

Western Region Population Growth Study 2024 - 2029 Final Report

*For. Western Regional
Enterprise Network*



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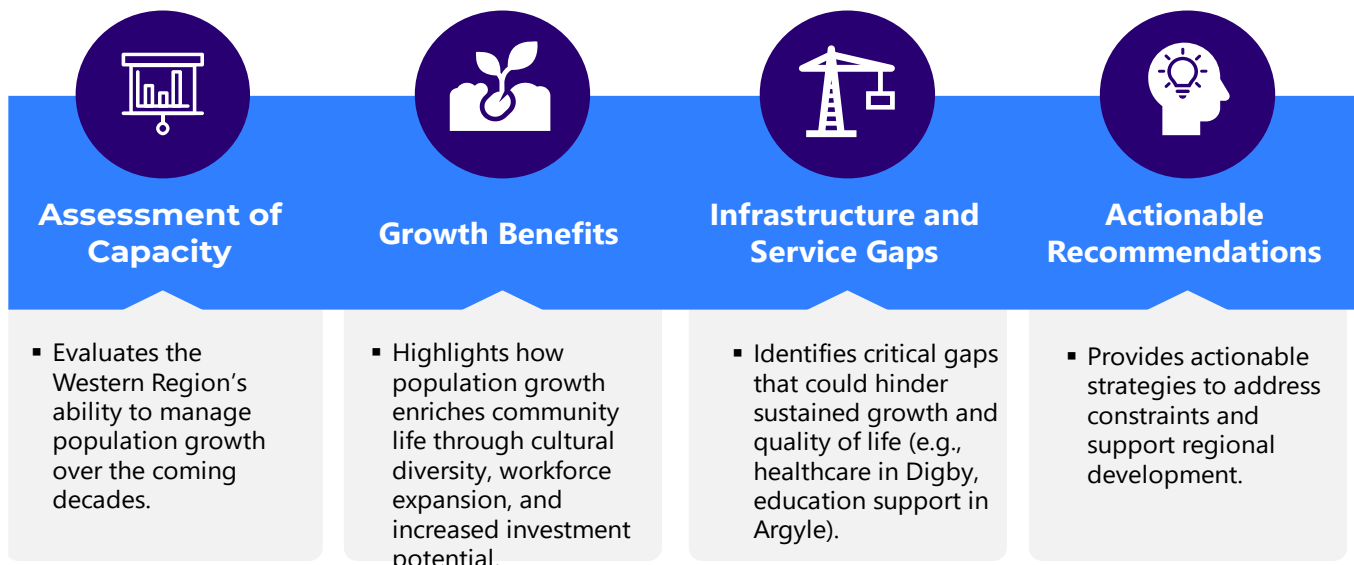
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Population Growth Study assesses the Western Region's capacity to manage population growth in the coming decades while outlining growth management recommendations. This study will support the Western REN and its partners in their efforts to ensure sustainable growth. Notably, this study enumerates infrastructure and service gaps to be addressed if population growth is to be optimized.

This study identifies and offers a framework to mitigate critical gaps that could hinder sustained growth and quality of life into the future. At the same time, the study highlights growth opportunities to be unlocked in the Region. This population growth study is an extension of Regional leadership to focus on next steps to maximize return on a collective effort across the Western Region.

The Value of a Population Growth Study

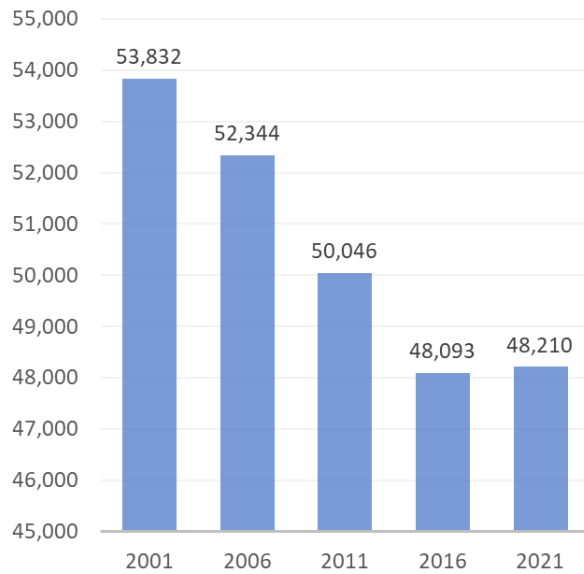


Western Region Demographic Analysis

With a 4% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 10% decrease from 2001-2021, the Western Region population declined across the last two decades. Notably, this trend recently reversed with the Western Region population increasing from 2016-2021. The Western Region had a total population of 48,210 in 2021. This is a modest but important growth signal for the Region.

This growth is not experienced evenly across the Western Region. The Municipality of Argyle (MOA) had 7,870 residents in 2021, reflecting a decline of less than 1% between 2016 and 2021. Similarly, the Municipality of Barrington (MOB), the smallest in the Region with 6,523 residents,

Western Region Population, 2002-21



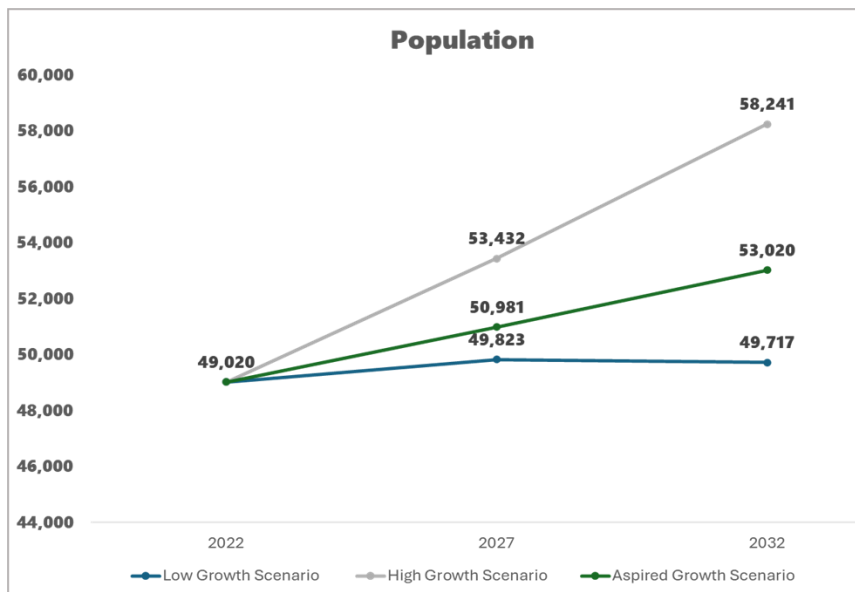
saw a 2% decrease in the last five years. The Municipality of Clare (MOC), with a population of 7,678, also experienced a decline over this period.

Four municipalities experienced population growth over the past five years. The Municipality of Digby (MOD), which had 7,242 residents in 2021, saw its population grow by 2% between 2016 and 2021. Similarly, the Municipality of Yarmouth (MODY), with 10,100 residents, registered a 2% growth in the last five years. The Town of Yarmouth also reversed its decline, growing by 5% from 2016 to 2021, reaching 6,829 residents. The Town of Digby, with 2,001 residents, saw its population increase by 2%.

Western Region Population Projections

The Western Region's population was 49,020 in 2022. Under a low growth scenario reflecting recent trends, the population is projected to increase by just under 2% by 2027, leaving the region with a projected total population of 49,823 in 2027. Extrapolating this scenario to 2032, the population is projected to decrease by less than 1% from 2027 to 2032, leaving the region with a projected total population of 49,717 in 2032. This slight dip reflects the expanding senior cohort in the region.

The aspirational growth scenario shows the population reaching 53,020 in 2032, while a high-



growth scenario aligned with the province's previously stated ambition to double Nova Scotia's population.

Population Growth Management Capacity

To assess the Western Region's capacity to manage and support population growth effectively, it is crucial to evaluate existing infrastructure and economic development initiatives.

Western REN plays a pivotal role in identifying the region's strengths and gaps, ensuring that resources are strategically aligned to foster sustainable economic growth.

Economic Growth Leadership

Western REN has led public-private partnerships to foster economic growth, diversification, and a business-friendly environment since 2014. Noted projects include:

- BusinessNow Program
- Connector Program
- Business Transition Program
- Continuous Improvement

Economic Diversification

The Region's traditional reliance on the fishery underscores the need for economic diversification to ensure stability and sustainable jobs.

Both secondary research and stakeholder interviews affirmed the need for further economic diversification. Research revealed two important sector-specific strengths and opportunities that could yield greater diversification, including:

Renewables

Significant sector opportunities in:

- Tidal energy
- Wind Energy
- Biomass

Considerations include:

- Ensure offshore projects do not disrupt fisheries
- Address community concerns

Tourism

- Yarmouth-Bar Harbor ferry is essential for sustaining tourism activity
- Room nights sold in 2022 exceeded pre-pandemic levels
- Further investment in the accommodation sector is prudent
- Aging accommodations require upgrades

Land use planning and housing are also critical components in preparing for sustainable population growth across the Region. Empowered by the *Municipal Governing Act*, the Western Region has the opportunity to develop strategic approaches to build a strong foundation for future development.

Key considerations include:



Land Use Planning: Shifting to a growth mindset for municipalities.



New Housing: Required to accommodate population growth.



Population Growth: Planning for sustainable increases.



Housing Challenges: Shortage of housing across the Region exacerbated by availability of trades and rural factors.



Housing Solutions: Early leadership in advancing innovative interventions, long term strategies and partnerships.



Public Land: Supply of Crown land almost double the provincial average.

Infrastructure is also important in supporting sustainable growth and enhancing the region's overall capacity for development.

Investments in transportation, utilities, and digital connectivity are essential to meet the demands of a growing population and expanding economy.

Addressing current gaps and modernizing infrastructure will



Public Transit: Critical to have an effective regional transportation network connecting rural communities to larger urban centers.



Utilities: Currently robust, but population growth in rural areas has outpaced expansion efforts.



Electric Grid: Region's network is 69kV – by far the lowest across the province.



Internet: Reliable internet access has improved significantly through strategic partnerships.

position the region to attract businesses, support workforce needs, and improve the quality of life for residents.

The Region faces healthcare accessibility challenges due to limited specialized facilities, capacity constraints, and frequent emergency department closures, exacerbated by population growth primarily in coastal areas and towns like Yarmouth and Digby. Regional leadership offers optimism including:

- Efforts to Resume Suspended Programs at Université Sainte-Anne
- Follow Up on Université Sainte-Anne Graduates (pre-med and med)
- Expand access to family doctors through Clare Health Centre; and
- New Community Navigator Position.

Quality of life is another cornerstone for the growing population, while supporting a thriving, diverse community. Key factors such as public safety, access to recreation, and initiatives to foster

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

- Home to a diverse cultural ecosystem.
- Making Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion a Priority.
- Highest reported frequency of discrimination.

Newcomer Attraction & Retention

- Western Region Local Immigration Partnership (LIP).
- Economic immigration pathways.
- Welcome francophone newcomers and all newcomers, ensuring that a vibrant Acadian identity and culture flourishes.
- Community Navigator has evolved to include a cultural component.
- Community Partners Private businesses and nonprofits.

Public Safety

- Incidents of violent crime in Nova Scotia have increased by 36% between 2016 and 2022.

Recreation

- Partnering with schools.
- Investing in active transportation.
- Mariners Centre expansion.
- Room for improvement in self-reported health, exercise and access to recreation and cultural activities.

diversity play a pivotal role in creating a welcoming environment. Strengthening these areas not only enhances resident satisfaction but also builds the region's appeal as a destination for growth and opportunity. The current state includes:

Limited educational resource capacity in MODY and MOD

- Aging educational infrastructure in MOA and MOC.

an acute crisis in education services, although this crisis is experienced differently around the Region.

Furthermore, much like other areas of the province, the Western Region is experiencing

Anglophone areas are impacted by a shortage of buses

- Francophone district is short on bus drivers.
- Dire child care shortage - although opportunity to access Early Learning and Child Care Action Plan funding.

Strategic Considerations

Strategic Pillar #1: Align Critical Infrastructure and Services with Community Needs

Goals:

- Enhance housing supply & access to support both short-term and long-term needs of newcomers and residents; and
- Improve key infrastructure - especially education, transportation, and healthcare.

Action Items:

- Work with municipalities and entrepreneurs on housing projects.
- Attract larger housing developers to the region through incentives & other means.
- Identify underutilized assets that may be repurposed.
- Enhance the region's electrical grid.
- Gauge interest in a more comprehensive regional transportation.
- Invest in targeted incentives to attract nurses.
- Reopen the LPN and CCW Programs at Université Sainte-Anne.
- Host a forum among Western REN partners for sharing best practices related to physician and healthcare worker recruitment and coordinating recruitment.

Strategic Pillar #2: Facilitate Economic Diversity

Goals:

- Maintain support for current local industry while exploring emerging industries opportunities.
- Cultivate a diversified economy; and
- Elevate economic immigration within the region's labour market strategy.

Action Items:

- Build on YASTA's success creating and promoting authentic experiences.
- Expand on and grow participation in the Western REN led Western Impact Partnership.
- Formulate a comprehensive investment attraction strategy.
- Targeted recruitment initiatives to attract highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs.
- Strengthen collaboration between academic institutions, business communities, and government bodies to drive innovation.
- Support business with enhanced HR capacity to maximize newcomer.

Strategic Pillar #3: Foster Sustainable Growth

Goals:

- Continue Western Region energy investment and residential energy progress goals around renewable sources.
- Develop a cross-county approach for coordinating priority population-growth areas and managing population growth; and
- Welcoming and integrate diverse populations while maintaining Francophone & Acadian identity.

Action Items:

- Encourage Western Region municipalities to coordinate land-use, which could culminate in the development of a regional planning strategy.
- Ensure that new developments are sustainable and culturally inclusive.

Strategic Pillar #4: Cultivate Deeper Community Ties and Interconnectedness

Goals:

- Strengthen the sense of belonging and community engagement among all residents; and
- Embrace the unique cultural heritage of the region to foster community pride and cohesion.

Action Items:

- Facilitate language and cultural immersion programs to promote understanding and appreciation of the region's Francophone and Acadian heritage.
- Encourage cross-cultural exchanges and dialogues.
- Monitor Quality of Life Survey results to consider how residents' experience with discrimination and feelings of isolation may have changed.
- Celebrate diversity and support greater inclusion across the region.

Introduction



Figure 1: Yarmouth Harbour

Photo Credit: marinas.com

The Value of a Population Growth Study

ATN Strategies is pleased to present the Population Growth Study for the Western Regional Enterprise Network (REN). This study assesses the Western Region's capacity to manage population growth in the coming decades while outlining growth management recommendations.

This study is not a strategy for growing the population or reserving population decline. As the first section of this document makes clear, the population of the Western Region *is already growing* after almost two decades of contraction. Such growth enriches community life by increasing cultural diversity, growing the workforce, expanding the consumer base and increasing the region's potential for investment and business innovation.

However, population growth trends and their attending benefits – as well as a high quality of life for current residents – may not be sustained if current infrastructure and service gaps are not identified and addressed.

This population growth study is valuable in that it provides the intelligence for determining where support is needed (e.g. healthcare in Digby, education support in Argyle) while offering specific, action-oriented recommendations to address those constraints.

Report Outline

The study proceeds in three broad sections.

- **Section 1** offers a regional demographic analysis illustrating population growth trends and projections in each of the Western Region municipalities and in the Western Region as a whole. This section illustrates where population growth is most apparent and where the greatest pressures might be expected.
- **Section 2** considers Western Region's current population growth management capacity by surveying several key socio-economic themes, including:
 - Economic Diversification
 - Land Use Planning
 - Infrastructure
 - Transportation
 - Utilities
 - Health Services
 - Education and Daycare
 - Quality of Life
 - Newcomer Considerations
 - Recreation

Section 2 concludes by synthesizing research findings into a SWOT analysis, highlighting strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to population growth management in the region.

- **Section 3** outlines strategic considerations based on the analysis in Section 1 and 2. These are organized in four strategic pillars and corresponding actions:
 - Align Critical Infrastructure and Services with Community Needs
 - Facilitate Economic Diversity
 - Foster Sustainable Growth
 - Cultivate Deeper Community Ties and Interconnectedness.

The report provides the Western REN and its partners the insight and evidence for navigating the socio economic challenges ahead and for managing services and infrastructure as the community continues to grow and flourish.

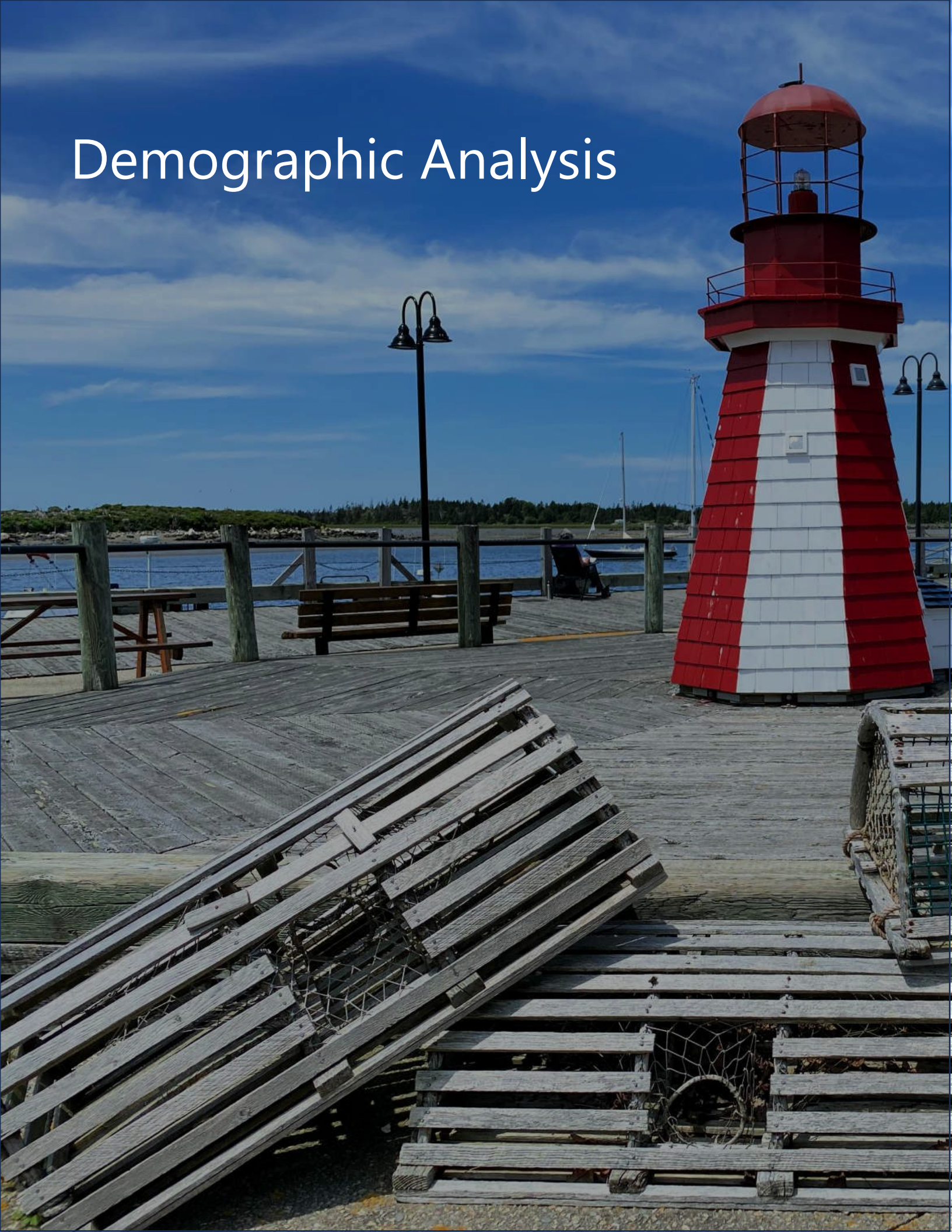
Methodology

Key findings from the report reflect primary and secondary research to ensure sufficient corroboration and diversity of source material.

Sources include:

- Statistics Canada data on Western REN Partners.
- News media reporting on socio-economic trends.
- Reports and press releases published on municipal websites.
- In-depth interviews with key stakeholders in the Western Region.

Demographic Analysis



1 Demographic Analysis

This section disaggregates Western Region population data, detailing changes from 2001 to 2021 and offering projections for 2022 to 2032. Subsequent subsections delve into similar analyses on a more granular scale, examining trends and estimates within specific municipalities and towns of the region. Population projections were pulled from the 2023 Municipal Housing Needs Report. Data was aggregated to project population for the entire region. All other data outlining population growth from 2016 to 2021 was taken from Statistics Canada census data.

1.1 Western Region

1.1.1 Demographic Profile

The Western Region had a total population¹ of 48,210 in 2021 (Figure 1). With a 4% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 10% decrease from 2001-2021, the Western Region population declined across the last two decades. Notably this trend recently reversed with the Western Region population increasing slightly from 2016-2021.

1.1.2 Population Projections

The Western Region’s population was 49,020 in 2022 and is projected to increase by just under 2% by 2027, leaving the region with a projected total population of 49,823 in 2027. The Western Region population is projected to decrease by less than 1% from 2027 to 2032, leaving the region with a projected total population of 49,717 in 2032. This projected growth is expected to occur primarily due to an expanding senior cohort in the region (Figure 3).

Based on the 2022 population estimates for the Western Region to double its population by 2060, the region would have to increase its population by 9% from 2022-2027 (population: 53,432) and

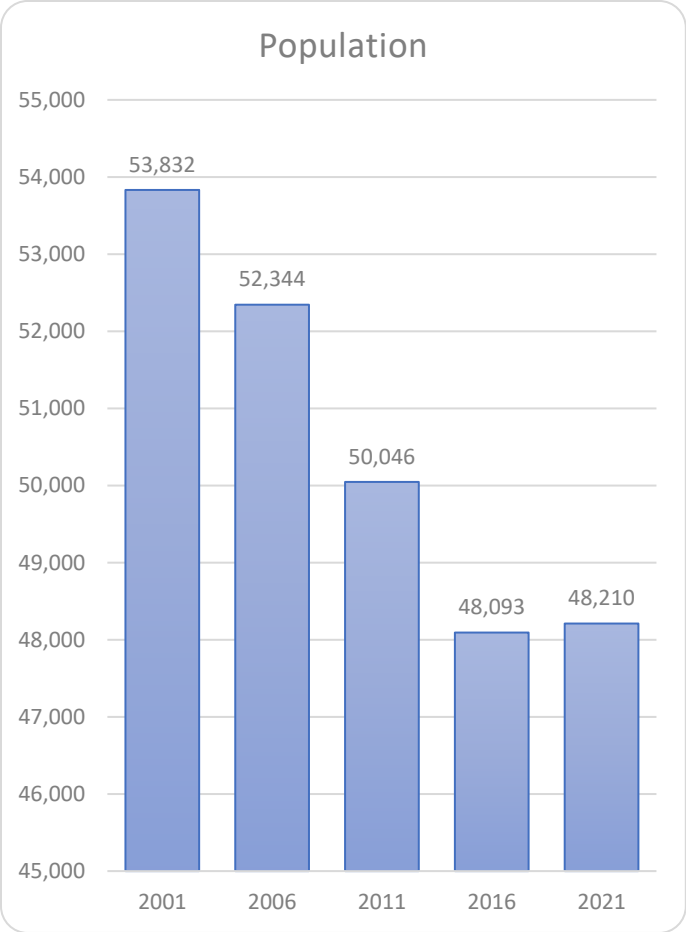


Figure 2: Population: Western Region

¹ Population estimates include Canadian citizens, by birth or by naturalization; landed immigrant, permanent residents; and non-permanent residents.

again by 9% from 2027-2032 (population: 58,241). Population growth of this magnitude would require a large increase in immigration (Figure 3).

In light of these challenges, it is useful to develop more measured growth objectives situated between the province’s target goal and the current growth trajectory for the region.

This analysis offers three growth scenarios (Figure 6). The “aspired” growth scenario was developed to reflect the national population growth average, which is both greater than the current growth trajectory in the Western Region and well below the growth needed to reach the province’s previously stated target.

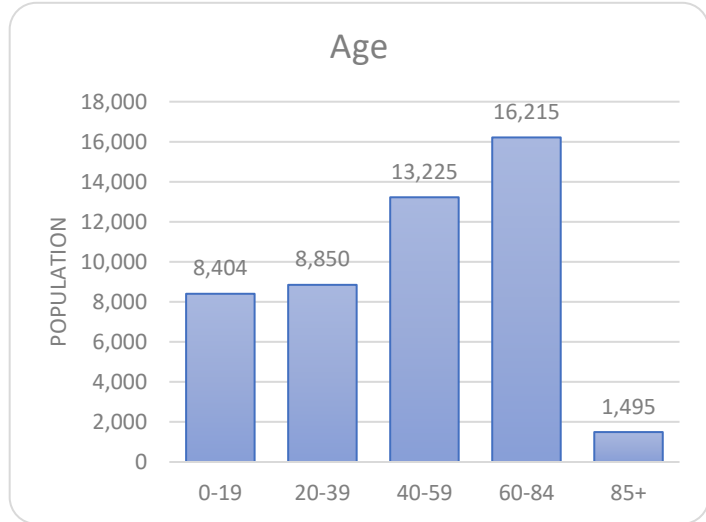


Figure 3: Age Distribution: Western Region (2022)

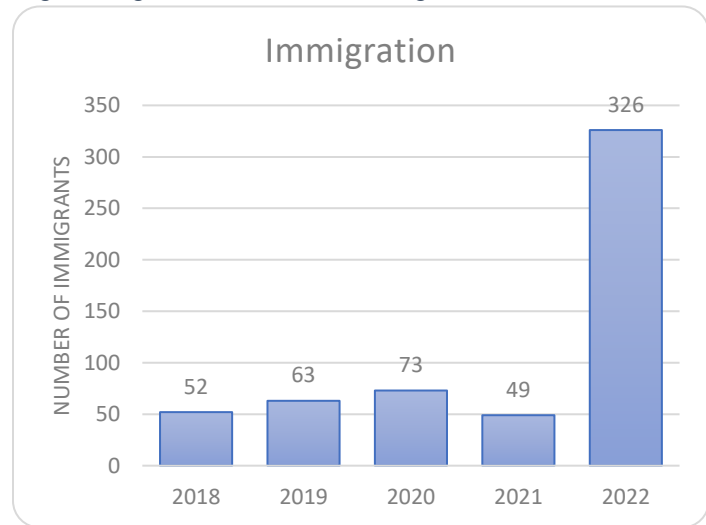


Figure 4: Immigration: Western Region (2022)



Figure 5: Cape Sable Island

Photo Credit: dashboardliving.com

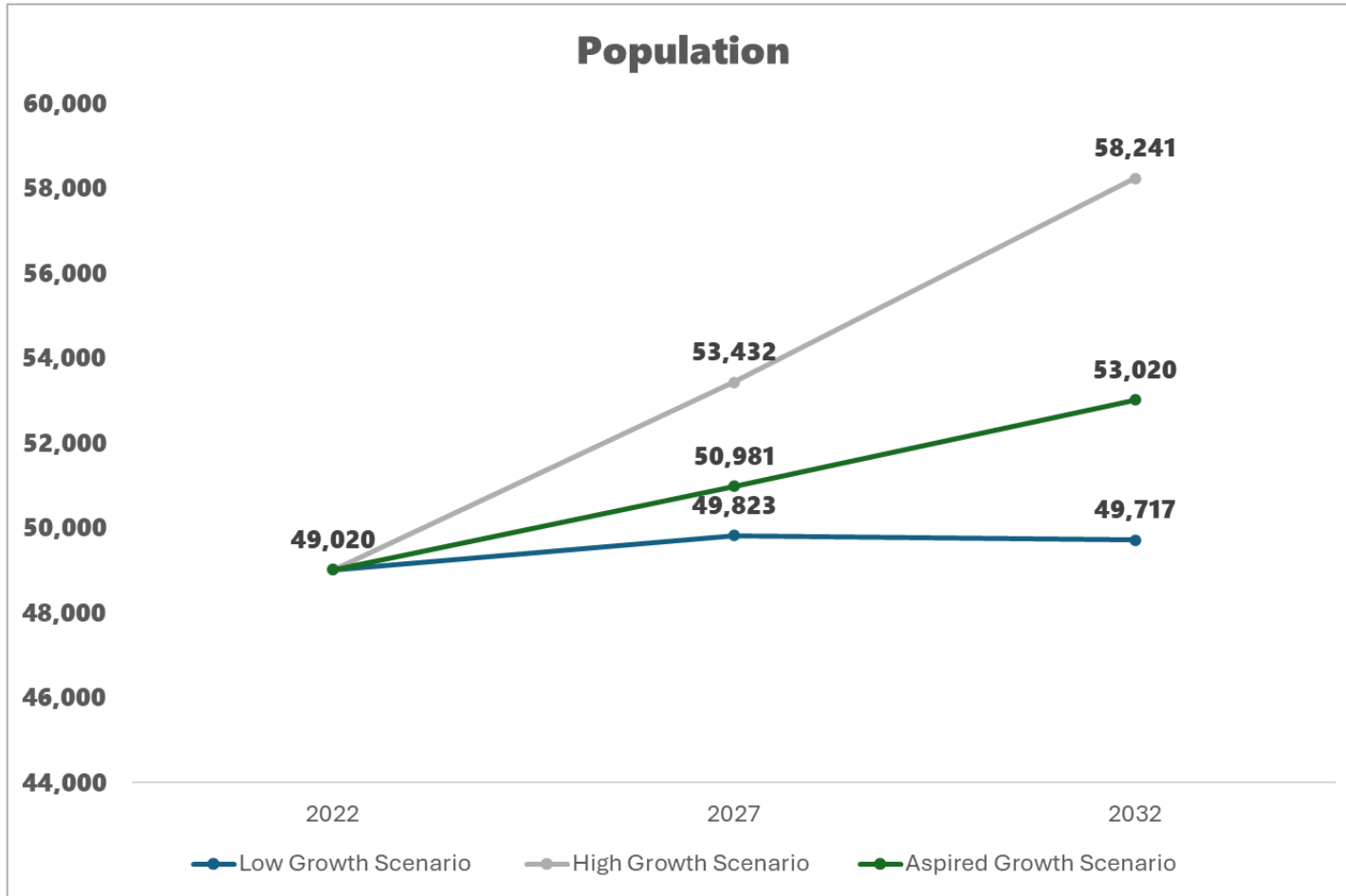


Figure 6: Population Projections: Western Region

1.2 Municipality of Argyle

1.2.1 Demographic Profile

The Municipality of Argyle’s (MOA) population was 7,870 in 2021 (Figure 4). With a 5% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 10% decrease from 2001-2021, MOA’s population has declined for two decades. However, the rate of decline has recently decreased with a less than 1% decrease from 2016-2021.

1.2.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase 1% annually, reaching 8,354 by 2027. If this trend continues, the population will rise to 8,780 by 2032. Under the moderate growth scenario (annual increase of 1.5%) the population is projected to reach 8,605 by 2027 and 9,270 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase), the population would climb to 8,865 by 2027 and 9,785 by 2032.

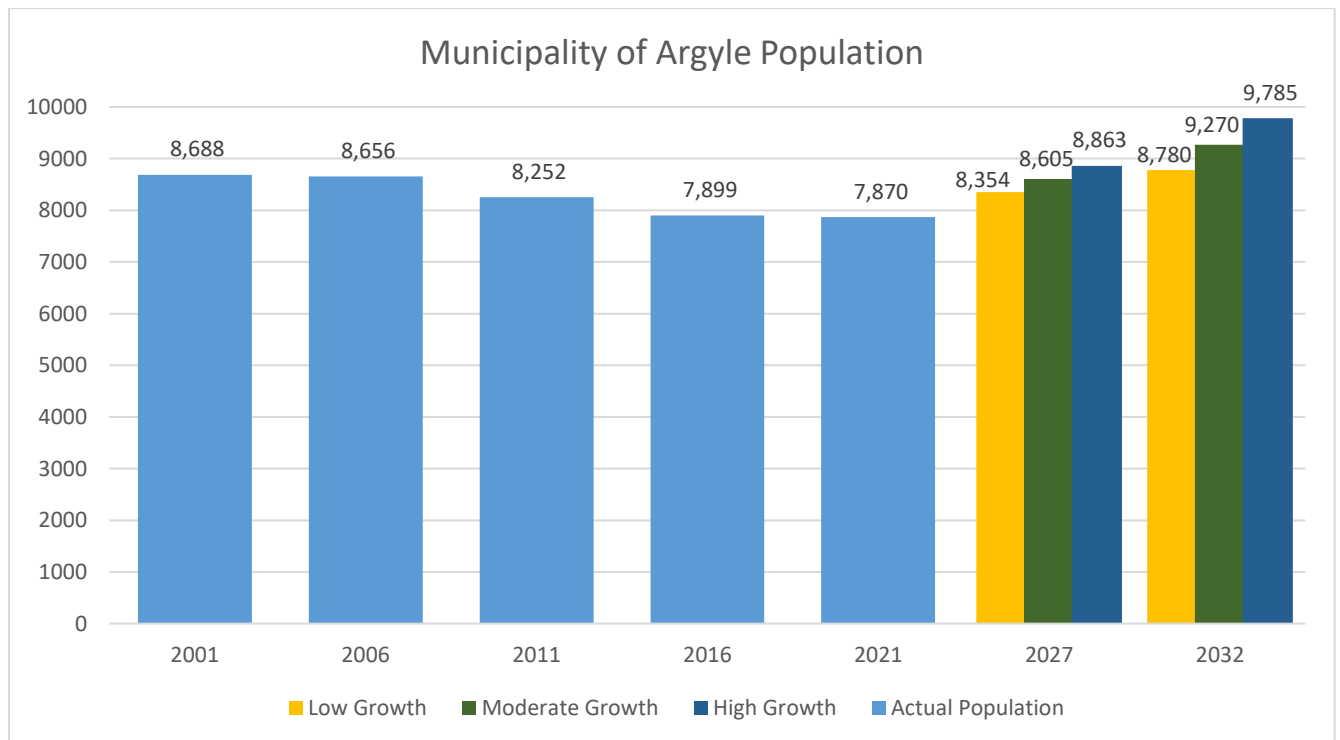


Figure 7: Population of Argyle

1.3 Municipality of Barrington

1.3.1 Demographic Profile

The Municipality of Barrington (MOB) has the smallest population of the region’s municipalities. MOB’s population was 6,523 in 2021 (Figure 5). With a 7% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 15% decrease from 2001-2021, MOB’s population decreased for two decades, although the rate of decline decreased, dropping to 2% from 2016-2021.

1.3.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase by 1% annually, reaching 6,924 by 2027. If this trend continues, the population is expected to rise to 7,278 by 2032. Under the moderate growth assumption (annual increase of 1.5%) the population will reach 7,133 by 2027 and further grow to 7,684 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase), the population would climb to 7,346 by 2027 and 8,111 by 2032.

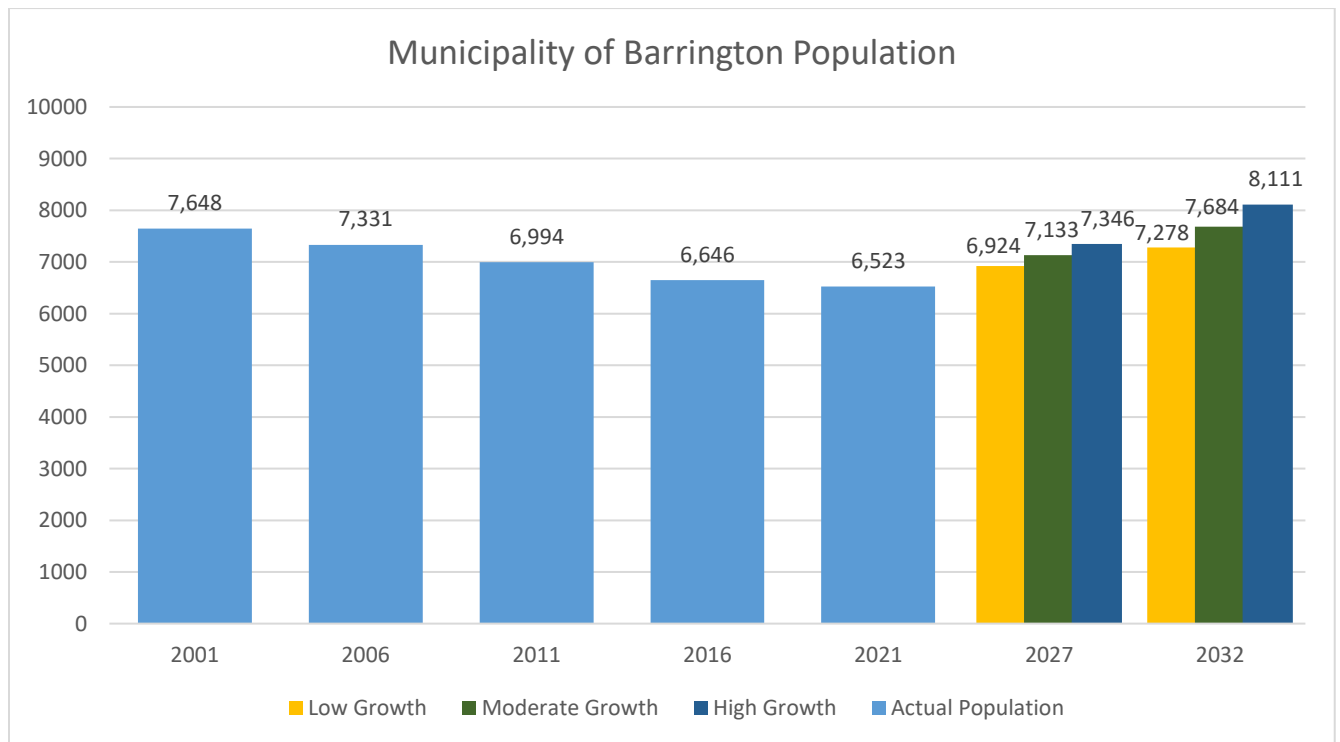


Figure 8: Population of Barrington

1.4 Municipality of Clare

1.4.1 Demographic Profile

The Municipality of Clare’s population was 7,678 in 2021 (Figure 6). With an 8% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 15% decrease from 2001-2021, the MOC population has been declining for two decades.

1.4.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase by 1% annually, reaching 8,150 by 2027. If this trend continues, the population will rise to 8,566 by 2032. Under the moderate growth assumption (annual increase of 1.5%) the population is projected to reach 8,395 by 2027 and 9,044 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase), the population would climb to 8,647 by 2027 and 9,547 by 2032.

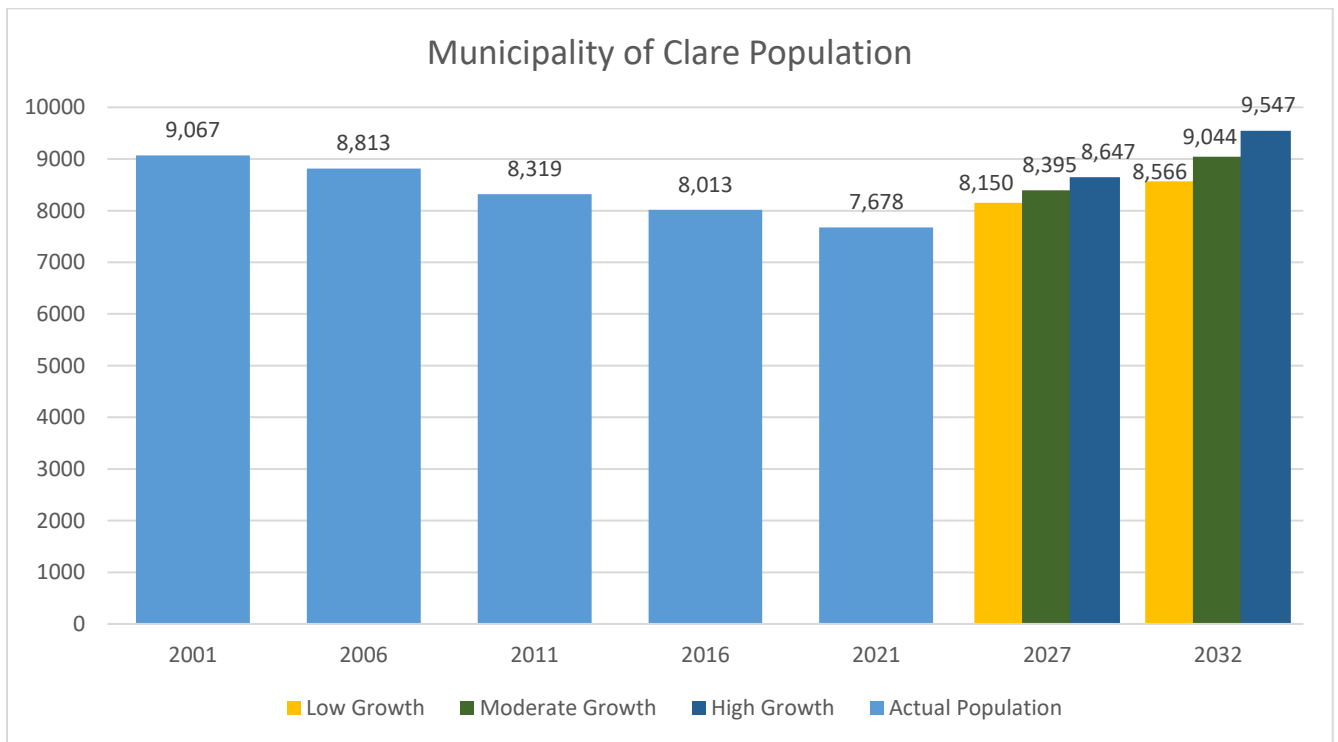


Figure 9: Population of MOC

1.5 Municipality of Digby

1.5.1 Demographic Profile

The Municipality of Digby’s population was 7,242 in 2021 (Figure 7). With a 3% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 13% decrease from 2001-2021, MOD’s population decreased across the last two decades. More recently this trend reversed with the population increasing 2% between 2016 and 2021.

1.5.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase 1% annually, reaching 7,688 by 2027. If this trend continues, the population will rise to 8,080 by 2032. Under the moderate growth assumption (annual increase of 1.5%), the population will reach 7,919 by 2027 and further grow to 8,531 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase), the population will climb to 8,156 by 2027 and 9,005 by 2032.

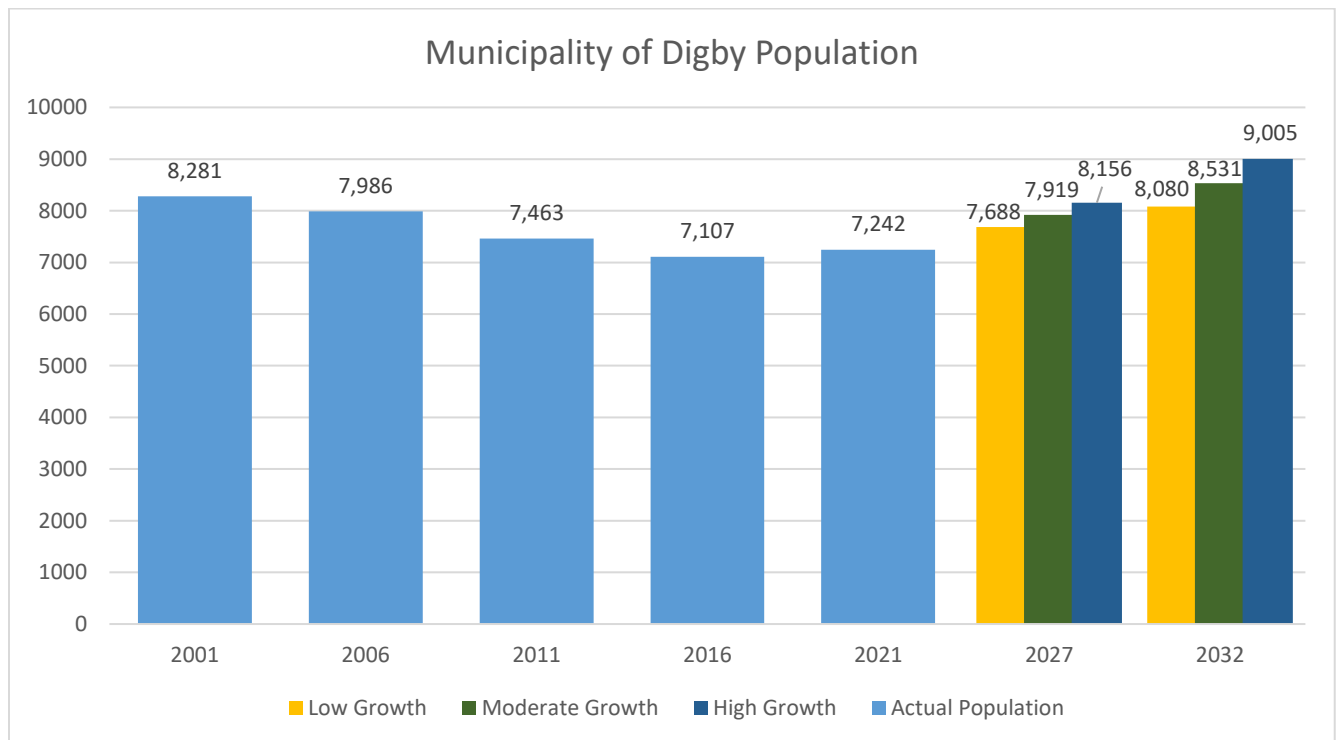


Figure 10: Population of Digby

1.6 Municipality of Yarmouth

1.6.1 Demographic Profile

The Municipality of Yarmouth had a population of 10,100 in 2021 (Figure 8). With less than a 1% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 4% decrease from 2001-2021, MODY’s population decreased across the last two decades. This trend recently reversed with the population registering a 2% increase from 2016-2021.

1.6.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase 1% annually, reaching 10,686 by 2027. If this trend continues, the population will rise to 11,231 by 2032. Under the moderate growth assumption (annual increase of 1.5%) the population is projected to reach 11,008 by 2027 and 11,858 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase) the population would climb to 11,337 by 2027 and 12,517 by 2032.

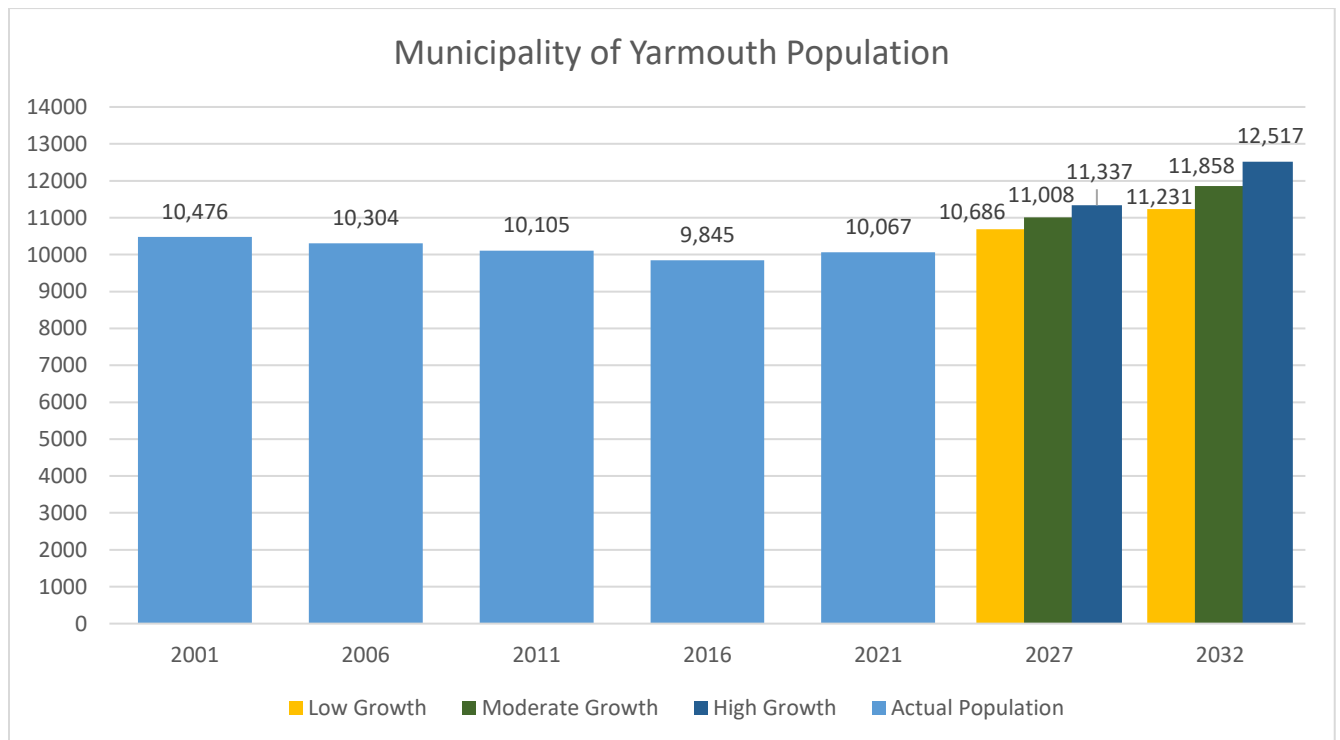


Figure 11: Population: MODY

1.7 Town of Digby

1.7.1 Demographic Profile

The Town of Digby’s population was 2,001 in 2021 (Figure 9). With a 7% decrease from 2011-2021 and a 5% decrease from 2001-2021, the Town’s population decreased across the last two decades.

1.7.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase 1% annually, reaching 2,124 by 2027. If this trend continues, the population will rise to 2,232 by 2032. Under the moderate growth assumption (annual increase of 1.5%) the population is projected to reach 2,188 by 2027 and 2,357 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase) the population would climb to 2,253 by 2027 and 2,488 by 2032.

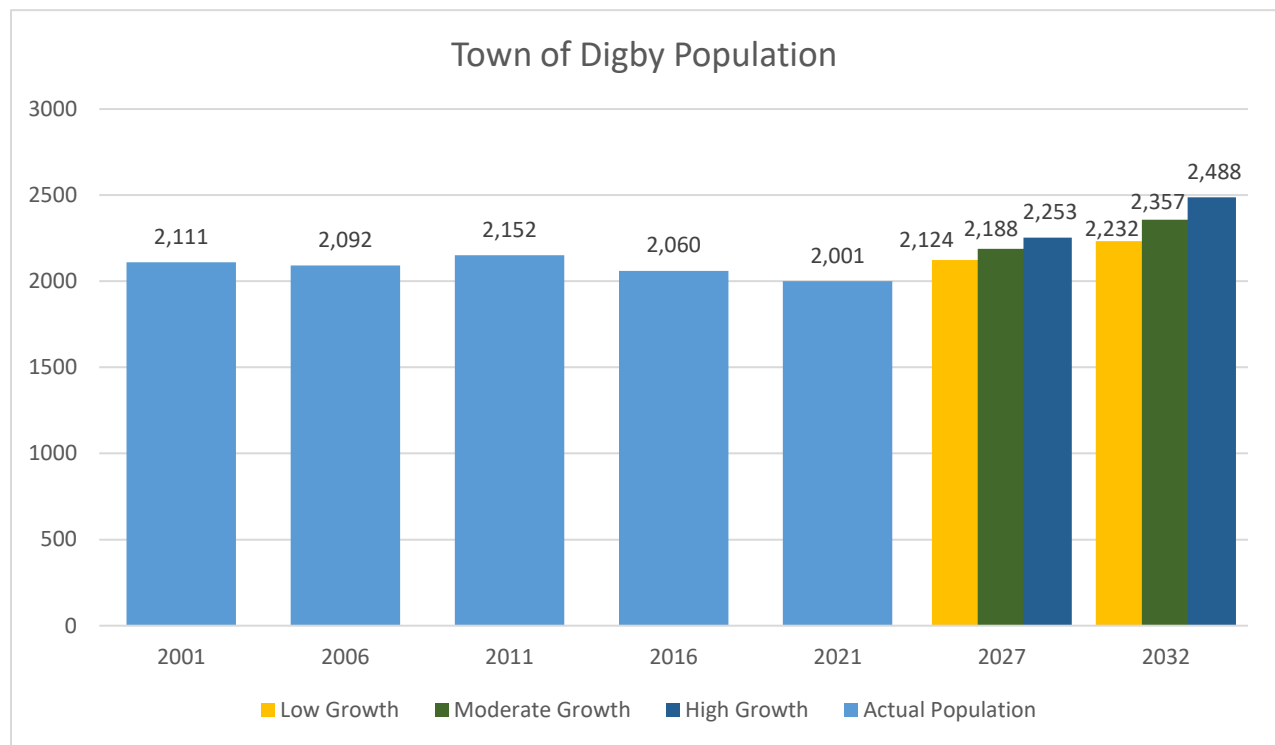


Figure 12: Population: Town of Digby

1.8 Town of Yarmouth

1.8.1 Demographic Profile

The Town of Yarmouth’s population was 6,829 in 2021 (Figure 10). With a 1% increase from 2011-2021 and a 10% decrease from 2001-2021, the Town’s population decreased across the last two decades. The Town of Yarmouth’s population trajectory recently reversed with a 5% increase from 2016-2021.

1.8.2 Population Projections

Under the low growth scenario, the population is projected to increase 1% annually, reaching 7,249 by 2027. If this trend continues at the same rate, the population is expected to rise to 7,619 by 2032. Under moderate growth assumptions, with an annual increase of 1.5%, the population is projected to reach 7,467 by 2027 and further grow to 8,044 by 2032. Under the high growth scenario (2% annual increase) the population would climb to 7,691 by 2027 and 8,491 by 2032.

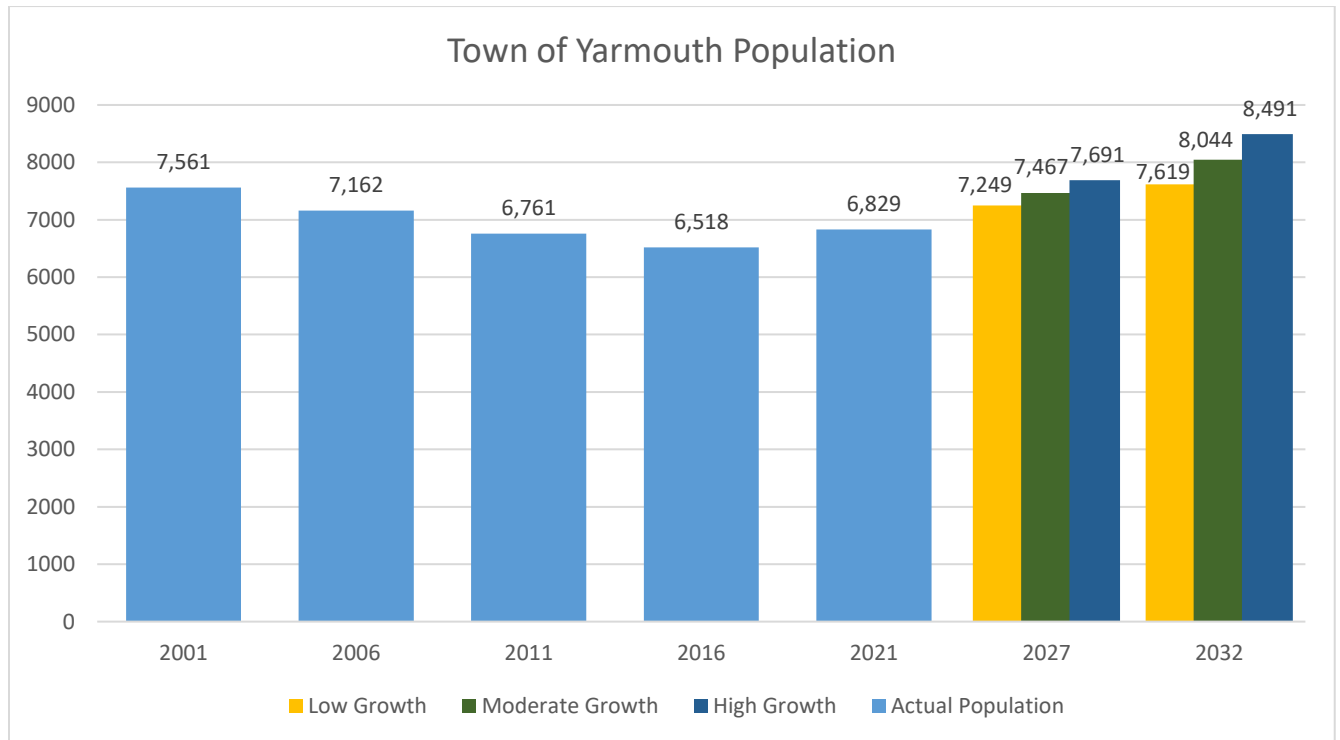


Figure 13: Population: Town of Yarmouth



Population Growth Management Capacity

2 Population Growth Management Capacity

This section considers the Western Region's capacity to accommodate population growth. The section is organized thematically, but geographic variations are outlined in the corresponding subsection.

A major information source for this section is primary data derived from interviews with the following community stakeholders:

Name	Position	Affiliation
Victoria Brooks	Chief Administrative Officer	Municipality of the District of Yarmouth
Stéphane Cyr	Chief Administrative Officer	Municipality of Clare
Kenneth Deveau	Executive Director	Conseil de développement économique de la Nouvelle Écosse
Chris Frotten	Chief Administrative Officer	Municipality of Barrington
Frank Grant	Director, Yarmouth Recreation	Municipality of the District of Yarmouth
Jeff Gushue	Chief Administrative Officer	Town of Yarmouth
Jared Purdy	Executive Director of Education	Tri-County Regional Centre for Education
Greg Landry	Senior Project Executive, Strategic Foresight for Long Range Planning for Population Growth	Government of Nova Scotia, Office of Planning and Priorities
Darlene LeBlanc	Deputy Chief Administrative Officer	Municipality of the District of Yarmouth
Alain Muise	Chief Administrative Officer	Municipality of Argyle
Kary Shannon	Project Director, Strategic Foresight for Long Range Planning for Population Growth	Government of Nova Scotia, Office of Planning and Priorities
Jeff Sunderland	Chief Administrative Officer	Municipality of Digby

Table 1: List of Key Stakeholders

2.1 Economic Development

As a region wide entity, the Western REN leads and coordinates economic development partnerships aligned with its mandate to create a business and investment friendly environment across Southwest Nova Scotia. Western REN has led collaboration among private and public sector partners committed to economic growth, diversification and planning across the region since 2014.

Western REN's business support programs are illustrative of the critical role Western REN plays in regional economic development. The impact of these programs is expanding as the REN, private sector and other partners increase their investment. Western REN growth tools include:

- **BusinessNow Program** in support of all aspects of business start-up, expansion and retention.
- **Connector Program** is a catalyst for labour market attachment by helping job seekers build their professional network, connect with career opportunities and find success in their chosen field.
- **Business Transition Program** supports business transition planning including matching business sellers with potential buyers; and
- **Continuous Improvement Program** assists businesses improve processing times, reduce costs, expand business, enhance customer experiences, boost employee morale, and increase profits.

Municipalities in the Region have also increased their commitment to economic development and diversification, either through a dedicated position or team approach to promoting sustainable growth and innovation.

2.2 Economic Diversification

Both secondary research and stakeholder interviews affirmed the need for further economic diversification. According to stakeholders, the Western Region's reliance on lobster exposes an economic vulnerability. Even slight fluctuations in lobster prices can impact the region's financial stability. This volatility diminishes the Western Region's capacity **to provide steady well-paying employment opportunities for current and new residents as the population grows.**

The 2022 closure of the Meteghan-based Champlain Seafood Processing Plant is an indication of sector volatility. Champlain attributed its plant closure to a decline in lobster populations.¹

“Catches during the 2022-23 winter season dropped – especially in the spring.”

--- Dan Fleck – Southwest NS inshore fisher representative

While the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) characterized lobster populations in all NS fishing areas as healthy in 2022, the sector is exposed to underlying challenges including climate change and warming waters. This may explain reduced catches in LFA 34 and adjacent LFA 33. For example, last year’s LFA 34 landings were down just over a quarter from 2016.



Figure 14: Champlain Seafood Processing Plant (now closed)

Photo credit: intrafish.com

2.2.1 Sector Opportunities

Research revealed several sector specific strengths and opportunities within the region that could yield greater diversification while still acknowledging the importance of a sustainable lobster fishery. For many interview participants, this balance was a prerequisite for sustainable economic growth considering the fisheries’ significance for regional identity.

Renewables

A growing renewable energy sector in the Western Region will play an important role in generating employment opportunities. The area benefits from significant natural advantages, including solar exposure levels of over 1,100 kWh per square mile and proximity to the world’s highest tides in the Bay of Fundy.

Tidal energy is a growth opportunity that has been prioritized by the Municipality of Digby. In 2022, the Scotland-based company, Sustainable Marine, used a floating platform constructed locally to deliver the “first floating in-stream tidal power to Nova Scotia’s grid.”² However key informants noted that despite research progress, companies struggle to scale up to larger commercial activity.



Figure 15: Sustainable Marine Energy Tidal Platform

Photo credit: Sustainable Marine Energy/CBC news

In 2022, Sustainable Marine cancelled plans to expand its tidal initiatives in the Bay of Fundy after the company and DFO arrived at an impasse regarding the tidal energy project, which introduces a significant challenge for attracting further investment³.

Other renewable opportunities include **wind** and **biomass**. There are 14 wind energy farms in the region, with a new 13-turbine project approved for construction in Argyle.⁴ This growth was cited by informants as evidence of the large-scale potential of wind energy.

Biomass energy is less developed, but recent initiatives reveal opportunities in the sector. In 2020, Scotia Gardens Seafood purchased an Anaerobic Digester in the Municipality of Clare to produce biogas, while the Université Sainte-Anne operates a biomass furnace using locally sourced wood chips.⁵

Two obstacles were cited by KIs regarding large scale wind infrastructure. Offshore wind development must not disrupt fisheries, so buy-in from sector leaders is vital. KIs also noted that wind turbines have been opposed by some residents on the basis that they would disrupt the local environment and the natural landscape. Robust engagement with affected communities will therefore be necessary. It was also stressed that new infrastructure is often opposed initially, but eventually becomes normalized.

Lithium Mining

The wider growth in green technology offers an opportunity for growth in adjacent sectors. KIs emphasized that the availability of lithium-bearing deposits presents an opportunity to explore

green transportation options (i.e. electric vehicles) and grow the economy. A private exploration company, Champlain Mineral Ventures, is already preparing to go into production at a site 25km outside the Town of Yarmouth, although final approval for mine construction has not yet been obtained. **KIs stressed that extractive industry development must incorporate extensive and ongoing engagement with Mi'kmaw leadership.**

Tourism

Tourism makes an important contribution to the Western Region economy. The Yarmouth and Acadian Shores Tourism Association (YASTA) leads tourism development and promotion across much of the Western Region. KIs noted that tourism was a vital sector that warrants more attention. Tourism activity in the Region is inextricably linked to the Yarmouth-Bar Harbour ferry. Some participants stressed that long term support for the ferry was needed and emphasized that **tourism bolsters population retention by providing employment and investment opportunities.**

“The Yarmouth - Bar Harbour ferry service is our tourism industry. **There is no tourism industry without, make no doubt about it.**”
- Key Informant

Research suggests that further investment in the tourism economy will be prudent – particularly in the accommodation sector. Tourism accommodation supply and room nights sold in Yarmouth and Acadian Shores rebounded significantly from the pandemic and in 2022 far exceeded pre-pandemic figures. In that year, 85,800 room nights were sold – a 32% increase over 2016 (Figure 17). **This was the largest recovery in room nights sold among all of the province’s tourism regions.**

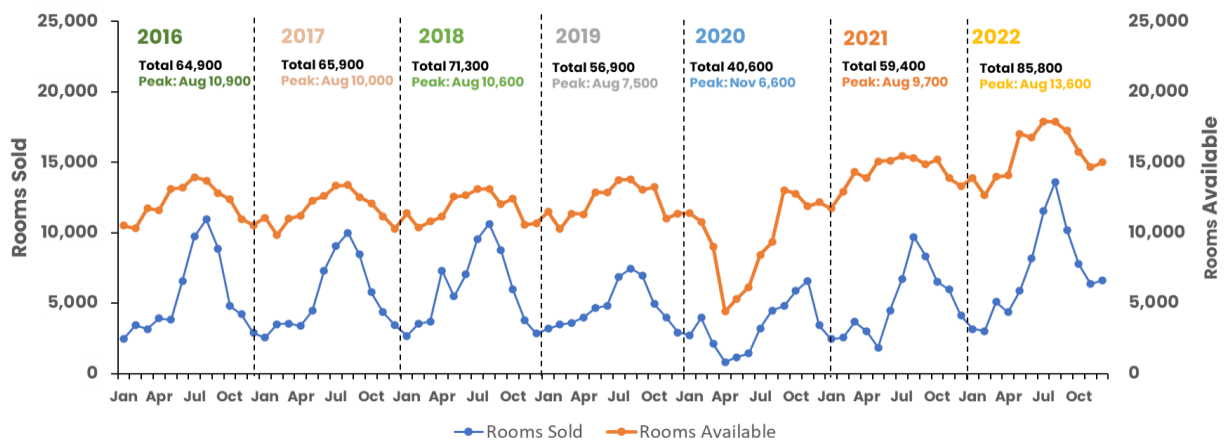


Figure 16: Supply and Demand for Traditional Tourism Accommodation in Yarmouth and Acadian Shores.

Photo credit: oldhousedreams.com

Unfortunately, many of these accommodations have not undertaken necessary upkeep including maintenance, upgrades and renovations, in part because some operators are planning to divest their properties (i.e. either retiring or reallocating investment). This has resulted in reduced quality,

exerting downward pressure on room rates and limiting the contribution these accommodations make to the visitor economy. Further, short-term accommodation can play a role in attracting and retaining new residents (e.g. remote workers, families visiting the region, temporary accommodation during the search for permanent housing).

2.3 Land Use Planning

Municipalities in Nova Scotia are empowered to develop planning and land-use strategies by the Municipal Governing Act. The Act requires municipal governments to engage the public to identify local needs and adopt strategies consistent with five “statements of provincial interest,” which pertain to drinking water; protection against flood risks; sustainable agriculture; infrastructure; and housing. Such provisions ensure that basic services are built into local planning documents while leaving space for navigating local challenges and leveraging regional strengths.

It was noted in interviews that until recently, municipal units developed land use planning documents for managing population decline or at most very gradual population gains along a 20-year growth curve. However, the health crisis (and attending opportunities for remote work and concern about dense urban neighbourhoods) spurred population gains in 2021 reversing a pattern of decline in MOD, MODY, and the Town of Yarmouth.

This shift in the population trajectory generated administrative and development challenges that have been experienced differently around the Western Region as this pertains to the ability to effectively manage population growth.

2.3.1 Land Use Plans

One challenge relates to land use plans, which KIs stressed must be kept up-to-date and evergreen. The health crisis and subsequent population growth pressures rendered existing Municipal Planning Strategies (MPS) outdated while compelling officials to produce new documents that have only recently come into effect.

Both MOD and MODY revised their MPS in 2023. MOC is currently deliberating and voting on a new MPS, while MODA and MODB completed their strategies during the early stages of COVID, in 2020 and 2019, respectively. Interviews with key stakeholders revealed a deep awareness of the need to develop areas most likely to host the rising population by prioritizing certain areas for utilities and housing developments, transportation infrastructure, etc. (e.g. Tusket in the Municipality of Argyle, or Church Point in the Municipality of Clare).

The updated MPSs recognize the Western Region’s renewable energy potential. For example, MOD and MODY plans outline guidelines for establishing commercial and community turbines and wind farms, allowing authorities and private operators to facilitate engagement and planning permissions without having to first negotiate minimum separation distance between farms and dwellings, performance standards (e.g. related to noise) and other issues.⁶ This is significant given potential public opposition to large-scale turbine projects.

However, land use planning has been challenged by the unpredictability of the recent health crisis and its affect on population growth. Changes to pandemic-era social organization, especially work-from-home (WfH) options and requirements, were likely responsible for unanticipated population clusters – that is, population growth transpiring in areas not always anticipated by municipal administrations. Interest in more authentic rural experiences is also a factor.

These population patterns have been prominent in the MOD, which anticipated population growth radiating outward from the Town of Digby (i.e. more residents settling closer to the Town than in outlying areas). However, new residents have prioritized more rural areas of the municipality, forcing municipal officials to reassess current and planned infrastructure projects, especially sewer (as noted in Figure 9 above, the Town of Digby itself saw population decline over the pandemic, unlike MOD, MODY, and the Town of Yarmouth).

Another challenge is limited coordination between municipalities, which has deprived individual leaders of best practices and resources-sharing opportunities. Although each unit confronts many similar issues related to access to healthcare, daycare, and housing, collaboration in the development of land-use bylaws or Municipal Planning Strategies has been limited. As noted above, MPS creation and revision has been staggered and siloed and, in some cases, separated by several years.

There are early discussions of a regional MPS, to better coordinate infrastructure development and economic growth, while timelines have yet to be established, and these discussions have not yet featured all Western Region municipalities.⁷



Figure 17: Tusket, Nova Scotia, where MOA is Anticipating and Encouraging Population Growth

Photo credit: oldhousedreams.com

2.4 Housing

This section profiles Western Region housing, offering projections for 2022 to 2032, within specific municipalities and towns. It is important to note that housing data projections were pulled from the 2023 Municipal Housing Needs Report. Data was aggregated to project housing for the entire region.

	Total Units Required by 2022	Estimated Units Built by 2027	Estimated Total Units Required by 2027	Estimated Units Built by 2032	Estimated Total Units Required by 2032
Region	1,130	575	1,355	1,150	1,090
Argyle	95	50	170	100	220
Barrington	130	75	35	150	-60
Clare	0	175	-175	350	-350
Digby	580	50	800	100	645
Town of Digby	0	25	-25	50	-50
Yarmouth	180	150	265	300	300
Town of Yarmouth	145	50	285	100	385

Table 2: Housing in the Western Region of Nova Scotia

It is important to note that a community having a 0 or negative number under a “Total Units Required” does not indicate that all housing needs within the community are satisfied. These statistics offer a general overview of the number of housing units available but did not consider critical specifics such as affordability, appropriateness, or the fulfillment of community requirements. This distinction is especially significant in the context of the Western Region, where there is an aging population.

This demographic trend points towards an increasing demand not just for more affordable housing options (e.g. public housing), but also for solutions tailored to smaller households, including single or two-occupant units. Moreover, the necessity for accessible housing options, including those that provide elevator access, are ground level or are wheelchair accessible, is expected to become more pronounced. Consequently, while quantitative housing data is informative, it offers an incomplete picture, underscoring the need for targeted action to ensure housing policies adequately cater to the evolving needs of the community.

The Western Region is facing significant challenges in providing adequate housing for its residents, a situation compounded by limited construction efforts.

These interviews identified that housing shortages, while persistent across Western Region municipalities, are more acute in Yarmouth and Digby County than in Shelburne, insofar as stakeholders from the former regions expressed more difficulties attracting developers and cited a lack of modern rental properties as a specific issue. This finding is corroborated by Table 2,

indicating housing units required by 2023 based on population projections for each Western Region municipality or town.

2.4.1 *Housing Limitations*

KIs attributed the region's inability to match the pace of housing demand to several factors:

- **Skilled Trades Shortage:** Most interviewees noted that one issue is a tight labour market and a shortage of skilled tradespeople.
- **Rural Isolation:** The labour shortage is not unique to the Western Region – this problem has affected most areas in the province, with the exception of Halifax (which has been experiencing a construction boom in recent years) – but stakeholders noted that the Western Region is uniquely affected by the labour supply because of its distance from HRM. Discussions revealed specific instances across the Western Region of developers dropping commercial projects or not responding to RFPs (e.g. one RFP issued by MOC, for the development of a land bank, went unanswered twice) – because of the higher investment risk compared to Halifax and the higher costs of transporting and providing temporary accommodation for workers in the Yarmouth and Acadian Shores.
 - Western Region municipalities were compared to New Glasgow, which is of a similar size to a community like Yarmouth, but which is closer to Highway 102 and to larger urban centers such as Moncton and Halifax.
- **Underutilized Housing Stock:** Although it was less prominent, a third factor mentioned by stakeholders was underutilized housing stock, such as homes occupied only part of the year, or homes granted as a bequest that go unoccupied year-round and so deprive the market of potential supply.

2.4.2 *Housing Solutions*

Participants emphasized the need for public-private partnerships to grow the housing supply, emphasizing that construction should be led by private developers while the government provides a supporting role through targeted funding and risk mitigation (e.g. providing funding to landlords to incentivize building in Yarmouth or Digby).

Other stakeholders noted the importance of incorporating long-term housing strategies into comprehensive land-use plans, including amending existing zoning regulations to allow for higher builds (MODY) and residential property development on commercial land (MOD).

Additional, ongoing strategies that could be deployed and expanded around the Western Region, both to compensate for limited housing and encourage new builds, include:

- Using temporary housing (e.g. hotels, motels) to provide bridging accommodation for new migrants and immigrants. Some participants noted that a failure to offer some bridging accommodation cost the region skilled workers, who otherwise would have moved to the Western Region. This option is currently being discussed by the Conseil de développement économique de la Nouvelle-Écosse.

- Subsidizing temporary accommodations for workers as incentives for developers.
- Renovating unused buildings (e.g. old schools, larger homes, older motels, such as the Siesta Motel pictured below) into affordable long term accommodation.²
- Incentivizing local developers to invest in small scale, lower risk rental stock (e.g. 2–4-unit complexes).
- Promoting new provincial government incentives designed to encourage residents to convert space in their homes into apartments.
 - Such an initiative is especially timely, as new provincial regulations on Short Term Rental (STR) accommodations (e.g. Airbnb) will likely reduce STR supply and provide opportunities for conversion to long term housing, for both rental and ownership.



Figure18: The Siesta Motel in Digby

Photo credit: siestamotel.ca

2.5 Public Lands and Assets

Some 1.53 million hectares or about 26% of the province) is designated as Crown land. A comparable figure for the Western Region is considerably higher at about 48%. This is significant since Crown lands are licensed for a variety of economic purposes ranging from licenses and leases for cranberry bogs, forestry operations, mines, peat bogs, power lines, wind energy, to

² In the summer of 2022, the Siesta Motel was purchased by the Digby and Area Housing Coalition, who intended to convert the fifteen-unit motel into affordable accommodations.

broadband towers and tidal energy. The Province considers Crown land a finite asset to benefit all Nova Scotians. The sale of Crown Land is only considered in unique circumstances.

The repurposing of federal assets is also a relevant consideration. Public Services and Procurement, in partnership with Housing, Infrastructure and Communities, recently announced federal properties that are available for housing, along with a new tool for builders called the Canada Public Land Bank. While these efforts are early, there is an opportunity to work with the federal government to identify underutilized assets that may be appropriate for housing and other critical infrastructure gaps in the Western Region.

2.6 Infrastructure

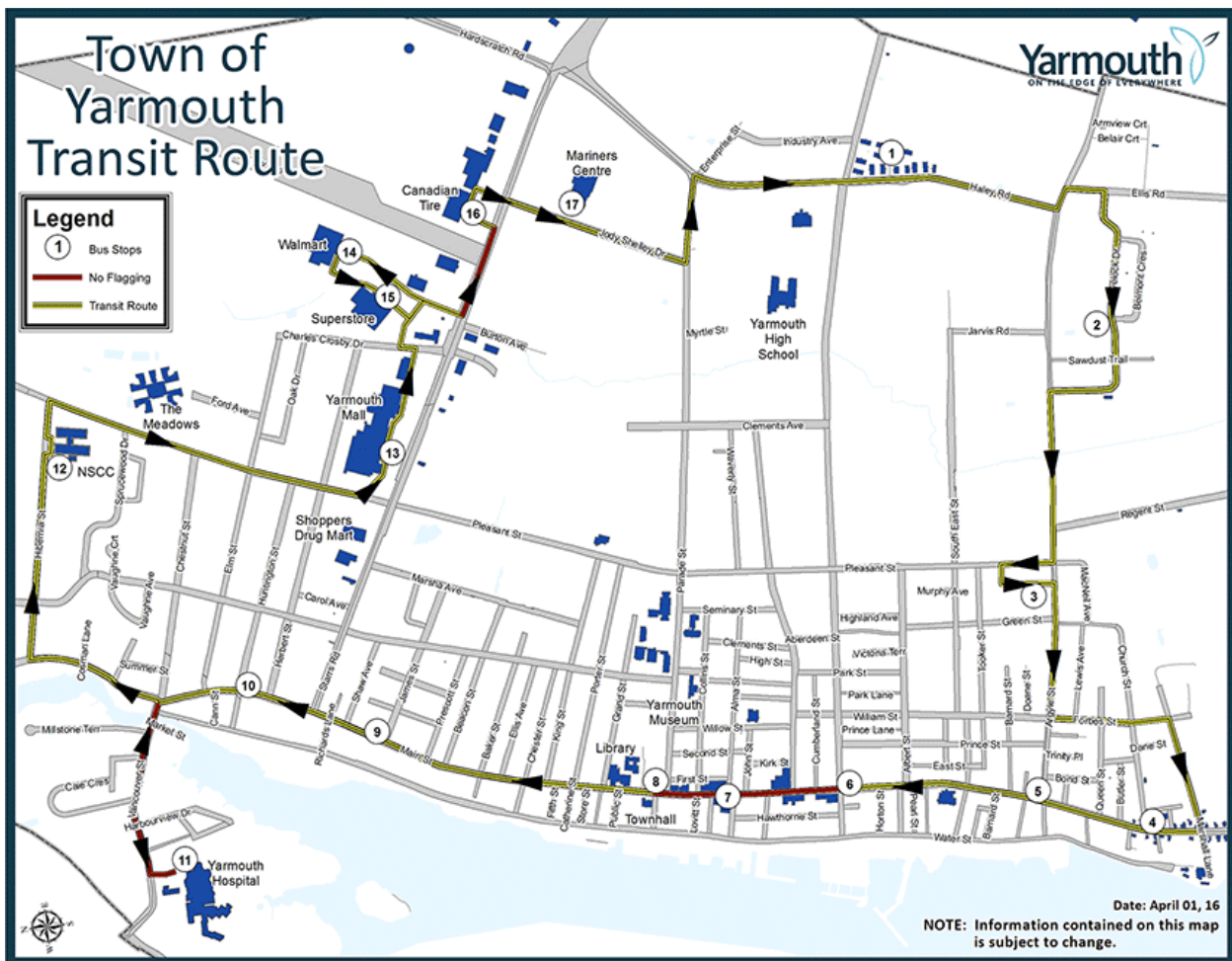


Figure19: Town of Yarmouth Transit Route.

Photo credit: Town of Yarmouth

2.6.1 Public Transit

A vital component of accommodating more residents is an effective regional transportation network connecting rural communities to larger urban centers. As noted in the above population

estimates, many new immigrants and interprovincial migrants will settle in the Town of Yarmouth, but those who settle in MODY and elsewhere may find employment in the town itself and require accessible public transportation. This need will only grow if the cost of living continues to outpace wages.

Western Region municipalities offer some commercial and public transit into and out of the region by air and sea. There are two airports in the region, including an international airport in MODY, as well as two ferries and six commercial wharfs connecting Nova Scotia to New Brunswick and the Eastern Seaboard of the United States.⁸

However, public road transportation linking the Western Region municipalities to one another is limited and sporadic. The Town of Yarmouth features a Flag Stop bus route and the Municipalities of Yarmouth and Digby both include links to the 100-series highways. The Municipality of Digby is also part of the Kings Transit Authority, which offers accessible public transit (funded by Kings County) around the Annapolis Valley.⁹

Beyond this – in the municipalities of Clare, Argyle, Barrington, and Yarmouth – transportation services are provided by non-profits or registered charities operating small fleets that run on a pre-booked service model.

Clare is serviced by the Transport de Clare Society, a registered charity launched in 1996, while residents in Argyle and Yarmouth have access to the HOPE Dial-a-Ride. Barrington residents are served by the non-profit organization, Sou'West Nova Transit Association, which is similarly a door-to-door pre-booked service.¹⁰

The pre-booked model may be useful for one-time trips, grocery runs, and especially for community members requiring mobility assistance. However, it is unlikely this system, which does not run on the weekend in Argyle and Yarmouth, could accommodate a significantly higher volume of passengers or regular commuters. Interviews with key informants also suggested that the pre-booked model is currently posing challenges for families interested in getting around the community and for current residents to engage in community building and welcome new members. **Specific instances were cited of new residents having issues integrating into communities because limited infrastructure made it difficult to get around.**

These challenges are not experienced in the same way in each municipality, and thus solutions to public transportation will vary. Based on interviews, MOD is under the most community pressure to expand existing transportation infrastructure – as noted above, MOD is the second fastest growing region after the Municipality of the District of Yarmouth, but the average annual household income in MOD according to data from Statistics Canada is over \$13,000 lower than in MODY, which has fueled calls for accessible public transit as gas prices rise.



MOD and the TOD are currently serviced by the King's Transit Authority, which runs in Annapolis
Figure 20: Kings Transit Authority.

Photo Credit: Kings Transit Authority.

and Kings County and operates a route from Weymouth to the Town of Digby through the corridor of Highway 101. This is MOD's most highly subsidized public service. Municipal leaders are following closely a two-year study underway by Kings Transit on rural transportation, but the current concern is that cost per rider for MOD is far outpacing bus fares – that is, although demand for bus rides have increased post-COVID, the cost of fuel among other inputs pushed operational costs far above rising demand (approximately \$18.00 cost per passenger vs. \$3.50 fares).

Key interviews pointed to possible solutions, including engaging local businesses, which benefit from more robust transportation networks (i.e. by facilitating greater access to workers) to contribute to maintaining and expanding the bus network.

Additional challenges derive from the Kings Transit Authority's governance model. Although MOD pays for and operates its own bus, municipal representatives do not have voting rights on the Transit Authority's board. This has made it difficult for both the Town of Digby and MOD to act on possible initiatives to expand the service in response to public demand. That is, even if municipal leaders decided to expand the service despite the cost pressures cited, Kings Transit Authority is preventing any expansion until the rural transit study is completed.

MOC, adjacent to MOD and part of Digby County, has also revealed interest in offering more comprehensive transportation services. Although pressures are not as extensive as in Digby and average annual household incomes are \$7,000 higher, lack of consistent public transit was cited as an issue and municipal authorities have been considering joining the Kings Transit Authority –

although it is unclear for stakeholders if demand is sufficiently large for this – or expanding the services of Transport de Clare to offer a regular service in addition to pre-booked offerings.

Outside of Clare and Digby, evidence for pressures related to transportation is thinner. The Municipality of Argyle, for example, has engaged in recent discussions to expand the Hope Dial-a-Ride service because of the unique geography of the region that adds distance and time to many journeys – but there is no demand for any additional services beyond this expansion.

There is no action or preliminary steps currently being taken – or evidence of pressing need or demand – to expand transportation services in the Municipalities of Yarmouth and Barrington nor in the Town of Yarmouth, which keeps its bus loop within the Town boundaries to ensure the service is not constrained by the Utility and Review Board (autonomy that has allowed the Town to conduct trial administration of the service and make needed adjustments in a reasonable time.

2.6.2 Utilities



Figure 21: Bulk Water Station in the Town of Yarmouth.

Photo credit: Town of Yarmouth.

The provision of water and sewage services are administered in each Western Region district by the corresponding political authority: services in the municipalities are handled by the local municipal council and in the Towns of Digby and Yarmouth they are provided by the town council.

Town and municipality websites offer comprehensive guidelines for connecting to sewers and maintaining the integrity of collection systems. Such information is vital for integrating new residents and facilitating seamless connectivity to wastewater facilities.¹¹

There is also evidence that local authorities adapt effectively to population clustering: in 1997, the municipality responded to growing density in the community of South Ohio by designating the area a Wastewater and Sewage Management District. This allowed authorities to install a cluster system of sewage pipes and to maintain all beds and septic tanks in this district.¹²

While it may be useful to encourage quicker and more seamless connections to sewage systems – applications to connect to the MOD system cannot be made online but must be mailed to the public works department or hand delivered – available evidence suggests that water and sewage infrastructure in the Western Region is well suited to handling a population increase over time.

Indeed, according to stakeholders, the provision and maintenance of public utilities in the Western Region is a source of strength and reveals local leaders' strong adaptability and effective growth management. In response to the recent drought that affected the southwestern-most areas, for example, the Town of Yarmouth installed a bulk water station to provide easily accessible, drinkable water to the county, supplying millions of litres to residents whose wells had gone dry.

In Barrington, where drought was also prevalent, officials developed a well supply upgrade lending program that provides low interest financing to property owners to upgrade their water supply. Such upgrades could include the construction of new wells, installation of cisterns, greywater collection and other containers for supplying or conserving water, and other developments. **Such initiatives would be supported as part of ongoing population growth management.**

One challenge raised during discussions was the problem posed by rapid and unanticipated population growth, especially in the Municipality of Digby. Officials in MOD **have had to halt current sewage developments and expansions because population clusters have emerged in more rural areas of the municipality, further from the centers of town services where the most significant growth was expected.**

2.6.3 Electricity

Power is supplied to the Western Region via networks of 69kV transmission lines (the lowest capacity transmission lines in the province) administered and maintained by Nova Scotia Power (NSP). This power moves through distribution substations that convert electricity down to a safe voltage for public consumption.

By law, NSP is required to generate 80% of its electricity from renewable sources by 2030, an initiative in which the Western Region could play a vital role.¹³ As above, MODA is the site of a new wind farm in the province – one of five newly approved farms that will add 373 MW by December 2024 – and Digby is the site of ongoing (and successful) experimentation in tidal energy. In 2020, Western REN also led the development and implementation of an Energy Investment Plan for the region, and there are numerous small-scale examples of solar energy use

and energy efficiency (e.g. Sainte-Anne Biomass plant, net-zero administration building in MOA) that could be expanded.¹⁴

However, most stakeholders expressed concern that even if such initiatives may be operationalized on a large scale, the grid currently does not have the capacity to carry this energy output, and **communication received from Nova Scotia Power is that it does not intend to increase capacity any time soon**. The Towns of Yarmouth and Digby were cited as stress points because these population centres will surge temporarily during the working day, putting augmented stress on the grid and other utilities.

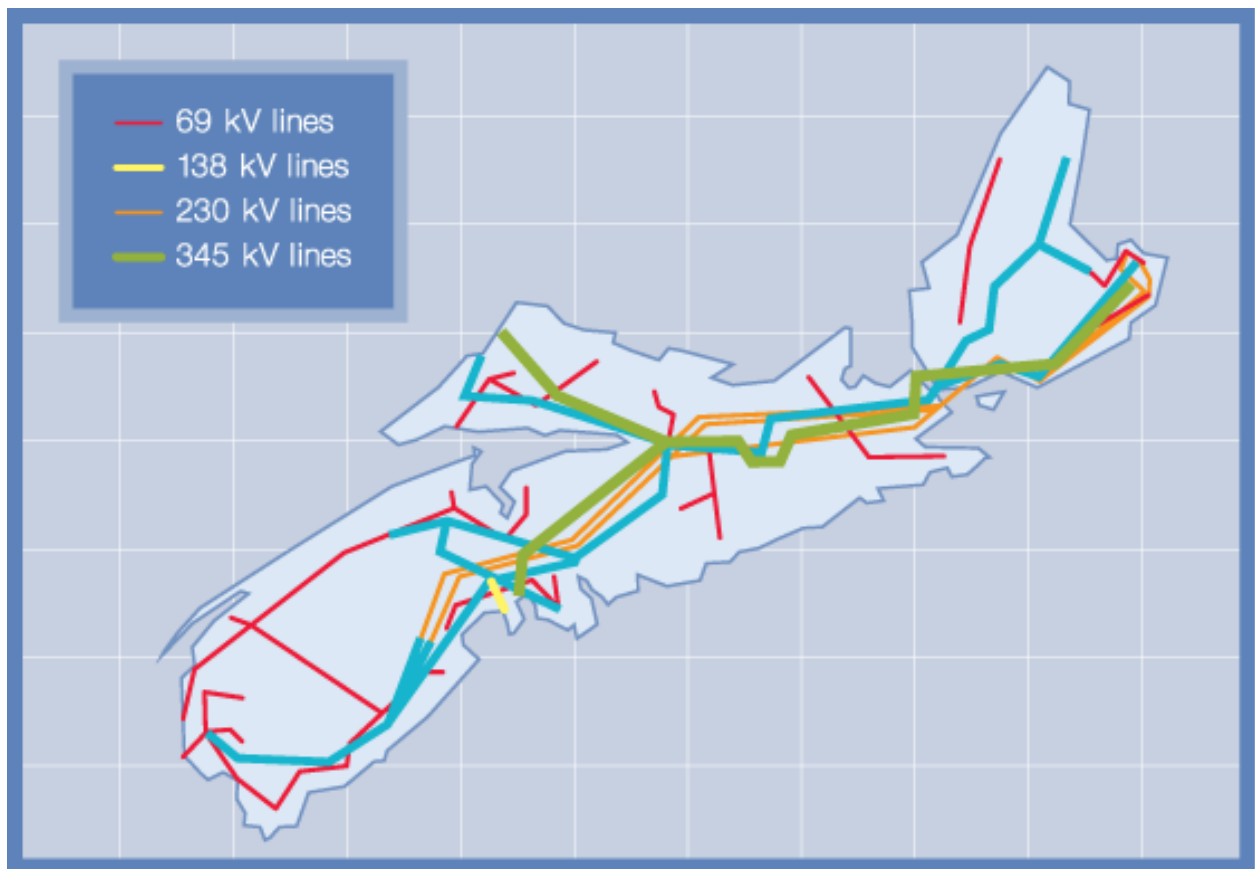


Figure 22: Nova Scotia Power kV Line Distribution.

Photo Credit: Town of Yarmouth

2.6.4 Internet

Access to reliable internet has become as much about health and safety as entertainment and recreation, considering the digitization of health records, booking systems, and news media (e.g. for receiving timely updates about health and climate events).

Western REN has recently coordinated strategic partnerships to boost high-speed internet access to rural communities and therefore has positioned itself well to accommodate a higher population density outside of the Towns of Yarmouth and Digby.

In 2020, Western REN partnered with four municipalities, Bell Canada and the former Develop Nova Scotia (currently known as Build Nova Scotia) which supplied funding from the Nova Scotia Internet Funding Trust to deliver high-speed internet access to 5,400 homes and businesses. This was the second round of funding provided by Develop Nova Scotia, and a third was delivered in 2021. This investment enabled fibre-optic service to an additional 1,060 homes and businesses in the Western Region.¹⁵

For stakeholders, the larger challenge for residents is now expanded and consistent cellular coverage, which has become more sporadic than internet access.

The Province announced an initial investment of \$47.3 million to launch the Cellular for Nova Scotia Program in October 2023. An additional investment of \$18.6 million was announced in July 2024.³

³ <https://news.novascotia.ca/en/2024/07/31/historic-investment-cellular-infrastructure-enhance-safety-connectivity#:~:text=Through%20an%20additional%20investment%20of,four%20announced%20in%20October%202023.>

2.7 Health Services

There are two hospitals in the Western Region – Yarmouth Regional and Digby General – with Annapolis Community and Roseway Hospital located in adjacent Annapolis County and the Town of Shelburne respectively (Figure 14). The Town of Yarmouth offers the only Regional Hospital in both the Western Region and in Shelburne and Queens Counties (i.e. there are none in Shelburne and Queens) as well as one of only five maternal units in Nova Scotia. The closest Regional Hospital outside of the Western Region is the South Shore Regional Hospital in Bridgewater.



Figure 23: Nova Scotia Hospitals and Health Clinics

Source: Nova Scotia Health

As Figure 23 demonstrates, hospitals and health centers in the Western Region are concentrated along the coast and become sparser towards the southwestern tip of the region. This aligns with population density, but news media and community discussions reveal that these facilities are struggling to provide full services for community members. Digby General Hospital has only 20 beds in the medical unit and 13 in its restorative care unit to accommodate the 20,000 people it serves in the Town of Digby, and the Municipalities of Digby and Clare. The hospital’s emergency unit has also been forced to close frequently because of staffing problems.¹⁶

Although there are no publicly available records detailing monthly closures, recent studies and news media make some comparative analysis possible to assess change and continuity over time. In 2021, according to an investigation by the *Tri-County Vanguard*, emergency department closures at Digby General reached a monthly high of 65 closure hours in August, before spiking to 223 hours in September and 238 hours in October.¹⁷

In February 2024, the emergency department was closed intermittently, for a total of 154 closure hours. Such figures indicate that the hospital is still experiencing issues maintaining regular emergency services for residents of Digby County.¹⁸

Both the limited distribution of more specialized facilities and the limited capacity within institutions have generated accessibility issues and frustration in the community. In the 2019 Quality of Life Survey, conducted by Engage Nova Scotia, residents from Southwestern Nova Scotia (which includes all Western Region municipalities) **posted the second lowest rating among ten surveyed regions when asked about the “perceived quality of healthy health care services” and the “perceived accessibility of healthcare services.”**¹⁹



Figure 24: Université Sainte-Anne

Photo credit: mynsfuture.ca

Such issues will only be compounded by increasing population, even if this rising population is more concentrated on the coasts and in the Towns of Yarmouth and Digby, rather than further inland where there is limited specialized healthcare infrastructure.

However, there is significant work going on in Southern Nova Scotia to mitigate the health crisis, which would inform future strategy and resource allocation:

- **Suspended Programs at Université Sainte-Anne:** Stakeholders noted that two programs offered at Université Sainte-Anne have the potential to expand access to local healthcare talent, but which are currently suspended because of low recruitment. These are the Continuing Care Worker (CCW) Program and the Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN) Program.
- **Following Up on Université Sainte-Anne Graduates:** According to informants, there is a steady stream of graduates in the faculty of sciences at Université Sainte-Anne (especially the biology department) that move on to pre-med and medical schooling. The Municipality of Clare has been following up with graduates who enter pre-med or pursue a career in public health for many years, using incentives (i.e. gifts, discussions over dinner, care packages during exams) to encourage them to return to the region to work. Stakeholders encouraged other municipalities to further develop local talent to

complement recruitment efforts external to the Region. These efforts would build on other successful initiatives including the examples featured below.

- MOC initiatives resulted in offices available for the newly renovated Clare Health Centre being filled even before the expansion project was completed, significantly expanding access to family doctors for residents.
- The Municipality of Digby and the administrative units of Yarmouth County²⁰ recently created a Community Navigator Position, responsible for attending recruiting events, following up with students in medical programs, and pursuing other recruitment duties. Such programs will contribute to keeping emergency departments in Digby and Yarmouth open for longer. In the latter case, a construction tender will soon be issued to begin a planned expansion four years in the making. This expansion will double the number of patients the facility can care for from 14 to 30, while increasing the number of ambulances from 2 to 4.

According to stakeholders, Clare has been speaking with other municipal units about physician recruitment best practices, going so far as to host tours of its expanded medical facility. However, such collaboration across county lines on doctor recruitment strategies remains very thin and there appears to be no region-wide recruitment strategy or initiative on the horizon, beyond the province's Physician Recruitment and Retention program.



Figure 25: Planned entrance to the new emergency department at Yarmouth Regional.

Photo credit: Nova Scotia Health

2.8 Quality of Life

2.8.1 Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

The Western Region is home to a diverse cultural ecosystem. Approximately 25% of the population of both Yarmouth and Digby Counties are French Acadian and the region's educational and tourism infrastructure offer plentiful opportunities for engaging with Acadian history and culture, such as the historic Acadian village and Université Sainte-Anne.²¹

There is also a vibrant Indigenous presence in the region. Bear River First Nation is home to over 100 Mi'kmaq community members, while Wasoqopa'q First Nation (formerly Acadia First Nation) includes Yarmouth 33 reserve. Further, many Mi'kmaw families and professionals live and work off reserve in the Western Region.²²

The Town and Municipality of Yarmouth have recently developed Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committees to advise local authorities on best practices for making services and infrastructure more accessible and welcoming, and a Newcomer Peer Support Group launched by the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and organizations such as the YMCA and Nova Scotia Health has recently started meeting at the NSCC Yarmouth Campus. According to stakeholders, the group has been well attended and received positive feedback, offering support for school enrolment, housing, and employment services.

Argyle has made DEI an essential pillar of its recent Strategic Plan, and Francophone newcomers to the municipality (as well as to Clare and indeed anywhere in the province) are provided housing and employment support by the Conseil de développement économique de la Nouvelle-Écosse.²³

The Western REN Connector Program supports increased quality employment for youth, newcomers and boomerangers.

Reaching the province's population growth objectives means that Western Region municipalities will become more culturally and linguistically diverse in the coming decades (or closer to the provincial average). Currently, 1.6% of residents in Yarmouth County do not speak one of the official languages as their mother tongue, compared to 6.5% in the province. In Digby County, the figure is slightly higher at 2.1% while in the Municipality of Barrington, the only Western Region municipality not in Digby or Yarmouth County, less than 1% of residents do not speak an official language as their mother tongue.²⁴

The distribution of residents who identify as a visible minority is similarly proportioned. In Nova Scotia, 9.8% of residents identify as a visible minority according to 2021 census data. In the Western Region municipalities, the figures are as follows:

	Digby	Yarmouth	MODD	MODY	MODA	MODC	MODB
Visible Minority Population	8.2%	8.5%	5.7%	2.3%	1.2%	2.7%	1.5%

Table 3: Visible Minority Population in Western Region Municipalities

Source: Statistics Canada

The visible minority composition is expected to change as the population grows and the region's welcoming initiatives further bolster attraction and retention.

2.8.2 Newcomer Attraction & Retention

Supporting employers with recruitment and retention is a priority for the Western REN in recognition of the critical role that the skills and talents of residents play in the region's prosperity.

The Western Region Local Immigration Partnership (LIP) is leading efforts in the region to welcome, integrate and retain newcomers. The LIP coordinates immigration services related to workforce and talent gaps, while recognizing that:

- Immigration is critical for the region's future with many industries depending on newcomers to fulfill their labour needs.
- Municipalities and community groups are best positioned to improve settlement and integration outcomes for newcomers.
- Retention requires a coordinated effort involving many partners; and
- The provision of basic settlement services alone will not ensure success. Consideration of newcomer needs must be incorporated into all aspects of community planning.

Western REN and its partners also promote several economic immigration pathways aligned with the region's labour market pressures. This includes the Atlantic Immigration Program (AIP), Economic Mobility Pathways Program (EMPP), or Francophone Mobility Program (among others) – to meet employer labour.

The Municipality of Clare developed a comprehensive action-oriented program for welcoming francophone newcomers. As one of the federally designated 14 most welcoming Francophone communities, MOC has received funding from Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada (IRCC) to provide support for French-speaking newcomers, working with employers, educational institutions, and other community partners (e.g. to provide English as a second language training) to make those residents feel welcome.

Crucially, IRCC funding is also used to host French-language classes and informal discussions for any interested participant, providing spaces for non-French speaking newcomers and established residents to learn the language and engage with Francophone culture.

This programming is vital for Francophone communities to welcome all newcomers while ensuring that a vibrant Acadian identity and culture is maintained and allowed to flourish (this means for some stakeholders, for example, being able to speak the French language in day-to-day interactions to front-line staff at stores, restaurants, and elsewhere). **Maintaining this balance between promoting diversity while strengthening Acadian culture was cited by several stakeholders as one of most ongoing and enduring challenges facing the region.**

In the Municipality and Town of Digby, the Community Navigator has evolved to include a cultural component, as part of a broader mandate to “promote the community as a place to work, live, and play.” Nonetheless, stakeholders noted that this is a gap in municipality activity and not as successful as doctor recruitment initiatives. The same is true of Barrington, which featured a DEI pillar in its recent Municipal Planning Strategy, but which has few actionable resources to support newcomers or expand and promote cultural diversity in the municipality.



Figure 26: Advertisement for the CMHA-led Newcomer Peer Support Group

Photo credit: novascotia.cmha.ca

Private businesses and nonprofits also contribute to this network of support structures. One hub in this network is the Halifax and Dartmouth YMCA, which provides settlement and language support to immigrants and refugees in Yarmouth through the YREACH program.²⁵

However, greater programming will likely be required to not only offer support for newcomers and members of racialized and equity deserving communities but to promote broader community inclusivity and encourage greater cultural and diversity awareness among members of the white majority.

According to the Nova Scotia Quality of Life survey, residents from Southwestern Nova Scotia (Yarmouth, Digby, Shelburne counties) **reported the highest frequency of discrimination due to ethnicity, culture, skin colour and disability among the ten regions surveyed.**²⁶ Stakeholders also reported that in some instances cultural homogeneity has acted as a disincentive for skilled professionals (including healthcare workers) to establish roots in the community. The Quality-of-Life Survey is scheduled to be held again in 2024 by Engage Nova Scotia, which will give Western REN and municipal leaders the opportunity to gauge the success of DEI and newcomer support initiatives offered during the COVID and post-COVID period (i.e.

2019-2024). **Commissioning or undertaking comparative analysis of the 2019 and 2024 results and/or running an independent survey of public attitudes regarding cultural diversity may be useful for informing future steps regarding new DEI programs.**

2.8.3 Public Safety

Incidents of violent crime in Nova Scotia have increased by 36% between 2016 and 2022, corresponding with rising population across the province, rising prices, and deteriorating standards of living.²⁷ The same has been true across the Western Region, as reported by RCMP detachments in Digby, Meteghan, Yarmouth, and Barrington. While figures are not readily available, Clare reportedly has the highest crime rate per capita in NS.

Region	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Rate Change 2016-2022
Digby	1,832.2	1,492.1	1,313.1	2,025.1	2,547.8	2,597.1	2,778.7	51%
Meteghan	780.7	966.0	780.67	966.0	1,000.7	1,242.0	1,098.6	41%
Yarmouth	818.4	707.7	543.2	849.5	912.2	796.9	1,201.7	47%
Barrington	1,549.7	1,275.41	1,542.4	1,899.3	2,232.2	3,392.4	2,150.5	39%

Table 4: Incidents of Violent Criminal Code per 100,000 Population

Source: Statistics Canada

This rise in violent crime has put significant pressure on the justice system's capacity to hear cases in a timely manner. During the past ten years, the number of backlogged homicide cases in the province increased 30% and the backlog of sexual assault cases doubled. Within the Western Region there is cause for concern - in Digby, for example, backlogged sexual assault cases increased by 88%.²⁸

Such issues will be exacerbated by planned population increases as well as current resource issues affecting rural RCMP detachments, including in the Western Region. First, there is evidence that the costs of maintaining RCMP services are straining municipal finances in the region because of unbudgeted and unaccounted for expenses. According to minutes of the MODY Council, and a letter from the MODB to the federal minister of Justice, municipalities are expected to cover periodic retroactive costs that arise from RCMP collective bargaining, despite advocacy from the Federation of Canadian Municipalities. According to MODB, this impacts the region's "ability to maintain services as they are and adequately invest in our future."²⁹

Further, and like elsewhere in the province, police in the Western Region are burdened by an outsized mandate that stretches their resources, especially in the arena of mental health. Between 2011 and 2021, RCMP Mental Health Act (MHA) occurrences increased by 121%, taking up significant police time not only during the initial intervention (for which law enforcement personnel often have little training) but also during subsequent hospital visits.³⁰

As noted in the Western REN's current Business Plan, the provincial government has been lobbying the federal government for more enforcement of existing fishery policy and law due to unauthorized harvesting and its impact on the health of the future lobster stock.

Although public safety was not highlighted as a major area of concern by stakeholders, one constant theme that emerged was chronic understaffing. That is, positions are approved and available in communities, but they are too often unfilled or have seen frequent turnover, preventing a strong connection and culture from developing between residents and their RCMP detachments. **According to research, this issue is most acute in MODY and the Town of Yarmouth.**

While MHA occurrences are not disaggregated by county, council discussions suggest this has been an issue in the Western Region. Minutes of the Joint Police Advisory Committee of MODY and MODA formed only in February 2023, reveal there have been discussions on "mental health calls and the process of how they are handled between RCMP and Healthcare," and the committee is preparing recommendations for the integration of mental health resources into the NS Police Training Initiative, due to be released in Spring 2024.³¹

2.8.4 Recreation

Most stakeholders addressed recent initiatives to improve quality of life through greater recreational programming and active transportation. This was acknowledged as a vital tool for retaining new residents and for more targeted recruitment campaigns (e.g. to attract physicians who express interest in robust recreation infrastructure for themselves and their families).

New and developing initiatives for expanding the recreation offerings include:

- Partnering with schools to expand health and nutrition options for students.
- Partnering with schools to facilitate access to gyms through community use agreements.
- Investing in larger facilities to bring more recreational opportunities under one roof (e.g. a new aquatic centre in Yarmouth); and
- Investing in sidewalks, trails, and parks through active transportation strategies and with support from volunteer organizations.

Collaboration between municipalities on recreation programming has been a focus. The Mariners Centre expansion is a case in point to be celebrated, reflecting a partnership between the municipal units,³² but this presents challenges. Namely, larger facilities require significant costs and there is little appetite for investing in a recreational hub or centre that will not be accessible to residents.

Overall, such investment in active transportation and recreation is timely because Southwestern Nova Scotia consistently scored lower than most regions in health and wellness on the 2019 Quality of Life Survey.

Specifically, among all ten surveyed regions, respondents from Southwestern Nova Scotia recorded:

- The **lowest self-reported** physical health.
- The **third-lowest self-reported** mental health.
- The **third-lowest percentage** who “engage in good quality exercise”.
- The **third-lowest percentage** who “ate healthy meals” and the highest percentage of respondents who “could not afford nutritious food”; and
- The **second-lowest** participation in team sports, and **the third lowest score** when asked if recreational and cultural facilities were “easy to get to.”

It is worth reiterating that this study was conducted in 2019 and will be issued again in 2024. Therefore, scrutinizing the results of the latter study and comparing them with the 2019 figures will provide important data regarding the success of recent recreational/active transportation programming and investments.



Figure 27: Mariners Centre, Yarmouth

Photo credit: marinerscentre.com

2.9 Education and Childcare

Much like other areas of the province, the Western Region is experiencing an acute crisis in education services, although this crisis is experienced differently around the region.

2.9.1 Infrastructure Capacity

Research indicated that educational facilities in the Tri-County Regional Centre for Education are already experiencing capacity issues and would be tested by rising population, based on current

student levels and projections calculated using a program called Baragar, which provides a 10-year enrollment projection.

- **Yarmouth County:** Educational facilities in Yarmouth are entering the “red zone” (i.e. 85+ capacity). This strain is most keenly felt in Yarmouth High, which is currently at 90% capacity **but is projected to reach 95% capacity in 2025.**
- **Digby County:** Facilities in Digby are also projected to reach over-capacity. The major stress point is Digby Elementary, which is at 90% capacity and is not equipped with a cafeteria. This surging enrollment followed the opening of new fish plants in Clare and Digby, which have together **drawn 20 new families to the region.**
- **Shelburne:** According to key informants, capacity issues are largely absent in Barrington, Shelburne, and Lockport communities, where capacity is between 60-70%.

Capacity issues in Yarmouth and Digby have yielded growing classroom sizes that are putting further strain on already stressed teaching resources, leaving some schools with classes of 27-30 students. The Tri-County school board has recently attempted to address the problem by narrowing Yarmouth Elementary from P-6 to P-5, but this has not solved the issue. Importantly, stakeholders emphasized that a solution is not as simple as building a new school, because this new infrastructure becomes a magnet for even higher population growth, thereby generating further strain on the new and surrounding institutions.

The situation is different in the Francophone school board, the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP). In the Municipalities of Clare and Argyle, where the CSAP operates, there has been a consistent but modest uptick in enrolment in schools, especially around Wedgeport and the Belleville Elementary School. However, there is little evidence CSAP facilities are “bursting at the seams” or confronting serious capacity issues. This can be attributed both to the lower rate of population growth in Clare and Argyle *relative to* Digby and Yarmouth and to the two new schools that are opening to replace aging facilities, including one in Wedgeport.

The larger issue for the Francophone school district is aging infrastructure rather than capacity issues, **which was cited as especially acute in Argyle:** École Belleville was built in 1987 while École Pubnico-Ouest opened in 1961. Both of these institutions were expanded in the subsequent decades to include new classrooms, offices, cafeterias, and a larger gym, but even many of these renovations are now several decades old (e.g. the larger gym at Pubnico-Ouest opened in 1989).

2.9.2 Service Limitations

In addition to the strain on classroom size, building capacity, and infrastructure quality, key informants listed other resource issues affecting educational facilities in the Western Region, including:

- **Buses:** Interviewees highlighted that the region has not invested in new buses for some time. This does not mean buses currently available cannot or do not meet guidelines established in Nova Scotia Transportation policy (i.e. picking up all kids who meet busing criteria). However, stakeholders noted that there is little room to maneuver going forward,

and that further population growth, especially the surges in areas like Digby fueled by new employment opportunities, would jeopardize the region's capacity to meet the province's transportation guidelines.

- **Much like infrastructure capacity, stress on bus networks is more prevalent in the Anglophone school board than in the CSAP.** In the latter, shortage of buses is not an issue – the problem rather is shortages of bus drivers.
- **School Support Staff:** Stakeholders explained that many supports have been made available through the provincial Schools Plus program to disadvantaged students and their families, including support for food security, navigating the health care system, and other health-care professionals such as school psychologists and speech-language pathologists. The introduction of school psychologists was mentioned as a particularly significant service (e.g. in diagnosing learning disabilities and helping to develop targeted supports). **However, it was also noted that because school psychologists must service schools in all three counties in the Western Region, it is sometimes difficult to access their support.**
 - Another group of workers referenced as strained are support workers for students of marginalized communities. **It was noted that an African Nova Scotian student support worker is often tasked with a caseload of 25-30 and even 40 students and provides out-of-class and often one-on-one support.**
 - Teacher shortages were also acknowledged as an issue, and it was noted that that targeted initiatives are being developed by the Conseil de développement économique de la Nouvelle-Écosse to attract graduates from the education department at Université Sainte-Anne to staff positions in school boards in the Western Region – filling such positions will also be necessary to manage population growth in addition to expanding physical infrastructure.

2.9.3 Childcare

The childcare shortage is arguably more dire. According to the most recent report released by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 47% of younger children live in childcare deserts in the province (postal code areas featuring less than 33% childcare coverage, based on the number of full day licenced spaces divided by the number of children).³³

In rural areas, 61% of children live in childcare deserts, including the Western Region. For example, in Yarmouth (postal code B5A), there are 630 children below kindergarten age but only 176 full day licenced spaces (for a 28% coverage rate), and in the Weymouth area (postal code B0W) there are 880 children and 223 full day licensed spaces (25% coverage).³⁴

Virtually all stakeholders identified childcare as an issue that affects most other social spheres – it is after all difficult to fulfill employment and other duties if regular and adequate childcare cannot be sourced.

The Government of Canada and the Province of Nova Scotia has recognized the severity of the issue and has recently advertised a new joint program to expand childcare access: the Early Learning and Child Care (ELCC) Action Plan.³⁵ Among other objectives, the Action Plan aims to:

- Achieve regulated child care fees of \$10-a-day by 31 March 2026.
- Create 9,500 new regulated child care spaces by March 2026.
- Implement an inclusive early learning and child care strategy “that focuses on respect for diversity and strives for equity, inclusion and accessibility across the child care system.”
- Improve data collection and reporting in the Government of Nova Scotia through an Early Learning and Child Care Agreement; and
- Support early childhood educators through a new compensation framework, including wage improvements and retirement and health benefits for all ECEs in the regulated sector.

2.10 SWOT Analysis

STRENGTHS

- Strong foundation in renewable energy, especially in tidal, wind, and biomass.
 - Demonstrates leadership in building energy-efficiency into public infrastructure (i.e. government buildings, university)
- Revitalization of tourism accommodation supply and room-night sales post-pandemic.
 - Yarmouth and Acadian Shores saw the highest recovery in room nights sold among all regions in the province in 2022.
- Innovative strategies for confronting the housing crisis, even if these have not yet attracted larger developers.
- Robust utilities infrastructure, especially in water and wastewater and the provision of fresh drinking water.
- Innovative and successful healthcare worker recruitment strategies.
 - This is especially the case in MOC, but other regions have increased initiatives recently through new Community Navigator roles.
- Growing recognition among all municipal and community leaders of the need for greater newcomer resources and more support for cultural diversity.
 - This has yielded successful new programs such as the Newcomer Support Group in Yarmouth and MOC's status as a Welcoming Francophone community.
- Extent and diversity of recreational programming and new initiatives illustrates recognition of the benefits of a healthy and active population.

WEAKNESSES

- Limited collaboration across county boundaries in key development areas, including in health, land-use planning, and economic diversification.
- Dependent on fisheries and natural resources for employment and economic growth.
- Limited educational resource capacity in MODY and MOD, and aging educational infrastructure in MOA and MOC.
 - Anglophone areas are impacted by a shortage of buses, while the Francophone district is short on bus drivers.
- Tourism accommodations have not received necessary modernization investments, detracting from quality.
- Distance from Halifax and key highways is a deterrent to larger housing developers.
- There is limited transportation infrastructure in the Municipality.
 - Expansion of the Kings Transit Authority is hampered by the Authority's governance model.
- Limited grid capacity and no timeline for increasing this capacity.
- Despite successful healthcare worker recruitment initiatives, access to emergency departments remains hampered by closures.
- Survey data suggests residents in Southwestern Nova Scotia report lower levels of physical and mental health than elsewhere in Nova Scotia,
 - 2024 survey data will help determine if recent recreational initiatives have been successful.
- Despite progress and growing interest, a gap between newcomer needs and supports persists.

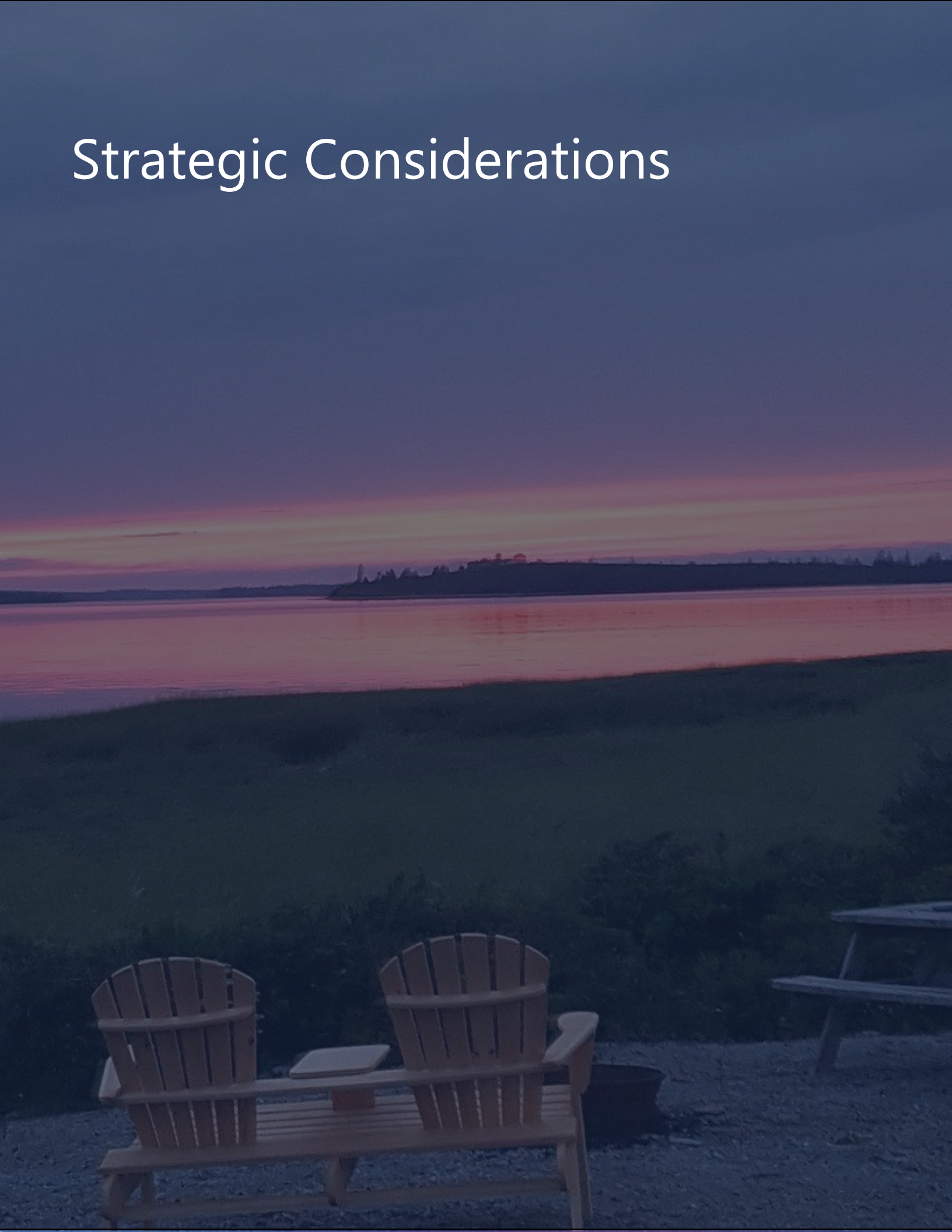
OPPORTUNITIES

- Potential to scale up renewable energy initiatives into larger commercial enterprises.
- Opportunity to leverage existing lithium-bearing pegmatite deposits to feed demand for EV batteries.
 - There is also an opportunity to strengthen trust relationships with local Mi'kmaw communities to ensure economic development and resource extraction is accompanied by robust environmental stewardship.
- Act on tentative initiatives to develop a regional land-use strategy for the Western Region.
- There is significant opportunity to operationalize funding allocate for the new Early Learning and Child Care Action Plan to improve daycare accessibility in the Western Region.
- Existing initiatives to grow housing supply (e.g. repurposing old buildings) may expanding and coordinated across county lines.
 - This would contribute to other issues, including attracting skilled workers (e.g. physicians).
- There is an opportunity to promote and enact successful physician recruitment initiatives (e.g. in MOC) elsewhere in the region.
 - There is some evidence of collaboration, but no widespread resource and best-practicing sharing.

THREATS

- Vulnerable to widespread economic decline if prices to key commodities (e.g. lobsters) shift significantly.
- More susceptible to climate-induced economic shocks because of reliance on natural resources.
- Public opposition to large-scale renewable energy initiatives may derail those opportunities **if work is not conducted with proper consultation and environmental stewardship.**
- Stagnating quality of tourism accommodations could deter prospective travelers.
 - The possible closure of the Yarmouth Ferry will also diminish traveler volume.
- Population growth in unanticipated regions (e.g. more rural areas, rather than closer to city centres), threatens the viability of long-term investment projects.
 - **This issue is most acute in MOD.**
- Limited public transit may deter families from moving to the region (e.g. who may work in a Town but live in a Municipality).
 - The threat is greatest in MOD. But issues are apparent in other regions and may worsen with population growth.
- Limited grid capacity may obstruct opportunities to leverage renewable energy potential.
- Rising incidents of violent criminal code violations and strained law-enforcement (**especially in MODY**) many diminish quality of life as the population grows.
- A thoughtful approach will be necessary to ensure the region's Acadian identity and culture are resilient as the population grows.

Strategic Considerations



3 Strategic Considerations

Acting on the Western Region Population Study will require all public and private partners to collaborate on population growth management while maintaining a strong quality of life for all residents. This will include residents, businesses, industry organizations, municipalities, Mi'kmaq Communities and enterprises, community-based organizations and service providers, post-secondary education institutions, social enterprises, research entities, and all three levels of government. Now more than ever, as more domestic and international migrants choose Nova Scotia and the Yarmouth and Acadian Shores as their new home, collaboration and alignment of priorities and actions are critical.

The following strategic considerations have been designed as a concise, results-oriented, pragmatic guide to implementation, and as this collaboration proceeds, the action items are likely to be refined. The Strategic Pillars reflect the gaps and opportunities revealed in background research and stakeholder engagements and are designed to cover both immediate priorities and objectives to pursue during the next 5 years.

3.1 Strategic Pillar #1: Align Critical Infrastructure and Services with Community Needs

Goals

- Enhance the availability and accessibility of housing to support both short-term and long-term needs of immigrants and residents; and
- Improve key sectors' infrastructure and service delivery to meet the needs of a growing and diverse population, especially education, transportation, and healthcare.

Action Items

- Work with local municipalities and entrepreneurs to develop and support housing projects that cater to new immigrants and temporary workers, ensuring the integration of housing strategies that cater to both immediate and long-term needs.
- Advertise and advocate for incentives to attract larger housing developers to the region. These might include:
 - Subsidizing accommodation for workers.
 - Connecting developers to low-cost financing options such as the Apartment Construction Loan Program.
 - Developing a demand inventory or study to assure builders of sufficient market demand as a risk mitigation technique.
 - Coordinate development of land-banks with utility infrastructure projects to reduce initial investment in basic services for developers.
 - Develop a survey of larger developers to identify and address reasons for not selecting the Western Region.

- There is an opportunity to work with the federal and provincial governments to identify underutilized assets that may be repurposed to address housing and other critical infrastructure gaps in the Western Region.
- Collaborate with government and industry to enhance and modify the region's electrical grid, accommodating the ascending voltage contributions from wind farms and supporting population growth efficiently.
- Conduct community surveys to assess interest in a more comprehensive regional transportation framework to consider if pre-booked services are sufficient to meet demands or if regular services are required.
 - In the meantime, Kings Transit Authority could be encouraged to designate the Municipality of Digby with a voting seat on its board to better engage in possible expansion opportunities.
 - Canvas employers in the region on the possibility of supporting an expanded transportation network as an investment in accessing more workers.
- Develop targeted incentives (accommodation benefits, tax incentives, etc.) for nurses to migrate to the area to reduce emergency department closures in Yarmouth and Digby. These incentives could be modelled after initiatives already developed by the Municipality of Clare to attract graduates from Université Sainte-Anne who have continued into pre-med and medical training programs.
- Support efforts to reopen the LPN and CCW Programs at Université Sainte-Anne to increase local healthcare labour supply; and
- Develop and host a forum among Western REN partners for sharing best practices related to physician and healthcare worker recruitment and coordinating recruitment strategies.

3.2 Strategic Pillar #2: Facilitate Economic Diversity

Goals

- Maintain support for current local industry while exploring opportunities provided by promising future industries.
- Encourage the development of a diversified economic base with a focus on tapping into high-quality professional talent, research and development, innovation; and
- Integrate economic immigration as a pivotal component of the region's labour market strategy.

Action Items

- Build on YASTA's success working with tourism operators to create and promote authentic experiences and products that tell the Region's stories.
- Expand on and grow participation in the Western REN led Western Impact Partnership (WIP) to share joint economic development partner communication and engagement.

Benefits include an enhanced understanding of priority issues impacting the region along with effective communication channels in support of active partnerships.

- Formulate a comprehensive investment attraction strategy aimed at identifying and drawing in both domestic and international investors to fuel economic growth and innovation within the region. This strategy will entail a thorough market analysis, the crafting of competitive incentive packages, and targeted marketing efforts to showcase the region's unique advantages.
 - One important focus for investment attraction could be the renewable energy sector, which has experienced problems scaling up commercial opportunities despite a strong foundation. Such an investigation would seek to identify: **1)** Why the renewable energy sector has not expanded at a rate anticipated by municipal authorities (e.g. by interrogating the conflict between Sustainable Marine Energy and the DFO); and **2)** What the sector needs to grow on a commercial level, in addition to expanded grid capacity.
- Develop targeted recruitment initiatives to attract highly skilled professionals and entrepreneurs, especially in priority sectors identified as under-resourced, such as healthcare and education.
- Foster stronger collaborations between academic institutions, business communities, and government bodies to drive R&D and innovation, leveraging local strengths and opportunities for economic diversification; and
- Support businesses in developing HR capacities to integrate and leverage the skills of immigrants, ensuring their contributions to innovation and business growth.

3.3 Strategic Pillar #3: Foster Sustainable Growth

Goals

- Advance current progress towards Western Region energy investment and residential energy goals while supporting Nova Scotia Power reach its 2030 objective of supplying 80% of electricity using renewable sources.
- Develop a cross-county approach for coordinating priority population-growth areas and managing population growth; and
- Ensure the integration and welcoming of diverse populations while maintaining the Francophone and Acadian identity of the region.

Action Items

- Encourage Western Region municipalities to coordinate amendments to existing land-use planning documents to better manage population growth and avoid competing for residents and resources where possible.

- This could culminate in the development of a regional planning strategy featuring input from all Western Region municipalities.
- Develop a comprehensive strategy that targets both population growth and the enhancement of Francophone and Acadian identities, ensuring that new developments are sustainable and culturally inclusive; and
- Enhance collaboration with federal and provincial programs to support targeted immigration and settlement initiatives that align with local sustainable growth objectives.

3.4 Strategic Pillar #4: Cultivate Deeper Community Ties and Interconnectedness

Goals

- Strengthen the sense of belonging and community engagement among all residents, through inclusive projects and initiatives; and
- Embrace the unique cultural heritage of the region to foster community pride and cohesiveness.

Action Items

- Facilitate language and cultural immersion programs to promote understanding and appreciation of the region's Francophone and Acadian heritage.
 - Initiatives such as more accessible language classes offered through Université Sainte-Anne, would contribute to the maintenance of Acadian culture and identity while growing cultural diversity in the region.
- Encourage cross-cultural exchanges and dialogues through forums, workshops, and community events that bring together long-standing residents and newcomers, by expanding the model of the Yarmouth-based Newcomer Peer Support Group.
- Review the results of Engagement Nova Scotia's next Quality of Life Survey to consider how residents' experience with discrimination and feelings of isolation may have changed.
 - The same analysis could reflect on how recreation and active-living initiatives may have improved the physical and mental health of community members.
- Celebrate diversity and support greater inclusion across the region, including considering the potential to develop a region-wide diversity, equity, and inclusion plan building on Argyle's and the Town and Municipality of Yarmouth's leadership in this area.

3.5 Monitoring Success

Developing a monitoring and measurement framework to report annual progress on the Region's population growth management efforts is imperative. This work would align with REN's current best practices in monitoring and measuring progress – including through annual business planning and the REN's regional dashboard.

Monitoring success will entail tracking outcomes related to enhancing critical infrastructure and services, supporting sustainable population growth, enhancing community connectedness and a sense of belonging, while ensuring that province-wide population growth benefits extend across the region.

¹ Preston Mulligan, "Champlain Seafood blames lack of lobsters for permanent closure of Meteghan NS processing plant," *CBC News* 14 February 2024

² Saltwire Network, "First floating tidal power delivered in NS," *Saltwire* 11 May 2022
<https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/business/first-floating-tidal-power-delivered-in-nb-100731671/>

³ <https://www.hydroreview.com/hydro-industry-news/oceantidalstream-power/sustainable-marine-energy-enters-voluntary-bankruptcy-cites-permitting-issues/#gref>

⁴ For the Development Agreement for the Wedgeport Wind Farm, see:
https://munargyle.com/images/agenda/24_0123/Draft_Development_Agreement_-_Wedgeport_WindFarms_last_version_002.pdf

⁵ Information on Biomass and other energy opportunities are available on municipal website. For example, see: <https://digbymun.ca/biomass.html>

⁶ Municipality of the District of Yarmouth (MODY), Municipal Planning Strategy (MPS), Effective 25 January 2024; https://munyarmouth.ca/images/Boundary_Review_2022/MODY_-_MPS_-_Effective_2024.01.25.pdf ; Municipality of the District of Digby, Municipal Planning Strategy, Effective July 2018; <https://digbymun.ca/1083-municipal-planning-strategy/file.html>

⁷ Western REN has attempted to facilitate more robust collaboration strategies. According to its 2021 Economic Development Strategy & Action Plan, one pillar for Western REN is "increasing investment in Western Nova Scotia through collaborative actions that engage the WREN's public sector partners."⁷ These investments have included developing a site certification program "to highlight the pieces of infrastructure which need to be developed or upgraded," as well as supporting the implementation of a regional energy plan (Section 7.2.2) and municipal investments with data and strategic insight.

⁸ A useful summary of these transportation linkages is available on the Western REN website and community breakdown, accessible here: <https://westernren.ca/invest/our-communities/>

⁹ For the Town Yarmouth bus route, see: <https://townofyarmouth.ca/transit-route-and-schedule.html>; for the Kings Transit Authority, see: <https://www.kbus.ca/schedule-information/>

¹⁰ For Transport de Clare, see: <https://www.transportdeclare.ca/>; for HOPE Ride-a-Dial, see: <https://gohope.ruralrides.ca/> ; For the Sou'West Nova Transit Association, see: <https://souwestnovatransit.ruralrides.ca/>

¹¹ For example, see guidelines accessible on the website of the Municipality of the District of Yarmouth: <https://munyarmouth.ca/index.php/community/recent-news-updates/725-think-before-you-flush>

¹² For discussion of South Ohio and its designation as a Wastewater and Sewage Management District, see: <https://munyarmouth.ca/index.php/municipal-operations/public-works/sewer-and-wastewater>

¹³ Jennifer Hendersen, "Nova Scotia Power is required to generate 80% of its power from renewable sources by 2030, but can it?" *Halifax Examiner* 23 December 2023, <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/economy/energy/nova-scotia-power-is-required-to-generate-80-of-its-power-from-renewable-sources-by-2030-but-can-it/#:~:text=By%20law%2C%20Nova%20Scotia%20Power%20has%20to%20generate,plan%E2%80%9D%20outlining%20how%20and%20when%20that%20will%20happen.>

¹⁴ For a discussion of the Energy Plan, see: <https://westernren.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Western-Region-Energy-Investment-Plan-final.pdf>

¹⁵ Information on Internet expansion taken from Western REN press releases: <https://westernren.ca/news/internet-expansion2020/>; <https://westernren.ca/news/third-round-of-internet-fibre-expansion/>

¹⁶ For an overview of Digby General Hospital, see: https://www.nshealth.ca/sites/default/files/documents/digby_general_hospital_aug_15_2022_0.pdf

¹⁷ Kathy Johnson, "Spike in Emergency Department Closures," *Tri City Vanguard* 24 November 2021 <https://www.pressreader.com/canada/tri-county-vanguard/20211124/281509344450111>

¹⁸ Atlantic Briefs Desk, "Digby General Hospital's Emergency Department temporarily closed on Feb 1 and Feb 3-6," *Salt Wire*, 1 February 2024; <https://www.saltwire.com/atlantic-canada/communities/digby-general-hospitals-emergency-department-temporarily-closed-on-feb-1-and-feb-3-6-100934659/>; Atlantic Briefs Desk, "Digby General Hospital ER to be closed Feb. 8-11, 7 February 2024, <https://www.saltwire.com/search/?search=digby+hospital&order=newest>

¹⁹ Data and analysis from the Quality of Life survey can be accessed at the following site: <https://engagenovascotia.ca/request-dataset-or-analysis>

²⁰ Municipality of Argyle, Municipality of Yarmouth, and the Town of Yarmouth collaborate on this doctor recruitment strategy.

²¹ Demographic figures were taken from the 2021 Canadian census. For examples of Acadian tourism, see <https://villagehistoriqueacadien.com/>

²² Demographic figures taken from the Western REN Profile Dashboard: <https://westernren.ca/regional-profile-dashboard/>

²³ For a list of committees in MODY, for example, see <https://munyarmouth.ca/index.php/government/voluntary-committees>. For strategic plans in Argyle and Barrington, see: <https://www.barringtonmunicipality.com/municipal-documents/5003-strategic-plan-2022-2025-final/file>; <https://munargyle.com/703-2023-2028-municipality-of-argyle-strategic-plan-summary/file.html>

²⁴ Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). Census Profile. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023.

²⁵ For these programs, see: <https://www.usaintanne.ca/en/academics/learn-french/french-as-a-second-language>; <https://ns.211.ca/services/yreach-yarmouth/>

²⁶ Data and analysis from the Quality of Life survey can be accessed at the following site: <https://engagenovascotia.ca/request-dataset-or-analysis>

²⁷ For violent crime statistics in Nova Scotia, see Statistics Canada. Table 35-10-0178-01 Incident-based crime statistics, by detailed violations, police services in the Atlantic provinces

²⁸ Nicole Munro, "Something is going to be missed': NS Crown attorneys say they're filing to meet base ethical obligations," *Saltwire* 26 October 2023; <https://www.saltwire.com/halifax/news/something-is-going-to-be-missed-ns-crown-attorneys-say-theyre-failing-to-meet-base-ethical-obligations-100905661/>

²⁹ Warden Lindsay Nickerson to The Honourable Brad Johns, Attorney General and Minister of Justice, 2 May 2023; [file:///C:/Users/jburton/Downloads/COTW Recommendation RCMP Retroactive Cost.pdf](file:///C:/Users/jburton/Downloads/COTW%20Recommendation%20RCMP%20Retroactive%20Cost.pdf)

³⁰ RCMP Occurrence Report – 2021 <https://www.rcmp.gc.ca/transparenc/police-info-policiers/calls-appels/occurrence-incident/2021/index-eng.htm>

³¹ Joint Police Advisory Committee Regular Meeting 22 November 2023; [https://munargyle.com/images/agenda/24_0123/DRAFT JPAC Minutes11.22.2023.pdf](https://munargyle.com/images/agenda/24_0123/DRAFT_JPAC_Minutes11.22.2023.pdf)

³² <https://marinerscentre.com/expansion>

³³ David Macdonald and Martha Friendly, "Not Done Yet: \$10-a-day child care requires addressing Canada's child care deserts," *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives* May 2023, p. 5; <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2023/05/not-done-yet%20%281%29.pdf>

³⁴ Yvette d'Entremont, "CCPA Report: 'Child care deserts' leave Nova Scotia parents struggling to find licensed spaces," 16 May 2023 <https://www.halifaxexaminer.ca/equity/families-and-childcare/ccpa-report-child-care-deserts-leave-nova-scotia-parents-struggling-to-find-licensed-spaces/>

³⁵ Press Release: "Government of Canada and Nova Scotia Release Early Learning and Child Care Action Plan," 16 February 2024. <https://www.canada.ca/en/employment-social-development/news/2024/02/governments-of-canada-and-nova-scotia-release-early-learning-and-child-care-action-plan.html>