



Meld. St. 27 (2022–2023) Report to the Storting (white paper)

A good life throughout Norway – regional and rural policy for the future



Meld. St. 27 (2022–2023) Report to the Storting (white paper) Chapter 1

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approved in the Council of State on the same date.
(Støre Government)*

1 It's about Norway

Small differences and a high level of trust between people are the success factors behind the Norwegian nation state. Equal opportunities regardless of where people live is a prerequisite for maintaining trust, safety and cohesion in our country. An active regional and rural policy is needed to give people equal opportunities for development throughout the country.

For the Government, it is crucial that people can live, work and enjoy a good life throughout Norway. This white paper is based on the regional and rural policy goals and initiatives contained in the Hurdal Platform¹, and explains how the Government will fulfil the regional and rural policy promises in the platform. Another important basis for the report is the recommendations from the Rural Demography Committee,² Rural Business and Industry Committee³ and Youth Panel on Rural Development.⁴ The Rural Demography

Committee has analysed the consequences of the demographic challenges in rural areas. The Rural Business and Industry Committee has assessed the challenges for business and industry in rural areas, and the Youth Panel on Rural Development has given advice on what the future regional and rural policy should be.

We need innovative thinking about regional and rural policy and the important role rural areas play in Norwegian society. People who have experienced the centralisation of basic services, the imposition of structures they do not want, or felt lack of control over the development of their municipality, shall notice a positive change. This report therefore highlights the most important recommendations from the committees and the panel and outlines how the Government will follow up on them. We will ensure that people all over the country have good services close to where they live, more jobs, good infrastructure and a variety of cultural offerings. Local communities will be allowed to make more decisions themselves. In this way, people will optimistically be able to be involved in building their local community. Ultimately, it's about being able to live a good life throughout Norway.

To facilitate a population increase in rural municipalities, the Government will pursue a policy that affects all the areas that are important for people to be able to live a good life. Rural and regional policy is therefore a broad and long-term task for the Government. With an active and

¹ The platform for the government based on the Labor Party and the Center Party.

² Official Norwegian Reports (NOU) 2020: 15 *Det handler om Norge – utredning om konsekvenser av demografifordringer i distriktene*. [It's about Norway – report on the consequences of demographic challenges in rural areas.]

³ Official Norwegian Reports (NOU) 2020: 12 *Næringslivets betydning for levende og bærekraftige lokalsamfunn*. [The importance of business and industry for vibrant and sustainable local communities.]

⁴ Centre of Competence on Rural Development (2021) *10 råd frå ungdommens distriktspanel*. [Ten recommendations from the Youth Panel on Rural Development] <https://distriktssenteret.no/ungdommens-distriktspanel/>

targeted policy, the Government believes that we have good conditions for increased settlement in rural areas, because:

- Proximity to nature, experiences and close-knit local communities make rural areas attractive and unique. Experience from the coronavirus epidemic shows that many people have changed their housing preferences and want a life outside the big cities. By developing and building on distinctive local features, rural areas can be attractive places to settle and work in the future.
- The digital evolution means that many work tasks and services are becoming place-independent, which can lead to new service solutions.
- Innovation in the public sector, the trust reform and pilot schemes can help to maintain the capacity and provision of services in small municipalities.
- The green shift is largely based on resources in rural areas, which can provide a new incentive for many rural municipalities, both because it generates greater income and because it leads to greater scope in the labour market.
- Decentralised and flexible education makes it easier for young people to settle in rural areas, and can attract young students from many parts of the country. Young people are the future. The most important thing for future development in Rural Norway is that young people thrive and have a good life in rural areas.

1.1 Goals for regional and rural policy

The Government's goals for rural and regional policy are that people should be able to live a good life throughout Norway, that all local communities should have room for development and creation of value, and that the population should increase in rural municipalities. The Government will work to ensure that people have access to work, housing and good services close to where they live. The Government will facilitate safe, sustainable and vibrant local communities throughout the country through decentralised solutions.

Norway is a diverse country rich in human and natural resources. The Government wants to preserve and develop this diversity. A prerequisite for this is that people live and work throughout the country. The Government therefore wants all citizens, regardless of where they live, to have a good range of services in their neigh-

bourhood. Good basic services provide safety and security in everyday life. As a nation, it is important for Norway that people live throughout the country. We are reminded of this in times of crisis and war.

The Government will ensure the provision of services close to where people live, more jobs, good digital and physical infrastructure and a variety of cultural offerings. The public sector will be present throughout the country, and employees will be given more trust and more time for those who receive services. Municipalities must have the resources, capacity and freedom of action to perform welfare tasks. The public sector also has an important role to play in the work to achieve the ambitious climate goals.

Rural municipalities can be defined as municipalities at the lowest centrality levels (see Box 1.2). The Government's goal is for the total population to increase in rural municipalities at centrality levels 4, 5 and 6. Through its regional and rural policy, the Government will facilitate growth in rural municipalities at these levels of centrality. It is also important to prevent entire regions from experiencing a decline in population over time. Through an active regional and rural policy, the Government will contribute to reversing the trend in such areas. At the same time, even more central municipalities may have larger or smaller areas with rural challenges. We therefore need a differentiated policy adapted to the challenges in different municipalities. For the Government, it is important to facilitate balanced development and ensure that growth and development are facilitated in areas with weak or negative population growth.

To deliver good services, we need people with the right skills. The Government is therefore working for a decentralised education system that is relevant and future-oriented, and that provides a basis for work and income. People must, to a greater extent, be able to pursue an education close to where they live and earn qualifications that are in demand in the private and public sectors. It is a goal that the management of natural resources should create work and welfare for people throughout Norway and contribute to skills development and reinvestment locally and regionally. National goals for land use management and development must be adapted to regional and local conditions through municipal and regional planning processes.

The dispersal of people, power and capital makes our country more diverse. Diversity is important for strengthening innovation, prepared-

ness and trust in society. This is why regional and rural policy is important for the whole country.

1.2 Youth are crucial for development in rural areas

The perceptions, experiences and priorities of young people are important considerations when shaping society and regional and rural policy for the future. The Youth Panel on Rural Development was established in 2019, with ten young people representing each county. The panel presented its proposals in spring 2021. Young people want proud local communities that have confidence in their own inhabitants and in neighbouring communities. They want communities with good transport solutions, good digital infrastructure and good access to housing. Young people need a safe and secure everyday life with prospects of employment and access to basic services.

Young people need training and education programmes that are relevant to the labour market, and they need to be aware of these opportunities. Access to work and education is a decisive factor in choosing rural areas over the large urban labour markets.

The youth panel encourages municipalities to showcase their qualities, think innovatively and cultivate uniqueness, and facilitate business development and job communities. All of this is important for young people to want to work, live and invest their future in rural areas. The panel emphasises that rural development is a team effort between the Government, the Storting, county council authorities, municipalities, businesses and the general public. The panel's work is summarised in ten goals, all of which are important if young people are to envision a future in rural areas. All measures and direction options in the Government's regional and rural policy are aimed precisely at achieving these goals. The fol-

Box 1.1 Ten goals from the Youth Panel on Rural Development

The work of the youth panel is summarised in ten goals:

1. *Work*: Young people in rural areas need professional and technical environments and job communities.
2. *Education*: Vocational and upper secondary schools must have a decentralised structure and offer subjects sought by the regional business community.
3. *Transport*: Young people seek on-demand transport along with environmentally friendly and public transport services. Roads and ferry connections need improvement and landslide-prone stretches must be secured. Pedestrian and cycle paths and street lighting are important for safety.
4. *A stable high-speed and mobile phone network*: This facilitates working from home, school platforms and digital services and is important for safety, security, emergency preparedness and the development of welfare technology.
5. *Individual measures*: Measures such as lower taxes, student loan write-offs, offers of young entrepreneurship, investment funds for young entrepreneurs and housing measures can make it easier for young people to settle in rural areas.
6. *Provision of mental health care*: It is important to have low-threshold services with open doors every day, comprehensive digital solutions and earmarked funds for school health services, and mental health must be an integrated topic in school curricula.
7. *Nature and sustainability*: Young people demand that municipalities have updated plans that emphasise proximity to nature, recreation, settlement and industries, and with a zero vision for the loss of productive topsoil to buildings. Development projects must have impact assessments that emphasise future generations and sustainability.
8. *Attractive and inclusive local communities*: Young people want municipalities to have strategies that address this factor, for example by developing meeting places and the uniqueness of individual towns.
9. *Local influence from young people*: Young people want to participate in local community development, for example through more active youth councils and active use of student councils.
10. *Emergency preparedness*: Short response times, quality of services and safety and security in everyday life are important for young people to want to live in rural areas.

Box 1.2 What characterises rural municipalities?

Rural municipalities are characterised by few people living in large areas. This means that there are long distances between people, workplaces and services. Although the distinction between rural municipalities and more central municipalities is fluid, rural municipalities can be defined as municipalities with a low level of centrality. Statistics Norway (SSB) groups municipalities into different levels of centrality, according to access to jobs and services. The centrality index¹ is recognised as the indicator best suited to measuring

so-called geographical disadvantages. A core element of rural and regional policy is that some areas have particular disadvantages related to size and distance and accordingly require additional efforts. The most central municipalities have centrality level 1 and the least central are classified as centrality level 6.

¹ Statistics Norway (2020) *Sentralitetsindeksen*. [Centrality Index.] <https://www.ssb.no/befolkning/artikler-og-publikasjoner/sentralitetsindeksen.oppdatering-med-2020-kommuner>

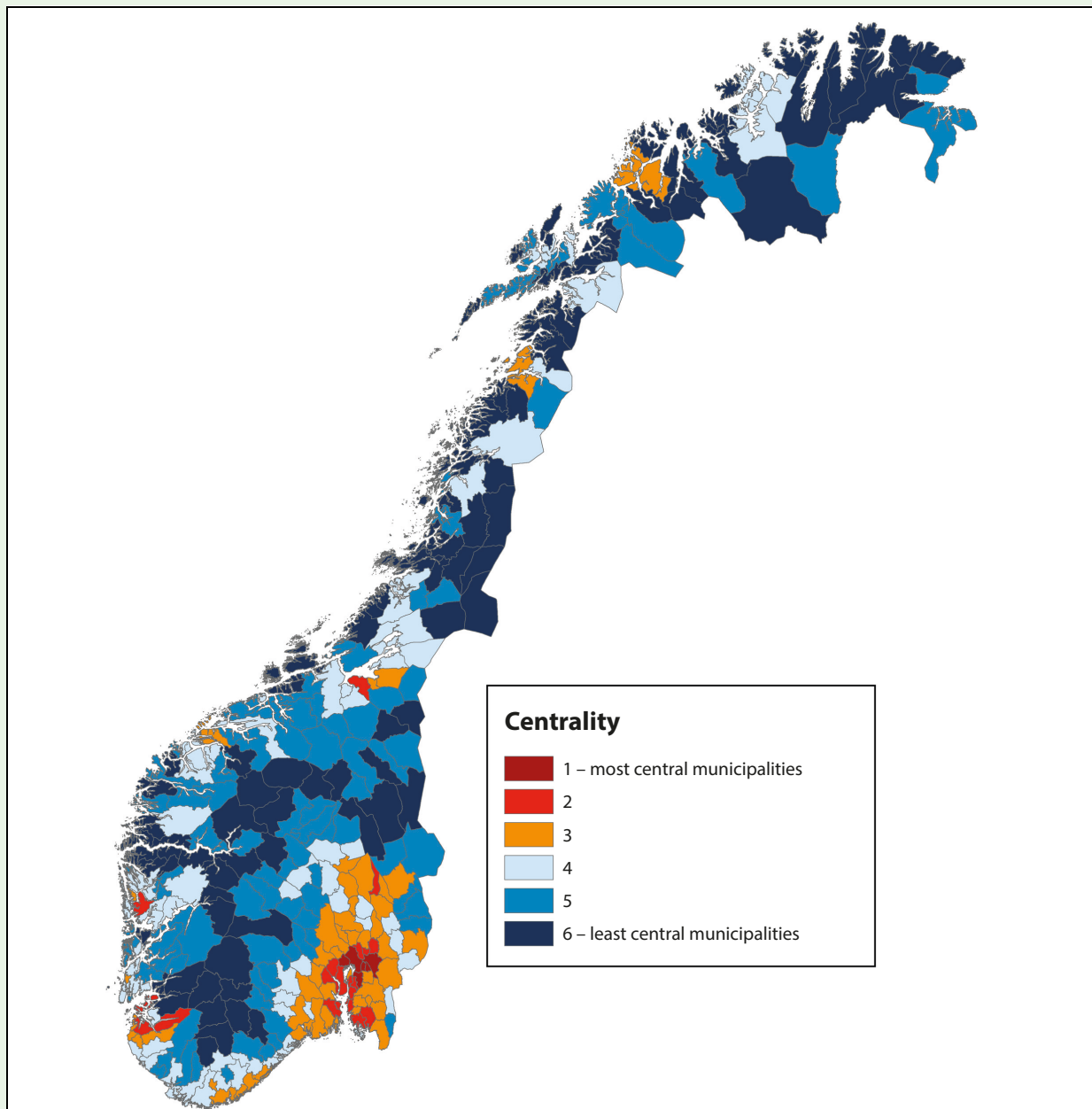


Figure 1.1 Classification of municipalities by centrality

Source: Statistics Norway (2020) Map: Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development

lowing chapters summarise how the Government will work with these goals and challenges.

1.3 Population development in rural areas

Over the past 60 years, successive governments have pursued different ambitions and goals, and not least measures, in regional and rural policy. In line with changes in society, the population and demographic composition of rural areas has also changed.

In 1960, about half of the population lived in sparsely populated areas. Today, the situation is different. A large proportion of the population lives in cities and densely populated areas, and many rural municipalities have a birth deficit. When fewer young people grow up in rural areas, migration from rural areas will also decrease. As a result, the population has stabilised in many rural municipalities, but the inhabitants are getting older. To maintain the population in rural areas in the long term, net migration to the rural areas must increase. It will be particularly valuable if more young people and families with young children choose to move to rural areas.

There is no reason to paint a bleak picture of the trend in rural areas. Centralisation is not a natural law, and many areas in rural areas experience periodic or long-term increases in population, jobs and value creation. Strong growth in existing and new industries, localisation of public sector jobs and the provision of good education options and services are factors that could support a positive population trend. It is those who live and operate businesses in an area who are the most important force in contributing to the development of a local community. Central government does, however, have an important role to play in supporting local initiatives. With clear political ambitions and initiatives, we can facilitate a decentralised development of our country.

Over the past 20 years, rural municipalities at centrality levels 4, 5 and 6 have experienced overall population growth, particularly thanks to high immigration in the period 2007–2017. Lower immigration, fewer births and centralised migration led to population declines in more than 200 municipalities in the period 2017–2022 (approx. 0.4 per cent over five years). At the same time, there are major differences between rural municipalities. The most challenging development is seen in many of the least central municipalities (centrality level 6),

where the population has been declining for a long time.

In 2022, the population decline reversed in many rural municipalities. The large number of refugees from Ukraine means that several rural areas are once again experiencing population growth. This means that in 2022, despite low birth rates, rural municipalities had the highest population growth in the period for which we have figures (since 1966). In its main alternative, Statistics Norway projects some growth in rural municipalities at centrality levels 4, 5 and 6 overall, both over the next five and 20 years. Immigrants, especially refugees, are also increasingly characterising domestic migration from rural areas and account for a majority of net migration from Northern Norway.⁵

Several studies of the motives behind settlement and relocation have shown that people have complex motives for where they put down roots. These are linked to work, family and friends, place and environment. For many people, choosing a place to live is not something one does as a young person and then take action to bring that choice to fruition. Their choices are influenced by what happens along the way. Many young people want a future in the neighbourhood where they grew up and have their family and roots. But many have to move far from home to get an education and find relevant work.

Surveys show that young people often settle close to where they have studied. The location of places of study and a larger labour market mean that many move to cities as young people. Many relocate out of the cities, but many also remain. There are many people who live in rural municipalities for shorter or longer periods, and who may have the potential for more long-term settlement. Among those who grew up in cities, around 5 per cent have settled in rural areas later in life.⁶

The Rural Demography Committee⁷ has analysed the consequences of the demographic challenges in rural areas. According to the committee, the main challenge is to create sustainable communities that can cope with an ageing popula-

⁵ Tønnessen, M. (2022) Innvandreres bo- og flyttemønstre i Norge [Immigrants' residence and relocation patterns in Norway] (report 2022:12). NIBR.

⁶ Høydahl, E. (2023) Bofaste og flyttere. *En kohortanalyse av ungdomskull fra de var 15 til 35 år* [Residents and relocators. A cohort analysis of young people from 15 to 35 years of age] (Report). Statistics Norway.

⁷ Official Norwegian Reports (NOU) 2020: 15 *Det handler om Norge – utredning om konsekvenser av demografiutfordringer i distriktene*. [It's about Norway – report on the consequences of demographic challenges in rural areas.]

tion. The population throughout the western world is ageing. Most municipalities are experiencing a demographic trend with more older people and fewer young people. Many of the municipalities with the highest percentage of elderly people are in rural areas. In order to ensure a good quality of life and services for those living in rural areas, it is a question of both facilitating net in-migration and how to plan to ensure good services in areas with scattered settlement.

Norway is the country in Europe with the fewest inhabitants living in large cities. One of the qualities of Norway is that we have settlement throughout the country. It is important that people can continue to choose to live in the local community of their choice in rural and urban areas. Different local communities, whether they are located in densely or sparsely populated areas, will have different qualities.

Attractive small towns that interact well with neighbouring municipalities are also important for people who live outside the big cities. Many education and health services, especially specialist health services, are located in regional centres, which therefore play an important role in access to services for those living in rural areas.

1.4 The challenges of the future require new solutions

Demographic challenges have consequences for the whole country. We find areas with a scattered population, low birth rates and a high proportion of elderly people in Northern Norway, in the inner parts of Southern Norway and in Trøndelag. The Government's rural and regional policy is intended to help meet these challenges so that people can live a good life throughout Norway. For example, the Government has already identified three areas in Finnmark and two areas in Trøndelag for rural growth agreements, and is planning for more areas in new counties.

In many rural municipalities, the biggest challenge today is not a lack of jobs, but that public and private enterprises lack the labour they need. Services and work tasks have become increasingly specialised, placing greater demands on municipalities. Access to good services is important for everyone and requires different solutions in areas with fewer people and scattered settlement compared with densely populated areas. This makes it necessary to pay additional attention to how we can ensure good services, capacity and expertise adapted to different areas. Digital

development plays an important role here because it opens up new ways of doing things.

Decentralisation is an important part of the solution to the challenges of the future. Digitalisation fundamentally changes our attitude to distance and opens up new opportunities for development and growth in rural areas. Increased use of digital solutions makes it possible for many tasks to be carried out wherever people live in the country.

The infrastructure and digital services facilitate new solutions that can help to solve some of the biggest challenges facing society, such as the demand for increased productivity, new welfare technology in the face of an ageing population and new technology that can help to reduce the climate footprint in a number of industries.

An aggressive climate policy and an aggressive regional and rural policy must go hand in hand. It is important for the green transition that people live throughout the country and that we utilise our abundant renewable resources in a sound and energy-efficient way. There are major plans for the growth of green industries in many rural municipalities in different parts of the country. In its work on the green industrial initiative, the Government has identified a number of special focus areas: offshore wind, batteries, hydrogen, CO₂ handling, the process industry, maritime industry, forestry and wood industry and other bioeconomies. These are important areas for sustainable production and value creation, which are largely based on the renewable resources in rural areas. When people have entire value chains in close proximity, they can also utilise circular solutions to a greater extent.

In order to utilise and manage these resources, we need labour and infrastructure. A varied labour market, good services, access to attractive housing and good local communities are important for attracting the skills and labour that are in demand. Norway is at the forefront of the transition to fossil fuel- and emission-free vehicles. Emissions from private motoring are therefore becoming an increasingly less relevant issue when planning areas for housing, jobs and other areas in the future.

Digitalisation makes it possible to solve tasks in a new and more efficient way, while providing good service to users at the same time. Access to high-speed broadband for all is crucial for enabling municipalities throughout the country to take part in digitalisation. New technology also provides opportunities for decentralisation and strengthening of business and industrial development throughout the country.

Digitalisation and the use of technology facilitate connection and learning across locations, regardless of geographical distances. While cities facilitate interaction in larger labour markets, remote work and digital technology offer new potential for connection and learning without being physically co-located. Digitalisation allows for flexible solutions that can be better adapted to the varied conditions in rural areas. In addition, digitalisation provides good opportunities for efficiency improvements. The Rural Demography Committee⁸ wrote that strong sector management combined with digitalisation and specialisation have, on the whole, been unfortunate for rural areas, which have often borne the costs of reforms through longer distances to services and fewer jobs. But it doesn't have to be this way. Through an active localisation policy, the Government will seek to balance the potential and challenges presented by digital development, which will make it more likely to succeed with decentralised development.

1.5 Strengthened efforts in Northern Norway

For generations, settlement and activities in Northern Norway have contributed to jobs and value creation and given Norway sovereignty over large areas of land and sea. There are enormous natural resources of great value here that are important for employment and value creation and for realising a green shift. It is crucial for Norway that people live in the north. It is time for a new, intensified efforts in this region. There are major demographic challenges here, and it is in the border areas in the north that we need settlement and activities more than ever. We must contribute to the development of the Sami areas and thus support Sami language, culture and social life. Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine emphasises the security policy implications of maintaining and strengthening settlement and the central government presence in the region, especially in the border areas. This is of great national interest.

Businesses and residents in East Finnmark have been particularly hard hit as a result of Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine and the accompanying sanctions. The Government parties and

the Socialist Left Party have agreed to provide NOK 105 million to support activities and development in East Finnmark in 2023. The activities package has been designed in dialogue with the municipality, the business community and the social partners. It contains a number of measures that will help to strengthen business and industry, retain and develop new jobs, and strengthen infrastructure. The Government will continue to work on measures for long-term development and restructuring in the region.

This white paper sets out the direction of the Government's policy for Rural Norway. There are rural challenges in all parts of the country. In Northern Norway, we find many sparsely populated areas with few people and long distances. Regional and rural policy therefore affects this part of the country to the greatest extent. However, the challenges are somewhat different when considering a large contiguous geographical area as a whole, with both towns and rural areas. Northern Norway has cities that are growing and developing rapidly, and where planning is underway for several major investments. The smallest municipalities face particularly major challenges associated with a declining population and a shortage of skills and labour.

Most sectors have several policy instruments that take into account the special challenges in Northern Norway. There are also a number of measures aimed at the region in particular. The most economically comprehensive scheme is the Regionally Differentiated Social Security Contributions scheme (RDSSC), with a zero rate in the action zone in North Troms and Finnmark and a low rate in the rest of the region.⁹ The value of this is estimated at around NOK 18.3 billion for 2023.¹⁰ In the revenue system for municipalities, a regional deficiency payment of around NOK 3 billion was granted to municipalities and county authorities in Northern Norway. The Action Zone for Finnmark and North-Troms has just over 90,000 residents. The individual measures in the zone amount to around NOK 1.6 billion and Regionally Differentiated Social Security Contributions scheme (RDSSC) in 2023. The total value of the schemes in the Action Zone is estimated around 6 billion.

In Northern Norway, long distances and a low population make it challenging in many places to

⁸ Official Norwegian Reports (NOU) 2020: 15 *Det handler om Norge – utredning om konsekvenser av demografiske utfordringer i distriktene*. [It's about Norway – report on the consequences of demographic challenges in rural areas.]

⁹ Like the other zones in the scheme, the action zone also has an additional employer's contribution of 5 per cent for salary income over NOK 750,000.

¹⁰ Prop. 1 S (2022–2023) *Fiscal Budget 2023, appendix 1*. Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development.

maintain a varied range of high-quality services in all local communities. There are major differences within the region. To make it more attractive to live in the smaller municipalities in the north, it is important to facilitate greater cooperation to strengthen professional and technical environments, improve the quality of services and residential environments, stimulate cooperation to solve tasks and ensure that services are located close to residents and businesses.

Demand for skilled labour is high in many areas of the region. This applies, among other things, to professions that are crucial to the provision of good services, emergency preparedness and safety and security for residents – such as teachers, nurses, doctors, psychologists and the police. There is also a shortage of people in the petroleum industry. Skilled workers at the upper secondary and vocational school levels are essential to maintain infrastructure and services.

Northern Norway has very important resources on land and in the sea, and the region is therefore in a good position to contribute to the green shift. The green shift creates increased demand for clean energy and raw materials that are part of the value chains for an emission-free energy system and society. At the same time, there are, by all accounts, large undiscovered oil and gas resources in the Norwegian and Barents Seas. The Norwegian continental shelf will be a stable and long-term supplier of oil and gas to Europe in a very challenging time. Many companies are working on major industrial ventures in the north.

1.6 Regional cooperation in the Arctic

Northern Norway is part of the Arctic. In an area with long distances, a small population and high strategic value, international cooperation across national borders is particularly important for development. Over many decades, the county council authorities have developed political dialogue and concrete cooperation with their neighbours in the Finnish, Swedish and Russian regions. Many actors in the North are involved in the broader international cooperation in the Barents region and the Arctic. With its secretariat in Tromsø, the newly established Arctic Mayors' Forum¹¹ is an important contribution to Arctic cooperation.

Due to Russia's attack on Ukraine, most cross-border cooperation with Russia has been put on hold. This has major consequences for East Finnmark in particular, and makes it natural to strengthen cooperation with Finland and Sweden. Topics for cross-border dialogue in the north include the green transition, access to expertise and increased interaction between local businesses and universities. The county authorities work through the Barents Regional Council, the Norwegian Barents Secretariat, the North Calotte Council and the EU's Interreg Programme in the north. The county council authorities are also involved in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs' work with the Barents Council and the Arctic Council. The Government wants to strengthen Nordic cooperation between the regional actors in the North, especially between Norway, Finland and Sweden.

Russia's war and the totalitarian developments in Russia have greatly reduced the opportunities for bilateral people-to-people cooperation between Norway and Russia. It is therefore both necessary and right to change the focus of the Barents cooperation. The Norwegian Barents Secretariat will continue to support people-to-people cooperation with Russia to the extent possible. The tasks of the secretariat will – in dialogue with the county council authorities in Northern Norway, which own the secretariat – be shifted more towards cross-border cooperation between actors in northern parts of Norway, Finland and Sweden and indigenous cooperation in the region, outside of Russia. The change will be viewed in the context of existing cooperation in European and Nordic forums. Areas that can promote good social development in Northern Norway will also be assessed. Further concretisation will take place in cooperation with the relevant county council authorities in the north, the Barents Secretariat, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development and other relevant actors.

High North policy cuts across sectors, administrative levels and national borders. The Regional High North Forum is an arena for political dialogue on issues that are particularly relevant to development in the North. The permanent members of the forum are the political leadership of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of Trade, Industry and Fisheries, the Sami Parliament and the county council authorities in Northern Norway. The forum discusses proposals and measures that are relevant in the

¹¹ arcticmayors.com

northern regions. In 2023, it is working to prepare a strategy for the forum's work. Efforts will be directed towards thematic areas such as climate change and the green shift, attractiveness for settlement, expertise, access to labour, integration and international cooperation. The forum will also help to ensure that young people and young adults are more involved in the work of developing High North policy.

1.7 The white paper in brief

Regional and rural policy must be strengthened and renewed. The Government will pursue a policy for stronger communities, growth and development throughout the country, where town and country go hand in hand. We will initiate new measures to create optimism and confidence in the future throughout Norway.

The Government has received input from all over the country on the future development of regional and rural policy. Among other things, the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development has organised 14 input meetings in the following towns: *Kirkenes, Karasjok, Alta, Dyrøy, Sandnessjøen, Steinkjer, Valldal, Sogndal, Kvitsøy, Iveland, Flesberg, Bjørkelangen, Vestre Slidre and Folldal*. In addition, there have been four digital input meetings on the following topics: *housing policy, innovation and digitalisation in rural municipalities, business policy and competence and recruitment*. The Ministry has also received many written submissions, and the white paper on regional and rural policy has been a topic in connection with several trips, events and meetings that the political leadership of the Ministry of Local Government and Regional Development has participated in over the past six months.

The contributions have provided valuable insight and learning. Many topics are recurring, particularly in relation to a more aggressive and rural-oriented housing policy, a more differentiated land use policy, accessible broadband for all, more decentralised education, measures to get more people into work, rapid resettlement of refugees, proximity to public services and government jobs, safe and better roads, access to more and cheaper electric power, and an industrial policy that is adapted to the needs of the rural area. There is a strong consensus that the recommendations from the Hurdal Platform and the Rural Demography Committee are well suited to the challenges facing rural areas.

Chapter 2: We want to give municipalities room to manoeuvre so that they can plan for a good society and cooperate on good solutions

More complex societal challenges require new solutions. Cooperation between municipalities and citizens, between municipalities and businesses, between municipal organisations and between municipalities and other actors is important in order to meet these challenges. Through trials and agreements, the Government will open up opportunities for municipalities to work more comprehensively across their areas of responsibility. Good advice and guidance from county authorities and county governors can help to strengthen the capacity and expertise of municipalities to work on community development.

The Government is working on new guidelines for land use policy, which will have a clearer differentiation between different areas. Land use policy must be adapted to local conditions and facilitate new growth and stronger development in areas with weak or negative population growth.

The Government wants to test new tools in regional and rural policy and has invited rural municipalities to apply to develop *rural growth agreements* with the central government to strengthen development in the municipalities. The purpose of the agreements will be to strengthen the coordination of public initiatives across sectors and administrative levels, so that the combined efforts are more effective in the selected areas.

A well-functioning housing market is a prerequisite for business and community development in all municipalities. The Government will strengthen the rural-oriented work of the Norwegian National Housing Bank. In the supplementary proposition for 2022, the Government added that up to NOK 1 billion can be prioritised for loans for rental housing and housing quality in rural municipalities at centrality levels 5 and 6. At the same time, the lending limit in the Norwegian National Housing Bank was increased to NOK 21 billion. From 2023, the Government has introduced a grant scheme for housing measures in rural municipalities. Through the work on new national planning guidelines, the Government will open up the possibility of facilitating new housing in sparsely populated areas to a greater extent. In spring 2024, the Government will present a white paper on a comprehensive housing policy, which will, among other things, consider whether a larger share of the loans from the Norwegian National Housing Bank should go to the establish-

ment of housing in rural municipalities, especially at centrality level 6.

The Government will consider special measures to strengthen planning and development capacity and planning expertise in areas where challenges have been identified. The Government will make arrangements so that ordinary education and more workplace-oriented and flexible continuing and further education can meet the challenges, and possibly test new solutions.

Chapter 3: We will facilitate safe local communities and good services close to people

If people are to live in and move to rural areas, important services such as kindergartens, schools and health services must be available in the surrounding area. The development of good services requires solutions that are adapted to local conditions. Many municipalities are also dependent on cooperation with other municipalities to perform their statutory duties and provide services to their residents. In order to increase capacity and expertise in the performance of tasks, including from a cross-sectoral perspective, the Government will consider enhanced measures to stimulate increased cooperation between municipalities.

Many of the most important welfare tasks are the responsibility of the municipalities, and municipal autonomy allows for local adaptations. The revenue system is important to help ensure that municipalities and county authorities can provide an equal range of services to their citizens.

The Government is also working to establish a *free municipality scheme* within the current provisions relating to pilot schemes, where municipalities and county authorities can apply for exemption from laws and regulations in selected areas.

Digital services, the trust reform and collaboration can help to ensure good services in areas where population density is low. The Government will strengthen the health and care sector, establish local service centres, promote cooperation between the emergency services and strengthen the local presence of the police.

Good cooperation between municipalities and hospitals is essential to ensure comprehensive and coherent offerings and services where people live. The Government will consider how the funding schemes can better support good collaboration between the different parts of the national health service. Developing and strengthening the general practitioner service is important to ensure a strong public health service. The Government

therefore proposes to strengthen the public budget by NOK 920 million in 2023 (full-year effect). Mental health is also an important priority area, and the Government will present an escalation plan for mental health in 2023, with a special focus on children and young people. The Government will present a white paper on emergency medical services that includes urgent care centres, response times for ambulance services and a professional standard for the content of ambulance services. The Government has presented a white paper on living safely at home *Fellesskap og meistring – Bu trygt heime*. The goal is to enable the elderly to live in their own home for as long as possible if they are able and willing.

The Government wants to ensure the safety of people throughout the country, including through better cooperation between the various emergency services and other emergency response organisations. The police must become more accessible to the public. Police services will be strengthened, among other things through locally adapted measures that will be designed in cooperation between the municipality and the police district. To ensure that the police are present locally, the police will establish nine new service centres in 2023. Among other things, the new centres will enable the police to carry out more preventive work and be more visible to residents in many rural municipalities. The Ministry of Justice and Public Security is working on a local police plan that will be presented in 2023.

The Government will invite municipalities to participate in a pilot cooperation on a local services model with co-location of central government and municipal services, so that residents have a place where they can meet representatives of public agencies. The Government believes it is particularly important to strengthen the military presence in Northern Norway, and has already implemented measures to strengthen the presence of the Norwegian Armed Forces through increased activity and improved capacity for continuous operations in the north.

Chapter 4: We will facilitate safe and reliable transport and a good digital foundation

Infrastructure such as roads, railways, harbours, ferries, airports, broadband and mobile networks bind Norway together and are crucial for settlement and jobs throughout the country. Good access and safety will help to ensure that people and goods arrive quickly and safely. The Government will use resources to take better care of and

utilise our existing infrastructure and transport services, rather than new, major development projects. In 2023, the county authorities will receive more than NOK 3 billion of the budget allocation for county roads. Earmarked grants totalling NOK 847 million have also been approved for county roads. The Government will prepare a comprehensive and binding plan to reduce the maintenance backlog on county roads and take the initiative together with the county council authorities to prepare a national implementation plan for landslide and avalanche protection of all national roads and county roads with a high or medium avalanche factor.

The Government has ensured the provision of free ferries to small island communities, generally lower ferry fares and cut the maximum price of tickets in half on the regional FOT (flight) routes along the coast of Western Norway and in Northern Norway from 2024. The Government has accelerated the pace of development of charging infrastructure for electric cars, so that fast chargers are now available throughout the country, including in areas with low population. The Government wants safe patient and school transport and good taxi services in rural areas, and it wants to halt the liberalisation of the taxi industry.

The Government wants to ensure that all households and businesses throughout Norway have access to high-speed broadband before the end of 2025. The Government wants a major expansion of broadband and mobile coverage throughout the country, and has allocated NOK 362 million to broadband. All counties received increased funding, but counties with many rural municipalities and few people in large areas were prioritised to a greater extent than before. The fifth generation mobile network (5G) is being rapidly rolled out. Coverage has increased from 23 per cent to 81 per cent of the population. The Government is providing grants for increased digital security and preparedness in rural areas, and has followed up measures worth almost NOK 70 million in Finnmark and implemented measures worth NOK 50 million in Troms. In 2023, the Government will spend NOK 25 million on strengthening the digital infrastructure in Nordland.

The Government will continue to work on the concept and feasibility study that looks at the future development of the transport system in Northern Norway. Plans call for the study to be completed in the summer of 2023. The Government has also asked the Norwegian Railway

Directorate to carry out a concept and feasibility study on the Northern Norway Railway. The Directorate will look at various solutions on the Fauske–Narvik–Tromsø section, with a possible branch line to Harstad. The study must be viewed in conjunction with the Nordland Line and Ofoten Line.

Chapter 5: We will support business development and the green shift in rural areas

The Government will pursue an active business policy that stimulates a green shift and facilitates the participation of small and medium-sized businesses in the development. In the Hurdal platform, the Government is clear that local communities and the community should receive a fair share of the value created by utilising the natural resources that belong to the community. In the fiscal budget for 2023, the Government announced the introduction of a resource rent tax on aquaculture and onshore wind power. A key part of the proposal is that local communities that make natural resources available will be guaranteed a share of the resource rent. The Government will facilitate renewable power and grid capacity through the establishment of new power generation, energy efficiency and development of the grid. It is important to have good democratic processes in the handling of these matters. The Government is working to incorporate the planning and construction of wind power plants into the Planning and Building Act. This will give municipalities greater formal control over land use in wind power cases.

In fulfilment of the ambitions in the Hurdal Platform, the Government has initiated a process to develop *regional growth agreements* and wishes to test this in Rogaland and Nordland counties. The aim is to develop this into a tool for more targeted and coordinated public efforts in different parts of the country and to develop an agreement scheme that can be rolled out in all counties.

The Government will contribute to sufficient and safe food produced from Norwegian natural resources. This includes working for clean and rich oceans, sustainable harvesting and production, and sustainable feed sources. The Government will prioritise efforts to improve income opportunities in agriculture. To support agriculture and reindeer husbandry, the Government will pursue a more restrictive predator policy. The Government has also presented a new soil protection strategy with strengthened goals related to the reallocation of cultivated and arable land. The Government will also facilitate industrial process-

ing of forests by developing the resource base and improving the infrastructure in forestry, promoting sustainable forest management and combining increased forestry activity with strengthened environmental considerations.

The Government is working on several measures to help create a competitive, year-round tourism industry that is more sustainable and profitable than before, and that creates activity throughout the country.

The Government will assess whether it is expedient to establish a central government contact point for large industrial establishments in Northern Norway. The Government will also consider how to develop ambitions for a defence industry cluster in the north involving private, public and military initiatives. The Government will consider how to better facilitate procurement from local suppliers. The Government will consider strengthening R&D environments that are particularly important for business development, including in East Finnmark. A joint programme for agriculture in Northern Norway will also be implemented.

Chapter 6: We will strengthen decentralised and flexible educational opportunities and ensure access to relevant education and labour

A labour force with the right skills is a prerequisite for development and value creation in all local communities. A decentralised and flexible education system is important to maintain the population in rural areas. Adapted education where people live, access to apprenticeships, better links between supply and demand for skills, and an inclusive working life are also important for developing well-functioning labour markets.

The Government will facilitate flexible education throughout the country, so that education and training will be accessible to all. The Government believes it is important to have a more comprehensive approach to skills and education policy. The goal is an education system that is even better adapted to the demand for expertise, both from the labour market and from those seeking education. Through the dimensioning of the education system, the Government will prioritise skills that are essential for a highly productive and competitive business sector in order to provide good welfare services throughout the country and to implement the green shift. The Government will follow up on healthcare education and consider the recommendations of the Health Personnel Commission in its work on the white paper on pro-

fessional programmes, which will be presented in spring 2024.

The Government is changing and simplifying the funding system for universities and university colleges so that they can better fulfil their broad social mission and the Government's overall priorities, and to efficiently facilitate high quality in the sector.

The Government will address the teacher shortage with a broad initiative to recruit, train and retain qualified teachers. In spring 2023, the Government presented a white paper on Sami language, culture and social life. For 2023, the Government has promised a grant of NOK 6.6 million to the Sami Parliament to strengthen the competence in Sami kindergartens, and increased the grant for Sami language training in primary education by NOK 17.5 million.

The Government has authorised around NOK 460 million for work on qualification and placement of apprenticeships. Through the *social contract for more apprenticeships*, a systematic collaboration is being developed between the social partners, county authorities and national authorities with the aim of recruiting more apprentice enterprises and strengthening local efforts for apprenticeships.

The Government will increase its efforts to get more people into work. To prevent young people and young adults from dropping out of school and working life, the Government will facilitate better coordination of health services, labour-related services and the education system. The Government will also ensure a more flexible education system for adults who need further education, which will make it possible for more users of Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration services to qualify.

The Government will continue to pursue the goals and geographical boundaries of the action zone for Finnmark and Northern Troms and prioritise measures aimed at families with children and young adults. The Government has introduced free kindergarten in the zone, and in 2023 the debt relief scheme for student loans in the action zone will be strengthened. This will contribute to increased recruitment and relocation of young adults and families with children.

The Government will consider how to better dimension and facilitate education and skills programmes within occupational groups where the demand for skilled labour is particularly critical, including in East Finnmark. The Government will consider measures to increase the number of placement places for health and social care stu-

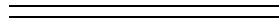
dents in rural municipalities and measures to increase recruitment to teacher training programmes, especially in the north. The Government will assess whether there is a need for special measures to ensure that more pupils complete upper secondary school, and whether there is sufficient flexibility in the regulations for upper secondary education to ensure different regional needs, for example in areas where there are few young people and long distances.

Chapter 7: We want a central government that is present

A strengthened state localisation policy is part of the Government's efforts to achieve more balanced development in the country. The Government believes that location of public sector jobs should be geographically dispersed and benefit the entire country. The Government will therefore strengthen efforts to localise location of public sector jobs outside the largest cities and locate more of the central government to rural munici-

palities where the jobs can strengthen local professional and technical environments. The Government therefore wants new and relocated state agencies to be located primarily outside Oslo, central municipalities in the Oslo area or other major cities. The Government has revised and strengthened the guidelines for the location of public sector jobs and (state) public services.

The Government will better facilitate decentralised work in state agencies. This can strengthen local centres of expertise and increase access to skilled jobs in rural areas. The Government's ambition is to increase the use of positions in central government that are advertised for decentralised work. The aim is to strengthen local professional and technical environments in order to provide rural policy benefits. This means that government jobs that are currently located in the largest cities or the most central areas of the country can to a greater extent be made available to workers in rural municipalities in various parts of the country.



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