



Norfolk's Rural Strategy was first developed in 2013 and refreshed in 2017. Since 2013 much has changed, from the march of technology to Brexit, a growing realisation of the need to tackle climate change, and in 2020, Covid-19 which created the deepest recession in 300 years and largest global health pandemic since the 1918 Spanish Flu. Rural Norfolk is not immune from these events which will have major impacts on how we live, work, spend and use our leisure time: Our aim is to make Rural Norfolk an attractive place in which to live, work, visit and invest in – for all age groups.

Previous versions of the Strategy have been used successfully to support bids for funding for rural projects and programmes and this will continue. However, a thriving rural community and economy is also dependent on how rural areas develop and therefore actions on planning, infrastructure and the way services, including health care and education, are delivered all have major impacts on rural areas and their communities.

The Norfolk Rural Strategy for 2021-24 has to exploit the opportunities that come with change and unite this with a clear plan to secure the resources and delivery partnerships needed to be innovative and proactive. The principles underpinning the Strategy are therefore to:

- Be ambitious for Rural Norfolk so it delivers quality of life for all age groups;
- Make the case for Rural Norfolk to decision makers at every level from district to national;
- Ensure businesses, communities and partners have access to the underpinning evidence to make the case for investment in Rural Norfolk;
- Learn from other areas, in the UK and overseas and work with neighbouring areas, to identify and build on successful models of rural development which have been shown to deliver sustainable growth.

Vision

Our Vision for Rural Norfolk is to deliver inclusive, sustainable communities, a dynamic economy and healthy natural environment, to meet the needs of all rural residents and visitors

Change

By 2024 rural Norfolk has to address major changes it faces in the commercial and social context, including:

- Covid has accelerated long term trends such as workplace digitalisation changing work, travel and the importance of accessing services online, especially with an ageing demographic. This can reduce the need to travel and will potentially make rural areas more attractive and reduce carbon emissions. The digital transition will, however, also lead to significant changes in rural employment patterns and require improved digital connectivity and changes to the High Street and economic structures.
- Brexit will impact Norfolk by changing how land managers are supported and the grant programmes which have backed rural development, workforce skills development and innovation programmes. Brexit will also change how rural businesses and services, such as health and care, can recruit staff and thus increases the need to upskill and attract a local workforce to live and work in Norfolk.
- New UK policies will focus on 'Build Back Better' and the delivery of Net Zero, which has been embraced by both businesses and government with a focus on clean growth. The government is also promoting 'Levelling Up' to address decades of under-investment in more peripheral areas. Norfolk has to make the case for its rural areas to secure additional mainstream investment in health and social care, education and infrastructure as part of the post Brexit, post Covid programme of change. The creation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is a real opportunity to review how funds are allocated in England and fulfil Government's objective of 'levelling up'. To deliver inclusive growth, sustainable job creation and retention outside the capital, rural needs must be reflected in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

Our Response

To respond to change the Strategy has one overarching focus, three delivery themes and three enablers:

Overarching focus:

1. **Engagement, Evidence & Project Pipeline** - deliver a **Vision for Rural Norfolk** and **Proactive Project Pipeline**, supported by local leaders and partners to advocate for rural investment.

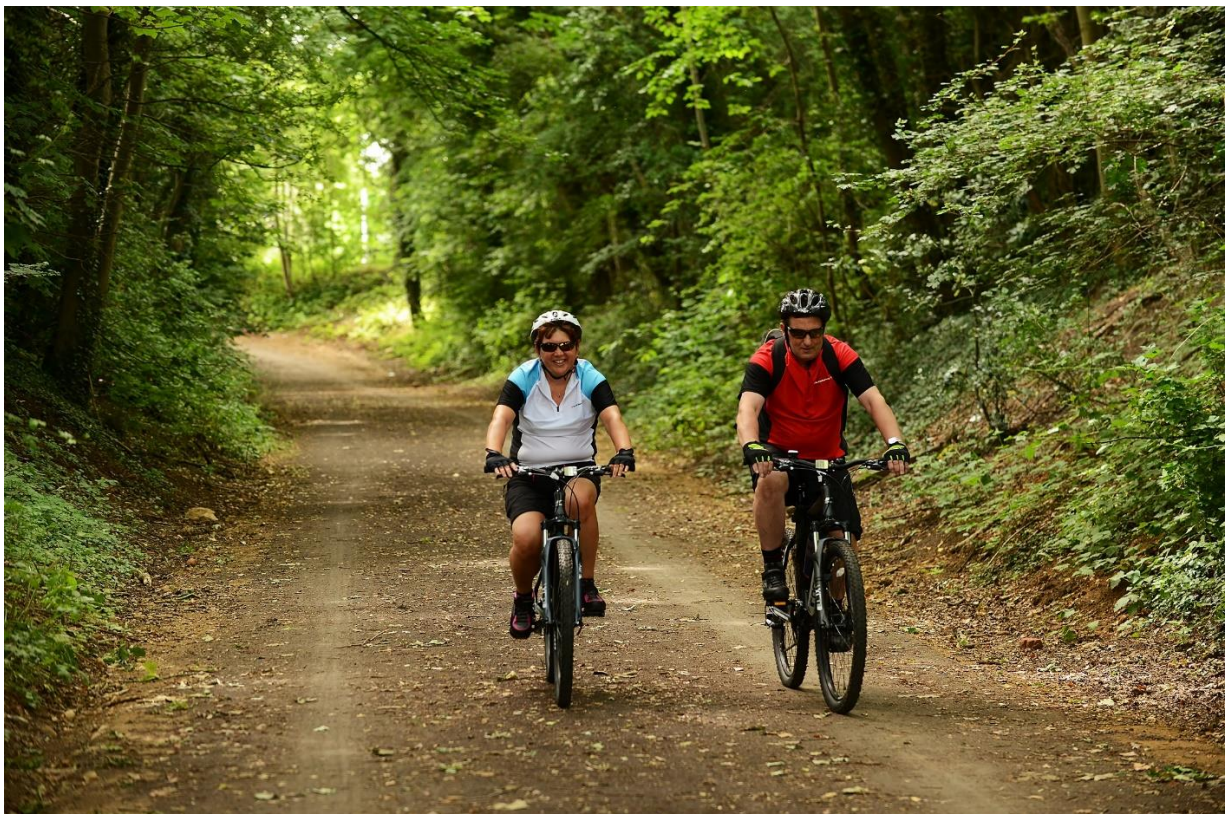
Three delivery themes:

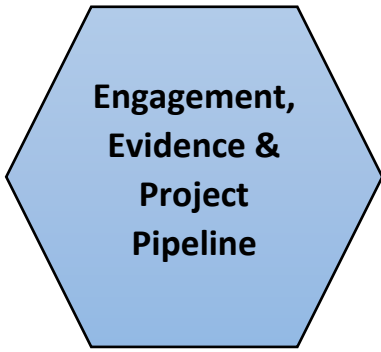
2. **New Rural Economy & Market Towns** - develop **new rural economic opportunities** and the role of **Market Towns and primary villages** as service centres, repurposing commercial space and delivering innovation.
3. **World Class Environment and the Green Economy** - embrace **Clean Growth** and the economic opportunities it provides, leading thinking in how rural areas can deliver a **low carbon economy**.
4. **Community Resilience** - ensure rural areas sustain diverse resilient communities by **preventing social, community and health challenges** at source and by delivering affordable housing and infrastructure **for all age groups** in society.

Three Enablers:

5. **Skills and Rural Innovation** - address the **rural skills divide** and embrace **innovation** supported by project funding and World class skills and innovation infrastructure.
6. **Digitalisation and technology adoption** - support rural areas to embrace **online business and service delivery**, supported by **automation and new technology** to deliver high value jobs.
7. **Modern Infrastructure** - the delivery of new rural infrastructure supporting the **transition to clean energy, sustainable transport, a digital economy** and **sustainable water management**.

Norfolk Rural Strategy 2021 – 2024





Rural Norfolk, in common with all parts of the UK, is facing significant change in the next few years. Having a clear vision for Rural Norfolk, supported by project proposals and the evidence to demonstrate how these projects can facilitate the delivery of new opportunities or address challenges, will be essential in securing support. Advocacy for Rural Norfolk by those who live and work in the area will be needed to get the message across that it is a priority location for health, education, transport and infrastructure investment.

Aim:

To deliver a **Vision for Rural Norfolk** and **Proactive Project Pipeline** supported by local leaders and partners to advocate for rural investment.

Priority Actions:

1a) **Strategic Delivery** – the Norfolk Rural Strategy complements the delivery of county wide plans in Norfolk’s rural areas, by supporting delivery of:

- The [Economic Strategy for Norfolk & Suffolk](#): a shared plan for growth supported by businesses, education providers, local councils, the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector and led by New Anglia Local Enterprise Partnership. The Economic Strategy outlines ambitious targets for future growth across Norfolk and Suffolk.
- Linked to the economic strategy for both counties, the [Local Industrial Strategy](#) outlines in more detail how some of our key sectors will drive future prosperity. With clean growth at its core, it focusses on three opportunity areas: clean energy, agri-food and digital.
- [Together for Norfolk](#), the County Council's 2019-'25 business plan sets priorities for boosting the economy, supporting communities and protecting the environment.
- The [Norfolk Delivery Plan](#) outlines the county’s contribution to the [New Anglia post Covid Economic Recovery and Restart Plan](#), through: supporting business recovery (jobs, supply chains, skills); developing clean growth opportunities and building on the environmental gains from Covid (less car travel and more people cycling and walking).
- These clean growth aims are also reflected in the County Council’s [Environment Policy](#), which seeks to work with partners to transition to a zero-carbon economy by 2030.

1b) **Evidence base** - the Rural Strategy Steering Group will work with Norfolk County Council to maintain an open access rural evidence base to identify the need for rural interventions. This will be accessible to the public sector, third sector organisations and businesses so that they can develop new project ideas or services based on clearly identified needs.

To recognise the significant speed of change which the county will see in the next 3 years, the evidence base will consist of the most up to date data and intelligence available, to give a true picture of local need.

1c) **Funding Alignment** - to deliver tangible contributions to Norfolk's strategies and plans, a key objective of the Norfolk Rural Strategy is provide the evidence base and policy framework to support bids to the Government's UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF)¹ and other funding streams. This will enable us to achieve rural Norfolk's sustainable growth aims, while at the same time fulfilling the Government's objective of 'levelling up' and delivering inclusive growth outside the capital.

1d) **Rural Project Pipeline** - the Rural Strategy Steering Group will work with partners, both in and outside of the county, to develop a pipeline of major projects or programmes. This will identify opportunities to replace specific rural programmes, e.g. LEADER in the UK Shared Prosperity Fund, as well as proposals for investments in transport, education, health, infrastructure and business support, to ensure the needs of rural areas are met in mainstream programmes.

The project pipeline for rural Norfolk should aspire to include proposals to act as a demonstration site for rural innovation projects. It will also build a database of willing project partners who can be mobilised to support bids.

1e) **Engagement** - a proactive programme of engagement with decision makers will be supported by the Rural Strategy Steering Group and other rural advocates. This action will include using social media, broadcast and print media to promote the need for rural investment. It will also include direct engagement with decision makers at local, county, LEP and national levels to make the case for investment in rural Norfolk.

Key objectives include making the case for specific rural programmes with local control, e.g. LEADER or local direction of ELMs (Environmental Land Management Schemes), alongside making the case for mainstream programmes in education, health, transport and infrastructure to address rural needs.



¹ The UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) is the replacement for EU structural funds following the UK's exit from the EU. It will be piloted in 2021 and replaces the European Social Fund (ESF), European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and aspects of the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development (EAFRD)



New Rural Economy & Market Towns

The rural economy will continue to change rapidly, and Norfolk has to ensure that its rural areas, villages and market towns have a diverse and dynamic economy which can embrace change. The Rural Norfolk economy is multi-faceted and increasingly diverse as digitalisation allows new business models and home working. Rural economic growth underpins our priorities for rural Norfolk and will enable the creation of an inclusive economy, support environmental gain and deliver successful communities.

Rationale:

- Our market towns are important retail centres, including Diss (61% retail), Wymondham (53%), North Walsham (52%), Dereham (47%), with the high streets of Watton, Fakenham, Attleborough, Long Stratton, Holt, Downham Market, and Aylsham also comprising a significant retail presence².
- The percentage of vacant units across Norfolk market towns increased from 5.4% in 2018 to 5.9% in 2019. Whilst data for 2020 is not yet available, the impact of Covid will lead to continued change in how our high streets are used.
- E-commerce accounted for more than 30% of total retail sales in the UK for the first time in 2020, up from 21.8% in 2019.
- Business start-up rates in Norfolk's rural districts are well below the national average, with, for example, one start-up per 188 working-age people in North Norfolk in 2019 compared with one per 108 people in the UK as a whole. The more urban districts in Norfolk (Norwich and Great Yarmouth) have better start-up rates than the more rural districts³.

Aim:

- To develop **new rural economic opportunities** and the role of **Market Towns**⁴ as service centres, repurposing commercial space, delivering innovation **and strengthening community resilience**

Priority Actions:

2a) **Market Towns and primary villages** - Norfolk's Market Towns and villages provide a network of services close to over half of Norfolk's population and provide services which support the visitor economy. Building on the mobilisation effect of the Town Deal process in Norwich, Kings Lynn and Great Yarmouth, Market Towns will be encouraged to bring together community and business leaders in a Local Investment Board (LIB) to develop Community Development Plans covering a group of towns or villages with similar needs. The Rural Strategy Steering Group will work with the LIBs to promote the projects proposed and to help towns connect with County, LEP and national bodies to help them deliver aspects of their plans.

Given the challenges of Covid, LIBs will prioritise the adoption of digital technology, grants and business support to help businesses recover, linked to the [Norfolk and Suffolk Covid-19 Economic Recovery Restart](#)

² ONS March 2020

³ ONS Business Demography 2019

⁴ In this context Markets Towns is taken to include larger villages and other service centres in rural areas which have a key role as service delivery locations for retail, health, education or other services

[Plan](#). Higher levels of home and remote working present a changed economic landscape for market towns to adapt to and benefit from. Towns will be encouraged to work proactively with their planning authority to identify private and public sector vacant buildings to repurpose (including through the One Public Estate programme).



- 2b) **Visitor economy** - tourism in Norfolk is mainly located in rural and coastal areas and is worth £3.4bn a year to the economy. Tourism was hit exceptionally hard by the pandemic and, despite some rebound in Summer 2020 as social distancing measures relaxed and people opted for domestic holidays, faces challenges again in 2021. Rural Norfolk's mix of open space and its tapestry of rural and coastal landscapes, biodiversity, local food, drink and culture and historic estates and towns, offers an exceptionally rich visitor experience meeting consumer demand for authentic experiences in a safe, welcoming environment. Rural Norfolk's tourism offer will build on these themes to attract new visitors with a focus on higher value, year round, green tourism.
- 2c) **Rural Diversification** - rural Norfolk's farms, villages and Market Towns have the potential to deliver new enterprises in food and drink, the green economy and services. The growth of online working allows them to host workers who derive their income by working for employers in major cities or towns whilst living in rural areas. The rural strategy supports diversification of the economy by promoting diversification grants⁵, e.g. a new LEADER programme or the DRIVE programme, and by ensuring that rural areas have a responsive planning system to support diversification and access to digital connectivity to open up new work and business opportunities. The use of public assets, such as the County Farms portfolio, can also be used to support rural diversification.

⁵ By the end of the LEADER 2014-2020 programme, funding awards for projects stood at just over £8.465million, leveraging in an additional £16.35million of private investment, with recipient businesses contracted to create 240 new jobs



Norfolk's World Class Environment supports the economy in multiple ways from green tourism to agriculture and securing plentiful, clean water supply as recognised in Norfolk County Council [Environment Policy](#). Norfolk's land is productive and with the growth in the bioeconomy provides the feedstock needed for new energy and biomaterial production as well as its traditional role in food production. The natural environment is also an economic opportunity through the delivery of eco-system services and through the support it provides to the visitor economy.

Rationale:

- With the UK transitioning to net zero carbon emissions by 2050, research shows that rural areas have more high carbon-emitting jobs than their urban counterparts and so will need to see the greatest shift toward a greener economy.
- Consumer research shows a clear trend towards purchasing more sustainable products.

November 2021 will see the United Nations Climate Change Conference, COP26, held in Glasgow, under the presidency of the United Kingdom. This will shine a spotlight on sustainable, clean growth and help to support actions on the environment right across the UK.

Aim:

- To embrace **Clean Growth** and the economic opportunities it provides, leading thinking in how rural businesses and households can deliver a **low carbon economy**

Priority Actions:

- 3a) **Natural Environment** - the development of the Natural Capital Assets Evidence Compendium⁶ by Norfolk and Suffolk County Councils and UEA provides a strong platform of evidence on which to build environmental programmes. This will be used to deliver UK leading approaches to the Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS) to support investments in the natural environment facilitating sustainable tourism and community wellbeing through promoting active access to the countryside, e.g. through walking and cycling, with consequential benefits for physical and mental health. Planning should be responsive to this shift to eco-tourism and the trend for wellbeing on holiday⁷. Links will also be made to social prescribing and community groups who promote access to the countryside.
- 3b) **Ecosystem Services** - the role of rural land in providing eco-system services is increasing and will be supported by the ELMS programme. In Norfolk a particular challenge exists in relation to water supply with pressures from development, agricultural abstraction, climate change and biodiversity targets. The rural strategy supports the ambitions led by Councils in Norfolk to work with Water Resources East to develop a Norfolk Water Management Plan to address both flood risks and water supplies in a holistic way for the long term. The aim is to ensure there is sufficient water for agriculture, the environment and to

⁶ [PowerPoint Presentation \(norfolkbiodiversity.org\)](#)

⁷ Relatedly, [EXPERIENCE](#) is a €23m project to attract visitors in the off-peak season, through a new 'experiential tourism' approach.

support economic growth in the long term. Rural land management is at the heart of these plans and provides a natural solution to these challenges at the same time as supporting sustainable tourism.

- 3c) **Clean Energy** - New Anglia is already at the centre of the UK's development of clean energy, with an ambition to become a leading hydrogen region. As a result clean energy and the delivery of Net Zero to address climate change is the number one objective of the Local Industrial Strategy. Rural Norfolk must play its full role in delivering on this ambition through both helping generate renewable energy, e.g. solar, wind and biomass, as well as by embracing new energy systems for transport, heating and power.

The move to electric vehicles (EVs) by 2030 is a particular challenge in rural areas due to poor grid capacity and will require innovation and substantial investment with a need to start the transition well before 2025.

Funding for decarbonising homes is set to double and this investment in home efficiency can be expected to include many rural homes, where there is often no gas grid and homes use solid or oil fuel, presenting an opportunity to meet our net zero carbon target and create new jobs.



- 3d) **Biomaterials** - the UK Bio-economy Strategy (2018) commits the UK to develop the bio-economy, worth £220bn (GVA) with an aim to double GVA to £440bn by 2030. The strategy encourages a focus on bioenergy, biomaterials and bioplastics. Norfolk with its large agricultural and forestry sector to provide the raw materials and biotechnology research base will aim to be at the forefront of this economic transition at the heart of Clean Growth.



Community resilience is a complex area which includes access to services, education, health, social care, housing, recreation, leisure and sport opportunities and the role of community organisations. To ensure that rural areas are attractive to a broad demographic it is essential that the needs of all age groups are met. However, service delivery has often been concentrated in larger urban areas leaving rural communities with poor, or no local access to services, leading to poor outcomes. New delivery models combining virtual and physical access can help meet rural needs.

Rationale:

- The English Indices of Multiple Deprivation (2019) show Norfolk's rural areas face greater distances to travel to services such as post offices, schools and surgeries than our urban areas: 57% of Norfolk's rural population live in an area more than 2km away from a GP surgery. Over 28% of our rural population live in an area more than 4km away from a GP surgery⁸
- ONS data shows Norfolk's housing affordability ratio to be worse than England's average and this problem has increased significantly since 1999. The number of homeless households in Norfolk's predominantly rural local authorities grew to 922 in March 2020, increasing from 862 in 2019.

Aim:

- To ensure rural areas deliver community resilience **for all age groups** by focusing on **preventing community, social and health challenges** at source.

Priority Actions:

- 4a) **Access to services** - access to services has been a problem in rural communities for decades as service delivery in both the public sector, e.g. hospitals, and private sector e.g. banks and shops, became more concentrated in urban areas⁹. Many rural residents, especially the elderly, the ill or low income groups struggle to access services remotely or to travel to large urban areas. Rural areas need innovative new collaborative solutions, including investing in the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector and through combining service delivery points through the One Public Estate programme. There is also a clear role for community led action in helping to provide services and sustain community centres.
- 4b) **Housing** - affordable housing is a particular challenge in rural Norfolk. In 2019 Norfolk had a lower quartile¹⁰ housing cost to income ratio of 8.41 compared to England at 7.27. The ratio is even higher in areas such as North Norfolk, making many rural areas inaccessible for young workers. Homelessness has also been rising in rural areas. More affordable housing provision is essential for young families and

⁸ Source: English Indices of Multiple Deprivation, 2019

¹⁰ The affordability ratio compares average wages with average house prices. In rural areas there is a particular challenge with affordable housing for those in lower paying service sector or manual jobs and to measure this a better measure is to compare the lower quartile average earnings to the price of lower quartile housing. On this measure some of rural Norfolk, particularly in attractive coastal locations has some of the worst affordability in the UK

workers in both public and private sector jobs. Innovative ways to address this, such as Community Land Trusts, are needed so that there is a supply of affordable housing for lower paid and younger workers who are essential to sustain rural businesses and service delivery.

- 4c) **Health and social care** - adjusted for risk factors e.g. age and income, rural areas do well on most health metrics. Whilst health care provision is concentrated in urban areas the rural population is older, has more complex care needs and constrained access to service, particularly for those most in need due to poor digital connectivity or a lack of public transport. Population change estimates show that the rural population will age much faster than in Norwich and this will increase the pressure to provide more health care in rural and coastal areas. By combining the delivery of services and access to care, provision can be sustained and improved in our rural areas, enhancing the wellbeing of residents. The formation of new Primary Care Networks (PCN's) can play a role in this.

Investment in preventative actions, including an enhanced role for community organisations and active recreation e.g. cycling and walking, can deliver enhanced physical and mental health. Rural Norfolk should champion the role of the Environmental Land Management scheme (ELMs) in supporting countryside access and active forms of countryside recreation.

- 4d) **Demographics** - rural Norfolk has an older age profile than Norwich and ageing is accelerating fastest in the most rural locations¹¹. To sustain this older population, without overwhelming health and social care provision, more focus is needed on healthy and active ageing. In contrast rural areas have fewer young people, with many young people born in rural Norfolk leaving due to poor access to educational programmes, low wage jobs and high house prices.

Creating a more balanced rural demographic is important to the economy and the ability of businesses and service providers to attract the skills needed, often through small local interventions such as those supported by the LIFT programme. A policy commitment to work with young people to address their needs is essential to future rural community sustainability.

¹¹ The proportion on people aged 70 or over is set to climb from 18.2% of Norfolk's population in 2019, to 24% in 2041: an increase of over 77,000 people (Source: ONS)



Skills & Rural Innovation

Rural Norfolk has a lower qualifications profile than average, and the gap is largest in sparsely populated and coastal locations. The increase in digitalisation and economic change means many rural workers need new skills to retain existing job roles or to embrace innovation and open up new career options. Increases in online education could benefit rural areas but can be constrained by poor digital connectivity. More focus on rural skills delivery would ensure the rural economy has World class skills to embrace future economic opportunities.

Rationale:

- Some of our more rural districts, such as Breckland (60.7%) and Kings Lynn & West Norfolk (57.3%) lag behind the national average (64.6%) on passing both maths and English GCSE in 2019.
- Of the more rural districts, Breckland has the lowest proportion of highly skilled workers. Only the more urban district of Great Yarmouth has a lower proportion of residents with an NVQ3 education attainment or above.
- Research by New Anglia suggests over 40% of the workforce in every rural district are in job roles which will see significant change by 2030 as a result of changes in technology¹². Across New Anglia 32% of workers are in occupations at risk of automation, but whilst only 12% of those with higher level skills are at risk from automation this rises to 46% for those with lower education attainment.
- Apprenticeship take-up in Norfolk in 2020 fell dramatically, with overall starts in 2019/20 declining by 15% in Norfolk, compared to the 2018/19 full year out-turn. This compares to an 18% decrease across England.

Aim:

- To address the **rural skills divide** and embrace **innovation** supported by project funding and world class skills and innovation infrastructure, helping rural areas to retain and attract job opportunities for younger people

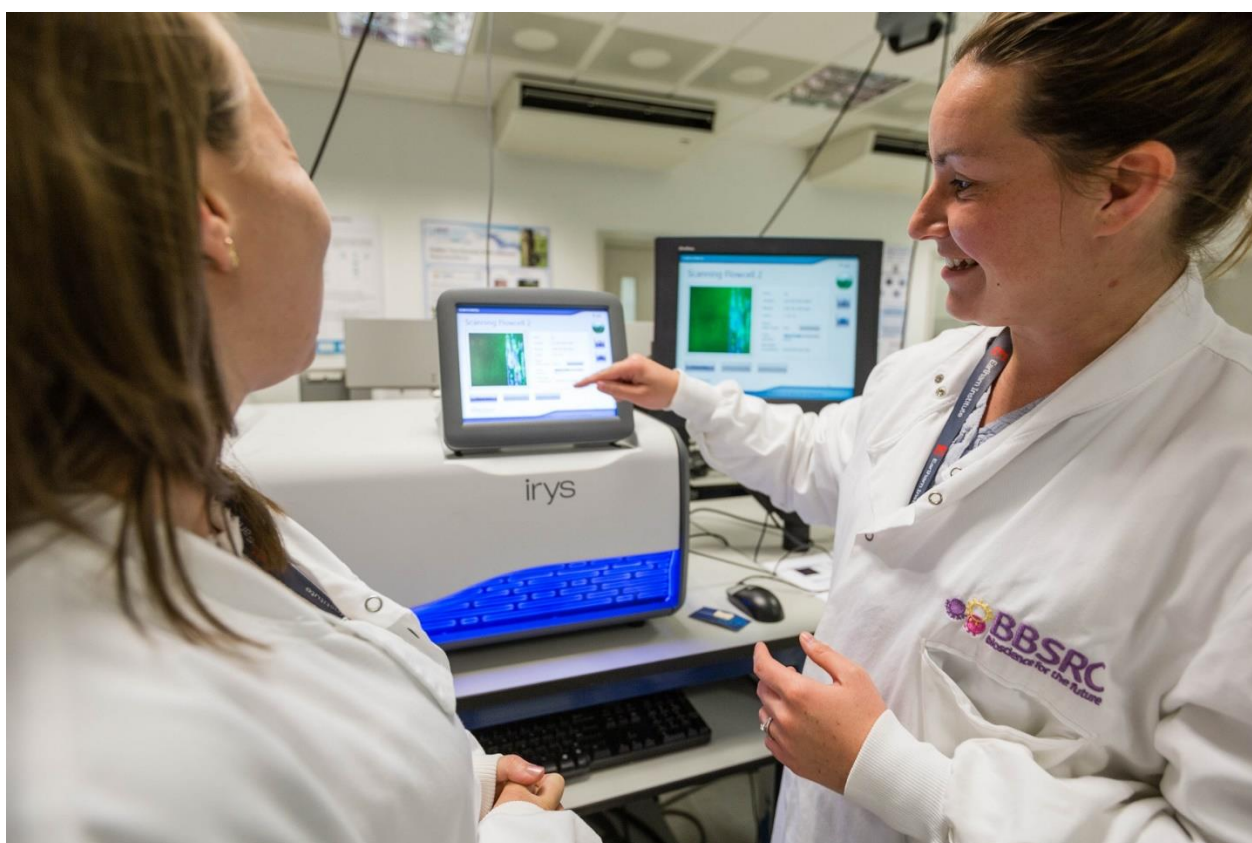
Priority Actions:

- 5a) **Schools** - rural schools in Norfolk have been improving their results, but in the more remote and peripheral locations attainment and progression to further and higher education remains well below national averages. As the qualification levels needed for most jobs continues to rise there is a need to do more to ensure that rural young people have the aspiration and support in school to obtain the qualifications and the aspiration to progress to FE, HE and higher paying jobs¹³. Rural businesses have a key role to play in working with schools to help young people appreciate the growing diversity of job roles which can be found in rural areas.

¹² New Anglia Sector Skills Plans (2016-19), [Sector Skills Plans - New Anglia](#)

¹³ New Anglia's Careers Hub project has a team of Enterprise Coordinators working with careers leads in schools now across Norfolk and Suffolk.

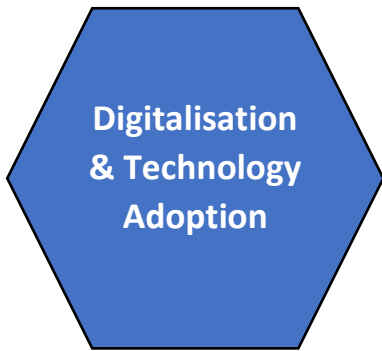
- 5b) **Colleges and University access** - many parts of rural Norfolk have poor access to FE and HE provision which results in low participation rates in post compulsory education. As the economy creates more L3+ jobs and fewer entry level roles this is a challenge which needs to be addressed. New blended delivery which reduces the need to travel and enhanced outreach programmes would make a wider range of FE and HE study options available to rural young people.
- 5c) **Workforce upskilling** - digitalisation, technology and new business models are changing how business operates and creating new job roles¹⁴. Rural Norfolk will work with education providers and the LEP to develop new routes to upskill the rural workforce. The focus will be on adopting new technology or obtaining the business skills needed for new job roles or self-employment, building on programmes such as LIFT and the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.



- 5d) **Innovation** - in 2017 the government committed to increasing UK R&D spending from 1.7% to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. The current government has reaffirmed this commitment to innovation, but data shows that R&D expenditure remains focused in large urban areas.

The Rural Norfolk Steering Group will work with Norwich's World class research base and the LEP to increase the number of rural businesses engaged in R&D and innovation activities by increasing access to skills and innovation programmes. This will focus on priority rural economy sectors, such as the bioeconomy and renewables to deliver clean growth, or where rural factors create concentrations of demand such as in health care for the elderly (who disproportionately live in rural areas).

¹⁴ Demand from Norfolk businesses to expand digitally is strong, with Norfolk Council's Go Digital Programme, which helps SMES to grow online, oversubscribed at the beginning of 2021.



Digitalisation and the adoption of new technology is essential for economic success and this need has been accelerated by Covid. Rural areas are in the front line of this change and must embrace the opportunities created by new technologies. Programmes for fibre rollout and mobile connectivity will need to support rural areas to ensure that rural communities, businesses and services have the digital connectivity needed to support new models of delivery. The pace of digital development is relentless and Covid-19 is widely reported to have delivered a decade's worth of growth in one year.

Rationale:

- The Office for National Statistics reported that as of November 2020, online department store sales increased by 157.2% while household goods stores and “other” non-food stores also saw sales rise by 124.7% each, compared to the same month in 2019.
- On 30th December 2020 Openreach revealed that during 2020 the use of internet data in the UK more than doubled from 22,000 petabytes in 2019 to 50,000 in 2020, as customers worked, shopped, learnt and accessed services and entertainment remotely.

Aim:

- To support rural areas to embrace **online business and service delivery**, supported by **automation and new technology** to deliver high value jobs.

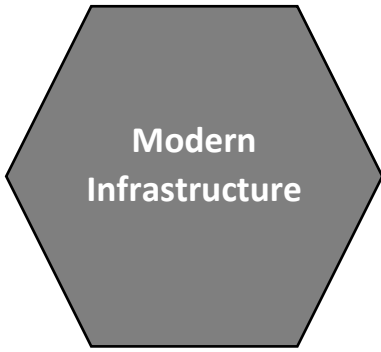
Priority Actions:

- 6a) **E-commerce** - online retail sales doubled in 2020 as Covid-19 restrictions on non-essential retail and a reluctance to travel to access essential retail combined to deliver more growth in one year than seen in the previous decade. Many rural retailers have responded, but further investment and support is needed to ensure that rural retailers keep pace with these sector wide changes and major investment in online delivery services by national retailers. Programmes to support the online skills of businesses in rural areas will support economic growth.
- 6b) **Remote service delivery** - service delivery, e.g. GP appointments, access to government services and education, have all seen major increases in the use of online delivery. Connectivity, access to IT equipment and skills are critical in rural areas to ensure that these changes don't disadvantage rural communities and in particular the most vulnerable in these communities. Training and grants through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund could help address these needs.
- 6c) **Remote working** - 2020 saw a big increase in people in white collar jobs working from home either full or part time, as offices and other workplaces were closed. This is very significant in rural Norfolk which has very high levels of out commuting and some of the longest average commutes in the UK. The same is true for education, particularly post compulsory education, with some young people travelling 40 miles or more to access further and higher education provision. As education also adopts blended digital and physical delivery it is essential that digital skills and technology enables rural learners to access education.

Whilst 2021-'24 is likely to see some return to commuting, for both work and education, surveys show that most employers and employees expect to move on a permanent basis to a mix of working from home combined with days in the office. For rural service providers and retailers, more people working in the area rather than travelling to cities should increase demand and support a vibrant rural community economy. Digital infrastructure and the provision of working space, either in the home or in rural hubs, in rural communities is important to support this change.

- 6d) **Automation** - the growth in the use of robotics and automation has been accelerating and offers the prospect of higher quality, better paid jobs whilst also addressing challenges with securing staff for manual and lower paid roles in the manufacturing, food chain and service sectors. Automation can also improve environmental and process monitoring delivering efficiencies and environmental gains. Rural Norfolk will work with innovation and technology providers to target increased adoption of automation in major sectors of the rural economy such as the agri-food and care sectors.





Delivering a vibrant, dynamic rural community in Norfolk requires modern infrastructure. Whilst roads are important, particularly in sparsely populated parts of rural Norfolk, the infrastructure to support the economy needs to include digital connectivity and access to the national rail network. Covid 19 has also seen increased demand for cycling and walking which requires more investment in cycleways and footpaths. Furthermore, water and energy infrastructure is at the heart of delivering clean growth and the development of infrastructure requires integrated, future proofed solutions.

Rationale:

- The rural nature of Norfolk means that many people are forced to be reliant on the car as their primary form of transport. A significant minority, however, do not have a car and are reliant on local service provision, walking, cycling or public transport availability. Some families that do run a car can ill-afford to do so. ¹⁵15% more miles were travelled on Norfolk roads in 2019 when compared with 2012 (5.8bn miles in 2019 and 4.9bn in 2012). Tourism is worth over £3bn to the Norfolk economy; enhancing our natural assets will help this value to grow.
- Ofcom data shows that rural Norfolk has significantly worse 4G coverage than urban England. North Norfolk in particular has both worse 4G coverage and voice coverage than the average in rural England.
- Transport and digital infrastructure both allow rural residents to access services and should therefore be developed in a co-ordinated way, e.g. blending telemedicine with transport options to allow patients to reach acute care or treatment, and students to combine remote online learning with access to classrooms, labs and workshops for practical study.

Aim:

- To support the delivery of new rural infrastructure supporting the **transition to clean energy, sustainable transport, a digital economy** and **sustainable water management**

Priority Actions:

7a) **Sustainable transport** - many of Norfolk's rural residents will continue to rely on private transport because of weaknesses in public transport, but actions to improve public transport are important especially for the young, old and those on lower incomes. Better community transport and lift-sharing initiatives can also alleviate the dependence on private transport. Bids to the Restoring Your Railway Fund can help increase connectivity and investment in the existing network is important e.g. longer trains on the Fensline and improved services from Norwich to London, Ely and connections to North Norfolk.

Much of the county also lacks safe cycling routes and all weather footpaths, which needs further investment to provide more sustainable transport opportunities which have the added benefit of improving health and attracting visitors.

¹⁵ The Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 reported 72 rural within the 10% most deprived and 6 in the worst 1% nationally for access to services.



7b) **Digital infrastructure** - rural Norfolk continues to have thousands of premises without superfast fibre and problems with 4G coverage. As urban areas adopt gigabit connectivity and 5G it is inevitable that data capacity and speed requirements will continue to grow rapidly.

Norfolk will campaign for government to support an 'outside in' approach so that public support is targeted at the hardest to reach rural communities first, using a combination of 5G and fibre to ensure that rural areas are not left behind as retailing, services and education all continue to move online.

7c) **Clean Growth** - as highlighted in the World Class Environment & Green Economy section of the strategy rural Norfolk should embrace the need for clean energy systems and sustainable water management. Delivery of clean growth will require substantial investment in new infrastructure enabled by a planning system which allows the rapid deployment of new technology. Modernisation of the energy system also needs to address areas where sustainable rural growth is constrained by electricity grid capacity.

The plan to decarbonise transport, with a policy to ban the sale of new fossil fuel cars from 2030, means rural Norfolk has only 10 years to deliver an EV charging infrastructure across the whole county.

The Norfolk Water Management Plan is considering a new reservoir and pipe infrastructure to ensure Norfolk has a secure long term water supply.

All these major schemes need support to secure the resources and planning permission needed for timely delivery.

7d) **Skills** - rural Norfolk needs to ensure that it has the workforce and skills base to build new infrastructure and the Steering Group will explore partnering with the existing CITB centre at Bircham Newton to support this drive. The Rural Strategy Steering Group will work with partners to promote innovative solutions to rural infrastructure construction and management, including bidding to deliver UK demonstration projects on clean growth and infrastructure.