No Covid-19 Deaths or Cases; the safest neighbourhoods in England – what makes them so special?

By John Clancy, Visiting Professor, Centre for Brexit Studies

Sixty-four neighbourhoods in England have recorded no Covid-19 related deaths and, even more luckily, they have also not recorded a single case of Covid-19.

Are they lucky? Or are they special? And if they are, what makes them so special?

Last Thursday the government published the first round of post-beta stats on positive Covid-19 tests at a very local level in England (the rest of the UK has yet to do this). They published them in neighbourhoods, not local authorities, or health boards.

The neighbourhoods are called MSOAs (medium super output areas) based on very local census areas of around 8,000 people. Every six weeks or so the Office for National Statistics publishes Covid-19 related deaths at that exact same local MSOA level.

On 3rd August the ONS produced the latest figures. This then enabled us for the first time last Thursday to identify the safest places in England.

As there are 6,791 of these local neighbourhoods in England and 64 have escaped both Covid-19 related deaths and positive cases of Covid-19, approaching 10% of England's neighbourhoods have been spared the spread of this disease. To be exact, 420,159 people live in these very special neighbourhoods.

Here they are:

	Neighbourhood Name	Local Authority
1	Eddington & Castle	Cambridge
2	Kingsmead	Bath and North East Somerset
3	Westward Ho! & Northam South	Torridge
4	Lyme Regis, Charmouth & Marshwood Vale	Dorset
5	Salcombe, Malborough & Thurlestone	South Hams
6	Dartmouth	South Hams
7	Torksey & Stow	West Lindsey
8	Lynton & Combe Martin	North Devon
9	Yoxford, Wenhaston & Walberswick	East Suffolk
10	Wragby, Roughton & Ludford	East Lindsey
11	St Breward, Tredethy & Lanivet	Cornwall
12	Isles of Scilly	Isles of Scilly
13	Niton, Shorwell & Godshill	Isle of Wight
14	Hartland Coast	Torridge
15	Conquest & St Helens	Hastings
16	Melton Constable, Briston & Little Snoring	North Norfolk
17	Bere Alston, Buckland Monachorum & Yelverton	West Devon
18	Walcot	Bath and North East Somerset
19	Stoford & the Cokers	South Somerset
20	Fremington & Instow	North Devon
21	Crackington & Tintagel	Cornwall
22	Barnstaple Sticklepath	North Devon
23	Martock	South Somerset
24	Marshchapel, Somercotes & Grimoldby	East Lindsey
25	Exmouth Brixington	East Devon
26	Pateley Bridge & Nidd Valley	Harrogate
27	South Petherton, Seavington & Kingsbury	South Somerset
28	Teignmouth North	Teignbridge
29	Glastonbury Town	Mendip
30	Pilton, Butleigh & Alhampton	Mendip
31	Littlefield North	North East Lincolnshire
32	Central Hastings	Hastings
33	Heathfield & Liverton	Teignbridge
34	Poppleford, Otterton & Woodbury	East Devon
35	Woolacombe, Georgeham & Croyde	North Devon
36	Ilfracombe East	North Devon
37	Tisbury, Donhead & Tollard Royal	Wiltshire
38	Loddiswell & Dartington	South Hams
39	Newton Abbot, Highweek	Teignbridge

40	Great Coates & The Willows	North East Lincolnshire
41	Crediton	Mid Devon
42	Great Torrington	Torridge
43	Torpoint	Cornwall
44	Bradninch, Silverton & Thorverton	Mid Devon
45	Silverstone & Syresham & Helmdon	South Northamptonshire
46	Cleethorpes North	North East Lincolnshire
47	Upton & Hele	Torbay
48	Cottenham	South Cambridgeshire
49	Lakenheath	West Suffolk
50	Isleham, Fordham & Chippenham	East Cambridgeshire
51	Exmouth Withycombe Raleigh	East Devon
52	Grimsby East Marsh & Port	North East Lincolnshire
53	Merley	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole
54	Yarborough	North East Lincolnshire
55	Grampound Road, St Newlyn East and Cubert	Cornwall
56	Buntingford & Great Hormead	East Hertfordshire
57	Moordown	Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole
58	Westfield	Bath and North East Somerset
59	Blandford Outer & Tarrants	Dorset
60	Barnack, Wittering & Wansford	Peterborough
61	Bruton, Brewham & Cucklington	South Somerset
62	Broomgrove	Hastings
63	Hartcliffe	Bristol, City of
64	Nunsthorpe	North East Lincolnshire

I've pointed out the patterns in MSOA places where no deaths have occurred throughout the pandemic before in blogs here at the Centre for Brexit Studies. These are Covid-19 deserts in terms of deaths. And I have highlighted that this hyper-local data points to a wider picture of a U.K. which is a patchwork of very differing experiences of how life is lived here and which explains the Brexit context away from the pandemic.

And there are still a considerable number of places which, though recording some actual positive test cases for Covid-19 have escaped without recording any Covid-related deaths upto the end of July.

There are also places which have recorded Covid-19 related deaths, but have not separately recorded positive test cases. So here, a local GP has judged a local death to be Covid-19 related on a death certificate, but there was no test for Covid-19.

So, looking at the Covid-19 deserts which are these 64 English neighbourhoods, what seems to determine their luck or special status?
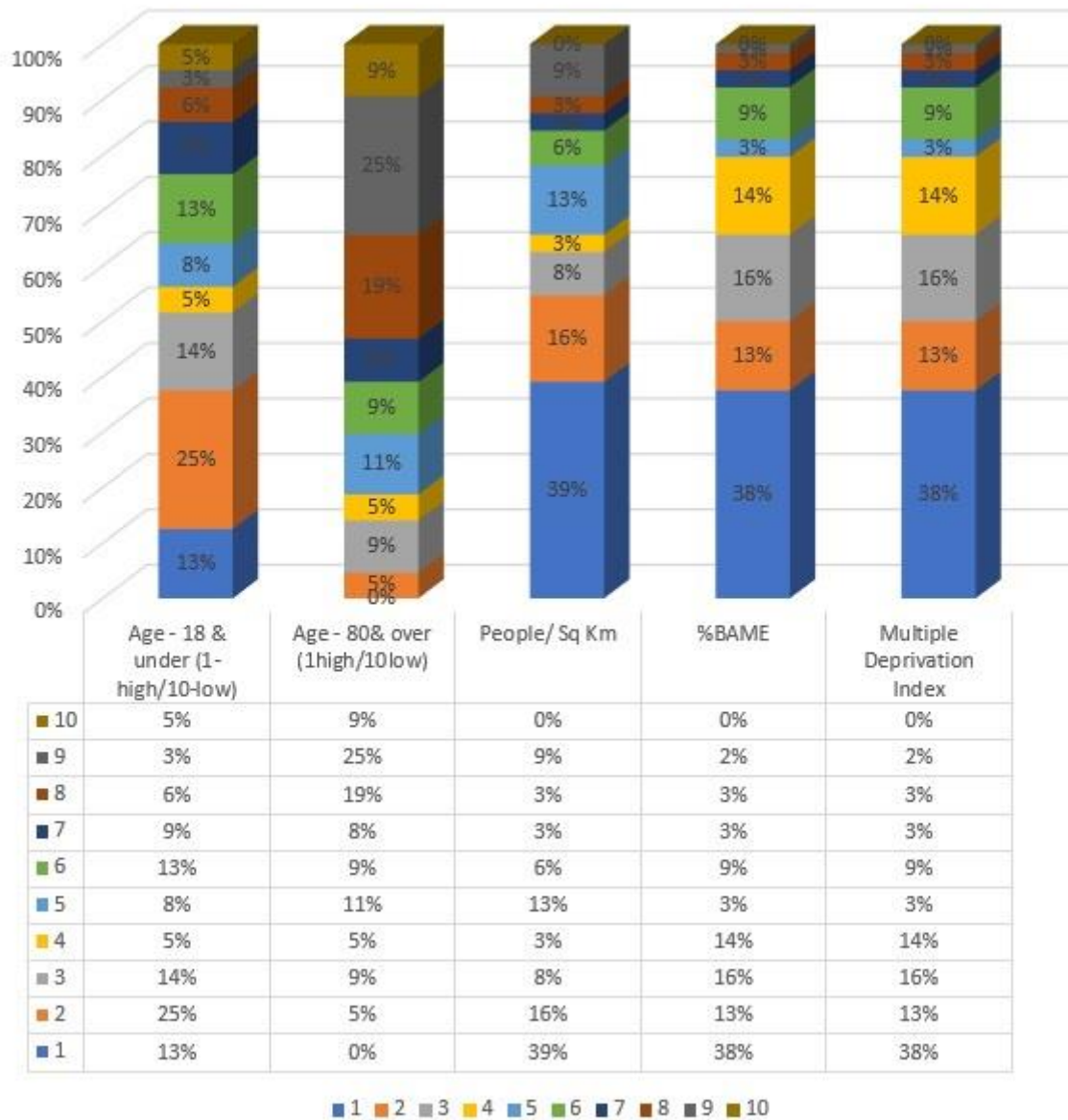
I've used and combined a wide range of indicators from statistics authorities to see what marks them out collectively. In particular, though, I have managed to extract this data at the very MSOA data level we now have the Covid-19 statistics for. Aside from Covid-19, this complex hyper-local data architecture in itself is indicative of how this often very different patchwork of neighbourhoods exists in the U.K. and I will return to the data in other contexts in how we approach a post-Brexit, post-Virus U.K.

I concentrated on stand-out data which relates to other assessments of Covid-19 indicators. So how do the 64 areas show up in these: age (those aged 80 and above, and aged 18 and under), population density (how many people per square kilometre), proportion of BAME residents, the urban/rural classification of the area. I have also looked at the ONS classification of the characteristic description of each neighbourhood.

A key indicator which is missing is in relation to Obesity/Body Mass Index. This is because, at the moment, whilst the NHS, Public Health England and the ONS have this data relating to other layers and areas it is not available for the MSOA or lower level. I would suggest they do start publishing these figures at this level.

I have broken these down into bands of 10% (deciles) and compared them across the 64.

Make-up of neighbourhoods in England where there no deaths linked to Covid-19 and no cases of Covid-19 registered

	Age - 18 & under (1-high/10-low)	Age - 80& over (1high/10low)	People/ Sq Km	%BAME	Multiple Deprivation Index
■ 10	5%	9%	0%	0%	0%
■ 9	3%	25%	9%	2%	2%
■ 8	6%	19%	3%	3%	3%
■ 7	9%	8%	3%	3%	3%
■ 6	13%	9%	6%	9%	9%
■ 5	8%	11%	13%	3%	3%
■ 4	5%	5%	3%	14%	14%
■ 3	14%	9%	8%	16%	16%
■ 2	25%	5%	16%	13%	13%
■ 1	13%	0%	39%	38%	38%

■1 ■2 ■3 ■4 ■5 ■6 ■7 ■8 ■9 ■10

People per square kilometre – population density

The first most clearly widely-shared characteristic of these 64 neighbourhoods is in relation to population density. These 420,000 people largely live in places where much fewer people live per square kilometre than the rest of England.

Approaching 40% of the 64 places are in the bottom 10% (decile) of population per square kilometre. Well over half (55%) are in the bottom two deciles. Two-thirds of the 64 areas are in the bottom 40% of population density.

As I pointed out in previous blogs, the sparsity of population between urban and rural/coastal areas is stark in the U.K. Over 16,000 people per square kilometre live in Tower Hamlets, Islington; whereas Powys has 26 people per square kilometre.

So the same applies here. 40 of the 64 neighbourhoods have less than 1,000 people per square kilometre.

The top 10% of MSOA population density ranges from 18,387 in Tower Hamlets to as high as 28,345 in Pimlico. The average in the UK is 3,400 per square kilometre.

Astonishingly, 24 of the 64 areas have (40%) have fewer than 100 people per square kilometre.

Pateley Bridge & Nidd Valley in Yorkshire has 22 folk per square Kilometre. It is in our list.

Social distancing is fundamentally built-in to the safest neighbourhoods in England.

Black, Asian and minority ethnic neighbourhoods

The prevalence of the spread of Covid-19 amongst the BAME population has been widely reported. Whilst on it own as a set of data, the complexity of BAME populations is difficult to separate from related other data in the communities in relation to poverty in particular.

Nevertheless these 64 communities are marked by the fact that over half of the neighbourhoods are in the two lowest deciles for the percentage of the MSOA who are classed as BAME.

Over 40% (27 MSOAs) of the neighbourhoods have 1% or fewer citizens designated as BAME. 70% (46 MSOAs) have less than 2% BAME. Only 3 neighbourhoods have above 10% of their community. The average across the England for an MSOA is 10% BAME.

The top decile for BAME itself in England's MSOAs, though, ranges from 50% to 94% BAME: in itself indicating the concentration of BAMEs in 10% of the MSOAs across England.

Multiple Deprivation

Looking at Indices of Multiple Deprivation or Poverty, 38% of the 64 areas are in the wealthiest top decile of MSOAs. Over 50% of the areas come from the 20% wealthiest communities in England. The most poverty-stricken neighbourhoods (the 'top' 10% in terms of poverty indicators) do not appear in the special/lucky list of 64 at all. Only 5 of them come from the top 40%.

Age

The areas with the youngest populations (aged under 19), and those areas with the oldest populations (aged 80+) suggest more of a statistical conundrum and so may be of less use in some ways. Over half of the 64 areas are in the bottom 3 deciles for under 19s, and this obviously correlates with over half being in the top 3 deciles for 80s and over. So other factors are at play. It may also be that older citizens in circumstances of less poverty and less dense populations are shielded better than would otherwise be the case.

Urban/Rural

A much more interesting correlation comes with the rurality factor, or not.

O.N.S. Urban/Rural Classification
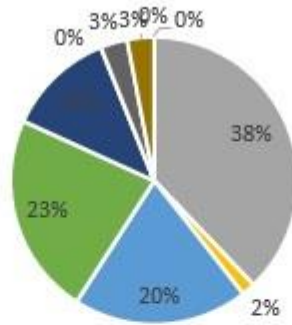
Legend:
- Large Urban
- Other Urban
- Accessible Small Towns
- Remote Small Towns
- Accessible Rural
- Remote Rural
- Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings
- Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting
- Rural village in a sparse setting
- Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings in a sparse setting

O.N.S. Urban/Rural Classification
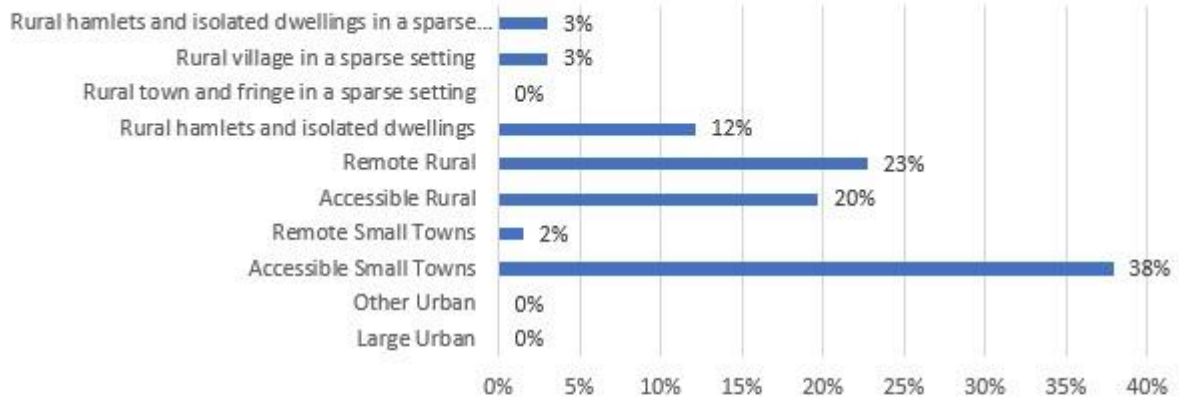
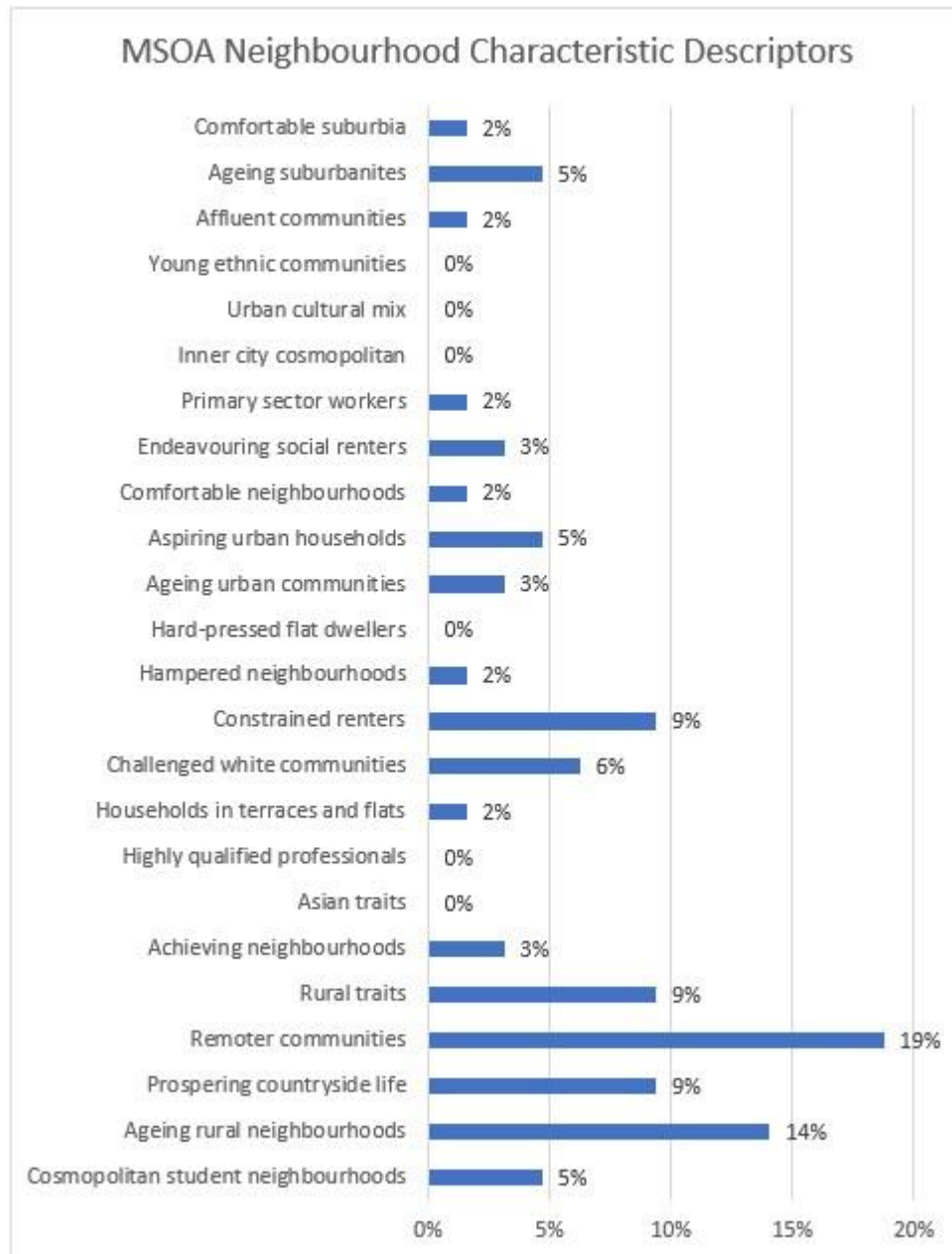|	Large Urban	Other Urban	Accessible Small Towns	Remote Small Towns	Accessible Rural	Remote Rural	Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings	Rural town and fringe in a sparse setting	Rural village in a sparse setting	Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings in a sparse setting
Series1	0%	0%	38%	2%	20%	23%	12%	0%	3%	3%

Of the 64 neighbourhoods, 61% are Rural neighbourhoods, ranging from Accessible Rural to Rural hamlets and isolated dwellings in a sparse setting. No large urban or other urban settings feature in the list at all. Accessible small towns, however are the largest segment at 38%.

ONS Neighbourhood descriptors

MSOA Neighbourhood Characteristic Descriptors

Descriptor	Value
Comfortable suburbia	2%
Ageing suburbanites	5%
Affluent communities	2%
Young ethnic communities	0%
Urban cultural mix	0%
Inner city cosmopolitan	0%
Primary sector workers	2%
Endeavouring social renters	3%
Comfortable neighbourhoods	2%
Aspiring urban households	5%
Ageing urban communities	3%
Hard-pressed flat dwellers	0%
Hampered neighbourhoods	2%
Constrained renters	9%
Challenged white communities	6%
Households in terraces and flats	2%
Highly qualified professionals	0%
Asian traits	0%
Achieving neighbourhoods	3%
Rural traits	9%
Remoter communities	19%
Prospering countryside life	9%
Ageing rural neighbourhoods	14%
Cosmopolitan student neighbourhoods	5%

The ONS uses descriptors for the general characteristics of neighbourhoods. They are very general and rule-of-thumb, but nevertheless the characteristics are useful indicators.

They unsurprisingly show the most dominant to be 'Remoter communities', 'Ageing rural neighbourhoods' and 'Prospering countryside life'.

Again, unsurprisingly (bearing in mind the other evidence) 'Young ethnic communities', 'Urban cultural mix' and 'Inner city cosmopolitan', 'Asian traits' appear nowhere. But perhaps more surprisingly nor does 'Highly qualified professionals'.

But the theme that ageing neighbourhoods in a rural setting seem to be more protective and shielding of older citizens does reappear.

Conclusion – Luck doesn't enter into it

The other side of the coin is obviously how all of the above data is applied to the 64 worst neighbourhoods, and I shall blog later on these. But you can probably expect it genuinely to be the inverse.

I started by suggesting that these special 64 places might be seen as 'Lucky'. It seems from the analysis here that they are, in fact, special by design. Their locations, populations, density, wealth, poverty and other characteristics are interrelated in a powerful complexity which has shielded them from the worst winds of a disease which has caused great grief elsewhere. Local lockdowns don't seem likely any time soon in these 64 places.

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