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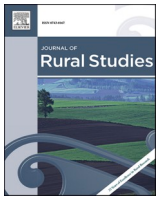

From 'counterurbanisation as practice' to the 'governance of counterurbanisation': Structuring pro-rural relocations through planning regulation of housing

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ABSTRACT

Over the last four decades or more, counterurbanisation studies have focused on statistical analyses of deconcentrated population trends or demand-side explanations to understand 'who' is moving, 'where' and 'why'. These studies, however, tend to overlook how individual preferences are 'structured' or influenced by supply-side enablers or constraints. In this paper, we argue that regulatory and policy regimes also matter in shaping counterurbanisation processes and outcomes. In other words, 'counterurbanisation as practice' intersects with the *governance of counterurbanisation*. We examine this theme through exploring the role of land-use planning in relation to regulating rural housing supply that enables or constrains counterurbanisation movements, drawing on Ireland as a case study. Utilising data from development plans, planning applications and a household survey, we evaluate the role of the planning system in identifying 'where' counterurbanisation is more likely to be accommodated through new development and in applying criteria in relation to 'who' is permitted to build a new rural property, including a range of social and economic criteria to determine an intrinsic need to live in a rural locality. This results in a group we identify as 'familiar counterurbanisers'. We argue that rural housing policies have been constructed around a counterurbanisation narrative, resulting in policies that privilege selective pathways for counterurbanisers moving to rural localities, specifically for those with a pre-existing connection to rural places (e.g. family links, return migrants).

1. Introduction

Over the past forty years or more, extensive research has examined rural residential mobility across diverse spatial contexts. Much of this scholarship has concentrated on in-migration and the so-called rural population turnaround, with counterurbanisation studies taking centre stage. Early work in this area largely comprised statistical analyses of national population trends favouring non-metropolitan regions, providing evidence of a rural demographic resurgence—particularly in the US and UK (e.g., Berry, 1976; Champion, 1989). As researchers sought to 'make sense of counterurbanisation' (Mitchell, 2004), the literature broadened to consider its driving forces, spatial scales, cycles of change, effects on host communities, and the interactions between rural places and pro-rural newcomers (e.g., Rivera, 2025). A key focus within this body of work has been on *demand-side explanations* of rural residential movements and counterurbanisation trends. In other words, counterurbanisation is explored in terms of lifestyle preferences or consumption practices. From this perspective, key questions in explaining counterurbanisation focus on, for example: who are the counterurbanisers? Where do they come from? And what draws them to live in different types of rural localities? This has led to studies focusing on the rural amenity factors that lead people to form attachments to particular rural landscapes and to migrate to them (Argent and Plummer, 2024) or on the importance of middle-class representations of rurality in underpinning consumption practices. For Smith and Phillips (2001), the acquisition of symbolic capital bound up with notions of 'place' in the countryside has proved very alluring for the new middle classes in pursuit of identity, belonging and status.

However, while revealing important drivers (e.g. quality of life factors, employment opportunities) behind counterurban movements,

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demand-side explanations tend to overlook how individual preferences are 'structured' or influenced by supply-side enablers or constraints particularly in relation to housing supply. This includes how pro-rural preferences are enabled or constrained through housing markets and the affordability of moving from urban to rural locations. In this context, there may be a latent demand for pro-rural relocations which is constrained by scarce housing resources. In this paper, we seek to contribute to the counterurbanisation and rural mobilities literature through examining how land-use planning policies and regulations intersect with pro-rural relocations. Therefore, we seek to focus on regulatory constraints or enablers through the planning system that controls the distribution and quantity of new housing supply in rural places. We argue that this is a neglected dimension of the 'counterurbanisation story' (following Champion, 1998). The key research question is: to what extent does spatial governance, examined through the lens of land use planning, shape counterurbanisation processes and outcomes? In this context, we consider land use planning policies, practices and decision-making as a critical avenue to constrain or enable the supply of rural housing, which in turn frames the spatial variegation of counterurbanisation outcomes.

How regulation and control of new housebuilding in rural places intersects with counterurbanisation is dependent on wider political priorities (and cultures) governing rural spaces. For example, housing scarcity and affordability concerns within rural localities emerge from planning systems that prioritise the preservation of rural landscapes and therefore place restrictions on housing supply in rural areas. In this sense, planning policies can restrict markets and therefore, to some extent, shape 'who' are the counterurbanisers based on financial resources. Secondly, in less restrictive regimes where housing development is more readily accommodated in rural places, rather than restrict housing supply, planning policy may seek to influence housing outcomes in terms of policies that favour 'locals'. Recognising that counterurbanisation can also be a process of settlement change (Mitchell, 2004), in this paper, we examine Ireland as a case study of how a less restrictive planning regime 'structures' counterurbanisation outcomes. This includes the role of the planning system in identifying 'where' counterurbanisation is more likely to be accommodated and also in applying criteria in relation to 'who' is permitted to build a new rural property, including a range of social and economic criteria to determine an 'intrinsic' need to live in a rural locality (often referred to colloquially as 'local need'). This has the potential to create selective pathways for counterurbanisers moving to rural localities. Specifically, these pathways enable pro-rural relocations for a sub-group we identify as 'familiar counterurbanisers'. This group comprises those who are moving from urban to rural but with previous local connections, such as growing up locally, family connections or return migrants. While sharing characteristics with households moving down the settlement hierarchy, the familiar counterurbanisers are generally returning to their rural roots. Moreover, this group is enabled and privileged over those without previous social connections in national and local planning policy to build a new dwelling in the countryside.

By addressing these themes, we seek to contribute to the literature in relation to how planning or housebuilding regulations enable or constrain pro-rural movements, and therefore act to selectively 'structure' rural mobilities. This approach aims to *complement* demand-side explanations of pro-rural relocations. To explore this, we draw on a multi-method study of rural residential mobilities in Ireland. Firstly, we undertook a content analysis of statutory land-use development plans focusing on rural housing policies across 10 local planning authorities (i.e. 40 % of county development plans excluding city councils and local authorities in County Dublin). Secondly, we analysed over 380 planning applications for new rural housing in five local authorities over a 9-month period (assessing over 40 % of relevant planning applications for new rural dwelling units) to examine how applicant characteristics were assessed in the development control process and how this related to housing outcomes. Thirdly, we designed and administered a customised household survey within three case study areas in Ireland, representing a near-urban, intermediary and more remote rural experiences (further discussed in the research method section), focusing on 'recent movers' – people who had moved to their current property since 2012 (n = 433). The remainder of the paper is structured as follows: firstly, we examine the counterurbanisation literature highlighting gaps relating to supply-side explanations. We then set out the research methodology, before discussing our research findings. These are structured around two themes: firstly, the governance of housing through a counterurbanisation lens, and secondly, structuring counterurbanisation outcomes. The paper concludes by reflecting on how counterurbanisation is structured through policy enablers and constraints.

2. 'Structuring' counterurbanisation: the governance dimension

Drawing on the Global North experience, counterurbanisation has been a dominant narrative within rural scholarship for over four decades (Berry, 1976; Champion, 1989; Mitchell, 2004; Gkartzios and Halfacree, 2023). Extensive studies have focused on urban-to-rural relocations (broadly defined) and subsequent socio-economic transformations within rural localities. Research has comprised both statistical accounts and more qualitative case studies, together providing in-depth insights into counterurbanisation processes and impacts (e.g. Argent and Plummer, 2024; Guimond and Simard, 2010; Mahon, 2007; Phillips, 2002). Within case study based research, emphasis is typically placed on understanding demand-side (or consumer-led) factors explaining population movements and the motivations of urban to rural movers – termed as *counterurbanisation as practice* by Halfacree (2012). The counterurbanisation literature has highlighted class identities of the social groups involved, the drivers behind relocations, diverse representations associated with the rural, as well as the implications of such mobilities on shifting community power relationships, development narratives and on support for rural services (see examples in: Bosworth and Atterton, 2012; Liu and Roberts, 2013; Halfacree and Rivera, 2012). In explaining the motives behind counterurbanisation, much literature has focused on the duality between economic (or job-led) and quality of life (or people-led) considerations of the migrants involved (see for example Halliday and Coombes, 1995; Mitchell, 2004). Within the context of quality-of-life factors, the consumption of rural amenity (landscape, green space, scenery, lifestyles etc.) have proved enduring explanations of counterurbanisation movements. These also relates to specific representations of rurality associated with particular constructions, meanings and expectations, which constitute rural mobilities both ideologically and politically (Gkartzios and Halfacree, 2023). Employment opportunities may also underpin motivations, but this factor may also reflect wider enabling or constraining factors, such as structural deficiencies in the rural economy, the emergence of new remote or hybrid working practices, or ability to start a new business as potential entrepreneurs move to rural localities.

Increasingly the counterurbanisation literature has moved beyond the duality of 'economic considerations' and 'environmental amenities' in examining relocation decisions. Often emerging from outside of highly urbanised contexts, research has explored on the role of family and family roots in driving residential location decisions from a life-course perspective (e.g. Feijten et al., 2008). From a rural lens, Lundholm (2012) for example discusses kinship migration amongst older groups in Sweden highlighting the role of birthplace in relocating to the rural. Return migration to the home region is also reported in relation to the mobility of young graduates in Switzerland, suggesting that mobility reasons are not only guided by the labour market but social and family ties as well (Rérat, 2014). Gkartzios (2013) highlights the contribution of extended family networks in Greece in the relocation of urban households to the countryside in a period of crisis through providing property, financial and emotional support as well as helping out with grandchildren. Such strong family ties have been also discussed in

relation to rural mobilities in Ireland. In an Irish context, Gkartzios and Scott (2010) also stress the importance of social or communitarian features of rural places in underpinning relocation decision-making, while in a later study also identify the pull of family and kin networks and housing choice as motivating factors (Scott et al., 2017). Finally, recent research has also highlighted how residential relocations, including counterurbanisation, can be a result of a household response to a crisis. This includes pro-rural relocations due to a financial crisis (Gkartzios et al., 2017), the Covid-19 pandemic (Gallent et al., 2023), and increasingly due to climate breakdown (Scott et al., 2024). These factors have led some scholars to note than counterurbanisation and rural residential mobilities are 'messy' and uneven (Stockdale, 2016). In other words, movements encompass lateral (i.e. rural-to-rural), return migration, temporary mobilities or international movements (Stockdale, 2016; Scott et al., 2017; McManus, 2022), which take place alongside more pronounced counterurban movements identified by Mitchell (2004) such as ex-urbanisation, displaced urbanisation and anti-urbanisation. This has led others to refer to 'pro-rural movements' as a more inclusive term (Halfacree and Rivera, 2012; Rivera, 2025), while Bjarnason et al. (2021) overcome the urban-rural binary by focusing on micropolitan centres (regional and rural towns) and, subsequently, microurbanisation movements.

These advances in the conceptual understanding of counterurbanisation have generally focused on demand-side explanations for population movements. In other words, focusing on relocating households, asking 'who' is moving, 'where' and 'why'. However, while this approach reveals consumer-led drivers underpinning change, this literature often overlooks how individual preferences are 'structured' or influenced by market and regulatory processes that include supply-side enablers or constraints. The most obvious relates to how pro-rural preferences are enabled or constrained through housing markets and the affordability of moving from urban to rural locations. Thus, demand-side studies do not always capture the experiences of those who would *prefer* to make a pro-rural move but are perhaps unable to exercise this choice due to limited financial resources – i.e. latent counterurbanisation demands. Demand-side studies have identified displaced-urbanisation as a form of counterurbanisation (Mitchell, 2004), whereby people move from urban to rural in search of cheaper (and larger) properties outside of constrained urban housing markets. This stands in contrast to ex-urbanisation and anti-urbanisation: these are guided by quality of life considerations with the former maintaining strong connections with the city (through commuting for example), whereas the latter rejecting a city lifestyle altogether. However, in some spatial contexts (e.g. rural England), rural housing is a scarce resource with a significant market value (Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011) and not all *potential* counterurbanisers have the resources to compete with more affluent consumers, including potential second-home owners or with investors availing of short-term rental platforms (e.g. Airbnb) (Gallent et al., 2023). Related (non-rural specific) factors may include mortgage availability, interest rates or individual factors, such as a recent inheritance that can help fund a pro-rural move.

Moreover, regulatory and policy regimes also provide an enabling or constraining factor on pro-rural relocations. While Buckle and Osbaldiston (2022) contend that counterurbanisation is determined by *geographical* context (e.g. physical characteristics of rural places, perceptions of rurality etc.), we argue that regulatory and policy regimes also matter in shaping counterurbanisation processes and outcomes. In other words, 'counterurbanisation as practice' intersects with the *governance of counterurbanisation*. This includes policy measures (at local, regional or national level) that actively seek to encourage or support urban to rural relocations. In these contexts, state support for counterurbanisation is viewed as a contribution to rural development policy through attracting new residents with entrepreneurial skills, or who bring new financial or social capital to a rural locality (Gkartzios et al., 2022). For example, Dilley et al. (2024) examine how counterurbanisation in Japan represents a development strategy pursued by central government as a means of reversing high levels of depopulation and ageing in rural places. In other examples, some European governments have been supporting remote working patterns (accelerated as a result of the pandemic) as a means to support rural communities. Iceland, for example, now aims for 10 % of public sector jobs to be 'location independent' to support remote working, while Norway supports decentralised public sector working through remote working policies and rural-based hub offices for place-independent public sector workers (Nordregio, 2024). These types of initiatives enable pro-rural relocations as well as enabling rural residents to remain in rural localities.

The focus of this paper, however, relates to how planning policies and housing regulations intersect with pro-rural relocations, which is a neglected dimension of the 'counterurbanisation story'. Planning systems control the distribution and quantity of housing supply in rural places through development plan policies and the regulation of new housebuilding through development control decision-making. The regulation and control of new housebuilding in rural places intersects with counterurbanisation in two critical ways. Firstly, planning systems which prioritise the preservation of rural landscapes and the restriction of housing supply in rural places, create rural housing scarcity. This is implicit in some counterurbanisation studies, which explore how counterurbanisation leads to a gentrification of rural places (Phillips et al., 2021). These studies bring attention to the displacement of 'locals' from housing markets who cannot compete with more affluent buyers with urban salaries, leading to acute housing affordability issues (Gallent et al., 2025a,b). In this sense, planning policies can restrict markets and therefore, to some extent, defines 'who' are the counterurbanisers. As Smith et al. (2021) recognise, scarce housing resources in saturated housing markets can, in turn, reduce opportunities for latent in-migrants due to housing pipeline constraints. In the English context, for example, the planning system, dominated by a rural preservation ethos, has long been recognised as an agent of acute housing affordability issues (Shucksmith, 1981; Gallent and Scott, 2019). At the same time, planning practices at a local scale have evolved to counter these pressures, such as rural exception sites (Gallent et al., 2025a,b) or the role of community land trusts in supplying affordable rural housing to address local displacement (Moore, 2019).

2.1. Irish context: governance of rural housing

In many ways, England provides an atypical example of how planning intersects with housing markets and counterurbanisation demands to create exclusive rural places. To provide a contrasting account, in this paper we focus on Ireland, which serves as an example of a less restrictive planning regime where housing development is more readily accommodated in rural places – and in fact a more typical approach to rural planning in a European context (Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015). Over the last two decades, many rural locations, particularly those accessible to urban centres, have experienced high levels of population growth, underpinned by a strong social-cultural preference to live in *single houses* in the open countryside rather than within villages and small rural towns. Indeed, the defining characteristic of Ireland's rural settlement system is its highly dispersed and scattered geography of rural housing. Single detached, 'one-off' houses in the open countryside comprise approximately 70 % of rural dwellings, with the remainder of dwellings located in rural clusters, villages or small rural towns (Keaveney, 2007). One-off rural houses, defined by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) (2016) as occupied detached houses with individual sewerage systems, total 442,699 dwelling units or 26 % of Ireland's entire housing stock in 2016 – see Fig. 1 for an example.

With limited popular appetite for refurbishing existing properties or disused agricultural buildings for residential purposes, the supply of rural housing has almost exclusively been accommodated by new-build properties (Scott et al., 2025). The rural housing supply system has tended to operate on a 'self-build' basis: i.e. houses that are not ready-built by a speculative builder or bought on the second hand

Fig. 1. Example of a 'one-off' rural dwelling under construction, County Louth, Ireland (source: authors).

market (Clapham et al., 1993). Often this process takes place whereby an owner-occupier would gain access to a site for a single rural house, manage or coordinate the construction process, and inhabit the dwelling after completion. Moreover, Gkartzios and Scott (2010) demonstrate that a residential move to or within rural localities in Ireland is generally associated with a new-build property or (less commonly) the purchase of an existing dwelling with the intention to demolish and replace with a new build.

New rural 'one-off' housing is generally accommodated within the Irish planning system, albeit as a deeply contested outcome. While planning officials generally express a preference for restricting one-off dwellings in favour of more concentrated forms of development, dispersed rural dwellings have widespread political and rural community support as a marker of a vibrant and viable rural community which reflect historic rural settlement patterns (Scott, 2012). For example, almost 40 % of houses constructed in the Irish state between 2011 and 2016 were one-off houses in the open countryside, comprising over half of all dwellings constructed within 17 of Ireland's 26 counties (CSO, 2016). As reported by the Office of the Planning Regulator (2022), in 2021, one-off houses accounted for 45 % of all houses permitted nationwide (7,499), an increase of 42 % from 2020. This compares to 27 %, 29 % and 30 % in 2018, 2019 and 2020 respectively. Increasing housing delivery has been a high profile political issues over the last decade, with volume housebuilders focused on cities and nearby counties. Within rural towns and villages, housing supply has been more limited due to limited land supply and market barriers to the construction sector, partly explaining a demand for self-build one-off dwellings (Scott et al., 2025).

Counterurbanisation narratives have been implicitly central to the policy response to persistent high levels of demand for new construction in rural places. From a policy perspective, the issue of planning for rural housing has been one of the most high profile and contested aspects of planning policy and practice in Ireland. Planning frameworks at a national level have been primarily focused on housing delivery whilst encouraging more compact forms of growth. Going against this compact growth policy direction, rural housing supply and demand has tended to reinforce dispersed settlement patterns, which have been criticised as inherently unsustainable and as uncoordinated development (Expert Group for the First Revision of the National Planning Framework, 2023). Historically, the management of rural housing demand was largely a local planning concern for local authorities. However, comprehensive planning reforms in the early 2000s, introduced national and regional planning frameworks alongside a suite of Ministerial planning guidelines, and increasingly national level priorities have shaped planning practices at a more local scale.

Reflecting the contentious nature of housing debates, the *National Spatial Strategy* (Government of Ireland, 2002) published in 2002, was careful to avoid a definitive statement on rural housing. Nevertheless, the strategy did introduce two key concepts for managing rural housing growth. Firstly, it provided a typology of rural Ireland, which provided recognition that rural places are not homogenous, but instead experience different development pressures, demographic forces and trajectories. Secondly, the NSS distinguished between *urban-generated* rural housing demand (essentially counterurbanisation pressures) and *rural-generated* (or local) housing demand, with greater restrictions suggested for the former. Urban-generated rural housing was defined in the NSS as 'housing in rural locations sought by people living and working in urban areas' (Government of Ireland, 2002, p. 106). In essence, this distinction between urban-generated and rural-generated, introduced a counterurbanisation lens to decision-making, whereby the 'lifestyle' and household attributes of applicants became factored into the physical assessment of the planning application particularly in rural areas under strong urban influence. This policy narrative links demand for housing construction in the countryside to counterurbanisation, echoing Mitchell's (2004) view that counterurbanisation can be viewed as a process of change that gives rise to a deconcentrated settlement pattern, thus influencing settlement and development outcomes. Moreover, the demand for rural housing (as framed in the NSS) has been driven by urban-generated growth, and is generally conceived as displaced urbanisation. In this context, counterurbanisation pressures are perceived to be caused not by the allure of rural places but due to 'housing affordability [in urban places], perceptions regarding quality of life in urban areas and inadequate support for sustainable urban development under past land use policies' (Government of Ireland, 2002, p. 107).

These themes were further elaborated with the publication of the government's *Planning Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing* (Government of Ireland, 2005). In summary, these guidelines provide detailed considerations that local planning authorities can consider in framing their rural housing policy within statutory development plans. In general terms, the guidelines provide that: (1) people who are part of and contribute to the rural community (i.e. rural generated housing demand) will get planning permission, in principle, in all rural areas, including those under strong urban-based pressures, subject to the normal rules in relation to good planning; and (2) *anyone* wishing to build a house in rural areas suffering persistent and substantial population decline will be accommodated, subject to good planning. This suggests that potential pro-rural relocations from urban areas are more likely to be accommodated in more remote rural locations, resulting in restricting opportunities for counterurbanisation in near-urban rural places related to Mitchell's (2004) ex-urbanisation and displaced urbanisation categories of relocations. Again, the assessment of the individual applicant, rather than simply the physical development, came into focus as a critical determining factor in assessing planning applications, with the 2005 guidelines providing 'illustrative' suggestions of how individual local authorities might wish to define 'rural generated housing need' in their respective development plans.

The NSS was succeeded with the publication of the *National Planning Framework* (NPF) in 2018. Policies around rural housing are largely a continuation of the general approach adopted in the earlier NSS. However, rather than a detailed rural typology, the NPF simply refers to rural areas under urban influence and other rural places. For example, National Policy Objective (NPO) 19 seeks to: 'ensure, in providing for the development of rural housing, that a distinction is made between areas under urban influence, i.e. within the commuter catchment of cities and large towns and centres of employment, and elsewhere' (Government of Ireland, 2018, p. 74). In this context, rural areas under urban influence are defined as rural places within the commuter catchments of towns and cities with a population of more than 10,000 people or employment centres with more than 2500 jobs. In relation to housing policy, this

spatial distinction is elaborated as follows:

- *In rural areas under urban influence*, the NPF seeks to facilitate the provision of single housing in the countryside based on the core consideration of demonstrable *economic or social need* to live in a rural area, aligned with siting and design criteria.
- *In rural areas elsewhere*, the NPF outlines that the provision of single housing in the countryside should be facilitated based on siting and design criteria.

In effect, the NPF provides the basis for a two-pronged approach to rural housing. Firstly, the NPF encourages local planning authorities to define different types of rural places – an *area-based* approach (spatially differentiated and tailored). Within rural areas under urban influence, the second prong is *applicant-based* – i.e. assessing social and economic needs of the applicant. A definition of social and economic need is not set out in the NPF, instead is left to local authorities to develop and apply local needs criteria. This has the potential to create selective pathways for counterurbanisers moving to rural localities which is compounded further by high levels of variation in terms of how 'local' is conceived by different local planning authorities. As such, planning regulation plays a critical role in relation to *where* new development is permitted and, importantly, in applying criteria in relation to *who* is permitted to build a new rural property, including employment criteria but also related to household attributes that can demonstrate a need to live in a rural locality or a social connection to a rural place. Under the recently published First Revision National Planning Framework (Government of Ireland, 2024), rural housing policies remained unchanged, and the recently published Programme for Government (Fianna Fail, Fine Gael and Regional Independents, 2025) restates the political commitment to continued support for one-off rural housing development.

3. Methodology

To understand the interface between counterurbanisation as practice and its governance, we adopted a multi-method approach with different data sources to build a picture of how planning practices influence counterurbanisation outcomes. Firstly, we undertook a content analysis of key national policies and a selection of local plans to examine policy narratives concerning counterurbanisation and how assessment of new housebuilding in rural areas is undertaken. At a national level, this included Ireland's first national planning framework, the National Spatial Strategy (2002), central government Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Sustainable Rural Housing (2005), the National Planning Framework (2018), and the recently published First Revision National Planning Framework (2024). We also undertook a content analysis of local authority county development plans and policies relating to rural housing, reviewing ten or 40 % of relevant local authority plans to examine specific rural settlement policies. Development plans from local authorities in County Dublin were excluded along with Cork City Council and Galway City Council. Of the remaining 24 local authorities, the following local planning authorities were selected: Cavan, Cork, Kerry, Kildare, Louth, Mayo, Roscommon, Tipperary, Westmeath and Wexford – see Fig. 2. These are representative of Ireland's three-way classification of rural areas: rural areas with high urban influence (near-urban), rural areas with moderate urban influence (intermediary) and highly rural/remote rural (predominately rural) – see Fig. 2.

Secondly, we examined development management decisions relating to applications for planning permission for one-off rural houses. We focused on five local planning authorities (again ensuring variation in terms of rural area classification and regional representation): Cork, Louth, Roscommon, Tipperary and Westmeath. Using the e-plans system (https://www.eplanning.ie), we extracted data on rural housing decisions for a 9-month period (i.e. 1 August 2022 to April 30, 2023). This was a manual process involving a search of planning files and subsequent examination and analysis of individual planner's reports and associated files. The analysis of each file included documenting a brief description of the proposed dwelling, planning decision, rates of refusal/granting of permission, reasons for refusal (if relevant), conditions attached to granting of permission (if relevant), application of local needs criteria, submissions, policies applied and site planning evaluation. The list of analysed applications were cross-checked against the GIS based National Planning Applications Database system (enabling confirmation of locations outside of defined settlement boundaries). In total, we assessed 386 planning applications through random (systemic) sampling approach with the aim of assessing a minimum quota of 40 % of applications per local authority. Overall, 42.4 % of all planning applications for one-off rural dwellings were thematically assessed in the selected authorities during our assessment period.

Thirdly, we conducted a rural household survey to examine housing choices and decisions. The research design had two overarching components: (1) designing and administering the questionnaire survey; and (2) selecting the case study locations and determining the overall sampling strategy. Given that the focus of the research was on assessing rural household mobilities, a questionnaire survey was designed investigating issues such as previous address, reasons/motivations for moving to current residence, and satisfaction with current dwelling/locality. We focused our surveys in three case study locations: Kildare (comprising rural areas under urban influence); Wexford (comprising rural areas under urban influence, strong rural areas, structurally weak rural areas and high amenity coastal communities); and Mayo/Roscommon[1] (representing a predominately rural area).

Surveys were targeted towards owner-occupiers of one-off houses in the open countryside who had moved to their current property within the last 10 years. These were identified through initial screening questions from the survey administrators. Second home properties were excluded. Data collection focused solely on the category of owner-occupiers of one-off houses, as this is the overwhelmingly dominant mode of housing supply in rural areas. In order to identify concentrations of one-off housing within the selected counties, we used ArcGIS software to analyse Census 2022 data at the Small Area (SA) level. Ireland contains 18,919 SAs, each typically comprising between 80 and 120 households. We mapped the distribution of households with individual septic tanks, which served as a proxy for locating one-off houses, given the absence of detailed housing typology data at the SA level (Keaveney, 2007). This spatial analysis enabled us to target hotspots of one-off housing across each county and facilitated the efficient deployment of the survey team. To achieve high response rates and efficient data collection, surveys were administered through a drop-off/pick-up method (see Junod and Jacquet, 2023). Households were approached in person by the survey team operating within these pre-identified hotspots. A brief doorstep interaction was used to confirm eligibility. Once confirmed, participants were given a printed questionnaire, informed of the study's purpose, and a convenient time was arranged for collection – typically 24 h later. Following this approach, a total of approximately 600 surveys were distributed to households across three case study areas (200 per area) with the specified aim of achieving at least 150 completed surveys per area. After reviewing the collected surveys and removing incomplete responses from the sample, we obtained 150 completed surveys from Wexford, 135 from Kildare, and 148 from Mayo/Roscommon. This represents response rates of 75 % for Wexford, 67 % for Kildare, and 74 % for Mayo/Roscommon, resulting in an overall response rate of 72 % for the 433 households included in the final sample. In this paper, we focus primarily on the sub-sample of identified counterurbanisers (n = 241) and a smaller group of counterurbanisers who relocated to a self-build dwelling (n = 127). Due to this more limited sample size, the paper focuses on presenting descriptive statistics.

[1] Counties Mayo and Roscommon were combined into a single case study as more remote rural areas tend to be more sparsely populated.

Fig. 2. Map of case study local authority areas.

4. The governance of housing through a counterurbanisation lens

In this section, we examine how national planning policy (discussed above) enables or constrains counterurbanisation and pro-rural relocations, as it cascades to local planning policies and development control. Within the Irish planning system, the county development plan (CDP) is the principal planning strategy document for the development of a local authority area over the statutory time period of the plan. As required by the NPF, development plans should identify different types of rural areas, with rural areas under urban pressure to be identified with clear criteria for local housing need in these localities (social and economic need). From the review of rural typologies across 10 local authority CDPs, it is possible to identify a variety of categories used, but also differences in the methodologies used to classify these area types and in calculating rural areas under urban influence. In terms of categories, these range from adopting two broad categories – rural areas under urban influence and the rural remainder (e.g. Westmeath) – to more plural and differentiated categories (e.g. six rural area types e.g., Cork). This range of rural area types across CDPs obviously reflect each rural context but also reflect methodological assumptions.

Commuting trends emerge as a critical means to identify rural areas under urban influence, which is suggested within the NPF. This helps to identify labour markets and rural to urban patterns of commuting, which are often dominated by the car as the primary mode of travel. Rural areas under urban influence are often identified using a threshold of 15 % of people commuting to an urban centre for employment, which is based on a methodology devised by the OECD in developing a rural regional typology. While commuting patterns is included in the OECD methodology, this generally refers to commuting to large metropolitan centres of 200,000+ population to identify broad regions under urban influence or those that are more predominately rural regions. In contrast, within CDPs, rural areas under urban influence have been identified at a very fine grain level on the basis of commuting to much smaller, local settlements. In some examples, a broader range of indicators have been applied, including housing density, employment characteristics, economic dependency and age structure (e.g. Kerry). In our sample of CDPs, only three local authorities integrated landscape and environmental factors into identifying rural areas types.

As mandated by the NPF, in rural areas under urban influence, applicants for planning permission for a single rural house must demonstrate an economic or social need (colloquially referred to as 'local need') to live in these areas (also subject to siting/design considerations at a site level). In both Kildare and Louth, the entire local authority area is considered under urban influence, and thus economic and social need criteria are applied in all cases. Different local authorities also apply economic and social need criteria to other types of rural places. For example, in Wexford, applicants for planning permission within defined areas under urban influence, stronger rural areas, coastal zones and landscape and heritage areas, must demonstrate an economic or social need to live in these areas. Cork identifies 6 rural area types: rural areas under strong urban influence; stronger rural areas; structurally weaker rural areas; tourism and rural diversification areas; transitional rural area; and metropolitan green belt. Economic and social need criteria will be applied in all areas in rural Cork except in structurally weaker rural areas.

Therefore, for rural areas under urban influence and a range of related categories, economic and social need criteria are critical in facilitating rural housing demand. *Economic need* generally refers to the occupation of the applicant for planning permission. Farming is the primary occupation noted across the CDPs, with farmers included with their sons/daughters or in their absence, a niece or nephew who will take on the running of the farm. Some CDPs (e.g. Kildare) specify a minimum landholding size and minimum years of ownership, while Cavan is satisfied with full-time or part-time agricultural related occupations. Other specified occupations include: employment in bloodstock or equine related activities; forestry; horticulture; peat industry; inland waterway and marine related occupations. Broader categories – beyond land based occupations – are identified in some CDPs, e.g. persons employed in a local service, enterprise or profession (Mayo), a person whose business requires them to reside in a rural area (e.g. Roscommon), or persons whose work is intrinsically linked to rural areas (e.g. Cavan). In Louth, economic need also includes persons who have an established business which is intrinsically reliant on being located in the rural area. Tourism related occupations are also specified in a limited number of very specific areas. For example, in Wexford's 'Coastal Zone' and 'Landscape & Heritage Areas', owners of a tourism business which requires them to be located in a rural locality may be considered – this excludes B&B owners. In Cork's 'Tourism and Diversification Area' category, persons working full time in rural based sustainable tourism, for a period of over three years, in the local rural area where they work are also included. *Social need* is perhaps a more complex concept to define, attempting to capture how intrinsic a person is to a rural community through their social ties. A wide variation of social need definitions can be identified across the CDPs examined – these are summarised in Table 1.

While national policy is constructed around a counterurbanisation narrative, with the aim of managing demand for so-called urban-generated rural housing within rural areas under urban influence, the application of economic and social need criteria appears to enable *selective* types of counterurbanisation movements. Economic need criteria appears relatively straightforward, aiming to support those whose employment requires them to live in rural locations, favouring traditional land-based economy jobs (farming, forestry etc). However, some county development plans enable broader (beyond productivist) categories of jobs, which may be important for rural areas but are not necessarily dependant on living outside of rural towns and villages. In some local authorities, this includes applicants employed in a local service, enterprise or profession, which could include teachers, pharmacists and so on. Thus, economic need criteria can enable *job-led* counterurban movements, albeit privileging land-based or productivist employment. Social need criteria are more variable across the local authorities examined, based around different conceptions of 'local' and social connections. These also provide significant (but selective) pathways for *people-led* counterurban relocations. Specifically, returning migrants are generally conceived as intrinsic to a rural community and therefore generally granted planning permission to build a new rural dwelling. This includes members of farm families seeking to build a new dwelling on the family farm (regardless of previous residence); returning emigrants, who have live substantial periods of life in other countries; and people considered to have pre-existing social ties to a specific rural community. This could include presenting evidence of growing-up in a local rural area (e.g. school records) or demonstrating that an applicant for planning permission has immediate family connections locally. In some cases, 'local' is considered to apply to entire local authority area and in others, 'local area' is considered to be within specified distances.

4.1. Planning consent and development management

As illustrated in Table 2, the overwhelming majority of rural housing planning applications in the sample examined are for new builds. Replacement dwellings (knock down/rebuild) and renovation of older properties account for approximately 6 % of planning applications – this ranged from 2 % in Westmeath to 17 % in Roscommon. Only one local authority, Louth, refused planning permission more than it granted planning permission. Granting planning permission rates ranged from 39.5 % in Louth to 97 % in Tipperary. The primary reason for refusal of planning permission related to applicants' inability to satisfy local need criteria – however, it should also be noted that potential applicants for planning permission can arrange for 'pre-planning' meetings (i.e. discussions before applying for planning permission) with local authority planners, resulting in those without sufficient proof of local need not

Table 1
Examples of social need criteria in County Development Plans (CDP).

Farm families	Members of *farm families* seeking to live on the family farm. This criteria is applied broadly in some cases (e.g. Westmeath) or linked to economic need in other local authorities e.g. to sons and daughters of farmer linked to their permanent occupation on the family farm (e.g. Cork).
Current rural residence	Persons *currently residing* in the local rural area and who can demonstrate a social or economic requirement for a permanent residence. Some CDPs specify minimum time periods for living locally (e.g. 5+ years in Roscommon; 7+ years in Cork; 10+ years in Tipperary; 15+ years in Kildare; 18+ years in Louth). Years are not specified in some CDPs (e.g. Cavan, Mayo). A study by Gkartzios and Scott (2009) reviewing development plans in the early 2000s also noted variation in relation to time periods that some CDPs specify for persons *currently residing* in the local rural area. Some local authorities that did not specify time periods in this earlier study now include them (e.g. Roscommon), while some that had previously included time periods have more recently extended the time period threshold (e.g. Kildare from 12 to 15 years and Louth from 15 to 18 years).
A history of living locally	Persons who have *spent a substantial period of their lives* (e.g. Kerry 7+ years), living in the local rural area in which they propose to build a first home. Mayo CDP ties this category to *family connections*, i.e.: '*sons, daughters or other relations of non-farming persons who have spent a period of their lives living in the general rural area in which they propose to build a home*'. Roscommon also allows for a family connection: '*persons with a significant link to the Roscommon rural community in which they wish to reside … by the existence in this community of long established ties with immediate family members*.'
Returning emigrants	*Returning emigrants* who lived for substantial parts of their lives in rural areas, then moved abroad and who now wish to return to reside near other family members, to work locally, to care for elderly family members, or to retire. Some CDPs specify a time period in relation to 'parts of their lives' e.g. Cork CDP specifies a minimum of 7 years living locally, while other CDPs leave this open (e.g. Cavan, Mayo).
Caring responsibilities	Persons who need to reside near elderly parents so as to *provide security, support and care*, or elderly people who need to reside near immediate family. Louth also includes care for a person with a disability living in an 'isolated rural area and who does not have any able bodied person (sic) residing with them' (p. 3–25). Notably, this phrasing is limited to considering only physical forms of disability, which has the potential to overlook diverse forms of disability, while highlighting the limitations of planners without specialist knowledge assessing housing need across diverse groups.
Health grounds of the applicant	When health grounds requires someone to live in a rural environment
Changing personal circumstances	Louth CDP also recognises housing need arising from *changing personal circumstances* i.e. social need also includes a person who has been a resident for at least 10 years that previously owned a home and is no longer in possession of that home due to the home having been disposed of following legal separation/divorce/repossession and can demonstrate a social or economic need for a new home in the rural area.

proceeding with an application. Siting and design issues were also widely cited for refusal of planning permission (particularly in County Louth), including inappropriate design, potential contribution to 'ribbon-development', road safety concerns, and potential impact on landscape features (e.g. excessive removal of hedgerows). Applications refused planning permission on design grounds can be resubmitted with modified design schemes. All planning permissions granted were subject to occupancy conditions, which require the dwelling to be the applicant's permanent residence and that the applicant, their immediate family, or their heirs must occupy it for a specified period, often seven years.

Local needs (i.e. economic and social) criteria were applied to the majority of overall planning applications. The exception was Roscommon with only 40 % of applications required to demonstrate local need – given the predominately rural character of this county, this is perhaps unsurprising with less of the county categorised as under urban influence. For the remaining local authorities, local needs assessments were applied to between 84 % and 94 % of applications. For example, all of rural Louth is considered as under urban influence, so its figure of 92 % is to be expected. The remaining 8 % of applications were for replacement dwellings whereby local needs is not assessed as set out in the Louth CDP. In this case, buying an existing rural dwelling with the intention of replacing with a new house represents a potential pathway for a counterurban movement. Cork applies local needs criteria to five of its six rural area types, accounting for 94 % of rural housing applications. The remaining applications were either located in its identified structurally weak rural area or as replacement dwellings where the criteria do not apply.

Notably, the vast majority of local needs criteria was met through establishing a social need (including a small number of health-related cases) to live in rural areas. For example, 94 % and 100 % of rural housing applications in Louth and Tipperary respectively that required applicants to demonstrate local need, were met through social needs. No applications were identified that included economic need only; however, applications were submitted that demonstrated both an economic and social need to live in the countryside. This combination is understandable – for example, an applicant working in farming (economic needs) is also very likely to have family connections within a locality. This confirms the importance of social ties as being of critical importance in generating housing demand and also for providing a counterurban pathway for those with rural roots. Economic need generates significantly less planning applications. This is also indicative of the nature of the rural economy, including structural limitations of the economy in terms of rural job creation, the penetration of urban labour markets into rural space (with increases in commuting distances), new post-pandemic remote working patterns, and a blurring of urban and rural economies (Scott et al., 2025).

Notably, a wide range of social needs are cited within individual planning applications, for example: sons and daughters of farmers; assisting on family farm (but not full time working); for future farm inheritance (and an intention to farm full time at a later point); non-farming rural ties/growing up in area; return migration (international and national); divorce/separation; bereavement (e.g. downsizing); caring responsibilities for ageing parents (with and without health issues at present); health grounds for applicants, their children or parents living locally; and retirement. This latter reason ranges from farmers retiring and seeking to live locally while transferring the farm house to a son/daughter to previous urban dwellers seeking to retire to the rural community where they have roots. Planning consent, thus, requires applicants to provide an extraordinary amount of detail about their private lives and background – most of this detail is required for planning permission, while some applicants provide additional and unprompted information to support their applications – once submitted as part of the planning application, this becomes a *public* document and all information is publicly available. This often includes place of work, family ties, letters from childhood schools or from a local church, letters from local sporting groups, medical records and so on.

In reviewing this planning policy context, a number of observations can be made. Firstly, planning policy is constructed around a narrative of reducing housing demand generated by counterurbanisation processes. This relates to areas perceived as under 'pressure' from housing construction, specifically rural areas under urban influence. This relates to near urban rural localities in the hinterlands of metropolitan areas and also in proximity to smaller urban centres. This 'structures' counterurbanisation through reducing opportunities for housing development in the open countryside driven by ex-urbanisation and displaced-urbanisation. However, selective pro-rural relocations are enabled

Table 2
Development management and rural housing decisions.

Local Authority	No. of rural one-off applications	No. applications analysed	Sampling Rate	New or replacement dwelling		Decision		Local needs (i.e. economic/social) criteria applied	Social needs only (% of 'local needs' based apps)
				New	Repl.	Refused	Granted		
Cork	477	203	42.5 %	194 (96 %)	9 (4 %)	39 (19 %)	164 (81 %)	191 (94 %)	148 (77 %)
Louth	92	38	41.3 %	35 (92 %)	3 (8 %)	23 (60.5 %)	15 (39.5 %)	35 (92 %)	33 (94 %)
Roscommon	75	30	40 %	25 (83 %)	5 (17 %)	10 (33 %)	20 (67 %)	12 (40 %)	8 (67 %)
Tipperary	160	72	44 %	66 (92 %)	6 (8 %)	2 (3 %)	70 (97 %)	63 (88 %)	63 (100 %)
Westmeath	106	43	40.1 %	42 (98 %)	1 (2 %)	13 (30 %)	30 (70 %)	38 (88 %)	29 (67 %)
Overall	910	386	42.4 %	93.8 %	6.2 %	22.5 %	77.5 %	87.8 %	82.9 %

through the application of economic and social need criteria. This facilitates job-led counterurban movements and counterurbanisation related to retirees, returning international emigrants, return to roots type movements (e.g. returning to a rural place or origin later in life-cycle), or relocating due to health grounds. These factors relate to *pre-existing* household characteristics. For example, a married couple with two children relocating from Dublin to rural Kerry could be granted planning permission to build their first home due to one of them having lived there as a child (despite renting in Dublin for 10 years), compared to a similar family without any social ties. As noted above, occupancy conditions are applied to all planning permissions for a one-off rural dwelling meaning that the applicant must be the occupant for a specified period, which results in a restricted supply of one-off houses on the open market. In the next section, we draw on the results of a household survey to examine actual rural mobility outcomes.

5. Structuring counterurbanisation outcomes

As outlined in the methodology section, we also conducted a rural household survey targeted towards owner-occupiers who had moved to their current property of a house in the open countryside within the last 10 years. This aimed to examine actual rural housing outcomes and the extent to which potential pathways to a new-build house prescribed in policy influenced the characteristics of recently moved households. In other words, does the policy landscape enable counterurban movements for specific groups while limiting others? Table 3 explores the relationship between the location of previous residences to current properties. The respondents were asked about the location of their previous residence in an effort to cover all possible residential rural movements that take place in a settlement pattern (see also Mitchell, 2004; Milbourne, 2007). Households that relocated in the study areas from bigger size settlements were classified as counterurbanisers. This distinction is based on Mitchell's (2004) conceptual approach of counterurbanisation based on a 'cascade' notion of counterurbanisation (see also Champion, 2005). Thus, this approach includes movements not only from large metropolitan centres to rural localities, but also those moving (for example) from rural market towns down the settlement hierarchy in a counterurbanisation direction. This approach is applicable in different spatial contexts, allowing rural to be defined in relative ways and is also straightforward for respondents to answer. Households from other similar size settlements, i.e. rural, were classified under lateral migration movements. It was also important to cover local residential movements where previous residence was in the same area, or even movements to the study areas from 'more' rural areas. The latter ones are usually characterised, along with lateral migration, as rural-to-rural migration movements (i.e. Halfacree, 1994). Overall, 56.6 % of our survey respondents can be classified as 'counterurbanisers' i.e. moving to their current property from a more heavily populated area. There were small variations across our surveyed areas, with the highest level of counterurban movements within the near-urban County Kildare. While counterurbanisation movements are dominant, other movements were recorded, notably moving within the same locality, providing further evidence of the 'messiness' of rural mobilities (Stockdale, 2016).

As recorded in Table 4, we examined how the counterurbanisation sub-sample (n = 241) moved into their current property to examine the extent to which counterurban movements involve relocating to a new, self-build property. As outlined in the table, 20.7 % purchased an

Table 3
Rural migration movements. *Counterurbaniser* is classified as those moving from a more heavily populated area.

Description of previous residence in relation to current property (*mobility type*)	Wexford	Kildare	Roscommon/ Mayo	Total
Same area (*local movements*)	45 (31.0 %)	44 (32.6 %)	36 (24.7 %)	125 (29.3 %)
More heavily populated area (*counterurbanisation*)	77 (53.1 %)	81 (60.0 %)	83 (56.8 %)	241 (56.6 %)
Similar population area (*lateral migration*)	20 (13.8 %)	9 (6.7 %)	19 (13 %)	48 (11.3 %)
Less populated area	3 (2.1 %)	1 (0.7 %)	8 (5.5 %)	12 (2.8 %)
Total	145 (100 %)	135 (100 %)	146 (100 %)	426 (100 %)

Chi-Square = 13.575, P = 0.035 (df = 6).

Table 4
Which of the following best describes how you moved into your current property? Self-build related categories highlighted in *italics* (127 households).

Description of how respondents moved into their current property	241 Sample
Not stated	6 (2.5 %)
Bought house from previous owner through estate agent	50 (20.7 %)
Bought house from previous owner through estate agent for significant renovation	27 (11.2 %)
Inherited house and site	6 (2.5 %)
Bought house on site for demolition & to self-build replacement dwelling	*4 (1.7 %)*
Bought site with planning permission & built house as self-build	*12 (5.0 %)*
Bought site without planning permission & built house as self-build	*13 (5.4 %)*
Bought site directly from landowner & built house as self-build	*18 (7.5 %)*
Built house on family-owned land as self-build	*64 (26.6 %)*
Inherited site & built house as self-build	*16 (6.6 %)*
Other	23 (9.5 %)
Total	241 (100 %)

existing property through an estate agent, a further 11.2 % purchased a property for significant renovation through an estate agent and 2.5 % inherited the house. However, over half of the counterurbanisation sample (52.7 %) relocated to a new, self-build dwelling, indicating that in the Irish case, counterurbanisation processes often involve a process of settlement change and not simply limited to a population movement.

From a policy perspective, this sub-sample essentially relates to the description of 'urban-generated' rural housing growth as outlined in national planning policy. In this context, policy at national and local levels seeks to limit new rural housing through applying local needs (economic and social) criteria in the assessment of planning consent for new dwellings. Reinforcing the assessment of planning permissions above, the results suggest that this counterurbaniser group largely had a pre-existing connection with the locality that they relocated to. For example, almost 90 % of respondents reported having family connections nearby. Employment was less of a factor, with 16 % reporting working locally in a rural based sector. As with the analysis of planning files, this suggests that local needs criteria are most often met through social need rather than for economic reasons, placing greater emphasis on people-led rather than job-led relocations. Only 12 % reported having no economic and social need to live in their rural locality. Respondents were also asked to describe the type of area in which they grew up until the age of 12. Residents who grew up in rural areas (either in the open countryside or in villages) appear to comprise the vast majority of the new-build counterurbanisers. Residents who grew up in rural areas form the clear majority of self-build counterurbanisers. 65.4 % spent their childhood in the open countryside—either in a one-off house or in a small cluster—while an additional 8.7 % grew up in a village setting. 17.3 % reported growing up in a town, while just 5.5 % were raised in a city. Early rural experience appears closely tied to later self-build relocation.

This suggests that policies related to urban-generated rural housing are, to a large extent, working as intended. However, this approach enables selective counterurban movements, i.e. for those with pre-existing rural connections. This group may be labelled as '*familiar counterurbanisers*'. That is to say, that this group of new build pro-rural movers display recognised characteristics of counterurbanisation, particularly ex-urbanisation movements, such as moving from more urban locations and continuing to work in urban rather than rural places (only 22.8 % reported working in rural locations). However, this group also have high levels of self-perceived need to live in *familiar* rural localities, often rooted in pre-existing social and family connections and/or returning to live in the rural areas where they grew-up – these counterurbanisers are 'returning to roots', as noted in previous studies by Ni Laoire (2007), Gkartzios and Scott (2010) and Scott et al. (2017). This includes people who retire to the rural place where they consider home and also couples with young children who may wish to raise children in a similar environment to where they grew up. This also suggest that rural localities may be considered by these in-migrants as 'home', regardless of moving to an urban location at various stages of their life cycle for university studies, employment, etc. However, while previous studies have noted the prevalence of return to roots movements in an Irish context, by focusing on the role of planning, this paper reveals that this group is selectively facilitated to make a pro-rural relocation through the planning system, whereas other potential counterurbanisers seeking to build a new dwelling are excluded. This also suggests a potential latent demand for self-build counterurbanisation from households who may wish to make a pro-rural relocation but without sufficient social or economic connections to warrant planning consent. In these cases, planning regulations rather than financial resources may be the more limiting factor.

While official policy narratives around urban-generated rural housing emphasise push factors from urban centres (displaced-urbanisation or ex-urbanisation), the survey data suggest that for our sample of counterurbanisers who relocated via a self-build property, the pull of the rural was much more significant. Table 5, for example, indicates a series of statements answered through a Likert scale (1–5), highlighting the importance of social networks, quality of life factors, and perceptions of rural living that underpin pro-rural relocations. Over 83 % of self-build counterurbanisers agreed or agreed strongly that they were now living in their ideal house. Over 70 % said living closer to friends and family was more important than being near work. Similarly, 63 % agreed that living in a rural location mattered more than proximity to work. In contrast, only 27 % agreed that price and affordability were key factors in their decision. Access to rural housing opportunities appears to be shaped more by planning criteria—particularly local need policies—-than by price or availability.

6. Conclusion

As highlighted by Gkartzios and Halfacree (2023), research on counterurbanisation is now vast and the concept is now increasingly explored beyond Western-Centric and Global North contexts to identify new patterns, processes and ongoing refinement of concept definition. In this context, these authors also note that is impossible to reduce the richness of counterurbanisation research into a single, 'universal' narrative. At the same time, the telling of the 'counterurbanisation story' has tended to be dominated by either statistical accounts of population redistribution or studies of demand-side explanations. These studies have provided a rich account of patterns and processes of counterurbanisation, emphasising 'counterurbanisation as practice' (Halfacree, 2012) to identify who are making pro-rural moves, where and why.

Table 5
For the counterurbanisers who self-built (n = 127), in making your decision to move to your current house, how far would you agree with the following statements?

Statement	Disagree Strongly (n/%)	Disagree (n/%)	Neither agree or disagree (n/%)	Agree (n/%)	Agree Strongly (n/%)	Don't Know/No Answer (n/%)
Living closer to friends and family is more important than living close to work	2 (1.6 %)	4 (3.1 %)	24 (18.9 %)	53 (41.7 %)	37 (29.1 %)	7 (5.5 %)
Living in a rural location is more important than living close to work	–	7 (5.5 %)	34 (26.8 %)	52 (40.9 %)	28 (22.0 %)	6 (4.7 %)
Where I'm living now is my ideal location	2 (1.6 %)	7 (5.5 %)	17 (13.4 %)	45 (35.4 %)	47 (37.0 %)	9 (7.1 %)
I would prefer to live closer to local services and amenities	2 (1.6 %)	44 (34.6 %)	34 (26.8 %)	29 (22.8 %)	6 (4.7 %)	12 (8.7 %)
The quality of life is higher in rural areas	–	5 (3.9 %)	23 (18.1 %)	52 (40.9 %)	41 (32.3 %)	6 (4.7 %)
Price and affordability were my most important considerations in choosing this house	5 (3.9 %)	31 (24.4 %)	46 (36.2 %)	24 (18.9 %)	10 (7.9 %)	11 (8.7 %)
I'm living in my ideal house	–	3 (2.4 %)	12 (9.4 %)	60 (47.2 %)	46 (36.2 %)	6 (4.7 %)
Having more internal and external space is more important than living close to amenities	1 (0.8 %)	11 (8.7 %)	25 (19.7 %)	46 (36.2 %)	36 (28.3 %)	9 (7.1 %)

In this paper, we argue that the *governance of counterurbanisation* has been particularly neglected within this literature, specifically how spatial governance mediates counterurban flows. We contend that understanding different governance contexts add to supply-side explanations, and that policy narratives are an essential component of the 'counterurbanisation story' that complement statistical accounts and demand-side explanations. Governance accounts have been limited but provide a more nuanced perspective on the counterurbanisation phenomenon – highlighting that consumers are not relocating only at will but within a terrain that is regulated by spatial policies creating opportunities and inequalities. This includes how attempts to stimulate deliberate counterurbanisation underpin efforts to repopulate rural areas (Dilley et al., 2022) and how new in-migrants provide essential social, political and financial capital for rural development (Stockdale, 2006). Studies also highlight the governance consequences of counterurbanisation, particularly relating to acute housing affordability for 'local' people arising from more affluent urban households seeking rural properties within constrained rural housing markets – and how local planning policies attempt to increase the supply of more affordable 'local' housing options to mitigate these market impacts (Gallent et al., 2025a,b).

We contribute to understanding the governance of counterurbanisation by focusing on the Irish experience, and its characteristic pattern of dispersed (and usually self-built) rural dwellings. Counterurbanisation narratives have been critical in the construction of national and local planning policies, whereby counterurbanisation demands are viewed as driving 'unsustainable' patterns of new dispersed housebuilding in rural areas, referred to as urban-generated rural housing growth. This form of 'new-build counterurbanisation' is underresearched in the literature. Whilst seeking to discourage urban-generated growth, the policy framework for rural housing enables selective forms of counterurbanisation. This includes all forms of pro-rural relocations to any rural area deemed not to be under urban influence; however, in rural areas under urban influence, rather than local planning officials assessing the characteristics of the physical development for planning permission, building consent is principally determined by the characteristics of the household seeking to build a new dwelling. While an economic need to live in a rural place is not unusual in an international context, the application of social needs criteria is less common. In essence, local needs criteria enable selective urban-to-rural movements, generally favouring those with pre-existing local and rural connections. We term this group as 'familiar counterurbanisers' to reflect how this group share attributes conventionally associated with counterurbanisation (e.g. urban to rural movements, connection to urban labour markets, timing of relocation within the life cycle, etc.), but also, in *policy terms*, are deemed as intrinsic to a rural community due to a previous link with a rural place. While this principle is established in national policy, the criteria and application of local needs policies are determined at local authority level. This leads to variation across Ireland based on different local policy interpretations of 'local', social connections etc. Critically, counterurbanisation outcomes are enabled or constrained through the regulation and control of housing development.

This also plays out in terms of rural mobility outcomes. In our household survey, counterurbanisation was the most significant form of rural mobility. Of the counterurbanisation sub-sample, over half relocated to a new, self-build rural dwelling, compared to less than a third buying an existing dwelling from a vendor. However, while this new-build counterurbanisation group shared many characteristics with the archetypical counterurbaniser, such as continuing to be tied into urban labour markets, we instead referred to this group as 'familiar' counterurbanisers. The overwhelming majority of this group had pre-existing connections to rural places as indicated by moving closer to family, to where they grew up, or to a similar type of house as to where they lived growing up. Therefore, this group was generally returning to the rural or perceived 'home' locality at key stages of the life-cycle (having children, retirement, to look after older parents etc.) or as return-migrants after living overseas. Survey data suggest that the allure of the rural and returning home were more critical factors behind a relocation decision rather than a push from urban living – this contrasts with the assumptions of displaced-urbanisation in national policy. Importantly, while these groups were returning 'home', they were also enabled to do so by national and local planning policy. This suggests that there may indeed by a latent demand for new-build counterurbanisation that is constrained or supressed by the planning system.

However, this approach does raise a number of (somewhat contradictory) equity and inclusion issues. Firstly, a self-build property is a much more affordable housing pathway compared to buying a property from a developer or on the open housing market (Department of Public Expenditure, 2024). In a country experiencing a well-documented housing crisis in terms of affordability and housing supply barriers (Hearne, 2020), those with social and economic connections to rural places have an opportunity to self-build in the open countryside as a more affordable option. Rather than assessing the physical and environmental impact of a proposed development, public planners, instead, are required to assess the lifestyle and background of an actual potential rural dweller, with policies that in effect are a barrier to potential newcomers. Obviously, the assessment of such personal circumstances might be guided by assumptions over who is legitimised to be (or to become) local *and* rural, privileging the ordinary 'Mr Average' (Halfacree, 2007 drawing on Philo, 1992). At the same time, the lack of availability of rental properties or social housing in rural places has been mitigated to some extent on a reliance on family or social networks to access land for a one-off house. Secondly, while favouring 'locals' and those with more productivist connections through land-based occupations, this approach may also undermine the resilience of rural places through excluding potential new residents with new forms of social, political and financial capital beyond land-based connections. While Stockdale (2006) highlights how newcomers can positively contribute to local development, other studies question how these processes actually work in practice, illustrating that counterurbanisers often provide more limited resources for local development in terms of social, political and financial capital or contribution to local economies or labour markets, particularly with the growth of remote working (Willett, 2023). In contrast, policies favouring 'locals' may provide a much greater boost in terms of a locality's social infrastructure or support networks based on pre-existing family and friendship networks (Heaphy and Scott, 2022). As is well documented, without policies oriented towards local need and where new housebuilding is constrained, rural housing tends to be more expensive and less affordable than in urban areas relative to in-area earnings (Gallent et al., 2025a,b). Thirdly, 'local needs' policies that lead to selective pathways for pro-rural relocations may have the unintended consequence of creating socially exclusive places. While restrictive planning policies in rural England may have led to socially exclusive places based on wealth and assets, an emphasis on pre-existing and, essentially, family-based social connections may reinforce the rural as a socially homogenous place, out of step with an Ireland marked by greater diversity and immigration. This suggests the need to place counterurbanisation studies more firmly within housing justice debates (Kordel and Naumann, 2024) to further unpack the influence of spatial governance and political priorities in enabling or constraining pro-rural movements.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Mark Scott: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Luke Kelleher:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Linda Fox-Rogers:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Menelaos Gkartzios:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Formal analysis,

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Declaration of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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