

Peripheral Dynamics in Rural Sweden: A Case Study of Vetlanda and Högsby

*An explorative case study of the peripheral areas and borders of the Swedish municipalities
Vetlanda and Högsby, focusing on sustainability and depopulation in rural areas*



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Introduction

This report is focused on investigating and gathering knowledge about peripheral places near municipal border areas, mainly focusing on the borders of Vetlanda, Högsby, Hultsfred and Uppvindige municipalities. Our main focus is on Vetlanda and Högsby. There is limited knowledge about the border areas. They are characterized by small dwindling populations and are mostly overlooked in policy making and planning. This research is a part of a larger research project carried out by the three regions and Nordplus (Figure 1). These municipalities are located in southern Sweden, Vetlanda is part of the Jönköping region, Högsby and Hultsfred part of Kalmar region, Uppvindige in Kronoberg region. Besides these communities are in the border areas of municipalities, they are also on the borders of three different regions. Vetlanda, Hultsfred and Högsby are part of the same LEADER area - Astrid Lindgrens Hembygd (Astrid Lindgrens Hembygd, 2026).

This report highlights the importance of getting to know these small townlets and rural areas, giving municipalities valuable info about policymaking and planning for the future. The main theme of this report is “social sustainability” meaning improving or preserving the quality of life of the people living in these smaller areas. But the themes of depopulation, collaboration between municipalities and regions are also taken into account.

Our research questions (RQ) are the following:

- 1) How do border areas define/experience/identify themselves?** Do they consider themselves rural/left behind/needing development/thriving? This question is really important to address in order to map out people's views of their home communities. The report wants to compare the community's opinions with that of the municipalities.
- 2) How are the services in the border areas?** What do the communities think about the access to services? This question includes road connections, access to grocery stores, hospitals, municipal services, education, jobs, doctors, sport, amenities. Our aim is to figure out if these rural areas are somehow affected by the border.
- 3) What perspective do the municipalities have on shrinking periphery areas?** With this question the report wants to map out the challenges and plans of the municipalities (in this report we focus on only Vetlanda and Högsby municipalities). This is done in order to compare them to the opinions of rural communities (as said in RQ 1).

To get answers to these research questions, we have chosen multiple methods to gather data on this topic. For primary research we use formal interviews with key stakeholders, informal meetings with people on the street, a survey aimed at the border communities, and field observations (while mapping out interesting areas). For secondary research we have collected strategic documents and comprehensive plans of the two main municipalities (Vetlanda & Högsby), while connecting our reasoning to the broader academic research.

This report is divided into five chapters. First explaining the conceptual and topical framework of our main themes, weaving together academic papers with the strategies and planning documents of the municipalities and regions. The second chapter explains further the methods we used. The third chapter contains our results that were gathered during fieldwork. The fourth chapter is the discussion, where the results have been analysed. The fifth chapter is the conclusion but it also contains future suggestions for the municipalities on how to handle these rural areas.

The selected study area

The study focuses on the border areas among Vetlanda, Hultsfred, Högsby and Uppvidinge municipalities. To have a clear idea of the case-area, we defined a buffer of 5 km, 7.5 km and 10 km from the inner borders. This was used as a starting point to gather information and broaden our perspectives around the area, hence, during the fieldwork these boundaries were useful to choose core localities to explore and analyse. It is important to mention that this buffer is a concept that guides our process rather than a “mental” barrier or constraint.

Högsby and Vetlanda do not border each other, which meant we had to define our area differently than other study groups in this research project. We did visit and include the municipalities Hultsfred and Uppvidinge as they are a part of the general border area, however our main focus was on Högsby and Vetlanda.

Demographic information

These municipalities make up a population of 55 323 residents (Vetlanda having 27 462, Högsby 5 227, Hultsfred 13 609, Uppvidinge 9 025 residents). As of 2025, the statistics show that the population has been going down in all of the municipalities (Statistics Sweden, 2025). The rural population roughly makes up 12,1 %, all other residents are gathered around the bigger towns and townlets. Even though the population makes up a small fraction, it is still important that the people have their basic needs met. All municipalities struggle with an aging population and these four municipalities are not exception; in Vetlanda and Uppvidinge the median age is over 45, Hultsfred 46, Högsby 48, and it is steadily increasing, as the only major way the younger population increases is through immigration (Statisticsdatabas.se, 2026).



1. Conceptual & Thematic framework

1.1. Glossary of the key definitions

Many of the concepts used in this study are employed in the literature in various ways, depending on the specific field of study and the researchers' theoretical frameworks. Our approach is informed by the objectives of our work: to gather information on the economic, geographic, and sociological realities of areas whose peripherality manifests itself on various scales (the field is relatively distant from major cities and major transportation routes, and is situated on the border of the municipalities under study) and in various senses (we intend to study peripherality not only in spatial terms but also in social terms). Consequently, the concepts used here cannot be defined in a general and definitive manner. The definitions we provide reflect the situated approach we have adopted for this work, taking into account both the field and our respective experiences, training, and interests.

Our main analytical concept concerns the “**periphery**”. Here, it is examined through its dialectical relationship with the center, emphasizing their mutual interdependence, which is constituted by the towns of Vetlanda and Högsby, the seats of their respective municipalities. This is because our work focuses on the boundaries of these municipalities—that is, the areas that are geographically furthest from the center, the most peripheral ones. This dialectical relationship cannot be understood without a socio-spatial analysis, which examines life in peripheral territories through the lens of the marginalization to which they are subjected socio-economically. Thus, we conducted our research by combining social marginality and spatial peripherality, for example by visiting Fågelfors, a town near the border of Högsby that is affected by phenomena of socio-spatial marginalization such as a lack of access to public services. Here, “periphery” and “**margin**” refer to spaces or geosocial classes (according to the concept used by Piketty (2020)) that are set apart, socially and/or spatially (Vant & Authier, 1986).

The areas we studied are characterized by rural nature. By “**rurality**”, we refer to the “way of living” (Nicole, 1996) characteristic of rural areas. As we are not familiar with the analytical standards of Swedish geographers, we will simply state that these areas are characterized by a high degree of rurality (Lévy & Lussault, 2013), leaving the statistical assessment to the discretion of each reader.

The concept of a “**shrinking**” area is also a subject of debate. Here, we will understand it as a process of decline in which the area in question loses the factors that made it strong (e.g., a well-developed economic base) or significant (e.g., a large population). According to the Syssner's approach to the issue, shrinking is due to two main factors and, thus, can be described as being active or due to legacy: “active shrinking is driven by negative net migration, while legacy shrinking is due to unfavourable age structures that in turn are due to out-migration of the past” (Syssner, 2022).

In Europe, as Peters et al. (2018) highlight, certain strategies are deployed to face this phenomenon. The literature underlines that “**smart shrinking**” in this context aims to “[scale] down community services and infrastructure while maintaining social equity”. To this extent, stakeholders “aims to balance supply and demand in the face of population decline, reduce the per capita cost of oversized and underutilized infrastructure, and improve quality of life despite shrinkage”, that is to say seek “right seizing” (Augis et al., 2025).

The topic of “**development**” will come up frequently. For the purposes of this work, we have chosen to consider it in its common geographical sense, namely “the range of technical,

social, spatial, demographic, and cultural changes that accompany the growth of material production or the improvement of human living conditions. It captures the structural and qualitative aspects of growth and can be linked to the idea of economic and social progress” (École normale supérieure de Lyon, s.d.).

By “**depopulation**,” we mean the loss of residents in a given area relative to average demographic trends. “**Ageing**,” that is, the increase in the median and/or average age of a population, can contribute to this phenomenon if it is not offset by **immigration** — that is, the arrival of new residents from elsewhere.

We will occasionally refer to the **public spaces**, which, according to UN-Habitat, corresponds to “all places that are publicly owned or used, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive”.

1.2. Definition of problems and knowledge

The way we define a problem determines how we search for a solution. With inspiration from Carol Bacchi’s approach, *What’s the Problem Represented to be?* (Bacchi, 2009), we tried to be critical of how problems are defined, and established discourse shapes the understanding of topics such as depopulation, shrinking, and growth. It is important to take notice of who has the agency and power to define the problem. Local knowledge from within the areas that we wish to develop should be considered when making decisions and forming policies (Lowe et al., 2019). This research supports that the municipality, locals in the border area, and researchers should collaborate and share knowledge, ideas, and experience. We believe that this will create a more sustainable development in the peripheral rural areas.

1.3. Sustainability

Sustainable development is a core principle of the European Union and a priority objective for the EU’s internal and external policies. The key to sustainability priorities includes preserving natural habitats, especially those that support red-listed species, and using planning tools such as environmental risk maps to guide development. At the same time, there is an effort to reduce car dependency by promoting more sustainable transport solutions. One of the sustainability goals is to acknowledge the declining population, which is seen as a consequence of changing trends, and to adapt rural areas to make them livable and improve the quality of life in these areas (Schmidt-Thomé, & Lilius, 2023).

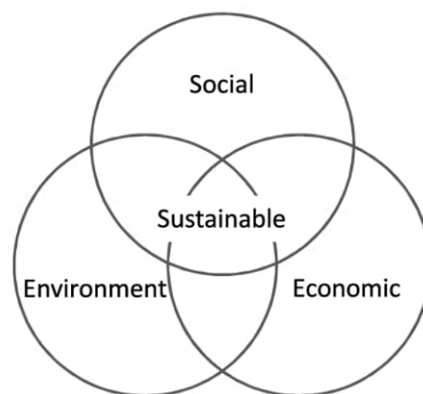


Figure 1.1 - Environmental, economic and social sustainability (source: Symes, & Phillipson, (2009).

”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) (Figure 1.1). Sustainability in the Högsby–Vetlanda border area can be understood through both social and ecological dimensions. The ecological aspect is reflected in nature planning, protected natural areas, and land use. Both municipalities have nature plans that describe the current natural area condition and the areas that require protection. It is important to maintain a high level of naturalness by implementing conservation measures, as these areas are valuable not only for their ecosystem services, but also as tourist destinations.

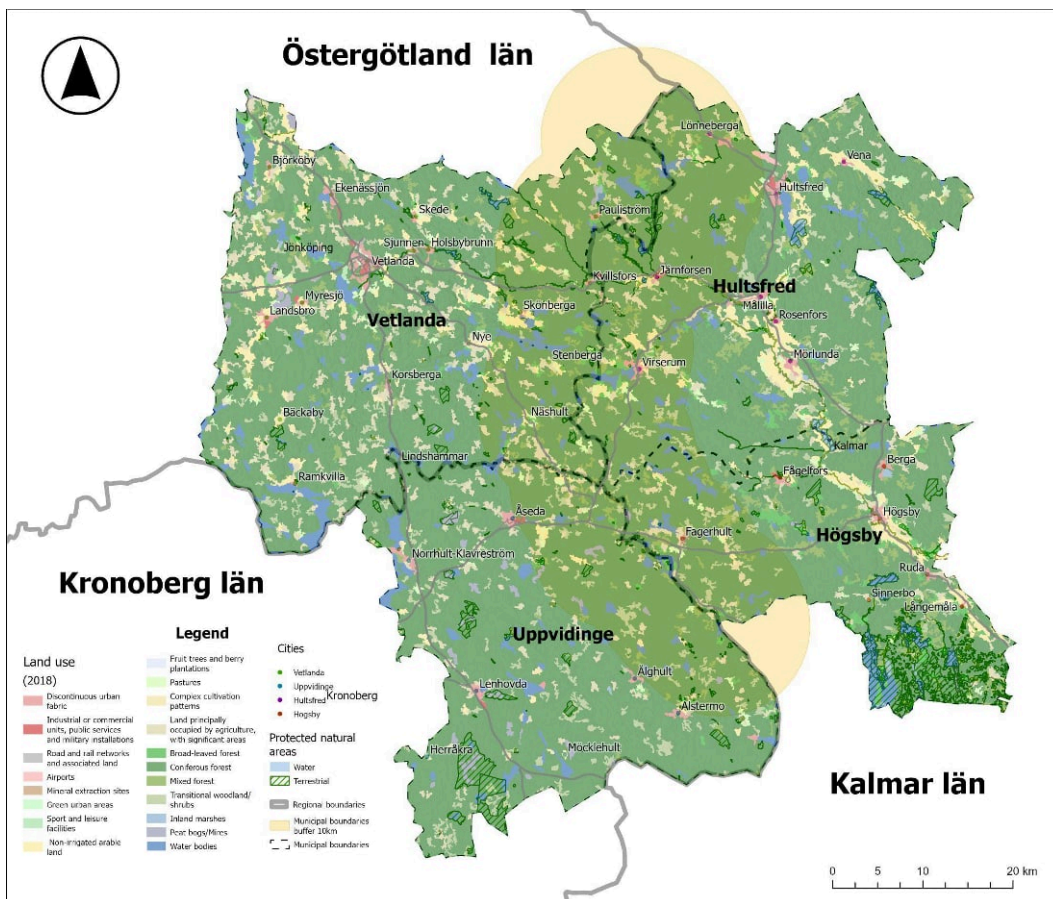


Figure 1.2 - Protected natural areas and land use among the areas (source: Corine land cover 2018 and World Database on Protected Areas)

The social aspect relates to the ability of local communities to maintain services, mobility, and quality of life in rural areas. In this context, the concept of smart shrinking is relevant, as it adapts to population decline through more efficient planning, better coordination of services, and sustainable use of local resources rather than growth-oriented expansion.

In the future, one of the key challenges in comprehensive planning will be social sustainability. Although political debates often frame this issue in terms of segregation between cities and rural areas. Small communities that are seeking a new identity while also trying to retain sufficient population to preserve basic institutions, such as schools. This is likely to become a major area of focus.

1.4. Authenticity as an uneven development driver in the area

Urban areas are influencers (Banks, 2022), they behave as capital magnets, both in terms of skills and economic power. The selected areas have a low density (Figure 3.2) and a limited pool of social and work opportunities and amenities (Figure 3.3), hence, populations tend to migrate to other towns as Växjö and Jönköping (see appendix 6) in greater regions. Under these circumstances it is relevant to underline how small realities must stand out to attract new populations, capital and skills in order to produce revenue. Small towns need to guide development in a way that promotes their brand, as skills and populations need to be attracted to sustain both city life and services (Banks, 2022).

Economic power, people and innovations are the core drivers of the economy and built environment production, however, they risk to tear the authenticity of the context (Banks, 2023). Vetlanda and Högsby are rural areas of southern Sweden (Nordregio, *n.d.*), dominated by forests, lakes and a high degree of natural elements (Figure 3.1), hence, forestry, natural development and protection through preservation practices are key factors highlighted in local documentation (Holmqvist, 2007; Vetlanda Kommun, 2019).

Between these areas there is a wide discussion about what improvements should take place to improve the local realities. The problem is how to improve services and connections without tearing the authenticity of villages and small areas (see appendix 6). The city's authenticity is a concept created a few years ago by David A. Banks (2023), describing how cities are increasingly becoming shaped by the attention economy, hence, where attracting people, investment, and visibility is more important than traditional economic factors. Cities, especially post-industrial ones try to present their core values, emphasizing, in this context, nature and historical traditions. However, what is marked as traditional is frequently constructed, curated, and commodified, hence, turning themselves into brands, as influencers that lead innovation and attract the creative class (Florida, 2005; Banks, 2022, Banks, 2023). In our case, the areas tend to be "city authentic", which Banks (2023) defines as cities that focus on identity, culture, and storytelling.

The key point that we think is the most relevant in the context is the final idea of Banks regarding the drivers in such towns, as they are driven by capitalist dynamics and compelling narratives, often simplifying their nature or distorting their values. Here, development in rural areas might distort their authenticity as localities need to survive, maintain a sufficient number of citizens, hence striving to produce capital.

On the one hand, being "authentic" is a way to capture value and attention to produce economic value, but on the other, it creates disparities and a clear uneven development (Figure 3.1), while also distorting the true value of small localities.

1.5. Rural development and rural power as driving concepts

Development can be defined as the process of moving from A to B (find a source). It can be described as a change and can be considered both positive or negative. When speaking about development in a geographical region as part of a planning process, development is generally spoken of as a change from condition A to B, where B is considered the better. Who the development is better for can be discussed and in this research, we lay a focus on the fact that development does not necessarily equal economic or population growth. This study proposes to move away from a normative approach to the concepts of growth and development. We do not take a position on whether development is desirable or not.

Nor do we view shrinking as inherently bad. As Hirt and Beauregard (2021) have shown, shrinking can in fact prove beneficial in certain circumstances for cities and their residents.

There are different perspectives on rural areas. From an urbanized and modern country perspective, rural areas can be thought of as poor or passive, while at the same time, the rural areas are romanticized. It is in rural areas that agriculture and food production take place, giving rural areas power since everyone needs food and the rural area has, to some degree, power over natural resources (Bell et al., 2010). The areas also have symbolic power, with the rural areas used as a recreational place and being praised for beautiful nature, the countryside aspect can be used as marketing tools e.g. when products are sold as “locally sourced” or at “Farmer’s markets” (Bell et al., 2010).

1.6. The Swedish context and planning situation

To connect all this theory back to the Swedish context, multiple comprehensive plans and strategic documents were used. The Swedish planning system is made up of regional planning/strategic documents that are not legally binding, but rather guiding, then going more specific into municipal comprehensive plans with thematic add-ons, then even more detailed and legally binding zoning plans and building permits. This report focuses on mainly the guiding, general documents. Chosen documents for this report are in order of more general to more specific:

- 1) Region Kalmar: Regionplan 2025-2027
- 2) Regional planning strategy (RUS): Utvecklingsstrategi för Kalmar 2035-2050
- 3) Regional planning strategy (RUS): Regional Utvecklingsstrategi Jönköping 2026-2035
- 4) Traffic strategy: Trafikstrategi för Jönköpings kommun (2025)
- 5) Culture: Regional kulturplan 2023-2025 Jönköping
- 6) Högsby comprehensive plan: Översiktsplan 2012
- 7) Vetlanda comprehensive plan: Översiktsplan 2010

Region Kalmar and Högsby municipality

This chapter starts with the overall themes of the large-scale planning documents, then focusing on the municipal ones. The regional plan and RUS (Regional planning strategy) bring up the challenges, mainly the shrinking and aging population, and the plans highlight the need to plan according to the situation. Many of the documents mention focusing on attracting foreigners to live in these rural areas.

They also describe a deficit (due to high inflation) in the regional budget that needs to be addressed in the coming years. The problems with distances are also brought up, as this is a very elongated region, access to amenities, connections between different towns can be complicated. This also adds more to the dwindling population, which creates a negative loop of life getting harder in rural areas, then people leaving, which creates more budgeting issues and because of that, cuts to services are made, and because of that life is getting even harder. This problem of still planning for growth while on the other hand struggling with infrastructure has been studied before (Grundel & Magnusson, 2022). This study also brings up the overall problem with rurality - how to give people the same quality of life while the geographical distances are vast? This has also given a rise to the new paradigm of smart shrinking and right sizing.

Region Kalmar's goals in the planning documents as a high quality living space for people, where the residents' trust in healthcare is one of the highest in Sweden (Regionplan 2025-2027). The regional plan has divided the developmental plans into six categories: 1) economic stability 2) accessibility 3) employees 4) local care 5) green transition 6) The entire region shall live and develop; the last one tying every aspect mentioned before together. The further plans for the region also highlight the need for a more circular economy and to plan according to the United Nations 17 sustainable development goals, with the whole regional plan (2035-2050) structured around them.

On the topic of collaboration, the regional plan emphasizes the need to have dialogues with local municipalities and not only those, but with businesses as well, as they are the main drivers of the economy. Even though the plan talks about a circular economy, the plan for the region still includes an aim to grow, in people, in development, in funds. Digitalization is also a big topic, as this is seen as a solution for creating a more efficient system for shrinking municipalities that lack funds.

The RUS calls the Kalmar region: the Smorgasbord of Scandinavia, meaning it has a lot of variety and has a lot to offer. The RUS brings up the strengths of Kalmar region, which are: strong brands and areas of expertise; attractive knowledge environments; lively rural areas with high natural and cultural environment values; good ability and conditions to cooperate. The last two are extra valuable for this report. The need for collaboration not only within the municipalities but with regions, even internationally, is highlighted as a strong direction for the future, which uplifts the region and helps with sustainability and innovation. The rural part of the RUS highlights the attractiveness and exciting parts of rural life, with little to no mention of uplifting also the smaller, more quiet places, that are usually forgotten.

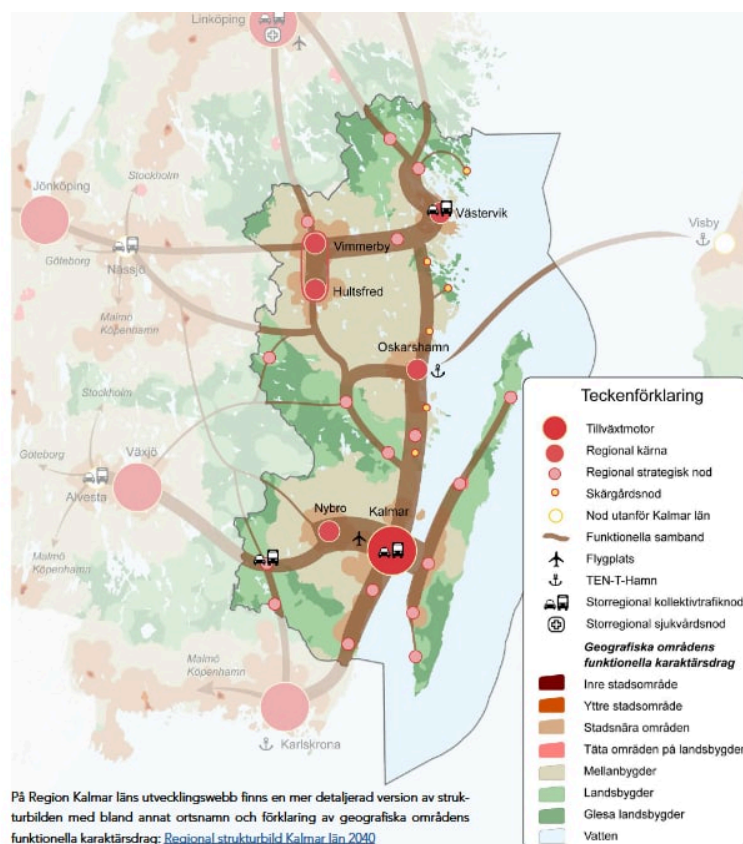


Figure 1.2 - Regional structural picture Kalmar region 2040 (Source: RUS Kalmar)

How does this all relate to the Högsby municipality? Högsby municipality is mentioned in the regional plan, but it mentions that Högsby municipality needs a health center, public dental care and district rehabilitation, but that budget is short of SEK 65 million. On the regional plan's graphics, the Högsby area is mainly left to the side (Figure 3.3).

Högsby also got their own municipal comprehensive plan, that agrees with the general directions (the need for sustainability, better connections) of these larger documents, even though the current active comprehensive plan is getting pretty old. This source is good for general descriptions of the Högsby area, but because of its old age (and a new comprehensive plan is in the works) this document is used sparsely. This plan is also pretty growth oriented, even though it is said in the text that the population has been in decline ever since the 70s with most of the population gathered around bigger towns (Fagerhult, Fågelfors, Berga and Högsby). The strategic map showing the future of the region also clearly shows that the Högsby municipality is quite left to the side when thinking of connections, with more connections in the coastal region.

Högsby's landscape is described as a mosaic, consisting of forests and agricultural lands. The municipality values its natural resources and uses them for advertising. Because of the municipality's relative closeness to Stockholm, the municipality houses a lot of foreigners and tourism is a growing sector (Översiktsplan 2012).

Region Jönköping and Vetlanda municipality

This chapter starts with the overall themes of the large-scale planning documents, then focusing on the municipal ones.

The Jönköping region is described by strong bonds in the community and great collaborations to find innovation, which is similar to other regional strategies as well. 16% of Jönköping lives in the rural areas (Regional kulturplan, 2023-2025). The RUS of Jönköping highlights the need for growing and expanding, even though the population growth is slowing down and even decreasing in some areas.

The RUS document is divided into six/seven categories, first one describing the current situation in the region, and the next categories are visions for future development:

The Preamble chapter is the place and the inhabitants, which is an important introductory chapter. It explains the main strengths and weaknesses of the area and populace. The strengths mentioned are: very good strategic location for logistics; rich natural and cultural environment for tourism; industrial development/new technology for economy; a strong civil society for social sustainability; strong collaboration on many levels. The weaknesses are as follows: declining birth rate and tax base; unequal and unequal living conditions on multiple levels of society; varied adaptability of different areas; insufficient connectivity within region and neighbors. The next chapters emphasize the 1) attractiveness, which prioritizes culture, equality, nature, business and tourism; 2) competitiveness, which prioritizes life long learning and creates a region which collects and retains workforce, providing a good labour market; 3) innovation means research based development, that is creative and innovative; 4) infrastructure, which prioritizes good connections, green energy and digitalization. 5) Health and well-being, which prioritizes health, education and equality in services. 6) Safety and security, which describes strong collaboration and resilience before and during times of crisis.

The RUS document also has many visuals showing the current state of production and commuting in the region. First one (Figure 1.3) shows that the border areas this paper is interested in are pretty empty of jobs, and the same can be seen on the commuting graphic (Figure 1.4.) that shows, especially in Vetlanda, how the main place of work is the municipality center.

The strategic plans for culture (2022) and traffic (2025) also support these directions for the future. The cultural plan is a thematic add-on to the regional plan that focuses on allocating funds to hold the culture sustainable in the region. The traffic plan also mentions sustainability, alternative transport methods. But the plan still is focused on growth and how Jönköping will grow from 170 000 to 200 000 in the future.

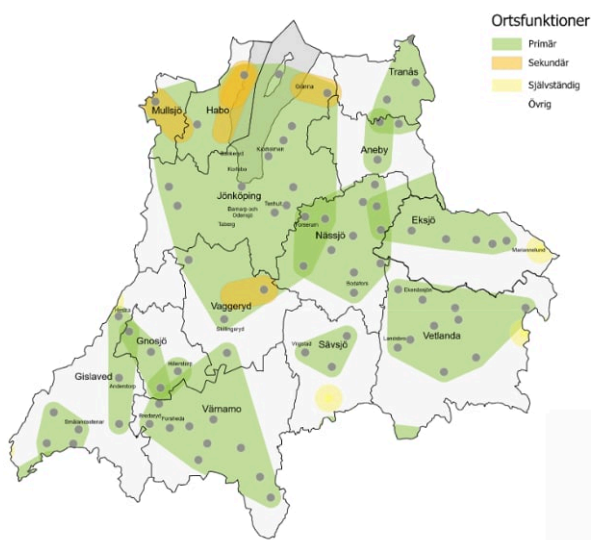


Figure 1.3 - Functional labor markets that exist in the region. Named locations have over 1,300 inhabitants. (Source: Jönköping RUS)

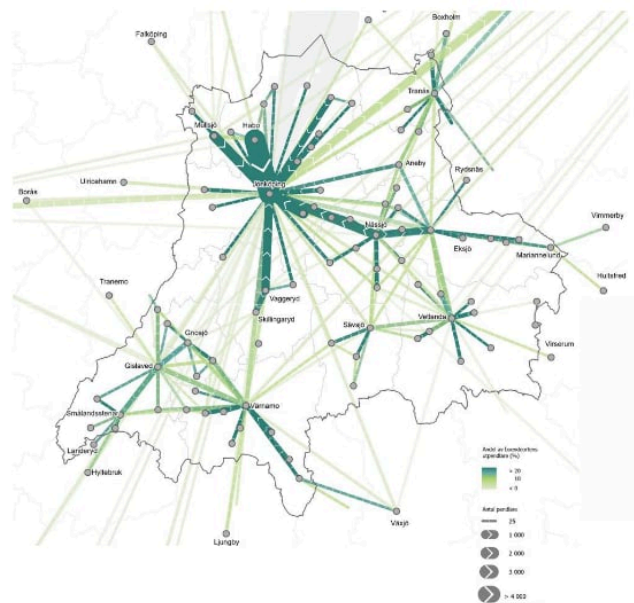


Figure 1.4 - Commuting patterns in Jönköping region. (Source: Jönköping RUS.)

Vetlanda municipality’s comprehensive plan also follows these guiding documents, even though it was made in 2010. In 2026, preparations have begun to start working on a new and improved comprehensive plan. This document also highlights the problems around the border area, with the eastern side of Vetlanda losing population the most. The bus traffic is planned with Vetlanda as the center in mind, with nonexistent connections between smaller communities. A very strong presence in the comprehensive plan 2012 is on sustainability and nature protection.

Natural environment in the study areas

Högsby made its last nature plan in 2007, which aimed to protect valuable landscapes, biodiversity, and the long-term functioning of rural ecosystems. In Högsby, a total of 4.282 hectares of nature is protected in the form of nature reserves, Natura 2000 areas, or biotope protection areas (Holmqvist, 2007). This corresponds to 5.3 percent of the total area of the municipality. Within the study border area 4.133 ha, a total of 171.754 ha of nature are protected in the form of nature reserves, Natura 2000 areas, or biotope protection areas.

Högsby municipality is mainly located within the river and Alsteråns catchments, and about 6 percent of the total surface is water. The municipality has more than 140 lakes, though it is in a protected area, and mostly has potential in tourism. In practical terms, the plan proposes local goals and actions: protect valuable forests, pastures, wetlands, lakes, and streams. Review reserve management plans and seek more funding and organizational capacity for nature conservation work and seek sustainability by not damaging more nature (Holmqvist, 2007).

In Vetlanda’s nature plan nature is defined as relevant not only for the environment itself, but also for humans and their well-being. Nature is described as important for health, recreation, pollination, water purification, and the attractiveness of the municipality. At the same time, the plan highlights that biodiversity is under pressure from habitat destruction and fragmentation, land-use change, climate change, invasive species, forestry impacts, and the decline of traditionally managed grasslands. It also states that Vetlanda has nearly 400 red-listed species such as European eel, lesser spotted eagle, white-backed woodpecker. (*Naturvårdsplan: Del 1 – Natur och naturvård i Vetlanda*, (2019).

Vetlanda, the general nature strategy has been turned into concrete actions through 2030. Its overall aim is to protect valuable natural areas, maintain species and habitats in viable condition, The action programme is organized into seven fields: forests, agricultural land, wetlands, lakes and watercourses, flora and fauna, the built environment and physical planning. (*Naturvårdsplan: Del 2 - Åtgärdsprogram*, 2019).

Transport & connections systems between the sites

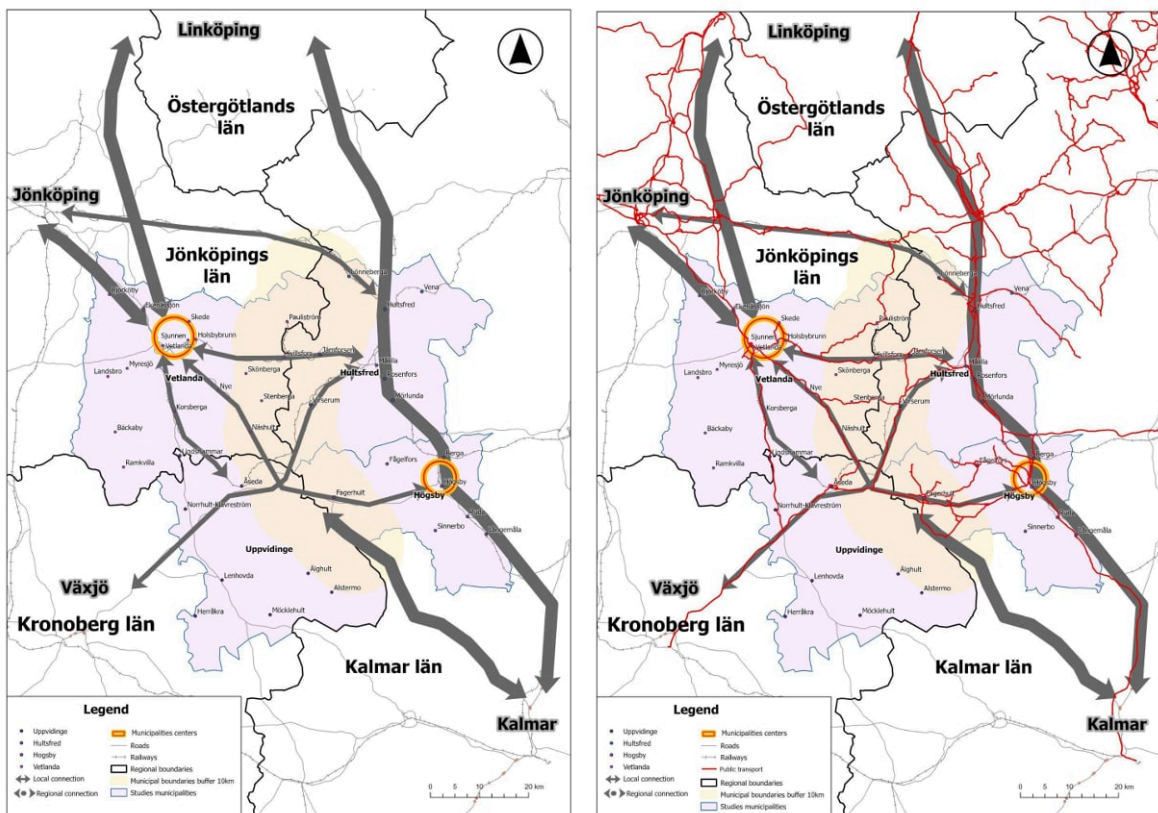


Figure 1.5 - Map of the connections and public transport in the area (source: SCB)

Högsby and Vetlanda do not share the same direct border, but they are close enough to form an important functional area for regional planning. This area is mostly rural and forested, and has little urban development. Because of this, transport connections are very important for the future development of the region.

The territorial connection between Högsby and Vetlanda is primarily shaped by the regional road network. Högsby Municipality is well-positioned within Kalmar region, as it is traversed by national roads that connect the municipality to the broader transport network of southern Sweden. We can see that mobility in the Högsby–Vetlanda area is based not on a single shared border highway, but on roads that connect the two territories through intermediate municipalities and regions.

From a road transport perspective, this area is important both for the daily mobility of residents and for economic connections. In the case of Högsby, the road serves not only a local but also a broader regional function, as official documents designate it as a key link between regional centers. The road network also serves a strategic function, as business and industrial areas, and the corridor itself is considered of significant importance for transportation. This leads to the conclusion that road infrastructure in the Högsby–Vetlanda area is the primary foundation for territorial integration, particularly in terms of private transport, logistics, and local economic circulation.

The railway system in this area is well-developed and plays an important role, but it is not organized as a direct Högsby–Vetlanda connection. Högsby is part of the Stångådalbanan railway axis connecting Linköping, Hultsfred, and Kalmar, and this line is designated as railway infrastructure of national importance in Trafikverket documents. Meanwhile, the Vetlanda railway hub is oriented toward the Nässjö–Vetlanda direction. It can be said that the railway systems of both municipalities are oriented toward different regional centers.

Meanwhile, in Vetlanda Municipality, the most important road corridors are to other municipalities. We can see that mobility in the Högsby–Vetlanda area is based not on a single shared border highway or railway.

Another important aspect is the institutional integration of the transport system. In Kalmar and Jönköping regions, public transport is organized by different agencies. This means that public transport connections in the Högsby–Vetlanda area depend on interregional coordination, the quality of transfers, rather than on a single, unified local transport axis.

2. Methodological framework

In this section we describe our data collection methods, their limitations, and our ethical considerations.

This research is explorative, since we aimed to increase knowledge about the border area of the municipalities and find new insights. It was aimed to be practical, and the results should be able to be applied. The research is made with mixed methods, containing both quantitative and qualitative primary methods (Clark et al., 2021), using both primary and secondary data. The primary data were semi-structured interviews, a survey, observations, and informal meetings we did while doing fieldwork in the areas (Figure 2.1). The secondary data was demographic information and statistics about the area, existing datasets for the mapping.

The quantitative part consisted of conducting a survey, field mapping and spatial analysis, while the qualitative part consisted of semi structured interviews and informal discussions. We chose a mixed-method approach to get a more complete picture of the area and research topic. The survey was meant to give a broad perspective, the semi-structured interviews were meant to give a more nuanced in-depth picture, and the informal discussion was to explore and gain a deeper understanding about our observations.

We spent four days in April 2026 doing field research and gathering data in the border area and the municipalities Högsby and Vetlanda. We had a car at our disposal and used it to drive around visiting several places. Figure 2.1 shows a map with markings of where we went during those four days.

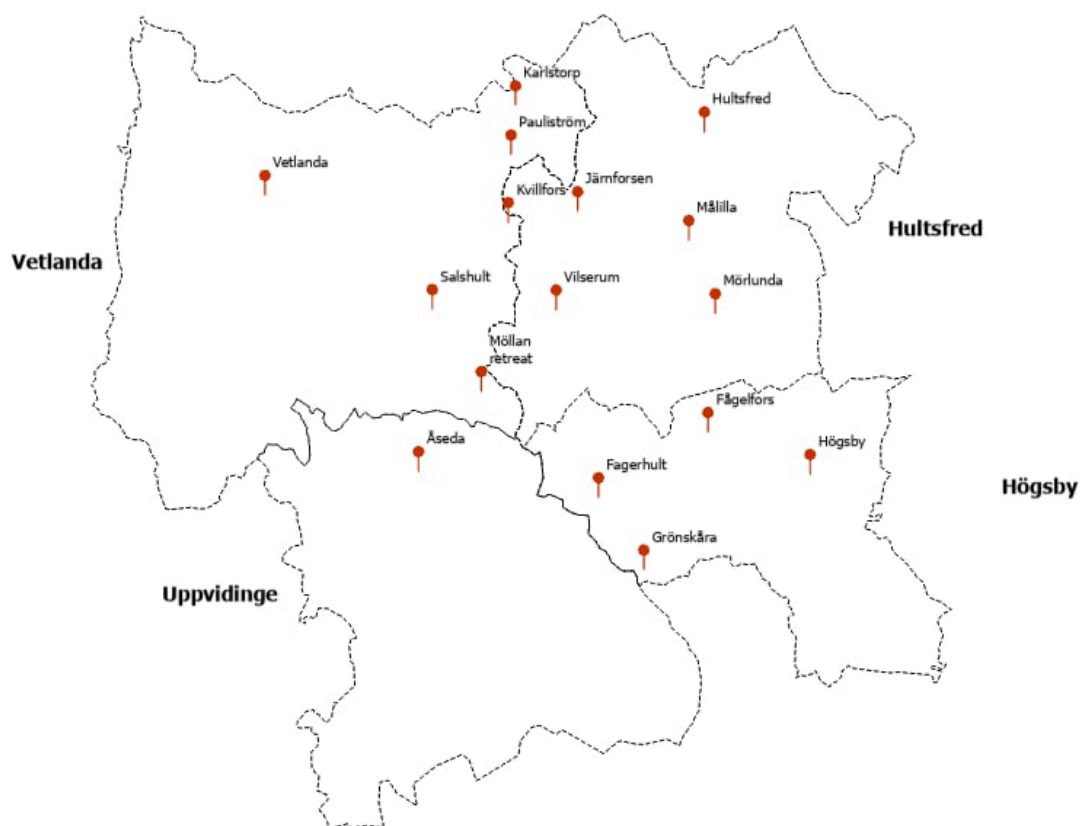


Figure 2.1 - Map of all the places we visited during fieldwork

2.1. Semi-structured interviews

We conducted 3 semi-structured interviews. Before conducting the interview, we had prepared a general script with themes and questions, but during the interviews, we allowed space and time to ask questions outside the prepared topics and questions (Clifford et al., 2023). All three interviews lasted approximately 2 hours.

Two of the participants were representatives from the municipalities Vetlanda and Högsby, who had knowledge of regional development in the area, how the municipality works in practice. The third participant has lived in the area most of her adult life and has been involved with several organizations and businesses that have shaped her community. The participants were chosen beforehand by our supervisors, so the participants were aware of the regional project and already had a date for the interview. We initiated contact by email, and the participants decided when and where to meet. With the representatives from the municipalities, we met at their workplace during work hours, and the third participant we met at their private home.

After having the participants' consent, we recorded the interviews. The interviews were recorded using our private phones with a pre-installed memo function. We recorded using two phones, as a backup if one phone failed or ran out of battery. Besides recording, we also took notes during the interview using pen and paper, to catch nuances or topics of special interest.

We chose to analyze the semi-structured interview by transcribing the recording into a Word document. To analyse and process, we coded the transcription to identify themes and labeled the different topics with various colors.

2.2. Survey

The survey was conducted with the purpose of learning and gaining knowledge for the people living and working in the border area, to gain a broader perspective.

The survey has 30 questions and was divided into 4 blocks. The first block was basic demographic information about the respondent, such as age, where they found the survey, if they work, study, or are retired; if they reside in the border area of the 4 municipalities; and which municipality they are from. The second block deals with questions about transportation and access to services. The third block consists of questions about the characteristics and feelings towards their area of residence, and the fourth block deals with questions of development, sustainability, and the municipality itself: how the respondents view it.

The survey was done as a mixed mode as it reduced costs as we did not need to print many surveys, mixed mode surveys especially over the internet have a wider reach than surveys conducted in single mode. Due to our time limitation our survey needed to be done and sent out as quickly as possible so a mixed approach was required (Dillman 2011). It reduced the amount of area we needed to cover ourselves making it more time and space efficient.

These are the Facebook group in which we posted our survey:

- Högsbygruppen
- Vi som är från Åseda
- Kvillsfors i mitt hjärta
- Du vet att du är från Hultsfred
- Vetlanda, en levande stad på höglandet
- Hultanäs Sofk
- Vetlanda
- Ruda, Högsby, Berga, Blomstermåla, Långmåla Nytt
- 🏠 Nytt i Fagerhult ⚽ InfoSida för Allt o Alla
- Fagerhults Anslagstavla

Survey analysis is conducted mostly with simple methods such as counting responses, simple coding of qualitative answers by topics and meanings contained in the response.

2.3. Convenience sampling

To get the residents' authentic answers about their place in the municipality, this report wanted to leave room for unexpected encounters. This method of convenience sampling is good for exploratory, short pilot projects such as this, as it gives a lot of info in a short amount of time. And with people out and about on the streets, this gives the advantage of getting people's unfiltered everyday perspective on their surroundings. These informal conversations were done by walking around the selected focus areas and visiting every seemingly open public place (stores, cafes, etc). During the walks a field observation was also conducted, marking down points on the Field Maps app. Altogether there were 38 points of interest marked on the map.

During the field work, 27 people were approached on the street, asking them if they wanted to speak. Of that group, conversation started with 11 people. These conversations were recorded by writing down notes, which were later digitized, summarized and added to the report (see appendix section).

2.4. Mindmapping perceptions and thoughts of locals

The core part of our research was the interaction, discussion and engagement with local communities. In our fieldwork activity we had the opportunity to interview multiple actors, stakeholders and citizens in the areas between Vetlanda and Högsby municipalities. As the main focus of our research to gain a holistic view of the living, working and socio-economical conditions of these rural areas (Nordregio, *n.d.*).

As described by Kevin Lynch (1960), people's perceptions are personal imaginaries of urban space structures around simple elements, such as nodes, edges and landmarks; hence, every individual has its positions and opinions about its surroundings. Among the literature, to understand the processes of thinking and rationalize thoughts regarding spatial thinking, multiple tools have risen (Quercia, 2016).

Acknowledging the relevance of perceptions, common knowledge and disparities among populations, we decided to put users in the center of our approach by asking respondents to fill a mind map (Figure 2.2), a blank cartographic product comprehending the main recognisable elements such as cities, railways, main roads and borders.

The idea is to allow the users to actively interact with the surroundings, hence giving space to express thoughts and argumentations while drawing on the printed map.



Figure 2.2 - Mind map used during the field work project (data source: OSM)

We structured this process as follows: first we interviewed the individual, then, when close to an end of the discussion we handed him a copy of the mind map and a pen, asking some questions capable of stimulating mindful thoughts, such as, what were the feelings and perspectives that characterized the lines drawn. During this process we did not express comprehensively what was the expected outcome of filling the maps, since the objective was to create new stimulus and a genuine play around sensations, feelings, emotions and physical perceptions of their known spaces in the areas.

2.5. Mapping physical elements and perceptions

As part of this primary data collection activity we designed various maps to comprehend both physical and immaterial dimensions of the area. The first kind was produced through grey geodatasets, the other is the result of findings emerged through interviews and chats with locals.

Physical mapping in these areas is relevant due the particular spatial definition. Through these maps we wanted to comprehend what physical amenities and elements are in the surroundings and how borders interplay between places. Such a category of maps is useful to both understand what is in the area and to localize the lines of thought of users, hence comprehend how they generated such beliefs and positions about the border areas. Under this typology we produced three maps following these main topics:

- Land use, here we used data from Corine land cover 2018 100m (vectors), to understand how the soil is used in these areas, taking in consideration both natural and artificial artifacts.
- Population, here we used data from SCB and Lantmäteriet to understand how the population is spread across the municipalities.
- Amenities, thanks to the OSM geodatabase, were possible to recognise the main amenities in the municipalities; this was done to understand to what extent the areas are dependent on the main localities.

Immaterial maps propose a visualization of perceptions, ideas and imaginaries, these, emerged through fieldwork analysis. Users are the resource in this context; through interviews, chats and moments of discussion thoughts and views of people guided the creation of this map that go further the physical limitations of grey data. What differentiates them from mindmaps is that these are the outcome of short discussions about the place rather than structured and formal interviews, therefore are fruits of speech and questions rather than drawings.

2.6. Field mapping

Another method of primary data collection that was used in this study is field mapping using the fieldmaps application from ESRI. We made categories of objects and places to add points and polygons to the research area describing what we see.

The point categories were: community objects which are objects and places that people gather around and exchange information or meet each other unplanned like notice boards, cafes, town squares, cultural objects are objects or places of culture like museums, sculptures and local street art that locals can enjoy, natural objects are places of natural beauty, wonder or relaxation where locals can go to enjoy the nature. There are 6 polygons each representing an emotion we felt in the area such as: cheerfulness, sadness, abandonment, rusticness, energetic, developing. We chose to have 6 emotions, 3 positive and 3 negative, although a place being rustic is not necessarily negative (Hawthorne et al. 2022).

The polygons were later switched to points due to the large area which caused the polygons not being visible on the map. But the polygons were kept as they contained data from our field mapping such as descriptions and photos.

Through these observations, we can develop an understanding of a place by analyzing the objects and emotions attributed to the study area, the types of pictures and descriptions added to a point. Using this we can see if a place has more positive emotions or negative emotions attached to it. as well as if there is a lack or abundance of community, cultural or natural objects, and we can identify problem areas of abandonment or that have a sad connotation (Hawthorne et al. 2022).

2.7. Limitations in the data collection process

There were several limitations in our data collection, including time, language, and some practical constraints. We experienced a language barrier several times. Most of our secondary data collection, for example the comprehensive plans, were in Swedish. Our survey questions were in Swedish and English, but mainly answered in Swedish which we had to translate using (DeepL.com). When collecting primary data in interviews and informal encounters, none of the people we spoke to had English as their first language and sometimes communication happened with a mix of Swedish, English, and German. This may have contributed to miscommunication, especially when we did not record and therefore could not later look back and correct misunderstandings.

We did have a discussion on the effect of recording people. Recordings and transcriptions gave us materials that we could code and accurately cite, but our participants in the semi structured interviews were also aware of the recordings and could potentially affect how freely they spoke. Högsby representative: *“I don't know if we say this on tape (...)”*.

To make this research better, we could have used wireless microphones to avoid using personal phones and the possibility of accidentally sharing the recordings. We could have used software such as MaxQDA to code the interviews, which might have made the coding more organized, however we did not have the funds for those digital tools.

The time constraint of the research period being two weeks, meant that we collected data in various ways at the same time, without having the time to coordinate. Had it been different, we might have been able to use the result from one type of data collection to improve another type, for example use the results from the interviews to ask more precise or relevant questions in the survey.

Survey method limitations

Some problems that may occur are both response and non-response bias as respondents' views may differ from their actual views due to social desirability bias or not understanding the intent of the question, there also may be issues where people that did not respond had wildly different views to those who did. Due to the relatively low amount of responses there may be a sampling error, this can lead to not adequately representing our target population and our findings may not be accurately generalized as the confidence interval may be lower than 95%. It is likely that our survey was answered by relatively active members of the community causing some bias towards their views and opinions (Dillman 2011).

Field mapping's method limitations

The study area is large, the border being 89 km long, meaning that travel time was long so we had little time to spend in each area for mapping. Due to time constraints there was limited time to field map in each location and often other tasks as the study is multi-method some are prioritized over others and field mapping was less relevant to the study then, surveys, interviews, perception mapping and mind maps.

Field mapping emotions and places can be very subjective especially as an outsider just visiting, making researchers biased and can only make conclusions on what they see or want to see resulting in observation bias. As well as the time limitation means that we only get to see a place once in a certain instance of time, not knowing how it has changed or will change in the future or how us as observers might view the place differently then the local residents.

2.8. Ethical considerations

With this research and in our methodology, we follow the ethical guidelines in the University Centre of the Westfjords handbook and the 1978 Belmont Report (Department of Health & Services, 1979). We aim at making our research methods transparent and the presentation of our results accurate.

All participants, including people in the semi-structured interviews, survey, and in more informal discussions, were informed about the overall research project from the regions, our research aim of gaining knowledge about the border areas, as well as our nationalities and that we are associated with Linköping University. This information was given verbally when we talked with people, both in written form in emails when we initiated contact and mentioned in the survey with a related question. We have anonymized to the extent it was possible without removing relevant information that could shape interpretation, for example we have deleted the names, age, and titles from our participants. Recordings from the interview were stored in Microsoft Team channel for this course, which is password-protected and the recording will be deleted after transcription.

3. Results

In this section, we show the results and findings divided into chapters by our different research methods. Considering the short time for this field work, altogether we got a sizable amount of data, although the Högsby municipality data pool turned out pretty small (due to low response rate).

Here is a table concluding all fieldwork done for this report from the 16th of April to the 20th:

| Municipality name | Interviewees | Convenience sampling | Survey respondents | Mind maps creators |
|--------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| Vetlanda | 3 | 11 | 14 | 4 |
| Högsby | 2 | 4 | 3 | 0 |
| Hultsfred | 0 | 3 | 10 | 0 |
| Uppvidinge | 0 | 1 | 3 | 0 |

3.1. Semi-structured interviews and convenience sampling

The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and later coded. We coded using a method of first generally highlighting interesting topics and sentences, which we then later analysed into themes. The meetings done randomly on the streets by using convenience sampling were recorded by writing down notes. These were the main themes we saw:

- Collaboration or lack thereof with other organisations, the opportunities and solutions they bring but also the challenges of funding and reaching consensus;
- Depopulation / shrinking / growth, how these affect the budget of the municipality;
- Sustainability strategies and systems or lack thereof
- Connection e.g. traffic or internet connection
- Community

3.2. Physical maps as further analysis tools

Before starting the field work, to broaden our perspective we produced three maps containing information about physical elements in the areas. The first one contains information about the land use (Figure 3.1), considering natural and artificial entities. It is clear that this area is rural (Nordregio, n.d.), with most of the soil in natural state and sparsely used for agriculture, while few areas are artificially covered. Railway connectivity in the area is limited, while road infrastructure is comparatively well developed. This map was fundamental to understanding how human settlements are spread among the municipalities and how these relate to the existing infrastructural network.

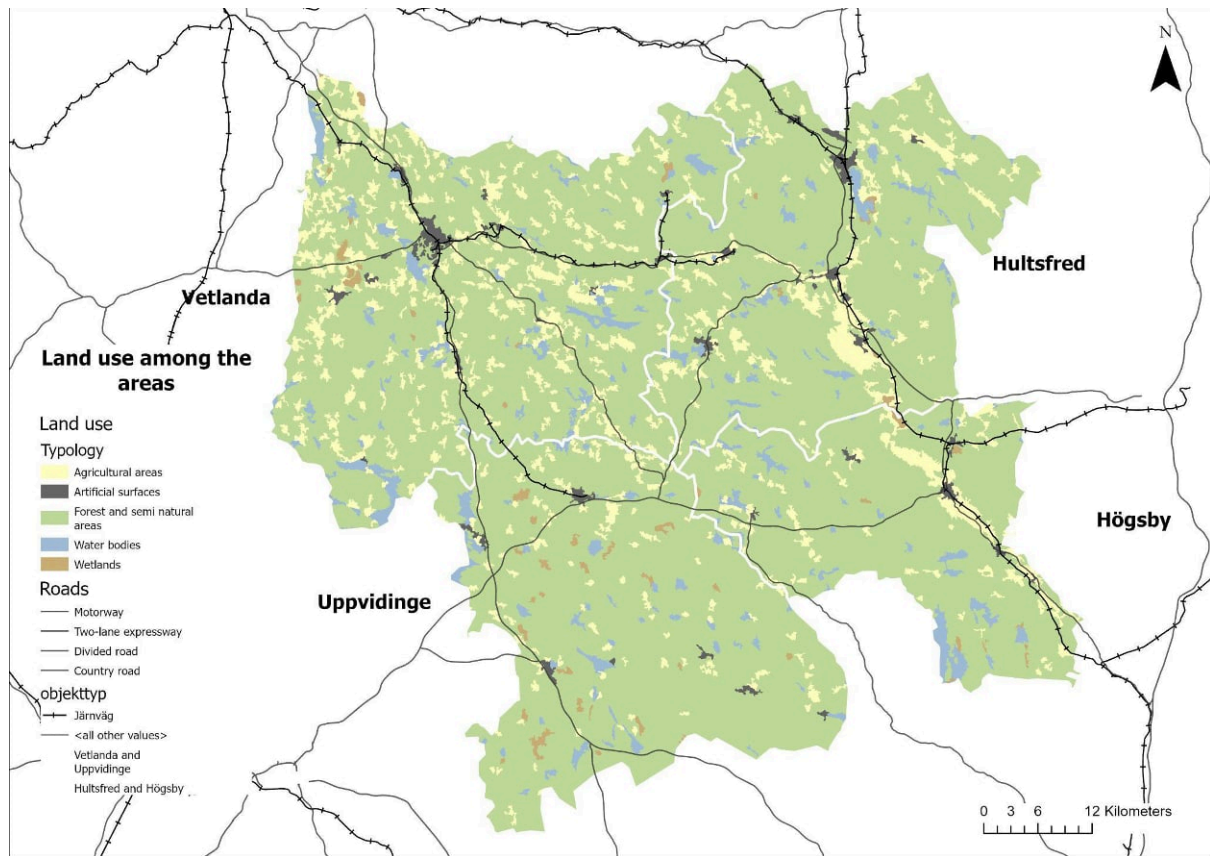


Figure 3.1 - Land use among the areas (source: Corine land cover 2018)

The second map we produced contains knowledge about the amenities in the area (Figure 3.1) such as hospitals, shops, nursing homes, pharmacies, major shops and schools; describing their typology and position in the area. This visualization was especially useful when seen along the third map containing the population distribution in the area (Figure 3.2), clearly presenting how populations' distribution is uneven and localized around the urban centers, Vetlanda and Högsby.

These were fundamental to comprehend possible behaviours and imaginaries among local populations, hence understanding how physical amenities and entities create variable narratives. In fact, these maps clearly show that border areas are comparatively weaker than other localities, with fewer infrastructures and amenities, which is reflected in lower population levels (Figure 3.3).

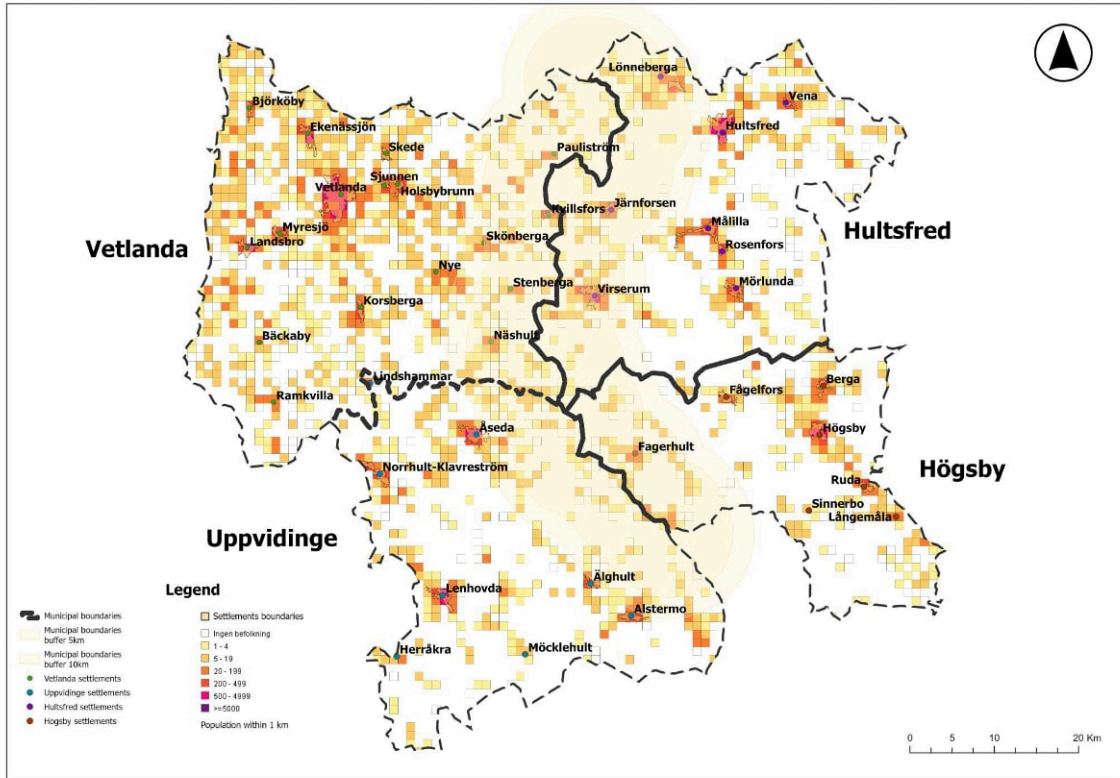


Figure 3.2 - Map of the populations in the area (source: SCB and Lantmäteriet)

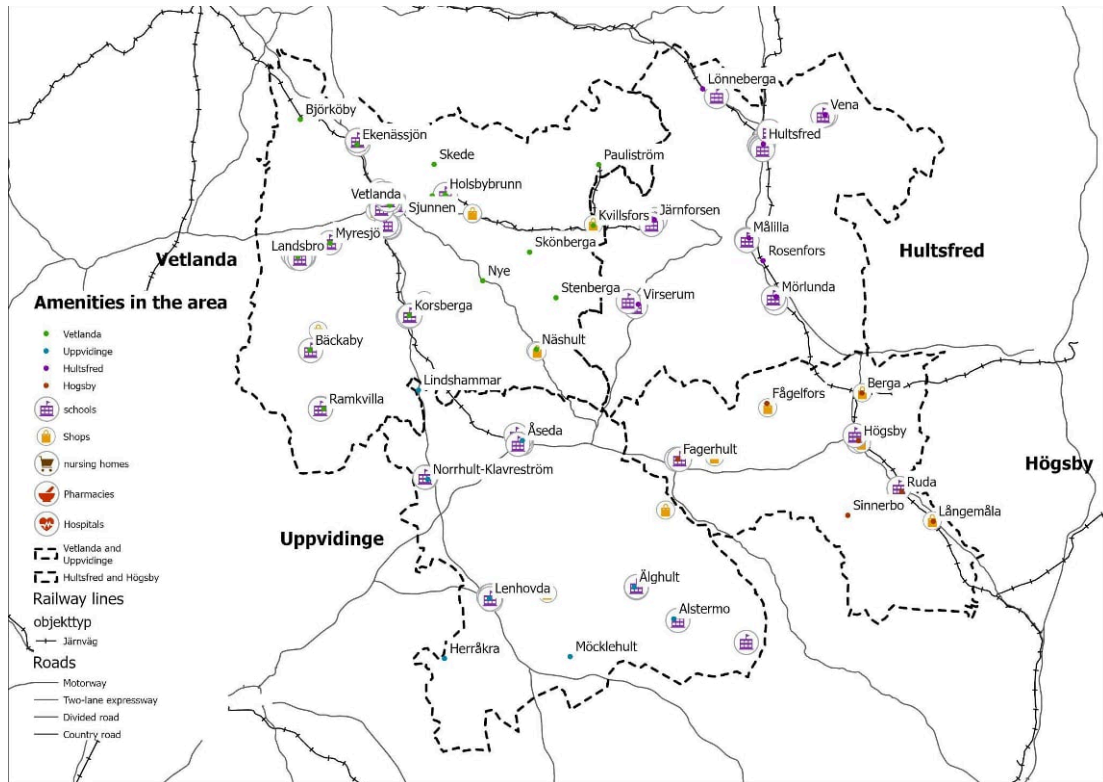


Figure 3.3 - Map of the amenities in the area (source: OSM)

3.3. Maps of perceptions as ways to engage with local communities

During the field work process we had the opportunity to interact with many people, both stakeholders and locals. When discussing, many ideas and imaginaries were shared with us, but sometimes not directly represented by them on the mindmaps, hence this typology of visualization we called “perception maps” represent all their feelings and ideas not directly represented.

The map reports clear results (Figure 3.4). Borders are not imaginary lines, they are real barriers that interplay in the area, compromising the collaboration among municipalities from different regions. When examined in relation to the spatial distribution of services and population (Figure 3.3 and 3.2), the two principal municipalities, Högsby and Vetlanda, clearly emerge as the core nodes of local service provision and the primary areas of attraction, expressing not only their relevance in the area, but also the degree of dependency that small-sized municipalities have with them. The map also shows that there is a wide “white spot” between the main roads in the area; these are perceived as the main roads as these are the only way to be connected with other localities. As underlined by the experts in Vetlanda municipality (See appendix 6), car usage is very high, as there are few public transport possibilities.

Through chats and interviews, the focal points were the same and are clearly reported in the map: connectivity and borders are the main concerns in the area, as these are under constant social debate. Municipalities can work only in their regions (see appendix 6), making it difficult to cooperate and create relations with border municipalities, this creates strong spatial inequalities and inefficiencies, as it takes two buses and almost two hours to go from Högsby to Vetlanda; this was tested out by three of the report writers.

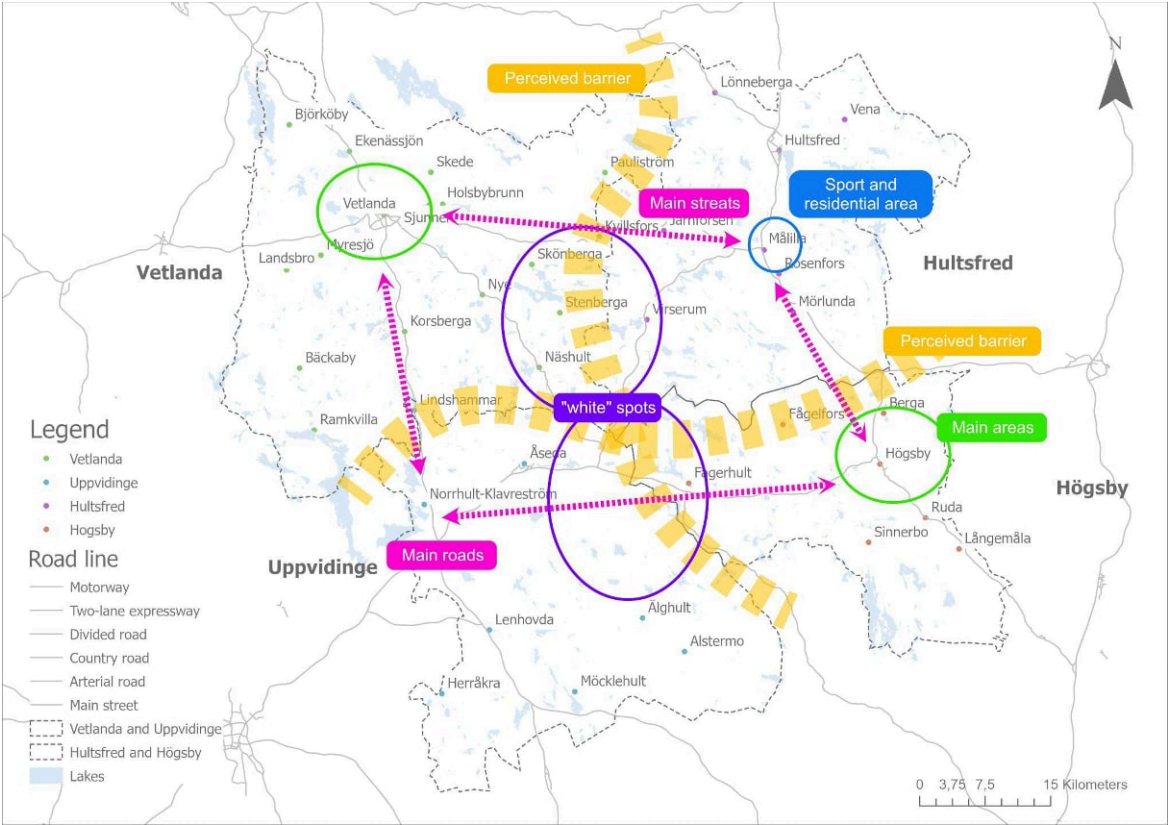


Figure 3.4 - Map of the perceptions (our production)

3.4. Mindmaps as tools to draw on impressions and thoughts

At the end of formal interviews, we asked the other parts to draw upon their impressions, ideas, feelings and thoughts about the study area, using our mind maps as a white canvas (Figure 2.2).

Results in this section are very well shared among all the interviewees. The areas are very appealing, and have great potential, on the other hand, many localities do not have many activities and attractiveness in general, hence are unknown simply because people do not have a reason to go there. This was especially true when discussing with Vetlanda’s experts (see appendix 6), as they said that they do not know much about Hultsfred’s and Högsby’s areas, since they have no contacts/reasons to go there. The main cities, again, Vetlanda and Högsby are the focal point in the area, hence are perceived as the place where to find services and activities, while other fractions, such as Pauliström and Kvillefors are “white” points, with few connections, particularly suffering from exceptionally strong borders (Figure 3.4).

During the discussions, participants were invited to reflect on potential improvements and future developments. Areas perceived as “beautiful” emerge as key assets that could be further enhanced and highlighted in future planning strategies. Similarly, locations described as “very attractive,” particularly due to the availability of sports and recreational activities, indicate strong potential for targeted investments. Strengthening and expanding these functions would likely generate significant benefits, reinforcing their role as focal points of local engagement and attractiveness (Figure 3.5).

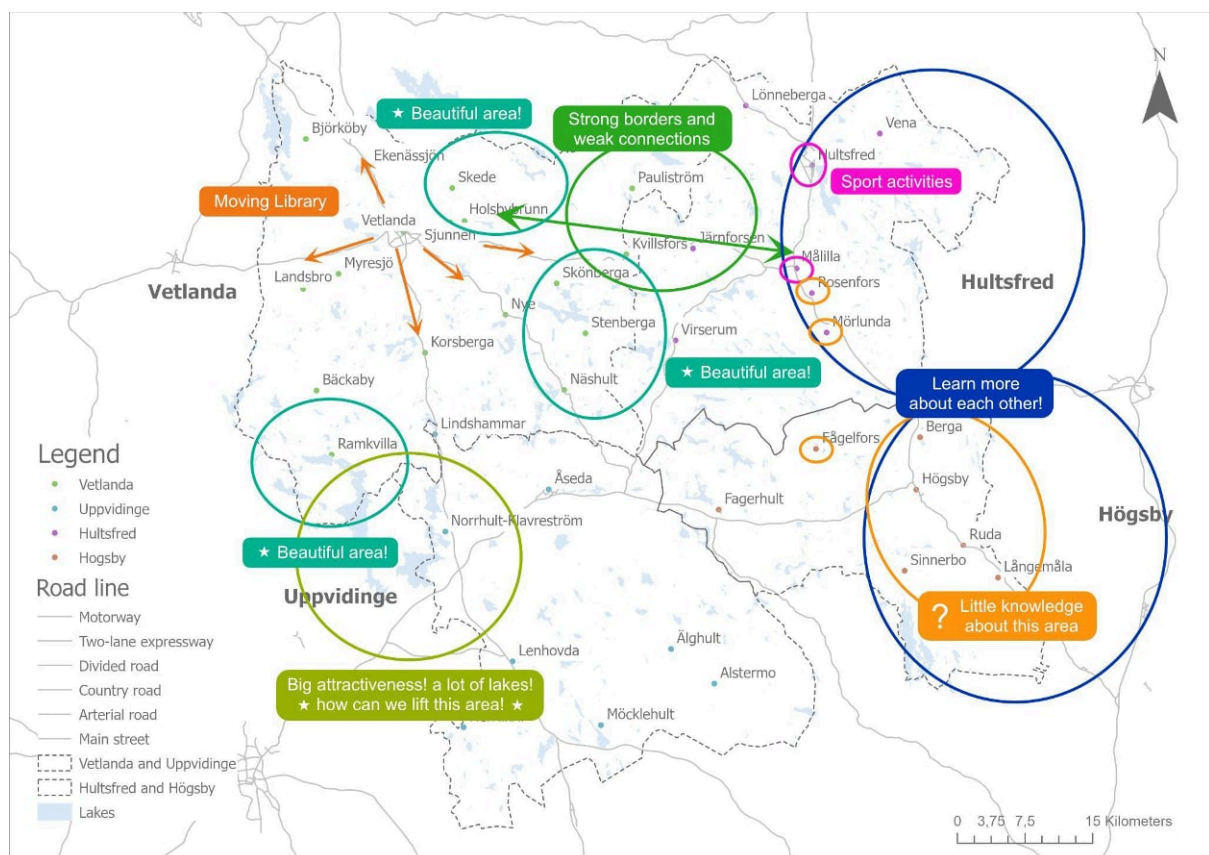


Figure 3.5 - Mind map (our production)

3.5. Survey's output

Info gathered from the survey has been divided into the same blocks as they were in the survey.

General questions

There were 30 respondents to the survey, the majority found the survey through Facebook, a smaller portion through posters that were placed on notice boards across the border area, and an equal portion through friends and family. Only one of the respondents got the survey through a forum, and none answered through email.

The most respondents were from the Vetlanda municipality with 14, followed by the Hultsfred municipality with 10, the Högsby and Uppvidinge both had an equal number of respondents, 3 each (Figure 3.6).

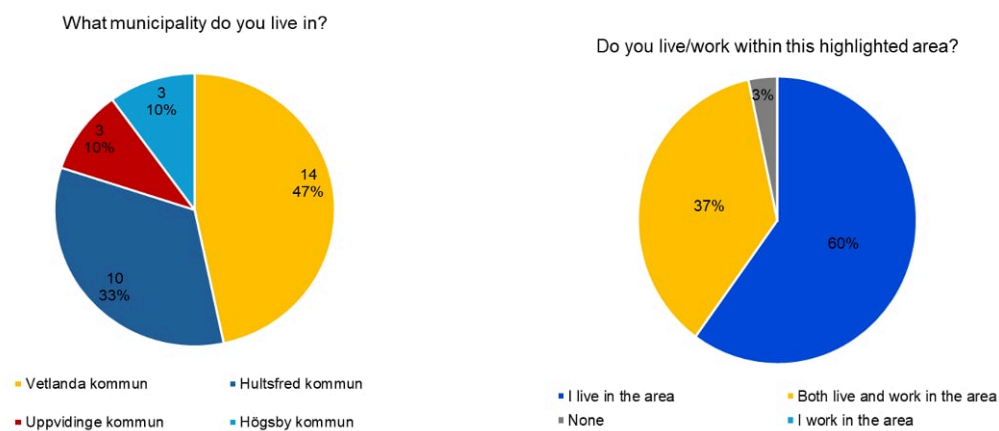


Figure 3.6 - Graph of respondent residence by municipality (Source: Survey)

Figure 3.7 - Proportion of respondents that live and work in the highlighted area. (Source: Survey)

In the survey there was an image highlighted of the border area, demarcating what we considered the border area. 96% of respondents, meaning 29 respondents, live in or live and work in this border area, while 1 of the respondents did not live in the area. None of the respondents only worked in the area (Figure 3.7).

The majority of respondents, 80%, were older than 35, with only 20% being 35 or younger. 13% of the respondents are 65 or older (Figure 3.8).

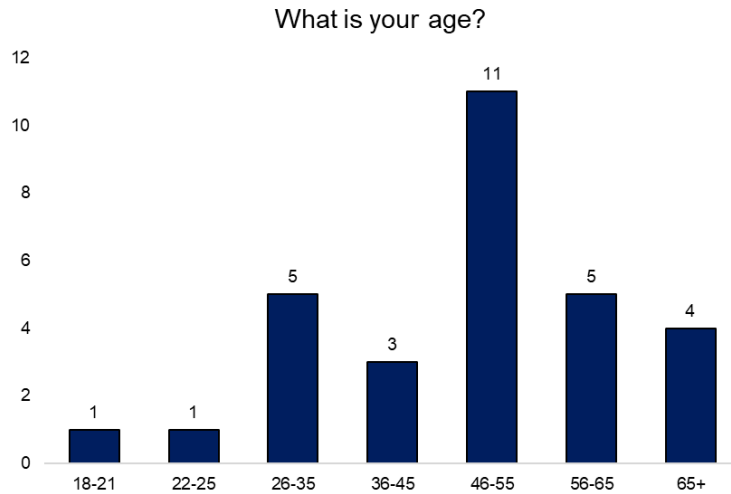


Figure 3.8 - Age of respondents. (Source: Survey)

22 of respondents, which is 73%, were working, while 1 of those working was also studying, as well as 1 being retired but still working. 6% of the respondents were only studying and 12% were retired (Figure 3.9).

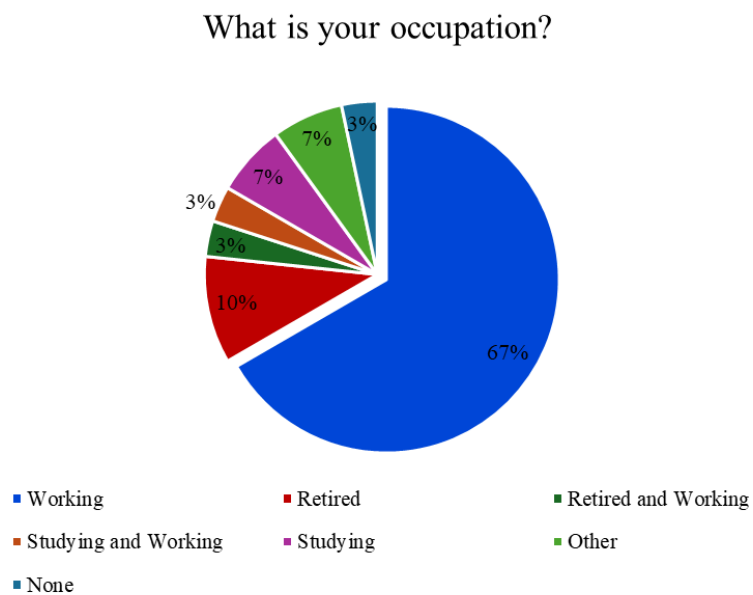


Figure 3.9. Occupation of respondents. (Source: Survey)

Transport and access to services

Most respondents travel by personal car and commute only 15 to 30 minutes each day. Only 3 respondents regularly use the bus but those who do also only commute 15 to 30 minutes (Figure 3.10). Only 10% of commutes last an hour and all of them are done by car (Figure 3.11).



Figure 3.10. Respondent daily travel time to amenities. (Source: Survey)

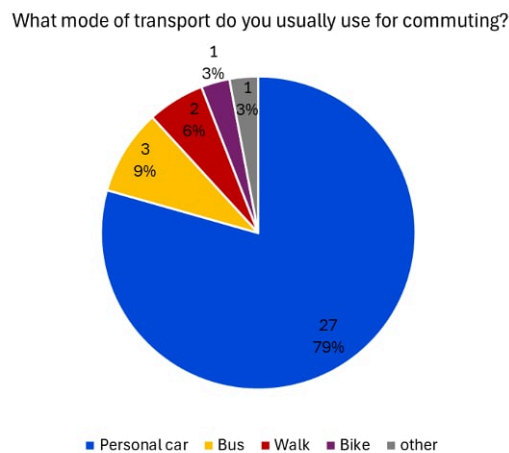


Figure 3.11. Respondent main mode of transportation. (Source: Survey)

57% of respondents say their municipality lost amenities (Figure 3.12), over 60% of respondents had to go to a different town, locality or municipality for services and amenities (Figure 3.13). The most popular destinations for cross border amenity seekers are Vetlanda, Hultsfred and Väjjö (Figure 3.14).

During your time in the community, has your community lost or gained access to amenities

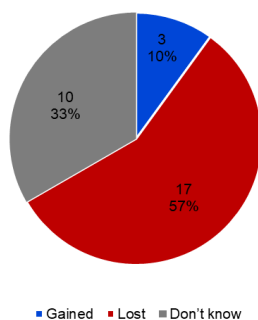


Figure 3.12. Respondent opinion on if their area gained or lost amenities. (Source: Survey)

Do you have to go to a different locality/town for amenities (groceries)?

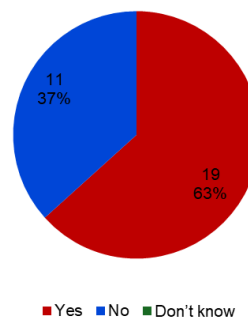


Figure 3.13. Graph of if the respondent has to go to a different town or locality for amenities. (Source: Survey)

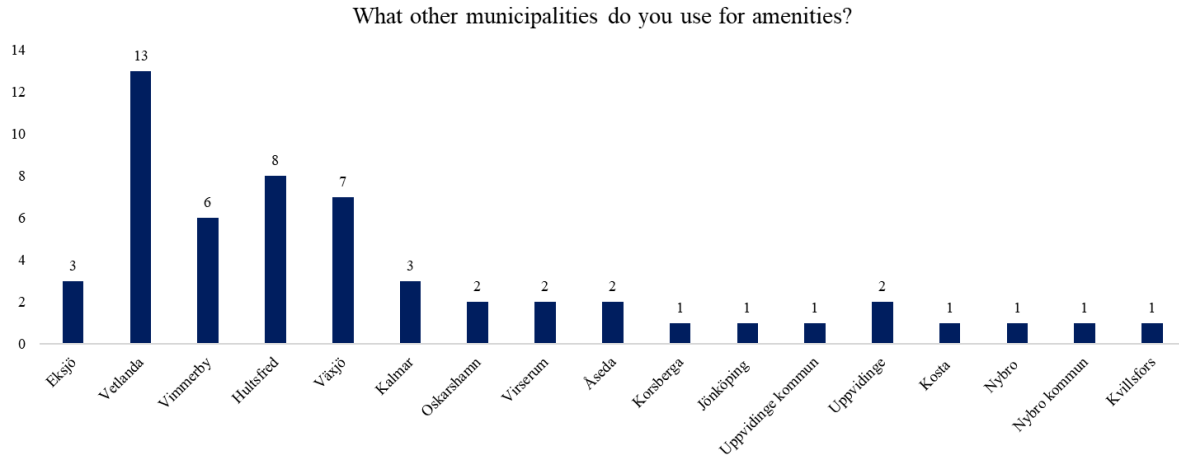


Figure 3.14. Which towns and localities the respondents go to for amenities. (Source: Survey)

The services/amenities that municipalities have lost the most of are stores, schools and public transport (Figure 3.15). Although some respondents say they have both lost and gained stores and other services through change of ownership and new businesses appearing to replace the ones that are lost or to fill the gap in the market if able. The closures that have most affected respondents are stores in their area and schools for their children (Figure 3.16). The loss of public transport options has limited movement for some respondents.

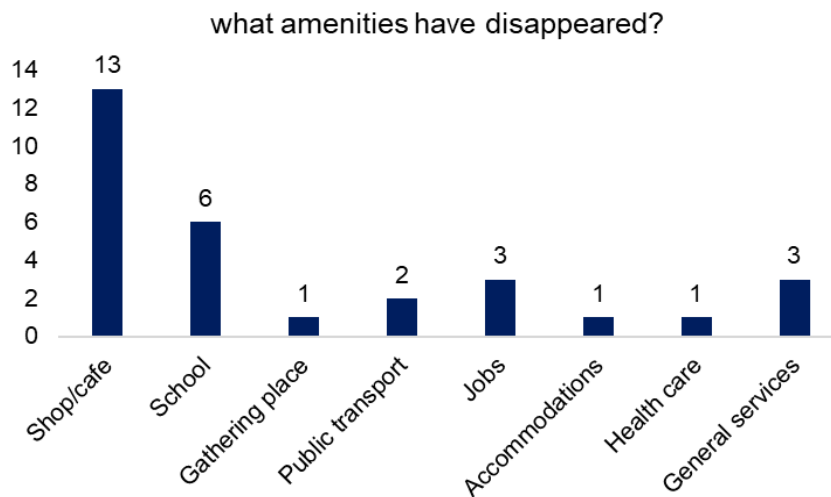


Figure 3.15. Which amenities respondents say their area has lost. (Source: Survey)

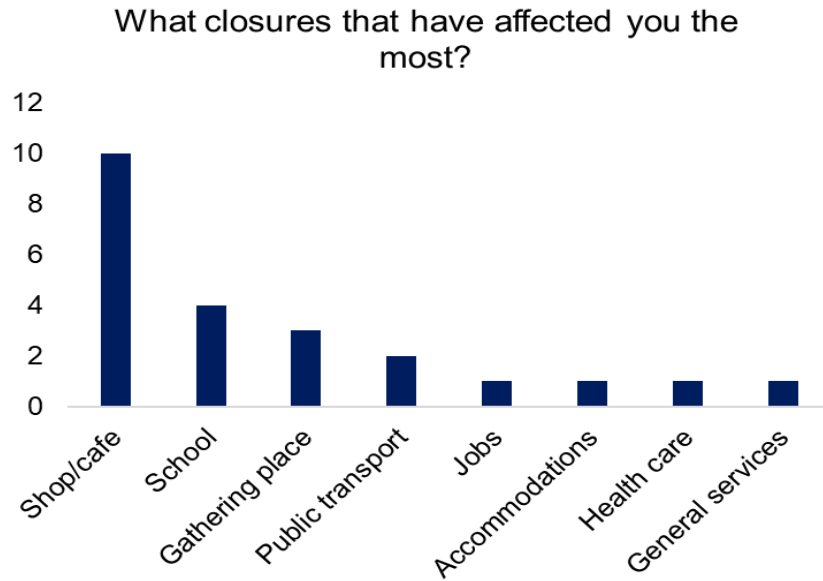


Figure 3.16. Which closure of an amenity affected respondents the most. (Source: Survey)

Characteristics and feelings towards your area

Many of the responses 46% say that their area is beautiful, charming or nice, 23% of responses describe their area as rural, that it has a lot of nature and many also mention forests in their descriptions. Only 6% of responses described their area as home or work, 19% of responses describe their area as peaceful or cozy (Figure 3.17).

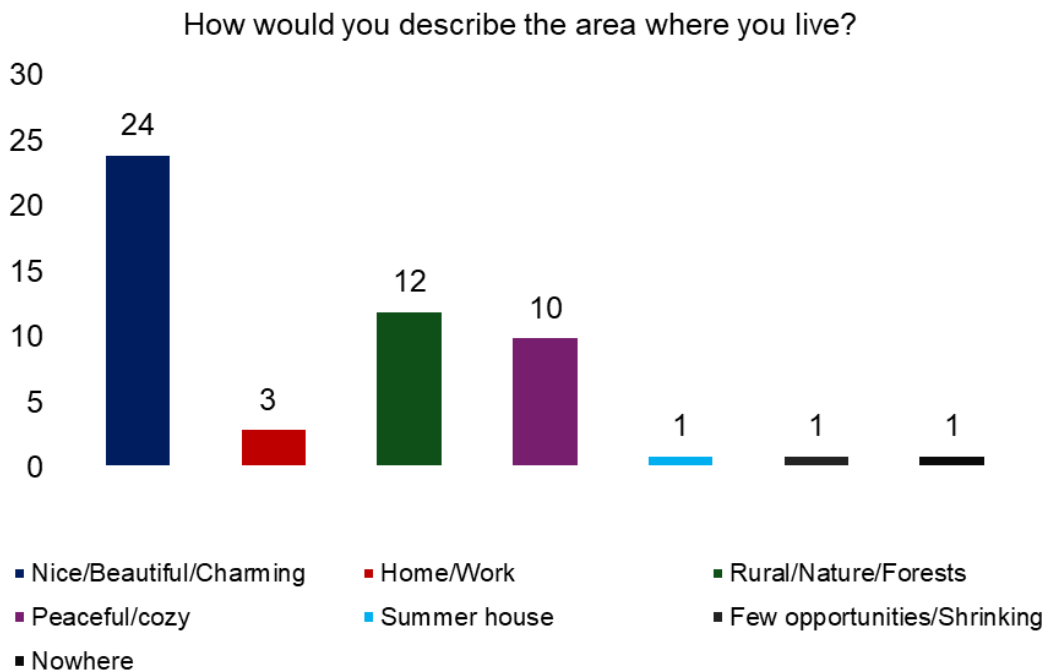


Figure 3.17. How respondents view or describe their local area. (Source: Survey)

83% of respondents agree that they live in a rural area and 7% are unsure, all respondents who answered no 10% are over the age of 35 (Figure 3.18).

Do you (in your opinion) live in the rural area of your municipality?

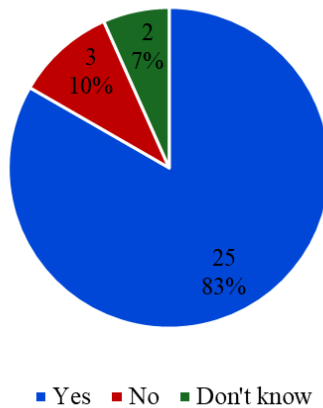


Figure 3.18. Respondent opinion on if they live in a rural area. (Source: Survey)

To the question of how respondents feel their area is doing over all 63% answered that the area is stable, 30% answered struggling and only 7% or 2 respondents said their area is thriving (Figure 3.19). All respondents from Högsby responded that their local area is struggling.

How do you feel your local area where you live is doing over-all?

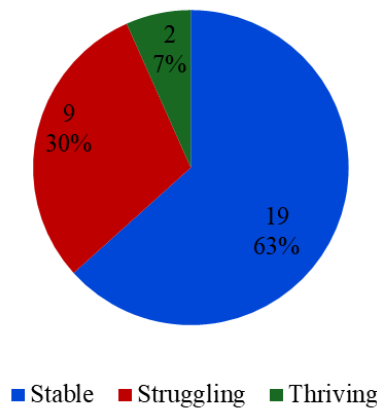


Figure 3.19. Respondent opinion on how their area is doing. (Source: Survey)

83% of respondents have not considered moving due to various reasons (Figure 3.20), most cited reasons being: family and friends, nature and that they simply like to live in their area, some of the respondents also recently moved to the area (Figure 3.21). 5 respondents 17% said they have thought of leaving mostly because of better opportunities elsewhere, age does not seem to play a role in the desire to leave as the respondents that answered yes cover ages 18-65.

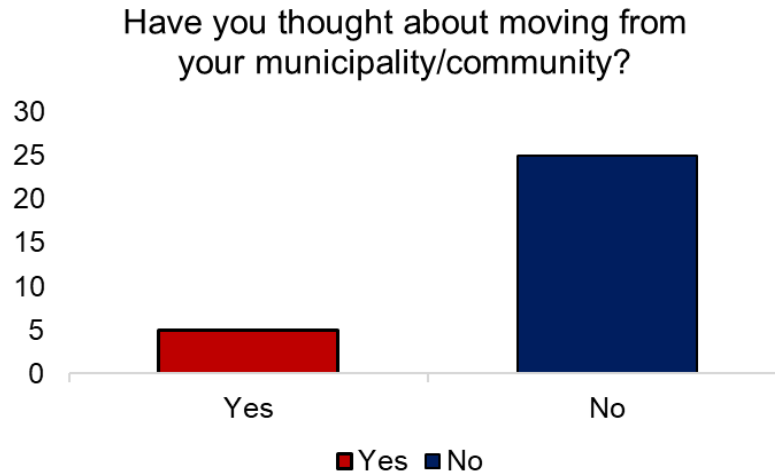


Figure 3.20. Graph of if the respondent have considered moving away from their area. (Source: Survey)

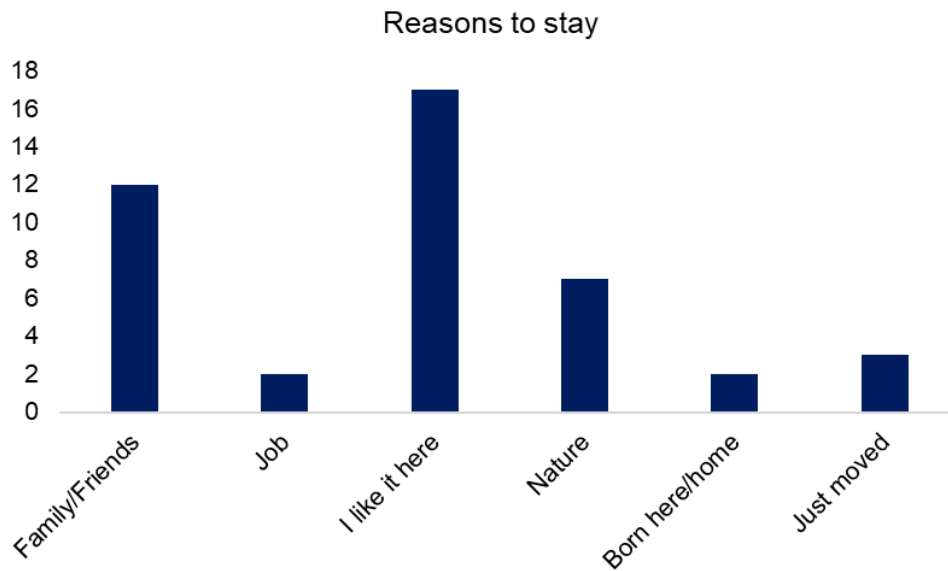


Figure 3.21. Reasons why respondents want to stay in their area. (Source: Survey)

Development and sustainable frontier in municipal perspectives

When asked what the municipality should focus on, more than half, 54%, said that the municipality should focus on public services, like schools, healthcare, buses, and local infrastructure. An equal number of respondents, 20% each, said that the municipality should focus on economic growth or sustainability (Figure 3.22). Only respondents from Vetlanda and Hultsfred said to focus on sustainability, while Högsby and Uppvidinge respondents put priority on economic growth.

What do you think your municipality should prioritize?

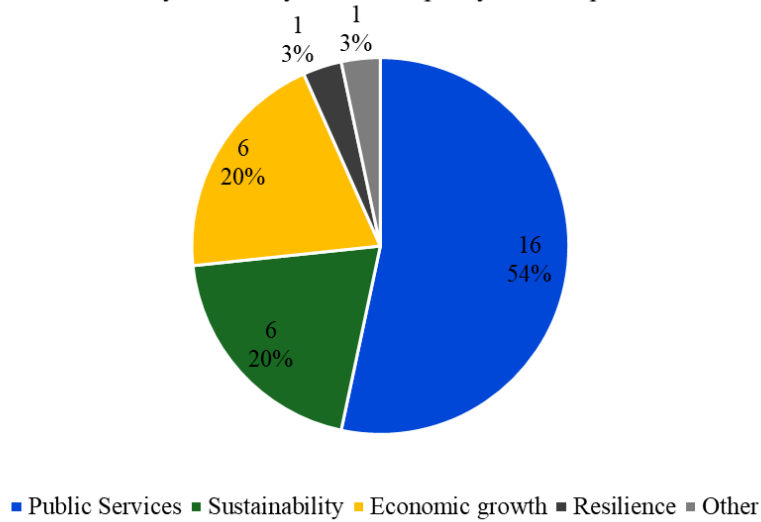


Figure 3.22. Respondents' opinion on what their municipality should prioritize. (Source: Survey)

An equal number of respondents said yes and no to the question of if they know of any local action groups or organizations in their community (Figure 3.23). When asked if there are any local action groups or organizations 52% said yes and 48% said no or that they do not know, but 67% of respondents say that they are active in their local community and events.

Most respondents, 52%, did not know if there are any active projects in their community with a focus on development and sustainability in their area. 19% said there are not any, and only 29% said there are some projects in their local community about sustainability and development (Figure 3.24). The most commonly mentioned organizations were local village organizations, sports clubs, and the Småland Trädgårdar.

The respondents that are active in their community are typically participating in 2-3 or more local organizations. The most common is participation in cultural organizations like museums and culture centers, sport clubs and events, local village associations, and local development projects.



Figure 3.23. Respondent awareness of local action groups and organizations. (Source: Survey)

Are there any active projects going on (that you know of) in your community that focus on sustainability and development in your area?

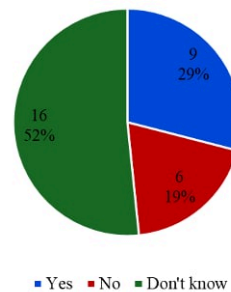


Figure 3.24. Are there any active sustainability and development projects in the respondents area? (Source: Survey)

When asked what the municipality should know, acknowledge, or change, many respondents said that they should keep or improve the local services, school, and transportation. Many also expressed the view that they feel forgotten or that the municipality, region, and nation should pay attention to them. Some expressed discontent with bureaucracy and lack of investment in their towns, calling for revitalization, and they called their town "dead".

A very common sentiment found in the survey is loss of services making life harder or less convenient as schools are closing and you have to go to school in your municipality even though there is a school closer, as one respondent wrote in the survey *"No, the children can now get a ride to Silverdalen. It's a bit of a hassle that the designated school is Målilla, which is 15 km farther away than Silverdalen."* Hultsfred kommun resident aged 36-45.

There is also a concern with aging and the availability of service for the elderly in the future as populations shrink in many areas as one respondent said *"We like it here. But we'll probably move when we get too old to manage on our own."* Vetlanda kommun resident aged 65+.

There are also difficulties with cooperation and motivating people to act together for the community as another survey respondent said *"I tried to gauge interest in local coworking spaces, but it was difficult. I think there might be potential, but it's generally hard to connect with people you don't already know."* Vetlanda kommun resident aged 26-35.

Some respondents express a feeling of being forgotten or ignored. One respondent said *"Don't forget about small communities. We need to be able to get around—and take the bus on weekends, too."* Vetlanda kommun 46-55, another respondent expressed that there is too much focus on metropolitan areas of their municipality *"Don't just focus on the "metropolitan area," but also on the surrounding towns."* Hultsfred kommun 26-35. This may be due to a lack of communication between municipalities and their people.

3.6. Field mapping

We mapped 38 objects and places: 14 community objects, 3 cultural objects, 1 natural object, 2 energetic places, 2 developing places, 1 rustic place, 7 abandoned places, 2 sad places, 6 cheerful places. There are too few points to make conclusions or worthwhile analysis based on field map observations. When moving through Högsby municipality would be that there are very few eye catching stops for the average visitor which could explain the gap in the municipality for field mapping. Högsby also had the most abandoned places out of any municipality while Hultsfred had all of the cultural objects that were mapped. Many of the places marked as cheerful could also be marked as natural objects as often they were lake sides outside and in towns that were visited, with many local residents also visiting so energetic could also be applied to the area. It would also be worth noting that at times places could have multiple emotions attached to them due to differing interpretations of the observed area. The border area had many community objects, mainly notice boards, churches and cafes where locals meet and could exchange information.

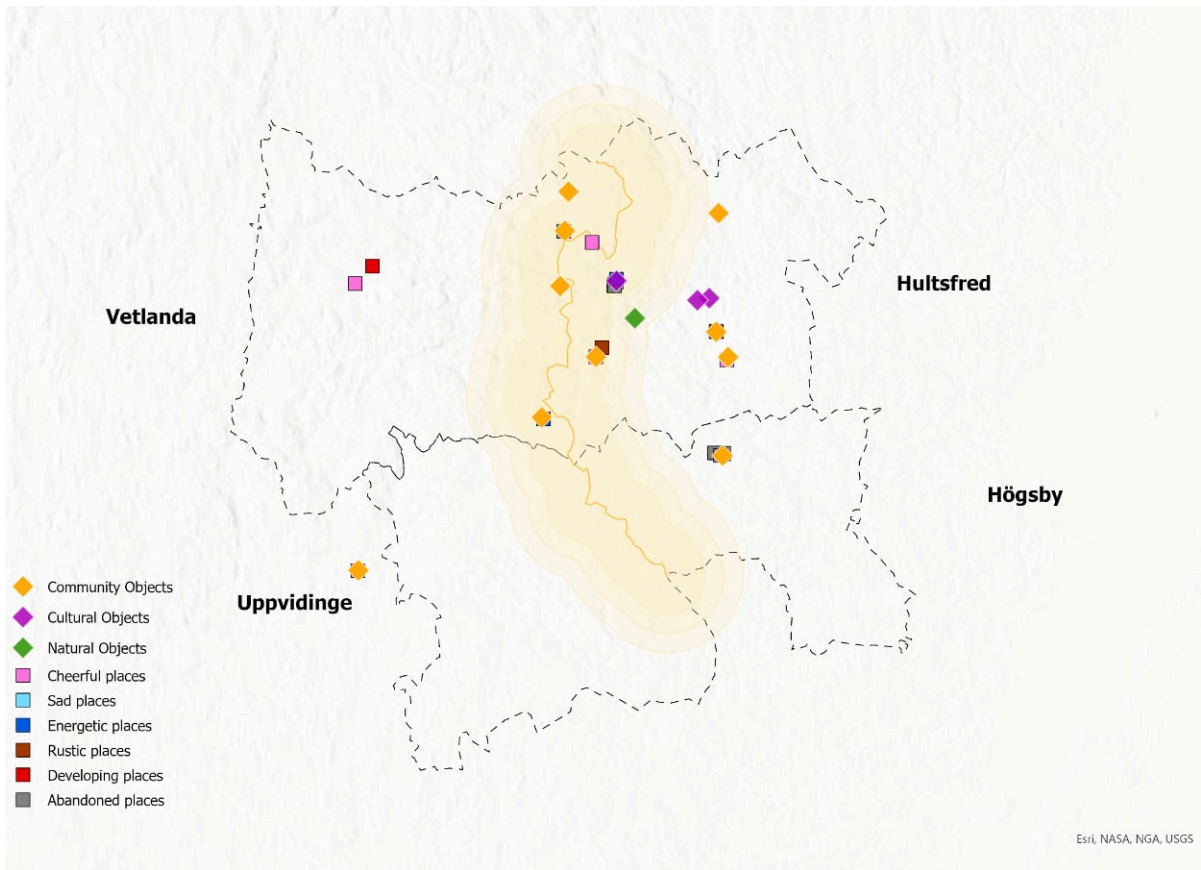


Figure fil. Field mapping data. (Source: gathered through ESRI Field maps)

4. Discussion

In this section, we answer our research questions based on a mix of our data collection methods. We evaluate our findings and connect it to the theoretical framework, while highlighting the themes and topics that came up during our explorative field work.

4.1. How do people in the rural/periphery areas define themselves and what kind of relationship do they have with territory?

In the border area, there are a lot of differing opinions. Based on informal conversations and semi-structured interviews, the locals describe themselves as “happy and beautiful” and “rural and countryside” and “independent”. We also saw themes of “boring and abandoned” and “foreigners and newcomers”

Happy place and beautiful nature

The people we met were generally content with their livelihood and described their kids as happy and that the area is overall positive, which some contribute to the visitors who come to the place for vacation and recreation. It should also be mentioned that, for the most part, the people interviewed and chatted with were active members of their own communities, so there is a gap in knowledge about “ordinary” residents who might have had differing opinions.

Citation and comment from the survey when asked to describe the area:

“An idyllic and peaceful countryside with unspoiled natural and cultural landscapes.”

Rural and countryside

Respondents describe their area as rural, for example, one of the interviewees highlighted the role that the rural lifestyle plays in making her café attractive. To illustrate this, she cited the COVID-19 health crisis, during which rural shops were flooded with customers from the cities. This phenomenon was mentioned by a local cheese maker, who also argued that the fact that her shop is “off the beaten path” adds to its appeal. These two examples show that the interviewees view their lives in a dialectical relationship with the city and more densely populated areas. This appreciation of rural areas in contrast to the city is particularly evident in discussions with nature retreat organizers. One of the area’s key Figures, who came with his family and friends primarily from two Northern European capitals, highlights the peaceful nature of the life they are building here, close to nature. The same is true for many of the respondents to our survey. Some speak of a “monastic life”, a ‘peaceful’ life in a place “very, very far away from everything”. This offers them a number of advantages, such as the ability to have their “own deep-well water source”.

Citation and comment from the survey when asked to describe the area:

*“Monastic life. Peaceful. Relaxing. Nature. The combination of living in the Outback while having access to 1 TB of internet (via fiber optic cable) is perfect. A large plot of land for gardening, solar panels, and more, allowing you to live off your own **electricity**. A crisis-proof place to live.”*

Self-sufficiency and independence

Some of the people we talked with described an attitude of stubborn independence, where they saw the people living in the countryside as people who help themselves and do not ask or expect help from the municipalities and, to some extent, do not ask for permission. We can connect this to the framework of rural power, since several of our interviewees mentioned the ability to grow food and sustain themselves as a part of their independence. Being able to rely less on the outside world and authorities such as the municipality is a part of how the people in the rural and peripheral areas saw themselves.

One respondent was optimistic about his municipality's ability to become self-sufficient and resilient saying *“The municipality of Hultsfred should work to make the municipality self-sufficient in electricity (by installing its own wind turbines and solar farms), make the municipality self-sufficient in food, and make the municipality resilient to crises. We are a municipality with few residents and businesses, yet we have a large agricultural and forestry sector (food production and livestock farming). We produce potatoes, vegetables, strawberries, raspberries, beef, pork, milk, eggs, cheese, and more. And we’re located in the middle of nowhere. There’s a good chance we could succeed in becoming 100%...”* - Hultsfred kommun 56-65. This indicates a strong desire for a sense of autonomy and the ability to take care of yourself in the rural regions.

The diversity of the people we interviewed also allowed us to grasp the variety of cultural approaches associated with territory. One interviewee emphasized the land they own and the importance of heritage. They emphasized what distinguishes themselves from those they call “immigrants” in the construction of community belonging. Beyond highlighting the role played by local associations, particularly hunting clubs, they emphasized the centrality of property in the construction of community belonging. For them, the community is more resilient and sustainable in the long term when it is based on land ownership.

When we draw a parallel with our previous interview with participants in Möllan retreat, they clearly emphasize that what matters most is not so much the community as the land. In contrast, when we asked one of the respondents from the nature company how much forest land they owned, they replied that it didn’t really matter, before emphasizing the community project and the pursuit of a life in line with his ideals.

Another key finding of our analysis concerns the issue of environmental sustainability. Only two interviewees brought up the topic spontaneously: one from the municipality of Vetlanda and one from a nature retreat. In the first case, the focus was on highlighting the municipality’s efforts and mentioning the national award they received for their sustainable management. This was one of the points raised when we asked about the municipality’s achievements and successes. In 2025, the municipality of Vetlanda won the award for Sweden’s most environmentally friendly rural municipality. In the case of the nature retreat, the topic was raised because it is central to the establishment’s purpose. Discussions therefore focused primarily on this aspect, and the interviewee emphasized his desire to offer his guests an experience as close to nature as possible.

In addition to these two interviewees, the topic of environmental (and social) sustainability was raised at our initiative. Some of the local residents and stakeholders admitted that sustainability was not a conscious priority for them, but that their actions (such as selling secondhand items or supporting local producers) were, in fact and in practice, part of a sustainability effort. Others responded that their actions were indeed grounded in a conscious commitment to sustainability, but never to the extent that it played such a central role as in the case of the nature retreat. There was this theme of some people wanting to return to rurality and independence in the search for a more stable life during global crises, this was also a theme in civil resilience parts of the planning documents (see this report's chapter 1.6.)

Citation and comment from the survey when asked what they would like their municipality to know, acknowledge, or change: *“Loosen up the rules a bit so people can get things done and innovate without too much red tape and expense.”*

About stubborn independence *“So as long as I can do it with myself, I will do it myself. And that has been, that has been also. It's a common way to think out here. I should try to manage myself.”*

The mindmap and our interview with the municipality revealed that the area is also known for its beautiful nature, with forest and lakes, which is in correlation with how the strategic documents define the area (Figure 3.5).

Boring and abandoned

As a counter, at Fågelfors, the place categorized by several abandoned buildings, we did encounter local inhabitants who were unhappy and planning to move, saying *“There is nothing here”* and *“there is nothing fun to do”*.

Also in our survey, more negative tones came out. Citation and comment from the survey *“Revitalize the towns within the municipality; every municipality has its pros and cons, but this one feels pretty dead”* (Answer about Uppvidinge Municipality)

Foreigners and newcomers

Interestingly we experienced that foreigners, especially Germans, had a prominent presence in the border area. Several of the people we encountered were originally from Germany and had moved to Sweden. We also had several signs where the written languages were in Swedish, German, and English. However visitors and permanent residents who originally come from other countries than Sweden were not mentioned in our informal meetings, it was not mentioned in any of the survey responses either, but many of the aforementioned comprehensive plans talk about attracting foreigners to live in the municipalities. This highlights the current trend of rural areas becoming empty not only because of depopulation but because of foreign (typically richer western countries) residents buying old villas to use as summer homes, increasing the population only during summer and deprecating the villages during winter.

“I don't know if we say this on tape but in Fågelfors there is this expression called “the germanmensch”, German towns, it becomes a social problem when there are a lot of people who don't live there all the time.” (See appendix 4)

4.2. How are the services in the border areas?

Many of our respondents raised concerns about the lack of public services. As Esping-Andersen (1990) explains, the concept of the welfare state is based on the opportunity given to all citizens to “maintain a livelihood without reliance on the market” (Esping-Andersen, 1990). Syssner (2022) points out that services such as education, healthcare, and nursing homes are thus, in theory, “provided as a matter of right” (Esping-Andersen, 1990). We did indeed find these concerns reflected in the respondents’ answers when we asked them what they considered to be challenges for their community or what they would like to improve. One respondent mentioned the unfortunate experience of a neighbor who, while in distress, had to wait far too long for an ambulance to arrive.

A respondent to the survey said “Make sure that the few municipal services that exist are preserved.” Vetlanda municipality aged 36-45 as well as another respondent answering the question what should the municipality change or know “That all residents of the municipality are people with similar needs who deserve the same services and opportunities” Vetlanda kommun 56-65.

Similarly, the lack of public transportation is often cited by residents and economic stakeholders, who regret that it does not run more frequently, as this situation increases dependence on cars; this is clearly visible when visualized alongside the map of the amenities, land use and populations (Figure 1.5, Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.2). This was also the report authors’ experience (see this report’s chapter 3.2). These situations are analyzed through the lens of demands for territorial equity.

One respondent asserts that the low population density of their region should not be a reason to reduce funding for transportation and health services: every resident must have equal and easy access to them, without distinction.

The survey brings a more critical tone to the border area, highlighting how the majority of residents have lost services and have to commute to other towns or municipalities. None of the survey responders work in the 10 km radius of the border (Figure 3.7 and 3.12). Many respondents to the survey wanted more bus routes to get around the different regions and municipalities easier as well as making moving within the municipalities less difficult especially for the elderly. When asked what amenities have disappeared one survey respondent said:

"Bus service. You can't take the bus to or from work if you work shifts. Otherwise, I think everything else is fine." Hultsfred kommun 36-45

When asked what should the municipality change one respondent answered *"Increase the number of buses to Åseda, Växjö."* Hultsfred kommun 65+

"So you need to go into Vetlanda. So I think that most people are quite connected to the town, and also when you want to so you come concerned or.. it's a lot. A lot of things are concentrated in the town." - A rural landowner

In terms of sustainability and services related to that, Högsby municipality doesn't have an environmental specialist of its own, they talk about sustainability in nature, they can initiate and do their own projects. But also, they collaborate with others. They have a lot of focus on the Eman river, which runs through the area, also have an organization that works with water projects, and they have an administrative function in water management.

The water area in Högsby Municipality is important for restoring certain ecological values, so it depends on collaboration with others. Everyone cares about the water and its quality, there is a connection with this resource, like fishing. Högsby doesn't have difficulties like bigger cities have, how to expand housing and preserve green areas, because they don't have that kind of development, expansion of land use. But there is a lot of agricultural use, and that has a lot of impact on nature, but it is also the economic foundation of the community and many other rural communities.

Vetlanda Municipality received a national award in 2025 as the best rural municipality. The municipality uses a pollution and risk map developed by Länsstyrelserna to support planning and better understand environmental risks. Despite this recognition, the municipality faces several challenges. The entire community is highly dependent on cars, as almost every daily activity requires driving. Because rural areas are shrinking, people are also concerned that healthcare services may decline or disappear in the coming years, also, demographic issues impact schools. There are too few children in schools, which makes education expensive to maintain, because schools have to continue to operate even with a lower headcount.

4.3. What perspective do the municipalities have on shrinking periphery areas?

When discussing the periphery areas with representatives of the municipalities, the clear difference between Högsby and Vetlanda emerges: Vetlanda municipality focuses mainly on the opportunities and future plans, while the interview with the Högsby municipality revealed a lot more challenges. The main challenge is still depopulation and reduced tax revenue. An interesting topic that was discussed was the problem of collaboration. When they work together it works nicely, but when there are political changes the collaborations can have a rough ending, bringing more problems than solutions.

In our interview with the Vetlanda municipality the representatives mentioned that in the future, they expect the rural areas to be more appreciated, as they are getaways from big cities and “realities”. This connects well with the theory of the rural areas having symbolic power and to some degree a romanization, which can be used in both marketing and selling of products in farm shops or local cafés, as well as attracting people who wish to experience what the rural areas are symbolically connected with nature and recreation.

Representative from Högsby municipality: “(...) *we don't really have anything except the beautiful nature to attract people (...)*”

As highlighted by experts in Vetlanda's municipality (see appendix 6), one of the main issues of the city is to attract and re-attract the local creative class (Florida, 2005), in order to produce economic and social value in the local area.

As underlined by experts in Högsby municipality (see appendix 4) there are many industrial areas as Ruda, Fågelfors and Berga that are “*becoming run down, having like and identity crisis*” (see appendix 4), small communities in these circumstances are striving to seek a new identity to maintain their population and services in the area. Another relevant aspect is the presence of “german towns” (see appendix 4), which are localities where there are many villas and houses being used as second homes by people, mostly from

Localities and connections in the study area

As mentioned in our theoretical framework, how we define a problem is how we search for the solution. When discussing areas and towns, it could be interesting to look into how those areas are defined. During our interviews with the municipalities, we noticed that areas and towns are often described by their number of inhabitants, the property value, or what historically the area or town was identified with e.g. “industry”.

Representative from Högsby: *“Fagerhult is well off, but the population is still dwindling”*

Currently the comprehensive plans focus on and describe the areas based on history, culture, and the visual aspect with nature. There are also maps showing whether areas have a high or low population density and how are the areas connected with bigger hubs. These maps also highlight the border as an empty space, but the plans don't focus or talk about the empty border areas. It would be useful to focus on the smaller towns and villages' connections with each other.

Citation from the survey: *“Don't forget about small communities. We need to be able to get around—and take the bus on weekends, too.”*

What we found during our data collection was that transport connections and digital connections were often mentioned and played a large role in why people chose to stay in an area. With inspiration from the Scottish Government's approach to defining their island and sustaining island populations (National islands plan, 2026), it could be interesting to research and define the areas and towns by their connections to the outside world, how able people are to reach services with transportation or digital services.

Representative from Högsby: *“if you look on the property values, the people who live on the countryside in like farmsteads, it's not so big a difference, where it is, because you need to drive your car and its quite like homogenous, maybe it's a bit more advantageous to be close to a big city, but it's not too big a difference, but people in these small townlets or Småstäder as we say in swedish, they um **they become like islands**, different from their surroundings.”*

Cooperations between municipalities and regions

Respondents to the survey were unhappy with the lack of cooperation and collaboration between the municipalities, that they had to go to a further school within the municipality, not a closer school in the neighboring municipality. One respondent said *“They should offer school bus transportations to schools in neighboring municipalities after closing so many schools.”* Högsby kommun 46-55

The transport infrastructure of the Högsby–Vetlanda area is structured around regional roads, rail lines, and public transport. The road network plays the dominant role in supporting everyday mobility and economic interaction, whereas the rail and bus systems primarily reinforce connections to regional centres, but do not provide a direct link between Högsby and Vetlanda. As a result, the area may be characterised as a functionally connected but spatially fragmented transport region, where mobility depends less on direct border infrastructure and more on intermediate transport hubs and interregional coordination.

Representative from Högsby: *“where the attraction of those places really depends on what is there and what connections are there like big work places or cultural life and vacations and value of property depends quite a lot on that and how good are the connections to major cities.”*

Representative from Högsby: *“One of the things that's really exceptional about högsby, when you think about how small the muni is with how small it is with 5k inhabitants is that we have 2 train stops, one in högsby and one in Berga (...)”*

Strong borders

We were a bit surprised, when our data showed that the people living in the border area do experience administrative borders and that the municipalities are aware of it as well. Several people mentioned that the borders meant that services were further away than necessary (Figure 3.4). This is exemplified by kids having to go to schools further away even when there are schools closer by because the closest school is in another municipality. The same happens with fibernet that could be laid from another place closer by, but due to administrative borders that does not happen .

Representative from Högsby municipality: *“When it comes to physical planning, the like the administrative borders, are still like, heavily engrained”* (Figure 3.4)

Limits of our research

This research presents some limitations that should be acknowledged when considering it, both for future research in the area and the consideration of our report.

Unfortunately, the project only lasted for 15 days, with only four of active fieldwork, hence the amount of time and interviews was relatively limited. Before conducting our research we gain knowledge through official documentation and grey data, but without a profound structural approach, since the time was very limited and none of us is a native Swedish speaker. The survey we conducted produced a fair amount of feedback, but still, not enough to gain strong and defined conclusions about what are the opinions in the area.

The interviews and chats we did were efficient, but would have been beneficial to discuss with more people from both municipalities and simple citizens. During the study, sustainability was one of the main topics, but much of the data we produced were not really in this direction, therefore, for further analysis a more structural depiction of sustainability between borders would help structure a better fieldwork and survey with more defined borders.

In summary, time was the main obstacle we had; more time would increase connections with locals and stakeholders, a more in depth analysis and a more profound depiction of all the main difficulties in the area. Hence, for further studies we recommend to better clarify what “sustainability” means in border areas and to invest more time building connections with locals, in order to gather more interviews and responses.

5. Conclusion & Suggestions

In summary, the project lasted two weeks, from the 11th to the 25th of April 2026 the study took place between the municipalities of Vetlanda and Högsby. The field work was conducted between the 16th and the 20th of April 2026.

We adopted a mixed-method approach (Clark et al., 2021), combining quantitative (survey, spatial analysis, field mapping) and qualitative methods (semi-structured interviews, observations, and informal discussions), supported by both primary and secondary data. This proved particularly valuable in providing insights into the processes currently shaping the area.

5.1. Current state, challenges, and potential of the border area

The current state of the border area is mixed, with different methods giving different results. From the interviews, the report got a perspective from the local business owners and how they are managing. Innovative and modern businesses focused on sustainability and digitalization appear to be performing well. Our data shows that the area is described with several positive adjectives including beautiful nature. The people living in the area described it as rural and countryside, often with a positive outlook on their ability to be self-sufficient. On the other hand, smaller places with less innovation are more quiet and slowly losing population, taxes, services, were described as “empty”, “abandoned” or “dead”.

At the moment, there is a clear lack of communication or clear overview of the ruralities between the municipalities and regions, as depicted in the interviews, but also an exceptional amount of second homes in the area, therefore creating uneven development among the settlements. Local communities are united and strong, but apparently they concentrate their efforts mainly when threatened. Since the area is sparsely populated and with a constant regression of the population, the public transportation system does not cover the needs of the residents and visitors, enhancing car dependency among the populations. Connection to the outside world through transportation methods such as access to larger roads and public transportation, as well as digital connections and internet, are important for people living in the border area. A positive note on services in the area is the moving library and food transport, that services sparsely populated areas, were mentioned several times.

The area faces several challenges, including strict administrative borders that constrain municipalities and limit cooperation, as key decisions are made at the regional level; this creates a lack of optic fiber in remote areas and makes sustaining schools difficult if not impossible. On the one hand, in this context funds are fundamental for developing strategies and innovation, on the other, it is very complex for the municipalities to handle this pressure properly since they have limited capital. One of the main challenges of the depopulation of these lands is the abandonment of buildings. In the area, many schools have been closed, and some towns (e.g., Fågelfors) contain entire residential areas that are vacant, as properties are both too costly to purchase and too expensive for municipalities to demolish.

5.2. Suggestions

We suggest that further research should be conducted on environmental sustainability. While we have explored the cultural dimension of people's relationship to this issue, a more in-depth study would be beneficial to examine the material reality of greenhouse gas emissions or the practices, consumption patterns, and production methods employed by the respondents. While some of the interviewees defined environmental sustainability as a key aspect of their project, other respondents may lead more sustainable lifestyles without necessarily being aware of it or claiming it as such.

As discovered in the literature, the negative environmental impacts of households in wealthy countries are proportional to their income level or capital (Knight, Schor & Jorgenson, 2017). Thus, it would be relevant to compare the actual environmental sustainability of different respondent profiles.

One survey respondent expressed regret over the dominance of private companies in electricity production. We therefore suggest encouraging and promoting the creation of energy communities. These are groups of residents who invest in producing their own energy in a sustainable manner. The capital is owned by the community, which serves the dual purpose of 1) strengthening community and territorial belonging and, consequently, revitalizing local areas (Neij et al., 2025 ; Campos & Marín-González, 2020 ; Hanke & Guyet, 2023) and; 2) improving residents' resilience in terms of energy independence amid rising military tensions. This is achieved in particular through Elinor Ostrom's (2010) model of polycentric governance. When civic centers aren't possible for each village, a volunteer contact person should be chosen who could be the village representative.

In conclusion, we suggest the municipalities to be inspired by success stories in the area and other places including outside of Sweden, such as the moving library in Vetlanda, that once a month picks up books from pickup points in all the nearby towns. We suggest to enhance dialogue among both populations and municipalities, invest in local communities to make them collaborate and create bottom up projects where regional bureaucracy constrain municipalities. It would be beneficial to foster communities by creating meeting points with mixed uses, a place that can be used as a second hand shop, cafe and repair-point would be beneficial for the towns/villages. Creating a place where people can meet and interact, while simultaneously fostering a shared sense of value and collective benefit. We suggest keeping track of the "development trajectory" as these areas share multiple social, natural and unique values, hence maintain the authenticity of them. Striving for a better public transportation system would benefit all the people in these areas.

But most importantly, we suggest to not leave any village behind, to make changes, we all have to go in the same direction. All the towns, villages and politicians must work together to create shared development and progress for their citizens .

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AI

[DeepL.com](https://www.deeppl.com) has been used to translate certain parts.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Notes on interview with local entrepreneur (Hultsfred)

- Customers - Germans, French, etc.
- local people have known them since 15 years. Probably boosted by Google Maps where she is well visible.
- Difficulty = the hardest part is the distribution.
- LEADER? Does not know if they are still in it.
- Did not get any support at the beginning from the Kommune but it seems friendly to them.
- Schools: 16 people up to year 6. their kid had only one roommate so they changed schools but couldn't have a school taxi anymore. Supported the closure of school because it wasn't good enough but many people aren't of the same opinion.
- Can't have a good enough internet connection.
- Don't have enough buses → 3 per day / or other public transport
- Wind turbines : thinks it's fine and not annoying but if she lives closer it would be annoying with noise
- Feels the border → because of lack of cooperation between municipalities
- Stg particularly successful? Small businesses in rural areas
- Thinks that people come not despite it's off but because it's off
- During the Covid crisis, in Sweden shops could stay opened → +50% more customers
- Now there are a lot of more places like this one / it used to be more businesses like banks etc before
- Happy place? Yes bc customers are on vacations so they are kind
- Customers = most 40/50 yo interested in food, not a lot of kids
- The idea of starting their own business came after she finished her studies in molecular biology → she saw pictures of old ladies breeding goats/sheeps

Appendix 2: Notes on interview with the owner of a Café

- From Germany → 4 years here
- Why Sweden? she didn't like Germany bc of politics (didn't know which politics she disliked)
- A lot of Germans → only on vacations, they have vacation houses
- Used to be an "apotik" (means pharmacy?)
- Found the place on internet
- The school's better here for her children compared to Germany
- Good internet connection
- Customers are mostly people who travel on the road along her Café
- Opens more in the summer but not only

Appendix 3: Notes on the talks with a local nature retreat owners

- Host 25 (??) people and construct a new home
- Didn't rely on LEADER project bc they didn't want to rely on its funds
- They want their lands (even if they say that land property is not important for them) to be a nature reserve
- They say that it's here a redneck country, it's very conservative
- What is challenging for other people according to them is to find jobs
- They rely on a big network from Copenhagen because they have been there
- They organize a festival each summer (300 people??) where they practice nature, they dance and do not drink alcohol
- Customers come from Stockholm and Copenhagen mostly
- They say that their relation with the municipality is nice
- It is mainly about sustainability

Appendix 4: Semi-structured interview with representatives from Högsby Practicalities

[Transcript not transmitted to preserve anonymity]

Appendix 5: Semi-structured interview with a forest landlord

- Big farms are located on the hill and not in the valleys
- Defines the area as an "island" (???)
- Meat and milk production
- Had a shop in the village but took too much of their time
- Used to do things by themselves (as a family), manage their own land
- Often surprised how very similar the pb are → solutions to address these pb are quite similar as well, she says
- Could be difficult to recruit young people → some of them come back but not all of them
- Thinks mistakes in rural areas could be resolved if all the generations were listened to → inefficient communication between municipalities and different

aged groups. But also says that you don't want to be asked just because you're young but because you're part of the municipality.

- According to them, a lot of people feel as if they were not approached by the municipality*
- them and their family (??) work in forestry businesses in Sweden and many other countries → men dominating areas → so works a lot with inequality issues in this area, she says
- Says that a long time ago nobody wanted to work with other people but it has changed
- People who come here are happy and nice → bring money to the area. they likes that there's a mix with permanents and not permanents.
- Most people who move to the village buy a house: have children, come here bc they find it beautiful,
- come from other parts of Europe (Germany, Netherlands, Belgium) → the biggest challenge is language barriers
- How is the community here? We could do more.. Three main organizations → hunters (3 different), outdoor theatre in summer, cultural clubs. Almost everyone here is engaged in an organization but says that certain people don't want to participate and it's a pity.
- Biggest challenge = transports → roads are OK to drive on but people drive really fast => children can't bike bc it's too dangerous
- When you need to do strategy → need to go to Vetlanda → most people are quite connected to the town of Vetlanda. Not wrong bc they also have services there.
- Thinks it's more difficult to attract people from Vetlanda here than opposite → would like to organize meetings.. People who live here have a good knowledge of what's going on in Vetlanda but not the opposite
- Main services that lack here? Healthcare and hospitals... If you don't have a car you can't have the basics
- Not an area where there is a lot of people but they deserve the same service "White area" in terms of services... When you lack services from the municipality you try to solve things by yourself
- It would be a try to have kind of a minibus and large roads on which you can drive
- Communication across the border is difficult here... A common way to think here = "I should manage myself"
- Their shop was a small grocery. Says it was a lot of work even if "I'm not afraid of hard work".
- Came here in 1992: Didn't grow up here... When she moved here she felt as if she found her home for the first time in her life... instantly involved by others to do things in the village
- Coming here was not the dream at the beginning but thinks retrospectively that it was a good move bc she can cut the trees she has planted when young
- "We don't see how much the community has changed"... When they came → there were a lot of Café evenings
- Highlights once again that strategy could be done with the municipality, they have to work more together. It's better to keep good relationships with the municipality because they can't be 100% independent.
- Our group speaks about the nature retreat → says that's not the most important → the place is more important than the community. The community is important only to make it possible to stay on her lands. She emphasizes the differences

between her sense of community and the one of people from the nature retreat. Says that “immigrants” are more kind to create the community just to create a community → that’s different from people who are here for a lot of time and own lands.

- There is a lot of aversion against the municipality here but she thinks they have more to win to work with it.
- On the other hand she thinks it’s important to have a sense of community against certain decisions of the municipality → example of Special home for elderly → at each election they look at the costs and say that they will close it → the community gather to say no in one voice. Thinks they should go forward to oppose the municipality so she says they are not friends in that sense. people are stubbornly independent and think collaboration and help from municipality is a weakness and “being a burden”
- What should be researched? They could rearrange this kind of meeting places → café (but more difficult than a shop), open space

[Transcript not transmitted to preserve anonymity]

Appendix 6: Notes on the interview with Vetlanda municipality’s workers

- The border is very close, “tight” between Högsby and Vetlanda and on the East. They insisted a lot on this!!! Cooperation does not work as much as they want to with other communities in the East. But they would like to bc they are part of the municipality that suffers the most from lack of cooperation (due to their location near the border).
- Example of public transport → very difficult to go from one municipality to another. They would like to increase the frequency of the travels but it’s the region that decides. Because of the low frequency, people get used to using their own car in order not to rely on buses → lack of trust has affected their way to travel, lack of public transport is rooted in their inhabitants and you can’t fix easily and quickly
- Example of Pauliström → very difficult for them because they are close to the border. “Blooming village” → it flourished in the past thanks to the nearby factory, but now it is a white spot in the area.
- Roles of the interviewees:
 - Chief of planning → work on land and water = municipal comprehensive plan. Develops an overview project on the whole municipality > smaller area > areas you can buy. Also works on QGIS
 - Rural developer → works a lot with the inhabitants, they can call her if they have any pb + apply for some financial to improve their areas + works with companies
 - Private interests are aligned with the municipality → “People who live here” gather and ask for funds and get extra from the municipality + the kommun help new activities to grow by “educating” the citizens through seminars and helping them with the starting activities and management-related matters
- Municipality classified as a rural one
- Politics try to say that they are for developing the rural areas
- Sustainability: they got a national prize for best rural municipality in 2025. Say that their work is very well recognized for sustainability. They work with a pollution

map taken from Länsstyrelsern that allows them to see various sorts of risks. The work of Vetlanda on sustainability is described as an example for the whole of Sweden.

- People happy with sustainability? → People don't know what the municipality does so the interviewees don't have a lot of info about their idea/opinion about that. Citizens only "meet" sustainability when doing something related to soil, as before buying and building there are many mandatory investigations concerning the "soil's quality"
- Example of a project → Landsbygds satsningar genomförda projekt (??) = places to meet each others → founded by LEADER project that includes 10 municipalities (???)
- They work a lot with the clubs
- 500 000 Kr for the 2027 budget (budget of what???)
- 40 projects took place between 2021 and 2026
- /!\ There isn't any project that is financed by the municipalities of both Vetlanda and Högsby
- QGis → cooperation with Eksjö, Sävsjö, Nässjö
- Roads associations got money from the authority of the roads (name in Swedish??). This is a very important topic because the whole community relies on cars.
- They are afraid that healthcare services will disappear in the next years
- They showed a map with a divide of areas between working areas, services, outdoor areas etc around the city of Vetlanda. → they have not sent it → ask again on monday
- What is successful in Vetlanda?
- Companies → big business life... Example of a building that opens in January where the company has invested to gather people for educational purposes. One of the interviewees mention that her children of 12 has got a mandatory visit of the place with his school, it's part of the business strategy to attract people → idea that if the children are familiar with the company they will work here later
- Sports (speedway, hockey) → Vetlanda (and surroundings) famous for its sports and has a lot of sport clubs
- Difficulties?
 - Hard for the companies to attract engineers → they have to already have a strong connection with the place before coming
 - Agriculture? There is a lot but has decreased → vegetable, meat, milk
 - there are few children in schools, which means the expenses are very high but the school runs anyway
 - there are a lot of activities and places in the surroundings, but for every movement the car is needed
- Vetlanda is described as a place where clubs and the Church are key actors in social life
 - Take the example of the workers of their administration → a lot of young workers come to Vetlanda to get some experience and then leave the area → pb for them because it's a huge turn over and they need to constantly form people. So when recruiting people, they ask them beforehand if they have any attachment to the area and if not, if they are involved in a local association or in the Church.
- LEADER → more focused on resilience these years → there are two people who work on this question (in the municipal admin???) = emergency coordinators

- For example if electricity lacks → they work on the capacity for the municipality to provide it all the same
- Say that it's the same in all rural areas → it's "top of the mind"
- To engage more with young minds the industries in the area opened "hightech" meetings for children and local businesses → the idea is to have a place to meet, and teach children about tech and companies. The point of that is to push pupils interested in such topics toward new discoveries and studies, striving to let them come back to Vetlanda after their studies.
- In the future the municipality expects services to be delivered at home to some extent and rural areas to be more appreciated, as they are getaways from big cities and "realities". But for such changes to occur, much time is needed.
- Highlight the importance of having a driving license. One of the interviewees says that she drives from 5am to 7pm (??) for her children.
- Preparedness → more people look for houses in rural areas. The interviewees think rural areas will be more appreciated, there will be a change mindset about the deep forest.
- Both love their place, they think it's a good place for children. They want to market the municipality for families.
- There is a strong feel of belonging so it's difficult if you're not involved in clubs/church to get into the community.
- What do they want to do with us? → erase the border so that the area becomes more attractive for the locals.
- Border: it stops at Mälilla and more in the West there's nothing for us as inhabitants of Vetlanda. Give the example of the sport matches → when you're member of a club in Vetlanda you face clubs from Vetlanda even if they are farer from those in Högsby (for example). [Axel's remark → the aristocratic interviewee said that [[I don't remember who]] inhabited Vetlanda but was involved in a club from a neighboring municipality].
- Landscape: agriculture keeps them open so it's very important to keep buying Swedish food. Too much forest is perceived as boring. The most attractive landscapes are mixed.
- Pauliström → German people buy a home there so it seems empty except during the holidays. The football club does not exist anymore, no school left.
- Karlstrop = very old village, old meal, restaurant and antique shops. A lot of people visit this place in the summer. Its littleness is seen as attractive.