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Campaign
to Protect
Rural England



Exploring the potential for prospering rural areas with English Devolution

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Version 1.1
May 2026

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Glossary

CPCA	Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority
BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
CLA	Country and Business Land Association
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DESNZ	Department for Energy Security and Net Zero
DSIT	Department for Science, Innovation and Technology
EIP	Environmental Improvement Plan
ELMS	Environmental Land Management Schemes
EMCCA	East Midlands Combined County Authority
EMSA	Established Mayoral Strategic Authority
FSA	Foundation Strategic Authority
GLCCA	Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority
GMCA	Greater Manchester Combined Authority
GMET	Greater Manchester Environment Trust
GVA	Gross Value Added
HEY	Hull & East Yorkshire Combined Authority
IS-8	Eight high growth sectors in the Modern Industrial Strategy
LCRCA	Liverpool City Region Combined Authority
LGP	Local Growth Plan
LGR	Local Government Reorganisation
LNRS	Local Nature Recovery Strategy
LTA	Local Transport Authority
LUF	Land Use Framework
MHCLG	Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government
MSA	Mayoral Strategic Authority
NECA	North East Combined Authority
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NICRE	National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise
NPFF	National Planning Policy Framework
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OEP	Office for Environmental Protection
Ofcom	UK regulator for the communications services
REH	Rural Housing Enabler
REPF	Rural England Prosperity Fund
RES	Rural Exception Site
RSN	Rural Services Network
RUC-2024	Rural-Urban Classification 2024
SA	Strategic Authority
SAHP	Social and Affordable Homes Programme
SDS	Spatial Development Strategy
SPP	Strategic Place Partnership
SRN	Shared Rural Network
SYMCA	South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority
TVCA	Tees Valley Combined Authority
UKSPF	Shared Prosperity Fund
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
WECA	West of England Combined Authority
WMCA	West Midlands Combined Authority
WYCA	West Yorkshire Combined Authority
Y&NYCA	York & North Yorkshire Combined Authority

Summary

Healthy rural economies, environments and communities bring benefits for the whole country, yet rural areas and issues have historically been deprioritised in policymaking: agglomeration and the favouring of policy towards centres of population has prevailed. This report explores the potential of English devolution to address this imbalance in policymaking and investment in its rural areas.

Rural England: economic potential and historic constraints

- Rural economies match urban performance in economic regions such as the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine and account for 12% of England's Gross Value Added (GVA), but rural workers' productivity is just 82% of that of their non-rural counterparts.
- Rural workforce and business development is constrained by ongoing challenges: 40% of rural firms highlight the lack of affordable housing locally as a key barrier, 39% flag lack of transport services and infrastructure, and 33% inadequate broadband capacity. These constraints are holding many rural areas back from prospering. With the right policies, increasing rural worker productivity could add an estimated £11 billion in tax receipts.

English Devolution: a metropolitan bias?

- The government's devolution programme is planned to bring 77% of England's population, many of them rural, under devolution arrangements by 2027.
- Devolution offers great potential to design policy tailored to rural circumstances and unleash rural England's prosperity but only if its inherent metropolitan bias and the stated intent of the government to deliver devolution through towns and cities is addressed. The inclusion of 'rural affairs' as a competency in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 (the 'Devolution Act') is one route.
- The Devolution Act creates a new category of authority, the Strategic Authority, which falls under three types:
 - Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA), available to those areas without an elected mayor
 - Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA)
 - Established Mayoral Strategic Authority (EMSA) which have the most funding and powers. All EMSAs are functionally MSAs.
- This report focuses on the 13 MSAs outside London, particularly seven with significant rural populations and/or those progressing rural issues.

Opportunities for harnessing rural prosperity under devolution

MSAs have a range of powers, funding and levers available to them to progress rural prosperity including in economic development, housing and spatial planning, and transport and digital connectivity.

Economic development

- The Integrated Settlement is the 5-year, single pot funding settlement from central government to EMSAs. It enables EMSAs to move funding between policy areas and financial years to support a longer-term, more strategic approach to investment based on local need, which could benefit rural areas.
- Mayors have the power to raise precepts and levies which can be used for infrastructure and services. The overnight visitor levy, for example, could help to fund the ‘invisible burden’ on popular tourist locations such as National Parks by supporting local transport, conservation and maintenance work.
- All MSAs are mandated through the Devolution Act to develop Local Growth Plans (LGP) to deliver the government’s economic growth priorities including the eight high-growth sectors (IS-8) in the UK’s Modern Industrial Strategy.
- Five sectors of relevance to rural economies were appraised across MSAs’ LGPs: agri-tech and sustainable agriculture; clean energy; visitor economy; small and micro rural enterprises and natural resources.
- Despite the prevalence of IS-8 firms in rural areas, their potential to contribute to the IS-8 sectors tends not to be well articulated in MSAs’ LGPs. Land-based industries, rural businesses and natural assets feature in some LGPs, as does addressing underlying structural rural constraints of transport and broadband connectivity and adult skills.

Housing and spatial planning

- MSAs must develop a Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) for their area. SDS will be the spatial investment framework for the LGP and guide spatial planning using centrally set housing targets and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).
- EMSAs can set the strategic direction of the Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP) in their area with a Strategic Place Partnership which includes shaping the tenure mix and identifying priority sites for development.
- There are significant regional disparities in capacity to develop and apply a rural lens to SDSs and the SAHP which risks creating unequal investment and planning outcomes across England. For example:
 - The need to meet ambitious, centrally-set housing targets could result in MSAs prioritising large urban schemes over smaller, community-led rural developments, especially where MSAs lack local rural expertise and advocates.
 - Rural housing is disadvantaged in the NPPF because most developments are too small to trigger affordable housing quotas. Rural Exception Sites can support affordable rural housing but are underused by local councils.

- The government has not set national targets for specific types of rural or community-led schemes, so SDSs and Strategic Place Partnerships will determine whether rural communities receive the affordable housing investment they need.

Connectivity: transport and digital

- The Devolution Act creates Strategic Authorities as the sole local transport authority (LTA) for their area, required to create a Local Transport Plan and mandating that all constituent councils implement it.
- Strategic Authorities now have greater powers to streamline bus franchising and greater flexibility to modify services. This could lower barriers for rural authorities to adopt franchising models tailored to dispersed populations and constrained institutional capacity.
- Improving rural broadband connectivity is recognised in several MSAs' Local Growth Plans to support inclusive rural economies and the visitor economy.

Spotlight: North East's Combined Authority Rural Taskforce

The North East Combined Authority's (NECA's) deeper Devolution Deal includes the creation of a North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce and Investment Plan for rural, coastal and environmental stewardship. The delivery of the Investment Plan is spread across several portfolios and allocated £17.5 million which, while sizeable, represents less than 1% of NECA's budget. Even with a robust investment plan and dedicated Taskforce, rural, coastal and environmental issues are at risk of being sidelined and deprioritised, especially once the Taskforce ends.

Harnessing the potential of devolution for rural England's prosperity: key recommendations

Much is at stake for rural areas as statutory guidance is developed for Strategic Authorities to implement the Devolution Act and develop SDSs.

We make eight recommendations:

1. Hardwire rural proofing *and* exceptionalism into devolved governance
2. Create robust statutory guidance on the Devolution Act's rural affairs competency
3. Include rural contexts and the natural environment as intrinsic to resilient, inclusive economic growth in MHCLG guidance
4. Underpin MSA's LGPs, SDS and investments with spatially sensitive rural evidence and metrics
5. Better align MSA powers and delivery mechanisms to deliver integrated agendas
6. Monitor EMSA Integrated Settlements for rural impact
7. Create a Roadmap for devolution so all areas of England can benefit fairly
8. Learn from the past

Introduction

It is often observed that the UK is one of the world's most centralised and geographically unbalanced economies, marked by clear regional differences in wealth, power and opportunity. In recent years, Westminster governments have sought to address regional inequalities by raising economic development in poorer performing areas, rebalancing growth and reducing inequalities across UK nations and regions.

Large disparities between places have been attributed to people living in so-called 'left behind' areas feeling forgotten by decision-makers and distrustful of traditional democratic institutions. The distance between Westminster decision-making and young people living in rural areas, for example, is especially marked, with less than one in ten (8%) feeling listened to by decision-makers.¹

The approach to addressing place-based inequalities has until very recently focused on cities, following a metropolitan mayor model. This is already changing, with more than 77% of England's population due to fall under devolution arrangements by 2027.

This report explores the potential of English devolution to address the imbalance in policymaking and investment in rural areas. It focuses on devolved areas with elected mayors, both Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs) and Established Mayoral Strategic Authorities (EMSAs), particularly those with significant rural populations.

It outlines historic structural rural constraints and how rural areas have historically been poorly understood and under-represented in policymaking. It sets out key aspects of devolved competencies in accordance with the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 (the 'Devolution Act') and analyses the rural composition of Mayoral Strategic Authorities (MSAs). It explores the potential for MSAs to progress rural prosperity through reviewing the access to funding and revenue raising powers available to them and how their Local Growth Plans (LGPs) reflect rural economic opportunities. It explores housing, transport and digital connectivity as key constraints for building rural prosperity, and the potential levers available to MSAs to address these constraints.

The report concludes with recommendations for policy- and decision-makers both nationally and within MSAs about how to harness the tools available for MSAs and for all Strategic Authorities to unleash the potential of England's rural people, communities, environments and economies.

The report was created by reviewing policy documents and academic literature and holding conversations with people working in or with MSAs and/or the rural policy environment.

8%

of young people in rural areas feel listened to by decision-makers

Rural England: historic constraints, persistent challenge

Rural areas occupy 85% of the land area of England and around 17% of the population,² equivalent to around 9.5 million people. Rural areas include those which are wholly rural, those which are mixed rural-urban and those which are predominantly urban but which include rural hinterlands. They include urban or semi-urban towns, villages, market towns, accessible rural areas, ex-coalfield communities, 10 National Parks and 34 National Landscapes and land used for agriculture and forestry.

Rural England is cherished by most of the population: 75% of British people support protecting the countryside and almost three quarters prioritise proximity to the countryside when choosing where to live,³ but much of the rural population continue to experience persistent and interrelated challenges. Lack of affordable housing supply and employment opportunities intersect with limited public transport, poor digital connectivity, lack of training and education, and lower qualification levels in the workforce.

Rural homes are often larger, older and harder to retrofit for energy efficiency than urban dwellings. Around a quarter of rural properties are off the gas grid and reliant on alternative fuels like heating oil which contributes to rural fuel poverty, experienced by around 12.3% of rural households.⁴ Off-grid rural households are more exposed to fluctuations in global oil prices than those connected to mains gas and high fuel costs disproportionately affect rural populations due to limited public transport and reliance on car use. Off-grid heating fuels like heating oil are not subject to the domestic energy price cap although there are higher levels of subsidy support for switching to a heat pump for those reliant on oil.

Rural areas tend to be older, with 27% of residents aged 65 and over⁵ and out-migration of young people much higher than in urban areas. Just two in five young people anticipate staying living in a rural area in the next five years⁶ which reflects their views on their prospects and the limited opportunities available to them. Access to healthcare is uneven: there are over twice as many healthcare professionals per 1,000 residents in urban compared to rural England⁷ yet access to GPs, schools, childcare, pharmacies and community hubs keeps rural places liveable.

People living in rural areas should benefit from a supported and thriving economy, good infrastructure, decent homes and digital connectivity to the same extent as their urban counterparts. The public support this: in 2024, 76% of adults surveyed in a YouGov poll supported investing more resources in rural England, with 86% of people supporting the idea that essential services should be available *wherever you live in the country*.⁸

Healthy rural economies, environments and communities bring benefits for the whole country – yet rural areas and issues have historically been deprioritised in policymaking.

75%

of British people support protecting the countryside

Rural considerations in policymaking

Lower population numbers and densities, distance from political and economic centres and connectivity challenges all work against adequate representation of rural issues in national policymaking. Greater distances and smaller markets make achieving returns on investment challenging and delivering services or capital projects incur higher costs in comparison to non-rural areas. These challenges are exacerbated by limited workforce availability and capacity to deliver projects and programmes.

Designing and adapting national policies to be appropriate for rural areas is not straightforward, in part because rural policy extends beyond any one government department and across the remit of local government service delivery.⁹ This also means that Defra, which has responsibility for rural affairs, is expected to deal with issues outside of its area of competence.

Local and regional statistics mask the reality of rural disadvantage, as spatial aggregation misrepresents rural poverty: more appropriate smaller geographic units such as parishes and Output Areas are rarely used. In addition, binary labels of ‘rural’ and ‘urban’ mask the difference between different types of rural areas. This matters because data drives decision-making and funding allocations, for example, the calculations used to allocate funds to local councils awards more money to densely-populated areas, even though the costs of delivering services in rural areas is higher.

Despite the need for applying a rural perspective to policymaking, England has no explicit rural policy. Successive governments have resisted calls for a dedicated rural strategy and instead pursued mainstreaming or integration to ensure the rural population has access to the same policies and programmes as in urban England.¹⁰ All government departments are therefore responsible for rural proofing their own policies – including financial allocations, investment decisions and service delivery. This approach has limitations as rural issues tend to get overlooked. Several examples illustrate this:

- Financial allocations: In 2026/27 rural residents will pay 17% more in council tax per head than urban residents and urban councils will receive 32% more per head than rural councils.¹¹
- Investment decisions: a core component of delivering the Levelling Up policy was the Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) which was approximately £2.6 billion over 2022 - 2025. The Rural England Prosperity Fund (REPF), part of the UKSPF, was allocated around £110 million for the same period, i.e., less than 4% of the main fund. Rural stakeholders including the Rural Services Network (RSN) and Country and Business Land Association (CLA) were critical of the REPF because, (a) it did not include revenue support which hindered the ability of rural councils to develop and deliver REPF proposals, and (b) the failure of some local authorities to engage rural stakeholders.¹²



- Rural proofing: A rural taskforce was created by the current government to rural proof its five core missions of economic growth (including building 1.5 million new homes), improving health, reducing crime, increasing opportunities and clean energy. There is currently little publicly available information on the work or outputs of the taskforce and how it will inform and influence delivering the government's priorities.
- Policy design: affordable housing is one example of inappropriate national policy design because small-scale developments of less than ten houses, which are typical in rural areas, are not required to include a quota of affordable homes.

These factors intersect and mean that agglomeration, i.e. the favouring of policy towards centres of population, has prevailed in policymaking to the detriment of rural areas and economies. There persists a perception that the benefits from urban investments trickle down to rural areas which perpetuates inadequate resource allocation and decisions which are ill-suited to rural circumstances.¹³ The case to date of the development of English devolution largely embodies this urban-centric bias.

English devolution: an inherent metropolitan bias?

The previous government started a new process of English devolution with nine combined authorities created between 2015 – 2019, mostly in city regions. Its flagship ‘Levelling Up’ programme, announced in its 2019 manifesto, promised to narrow regional inequalities by investing in infrastructure, skills and local economic development outside London and the South East through funding initiatives, devolution deals and policy reforms. Criticisms of Levelling Up included its focus on cities and towns and ‘left behind’ industrial centres and of failing to address or understand disparities within regions, not just between regions.¹⁴

This criticism is levelled at approaches to economic development more generally – with urban economies being thought to function in an inherently more innovative and productive way than non-metropolitan areas, and policy, power and funding skewed towards urban cores. The potential of rural areas to boost national prosperity tends to be poorly understood and often forgotten.¹⁵

A core component of the Levelling Up programme alongside rebalancing economic development across the UK was devolving more power and resources to England’s regions to areas which expressed an interest in a devolution deal. This led to the extension of mayoral devolution in three new areas in May 2024. Since then, the Labour Government energetically picked up the baton of devolution with two additional mayoral combined authorities established in May 2025.

The Devolution Act creates a new category of authority, the Strategic Authority (SA), which falls under three types:

- Foundation Strategic Authority (FSA): available to those areas without an elected mayor, FSAs will have limited devolution.

Combined Authorities and Combined County Authorities will automatically be designated as this.

- Mayoral Strategic Authority (MSA): Mayoral Combined Authorities and Mayoral Combined County Authorities will automatically begin as this unless they have been designated as Established. For those with an elected mayor, a range of powers will be devolved.
- Established Mayoral Strategic Authority (EMSA): for MSAs which satisfy additional governance requirements including having an elected mayor in place for at least 18 months. Established status unlocks access to further devolution powers and funds, notably the Integrated Settlement.

There are currently 13 MSAs in England outside London. They are:

- Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)
- Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA)
- South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority (SYMCA)
- West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)
- Tees Valley Combined Authority (TVCA)
- West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA)
- Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Combined Authority (CPCA)
- West of England Combined Authority (WECA)
- East Midlands Combined County Authority (EMCCA)
- North East Combined Authority (NECA)
- York & North Yorkshire Combined Authority (Y&NYCA)
- Hull & East Yorkshire Combined Authority (HEY)
- Greater Lincolnshire Combined County Authority (GLCCA)

The MSAs with EMSA status are: GMCA, LCRCA, SYMCA, WYCA, EMCA and NECA. Others including CPCA, EMCCA and Y&NYCA are likely to receive EMSA status in 2026.

Critics of the model of devolution employed to date in England argue that it is inherently biased towards cities because it is based on the Greater London Authority Act which established the Greater London Assembly and Mayor of London.¹⁶ Other criticisms emphasise the way in which devolution has spread across the country in a piecemeal and asymmetric way through a deal-based approach predicated on the institutional histories, interests and strengths of the actors in the room at the time.¹⁷

Some regions are experiencing Local Government Reorganisation (LGR), draining resource and expertise from engaging in devolution settlements. In some areas, there is no political appetite for having an elected mayor thereby limiting the devolved powers and funding available.¹⁸ Another factor is that devolution is happening at such a pace and scale that it is being developed while already in operation, with those regions getting there first having access to powers and funding others do not.

The upshot is a patchwork of different levels of maturity, focus, funding, power and depth of devolution across the country. Table 1 highlights some of these issues. It shows the oldest and most established MSAs, namely Greater Manchester CA and Liverpool City Region CA, being metropolitan ones with 1% of their populations being rural. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough CA, created in 2017, has a sizeable rural population of 34%, and the subsequent MSAs created from 2022 onwards, all have 20% rural population or over. Four of these – East Midlands CCA, North East CA, Greater Lincolnshire CCA and Hull and East Yorkshire CA – are two years old or less.

To look at rurality with a different lens, each of the 13 MSAs were categorised according to whether they included any counties or districts with have any rural-character counties or districts according to the Rural-Urban Classification 2024 (RUC-2024). This shows a slightly different picture. The West Midlands CA, for example, although having only 1% of its population as rural, and although all its constituent local authorities are metropolitan boroughs, does according to RUC-2024, have at least one rural district. Also, several MSAs with no RUC-2024 counties or districts have at least 10% of their population classified as rural. Even Greater Manchester CA, for example, includes a significant rural hinterland of 30%.¹⁹

It is the current government's intention to have more mayors with more powers, with a goal of universal coverage across England. As part of its 'priority devolution programme,' six more are planned to come into being by 2027: Cheshire and Warrington, Cumbria, Greater Essex, Hampshire and Solent, Norfolk and Suffolk, and Sussex and Brighton. This expansion would bring more areas with rural characters under devolution arrangements, notably Cumbria with 50% rural population and Norfolk and Suffolk which has 45% rural population. This expansion will mean 77% of England's population is covered by devolution arrangements.²⁰

This analysis underscores that all MSAs need to take account of and understand their rural areas – whether wholly rural, mixed rural-urban and predominantly urban but with rural hinterlands. A challenge ahead for MSAs will be to address rural needs, overcome the prevailing core-periphery divide between rural and urban areas and harness the extensive potential of rural economies and communities, in all their difference.

Table 1:
Information on 13 MSAs²¹

	Mayor/Party/next election	Constituent LAs	Population	Rural Population	% Rural	Any rural county/districts according to the RUC-2024
Greater Manchester Est 2011	Andy Burnham, Labour (2028)	Bolton, Bury, Manchester, Oldham, Rochdale, Salford, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford and Wigan	2,867,762	26,535	1%	No
Liverpool City Region Est 2014	Steve Rotherham, Labour (2028)	Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton and Wirral	1,551,765	15,834	1%	No
West Yorkshire Est 2014	Tracy Brabin, Labour (2028)	Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds and Wakefield	2,351,583	244,902	10%	No
South Yorkshire Est 2014	Oliver Coppard, Labour (2028)	Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield	1,375,000	113,921	8%	No
West Midlands Est 2016	Richard Parker, Labour (2028)	Birmingham, Coventry, Dudley, Sandwell, Solihull, Walsall and Wolverhampton	2,919,653	27,356	1%	Yes
Tees Valley Est 2016	Ben Houchen, Conservative (2028)	Hartlepool, Middlesborough, Redcar & Cleveland, Stockton-on-Tees and Darlington	677,189	71,562	11%	No
West of England Est 2016	Helen Godwin, Labour (2029)	Bath & North East Somerset, City of Bristol and South Gloucestershire	956,298	78,850	8%	No
Cambridgeshire & Peterborough Est 2017	Paul Bristow, Conservative (2029)	Cambridge City, Cambs County, East Cambs District, Fenland District, Huntingdonshire District, Peterborough City and South Cambs [subject to LGR]	894,519	300,970	34%	Yes
York & North Yorkshire Est 2022	David Skaith, Labour (2029)	York City and North Yorkshire	818,312	346,814	42%	Yes
East Midlands Est 2024	Claire Ward, Labour (2028)	Derbyshire County, Nottinghamshire County, Derby City and Nottingham City [subject to LGR]	2,204,451	449,136	20%	Yes
North East Est 2024	Kim McGuinness, Labour (2028)	Northumberland, County Durham, Gateshead, Newcastle, Sunderland, North Tyneside and South Tyneside	1,969,826	398,739	20%	Yes
Greater Lincolnshire Est 2025	Andrea Jenkyns, Reform UK (2029)	North East Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and Lincolnshire [subject to LGR]	1,095,014	450,303	41%	Yes
Hull and East Yorkshire Est 2025	Luke Campbell, Reform UK (2029)	Hull City Council and East Riding of Yorkshire Council	609,229	149,206	24%	Yes

The road ahead: opportunities and challenges for harnessing rural prosperity under devolution

The Devolution Act sets out devolved areas of competency for Strategic Authorities (SAs). These include: housing and strategic planning; transport and infrastructure; skills and employment support; economic development and regeneration; environment and climate change; health, wellbeing and public service reform; and public safety. As the Devolution Bill made its way through Parliament, rural affairs, coastal communities and culture were added as areas of competence in response to concerns raised by CPRE, Royal Town and Planning Institute (RTPI) and the Better Planning Coalition about the marginalisation of these interests.²²

While these competencies provide potential for all SAs to significantly improve rural prosperity and livelihoods, the government has stated that devolution will be delivered through towns and cities. SAs must also align their priorities and investment with delivering the five core missions of the government, which emphasise economic growth and delivering housing and infrastructure.

12%

Percentage of England's Gross Value Added (GVA) contributed by the Rural Economy

This section explores existing strengths and growth opportunities of rural economies and appraises how access to funding and revenue raising powers could help mayors have the resources to deliver for rural areas and communities. It then explores how MSAs are interpreting the National Industrial Strategy through their Local Growth Plans.

Rural economies: existing strengths and growth opportunities

The rural economy accounts for 12% of England's Gross Value Added (GVA).²³ Employing 4.2 million people across 600,000 registered business units, England's rural enterprises make up a quarter of businesses and add over £315 billion to the economy. Rural economies match urban performance in economic regions such as the Northern Powerhouse and Midlands Engine.²⁴

Many rural economies are closely linked to natural assets including through agriculture and forestry, the visitor economy, energy generation and carbon capture and storage. Public services including education, health and social work are further critical components of the rural economy, accounting for 16% of employment.²⁵ Some rural areas experience a low-skill, low-wage equilibrium, reflecting the structure of local labour markets and limited access to training opportunities. Levels of part-time and seasonal employment are also relatively high, often associated with tourism, while economic inactivity is elevated due to older population profiles.

Rural workers' productivity is just 82% of that of their non-rural counterparts²⁶ but with policies to support growth, rural economies could add £5,000 to £11,000 per worker

to current rates of productivity. Research suggests that increasing rural worker productivity could add an estimated £11 billion in tax receipts.²⁷

Access to funding and revenue-raising powers for MSAs

The Integrated Settlement is a five-year, single pot funding settlement from central government to EMSAs. It enables EMSAs to move funding between policy areas and financial years, thereby supporting a longer-term, more strategic approach to investment based on local need. It can also leverage in additional funding and investment. In this sense, it gives EMSAs a full, department-style funding settlement across their areas of competency, accountable to central government through outcomes frameworks.

MSAs have to put resources into the processes involved in competing for some funding which EMSAs receive via the Integrated Settlement. More rural MSAs such as Greater Lincolnshire CCA face different challenges which are not currently well represented in the MSA funding formula: having access to the Integrated Settlement would help address this. A focus on brownfield sites for regeneration is less relevant in Greater Lincolnshire than Greater Manchester, for example, and the area has different infrastructure challenges which are harder to realise and get recognition for due to the sparsity of the population. Water availability in the region, for example, is a key constraint to realising housing and business growth.

Mayoral Precept and Mayoral Levy

Mayoral Precepts and Levies are mechanisms used by MSAs in England to fund their activities, but they differ in how they are collected and displayed to local council taxpayers.

A **Mayoral Precept** is a direct, additional charge added to individual council tax bills to fund specific mayoral functions and services such as police, fire and rescue, and transport. Examples of how MSAs are using Mayoral Precepts include:

- GMCA provides resource to the Greater Manchester Environment Trust (GMET) funded through a Mayoral Precept. GMET is the UK's first regional environmental impact fund – which funds environmental community projects through the Green Spaces Fund.
- Liverpool City Region's Mayoral Precept will be used to deliver projects for the city region, such as ultra-fast digital connectivity, a Mayoral Transport Plan and an apprenticeship portal.

£11 billion

Potential tax receipts with increased rural worker productivity

- York & North Yorkshire has a Mayoral Precept to fund police and crime and fire and rescue services. The funding is targeted at maintaining neighbourhood policing teams and increasing visibility in rural communities.

A **Mayoral Levy** is a charge imposed by the MSA on local district councils which they pay out of their overall budget rather than directly charging residents. Mayors can charge developers for new development and raise funds to deliver infrastructure to support development in their area through the Mayoral Community Infrastructure Levy. The government consulted on the power for Mayors to raise an overnight visitor levy on commercially-let visitor accommodation in England. Such a levy could create a mechanism to fund the ‘invisible burden’ on honeypot locations such as National Parks and National Landscapes by supporting local transport, conservation and maintenance work.

The visitor levy as envisaged does not currently require any coordination or collaboration between neighbouring Mayoral Authorities. The Peak District National Park is surrounded by 20 million residents, many of whom visit for the day from nearby towns and cities including Sheffield, Nottingham, Derby and Manchester. Many overnight visitors stay outside the National Park in South Yorkshire or Greater Manchester. Day visitors and those staying overnight outside the National Park would be exempt from the visitor levy, which effectively taxes sleeping rather than visiting. There are concerns from rural stakeholders that the levy could go towards increasing visits rather than managing the impacts of those visits and creating better experiences, for example through improved local transport, digital connectivity and visitor experiences.

Several other powers available to mayors of EMSAs are of relevance. The Mayoral Duty to Collaborate, for example, ensures that Mayors of neighbouring EMSAs have a formal process by which they can enter into collaboration with one another. The Power to Convene and Duty to Respond enable mayors to convene local partners to address local challenges and place a duty on local partners to respond to a mayor’s request when they make use of the power to convene. In the context of the visitor economy, for example, these powers, when added to a visitor levy, could create a wider, joined up and intelligent approach to managing visitors and making their impact felt across whole regions.

20m

residents surrounding the Peak District National Park

Priority growth sectors

The UK's Modern Industrial Strategy²⁸ is the strategy for delivering the government's priority mission of economic growth through developing eight high growth sectors – the IS-8. These include advanced manufacturing, creative industries, life sciences, clean energy, defence, digital and technologies, professional and business services, and financial services.

The Industrial Strategy is focused on increasing the productivity of city-regions and industrial clusters. It mentions 'rural' just once and overlooks the potential of rural areas in developing the IS-8. This is perhaps unsurprising given the government is clear that it sees cities and towns as the focus for both economic growth and infrastructure investment. The Northern Growth Strategy too, for example, prioritises the Northern Growth Corridor, mentions 'rural' once, and emphasises the economic benefits of unlocking agglomeration.²⁹

Analysis by the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE)³⁰ demonstrates that the IS-8 do in fact have a substantial rural footprint, for example:

- businesses in rural areas account for 25% of manufacturing business units and 22% of manufacturing employment
- firms in rural areas contribute significant proportions of businesses in all three 'Advanced Manufacturing' sub-sectors, for example 22% of business units in computer, electronic and optical products, 29% of business units in the air and spacecraft sub-sector and 21% of employment in pharmaceutical products and preparation.

- in 'Professional, Scientific and Technical Services' 21% of business units and 13% of employment is rural. This includes 24% of business units and 31% of employment in scientific research and development
- a third of businesses and a fifth of employment in defence activities are in rural areas, as well as 39% of businesses engaged in the manufacture of weapons and ammunition.

Local Growth Plans and rural economies

All MSAs are mandated through the Devolution Act to develop Local Growth Plans (LGPs) to deliver the government's economic growth priorities. LGPs set out how MSAs will draw on their region's strengths to develop and support the National Industrial Strategy eight priority sectors (IS-8) and its foundational sectors. LGPs also explain how MSAs will support the development of transport, digital connectivity and workforce skills to deliver the LGP. Current guidance on LGPs does not mention rural areas or issues as a consideration in developing an LGP.³¹

As the guide for MSAs' economic development in the region, LGPs indicate where and how the MSA will focus its investment. Available LGPs for the MSAs with 20% or over rural populations (see Table 1) were analysed to explore the presence of IS-8 firms and if and how they consider rural economies.³² Table 2 shows that rural economies are fundamental to meeting the government's economic growth objectives. In the more rural MSAs such as York & North Yorkshire, 44% of its total IS-8 firms are rural, compared to 39% in Greater Lincolnshire, 21% in East Midlands, 7.2% in West of England, 18% in North East and 0.5% in Greater Manchester.

Table 2:

Rural economies in six MSAs

MSA	Total IS8 numbers	Urban IS8 firms %	Rural IS8 firms %	Rural economy considerations in Local Growth Plan
York and North Yorkshire	7,359	56	44	Local Growth Plan ³³ includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport: rural bus service improvements • Housing: affordability and second homes • Economic development: visitor economy; high performing rural businesses • Nature & climate: farming and carbon sequestration • Energy: developing LESP • Crime: via mayoral precept
Greater Lincolnshire	6,242	61	39	Local Growth Plan (draft) ³⁴ includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport: create and chair a National Rural Transport Panel • Economic development: establish Innovation Panel and focus on agri-tech • Natural resources: water resource management
Cambridgeshire and Peterborough	8,954	66	34	Local Growth Plan ³⁵ includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transport: rural connectivity • Economic development: agri-tech growth zone including regenerative agriculture in Fens; energy and green tech
Hull and East Yorkshire	3,822	76	24	Economic evidence base ³⁶ for Hull and East Yorkshire's draft LGP indicates ³⁷ : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Agri-food and agri-tech • Clean energy
East Midlands	15,581	79	21	Local Growth Plan ³⁸ includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital connectivity: improving for rural areas • Economic development: growing visitor economy • Energy: developing green energy • Nature & climate: Biodiversity Taskforce
North East	10,801	82	18	Local Growth Plan ³⁹ includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rural Trailblazer status; Rural Taskforce • Economic development: visitor economy • Energy: developing green energy
West of England	10,291	93	7	Local Growth Plan ⁴⁰ includes: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Economic development: Rural Productivity Testbed • Nature: as economic asset including growing green/nature skills

Despite the prevalence of IS-8 firms and the potential of rural areas in growth economic areas, from agri-tech and producing clean energy to the visitor economy and nature-based solutions, the potential of the rural economy tends not to be well embedded and integrated into MSAs' LGPs as they tend to mirror the priorities of the Industrial Strategy. Rural economies are not, however, totally absent from LGPs, as Table 2 illustrates: land-based industries, rural businesses and natural assets do feature; in some, so too does addressing underlying structural constraints of transport and broadband connectivity and adult skills.

Five sectors of particular relevance to rural economies were appraised across the local and draft LGPs and/or their accompanying evidence base for the MSAs with 20% or over rural populations. The West of England is included in the appraisal because although it has a low percentage of rural population, it includes two areas of interest for rural economic development: a rural productivity testbed and the integration of nature as infrastructure. The five sectors are: agri-tech and sustainable agriculture; clean energy; visitor economy; small and micro rural enterprises and natural resources.

Agri-tech and sustainable agriculture

Increasing the resilience and value of the domestic food supply chain from ‘farm to fork’ is becoming more urgent given the changing climate and global economic and political volatility. Sustainable agriculture is a growth sector, for example, organic agriculture has grown year-on-year in the UK and is worth £3.9bn.⁴¹ Public sector procurement spend is estimated to be £5bn annually, much of which could be redirected towards sourcing locally procured food and food created to higher environmental standards.⁴² Agri-tech is estimated to be worth £13bn to the UK economy⁴³ and holds considerable potential for research, development and innovation in rural areas, building on existing agri-tech firms and research institutions.

York & North Yorkshire’s LGP positions Food & Farming Innovation as a competitive advantage sector with specialisms in precision agriculture, regenerative agriculture, food & drink manufacturing, controlled environment agriculture and coastline opportunities. It underscores its ideal location to be an innovation testbed and trailblazer to lead on national food security.

Greater Lincolnshire’s draft LGP highlights its strengths and potential growth in agriculture, agri-tech and precision farming, and in food processing. Home to the UK Food Valley Programme,⁴⁴ supported by the MSA, it aims to establish the region as a Top 10 Global Food Cluster. Through UK Government Local Innovation Partnerships Fund (UKRI) funding of up to £20 million and the appointment of an ‘Innovation Panel,’ Greater Lincolnshire wants to be a rural innovation testbed and develop proposals for ‘Innovation Accelerators’ in agri-tech and defence businesses

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough’s LGP highlights agri-food and tech as one of six priority growth sectors. Within this, a growth opportunity is identified for the region to be a leader in regenerative farming through soil health mapping and reducing reliance on fertilisers and pesticides. Water stress in the region is noted in this context and the need to implement strategic infrastructure projects of the Fens Reservoir and Grantham Transfer schemes.

Clean energy

Renewable and low-carbon technologies could support 1.38 million jobs across the United Kingdom by 2050⁴⁵ with significant potential for job creation in rural areas. Clean energy generation is mostly hosted and created in rural and coastal areas and there are existing innovation clusters, such as in electricity in Cumbria, which could be scaled.⁴⁶

North East's LGP identifies offshore wind and the energy transition as key growth sectors. The region is an important generator of offshore wind energy: around 9% of the UK's offshore wind businesses are located in the North East and the LGP states an aim to grow the regional renewables workforce to 50,000 by 2035.⁴⁷ NECA has established a North East Strategic Energy Board to coordinate energy supply and demand and promote growth in the offshore wind sector to think strategically about opportunities and barriers to economic growth in the region.

East Midland's LGP includes clean energy as one of its five sectoral priorities, with fusion and nuclear energy identified as a potential area of leadership in the UK.

Cambridgeshire and Peterborough's LGP focuses on consolidating mature centres of excellence in Research & Development in clean energy in Cambridge and green energy firms clustering around Peterborough.

Visitor economy

Rural tourism in England contributes over £13 billion per year to the economy⁴⁸ and offers the opportunity to expand inward UK tourism beyond the core cities of London and Edinburgh. There are 90 million visits to National Parks adding £6 billion to the economy, and more than 66% of people in England living within a 30 minute journey of their nearest National Landscape.⁴⁹

York and North Yorkshire's LGP notes that the visitor economy is the top employment sector of the region, attracting 40 million visitors, supporting over 54,000 jobs and worth over £5.86bn to the region. It aims to build on this through increasing the value of tourism through regenerative tourism whereby visitors have a positive impact on their holiday destination.

Growing the visitor economy is one of East Midlands's LGP five priority growth areas, aiming to increase the number of overnight visitors by 50% and increase visitor spending by 50% through more options across high-value experiences, restaurants, hotels and entertainment such as arts and sports.

The North East aims to attract more international visitors through playing to its natural assets – highlighting its 300 miles of coastline, Northumberland National Park and UNESCO World Heritage Sites in its LGP, as well as its cultural and sporting assets.

Rural enterprises

The rural economy is increasingly globalised with a prevalence of micro businesses and hybrid/home working with almost a third of rural local authorities being hubs of business start-ups, survival and growth.⁵⁰ There is much untapped potential, with rural businesses more likely to be exporters of goods and services and more likely to have introduced innovations than urban ones⁵¹ and their supply chains, innovations and workforces reaching well beyond rural areas.

West of England's LGP spotlights the creation of a 'Rural Productivity Incubator' in the Somar Valley which is proposed as a national testbed for rural productivity opportunities and prospects for investment in the facilities and infrastructure needed to drive rural productivity. The LGP states that the region will "evolve from its industrial past into a modern, green productivity zone, where sustainable business, vibrant communities and landscape-led regeneration can go hand in hand" and "be a testbed and national blueprint for rural productivity" in market towns and semi-rural communities.

York and North Yorkshire's LGP includes Community Wealth Building as a principle of inclusive growth, identifying access to finance as a challenge for many businesses, but particularly micros (having up to 9 employees) which make up 89% of York and North Yorkshire's businesses.

North East's LGP commits to establishing a tailored rural business advice service to help businesses overcome additional barriers to growth.

Natural resources

A resilient and naturally functioning environment is a key enabler to economic growth and the bedrock of economic growth for future generations, yet biodiversity and ecosystems services are in steep decline.⁵² Natural land provides ecosystems services in natural flood management, water quality, biodiversity, recreation, and the conditions for renewable energy generation.

Climate change threatens water supplies, food production and risks critical infrastructure – all of which undermine the government’s economic growth ambitions – and all of which rural areas play an outsized role in mitigating through nature-based solutions such as natural flood risk management. The independent regulator, the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP), has recently warned that economic growth cannot be pursued at all costs, with nature’s recovery a prerequisite for prosperity, health and wellbeing.⁵³

Responsibility for creating Local Nature Recovery Strategies (LNRS), the delivery of which will be one of the key ways to deliver the OEP’s Environment Improvement Plan (EIP) and associated statutory nature targets, now sits with Strategic Authorities. LNRS can open up opportunities for new and/or aligned economic opportunities through nature recovery such as through Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), Environmental Land Management schemes (ELMS) and other nature markets. However, there is no requirement in the Devolution Act nor for Local Growth Plans to align economic growth with nature recovery and wider environmental goals, nor with considering the environment as first infrastructure.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, some MSAs are explicitly including nature recovery and considering nature as an economic asset within their Local Growth Plans.

The North East has a dedicated section in its LGP on rural and coastal areas. Its LGP notes that rural and coastal areas account for 30% of the region’s GVA spread across the visitor economy, advanced manufacturing and opportunities for food production, carbon and nature markets and supporting clean energy. It commits to establishing a tailored rural business advice service to help businesses overcome additional barriers to growth.

In its LGP, the East Midlands commits to establishing an expert Nature and Biodiversity Taskforce to prioritise natural capital restoration and climate resilience, supporting the delivery of LNRSs for Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire and to developing business cases for investment in flood resilience, nature recovery and access to green spaces.

York and North Yorkshire’s LGP emphasises its potential for nature-based solutions as one of four pilot places that are part of Defra’s Local Investment in Natural Capital programme, developing and testing approaches to leverage private sector investment to enhance natural capital, improve carbon sequestration and boost biodiversity. It notes that these projects will illustrate how its net zero ambitions can yield economic benefits for landowners, farmers and coastal communities.

The West of England weaves nature throughout its LGP as a ‘high-value economic asset’ which creates jobs, improves climate resilience and protects natural assets, and commits to embedding nature-based solutions and green infrastructure in the region’s green growth ambitions.

The role of devolution in addressing long-standing rural constraints

In many rural places, key long-standing structural constraints affecting the workforce and business growth include too little affordable housing, poor public transport for commuting, and weaker physical and digital connectivity: 40% of rural firms that felt well placed to take advantage of opportunities highlight the lack of affordable housing locally as a key barrier; 39% cite lack of transport services and infrastructure; and 33% inadequate broadband capacity.⁵⁵ These issues are explored by considering the powers and levers available to MSAs in housing and spatial planning, transport and digital connectivity.

Housing and spatial planning

Housing availability and affordability is a major issue in some rural areas, with house prices 10–12 times local incomes in some areas.⁵⁶ This is driven by lower wages in some rural areas and over three times as many second homes⁵⁷ to urban areas which further reduces supply, especially in areas with high visitor numbers.

Around 5% of homes in rural areas are classified as affordable housing compared to a 23% national average⁵⁸ and rural social housing waiting lists rose by 31% compared to 3% in urban areas between 2019–2022.⁵⁹ This is a missed opportunity: for every 10 new affordable rural homes, 26 jobs could be supported, generating £250,000 in government revenue and boosting the economy by £1.4 million.⁶⁰

Two areas of devolved competency, Spatial Development Strategies (SDS) and delivering affordable housing, will be critical in shaping the number, nature and location of housing across the country.

Spatial Development Strategies

Spatial Development Strategy (SDS) will be the spatial investment framework for the LGP and central to delivering the government's 1.5 million new homes target. The introduction of SDSs effectively brings back regional spatial planning which was abolished in the 2011 Localism Act.

Housing and spatial planning is a significant element of English devolution with all Strategic Authorities required to produce an SDS and having devolved powers on housing and land concurrent with Homes England and local authorities. SDS will be high-level strategies with a long-term time horizon of over 20 years. They will apportion and distribute housing and employment need to the most appropriate locations based on the standard methodology with the ability to redistribute the need between Local Planning Authorities in their patch.

SDSs are tied to the government's economic growth agenda in several ways. Housing number allocations set centrally will form the basis of decisions for SDS and development decisions and SDS will have to take into account the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF). SDS will identify key infrastructure requirements to enable the SDS to be implemented, strategic locations for and scale of development, and areas where protection or restoration of the natural environment is required.⁶¹

The departmental home of SDSs in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG) and link to economic growth and housing delivery, means that rural hinterlands, economies and communities may get overlooked.⁶² While the NPPF, which will still guide planning decisions including in the absence of an SDS, covers all types of land – both urban and rural – it is inherently urban-centric. The current draft NPPF, for example, states that SDSs will need to consider LGPs, the national Industrial Strategy, the 10 Year Infrastructure Strategy and Local Transport Plans – all of which are urban-centric. The NPPF also disadvantages smaller scale rural developments for affordability as most new housing developments are for fewer than ten houses in rural areas, which means developers aren't required to include a quota of affordable homes.

Rural Exception Sites (RES), which enable small schemes of new affordable rural housing, were only used by 17% of rural local planning authorities between 2021–22.⁶³ Rural Housing Enablers (RHEs) are individuals employed to bring stakeholders involved in rural affordable housing together to progress affordable housing, including through RES, but dedicated funding for RHEs was not committed beyond March 2026.⁶⁴

There are concerns amongst rural stakeholders that rural housing development will be deprioritised in favour of high-volume urban schemes given the ambition of government house-building targets imposed on local authorities, and that many MSAs may lack the local knowledge required to support small-scale, rural or community-led development.⁶⁵

Another issue is that SDSs lack explicit links to delivering other critical agendas including environmental improvements through links to the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) and land use change through the Land Use Framework (LUF). SDSs could, for example, overlay flood data with local nature recovery data to see where simultaneous benefits could be delivered, including amenity value, and where land could be allocated flood mitigation or water attenuation through nature-based solutions such as wetland creation.⁶⁶

There are also concerns about the impact of the piecemeal, uneven and deal-based nature of devolution to date, with uneven distribution of power, resources, experience and maturity across Strategic Authorities. Capacity challenges presented by Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in some areas, and the incompleteness of around 70% of local plans also impact on MSAs' ability and capacity to create a robust SDS. This means that some areas are progressing their SDS, while others are not. Given the SDS is being positioned as a spatial investment framework, this inequality between regions and neighbouring Strategic Authorities is of concern.⁶⁷

Affordable housing

EMSAs can set the strategic direction of the Social and Affordable Homes Programme (SAHP) 2026 to 2036⁶⁸ in their area which includes shaping the tenure mix and identifying priority sites for development. The SAHP plans to deliver 300,000 new homes across 10 years with at least 60% for social rent.⁶⁹ Strategic Place Partnerships (SPPs) will be responsible for setting the strategic direction of, and shape bidding to, the SAHP.

Research on devolution and rural affordable housing highlights concerns that because the government has not included targets for specific types of rural or community-led schemes, SDSs and SPPs will determine whether rural communities receive the affordable housing investment they need. Again, this means that decisions in SDS and SPPs will be contingent on devolved areas' rural-urban geographies, their existing rural housing partnerships and delivery legacies. This risks divergence between areas with strong rural frameworks supporting embedding of rural need in strategic plans, and areas where rural needs remain marginal, and responses undefined.⁷⁰

Rural need is a central theme within York and North Yorkshire's work on affordable housing. Its Devolution Deal includes a commitment to work with Homes England to unlock barriers to rural affordable housing delivery while the Strategic Place Partnership commits to speeding up affordable housing building in coastal, urban and rural communities. A rural delivery programme including support for a Rural Housing Enabler network is within the 10-year investment plan and the Brownfield Housing Fund prospectus prioritises affordable schemes and includes rural schemes in its current build programme.⁷¹

The North East's deeper Devolution Deal includes setting the strategic direction of the SAHP in partnership with Homes England through a Strategic Place Partnership which includes a strategic spatial priority for supporting coastal and rural ambitions as per the Local Growth Plan. Of the North East Strategic Place Partnership's six spatial priorities, one is for 'supporting coastal and rural growth ambitions'.⁷²

Transport

Transport accessibility is a significant challenge in rural areas, with rural transport declining to the point where car ownership is essential, leaving non-drivers isolated and opportunities out of reach. Over a fifth of rural bus routes no longer exist and public transport accounts for less than 1% of journeys in villages, hamlets and isolated rural areas. Private vehicles are essential for accessing services and employment and so rural populations are particularly exposed to rising petrol prices. Urban authorities currently spend more than 3.6 times more per head on subsidised routes than rural areas, and over half of small rural towns are at risk of becoming transport deserts.⁷³

Compared to cities, rural areas have benefited less from transport policy levers through devolution. Greater Manchester's Bee Network, for example, is an exemplar of an MSA which has streamlined the process for mayors to control bus services. The Devolution Act changes this by creating Strategic Authorities as the sole local transport authority (LTA) for their area, requiring them to create a Local Transport Plan and mandating that all constituent councils implement it.

The Bus Services Act 2025 aligns with the Devolution Act's extension of transport powers to Strategic Authorities which now have greater powers to streamline bus franchising and greater flexibility to modify services. This is particularly important for rural areas and could lower barriers for rural authorities to adopt franchising models tailored to dispersed populations and constrained institutional capacity. However, rural transport viability challenges remain significant. Sparse networks limit opportunities for cross-subsidy between profitable and unprofitable routes, constraining whole-network approaches. Larger, strategic transport authorities covering wider geographies may help address this by pooling revenue across broader areas.⁷⁴

While LTAs have discretion, the Local Transport Plan guidance focuses on towns and cities and gives little attention to the needs of rural areas in its prioritising of: faster bus services in larger towns and cities; better rail and coach services between larger towns and cities; and improving walking and cycling in towns and cities.⁷⁵

Greater Lincolnshire is creating and chairing a national Rural Transport Group backed by the Department for Transport to bring expertise from across the UK to lead the development of transport solutions for rural areas, including leading the delivery of an annual report to government.⁷⁶

Led by EMCCA, the 'Better Connected' strategy was launched in April 2026. It is a national UK transport initiative featuring a £6 million 'Mini-Switzerland' pilot in the East Midlands which aims to create a Swiss-style, integrated, hourly and clockwork public transport network in the Peak District's Hope Valley.

Digital connectivity

Availability of a decent, superfast, or gigabit-capable broadband service in the most rural areas is behind that of the rest of England. In 2025, around 13% of premises in smaller rural settlements could not access a superfast broadband service and 62% of rural premises had access to a gigabit-capable broadband service, compared to 90% of premises in urban areas. In smaller rural settlements, just half of all premises had access to gigabit-capable broadband.⁷⁷

Limited digital access makes it harder to retain skilled workers and grow businesses in rural areas, impacts the visitor economy and restricts the ability of businesses to thrive in remote and hybrid working environments.

The government's target is for gigabit broadband to be available to 99% of UK premises by 2032. Ofcom has estimated that if operators' stated network deployment plans are achieved, 88% of rural areas could have gigabit-capable broadband by May 2027 – with remaining premises requiring public funding.⁷⁸

The Shared Rural Network (SRN) is an over £1 billion initiative between the UK government and mobile operators EE, Three, VMO2 and Vodafone, designed to extend 4G coverage to 95% of the UK landmass by the end of 2025, but full rollout and operator compliance is not expected until 2027.

Criticisms and concerns have arisen from rural interests around Project Gigabit and increasing rural broadband and mobile coverage. Some Project Gigabit deployments have faced delays, with contracts being scaled back or terminated and reallocated to another provider. This has affected contracts covering Cheshire, Cornwall, Peak District, Mid West Shropshire, North Shropshire, and West Herefordshire and Forest of Dean.⁷⁹



The commitment to public funding being based on an ‘outside-in’ approach of connecting with the ‘hardest-to-reach’ premises first, starting with areas that do not have superfast broadband has waned – with the current “approach to rolling out gigabit risks perpetuating digital inequality across the UK”⁸⁰

The National Farmers’ Union’s (NFU) digital access survey, for example, found that 21% of respondents have broadband speeds under 10Mbps compared to the national average of less than 1%, nearly one out of ten respondents have no 4G or 5G access and 33% have access to fibre broadband – significantly below the UK average of 57%.⁸¹

While the UK government has primary responsibility for broadband policy and coverage targets, the delivery of broadband infrastructure projects often involves local authorities or devolved responsibilities, such as building regulations, planning and business rates. However, some MSAs such as the West Midlands’ deeper Devolution Deals include control over digital infrastructure spending.⁸²

East Midlands Local Growth Plan includes a priority to enhance digital connectivity, especially in rural areas and villages to allow for more people across the region to access jobs. It notes that rural areas experience significantly slower broadband speeds and reduced 4G/5G coverage than cities in the East Midlands, with some areas lacking service entirely. Seven areas fall below the national average for gigabit broadband availability with the most significant digital connectivity challenges in Derbyshire Dales (54.4%) and High Peak (64.2%). EMCCA states it will engage with Building Digital UK and regional partners about bringing fast and reliable broadband and better mobile coverage to the areas that need it most, including through Project Gigabit and the Shared Rural Network.

York and North Yorkshire’s rural communities are some of the worst-off areas for connectivity and its Local Growth Plan commits to exploring how it can accelerate digital connectivity with the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT) and local partners to accelerate digital connectivity.⁸³

Spotlight on the North East's Rural Taskforce

The North East Combined Authority's (NECA's) deeper Devolution Deal confers its status as a rural innovation trailblazer. The Deal includes the creation of a North East Coastal and Rural Taskforce ('the Taskforce'), a commitment to develop the North East Environmental Stewardship, Coastal and Rural Growth Investment Plan ('the Investment Plan') and collaboration with government to support rural infrastructure development, including stimulating housing and economic growth in rural areas.⁸⁴

The Taskforce, established with the UK Government, will operate until September 2027 and develop a set of 'Coastal and Rural Economy Transformation Blueprints' for the region. These blueprints will offer practical models, policy recommendations and insights that can be shared nationally. The Taskforce is applying a coastal and rural lens to regional and national policymaking working around three core themes: agriculture, land use and nature; climate adaptation and resilience; and coastal and rural communities.

One reason for the inclusion of rural and coastal issues in NECA's deeper Devolution Deal is the strong history of working on these issues within the region. Rural research, knowledge exchange and innovation is significant in the North East, with Newcastle University's Centre for Rural Economy and leadership of the National Innovation Centre for Rural Enterprise (NICRE).⁸⁵ NICRE works with stakeholders, from community groups to business support organisations and all levels of government, to find new ways of unlocking potential and supporting thriving rural businesses and communities.

NICRE is serving as the Secretariat for the Taskforce and created the evidence base⁸⁶ for the Investment Plan, building on a similar investment plan NICRE had created for the North of Tyne Combined Authority, which expanded in 2024 to become NECA. The Taskforce is aligned with the Investment Plan which allocates £17.5m between 2024 and 2029 to support nature recovery, rural and coastal business growth, and evidence and innovation. Having a robust, evidence-based Investment Plan for the region's rural and coastal communities is currently unique amongst MSAs.

Delivery of the Investment Plan is spread across NECA's portfolios, and the Taskforce is advisory and time-limited. While £17.5 million is a significant amount to support delivery of the Investment Plan, it represents less than 1% of NECA's overall budget of £2 – £2.5 billion. In this respect, although rural, coastal and environmental issues have a robust evidence base, investment strategy and profile, they are still at risk of being sidelined and deprioritised, especially once the Taskforce ends.

Harnessing the potential of devolution for rural England's prosperity: conclusions and recommendations

Agglomeration and its favouring of policy towards centres of population has prevailed in policymaking to the detriment of rural areas and economies. Devolution offers great potential to redress this imbalance, design policy tailored to rural circumstances and realise rural England's prosperity.

Our recommendations are directly relevant to current policy agendas as more rural communities become part of devolution arrangements and new guidance is developed for implementing the Devolution Act and Spatial Development Strategies. We focus on MSAs, though many recommendations are applicable to all SAs.

Recommendation 1

Hardwire rural proofing and exceptionalism into devolved governance

Debates about integrating rural considerations in policymaking often weigh down on one of two sides – rural proofing or rural exceptionalism – but both are needed. This includes both adjusting existing mechanisms (e.g. strategies, funding criteria, service design) and creating dedicated rural interventions such as Rural Housing Enablers.

A rural proofing capability should be embedded in MSA governance structures to ensure that a rural lens is applied across all portfolios and that portfolio holders are held to account for the reach, delivery and impact of MSA policies into rural areas.

Recommendation 2

Create robust statutory guidance on the Devolution Act's rural affairs competency

Statutory guidance for the Devolution Act should set expectations for how rural considerations are embedded across all MSA and EMSA activities. This could include:

- an annual impact review of EMSA activities on rural areas, e.g. through spend (e.g. Integrated Settlement, Mayoral Levies and Precepts), plans (e.g. Local Growth Plan) and general powers (e.g. Power to Convene and Duty to Collaborate)
- through using appropriate metrics and data to better reflect rural circumstances (see Recommendation 4)
- through governance arrangements, e.g. accountability arrangements for portfolio holders for rural issues, the role of a Rural Commissioner in championing rural issues and appointment of a rural prosperity advisory board including local stakeholders.

Recommendation 3

Include rural contexts and the natural environment as intrinsic to resilient, inclusive economic growth in MHCLG guidance for LGPs and SDS

There are gaps and inconsistencies between national and local policies such as the Land Use Framework and NPPF with Local Growth Plans, SDS and LNRS. Guidance for LGPs and SDS should articulate these and their interactions so they can work together to deliver inclusive and resilient growth. SDSs are the spatial expression of the LGP, so the guidance for both documents should be sensitive to rural contexts.

A resilient and naturally functioning environment is the bedrock of economic growth for future generations. The economic risks posed by climate change underscore the need for LGPs to include priorities and projects for economic growth which secure environmental resilience. Rural areas have a crucial role in providing the natural resources to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Rural populations should benefit from the economic growth opportunities in their areas through fair access to digital connectivity, transport and housing

Rural housing need risks being overlooked as SDSs are developed. To mitigate this, SDS guidance should include requirements for early engagement of rural stakeholders who understand local contexts and a robust, data-driven evidence base of rural need and opportunity.

Recommendation 4

Underpin LGPs, SDS and investments with spatially sensitive rural evidence and metrics

Guidance for SDS should include a requirement for SDS to be grounded in sustained and early engagement of rural stakeholders who understand local context and community-led local development from experience of delivering and engaging with previous rural development programmes such as LEADER and Rural Housing Enablers (RHE) services. This should acknowledge the need for, and results generated from, bottom-up capacity building of rural businesses and organisations.

Appropriate evidence which would better reflect local circumstances could include evidence about the higher costs of delivery in rural areas and of the need for eligibility criteria and investment intervention logic to work for rural areas by not excluding rural based on scale of intervention or expected outcomes. Evidence should also include the growth challenges and opportunities of rural business environments characterised by sparsity, physical/digital distance and constrained access to knowledge, markets, labour, support services and capital.

Suitable metrics could include:

- the role of micro and small businesses, which in rural areas account for a higher share of employment in registered businesses
- the resource needs of growth and role of natural capital in achieving climate- and biodiversity-resilient growth; the potential for traditional infrastructure providing nature and climate benefits (e.g. through Building with Nature Standards⁸⁷) and health (e.g. clear air, green space)
- diversity of business performance, productivity and entrepreneurship within areas
- data which is accessible at more granular levels for more locally targeted and sensitive measures and evaluation
- % households in fuel poverty; workplace-based incomes; house price to local earnings ratio; rates of seasonal employment; frequency of public transport to key services; distance to FE provider with range of courses; % premises superfast broadband; cost of living etc.
- capture social and environmental outcomes alongside economic ones.⁸⁸

Recommendation 5

Better align MSA powers and delivery mechanisms to deliver integrated agendas

Research by the Green Finance Institute⁸⁹ with Natural Capital East calls for a more coordinated approach and co-investment strategy to secure Suffolk and Norfolk's future economic growth – with lessons for all English regions. MSAs could consider:

- using the powers of compulsory purchase and/or set up a natural asset company to purchase land for nature recovery and climate resilience through nature-based solutions such as wetland creation.⁹⁰
- pooling resources and funds at MSA level to give greater potential to spatially target finance (e.g. ELM, BNG), match private finance and deliver LGP, SDS and LNRS.⁹¹
- developing their Adult Skills Strategies to direct support for skills development for the economic mix of land-based and visitor sectors with new, higher value sectors such as clean energy.

Recommendation 6

Monitor the Integrated Settlement for rural impact

The transition for EMSAs to the multi-year, single-pot funding Integrated Settlement could be a great positive for rural as this more effectively supports long-term planning and service integration in rural areas.

The conditions attached to the Integrated Settlements should give EMSAs flexibility to address rural needs – within a solid framework informed by evidence, monitoring and accountability.

An annual review of the Integrated Settlement across all competencies, including rural affairs, should be a requirement included in statutory guidance for EMSAs to assess the reality of what is happening on the ground. This will be enabled by the Devolution Act which establishes Local Scrutiny Committees for mayoral authorities, which will provide scrutiny of local public spending and decision making. Individual EMSA reviews should feed up into an overall review by HM Treasury.

Recommendation 7

Create a Roadmap for devolution so all areas of England can benefit fairly

An uneven pattern of regional power and development is emerging in England, which risks further empowering some areas and widening regional inequality, including of peripheral and rural areas. Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) is an important factor for some areas and is consuming much political and administrative resource, with the opportunities afforded by administrative stability, agglomeration and devolution being missed. Areas which are later to develop an SDS and which do so on a smaller geographic scale, for example, will not have access to the planning and revenue generating powers of an operational SDS covering a larger region.⁹²

The piecemeal, asymmetric and deals-based approach of devolution to-date is creating a patchwork of different levels of maturity, focus, funding, power and opportunity across the country. This works against principles of inclusive and resilient growth. The government should create a Devolution Roadmap setting out how and when all areas will benefit from the opportunities of devolution, and how the risks of not having universal English EMSA and MSA coverage will be mitigated.

Recommendation 8

Learn from the past

Criticisms that regional approaches to economic development overlooked rural areas is not new: the regional strategies which pre-dated the 2011 Localism Act which abolished regional development agencies and strategies were also accused of this.⁹³ As most MSAs with sizeable rural populations have been created since 2022 and are therefore relatively young, lessons about rural regional policymaking could include reviewing regional strategies and plans and their evaluations and learning from local authority officers and other rural stakeholders who were working in the field of rural development prior to 2011's Localism Act. Learning from other countries is also important, including Scotland's recent Rural Communities Policy Review⁹⁴ and international case studies (England, Finland and Canada) and the OECD Rural Policy Review of Ireland 2026.⁹⁵

Acknowledgements

The author would like to express sincere thanks to the following people for taking the time to share their thoughts and expertise in conversations over the course of developing this report. The content of the report is the sole responsibility of the author.

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Kerry	Booth	Chief Executive Officer	Rural Services Network
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