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European Rural Parliament - Wales Report

Background

Wales is a country that is part of the United Kingdom and the island of Great Britain, bordered by England to its east, the Irish Sea to its north and west, and the Bristol Channel to its south.   It had a population in 2011 of 3,063,456 and has a total area of 20,779 km^2 (8,023 sq mi). Wales has over 1,680 miles (2,700 km) of coastline and is largely mountainous, with its higher peaks in the north and central areas, including Snowdon (*Yr Wyddfa*), its highest summit.   The country lies within the north temperate zone and has a changeable, maritime climate.

Rural Wales

According to the Welsh Government, rurality is an issue with many facets. We may have rural land, rural people, rural businesses and so on. Rural areas in Wales include isolated residencies, clusters of small villages, large villages , small market towns and large market towns.   The main economies in rural areas are agriculture, tourism and public sector employment.   The areas are often characterised by their remoteness from labour markets, major transport links and higher levels of Welsh speakers.

In 2011 the population of Wales was just above £3m, increasing by 5.3% in the ten years previous.   The increase was due to fewer deaths and more births due to increased fertility. The population also grew because of migration.   The resultant effect is a population with high numbers of people over the age of 65, and reducing numbers under the age of 15 years.

According to the Wales Rural Observatory[1], rural areas have a larger share of residents in the retirement age category (65 and over) compared with the rest of Wales.   One million people live in the rural areas, with nearly half a million in semi-rural locations, overall representing half of the population of Wales.

The rural population aged between 15 and 24 years were more likely than other age groups to migrate and also compared to persons of the same age in the rest of Wales.   There is a growing trend of young people leaving their rural homes to find work and wider education and social opportunities, elsewhere in Wales and further afield.   This pattern has been examined more widely in the UK and is linked to structural factors such as housing, wages, education, employment and non-economic motivations such as quality of life.   Along with net in-migration of older people, this is of concern to Welsh society and government, for the implications it has for the sustainability of rural communities.

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[1] Wales Rural Observatory (2013) *'The Experiences and Aspiration of Young People in Rural Wales'*

Map showing Classification areas in Wales using Rural Development Plan 2007 -2013
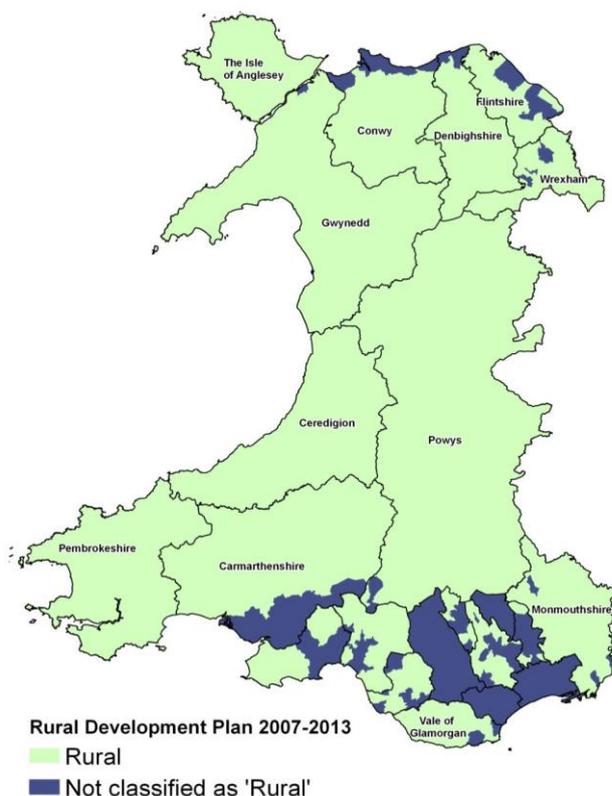
Source: Welsh Assembly Government (2010)

Wales is officially classed as a bilingual county and has a distinct cultural identity. Over half a million Welsh language speakers live in Wales. Welsh Language ability[2] and competence was noted to increase in line with the length of residence in a rural locality. Highest percentage of fluent Welsh speakers are found in the Western and Northern rural counties of Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Gwynedd and Anglesey.

In terms of local social and community context, 64% of respondents to a rural household survey[3] lived within 10 miles of at least one family member. Older residents were more likely to have family living further away. Respondents who had spent most of their lives in Wales were much more likely to have a local family network, whereas those who had spent most of their lives outside Wales were most likely to have their nearest family member living over 50 miles away. People reporting to have a strong Welsh identity and those who speak Welsh, were most likely to have family living less than five miles from their home.

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[2] Wales Rural Observatory (2013) *'Rural Household Survey'*

[3] Wales Rural Observatory (2013) *'Rural Household Survey'*

To illustrate civil engagement levels in Wales, the household survey showed that 43% had signed a petition, 19% had contacted their local Councillor and 5% had contacted their MP or AM, 28% had attended a public meeting.   45% were involved in local activities.   78% reported that there was a sense of community in their local area. 81% agreed and agreed strongly with the questions as to whether they considered themselves to be a member of the local community. 19% reported feeling isolated living in their area.

The value of rural Wales is demonstrated through the economic contribution it makes, its iconic landscapes, its contributions to eco-systems and as the heartlands for Welsh language and culture. In 2010, the Campaign for Rural Wales stated that the rural environment contributes £9 billion annually to the Welsh economy and that the countryside provides work for 1 in 6 people in Wales.   All of Wales' internationally iconic landscapes are in rural areas yet some of the most economically and socially deprived areas of the UK exist within close proximity to them.   The uplands of Wales is regarded as key to helping to solve our climate change challenge with huge amounts of sequestrated carbon locked up in the woodlands, peat and organic soils of these areas.   Rural areas are bastions of Welsh identity, culture and the Welsh language[4].

The concept of rurality is therefore complex and not just encompassed by low settlement density, the cultural, economic and seasonal variations of populations, the existence of tourist attractions, and the inward migration of second or retirement home owners.   All of these dimensions do however directly affect the character and challenges facing Wales' rural areas now and in the future.   Often denied parity because of their communities are characterised by isolation, poor communication, inadequate service provision, low wages, less disposable incomes, increased costs, a lack of affordable housing and limited job opportunities[5].

Method

Secondary research through policy and literature review has enabled the introduction above, which describes rural Wales and some of the statistics that are available from key sources.

The next section goes on to address lower level information, found by LEADER groups in the preparation of their Local Development Strategies, their ongoing animation work with communities including action planning carried out by PLANED with community forums and associations it supports in Pembrokeshire.   Methods used with rural communities have included one or more of the following:

- Action planning and visioning,

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[4] Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (2010) *'An Advocate for Rural Places'*

[5] Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales (2010) *'An Advocate for Rural Places'*

- Focus Groups,
- Questionnaires,
- Interviews with key stakeholders,
- Video capture in the form of 'vox pops' and documentary evidence collected by communities.

Examples of these events include Neath Port Talbot's Think Links project which used existing community structures to gain information with the following outcomes:

During the development of this Strategy drop-in session were held in each valley to allow rural residents to have their say in the development of the Action Plan. Attendees were asked to prioritise the activities that came out of the Think Links research project thinking about what would be most important to their community. The results are listed below:

1st   Encouraging local producer markets and shops
2nd   Public transport improvements
3rd   Tourism support service
4th   Cycle and walking trails
5th   Further promotion and development of mountain biking in NPT
6th   Skills development for rural residents
7th   Green energy for rural residents
8th   Broadband exploitation programme

Results vary across Wales, but similar themes reappear. For example, in Pembrokeshire, PLANED's community-led visioning processes over recent years have highlighted opportunities:

1. Improved community facilities and activities
2. Services and health
3. Environment, energy, recycling and local food
4. Culture and heritage
5. Business and Tourism
6. Transport and communications

By triangulating both primary and secondary sources of evidence, the report considers the facts further and presents more detail on the challenges and opportunities that rural Wales experiences

Findings

From the analysis of information, the following issues and challenges have been identified, in Welsh rural communities. There are a number of current drivers for this. One is the

Rural Development Programme, another is significant budget cuts to public bodies, and the third is a recognition of the need for sustainable outcomes, most fundamentally demonstrated by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015[6].

> *'There is a changing policy, funding and organisational context for delivering services in the UK and in Wales. In the face of austerity, demographic change, and increasing demand for and expectations of services, there are two simultaneous agendas of Cuts and Reform. Furthermore, there is a tendency for service rationalisation to impact disproportionately on the poor and non-urban populations[7].'*

Overall, communities have reported that where challenges exist, there are opportunities that need to be exploited.   Across Wales, these can be categorised as follows: community cohesion, the future of the Welsh language, the visitor economy, rural business, transport and communications, service provision, energy and skill development.

- Community Cohesion

In Pembrokeshire, for example, community associations are seeking to work with community and town councils to increase community resilience and cohesion by creating a localised infrastructure.   PLANED reports that community cohesion relies on strong participation and a structure by which people can be engaged.   Drawing on potential future changes in devolution in Wales, there is an opportunity for wider participation. The Welsh Government White Paper notes that *'effective community involvement requires us to establish a framework which allows for greater sharing of power and responsibility between Local Authorities and the communities they serve. This will enable communities to go beyond having their voice heard to actively taking responsibility for the changes and improvements they wish to see in their community*[8].

Communities report that they want greater local 'say' and 'ownership', locally directed prioritisation and removal of the tiers that prevent making things happen.   Overall communities see a significant opportunity for local knowledge to influence better and more sustainable solutions in an area.

- *Supporting and developing the use of the Welsh language*

Rural areas are traditionally a stronghold for the Welsh language. Communities often include Welsh language as a key element of their identity.   This is not a universal focus by

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[6] http://gov.wales/legislation/programme/assemblybills/future-generations/?lang=en

[7] Wavehill (2015) *'One Pembrokeshire: Scoping Study for New Ways of Working*

[8] Welsh Government (2015) *'Devolution, Democracy and Delivery, White Paper - Reforming Local Government: Power to Local People'*

communities, but many see a future opportunity in focussing on developing innovative ways of promoting the benefits of the Welsh language in both economic and social terms.

- Visitor economy

Rural Wales boasts a very high quality environment. It boasts a rich variety of landscape and Mountains. The natural and cultural environment is a potential economic driver for the country and communities seek to engage with this opportunity. The All-Wales Community Tourism Network, facilitated by PLANED gathers information and supports communities who want to further their engagement with tourism at the local level.   Communities in Wales feel a sense of place and quite often wish to develop this.

The main concern of communities is to ensure that this is linked with the strategic direction of Visit Wales, so that iconic destinations are defined through local story telling and therefore local residents and business people naturally become ambassadors for their area. At a local level communities report that the added value that is represented in very community-based activities should be recognised and valued through funding and support. Examples include local heritage centres and eco-museums, heritage trails, walkers are welcome, local festivals and interpretation.

- Rural business development

Business support is a key theme that emerges for rural communities.   In 2012 the Federation of Small Businesses identified their priorities for rural businesses.   They noted the key challenges as follows:

> *'Many of the problems faced by businesses in rural areas are similar to those faced on a daily basis by those in urban ones. However, the geographical isolation means that some of problems encountered daily by businesses in urban areas are further exacerbated in rural areas. The negative effects of high fuel prices, remoteness from suppliers and customers, poor quality communications infrastructure (mobile phone coverage and access to broadband) and poor transport infrastructure are magnified'.[9]*

"Many of the problems faced by businesses in rural areas are similar to those faced … by those in urban areas.   However, the geographical isolation means that some of the problems … are exacerbated in rural areas.   The negative effect of high fuel prices, remoteness from suppliers and customers, poor-quality communication … and transport infrastructure are magnified."

Local skills development can be a barrier for businesses and often this is further impacted by the net migration of young people from rural areas.   By encouraging and providing access to skills training and workshops, we can promote local and traditional skills, and provide opportunities for intergenerational learning experiences.   Outcomes can include:
- nurtured confidence, self-esteem and motivation,

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[9] Federation of Small Businesses (2012) *'Our Place in the Country: The FSB Wales Agenda for Rural Business'*

- increased aspiration and ambition,
- an improved skill set,
- enhanced knowledge of availability of business support,
- increased entrepreneurial spirit,
- improved awareness of alternative employment opportunity,
- reduced isolation,
- improved earning capacity, and
- improved learning capacity e.g. progression to qualifications.

Communities recognise the value in skill development. This can range from harnessing their skills, knowledge and enthusiasm to identify and implement local solutions to their area's problems, to community ambassador training for local tourism projects, through to formal accredited land management or other qualifications; delivered in local venues.

- Transport and communications

Whilst noted above for business, transport and communications are also fundamental challenges for rural inhabitants and visitors. Broadband and digital technology feature as a key communication need for the population. In 2013 it was established that 56% of the rural population rated the quality of broadband as poor or very poor[10]. The provision of Superfast Broadband in recent months is set to address this, but service providers indicate that there is a challenge for rural areas to maximise the opportunities from Superfast Broadband. This however, does not present itself in the evidence of need from communities. Local websites are in their infancy in many places, but communities report that they do not fulfil their potential for rural communities, especially in terms of social media, local connectivity or local economic development. The CLA, which represents owners of land, property and businesses in rural England and Wales, said ten to 15 per cent of the population were still unable to get broadband.

"It is clear that rural areas have fallen behind. If the government is serious about levelling the playing field it must listen to MPs and prioritise hardest-to-reach areas, even if this means diverting new investment into alternative technologies such as satellite," said CLA president Henry Robinson. *"Access to fast, reliable broadband and mobile phone coverage is vital for the success of rural business and social inclusion in the countryside. Every home or business that is not connected to the internet is suffering a major disadvantage."*

Transport can be an emotive subject for rural communities. In some areas, the ownership of a car is seen as an increasing necessity and sometimes the cost of which negatively impacts on the ability for families to pay for food. Transport is a key feature of every Local Development Strategy in Wales. With increasing cuts to services, they will not be provided in every village but proposals include the need to have rotational services that visit the

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[10] Wales Rural Observatory (2013) *'Rural Services Survey'*

community halls in some of the most remote areas of Wales. Many residents accept that transport will not improve, but for some it is a lifeline, particularly for those who are very geographically isolated and who experience multiple social barriers. Local befriending and neighbourhood schemes have been initiated in a number of communities to begin to address these issues. There is often a tension between transport infrastructure development and the very local economic development. Where infrastructure is improved, in some cases, this can bypass key communities who's small businesses previously relied on 'passing trade' which now 'bypasses' the village.

- Access to basic services

Wales history of finding solutions for tackling poverty and disadvantage, not necessarily rural only. Welshman Aneurin Bevan was responsible for the first building blocks of the welfare state. With many rural areas reporting the challenge of loss of services, a key focus of for the future will be the identification and testing of new ways of providing services. For most communities these include community cafes, leisure, shops, transport, social care services, childcare and other opportunities which are sustainable and accessible to all. Areas of proposed development mainly include social enterprise development, asset transfers, shared or mobile service provision and ensuring volunteer engagement in the delivery of local services.

In terms of community asset or service transfer, communities are apprehensive and want to ensure that community ownership is a safe transfer of responsibility in a supportive environment, not purely the acceptance of liability by communities. In Bridgend as well as other areas, opportunities exist to identify and facilitate community asset transfer of local authority owned buildings and property. Support is needed to provide assistance to communities to work together and look at setting up enterprises and social enterprises within community venues. Whilst there are many good practice examples in Wales, there are also a number of examples where community asset transfer has failed and placed individuals in vulnerable positions. It has been suggested that projects could provide local services and activities that specifically address rural poverty issues e.g. childcare provision, local and community transport initiatives.

- Renewable energy

Whilst there are a number of initiatives in place, it is felt that community based energy is not well supported in early stage development. Communities in Wales have noted the need to build capacity at community level, organise visits to schemes that demonstrate good practice, seek opportunities for transnational working with other EU countries where renewable energy and in particular community renewables better developed and to learn how to influence behaviour change. Overall, communities recognise that their role in community energy is long term and that support needs to reflect that - typically time frames from start to implementation can be in excess of seven years.

Suggested ways of doing this include: facilitating and investigating novel ways of encouraging and implementing renewable energy schemes both on farm and within local communities; facilitating access to energy efficiency support measures for residents in areas of fuel poverty as well as piloting ways to develop new sustainable products linked to agriculture and forestry sectors e.g. bio fuels.

Conclusions

Rebecca Evans AM is the Deputy Minister for Farming and Food. She has said: "Our vision is of a prosperous, sustainable industry. Successful, profitable farm businesses which have long-term futures are fundamental to success. We want an industry that is forward looking; uses best practice and works to safeguard and enhance soil, water and the natural environment – the bedrock of farm production."

The Deputy Minister added that the Rural Development Programme, which was approved by the European Commission last week, will provide financial support for many of the changes needed to farming and associated rural businesses, to help realise that vision. She said, "With a value of over £900 million to rural Wales, much of which will be funded directly by the Welsh Government, this is the largest and most ambitious RDP we have ever proposed. The emphasis will be on 'green growth', supporting only those actions that are good for our rural economy, good for communities, good for the environment. For agriculture in particular, the new RDP will make significant, integrated investments in skills and knowledge, business development, fostering collaboration and improved land management. Our guiding principles are that we will achieve much more by working together and that farming must be a sustainable industry in the widest sense".

For Wales, there are a number of solutions, but as Tom Jones (Wales representative to the European Economic and Social Committee) notes in his draft opinion piece for the EESC that Government cannot do this alone:

> *'Governments alone cannot deliver the real change required to invigorate rural areas. They can provide the legislative and planning framework, the democratic accountability, better public services and catalyst funding. However, it is mostly private business, skilled employees and social and community enterprises that deliver for people and the environment. To be willing to invest time and resources, people have to be confident that a common vision for a better rural future can be delivered and not hindered by lengthy application processes.'[11]*

Next steps

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[11] Tom Jones & Juana Agudo I Bataller (2015) *'Draft Opinion of the Secton for Agriculure, Rural Development and the Enviornment on Rural Development Programmes – Sticking Plasters or Green Shoots of Recovery?'*.

Outlined below are the intended areas for discussion for the Wales Rural Community Parliament to address on the 12th September 2015. This will be led by members of the CITCOM programme[12]. It will enable further upward cascading of ideas, to what has been presented in this report.

- *the Rural Community Parliament itself and where to go with it for Wales in the future;*

- *raising the rural community voice;*

- *communities planning not planning communities;*

- *integrating housing, language and work to build communities;*

- *building integrated new economies through collaboration and cooperation*

- *learning for change in rural community areas;*

- *access to superfast broadband (or not as the case may be!);*

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[12] CITCOM is a two year Grundtvig Multilateral Project and is funded by the European Commission. Partners include Wales, France, Italy, Lithuania, Romania and Czech Republic. The Welsh partner is Bangor University. 2013 was the European Year of the Citizen and the focus of activity was on understanding and promoting the idea and practice of citizenship, in terms of European and more local forms of citizenship. Much of what has gone before has focused on the more concrete, direct and individual aspects of citizenship such as participation in formal politics and voting procedures and individual rights and responsibilities of 'the citizen'. What it has not dealt with is the 'lack of belonging' that affects so many and leads to disengagement and apathy.