



Delivering the Potential

Seminar Report **22 June 2021**

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The organisers would like to thank the speakers, attendees and organisations that made this seminar possible. In particular we would like to thank Four Cymru, Menter Môn, PLANED, Antur Cymru and Cadwyn Clwyd for their support in the planning and delivery of the event.

CWMPAWD GWLEDIG CYMRU / WALES RURAL COMPASS

Wales Rural Compass grew from a network of individuals and independent enterprise agencies with a long history of working in rural Wales.

As part of the [Arsyllfa](#) project Four Cymru, a leading bilingual communications agency, also supported the work in facilitating events, meetings and wider communications throughout the initial stages.

In 2019 the network held a seminar in Carno, Montgomeryshire aimed at highlighting the economic potential of rural Wales and the impact of community led development through programmes such as LEADER. The network issued a paper titled “Growing the Potential”.

A second paper was produced before the Senedd elections in May 2021. Called, “Grasping the Potential”.

This report outlines presentations and discussions held on 22 June 2021. The seminar, called “Delivering the Potential”.

BACKGROUND

As the new Welsh Government begins work on national recovery post the Covid-19 pandemic, the seminar asks, how will it deliver for rural Wales?

Nine council areas are designated as being rural. Collectively they are home to over a third of the Welsh population with many more in rural pockets in other council areas. The nine rural councils cover an area of over 80% of the Welsh landmass.

The recently published WLGA Rural Vision and accompanying Evidence Report sets out the challenges for rural Wales, many of which have formed the backbone of rural development policy over many years. Post Covid-19 and post Brexit there are new challenges to be faced but the response for rural Wales is fragmented between emerging regional structures such as CJs, and delivery mechanisms such as City and Growth Deals.

The seminar covered the following questions and more:

- How can a coherent integrated vision for rural Wales be supported going forward?
- How will we build on the lessons of LEADER to foster multi-agency delivery mechanisms that are place-based and community focussed?

- How do we nurture and support locally led innovation rooted in local communities?

SPEAKERS

Professor Michael Woods, Aberystwyth University

In the first presentation, Professor Michael Woods of Aberystwyth University summarised some of the challenges and opportunities for rural Wales and outlined possible governance models for ensuring that rural issues are appropriately targeted in post-Brexit programmes. Research in the ROBUST project had revealed how Brexit and COVID-19 have accentuated inequalities and structural weaknesses in rural Wales, informing priorities in the new Rural Vision for Wales, produced with the WLGA. However, Michael questioned whether the appropriate mechanisms were in place to deliver these aspirations. He noted that uncertainty over UK and Welsh Government post-Brexit programmes had stymied planning and that the apparent claw back of powers by Whitehall constrained Wales's capacity to develop its own responses to distinctive challenges in rural development.

Ongoing silos in Welsh Government had contributed to dual emphasizes on sustainable land management and on regional investment, with the risk that people-oriented rural development could disappear into the gap between these. In particular, resources for community-led local development in rural Wales could be squeezed if rural communities are forced to compete with urban communities for funding. As such, Michael argued that there is a need for clear representation of rural interests in post-Brexit policy delivery in Wales and the coordination of rural development interventions.

He set out five potential approaches (not mutually exclusive) including a rural funding stream (broader than the previous RDP), a rural development agency (as a corporate joint committee), a rural commissioner, a rural policy council and a rural parliament.

Wynfford James, Director Sgema Cyf

Wynfford's presentation focused on highlighting the key messages from his paper on 'The space for Innovation: Antur Teifi LEADER I & II. He explained that his intention in the paper was to consider how the LEADER programme in the Teifi and Aeron Valleys in West Wales in the nineties was co-ordinated and delivered. He also wanted to consider what impact

the programme had made, and what could be learnt from the experience which could be valuable for future actions in rural Wales.

He explained that he wished not only to consider individual projects but also to view the context in which the development took place and who were the main actors and the engagement with both local authorities and state structures.

Antur Teifi became the main actor in the delivery of both LEADER I & II. An organisation that had emerged into a mainstream enterprise agency by the nineties from its earlier days as a community initiative. It was an organisation working in the space between the state, local authorities and the community.

He outlined the main threads of the LEADER I programme and how community engagement evolved and differentiated it from formal consultation. LEADER II followed from its success and was led by a Rural Innovation Centre which incorporated a telematic facility. Not all the interventions were successful but many became catalysts for main stream programmes later by Government Agencies.

What was to be learnt from this experience? He drew on the methodology of LEADER and argued that the main characteristics of the approach needs to be renewed and re -energised. In doing so, it would provide a delivery mechanisms and structures which would create the space for innovation to serve the needs of the people, business and community of rural Wales for the future.

Jon Parker, Chief Executive, The Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales

Jon began his presentation by reporting on a recent survey of both members and non-members of CPRW that received over 500 online and postal responses. Amongst other things, the survey asked what is important to rural communities and what is important for future generations. Unsurprisingly perhaps pollution of air, rivers, land and sea environments, the decline of nature and climate change were all top concerns. Open spaces, landscape and countryside and our rural economy and way of life were seen as important for future generations. Perhaps more surprisingly, living sustainably (and making choices to do so) and how changes in agriculture will affect rural communities were seen as less important, but this may be due to uncertainty and understanding of policies and direction.

Key take aways from the survey included an ask for information on local regional rural issues and concerns, the push/pull tensions of developments such as renewables and again perhaps not surprisingly, supporting the rural economy. The conclusion to be drawn is that meaningful conversations need to be had with rural communities about these takes, especially where communities are divided on issues.

Jon asked if it is time to reflect on what has or hasn't worked in community development in rural Wales and to use this as a springboard for future activity. He posed the question about how we reach out to all, make discussions accessible, using appropriate terminology and language.

Jon took the fishing sector and its communities as a case study. The sector is predominately rural Wales based and is of both historic and cultural significance to Wales. Engagement has been reduced to consultation on resource use. This is against some stark challenges for the fishing industry. The key question is how we work towards truly sustainable fisheries. This must involve moving out of sectoral silos and reaching out to the sometimes difficult to reach fishing community.

Engagement mechanisms are key. Jon concluded by reflecting on the interconnections between vibrant cities and the survival of rural communities and urged people to be brave and radical.

Endaf Griffiths, Director Wavehill

Endaf reflected on 15 years of evaluating rural development projects and programmes in Wales. To set the he spent some time in the National Library of Wales in Aberystwyth looking at old 'Rural Wales Strategy' documents. There have been a few of them including a 'Strategy for Rural Wales' written by the Welsh Council 50 years ago, in 1971.

Reading through these documents he found a lot of the same issues that we discuss today were being discussed way back in 1971 and again throughout the 1990s. Most notably, all the documents talk about the need to address the outmigration of young people from rural communities and the need to diversify the rural economy. So, on that basis, what's changed? What has been achieved by the billions that have been spent over the years on rural development projects and programmes? Should we not have addressed these issues by now?

Endaf called for more challenge and questioning of the programmes, schemes and projects that are being delivered in the name of 'rural development'. Are we learning from not only the things that work but

also the things that did not work, particularly those innovative initiatives?

If we don't, we are not going to learn from those 'failures' and we risk doing the same things again. Do we fully understand the problems facing rural Wales and, if not, how can you solve them?

Endaf made three main reflections. Firstly that there is a rush to develop project ideas and to take action rather than collecting information, deciding the cause of the issue and identifying a range of possible solutions. Secondly not enough time is spent reviewing what's been achieved and (importantly) sharing the findings of those reviews with others. Thirdly, and Endaf's main reflection was that fundamentally projects are about people and the places and communities they come from. More often than not, there is a key motivated and committed individual behind a successful project or a successful business. Further, a place or a community is often key to that individual's motivation. Finding and engaging with those individuals is, therefore, *the* critical factor.

Professor Kevin Morgan, Cardiff University

In the final presentation, Professor Kevin Morgan spoke about emerging governance structures and strategies. His presentation addressed three issues - the rural question, the new systems of governance in Wales and finally the challenges emerging from the new centralism being pursued by Westminster.

The rural question has been side-lined for the last quarter of a century, not only in Wales but across OECD countries. It has disappeared off the serious political agenda due to the growth of city regions, driven by the concept of "agglomeration". Agglomeration does generate economic benefits under certain conditions, as there is a very real correlation between productivity, innovation and population density. But this concept has morphed into an ideology of what Kevin called "metrophilia" which extolls the benefits of urbanisation whilst belittling its costs. Post pandemic this may change with a greater awareness of well-being and a broader understanding of development that goes beyond the narrow metric of GDP per capita.

As regards new systems of governance, we need to recognise that there are now two models of devolution in Wales. The first is the *national* model of devolution from London to Wales, the second is the *sub-national* model of devolution within Wales. This sub-national model was

triggered by the creation of City and Growth deals and the regional model of development, involving the four new development regions of Wales. The most developed region is the Cardiff Capital Region, which may soon have its own regional development agency, and this could happen in the other regions. How will the two models of devolution rub along with each other? New Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) are being formed in each of the four regions and these new structures face some big challenges, including their capacity to fulfil their mandate, their composition and their ability to collaborate with each other and with Welsh Government. CJCs are essentially local government structures, but other partners need to be involved because regional development is a multi-stakeholder process. The Welsh Government will need to recast its relationship with these CJCs and treat them as real partners not low-level delivery agents.

The third issue is the new centralism that has been spawned by the “muscular unionism” of the UK government under Boris Johnson. The UK “levelling up” funds run counter to the good practice we have developed with the Structural Funds and plunge us back into some of the worse features of the past - such as tight timelines, competition between local authorities and silo working.

For its part the Welsh Government is caught between a rock and a hard place. If it protests it could lose resources; but if it uncritically engages, it loses face. Nevertheless, a pragmatic approach based on enlightened self-interest needs to be adopted and this is especially true for rural development policy. To achieve the resource base to face future challenges, rural development policy will need to go where the funding streams are - in Wales, UK and Europe. Only by mobilising and integrating all funding streams will we be able to bring the rural question from the margins to the mainstream.

DISCUSSION

The discussion began by considering some of the structures raised in Michael Woods’ presentation. The idea of a rural policy council comes from a Finnish model and could be a mechanism for supporting cohesive rural leadership that is able to influence governments and support grassroots action. We need structures that will exploit synergies between what is coming out of Cardiff and London, political differences aside. There needs to be a mechanism that works through the challenges of rural development, researches them and formulates a coherent plan.

It needs to be a mechanism for working across silos and has resonance with different agendas including climate change, social justice and the digital agenda.

Rural parliaments are a model for supporting community voice. They are structures that support grassroots organisations coming together to highlight issues and take their concerns to government. We are very fortunate in Wales to have Tom Jones as the newly elected of The European Rural Community Alliance (ERCA), a founding organiser of the European Rural Parliament. Tom recently made a presentation to the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) arguing for equitable partnerships between rural and urban. The dynamics of rural areas are changing and there will be a need for different views of rural spaces to be brought together and also maybe conflict resolution.

There was disappointment that the recently published Programme for Government lacked analysis of the needs of rural Wales and targets to meet these needs. People asked, will there be programmes outside the siloed targets that will address the cross cutting needs of rural Wales?

There is still a general lack of understanding about what LEADER has achieved. This may be because it is seen as an add on. It may be because successful initiatives do not recognise the small input from LEADER that gets things started. Many people who were involved in LEADER have now moved on to more senior levels. The learning from LEADER goes with them.

Evaluation timeframes may not register small scale early support. The LEADER journey is not always linear, it has many twists and turns but the journey is a facilitated one and this facilitation needs funding. Flexibility to maximise the potential is not always recognised. Success comes from supporting the right people and providing resources to follow a course that is sometimes unpredictable. LEADER has been mainstreamed and so more controlled. It has moved away from being community controlled and therefore less dynamic.

Beyond LEADER it is important to recognise the success factors behind successful community-led development. This includes the ability to bring sectors and interests together in a local space. There seems to be no clarity going forward as to how this will be facilitated.

People felt that the rich learning about community led development has not been shared and acted upon as much as it could have been. The evidence and stories are there but they had not been acted upon. Some felt that some lessons had been built into the design of programmes but

they had not been carried through to the way in which community-focussed programmes had been implemented.

There was a huge amount of expertise gathered in the seminar and we must find a way of building on it. The Irish Rural Network is an excellent example of a dynamic, public facing space to share expertise. Unlike in Wales, it is independent of government and has a much higher profile.

Learning must be gathered from things that have failed. There is a temptation to sweep things under the carpet if they don't achieve but the learning is important so that the same mistakes are not made. Innovation involves testing things out and allowing some things to fail.

The learning from FLAGs is also important especially concerning how to support a community that is difficult to engage, is time poor and has challenging working patterns.

Seminars like this one could be part of a platform that allows people to think, speak and explore the challenges of rural areas beyond this, resources must be provided for local development and delivery with space built in to innovate, test out and respond flexibly to the potential of people without being driven by centrally constructed targets. The multi-faceted nature of local development brings many connections and those connections can spark innovation.

In the meantime we are in danger of losing expertise and valuable skills. How are we going to bridge the gap if there is no successor programme being designed?

The legacy of LEADER needs to be reviewed and the methodology revisited in order to create a new dynamic place based space for innovation.

CONCLUSION

The seminar discussed how to deliver the potential of rural Wales with a particular focus on community-led innovation. People felt that the targets for rural development as set out in the new Programme for Government were disappointing with a greater emphasis needed on cross departmental programmes that delivered an integrated approach.

Local development in rural Wales is in danger of being squeezed and lost between the dual focus on sustainable land management and regional development.

The lessons of the rich Welsh experience of community led local development has not been carried through to the implementation of the most recent rural programmes, especially the latest iteration of LEADER.

Innovation at community level needs space to breathe, to test out new ideas and to experiment. Innovative initiatives with the potential for the most impact will experience many twists and turns before they deliver. They will not grow from prescribed activity within a grant-led culture. This space is a facilitated space. It needs funding in its own right as a process and it needs to have the capacity to bring together resources from public, private and third sectors at a local level.

The seminar felt that we need to revisit the rich learning available from rural Wales, especially from early iterations of LEADER.