



Feasibility assessment

Title of report: Rural Wales: Time to Meet the Challenge 2025

Publication date: 2017

Short summary of report

The report was commissioned by Eluned Morgan AM in her role as Assembly Member for Mid and West Wales. It identifies a need for a robust policy and ambitious programme in response to the pressures of globalisation and the consequences of our departure from the European Union. The report was compiled through consultation with stakeholders, including individuals in rural Wales.

The report makes 56 recommendations under six themes. It says that the UK Government, that supports City Deals, should be asked to contribute to the delivery of an integrated plan based on these recommendations.

The report calls for the establishment of a Rural Commissioner responsible for holding Welsh Government to account for the rural plan, rural proofing policy and fostering links between urban/rural, between sectors and across borders. Engagement with as many stakeholders as possible in the delivery of the plan is seen as vital.

Feasibility assessment by panel of how this will feed into the project work

Several findings contained within the report resonate with the project theme of “facilitating pre-commercial development, business partnerships and short supply chains”, within the priority of “investigating and piloting new ways of encouraging entrepreneurship and test trading”.

At the centre of the report is a call for a “community driven approach”, by which the report means enabling the local community to take responsibility for delivery of as much of the plan as possible. The underlying philosophy is the need to do “with” not to do “to” communities in order for interventions to be effective and sustainable. The term “co-production” is not used in the report but is the approach recommended. The report says that there needs to be a meeting between a bottom-up community-based economic strategy and a more overarching strategy from above.

Although the report does not reference LEADER, it does propose activity that has been central to the LEADER approach. Examples include a call for a co-ordinated, multi-sectoral approach with strong community buy in. The work of locally based rural development

organisations such as Antur Teifi, Cadwyn Clwyd, Menter Môn and PLANED is highlighted as an example of successful rural development practice that can be developed.

In several places the report makes reference to the need to utilise and add value to local resources and recommends the strengthening short supply chains. Developing the local economy in a sustainable way, whilst protecting the local environment is central to the report.

The report calls for a focus on rural towns arguing that they are often the economic hub of a much larger geographical area. It does however recognise that villages and smaller settlements can be the focus for entrepreneurial activity.

What are the key points and how can they be applied to this project?

The report sets out a large number of recommendations which are wide ranging in scope, covering topics such as social care and education as well as the local economy.

The six recommendation themes are:

1. Building on the infrastructure of rural Wales
2. Increasing rural Wales' skills and productivity
3. Growing our businesses
4. Promoting food, farming and forestry
5. Using the foundational economy to ensure local jobs are provided for local people
6. Maximising tourism potential

The following seven pilot projects are proposed:

1. Eco homes for older people
2. Local Community Care providers
3. A Rural Wales Portal
4. Electric Vehicles for rural Wales.
5. Developing a horse breeding centre of excellence in Wales
6. Using public procurement to drive development
7. Hydroponics

These proposed pilots are interesting and further feasibility could be explored.

It is however notable that some subsequent policy initiatives have overtaken the recommendations contained in the report. The Welsh Government's new Foundational Economy initiative is one such example. A key difference however still remains the lack of rural focus in emerging policy. The setting up of Public Service Boards (PSBs) for example could be seen as meeting the need to pull together public, private and third sector organisations locally. In local authority areas with a mix of urban and rural there is no requirement to address the rural, although Carmarthenshire are leading the way in this respect with their rural strategy 'Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward'.

The report's vision is based on a call for a clear place-based policy, delivered through an integrated and co-ordinated approach across economic development, planning, transport and public service provision. This is another dimension of LEADER and the report is therefore useful as an advocate for this approach.

How can these principles and values interact with fostering an entrepreneurial culture?

The report says that rural Wales has a number of people who are highly entrepreneurial but states that evidence shows that the start-up rate in Rural Wales is significantly below that of Wales as a whole.

Several of the recommendations seek to address this underperformance. They include:

- Access to appropriate finance, especially small loans for micro enterprises
- Expansion of Rural Enterprise Zones and the introduction of tax incentives around key hubs and market towns
- Support for smaller settlements to foster entrepreneurial activity with appropriate planning policies
- Access to appropriate training. Priorities include the development of modular, interactive courses and addressing the transport needs of those wishing to access training
- Establishing a Rural Portal or Rural Wales Website for up to date business advice
- Integrated and flexible planning policies to support of rural business
- Unlocking the potential of Higher Education to foster ideas for new business
- Encouraging underrepresented groups to upgrade their digital skills
- Establishing a bursary enabling young people to set up businesses in rural Wales

The report does not go into detail about how these ideas will be established, not the context(s) within which they would operate. Nevertheless, the report is a useful contribution towards raising awareness of the possibility of nurturing entrepreneurship in rural areas, bringing together as it does some of the key barriers and suggesting initiatives to capitalise on opportunities.

Some of the recommendations require high-level strategic action but others could be driven from a local base.

Key findings

The report has 56 recommendations, grouped under themes. These are summarised below:

1. Building on the infrastructure of rural Wales

- An infrastructure for electric vehicles to re-charge across rural Wales
- Companies responsible for maintaining the National Grid to reinforce the network, especially in areas where the grid is weakest and economic development opportunities greatest
- Exploring the option of a new energy infrastructure fund
- Creating better North-South, West-East road infrastructure and dualling roads where appropriate
- Encouraging cross border co-operation and support for infrastructure connectivity to the English Midlands
- Exerting pressure on the UK Government for mobile phone masts to become a universal public service obligation and encouraging mobile phone providers to share masts

2. Increasing rural Wales' skills and productivity

- Recognising the support needs of rural schools
- Supporting the Regional Learning and Skills Partnerships
- Providing adequate transport to training opportunities

- Implementing a skills audit and using it to drive forward relevant training in key sectors
- Facilitating agri-tech and precision agriculture and facilitating links with higher education in this area
- Developing links between schools and tourism, food preparation and hospitality businesses
- Recognising the higher costs of delivering some training such as plumbing and electrical engineering in rural areas
- Creating a Rural Wales Portal as a single promotional focus for all relevant rural courses and qualifications
- Supporting the provision of digital skills in underrepresented groups such as women and older people

3. Growing our businesses

- Using technology to deliver modular, convenient and interactive training to indigenous businesses, focussing in particular on those adding value to local resources
- Providing small loan funding to micro-businesses and promoting access to longer term loans through the Development Bank for Wales
- Developing beyond the current Rural Enterprise Zones in rural Wales and introducing tax incentives around key hubs and market towns
- Supporting rural entrepreneurs and connecting them to initiatives such as BeTheSpark.com
- Reworking place based focal points to mobilise the private sector in creating enterprise and supporting new business
- Supporting successful rural development agencies such as Planed, Antur Teifi, Cadwyn Clwyd and Menter Mon
- Local Development Plans supporting the shift towards village-based self-employment through appropriate housing and co-working locations
- Local Development Plans promoting and nurturing businesses by being flexible where appropriate on building control, licensing, procurement and trading standards
- Rolling out an information delivery course to deliver a shared aim of achieving appropriate development
- Implementing the recommendations of the Marsden Report and the Future Landscapes - Delivering for Wales Report, to permit appropriate employment and economic activity within National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty.
- Establishing a rural bursary to support young people looking to set up their own business in rural areas

4. Promoting food, farming and forestry.

- Appointing a highly-experienced industrialist to oversee a radical overhaul of food, farming and forestry
- Driving changes in all public sector procurement rules to ensure as far as possible the use of local food
- Using public procurement to provide an initial guaranteed domestic market in particular for lamb and beef and to encourage farmers to work in collaboration and in co-operatives
- Using public procurement to encourage adding value to local food with quality and quantity assurances
- Using public procurement to develop relationships with major supermarket retailers to ensure sustainable supply chains benefitting farmers, processors and supermarkets
- Refreshing and being more ambitious in the delivery of 'Toward Sustainable Growth: An Action Plan for the Food and Drink Industry in Wales 2014 - 2020'
- Supporting innovation and commercialisation in Universities, in particular in the food, plant and biosciences arena

- Developing a strategy to add more value to dairy produce in line with the recommendations of the Welsh Dairy Review
 - Exploring feasibility of chilling/freezing facilities to allow the meat industry to reach new markets
 - Add value to forestry products locally and ensure use in the construction supply chain
 - Creating an integrated strategy for upland Wales covering food, tourism, energy and eco system services including exploring the possibility of delivering a rewilding pilot
 - Developing a sustainable Welsh “game meat” and shellfish strategy
- 5. Using the foundational economy to ensure local jobs are provided for local people**
- Supporting short supply chains and retaining economic benefits locally
 - Reviewing the definition of affordable homes in rural areas and support increased construction of such properties.
 - Raising awareness of the “Help to Buy” scheme in rural Wales for first time buyers from the local community
 - Building eco care homes for older people, using Welsh materials and providing apprenticeships for local people. Providing extra care facilities and care hubs in rural areas
 - Encouraging community models for social care using the social capital assets that already exist in rural Wales
 - Supporting intergenerational models of support to develop skills, retain young people and also address social isolation
 - Childcare training
 - Enabling more rural businesses to create their own green energy as technologies become increasingly viable on a small scale
 - Encouraging more use of off grid/local grid energy and exploring opportunities provided by the Smart Villages Initiative
 - Developing imaginative solutions including micro renewables to address issues of fuel poverty
- 6. Maximising tourism potential**
- Consolidating existing sea-side town strategies across Wales
 - Marketing coastal destinations on the West coast and promoting the Wales Coast Path
 - Support the development of forestry land in North Powys to create a woodland leisure activity resort.
 - Encouraging the private sector to lead destination marketing campaigns
 - Extending the tourism season to provide sustainability within the rural economy
 - Using the Welsh language and culture as a differentiating positive factor in relation to tourism
 - Creating a Tourism Training Centre of Excellence in and for Rural Wales
 - Ensuring that the Welsh Government develop a wider rural tourism strategy beyond Pembrokeshire, Snowdonia and Brecon Beacons, including promoting off-peak and winter activities and events

Conclusions

The report is very wide ranging in its scope. It does not therefore go into detail about how some of the recommendations could be enacted and the wider context within which they could operate. It is a useful snapshot of some of the barriers to the development of the rural economy. It makes use of examples of good practice.

Having been written in 2017, some of the recommendations have subsequently been overtaken by new Welsh Government initiatives and policy to prepare for the impact of Brexit. Nevertheless some of the ideas are still valid and could form the basis of pilot projects. These would require further feasibility work.

Appendices

See appendix A for a copy of Rural Wales: Time to Meet the Challenge 2025
