



Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST)

ROBUST receives funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020

*research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 727988.**



September 2018

Welsh Local Government Association

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Rural-Urban Governance Arrangements and Planning Instruments

Growing Mid Wales Partnership

Mid Wales

1. Overview

Growing Mid Wales [GMW] is a regional partnership and engagement arrangement across the public, private and third sectors with a vision to grow jobs, population and the wider economy within the Mid Wales region. Spatially, the partnership is centred on the administrative boundaries of Ceredigion and Powys Local Authority areas; although there is an ongoing discussion on the issue of towns/communities which are situated across – and are adjacent to – these administrative boundaries.

The Partnership is driven by the secretariat and Chairs jointly provided by local government and aims to create a vision and consensus for the future growth of the Mid Wales region. Reflecting the geographic proximity of its communities and their Travel to Work Areas to adjacent areas in other Regional arrangements in Wales (Gwynedd Council to the North, Carmarthenshire to the South, English Authorities to the East), the Partnership has a strong emphasis on collaboration and cross-border working.

2. Main Challenges

Growing Mid Wales was borne out of a response to the ever-evolving “regional” governance and policy landscape within Wales. With the Cardiff and Swansea City Region models developing in the South of the country, and the authorities in North Wales currently working on a Growth Bid, there was an obvious gap in any comparable regional arrangement covering Ceredigion and Powys. This arrangement consequently seeks to influence and champion the needs and opportunities of Mid Wales via a Growth Bid that reflects the characteristics of the region, including deep rurality and peripherality, and comparative over-dependence on SMEs. This process therefore looks to highlight and build upon the environmental and cultural capital held within Mid Wales, linking this to the green and doughnut economies, and the positive attributes of low-growth (Raworth 2017).

Recognizing the limits to growth outside (but also within) major urban centres and an emphasis on GDP measures, this is allied to the particular geography of Mid Wales. Whilst comprising of 39% of the land areas of Wales, it has less than 7% of its population and no city-

anchor. It is characterised by a dispersed pattern of small market towns within a region that is overwhelmingly rural in nature, except for the larger market/university towns of Newtown and Aberystwyth (Growing Mid Wales, 2016). It is also the case that this part of Wales is rhetorically valued in terms of its environmental and cultural attributes, including ecosystem services and tourism. As such the Growing Mid Wales model seeks to better formally capture and better realise the potential of these assets as a driver of sustainable growth.

To date, principal challenges presented and addressed by this initiative include:

- > Developing a Growth Deal that is not structured along the “traditional lines” of city/urban centred models.
- > How such a regional approach can take a sufficiently place-based trajectory, being sensitive to “local” issues?
- > The types of project needed – and appropriate – for the development of the region may not necessarily deliver economic and material outputs on the same scale as can be achieved in more urbanised areas.
- > Following the above, there exists a perceived disadvantage in a competitive grant funding environment where the emphasis on transformative investment is often interpreted as “bigger is better”. In reality, truly transformational growth in a more rural region might only be sustainably achieved through a mix of smaller-scale, locally-sensitive, investments (Marsden, 2013).
- > The rural nature of the region makes it susceptible to pressures and social exclusion issues that affect all rural communities. However, it might also help to define these communities, their identity and culture, and their views on urbanisation and growth more generally.

3. Main Insights

Whilst the partnership was established in 2015, it is only now beginning to gain significant traction. This is reflected in an agreement to commission external resources to develop an evidence-based programme of interventions for the region. This is scheduled to be completed in 2018, with input from the range of partnership Members to agree on a shared vision and programme of interventions. This is intended to set the foundations for clear funding targets and achievements within a potential Growth Bid for the region.

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

The partnership deliberately consists of a range of partner organisations across the public, third and private sectors, ranging from local and national government, Higher and Further Education, Business representation organisations & Farming Unions, Voluntary Organisations and representatives as well as representation from a range of special interest forums (i.e., health, transport, skills, tourism, etc).

As such, this model is attuned to – and reflective of – a form of networked governance which is purposely cross-sector and representative of differing communities (both in terms of territorial remit and interest). It is also the case that the various actors and institutions involved in this process attach different values to the economic and political landscape of Mid Wales, but collectively recognise the need to orchestrate a more coherent and interactive approach to growth.

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

The partnership meetings are alternately chaired by the Leaders of Ceredigion and Powys Councils, with the secretariat function shared between both Authorities. A key partnership value is working to develop a shared vision.

The partnership recognises in its terms of reference that the extent to which particular sectors/stakeholders are engaged and contribute to particular priorities will vary according to the nature and detail of the activity. Both councils also support, and can draw on, Public Service Boards in their areas. These bring sectors/partners together to improve coordination and cooperation to improve well-being. It is, however, the case that this initiative is very much centred on Local Authority actors. This reflects the historic and ongoing onus on these institutions to drive planning in more rural contexts, and where the capacity of third and private sector institutions is often comparatively lower than in urban constituencies.

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

As a governance model, the partnership is still very much in its early days and – correspondingly – continues to function as an essentially informal network operating on the basis of consensus. However, should a Growth Deal emerge from the work of the Partnership, there would be a need to institute and strengthen formal governance arrangements between key delivery partners. This might include a role for the partnership as currently constituted to act as an advisory body within that structure.

4. Effectiveness Indicators

From a public policy perspective, the Partnership has a key role to play in countering and responding to the strengthening regional arrangements across Wales. Without the partnership, there would be a void in the existence of an equivalent/similar arrangement addressing economic and territorial cohesion at this scale. The strengths of such a model is that it can help focus institutional engagement and cooperation through the “Mid Wales lens”, taking into account the specific challenges and opportunities that stem from the region’s assets. In this vein, for example, where a dependence on SMEs is perceived as a weakness in the regional framework, it might alternatively be cast as an advantage through which to develop specific interventions to target SME growth.

Wales does not have the Local Enterprise Partnership model that exists in England. However, the GMW Partnership has at least enabled some level of equivalence through initiating and engaging in cross-border discussions with the neighbouring Marches LEP in England. This has involved conflating a number of smaller arrangements that were sector specific or covered specific geographies.

In terms of effectiveness, the major milestone that the arrangement has enabled is the instigation of formal discussions with both UK and Welsh Governments on a Growth Deal for the Region. Having brought together a number of smaller and sector-specific arrangements within the region, the GMW Partnership has provided the sufficient scale and vision to enable those formal discussions.

The Partnership has also worked to establish its profile and ensure stakeholders understand its role, as well as how to work with it. This will need to develop, and it should be possible to gauge how effectively it achieves this over time, looking at levels and extent of awareness and engagement.

5. Illustration and further information

Growing Mid Wales Partnership (2016) Framework for Action (available at: <http://www.powys.gov.uk/en/democracy/how-the-council-works-in-partnership/growing-mid-wales/>)

Marsden, T. (2013) Sustainable place-making for sustainability science: the contested case of agri-food and urban–rural relations. *Sustainability Science*. 8 (2) pp. 213-226.

Raworth, K (2017) Doughnut Economics: Seven Ways to Think like a 21st Century Economist. New York: Random House.

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