



Wider B&NES Business Plan

June 2006

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Executive Summary

1.1 Introduction

Bath and North East Somerset (B&NES) is one of the most attractive areas in the UK, offering a combination of the City of Bath with World Heritage Site status; attractive towns and villages; as well as rolling countryside. Much of this countryside is designated as greenbelt but also includes a number of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore, the area has become a sought after residential location making B&NES one of the ten most expensive housing Authorities in the UK.

It is however impossible to consider B&NES as a single uniform area. Housing pressure is at its greatest in the City of Bath. Elsewhere greenbelt restricts development across much of the Local Authority whilst settlements to the West are increasingly influenced by the growth of Bristol. Pressure on land is least prevalent in the South of the Authority but here there are challenges relating to the provision of local employment.

The strength of the housing market and the overall character of the area results in a number of tensions. A resident population requires employment opportunities and the provision of services. Any of the changes in housing provision and employment also impact on transport needs.

Essentially these tensions relate to the economic future and use of land across B&NES. This document seeks to address these tensions.

1.2 Context

In recent years there have been large scale changes to the frameworks which help determine regional development. The decisions concerning future economic direction; transport requirements; and overall land use are increasingly undertaken at a regional level through the creation of a number of interlocking strategies:

- Regional Economic Strategy
- Regional Spatial Strategy
- Regional Transport Strategy

Prior to these changes in strategic approach, the Local Authority was responsible for establishing a Local Plan which was the statutory planning document for the area. Despite all the changes at the regional level, the principal requirement placed upon the Local Authority remains the requirement to produce a Local Development Document. This document sets out detailed land use categories for the Local Authority.

B&NES, however, has taken a more far-sighted and proactive approach in its response to these new frameworks of regional development. B&NES has worked with Ernst & Young to determine a long term vision for the Local Authority which recognises the future direction of the overall region. This approach provides clarity for the development of B&NES; allows opportunities to be pursued more proactively; and ensures that any constraints have been identified at an early stage. By providing a considered overall direction, the vision provides a framework against which proposed developments may be considered and prioritised.

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This document considers the area of NE Somerset outside of the City of Bath. As such the document specifically considers the towns of Keynsham, Midsomer Norton and Radstock as well as the broader rural communities and the suburbs of Bath. The document examines the current socio-economic position of the area and provides an analysis in terms of future threats and opportunities before making a number of recommendations.

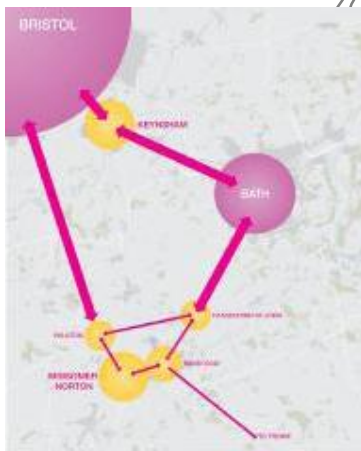
The analysis is presented in terms of a detailed assessment and a spatial outcome. In addition a financial model has been prepared for the internal use of the Council. The overall work therefore represents a Business Plan for the wider B&NES area. This work follows on from a similar document prepared for the City of Bath in 2005 (Bath Business Plan). Some of the findings of the Bath Business Plan are combined with this document in later chapters to provide an overarching and cohesive vision.

1.3 Current Situation and Market Trends

The Business Plan for the Wider B&NES Area inevitably focuses on those areas in need of improvement and draws attention to some of the differences between the various areas of the Authority. There are however many characteristics of the Authority which are worthy of celebration and in some cases, it has been the preoccupation of certain communities on their differences rather than their broad similarities, which have created an Authority which has struggled to address some of the areas of greatest need.

One of the reasons for the differences between the communities within B&NES is that each of the larger settlements lie on the boundary of the Local Authority and are influenced by different urban areas. This is somewhat unusual for a City Authority where all the settlements usually have a direct functional relationship with the Primary Urban Area. In B&NES there are a number of suburban areas and villages influenced primarily by Bath; but Radstock and Midsomer Norton are influenced not only by Bath but also partly by Frome, Trowbridge and Bristol; whilst Keynsham is strongly influenced by Bristol.

This is illustrated below:



Source: David Lock Associates

Map of B&NES Area



Pattern of Development



Source: David Lock Associates

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Each of the areas of the Authority is now considered in turn.

Keynsham

Keynsham is a town of opportunity. Despite its proximity to Bristol, the town retains a distinct form and is surrounded by attractive greenbelt. The town centre has attractive parkland, leisure facilities and some river frontage whilst neighbouring Saltford has a marina and associated river uses.

Transport provision in the town is reasonable with a bi-pass for the town (A4) which links into the Bristol ring road and then on to the M32/M4. The town is well connected by bus and has a, albeit infrequent, heavy rail service to Bristol, Bath and beyond.

The town is at virtually full employment although there is a large amount of out-commuting to Bristol and also Bath. On the edge of Keynsham, Cadbury has occupied its own campus style development since the 1920s and remains the largest private sector employer in the town.

In addition to these attributes, the town provides high quality housing, community activities and schooling and has a low crime rate.

Overall, therefore, there is much to commend Keynsham as a high quality residential area or as a location for business and yet the town is not recognised as an aspirational place. The principal reason for this is the nature of the town centre. The town centre is linear in form with a large number of retail units, but much of the High Street is dated in appearance. At the centre is the Town Hall and its associated retail parade. This development is unattractive, somewhat run down and its central position results in a disproportionate impact on the whole.

The overall character of the High Street is also somewhat price conscious but has a number of independent retailers. This character has been influenced by the demographic of Keynsham, which is elderly in nature. In fact Keynsham has a demographic structure which is comparable to the retirement locations of Bournemouth or Torbay. Retail use in Keynsham is consequently a daily but low spend activity.

The priorities for Keynsham within this report therefore relate primarily to the town centre.

Midsomer Norton & Radstock

Midsomer Norton, Radstock and the associated settlements of Paulton and Peasedown St. John face more challenges than the other areas of B&NES. They each have distinct centres but are sufficiently close together to result in competition between retail activity and have some shared functions. Independently, the towns are of insufficient scale to be recognised at a Regional level and are therefore broadly over-looked in the various regional strategy documents.

The towns were former mining settlements working the North Somerset coalfield and have since developed a strong paper, packaging and printing sector. The settlements are rather over-dependent on this sector however and in recent months one of the largest companies, Polestar, has moved out of the area.

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No doubt related to the industrial history of the towns, the average wage levels are low in comparison with the remainder of B&NES. The ability to shift this position in the short term will however be affected by the low skill attainment within the settlements. Whilst education provision has improved within recent years, the conundrum of a limited variety of employment; low skills attainment; and low wages is a problem and is particularly entrenched in some parts of the community. Overall it is manifested through the price conscious high street at Midsomer Norton, a decline in retail activity in Radstock and the lowest house prices in B&NES.

The attraction of new employment is hampered by the relative isolation of the area. Transport links are limited to single carriageway roads resulting in slow peak time travel to Bath and Bristol and limited access to the motorways.

The difficulties may be exaggerated by the apparent political discord between Bath and Norton Radstock. The challenges facing the area are no different to those facing numerous market towns across the UK and on a positive note the area remains at close to full employment and is recognised as providing a high quality residential environment with good access to open space. Midsomer Norton has a clear role as the District Centre and in recent years has attracted a number of National multiple retailers; Paulton and Peasedown St. John have employment land available although the land at Paulton is the result of a recent printing closure. Radstock meanwhile has a less clear function but does have a developing heritage and arts offer within an attractive town centre which is otherwise dominated by the local Co-operative Society retail units (Radco and their separate Homewares unit).

The primary objective for this area of B&NES is to generate greater employment opportunities and this will require the focus of all the agencies concerned.

Rural Areas

It is difficult to generalise about the rural areas of the Authority. On the whole they provide high quality housing for commuters to the urban centres, although there remains an agricultural base some of which provides local produce and also helps to maintain the character of the rural communities.

In common with the rest of the UK, there is pressure on the provision of services to the rural centres and in some cases shops are closing and public transport links are limited. This is creating further momentum in the shift in function of the rural areas towards predominantly commuter based communities. This shift is also driving up the price of housing and there is a real risk that within a generation the rural communities of B&NES will simply become desirable, but essentially sterile commuter villages. Social exclusion for the poorly paid or immobile is a significant issue in the rural villages.

Bath Suburbs

There is tremendous pressure on land use in Bath created by economic growth; geography; and the tightly drawn greenbelt. Commuting from the outlying areas creates traffic congestion at peak times and some 'rat running' through residential areas. Perhaps more importantly, the

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convergence of the A4/A36/A46 forces HGV movements across the City creating road safety; pollution; and wider environmental issues.

Across the Bath suburbs there are a number of areas of transition. Pressure on land use is threatening to displace businesses undertaking the local and sub-regional provision of services. These businesses are typically based along the radial routes such as the Lower Bristol Road, Upper Bristol Road, London Road and Wellsway. There is a need to identify alternative accommodation opportunities for local businesses and workshop space for those businesses under pressure.

Nor are the Bath suburbs homogenous in nature. The City has some areas of very high quality, high value and low density housing, but similarly there are areas of lower quality residential dwellings where there is a high density of development. In areas such as London Road and Twerton there are significant social needs and pressure on the provision of the community services. Further development at Bath Western Riverside, Twerton and to the South of the City may increase the pressure on these services. Additionally, in addressing the need to increase the amount of housing and the density of development in Bath, it must be recognised that there will remain a requirement for the provision of leisure and further green space.

There are also local issues to resolve such as the provision of convenience retail to relieve pressure on journeys into the City Centre especially if the urban area is extended into the greenbelt and into the South of Bath (see below). There is a pressure for an additional large scale grocery store within the Southern Bath suburbs.

1.4 Regional Spatial Strategy

In order for any Business Plan to address the issues raised, there is a need for it to be achievable against the principles and findings of the Regional Spatial Strategy (RSS). Although currently at draft stage (in June 2006) the over-riding principle within the RSS is a need for future development to be sustainable.

The RSS expects economic growth and the pressure for further housing in the sub-region of the West of England to continue. The RSS argues that the economic growth for the South West is likely to take place within the Principal Urban Areas (PUAs) which include Bath, but will be limited in the other towns within B&NES. Given the expected economic growth of Bath, the RSS also states that most of the housing required should also be developed within the City of Bath. Development in this manner will limit growth in commuting which the RSS sees as unsustainable. This position is reinforced by an assertion that in order to supply the required housing, it is better to extend Bath into the greenbelt rather than jump the greenbelt and extend housing in the existing settlements of Midsomer Norton, Radstock or Keynsham.

The RSS then makes provision for the modest development of other towns within B&NES but states that this development should be in a manner in keeping with the economic importance and scale of employment opportunities within those towns. This policy is intended to limit damaging outbound commuting.

Finally the RSS seeks to limit rural development except to fulfil any limited requirements of existing local enterprise; or pressing housing needs for the rural communities themselves.

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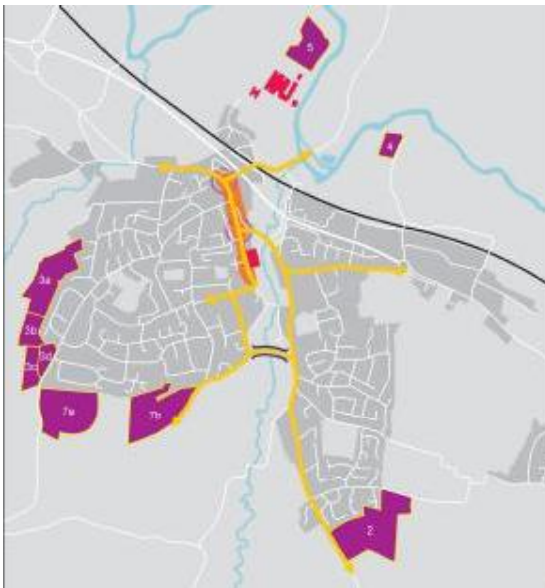
To put this into context for B&NES, the most significant aspects of the RSS are the apparent need to extend the urban area into the greenbelt in order to meet the aggressive housing projections of the RSS; and the limitation on future development within Norton Radstock unless more employment opportunities can be developed.

1.5 Conclusions

This Business Plan provides a solution in keeping with the principles of the RSS (although the growth projections used within the document appear to be aggressive and there is no clear calculation provided which translates the economic growth forecasts into housing need). With this in mind, there appears to be no immediate requirement for Bath to plan to develop into the greenbelt and there are a number of other development opportunities which can take place prior to any requirement to develop the greenbelt. By undertaking development in this manner, it is hoped to preserve the boundary of the greenbelt until the validity of the aggressive RSS growth forecasts are clearer.

Conclusions for each area of B&NES are set out in turn.

Keynsham



One interpretation of development potential of Keynsham. - Source: David Lock Associates

The vision is for Keynsham to be developed into an aspirational residential town. As a well defined settlement between the growing Cities of Bristol and Bath, Keynsham will continue to serve a function as a commuter town but there are sufficient opportunities to allocate and redevelop employment land to ensure that any further residential development can be balanced with employment growth.

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It is important to ensure that Keynsham reinforces its current employment base as part of this strategy. The town has a strong element of out-commuting; and it is the ageing population which currently supports the High Street. Without further employment opportunity within the town there is a risk that the vibrancy of the centre will diminish as the demographic shifts.

The position of the town between Bath and Bristol also results in the retail function of Keynsham being forced to compete with the larger conurbations. As a result it is important that Keynsham remains extremely accessible for shopping visits with cheap and available car-parking and retains its independent and differentiated offer. There is the opportunity to further differentiate the offer by increasing the prominence of the Fair Trade status and the farmers' market.

The main priority in the development of Keynsham must be a focus on the town centre. The decaying linear High Street currently has a strongly detrimental impact on the overall perception of the town. At the centre of the High Street is the unattractive Town Hall development which includes a parade of shops, a library, offices and a car park. This development is owned by B&NES and the majority of leases on the facility are nearing expiry. As a result, there is a tremendous opportunity for B&NES to completely remodel the office and retail content in a more attractive manner that will improve the overall facilities on offer.

Any planning gain contributions gained from the Town Hall redevelopment could be utilised to reduce the impact of traffic on the High Street and remodel the streetscape with planting and road calming measures. It is also suggested that there is a common bus terminus within the town which could be located along Ashton Way.

As part of the plans for the town centre, the Charlton Road site is being marketed by B&NES as a location for a grocery multiple development. This Business Plan recognises that there is some leakage of retail expenditure from the town, but the development of a large food store in Charlton Road is not seen as offering anything to encourage further footfall along the High Street. The Town Hall re-development and the existing Somerfield store offer the best potential for an improved foodstore offer. It is therefore proposed that Charlton Road is redeveloped for a mix of office and residential bringing more vibrancy into the town centre.

Finally, the southern end of the town centre is dominated by the Riverside office development which is partially occupied by B&NES and partially vacant. B&NES has an aspiration to vacate these offices as part of their rationalisation. Such a move will allow a redevelopment of the offices. The site configuration favours a mix of commercial and residential space and the commercial space will be important in continuing to generate weekday footfall for the town centre.

Outside of the town centre there are some further opportunities to increase the provision of housing and create employment opportunities. These essentially create a balance between housing growth and employment and preserve the overall character of the town. Most importantly, the greenbelt between the town and both Bristol and Saltford should be preserved. Available opportunities are therefore essentially employment land to the North of the railway line and residential opportunities to the South of the town.

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Midsomer Norton & Radstock

One interpretation of development potential of Midsomer Norton & Radstock - Source: David Lock Associates

Midsomer Norton and Radstock are strongly developed communities in the south of the Authority but suffer from low skill levels and low average wages. The key to breaking this cycle of relatively poor economic performance is to attract greater levels of employment with a wider diversity of job opportunities. In fact in the longer term, current planning policy will dictate that without greater levels of employment, further opportunities for housing development will be restricted. With restricted housing, given the shift to smaller households, the area would then suffer a decrease in population with a resultant spiral of social and economic decline for the remaining community.

As a result, Norton Radstock must be recognised as the economic priority area of the Local Authority area and the key issue being the attraction of more employers to ensure that the communities continue to thrive and gain greater opportunities.

One of the difficulties, however, in addressing the needs of Midsomer Norton, Radstock and the associated settlements is that on a regional scale, each of the settlements are relatively insignificant. This report therefore considers a broader definition of Norton Radstock and suggests that, at least presentationally, better critical mass and recognition is gained from considering a combination of Midsomer Norton, Paulton, Peasedown St. John and Radstock.

By considering the area in this manner, there is an opportunity to reach a scale which is considered important in establishing sub-regional priorities. There is also an opportunity to focus specific functions across a relatively small geographic area whereas without such a functional identity, competition between settlements in close proximity may undermine overall success.

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On this basis, Midsomer Norton has established itself as the clear District Centre and in recent years has attracted a number of National multiple retailers. With more support for consolidation of ownerships on the High Street, some minor public realm investment and a clear focus to reinforce retail within Midsomer Norton there is the opportunity for further improvement.

Paulton has become an increasingly residential village and its restricted access is likely to reinforce this classification. The proximity of Paulton to Midsomer Norton and the Tesco store at Old Mills restricts the attractiveness of the village to other retailers, but the former Polestar site and the retention of the hospital (in favour of Keynsham) provides some employment opportunities. The connections of Paulton and the configuration of the Polestar site mean that future employment opportunities can be achieved but will be relatively limited in scale.

Peasedown St. John can become an important employment generator for the settlements. Its relative proximity to Bath and the accepted brand name of 'Bath Business Park' has begun to result in this location drawing interest from Bath where employment sites are limited. The current developers are confident of securing a number of significant pre-lets in the next few months (at June 2006) as well as the likelihood that they will develop some speculative units. There is an opportunity for B&NES to pro-actively support this opportunity through its planning and economic development departments. This may begin to stretch the economic success of the Authority to the South.

It is more difficult to identify a clear identity and sustainable future for Radstock despite its position as a former lead settlement within the area. The pre-eminence and established form of the Midsomer Norton High Street and its retail provision is an important economic centre, and any challenge from Radstock will diminish the overall impact for the whole Norton Radstock area. Radstock has a need for local retail provision but struggles to support the wider number of units currently provided. If it were not for the large Co-operative presence, the centre would contain little more than a local community convenience retail offer.

Radstock does have a number of strengths although these are currently somewhat disjointed. The attractiveness of the centre; the mining heritage museum; the college; convergence of important routes; strength of the local community; amenity space; and the access to the surrounding countryside through footpaths and cycle paths are all important. There is also a recognised arts group within the town.

There is also the opportunity for Radstock to build on these strengths by unifying a number of the current features within a flagship project for B&NES. One possible solution would be to focus the sustainability agenda of B&NES on Radstock with a National exemplar project backed by the community and the college. One important but perhaps overlooked participant in any such scheme could be the Co-operative Society. At the heart of the Co-operative Society's beliefs are the needs to serve the community and trade ethically. Radco have indicated their willingness to become more engaged in any strategy for the town and given their dominance and land ownership this is essential for the success of any vision for Radstock.

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Rural Areas

The main conclusion in respect of the rural areas of B&NES is to restrict further development. The entire character of B&NES is determined by the relationship between the towns, villages and countryside.

As pressure on land increases, there is a need to consider sustainability of development. Rural development is the least sustainable of all the options in B&NES. Whilst in some cases rural settlements may be closer to Bath or Bristol than alternative sites in Norton Radstock, the nature of rural settlements is that they are dependent on car journeys, not simply for commuting, but also for gaining access to local services and leisure activities. There is also the greater difficulty for B&NES in the provision of adequate services to these rural settlements.

There is some need for the provision of some housing in the rural areas for without some residential development, these communities will decline in population as households get smaller. Any decline in population will cause the existing limited service provision to diminish further. The report has also already identified the clear affordability issues in the rural areas and the large scale out-commuting.

The conclusion, therefore, is that there is a need for limited housing development in some of the rural villages. Every effort is needed to ensure that this is housing for the community and not rural executive housing to generate more out-commuting. In those villages where there is public transport provision, it is proposed that the level of affordable housing sought should be greater level than the average ratio for the Authority.

There is also the likelihood that the proposed urban extension for Bristol will encroach into the rural villages towards the West of B&NES. The need for such an urban extension will be determined by the vision for the Greater Bristol area but any such urban extension will require the improvement of transport links (see below) because further pressure and congestion on the A37 into Bristol is likely to increase the isolation of Norton Radstock and also, potentially, displace HGV traffic which may then seek to travel through Bath.

Bath Suburbs

The main issues for the suburbs of Bath relate to the intensity of land use and transport pressure along the major radial routes. This creates an unpleasant environment along most of the major corridors into Bath (Upper and particularly Lower Bristol Road; Wellsway; and London Road). The problem of HGV traffic using the trunk routes is exacerbated by the employment uses along these routes creating their own commercial traffic movements.

There is a need to encourage light manufacturing and other workshop based commercial activity to move away from the centre of Bath in order to reduce pressure on these routes. If such an approach is to be undertaken, there must be a suitable alternative. Alternative sites do exist in Peasedown and Keynsham and a more proactive approach is needed to present these opportunities to businesses. In the future any development in the South of Bath – at Foxhill or in a southern urban extension must also have some employment site provision.

As residential density increases in the South of the City there will also be the requirement to create a small convenience retail centre.

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The solutions for the Bath suburbs and indeed much of the Authority are intrinsically linked to the provision of transport. This is considered below.

Transport

The economic fortunes of Norton Radstock have been hampered by poor transport links. Similarly the convergence of major routes in Bath has resulted in a deteriorating living environment for some of the Bath suburban area. There is also an important road safety aspect for the rural villages where road safety targets have been missed.

In most Cities a ring road helps solve the problems of traffic convergence and provides better accessed sites for businesses which were historically located on radial routes. A ring road cannot be provided in Bath for reasons of cost, topology and the surrounding environment.

The main issue for B&NES however is not road access from outlying areas into Bath; the most important issue relates to access to the motorway network. Norton Radstock is hampered in attracting businesses because of the time taken to reach the motorway. Furthermore the roads within B&NES are adversely affected by HGVs moving through the Authority to reach / leave the M4 at junction 18. One previously examined plan was to create a better link between A36/A46 and whilst this would help the congestion situation within the City of Bath, it would not necessarily help improve journey times or therefore the accessibility of Norton Radstock. It is also likely to remain politically impossible to achieve.

There is an alternative transport solution. The Regional Spatial Strategy makes a strong case for the need for improved infrastructure if the growth of the sub-region is to be achieved. The road scheme which has broadest agreement within the sub-region is the completion of the Bristol ring road (to the South). The completion of this ring road to a high standard will be important to allow the increase in residential capacity in the Bristol urban extension. There is an opportunity through this plan for B&NES to fully support the Bristol ring road if the scheme includes improved links to the south of the B&NES Authority creating faster motorway access for Norton Radstock whilst at the same time removing some HGV pressure on Bath.

Within the Authority there is some disquiet at the length of time taken to make commuter journeys into Bath. This issue appears to have gained undue prominence. The commuter pressure on the roads is no more significant than in other locations and indeed the 'rush hour' falls over a fairly narrow period. As such, whilst commuter traffic is inconvenient, at the current level, schemes to alleviate the problem are unlikely to gain Central Government support.

There is, however, a need to improve some of the commuter bus routes. At present the lack of dedicated lanes or priorities for buses results in commuter bus journeys taking at least as long as a similar car journey. This provides no incentive for car users to catch the bus. Future road improvements need to build in bus lanes and bus priority schemes for use at peak times where space can be made available. A second commuter bus improvement would be better parking provision at the point of bus departure (within Radstock or Midsomer Norton). These schemes would allow the bus to present a genuine alternative to car borne commuter journeys.

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1.6 Recommendations

The Business Plan makes a number of practical and physical recommendations. The recommendations within this Executive Summary are the priorities for B&NES as a result of combining the Bath Business Plan with the Wider B&NES Business Plan. This results in four priorities for B&NES which are considered *equally* important.

- Ensure that the *entire* Bath Western Riverside (BWR) scheme is completed effectively and within the next ten years.

The BWR scheme represents the largest contribution to the provision of housing, and especially affordable housing, within B&NES. The provision of affordable housing in particular is a significant issue for the Authority. B&NES must meet its housing targets within the next ten years to reduce the need to make any immediate decision on development into the greenbelt. Any change in the economic landscape during the next ten years may then reduce the need for additional housing and alleviate the pressure to develop into the greenbelt.

- Ensure that the Southgate scheme is completed as quickly as possible and the migration of retailers with the City is managed proactively.

Much of the wealth creation in Bath is based on the visitor economy. This is not simply from tourist visitors but also pure retail visits. As consumer tastes change, the retail experience is an increasingly important aspect of any visit. The Southgate redevelopment allows Bath to regenerate a particularly unattractive area of the City and create modern retail units which will not only improve multiple retailer provision but will also allow more independent or higher value retailers to trade at the Northern end of the retail spine.

The development is required urgently to help arrest the decline in visitor numbers but also to preserve Bath's position as a retail destination of choice in the sub-region against the soon to be completed Bristol Broadmead scheme.

- Complete an attractive retail redevelopment of the Town Hall site in Keynsham.

Keynsham has an opportunity to become recognised as a high quality residential location but at present the town centre is unattractive and this impacts on the overall perception of the town. In the coming years the demographic of Keynsham will shift and this, combined with the growth of Bristol (and Bath), will create an opportunity to increase the wealth of Keynsham. The town could benefit from this increase in wealth, capturing it within by offering distinctive and attractive retail; or it could leak away to Longfield Green and Bristol. The latter would eventually lead to Keynsham becoming more indistinct within suburban Bristol.

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- Undertake more proactive work and place a focus on generating the employment provision within Norton Radstock.

Greater wealth generation is required in the south of the Authority. Without a focus on greater employment opportunities the risk is that there will be increased out-commuting, less planning acceptance for new housing, a declining population and diminishing support for retail or community facilities.

The full list of recommendations arising from the wider B&NES Business Plan is provided at the end of the complete report.

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