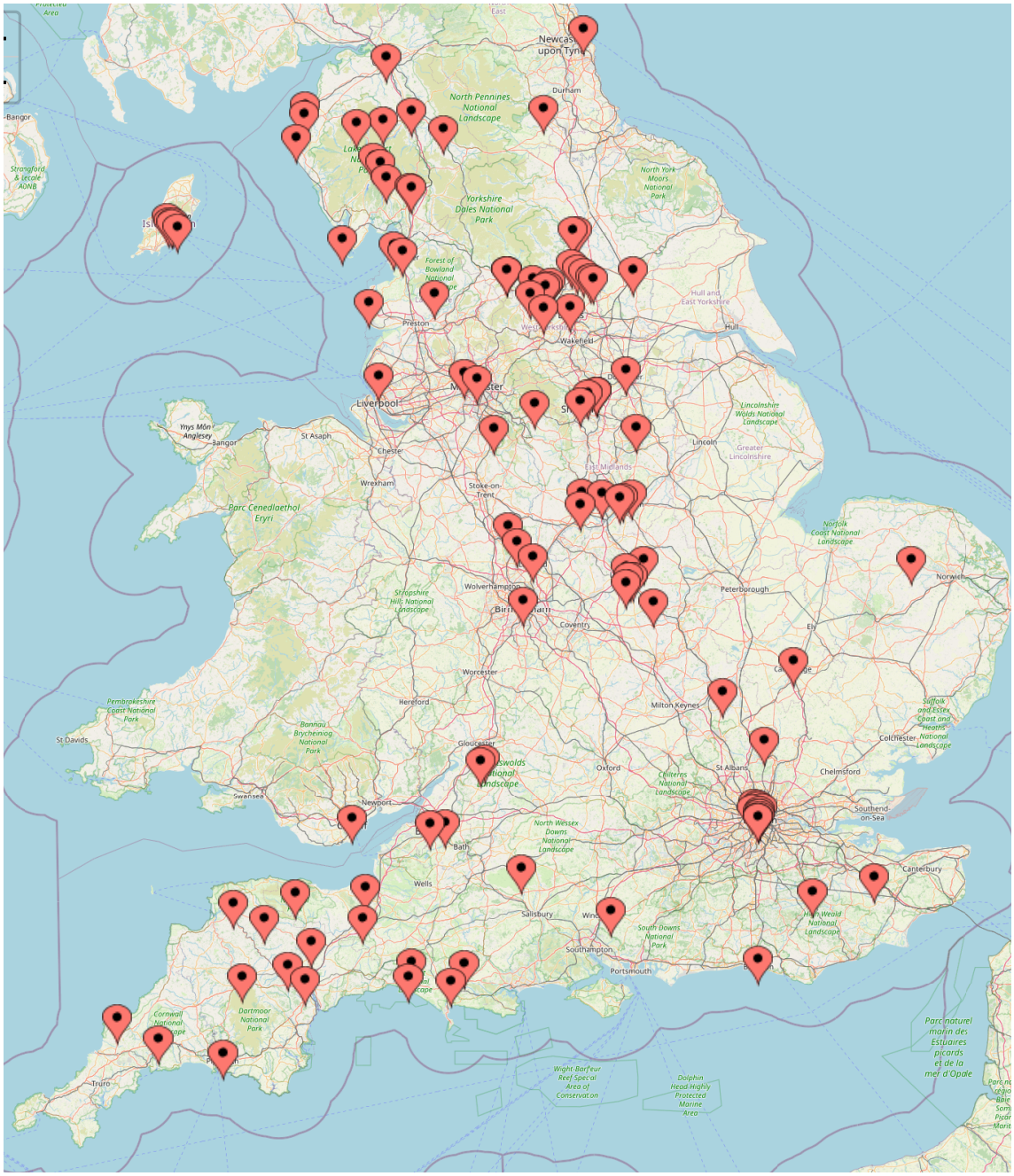

Figure 1: Approximate geographic locations of participants[9]

[9] Locations are approximate to protect the anonymity of participants. Please note that the individuals whose pins are located on the Isle of Man represent people who did not disclose their locations or live abroad and are regular visitors to England.

Interview participant Demographics (N = 115)

The research involved interviewing 115 participants from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and gender identities. The largest ethnic groups were Asian/Asian British (26%, n=30), Black/Black British (17%, n=19), Mixed Heritage (16%, n=18), and 46% (n=53) identified as White British.[10] The remaining participants identify as Jewish, White Mixed Heritage, Romany Gypsy, White Scottish, and White English. In terms of gender, participants were majority female (60%, n=69), followed by male (37%, n=43), with three participants identifying as non-binary. This diversity was vital for capturing a broad range of experiences across racial and cultural lines whilst being attentive to how gender may also play a role in perspectives on rural life, identity and belonging across intersecting lines of race and gender.

A note on terminology

We recognise that racial and ethnic identities are deeply personal, context-dependent, and often fluid. Within this report, individuals may self-identify in ways that reflect a complex interplay of heritage, culture, experience and context which can evolve over time. Terms such as “White,” “people of colour,” “minoritised ethnic communities,” “Black,” “South Asian,” and “Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers,” among others, are imperfect.

In this report we have adopted broad categorical terminology to enable meaningful thematic analysis and to reflect common patterns across people’s experiences. These categories are used for analytic clarity rather than to essentialise people’s identities. Where appropriate, we draw on participants’ own descriptions of their identities and we use direct quotations to retain the richness of their perspectives.

We also acknowledge that terms like “minoritised” intentionally highlight the social and structural processes through which groups are marginalised, rather than implying demographic inferiority. Our approach remains sensitive to the evolving nature of language and the importance of allowing space for self-definition.

A note on well-being

To support the research team, we obtained additional funding to appoint a counsellor who could provide specialist support to the research team by facilitating reflective practice meetings which created space for team members to discuss the psychological demands of this work. This support was extended to all of our research

[10] While the number of White British participants may appear incongruous in a project focused on rural racism, this demographic distribution was necessary. The inclusion of White British participants reflects one of the core aims of the research: to understand how racism is expressed, normalised or challenged by White individuals in rural England. This demographic included both anti-racist allies and those whose views or actions may contribute to exclusionary dynamics.

participants via opt-in group sessions or face to face individual counselling sessions to discuss anything which had been triggered by recalling memories of racism. This was all key to our overarching priorities around safeguarding and an ethics of care, and part of a wider desire to ensure that neither participants nor researchers should end the project in a worse state of mind than when they began it. It is important, in all cases, to acknowledge the stresses and strains of prolonged exposure to hate speech and negative commentary.

2. What is Rural Life Like?

Understanding the lived realities of rural life is key to contextualising how racism is expressed and addressed in rural settings. The English countryside is often portrayed in exclusively idyllic terms characterised with an emphasis on close-knit communities. However, they also present real, material challenges. This project allows us to explore these realities and the distinctive challenges that rural places, rather than urban contexts, present for equality and a sense of community.

The positives of rural life

For many of our participants, rural spaces inspire a deep appreciation for nature and a love for the environment. Compared to urban settings, participants feel that rural spaces offer a better quality of life. Access to outdoor spaces is valued for leisure whilst also being deeply intertwined with emotional wellbeing and a sense of belonging. Importantly, this deep connection to rural spaces and its benefits transcends identity categories, with the research highlighting that a deep love of the countryside is an emotion common to all, irrespective of ethnicity.

Connection to nature

Participants frequently describe an appreciation for rural spaces because they offer a connection to nature. Compared to urban settings, rural areas are seen as places for physical and psychological rejuvenation allowing individuals to reset and reconnect. Rural spaces were often compared with city parks, which some viewed as limited in space, artificially made or overly curated.

> *"Before, the parks that I was going to… it's just a patch of land… you can see a few metres away there are still houses. So, it doesn't really feel like you're in nature." – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab*

In contrast, participants shared that rural spaces offer uninterrupted views of natural beauty, whilst fostering a sense of peace and rootedness. These encounters were deeply spiritual, shaped by the land's history, the rhythm of seasons and the possibilities this offers for one's connection with the self. Others highlighted the all-encompassing sensory experience of rural spaces which offers a deep connection to the land, mentioning the sounds of birdsong, the scent of soil and the feel of the air on the skin as integral to their experience.

> *"Just being close to nature and being able to hear it… birdsong, not police calls or ambulance sirens." – Laurel, White British*

> *"I love nature, I love green, so I want to be where the trees are. I want to smell it." – Kitra, Yahudi*

> *"I just like being able to wake up and look at just greenness, beauty, see the sky, clean air, hear the birds singing. Smell stuff. Touch stuff. Work on the land. Just feel I am part of all this. I'm at one with it. I'm not separate from nature." – Jonathan, White British*

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

For many, this connection extended to a variety of rural spaces. For example, many older participants spoke about their love of the sea.

> *"My son got into surfing… he loves the sea. I'm a scuba diver… I love the sea too. We get on really well, him above and me below the water." – Paul, Mixed Heritage British*

> *"I wanna go to the beach, just to walk along by the sea. that's really helped ground me. I definitely feel a very strong connection. It feels like it's an historical space and I'm just a little blip." – Jessamine, British and Ghanaian*

These rural connections extended beyond mere aesthetics, supporting emotional healing and creativity. The natural world provided solace and inspiration, whether in navigating personal challenges or in fostering a sense of belonging.

Whilst it is often assumed that only White English individuals have historical connections to the land, minoritised individuals often spoke of intergenerational connections.

> *"I am from the Caribbean, and I saw this property in an area with so much green space and wildlife and I just thought, great. I can go in the woods with my daughter. The country life just reminded me of Caribbean." – Instinctive, British Caribbean*

> *"There's this common misconception that the countryside is for White folk, and they are the only ones with a relationship with the countryside. Whereas, we, our parents, our grandparents, are all from countries where the countryside was so important. We have a relationship and our roots in rural spaces." – BGH, Black British*

Despite differences in background and experience, a clear pattern emerged: rural environments hold immense shared value for mental, physical and emotional well-being. They are places of beauty and retreat, offering perspective, healing and joy.

Community and identity

Rural communities are often characterised by self-sufficiency, close-knit relationships, and mutual support. These qualities cultivate an environment where individuals can forge meaningful connections and experience a sense of belonging, irrespective of their backgrounds. This section explores how when individuals were able to share positive interactions with fellow community members, this contributed to a sense of belonging and a welcoming atmosphere in rural communities.

Indeed, rural spaces can provide opportunities for positive social interactions where differences in race, gender and age are not seen as barriers.

> *"The people I resonate with are the farmers. One runs a collective growing butternut squash and helping people to become self-sufficient, growing their own food, organically, sustainably. It's very community*

minded, trying build something for the good of the whole." – Helen, White and Asian

"My building is welcoming, everyone says hello, I feel like I belong. Maybe because [the building] is like a small city, it feels like a town, but it's diverse." – S, Indonesian

In addition, rural communities often thrive on shared participation in local events and activities. Indeed, many rural residents spoke about engaging in a variety of cultural and leisure activities within their neighbourhoods, fostering close relationships.

"We run a programme of professional performance in rural community spaces and people go to it and they don't care what's on really. They want to go and support it." – Ollie, White British

"I am part of a swimming group. It's nice, as without them, I wouldn't have built up my confidence to go swimming on my own." – Rashmi, Pakistani

Where people engage in community-driven events, they also reported a strong sense of connection to the local culture, fostering inclusivity and shared experiences across diverse groups. It also exemplifies the varied ways in which rural spaces are tied to cultural and leisure activities.

Rural areas similarly can be home to initiatives that actively support the integration of newcomers, including migrants and refugees. These community-led projects work to build connections between newcomers and long-established residents, in a two-way process.

"When I got into conversation with the taxi driver, he was an Afghan guy and how long had he been around in Exeter? He said 10 years and I remember being part of the inter-agency team that was setting up the support work for 50 Afghan young men coming into Exeter 10 years before. So he was there as a taxi driver. He was part of the community. And in a way, I knew part of his story before." – Horatio, White British

"I was actually overwhelmed with the positivity I witnessed in rural communities and how welcoming they were towards, not only myself, but also the refugees and their families." – Sepideh, Iranian

Whether through community-led efforts to connect, participation in local events, or the openness of tourist areas, rural spaces can offer welcoming environments where individuals can thrive. Where it does exist, the sense of belonging and mutual support in rural communities fosters an atmosphere that can be inclusive and empowering for all.

Well-being

Participants also identified clear well-being benefits from spending time in rural environments. The ability to walk on the moors, encounter wildlife, or listen to natural sounds like the rustling of trees and flowing water was seen as restorative and healing,

particularly in response to work-related stress, the pressures of urban life, and even from experiences of discrimination and marginalisation.

> *"The difference, the hustle and bustle of nature is better than hustle and bustle of people. I will feel more exhausted if I'm hearing traffic." – Robin, White British*

> *"For me green spaces have always provided clarity because whenever I'm on a walk, I tell my family I'm going on a walk, don't contact me, this is my time to be myself." – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab*

For some, these experiences have become more valuable since the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdowns and health concerns led many to reassess the importance of exercise on physical and mental well-being.

> *"I've recently discovered that whilst I don't need to do very strenuous exercise outside, going for a walk slowly in areas of nature, just does a lot for my brain, for my health and for the way that I view the rest of my work. And it clears my head mentally." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

> *"I find walking is so good for my mental health. During COVID, I was able to get fit and get out and about with my husband. It makes a difference for my physical and mental health living in rural spaces." – Deana, White British*

Indeed, research suggests that exercise in green spaces is more beneficial for mental health and well-being than exercise in non-green, urban spaces[11]. Whilst this effect is observed even in urban green spaces, participants reported a heightened sense of rejuvenation and calm when in rural environments. The beautiful vistas and the slower pace of life appeared to amplify the benefits.

For individuals from minoritised backgrounds, rural spaces also offered moments of sanctuary: an opportunity to feel grounded, to reconnect with themselves and their surroundings, and to experience joy and freedom in environments often romanticised but not always perceived as inclusive. This shaped how they coped with everyday challenges.

> *"In the work that I do, there's a big emotional toll and being next to water, being in green spaces reduces my cortisol levels. It might be psychosomatic, but it just makes me feel so much more connected to the world we live in as opposed to looking at tarmac all the time." – Ikram, British Asian*

[11] Jabbar, M., Yusoff, M. M., and Shafie, A. (2022). Assessing the role of urban green spaces for human well-being: A systematic review. *GeoJournal*, 1-19.
Robinson, T., Robertson, N., Curtis, F., Darko, N. and Jones, C.R. (2022). Examining psychosocial and economic barriers to green space access for racialised individuals and families: a narrative literature review of the evidence to date. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, *20*(1), p.745.

“I definitely feel more alive. I feel more connected to myself and to the natural world. It's fundamental to who I am. Without it, I'd be bereft.” – Krish, British South Asian

Leisure and nature

As shown, rural spaces play a vital role in supporting individual well-being, whilst offering unique opportunities for leisure and relaxation. Indeed, the countryside offers a wide range of opportunities for both active pursuits and quieter, reflective engagement. Activities such as walking, hiking, birdwatching, swimming, gardening, cycling, foraging, and spending time with animals were commonly mentioned. In contrast to urban spaces where access to green spaces can be limited or crowded, rural areas were often seen as places where participants could enjoy these activities freely, either alone, or with others.

Many participants described how their hobbies and identities were shaped by, or sustained through, engagement with nature. For some, a lifelong love of walking and hill-climbing was rooted in family traditions or friendships that introduced them to landscapes like the Lake District or Dartmoor. Others shared how rural living enabled them to pursue niche or nature-based interests such as scuba diving, beekeeping, wild swimming and cycling.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Family connections were often at the heart of these experiences. Parents spoke of raising children in rural settings that enabled affordable, accessible activities and contributed to both physical and emotional well-being, as well as fostering a connection to nature from a young age.

> *"My youngest son just creates things for us to do in the countryside through his imagination… it's great fun to watch him do it." – David, Black British*

> *"My parents instilled a love of walking in me because we used to go on walks every weekend regardless of the weather… It was all a part of an adventure, and I've pursued that ever since." – Suzanne, Mixed White Heritage*

For others, leisure in rural environments provided a powerful sense of belonging and peace. Participants described time outdoors as part of their weekly routine and as essential for well-being.

> *"If I don't walk at least three times a week, I don't feel like I've relaxed… it'll be the beach, the moors, woodlands. It's always outdoors." – Sandhya, British Indian*

> *"I go to the meadows, I sit there, watch the horses, breathe some fresh air and I come back skipping like a child." – Mariam, North African*

Leisure activities were not always physically demanding. People found joy in quiet forms of connection to the land, such as sitting by a lake, tending a garden, or watching birds. These slower rhythms of enjoyment were just as important for well-being.

> *"I've been birdwatching for 35 years… the country is not the same without the birds." – Nelson, White British / South Asian*

> *"I'm a keen gardener, I go foraging, I always had horses when we were younger, it definitely feels like home." – Jane, Romany Gypsy*

At the same time, it was emphasised that people engage with rural spaces in different ways, often shaped by background, family culture, and access. Some were drawn to hill walking and rugged climbs, while others enjoyed picnicking or quiet reflection. This diversity in enjoyment challenges stereotypes about who rural spaces are 'for' and 'how' we access them and highlights the varied ways people connect to nature. Whether engaging in mountain sports, fishing trips, park runs, or simply sitting in a

field, participants expressed a strong emotional bond with rural landscapes and the freedom they offered, especially when compared to the pressures of urban life. The ways in which rural spaces are experienced are as varied as the people who use them, reflecting the diverse forms of enjoyment they provide.

The challenges of rural life

Whilst rural spaces offer many positives for both residents and visitors, they also present some unique challenges. The remote nature of many rural settlements, a lack of significant infrastructure as compared to urban spaces, economic inequalities, and various accessibility challenges compound the day-to-day problems that some people experience when living in or visiting rural spaces. These are important to highlight, as they show the ways that rural environments, while often perceived as idyllic, can also be isolating, under-resourced and exclusionary.

Access to services and infrastructure

Many participants highlighted the persistent challenges of accessing essential services in rural areas. Access to healthcare emerged as a significant concern, especially for those managing chronic conditions or caring for families. Many described the long distances required to reach quality medical care, with some noting that delays in emergencies could have life-threatening consequences.

> *"If you were to have a heart attack or something bad to happen… it takes you time to get there. You're isolated, during that travelling period, obviously you're endangering your life." – GT, Mauritian*

> *"When I needed help and support, everywhere was within about an hour's drive. Or multiple forms of transport, which would take you between two and four hours to get to each way." – Melanie, White British*

Public transport limitations were another widely felt challenge that transcended demographic differences. With few alternatives to driving, many residents felt disconnected from jobs, education, healthcare and cultural opportunities, a reality that particularly affected young people and lower-income households.

> *"There's just things that rural spaces don't and can't offer, so there is still that need to stay connected to the city." – BGH, Black British*

> *"There's no transport, the concept of things being closed on a Wednesday because it's market day." – Ollie, White British*

These testimonies point to the way in which minoritised individuals and White people are connected in their experiences of difficulty. Many spoke of the lack of transport, a scarcity of nearby shops, childcare services, schools, and places of worship as compounding daily difficulties. The assumption that one can easily "nip out" for essentials did not apply in many villages and hamlets, with people having to plan ahead for many of their needs.

> *"There were no registered childminders anywhere. We found one, but she could only do one day a week." – MAC, Bangladeshi*

> *"You can't always just nip round the corner like you do in London or any other city. You must have a freezer." – Cheryl, Trinidadian and Chinese*

For minoritised individuals, limited access to culturally relevant amenities, such as Halal or Kosher food, specific hair products or prayer spaces, could heighten feelings of isolation and the challenges of living rurally.

> *"I don't know where you would get Kosher food or Halal food… or just things you're used to eating that, if you don't eat them, you feel like your whole system's clogged up." – Penny, White British and Israeli*

> *"Not being able to buy Black, Asian and minority ethnic food… there's one shipment of coriander a week." – Dana, Asian and Welsh*

A lack of cultural infrastructure, such as music venues, theatres, galleries, and political events, was also cited as a barrier to feeling fulfilled or connected, as people emphasised the importance of such activities.

> *"Lack of culture, lack of music, lack of poetry… I used to always be going to gigs and music events [in London]." – Paul, Mixed Heritage British*

> *"Ideally, I'd go to a yoga class twice a week and walk to it, but I have to live in a city [for that]." – Jonathan, English/Irish*

Taken together, these barriers challenge the narrative that rural areas are universally accessible. While some residents adapt to these obstacles, others find themselves excluded by rural neighbourhoods that, without adequate infrastructure, can be difficult to navigate or call home.

Know before you go

Navigating rural environments for certain activities also required specific knowledge, colloquially termed ‘know before you go’, such as knowing what to bring, where to go, and how to behave safely. Several participants linked this lack of exposure to broader patterns of intergenerational inequality, where earlier generations of immigrants had little time or access for leisure, and so did not pass on these skills or foster a personal relationship with nature.

> *“I didn’t have a pair of wellies until I was 28. My son, who grew up in Devon, can read a map and navigate, he’s so equipped. I had to learn all of that later.” – Sandhya, British Indian*

> *“They [minoritised individuals and new migrants] don’t know where to go. They were astonished they could walk across land by right, they’d never heard of rights of way.” – Judy, East Asian*

Others noted the role of fear, safety, and the unpredictability of outdoor environments. Older participants spoke about how even seemingly ordinary countryside encounters, such as walking through farms, bypassing right of way signs, or partaking in leisure activities at adventure training type places, could feel daunting without prior knowledge that others might take for granted.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Planning and preparation were seen as necessary but often complex and taken for granted by many White residents who had grown up accessing rural spaces in this way. Participants described needing to check routes in advance, understand local terrain, think about the weather, assess toilets or understand signage, and consider whether paths might be closed or unsafe. One participant, who had built a walking app to support people of colour, noted how daunting this all can feel and how it could discourage people from accessing rural spaces.

These accounts reflect a broader structural challenge: that access to rural leisure and nature is not simply about proximity, but about whether people feel entitled, confident, informed and supported enough to occupy these spaces. Without this foundational exposure or confidence, rural landscapes can feel closed and psychologically inaccessible, even when technically open.

Quality of life

Participants also emphasised significant economic inequalities that shape who can enjoy leisure time in rural areas. Indeed, these challenges were among the most discussed by participants. From rising housing costs to limited employment opportunities, the realities of rural life are deeply entangled with class, income and other forms of structural exclusion.

Younger participants reflected on housing as a key issue. The cost of renting or buying in popular rural areas has become increasingly inaccessible, particularly for first-time buyers and low-income households.

> *"You've got to find a house you can afford and that's actually nice enough that you might want to live in it, that disparity in property prices is reacting to conditions." – David, White British*

> *"Housing is very hard to find down here and quite expensive. If you're not on the housing ladder, it's quite tricky." – Chantal, White British*

In many areas, property demand driven by tourism and the ownership of second homes has contributed to shortages in affordable housing, pricing out locals or pushing them into substandard or insecure housing. Even when housing is available, remote living brings other costs, including higher utility bills, more expensive services such as your local shops, reliance on cars, and limited public transport.

> *"The cost of things in local shops was already high, even before the recent cost of living crisis." – Nelson, White British and South Asian*

> *"Transport is expensive. Even having a car, because again, to get to those wild places, you need to be able to travel. I'm spending £50 to go to Bristol this weekend [from the countryside], and I don't feel like it should cost that much." – Ellery, Nigerian and British*

Participants also described a lack of employment opportunities in rural areas, especially in fields outside of agriculture or tourism. Some noted that many younger rural residents often relocated to cities for work, leaving rural communities depleted of talent or creating a cycle of economic stagnation.

Participants also emphasised the existence of poverty within rural communities, especially among White working-class families and underrepresented minoritised groups. This rural deprivation was described as "hidden" and often excluded from mainstream narratives or policy attention surrounding rural England.

> *"Some deprivation is hidden because it's really difficult to capture in official measures. But it does exist." – Clare, White Scottish*

> *"The contrast between the wealthy part of Cornwall and my estate is absolutely stark." – Cleo, White British*

This sense of invisibility was further reinforced by the framing of rural identity. Participants described how class and race intersect in these spaces in terms of access to resources. For example, participants cited high parking costs and the cost of certain leisure activities.

> *"It's not just about being able to go into these spaces, there's a premium cost to pay. It's the privileged who can access them. And, it's not just about the cost of actually going on the trip, so paying for the trip, but then there's also the cost of getting the gear." – Nigel, Black British*

> *"I think it comes down to an affordability thing. I think there should be more on offer to bring Black, Brown and Asian people to the countryside. Because often people don't think it's for them, or they look at the costs and they go, well, I can't make that work. Something as simple as I've only had a car for about a year, but before that not having a car and trying to travel around Cumbria is a nightmare. It's so difficult with the trains and cancellations and replacement buses." – Lydia, Black British, Mixed heritage*

Expanding on these class divides, several participants noted how rural areas are often perceived, and sometimes policed, as exclusive spaces, both economically and

culturally. Historical legacies of land ownership and class-based exclusion continue to shape who belongs and who has the confidence or feeling of entitlement to be in the countryside.

> *"Historically, the land is owned by wealthy landowners… it was our protest in 1932 that brought about the Right to Roam Act." – Kerry, White British*

> *"People used to say, when we did drive in the country, all we saw were fences… every bit of land is owned by someone." – Judy, East Asian*

Participants also reflected on how gatekeeping manifests today, not just in property ownership or access, but through social dynamics and subtle exclusions that reinforce who the countryside is "for", typically defined along class and racial lines.

> *"You get this upper-working class, lower-middle-class, slightly right-wing vibe in some places… ignorance, pub fights, people stuck 40 years ago." – Janette, White British*

> *"Sometimes I feel like it's like not for me, like it's a White space, people go with their families, and they've got all the gear and the wellies and the knowledge." — Nigel, Black British*

Isolation and lack of diversity

One of the most frequently discussed challenges was the noticeable lack of diversity in rural areas. This was immediately visible to both long-term residents and visitors alike. Whether visiting the countryside for leisure or relocating to rural spaces, many noted how overwhelmingly White rural spaces remain. For some, this was contrasted with multicultural cities.

> *"Brighton is not massively diverse, but it's still fairly diverse. And then you go to the countryside surrounding Sussex and The South Downs and it's completely different, you just don't see the diversity." – Robbie, White British*

> *"The closest place that would have a few people who are Muslim is Manchester. That's three hours away on the train. Never lived there but when I visit, it feels more like home." – Nowal, Arab*

This absence was particularly acute for minoritised individuals, who often described being the only non-White face in the area they visited or lived in. These experiences often lead to feelings of discomfort and hypervisibility.

> *"It's just such a weird thing, being in a space where everyone looks slightly different. It's those moments where you're like, 'OK, I'm the only one again'… it just feels quite lonely." – Jessamine, British and Ghanaian*

> *"When I went to the Lake District, you didn't see the diversity, it made you feel uncomfortable, like an outsider going into a space you shouldn't be in." – Sara, Yemeni/British*

Participants who had previously lived in cities such as London or Birmingham expressed a sense of loss after moving to less diverse rural areas. The culturally diverse opportunities of urban life were often missed, and many parents of mixed heritage children reflected on the lack of opportunities for their children to both see themselves represented and to not feel othered by overwhelmingly White populations.

> *"I remember taking the kids to the Lake District and as we stepped off the train, the kids went, "Where are all the people, the normal people?" And I asked, "What do you mean, normal people?" And they're like, "Why is everyone white?" It really stands out." – Penny, White British and Israeli*

> *"For me raising a family, the lack of cultural diversity is very apparent, and I think growing up in White dominant spaces is not good for anybody." – Kate, White British and American*

These experiences raise important questions about belonging in rural Britain. The overwhelming Whiteness of many rural areas contributes to a sense that these spaces are "owned" by a particular demographic, namely middle-class, White, and long-standing residents.

For others, exclusion operated more subtly, through cues of monocultural customs for example in pub culture or in the dominant social attitudes of the area. Some participants noted that in many rural communities the most visible diversity is among health and social care workers, takeaway and restaurant owners, or seasonal agricultural labourers. While these forms of diversity are important, they rarely translate into full inclusion or representation, instead highlighting the persistent social and economic boundaries of rural life, and how minoritised groups are overrepresented in occupations which relate to goods and services and underrepresented in higher-status rural professions such as teaching or the medical profession.

Ultimately, the experience of isolation in rural spaces is not simply about population density or physical remoteness, but about who is expected and made to feel at home. For many minoritised people, rural environments, however beautiful, feel like places where community, culture and welcome are absent.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

3. What Does Rural Racism Look Like?

Having identified the various positives and challenges associated with living in and accessing the English countryside, participants experienced various forms of gatekeeping which communicated an unspoken sense that the countryside is a White domain. In particular, exclusionary narratives or actions that promote hostility against minoritised individuals. This section explores the multifaceted ways racism manifests in rural England, at both the interpersonal and structural levels. It examines the unique characteristics that distinguish rural racism from its urban equivalents, highlighting how factors such as a lack of anonymity and the gatekeeping of rural spaces contribute to its insidious nature. By unpacking these dimensions, this section aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how racism operates within rural contexts.

Interpersonal racism

One of the most common ways in which racism manifests in rural spaces is interpersonally, from explicit acts of hostility such as verbal abuse, the use of racial slurs and threats, to more subtle, everyday microaggressions that foster exclusion and suspicion of racialised minorities as 'other'. The most common forms of racism disclosed were overt racism, including verbal abuse and physical intimidation; and more subtle, non-verbal experiences such social exclusion, staring and racialised assumptions.

Overt racism: verbal abuse, slurs, and physical threats

For many participants, overt racism was a distressing and common feature of rural life. This was particularly the case for more 'visible' minoritised groups, with Muslim women and Black men and women reporting more hostile forms of racism. Encounters included being subjected to racist slurs and physical intimidation, in both public and professional spaces.

> *"Some white guy said 'Look at that N word. He's got better clothes than I have. Beat him'." – Dana, Asian and Welsh*

> *"And a guy, I think he was the chef just said that he wanted to kill all, well, he used the P word, but he meant all Asians. And he wanted them to burn." – Krish, British South Asian*

Verbal abuse was often accompanied by physical threats, including encounters involving dogs and other means to convey intimidation.

> *"I was cycling to the corner shop. And these two kiddos, they were in their early 20s with attack dogs. And as I passed them they made several racist comments." – Paul, Mixed Heritage British*

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

"People shout at you, or they won't serve you in a shop or they're very unpleasant. Or sometimes if they are in the group, they can be threatening." – Judy, East Asian

These incidents often occurred without sanction or repercussions, deepening the feeling that such behaviour is tolerated, or even normalised, and underscoring the point that much racism goes unreported. Indeed, other participants described hearing racist language from individuals in positions of authority.

"It was summer, and we were all clearing some weeds and I was with a volunteer, and we're just talking about how lucky we are with the weather. And he said, "omg, I just feel like I could be in the middle of a jungle or something. And your hair is quite jungly too"," - Ellery, Nigerian and British

"I even hear social workers, mental health nurses using racist language. At the weekend a friend was going on about the NHS and about how people should be sent back to their own country." – Jane, White British

Racism also often occurred in young-person and family-oriented settings. One of the most troubling findings was the frequent occurrence of overt racism in rural schools. Participants shared numerous accounts of children experiencing racial slurs and derogatory behaviour in schools, underscoring how early racist attitudes and language use manifests.

"My youngest daughter [in Year 5], she was in the dinner queue. And one of the boys came up to her, made a comment about the colour of her skin being dirty." – GT, Mauritian

"When my son went to secondary school, he started having a crowd of boys following him around the school making monkey noises. Or kids saying, 'Is your face that colour because your mum puts poo on your face every morning?'" – Susan, White British

These accounts highlight how racism in schools is not only frequent but normalised from a young age as reported by project participants. The language used, from slurs to dehumanising noises and being mis-associated with terrorism, points to the ways that racism is being subtly, and sometimes overtly, transmitted to young people growing up in rural England. The ways in which these racist incidents impacted upon the well-being of children and young people will be explored later. But overall, these

experiences reflect broader dynamics in the study, suggesting that employing racist attitudes is widely accepted.

Microaggressions, staring and social exclusion

Alongside more overt incidents, most participants pointed to the cumulative toll of everyday racism, including microaggressions, assumptions of foreignness, and subtle acts of social exclusion, such as staring or hostile body language. Rural communities, often mis-characterised as largely homogenous, can sometimes amplify feelings of unbelonging in anyone racialised as not White. Participants report that they are frequently asked, *"Where are you really from?"* which exemplifies how individuals, even those born and raised in the same British Isles, are made to feel like they don't fully belong. Such comments reflect the subtle racialisation of rural space where minoritised individuals are seen as outsiders, regardless of their personal connection with the place.

Minoritised individuals disclosed being subjected to stereotypes regarding the behaviours and cultural practices of certain groups. Stereotypes were both positive and negative. Positive stereotypes typically manifested as ways to categorise certain groups or individuals as 'okay', with their presence in rural spaces being deemed acceptable. Some participants reasoned that this is possibly due to their conforming to stereotypical norms that exoticise or exceptionalise certain groups, whilst others remain demonised.

> *"When people realize that we are just a group of women walking, we get, 'actually, you lot are OK!'" – Peggy, Black British*

> *"The whole, 'but we love black women, they're so fierce, they're so loud and funny, and they've all got strange names'." – Ollie, White British*

These examples show how positive stereotypes can reduce individuals to a set of characteristics that fit a particular narrative, overlooking the individuality or distinctiveness of members who belong to a certain identity group. As Penny noted, "positive stereotypes are also racism". These assumptions, even when seemingly flattering, can confine individuals to certain expectations and reinforce a sense of racialised expectation.

Negative stereotypes, in contrast, worked to demonise particular groups. Participants told us the phrase "go home" is frequently employed in various forms, reinforcing the notion that non-White individuals are foreigners, irrespective of their birthplace or residence in the UK. This was most often reported by African and Muslim or Arab participants, reflecting the data which suggests heightened levels of Islamophobia and colonial hostilities.

“Practically every day of my school life being told to go back to Africa. You didn’t feel as if you belonged.” – Caleb, Black British

“People just having the same opinions, “There’s too many of them over here, what are they doing here, why don’t they go back to where they came from?”” – John, White British

This seemingly simple command carries a weight of historical and systemic exclusion, serving as a reminder that rural England is the domain of White British people only. Even when directed at individuals who have lived in the UK their entire lives, the implication is clear: their racial or ethnic background undermines any claim to national identity, rendering them as outsiders. Since the English countryside has strong associations with the soul of the nation, that lack of belonging to the countryside implies by default a lack of Englishness or Britishness.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Participants also described being variously watched, stared at or glared at and being exposed to hostile and unwelcoming body language. This often amplified feelings of being out of place and under scrutiny. People described being stared at wherever they went, offering examples such as whilst out walking, when entering a country pub or café or whilst queuing for a tourist attraction.

> *"We just get the looks, THE LOOKS [emphasis], I bet everyone talks about the looks, and people assume things of you. I feel it's more tied in with stereotypes surrounding your own ethnicity." – Motaz, South Asian*

> *"I remember I was with my friends; we were all Muslim Hijabi women, and we were lining up for the Lake Windermere boat and you could see, not distress, but you could feel the stares of the locals." – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab*

Many participants surmised that the reason for the incessant staring was the lack of visible diversity in the countryside, which manifests as either shock, surprise, or in more hostile cases, anger, as if rural spaces are being invaded by unwelcome groups. Some participants pointed out the irony that, in popular tourist destinations, many of those staring are also strangers to the area, yet their use of staring appears to convey that they have a greater right to the space.

This hostility is consciously or unconsciously expressed as unfriendly body language, where people use their physical presence to express exclusion or intimidation, whether through acts such as deliberate avoidance or blocking pathways.

> *"I've had experiences of going into a takeaway or a cafe, with a group of people and it was just the way the waiting staff served us, or didn't serve us. And the impression that you got, well, actually, you don't want us really to be here, do you?" – Ranger M, British Indian*

> *"There's little things, body language, sort of turning away from you, that kind of thing." Helen, White and Asian*

The subtle but persistent nature of non-verbal cues of hostility are difficult to articulate, and therefore difficult to explain to the sceptic. However, they illustrate the ways that racism in rural spaces operates on a different level than more conventional expressions of physical or verbal hostility.

The cumulative effect of these non-verbal cues creates an environment where minoritised individuals feel constantly observed and judged, amplifying feelings of discomfort and anxiety. These experiences are often then amplified and intensified by

broader patterns of exclusion, such as being questioned about their presence in rural spaces in ways that subtly reinforce their outsider status.

> *"It will be the very subtle way of how people look at me, 'Ohh, are you on holiday?' Or something about walking in waterproofs, wellies being muddy already. And I'm only at the beginning of my walk. There's something very subtle how I feel like I'm observed" – Sandhya, British Indian*

> *"At bus stops, there would be people queuing. And then I remember someone said to me, 'in this country we queue'. And I started to think, I think we queue more in Hong Kong than here…" – Adrian, East Asian*

This represents a subtle policing of behaviour, in which visible minoritised groups were made to feel out of place, or like their self-expression was open to public scrutiny or judgement. These experiences are not always overtly or consciously hostile, but the underlying effect can still be alienating. Even when attempts are made to rationalise the staring or comments, the feeling of being othered persists.

Structural racism

Many participants highlighted the pervasive nature of institutional racism embedded within establishments such as schools, local authorities, and local policing. In rural areas, these structures were often experienced as actively biased, particularly for racially minoritised individuals, and especially for Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities.

In education for example, young minoritised individuals and their families often felt mistrustful of school environments, which they viewed as ill-equipped to deal with racism and largely inaccessible to critique or reform.

> *"Our young people are very mistrustful of teaching and teachers… There has to be a way to look at this truthfully and honestly, you can't dress it up in something that isn't factually correct." — Lily, Caribbean*

> *"Ofsted did a review of schools in Cumbria, and they said the Cumbrian education system wasn't preparing young people for life in multicultural Britain." – Thomas Major, White British*

Indeed, many shared that the education system itself was predicated on an ethnocentric curriculum, and this exclusion of minoritised voices was further reinforced by a lack of racial literacy among teachers. This reportedly created environments where racism was either ignored or actively minimised, and where those seeking to

address inequalities faced resistance. Such institutional barriers, participants suggested, stifled both accountability and progress.

These dynamics extended to other institutions. Participants described how their perspectives and experiences were routinely dismissed or penalised within certain cultural/historic settings, particularly when referencing sources or experiences from the Global South or when making visible the racialised nature of knowledge production.

> *“In academia, as a person of colour, when you try and bring in that material, they’ll say, ‘Where did you find this from?’. They make the assumption that it’s dubious because it comes from a Caribbean country.” — Instinctive, British Caribbean*

> *“We had this training day where we did this exercise where you described what the centre would look like if it was designed to be racist and what it would look like if it was designed to not be racist. And lo and behold, the actual structure matches the one that you would design if you wanted to make a racist structure.” - P173665[12], American/Indian Jew*

Others spoke about a subtle but pervasive structural exclusion, for example, being passed over for promotions or made to feel out of place in senior roles. One participant gave an example of having complaints ignored or downplayed.

> *“We had a staff member who was abused while doing her job, and she reported it as a health and safety incident. But it didn't go anywhere else because the health and safety manager was aggressively denying it. He took that very personally and said, ‘I'm not going to send this through and you should be really careful about what you say’ because he took that as [we] are racist.” – Robbie, White British*

Another participant shared an incident involving a White female Deputy Head of a comprehensive school where they worked.

> *"[The Deputy said to me] ‘I'm just wondering, are you qualified to do what you do?’ And I said, ‘I'm not even going to ingratiate your question. You have my qualifications on record’. But it was again that question of, can this Black male be professional?" - Rio, Black British*

[12] This pseudonym is based on the number the participant was given as an immigrant into this country. He wanted to highlight how immigrants are reduced to numbers and statistics.

Policing and the wider criminal justice system were also repeatedly named as key sites of institutional racism, especially in rural areas where diversity is low and visible difference is hyper-surveyed. For example, participants noted racial disparities in stop and search data, disproportionate penalties and an under-resourcing of responses to hate crime, particularly targeting the Black and male population.

> *"We review data like stop and search and even now there's inequal effects in the amount of people [the police] stop. There's a much higher percentage of [people of colour] being stopped and searched. That clearly shows you that the behaviour by the police is inappropriate." – GT, Mauritian*

Even those with positions of authority, such as advisory roles within policing structures, reflected on how deeply racial bias was embedded within institutional cultures, often rationalised or downplayed as bureaucratic norms. One participant likened the experience to "code-switching as survival," describing how even basic gestures or speech patterns are policed depending on whether they conform to White, middle-class expectations of how to behave.

> *"I have to put my hands by my side, not talk like I would with people of colour. It's violence. I'm taught by the system what I can't do." — Ikram, British Asian*

For Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Traveller communities, institutional racism was especially stark, from exclusionary practices relating to planning applications and housing, and poor treatment in education and healthcare. For example, some described the contrast between how Traveller families are treated compared to settled residents.

> *"If you're from the settled community, there's a 90% chance of getting planning permission first go. If you're a Gypsy or a Traveller, it's 10%." — Jonathan, English/Irish*

Participants also highlighted how these structures are protected through silence, denial or tokenism, where organisations commission diversity audits or develop race action plans, but fail to act on them in meaningful ways.

> *"It is the systematic structures. It wasn't the land or nature. It was the structures." – Kitra, Yahudi*

> *"Devon and Cornwall Police is institutionally racist — they even said so. But has the race action plan changed anything? We don't know." — Abi, Multi-Heritage*

Furthermore, participants often spoke about the ways minoritised individuals were often only represented in particular sectors of rural work life, for example as seasonal workers, and NHS nursing and care home staff. Whilst these jobs are extremely valuable, it speaks to the ways that minoritised communities are limited in their opportunities for economic and social mobility.

> *"Apart from the doctors it's not diverse at all … The only Black faces were the agency midwives." - Rebecca, Black British*

> *"I think since Brexit, funnily enough, the visibility of multiculturalism has increased because instead of having Polish and Eastern European care workers, they've been bringing in Indian and African care workers." – Chantal, White British*

> *"I think that's why we've seen Devon become much more diverse, in comparison to when I was a child, the landscape is changing so fast. There's obviously the government policy of going out to places like Zimbabwe and Nigeria and bringing migrant workers to work in care. And they get plomped in places." – Juliet, White European*

Interestingly, many participants spoke about the changing nature of structural racism in this regard, as predominantly White and Eastern European populations of health and agricultural workers were prevented from working in the UK following Brexit. However, these jobs have since been tended out to populations from beyond Europe, increasing the visibility of diverse minoritised groups, which in turn, has entrenched the more explicit versions of hostile racism discussed in the preceding section.

These accounts reflect a broader systemic problem in which rural institutions and practices often replicate and at times intensify the forms of racial injustice present in wider society. By doing so, they restrict access to justice and belonging and place the burden of change on those most marginalised.

How does racism differ in rural spaces?

Participants consistently emphasised that racism is present in both urban and rural contexts, but that its form, intensity and visibility are geographically varied. Interestingly, when asked whether racism in rural spaces was getting worse, lessening or staying the same, minoritised participants across the range of ages and genders

did not differ in their opinions. In fact, most participants felt that racism in rural England is getting worse.

Many participants contrasted the visible diversity of urban spaces with the lack thereof in rural spaces, and thus navigating the countryside often relies on a kind of intuitive radar to stay safe.

> *"It's like a race-dar. I get a feeling of, how safe is it here? It just depends, some places feel much more insular than others. Small seaside towns and villages can feel much more threatening." — Jessamine, British and Ghanaian*

What emerged from participants' experiences was that rural racism is not uniform, it varies significantly between regions. While some rural areas were described as "warm" or "welcoming," others felt deeply hostile. The experience of racism in rural settings is shaped not just by general geography, but by the specific culture and demographics of a place.

While generalisations by region are complex, several participants described rural southern and northern coastal as less welcoming, shaped by factors such as tight-knit communities, geographic isolation, and low levels of diversity. Unlike cities, where minoritised individuals might find cultural infrastructure and community support, rural environments were described as socially homogenous and resistant to change. Inherent within some conversations with White rural residents, was a denial that racism was a particular problem in rural spaces.

> *"Clearly, racism is a factor that persists in our country, and rural areas are not going to be immune from it. However, does that amount to a case for saying that rural areas have a specific or unique problem with racism?" – David, White British*

Others noted that racism may not even be recognised by those not directly experiencing it, especially in environments where microaggressions are seen as harmless quirks or where "nice" locals don't recognise their own biases.

Many spoke about a lack of anonymity in rural communities. Where "everyone knows everyone," participants felt that difference, especially visible racial difference stood out more starkly. Without the buffer of diverse populations or busy city environments, minoritised residents and visitors often felt exposed and hyper-visible, and this was cited as a reason for racism experienced in rural spaces.

> *“It's just another aspect of racism and stopping people from going to the countryside, because in my experience anyway, I probably wouldn't go. If you come from a city, and then have to go and face racism outside, then it's kind of like, why would you do that?” – Mohamed, British Indian*

A recurring pattern was that areas with higher visible diversity or proximity to urban centres were seen as less hostile, while smaller, isolated villages were more likely to evoke discomfort or fear. However, in some cases, where minoritised individuals spent years being in rural spaces, they reported becoming more accepted over time.

> *“The first year and a half, yes [I experienced racism]. But I think people have got used to seeing us. They know who we are.” — Peggy, Black British*

Two Black British men interviewed reported having never experienced racism in rural spaces. They shared stories of physical and verbal abuse growing up in urban spaces, but that they had always felt a sense of welcome in rural spaces. Both are avid Birders and spoke about participating in a White-majority leisure activity, whilst emphasising the importance of sharing their lack of experiences of racism.

However, these experiences were typically the exception, with many more reporting being hounded out or suffering in silence. In contrast to the visible nature of urban racism, disclosed by participants to include overt slurs, harassment or criminal offences, rural racism was more likely to operate through silence, gatekeeping and social exclusion, as described in the preceding sections. Indeed, racism in rural areas is particularly shaped by ownership, where land access and local institutions are often controlled by long-standing families or local elites. As such, social mobility or community involvement for minoritised individuals can be limited.

Finally, a small number of participants were keen to challenge the rural/urban binary, noting that, while racism may feel different in the countryside, its root causes remain consistent regardless of the setting. However, others warned that racism in these settings may be harder to name or challenge, and when it does surface, there is often little means of addressing it. In this way, rural racism is not always about hostility, but about erasure and being reminded that you do not belong to these spaces. The geography of racism matters: it shapes how it is felt and how it is made invisible, but also the ways in which it is resisted. But, whilst racism in rural areas follows particular patterns, it also reflects broader national structures of inequality and exclusion. Understanding these patterns helps illuminate both the shared and specific challenges faced by minoritised individuals in rural places.

4. What are the Impacts of Rural Racism?

While this research shows how racism disproportionately affects minoritised individuals, its consequences are complex and extend beyond. The presence of rural racism creates an environment of social tension and mistrust, affecting not only those directly targeted but also those who witness or challenge it, sometimes leading to a division between communities. This section looks at the different ways in which racism in rural spaces affected participants within this study beyond those conventionally captured by studies on the impacts of hate.

Impacts on emotional well-being

The emotional and psychological toll on minoritised individuals who navigate spaces where they are often hyper-visible and marked as outsiders was evident. For many older participants this was not limited to one-off incidents, as they reported feeling anxious and stressed over time.

> *"It's like a trauma you can never heal from because you're always surrounded by it." - Jessamine, British and Ghanaian*

> *"Sometimes you feel like you're just waiting for it, waiting for the comments to be made." – Mohamed, British Indian*

In some cases, the accumulation of racist incidents and feelings of unsafety led to mental health breakdowns or symptoms consistent with PTSD. One participant reflected on the "drunken daze" of fear and how a racist incident contributed to emotional collapse, while another described her depression as rooted in being treated as "less than a person."

For others, stress was a major emotional response to racism. Stress was often not only about experiencing direct harm but about anticipating it. Simply preparing for a visit to a rural area or carrying out day to day activities in your local community could involve needing to put on psychological armour. Indeed, feeling unsafe and experiencing hypervigilance were reported across participant accounts.

> *"You have to make sure you've had no stressful days beforehand, so if you do encounter weird treatment, you won't flip out." – Dana, Asian and Welsh*

> *"It's not just abuse, it's a possibility of harm. That is also stress. And one of the things about minorities is that we are very stressed because of all these things and this harms us in terms of mental health and physical health" – Judy, East Asian*

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Through exploring the daily emotional labour required to survive the threat or experience of racism, participants reported subsequent feelings of anger, exhaustion and distrust. For many, anger emerged as a response to racism. The emotion ranged from sharp flashes of rage to long-term frustration, sometimes directed outwardly at perpetrators and institutions, other times turned inward through exhaustion, or a sense of futility.

> *"I am angry. This country, it's systematic, it's built into institutions. It's a cycle that just keeps going and going and going." – Instinctive, British Caribbean*

Anger often arose not only in response to racist incidents themselves but also in their aftermath, with respondents describing the inability to respond in the moment or the societal expectation to remain composed. Several interviewees described internalising their reactions to avoid confrontation, particularly in professional or social settings where they felt that speaking out could jeopardise their safety, careers or relationships.

> *"I regret just sucking it up. But because I was in a work situation, I just didn't want to ruin it." – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

> *"One person I spoke to, he was experiencing racism, and he said, 'what do I have to do be accepted? I've lived in the community, I've been in the schools, I've worked in the town, everybody knows who I am, I've lived here all my life, my children are raising their children. What do I have to do?'" – Lily, Caribbean*

For others, anger was intertwined with deeper feelings of betrayal from wider communities. This stemmed from the deep sense of isolation felt by minoritised groups who are typically left to deal with the effects of racism, whilst White people either continue to express racism, are oblivious to it or don't speak up. Other older participants expressed exhaustion from witnessing racist ideologies persisting unchecked for decades.

> *"There's an epigenetic impact on our skin, it's written in our genes this idea that we are physically, mentally, emotionally burdened by racism." – Ikram, British Asian*

> *"If I saw a St. George's flag and I could do something about it, I would burn it straight away." – Nelson, White British and South Asian*

A particularly powerful theme was the reclamation of anger, prominent among younger, female participants. Some spoke about asserting the right to feel and express their anger without shame and without being labelled as 'the angry black person'. Anger became a form of self-assertion in the face of a society that often condemns the emotional responses of minoritised individuals.

> *"Why do you get monopoly over anger? And why do I have no monopoly over my own anger?" - Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

> *"I'm not an argumentative person in the slightest. But, if there was a case where you might be slightly annoyed with someone, you're like, okay I have to reign it in cos otherwise people think I'm just this mental, out-of-control gypsy, causing all these problems." – Jane, Romany Gypsy*

In many cases, anger was routinely suppressed by participants, particularly those who were Black women. Feeling the need to moderate their reactions for fear that they become the 'angry Black woman', it became clear how racism and misogyny intersect to silence and further marginalise minoritised women.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

For others, the anger was dulled by exhaustion, with many participants explaining that the more frequent emotion over time was not rage but fatigue.

> *"I think what was difficult was having to explain some of that to my mates, who are sensitive and socially aware. But there's a sense of why do I always have to explain?" – Krish, British South Asian*

> *"I'm so tired of the old, the old language, the old thought processes, the old patterns." – Kitra, Yahudi*

Overall, anger functioned not simply as an emotional reaction but a response to injustice, a coping mechanism, and, in some cases, a catalyst for change. Yet it also revealed the burden of constantly managing that emotion, especially in environments where the responses of minoritised individuals are often judged and misunderstood.

Impacts on physical well-being

While the psychological consequences of racism are well-documented, participants also spoke about its physical manifestations; how racism quite literally 'lives' in the body. The stress of navigating everyday racism resulted in chronic health issues, fatigue, weight fluctuations, and physical pain. The ongoing need to assess safety and suppress reactions creates what one participant described as "micro-traumas": repeated small injuries that accumulate over time.

> *"These feelings, they reside in your body. It aches; it's in pain at different times." – Krish, British South Asian*

These experiences were often internalised in silence to avoid being labelled as aggressive or difficult, creating a cycle where people absorbed hostility to protect themselves, further exacerbating symptoms of physical pain.

> *"You just absorb it, and then you get diseases and immune problems as a result of absorbing all the toxicity." – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

Participants described being in a constant state of high alert, anticipating harm even in seemingly mundane moments, such as walking into a shop or speaking with strangers. This created a persistent anxiety that participants said was difficult to shake, even long after the incident had passed.

> *"I was in hypervigilance mode; it took me three days to come down from that." – Ikram, British Asian*

For others, especially younger individuals, this prolonged exposure to hostility or hypervisibility had more severe consequences. One participant described how their child had developed acute symptoms of body dysmorphia and depression to the point where they were no longer attending school. This serves as a reminder that racism's physical and mental impacts do not occur in isolation, but accumulate over time, often beginning in childhood.

In some cases, people described the physical toll as so integrated into their everyday lives that they barely noticed it anymore, or as a normalised habit to protect their well-being.

> *"I know what's gonna happen. I can see it unfolding and I expect that reaction. Which gives me a sense of control, but it's still there." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

> *"You've got external barriers, and you've got internal barriers. And I'll be honest, lots of it comes from me being on the defensive, trying to protect myself all the time." – Mariam, North African*

Even when no incidents of racism take place, the internalised stress and vigilance serve as constant reminders of racialised difference, which are evidently wearing down confidence and health.

Impacts on economic well-being

While the most important impacts of racism are those experienced by minoritised individuals, our project data evidences much wider impacts, as participants demonstrated the ways that racism shapes rural economies and local services. Indeed, many participants spoke about the financial consequences of racism. As discussed, racism and social isolation contributed to poor mental health, often forcing individuals to leave jobs or relocate to urban spaces.

> *"People lose their jobs. It impacts their mental health, their ability to form connections, their jobs, their friends, their families." – Clarissa, Dual Heritage, White English and Black Caribbean*

> *"[I spoke to a local café owner], who had to shut shop for a couple of weeks… and she just couldn't stop crying. She said, 'I don't feel safe being here, I don't feel safe in my own building'. So she's now thinking of leaving. She had a five-year lease, and she said, 'I don't have another five years in me'." – Rashmi, Pakistani*

For those trying to run rural businesses, the economic impact of racism often leads to long-term reputational damage, loss of customers, and, in some cases, closure. This both destroyed the business opportunities of minoritised individuals but is depriving rural spaces of a diversity of services. This, as many White participants noted, reinforced the entrenchment of racist attitudes further as rural spaces continued to be seen as exclusively White-owned.

> *"Being in a rural space for us was just not going to work. It's so counterintuitive, because then the diversity doesn't change, it's this constant vicious cycle." – Juliet, White European*

> *"Down here there's such a small number of black and minority ethnic people. Because whenever we move down here, we get hounded out. It means that they can labour under the misapprehension that Britain is White." – Paul, Mixed Heritage British*

Furthermore, a significant finding from the research shows that workplaces in rural areas were rarely seen as safe or supportive. Some participants described leaving their careers or turning down professional opportunities to protect their well-being. Others noted how racism affects recruitment and retention in sectors like education and healthcare.

> *"We've lost some fantastic professionals because they've either said we can't in good conscience move our family to Cornwall, or they stayed for a while and then left because their children were facing such huge difficulties and racist bullying in schools." – Cleo, White British*

These harms also affect local economies more broadly. Rural areas that are perceived as hostile or unwelcoming lose out on the contributions and spending power of both residents and visitors.

> *"From a business perspective, people may not come back again because they think, what's the point if I'm going to get this abuse?" – Ranger M, British Indian*

> *"This man could have been an asset to the town, he was such a good chef, a singer and guitarist… he wanted to do music, start a band. But he left." – Susan, White British*

Ultimately, racism undermines rural resilience, particularly in a period of economic austerity. It drives out talent, deters investment, weakens community cohesion and

restricts growth. Recognising the economic costs and social deficit of racism is essential for any strategy aimed at building more inclusive rural spaces.

Impacts on personal well-being

One of the more complex consequences of rural racism lies in how it shapes and constrains people's identities. Participants described how racism, whether overt or subtle, prompted them to question their identity in relation to rural spaces. This subsequently has caused changes, such as the need to self-monitor or alter one's behaviour and appearance to feel accepted, or to remain invisible to avoid racism.

A key theme is the notion of a "passport to legitimacy": the idea that certain identity categories or behaviours can offer a form of protection or legitimate access to rural spaces that might otherwise feel unsafe or exclusionary. One researcher offered the following reflection after a fieldwork visit.

> *"My biggest takeaway from the day was the passport of legitimacy certain identities or things afford us in different spaces and at different times. For example, as a lone woman in the park, I would feel unsafe. With a male presence, I was afforded safety. My friend, as a person of colour, spoke about how his dog offered him legitimacy, justifying his presence in green spaces that he would not have without a dog." – Rachel, White British*

These symbolic passports, whether a dog, a child, a professional role, or even a particular accent, served to ease some of the tensions that racialised individuals experienced in predominantly White rural spaces. However, they also highlight the underlying precarity of their belonging: legitimacy must be earned or displayed, rather than assumed as a given. This stands in direct contrast to White people, whose presence in rural spaces is rarely questioned.

Closely linked to this are themes of shame and assimilation, which minoritised individuals reported internalising through acts of concealment or conformity. Some described how cultural expectations around shame compounded the emotional burden of experiencing racism.

> *"The people hiding their identity are affected by it because they're ashamed of not revealing their identity or they're always on guard lest their identity be discovered, or the fact they live on a Traveller site be discovered." – Jonathan Herbert, White English/Irish*

Many participants spoke about the various ways they adapted their behaviour and/or appearance to assimilate to the dominant (White) culture in rural spaces, hoping to

avoid racism. For participants who are White, or White-presenting, or who ‘conform’ to Western values, these measures were often easier to adopt. For more visible minoritised groups, there was often a trade-off between cultural and religious practices and a need to be safe. For example, some Muslim female participants spoke about removing their hijab or other religious dress, opting to put on a hat or long-sleeved clothing instead to reduce their visible difference. Clothing, accent, tone and mannerisms all became tools of adaptation and protection in many participants’ stories.

> *“I don't want to get it wrong. I feel like sometimes I put on an act. I found that in National Trust places, I’ve tended to be a bit posher, when I walked around cos I thought that’s what the stereotypical thing is. So you need to sort of fit that mould.” – Clarissa, Dual Heritage, White English and Black Caribbean*

Participants described how even basic social interactions required proactive work on their part, such as generating conversation, overcompensating with friendliness or visibly projecting comfort and ease.

> *“I have to work quite hard to show people that I think and feel in similar ways to them … it seems to be me that generates those conversations.” – Krish, British South Asian*

> *"There is the smallest amount of instigation that I have to do. It's me outwardly appearing comfortable to be around. I have to make myself palatable, show expression, be happy and smile ... and then you can see the relief in their eyes. It's like, ‘oh, my God, you're not something else’ ... On some level, I can relate to you." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

However, assimilation has come at a cost for many. The long-term consequences of feeling the pressure to assimilate reveal how racism distorts identity and limits full participation in rural life. Racism and subsequent acts of assimilation strip individuals of their belonging and reinforces the notion that minoritised individuals remain viewed as interlopers to rural spaces. The effects build up over time, shaping not just individual well-being but broader possibilities for community cohesion and cultural diversity in rural spaces.

Indeed, both participants of colour and White rural residents spoke about a deepening divide between communities, where racism not only isolates those who experience it directly but also damages the attitudes and opportunities of White people. This divide is often perpetuated by shame and silence, which discourages open dialogue and can

sustain harmful stereotypes which may reinforce marginalisation, creating a cycle of disengagement.

White allies then reflected on the long-term impacts of racism within White communities. One participant described the toll that racism has on those who are complicit in it.

> *"You do realise that you're affected as a White person, psychologically. We as White people are damaged by our racism, we are less strong, we're less robust, we're less able to be fair" – John, White British*

Drawing analogies from studies of domestic abuse and historical injustice, John pointed to the internal contradictions and emotional dissonance inherent in living within and upholding unjust systems. This dual recognition, of how racism corrodes both its targets and perpetrators, underscores the need to treat racism not simply as a series of interpersonal incidents but as a deeply entrenched system with far-reaching effects.

Many White participants reflected on discriminatory attitudes they once held when growing up in rural spaces, reporting the ways that they viewed minoritised individuals as 'other', trashed local restaurants and takeaways when drunk, and generally held racist attitudes whilst at school, all justified in the name of 'banter'. This early internalisation of racism can fuel prejudice and restrict young people's ability to engage confidently in an increasingly multicultural world. With limited cultural diversity in many rural communities, participants feared that young people may grow up with unchallenged stereotypes or even a fear of difference. Indeed, many observed a diminished capacity in some White people to form meaningful diverse relationships. In this way, rural racism undermines social cohesion not only by harming those directly targeted, but also by shaping the perspectives and futures of White People, entrenching inequality.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

5. Why Does Rural Racism Happen?

To understand racism in rural England we must examine the underpinning causes and motivations. Indeed, our research shows a denial that racism is a problem in rural spaces. Yet racism in the countryside takes unique forms: it is often more socially acceptable, it can be more overt, and it is focused on specific ideas of belonging and an intensified insider/outsider dynamic. Thus, it is structural as well as interpersonal.

The origins of rural racism can lie in historical social dynamics that shape attitudes and behaviours over time. This chapter examines the main drivers of rural racism, including fear of change; limited exposure to diversity; learned behaviour; the influence of right-wing populism; and finally, media narratives. This section also considers how social and geographic isolation intensifies these dynamics, allowing discriminatory beliefs to persist with little to no challenge.

Fear

A) Fear of change

One of the key causes of rural racism identified by participants was a pervasive fear of change. In many rural communities, change is perceived not only as unsettling but as a direct threat to deeply rooted ways of life. This fear manifests in various forms including resistance to demographic changes and subsequent suspicion towards newcomers.

> *"You want your environment to stay the same. You want your local grouping to remain the same, and if a different herd comes along, you don't want them coming and grazing on your pasture." – Ed, British Jew*

This experience was echoed by many participants. In rural areas, where communities are often tight-knit and family histories deeply embedded in the area, even minor disruptions to the status quo can provoke discomfort. For example, one participant described the shock of realising how deeply rooted some rural populations are.

> *"I was really surprised when I first moved to Penrith, how rooted families are here… they could trace people all the way back to Vikings because they haven't moved. Even though all three of my children have been born here, that still doesn't make me local." – Loretta, White British*

For many, the arrival of racially or culturally different people is experienced not simply as a new presence, but as a challenge to the identity of the established community. If any changes are suggested to accommodate newcomers, local White people can become resistant and fearful. Sometimes, in more extreme instances, this manifests as hostility. Some participants explained that this was often underpinned by a basic

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

human survival instinct, where incomers were seen to be changing community dynamics and draining already precious resources.

Others pointed to the role of isolation and geographic insularity in fuelling this fear. In many rural areas, physical distance from diversity has resulted in an unfamiliarity that breeds suspicion.

> *"They just have a resistance to change. They just have a resistance to people, because they've not experienced it before." – Joanne, White British*

Together, participants illustrate how fear of change, rooted in economic insecurity, and a strong sense of nationalism or even localism, creates fertile ground for racism. Rather than being recognised as a process of enrichment, change is framed as a threat to the stable and enduring norm of rural identity.

B) Fear of difference

Closely linked with a fear of change, participants also spoke about a fear of difference. In rural areas where communities are often demographically homogenous and where traditions and norms are deeply embedded, difference can feel particularly unsettling. This lack of contact and limited exposure to people of different racial or cultural backgrounds has created conditions in which myths and harmful stereotypes are easily formed and difficult to challenge. In these contexts, 'difference' can be wrongly construed as deviance or danger.

> *"It's kind of unsettling for White communities that perhaps haven't been exposed to different people and different cultures, and there's a fear there. That fear is bubbling up… a kind of geyser." – Krish, British South Asian*

This discomfort can quickly manifest as suspicion and hostility. In rural settings, where communities can be geographically isolated and demographically uniform, difference becomes especially conspicuous.

> *"There's an awful lot of that just kind of underlying: don't like outsiders piece." – Tsara, White British*

> *"Muslim women get demonised for wearing a burqa or a hijab… there's a fear that then manifests itself in racism, and it's an unfamiliarity of different cultures and different experiences." – David, Black British*

Several participants highlighted the historical and generational roots of this fear, which construct rurality as the domain of White British, settled communities. Others pointed to the long-standing narrative of "being taken over," particularly in the context of immigration.

Furthermore, several participants noted that when financial conditions worsen, people are more likely to seek scapegoats.

> *"People are scared because financially, people aren't doing well, they're looking at migrants and they're like, 'I can blame migrants'… it's just a very visible thing people can blame things on." – Clarissa, Dual Heritage, White English and Black Caribbean*

> *"Inequalities are greater now. And there is probably a stronger tendency to scapegoat people and to look for easy people or groups to blame." – Horatio, White British*

Some White participants reflected on their own upbringing in rural spaces, and how they were sometimes subconsciously, and at other times consciously taught to fear difference in quite extreme ways, offering examples of absorbing Islamophobic or anti-gypsy narratives from their parents and online.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Without meaningful contact or education, these fears remain unchallenged. In fact, some participants described a general reluctance among rural populations to name the issue, let alone address it.

> *"There's a fear and an ignorance. And a lack of education around what Muslims are." – Sara, Yemeni/British*

> *"Fear is when the othering happens. It's connected to a form of psychological threat." – Suzanne, Mixed White Heritage*

In environments where diversity is limited and critical conversations about race are avoided, this fear of difference results in exclusionary attitudes which can help entrench racism.

Ignorance

Across all conversations, ignorance emerged as a recurrent theme underpinning racism in rural spaces. Interviewees often described perpetrators as lacking not only knowledge about minoritised groups, but also the emotional and social literacy necessary to understand the consequences and harms of racism, however seemingly subtle.

> *"There was no recognition of cultural difference, religious difference, of how harmful racism is." – MAC, Bangladeshi*

> *"There's a lot of people who are not racist, but definitely not anti-racist, they have very limited knowledge. They're too busy going about their own lives to think about somebody else." – Tsara, White British*

This ignorance was sometimes interpreted as innocent unknowing but more frequently as an embedded feature of rural life that fuels prejudice and gives licence to hostility. In this way, ignorance was often described as wilful rather than passive. Participants spoke about perpetrators "not bothering to learn" or "refusing to understand" perspectives and cultural/racial diversity.

> *"I guess the motivation is tricky 'cause I don't think there's a motivation like, I'm going to go out for a run now. I'll be motivated to do that. I'm going to be motivated to be racist. I think it's just a lack of education and representation across all areas of people's lives." – Em, White British*

At times, ignorance becomes a tool of dismissal; a deliberate refusal to engage with difference. This purposeful ignorance was also connected to broader structures of

power and privilege. Participants suggested that some White individuals benefit from not knowing or from pretending not to know the realities of rural racism.

> *“If they admit it’s happening, then they might have to do something about it. Easier to act like it’s all fine.” – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

In this way, ignorance functions to shield White people from accountability, maintaining unequal power dynamics, and sustaining the social conditions which makes racism possible.

Participants repeatedly linked ignorance to social homogeneity, describing how cultural isolation contributes to uninformed or harmful attitudes towards minoritised groups. Several participants explained that many rural residents live in "bubbles," with little direct contact with people from different backgrounds.

> *“There’s a lot of people out there living in their own bubble. I think it’s really dangerous because people aren’t getting education or perspective of different communities and values.” – Katey, White British*

> *“I think part of it is that anywhere rural is quite a few years behind the thinking of less rural places. So these ideas and concepts come to them much later than they would in cities.” – Chantal, White British*

White allies reflected on their own experiences growing up in monocultural rural environments. Ollie noted that “me and all my friends were racist,” not necessarily out of hatred but because they were simply repeating what they saw in the media and lacked meaningful relationships with minoritised individuals. Likewise, John recalled that the first Black person he ever interacted with was during his teenage years while volunteering with a local racial equality group, an encounter that underscored how little exposure they’d had to diversity growing up.

The consequences of this isolation were illustrated by participants who then noted the Far-Right and extremist views that could be developed by young, White residents with little if any experience of diversity. According to some participants, when you grow up in a monoculture, it is easier to develop attitudes that other and demonise non-White identities.

From the perspective of minoritised individuals, this lack of exposure is palpable. Many remarked that in rural communities it is possible to live for years without seeing anyone who wasn’t White. Others made a direct link between this lack of exposure and the persistence of stereotypes or discriminatory views.

> *"I think in rural areas there's a lack of experience of black and minority ethnic people. In London, the racist can't get away with it for very long before they have to face it." – Paul, Mixed Race*

> *"It's the negativity, it's that lack of community and some of the prejudices and the discrimination that's out there, sometimes totally unwittingly. They haven't got a clue because they have no education or understanding of those different communities that are living on their doorstep or in their area, they've never experienced community outside of the little village or town." – Ranger M, British Indian*

The effects of this isolation shape everyday behaviours and social networks. As some provocatively asked, when White rural people label certain ethnic groups as "hard to reach," they should instead be asking themselves: *"Who are your friends? Who do your children marry? Who do you have a cup of coffee with?"* The issue, they argued, is not marginalised communities' inaccessibility but rather the insularity of White rural communities. In short, ignorance in rural contexts is not always born of hostility but is often the product of isolation which sustains outdated attitudes and closes down opportunities for understanding and connection across difference.

Learned behaviour

One of the most frequently discussed causes of rural racism is its characterisation as a learned behaviour rather than an innate personal belief. Participants repeatedly framed racism as an attitude passed on through familial and educational structures, often starting in early childhood. This learning was seen as both deliberate and subconscious, shaped by what children overhear at home and what they observe in their communities.

> *"There is a quote unquote 'normality to society' that has been developed over time to such an extent that it's become the absolute, which means that it's not questioned." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

> *"Even when I heard some of my peers speaking… they heard that from their parents, and their parents heard that from their parents, and their parents heard that from their parents. And it went on and on and on." – Ar'mani, Yahudi*

Others compared this process to indoctrination or cult-like thinking, suggesting that these ideas become so entrenched they resist logic or challenge.

“It might be like being part of a cult. People get brainwashed and it does not matter what you say. There is no way that person is going to understand.” - P173665, American/Indian Jew

Participants noted how children, especially in more insular rural environments, often absorb prejudices from those around them long before they are capable of forming their own views.

“This was a four-year-old girl who said ‘Muslims are all bad people’ … a four-year-old hasn’t developed to form their own views. It comes from parents and people who live around them.” – Ranger M, British Indian

“You have these conversations within the capacity of your home, and you have children that are little sponges, sponging everything you’re saying ... and you say the most heinous and biased things against groups of people, and then you don’t expect that your child is going to take that on?” – Instinctive, British Caribbean

Several participants highlighted the role of the education system in sustaining racial ignorance, noting how the absence of engagement with diversity in schools reinforces stereotypes and limits opportunities for critical discussion about race. This was understood not just as a failure of the formal education system, but as a broader deficit in critical thinking and unwillingness to engage with difference.

Some participants emphasised that the school curriculum has actively avoided meaningful engagement with colonialism or Britain’s role in empire.

“We don’t learn enough about the racism in this country in school. It’s all Martin Luther King and Rosa Parks, but we don’t really look at the racism in this country.” – Jane, Romany Gypsy

“Schools don’t want to teach it. They don’t want to say Britain did this. They don’t want to say the British Empire did that. They want to say it was glorious, and it wasn’t. It was awful.” – GT, Mauritian

Where multicultural education was present, it was often described as tokenistic or surface-level, leaving many young people reaching adulthood without a nuanced understanding of race or racism. Furthermore, several participants spoke about the absence of ongoing education into adulthood, arguing that many rural residents simply stop learning about the world once they leave school, and often had no opportunities to revisit or challenge their assumptions.

"It's like they're scared to admit they might be wrong. Or they think they already know it all. So they don't read, they don't listen, they don't try to understand anyone else's experience." – Abi, Multi-Heritage

Populism

Participants frequently referenced how racism stems from the ways that British national identity is constructed around Whiteness and exclusionary ideas of "native" belonging. This sense of nationalism was most powerfully illustrated in participants' reflections on a lack of public empathy towards ethnic and racial difference. One participant recalled a media commentary about a White British woman being the victim of gendered violence.

"She said, 'Yeah, but she's the nation's daughter. She could be me. She could be anyone's daughter'. And that's the point where I realised I'm never going to be the nation's son regardless of what I do or how I act … A white woman cries, a person of colour dies." – Ikram, British Asian

Many participants spoke about how White victims of violence are framed as universally relatable, whilst racialised individuals are often cast outside these narratives of care. These exclusions were felt particularly acutely in rural areas, where the countryside was described as a symbolic and literal space of White ownership.

"There's a bit of, 'This is our countryside. What are you doing here?' It's as if somehow this is the province of a group of white Anglo-Saxon people." – David, Black British

"There can be quite a strong nationalist element to that as well, which if you've got quite a nationalist understanding of what Cornish is and what it isn't, then it's generally White." – Cleo, White British

Rural spaces are not experienced as universally welcoming for all, as participants observed how cultural inheritance and a belief that they "belong" to White Britons motivated a desire to 'protect' rural spaces from outsiders. Participants drew parallels with settler-colonial ideas of entitlement to land, recast in the language of contemporary national heritage.

"It's always: my country, you're in my country, you behave like this ... it's just a hereditary colonialism, if depression can go from generations, so can the colonial mindset." – Ar'mani, Yahudi

Here, nationalism reproduces colonial values under the guise of patriotism or tradition. The persistence of such attitudes, even in younger generations, underscores the deep

roots of racial exclusion in the formulation of a national and local rural identity. This set of cultural codes then become flashpoints for racism reinforcing who counts as authentically English.

Several participants drew attention to the impact of political discourse, particularly around immigration and the denigration of Islam. The entrenchment of anti-migrant sentiment, participants felt, was part of a broader nationalist project aimed at consolidating power for White English people through division.

> *"There's an agenda … Palestinians and Arabs are the demons and the bad ones. The Islamophobia by politicians and the media, that's the big agenda." – Sara, Yemeni and British*

> *I travelled around the country to 60 different towns across rural areas, talking to people about post-Brexit immigration systems. The ingrained racism was quite scary, particularly the kind of anti-Muslim sentiment. People terrified that jihad was coming." – Rosie, White British*

In these accounts, anti-migrant and Islamophobic rhetoric is a tool that seeks to maintain the nationalist project by generating fear and hostility. The language of "security", "borders", and "British values" is used to draw moral and cultural lines between insiders and outsiders. This form of racialised nationalism was also seen to create the conditions for far-right organising in rural areas, where such views could take root more easily in the absence of diversity.

These accounts reveal how certain identities are seen as un-British and thus incompatible with rural life, which reveals how nationalism works to embolden racist attitudes. Participants highlighted the ways that xenophobia is embedded in both formal politics and everyday life, where racism in rural Britain cannot be understood separately from the nationalist narratives that continue to define who belongs and who does not.

Media

Across the interviews, participants repeatedly pointed to the media as key actors in the production and normalisation of racist attitudes. They described how both traditional and new forms of social media fuel fear and misinformation and identified a sustained narrative that portrays minoritised individuals, migrants, and Muslims in particular as threatening or fundamentally "other."

The most consistent critique was of the media's tendency to negatively portray and demonise Muslim and Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers. Within the broader scope of the Rural Racism project, we have captured the backlash to identifying

Islamophobia and racism against Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers. Within this stream, participants argued that people in rural areas who lack personal contact with diverse groups are especially susceptible to these narratives, which are often the primary source shaping their views.

This persistent negativity beyond just spreading misinformation, actively enables hate. As one participant reflected, the accumulation of harmful tropes builds resentment and rationalises discrimination.

> *"We would not have had those riots had this drip from politicians and by the media feeding us drip, drip, drip." – Sara, Yemeni and British*

> *"It was the media that triggered a global backlash against Muslims, and it's lingered for more than 20 years now." – Mariam, North African*

The influence of the media was seen to extend into broader social norms, influencing people's views about migration and consequently, national identity. The media-driven suspicion of so-called 'outsiders', has often been masked in political neutrality or concern for British values but was experienced by participants as another form of racism.

> *"People hold certain ideas that we are a threat, we are backwards and we're here to slow down the progress of UK society, and the media has contributed towards that." – Motaz, South Asian*

> *"All of the bigotry is being encouraged by the media, by social media, by the political leaders because it suits them. And that is gonna make things a lot worse in the countryside." – Robbie, White British*

Others described how this media messaging provides cover or justification for prejudices that might otherwise be considered unacceptable. As such, racism becomes more socially permissible when it echoes popular public discourse. Social media in particular, was seen as place that enabled Far Right thinking, where people could express their views with near impunity.

In addition to the propagation of harmful stereotypes, participants described how the media contributes to the formation of a national identity that excludes minoritised individuals. They observed that rural Britain is frequently depicted as White and middle class both in factual programming and fictional storytelling, which reinforces the notion that minoritised individuals are outsiders in these environments.

“The media are selling us this idea that the countryside is White and is for White people … it’s always, 90% of the time, presented by White middle-class, middle-aged man.” – Caleb, Black British

“80% of the newspapers are owned by a single billionaire who has right-wing views. So, if you’re feeding this information to the public, some people don’t have critical thinking skills.” – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

6. What are the Compounding Challenges?

Although the expressions of racism in the countryside are serious in isolation, the obstacles to addressing it often intensify its effects and allow racism to persist unchallenged. This section examines the multiple, intersecting barriers which hinder meaningful redress: from the personal challenges that individuals encounter when reporting racism, to the broader structural and social forces which block progress towards inclusion.

Barriers to reporting

Access to support and reporting mechanisms

A consistent challenge in responding to racism was the disparity in support and access to resources for those affected in rural areas compared to urban ones. Many respondents highlighted the challenges of both reporting incidents and accessing support services, highlighting how rural areas often lack the resources or reporting pathways.

> *"The problem is the capacity of them doesn't reach that far. So, when you talk about rural spaces, are they likely to go in there? Only if there is a demand." – Ed, British Jew*

Participants consistently highlighted the absence of clear, accessible support mechanisms following experiences of racism in rural areas. This absence was not merely a bureaucratic issue but actively exacerbated feelings of vulnerability and abandonment. The scarcity of support networks in rural regions was discussed in several interviews, underscoring the challenge of reaching rural populations who may be unaware of or who feel disconnected from available resources. Indeed, participants highlighted how support is typically much more urban-focused or based.

> *"The issue for Somerset is that Bristol has the whole cake, and we have the crumbs, so this feeling of being left out." – Lily, Caribbean*

> *"Over 75% of our [service users] told us that they strongly agreed or agreed that there was an inequality in rural versus urban support services." – Melanie, White British*

The lack of targeted initiatives in rural communities is a recurring concern, and even when services exist, they are often fragmented. This lack of cohesion and accessibility in support services creates barriers for those in rural areas seeking help in response to racism. The reliance on urban organisations to serve rural populations points to an under provision in rural areas. As a result, participants in rural areas disclosed feeling

that there is little point in trying to access support because it is too difficult or distant from their community.

Others described having low confidence in institutions such as the police or local councils to deal with reports of racism, believing that these bodies were either ill-equipped or uninterested in offering support. Trust in the police was particularly low among Black and Romany (Gypsy), Roma and Irish Travellers, with participants disclosing either poor prior experiences or such low levels of trust, that they would never report.

> *"I remember talking to police officers and they have a 'no racism here' mentality. If racist incidents don't show up in the figures because nobody's reporting it, then they're not going to prioritise it. And they think it's a problem in the city, it just doesn't happen here." – Mike, British Indian*

Thus, policing in rural areas was distinguished from policing in urban areas, which although has its own problems, participants felt the isolation of rural spaces exacerbated the capacity of rural police services to recognise and respond to racism. This sense of distrust was reinforced by past negative experiences, where victims felt that their reports were minimised or dismissed, as shown in the following two examples.

> *"I've had policemen telling me go away from my door. I've just been beaten up. Had my leg broken. I'm trying to get them to deal with it. But they say go away. We're dealing with serious crime." – Paul, Mixed Heritage British*

> *"One time I went to get a taxi, I was about 13, and maybe from the way that I was dressed or that I spoke, they could tell I was a gypsy. And just instantly said, 'No. No way. We don't take gypsies. Get out.' And as I walked outside, there was a police officer. And I spoke to him about it, and he just said, 'OK. Yeah. Thanks for letting me know'. And wandered off." – Jane, Romany Gypsy*

A further barrier was the lack of culturally sensitive services in rural areas, such as a lack of minoritised police officers or translation services. Participants expressed frustration at needing to educate service providers on basic issues of racism and discrimination, adding an additional emotional burden at a time when support was needed. Several participants compared rural experiences unfavourably to those in urban areas, suggesting that specialist organisations in cities provided a level of support that is non-existent in rural locations.

Personal barriers to seeking support

Participants also spoke about personal barriers that limited their ability or willingness to seek support following experiences of racism. These were influenced by the exclusionary attitudes already experienced within rural spaces, where hostile community dynamics decreased the likelihood of disclosure. Two main themes emerged in this regard: the fear of retaliation and social ostracism; and internally trivialising and downplaying incidents.

Many participants disclosed that they had not sought support due to a fear that speaking out about racism might provoke backlash, which in turn, could further harm their safety and well-being. Indeed, this fear was often grounded in past experiences, where people had sought to disclose an incident of racism and were met with denial, or further hostility. This was exacerbated in rural spaces, wherein anonymity is limited, and power structures are inherently White-centred. Participants described feeling trapped between the desire to speak out and the risk of negative repercussions, not only for themselves but also for their families, as one White mother of a mixed heritage child explained.

> *"There's very little I can do because if I wanted to really make a big fuss about it, I know that there would be retaliation because teachers have a lot of power. They're very closely connected with social workers. And I just worry that they could question my mental health or send social workers round to the house to see if they could find a reason to call me unfit." – Susan, White British*

It was within the context of schools that many participants described how a recurring cycle of complaint and inaction had left them feeling voiceless and vulnerable, as reporting racism was met with a wall of silence and opposition. Indeed, some spoke about when reporting cases of racism in rural schools, the schools not only failed to address these, but responded with inappropriate punitive measures against the victim.

> *"Really vile Islamophobic bullying that kid faced and the school were just unequipped to deal with it and were actively not dealing with it. Putting him in detention with the perpetrators." – Samuel, White English*

This highlights how authority figures, such as teachers, can become gatekeepers of responding to racism through inaction. This fear of retaliation entails an arduous process of psychological decision-making involved in deciding whether to report.

> *“Usually this isn’t something that you would report, 'cause I think the reporting process is even worse than the actual [experience].” – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab*

Even when people did report, the responses were often limited to performative gestures, leaving victims and their families feeling disillusioned. For example, one mother shared how when she reported the racism her of a mixed heritage child had faced, the school paid lip service to it, acknowledging the incident, but not raking further action to address the attitudes of his peers. She also spoke about fearing that the teachers actually found the racism funny, lacking empathy for these more subtle incidences that are often termed ‘banter’. Similarly, a young woman who left school following repeated instances of racist bullying, recalled teachers displaying annoyance upon her reporting racism, acting as if her experiences were trivial.

Within these systems, many participants developed another coping mechanism which prevented reporting or support seeking. Many disclosed internalising a belief that certain experiences were not “serious enough” to warrant action. This belief was shaped not only by the absence of good quality reporting mechanisms and support, but also by lived experience that rendered racism banal and unworthy of a response.

> *“I was so used to being called names, I wouldn’t have known it was hate crime” – Jessamine, British and Ghanaian*

The normalisation of racism shaped expectations around what merited action, with the more everyday experiences being dismissed or downplayed in their severity. Many described the difficulty in navigating the boundary between what felt legitimate to raise and what felt too minor, ambiguous, and too likely to be dismissed. Where racism is regularly downplayed or treated with performative concern, minoritised individuals reported internalising this. A lack of action, even in the face of overt instances of hate was described not just as apathy, but as part of a wider social dynamic in which people learned not to make a fuss.

A fear of being perceived as dramatic or hypersensitive was a key deterrent, exacerbated in rural settings where minoritised individuals were highly visible, and any form of resistance could lead to social ostracism.

> *“It’s just such normal life. You grow up around it… I don’t think anyone would really feel or really recognise that they need support to work through that trauma.” – Jane, Romany Gypsy*

Ultimately, the process of perceiving experiences as trivial not only suppresses the reporting of racism but also deepens its emotional toll. Participants described the long-

term psychological effects of enduring racism without acknowledgment or any form of response, internalising blame, or convincing themselves their pain wasn't valid. In rural spaces especially, these feelings were magnified by the physical and social isolation that further silenced those who already felt out of place.

Barriers to anti-racism

Overt hostility towards anti-racism

Efforts to address racism in rural areas are further compounded by barriers to carrying out meaningful anti-racist work, including the hostility that anti-racism efforts provoke. Within this study, barriers included personal attacks towards participants and institutional resistance to community backlash and politicised rhetoric. In some rural areas, even modest attempts to raise awareness or improve representation were met with suspicion, ridicule, and at times, intimidation. Where racism was often downplayed or denied, anti-racism was framed as offensive, divisive and threatening.

A conflation of a call for anti-racism with a personal attack on a person's character was common. Several White allies described the backlash they received for speaking out, including being labelled "woke," "a Judas," or subjected to online trolling for their anti-racism. For instance, many described the response to the National Trust report on their links to colonialism.

> *"The really visceral, highly charged and politicised culture war type response to that report was not a surprise… that is the established view of the countryside." – Suzanne, Mixed White Heritage*

In some cases, anti-racism efforts led to reputational damage, exclusion, and even fears for personal safety.

> *"We get physical attacks, the building gets attacked. The minute you try to produce something that even begins to address this, you're immediately threatened." – Thomas Major, White British*

Others described long, emotionally draining arguments with people who felt "oppressed" by diversity efforts.

> *"He saw me and said, 'Your [anti-racism] flag makes me really angry… as a white guy I just can't do anything these days, can I?'" – Tsara, White British*

Participants who engaged in Black Lives Matter protests and debates were told they should be wearing 'White Lives Matter' t-shirts instead, were subject to online abuse,

or lost business in their local area for speaking out against racism. The backlash to anti-racism and a reclaiming of rural spaces by minoritised individuals is particularly exemplified in the ways groups like Muslim Hikers or Black Girls Hike have been treated, both online and offline, to repeated and targeted abuse.

In addition, anti-racism efforts in institutional settings also triggered backlash. Some organisations, such as nature organisations, local councils and churches, experienced pushback against inclusive hiring policies or other anti-racism initiatives.

> *"For some of the anti-racism initiatives, there's been some pushback, some people stepped down from a committee because they felt it was unfair [on White people]." – Sophie, White British*

> *"If the church did get really friendly with travellers, you'd then get massive pushback from the villagers. They all hate gypsies." – Brunel, White British, White British*

Participants also highlighted how media narratives and prominent government figures can fan the flames of backlash. Several referenced the role of outlets like the Daily Mail in fuelling negative attention.

> *"There's a lot of kickback … the Times, the Telegraph, the Daily Mail, the Spectator, Twitter and the Minister for Equality is getting involved." – Clarissa, Dual Heritage, White English and Black Caribbean*

In this hostile context, many were left questioning whether speaking out was worth the personal cost. Indeed, participants described the emotional burden of challenging racism, only to be met with apathy or further hostility.

> *"I was asked to speak on decolonising the outdoors on a podcast and I was just like, 'Am I gonna get trolled? Is my mental health stable enough to handle that?'" – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

> *"And this is what creates toxic societies and work environments. They may be worried that if they speak out, they're going to get confrontation." – Melanie, White British*

Ultimately, these accounts show that anti-racism in rural areas is often an emotionally costly endeavour, especially for those already marginalised. It reveals a paradox: in places where racism is denied, anti-racism itself becomes the target, treated as a threat to the seemingly benign status quo rather than as a legitimate response to the injustice it seeks to confront.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Fear of anti-racism

Another barrier to effective anti-racist practice identified within this study was fear. Participants exhibited a variety of anxieties, ranging from a fear about the consequences of engaging in anti-racism (such as concerns about being accused of being racist towards White people, or unsettling established norms) and fear which translated into a more performative form of anti-racism lacking in any form of genuine commitment. This fear, often couched in politeness, was a recurring theme during the project and was expressed by both minoritised communities and White allies. Though less overtly aggressive than backlash, fear manifests as resistance and inertia, or in insincere or dubious acts of anti-racism which are designed to make the individual look good rather than really helping to dismantle racism.

A core element of this fear is discomfort with acknowledging the realities of structural racism and racial privilege.

> *"The why is simple… White people don't want to have to recognise the privilege, the entitlement of being White, because then you have to do something about it." – P173665, American/Indian Jew*

Those who faced denial, particularly in circumstances where they tried to call out racism were further accused of being obsessed with, or 'bigging up' a non-existent issue. Other participants noted that resistance often stems from a fear of losing something, whether that be status, power, or the perceived social cohesion of the rural idyll.

> *"People have fear of losing what they've got, the privilege, the power that they've got. So for fear of that, they want to maintain the status quo." – Mad Max, African, Ghanaian and Black British*

Some participants noted that even in the face of clear incidents of racism, rural communities tended to turn away or downplay the issue. This was described as the stereotypical over-polite 'Britishness' of skirting around an issue, rather than naming it.

Among professionals and institutions, fear of anti-racism was often expressed through hesitation, avoidance or an insistence on staying "neutral". In schools, local authorities and community organisations, many participants described how the desire to avoid discomfort frequently outweighed any real commitment to tackling racism.

> *"It's very difficult to penetrate. It's greeted with a sort of blank defiance… you're never going to get mass embrace for these things." – Thomas Major, White British*

Even those leading anti-racist work within their own workplaces encountered institutional fear.

> *"They see the word 'racism' and immediately the colour leaves their face. I've had people literally run away from me because they just can't engage." – Tsara, White British*

Many observed how this fear to engage has contributed to performative anti-racism, where particular actions are taken by organisations to symbolically align with anti-racism, but that contain little substance or long-term commitment and do nothing to adequately address the racism within the wider environment in which they are situated.

> *"What are you sacrificing? 'I'm anti-racist', what because you blocked a square out on Instagram?" – Ikram, British Indian*

> *"The fact that we're dealing with deep-seated prejudices and lies. I'm disappointed with my work colleagues for not addressing that. They*

chose a false sense of peace rather than addressing the issue, pulling it out, uprooting it, and setting it on the fire." – Kitra, Yahudi

Where initiatives are driven without deep engagement, resistance becomes even more entrenched. This creates a climate in which individuals and organisations hesitate to act unless directly compelled, opting for a reactive rather than proactive approach to anti-racism. Inherent within this, is a denial of the presence of diversity within rural areas, and this is used as justification for why anti-racism is not needed; the oft referred to 'no problem here' mentality.

These examples of avoidance and resistance have real impacts that affect the ways in which anti-racist allies and activists approach their work. Many noted how fear of doing it 'wrong' can silence meaningful dialogue. Instead, many White allies adopted tactics to engage in anti-racist work, including using non-confrontational or what they termed 'softer' language, to open conversations and gently challenge assumptions without triggering defensiveness or shutting down the possibility of change.

Ultimately, a fear of anti-racism maintains the status quo. Participants reported how it encourages silence and discourages meaningful commitments and changes. Yet, as participants across the dataset repeatedly made clear, avoiding the issue does not make racism disappear; it simply lets it go unchallenged.

"Why don't we try something else? And fundamentally, that means changing everything… And it is quite daunting, but you've got to change everything." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian

Discomfort about anti-racism

A final barrier to anti-racist work in rural spaces shared by participants within this study was a discomfort about anti-racism. This often results in inaction, where individuals recognise racism is a problem but feel unprepared or reluctant to address it because they are afraid of getting it wrong. Interestingly, minoritised individuals spoke more about a lack of awareness from White people over how to respond, whilst White allies commonly observed that they had a fear of getting it wrong.

A) Fear of getting it wrong

Across the interviews, White participants repeatedly described anxiety when engaging in conversations around race and racism in rural spaces. This fear is not rooted in indifference, but in a lack of confidence and training or expertise often resulting in inaction, avoidance, and self-censorship. This apprehension was especially evident in public services such as schools or nature-based organisations, where staff were described as "frightened to get it wrong", or provoking uncomfortable reactions.

Many described internal debates and hesitation over whether or how to challenge problematic language or behaviour, struggling to navigate the complexities of being a bystander and ally who prioritises the safety of the people affected by the racism.

> *"I am debating about whether to respond to somebody… do you try and help to explain? I spend my life doing a lot of this thinking." – Robin, White British*

> *"There's been times when you want to say something, but you're just not completely sure what you heard, and then you come away with that guilt." – Joanne, White British*

Even in low-risk environments such as training sessions, discomfort persisted. But this exacerbated the anxiety in 'real-life' scenarios. For others, fear of 'getting it wrong' led to excessive caution or diluted language.

> *"I am hiding behind lots of softer terms like being inclusive and helping people feel welcome… people in the sector and local government are frightened to death about this subject." – Robin, White British*

> *"We've benefited from a system where we've never had to even talk about race, it's like a muscle we've never exercised." – Juliet, White European*

Such fear can be both paralysing and self-perpetuating. Individuals and organisations worried about making mistakes, often saying nothing at all, a response which sustains the very structures that they fear to confront.

However, some participants recognised that fear cannot be an excuse for disengagement.

> *"You have to get comfortable with that [discomfort], because doing nothing is getting it wrong." – Em, White British*

> *"Being silent is just too dangerous… Even if you burst into tears or it comes out wrong, you need to just speak up and stand up." – Melanie, White British*

Among more self-aware participants there was an openness to admit mistakes, coupled with a sense of responsibility to keep trying.

"We will misstep and we'll do something that makes things slightly worse. And that's just a risk we have to take." – Robbie, White British

B) Lack of awareness

Participants of colour spoke about a more subtle but equally pervasive barrier to anti-racism: a lack of awareness and understanding. This discomfort often stems not from deliberate opposition, but from not knowing what racism looks like, how to respond or how to talk about it. For those without lived experience of racism, confusion and minimisation can become default responses, even when intentions are supportive. This creates an environment where even basic interventions or conversations around race feel fraught with risk.

Several participants described the invisibility of racism to those not affected by it, particularly in rural communities where racial diversity is limited. This lack of understanding is not always born of malice. For many, ignorance was a by-product of never having been asked to confront racial inequality before.

"There's this an assumption of Whiteness, there is a real gulf of understanding. Even amongst people who I think would know better. What does a person of colour mean? The only thing it means is that you're not somebody who's been allowed into this elite club of whiteness." – P173665, American/Indian Jew

"Even amongst teachers—just not being familiar, not recognising [racism], and endorsing what the students were doing." – MAC, Bangladeshi

Multiple participants reflected on the confusion that subtle racism causes for people untrained to see or understand it.

"It really does stem from the confusion that microaggressions cause… they're so small and specific to your person and to your identity that someone with a dissimilar lived experience will not understand how or when that's happening." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian

The emotional distance that many White people feel from racism is compounded by a lack of education. Indeed, many participants spoke about how it was only during big anti-racism movements, such as Black Lives matter and the pulling down of the Colston statue that people began to find out about England's colonial histories and the contemporary legacies of imperialism. The result, as also noted by White allies, is a cycle of non-intervention and silence, where those witnessing racism often feel

unqualified to speak out, and those affected internalise and endure their experiences in isolation.

> *"I think there is somewhat of reluctance… but then it's also like the people that aren't in the room—why are they not in the room?" – Abi, multi-heritage*

> *"The trouble is, not many White people understand how important it is to do something." – Paul, Mixed Heritage*

This illustrates an urgent need for solution-based approaches to overcome some of these barriers to responding to racism in rural spaces. The main contention was that until more people feel confident to recognise and name racism, particularly its subtler forms, many rural communities will continue to fall short of genuine inclusivity and racial justice.

7. How Can We Make the Countryside More Inclusive?

This report has explored the multiple and often interlinked ways in which racism manifests in rural England. Drawing on lived experiences of both White and minoritised people, it has traced how interpersonal and structural forms of racism shape the lives of minoritised individuals living in or visiting the countryside. It has also examined the underlying drivers of rural racism, and the emotional and practical consequences for those experiencing racism. Beyond the immediate harms caused by racism, participants highlighted a broader culture of inertia and a lack of meaningful accountability. Efforts to challenge racism were often met with resistance, denial or superficial responses that failed to bring about real change, contributing to a deep sense of disillusionment.

This final section asks: what do we need to do to make the countryside more inclusive? It considers what needs to change across institutions and communities to build a rural England where everyone feels that they belong. Drawing on participants' reflections and recommendations, this section highlights examples of solidarity and action that can help drive progress toward equity and inclusion in rural spaces.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Structural recommendations

Policy development

Participants emphasised the importance of developing inclusive rural policies and strategies to address both the structural nature of racism and the barriers that prevent minoritised individuals from accessing the countryside. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of top-down change to prevent exclusion through changes to national rural policy, funding mechanisms, local planning, and land management. Central to this is the idea that inclusion and anti-racism should be built into the mandates of rural governance, not added on as afterthoughts.

Indeed, many participants argued that rural policy should actively work to include racialised minorities as part of a broader rural regeneration strategy, recognising the economic, social, and cultural value of diversity whilst challenging the socioeconomic inequalities identified within an earlier section of this report.

> *"You could revive rural communities by bringing in more diverse communities. You may not see the impact immediately and it might be difficult, but it's an investment that will contribute to the revival of those rural areas." – Sepidah, Iranian*

> *"I'd love to see [inclusive rural spaces] as part of their mandate… that compels local authorities to think about this in planning and housing and healthcare provision. I think that is the kind of change that could have meaningful benefits for so many." – Mike, British Indian*

Inclusive policy also requires systemic support and long-term funding. Without this, anti-racism and inclusion efforts risk becoming fragmented, under-resourced and ultimately unsustainable.

> *"We could run projects tomorrow, continuously, but we can't do this work as a small charity because of funding constraints. So we're dependent on funding." – Sandhya, British Indian*

> *"There's been a lot of initiatives around rural racism or rural inequalities but there's less resources and funding or recognition nationally or regionally. And we need to relook at that." – MAC, Bangladeshi*

Participants suggested this work must be rooted in intersectional approaches. This means transforming the very systems through which rural environments are governed, so that inclusion is not a peripheral concern but a guiding principle.

> *"We need to use an alternative system of education and growth around ecology, conservation and nature. And what I mean by that is de-structuring it; de-structuring the toxicity that formed the foundation of a lot of these places and that comes in the format of decolonising." – Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

> *"I think local authorities, local councillors really need to play a role in addressing those issues and encouraging mutual forums. Which is not something they tend to do except when pushed." – Ed, British Jew*

At the institutional level, participants called for stronger protections for minoritised groups, more inclusive decision-making and reforms to public sector policies that disproportionately target or overlook communities of colour. Participants also argued for fairness and transparency to be embedded into local service provision and planning.

> *"Some of the previous Council tenants were rehoused in these new builds, they were given flats that overlooked a really busy road. None of them got views of the wetlands." – Ellery, British Nigerian*

> *"We are working in dioceses, cathedrals, training institutions, education, every sort of network we can to get people thinking outside their normal monocultural White box." – Brunel, White British*

Some noted how strategic frameworks around inclusion should promote access for diverse communities.

> *"We've put together grant money … We'll cover all your costs to do the thing that you want to do. Putting more money behind things is not an easy solution but is often a useful one." – Sophie, White British*

> *"You need to be located in the place that needs it most ... the geography of it ... I think it's where the local education authorities have a huge role to play to bridge the gap." – Thomas, White British*

Overall, participants recommended policy reform at all levels to reframe inclusion not as a threat to rural life, but as essential to its future. This requires political leadership, targeted investment, diverse representation, and genuine listening to those with lived experience.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

Embedding equity and lived experience

Participants argued that efforts to address racism in rural areas cannot rely solely on well-intentioned statements or surface-level measures. For meaningful change to happen, equity and inclusion must be embedded across rural institutions, whilst recognising the importance of lived experience within this process. Indeed, participants emphasised that top-down initiatives alone are insufficient without meaningful input from those most affected by racism.

For many, the absence of diverse voices in decision-making processes undermines the legitimacy and effectiveness of their strategies. Participants stressed the need to move beyond tokenism and towards genuine representation.

> *"A lot of people that are in those spaces are White people and they don't necessarily recognise the barriers to access to nature for us ... So having more racialised minorities on their boards and in their institutions, I think that's also key to learning and unlearning." – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab*

> *"Having people of colour that sit in key positions would be one way to generate some kind of change. All of these places are occupied on a senior level and also not such a senior level, a meet and greet level, by White folk." – Suzanne, White British*

Structural change must also be matched by internal organisational reform, particularly within charities, councils, and conservation bodies. Some described how diversity efforts often lack depth or are driven by external pressure rather than a genuine commitment to change.

> *"Organisations need to not just pay lip service … I'm the token person of colour in the room. And I'm a terrible version of that because I'm not representative. It's getting the right people in the room to speak and getting the right people in the room to see other people in that position." – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

Part of embedding values of equity involves recognising that not all knowledge is held at the top. Institutions need to actively listen to people who experience exclusion, rather than assuming what support is needed.

> *"We do very little in terms of grassroots ... it's been quite hard to reach out to certain groups and have those relationships of trust and authenticity." – Helen, White British*

> *"Talk to a diverse range of people and ask them what they actually want and then implement those things. I guess I can say things that I think would be helpful ... but I am NOT an expert." – Ellie, White British*

The values mentioned here often sit within traditional EDI frameworks. We argue that even where EDI-specific work may not be happening, the values and principles of equity and inclusion remain and are beneficial for all organisations. These actions must not be symbolic; they should come with resources and mechanisms for accountability. This work could be strategically embedded within existing structures, bids for funding, or new initiatives. Participants were clear that inclusive values benefit everyone and strengthen your overall organisations' activities.

Within this, some participants stressed that the most transformative perspectives often come from people whose lived experience spans multiple marginalised identities. Being cognisant of these intersectionalities also allows fairness for all. Thus, embedding equity and inclusion is not just a box-ticking exercise, nor a process which demands investment of increasingly limited financial resources. Rather, it requires a redistribution of power, inclusive leadership, and an ongoing willingness to listen and learn.

Making institutions accountable

Finally, systemic accountability was repeatedly identified by participants as a cornerstone of effective anti-racism. Without mechanisms to track whether anti-racist policies and structural change has been enforced, or to measure the redistribution of power, many feared that well-meaning initiatives would either stall or be tokenistic. Several participants pointed to the need for transparent frameworks that could compel institutions to uphold their duties towards anti-racism.

> *"We need accountability, because if you're giving millions to these organisations to provide stuff and they're not doing it, then in a normal business situation you're going to want your money back, aren't you?" – Melanie, White British*

> *"There are tools of the law which should be applied. That means that the local constabulary needs to be educated in it. I think regulated in a way which means that they structurally understand the importance of being anti-racist." – John, White British*

Systemic change was also understood to involve a reimagining of institutional goals: not just making space for minoritised individuals but actively handing over power. Accountability must therefore include an intentional shift in who sets the agenda.

> *“If you’re privileged enough ... build that platform with the essential goal of it being dissolved, so that people of colour and global majority people can then thrive in that space and grow and have further confidence in themselves.” – Jasmine, Southeast Asian*

Some participants described the need to embed anti-racism into rural policy mandates at a national level, to compel local governments, landowners, and public services to take action.

> *“If government departments owned this when they’re talking about rural policy frameworks, having it as part of your mandate compels local authorities and others to think about this in their provisions.” – Mike, British Indian*

Voluntary initiatives, while welcome, were seen as insufficient without wider structural backing. There was also appetite for more visible benchmarks and shared frameworks that allow organisations to monitor their own progress and work together towards their anti-racist goals, holding each other to account.

> *“Every organisation [needs] leadership. And that’s not just the person at the top, but anybody who’s a decision maker ... to take action in the first place and to stand by their actions when challenges and hostility arise.” – Suzanne, White British*

> *“It’s been really positive to have something that they can kind of pledge to, to drive that accountability ... a friendly competition of not wanting to be the person who’s ignoring this stuff and not stepping up.” – Helen, White British*

At its core, systemic accountability is about ensuring that anti-racism is not optional. It requires a cultural and regulatory shift in which inclusion is built into how institutions operate, how success is measured and who is empowered to lead. For rural communities to become truly inclusive, this kind of structural transformation was seen as not only necessary, but urgent.

> *“I just think large organisations do need to get involved a lot more, you are going to get some backlash, you just need to deal with it. You can't sit on the fence and be too scared to do anything because then nothing's gonna change.” – Clarissa, Dual Heritage, White English and Black Caribbean*

Interpersonal and community recommendations

Making the countryside welcoming for all

A) Making green spaces accessible

Access to the countryside is not only about physical proximity, but also about ensuring that these spaces are welcoming to all. Participants described a wide range of barriers that make rural environments feel inaccessible or exclusionary to minoritised individuals, even when technically open to all. From dietary and religious needs, to safety concerns and inclusive infrastructure, participants emphasised that rural spaces must actively adapt if they are to become truly inclusive.

One of the most frequently mentioned barriers was the lack of appropriate facilities to meet religious and cultural needs. These were also reflected in conversations within Report Two. Several Muslim participants noted that simple changes, such as the availability of halal food or spaces for prayer, could make a significant difference in whether people feel comfortable visiting the countryside.

> *"I know there's a Halal-only Cafe [which a lot of my friends visit]. And it is going to incentivise people to go there even more because now you can actually eat food there." – Nabiha, Pakistani and Arab*

> *"Some places have prayer spaces and you could just put a few more symbols than just a cross or a Star of David. You'll get some random Muslim person who's like, 'Oh, how cool, they've got a little prayer mat for me'." – Penny, White British and Israeli*

Organisations were also encouraged to consider inclusive design from the start, embedding a sense of safety and cultural sensitivity into rural planning rather than treating them as retrofits or afterthoughts. Welcoming minoritised individuals into the countryside means more than tolerance; it requires thoughtful adaptation, sustained inclusion efforts and a willingness to change. As one participant put it, such changes are not only necessary, but they are also good for everyone.

B) Building connections to rural spaces

While removing practical barriers to access is essential, inclusion in rural spaces also requires the fostering of meaningful connections to nature. Participants described how, for many, the countryside is not only a place of recreation but also one of emotional healing and personal empowerment. Indeed, for some, engaging with nature evoked deep, even ancestral, memories of landscapes from elsewhere, allowing for a sense of reunion and continuity across borders and generations.

"When you take [new arrivals and older generations] to nature places … they get this huge sense of reunion, of a part of themselves. So all these things really matter in the work." – Judy, East Asian

Creating positive experiences was seen as key. When people were welcomed into rural environments with intention and care, memories formed that countered negative assumptions or past exclusions. These were then shared with friends and family, further encouraging peers to visit rural spaces.

Others highlighted the countryside's power as a space of healing and learning. Time spent in nature was described as vital to mental health and community bonding. We know that minoritised communities are disproportionately affected by poor health and well-being outcomes[13], therefore fostering this connection to rural spaces holds even greater importance.

"Going for a walk in a green space, just sitting and listening or being mindful, it's an education in itself. There is definitely some work that needs to be done on how the medical profession can get people to acknowledge the benefits of being outdoors." – Nigel, Black British

Participants also discussed the emotional impact of representation in rural spaces. For those who had previously internalised the idea that nature was "not for them," efforts to include and celebrate minoritised individuals helped restore a sense of belonging.

"Challenging the perception that the rural is racist or that the rural is a White space … that education needs to happen in communities of colour as well, because everyone needs to know that the rural space is for them." – BGH, Black British

"I want my kids to feel a connection to all spaces and places anywhere in the world as quickly as they can, rather than feeling that there are some places off limits." – Mike, British Indian

For children and young people, early and positive experiences were seen as especially transformative. Work like Black2Nature and Boots and Beards were commended for offering safe, structured opportunities to discover outdoor life, and, by extension, new pathways for learning, well-being and even for work.

[13] Hamza, M., Edwards, R.C., Beaumont, J.D., De Pretto, L. and Torn, A., 2024. Access to natural green spaces and their associations with psychological wellbeing for South Asian people in the UK: A systematic literature review. *Social Science & Medicine*.

Place attachment also proved to be a powerful counter to racism. When newcomers had positive experiences of local welcome, they were more likely to see incidents of hostility as outliers, not defining characteristics of a place.

> *"When those instances of racism happened, it didn't stop them feeling in their words, 'This is my village. This is my home.'" Samuel, White English*

Fostering connection to green spaces, then, is not just about encouraging visits: it is about enabling minoritised people to see themselves reflected in, welcomed by, and emotionally rooted within rural environments.

Education and awareness

A) Cultural education

Participants repeatedly emphasised the importance of education in challenging racism and fostering greater cultural understanding. They argued that this education needs to reflect the diversity of British history and society, particularly in rural areas where contact with different cultures may be limited.

> *"Education needs to start young; we need to decolonise their education so that we're learning that access to rural spaces is not just for White people, we're learning about different cultures, about each other, and our shared access to these spaces and all our identities." – BGH, Black British*

Many felt that early intervention was critical, and that educational approaches should start at primary level and continue throughout life. This would help White children develop cultural competence and to reduce the risks of ignorance and subsequent racism later in life.

> *"It starts young really, and talking in schools about different cultures in a way that they bring people in. So the children are learning from a young age." – Helen, White British and Asian*

For others, this kind of education needed to go beyond schools and into families, workplaces and communities. Several White participants reflected on the need to unlearn more 'traditional' conceptions of Britishness by exposing themselves to other cultures and perspectives. This included everything from reading and listening to podcasts, to joining community events or seeking experiences beyond their usual circles.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

"There are so many amazing Black and Asian British authors who speak about racism from a British lens. Just reading one book will start helping to remove the layers." – Kate, White British and American

"We need to expose ourselves to experiences and communities … the places that I've learned the most are where I've been in environments where I'm in a minority myself." – Robin, White British

There was also a strong desire to shift narratives to reflect Britain's multicultural past and present. Participants wanted local and national history to include stories of migration, contribution, and resistance, rather than presenting a Whitewashed version.

"Let's look at the history of this space that we're in, and actually it's been multicultural for thousands of years. But those stories are just invisible." – Sandhya, British Indian

"I think it's accepting that the countryside isn't just the province of a certain group. People that come to the countryside will be different and have different values. But also to accept that those people are coming because they are just like you. They enjoy the countryside, they know the value of the countryside, they do respect it as much as you do." – David, Black British

Overall, there was a consensus that cultural education, particularly when delivered early, could begin to close the gaps in understanding that allow rural racism to persist, and instead foster a sense of shared humanity and belonging.

B) Celebrating diversity

Beyond cultural education, participants repeatedly called for a celebration of diversity within rural spaces, not just to counter racism, but to build connection and belonging. This included festivals, arts and cultural programmes, community food gatherings and awareness campaigns, to create proximity, highlight shared humanity and disrupt the tendency to "other" those seen as different.

"How can I get people's paths to cross that wouldn't normally? In a way that creates connection which really disrupts the tendency to other, because people start looking at their common humanity rather than what makes them different." – Clare, White Scottish

"We want to really celebrate the fact that we have all these different communities from different ethnic backgrounds. They contribute invaluably … so we have a celebration day." – Sandhya, British Indian

Others described how celebrating different cultures helped to counter reductive narratives that only associated minoritised individuals with stereotypical tropes, or with suffering or struggle. There was a strong desire to move beyond tokenistic gestures, towards full recognition of people's talents, creativity and cultural heritage.

> *"One thing that would be really cool is if White people stopped asking people of colour to come and talk about diversity ... What is deeply irritating is just having people of colour talk about diversity rather than their amazing achievements or the fun things that they do." – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

> *"Don't just talk about slavery ... highlight the vast contribution that [Black people] make. To celebrate them for being who they are, doing amazing things." – Chantal, White British*

Several people shared examples of existing projects and events in their local areas. From cultural champions and community theatre productions to multicultural festivals, participants described how they had created trusted spaces, fostered inclusion, and generated a sense of pride in their local community.

> *"There was a theatre that was extremely keen to put on projects that included gypsies and travellers every year. It just became so trusted." – Jane, Romany Gypsy*

> *"I'm working with two different Indian language Ministers to look at how we could form an exchange. We're looking to arrange to do that at Harvest, because that's a mainstream festival that people celebrate all worldwide. And having that sharing of food and getting two different cultural groups visiting and mixing with each other." – Loretta, White British*

Participants also highlighted the value of using arts and storytelling to share the experiences of marginalised groups in rural areas. Theatre, literature, and visual media were viewed as engaging and powerful vehicles for both education and celebration.

> *"Take the Windrush 75 and 100 … tell the story of living in a rural environment as a person of colour. I think theatre is a wonderful vehicle for that." – Lily, Caribbean*

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

> *"In their festival they have this author talking about her book and what it is like to be a non-White person in a rural area … she would say things to them that it would never have crossed their minds." – Cheryl, Trinidadian and Chinese*

Underlying many of these initiatives was the belief that Britishness (or Englishness) should be reimagined to reflect its multicultural reality. Celebration was not just about showcasing difference but about reshaping collective identity.

> *"Being British should be about multicultural life and sharing what positives there are for everyone, equally. Britishness is so global, we're so globally connected because of this history … Britishness is overarching." – Kate, White British and American*

Ultimately, the desire to celebrate diversity was framed not only as a strategy for inclusion, but as a rejection of polarisation and monoculturalism. These celebrations created opportunities for connection within rural spaces and were seen as vital for a truly inclusive countryside.

Allyship in action

A) Empathy

One of the most popular suggestions was the need to foster empathy and self-reflection within any anti-racist work. While policy and structural change were seen as necessary, many participants also underlined a personal need for change. Within this is the need to develop empathy for others and their experiences.

> *"Empathy is a really important part of the conversation … I've got different experiences as a human that I use to draw on and relate to what that person is going through ... Not to be defensive and quick to separate people." – Jessamine, British and Ghanaian*

For several participants, empathy was described not simply as an emotional response but a practice that needed to be built intentionally, which is grounded in humility and supported by openness to feedback and self-examination around racism.

> *"You have to have a bit of humility and not take it personally ... people acknowledging their privilege would be really good." – Tina, Southeast Asian and British*

> *"Courage to examine yourself, your organisation. Courage to take action regardless of any disapproval ... How do you get beyond that and do the right thing?" – Suzanne, White British*

For some, this meant learning how to hear difficult truths without becoming defensive, especially for those with racial or social privilege.

> *"White people are not being killed because of racism so having a difficult, uncomfortable conversation and being able to hold those feelings is the least we can do." – Kate, White British and American*

> *"Accepting people with kindness? When you meet someone you don't use unconscious bias. You don't assume things about people, and I think being open, listening and being a good friend." – Katey, White British*

Many also reflected on the value of using lived experience and shared emotions, such as grief, isolation or fear, as a bridge for empathy. Recognising common human vulnerability was seen as a powerful way to resist the compartmentalisation and "othering" that racism often relies on.

> *"See you as a human being, as my brother, as my sister, as my mother … And that's where people need to start from. And then we can show humility. That's the only way things are going to change." – Ar'mani, Yahudi*

Empathy was also understood as something that could help counter fear. Participants suggested that when people feel less threatened and more connected, they are less likely to act defensively or with hate.

B) Empowering allies

Once people begin to develop empathy for others, many participants argued that the next step is empowering White allies and those in positions of power or privilege to act. Participants were clear that action must be guided, not performative, and rooted in solidarity rather than allyship that has gone awry. Support should be grounded in humility and a willingness to follow the lived experiences of minoritised individuals.

> *"This is not the time for fear. It's not the time to be afraid. It's going to take courage to be able to say, 'We've got to uproot this'." – Kitra, Yahudi*

> *"As a white person, it's critical because only a White person can really address racism with another White person fully." – Paul, Mixed Heritage*

Some described small but meaningful actions that White people can take, such as starting conversations, being a good active bystander, and noticing and challenging everyday exclusions. The accumulation of these actions, they argued, could shift hostile and racist cultures and create more inclusive environments.

> *"Try and just make the people around you think. If you can convert a couple of people and then a couple more people … that's probably the best thing we can do as allies." – Robbie, White British*

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

"You build up these muscles and things become easier the more you do them … Equip yourself with that confidence, with the language, with the knowledge." – Tsara, White British

Participants also highlighted the importance of support that did not alienate other White people but calls them in to learn alongside you. Within this, participants spoke about the value of using personal strengths, whether communication, art, parenting, or protest, to engage others and keep the momentum going. Participants also underlined that not all action needs to be public or immediate. Quiet acts of allyship, reflection, or feedback can be just as powerful.

C) Creating safe spaces for dialogue

Throughout the research, the need for safe spaces, where people can speak honestly and connect across difference, was a recurring theme. These spaces were seen as crucial for dialogue, reflection, and long-term change. Without them, participants felt that conversations about race and belonging either did not happen or quickly became polarised and defensive.

Participants spoke about the value of dialogue that was structured but not stifled; which welcomed vulnerability but maintained respect; and which provided a place to learn, challenge and grow together. Whether through informal conversation, or in facilitated settings, these spaces were about creating the conditions for people to think differently, and act differently.

"If you don't allow people to express their views, they will go underground. It's really important, as part of a liberal democratic society, that people can air these things so we can dispel these myths." – Clare, White Scottish

"We need to have many more conversations across all groups to understand where everyone's coming from… It's not about pointing the finger, it's about acknowledging there is a problem and working together." – Sophie, White British

Many people described how the most impactful moments came from unexpected connections; spaces where people from different walks of life shared their stories, asked questions and challenged each other with compassion.

"They sat and they listened to each other… and by the end of it they were going, 'Oh yeah, I never thought of that.' It was probably the most brilliant example I've ever seen." – Jessamine, British and Ghanaian

> *"I think the goal is just to have conversations, to find common ground… constructive conversations with people who might not understand the issue." – Adrian, East Asian*

Safe spaces, in this context, were not about avoiding discomfort. They were about managing it with care, whilst recognising the very real concerns and fears different groups may hold. They offered a way to resist silence and to confront difficult truths without blame. In rural contexts where communities may be tight-knit, isolated or resistant to change, these spaces become a site for transformation, to make the countryside inclusive and welcoming to everyone.

Reflection: research on rural racism

Undertaking research into racism in rural England is difficult. Within the two-year lifecycle of this project, we witnessed worrying steps backwards, including the racist riots in the summer of 2024 and the increase in right wing populist thinking into our mainstream politics, governance and media narratives, with visible effects on rural populations opinions and voting patterns.

And yet, even in this difficult climate, this research has revealed the possibility for change that lies in rural communities. It has highlighted the valuable contributions of people and organisations, often working quietly, creatively, and with limited resource, who are committed to building something better. People who are refusing to let racism go unchallenged. People who are carving out spaces of welcome, belonging, and solidarity, often in places where isolation and hostility might have once gone unspoken.

Rural England has always been rich in beauty, but it can also be rich in justice. For that to be a reality for all, action must be sustained, not just by those directly affected but by everyone who wants to see a different and more inclusive future. There is no single solution to rural racism, but this report makes clear that change is both necessary and possible. It begins with listening. It continues with accountability; with reimagining who the countryside is for, and with recognising that anti-racism is not a niche concern but a shared responsibility. We hope that this report can be a small step in that direction.

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028

The Rural Racism Project: Towards an Inclusive Countryside
Centre for Hate Studies
University of Leicester,
School of Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy
University Road
Leicester, LE1 7RH, UK

e: ruralracismproject@leicester.ac.uk
w: https://le.ac.uk/hate-studies

 /uniofleicester  uniofleicester  @uniofleicester

DOI: 10.25392/leicester.data.29626028