Feasibility assessment

Title of research: Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward

Publication date: June 2019

Short summary of report:

Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward is a report by the Rural Affairs Task Group of Carmarthenshire County Council. It has been produced after extensive consultation across rural Carmarthenshire.

The report is wide-ranging, but a major aspect is the launch of a flagship project focussing on small towns. The 'Ten Rural Towns Initiative' is aimed at securing the economic, social, environmental and cultural sustainability of Carmarthenshire's towns and their surrounding villages.

Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward contains 55 recommendations across 10 key areas. The recommendations focus on what Carmarthenshire County Council can do, often in partnership with others, to facilitate thriving and sustainable rural communities.

The anticipated costs of implementing the recommendations are set out in the original report.

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

Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward references LEADER as an example of funding that has been attracted to the County in support of rural development. The Arfor Fund, which promotes entrepreneurship, business growth and community resilience with a focus on promoting the use of the Welsh language, is referenced in the same way.

The report does not go into detail of how LEADER has impacted on rural Carmarthenshire, but characteristics of the LEADER approach are prominent both within the body of the report and its recommendations. This is most evident in the focus on a place-based approach and in the recognition that support for entrepreneurship is important. The role of LEADER in the support of local innovation is not specifically alluded to, although is acknowledged as an important funding stream for projects such as EV charging points (see original report).

What are its characteristics and how can they be applied to this project?

The Carmarthenshire Rural Affairs Task Group was established in September 2017. It set out, *"to consider the issues effecting the rural communities in Carmarthenshire and to identify actions the Council, in partnership with other public bodies and organisations, can take in addressing those issues to ensure and support rural regeneration in future years"*.

The report includes a statistical review of rural Carmarthenshire. Rural is recognised as those wards defined as such in the Carmarthenshire Local Development Strategy, (LDS). Artificial boundaries are not however imposed, especially in localities where connectivity between rural and urban spaces is important.

The statistical review includes data on a wide range of topics and is mainly drawn from the mid-term review of the LDS undertaken by Wavehill in April 2019. The following statistics are pertinent to the Arsyllfa project.

- 61% of the Carmarthenshire population live in rural areas, which is significantly higher than the percentage for Wales which stands at 33%.
- Carmarthenshire has the highest number of Welsh speakers of all counties in Wales at 43.9%, (2011 census). In rural wards the percentage of Welsh speakers raises to 50.2% of the population.
- 12% of people aged 16-64 in Carmarthenshire are classed as self-employed compared to 10.6% in the UK and 9.6% in Wales.
- In 2011 there were 38 businesses per thousand people in Carmarthenshire, compared to 29 per thousand in Wales. There were more businesses being created in each of the four years from 2013-2016 than businesses dissolved (i.e. net business creation), following a net loss in businesses in the three previous years.
- Businesses in Carmarthenshire are typically smaller than businesses throughout Wales and the UK. In Carmarthenshire, microenterprises (0 to 9 employees) account for 91.4% of all business stock, which is around 2% higher than the equivalent in Wales and the UK. There are proportionally fewer small (10 to 29) and medium-sized businesses (50 to 249) in Carmarthenshire.

The task group consulted widely, including attendance at a number of events, the production of a survey (335 responses) and a Carmarthenshire Rural Affairs Conference in September 2018 (160 attendees).

This statistical analysis, viewed alongside the results of the consultation, leads the task group to identify overarching themes or principles that spread across all the recommendations in the final report. These include a theme on community life, housing and one specifically about fears over the future of agriculture following Brexit. Of particular resonance with the Arsyllfa project however are the following priority themes.

- The Carmarthenshire pound, keeping spending both from organisations, businesses and individuals in Carmarthenshire.

- Economic regeneration. Appropriate and sustainable growth. Focus on developing suitable core and distinctive sectors for Carmarthenshire.

- Broadband and transport infrastructure in support of economic as well as social development.

- Welsh Language and recognising the importance of rural communities to the future viability of the language.

The report recognises that many issues in rural areas are linked. The recommendations reflect this point, which arose during consultations. The recommendations under the planning and housing section for example recognises the impact, both positive and negative, that proposed developments can have on the Welsh language.

The report includes the launch of a flagship project called 'Ten Towns Initiative', aimed - amongst other objectives - at growing existing business, maximising job creation and supporting the development of a knowledge economy. The report argues that small towns are well placed to act as a central plank for rural development, with the potential for the clustering of business and services in order to ensure the future sustainability of rural communities. The report is clear that surrounding villages are also part of the vision and that rural socio-economic development needs to understand the interdependencies between the hamlets, villages, market towns, main towns, county and wider region. How this interdependency can generate prosperity across a wider geography is outside the scope of the report, but possibly an aspect that can be explored in future.

A strong place-based approach is advocated throughout the report, based around the focus on towns. The Council is urged to take a leading role in promoting it as a means of developing thriving and sustainable rural communities. In tangible terms this means supporting the development of business incubation sites and medium sized business units for progression. Companies, the report argues, need additional support and assurance to anchor their investment in the County's more rural areas if they are to overcome the cost of undertaking development in these areas. The Council's successful Rural Enterprise Fund, which provides assistance to enterprises and sole traders for the development of new and existing business premises, is seen as a central tool in this respect.

Support for the foundational economy and circular economy is a strong theme throughout the report. One of the overarching themes is support for the Carmarthenshire pound.

The report questions the delivery of business advice. It asks whether there is enough clustering and signposting between agencies in order that businesses are offered the most appropriate support and that there is no duplication of effort.

Supporting entrepreneurship amongst young people is identified in the report as key. Carmarthenshire, like other rural areas, experiences a loss of young people to follow education and employment opportunities. The report identifies a need to nurture and support those who want to stay in the County to develop and raise their aspirations. It says that more should be done to improve the offer for those people, who having followed their education choices elsewhere but want to return to the County to live and work.

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

The report is only explicit about the support needed to foster an entrepreneurial culture in relation to young people. It says in the section on education and skills that more needs to be done to encourage and support entrepreneurship amongst younger people. The main vehicle for the realisation for this objective is to work through the Swansea Bay City Deal and Regional Learning and Skills Partnership Skills and Talent Project, to increase careers input aimed at fostering entrepreneurship at a younger age. There is potential here to widen the discussion in order to design, test and develop a more rural focus to this aspiration.

Elsewhere, for example, the report suggests that Coleg Sir Gâr could be an important driver of innovation through a technology and skills hub.

The report has particular resonance with Arsyllfa in its desire to develop the distinctiveness of the area, although it does not go into detail about how economic development based on distinctiveness can be nurtured, supported and developed.

The report hopes that the 'Ten Towns Initiative' will identify opportunities (based on demand) to develop business support hubs in town centre locations, which would act as an incubation facility for start-up businesses with fixed or flexible office accommodation for a number of micro-businesses. It says that these should be taken forward through a place-based, multi-agency and multi-stakeholder approach. The report recognises that a one size fits all approach will not work as each community will have its own needs but feels that the Council is well placed to act as a facilitator to initiate and take this approach forward.

Key findings

The report makes 7 recommendations for Carmarthenshire County Council under the heading "Economic Development". These can be summarised as:

- To work with local communities and stakeholders in ten rural towns (and surrounding communities) to develop individual plans providing a long-term strategic vision in order to secure economic, cultural, social and environmental sustainability for those towns.

- To continue to implement existing funding opportunities for rural development and identify external public and private sector funding opportunities.

- To focus on the further development of the foundational economy sector within Carmarthenshire, whilst supporting the principles of the circular economy.

- To enable the re-use of vacant or unused buildings on agricultural land, and within rural towns and villages, to develop business incubator or commercial accommodation in rural areas.

- To maintain its rural estate but review its use and policy going forward, whilst also working with other public sector partners to identify development opportunities throughout their rural estate.

- To continue to make grant funding available to support the growth aspirations of the County's entrepreneurs and rural businesses whilst exploring the feasibility of establishing a local private sector loan fund.

- To work with other business support agencies and services (e.g. Business Wales, Business in Focus, Farming Connect etc.) to enable greater clustering of support and signposting to local businesses.

The 'Ten Towns Initiative' is the major flagship project, but the recommendations and appendices recognise that there are many interlocking strands that need to be pursued in an integrated way in order to achieve the report's aspirations. Housing, education and skills are just some examples of the dimensions that will need to be brought into play to support the economic development recommendations above.

Conclusions

- Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward is an ambitious and wide-ranging exploration of the issues facing rural parts of the County. The report brings into sharp focus the particular issues associated with rurality as well as ambition to capitalise on strengths and overcome barriers to prosperity.

- The importance of rural areas to a thriving Welsh language is demonstrated and although the report does not go into details, an approach based on local distinctiveness is encouraged.

- The various strands within the report that either implicitly or explicitly refer to entrepreneurship need to be brought together into a coherent strategy and programme of work. The 'Ten Towns Initiative' will draw out some of this but other players such as Coleg Sir Gâr need to be central. There is space here for an initiative such as Arsyllfa to explore the potential.

Appendices

1.   Moving Rural Carmarthenshire Forward. Report and Recommendations.
2.   Appendices
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