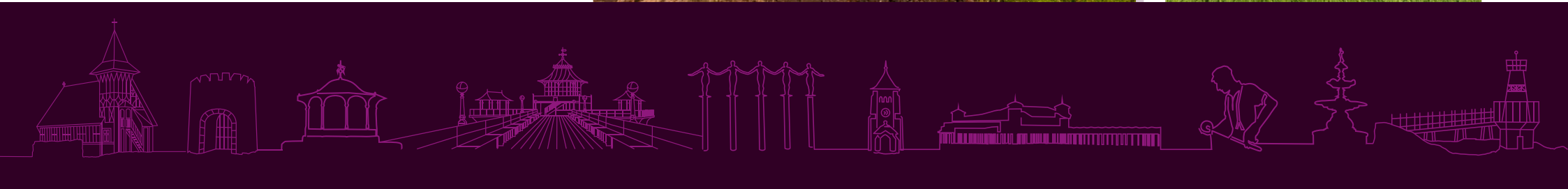


North Somerset Rural Strategy 2024-2028



Foreword



Thank you for reading North Somerset Council's first Rural Strategy.

Before writing it, we held several meetings and workshops with rural partners including representatives from parish councils, to hear from them what things they would like us to include in a Rural Strategy. I hope that when you read it, you can see yourself, and the place in which you live, reflected in its findings.

Why a Rural Strategy? The answer to that is simple. 30% of all North Somerset residents – about 65,000 in total – live rurally in a variety of villages, hamlets, and isolated areas. And rural North Somerset, like all parts of North Somerset, the South West and the country as a whole, face a number of challenges; access to services, public transport, affordable homes and leisure facilities are just some of them. But in rural areas, many of these challenges will be unique.



In 2019, North Somerset residents voted for a collaborative council where councillors of all parties, and none, worked together to get things done for our community.

In 2023, this approach was reinforced and our Partnership Administration of Liberal Democrat, Labour, Green and independent councillors was refreshed with renewed energy and purpose. It is important to us that we stay focused on delivering the priorities which residents have identified, and that is what led to us developing this Rural Strategy, which will sit alongside our revised and updated Corporate Strategy.

As a Council, our vision is to be open, fair, and green across all parts of North Somerset. This Rural Strategy brings together the work we are undertaking for our rural communities to help contribute to that vision.



Times are difficult for councils up and down the country. It is important to stress that this strategy will have to be delivered against the backdrop of ongoing, serious economic challenges for local government, but also for other public bodies and for some residents in our communities. In the years to come, when hard decisions have to be made, we will need to balance meeting our statutory duties against our ambitious aims for North Somerset and for you as our residents.

As a council, we are committed to listening, understanding the needs of local communities, and agreeing priorities together, and this strategy will support how we will work together with our rural communities.

We have enjoyed preparing our Rural Strategy and are thankful for everyone's input so far. We now hope to hear from you, our residents, to see whether it includes all we love about our rural life, whether it accurately reflects the challenges we face and whether we have identified some of the solutions to them.

We look forward to hearing from you.

Annemieke Waite
Executive Member

Our vision

Open



You told us open means being honest and transparent. It means listening to you and your views on the decisions we make. It means being accountable for how we spend your money and ensuring we provide the very best value we can.

Fair



You told us fair means being accessible and inclusive in how we work. It means listening to the views of all groups and acting on local issues. It means ensuring equity in access to services.

Green



You told us green means we take our responsibility to respond to the climate emergency seriously. It means we do all we can to understand the impact our actions have on the environment and mitigate them where possible.

An Open, Fair, Green North Somerset

Following local elections in May 2023, the council has reviewed and refreshed our Corporate Plan. The plan sets out our vision, ambitions, and commitments for how we will continue to work together to make North Somerset open, fair and green.

Within our Corporate Plan we have committed to ensuring our four towns of Clevedon, Nailsea, Portishead and Weston-super-Mare have placemaking strategies and that our rural communities should have a Rural Strategy.

The strategy is intended to contribute to the work of the Corporate Plan by considering the unique needs of rural North Somerset and bringing together the actions we are taking to support those needs.

Alongside this, a number of over-arching strategies guide other areas of our work including the Climate Emergency Strategy, the Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy and the new North Somerset Local Plan which identifies where development can and cannot take place in North Somerset, while guiding investment for new housing, jobs, transport and community facilities.



Key rural stats

32% **68%**

32% of the North Somerset population live in a rural area Compared to 68% living in the four towns

25% **33%**

25% of rural households are one person households compared to 33% in the towns

18.8% **13.8%**

18.8% of rural residents work mainly from home compared to 13.8% across the towns

2.7% **5%**

Rural residents are less likely to walk or cycle to work, 2.7% compared to 5% across the towns

59%

59% of rural residents are economically active, the same as across the towns

1.8% **2.4%**

1.8% of rural residents unemployed, compared to 2.4% across the towns

54.6% **43.7%**

54.6% of rural residents work in highly skilled occupations compared to 43.7% across the towns

25% **23.4%**

25% of rural residents are aged over 65 years, compared to 23.4% across the towns

56.9% **59.2%**

56.9% of rural residents are aged between 16 and 64 years compared to 59.2% across the towns

17.4% **18%**

17.4% of rural residents are aged under 15 years compared to 18% across the towns

17% **20%**

17% of rural residents are disabled under the equalities act compared to 20% across the towns

51% **45.9%**

51% of rural residents have very good health compared to 45.9% across the towns

4.4% **5.7%**

4.4% of rural residents have very bad health compared to 5.7% across the towns

Developing this strategy

In developing this strategy we have taken the following approach:



Evidence based

Data and information has been reviewed to give a broad overview of our rural communities. One of the main sources of this has been the Census 2021 which gives an up to date view of the North Somerset population.



Engagement Led

This strategy has been co-produced with our rural partners including representatives from our parish councils, members of North Somerset Together, and with advice from Avon Local Councils Association and the the West of England Rural Network.



Action focused

Our Rural Strategy has been developed alongside our Corporate Plan which gives the vision, ambitions and commitments we have made to continue to support North Somerset to be open, fair and green. Alongside these strategies are clear action plans which are informed by the priorities of rural communities.



Measurable

Actions aligned to our strategies are SMART (specific, measureable, attainable, realistic and time-bound), ensuring they can be effectively monitored and evaluated.



Adaptive & Responsive

The priorities of communities across North Somerset, the region and the country as a whole will change in response to all sorts of events, covid being a good example. We are committed to ensuring that we regularly review our action plans to reflect that evolving landscape.

Our themes

Our themes for rural communities for this strategy are as follows:

1.
Community empowerment and engagement



2.
The rural environment



3.
Rural economy and skills



4.
Rural infrastructure



5.
Rural innovation and digital



Wrapping around these themes is one of Health and Wellbeing and we recognise that there are elements within each theme which contribute to good physical and mental health and wellbeing. Our [Joint Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) is being refreshed in 2024 and we will consider rurality as part of that refresh.

1. Community empowerment and engagement

Community empowerment is about recognising the strengths in our communities, enabling a shared understanding of local skills and challenges and then, ultimately, shifting power where possible to the community itself.

The engagement process is about understanding the best way to do that. It is not a one size fits all approach and the specific needs and challenges of each community will vary but this is a key theme for this strategy.

What we are doing:

- Involve representatives from across rural and farming communities in the development of the wider North Somerset Community Strategy.
- Review our participatory planning tools including methods like community forums, surveys, and focus groups to gather input and ideas.
- Co-produce an annual engagement programme between North Somerset Council and the parish councils.
- Set up an annual rural conference for representatives of rural and farming communities to network, share best practice and discuss challenges.
- Support community organizations by providing resources and funding for local groups and initiatives where we can through grant programmes such as the Shared Prosperity Community Grants Fund.
- Make rural data sets readily available on our Data and Insight Hub to support funding bids and raise awareness of activities that are impacting on communities such as planned road improvements and maintenance.



2. The rural environment

Over 30% of North Somerset residents live in a rural area. The rural environment includes significant natural covering 60% of North Somerset's total land and includes parts of the Mendip National Landscape including part of the Mendip Hills National Landscape, 39 sites of Special Scientific Interest and 25 miles of coastline.

Protecting our rural environment has been identified as a key theme for this strategy to ensure we retain its unique ecosystems, enhance biodiversity, safeguard essential resources like water and food, and support the wellbeing of our rural communities. The actions identified are linked to our Flood Risk Management Strategy, Green Infrastructure Strategy and our Public Rights of Way Strategy.

What we are doing:

- Strengthen biodiversity across rural areas through a number of projects including North Somerset Nature Parks.
- Protect rural areas from flooding by implementing natural flood risk management.
- Support North Somerset's Peatland Initiative scheme to conserve and restore lowland peat areas.
- Improve rights of ways across rural locations through implementation of the Public Rights of Way Improvement Plan.



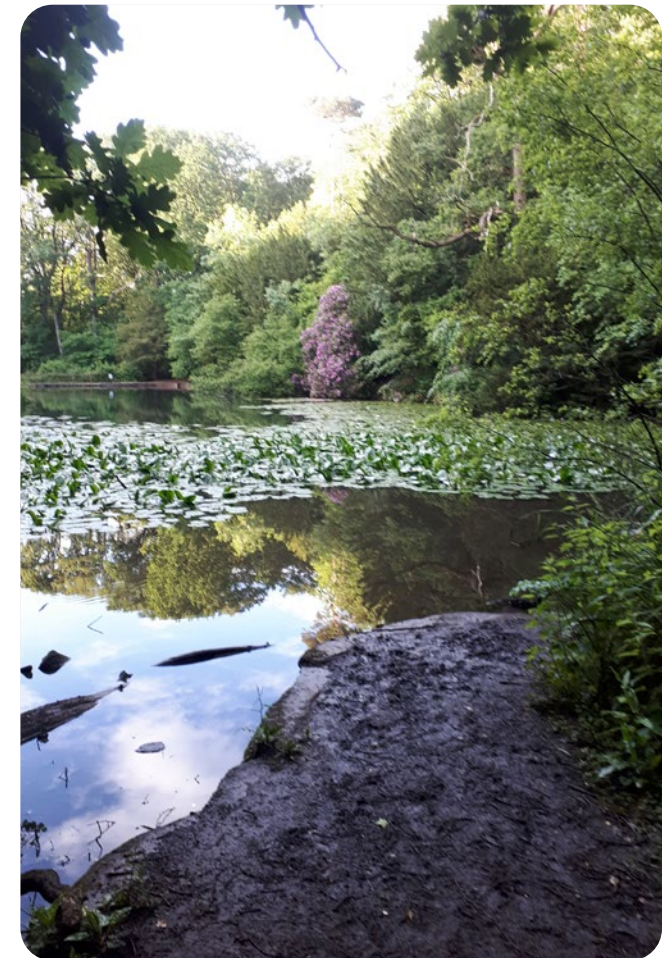
3. Rural economy and skills

The Rural Economy contributes to North Somerset's Gross Value Added, providing employment and skills opportunities. It encompasses a wide range of economic activity and industries including agriculture, manufacturing, tourism, creative industries, and food and drink production.

The challenges for rural economies can be unique including links to infrastructure, digital resources, and the impacts of climate change. It has been identified as a key theme for this strategy linked to our North Somerset Economic Plan.

What we are doing:

- Support community organizations and rural businesses by providing resources and signposting to funding where we can, to strengthen the rural economy.
- Identify key challenges for rural economies within our North Somerset Economic Plan and our Skills Strategy and consider what actions we can take to help with those challenges.
- Continue to deliver the Business Support Unlocked programme to support start-ups and ensure established businesses grow and remain resilient.
- Support our visitor economy businesses in terms of promotion, training, skills development, project development through key partnerships.
- Raise awareness of the business rate relief schemes.
- Deliver on and promote large infrastructure projects which promote tourism such as Pier to Pier route and extension of the England coastal path in North Somerset.
- Support rural food and drink producers and growers through specialist support delivered by The Food Works, South West Agri Tech group and signpost to regional and national funded programmes and advice.
- Identify funding opportunities and work with key partners to ensure businesses can access support and advice to make homes and businesses more sustainable.
- Develop a creative industry network and support programme that brings together a dispersed range of organisations.



4. Rural infrastructure

The rural infrastructure of North Somerset is varied and this is reflective of the scope of communities across the district. By infrastructure for this strategy, we mean land use, housing, and transport.

The actions identified in this theme are linked to the North Somerset Local Plan, our Housing Strategy, our transport strategies, and our major infrastructure projects work.

What we are doing:

- Promote the optimal use of previously-developed land to support regeneration and the rural economy.
- Ensure that the Green Belt in North Somerset continues to meet the national purposes of Green Belt. In doing so it will protect rural settlements maintaining their character and separate identities.
- Ensure that any new development must make adequate provision for green infrastructure including the enhancement of existing provision where appropriate.
- Deliver on large infrastructure projects which connect rural and urban communities such as the Banwell Bypass and Metrowest.
- Affordable housing provision will be sought to meet local needs on all major developments with a proposal for rural exceptions schemes for 100% affordable housing to meet local needs where agreed criteria is met.
- Support Community-Led Housing groups to deliver affordable housing in rural areas, where this is initiated by the community and has genuine local support.
- Explore opportunities for improvements to rural transport to include:
 - connecting rural locations into transport hubs for onward journeys using demand responsive transport.
 - investment in enhanced commercial services, some of which help to connect rural locations.
 - encourage options to walk and cycle by continuing to develop new cycle paths and routes.



5. Rural innovation and digital

Rural and farming communities can often face challenges in accessing services and opportunities. For this theme, we have focused on challenges related to digital exclusion and cultural elements, and how we can consider innovative solutions to tackle these challenges. These can contribute positively to tackling loneliness and social isolation and therefore improve wellbeing.

What we are doing:

- Working with partners across the voluntary and community sector, we will undertake a research study to quantify the extent of digital exclusion across North Somerset and rural communities.
- Make the most of our mobile libraries including continued book lending service, outreach to targeted groups, and increased community engagement activities overall and continue to raise awareness of online library services available for all residents regardless of location.
- Undertake an audit of cultural networks and refresh of our Cultural Strategy to agree how cultural activity across all of North Somerset can be facilitated.
- Undertake an audit of social and sports networks for young people across North Somerset.



Governance and reporting

The council's Executive has strategic oversight of the delivery of the Rural Strategy and the supporting action plan.

Executive members receive updates quarterly on the commitments and actions of the strategy which are actively reviewed in performance challenge sessions with members of Corporate Leadership team, made up of the Chief Executive and directors.

The council's Transport, Climate and Communities Policy and Scrutiny Panel and Placemaking, Economy and Planning Policy and Scrutiny Panel also review and monitor progress against the delivery of the action plan, with reports to panel chairs and vice chairs, and topic specific reports brought to scrutiny panels as needed.

Corporate Leadership team, oversee the work that delivers against the plan, with their heads of services responsible for the day-to-day operational delivery of the commitments we have made and the actions. They do this through our performance and risk management framework, reviewing progress and any risks on a regular basis. Updates are published quarterly for you to review via a performance and risk dashboard.



Council documents can be made available in large print, audio, easy read, and other formats. Documents on our website can also be emailed to you as plain text files.

Help is also available for people who require council information in languages other than English.

For more information email:
business.planning@n-somerset.gov.uk

