



CoP Public Infrastructure and Social Services

Example of Good Practice

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Young Farmers' Clubs as cultural infrastructure

Mid Wales

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1. Introduction

Throughout rural Wales, Young Farmers' Clubs (YFC) offer social opportunities and skills development for young people aged 10-26. There are 157 local clubs in Wales, organised by county and national networks. The clubs and counties in Wales YFC are affiliated to the National Federation of Young Farmers Clubs of England and Wales. Wales YFC is also affiliated to Rural Youth Europe, which links similar organisations across twenty countries.

YFC is an important part of the intangible cultural infrastructure in Wales, including supporting the Welsh language. The clubs help young people in rural areas play a role in their communities. They nurture skills and leadership for the next generation in agriculture, entrepreneurship and rural communities.



Young people participate in a stock judging competition, Tal-y-bont, Ceredigion © Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins

2. Project Intention / Background information

YFC in Wales began in Pembrokeshire in the 1920s. The clubs initially aimed to provide agricultural education, and to involve children and young people in keeping animals and growing produce. The clubs still have strong agricultural roots, and a long tradition of competitions such as stock judging and flower arranging. In the UK, a National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs was formed in 1932. Welsh YFCs remain part of the national federation, but there is also a Wales-wide federation, formed after Welsh political devolution in 1999 due to the changing funding landscape. Alongside national funding and membership levies (levies cover about one third of operating costs), the national federation maintains an income through a commercial arm (an agency for seasonal agricultural labour) and an investment portfolio.

At a grassroots level, individual members join their local club. There is a small annual joining fee of £30-40, set by the clubs themselves, and part of which covers a levy to the national and Wales federations. Each individual club has charitable status, and appoints its own officers. However, the federations provide administrative support from paid staff, organise competitions and travel, and guidance on topics such as legal and regulatory compliance, and safeguarding responsibilities. The federations also organise international exchanges.

Clubs need a minimum of six members to affiliate to the federations. Local clubs range in size from six to 100+ members. They organise their own events and meetings, which also generate income, and participate in 'rallies' and competitions at county and national level. New members usually get involved through family connections to YFC or through following friends their own age. Although YFC primarily attracts young people with an interest in agriculture, some members join for opportunities to participate in social life and sporting competitions. There are currently over 5,000 young people involved in YFC in Wales.

3. Main Description

YFC today aims to support good farming, good countrymen, and good citizens. YFC is part of the cultural infrastructure in rural Wales in three main ways:

- Providing social opportunities, skill development and community involvement for young people in rural areas;
- Celebrating rural culture through competitions and events, and encouraging the next generation;
- Supporting the Welsh language.

3.1. Benefits

YFC is a strong voice for future generations in rural areas, and for rural development more broadly. The organisation also offers opportunities for young people to engage with policies that affect rural places, and have their voices heard. Within the organisation, elected positions

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also mean that young people engage with democracy and take responsibility. Members tend to move through the ranks as they grow older, which fosters ambition and leadership. Young people learn by doing – gaining skills without the explicit awareness that they are receiving education. There are many examples of young people who have grown up in YFC going on to start their own businesses in rural areas.

In terms of support for the Welsh language, YFC has had an important role in fostering Welsh in majority English-speaking areas. Meetings provide a space for Welsh-language socialising, and newsletters are bilingual. Opportunities such as public speaking in Welsh also help young people who may not use the language outside the home to grow confidence and pride. Through Rural Youth Europe and bilateral agreements with organisations as far afield as Aotearoa New Zealand, YFC offers opportunities for cultural exchange and additional leadership development for national office holders. Rural Youth Europe runs around three thematic events a year. Exchanges offer cultural experiences that are ‘off the beaten track’ – for example, rather than simply visiting a place, young people will participate in a project or learn rural skills from other regions.

3.2. Challenges

Some smaller clubs do face challenges to keep going. This can be intensified since young people may travel to go to more successful clubs, rather than the one closest to them. At a national level, there are concerns about financial sustainability, especially since COVID-19 has put pressures on commercial revenue and investments.

Being an inclusive organisation can be a challenge, although YFC has been very proactive with putting inclusion policies in place. YFC does not have many members from ethnic minorities, largely due to demographics in rural areas. Children and young people from migrant and incomer families are also rarely attracted into the organisation, although some clubs do make extra efforts (such as including Polish on fliers in areas with large migrant labour populations). Areas with predominantly Welsh-speaking memberships can also be challenging for young people who are not Welsh speakers.

Another challenge is the age of the young people involved. Members starting at 10 mean that there are additional responsibilities on local clubs to safeguard children. Members in their late teens and early twenties can also behave irresponsibly – unfortunately, the national federation no longer runs a National Convention due to concerns about alcohol-fuelled behaviour and reputational damage by the few that has affected the many. There is also interest in engaging with members older than 26, especially since many young people go away to university and re-join their local club afterwards; extending the age range to 30 could help to engage young people returning to rural areas.

Safeguarding is also an issue for maintaining international exchanges, with homestays increasingly difficult to organise due to safety concerns and regulations. In the future, more group study tours and project work are more likely.

3.3. YFC and Covid-19

COVID-19 has posed new challenges for YFC. Lockdown and mobility restrictions have meant that local clubs cannot hold regular meetings and events, and national meetings have been similarly cancelled. The major event of the year – the Royal Welsh Agricultural Show – has also moved to a virtual format for 2020. Lost opportunities for socialising have limited revenue, and also raised concerns that members may drift away to other activities. Some clubs are reluctant to restart their activities due to the difficulties of maintaining social distancing in spaces such as village halls. Clubs have raised thousands of pounds for the NHS and local charities during the pandemic but despite lost revenue and their own charitable status, they are reluctant to fundraise for their own organisation.

At the same time, the pandemic has created some positive changes in the organisation. A move to online committee meetings has brought people together more easily, and meant that decisions can happen at a faster pace. YFC has also been very visible in organising mutual aid and assisting the community in rural areas during the pandemic.

Looking ahead, YFC will be recalibrating. The organisation has already weathered previous crises, including the 2001 foot and mouth outbreak, which had a large impact on rural areas and led to many events being cancelled. As an organisation for rural youth, YFC needs to change with the times, although attachment to traditions can mean that there can be a reluctance to do so. However, after an almost 100-year history, it is clear that YFC will be a part of the cultural fabric in rural Wales for many years to come.

4. References

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