



Rural North Yorkshire: The way forward

Beautiful, connected, and embracing the future

Executive Summary

July 2021

This is the first Rural Commission of its kind. Our report aims to preserve the beauty of Rural North Yorkshire while embracing new ways of living and being.

The issues the Commission has examined require positive behavioural change to allow rural and remote North Yorkshire to become a leader in the green economy, have beautiful living rural spaces, to be digitally connected, farm sustainably and have vibrant services. The Commissioners believe that a thriving rural community is one in which people of all ages and backgrounds can find a home and play a part in community life.

The Commission strongly advocates for the levelling up debate not only to focus on Northern industrial regions, but also on remote and rural regions. The debate must recognise the significant potential of rural and sparsely populated rural areas to contribute to the national economy, achieve net zero targets, and drive energy transitions.

The Commission is strongly of the view that devolution is a priority for rural North Yorkshire. The Commission believes that central government must ensure additional powers and funding for the devolved authority so that it has real capacity within the region for decision-making and control of significant funding.

The Commission examined seven key themes: rural economy; energy transition; digital connectivity; farming and land management; rural schools, education and training; rural housing; rural transport. Cross cutting themes were also examined.



The Commissioners: The Very Reverend John Dobson DL, Martin Booth, Chris Clark, Heather Hancock, Jean MacQuarrie, Professor Sally Shortall, Dr Debbie Trebilco, Sir William Worsley Bt DL.

Key recommendations:

Rural economy: key challenge: North Yorkshire has a diverse economy. There is high skilled employment but there is also a significant low wage economy.

What Commissioners suggest:

- Devolution is critical to ensuring the right use of investment in the region and the Commission calls on the government to agree a deal as a matter of urgency.
- The County Council must encourage investment in the region. This could be pursued through a mutual bank, with supporting funding from the Levelling Up Funds or the Shared Prosperity Fund.
- The Commission sees a role for North Yorkshire leading in green employment including food, farming, forestry, and renewable energy. The Levelling Up Funds or the Shared Prosperity Fund must provide seed funding support to be match funded by industry.

Energy Transition: key challenge: Up to 47% of North Yorkshire is designated as either a National Park or Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Much of the rural housing stock is made of solid brick or stone walls; there is no gas grid, and weak electrical infrastructure.

What Commissioners suggest:

- The Government must invest in an electricity structure that does not overlook rural and remote areas.
- The York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership and the County Council must advocate for investment in rural electricity infrastructure.
- The National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty should execute an enabling strategy to permit the essential infrastructure and upgrades to buildings to be undertaken, to ensure a 'fit-for-purpose' future within these protected landscapes.

Digital connectivity: key challenge: The Commission acknowledges the commitment and considerable investment the County Council has made to digital connectivity in North Yorkshire. Despite the significant investment, digital connectivity remains a significant challenge, especially in rural areas.

The Commission is strongly of the view that digital connection must be considered a human right.

What Commissioners suggest:

- The Yorkshire National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty must establish a Digital Inclusion Group to advise on a digital infrastructure that will be acceptable for these protected regions.
- National government and OFCOM must understand digital connectivity as a human right. This is as much a human right for people in rural and remote areas as it is in urban areas. The Commission advocates that the government begin by connecting its most remote citizens to avoid the typical lagging-behind model.
- The Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport must place a higher priority on digital inclusion in rural communities and set out a strategic approach to address the issue for North Yorkshire and other sparsely populated areas. The Shared Prosperity Fund could be used as a vehicle to address this issue.



Farming and Land Management: key challenge: North Yorkshire has a long and proud history of farming. There was a great deal of evidence that farming, and farmers are facing significant challenges and policies must be developed to assist them to meet these challenges.

What Commissioners suggest:

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must have a more integrated approach to farming, land management and the environment. It must recognise that farming and land management practices are central to achieving environmental targets. Working with Nature, rather than substituting for it, will deliver the most profitable farms in conjunction with the most sustainable Nature.

The Council, in conjunction with the Yorkshire Agricultural Society, should facilitate a new Farm Business Task Force to direct the culture change needed for the farming future and to ensure changed business practice meets environmental targets. This should liaise closely with the national Agricultural Productivity Task Force.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must provide free business coaching and mentoring support to help farm businesses survive and restructure, whilst ensuring support is in place to help farmers exit the industry with dignity.

Rural schools, education and training: key challenge: North Yorkshire has the highest number of small schools in England. Rural schools perform well. Yet, rural schools risk closure. The sustainability of rural schools is largely attributable to falling pupil rolls, financial difficulties and schools standards. Children attending small rural schools achieve better educational outcomes than urban children, yet they are less likely to go on to further and higher education when they leave school.

What Commissioners suggest:

The Commission believes that the Department for Education must revise its National Funding Formula to ensure increased support for rural super sparse secondary schools.

The County Council must lead on pioneering a two-stream educational system post GCSE in rural and remote areas, with one stream focusing on vocational education while the other remains academic.

The County Council and the York and North Yorkshire Local Enterprise Partnership must strengthen the offer for post-16 education and provide a better sense of future for young people.

Key recommendations:

Rural housing; key challenge: in North Yorkshire there is a significant shortage of affordable homes in large parts of the County and an acute housing shortage within the national parks. The general high cost of rural housing means that the region is unaffordable for low- and medium-income families.

What Commissioners suggest:

The formula for designating affordable housing must be revised by the Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government so that it does not reflect market value in an area but rather average income in the area.

The County Council should be enabled to have the power to levy a charge on second homes which must stay in the county and be used to further affordable housing.

Each parish in rural North Yorkshire should build five houses over a ten-year period. 40% of this housing stock must be affordable or available for rental.

Rural transport; key challenge: People who live in super sparse and rural areas need to travel for school, employment, shopping, and health facilities. This raises issues that include accessibility, affordability, and environmental impact.

What Commissioners suggest:

The Commission believes that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs must make it clear what rural fund will replace the loss of the EU Rural Development Programme funding which allowed local communities to respond imaginatively to local needs around transport.

Until the devolved authority is established, the Council must have the power to use Shared Prosperity Funds and Levelling Up funds to design relevant schemes for rural and remote areas in North Yorkshire.

The Commission believes that the County Council should take up the opportunity to provide more innovative passenger transport such as demand responsive transport across the county.

Cross cutting themes; key challenge: The Commission identified a number of issues for the region that are impacted by all of the previous themes. These are the demographic challenge and the missing generations; leadership; the importance of community and climate change.

What Commissioners suggest:

Devolution is critical to securing long-term investment into the region and the Commission calls on the government to agree a deal as a matter of urgency. This will allow North Yorkshire to ensure best use of levelling up funds for its remote and rural regions.

The County Council must establish an Advisory Task Force to include civil servants, rural business, banking and industry, academic and scientific expertise, and communities to take forward our recommendations.

The Commission urges the government to ensure Levelling Up funds recognise the needs of sparsely populated northern regions as much as the needs of northern industrial regions.

Community and social infrastructure are critical. The government must ensure Levelling Up funds protect social infrastructure in remote and rural regions.