



Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST)

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Rural-Urban Governance Arrangements and Planning Instruments

WLGA Rural Forum

Mid Wales

1. Overview

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) is a politically-led, cross party organisation that represents the interests of local government and promotes local democracy in Wales. Wales is a constituent country with the United Kingdom which has gained a significant degree of autonomy through devolution. The WLGA Rural Forum was established at a WLGA Council meeting on 30 November 2007, giving it a democratic mandate to be the Local Government Forum to debate issues affecting rural areas at the national (Wales) level, whether they be socio-economic, demographic, cultural, etc.

Forum membership consists of senior political and official representatives from the nine Local Authorities (Unitary Authorities) in Wales that are classified as “rural” by the Welsh Government (2008) due to their population density being below 140 persons per km². These authorities (Anglesey, Conwy, Gwynedd, Denbighshire, Ceredigion, Powys, Carmarthenshire, Monmouthshire, and Pembrokeshire) represent a combined population of over a million people (UK Census 2011). Collectively these authorities constitute Mid Wales, and all contain urban areas, as well as rural. Travel to work patterns extend across individual local authority boundaries and, in some cases, into England.

The Forum does not have any legislative power in itself, but rather constitutes a platform for Local Authorities to discuss and coordinate actions in response to the needs and challenges of their rural communities, and – in advance of the 2016 Welsh Assembly elections – published a Manifesto for the period 2015-2020 (Welsh Local Government Association, January 2016).

The forum operates according to the following terms of reference:

- I. To provide a WLGA forum for exchanging views on key issues affecting rural local authorities in Wales
- II. To provide a coordinated approach to key strategic issues affecting local authorities in rural Wales

- III. To identify items of common concern and to discuss ways of addressing them in co-operation
- IV. To coordinate lobbying and representational actions on issues of common concern to achieve better outcomes for the communities and people of rural Wales
- V. To identify potential areas of collaboration and joint work for the benefit of rural areas
- VI. Where possible, to speak with one voice for, and represent the interests of, local authorities in rural Wales
- VII. To undertake broader collaborative discussions about the economic, social and environmental well-being of rural areas in Wales.

2. Main Challenges

Being a national Forum for Local Government, the key issues debated in relation to rural areas amount to concerns that collectively need to be addressed nationally by the Welsh Government under broad headings of: Finance, Local Freedom & Flexibility, Schools, Health and Social Care, Housing and the Environment, and Jobs and Regeneration.

Growth Deals and governance

Wales is currently undergoing significant change in a policy, funding and governance context. Regional approaches are being developed through City and Growth Deals. These deals have a regional remit inclusive of urban centres and rural hinterlands, but primarily focus on the city. They have the following footprints:

- North Wales: North Wales Economic Ambition Board. Growth Deal in negotiation.
- Mid Wales. Growing Mid Wales Partnership. Growth Deal in development.
- South West. Swansea Bay City Deal. City Deal Agreed.
- South East. Cardiff Capital Region. City Deal in operation.

The nine Authorities of the WLGA Rural Forum collectively intersect with all four of these footprints. In 2017, the Welsh Government published their new Economic Strategy which outlined a new way of working along a regionally-focussed model of economic development – aligned in part to the four regional approaches highlighted above (Welsh Government, 2017).

Forum Members face the challenge of identifying the role rural areas play in these new regional/sub-regional arrangements, with the following issues being central to the current agenda:

- Does inclusive growth mean ensuring rural dwellers can take advantage of urban-focused economic growth? Or, does it require identification and development of appropriate opportunities to grow and develop within rural areas too?

- Should urban growth/urbanisation be the focus, with improved transport/infrastructure links for commuters from rural areas? Or, should there be a balanced approach, identifying parallel opportunities for rural development/counter-urbanisation?
- Are there opportunities to increase value-added activities, for example by increasing local processing, creating stronger direct economic ties between rural and urban areas/activities?
- Could payment for ecosystem services contribute towards a viable future for rural communities?
- What are the knock-on effects if farming and food production decline in rural areas?
- Linked to this, what are the considerations and uncertainties in regard to the implications of Brexit for future policy and funding for economic development in rural areas? In addition, what are the potential direct and indirect impacts of Brexit on housing, the economy, community cohesion etc?

The impact of growth deals on rural communities:

The key issue now is the role and purpose of the Rural Forum going forward. We now have 2 agreed city deals: one emerging growth deal in the North; and one initiated later in Mid Wales. A key concern/challenge for the 9 LAs (although part of these deals) is the impact of the deals on their rural communities. There are still wider actions that need to be addressed beyond the city/growth deal funding alone. A challenge related to this is how to reach agreement on what constitutes transformation in a region. For example, North Wales has a larger number of smaller projects, rather than a smaller number of larger projects (as is traditional with the large transformative scale of City Deals).

3. Main Insights

The WLGA Rural Forum was established to promote actions aimed at sustaining rural communities. Specifically, the work of the Forum has been focused on maintaining and, where necessary, restructuring the functionality and balance of rural settlements to provide reasonable and affordable access by rural residents and communities to the range of services, facilities and opportunities which are necessary to achieve economic and social wellbeing.

3.1. Insights related to the broad area of “network governance”

Whilst the core membership of the Forum is exclusively Local Government, various external stakeholders have been brought into meetings to supplement debates on different issues. Beyond the Forum meetings, Forum Members (being the Political Leaders of their Local Authorities) are expected to interlink the current debate and work programme of the Forum with various Local fora and networks. A number of Forum Members are also involved in the development and implementation of the four Growth and City Deals. Forum Members are expected to connect the discussions and concerns emanating from the Rural Forum within their respective Authorities, but also to utilise their understanding of the City/Growth deal approaches in determining the direction of dialogue in the Rural Forum in response to current concerns.

It follows that the Forum clearly constitutes a ‘space of engagement’, and one which is premised on the notion of ‘networked development’. With respect to the interaction of the Forum with the emerging institutions coalescing around the City/ Growth Deals, there is clearly an emphasis on building alliances which stretch across Local Authority jurisdictions.

3.2. Insights related to mechanisms of cross-sectoral coordination and cooperation

Membership of the Forum consists of democratically-elected Members representing each Local Authority area, supported by senior officers within the Local Government. This ensures a high degree of interconnection between local issues and the concerns of local communities, and those discussions regarding governance at regional and national levels. By its very nature it has a dominant focus on Local Government and, therefore, this might have an impact on buy-in beyond these actors. Specifically, the extent to which outside organizations engage in this policy agenda is dependent to a greater extent on being identified and invited to play a part in the Forum.

3.3. Insights related to the role of (actual, potential) social, organizational, institutional innovations

The Rural Forum is currently the only public policy platform in Wales where there is a sole focus on “rural”. There is no equivalent platform that considers such a broad range of economic and social concerns through a solely “rural” lens.

The strengths of the Forum are its ability to unify and strengthen a Local Government voice on particular concerns, and to enable a stronger influence and impact on Welsh Government policy and funding decisions. Since its inception, the Forum has had a series of successes, including a greater recognition of the enhanced costs of service delivery in rural areas. This has been consequently reflected in an increase in funding for those Authority areas.

Following on from section 3.1., there is clearly evidence of a differentiated approach to rural-urban governance strategies. This is most notable in terms of the nine Local Authorities’ differentiated position within a number of City/Growth deals – and the status of these applications. Partly a reflection of criteria set by the UK government and (to a lesser extent) the Welsh Government, the rhetoric of City deals very much accentuates the role of large urban centres in driving economic development in the North West, South West and South East Wales. As such, the potential development trajectories of (areas of) a number of those Local Authorities within the WLGA Rural Forum are directly connected to the impetus created by cities/ large towns in adjacent authorities. These include the role of Swansea in creating opportunities in connection with south Carmarthenshire, and the role of Wrexham, Chester and Liverpool as a driver for growth in rural Denbighshire. By contrast, and within mid-Wales, the pursuit of a Growth Deal reflects the absence of an

identifiable large-scale urban centre, and rather the adoption of a model premised on the role of multiple smaller ‘hubs’ for service provision as a driver of regional success.

4. Illustration and further information

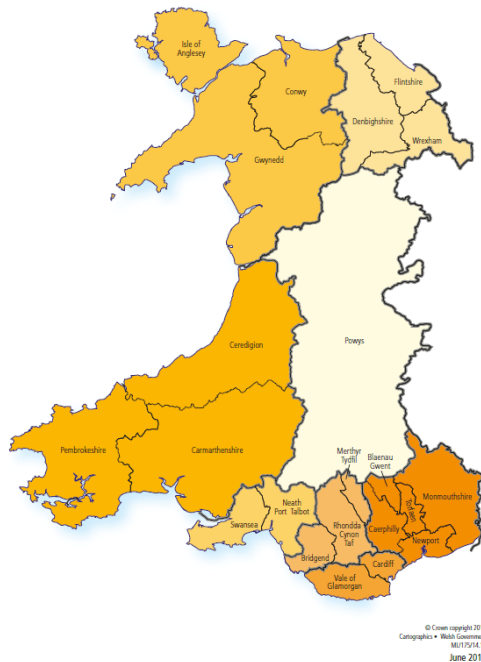


Figure 1: The 22 Local Authorities in Wales. Source: Senedd Research, National Assembly for Wales, 2015

Welsh Government (2008) Statistical focus on Rural Wales Report, 2008 Edition.
<https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/statistical-focus-rural-wales/?lang=en>

2011 UK Census - Population and Household Estimates for Wales

Welsh Local Government Association (2016) Realising the Potential of the Rural Areas of Wales: A Manifesto for the WLGAs Rural Forum 2015-2020
<https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=1184>

Welsh Government (2017) Prosperity for All: Economic Action Plan
<https://gov.wales/docs/det/publications/171213-economic-action-plan-en.pdf>

Getting the measure of rural deprivation in Wales:
<http://www.oci.co.uk/news/wp-content/uploads/OCSI-GettingMeasureRuralDeprivationWales.pdf>

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