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Sustainable practices and development for depopulating and peripheral localities in European North

Hultsfred - Eksjö Municipalities

Cloe Delgado Garcia

Eva Haberkorne-Vimba

Irma Leene Kiho

Jānis Saverass

Nicolle Ashima Uribe González

Oskar Möbius

Sai Nikhil Narasapuram

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Introduction

Hultsfred and Eksjö are two small municipalities in the southern part of Sweden, located at the border between Jönköping and Kalmar counties, forming an integral part of the cultural and historical region of Småland. Although both municipalities are located at approximately the same distance from Stockholm, which is about 320 km, their demographic development, economic dynamics, and population age structure differ (Statistics Sweden, n.d.).

Participating in the NordPlus 2026 programme “Sustainable practices and development for depopulating and peripheral localities in the European North”, our international group of students from six countries (India, Spain, Mexico, Germany, Estonia, and Latvia) conducted a two-week study on the territories of Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities. The overview of the territory can be seen in Figure 1.

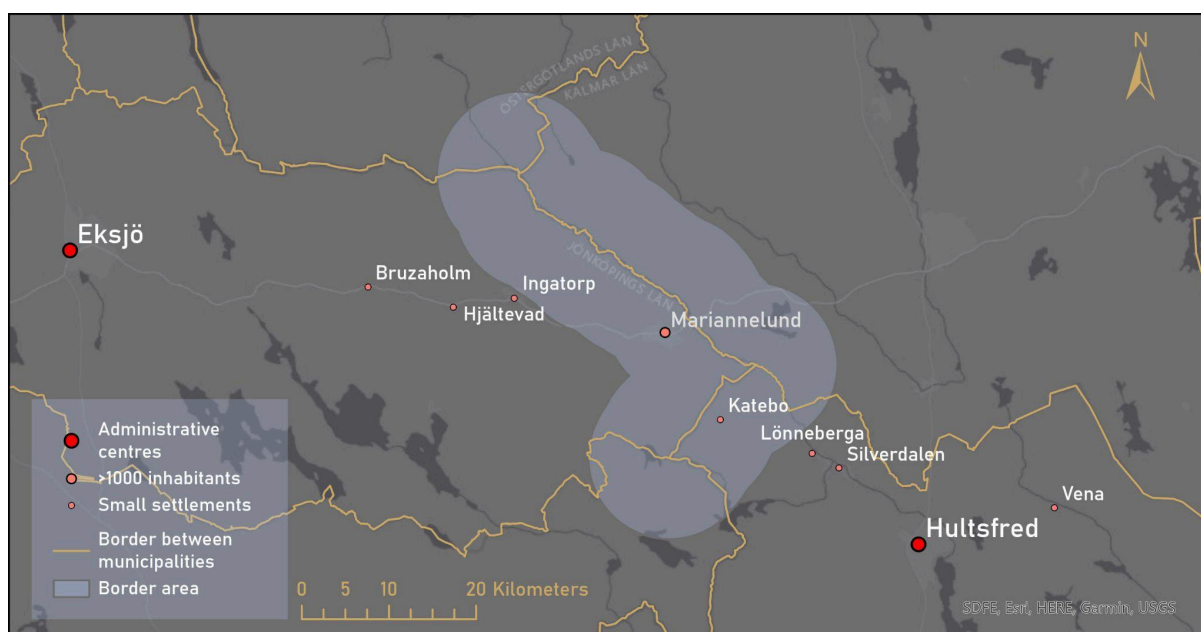


Figure 1. Map of the researched area between Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities. Author: Irma Leene Kiho

Although there is extensive scientific literature available on the decline in the number of inhabitants in rural areas, population aging and depopulation, as well as a large number of studies and academic articles on sustainable development in rural territories and peripheral regions (Syssner, 2015), a significant research gap still exists concerning inter-municipal cooperation. Insufficient attention has so far been paid to the specific challenges between municipalities and between regions in the border zone between Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities and the Jönköping and Kalmar regions. At present, there is a lack of research on residents’ commuting patterns, values, perceptions and visions, and on how these are linked to practical actions and decision-making in the context of interdisciplinary cooperation between the municipalities.

The focus of the research was on population dynamics, aging, sustainable development, community resilience and engagement in the peripheral rural border area between the two municipalities.

To gain a comprehensive understanding of both territories, as well as the similarities and differences in the border region between them, the following main research questions were formulated:

1. What aspects do locals value in the area and what challenges do they perceive? How do locals envision the future development of the area?
2. How is the relationship between Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities perceived?

Rural shrinkage is not only a demographic issue but also a structural territorial process shaped by economic restructuring, migration patterns, aging populations, and service concentration in larger urban centres. In Sweden, approximately half of all municipalities experience some form of population decline, particularly in peripheral regions where young people outmigrate and local labour markets weaken (Syssner, 2015). These dynamics create challenges for maintaining public services, economic vitality, and long-term social sustainability.

Smaller and more peripheral regions become less populous and relatively poorer production-wise (Henning *et al.*, 2023). Depopulation in shrinking regions is commonly associated with aging populations, out-migration of young people, and challenges in maintaining services and economic activity (Syssner, 2022). Taking into account research-based territorial development analysis and potential risks to the territory's economic growth, we analysed which processes, services, and forms of community engagement are valued by the residents.

Population decline and aging, especially in rural areas, indicate that new solutions must be sought for balanced territorial development and greater civic participation in economic and social processes. Technological, global, institutional and possibly territorial aspects are the primary causes behind the shrinking population in the region.

Hultsfred municipality shows a tendency for the population to decline, which is characteristic of many rural areas in European countries. In contrast, the depopulation process in the rural territory of Eksjö is slower. On the contrary, in recent years the population has slightly increased, especially compared to other municipalities in the Småland region (Statistics Sweden, 2026). This can mainly be explained by stronger employment in the public sector, the presence of the military engineering regiment (*Göta ingenjörregemente*), which provides stable jobs, as well as higher quality of life opportunities.

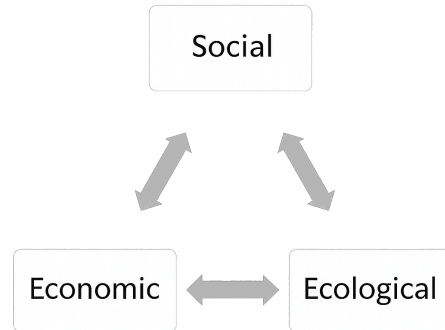
In the study, several both qualitative and quantitative methods were used, including data analysis, interviews with representatives of various target groups, resident surveys, territorial surveys, field observations and GIS.

Based on our findings, in this report we have prepared several recommendations for sustainable, balanced and socially equitable territorial development. The results will inform management for Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities.

Sustainable development definition

“Sustainable development is a three-legged stool embodying environmental, economic and social sustainability; dangers arise when one of these legs is weakened by neglect.” (Symes & Phillipson 2009, 1).

Sustainable Development aims to balance present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.



It focuses on maintaining harmony between environmental protection, economic growth, and social well-being in rural and urban planning, this concept helps guide decisions related to resource use, infrastructure, healthcare, and public transport.

1. Overview of the study area

1.1 Geographical and natural characteristics

The total area of Eksjö Municipality is 1,250 km², while Hultsfred Municipality is slightly smaller with 1,190 km² (Statistics Sweden, 2026). Both municipalities are characterised by extensive forest landscapes, numerous lakes and wetlands, which are typical of the Småland highlands (Figure 2). The Småland highlands are considered a region less suitable for agriculture, where land use has historically been characterised by a combination of forests, pastures and small-scale agricultural areas (Lagerås, 1996). In many places the landscape is strongly undulating with valleys leading to flatter areas. The landscape is mostly composed of forests, fields, lakes and rivers (Hultsfreds Kommun, 2009).

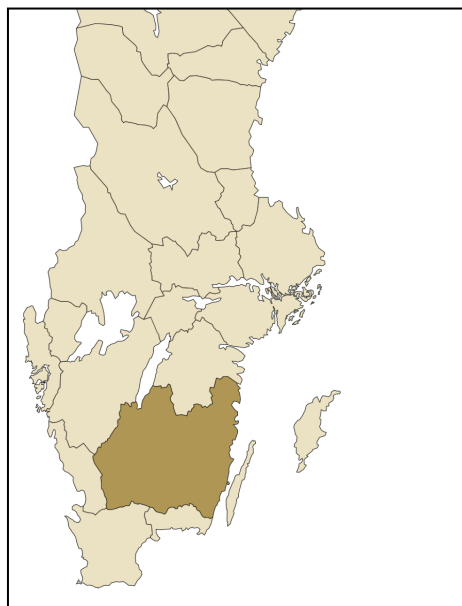


Figure 2. Location of Småland (Lapplanning, 2009)

Approximately 31,000 people live in Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities combined. The town of Eksjö is the administrative, service, trade and cultural centre of Eksjö Municipality with 9,800 inhabitants (Statistics Sweden, 2026). Hultsfred, with more than 5,000 inhabitants (Statistics Sweden, 2026), is the largest settlement in Hultsfred Municipality and serves as the administrative and service centre of the municipality. As interviews show, in recent years residents and civil society organisations have become more active in order to achieve closer cooperation. The common challenges are population decline, ageing and the need for sustainable regional development.

In the regional context, Eksjö and Hultsfred border the municipalities of Vetlanda, Nässjö, Vimmerby and Oskarshamn. The territory is well connected by national roads. Hultsfred municipality is located in the south-eastern part of the highlands, which is part of the Småland highlands with a typical forest landscape.

1.2 Environmental challenges and sustainability

Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities are located in the Småland highlands region, with the highest peak in the area being Kulla Backar at 342 metres above sea level (Eksjö kommun, 2022). The municipalities are dominated by extensive forest landscapes, lakes, wetlands, and moraine soils. These natural conditions provide significant ecosystem services; however, both municipalities face several interconnected environmental challenges typical of peripheral rural areas in Sweden, including the study area.

Sweden contributes a substantial share of the European forests, with dominance of non-industrial forest ownership and an extensive forestry footprint, and hence with an immediate need for advanced conservation and restoration (Svensson *et al.*, 2024).

In Hultsfred Municipality, there are 10 designated nature reserves of national importance (Silverån valley, Virån water system, Emån water system, Virserumsåsen, Ramsebo-Åsen, Stormossen, beaches at Hulingen, Stubbhult, Skinnskälla-Högeruda, and Odensås).



Figure 3. Forestry in Eksjö municipality. Author: Eva Haberkorne-Vimba

1.2.1 Forestry and Biodiversity

Sweden constitutes a significant share of European forests. The majority of the territory of both Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities is covered by forest (Figure 3). However, intensive forestry and forest management practices have affected biological diversity, particularly in old-growth forests and wetland areas. Although forest cover is high in both municipalities, the proportion of high-nature-value forests and biotopes raises concerns and requires strengthened protection (Eksjö kommun, 2022; Hultsfreds kommun, 2023). Svensson *et al.* (2024) point out that, in terms of the contribution of protected areas to the overall picture of forest conservation and restoration in Sweden, Sweden is not achieving the agreed national, European, and international targets for forest conservation and biodiversity. (Svensson *et al.*, 2024). Intensive forestry has led to a decline in biological diversity,

especially in old-growth forests and wetland areas, which portrays that the main environmental issues are forestry and the biodiversity related to these areas, land use and climate change.

According to official data from the Swedish Environmental Protection Agency and Statistics Sweden, nature reserves are the dominant type of protected areas in Sweden, forming the largest part of the protected territory. There are 12 nature reserves in Eksjö Municipality, while Hultsfred Municipality has 22. In both municipalities there are also several Natural 2000 sites, which increase the total number of protected areas and thereby promote the conservation of biological diversity and the development of the regional ecological network (Naturvårdsverket, n.d.; Statistics Sweden, 2025).

1.3 Land use challenges

Although the majority of the territory is covered by forests, in recent years significant and economically important business activity in renewable energy production has entered the area. A good example is the Hultsfred solar battery park (Figure 4) with a capacity of 100 MW, which was built on the site of the former military airfield. This project demonstrates how unused military infrastructure can be effectively adapted to modern trends and the need for renewable energy, while at the same time creating new economic opportunities in the region (Neoen, 2025; Alight Energy, 2025).



Figure 4. Sweden's Largest Solar Park. Hultsfred (Neoen, 2025).

1.4 Climate change challenges

Climate change is one of the most significant future challenges both globally and in the territories of Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities. This issue is clearly acknowledged in the planning documents of both municipalities. In particular, Eksjö's Översiktsplan 2040 highlights climate change and adaptation to it as one of the main challenges that the municipality will face in the future.

Rural municipalities face greater challenges in working with sustainable development and climate adaptation due to their demographic and economic structure (Sävje, 2021). Flood

risk, intense heavy rainfall, prolonged drought, and heatwaves are identified as the main challenges of climate change in both municipalities. Eksjö Municipality integrates climate issues in a relatively detailed manner into its physical planning documents, particularly in relation to infrastructure and construction. In contrast, in Hultsfred’s planning documents, climate change is addressed mainly at a general level, without detailed risk assessments or specific adaptation measures.

1.5 Demographic Profile and Population Trends

According to official data from Statistics Sweden (2026), the municipalities of Hultsfred and Eksjö together have approximately 31,000 inhabitants. Of these, 13,484 live in Hultsfred Municipality and 17,660 live in Eksjö Municipality. Eksjö Municipality has a higher population density (approximately 14.1 inhabitants per km²) compared to Hultsfred Municipality (approximately 11.3 inhabitants per km²). (Statistics Sweden, 2026). According to official statistics, approximately 39% of the population of Hultsfred Municipality and 57% of the population of Eksjö Municipality live in the largest town of the respective municipality. (Tables 1 and 2)

During the period from 1980 to 2024, the population in both Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities has declined. Over the past fifteen years, population trends in Eksjö Municipality have been positive, whereas Hultsfred has continued to experience population decline (Figure 5).

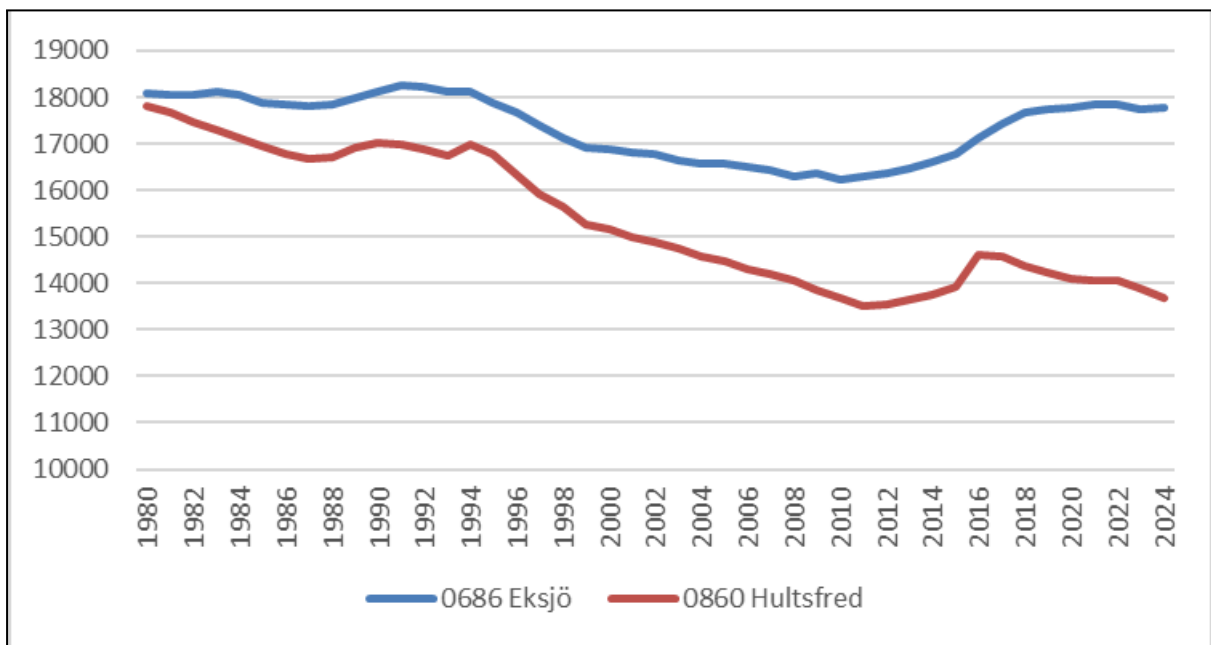


Figura 5. Population dynamics in Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities 1980–2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

Table 1. Population in the settlements of Hultsfred municipality (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

Settlement	Population, 2025
Hultsfred	5301

Virserum	1819
Malila	1556
Silversdalen	785
Mörlunda	927
Jarnforsen	551
Vena	418
Lonneberg	172
Rosenfors	337
Sparsely populated (excluding urban areas)	2618
Total	13484

Table 2. Population in the settlements of Eksjö municipality (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

Settlement	Population, 2025
Eksjö	9800
Mariannelund	1550
Ingatorp	490
Hult	470
Hjältevad	340
Bruzaholm	270
Sparsely populated (excluding urban areas)	4740
Total	17660

Both municipalities' population pyramids indicate an ageing population. An increasing share of elderly people within the population is a reality, especially in peripheral areas where young people migrate to urban regions (Hörnström & Perjo, 2015). The pyramids are clearly regressive, particularly in Hultsfred, while Eksjö demonstrates greater stability. In Eksjö Municipality, the largest population groups are concentrated in the 45–70 age range, whereas in Hultsfred Municipality the dominant group is aged 55–75, indicating a more pronounced ageing process compared to Eksjö Municipality (Figures 6 and 7).

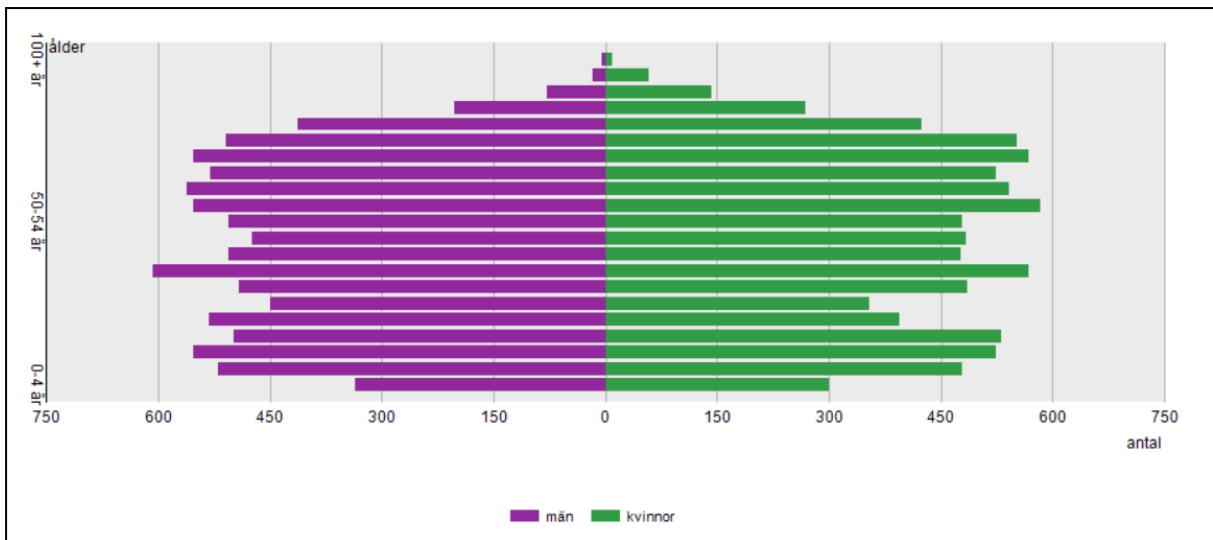


Figure 6. Population age and sex structure of Eksjö (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

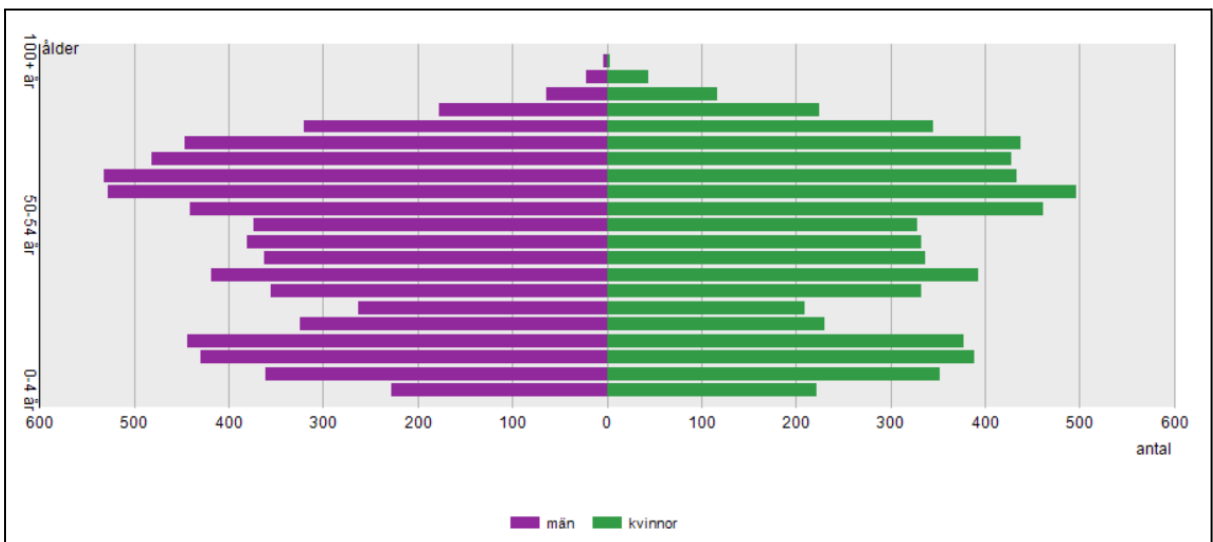


Figure 7. Population age and sex structure of Hultsfred (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

Comparing the age structures of Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities, it is evident that both territories are characterised by ageing populations; however, this trend is more pronounced in Hultsfred. The population pyramid of Hultsfred is characterised by a narrow base and a distinctly wider upper section, indicating low birth rates and a high proportion of elderly residents. In contrast, Eksjö Municipality exhibits a more balanced age structure, with a higher proportion of younger and working-age residents. This suggests greater demographic resilience and a slower depopulation process. These differences reflect uneven regional development processes in peripheral areas.

In Eksjö, the share of children and young people is higher, while women dominate in the older age groups, which corresponds to general demographic trends (Figures 6 and 7).

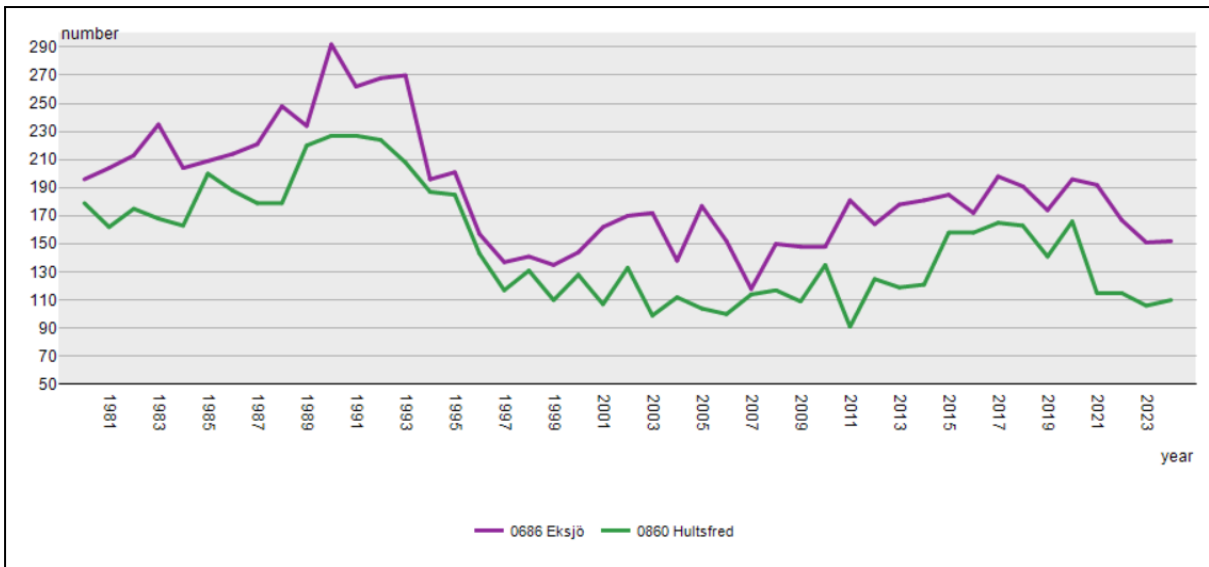


Figure 8. Number of Live Births in Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities 1980–2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

The number of births in the study area has continuously decreased over the last forty years (Figure 8). The birth rate was high in the late 1980s and early 1990s, but then dropped significantly in the mid 1990s and has remained at a low level since then. In Hultsfred Municipality, the number of births is consistently lower than in Eksjö, which also reflects its smaller population size and the trend of population ageing.

1.5.1 Migration

The immigration process in Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities between 1997 and 2023 has been characterized by significant fluctuations, with clear periods of growth and decline. Figure 9 shows that the intensity of immigration has often been similar in both municipalities, although Eksjö has recorded a slightly higher immigration rate than Hultsfred.

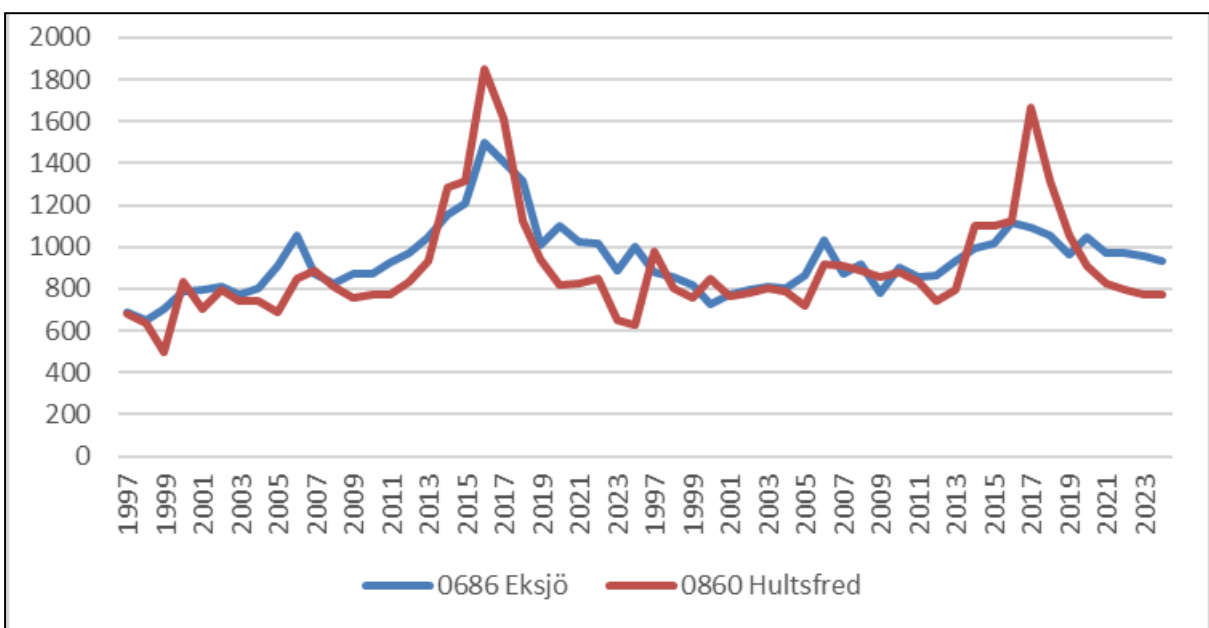


Figure 9. Immigration to Eksjö and Hultsfred Municipalities, 1997–2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

The most substantial increase in immigration occurred between 2014 and 2016, when the annual number of immigrants peaked at approximately 1,500 in Eksjö and nearly 1,850 in Hultsfred in 2016. The number of refugees in Sweden peaked in 2015, reaching 162,900 (Wennström & Öner, 2019). This rapid surge is most likely associated with the 2015 European refugee crisis. The significant influx of immigrants was also highlighted by residents of both municipalities in the interviews. In Sweden, in contrast to other European countries, refugees have been disproportionately placed in peripheral and rural areas with high unemployment and rapid native depopulation where the prospects for integration, both socially and economically, are poor (Wennström & Öner, 2019).

In parallel with immigration, continuous outmigration also takes place in both municipalities. Figure 10 shows that the level of outmigration in Hultsfred was particularly high in 2017, exceeding 1,600 people per year. Outmigration in Eksjö was more stable, but it also remained at a significant level there. Migration processes in Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities are characterized by high volatility and a strong dependence on external factors, such as global migration flows and changes in Sweden’s migration policy.

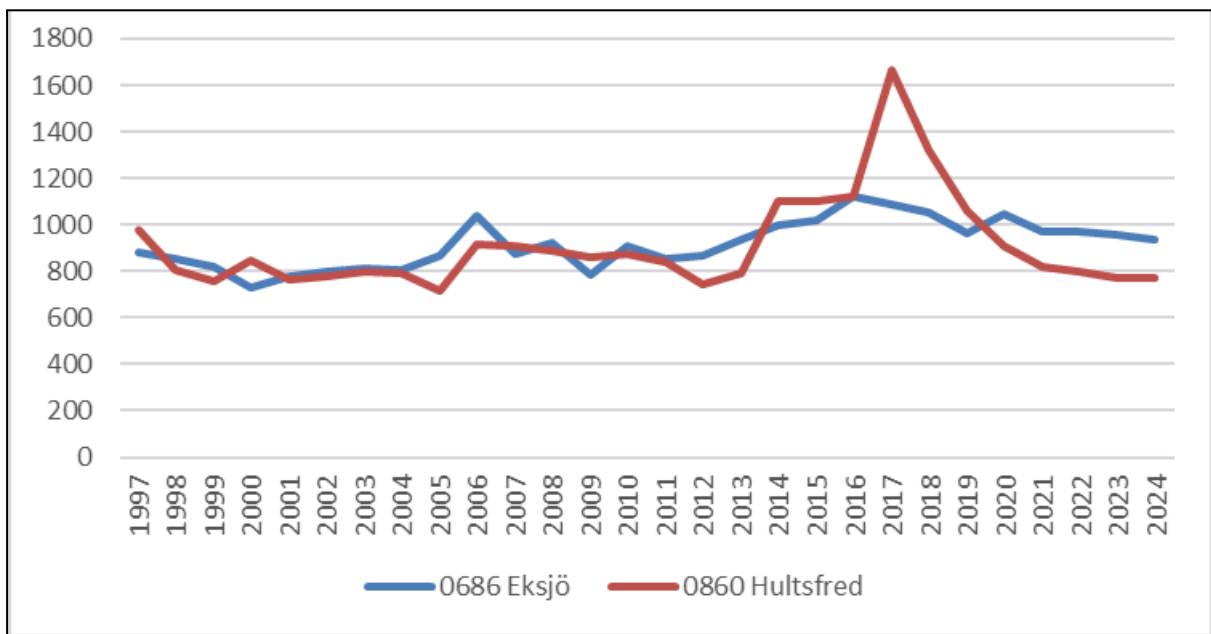


Figure 10. Outmigration of Eksjö and Hultsfred Municipalities, 1997–2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

Figure 11 illustrates the internal net migration balance (the difference between in-migration and out-migration between municipalities) in Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities from 1997 to 2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

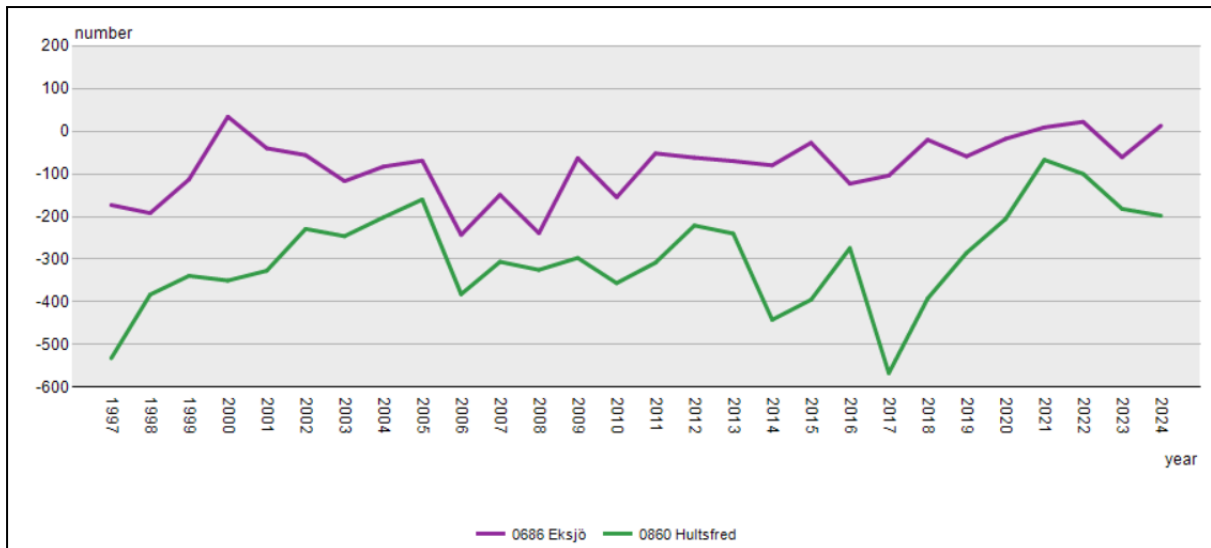


Figure 11. Internal Migration Balance in Eksjö and Hultsfred Municipalities, 1997–2024 (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

In both municipalities, internal net migration balance for the period 1997–2024 is negative, indicating that the number of people leaving the municipalities consistently exceeds the number of people moving in from other Swedish municipalities. Hultsfred Municipality has a consistently and markedly negative balance. Eksjö Municipality shows several rises and falls, with a particularly negative balance in 2017, but the fluctuations are less pronounced than in Hultsfred with the net loss exceeding 550 people (Statistics Sweden, 2026).

The data suggest that both municipalities have experienced a steady loss of population due to internal migration for nearly thirty years. This negative internal net migration balance, combined with low birth rates, is one of the main structural factors contributing to the overall population decline in both Hultsfred and Eksjö. The decline of the rural population is influenced by internal migration processes. As Hedberg (2014) points out, the negative natural increase is supplemented by a negative internal migration balance, in which residents with the highest education and especially women leave rural areas.

1.6 Education and cultural offer

In Eksjö municipality there are 13 preschools in total. Eight of them are located in Eksjö, the other 5 in other towns of the municipality – Hult, Mariannelund, Ingatorp and Hjärtevad (Eksjö kommun, 2026). There are 5 primary schools in Eksjö and 4 in other towns of the municipality. In the whole municipality there is only one high school, which is located in Eksjö. The proportion of higher education is 28.8% (2024), which is lower than the national average (34.4%) (Ekonomifakta, n.d.) So for the students further from Eksjö in places like Mariannelund, Hult and Ingatorp, it is a choice between going to study in Eksjö or Vimmerby, but Vimmerby is outside the municipality, so for the students from Eksjö municipality it is more difficult to get accepted into a school in different municipality. There is folkhogskola in Mariannelund, which offers some courses and education for adults, for example teaching Swedish language for immigrants (Eksjö kommun, 2026).

In Hultsfred municipality there are 4 preschools, a primary school, a middle school and one high school placed in Hultsfred town. Hultsfred gymnasium offers different kinds of programs: science, social science, economics, and vocational programs. In Hultsfred there is also a learning center called Hultsfred Larcenter which is providing adult education, Swedish language courses for immigrants and vocational courses. There is a primary school in Silverdalen too (Hultsfred kommun, 2026).

The main cultural institution in Eksjö is Eksjö Teaterforening, which is a theatre association, a part of the National Theatre. Also taking part in the Eksjö Stadfest, which has been happening once a year since 2008, attracting over 20.000 visitors, who enjoy music, food and a lovely atmosphere (Eksjö kommun, 2026).

In Hultsfred, Riksteatern Hultsfred, a part of Sweden's National Theatre, regularly contributes to the local cultural scene by organizing approximately one performance each month. Hultsfred was also previously well known for the Hultsfred Festival, a major rock music festival that once attracted large audiences, but is no longer held. Another important cultural venue is Folkets Hus Hultsfred, which serves as a community cultural centre and hosts a variety of local events and activities throughout the year (Hultsfred kommun, 2026).

1.7 Availability of public services

1.7.1 Transport and Infrastructure

Several important communication routes pass through Hultsfred Municipality. The municipality has historically served as a significant transport junction for both rail and road traffic. It lies at the intersection of the Stångådalsbanan and Nässjöbanan railway lines, as well as national roads 23, 34, and 47, which connect Växjö and Västervik. These routes, including the area around Målilla, hold considerable strategic importance from a communications perspective (Hultsfreds kommun, 2009).

Road network in Hultsfred Municipality is relatively dense, consisting of national highways No. 23, 34 and 47, as well as the local road No. 129. The Stångådalsbanan railway line provides regular passenger and freight connections with Linköping to the north and Kalmar to the south (Trafikverket, 2024). In addition, the historic narrow-gauge railway Hultsfred–Västervik operates today primarily as a tourist and cultural heritage attraction (Hultsfreds kommun, 2023) (Figure 12).

In Eksjö Municipality, transport infrastructure plays a strategically important role in regional connectivity. The town functions as a local transport hub, with national road No. 32 and several regional roads passing through the area. Although Eksjö does not serve as a major railway junction, its transport connections support regional integration and local economic development (Eksjö kommun, n.d.). The municipality lies on the Bockabanan railway line; however, passenger services currently operate only between Nässjö and Eksjö. The

connection between Eksjö and Hultsfred has been suspended since 2014, although discussions regarding its potential restoration are ongoing.

Public transport in both municipalities is primarily provided by bus services connecting smaller settlements with regional centres. While coverage is generally adequate, service frequency remains low, particularly in more remote areas and on weekends, which limits mobility options for residents. Cycling infrastructure exists in the main settlements of both municipalities (Figure 13), yet its extent and quality vary significantly. Overall, there is considerable potential for further development of sustainable mobility solutions, including pedestrian and cycle networks, to improve accessibility and reduce car dependency.



Figure 12. Railway line in Hjaltevald. Author: Eva Haberkorne-Vimba



Figure 13. Road infrastructure in Hjaltevald. Author: Eva Haberkorne-Vimba

1.7.1.1 Commuting

From the data presented in the figure (Figures 14 and 15), the commuting patterns and labour mobility needs are similar to those observed in other small municipalities. Eksjö Municipality has a positive net commuting balance of +1,652, with the majority of in-commuters arriving from Nässjö, Vetlanda, Aneby, and Jönköping. In contrast, Hultsfred Municipality has a negative net commuting balance of -653, meaning that more people work outside the municipality's borders, primarily in the direction of Vimmerby.

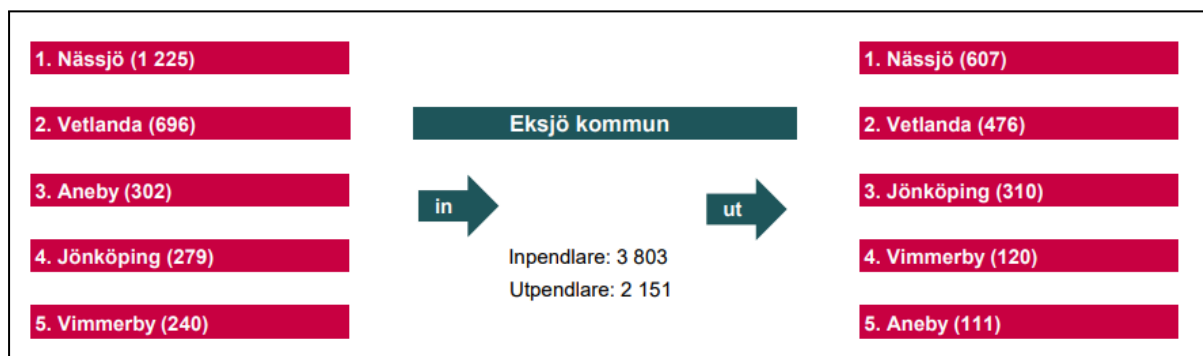


Figure 14. Commuting patterns in Eksjö Municipality (Företagarfakta, 2025).

Eksjö serves as a more significant employment centre than Hultsfred. It attracts labour from surrounding municipalities, including Hultsfred, while Hultsfred experiences a net loss of workforce towards Vimmerby.

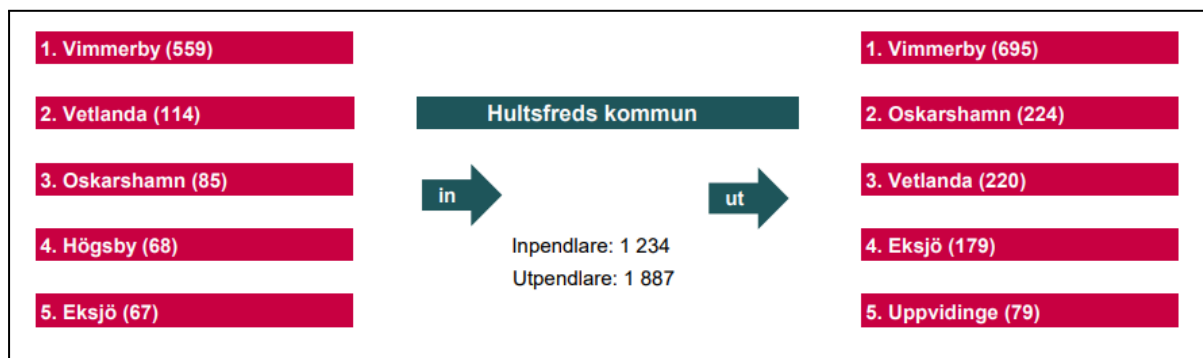


Figure 15. Commuting patterns in Hultsfred Municipality (Företagarfakta, 2025).

1.7.2. Healthcare

In Eksjö municipality there is only one hospital, it is the Högland hospital in Eksjö town, also there is a health center. There are no other big medical facilities like hospitals in Eksjö municipality, but there is a small health center in Mariannelund. So the only place to get official health services in the municipality is Eksjö (Eksjö kommun, 2026).

In Hultsfred municipality there are no hospitals, but there is a health center in Hultsfred. It is also possible to get daily care for elderly people and people with disabilities,

there are few accommodations for those people. There is also a service available for those in need to get help with everyday tasks (Hultsfred kommun, 2026).

In Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities there are 6 pharmacies in total. Their number and locations are compiled in the Apoteksinfo.nu database (Apoteksinfo.nu, n.d.). Hultsfred has 3 pharmacies, located in Hultsfred, Mörlunda and Virserum, whereas in Eksjö municipality all pharmacies are situated in the town of Eksjö and are not available in the rural populated areas. Both areas also offer a variety of health services, including dentistry, home healthcare, mental health support, family centres, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and rehabilitation. The range of services available in Eksjö is significantly broader.

1.8 Economy

In both Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities, the share of entrepreneurs is average. The business environment in Eksjö is ranked 118th, while Hultsfred is ranked 116th among the worst in Sweden. In 2024, the average income in Eksjö Municipality was 335,000 Swedish kronor, while in Hultsfred it was 300,700 kronor (Ekonomifakta, n.d.). The municipal tax rate in Eksjö Municipality in 2026 was 34.02%, while in Hultsfred it was 33.77%.

As shown in Figures 16 and 17, the proportion of entrepreneurs in Eksjö is 8.6% (2024), which is close to the national average (8.8%). This means that, compared to other Swedish municipalities, business activity is average. In turn, the proportion of entrepreneurs in Hultsfred is only 10,7% (2024). The formation of new companies is approximately 6.8 per 1,000 inhabitants (aged 15–74). Hultsfred municipality’s business climate rating is low — 248th place out of 290 Swedish municipalities. This means that Hultsfred is one of the weakest municipalities in terms of the business environment, while Eksjö has a slightly better situation, where the rate of new company formation is 7.7 per 1,000 inhabitants (aged 15–74). The municipality’s business climate rating is 118th place out of 290 Swedish municipalities.

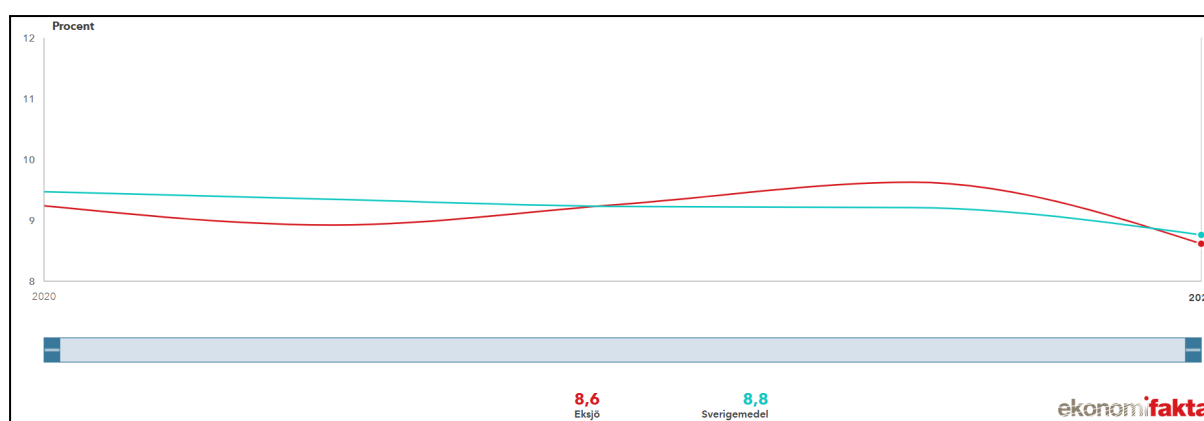


Figure 16. Share of entrepreneurs in Eksjö the period 2020-2024 (Ekonomifakta, n.d.)

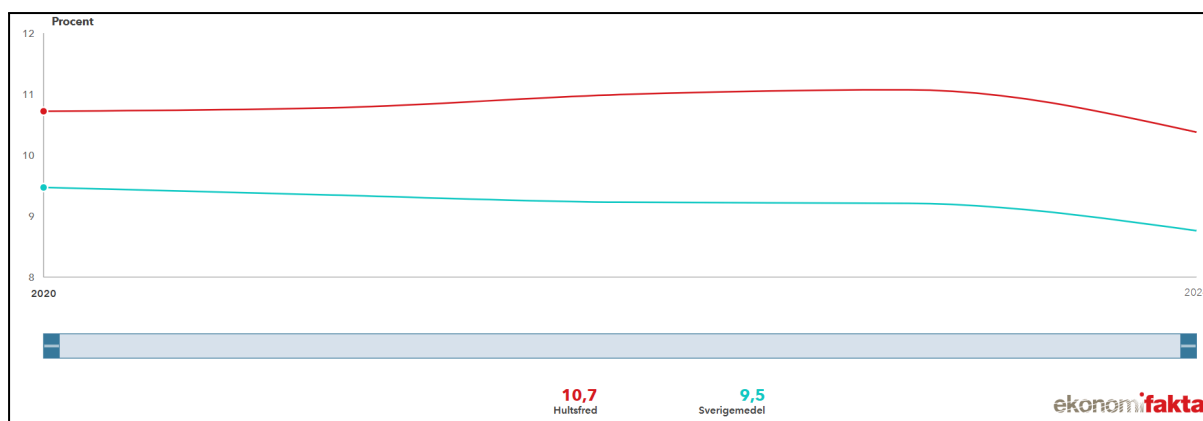


Figure 17. Share of entrepreneurs in the period 2020-2024 (Ekonomifakta, n.d.)



Figure 18. LEIAB Fönster AB (LEIAB, 2025)

In Eksjö municipality, the largest and most significant private employer is LEIAB Fönster AB (Figure 18) with 125 employees, and 91.4% of inhabitants work as salaried employees for the state, municipality or private companies. As stated, employment in Eksjö is 81.4%, which is slightly higher than the Swedish national average, while employment in Hultsfred is 76.8%, which is significantly lower than the Swedish national average (80.5%) (Företagarfakta, 2025). The unemployment rate in Hultsfred is also 8.1%, which is higher than the national average (6.9%).

In the period from 2020 to 2023, the proportion of entrepreneurs in Hultsfred was higher than in Eksjö, but in 2024 there is a sharp decline in both municipalities, especially in Hultsfred. (Företagarfakta, 2025)

The most significant private company in Hultsfred municipality is IKEA Industry Hultsfred AB (Figure 19), which provides 425 jobs (Ekonomifakta, 2025) and biggest solar power plant in Sweden (Figure 4). The biggest employer in Eksjö is the kommun, followed by the hospital and the garrison (Eksjö kommun, n.d.).



Figure 19. IKEA Industry Hultsfred AB (Expressen, 2025)

Most significant economic contribution in both municipalities comes from forestry and the wood industry, which includes both raw material extraction and wood processing. This is typical for the Småland region. In Hultsfred, IKEA makes this even more pronounced (Eksjö kommun, n.d., Hultsfred kommun, n.d.).

Both municipalities are dependent on state grants and the equalisation system. In addition, around 98%, are small and micro-enterprises, where the number of employees does not exceed 50. Hultsfred has slightly more companies; however, given that they are small enterprises, the economic situation is weaker than in Eksjö, which has 1.5% medium-sized enterprises that provide more stable employment and slightly higher economic activity (Företagarfakta, 2025).

The public sector is a significant part of the area's economy. In Hultsfred, 35% of all employed people work in the public sector, which amounts to 1,825 people (Figure 20). In contrast, in Eksjö municipality, 5,626 people work in the public sector, which constitutes 56% of the jobs in the municipality's territory (Figure 21). These are workplaces such as: kindergartens, schools, senior homes and elderly care, social services and support, municipal administrations, cultural, sports and leisure services, fire and rescue services. The military sector is also significant.

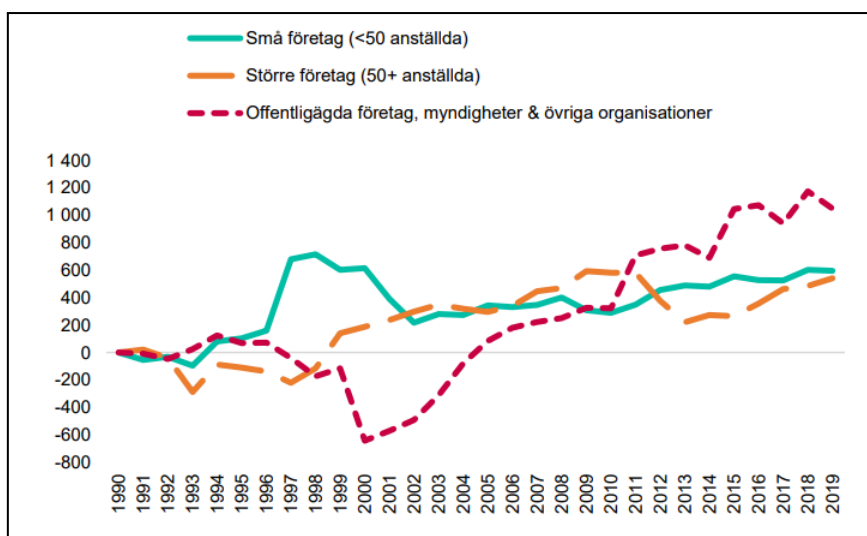


Figure 20. Development of the number of jobs in Eksjö Municipality 1990–2019 (Företagarfakta, 2025).

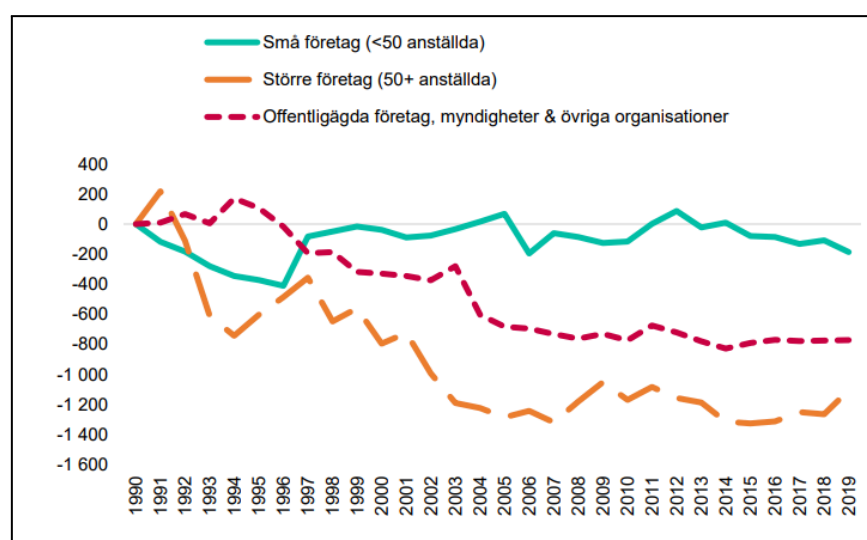


Figure 21. Development of the number of jobs in Hultsfred Municipality 1990-2019 (Företagarfakta, 2025).

1.8.2 Tourist industry

Tourism in Sweden is a steadily growing sector in the economy. While in the natural environment the “*Allemansrätten*” (the right of public access) plays a central role, in urban centres it is more connected to historically important cities (Statista, 2025; Regeringskansliet, 2010).

In the research area tourism offerings contain cultural offers and the landscape, which is characterised mainly by forest. The stories of Astrid Lindgren are playing a huge role in the border area of Vimmerby, Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities. In Vimmerby Astrid Lindgren World has attracted tourists since 1981. This tendency is also apparent in the border area, as many of the films are shot there. In these border areas many smaller companies started with the help of the Astrid Lindgrens Hembygd – LEADER group support. The biggest attractions are Filmbyn and Cykla i Filmlandskapet Småland, but there are also restaurants, hotels and

other small shops in the area that profit mainly through the 500 thousand tourists coming every year to Vimmerby (Astrid Lindgren's World, n.d.).

The territory features several hotels, guesthouses and campsites. The main attraction in Eksjö municipality is the town of Eksjö, which is one of the best-preserved wooden towns in Europe. Other important tourist attractions include museums such as the Eksjö Museum and Filmbyn Småland film village (see Figure 22), as well as various protected natural areas like Skurugata and Skuruhatt (Visit Eksjö, n.d.). Similarly, Hultsfred municipality also has museums.



Figure 22. Filmbyn Småland film village. Author: Eva Haberkorne-Vimba

2. Conceptual and topical framing

Urban and rural shrinkage can be understood as the result of interconnected processes operating across multiple scales. At the macro level, factors such as economic restructuring, deindustrialisation, globalisation, increased mobility within the EU, and political change have been identified as key drivers explaining why some cities and regions experience decline. At the meso level, spatial processes such as urban sprawl further redistribute population and economic activity, while at the micro level, changing preferences and behaviours influence individual migration decisions. A significant component of shrinkage is also linked to demographic dynamics, particularly low fertility rates in shrinking communities. These are often consequences of selective outmigration, especially among young adults, which reduces the reproductive population over time. As a result, shrinking municipalities face financial challenges, including reduced labour-related tax revenues and difficulties maintaining over-dimensioned and underutilised infrastructure. In Sweden, the issue is widespread, with population decline affecting approximately half of all municipalities (Syssner, 2015).

The decline of rural areas is closely tied to demographic change and shifting population structures, particularly the outmigration of both people and businesses from peripheral regions. This population loss leads to multiple challenges for rural societies, including the disappearance of public services and broader cultural, social, and political transformations. At the same time, technological advancements in sectors such as agriculture have increased productivity while reducing labour demand, contributing to declining employment opportunities and further depopulation. Additional barriers, including age structure, skill mismatches, and limited job quality, make it difficult for rural businesses to attract and retain workers. As a result, rural decline has become a central issue across much of Europe (Ahlmeyer & Volgmann, 2023).

Many rural regions in Europe are also characterized as peripheral areas with relatively weak economic conditions, making sustainable development particularly challenging. In response, rural development strategies have increasingly shifted towards leveraging local assets and recognizing regional diversity as a strength rather than a limitation. However, these approaches can be constrained by weak regional cultures of entrepreneurship and limited institutional capacity, which can hinder long-term development processes (Dax & Fischer, 2017).

Demographic ageing further complicates efforts to reverse population decline, as elderly population structures reduce the potential for natural population growth, especially in rural areas (Gimeno et al., 2025). At the same time, service provision becomes increasingly uneven: larger municipalities tend to retain key services, while smaller ones experience gradual closures of both public and private services, including supermarkets, banks, and social spaces. Housing markets also play a critical role, as limited availability and low turnover can act as barriers for newcomers or temporary residents, further reinforcing depopulation trends.

Within this broader context, Hultsfred provides an interesting example of rural transformation. Historically, its development was linked to improved connectivity and its role as a regional node, and it gained recognition through cultural initiatives such as the Hultsfred Festival, which positioned the town as a notable case of rural development based on local strengths (Hodges & Bjärlesjö, 2024). However, like many similar localities, it has also faced challenges related to industrial decline, demographic change, and shifting economic structures.

Eksjö, in contrast, demonstrates how heritage-based development can contribute to local resilience. As a well-preserved wooden town, it has benefited from long-term planning efforts, including the work of municipal architects focused on conserving its historic built environment. The continuity of its wooden urban structure, combined with careful adaptation to modern needs such as housing, business, and infrastructure, has supported its attractiveness for tourism and local identity. Planning strategies addressing traffic and parking have further helped maintain the character and functionality of the town (Ivanov, 2005).

Rural development and decline in Sweden must be understood as part of a broader, long-term structural processes rather than isolated local dynamics. Henning et al. (2023) demonstrate how economic and demographic processes increasingly concentrate growth in urban areas, while peripheral regions fall behind, highlighting that “smaller regions, and especially peripheral ones, lag substantially behind both in terms of regional GDP per capita and population” (p. 879). This reflects a pattern of “double divergence,” where both economic activity and population concentrate in core regions. This is clearly visible in the Eksjö–Mariannelund–Hultsfred corridor, where smaller settlements experience decline relative to stronger regional centres.

At the same time, Loras-Gimeno et al. (2025) emphasise that depopulation is a complex, multi-causal process, noting that “no single policy can independently halt depopulation in rural areas; rather, multiple policies... are necessary” (p. 1). The study further highlights how “larger municipalities tend to retain... services... while smaller ones suffer from a progressive closure”,(p.3) reinforcing uneven accessibility and decline. In the study area, this is reflected in the concentration of key services such as healthcare, secondary education, and retail in Eksjö and Hultsfred, while smaller settlements like Mariannelund have more limited local provision, increasing dependence on regional centres and private mobility.

From a global perspective, Li et al. (2021) frame shrinking rural regions as part of uneven spatial development, stating that “uneven spatial development leads to deprived localities and brings forward a significant global challenge”, indicating that the challenges faced in this corridor are part of wider structural transformations. The corridor itself is located in Småland, a region historically shaped by forestry, small-scale industry, and manufacturing. While Eksjö retains administrative and service functions and has a relatively stable role as a municipal centre, Hultsfred has experienced industrial decline and population

loss over recent decades, and Mariannelund, as a smaller locality, faces even stronger pressure related to ageing populations and limited economic diversification.

At the social level, Rönnlund and Tollefsen (2024) highlight how rural areas are shaped by “economic decline, deindustrialisation, depopulation and ageing populations” alongside “closures of educational and health care institutions” (p. 1360), with young people leaving due to limited opportunities. This is evident in the corridor, where younger populations often migrate to larger cities such as Jönköping, Linköping, or Växjö for education and employment, leaving behind an increasingly ageing demographic structure.

This demographic imbalance further affects local labour markets, school viability, and service demand, reinforcing cycles of decline. These dynamics are deeply rooted in historical development paths, as explained by Chu et al. (2026), who argue that regional trajectories are shaped by “self-reinforcing... mechanisms that impart inertia and strong continuity in the economy and society” (p. 1), leading to forms of lock-in that constrain adaptation and transformation. In this context, the historical reliance on specific industries in Hultsfred and surrounding areas, along with established settlement patterns and infrastructure, influences current development possibilities and limits rapid economic diversification.

More broadly, rural change is linked to political-economic restructuring, where shifts towards neoliberal governance, privatisation, and reduced state intervention have increased local responsibilities while weakening institutional support, particularly in resource-dependent regions (George et al., 2009). In response, strategies such as tourism development have gained importance in the corridor. Eksjö, for example, leverages its well-preserved wooden town heritage as a cultural tourism asset, while Hultsfred has built its identity around events such as the former Hultsfred Festival and nature-based recreation. Mariannelund also connects to tourism through its association with Astrid Lindgren’s cultural landscape and nearby attractions. However, while tourism can stimulate local economies, it may also create seasonal employment and new dependencies, and does not guarantee long-term resilience.

2.1 Hultsfred comprehensive plan

The comprehensive plan of Hultsfred Municipality (Översiktsplan 2009/2010) represents a strategic framework for long-term spatial development, emphasizing sustainable land use, rural vitality, and the efficient provision of services in a context marked by demographic decline and aging. The plan prioritised consolidation over expansion by encouraging infill development within existing settlements, while simultaneously promoting Landsbygdsutveckling i strandnära lägen (LIS) to leverage the municipality’s extensive natural assets for residential attractiveness and tourism-led growth.

It also identified the need to sustain local economic activity through support for small-scale industries and improved connectivity between dispersed settlements. At present, the implementation of the plan reveals a mixed trajectory: while its focus on maintaining

basic services and supporting rural living has helped stabilize certain localities, broader structural challenges such as continued population decline, limited labour market diversification, and service centralisation persist. These evolving conditions, alongside emerging priorities related to climate adaptation and energy transition, have prompted the municipality to initiate the preparation of a new comprehensive plan, reflecting the need to update strategic directions in line with contemporary socio-economic and environmental dynamics.

2.2 Eksjö Comprehensive Plan 2040

The goals state that by 2040, Eksjö Municipality should have a continuously increasing population, with at least 60 new homes per year, a continuous influx of inquiries for varied business establishments, and be a viable municipality with a good environment to live and work in. To meet these goals, several general planning directions are outlined. Attractive living environments should include good access to public transport, a rich range of shops, services and culture, as well as opportunities for leisure, education and care. Proximity to nature, communications and services is particularly important, and the municipality will work to protect natural areas close to residential areas. Housing for the future requires planned land for at least 60 homes annually, with varied building types and forms of tenure. Development should mainly take place within existing neighborhoods or clusters, while avoiding the use of valuable natural or agricultural land. Where appropriate, holiday home areas may transition into permanent housing. Flexible communications are essential, with improved connections to other municipalities and alternatives to travel. Cycling opportunities between localities should be strengthened, and public transport developed, including efforts toward passenger train services between Eksjö and Mariannelund. A strong business community relies on good service, dialogue and support for both existing and new businesses, as well as identifying suitable locations for development while placing disruptive or industrial activities outside urban areas. An attractive natural and cultural environment should be preserved through conservation measures, prioritizing long-term ecological value and strengthening connections between localities, natural areas and recreational spaces, while using cultural environments for visibility and promotion. Reducing climate impact and ensuring long-term adaptation involves risk assessments, preventive measures and avoiding development in climate-sensitive areas, while preserving land with important environmental functions. Finally, efficient and sustainable land use should focus on identifying underused areas and adapting them to current needs, as well as revising outdated plans to align with present standards and development directions (Eksjö kommun, 2022).

3. Methods

3.1 Stakeholders

The focus of this research was to understand how different stakeholder groups perceived the social, environmental and economic positive aspects and challenges of living in the Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities, as well as the sense of community, the future development of the regions, and the relationship between the municipalities. This was investigated through 15 individual semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, a survey, and field observations. A summary of the data collected and the locations can be found in Table 3 in the Results section (Section 4). Data was collected during our on-site stay from the 16th April to 20th April 2026.

The subject pool consisted of people who were spending their time in the border area between Eksjö and Hultsfred, and residents who were part of the local Facebook groups we contacted. The focus was on local stakeholders who provide or receive services in the administrative towns and in the border region. The contacted stakeholders included non-governmental organisations (NGOs), business owners, residents, rescue services, schools, care facilities for elderly, city halls, public transportation managers, the military, police, hospitals, social or cultural events venues and institutions, and leisure organisations.

3.2 Interviews (Formal & informal)

Using the method of semi-structured interviews we collected qualitative data, which is necessary to develop new strategies for the border area.

We differentiated between a formal and an informal interview. For that we worked with two different lists of questions. The formal interview question list had more questions, with sub questions, and followed a logical sequence to provide structure. This question list was used for the formal interview, beginning with questions about the interviewee's background, then about local positive aspects, challenges, population change, services, housing, social and cultural life and sense of community. Forestry and its sustainability were also addressed. In the end, we asked about how they envisioned the town's development in the future, and about the relationship between the municipalities. We had additional questions only for organisations and business owners focused on regional cooperation and municipal support.

We asked verbally for permission to record the interviews and to use the data for our research. These recordings were stored in a confidential protected file, and all data was confidential. Additionally, we had a consent form with the rights written in case someone needed it.

We explained to the interviewees the research programme before starting the interview so they had context. That avoided misunderstandings and gave them the option to participate in the way they thought it was best. This approach is common in everyday life,

through which the conversation feels natural for both sides, but is still focused on the questions the interviewer has. The informal interview was a conversation, without leitmotif, and so an unstructured interview, despite the questions being in the mind of the interviewer during the time (Zhang Y. and Barbara M. Wildemuth B. M., 2017).

While informal interviews have the strength of getting into contact with more people, and talking with them about what they experienced, it is better to have a formal, semi structured interview, when the goal is to have a completeness of contents. The advantage of structured interviews is that the semi structured interview allows the use of open questions and generates new qualitative data. (Luo L. and Wildemuth B. M., 2017).

3.3 Surveys

For the purpose of quantitative data collection, we chose to use surveys. To reach a significant amount of people we focused on online surveys but also used surveys on paper in case someone did not have a phone or was not able to answer the survey on it. We created a QR-code with the link to the survey to show it to locals on the street with a short explanation of what the survey was about. These were additionally shared in local Facebook-groups, information boards and with locals we interviewed.

In the survey, we included information about the project and how the data was going to be used to have the consent to collect and use it. All the answers were confidential.

3.4 Field observations

Field observations were usually conducted to get to know the region and its locals. This method was used the whole time we had been in the area. It helped us not only to collect data, but also to classify, analyse and form new questions for our following interviews (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011). Notes were taken in relation to visual observations and general perceptions of the town.

3.5 Limitations

The short period of time did not allow us to do piloting, which would otherwise be recommended (Majid et al., 2017). This report can also not provide balanced reporting of every actor in the border area, because we were able to have more interviews with subjects who provide a service, than with actors from other economically important sectors.

There might be bias in relation to environmental sustainability, since we are students that are familiar with the term and advocate for it. This could have affected the way questions were phrased. Most of us are under 30 years old, therefore our perspective is closer to someone around this age than to elderly people, and might affect how we understand and interpret the collected data. Nevertheless, through thoughtful interviews and addressing the analysis carefully, we reduce and correct these biases in the report writing. (Salazar, M. K., 1990)

Overall, it was easier to find subjects to interview in the three larger towns (Mariannelund, Eksjö and Hultsfred) than in small towns. There was a higher answering rate in emails when asking for a potential interview, whereas in small towns we received no response, and even going physically there, we could not find the organisations' managers.

Further limitation came through the language barrier. All interviews were held in English, since our team did not have someone who could speak Swedish. This also prevented us from being able to interview inhabitants that only spoke Swedish. The survey did not suppose an obstacle because we were able to translate the questions, although some users commented that there were some weird translations for specific words. However, some of the Facebook posts with the survey were deleted or we could not even post them, since we were not accepted into some of the Facebook groups. This might be due to our foreign origin names. This prevented us from reaching out to some smaller towns through Facebook, therefore we had less survey answers and less information about these settlements.

Some questions in the survey were mandatory at the beginning, and we did not include the "I do not know" option, so respondents could not answer. We modified it as soon as we realised. In the design of the survey, it was difficult to combine open-ended questions with close-ended questions. We could have had more insight on the reasoning of the ratings if we had included an option to add additional comments. Furthermore, we did not have feedback on how long it took to respond to the survey or if some respondents decided to not finish it because of the length.

Moreover, we could keep the survey open only for a week. For future research, it would be useful to conduct a survey with a longer time window that would allow the researchers to receive more answers.

There were two survey answers from residents of Vimmerby, that is outside our researched municipalities' area, but we decided to leave their answers in nevertheless, because our survey reaching them indicates, that they must have some relation to the study area.

3.6 Analysis of data

The focus of the analysis is how social, environmental and economic positive aspects and challenges of living in the Eksjö-Hultsfred municipalities, and their future development are understood by different stakeholder groups through 15 individual semi-structured interviews, informal interviews, a survey and field observations. Interviewees were selected using criteria-based sampling and divided into three groups: Eksjö, Hultsfred and Mariannelund.

Some interviews were transcribed with the Voice Recorder App, and for others we took notes. These transcripts and notes were coded and analysed with MAXQDA Analytics Pro (26.1.0) software. The employed analytical approaches were thematic analysis and

content analysis, although the main focus was on the latter, categorising text segments, analysing their presence or absence, and their frequency.

A deductive coding strategy was applied to sort the data in the following predefined categories: Positive aspects (sense of community, economic, environmental, social), Challenges (sense of community, economic, environmental, social), Future, Municipalities relation (none, positive). The analysis with MAXQDA was guided by Bingham (2023) framework recommendations. Topic coding was used to identify the topics that were being discussed and to compare how these appeared across stakeholder groups. In addition, analytical coding was used to understand how participants expressed their perceptions about these topics.

Graphs and figures were created and included in section 4 to visually represent the data from the interviews. The content of the coded segments was analysed and summarised in section 4.

4. Results

In total, 25 interviews were conducted, 15 of them being formal and the last 10 were informal since they were conversations carried out in the streets and were not recorded. The survey had a great response overall with 44 responses, one participant did not mention their place of residency which is why it is not listed. We got two responses from people living in Vimmerby too, even though it was not our study area. We included these into our study nevertheless, because we had reason to believe that their everyday commuting might tie them with our region, as neither of them work in Vimmerby. Field observations were taken on seven different localities where interviews or surveys were difficult to conduct due to low population and no residents presence on the streets. The distribution of the locations where interviews and observations were conducted as well as survey answer origins can be seen in the table nr 3 below.

Table 3. Total conducted formal and informal interviews, survey answers and field observations in the area between Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities. Towns in yellow belong to Eksjö municipality, towns in green belong to Hultsfred municipality and the town in orange belongs to Vimmerby municipality (not our study area).

Location	Formal interviews	Informal interviews	Surveys	Field observations
Eksjö	3		16	X
Ingatorp		3	1	X
Bruzaholm			1	
Hjältevad		3		X
Mariannelund	8		15	X
Hultsfred	4		5	
Katebo		2		X
Lönneberga			1	X
Silverdalen		2		X
Vena			2	
Vimmerby			2	
Total	15	10	43	

4.1 Formal Interviews

Fifteen interviews were conducted in total, between April 17th to April 20th, having three interviews in Hultsfred, four from Eksjö and eight interviews from Mariannelund. Even though we reached out to several stakeholders in different towns, we received no answer

most of the time or the emails and phone numbers were not up to date so there was no form of contact.

Despite Eksjö and Hultsfred being bigger and more populated towns, these two localities were more challenging to reach for interviews. Mariannelund was the town with more interviews since locals in the area were more easy to approach with questions, as well as being more interested in talking and expressing their opinions. In addition, this locality was more welcoming to the research that we were conducting, which resulted in a higher frequency of inclusion to social events, allowing more engagement and communication with the community.

While each town has their own perceptions, different services and challenges of their own, in general, the social aspects (public transportation, migration, education, healthcare, cultural activities, etc) were the most commented on in all of the three communities. Eksjö was the one that emphasized more the positive component of social factors with 45%, showing a strong positive social perception. Hultsfred showcased the highest proportion of social challenges with 38%, whereas the positive economic remarks exhibited in Mariannelund were the most prominent with 20% of all coded data (see Table 4).

Table 4. Code coverage of segmented codes in Hultsfred, Eksjö and Mariannelund

Code System	Hultsfred	Eksjö	Mariannelund	TOTAL
Municipalities relationship				
Negative				
None	3%	4%	4%	4%
Positive	4%	1%	4%	3%
Future	5%	11%	12%	10%
Positive aspects				
Sense of community	5%	8%	7%	7%
Economic	8%	7%	20%	13%
Environmental	5%	7%	5%	6%
Social	31%	45%	32%	36%
Challenges				
Sense of community	2%	0%	4%	2%
Economic	12%	2%	10%	8%
Environmental	3%	2%	1%	2%
Social	38%	23%	34%	32%
CODED	100% (13,968)	100% (16,386)	100% (25,387)	100% (55,741)

This can also be supported with figure 23, which represents the frequencies of segmented codes regarding positive comments on social, economic, environmental and sense of community. In general, from the 15 interviews, only 11% of all the positive coded segments were regarding positive sense of community, with social observations being the greatest positive aspect with 58%. Most common perspectives were the tranquility of living in a small area, services offered (e.g. library), art workshops, clubs, and these areas are viewed as an attractive environment for family formation and residential stability.

“...It's a nice place to live, especially if you have children” (Interviewee 8, Eksjö).

Economic remarks constituted an 18% of all positive coded segments, with varying opinions between localities, with comments on the availability of jobs related to elderly care,

Astrid Lindgren's stories bringing a lot of tourists into the area, the presence of several markets in different times of the year, and business and companies establishing in the region (e.g. IKEA manufacturing plant, LEIAB).

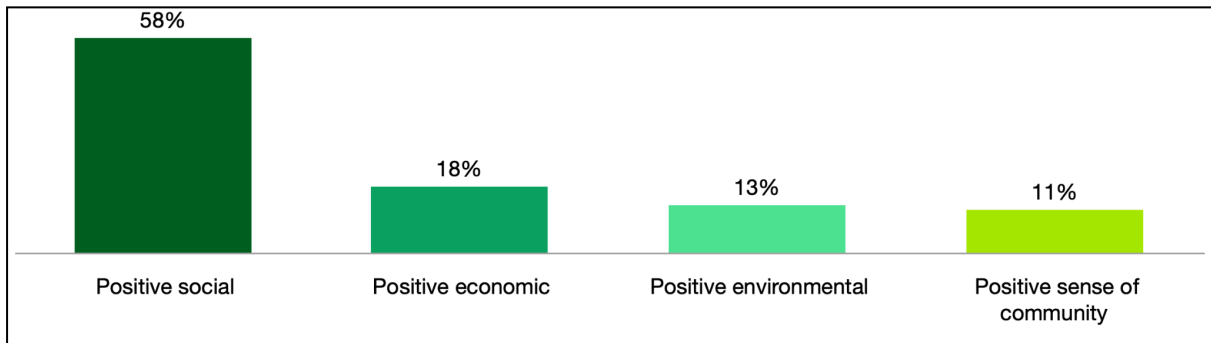


Figure 23. Frequencies of segmented codes on positive comments on social, economic, sense of community and environmental aspects among all 15 interviews.

Regarding challenges on the regions, social challenges were the most mentioned with 73.3% of codes and only a 2.5% of codes belonged to environmental challenges, with most comments regarding the forestry industry and the extent of logged areas (Figure 24).

“...it could be better if they cut down only a few, not big areas...” (Interviewee 9, Hultsfred).

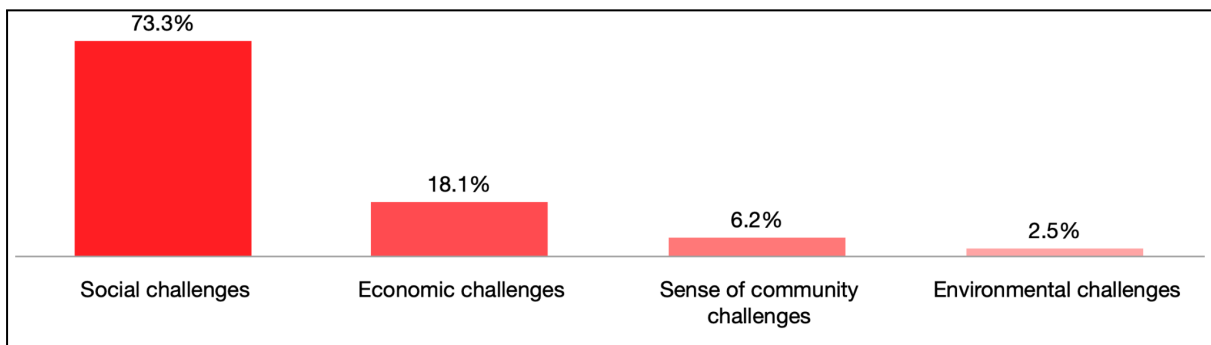


Figure 24. Frequencies of segmented codes on social, economic, environmental, and negative sense of community challenges among all 15 interviews.

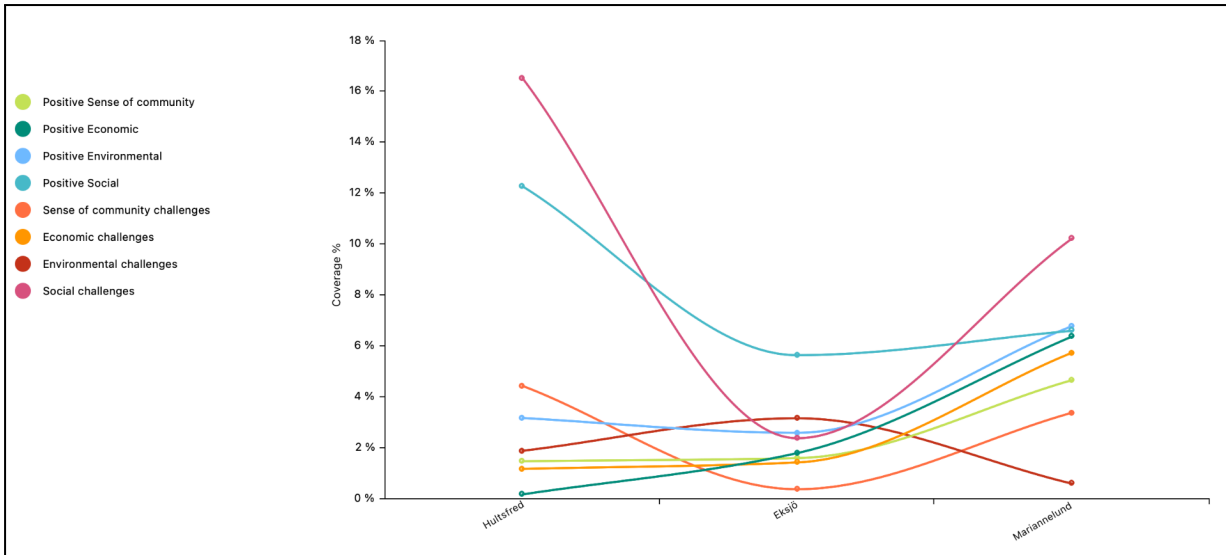


Figure 25. Percentage of positive aspects and challenges coded in the interviews by town (Hultsfred, Eksjö and Mariannelund). In green and blue, the positive aspects and in warm colors, the challenges.

Code System	Hultsfred	Eksjö	Mariannelund	SUM
MAGENTA	0,6%	0,2%	1,0%	1,8%
Municipalities relationship				
None	0,5%	0,8%	1,1%	2,4%
Positive	0,6%	0,5%	0,6%	1,8%
Future	0,8%	1,3%	2,7%	4,8%
Positive aspects				
Positive Sense of community	1,6%	1,4%	2,7%	5,8%
Positive Economic	1,6%	1,4%	5,9%	8,9%
Positive Environmental	1,6%	1,6%	3,2%	6,4%
Positive Social	6,5%	11,7%	11,2%	29,4%
Challenges				
Sense of community challenges	0,3%	0,2%	1,9%	2,4%
Economic challenges	3,0%	0,6%	3,4%	7,0%
Environmental challenges	0,3%	0,2%	0,5%	1,0%
Social challenges	8,6%	5,9%	13,9%	28,4%
Paraphrased Segments				
SUM	26,2%	25,7%	48,1%	100,0%

Figure 26. Use of codes by town in percentage of coded segments. The last row shows the total percentages of coded segments per town and the last column shows the total percentages of coded segments per topic. The results need to be red by column, compared within the town. The biggest numbers are highlighted in red.

Positive social aspects are the most frequent topic, and social challenges are the second most commented topic in all the interviews (Figures 25 and 26). From the total coded segments, 48.1% of them were in Mariannelund interviews, since there were more interviews in that town. Almost 14% of the coded segments in Mariannelund were social challenges, and 11% were positive social aspects, whereas almost 6% were economic positive aspects. In Eksjö, positive social aspects were the most frequent with a 12%, and social challenges with

a 6 %. In Hultsfred, social aspects were addressed as a challenge, with an 8.6%, as well as positive aspects, with a 6.5% (Figure 26).

4.1.1 Responses from Hultsfred

a) Social aspects

Hultsfred was described as having a special atmosphere and culture, with no organisational hierarchy, and with friendly people. Many locals lived there when they were young, studied somewhere else and came back with their friends and family, sometimes to raise children.

“You have everything that you need all around you (60 km to Eksjö, 70 km to Västervik)” (Interview 2, Hultsfred).

There are public organisations that help locals find a job by offering free courses and guidance, and assisting companies in finding employees. Swedish language courses are free for locals and foreigners. It is considered a welcoming town for newcomers and immigrants, with affordable housing. Public housing is available for neurodivergent people, people with physical limitations, and elderly residents.

Residents highlighted the comfort of not having to wait in line, a safe environment, and a good place to raise children. There are schools for all educational levels, which are perceived positively. There is also an adult school, and a school for neurodivergent people/people with physical limitations.

Public transport was described as good but with low frequency to surrounding areas. There are public free transport options for neurodivergent people and people with mobility limitations, precisely pick up service in case they cannot take the bus. For children under 16, there are special cars that they are allowed to drive.

There are many cultural events such as concerts, film screenings, book author talks, and facilities like a library and a theatre. Music is a major part of the identity of the town. The rail tracks are historical and currently used as a tourist attraction for cycling. Speedway (bike racing sport) is popular, as well as tractor pulling and Swedish car racing. Elderly people can participate in organised trips, while neurodivergent people can attend a club and the municipality takes care of the food, accommodation and medication.

Some of the social challenges mentioned by interviewees were regarding out-migration of youth, mostly for studying opportunities in bigger cities (e.g. Stockholm, Linköping, Gothenburg). A couple of them stated that they moved out of smaller towns to pursue higher education degrees and eventually they moved back after a couple of years. According to one of them, youth leaving is a good thing so they can meet new people and have new experiences, with the problem of people not wanting to come back after.

“...challenges for the small town is having people coming back eventually and start their family...” (Interviewee 13, Hultsfred).

Another challenge frequently pointed out was public transport, with few options in schedule, bus stops located far away from places in town and how it is disappearing since there is less and less coverage over the years. This has created a higher dependency on cars, since there are also no taxi services besides the pick up service for the people in need. Someone remarked that since counties are the ones deciding instead of the municipality, the people making decisions do not know sometimes what is the best for the community, and even though they (as a community) make suggestions, they are not being listened to.

“...people making decisions about public transportation sit somewhere else, not here” (Interviewee 2, Hultsfred)

“Public transport is quite bad but you get used to it”(Interviewee 13, Hultsfred)

Related to public transport, education in the area is also a common issue. Since there is a small offer on transportation, there is a high dependency on owning a private car since the majority of students commute and they need to move large distances. This represents a bigger constraint since education is already lagging in the area, which consequently creates a lack of job opportunities in the area due to low education.

“We have one of the lowest education levels in Sweden... 49% over the last years haven't got the certificate for the upper secondary school” (Interviewee 13, Hultsfred)

b) Economic aspects

The positive economic condition in Hultsfred is strongly connected to employment opportunities, affordable housing, tourism, and local industries. In interviews it was highlighted that during the large wave of immigrants in 2016, Hultsfred was one of the municipalities in Sweden that welcomed a significant number of newcomers, creating strong demand for Swedish language education, with more than 300 students enrolled and another 300 waiting, which also increased the need for hiring teachers.

“Hultsfred is easy and affordable to find houses” (Interviewee 13, Hultsfred)

Another one noted that housing in Hultsfred is easy to find and affordable, making the municipality attractive for residents and newcomers and also mentioned that many German and Dutch tourists visit the area, contributing to the local economy through tourism. Forestry was identified as an important economic sector and one of Sweden's major export industries, especially significant for rural municipalities like Hultsfred.

Adult education programs were also described as an important strategy to match local skills with labour market demands. While new welfare policies require unemployed people receiving financial aid to participate in particular work and education to improve

employability. Additionally, care work was described as a stable employment sector, particularly in elderly care where jobs are consistently available.

“If you want to work with older people there is always work” (Interviewee 13, Hultsfred)

Seasonal markets and local events also support small-scale economic activity, as mentioned by one of the interviewee. Markets in August where craftsmen exhibit their products attracts both local residents and visitors from the camping site, strengthening local business activity.

“Last August we had a record sale (Mostly local people coming from the camping site)” (Interviewee 9, Hultsfred)

The economic challenges in Hultsfred are mainly linked to a weak job market, out migration, low educational attainment, and declining commercial services. Housing demand is also weak because people try to sell houses for years without finding buyers, reflecting population decline and low attractiveness for new residents, which shows the lack of strong local economic activity. Employers struggle to find workers with the right skills and competence needed for future development. Many young people leave for education and work, but few return to settle and start families. The closure of industries such as the paper factory in 2001 further worsened the situation, increasing the need for new enterprises and job creation.

c) Environmental aspects

Positive environmental conditions in Hultsfred are strongly connected to its natural landscapes and protected resources. They described Hultsfred as a place with beautiful nature, lakes, cycling tracks, and hiking opportunities, making it calm, quiet and attractive for both residents and tourists. Also emphasized that nature, lakes and forests are among the most valued qualities of the municipality. With strict rules such as no construction allowed within 10 meters of lakeshores and beaches to preserve the environment. Forestry is managed sustainably by planting and cutting trees in phases, following environmental regulations.

“Natural resources are protected by law” (Interviewee 2, Hultsfred)

Environmental challenges in Hultsfred are mainly related to forest exploitation and concerns about large-scale logging. They highlighted that replacing natural forests with industrial forest has created ecological problems, including biodiversity loss and rising temperatures, with examples from northern Sweden where reindeer populations were affected. It was also noted that many residents dislike large areas of trees being cut down and feel it would be better to manage forests by cutting smaller sections rather than clear-cutting large areas.

d) Sense of community

Social conditions in Hultsfred are characterized by a strong sense of community and belonging. And some described how “Everybody knows everybody,” with neighbours, and interacting through activities like garden games, creating a close-knit and supportive environment where people help each other and actively participate in local life. The municipality has a friendly atmosphere, openness, and relatively flat organized structure, which makes it easier for people to connect. With many local initiatives driven by volunteers, family ties and job opportunities are key reasons why people choose to stay in Hultsfred.

“...people feeling rooted here...” (Interviewee 2, Hultsfred)

“Most people live here think of themselves as a part of community” (Interviewee 9, Hultsfred)

Social challenges in the Hultsfred area are linked to difficulties in social integration for newcomers. One of them explained that although people know many others in the town, it is harder for those who did not grow up there to become fully part of the community. Entering local social networks was described as difficult because residents were not very open to newcomers, and establishing oneself often required already knowing someone in the area.

e) Future vision

Future development goals in Hultsfred focus on stopping decline, strengthening the local economy, and preserving existing assets. And they need to stabilize population loss, fill empty houses, attract more businesses, and protect what the municipality already has. Improving infrastructure and faster transportation connections to nearby cities were also seen as important for development .

One participant highlighted the hope that more people will recognize Hultsfred as a good place to live, helping to fill housing, support local industries, and maintain welfare services. Also mentioned preserving local heritage and historical places so they can attract visitors and function as cultural assets, such as museums.

4.1.2 Responses from Eksjö

a) Social aspects

The town is described as welcoming, peaceful, and surrounded by nature, with a beautiful historical old town of wooden houses. It is considered a nice place to live and raise children, and residents value the slow-paced lifestyle.

Some interviewees perceive that it offers most or all the services needed (such as schools, shops, healthcare). They highlighted that there is no need to commute to get to work, that everything is smaller and the area feels safer. It was mentioned that the hospital and the military attract people to the area for employment, and that the municipality collaborates with the hospital and the tourism office to make newcomers feel welcome. Housing is considered very affordable. There is a large arena for sports events, and there are concerts in open air

areas, cafes and clubs, but no theatre for indoor big concerts, theatre plays or other events. There are some pubs as well. The town was voted the best destination for bike gravel routes in Sweden, there is a ski and orienteering club, walking activities for elderly and sport events. Tourism related to Astrid Lindgren is considered an important asset.

The library offers activities for all age groups such as book clubs, book presentations, art exhibitions, and some musical instruments to play. Furthermore, there is an exhibition space free to book. Some interviewees mentioned the increase in population in 2015 due to migration but population ceased again, while another interviewee perceived population as stable.

Challenges related to social aspects in Eksjö were public transport, the feeling of being isolated, and youth leaving for bigger cities. Cultural offer in the area is also a pressure in Hultsfred, since there are no venues in the area for theatre, music events or clubs, which results in people feeling the need to commute to bigger areas and creates the sense of being forgotten. Depopulation has always been a problem in the area according to some participants, with a population decrease in the smaller settlements since few people are moving to live here and limited higher study opportunities. This can create pressures in the job market in the region, creating an issue for young families who wish to move to calmer parts of the country. And although there are building new residential complexes so people can move in, the lack of transport options in the area creates a limitation for residents, resulting in a reliance on cars.

“A young person probably needs support from their parents to drive them...”
(Interviewee 3, Eksjö).

“Transport is a bit limited here...you are more dependent on driving a car, which is a drawback” (Interviewee 8, Eksjö).

House prices and rent in Hultsfred are cheap, which can be a great opportunity for young families who wish to settle here, with foreigners taking advantage of these low prices. While this initially may be great for the economy of the town, in the long term, it creates a challenge since these properties are only being used as summer houses instead of permanent residences.

b) Economic aspects

Some things mentioned with positive regards in the region were the availability of jobs, military facilities attracting new people to the area, cheap housing, possible expansion of the wind energy industry, and the steady inflow of tourists, especially during the summer. On the other hand, the only negative aspects mentioned were how out-migration can cause shop closing in the area since there is no market for them, in addition to public transport lacking since it is not bringing any revenue to the community.

“We got lots of tourists here because of Astrid Lindgren and Emil.” (Interviewee 5, Eksjö).

c) Environmental aspects

Eksjö is perceived as a great community connected to a lot of nature surrounding the town, with forests and lakes at close proximity and well-preserved, which give people a sense of calm and tranquility. In general, it is presumed and sensed that these natural areas are well preserved, but there is a concern regarding the forestry industry and how it has been increasing over the last years, not allowing trees to grow at their natural rate.

d) Sense of community

According to respondents, Eksjö has a great sense of community and is very welcoming. Even though it is seen as a big town, people are kind and open to meeting new-comers, with a big offer for cultural activities, which can act as a bridge for connecting with others. Nevertheless, entering this community with high social cohesion can sometimes present an obstacle for new residents wishing to be involved in society.

“If you are not active, you can feel like an outsider.” (Interviewee 1, Eksjö).

e) Future vision

Residents would like to have more people moving into the area, with more cultural, businesses, and educational offers, as well as some form of promotion on the advantages that life in this locality has (e.g. cheaper houses and nature). There is also an interest in keeping history and heritage alive, besides the need for bigger venues for more cultural events that could help with social cohesion. One participant pointed out that it might be interesting to look for further opportunities for cooperation between Hultsfred and Eksjö municipality due to their proximity.

“...it is interesting since Hultsfred is kind of close and maybe in the future they should look at that.” (Interviewee 8, Eksjö).

4.1.3 Responses from Mariannelund

a) Social aspects

Interviewees mentioned that they moved back to the area due to their family, as they were living there, and mentioned that people that move to the area are adults with kids or to work there. There are some perceiving many newcomers arriving. The interviewees value tranquility and social gathering clubs.

Respondents in Mariannelund stated that the most important service for them in Eksjö municipality is the hospital, because it is in the same municipality. They do not go shopping there as much, because it is closer for them to go to Vimmerby. Job opportunities in Mariannelund are limited, so many residents also work in Vimmerby. One of the interviewees said that they have built two houses to rent for tourists, so that is good for the town both in

economic and social ways. One of the respondents mentioned that they are staying in Mariannelund mainly because of the tranquility.

“Mariannelund has a lot of places for being such a small village: library, grocery store, fire department, it is unique for a place so small. Sometimes people don’t think about how much they have.” (Interviewee 12, Mariannelund).

There is no high school in the town and students have to go to Eksjö or Vimmerby, but there is an adult school. What Mariannelund residents value is the cinema, as they stated it is one of the oldest in Sweden, as well as other cultural buildings. They explain that the church is a social gathering point and organises events. Several interviewees highlighted that there are concerts in the summer and many cultural activities throughout the year (e.g. markets), but for theatre you have to go somewhere else. Astrid Lindgren cultural heritage is very important for locals.

“There should be more music and theatre activities so that young people want to stay.” (Interviewee 11, Mariannelund)

Public transport was also an aspect that was brought up several times, with residents bringing as a positive aspect the initiative from last summer of giving free passes to Eksjö for the students. However, participants mentioned that there was a lack between all the different villages, with a low availability of bus frequencies. Even though it is not expensive, it was described as limited. This directly affects people who commute frequently for work, since the bus schedules are usually not coordinated with the usual entrance hours and this creates a constraint for residents that do not have the possibility of owning a car. Another obstacle regarding transport is that whenever people want to commute to some places, prices are higher when they wish to cross regions.

“Bus connection to Hultsfred is poor, mainly due to inconvenient timetables and weak links between settlements.” (Interviewee 10, Mariannelund).

“You can’t live here if you can’t afford a car.” (Interviewee 12, Mariannelund).

Migration was also perceived as a challenge in the area, with some mentions on how foreigners coming to work in the area can create problems for the healthcare centers, housing availability and overall infrastructure.

“It’s one, two, three, four. Every four people we meet is an immigrant and that’s a very big, big percent of the population... We want to live in Sweden because we want to know Swedish people.” (Interviewee 2, Mariannelund).

Politicians' perception by residents was also mentioned as a challenge, with locals' perception being that they are not doing their job, they do not feel close to them, there is no transparency, and some even mentioned that they feel as if politicians do not care about them.

Another issue regarding politicians is that the ones that are closer to them do not hold enough power or influence to help on the problems that Mariannelund faces.

“People say that the region ends in the roundabout that Eksjö has in their entrance and politicians don’t care about the places after this.” (Interviewee 12, Mariannelund)

b) Economic aspects

Housing in Mariannelund is described as relatively cheap, so that can be a way to attract people to live there, also from some economically more vulnerable groups. Although the prices here are cheaper than in cities, some of the economic challenges are lack of places to work and it is also difficult to find staff for local services and businesses. So the recruitment of workers in Mariannelund is really a challenge.

c) Environmental aspects

Many respondents mentioned nature as one of the best factors there are in Mariannelund. It was said that nature is very well taken care of, also that it is clean everywhere. There are some people who pick up trash to help maintain the clean environment around. Trees are also very well preserved as there is a programme that helps keeping nature controlled and saved, so the trees cannot be cut down so easily, also if they get cut down, someone must plant new ones. However it was also mentioned that there are only a few old trees left, but that is not a problem only related to Mariannelund, but elsewhere too.

d) Sense of community

One of the most mentioned aspects by locals for the sense of community is the church as it is quite unique here. The church in Mariannelund really brings together people of different ages and backgrounds, although such diversity could make some challenges in unity and shared perspectives. As mentioned by one of the interviewees - the sense of community here is so strong, because everyone knows each other. If people have not seen somebody in public for a few days they might start worrying if everything is alright with that person. Neighbors tend to help each other a lot and the bond between them is much closer than in cities. But as mentioned by other respondents, the sense of community is strong around here, but not really about the municipality as they feel closer to places like Hultsfred and Vimmerby which are located outside their municipality than to Eksjö which is the center of their municipality. Even though the sense of community is a good thing to have in a small town like Mariannelund, it can also be a challenge for someone moving from different places to Mariannelund as it is not so easy to integrate in the community. It is also like that to people from other countries who move there, that is also more difficult to them because of language. Some respondents also mentioned that Swedish people tend to be more to themselves than communities

e) Future vision

Many of the respondents really see the potential of development on factors that involve young people. For example, one of the things mentioned was that the town needs

more places for children and young people to play. Also there should be more cultural activities happening, for example theater plays and concerts so the town can get more attractive to younger people. Attention should be paid more to attaching people to the Christian faith as it is on a growth in Sweden, especially to the young people. Another factor that could be improved in the future is to have more shops in Mariannelund so it would be closer for locals to shop and they would not have to go to Vimmerby or Hultsfred so often.

4.1.4 Relationship between the municipalities of Eksjö and Hultsfred

Code System	Hultsfred	Eksjö	Mariannelund	SUM
▼ Municipalities relationship				0
None	3	5	7	15
Positive	4		4	8
Σ SUM	7	5	11	23

Figure 27. Relationship between municipalities of Hultsfred and Eksjö perceived by the locals by town. Information extracted from the 15 interviews. Warm colors (red, purple) show the most frequent coded segments, blue colours show the less frequent coded segments.

The relationship between the two municipalities was mostly perceived as inexistant in Mariannelund and Eksjö, whereas in Hultsfred it was slightly more perceived as positive (Figure 27). In Hultsfred, the interviewees commented on the strong mental separation perceived due to the two main towns belonging to different counties, Kalmar and Linköping. They stated that there is no cooperation between the two municipalities regarding public transportation, especially between small settlements. There used to be cooperation, but not anymore.

On the other hand, there is a connection between schools, as students from other municipalities can attend school in the other municipality, but it has to be approved by the municipality. There are also agreements for job courses. Collaboration in tourism and with environmental inspectors exists, but it is not much.

“The border affects, like how you view the distance, even if the distance might be shorter.” (Interviewee 2, Hultsfred).

In Eksjö, locals felt more connected to municipalities closer to their towns, such as Vetlanda, Nässjö, Vimmerby and Mariannelund. The difference in county affiliation was also mentioned. Some interviewees were unsure if there are connections and stated that Hultsfred is geographically close and could be more connected. Others stated there is no connection with Hultsfred municipality.

In Mariannelund, the interviewees stated there is more connection to Vimmerby or Eksjö than to Hultsfred. They go shopping in these two towns. If they need healthcare assistance, they cannot go to another municipality even though it is closer to where they live; they need to go to Eksjö. The increase in price in the public transportation when they need to cross the border is an issue. Some people have to take the bike to cross the border and then

take a bus on the other side, some youth cannot cross the border because they cannot afford it.

On the other hand, interviewees commented positively on the hiking trail built together with Hultsfred from Mariannelund to Lönneberg and the gravel cycling between Vimmerby, Hultsfred and Eksjö to develop cycling in the region. Some mentioned there is more attendance to events in town from Hultsfred and Vimmerby than Eksjö.

4.2 Informal Interviews

Results showed that the community was open for newcomers when they had kids and participated in local activities. The meeting places were most popular, for the opportunity to meet are libraries, restaurants, sport activities like football and churches. These meeting places were also functioning for elderly people as a security system. Thanks to social connections, elderly check on their neighbors if they don't show up for a longer time. Other places which are appreciated are the nature in the rural areas and the park in Mariannelund. For healthcare, inhabitants were pleased, despite the fact that they often have to move to the municipal centre. Also, tourism was perceived as a positive aspect, which creates opportunities for small businesses. Overall, the region is seen as calm and peaceful with a low criminal rate.

Challenges are seen in the public transport and on workplaces. People living in the area highlighted that it was easier when the trains were running, and although there are few bus services, it is necessary to have a car. Regarding this, the train tickets in Hultsfred can only be purchased online or through a machine in the station, which can represent a challenge for some people. Depopulation, lack of shops, and lack of support for entrepreneurs from municipalities and state, creates a challenge for businesses in the area. Elderly people are getting more relevant in the area due to youth outmigration to cities where there are more possibilities for work and study. There is also a lack of interest in working the land since it is regarded as a high-maintenance and intense labor, which results in people giving up the land and moving to the cities as well.

4.3 Survey

The survey received a total of 44 responses. Most of the responses came from the residents living in either Eksjö or Mariannelund, with a fair share from Hultsfred as well. The distribution of the settlements can be seen in Figure 28 .

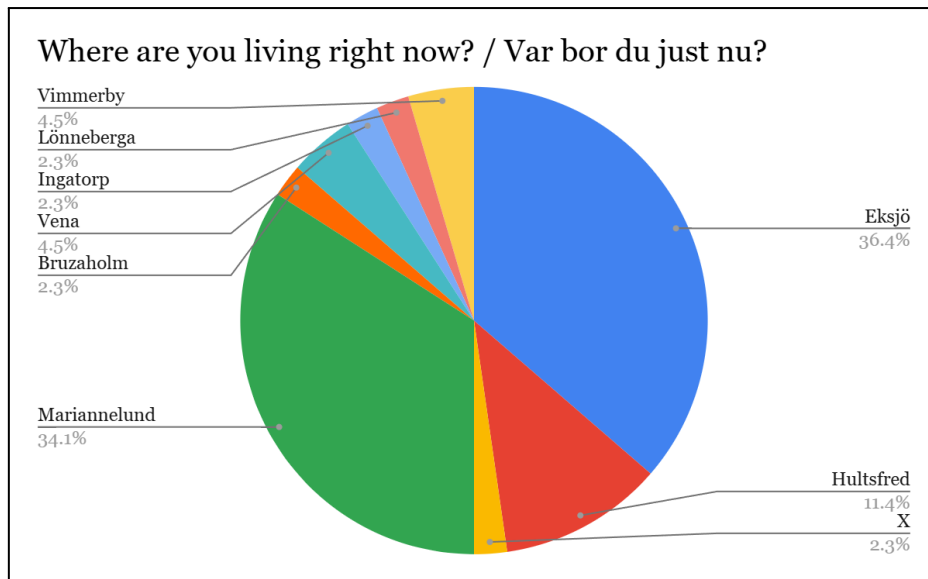


Figure 28. The distribution of the responses to the question “Where are you living right now?”

There was a strong imbalance in the amount of males to females ratio who responded to the survey, with 31 responses from the women, and only 13 were from men. Age distribution had a strong inclination towards people of working age, ranging from 35–65 (Figure 29), while the older population (65+) had a low representation (only four responses), but that could be related to limited digital skills or the survey not reaching them (via Facebook groups or mailing lists). The youngest group (ages between 21–34) had six respondents. This could be due to the aging population of the area, so the proportion was not unexpected.

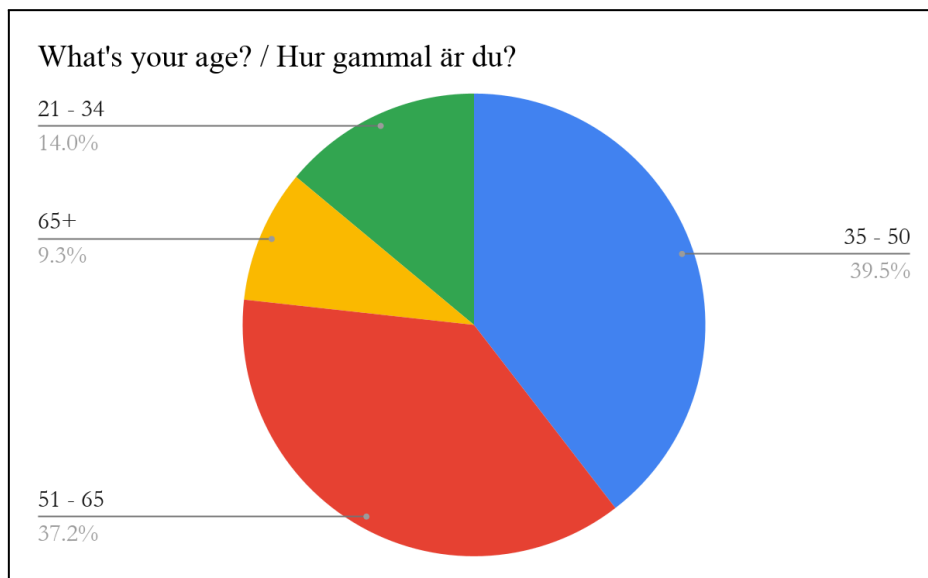


Figure 29. The age distribution of the respondents.

Regarding occupation, the majority of our respondents were employed, while 13.6% of the respondents were either public workers or retired. A bit lesser amount were business owners and entrepreneurs. A minority of people were either unemployed, currently not

working, students or something else (unspecified). This distribution can be seen in Figure 30 and it reflects the fact that the population between Eksjö and Hultsfred has aged.

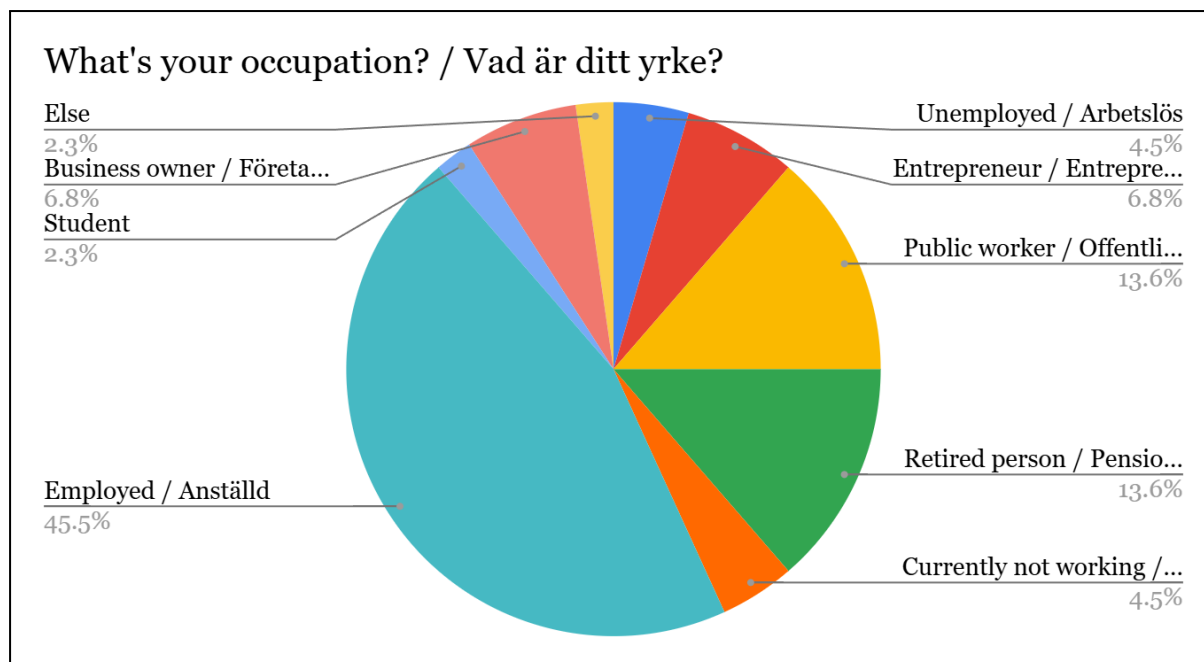


Figure 30. The occupation distribution of the respondents.

Over half of the people (26 persons) stated that they work in the same municipality they currently live in, while a big majority (seven out of eight) said that they have not always lived here and three from the four answers said that they see themselves living there in the future.

4.3.1 Results from Eksjö

We received 16 answers from the people living in Eksjö. The mean ratings that they gave to the different aspects of Eksjö can be seen in Table 5. The work of local public libraries and healthcare facilities received the highest level of satisfaction, whereas the overall development in the region in the last 10 years and the transport services got the worst ratings. The latter was also reflected the most amount of times as something that needs to be improved (15 respondents out of 16 mentioned that). It was also mentioned that the railway connections should be re-established, for example between Eksjö and Oskarshamn or Eksjö and Jönköping. Also the public transport in the bounds of Eksjö and cycle paths between Eksjö and Hult are needed. Improving the education as well as pedestrian/cycle infrastructure was mentioned both 6 times and improving healthcare had 4 mentions.

Table 5. The ratings of different aspects for the people of Eksjö.

Work of the local public library	4.2
Medical facilities	4.1
Feeling of safety	3.9
The work of local NGOs	3.9

Work of local entrepreneurs	3.8
The overall cleanliness	3.6
The state of the pedestrian/cycling infrastructure	3.6
Options for leisure time activities	3.5
Work of local education institutions	3.3
The overall development in the region in the last 10 years	2.8
Transport services	2.4

When asked about services that the municipality is lacking, some people felt the need for a larger grocery (and other) stores and services like cafes and restaurants, but also space for events. People feel the lack of events that include music, culture and young people, and some activities, like billiards for example. Olsbergs Arena and Sjöängen were mentioned as spaces that have a lot of potential that are underutilized spaces with considerable development opportunities. Overall, the respondents stated that they take part in the events in the local community, but the majority noted that they would not attend the events in Hultsfred's municipality. Nine respondents could not come up with an answer to whether there are any resources that are not fully utilized.

Respondents also said that the area lacks jobs and it would be suitable for the area to have more industry, as well as more innovative businesses and companies working in the IT sector. It was specified that they could have a higher education program linked to the professions that are in demand in the Höglands hospital. It was also mentioned that Eksjö could focus more on tourism. That includes improving the options for accommodation and marketing the wooden city better. The latter was mentioned by 13/16 respondents as something that gives Eksjö its identity. Other things included Eksjö city festival and the surrounding forests.

4.3.2 Results from Mariannelund

From Mariannelund we received 15 answers. The highest ratings were given to the work of the local public library and to the feeling of safety. The lowest ratings were similar to the ones that were also poorly rated in Eksjö – transport services and the overall development in the region. All of the ratings can be seen in Table 6.

Table 6. The ratings for different aspects for the people of Mariannelund

Work of the local public library	4.2
Feeling of safety	3.6
Work of local education institutions	3.5
The work of local NGOs	3.4
Work of local entrepreneurs	3.3
Medical facilities	3.1

The overall cleanliness	3.1
Options for leisure time activities	3.1
The state of the pedestrian/cycling infrastructure	2.5
Transport services	2.4
The overall development in the region in the last 10 years	2.2

The respondents named small shops, restaurants, pharmacies and meeting spaces for people of all ages as something that the municipality is lacking, but there were a few people who could not come up with an answer or said that the municipality is not lacking anything. On a more social note, two respondents indicated that they feel the lack of overall friendliness and common sense in the municipality.

The types of businesses that the respondents felt would fit to Mariannelund included industry (four mentions), furthermore wood industry, different types of stores (food and apparel), pharmacy, in addition to professions like a bicycle repairman and plumber. Five people mentioned that they do not know what would be suitable for Mariannelund and one commented that they feel like it already has enough. Facilities that the locals would like to see appear in the near future included walking paths along the Bruzaån river, re-populating empty housing and having more life in the centre (including having social services and investments into young people's wellness). The need for improving the medical system was mentioned multiple times – people would like to have the pharmacy return. Elderly need to receive better care, and it was stated that the locals require receiving prescription medicine straight from Mariannelunds health centre, without having to go to bigger cities. Keeping the health centre there is important to the locals. The respondents would also like to see more cooperation between municipalities, between Vimmerby and Eksjö for example as well as cooperation among entrepreneurs. The lack of green spaces and safe cycle paths were also remarked. From the social side, people mentioned that they would like to see Mariannelund being more inclusive and making everyone feel safe, but there were some answers that were in conflict with each other as well, especially regarding immigration. A few people would like to see more immigration, whereas there was one respondent who does not want to have more immigration, especially from abroad. There was one response that said that they would like keeping household animals like chickens, ducks, or goats for free, because right now the municipality is charging them huge taxes.

When asked about resources that are not being utilized to its full potential, an impression of the town was mentioned. With the feeling of Mariannelund potentially having a promenade along the river and renovating the facades of the houses in the center and along road number 40.

As challenges, 10 participants noted healthcare, nine noted public transport and eight pedestrian/cycle infrastructure. Sporting facilities and education were named as aspects needing improvements only twice and one respondent said that nothing needs improvement.

Most of the responses stated that they do take part of the local communities activities, and two out of three said that they would also go and take part of the activities in Hultsfred, which differs from the answers we got from Eksjö and it illustrates the closeness to the border that Mariannelund has.

The participants generally feel a strong identity tied to Astrid Lindgren's stories, as many are filmed in the area and it was mentioned seven times. People feel that nature also gives the place an identity (three people noted that) and the Karamellkokeriet as well.

4.3.3 Results from Hultsfred

From the town of Hultsfred we received five responses. The mean ratings of the different services can be seen in Table 7. The work of the local public library and the feeling of safety both got high ratings, similarly to Mariannelund. The aspects with the lowest ratings were again transport services and the overall development in the area. The same thing was reflected later, when four of the five respondents stated the need to improve public transportation. Improving the pedestrian/cycle infrastructure was mentioned twice, healthcare and sports facilities once.

Table 7. The ratings

Work of the local public library	4.3
Feeling of safety	4
The work of local NGOs	3.8
Work of local education institutions	3.6
The overall cleanliness	3.6
Options for leisure time activities	3.4
Work of local entrepreneurs	3.2
Medical facilities	2.6
The state of the pedestrian/cycling infrastructure	2.4
Transport services	2.4
The overall development in the region in the last 10 years	2.3

The respondents felt like there was a lot lacking in Hultsfred - they mentioned cafes, restaurants, nicer centres, activities for people and businesses. Similar things were named as something that they would like to see happening in Hultsfred – lively centre, a pub that would be open later than 11pm, more jobs (though new shops and companies), cafes and industrial development.

The main thing that was said to give the place an identity is the Hultsfred festival, but it was indicated that because it does not take place anymore, the identity is also lost. One participant wrote: *“What gave the place its identity no longer exists such as Hultsfredsfestivalen and Hultsfredshus”*. Two participants said that there is nothing

(anymore) that gives the place its identity and one mentioned nature. They also could not mention any single resource that is not fully in use. The types of businesses that two of the participants found to be suitable for the area were industry, one said trade and two did not know how to answer that question. Two out of five said that they do not take part in the local communities activities and three out of five would take part of Eksjö's community activities, furthermore, there was one response that would only take part in Eksjö's activities.

4.3.4 Results from the rest of small towns

As we got responses from smaller places and in smaller quantities, the results were analyzed together. From Vimmerby and Vena we got two responses and from the rest of the places we got 1 from each. Lönneberga and Vena are located in the municipality bounds of Hultsfred, while Ingatorp and Bruzaholm are in Eksjö. Even though we got two answers from Vimmerby, that is not our study area, we included them into the discussion, because if our survey reached them, they must have some relation to either Eksjö or Hultsfreds' municipality.

The highest and lowest ratings can be seen in Table 8, with highest rankings being indicated with green and the lowest with red. The highest ranking between all of the settlements was given to the cleanliness in Lönneberga (5/5) and the lowest were the overall development in Bruzaholm in addition to the transport services and the state of the pedestrian/cycling infrastructure of Vena.

Table 8. The rankings of the facilities in the smaller regions

	Bruzaholm	Ingatorp	Lönneberga	Vena	Vimmerby
Work of the local public library	2	4	4	4	2
Feeling of safety	4	3	4	3.5	2.5
The work of local NGOs	3	-	-	4	3.5
Work of local education institutions	3	-	4	2	3
The overall cleanliness	4	3	5	4	2.5
Options for leisure time activities	3	3	4	2	3
Work of local entrepreneurs	4	3	3	3	3
Medical facilities	4	2	3	2.5	2.5
The state of the pedestrian/cycling infrastructure	3	4	4	1.5	4
Transport services	2	2	3	1	3
The overall development in the region in the last 10 years	1	-	3	2.5	3

When asked about the facilities that the municipalities are lacking, the respondents from Eksjö (Bruzaholm and Ingatorp) said communication between the municipality and the locals as well as public transportation and good waste management. The people from the

Hultsfred municipality feel the lack of skilled people in the leading positions and one respondent requested better opening hours for retail. The answers from Vimmerby requested a place for young people and a bathhouse. One respondent did not specify the settlement where she lived, but felt the lack of a nature reserve in Nifsarpsmaden/Kvarnarp. Furthermore, the person from Bruzaholm stated that there is too little investment in community life in smaller towns.

Businesses that the respondents found to be suitable for Eksjö municipality were service stores that are open 24/7 and woodworking. The participants from the Hultsfred municipality (Lönneberga and Vena) said that they do not know what would be suitable, and one person from Vimmerby said carpentry, whereas the other one left a blank space.

Moreover, the aspects that the participants would like to see happen in the next 10 years included improving the public transport and utilization of empty premises in the Eksjö municipality, and improving the medical/dental care (not only in health centres, but also within schools through health-promoting activities), develop the cooperation with Vimmerby and change the people in lead in Hultsfred. The respondents from Vimmerby would like to have organized meetings for the young people with moped-cars and grow the overall community.

Everybody, except for the people from Vimmerby, would like to see improvements with public transport. For Eksjö, the respondents also mentioned pedestrian/cycle infrastructure and the healthcare facilities needing improvement. For Hultsfred, the answers were healthcare facilities and education institutions (both were selected by two participants), pedestrian/cycle infrastructure and sporting facilities were mentioned once. The responses from Vimmerby would like to see improvements in education institutions, healthcare facilities and sport offerings.

Most of the respondents do attend their local communities activities, there was only one person from Vena and one from Vimmerby that said that they do not, by the way, the latter would not also attend the activities in the other municipality. Attending activities in the other municipality got in total three “no” and four “yes” answers. The specific things that the locals felt like is giving the places its identity is the mill, museum, people’s house, Skröle Hie, go-karts and waterfall for Bruzaholm, Astrid Lindgren, historical places and nature for the person from Lönneberga, the forest for one of the respondent from Vena (the other one said that the rock festival used to give the place its identity, but now that it is gone, the place is depressing). Raggarna and Astrid Lindgren 's World were mentioned by the people from Vimmerby.

4.3.5 Overall satisfaction

We asked the participants if they work in the same municipality that they live in and the results can be seen in Table 9. For Eksjö and Hultsfred, the majority does work in the same municipality, but for the smaller settlements, many of the respondents do not work in

the same municipality that they live in. For Mariannelund it was equal. This furthermore proves that people really need good and frequent public transportation coverage to move between their homes and workspaces, especially people that live in the rural areas.

Table 9. Answers to the question “Do you work in the same municipality you live in?”

	Distance student / distansstudent	No / Nej	Not working / fungerar inte	Retired / Pensionär	Yes / Ja	Grand Total
Bruzaholm		1				1
Eksjö	1	1	1	1	12	16
Hultsfred					5	5
Ingatorp		1				1
Lönneberga					1	1
Mariannelund		7		1	7	15
Vena		1			1	2
Vimmerby		2				2
X		1				1
Grand Total	1	14	1	2	26	44

The results for the question if they want to live in the same area in the future can be seen in Table 10. Most of the respondents answered with “yes”, which reflects the strong ties that people feel with their homes and furthermore proves that the locals require investments into the facilities at the site and overall development of the living conditions that were

Table 10. Answers to the question “Do you plan on living here in the future?”

	Don't know / Vet inte	It depends / Det beror på	No / Nej	Yes / Ja	Grand Total
Bruzaholm				1	1
Eksjö			2	14	16
Hultsfred	1			4	5
Ingatorp				1	1
Lönneberga				1	1
Mariannelund	1	1	3	10	15
Vena		1	1		2
Vimmerby			1	1	2
X	1				1
Grand Total	3	2	7	32	44

As most of the people see their future in the same municipality that they currently live in, it is important that they (and their kids) could have jobs in the same region. The lack of jobs came apparent from the survey, but in Table 11 you can see the overall rating of how

easy it is to find a job in the region right now. It comes clear that the locals rate it fairly low, as most of the answers are “3” or less. So bringing more industry or other sectors of employment into the area is definitely needed.

Table 11. The difficulty of finding a job in the region. “5” means very easy, “1” means very hard.

	1	2	3	4	5	Grand Total
Bruzaholm	1					1
Eksjö	2	2	8	2		14
Hultsfred	1		3			4
Ingatorp					1	1
Lönneberga		1				1
Mariannelund		3	8	1		12
Vena	1		1			2
Vimmerby		1	1			2
X	1					1
Grand Total	6	7	21	3	1	38

When we asked the participants what resources the area has, everyone except two said forest.

Talking about investments and development in the area, the importance of sustainable development can be seen in Table 12. It appears that sustainable development is important to the locals, as the majority of the respondents ranked it with “5” or “4”. So implementing sustainable practices for the development is seen as very highly valued.

Table 12. The importance of sustainable development. 5 meaning very important, 1 meaning not important at all.

	1	2	3	4	5	Grand Total
Bruzaholm					1	1
Eksjö		2		5	7	14
Hultsfred			1	1	2	4
Ingatorp			1			1
Lönneberga					1	1
Mariannelund	1	1	1	2	9	14
Vena			1		1	2
Vimmerby		1		1		2
X						1
Grand Total	1	4	4	9	22	40

We asked the participants about the transparency between the policy makers and the locals and the answers were divided between the two municipalities, the result for Eksjö

municipality can be seen in Figure 31 and the result for Hultsfreds municipality can be seen in Figure 32.

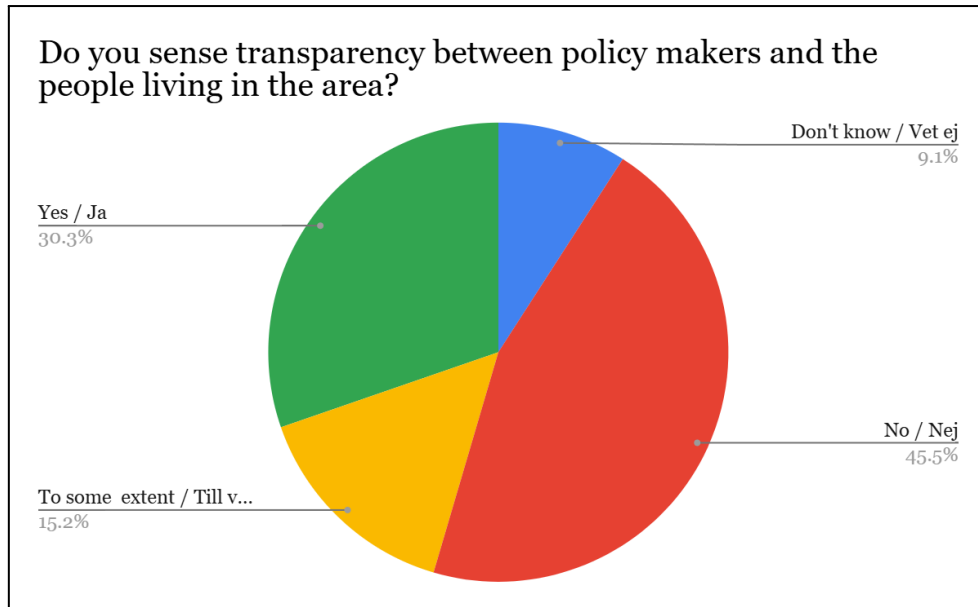


Figure nr 31. The distribution of the answers to the question “Do you sense transparency between policy makers and the people living in the area?” from the municipality of Eksjö

It comes clear that there is not much transparency sensed between the locals and the policy makers in either of the municipalities. The case is worst in Hultsfred, where only one of the respondents answered with “yes”. Working on communicating and cooperating with the locals is an important task in order to keep the community close to the policy makers and drive overall satisfaction with the region.

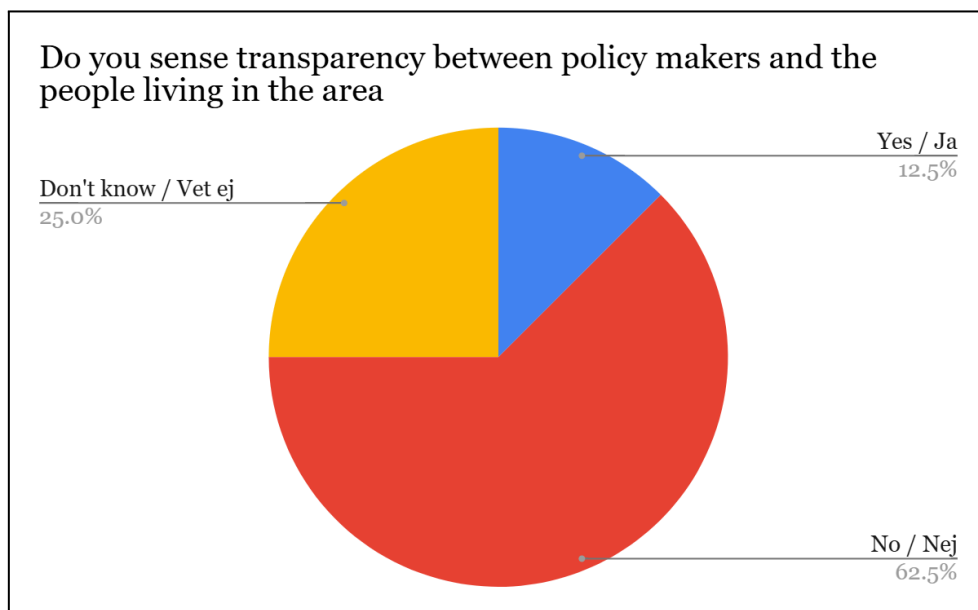


Figure 32. The distribution of the answers to the question “Do you sense transparency between policy makers and the people living in the area?” from the municipality of Hultsfred

4.4 Field observations

Plenty of abandoned houses were seen in the outer parts of almost all towns, as well as in the highways communicating the villages. The area is shaped by forest and not densely populated. There are some parks and lakes, with benches to rest. Lakes and sport places are also used for cultural activities. The centre and public facilities are mostly well maintained, even though some houses are empty and point to a time when more people lived in these towns. Some cafes, shops and businesses are in the area, and apparently make the most profit in the tourist season, which starts from May. A very common thing, not only in churches, where we have been part of it, is “Fika”. It is known and practiced by many people in Sweden. The buses are coming regularly but not much so that cars are necessary. Some buses come every hour as between Eksjö and Vimmerby, other ones, like between Hultsfred and Silverdalen, only come in the morning and afternoon, so that students and the working population can use them in everyday life.

In most places, there were few people walking on the street, with the majority of people seen belonging to the elderly population in the area. Young adults or teenagers were rarely seen in most of the localities visited. When approaching people on the street, it is noticeable that in the rural areas, there are mainly elderly people. Some do not want to talk, do not speak english or get sceptical, when it was mentioned that research was closely related with the municipalities, but most were responsive and welcoming.

5. Discussion

5.1 Values

5.1.1 Cheap housing

Based on the fact of population ageing and the depopulation of rural areas, houses, apartments and other real estate properties are becoming vacant. On the one hand, this creates risks that the properties will remain neglected, which in turn may pose safety hazards. On the other hand, it opens up opportunities to offer housing at relatively low market prices.

Spatial inequality in rural housing can also be conceptualised by recognising the existence of “cold spots” that emerge where there is an oversupply of housing and low prices as a result of emigration, lack of employment opportunities and/or insufficient infrastructure and services (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel, 2024).

Low prices create several implications. On the one hand, they provide people with a good opportunity to relocate and settle in the area, as they can afford to purchase property. On the other hand, this encourages the acquisition of second homes, or so-called summer houses, which create uninhabited and abandoned areas in the landscape during the autumn and winter seasons. Access to housing in rural areas is closely linked to demographic and social changes, for example, with regard to age, household structure and the mobility and migration motives of different groups (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel, 2024).

Although low prices may seem attractive, in rural areas with limited demand, the low market prices mean that banks are reluctant to offer loans. As a result, the housing shortage is further exacerbated.

One possible solution is the transformation of the working-age population, enabling a larger share of residents to work remotely. This is linked to the growing “lifestyle mobility”, including digital nomadism (Stenbacka & Heldt Cassel, 2024).

5.1.2 Nature and sense of community

For all three towns, the sense of community had a strong and positive feedback. There is a high sense of social cohesion and belonging, with a friendly atmosphere and active participation in local cultural life. Cultural activities offered and centres, such as the church in Mariannelund, act as social centres allowing people to come together, in addition to enforcing interactions and support. However, this social bonding can also be counter-product for new residents coming to the area finding it difficult to enter and integrate to the already existing community. Hultsfred specifically presented a shared-sense of identity which was supported by the previous existence of the Hultsfred music festival that took place in the region, and due to economic reasons, this event was terminated in the 2010's. Several participants mentioned that this musical gathering was something that was missed in the region and a comeback of this performance could help build up the community sense besides bringing revenue into town.

Proximity and easy access to nature was frequently pointed out by several participants in all of the regions consulted. Having mostly only positive remarks on how surrounding nature allowed them to do several activities, feel closed to the community, and an overall perception of tranquility. According to Cozzi et al. (2022) natural areas and human well-being represent a positive link, with an emphasis on people preferring natural landscapes to recover from mental fatigue. Access to nature has also been described as an advantage of rural areas over urbanized areas, since they provide an overall feeling of support, protection, social bonds, in addition to community experience among residents (Schnorr-Bäcker, 2020).

Even though nature was mostly mentioned as a value for the areas, concerns regarding the forestry industry were also stated. More sustainable practices could be put into use, keeping mixed species and avoiding monocultured forests, protecting key-habitats to maintain biodiversity (USDA Forest Service, 2012). Better strategies for wood harvesting could also be implemented, such as avoiding logging large patches and harvesting selectively instead of fully exploiting landscapes (Oliver, 2003).

5.1.3 Tourism

Tourism is a significant value in the study area. This is also confirmed by several interviewees in both Eksjö and Hultsfred municipalities. The economic importance of tourism was also mentioned by people during short informal conversations. Every resident knows the name of Astrid Lindgren and is aware of her importance for tourism development in the region. This positive aspect is mentioned in at least seven survey responses as a significant heritage and an important element of the local identity.

Tourism in this area is highly seasonal. Therefore, it would be valuable to look for solutions to extend the season with attractions such as “Emil of Lönneberga skiing” or other winter activities related to the characters from Astrid Lindgren’s stories.

The Swedish writer Astrid Lindgren is a literary icon (Bom, 2016). She acts as a magnet that attracts tourists to this territory. In modern times, literary places attract a much broader target audience (Bom, 2016). Therefore, it is important to take into account the increasingly significant aspects of emotional tourism and emotional geography in order to continue attracting visitors throughout the year.

As a business idea, a Pipi Langstrump themed hotel would work in the region. Besides the Lindgren’s amusement park, a singular hotel in the Mariannelund area could also attract visitors. The idea is that the users can sleep in Pipi’s recreated house, with activities for children and adults, with the inspiration from Disney World themed hotels in Paris (Disneyland, n.d.).

5.2 Challenges

5.2.1 Cultural offer

The cultural offerings are limited in the rural and peripheral areas. One of the interviewees mentioned that they feel the need for a new venue for big events, although from the survey it became apparent that there are currently two event spaces in Eksjö that are not fully meeting their potential. The locals felt that even though Eksjö and Hultsfred have plenty of events for the elderly, they lack activities for the youth. This is something that the municipalities could definitely improve, as it is essential for keeping the youth in the region. A highly effective approach is to consult youth about their preferences and involve them in the design of the activities (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018).

The other towns could take Mariannelund as an example as it has many different events and concerts that the town, organisations and the church are organizing.

The work of the library was very highly rated in the survey in the three towns: Eksjö, Hultsfred and Mariannelund, so continued investment and support is strongly recommended. A pub that is open later than 11pm was required in one of the survey answers from Hultsfred.

5.2.2 Shops

Shops are also one of the challenges in the municipality, because due to depopulation some of the shops are closing. Some of the respondents in interviews mentioned that in towns like Mariannelund there are too few shops so residents usually go shopping to Hultsfred or Vimmerby. A potential solution to this issue could be opening more shops in those places.

Studies on rural retailing indicate that traditional village shops are under pressure due to demographic change, urbanization, and competition from large supermarkets. However, research also highlights that rural shops can remain viable if they adapt to local conditions and diversify their services. Instead of focusing solely on selling goods, successful rural stores often expand their role within the community. Key recommendations include offering additional services such as cafés, postal services, or local product sales. By doing so, shops become multifunctional spaces that serve both economic and social purposes. This transformation helps strengthen community ties and increases customer loyalty. In many cases, rural shops function as important social hubs, especially in areas where other public services have disappeared (Paddison & Calderwood, 2007).

5.2.3 Job market

The job market in the area of interest was rated rather poorly by the locals (Table 11). The lack of jobs came apparent from the interviews as well. Some of the solutions suggested by the locals included having more industry, but also innovative companies and companies working in the IT sector in the area. It was also specified that they could have a higher education program linked to the professions that are in demand in the Högländs hospital in Eksjö. All but one of the participants from the survey mentioned forest as a resource, so

implementing more industry in the wood/forestry sector could be an opportunity. To keep in mind sustainability, a good solution might be introducing woodworking companies instead of increasing the number of trees being cut down. This way the area would attract carpenters and selling wooden furniture from locally grown wood would develop the economy.

The residents from Mariannelund felt the lack of professions like a plumber and a bicycle repairman, but having a separate job offering for a plumber in such a small settlement would not probably be feasible, so an idea for a solution is creating a community-run repair shop. It would work on the already strong sense of community the locals feel and helping each other would bring them even closer. These sort of solutions have been implemented elsewhere as well, for example in Tartu, Estonia, where Paranduskelder is reducing the environmental waste and strengthening the community though repairing all sorts of simple electronics, bicycles and else using the motivation of the locals (Paranduskelder, n.d).

5.2.4 Public transport

Public transport emerged as one of the main concerns for the local residents. People value having access to nearby towns and services, but they feel that the current transport system is limited and slow. Many residents mentioned that connections between Hultsfred and surrounding municipalities are not effective, making daily commuting for work, education, and healthcare difficult. Limited bus frequency and long travel times were seen as major challenges, especially for elderly people and young people who do not own cars. Some interview participants also pointed out that poor transport connections reduce the attractiveness of the municipality for new residents and businesses.

This creates dependency on private cars, which become a major problem for elderly residents, students, and low-income households. Similar findings are discussed by Hjorthol (2013), who explains that limited transport options in rural areas reduce mobility and quality of life for older adults, while insufficient public transport creates unmet travel needs and social exclusion. The study also highlights that special transport services offered by local authorities are often not enough to meet daily needs (Hjorthol, 2013). What is more, the use of private vehicles instead of public shared ones is not environmentally sustainable. At the same time, locals value the existing infrastructure and believe that improving transportation speed and accessibility could help stabilize population decline and strengthen regional development. Therefore, improving regional transport connections and introducing more flexible transport solutions could make rural areas more attractive for both current and future residents.

5.2.5 Healthcare

Healthcare is an important component of quality of life at all ages. In the resident survey, inhabitants of the Eksjö area rated the available medical services particularly highly, giving them 4.1 points out of 5, while the rating was slightly lower in Mariannelund.

In interviews with residents, the Eksjö hospital was repeatedly mentioned as a significant factor — not only as an important workplace in the region, but also as a key element ensuring quality of life. Especially residents of Mariannelund consider the Eksjö hospital as one of the most important services in the municipality. Several respondents indicated that the high quality of healthcare is one of the reasons why people choose to stay in the area.

Research on Swedish healthcare accessibility supports these concerns. Lundberg (2020) found that private primary healthcare providers are less likely to locate in rural municipalities compared to urban ones, which creates unequal access to healthcare services. Elderly population and lower-income groups are often the most disadvantaged, even though they have the greatest healthcare needs.

In order to reduce the need to use healthcare services, it is particularly important to promote an active lifestyle among older people and to offer various health-promoting activities. Given that the proportion of women is higher among the elderly population, it should be taken into account that some studies show women generally have poorer mobility and are more dependent on good health and the assistance of others for their personal mobility (Hjorthol, 2013).

Another possible solution is to strengthen local primary healthcare centers, improve digital healthcare services such as telemedicine, and better coordinate healthcare with transport planning. Mobile healthcare services and stronger cooperation between municipalities and regional healthcare providers could also reduce the burden of long-distance travel. Improving healthcare accessibility would not only support residents' wellbeing but also contribute to population stability and long-term municipal sustainability (Lundberg, 2020).

5.2.6 Education

All three towns stated an overall mixed perception on the education sector, with rankings falling in mid-range positions instead of highest or lowest positions. There are mixed opinions regarding the offer that education has in small localities, with some complaining about schools closing early due to an expected population decrease when it is still a necessity in the present. On the other hand, others commented that closing schools has been postponed since it is something that is not well received within the population, but this can negatively impact the quality of education.

Another issue pointed out during the interviews was the historic tendency of these regions giving low value in pursuing higher academic education since historically it has not been valued within the local industry. There were more families working in rural businesses such as forestry, farms and agriculture, therefore the population did not consider higher education a fundamental aspect. This generates a problem on its own nowadays, considering that most of the job opportunities require upper secondary certificates. We therefore strongly encourage the municipality to promote the completion of upper secondary education by

providing support to children from families with low educational background or from vulnerable families, as well as guidance for youth.

Regarding the conflicting opinions on closing education centers, further research should be conducted to assess the most socially beneficial option for these rural contexts. It is important to take into consideration that schools also act as social centres and help with social cohesion (Lyson, 2002), emphasizing the urge on reflecting that closure may also impact cohesion and long-term social sustainability in these areas. Municipalities could also implement social projects to promote pursuing upper education degrees to improve youth retention and employment rates in peripheral regions (Sosu & Ellis, 2014).

5.2.7 Outmigration

The challenges for workplaces correlate in most cases with the lack of young people. Most young people move into bigger cities, where they can have higher education. Smaller towns like Mariannelund lacked a direct and fast connection to cities like Jönköping and Linköping to commute regularly there to work or study. In this context, the uprising of digitalisation is giving hope to the smaller towns and villages. It will not be a solution for everyone, but it enables students who want to study online to stay in these rural areas, or only commute a few times a week if the internet connection is stable.

Another idea that was mentioned to tackle outmigration was to increase labour migration in the region. This would need to be addressed on a national level and seems unlikely when recognising the international trend. Political movements in European countries indicate that migration will get less in the next decades (RF Berlin, 2025).

Through the interviews, we found that there is a lack of workers in the rural areas that work in farms, family-owned forestry businesses and agriculture, since younger generations do not want to work in these fields. Neighbours help each other but it is not enough. We suggest that the municipality promotes the use of platforms such as Workaway, that connects people that want to do voluntary work in rural areas with farmers that need help. Workshops on how to create a profile, create an offer, use the platform and legal conditions could be held to help locals to use them. Internship agreements with students from universities could be established so they can get help as well. Additionally, there are many residents that do not hold a high education level and are looking for a job. These job-searchers could be connected to the rural residents in need of workers.

5.2.8 Abandoned buildings

Abandoned buildings are becoming a big problem especially in rural areas and areas where depopulation is happening. There were some abandoned buildings noticed during the field observations in a few towns of the municipality.

To revitalize shrinking cities it is suggested for local governments to use some of the following strategies: removing policy barriers to reusing vacant properties, providing tax incentives to encourage housing redevelopment, supporting the demolitions for abandoned

houses for resale and reusing vacant lots in a creative manner, for example for community gardens (Lee, 2023).

Policy in Catalonia also shows some strategies being done, for example offering financial aid to families to move into unused old houses with the condition of staying for a minimum amount of years. This has helped repopulation of rural areas. Some other towns offer subsidies for rents or partial financing of projects that generate employment (NacioDigital, 2025).

5.2.9 Ageing population and lack of youth

Population ageing is a challenge across Europe. In many Swedish municipalities, the total population is declining while the proportion of elderly people is simultaneously increasing (Abramsson, 2018).

Field observations conducted in various settlements within the study area revealed a noticeable presence of older people, particularly in smaller and more remote villages. Demographic data also clearly indicate societal ageing. Population aging creates a series of other challenges, such as labour shortages, a less active entrepreneurial sector, a greater burden on municipal budgets, and increased pressure on the healthcare system. The outmigration of young people from these areas, combined with the rising life expectancy of the older population, has significantly altered the demographic structure of rural Sweden (Abramsson, 2018).

These demographic changes affect lifestyle, as they threaten the foundation of service provision and social activities. This raises concerns about whether a shrinking municipality can remain socially and economically sustainable. The results of our survey also reflect societal ageing in the area: 46.5% of respondents were over 50 years old, while young people under 35 years of age accounted for only 14%.

Societal ageing in the territory also poses a challenge to the healthcare system and the provision of various forms of social support. In a situation where young people move to larger cities, while older residents wish to remain in their homes and farms for as long as possible and eventually become dependent on home care staff, whose visits become scattered daily events, it becomes increasingly difficult for small towns to maintain what makes a place a community — jobs, shops, culture, associations, and means of communication. The traditional way of life is disappearing (Abramsson, 2018).

Often, elderly people's dependence on external services is closely linked to their ability to use various modern tools, such as shopping online or ordering necessary medication remotely. This means that it is important to provide older people with training in the use of different technologies and modern social media. The introduction of technology in elderly care would also reduce the municipality's monthly expenses.

5.2.10 Politicians perception

It came apparent that the locals do not feel a strong sense of transparency between themselves and the policy makers. As Figures 31 and 32 illustrate, the majority feels like there is no or only limited trust and involvement in the management of the municipality. If the transparency was higher, the overall quality of life in the municipalities would grow (Widjaja, 2025).

Some actions that the municipalities could implement were introduced by Grueber and Mello (2022), and include collaborative governance, meaning that both the decision-making and the outcome needs to be communicated clearly with the residents. The latter consists of both the success and the failure of chosen measurements, to show the actual outcome of engaging the locals. Another idea is engaging the third-party institutions, like the educational institutions and library, for example, to gain additional personnel and resources in order to mitigate problems and expand the scope of people involved in the everyday decision-making and thus bringing the governance closer to the locals.

5.3 Relationship between municipalities

RQ2: How is the relationship between Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities perceived?

The majority of coded segments in the interviews described the relationship as inexistant due to a mental barrier. One interviewee perceived as positive that one young person could attend the Hultsfred high school, even though they belonged to the other municipality. This matter should be taken into account specifically for the residents living in the border area. They should be able to choose which school to attend.

The fact that some interviewees did not know anything about the relationship gives information about the relationship, which suggests that there is no relationship.

Public transportation to cross the border is an issue due to the high price. Taking the bike to cross it to save money is highly inconvenient, especially for elderly people or people with mobility limitations. Even though transport is managed by the counties, both municipalities could work together to achieve an agreement to lower the cost of crossing the area, to facilitate connections between residents living in the border area. That would reduce their isolation and would help their wellbeing. There have been cooperations before in relation to the hiking trail and cycling (Cykla i Filmlandskapet Småland. (n.d.)), therefore further collaboration can take place. Some interviewees suggested that a calendar shared between the municipalities could be created. This would include cultural and leisure events and would encourage residents from the other municipality to attend events that might be close to them.

Regarding healthcare, the municipalities could look into how to tackle the issue that some residents in the border are facing. They cannot attend a hospital that is closer to where

they live because of the border. That involves losing quality of life: they spend more travelling time and that can prevent them from going to the hospital when they need it.

If more collaboration took place, both border areas in the municipalities could use tourism to mutually benefit. They could inform tourists about all the relevant visits present in the area, in both municipalities, as a joint effort. They could create a map showing all the border areas and what can be visited and which nature activities can be done.

6. Conclusion

The goal of our survey was to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: What aspects do locals value in the area and what challenges do they perceive and how do locals envision the future development of the area?

RQ2: How is the relationship between Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities perceived?

With some previous research, we achieved an initial understanding of the border area. In order to collect data we created a survey and semi-structured interviews and contacted research subjects through email, Facebook groups, and via phone call. During fieldwork, interviews, surveys, and field observations were conducted to analyze local perceptions.

Research has shown that both municipalities represent typical peripheral rural territories in Småland and elsewhere in Sweden. They face the classic challenges of depopulation, ageing population, and centralisation of public services. Residents and workers in both municipalities highly value the proximity to nature, strong sense of community, feeling of safety, and high-quality healthcare services, particularly the Eksjö hospital. Tourism linked to the cultural heritage of Astrid Lindgren is perceived as a significant economic and identity resource, although it remains highly seasonal.

The main challenges identified are population ageing with youth outmigration, insufficient labour market, limited accessibility to public transport, restricted diversity of cultural and leisure offerings, and the gradual decline of services (e.g. shops, pharmacies, educational institutions), especially in more remote small villages. The survey and interviews carried out during the study indicate that residents wish to remain in the area but call on municipal decision-makers to implement concrete improvements, such as more frequent public transport services, additional after-school activities for young people, more social opportunities for the elderly, and greater interest in cooperation between the two municipalities and regions.

Residents and those working in the area describe the relationship between Hultsfred and Eksjö municipalities as weak or inexistant. In particular, people in Mariannelund and the border zone experience the administrative border as a burden. The border area is sometimes perceived as a penalty due to higher transport costs and reduced accessibility of healthcare and educational services. At the same time, the study highlighted positive aspects, such as the richness of nature and the existing network of cycling routes and hiking trails, which represent a small but promising starting point for future cooperation.

Our study, conducted in a relatively short period, confirms that the territory possesses considerable development potential: affordable housing, rich and diverse natural landscapes, a valuable cultural heritage, and high-quality public services. We particularly wish to emphasise the strong sense of community, which is an excellent resource that has so far been underutilised.

For the territory to become sustainable and achieve its full development potential, closer cooperation between the municipalities and the regions is essential. Furthermore, we would like to stress the importance of extending sustainable tourism into the winter season by further developing and enriching activities and attractions inspired by Astrid Lindgren's stories.

To conclude, we would like to thank all the participants in the surveys, the interviews, the talks and our teachers. With them, this research has been possible.

7. Reflection

During the research, particularly while conducting fieldwork, the majority of residents were open, friendly and willing to share their experiences and opinions. People were especially responsive when approached on the street and given a brief explanation on the purpose and goals of the study. It is worth noting that elderly residents were particularly approachable and open to conversation.

The highest level of engagement and responsiveness was observed in the towns of Eksjö and Mariannelund. The residents and workers in Mariannelund were notably responsive and open, largely thanks to the great openness and support of the Emilkraften organization. In contrast, the residents of Silverdalen were remarkably reserved and reluctant to answer questions, engage in discussions or answer the survey.

Main challenges we encountered during the study were related to the use of social media. In order to obtain as many survey responses as possible, we attempted to join more than thirty different Facebook groups. Some of our requests were not approved, therefore some small border towns did not show many answers. The limited use of social media, combined with the relatively short time frame, was reflected in the survey results — only 44 responses were received. While it may not be enough to conclude any comprehensive conclusions, it still gave us a valuable insight into the views of the local residents.

A significant part of the research involved interviews. When planning them, we sent out more than fifty emails, but received only a few replies. Another challenge was the relatively short notice given for arranging meetings. Some people declined to participate because their schedules were already fully booked. Others mentioned that they were too busy.

Despite these obstacles, overall the local people were responsive and interested in our study. They generously dedicated a considerable amount of their time to us, which allowed us to gather valuable and authentic information.

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Appendix

Survey

Nord+ Survey on Eksjö-Hultsfred Kommuner

Hej hej!

Tack för att du har valt att delta i denna konfidentiella forskningsenkät, som tar cirka 10 minuter att besvara. Enkäten genomförs som en del av Nord+kursen "*Sustainable Practices and Development for Depopulating and Peripheral Localities in the European North*", som erbjuds av nordiska universitet, inklusive Linköpings universitet.

Vi är internationella studenter som forskar om socioekonomiska förhållanden, hälsa och jämlikhet samt utmaningarna med att leva i perifera områden mellan Hultsfred och Eksjö. Resultatet av detta projekt kommer att vara en rapport som vi utarbetar, där vi presenterar våra resultat och föreslagna lösningar. Rapporten kommer att delas med båda kommunerna för att stödja deras arbete och beslutsfattande.

Vänligen svara så ärligt som möjligt och dela gärna med dig av alla tankar du anser vara relevanta. Alla svar kommer att behandlas konfidentiellt.

_____Engelska_____

Hej hej!

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this confidential research survey, which should take approximately 10 min to answer. This survey is conducted as a part of the Nord+ course "*Sustainable practices and development for depopulating and peripheral localities in the European North*", offered by Nordic universities, including University of Linköping. We are international students doing research on the socio-economic conditions, the state of health and equality, and the challenges of living in peripheral areas between Hultsfred and Eksjö. The outcome of this project will be a report created by us including the findings and proposed solutions, which will be shared with both municipalities to inform management.

Please answer as honestly as possible, and feel free to share any thoughts you consider relevant. All responses will remain confidential.

Where are you living right now? / Var bor du just nu?

Eksjö

Mariannelund

Hultsfred

Else:

What's your age? / Hur gammal är du?

0 - 20

21 - 34

35 - 50

51 - 65

65+

What's your gender? / Vilket kön har du?

Male / Manlig

Female / Kvinnlig

Prefer not to say / Föredrar att inte säga

Else:

What's your occupation? / Vad är ditt yrke?

Student

Employed / Anställd

Entrepreneur / Entreprenör

Business owner / Företagsägare

Public worker / Offentligt anställd

Unemployed / Arbetslös

Retired person / Pensionerad person

Currently not working / Fungerar inte för närvarande

Else:

Do you work in the same municipality you live in ? / Arbetar du i samma kommun som du bor i?

Yes / Ja

No / Nej

Else:

Have you always lived here? / Har du alltid bott här?

Yes / Ja

No / Nej

Else:

Do you plan on living here in the future? / Planerar du att bo här i framtiden?

Yes / Ja

No / Nej

Else:

The next questions had a scale from 1 to 5. 1 meaning the worst and 5 meaning the best.

How do you rate the local transport service? If you don't know, skip the question / Hur betygsätter du den lokala transporttjänsten? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the state of the pedestrian/cycling infrastructure? If you don't know, skip the question / Hur betygsätter du tillståndet på gång- och cykelinfrastrukturen? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the medical facilities? If you don't know, skip the question / Hur betygsätter du vårdinrättningarna? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the feeling of safety? / Hur betygsätter du känslan av trygghet?*

How do you rate the options for leisure activities? If you don't know, skip the question / Hur betygsätter du alternativen för fritidsaktiviteter? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the work of local entrepreneurs? If you don't know, skip the question / Hur betygsätter du de lokala entreprenörernas arbete? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the work of local education institutions? If you don't know, skip the question / Hur betygsätter du de lokala utbildningsinstitutionernas arbete? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the work of local NGO's? If you don't know, skip the question/Hur betygsätter du de lokala icke-statliga organisationernas arbete? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the work of the local public library? If you don't know, skip the question/Hur betygsätter du det lokala folkbibliotekets arbete? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the overall cleanliness of the region?/Hur betygsätter du den övergripande renligheten i din region?

To what extent do you consider sustainable development important? If you don't know, skip the question/ I vilken utsträckning anser du att hållbar utveckling är viktig? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How easy is it for a person to find a job in your region? If you don't know, skip the question/ Hur lätt är det för en person att hitta ett jobb i din region? Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

How do you rate the overall development of the region in the last 10 years? If you don't know, skip the question/ Hur bedömer du regionens övergripande utveckling under de senaste 10 åren? (1-5) Om du inte vet, hoppa över frågan.

What resources/possibilities does your municipality have? / Vilka resurser/möjligheter har din kommun? (*Multiple selection*)

Forest / Skog

Energy / Energi

Sporting facility / Sportanläggning

Art gallery (or similar) / Konstgalleri (eller liknande)

Cinema and/or theatre / Bio och/eller teater

Restaurant / Restaurang

Cafe / kafé

Availability of housing / Tillgång till bostäder

Availability for short-term stay (hotels or AirBnb or similar) / Tillgänglighet för korttidsvistelse (hotell eller AirBnb eller liknande) /

Pedestrian / bike infrastructure / Fotgängar-/cykelinfrastruktur

Else:

Do you think there are any resources that are not fully used? / Tycker du att det finns några resurser som inte utnyttjas fullt ut?

What type of businesses would be suitable for your region? / Vilken typ av företag skulle passa för din region?

What is your municipality lacking? / Vad saknar din kommun?

Is there anything that really makes the place have an identity? Please comment on it / Finns det något som verkligen ger platsen en identitet? Lägg till en kommentar

Do you sense transparency between policy makers and the people living in the area? / Upplever du transparens mellan beslutsfattarna och invånare?

Do you take part in any of the local community events such as sports, fairs, markets... If so, please specify. / Deltar du i några lokala evenemang, såsom sport, marknader eller mässor? (Om ja, vänligen specificera)

Yes / Ja

No / Nej

Else:

Would you attend the events of the other municipality? (If you live in Eksö, think about Hultsfred, and vice versa) / Skulle du delta i evenemangen i den [andra kommunen]? (Om du bor i Eksjö, tänk på Hultsfred, och vice versa.)

Yes / Ja

No / Nej

What would you like to see happening in your municipality in the next 10 years? / Vad skulle du vilja se hända i din kommun under de kommande 10 åren?

Which aspects should be improved? / Vilka aspekter bör förbättras? (*Select multiple*)

Public transport / Kollektivtrafik

Healthcare facilities / Medicinska anläggningar

Education institutions / Utbildningsinstitutioner

Sports offer / Idrottsutbud

Public library / Offentligt bibliotek

Pedestrian/cycling infrastructure / Infrastruktur för gång- och cykeltrafik

Else:

Do you have any additional comments or thoughts you would like to share? / Har du några ytterligare kommentarer eller tankar som du skulle vilja dela med dig av?

Formal Interview questions

- Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
 - What is your background? How long have you been working there?
 - Have you always lived in the area or did you move here?
 - If they say yes, why?
 - How was the process of entering the community?
 - How would you describe life in this place?
 - What do you value most here?
 - What are some challenges that you face?
 - What are the challenges that the region faces?
 - What is your perception of the population change in the last ten years?
 - What are the reasons why people are leaving?
 - What are reasons for people to stay?
 - Do you think there is a certain age group that is leaving?
 - What are the positive or negative aspects related to migrating to the area?
 - How would you describe services in the area? Like healthcare, schools, transport, housing...
 - What are the positive aspects regarding these services?
 - What are the challenges regarding these services? (is education bad and yes then why?)
 - Are you commuting to work/school?
 - How is access to housing in the area?
 - How would you describe the social life here?
 - How would you describe the cultural activities offered here? Such as music, theatre, sports, events
 - Do you feel a sense of community?
 - What are the most important natural areas in the region? Are they well preserved?
 - How do you perceive the forestry industry in the area?
 - To what extent do you consider it as a sustainable industry?
 - Is it feasible to keep these practices?
 - Do you think there are any resources that could be more exploited?
- *Only for business owners/organisation runners (such as NGOs)
- What are the challenges of running a business in this region?
 - Do you collaborate with other partners in the region?
 - Are there policies from the municipality to facilitate or restrict new businesses or organisations?
 - How would you describe the relationship between the municipality of Eskjö and Hultsfred?
 - Do you know any ongoing collaborations between the two municipalities?
 - How do you envision the town for the next 10 years?

Informal Interview questions

- Can you tell me something about you? /What is your role? (Opening question)
- What challenges do you have here in the region?
- What do you like here and where do you see opportunities to make it even better?
- Do you commute between different towns or what are your thoughts on the non-existing public transport?
- What are your thoughts about the infrastructure?
- What is your relationship to Eksjö and Hultsfred?
- Can you suggest somewhere else we should go?