

## Address to North Somerset Council Executive Committee

**Wednesday 16 October 2024 at 2:30pm**

Good afternoon, thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak about rural communities, food and farming in relation to energy and housing.

North Somerset Council has called a Climate and Nature Emergency, and media has reported that coastal areas such as Weston could be underwater by 2030. Conversely, councillors have stated Weston is “*set to become the second biggest settlement in the West of England over the next decade*”, second to Bristol, and the Local Plan is prioritising land use for energy and housing. **How is council protecting the farmland needed to feed the residents? How is it supporting farmers as custodians of the land for future generations?**

Last December I asked this committee to protect and secure food production and farming in its Local Plan and across all its policies. Although I met with councillors, the republished draft local plan did not specifically quantify or protect farmland, with one policy indicating that, “*Farmers are encouraged to diversify their activities and supplement their income from enterprises other than normal food production*”, with several farms proposed for housing. This resulted in a resident requesting a Food Security Emergency in July. **An update on farming and food security would be appreciated.**

In July’s press release council indicated a 60% housing increase beyond North Somerset’s requirement, due to the government’s NPPF. **How is council challenging this damaging target?** Council also stated that it wants “... *to create a Local Plan that also reflects the needs of our environment. Around 85 per cent of our land is at risk from flooding, part of the Mendip Hills landscape, high-quality Green Belt or protected in other ways for environmental or heritage reasons.*” **There was no statement or commitment to protecting rural communities, farming, food production or food security.**

In relation to maximising delivery in urban (not rural) areas, the recent NPPF consultation stated that, “*the new formula increases targets by more than 30% across our Mayoral Combined Authorities*”. Last month council showed interest in joining the West of England Combined Authority (as a LLP on Companies House?) under its regional mayor. This super-authority will be able to borrow money and levy constituent authorities, presumably whether residents directly benefit from the outcome or not, and presumably by increasing council tax. I believe that in joining WECA local democracy will be lost, causing land battles due to competing enforced priorities between rural North Somerset communities and urban combined authority partners, such as Bristol and Bath, that need land to build. **Considering the Localism Act, how does devolving services and increasing costs to parishes, whilst centralising policy and central government money to a mayoral super-region, benefit residents or farming? How does this fit with council’s UK100 Countryside membership and global C40 Mayoral Cities?**

Last week Somerset Live reported Bath and Wiltshire’s current land battle, quoting the leader of Wiltshire saying, “*Instead of fighting the government’s planning reforms which unfairly increase the housing target for rural communities while letting London off the hook, they are instead calling for a more flexible ‘regional cross boundary’ approach*”. Bath’s leader responded, “*Government requires neighbouring authorities to cooperate... This crude target doesn’t recognise the unique circumstance of Bath’s World Heritage Site status.*” **How is council protecting and enhancing North Somerset’s rural heritage and culture, including farming and food production? Especially if some decisions will be made under a regional mayor, tasked with achieving other competing authority requirements.**

As you are aware, the government states that food is one of the 13 National Infrastructure Sectors, which if compromised, could result in significant loss of life or casualties – and that 68% of North Somerset land is enclosed farmland that is already at risk of flooding. Last week, the BBC reported that proposals for the sea-water cooling system at Hinkley Point C will see 44 tonnes of fish ingested and killed every year. The French state-owned EDF plan to offset this loss by flooding 1,500 acres of prime agricultural land between WSM and Clevedon, turning it into salt marshes, which may irrevocably poison the land. **What are councillors doing to protect our rural communities, farmers and food supply from Biodiversity Net Gain policy offsetting such as this?**

**In summary**, how will you, councillors, guarantee that energy, housing and BNG plans will not adversely affect agriculture land, or the associated rural community culture and heritage of local farming, food production and food security? How will you protect rural communities from the pressure of the NPPF, of joining WECA under its regional mayor or a duty to cooperate with neighbouring authority plans?

Thank you

NSC video recording at 34mins <https://youtu.be/PmH9M-M42VA?t=2050>