

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 1. Why do we want to stay in rural areas?

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale



This briefing explores the **wide and varied reasons why people want to stay in rural areas**, and specifically in the case study site of the Clogher Valley (Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland).



View of the Clogher Valley from Knockmany Cairn

### The STAYin(g)Rural Project

*STAYin(g)Rural* is an international project jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NOW), and German Research Foundation (DFG). The project involves collaboration between three Universities: Queen's University Belfast (NI), University of Groningen (the Netherlands), and the Johann Heinrich von Thünen Institute (Germany). The team includes three principal investigators, one Postdoctoral Research Fellow and two PhD students. The aim of the project is to understand how and why people stay in rural areas at different life transitions, and the contributions they make to rural communities and rural quality of life. The findings will help inform rural policy decisions concerning funding, service provision and living conditions. The project ran from 2019 to 2022.

This series of four research/policy briefings focuses on the Northern Ireland case study, Clogher Valley, situated in Co. Tyrone. The briefings in this series include: 1. Why do people stay in rural areas?, 2. How is rural staying best enabled?, 3. What are the obstacles to rural staying?, 4. Rural staying across the life course: preferences, barriers and opportunities.

### Summary

The Clogher Valley (CV) has a population of stayers, with many people either having not left during their lifetime, or returning to stay after a period away, or moving to the area and now planning to stay for the rest of their life. Our findings revealed several factors which help to explain why people decide to stay in the area:

- The natural beauty of the scenic rural landscape, including the farmed countryside, well-maintained forested areas, and small, compact settlements.
- The experience of a conventional slower-paced rural lifestyle, including enjoying the availability of plentiful space and privacy, alongside the advantages of living within commuting distance to nearby regional towns.
- A strong sense of belonging and rootedness to the area. Many referred to extensive family networks that have lived in the Clogher Valley, for numerous decades, if not centuries.
- The close-knit communities, both within settlement limits and across the open countryside. This resulted in positive rural relations and a strong sense of security and support.

### What did the research involve?

The project adopted a mixed methods research design, including three European rural case study areas: East Groningen (NL), Südharz (DE) and the Clogher Valley (NI). The findings within these briefings are based on data collected as part of a large household survey, interviews, and focus groups, conducted between 2019-2022 with residents living in the Clogher Valley.

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### Staying in the Clogher Valley

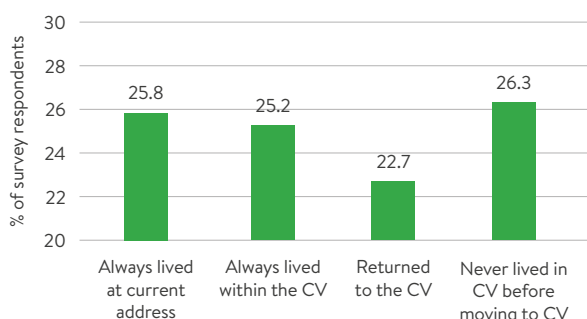
Staying is a common phenomenon in the Clogher Valley (CV). It is often reported to be an active, positive, and long-term decision, and is typically influenced by multiple inter-related factors.

As highlighted in Figure 1, over half of all survey respondents reported that they have always lived in the area, either at the same address (26%), or having moved within the area (25%). A further 23% returned to the area after living elsewhere. Only 26% had never lived in the area before moving to the Clogher Valley. Importantly, thinking into the future, most respondents (86%) reported that they want to stay in the Clogher Valley for the rest of their life.

Whilst two thirds of respondents reported moving to a different address due a change in personal circumstances (e.g. marriage, forming a family, or divorce/separation), the most common reasons for deciding to live and stay in the wider Clogher Valley area were: to be close to family members, a preference to live in a rural location, the overall quality of life, and having a strong sense of belonging to the area (Figure 2).

Within the academic literature, there is a widespread perception that people who stay in rural areas are 'stuck in place' or have been 'left behind'. However, we found that the decision to live in the Clogher Valley was often an active decision, made either by an individual (28%), or else jointly with someone else (55%).

Figure 1: Residential history of people living in the CV



### Rural Landscapes and Lifestyles

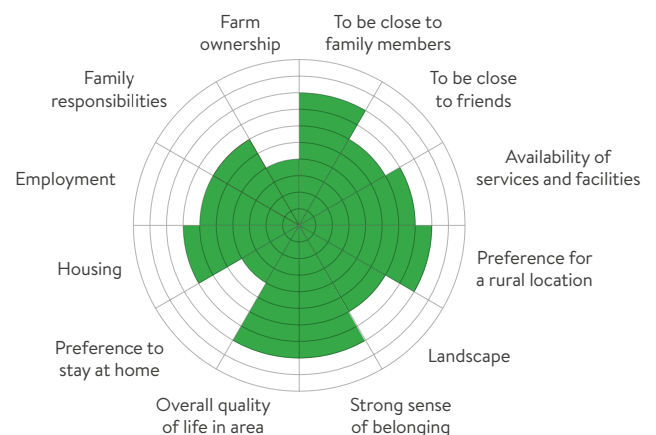
The most common reasons why people decided to live in the Clogher Valley were (i) the preference to live in a rural location, and (ii) its associated natural landscape and quality of life, both of which were also highly rated by both survey respondents and residents interviewed (4.11 and 4 out of 5, respectively). The attraction of the Clogher Valley landscape and lifestyle was reiterated by the high proportion of respondents who either agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements:

- 'I like the farmed landscape of this area' (79%)
- 'I like the small settlement pattern and dispersed housing in this area' (76%)
- 'I value the 'way of life' in this area' (78%)

Insights from the residents we interviewed suggested that it was not only the farmed landscape which was considered attractive. The Clogher Valley also boasts several forest and woodland areas, some of which have recently received substantial investment, and subsequently remain well-maintained without their natural beauty being negatively impacted.

In relation to the Clogher Valley lifestyle, many residents appreciated having the best of both worlds: the peace, space, and tranquillity of the countryside, whilst being within commuting distance of nearby employment and service centres.

Figure 2: Motivations to live and stay in the CV



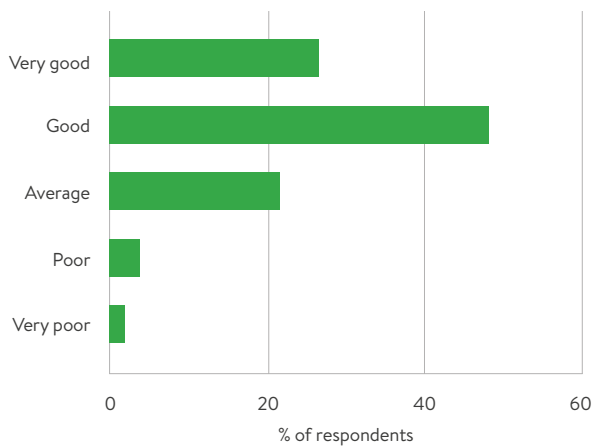
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These lifestyle preferences were stated by both those with and without previous experiences of living in rural areas. For people who had lived either in the Clogher Valley or another rural area, these preferences often related back to childhood memories and experiences. For people who had not, preferences stemmed from stories communicated by friends, family, and the media. However, there was a strong indication that the Clogher Valley lifestyle would provide an ideal quality of life for families (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Rating the CV as a place to bring up children



### Rooted in the Rural: Family Connections

Being close to family was identified as a key reason for wanting to stay in the Clogher Valley: 56% indicated it was important or very important in their decision to live/stay in the area. This extended beyond family living in the same household, and included (grand)parents, adult siblings, aunts/uncles, and cousins. A large proportion of survey respondents reported having family living in the Clogher Valley (89%); a much larger proportion than those with either friends (48%) or colleagues (18%).

Reiterating the importance of family, we found that locally-based family members featured prominently within social networks: 69% agreed or strongly agreed that their 'main social circle were family and friends in the area'. We also found that, in households where a family member had left the area, many had decided to stay relatively close: 35% either stayed in the area or within Co. Tyrone.

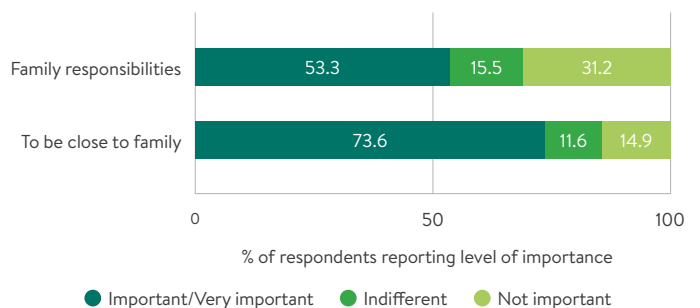
Although many reported having large family networks, the interviews revealed that spending time with one another was relatively infrequent. However, this did not detract from their importance: the sense of security or comfort in having family nearby, in addition to the sense of belonging they contributed to, was considered as important as actual interaction (Box 1).

Box 1: Family and a sense of security in the CV

*"They (relations) live right beside me. But you know, I would say I probably only see them in passing...But no, they're always here if you need anything. It's comforting to know that."  
(Cathy, 45-49)*

Although a larger proportion of survey respondents indicated that being close to family was an important reason for living and staying in the area, a sizeable proportion also indicated that family responsibilities were important (Figure 4). These responsibilities included involvement or succession of a family business/farm and/or caring for family members. Nonetheless, within the interviews, very few expressed feeling regretful or constrained because of these responsibilities.

Figure 4: Importance of family for living/staying in the CV



Family was not only a key factor in explaining why people wanted to stay in the Clogher Valley, but they were also of central importance in helping people to stay (see Briefing 2). This was strongly related to their role in the provision of both employment and housing opportunities.

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### Rural Relations: A Close-knit Community

The Clogher Valley is perceived as having a supportive community, with a strong sense of community spirit (see Figure 5). Consequently, there is a consensus that people living here feel part of the local community. This was supported by our findings on the widespread support and involvement in formal community organisations and reflections on the importance of informal community networks.

The importance of community residents' decision to live/stay in the area was clear from the interviews conducted. Relatedly, having a sense of belonging was identified through the survey as an important reason for deciding to live/stay in the Clogher Valley (62% indicated it was important or very important). When this was explored in the interviews, community was often cited as a reason people felt like they belonged to the Clogher Valley (Box 2).

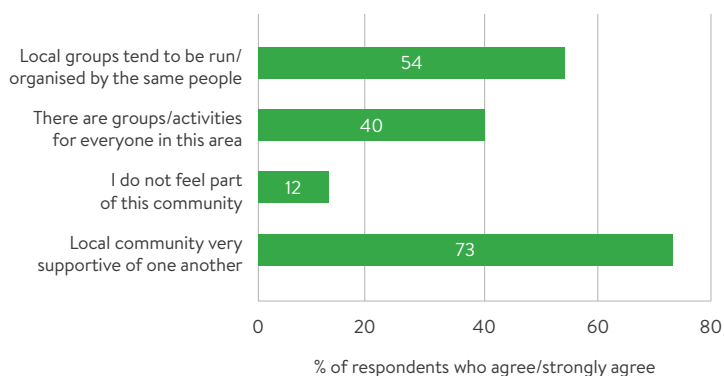
#### Box 2: Community and belonging to the CV

*“To this day, when my son comes back...they [the local community] take him like a long, lost son. So, again, I sound like a stuck record, community will either keep you here or it draws you back.” (Richard, 55-59)*

Three quarters of survey respondents were involved in the local community in some capacity, either through providing support (50%) or being actively involved (25%). Groups and activities most engaged with included church/religious groups, sports/leisure groups, and annual community events. Respondents indicated that the main reasons they engage with such groups/activities are for personal enjoyment, health and well-being reasons, to contribute to the local community, and to meet people. A smaller proportion (24%) suggested that they felt obliged to participate.

Informal support networks were also cited by many as being a key reason they feel part of their local community, and have a strong sense of belonging to the Clogher Valley. Local community residents were described as neighbourly and welcoming, and that they could be relied upon to provide support if/when needed. Although there are positive rural relations reported, which may make people want to stay, it is important to note that there were some indications that there remains room for improvement. Residents interviewed indicated that community spirit could be further enhanced through greater diversity within the running of local groups (including greater cross community), and a greater range of groups/activities on offer (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Community in the CV



This research was granted full ethical approval from Queen's University Belfast. All survey and interview data are anonymised, and names have been changed.

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# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 2. What enables people to stay in the rural?

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale



This briefing explores the factors which help or enable people to stay in rural areas, and specifically in the case study site of the Clogher Valley (Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland).



Connectivity was highly valued by respondents (Image: BBC, 2021)

### The STAYin(g)Rural Project

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### Summary

The Clogher Valley (CV) has been identified as having a large population of stayers (people who have or intend to stay in the area long-term). This is important for the maintenance of both rural quality of life and community resilience. Our findings revealed several factors which enable, or make it easier for, people to stay in the Clogher Valley:

- The favourable location of the Clogher Valley, which is within a 30-minute commute to three regional towns that serve as employment and service centres, and a one-hour commute to the capital city.
- Adequate physical infrastructure provisions and improved telecommunication infrastructure, which ensures that people can remain both physically and virtually connected to people and places within and beyond the Clogher Valley.
- Vibrant villages with appropriate and functioning shops, services, and other facilities. Limited derelict or vacant properties also contribute to village vibrancy.
- Sufficient openings and opportunities which enable people to access the local labour and housing markets.

### What did the research involve?

The project adopted a mixed methods research design, including three European rural case study areas: East Groningen (NL), Südharz (DE) and the Clogher Valley (NI). The findings within these briefings are based on data collected as part of a large household survey, interviews, and focus groups, conducted between 2019-2022 with residents living in the Clogher Valley.

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 2. What enables people to stay in the rural?

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale

### A Connected Countryside: Physical and Virtual

Whilst the preference to live in a rural location was one of the most common reasons for people wanting to stay in the Clogher Valley (see Briefing 1), the advantageous spatial location helped to enable these preferences to be fulfilled. Located in the west of Northern Ireland, the Clogher Valley is within a 30-minute commute (by car) to three provincial towns, including Omagh, Dungannon and Enniskillen, all of which serve as key employment and service centres. This is particularly important given that services and facilities in the Clogher Valley were rated as 'average' or below average (Briefing 3).

Although a sizeable proportion of survey respondents (44%) were either home-based or work in the Clogher Valley, the remaining 56% reported that they commute to work/study elsewhere. The main places of employment/education identified beyond the Clogher Valley were Omagh, Dungannon, Enniskillen, Belfast, and Craigavon. Over 80% reported commuting by car, and 15% car-share. Given that few respondents rated it as good or very good (see Briefing 3), only 1% used public transport to commute to work. Most respondents (78%) also reported shopping in towns and cities beyond the area for main groceries, clothing, and large goods.

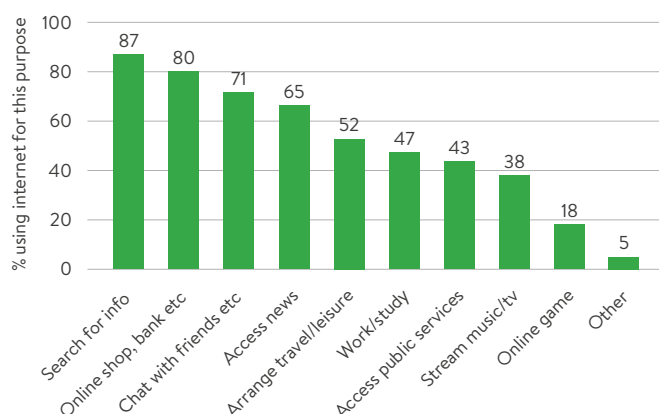
The interviews indicated that the physical infrastructure (roads, etc.) connecting people in the Clogher Valley to these places was also of core importance in enabling staying. Although references were made to the need for continual upgrades/improvements, there was an appreciation of infrastructural investments to date. These have made travelling to other places a more efficient, safer, enjoyable experience (Box 1).

#### Box 1: Improved connectivity in the CV

*"I'm well aware of the old road and how bad it was...so it was more luck rather than design that I moved here after that. The dual carriageway was completed by the time we moved...thankfully." (Mark, 45-49)*

Improvements to telecommunications and associated infrastructure were also emphasised as important in enabling people to stay. This was particularly apparent within rural settlements, but there remains a number of virtual 'blackspots' across the open countryside, where coverage remains less consistent. Reflecting this, the quality of the internet connection was rated as poor or very poor by 50% of survey respondents. Nonetheless, internet usage in the Clogher Valley is widespread: 83% reported connecting to the internet at home, and of those who do, most (84%) do so on a daily basis. The internet is used for a wide range of purposes, as highlighted in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Purposes of using the internet in the CV



Access to the internet in enables Clogher Valley residents to stay connected to people, places, services, and news, both within and beyond the area. It can also facilitate working from home opportunities. Although this was not widely availed of when the survey was conducted (Autumn 2019), the interviews (conducted during the coronavirus pandemic) indicated a growing preference, favour and appreciation for these opportunities - and an acknowledgment that this may enable staying in the future (Box 2).

#### Box 2: Staying and working from home in the CV

*"A company contacted me about a job. I initially said, 'It's Belfast based...Not interested'. They said, 'What if you can work from home twice a week?' That sold it to me. I wouldn't have to move." (Steve, 40-44)*

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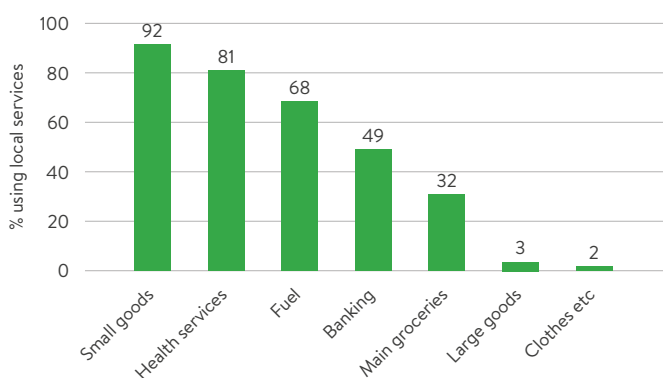
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### Vibrancy within Villages

Whilst physical and digital infrastructure connecting residents to people and places beyond the Clogher Valley can enable people to stay, the facilities, services and community infrastructure within the area are also important. Although shops and services are also used elsewhere, residents' use of local shops, services, and facilities, is important in enabling them to remain viable. This means that villages have a certain vibrancy, which makes them more pleasant places to live.

Although 35% of survey respondents indicated that the availability of services and facilities was important or very important in their decision to live/stay in the area, the availability of local primary health care and shopping facilities were rated as 'average' (Briefing 3). Few respondents indicated that they rely on local shops for main groceries and larger goods. Nevertheless, there was a high usage of local shops for daily goods, perishable items, and fuel (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Use of local shops and services in the CV



The survey also revealed that a large proportion of people living in the area are registered with, and use, local health services. Moreover, despite the growing prevalence of online banking, a substantial proportion still avail of local banking services. Residents interviewed highlighted the importance of additional local services which can enable staying, including local childcare services and education facilities. However, with recent closures, there are growing concerns regarding the implications this will have on the vibrancy and sustainability of local villages.

Public and community facilities also contribute to the vibrancy of villages. Although the availability of community facilities in the Clogher Valley was only rated 3 out of 5, the residents interviewed emphasised their importance (Box 3).

Box 3: The importance of public facilities in the CV

*"The park is just great honestly, just to have it. It's not massive but it's a big thing for us. Obviously, as the boys get bigger, we won't use it as much. But I think for the smaller children, it is great to have it. The forest is great as well."*  
(Grace, 30-34)

### Openings and Opportunities: Employment

Although being connected to employment centres beyond the Clogher Valley (but within commuting distance) is important, local employment openings and opportunities could also enable staying. Many survey respondents reported that they either work at home (23% - of which most were within the agriculture sector and/or self-employed) or elsewhere in the Clogher Valley (21% - of which most were employed within health and social work, education, or wholesale/retail sectors). A small proportion of respondents (10%) also indicated that they create local job opportunities. Those creating these opportunities were primarily employed within agriculture or retail sectors (61%) (Figure 3).

However, within the survey, the availability of local employment opportunities was rated distinctly 'average'. Only 16% of respondents indicated that opportunities were good or very good. Whilst accessing local opportunities was less problematic for those connected to somebody with an established farm/business in the area, many of the residents interviewed suggested that an increased variety of employment opportunities would be important to facilitate future staying (Box 4).

Box 4: Opinion on employment and staying in the CV

*"If there were more products made in this country, maybe create more and different jobs...that would encourage people to stay."*  
(Dave, 40-44)

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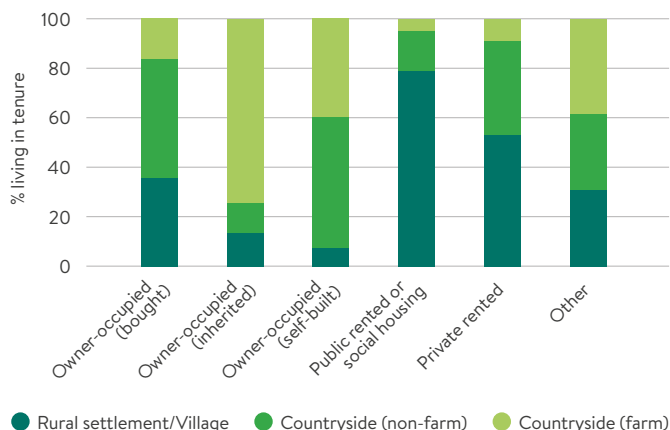
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### Openings and Opportunities: Housing

Similarly to employment, openings and opportunities within the local housing market were found to be potentially important for enabling people to stay in the Clogher Valley. There were evident links between access to local housing and having family living in the area. Several of the residents interviewed referred to being able to stay following the inheritance of a property from a deceased family member, or else being offered the opportunity to build on land belonging to a family member (Figure 3). Within the survey, after the purchase of an existing property, self-builds were the most common housing tenure: 31%, of which 62% of these were built on family farmland. This was followed by the inheritance of a property: 11%, of which 75% are on farms.

Although only one in four survey respondents indicated that housing availability (25%) and affordability (24%) in the Clogher Valley was good or very good, housing featured as a somewhat important reason for deciding to live/stay in the area (35% stated it was important or very important). As survey respondents had lived at their current address for an average of 18 years, one potential explanation for these findings may be the stricter planning controls (relative to earlier time periods) on one-off housing in the countryside. Access to the local housing market may have been easier in previous decades, compared to the current, more restrictive, policy environment. This was reiterated when comparing accounts of the residents who have lived in the area for contrasting periods of time (Box 5).

Figure 3: Housing tenure in the CV



Box 5: Opportunities to build housing in the CV

*“We’re renting here...you see getting planning permission to build is a nightmare...” (Tess, 25-29)*  
*“My husband had already building a house...just the shell as he had planning permission. It made sense to live here.” (Cathy, 50-54)*

Although there were more local housing openings or opportunities in earlier time periods, the interviews highlighted the enduring importance of housing in enabling staying. The residents interviewed indicated that housing was an issue of central importance, and one which policy makers should address to facilitate staying for future generations (Box 6).

Box 6: The role of policy in staying in the CV

*“I do think they should think through their policies, because there’d be a lot more people in this area if they were able to build houses.” (Marie, 70-74)*

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# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 3. What are the obstacles to STAYin(g)Rural?

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale



This briefing explores the **obstacles experienced by people who wish to stay in rural areas**, and specifically in the case study site of the Clogher Valley (Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland).



Agriculture in the Clogher Valley

### The STAYin(g)Rural Project

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### Summary

The Clogher Valley has a population of stayers (people who have/intend to stay in the area long-term), which is important for maintaining rural quality of life and keeping communities resilient. However, our findings revealed challenges which are making staying rural increasingly difficult:

- There is a limited choice/variety of employment opportunities beyond the main sectors in the area.
- Restrictive planning policy has resulted in a reduced supply of housing beyond settlement limits. This creates concerns for future generations being able to purchase locally.
- A high demand to live in the area, alongside a reduced housing supply, means that living in the area has become increasingly unaffordable.
- Declining use of existing rural services is making it increasingly difficult for them to remain viable and compete with nearby towns.
- Centralisation of key services (e.g., banking and health) has raised concerns for the long-term sustainability of the area.
- Inadequate and inconsistent internet provision create challenges for those who have a daily dependency upon this service.

### What did the research involve?

The project adopted a mixed methods research design, including three European rural case study areas: East Groningen (NL), Südharz (DE) and the Clogher Valley (NI). The findings within these briefings are based on data collected as part of a large household survey, interviews, and focus groups, conducted between 2019-2022 with residents living in the Clogher Valley.

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## 3. What are the obstacles to STAYin(g)Rural?

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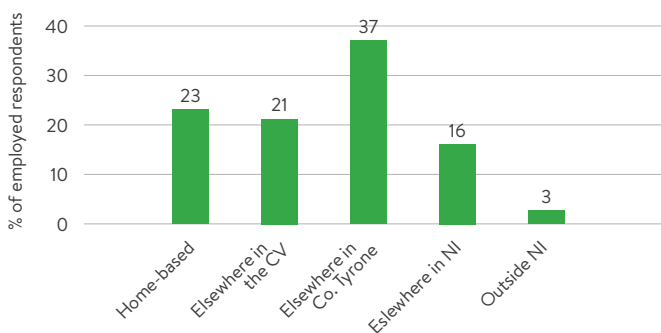
### Employment: Limited Opportunities?

Unemployment levels in the Clogher Valley are low (1.3% of survey respondents). Almost two thirds of survey respondents were either (self-)employed, working full or part time. The most commonly reported employment sectors included: health and social work (17%), agriculture, forestry and fishing (16%), and education and research (12%).

Two in five survey respondents reported that their place of employment is either home-based or located elsewhere in the Clogher Valley. These tended to be long-term positions, with over three quarters stating that they have worked at the same place for over two decades. The main centres of employment are in the villages of Ballygawley, Clogher, and Fivemiletown.

Whilst the survey revealed that employment levels are relatively high and stable in the Clogher Valley, the main concern expressed by the residents we interviewed was the limited variety of employment opportunities within the area. Beyond the main employment sectors reported, job opportunities are scarce and there is limited investment in job creation. Consequently, many residents had to secure employment elsewhere – within the wider Co. Tyrone, or elsewhere in Northern Ireland (Figure 1), resulting in lengthier commutes. The main employment centres in the region and country are, respectively, Omagh and Belfast.

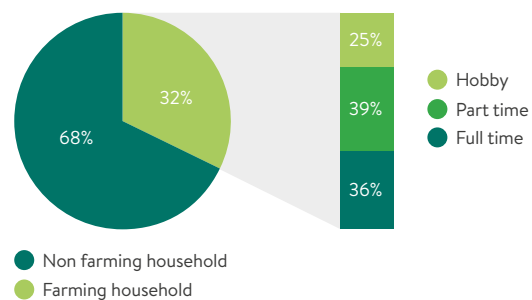
Figure 1: Places of employment of CV residents



### Agriculture in the Clogher Valley: A Changing Industrial Landscape

Although our findings revealed that agriculture remains one of the primary local employment sectors (x8 larger than NI average), there is also evidence that this industry is increasingly witnessing a shift towards both part-time and hobby farming. Almost one third of survey respondents indicated that at least one person in the household was involved in farming. However, only 36% of these farmers were full-time. Almost two thirds are farming on either a hobby or part-time basis (Figure 2). Increasing numbers of farmers are now having to seek out alternative employment to sustain their farm business, which has often been in the family for generations.

Figure 2: Farming in the Clogher Valley



Several of the residents we interviewed highlighted their concerns about the long-term sustainability of this sector. There has been a growth in larger scale commercial farming businesses (by a small number of farmers) which has made it increasingly difficult for small scale farming enterprises to remain viable (Box 1). This was also reflected in the diversity of household incomes reported by farming households, which included some of the lowest and highest earners.

Box 1: A changing agricultural landscape in the CV

*“It’s sad to see some of those farms that you know are going to be discontinued shortly within my lifetime. Generally, those smaller farms have been swallowed up by the bigger farms...you have the big person getting bigger and the small man just not being there anymore.” (Dave, aged 35-39)*

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 3. What are the obstacles to STAYin(g)Rural?

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### An Uncertain Future for the Property Market

Briefing 1 highlighted the influential role of housing in deciding to live and stay in the Clogher Valley. Nevertheless, our findings uncovered several housing issues, many of which have escalated in recent years, and are causing concerns for the future of the property market in the Clogher Valley.

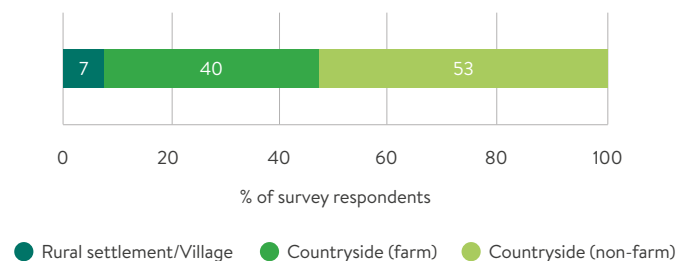
Owner-occupied housing is the most common tenure in the Clogher Valley (84%). Homeowners report having either purchased (42%), built (31%) or inherited (11%) these properties. Reflective of the historically favourable planning policy concerning single housing development in the open countryside, self-build properties are particularly prevalent in this area. Almost all of these properties (93%) are in the open countryside (Figure 3), and 70% were built on family-owned (farm) land. Although there is currently plentiful housing in the area, most of these properties are already occupied. The primary concern is therefore in relation to housing availability, and the reduced opportunities for future generations to become owner-occupiers in the area. Given the shift in planning policy, future opportunities to build have been largely diminished (Box 2). Only one in four survey respondents indicated that housing availability in the Clogher Valley is good or very good.

#### Box 2: Challenges in accessing housing in the CV

*“Originally, we were going to build a house on the farm, but the planning side of things became really restrictive, and they wouldn’t allow us a two-storey. Then there was a house right beside the farm that came up, but we couldn’t afford it.” (Peter, 26-30)*

Although opportunities to build on family (farm) land have reduced significantly, the Clogher Valley remains an attractive location to live. The preference to live in a rural location was emphasised within both the survey and the interviews. Given its popularity as a residential area (see Briefings 1 and 2), recent years have witnessed substantial housing development taking place within local villages in the Clogher Valley. However, in addition to concerns regarding the integration of new proprietors to the local community, the affordability of housing in the area was also highlighted as problematic. Only one in four survey respondents indicated that housing affordability is good or very good. Due to the high demand to live/stay in the Clogher Valley and lower supply of housing given the reduced opportunities to build, current house prices are rising and becoming increasingly unaffordable. For those who may not be able to afford to purchase their own home at this time, there is a growing reliance upon rental properties. Within the survey, one in ten respondents lived in a private rented property, which is a relatively high proportion for a rural area. This greater reliance upon private renting is also partially explained by the limited supply of social/public rental properties.

Figure 3: Location of owner-occupied self-build housing in the CV



# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 3. What are the obstacles to STAYin(g)Rural?

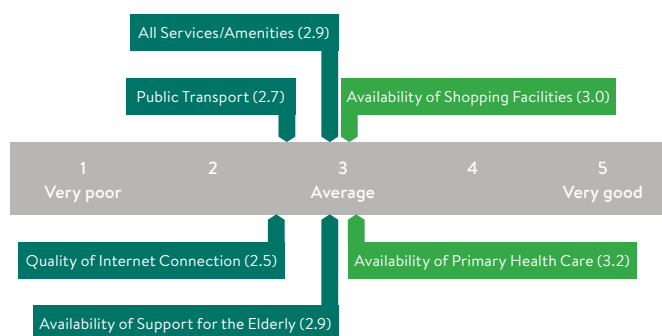
Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale

### Rural Service Provision

Survey respondents were asked to rate a variety of different services within the Clogher Valley to provide an indication of where there is room for improvement. Ratings were provided for the following: quality of internet connection, availability of primary health care, shopping facilities, support services for the elderly, community facilities, and public transport (Figure 4). Generally, respondents only rated these services as 'average' or below average. This was also highlighted by the residents we interviewed, whereby the lack, or ongoing decline, of services within the Clogher Valley was one of the most reported disadvantages or challenges of living in the area. Issues included the decline of local shops and public services, and an inadequacy and inconsistency of telecommunication provisions.

Respondents rated the availability of shopping facilities as 'average', which is reflected in the limited proportion of the local population who shop locally for goods other than the 'basics' (i.e., small goods and staples such as milk, bread, newspapers (Briefing 2)). Instead, there is a greater reliance on nearby towns for main groceries and other higher value goods. Yet, these local contributions can have an important influence on both the sustainability and vitality of an area, particularly in rural contexts. A vital thriving area with operating shops and services may permit people to stay. Likewise, if shops and services are not availed of, closures (which have become increasingly commonplace in rural areas) may result in a greater inclination or desire to leave.

Figure 4: Average ratings of services and facilities in the CV



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Acknowledgments: We are grateful to the research funders for supporting this project (ESRC-Open Research Area (ORA) grant reference: ES/S014683/1). The team sincerely thank the Clogher Valley research participants for their willingness to be part of this research, and for their time and enthusiasm. We also thank the Steering Group of local stakeholders (including DAERA, Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, Mid-Ulster District Council, Community Organisations of South Tyrone & Areas Ltd (COSTA) and Clogher Valley Sure Start) for their invaluable advice on the project as it progressed. The authors are responsible for all content within these briefings.

The availability of local health care services was rated by respondents as 'above average' and are widely used in the area: 81% of survey respondents use local health services. However, there is widespread dissatisfaction that, akin to banking services, some local health provisions have been removed, closed, or centralised (Box 3).

#### Box 3: Concerns about service closures in the CV

*"When we moved here, we thought it was a better place to live. With nearly everything closing now, it's not so good. Doctors, shops, banks, primary schools...What other village is left without a doctors' surgery? What about people like me who can't drive because of their health? It is a constant worry..."*  
(Survey respondent, aged 45-49)

Respondents were also asked to rate the availability of support services for older people. Only 23% rated these as good or very good. When considering prospects for staying (and growing older) in the Clogher Valley, these poorer ratings could have important implications. Finally, the quality of the internet connection was given the lowest rating (2.5/5), and despite being widely availed of by the local population (Briefing 2), it was described as wholly inadequate. One person noted, "there has been a severe lack of funding in the area. Internet connection here is shockingly poor" (survey respondent, 40-44).

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 4. Rural staying across the life course

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale



This briefing explores rural staying across the life course, including the staying preferences, barriers and opportunities for young adults, families, and retirees, specifically in the case study site of the Clogher Valley (Co. Tyrone, Northern Ireland).



Bluebells at Knockmany Forest Park

### The STAYin(g)Rural Project

STAYin(g)Rural is an international project jointly funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NOW), and German Research Foundation (DFG). The project involves collaboration between three Universities: Queen's University Belfast (NI), University of Groningen (the Netherlands), and the Johann Heinrich von Thünen Institute (Germany). The team includes three principal investigators, one Postdoctoral Research Fellow and two PhD students. The aim of the project is to understand how and why people stay in rural areas at different life transitions, and the contributions they make to rural communities and rural quality of life. The findings will help inform rural policy decisions concerning funding, service provision and living conditions. The project ran from 2019 to 2022.

This series of four research/policy briefings focuses on the Northern Ireland case study, Clogher Valley, situated in Co. Tyrone. The briefings in this series include: 1. Why do people stay in rural areas?, 2. How is rural staying best enabled?, 3. What are the obstacles to rural staying?, 4. Rural staying across the life course: preferences, barriers and opportunities.

### Summary

As people transition into different life course stages (including young adulthood, family formation, and post-retirement), residential choices, including staying, may be reconsidered. Different preferences, barriers, and opportunities between life course stages were identified, each of which may influence the decision to stay:

- Despite being positive about living in the Clogher Valley, we found that several young adults had left the area (for education/employment). However, with improved physical and virtual infrastructure, many have returned, or intend on doing so. Yet, there remain long-term concerns about accessing local housing and employment.
- Aided by child-focused services and family-friendly communities, the Clogher Valley is considered to be an accessible and attractive place to start and expand families. However, parents are concerned about the prospect of their children being able to stay in future years.
- With family/social support, and service access, retirees (especially those who have lived in the area for a long time), expect to stay the rest of their life. However, there are concerns about the realistic prospects of staying if support was to be lost alongside declining health/mobility.

### What did the research involve?

The project adopted a mixed methods research design, including three European rural case study areas: East Groningen (NL), Südharz (DE) and the Clogher Valley (NI). The findings within these briefings are based on data collected as part of a large household survey, interviews, and focus groups, conducted between 2019-2022 with residents living in the Clogher Valley.

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 4. Rural staying across the life course

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale

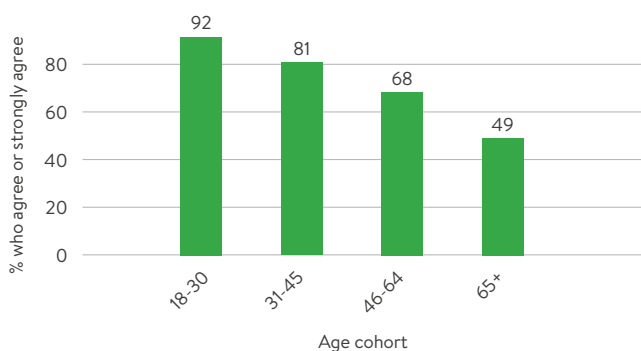
### Staying as a Young Adult in the Clogher Valley

There is a culture of leaving rural areas at the young adult stage of the life course. Whilst we found evidence of this in the Clogher Valley, we also found important differences. For example, 60% of young adult respondents have never left the area. For those who did leave before the age of 30, there is also evidence of returning: 16% of young adults had left but subsequently returned during their twenties.

Traditionally, there has been a perception that “young adults must get out [of rural areas] to get on [in life]”. However, whilst this may have been more applicable for older generations, this perception seemed to be changing. When asked to what extent they agree with this statement, only 38% of respondents aged <30 agreed or strongly agreed, compared to 58% of those aged 65+ (Figure 1). Younger adults are more positive about being able to stay in the area and not feel that their life opportunities are being constrained.

Figure 1: Perceptions of opportunities for young people in the CV

‘Young people have to leave this area to get on in life’



Investment in physical and virtual infrastructure has made it easier for young adults to (i) commute elsewhere for work/study; (ii) retain contact with people living elsewhere; and (iii) avail of services and facilities unavailable in the Clogher Valley (see Briefing 2). As one interviewee commented, “I do feel as if I have the best of both worlds living here”.

This positive outlook on living in the area is further reflected when considering the proportion of young adults who agreed that they would choose to live in the area (68%). Of those surveyed, the main reasons they decided to live in the area were: to be close to family, preferences for a rural location, and for quality of life.

Nevertheless, there remains evidence that of all life course stages explored, young adults have the highest proportion of out-migration. When respondents were asked about people who had left their household, most who moved outside of the area (75%) were young adults. Of those who left as a young adult, the most common reasons were for employment/education, or a change in personal circumstances (e.g., getting married).

Although opportunities to commute/work from home have become more prevalent since the pandemic, the interviews revealed that many young adults appreciated that they could stay, but had chosen to avail of the opportunity to temporarily leave for ‘life experience’. However, supporting our finding that many leavers chose to return (and then stay) in the Clogher Valley, the interviewees emphasised that although many young adults do temporarily leave, many remain strongly emotionally rooted to the area (Box 1).

Box 1: Emotional rootedness of young people in the CV

*“I knew after I left University that I definitely wanted to come home, I didn’t want to stay in England...I didn’t have a permanent job, I came out during that financial crisis, but I always knew I was going to come home.”*  
(Rachel, 26-30)

### Navigating the Charms and Challenges of Family Life in the Clogher Valley

As with other rural environments, the Clogher Valley is seen as an attractive place for families to live and grow. Indeed, the greatest proportion of survey respondents were within the family formation life course stage (64%), and when asked if they would choose to live here given a free choice, 81% agreed.

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 4. Rural staying across the life course

Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale

Generally, all respondents, regardless of age, appreciated the advantage of raising a family in the Clogher Valley, with one stating that it “is a beautiful area to live in, and especially bring your children up”. As a place to bring up young children and teenagers, survey respondents rated the Clogher Valley as above ‘average’ (scoring 3.94 and 3.12 out of 5 respectively). When those at this life course stage were asked the main reason for living/staying in the Clogher Valley, the main reasons given, in order of importance, were: the preference for a rural location, to be close to family, and the overall quality of life in the area. However, for those respondents with children, being close to family was considered a more important reason than the preference to live in a rural area. This emphasises the positive influence of nearby family members on young families deciding to live in the Clogher Valley. Most survey respondents at this life course stage indicated they had family living in the area (94%), and the interviews further revealed exactly how they helped them to stay. The instrumental (e.g., helping with childcare) and emotional (e.g., social contact) support provided by family members was highlighted as invaluable (Box 2). This support also included providing access to both housing and employment opportunities (Briefing 2).

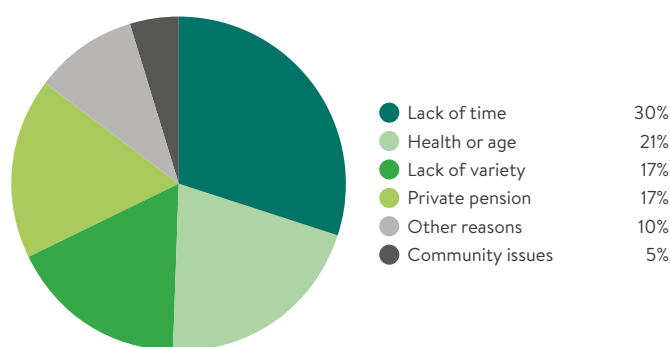
### Box 2: Support provided by family living in the CV

*“Mummy always said whenever she had grandchildren, she was going to be a big part of their lives. She looks after my sister’s kids too. I think it was always talked about as we were growing up, so maybe that was in the back of my mind somewhere when I decided to stay at home.” (Jodie, 30-34)*

Aside from support provided by local family members, services and facilities in the Clogher Valley also proved advantageous for families. The availability of formal childcare facilities, primary and secondary schools in the area, in addition to the provision of public transport to access them, enabled parents to comfortably avail of employment opportunities, either within or beyond the area. Additionally, although community organisations specific to the personal interests of parents may not be widely available (Briefing 1), there are extensive opportunities for children to engage in the community. This provides indirect opportunities for parents to also become involved (e.g., parents’ groups), and subsequently embedded within communities.

However, despite this, raising a family in the Clogher Valley does not come without its challenges. For example, whilst there are multiple reasons why people cannot or do not engage in community activities (Figure 2), for those with younger families, it was a lack of time (due to work/family responsibilities). Consequently, this can result in difficulties in integrating with fellow residents. This was particularly evident for those families who had moved to the Clogher Valley upon family formation.

Figure 2: Reasons why residents chose not to engage in community activities in the CV



Finally, despite rating the Clogher Valley as a slightly above ‘average’ place to raise teenagers, there were concerns regarding the potential implications of a lack of suitable activities to entertain teenagers. Consequently, some villages have experienced increased instances of anti-social behaviour.

# STAYin(g)Rural Policy/Evidence Briefing Series

## 4. Rural staying across the life course

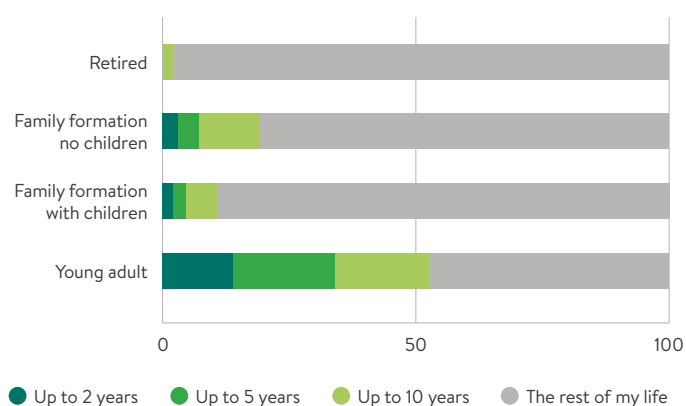
Dr Sara Ferguson, Dr Gemma Catney, and the late Prof. Aileen Stockdale

### Retiring in the rural: 'Included and Supported' or 'Isolated and Struggling'?

Despite having a relatively young age structure (compared to other rural areas), the population of the Clogher Valley continues to age. Of all survey respondents, over one quarter (27%) were post-retirement. In academic research, the transition into retirement has been identified as a prompt for migration. Although there was some evidence of this, most retirees had chosen to stay. However, despite being attractive to retirees in our research, this is on the basis that services are available.

When asked why they decided to live in the area (which was likely to have been at a younger age), retirees indicated that it was because of a preference for a rural location, the overall quality of life, and to be close to family. Many also indicated that a strong sense of belonging to the area was influential. Compared to the total survey sample, a slightly higher proportion of retirees have never left the Clogher Valley (57% vs 51%). These lengthier periods of living in the area may have resulted in greater place attachment. Given this, most retirees expect to stay for the rest of their life (98%) (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Length of time residents expect to live in the CV



Interestingly, for retirees who moved to the area post-retirement, housing, availability of services and facilities, and being close to friends, were identified as more important reasons for deciding to live in the Clogher Valley. There are prevalent perceptions that older adults in rural areas are vulnerable to becoming isolated. This influential role of friends suggests that informal support networks may be important in the Clogher Valley. A large proportion of older adults reported having family or friends living in the area; 86% have family and 49% have friends living locally.

Retirees in the Clogher Valley also widely engage with local formal community organisations. Over 75% of survey respondents indicate that they are involved in the local community. Compared to those younger than 65, a greater proportion of retirees (16%) hold a defined or leading role within a community group/organisation and spend a greater proportion of their time on community activities (29% of retirees spend over 3 hours per week on activities compared to 18% of those at family formation). Some of the more common activities are those linked to the church, special interest groups, and senior citizens' groups.

With age, retirees may require additional support. However, in the Clogher Valley, survey respondents indicated that the availability of support services for older people were 'below average' (rated 2.91/5). When considering prospects for staying (and growing old) in the Clogher Valley, these poorer ratings could have important implications. Notwithstanding this concern, when considering the Clogher Valley 'as a place to grow old', the area was rated as 'above average' (3.76/5). Alongside evidence of community involvement, the importance of social networks, and the presence of family living locally, this may suggest that it is not necessarily the services which are important, but formal and informal support networks.

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