



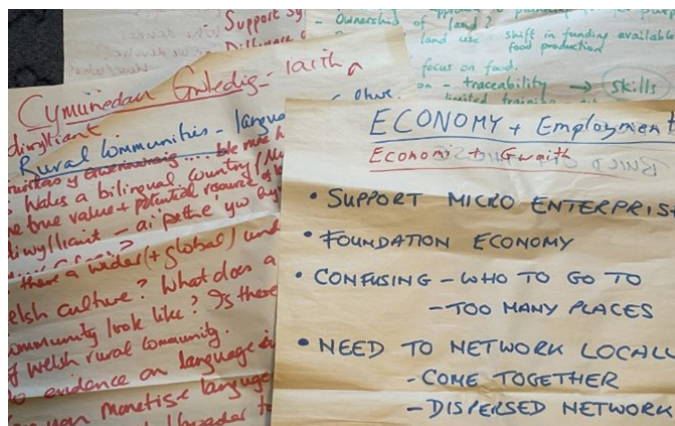
ROBUST RURAL-URBAN UPDATE

Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST) is a European research project that advances our understanding of the interactions between rural and urban areas. Its main premise is that strong, mutually-supportive linkages between rural and urban areas are key to realising smart, circular and inclusive development for a sustainable Europe. ROBUST kicked off in June 2017 and will run until November 2021. The project brings together 24 European partners representing both research- and practice-oriented organisations. They work with 11 regional Living Labs and five Communities of Practice.

Mid Wales Living Lab

Rural Wales faces major challenges: remoteness, infrastructure, market and service access, a changing agricultural economy and a post-Brexit future. How can rural-urban connections help tackle these? Current city-led growth models are not always the answer for predominantly rural regions. The Mid Wales Living Lab links researchers at Aberystwyth University with the Welsh Local Government Association to find new ways to grow positive rural-urban connections at a distance from the city.

Our work combines research and practical action. We identify and test how smart development informs inclusive regional growth. We assist and assess new initiatives, and we engage stakeholders in a strategic vision for rural Wales. Three of ROBUST's Communities of Practice help us expand what we learn. The Sustainable Food Systems CoP puts a key Welsh industry into European perspective. Through the Public Infrastructures and Social Services CoP, we share solutions for service delivery. The Cultural Connections CoP reminds us that Welsh culture and the arts are vital for regions to thrive.



Governance Innovations in Mid Wales

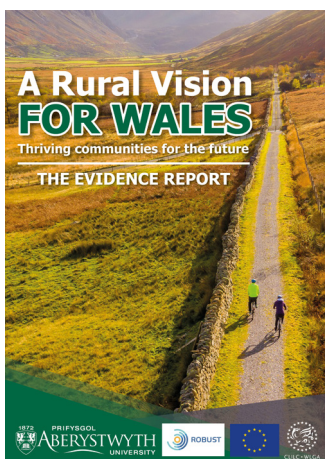


A key objective of the Mid Wales Living Lab has been to develop a new holistic framework for rural policy in Wales that effectively targets the needs of the region. The moment is right for rethinking approaches to rural policy and governance in Wales. Brexit has required the Welsh and UK Governments to design new programmes and funding schemes to replace EU funds for rural and regional development and the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed underlying inequalities and highlighted the interconnection of rural and urban economies and societies.

Over the last two years, the Mid Wales Living Lab has facilitated a process of co-producing a new Rural Vision, led by rural local authorities in the WLGA Rural Forum and involving a range of stakeholders and individuals. Through workshops, meetings and an online survey, we discussed the challenges and opportunities facing the region, explored scenarios for the future, investigated examples of innovation, and identified key asks for policy.

The resulting [Rural Vision](#) statement, launched in January 2021, outlines seven priorities: (1) Diversifying and greening the rural economy; (2) developing the skills and opportunities of the rural workforce; (3) investing in digital infrastructure and preparing for post-carbon transport; (4) encouraging more widely-spread and sustainable tourism; (5) providing affordable housing that meets the needs of rural communities; (6) supporting small towns with a Smart Towns Initiative; and (7) empowering communities and keeping wealth within local economies.

The proposals in the Rural Vision are intended to be delivered through structures such as the Welsh Government's Regional Investment Framework and the regional Growth Deals, including the Mid Wales Growth Deal. However, the Living Lab discussions also identified calls for greater coordination of policy-making and delivery across Rural Wales and for measures to reflect the distinctive needs of rural areas. The [Rural Vision Evidence Report](#) outlines several options, including a Rural Commissioner and a Rural Agency, for further discussion by stakeholders.



ROBUST Final Conference

The ROBUST Final Conference will take place online on 21 and 22 September 2021.

For more information visit rural-urban.eu

Learn more about ROBUST

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To learn more about the ROBUST project and to get the latest information about cutting-edge research on rural-urban issues visit www.rural-urban.eu

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Beyond ROBUST

The launch of the Rural Vision in January 2021 was the culmination of the Living Lab work, but is only the start of the policy challenge of putting its recommendations into practice.

The Rural Vision formed the basis for the WLGA's [Rural Manifesto](#), informing debate in the May 2021 Senedd elections. Proposals in the Rural Vision have been endorsed by a range of stakeholders and discussed with government ministers and civil servants. It is envisaged that they will feed into the implementation of the Welsh Government's Regional Investment Framework and the UK Government's Shared Prosperity Fund in Wales, as well as the production of a new Rural Development Plan for Wales. Debate on governance arrangements for rural development in Wales are being taken forward by the new Rural Compass Wales think tank, building on options outlined in the Rural Vision.

The WLGA is also following up the Rural Vision with further work. A Task and Finish Group of local authority officers has been established to look further at the challenge of rural housing and to elaborate ideas in the Rural Vision. More work is also planned with rural young people, including an online survey, to discuss their vision for the future and find solutions to pressures that drive youth out-migration from rural communities in Wales.

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