

# Somer Valley Stakeholder Workshop Report

Bath and North East Somerset Council

June 2023

## Quality information

<b>Prepared by</b>	<b>Checked by</b>	<b>Verified by</b>	<b>Approved by</b>
Niamh McDevitt Graduate Planner Lindsay Eastwell Placement Planner	Anthony Whitaker Principal Planner	Niltay Satchell Associate Urban Designer	Mark Hughes Director

## Revision History

<b>Revision</b>	<b>Revision date</b>	<b>Details</b>	<b>Authorized</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Position</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> Draft	24/01/2023		MH	Mark Hughes	Director
2 <sup>nd</sup> Draft	06/04/2023		MH	Mark Hughes	Director
Final	07/06/2023		MH	Mark Hughes	Director

## Distribution List

<b># Hard Copies</b>	<b>PDF Required</b>	<b>Association / Company Name</b>

**Prepared for:**

Bath and North East Somerset Council

**Prepared by:**

AECOM Limited  
Aldgate Tower  
2 Leman Street  
London E1 8FA  
United Kingdom  
aecom.com

© 2023 AECOM Limited. All Rights Reserved.

This document has been prepared by AECOM Limited ("AECOM") for sole use of our client (the "Client") in accordance with generally accepted consultancy principles, the budget for fees and the terms of reference agreed between AECOM and the Client. Any information provided by third parties and referred to herein has not been checked or verified by AECOM, unless otherwise expressly stated in the document. No third party may rely upon this document without the prior and express written agreement of AECOM.

## Table of Contents

1.	Introduction.....	5
2.	Methodology.....	5
3.	Outcomes.....	7

## Figures

No table of figures entries found.

## Tables

No table of figures entries found.

# 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) Council was successful in achieving a funding bid from West of England Combined Authority (WECA) to commission Strategic Planning work to assist in the formulation of its new Local Plan. AECOM has been commissioned to undertake the strategic planning commission for the Somer Valley area.
- 1.2 There are two phases of the studies, the Strategic Place Assessments which are high level and cover a broad area of search looking at character and capacity issues such as ecology, landscape, transport, historic, environment, and the development potential of particular locations. The second phase will produce updated or new Strategic Planning Frameworks for identified development areas. These are more detailed and place specific and provide the basis for allocating sites within the Local Plan.
- 1.3 B&NES stakeholder workshops were held in January and February 2023 to inform the Strategic Planning Frameworks for the key study areas.
- 1.4 This Stakeholder Workshop Report will outline the key findings from the workshop, broken down into themes, to ensure all views have been accurately recorded.

# 2. Methodology

- 2.1 A stakeholder workshop was held on the 6<sup>th</sup> of February 2023 to cover the areas within Somer Valley with various stakeholders including representatives from local third sector groups, town and parish councils, and local ward councillors.
- 2.2 The purpose of this workshop was;
  - Baseline: to outline and validate the teams understanding and assumptions on the context of area.
  - Future: to share and agree on the key priorities that the strategic place assessment should focus on and establish development objectives.
  - Synthesis: to share and agree on the key priorities.
- 2.3 The session started with a welcome and introduction from B&NES, followed by area context and technical analysis.
- 2.4 The participants were asked to discuss the following questions: “what do you value about the area?”, ideas on some key questions per placemaking themes (the questions are noted below under each theme heading), and “what are the key priorities for your area?”.
- 2.5 As per B&NES request following the internal workshop, the five placemaking themes were adjusted to separate ‘Thriving, Healthy and Inclusive Homes and Communities’ into ‘Housing and Shared Prosperity’, and ‘Healthy and Inclusive Communities’. Therefore, six placemaking themes were used at the stakeholder’s workshop. Two to three questions were posed per theme:
  - Zero Carbon and Climate Resilience;
    - What changes would you like to see to support you to live low carbon lifestyle?
    - What kinds of changes could create green jobs and are there barriers to businesses becoming more sustainable?
  - Moving Around;
    - What would enable you to walk, wheel or cycle and use public transport more?

- What activities, opportunities and services does your community need to access nearby?
- Natural Spaces and Biodiversity;
  - Are there any barriers to accessing nature, public space and high-quality green space?
  - How could the natural spaces be improved for people and wildlife in this area?
- Identity and Belonging;
  - What would the future community be like in the Somer Valley area? How do they live?
  - What is the future character and identity of this area?
- Housing and Shared Prosperity;
  - What is the housing need in this area and how can this be met?
  - What are the strengths of the local economy and what could be the new economic opportunities?
  - How has Covid-19 and the shift to greater levels of homeworking affected your area? Has it affected housing demand and/or local employment?
- Healthy and Inclusive Communities
  - How can communities in the Somer Valley area be supported for better health and wellbeing?
  - What would an inclusive and healthy place look and feel like in future?

2.6 The workshop participants gave feedback on their discussions and next steps were discussed.

## 3. Outcomes

- 3.1 The workshop structure outlined key themes and questions however sometimes the conversation swayed from these to include wider topics. Naturally, some themes and questions gained more comments and answers than others.

### Key values

- The following list of key values were identified by the workshop participants at the beginning of the workshop:
- Midsomer Norton, Radstock and the surrounding settlements are highly valued for their green spaces, heritage, and water.
- A substantial Public Right of Way network was highlighted as a key aspect valued by the community, as well as visitors who the landscape and walking routes attract.
- Many services are provided within the area, such as large shops and leisure activities.
- The coal mining heritage is another aspect the stakeholders spoke very highly of. Agricultural land surrounding the area was noted as an important heritage aspect.
- Given the rural setting, access to the countryside is one of the main attractive elements of this area.
- Proximity to Bath and Bristol makes the area desirable for residents, old and new.
- There are many places good for development opportunities, whether it be business or retail.
- The area and individual settlements have strong communities and excellent local charities.
- The area also has good quality schools.

### Theme 1: Zero Carbon and Climate Resilience

- 3.2 A big issue that new development faces, nationally, is the lack of **sustainable design and construction, renewable energy generation and green space** included within. Many new builds have very small gardens with limited growing space and no opportunity for future expansion.
- 3.3 It was suggested that there are many suitable locations locally that can provide space needed for renewable energy generation such as **solar and wind** farms. The scale of these, however, should be sensitive as to need and impact (including on the landscape).
- 3.4 Several other ideas were suggested for sustainable energy generation. This included the use of old mining shafts for ground sourced heat and the provision of sustainable energy pumps within the mines.
- 3.5 There was concern raised that sustainable energy such as solar could impact on the availability of high quality agricultural land. The idea was then suggested to use up as much roof space and brownfield land for solar as possible so that agricultural land use was minimised.
- 3.6 Offering grants or “**green incentives**” to encourage residents to install solar panels, or other measures to work towards carbon neutrality, and assist with retrofitting the historic building stock in the area.
- 3.7 New developments in the area may provide opportunity for green jobs, meaning local people can be employed during construction with shorter commutes needed (providing other alternatives to the private car). Additionally, local business parks hiring local residents would reduce the distance and hence the impact of car travel.

## Theme 2: Moving Around

- 3.8 The Somer Valley is a fairly populous area as a whole, however this **population is dispersed across many settlements**. Some are relatively well connected, whilst others prove challenging travelling to and from, particularly by public transport or active travel.
- 3.9 Due to **limited public transport**, residents find it difficult to travel around the area unless they travel via car. Many buses are well used during rush hour but stop at certain times or simply do not go where people need. Rural bus services are soon expected to lose funding, meaning people will struggle even more to access certain places.
- 3.10 There are bus links between Midsomer Norton and Paulton, however other settlements are left out of these links and are therefore more isolated.
- 3.11 Peasedown St John was also noted as a location where later development does not connect to older development by vehicle, with traffic needing to go to the bypass and then back in another route. It was noted that this can create accessibility challenges, but also that it incentivised making those trips on foot. However, the quality of footway links, including in terms of personal safety elements, could be better.
- 3.12 There is very limited funding in the area dedicated to public transport; many buses struggle to run as they rely heavily on usage and must be commercially viable.
- 3.13 The idea of Demand Responsive Transport (DRT) was floated, to connect more rural areas to key bus corridors, town centres, and facilities. It was seen as a good idea in principle, but with scepticism on commercial viability, and it would need to be accessible to all.
- 3.14 A key road running through the Somer Valley is the A367. This road, however, cuts through Radstock, bringing the traffic with it. Although it is a main road, many stakeholders noted congestion on the route to Bath due to the sheer amount of traffic.
- 3.15 Residents use the A367 to travel to Bath, Bristol, Midsomer Norton and Radstock, however it was described as being difficult to use due to congestion and volumes of traffic. Wells was mentioned as being easier to access than Bristol and Bath.
- 3.16 HGVs were stated as a major problem in the area due to the small, winding roads, and the already heavy traffic.
- 3.17 The main road through Radstock is inadequate, and the roundabout in the centre was stated as a priority for improvement in terms of the impact of traffic on the environment. Bristol Airport also contributes towards the traffic travelling through the area.
- 3.18 It was suggested by several stakeholders that a **bypass be constructed around the towns** to take traffic off the A367 through Radstock.
- 3.19 Residents of the Somer Valley are often forced to rely on their vehicles to access amenities such as shops, education, and healthcare. Services are dispersed all across the area, for example the hospital is in Paulton, golf club in Farrington Gurney, and big shops are in Midsomer Norton or even as far as Bath or Bristol, meaning that car ownership is practically a must.
- 3.20 Better rail links to Frome and other larger surrounding settlements were suggested.
- 3.21 Several attendees mentioned the **old railway lines** located across the area. It was suggested that these be revitalised and regenerated. For example, the railway station could become a bus station, and the railway lines **turned into cycleways**.
- 3.22 Due to the **topography of the area**, many struggle to actively travel within and between settlements. Efforts can be made to provide better accessibility and to improve the quality of these active travel networks.
- 3.23 Post-pandemic the **Public Right of Way network** is now more highly used than ever. Measures should be taken to ensure the footpaths are conserved and enhanced to provide better

accessibility and longevity. It was suggested that reducing traffic on some lanes may make them more suitable for cycling, and that this could improve **linkages between settlements**.

## Theme 3: Natural Spaces and Biodiversity

- 3.24 The area is surrounded by agricultural land and countryside, with Radstock being highly valued for its own green spaces. Agriculture plays an important role in the heritage of the area.
- 3.25 There is a project to connect up open spaces along the valley between Midsomer Norton and Radstock for multiple green infrastructure benefit.
- 3.26 It was stated that many residents are unhappy with the **allotment space** provided in new development. These developments often only provide small gardens and limited green or recreational space.
- 3.27 Whilst there are allotments in Bath, there is a very limited number in the Somer Valley area. Given the lack of space in new developments, it was highlighted that the need and popularity of allotment spaces is increasing.
- 3.28 The topography of the area with undulating landscape with steep valleys and plateaus and the Cam Brook and Wellow Brook is one of the key aspects of the area.
- 3.29 The river running through Radstock was highlighted as a feature that needs improvement, as well as all other water courses in the area. It was said that they are difficult to access, so this could be improved, and the river and its banks enhanced.
- 3.30 The importance of **access to the countryside** and small parcels of land within the settlements was stated as a must-have. These should be accessible for all.

## Theme 4: Identity and Belonging

- 3.31 The Somer Valley is highly valued for its **mining heritage**. This heritage has left the area with network of Public Rights of Way that connect the now disused mines and rich diversity in housing styles.
- 3.32 It also contains an important geographical feature, known as Limestone Link.
- 3.33 Although the heritage is rich, it was often mentioned that this **heritage is not celebrated enough and marketed or used to attract visitors or tourists**.
- 3.34 Radstock is home to the **local museum**. However, nobody knows about it unless they walk directly towards it. Efforts could be made to enhance and provide better advertising for it.
- 3.35 Several attendees suggested that the mining heritage might be fading, with original miners passing and local children having fewer connections to the roots. The question was asked if miners will still be remembered in twenty years' time.
- 3.36 Mining is not the only heritage in the area, with the Fosse Way travelling through and settlements dotted around the area, Peasedown St John and Wellow claim this Roman heritage as part of theirs.
- 3.37 **Each individual settlement has its own identity**. Peasedown was noted as having a good local centre, with a coffee shop, vet, two pubs, cricket club, post office, and community centre and a library. But Paulton was mentioned for having very few facilities, with those being a football club, library, kebab shop, and a Co-op shop.
- 3.38 Local shops in local centres relieve people of having to travel far to large supermarkets. It was stated that independence is needed in the smaller towns and villages due to difficulties accessing Midsomer Norton and Radstock.
- 3.39 However, whilst many of the settlements have small independent businesses, complaints were heard that the large Tesco supermarket just outside Midsomer Norton has taken trade from the local retailers and has even forced some to close due to loss of business.

- 3.40 As a result of many issues mentioned throughout the themes, the retail offers in Midsomer Norton and Radstock town centres are not as good as they once were, and the level of traffic worsens this problem both in terms of congestion and affecting the quality of the environment. Many residents of the surrounding area now choose to go to Frome, thanks to its recent regeneration, or Wells for their shopping and days out.
- 3.41 There is **conflict in the area over regeneration of jobs and industry being balanced with protection of heritage**, and determining what the priority should be.
- 3.42 Stakeholders recommended that the Somer Valley should be invested in, and further efforts be made to improve their own local centres through regeneration and the promotion of their many strong heritage assets. This regeneration plan should look at all aspects of the area instead of just focusing on a single settlement or street.
- 3.43 The industrial and natural history of the area should be preserved and could even be promoted to generate tourism. The generation of tourism could provide the means necessary for more facilities and activities, as well as income for further regeneration.

## Theme 5: Housing and Shared Prosperity

- 3.44 Stakeholders recognised that housing in the Somer Valley is **much more affordable than in Bath and other parts of the district**.
- 3.45 People who work in Bath or Bristol but cannot afford house prices there often choose to live in more affordable areas such as the Somer Valley, and therefore these settlements have become more popular for commuters and people starting families. This has increased over time as prices have increased and working from home has become more common.
- 3.46 Although the **demographics in the Somer Valley are changing**, there is a **considerable lack of smaller homes for first-time buyers or for the older generation looking to downsize**.
- 3.47 If new development is built, stakeholders argued that it should deliver affordable and starter homes, bungalows, and possibly some apartments, whether these be for single people, assisted living, or retired living is up for further discussion.
- 3.48 Large new developments in the villages such as Peasedown St John have almost doubled the settlement sizes in recent years.
- 3.49 An issue faced in the area, similarly to many other places, is that **not enough infrastructure is provided to support all this development**. There were specific mentions of congested affecting journeys to Bath and Bristol, especially during rush hour, and the lack of NHS healthcare nearby.
- 3.50 Complaints were made that Midsomer Norton receives the retail budget and Radstock receives the housing budget. This means that the areas are not balanced or as self-sufficient as they could be. Efforts should be made to address this issue and a fair approach should be had towards rebalancing the towns.
- 3.51 It was mentioned that, in Radstock particularly, there are many empty buildings that need repurposing. However, there are some challenges with these even though several are under local control.

## Theme 6: Healthy and Inclusive Communities

- 3.52 Many people in the area work in Bath and Bristol, with Midsomer Norton and Radstock providing some employment. Around 60% of Somer Valley residents commute for work.
- 3.53 An influx of new residents has made the area more vibrant and provides much needed diversity. **The opportunity to both live and work in the area provides optimism for the regeneration and economic success of the area.**

- 3.54 Villages such as Peasedown St John and Farrington Gurney do not provide sufficient employment opportunities as access difficulties make it impractical to travel from afar, and there is limited employment within the local retail centres.
- 3.55 As mentioned previously, **housing development is increasing but the infrastructure to support it is not**, partly as a result of the fact that the area has grown faster than anticipated in the development plan. There are local doctors and dentists in the area, however, as with many places across the country, these cannot cater for the entire local population. This means that some residents have to travel even further if they require care that they cannot get locally.
- 3.56 Outside the main settlements, there is an NHS hospital in Paulton, and a GP surgery as well as a private healthcare facility in Peasedown. There is a small number of GP surgeries within Radstock and Midsomer Norton. As the Paulton Memorial Hospital is only a cottage hospital and is not open 24 hours, residents have to travel as far as Bath or Glastonbury for further care. The issue of poor accessibility to public transport may then impact the ability to access the hospitals. Not very many residents actually work in the local hospital.
- 3.57 Many stakeholders mentioned that there is now a lack of skills for enterprise, meaning there is little local support to “skill-up” people to help run businesses. Due to a wider range of opportunities, many young people now leave the area and do not return until much later on in life, if at all.
- 3.58 If the **Enterprise Zone** is to be successful and be expanded in the future, efforts should be made to provide detail in order for locals to understand and appreciate its benefits.
- 3.59 One thing the Somer Valley and all other study areas share is their **sense of community**. There are many charities and volunteer services who help the area stay as attractive and inclusive as it is. Efforts should be made to strengthen this community and preserve the spirit and generosity of locals.
- 3.60 However, the area also has **poor digital connectivity**, as well as a lack of community spaces. Policies should take a strategic approach to enable and provide services which the community are much in need of.
- 3.61 Suggestions were made for the construction, or redevelopment, of a **community office hub** which could provide locals with a place to study, read, or work if they are unable to do so at home. Given the abundance of community spirit, it would supposedly not be difficult to run.

## Priorities

- 3.62 Building on the discussion under each theme above, the following list of priorities were identified at the workshop:
- Transport networks desperately need improvement in the area. This includes public transport links like buses and train, as well as active travel routes.
  - Traffic needs to be taken away from the settlement areas.
  - Development should be delivered with sustainability and character of the area in mind.
  - Development should also deliver affordable homes and should not be constructed until the adequate infrastructure has been provided to support it.
  - Enhancement and promotion of the local heritage and accessibility within the countryside.
  - The improvement and provision of employment opportunities within the area, as well as the improvement and provision of better essential infrastructure such as healthcare facilities.
  - A regeneration strategy for the town centres to attract employment, footfall and possibly tourism.
  - Promotion and preservation of the community aspect, whether this be funding for community hubs or support for local charities and youth activities.

