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Rural-Urban Governance Arrangements and Planning Instruments

Wales Spatial Plan

Mid Wales

1. Overview

This policy intervention was adopted by the Welsh Government in 2004 (WAG 2004), updated in 2008 (WAG 2008), and was drawn up as a 20 year national strategy for sustainable development. The WSP sets out a series of national spatial priorities across key sectors, including health, education, housing and economy, as well environmental capital and natural resources. Notably, and in terms of rural-urban linkages, the WSP advocates a governmental approach which does not restrict itself to 'hard' administrative boundaries and which is centred on; 'key settlements' and 'cross boundary settlements' identified as a focus of present and future development; 'socio-economic hubs' with high concentrations of people and enterprise, and; 'international/interregional/regional links' indicating outward facing relationships.

The WSP is structured around six sub-regions of Wales (see figure 1), inclusive of: Central Wales; North East Wales (Border & Coast); North West Wales (Eryri a Môn); Pembrokeshire (The Haven); South East Wales (Capital Region); Swansea Bay (Waterfront and Western Valleys). In terms of governance, oversight and delivery, Spatial Plan Area Groups were established for each region which comprised of representatives from the private, public and third sector. The role of these groups were to align institutional investments, and provide a forum for collaborative planning within and across rural and urban contexts. On the understanding that the interactions of everyday economic and social life take place across different axes, the WSP highlights the existence of so-called 'fuzzy boundaries'. In this way different organisations were able to sit on multiple Area Groups. The composition and activities of these groups varied by region and has now come to an end, with the WSP being supplanted by the National Development For Wales (NDF), currently undergoing public consultation.

2. Main Challenges

As an overarching strategy, the WSP highlighted a series of key problems facing Wales. These are: building sustainable communities; promoting a sustainable economy; valuing the

environment; accessibility, and; maintaining internal and external cohesiveness. Within those narratives provided for each WSP region. This can present issues in terms of 'ownership' of specific problems in specific local contexts, particularly when considering expenditure. Within the Central Wales Spatial Plan Area, specific challenges identified include: enabling integrated growth through building a broader economic base; extending the regions internal and external accessibility, including IT technology, and; maintaining mid Wales' rural and natural character.

Integrated growth and labour market issues

> Mid Wales has comparatively low levels of unemployment, but operates primarily as a low-wage economy. It also exhibits a higher-than-average dependency on public sector jobs, and has few large-scale employers out of this context.

> Central Wales is characterized by limited inward investment from the private sector, although there are pockets of micro-business and small enterprise initiatives. This reflects innovation and spin-out activities, but also the limited capacity for significant growth.

> The higher education and research infrastructure is identified as being significant, particularly in the context of the region's overwhelmingly rural character. However, a key issue is the ability to translate educational attainment into economic growth given the limited career pathways offered within the majority of locations in Mid Wales.

Accessibility

> The region is characterized by limited transport infrastructure, including major road and rail connections. This has a negative impact on access to services, including education and healthcare, with a number of urban centres serving as service hubs (namely Aberystwyth, Brecon, Camarthen, Lampeter, Newtown, and Welshpool).

> High dependency on private transport coupled with a lack of high-speed ICT links in many localities in Mid Wales limits employment opportunities.

> Compared to other parts of Wales and the UK, there is a lack of affordable housing to either buy or rent around urban service centres.

Maintaining distinctiveness and environmental capital

> Cultural vibrancy is highlighted as a key attribute of the region, in terms of both maintaining social and economic resilience. Examples include the role of the Welsh language, as well as environmental capital. This vibrancy is also allied to economic development in terms of facilitating high-value-added tourism.

> The region's ecosystems are identified as of primary importance to its social and economic fabric. A key challenge is managing the environment to foster development through agricultural innovation and tourism, while also protecting landscapes and

enhancing their function to help address the challenges of climate change (including carbon capture, flood prevention).

3. Main Insights

The WSP was developed and produced as a mechanism to integrate planning across spatial scales, as well as provide avenues of delivery. At the local level these were largely centred around local authority provision and service boards, including strategies for housing, health and well-being, and children and young people, all of which were intended to feed into WSP Area Strategies. Strategies were intended to fulfil a regional remit - a scale that has been identified as needing a pronounced form and function post-devolution - being devised and delivered via Area Groups.

3.1. Insights related to the broad area of "network governance"

Beyond a core membership, there was an expectation that Area Groups formally interacted with other regional bodies and delivery mechanisms, including Regional Transport Consortium and Welsh European Funding Frameworks, and Regeneration Plans, increasingly centred primarily around city-regional planning models. At the national scales the Welsh (Assembly) Government was essential for pulling together the 6 Area Strategies and dove-tailing them with targets set out in the National Transport Plan and various capital investment programmes.

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

The ability of the WSP to extend integrated development across rural and urban spheres was via Area Groups. Each Group was chaired by a senior representative from the Welsh Government, and were expected to involve actors from multiple sectors. On this basis it was recognised that initiatives and investments could be better aligned and connected to the national-policy making process via Ministerial oversight. In particular this oversight included monitoring delivery, focusing on cross-boundary collaboration and specifying task and finish groups. The relationship between the Area Groups and Regional Transport Consortia was deemed to be particularly important in both the WSP and the Wales Transport Strategy, which both highlight limited connectivity between north and south Wales, and access between key settlements and sites in Mid Wales.

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

While it could be argued that the WSP has had limited impact, it has no doubt served an institutional purpose in terms of creating and harnessing 'institutional thickness' in a regional context in post-Devolution Wales. As such the WSP has connected statuary responsibilities at local authority level to regional and national policy making streams, as well as encouraged interaction between a wider range of public, private and 3rd sector

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actors. However, the capacity to cement these inter-and intra-regional linkages was arguably put in check by the limited resources channeled through the WSP by the Welsh Government.

4. Effectiveness Indicators

Following on from the above, the WSP has been replaced by the National Development Framework (NDF) (following the Planning (Wales) Act 2015). The NDF sets out/ will set out national spatial planning priorities, and is currently under consultation. As per the WSP, statutory Local Development Plans (LDPs) as drawn up by Local Authorities will be required to take the NDF into account. Furthermore, the Welsh Government has specified powers to identify Strategic Planning Areas that operate in a regional context, and it has been indicated that there will be no more than three. This is less than the six WSP Areas, and suggests limited success and/or political uptake of this model (National Assembly for Wales 2016). Furthermore, their has been limited evaluation undertaken of the WSP, of which has been mostly confined to academic rather than practitioner scrutiny. Here, for example, Haughton and colleagues (2010) have indicated that the WSP suggested consensus and integrated decision making, but was too general to provide a practical base to build upon in many localities. Elsewhere Heley (2013) highlighted the considerable extent to which the WSP had impacted the consciousness and networks of policy makers and political actors more broadly, but also the limited extent to which this was able to instigate change 'on the ground'.

5. Illustration and further information

National Assembly for Wales (2016) Comparison of the planning systems in the four UK countries. National Assembly for Wales Research Service. Available at:

http://www.assembly.wales/Research%20Documents/16-001%20-%20Comparison%20of%20the%20planning%20systems%20in%20the%20four%20UK%20countries/16-001.pdf [Accessed 7th August]

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Heley, J. (2010) Soft Spaces, Fuzzy Boundaries and Spatial Governance in Post-devolution Wales. International Journal of Urban and Regional Research. 37,4. pp 1325-48.

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