



Policy Paper

The Right to Stay in Rural Areas

**RURAL
YOUTH
EUROPE**



Table of contents

Introduction	3
Context: rural depopulation and its impact	4
Drivers of rural migration	6
Unequal access to essential services	6
Access to housing and land	6
Education and employment opportunities	7
Youth participation and representation	7
Quality of life and sense of belonging	8
Policy opportunities	10
Conclusions	11

Introduction

Across Europe, rural areas are undergoing profound demographic transformations that challenge their long-term sustainability and social cohesion. In response, the European Commission has announced its intention to develop a strategy aimed at ensuring the “right to stay” in rural areas - recognising that individuals should be able to remain in their communities without being forced to leave due to a lack of opportunities, services, or viable living conditions.

This policy paper seeks to contribute to this emerging agenda by bringing forward the perspectives and experiences of rural youth across Europe. Drawing on input from member organisations, it reflects real-life challenges faced by young people living in rural areas, as well as practical solutions already being tested at local, regional, and national levels.

By combining evidence, lived experience, and policy analysis, this paper aims to highlight the structural drivers of rural out-migration and propose actionable recommendations to support more equitable and sustainable territorial development.



Context: rural depopulation and its impact

Rural regions across Europe are facing significant demographic challenges that threaten the viability of local communities and the equitable development of territories. According to Eurostat, predominantly rural regions account for almost half (45%) of the EU's area, yet only around 21% of the EU population resides there. This imbalance is compounded by ongoing population decline: over the period 2015–2020, the population of predominantly rural regions fell on average 0.1% each year¹.

The **primary driver of rural depopulation is out-migration**, particularly among rural youth. Analysis of migration patterns within the EU shows that people aged 25–29 are the most likely to move, mainly because they are entering the labour market after completing higher education². It also shows that, in most countries, people tend to move from poorer regions to richer ones within the same country, driven by better economic opportunities³. As a result, relatively few young people in their twenties remain in rural regions, while those who stay tend to be older, reinforcing the structural ageing of rural communities.

However, **population change across rural Europe is highly uneven**. Some regions experience significant decline, while others, particularly those with strong connections to urban centres or offering a high quality of life, are able to attract or retain residents. This diversity highlights that **rural depopulation is not inevitable**, but shaped by economic, geographic, and policy conditions⁴.

Rural out-migration creates a **self-reinforcing cycle of decline**. As young people leave, rural populations age, weakening local labour markets, reducing tax revenues, and **limiting economic growth** and innovation. **Shrinking populations undermine the viability of essential services** such as schools, healthcare, and public transport, further reinforcing this cycle. As population levels fall below a critical threshold, schools may close due to a lack of children, while the need for nearby healthcare increases due to ageing communities. **The loss of these services further reduces the attractiveness of rural areas**, prompting additional out-migration.

Importantly, **fewer people do not necessarily mean fewer needs**. Ageing populations often require more healthcare, adapted housing, and accessible transport, while smaller households can increase, not reduce, demand

1 https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php?title=Urban-rural_Europe_-_demographic_developments_in_rural_regions_and_areas

2 Testori, G., Franklin, R., Saraceno, P., Pertoldi, M., Perea Milla Fernandez, D. et al., Territories and demographic change - Regional patterns and policy approaches, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2026, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/4140574>, JRC143332.

3 Alfredo Alessandrini and others, Demographic outlook on “Right to Stay”, beyond the Letta report, European Commission, Joint Research Centre, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2025, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/4989571>, JR142835.

4 Testori, G., Franklin, R., Saraceno, P., Pertoldi, M., Perea Milla Fernandez, D. et al., Territories and demographic change - Regional patterns and policy approaches, Publications Office of the European Union, Luxembourg, 2026, <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2760/4140574>, JRC143332.

for housing⁵. Ensuring the provision of services in sparsely populated and geographically dispersed areas can prove more challenging, but no less important, particularly when it comes to ensuring equitable access and territorial cohesion.

Beyond these economic and service-related impacts, depopulation also has important **social, cultural, and environmental consequences**. The departure of younger generations disrupts the transmission of local knowledge, traditions, and community identities, threatening the cultural fabric of rural areas. At the same time, reduced human presence can lead to the underutilisation of land and weaker environmental stewardship. Together, these dynamics further diminish the long-term sustainability and resilience of rural communities.

These trends also raise broader concerns of **social equity and territorial justice**. When access to basic services, economic opportunities, and viable living conditions is unevenly distributed between urban and rural areas, individuals in rural regions may be effectively deprived of a genuine choice to remain in their communities. In this sense, rural depopulation is not only a demographic or economic issue, but also a question of **rights and fairness**, challenging the principle that all citizens should have equitable opportunities regardless of where they live.

Contrary to common assumptions, many rural young people express a strong desire to remain in or close to their communities, supported by social ties and attachment to place⁶. The key challenge, therefore, is not simply to increase population numbers, but to ensure that people living in rural areas can lead long, healthy, and fulfilling lives, and that remaining is a genuine choice.



5 Ibid., at 8.

6 Francisco Simões and others, *Here To Stay? The Transitions of Rural Youth Before and After the Covid-19 Pandemic*, Council of Europe and European Commission, January 2026



Drivers of rural migration: perspectives and experiences from rural youth across Europe

Evidence from rural youth perspectives confirms that out-migration is rarely the result of a single factor; it emerges from the cumulative effect of limited services, restricted opportunities, and diminished quality of life. Rural Youth Europe calls European, National and Regional Institution to implement programmes, instruments or policies to solve the following challenges, guided by best practises from several European countries.

Unequal Access to Essential Services

Access to essential services remains one of the most significant structural inequalities between rural and urban areas. Young people report unreliable internet connectivity, very limited public transport (sometimes restricted to one or two buses per day) and significant barriers linked to the “last-mile problem”, which makes access to services dependent on private car ownership. Long distances to healthcare facilities, reduced maternity services, and the closure of post offices and financial services further compound these disparities.

Addressing these gaps requires targeted investment in rural healthcare and mobility systems. Ireland and Germany have implemented financial incentives and grants to encourage doctors to remain in or relocate to rural communities. Expanding community-based healthcare services, including midwife-led maternity care and local medical centres, can reduce travel burdens and improve health outcomes. In Finland, public transport subsidies help ensure affordability regardless of distance, while in Slovenia, pilot ride-pooling and car-sharing initiatives enable residents to coordinate transport where traditional systems are not viable. Reliable digital connectivity must be treated as a core public service, not a discretionary amenity.

Access to Housing and Land

Housing availability and affordability are increasingly critical constraints for young people in rural areas. Limited rental markets, rising property prices, strict planning regulations, and high renovation costs make it difficult to access housing. Legal barriers can prevent individuals from building on family-owned land, while environmental risks and declining property values further complicate investment.

In Scotland, rural housing grants provide financial support for individuals constructing or renovating homes in rural areas. Similar measures such as targeted renovation grants for young residents, rent-to-buy schemes, and programmes facilitating access to land can support long-term settlement. Simplifying planning procedures and removing unnecessary administrative barriers can enable more flexible housing solutions. Legal and technical support for first-time builders can further encourage the reuse of vacant buildings.

To enable access to property and buildings in competition with investors, German local authorities hold a right of first refusal, enabling them to set up own rules and adjusting prices when reselling. Especially for agricultural land and in rural regions with high recreational values the authorities challenge the high competition and redistribute properties to locals, young families and those planning to return.

Education and Employment Opportunities

Limited access to education and employment remains a primary driver of youth out-migration. The closure of schools, lack of secondary and higher education institutions, non-formal education opportunities and insufficient childcare often force young people to leave rural areas early in life. Rural labour markets tend to offer fewer job opportunities, lower wages, and limited career progression. High mobility costs (particularly car dependency) further restrict access to employment.

Supporting rural entrepreneurs, developing co-working spaces and local innovation hubs, and promoting hybrid and remote work models can allow young professionals to remain in rural areas while accessing broader labour markets. Cultural and creative sectors also play an important role: in Ireland, wage support schemes for artists working in communities have contributed to both local economic activity and cultural vitality. Shared-use school facilities, community campuses combining education and public services, and investment in affordable childcare can help retain families. Curricula adapted to rural contexts, emphasising sustainability, agriculture, entrepreneurship, and digital skills, strengthen the link between education and local opportunity.

Youth Participation and Representation

Many young people in rural areas report limited influence over decisions affecting their communities. The absence of effective youth councils in some municipalities, or their limited impact where they exist, contributes to a sense of exclusion. Participation at higher governance levels is often perceived as symbolic. Practical barriers such as time constraints, transport limitations, social pressures further restrict engagement.

Policies should ensure meaningful youth representation in decision-making: through minimum representation thresholds in local committees, structured involvement in planning and budgeting, and expanded youth organisations. Logistical support can make participation more accessible. Mobile youth work initiatives can reach young people in more remote locations: in Estonia, in the Toila Municipality, a sea container was converted into a mobile youth center and located in different areas during the summer periods, providing young people with a safe, socialized environment in a public space that encourages initiative and active citizenship. Crucially, participation should be linked to visible outcomes; without this link, engagement initiatives risk reinforcing cynicism rather than addressing it.



Quality of Life and Sense of Belonging

Quality of life is a critical yet often overlooked factor in young people's decisions to remain in rural areas. Many report a decline in cultural venues, limited social infrastructure, and a lack of spaces for interaction and self-expression. Cultural activities are often seasonal and reliant on volunteers, while opportunities for engagement outside peak periods remain limited. These conditions weaken the sense of belonging and community attachment that are essential for long-term settlement. To challenge them, the German Foundation for Civic Engagement and Volunteering is offering micro grants for small informal groups and bigger programmes for coalitions of local clubs and organisations, to strengthen community building, cultural and social opportunities in rural areas: e.g. villages introduced a digital and mobile platform to connect and communicate for their neighbourhoods, events, clubs and services.

Policy responses should invest in cultural and social infrastructure, including youth centres, community hubs, and creative spaces. Supporting local events and cultural initiatives not only enhances quality of life but contributes to preserving and revitalising local cultural traditions, reinforcing the social fabric of rural communities.

These findings show that ensuring the “right to stay” in rural areas requires addressing interrelated challenges through integrated, place-based policy approaches. Because regions are interconnected through labour markets, mobility, and service provision, demographic change cannot be treated as a purely local issue. Effective responses must therefore improve living conditions, expand opportunities, and strengthen community resilience across territories.

Some existing tools, such as LEADER and Community-Led Local Development (CLLD), already provide a strong foundation for integrated, bottom-up rural development, but require stronger support and more consistent implementation across Member States.

At the same time, policies must be adapted to local contexts. In regions experiencing population decline, the focus should be on adaptation, aligning infrastructure and services with demographic realities while maintaining quality of life. In contrast, rural regions experiencing population growth require policies that manage integration and ensure that housing, services, and local economies can adjust to changing population structures.

Recap of suggested actions

National Level	Regional and Local Level
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop integrated national rural strategies that align housing, transport, healthcare, education, and digital investment - avoiding siloed sectoral responses. • Implement financial incentives for professionals (doctors, teachers, entrepreneurs) to work and settle in rural areas. • Expand community-based and decentralised healthcare services, including mobile clinics and telemedicine. • Reform planning frameworks to enable more flexible and affordable rural housing solutions, including simplified procedures for renovation and self-build. • Establish rural housing grant schemes targeting young residents and first-time buyers. • Invest in rural public transport, including community transport schemes, rural bus network expansion, and digital ride-pooling pilots. • Treat universal digital connectivity as a public service obligation, with binding coverage targets and investment support for underserved rural areas. • Implement rural proofing when designing policy interventions in order to prevent negative outcomes for rural areas and communities. • Introduce mechanisms to improve access to land and limit speculative property investment in rural areas. • Ensure access to affordable childcare and education services in rural areas. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest in social and cultural infrastructure - youth centres, community hubs, creative spaces - as core components of rural quality of life. • Embed meaningful youth representation in local governance: minimum thresholds on committees, structured involvement in planning and budgeting. • Develop co-working spaces, innovation hubs, and entrepreneurship support to expand local economic opportunity. • Pursue peer-learning partnerships with other rural regions facing similar demographic challenges. • Use LEADER/CLLD strategies as the vehicle for integrated local development, ensuring they reflect genuine community priorities through participatory design. • Support local cultural actors and year-round community programming to strengthen social cohesion. • Promote the reuse of vacant and underused buildings for housing and community purposes. • Provide logistical support to enable youth participation, including transport and digital access. <p>In addition to these actions, changes at EU level are required to enable and sustain these efforts.</p>



Policy opportunities

Delivering on the “right to stay” requires not only targeted local and national interventions, but also a supportive and coherent EU policy framework. Without adequate funding structures, clear governance mechanisms, and aligned policy instruments, the structural challenges identified in this paper cannot be effectively addressed.

Rural Youth Europe therefore calls EU policymakers to:

- Provide guidance on the operationalisation of the “right to stay” to support Member State programming;
- Provide an EU-level definition of “rural areas” to improve targeting and monitoring of relevant expenditures in rural areas.
- Replace the 10% rural target with a 10% earmarking to support integrated local development strategies, leaving discretion to Member States to distribute the amounts between different local realities.
- Require Member States to distinguish clearly between:
 - spending located in rural areas, and
 - spending designed to address rural development objectives
- Introduce safeguards against over-attribution of rural spending to unrelated sectoral investments;
- Exclude CAP- and Common Fishery Policy-related expenditures from cohesion-oriented rural allocations to avoid crowding-out effects;
- Develop a clear and operational EU-wide definition of rural proofing and implement it at an early stage of policy design and impact assessment.;
- Provide a common framework and analytical guidance to assess rural impacts across EU and national policies;
- Encourage Member States to consider all of the above points and actions when setting up their National and Regional Partnerships Plans.

Together, these measures are essential to ensure that the “right to stay” is translated from a political ambition into an operational principle guiding EU policy. Without stronger coordination, clearer targeting, and protected funding, there is a risk that rural development objectives remain fragmented and insufficiently prioritised. Embedding these recommendations within the upcoming policy framework will be key to ensuring that rural communities, particularly young people, can genuinely choose to remain and thrive in their regions.

Conclusions

Rural depopulation is not an inevitable process, but the result of structural inequalities in access to services, opportunities, and quality of life. Many young people in rural areas do not aspire to leave; rather, they are often compelled to do so in the absence of viable alternatives. Ensuring the “right to stay” therefore requires creating the conditions that allow people to build meaningful, sustainable lives in rural communities.

It also needs a shift in policy thinking. Rural development cannot be treated as a secondary or sectoral concern, nor confined to agricultural policy alone. It requires approaches that reflect the diversity of rural territories, strengthen connections between rural and urban areas, and prioritise long-term well-being.

At the same time, the effectiveness of these efforts will depend on the strength and coherence of the EU policy framework. Adequate funding, clearer governance structures, and stronger safeguards are essential to ensure that rural development objectives are not diluted or fragmented across competing priorities.

Ultimately, enabling the “right to stay” is about ensuring that where a person lives does not determine their life chances. It is a question of fairness, inclusion, and territorial balance. By grounding policy responses in the lived experiences of rural communities, particularly young people, Europe has the opportunity to build more resilient, vibrant, and equitable territories for the future.



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