

Essential Service Provision and Access to Services in Nordic Rural Areas

NORDREGIO POLICY BRIEF 2023:1



Nordregio



Introduction

Service provisions are one of the key factors that make rural areas attractive and viable. Recent and ongoing developments, such as migration flows, digitalisation and the effects of climate change influence service accessibility and perceptions of which services are essential for everyday rural lives.

This policy brief summarises the outcomes of the project [*Service Provision and Access to Services In Nordic Rural Areas – Secure, Trusted And For All Ages*](#) as well as presenting policy recommendations.



What is service provision and why is it relevant to Nordic rural areas?

The models for welfare services in the Nordic countries share many similarities. The 'Nordic model' is underpinned by a 'social contract' which entails collective responsibilities of the society to provide certain services and fulfil human needs, for example, health and social care and education. Due to societal and demographic change, the effects of climate change, globalisation and other factors, the demand and need for services is rapidly changing. The research results show that essential services and service needs are now considered to go beyond traditional welfare services. These changes affect service provisions in rural regions, as a decrease in general population poses challenges to public authorities. Activities have to be adapted to a shrinking population, which is made up of fewer young people and more elderly people, while the need for services provided increases.

The Nordic Region is characterised by different types of physical and geographical realities. Each requires specific approaches to service provisions. These varied geographies include coasts, inland areas, mountains, islands, permafrost, sparsely populated areas and densely populated ones. Nordic public authorities also differ significantly in size, conditions, language, work culture, tax base and responsibilities. In turn all these aspects affect how authorities are able to provide rural services and infrastructures. Within the Nordic Region, different national, regional and municipal authorities and institutions, public companies, private enterprises, civil-society actors and other private and public actors provide services and service infrastructure in rural areas, both individually and in partnerships with each other.

The objective of the project *"Service provisions and access to services in Nordic rural areas – secure, trusted and for all ages"* is to analyse how essential service needs for different ruralities can be understood and defined. Furthermore, how solutions to rural service provision challenges can be organised. This was done by a review of research literature, a regional policy analyses and 8 case studies from each of the Nordic countries and territories. Additionally, workshops were held to identify examples, solutions and service initiatives within the Nordic region. It also assessed what the essential service needs are and how are they being provided in the rural regions of the Nordic countries.



What did we do?

- Reviewed Nordic and international literature on rural service provisions published in journals and by research institutions, public authorities, and civic society organisations to assess and address the first research question: What are the service needs, now and in the future in Nordic rural and sparsely populated areas?
- Performed a policy review of Nordic national rural and regional service priorities in the five Nordic countries and three autonomous territories. The policy analyses were made through reviewing the current national rural and/or regional policies that present the priorities for rural service provision. This enabled the review to focus on how rural policy can enhance the work on service provision and addressed the second research question: How to provide people in rural areas with good, place-based services? This was presented and expanded on in a workshop attended by Nordic stakeholders in 2021.
- Analysed accessibility based on georeferenced statistics to create a knowledge overview to use as a foundation for case-study work. As a starting point for the identification of potential case study regions, accessibility to the four service areas of grocery stores, pharmacies, libraries, and educational facilities was analysed in relation to rural population density.
- Performed case studies in all five Nordic countries and the three autonomous regions in 2022. This entailed 56 interviews and dialogues with different actors in the field. The case studies looked closely at the challenges and opportunities presented in previous parts of the research. The aim was both to verify the previous findings, and identify possible services considered "essential", but which had not been identified in previous parts of the research. The case studies investigated the third research question: What are the key challenges and opportunities for secure and safe service provision in rural and sparsely populated areas across the Nordic Region?
- Hosted a workshop in 2023 where results from the previous activities were presented and discussed. The workshop also contributed to prioritise and develop the policy recommendations presented in this publication. The recommendations are divided into suggestions for policy makers at the national and at the regional/local level. These recommendations are based on the research results and were discussed, prioritised and developed further in workshops with relevant stakeholders from the different Nordic regions.

What did we find?

Which services are essential in rural areas?

Based on the journal articles reviewed for this study and input from individuals working in Nordic public authorities at national, regional, local and cross-border institutional levels, it appears that the essential service needs for rural areas now (and in the future), are healthcare and social care; education and childcare; physical infrastructure; climate adaptation and management of climate impacts; digital infrastructure; and emergency services and civil defense. The combined research and policy review shows that most of these essential services are covered by the Nordic rural policies. The 56 interviews in eight Nordic case study areas have also, in general, confirmed the essential rural services classification. However, the fieldwork also identifies nuances and variations in each of these categories. As such, the study confirms the importance of adapting services to places, so that the inhabitants of Nordic rural areas can thrive and feel safe and secure. The fieldwork also identified additional services as essential, e.g. commercial services such as local shops and fuel delivery, payment services but also cultural and sports activities, can be viewed as essential services for everyday rural lives in the Nordics.

| | Denmark | Finland | Iceland | Norway | Sweden | Faroe Islands | Greenland | Åland |
|--|---------|---------|---------|--------|--------|---------------|-----------|-------|
| Is service delivery included in rural policy | | | | | | | | |
| (How) does the rural policy ensure place-based services? | | | | | | | | |
| Which services are included? | | | | | | | | |
| Climate adaption and management of climate impacts | | | | | | | | |
| Emergency services and civil defence | | | | | | | | |
| Education and childcare | | | | | | | | |
| Healthcare and social care | | | | | | | | |
| Physical infrastructure | | | | | | | | |
| Digital infrastructure | | | | | | | | |

Figure 1. This figure illustrates the analytical work on Nordic rural and regional policies and should only be read alongside the text as the subtler nuances might otherwise be missed. The aspects and questions to the left in the figure are questions asked about the material collected in each Nordic country and region. The services listed are derived from the research review performed by the authors and presented in a previous report. Green indicates that the topic is included in the documents reviewed; yellow that it is included to some extent, red that it is not included

How are essential services provided in rural areas?

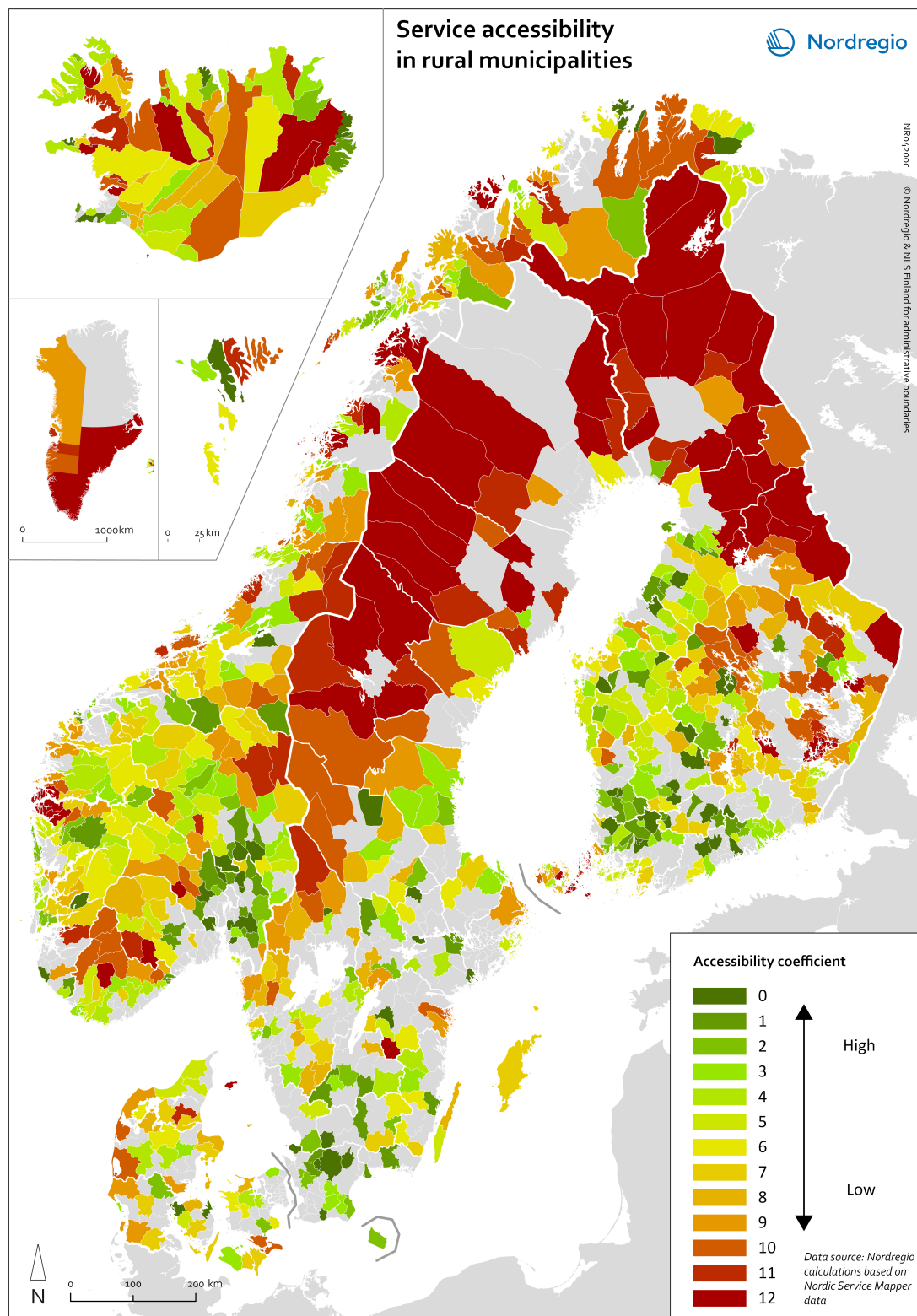
Public, private and civil society actors are responsible for ensuring rural services. There are also various collaborations and agreements between these actors that enable service provisions. Although the actors interviewed emphasised the importance of the independence of the municipalities and regions for maintaining public services, there is also cooperation with other public actors, and with private and civil-society actors, both formal and informal. It can be noted that while collaborative service provision is considered a good idea for resource efficiency, and as an alternative to merging municipalities, there are also risks involved, as it becomes more difficult to directly assign political responsibility for specific actions.

What are the main challenges for the provision of essential services in rural areas and what are there solutions?

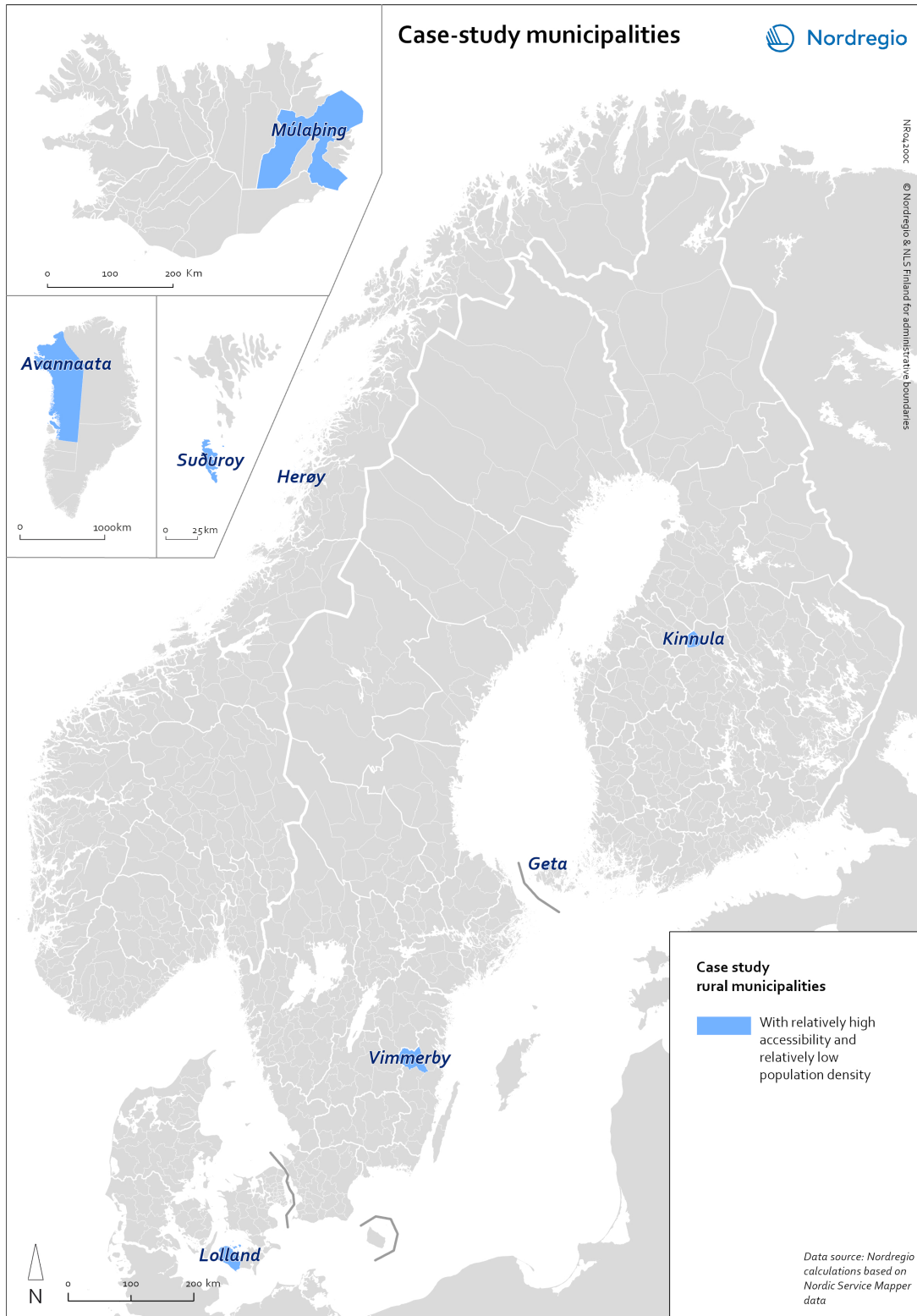
Comparing the case study results of challenges in rural service provisions, it becomes evident that there are commonalities across the Nordics. The most important are labour shortages and attracting the right competencies to provide the rural services; mobilising financial resources to cover the service needs; and physical and geographical characteristics, such as climate and long distances, which affect service provisions. Lack of housing, bureaucracy and administration, digitalisation and tourism pressure during peak season are also perceived as challenges in some regions.

Furthermore, the results show that opportunities and strategies for rural service provisions are shared across the Nordics. The most important are digitalisation of services, increased cooperation between neighbouring municipalities and settlements as an alternative to mergers of public authorities and increased cooperation between public, private and civil society actors.





Map 1: Service accessibility by municipality in the Nordic Region. The services categories included in the analysis are grocery stores, pharmacies, libraries and educational facilities. The data reflects the situation in December 2019. The calculations of an 'accessibility coefficient' have been carried out separately for the four service types and with regard to the region type and the country. This means that the accessibility reflects the situation within the respective country and region but can still be compared with the situation across the whole Nordic Region.



Map 2: Location of the municipalities chosen as case studies. The choice was made from a list of rural municipalities within each country that had the highest level of access to four services (libraries, pharmacies, local shops and education). The exceptions are the cases in Norway and the Faroe Islands.



Policy recommendations

For national level policy makers

- Further support at regional and local levels on how to prioritise delegated tasks according to legislation.
- Guidance in budget priorities can help to facilitate or even avoid local conflicts on which services to keep, or where to develop new ones. One example of when this can be helpful is spatial locations of rural schools.
- Delegating responsibilities from national to local policy levels works as a positive, in allowing local adaptation of service provisions. A key issue is ensuring necessary financing, and that delegation of tasks not be coupled with increased bureaucracy. This will allow those working with the issues at hand to implement the policies and find the best place-based solutions.
- To attract the right competencies to local level services, support remote working opportunities by allowing for such employments and invest in digital infrastructure.
- Acknowledge that local services are crucial for making regions attractive. Support local investments by establishing a service fund from which the municipalities, regions or actor-groups can apply for funding for ways of providing services.
- Provide better resource support for regions that have seasonal pressure on their infrastructure, for example during tourism high seasons.
- Assist and support regions and municipalities in adapting their essential services to climate change. This can be done in diverse ways, from knowledge sharing to financial support.
- Be willing to take over tasks that regions or municipalities cannot fulfil, or secure that local/regional level actors have sufficient resources to carry out the tasks.

For regional and local level policy makers

- Combat financial restraints and labour shortages within rural services by recruiting people from abroad. Include language training, education development as part of employments, and use appealing salaries. Collaborations between municipalities and regions can help facilitate appealing salaries and attractive employment conditions.
- Utilise local and regional strategic planning tools and participatory dialogue to adapt service locations to a shrinking tax base. Such strategic planning includes internal and external communication, for example through increased public participation by having a conversation with the locals about what is happening, how they view the situation and what their priorities are.
- Encourage dialogue between the local levels, the state and the local businesses to better know what the different needs and labour skills are in each area.
- Use dialogue to seek a balance in optimal service locations and digital solutions. To soften local conflicts ask for support from the regional and national level during the process.
- To attract young people and families to rural areas, invest in essential services, including sports and arts facilities.
- Enhance collaborations between regions and municipalities in providing better services by sharing resources.
- Cooperate on adapting services to a changing climate. Such collaborations can focus on developing a public planning and management body. One that considers how different services need to be adapted to a changing climate, with more severe weather events. For instance, make plans for housing areas and other crucial facilities such as health care centres, hospitals and schools – how they can be provided with electricity, water and sewage, as well to secure local roads and transportation hubs such as airports and harbours during extreme weather events.
- Be willing to delegate certain tasks from the regional level to the local, and vice versa, for optimal efficiency that best suits each region.



About this Policy brief

Service Provision and Access to Services in Nordic Rural Areas – Secure, Trusted And For All Ages

This policy brief is based on results from the research project *Service Provision and Access to Services In Nordic Rural Areas – Secure, Trusted And For All Ages*. The project was commissioned by the Nordic thematic group for Green and Inclusive Rural Development. The group is a part of the Nordic Co-operation Programme for Regional Development and Planning 2021-2024 and will contribute to [Nordic Vision 2030](#) to be the most integrated and sustainable region in the world. The thematic group includes national and regional development representatives and experts which together with the researchers at Nordregio develop and share new knowledge while creating added Nordic value through collaboration.

The policy recommendations presented in this policy brief are based on results from two previous project reports published in 2022 and 2023. These results were then presented and discussed in a workshop with relevant and interested participants from the Nordic countries in February 2023. The workshop was used to validate the research findings, as well as adding nuances and expand on the results and to prioritise and develop policy recommendations.

Further reading:

Slätmo, E., Bogason, Á., Vasilevskaya, A., & Salonen, H. (2022). Essential rural services in the Nordic Region: – Challenges and opportunities. <https://pub.nordregio.org/r-2022-1-essential-rural-services/#>

Slätmo, E., Bogason, Á., Salonen, H., Cedergren, H. & Huynh, D. (2023). Service provision and access to services in Nordic rural areas. <https://pub.nordregio.org/r-2023-2-service-provision-and-access-to-services-in-nordic-rural-areas/#>

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