



Welsh Affairs Committee

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From the Chair of the Committee

Professor Michael Woods
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22 February 2024

Dear Professor Woods,

Thank you for taking the time to appear before the Welsh Affairs Committee on Wednesday 6 December. It was an excellent session and will help us greatly going forward in our inquiry into population change in Wales. There are several matters on which the Committee would appreciate additional information, as soon as is convenient for you:

1. In response to Q33, you noted that some of your colleagues at Aberystwyth University have looked partly at the economic impact to Wales of people purchasing properties in towns and villages. Could you please write to the Committee with further details about their findings?
2. What research have you undertaken about the economic and social contribution of older people?
3. How should transport interventions be aligned with other policies, such as on housing, attracting businesses and graduates?
4. The Census showed us the overall number of Welsh speakers in Wales is falling, although the exact pattern varies across Wales. What do you think is driving those changes?
5. The Committee has received evidence that housing affordability and availability is affecting the movement of people in Wales, particularly young people. What immediate measures would you advocate to alleviate the housing shortages that communities are experiencing now?
6. Are there any international examples that struggling communities can learn from, of people pooling resources or doing things differently, to remain viable?

Thank you again for contributing to the Committee's work.

Yours sincerely,



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Rt Hon Stephen Crabb MP

Rt Hon. Stephen Crabb MP
Chair, Welsh Affairs Committee
House of Commons.

13th March 2024

Dear Mr Crabb,

Thank you for your letter and I am pleased to provide the additional information that the Committee has requested in relation to its inquiry into Population Change in Wales. In answering the Committee's questions, I have also drawn on research by my colleagues in the Centre for Welsh Politics and Society at Aberystwyth University Dr Lowri Cunnington-Wynn, Dr Jesse Heley, Dr Rhys Dafydd Jones, and Dr Huw Lewis, as indicated below.

1. In response to Q33, you noted that some of your colleagues at Aberystwyth University have looked partly at the economic impact to Wales of people purchasing properties in towns and villages. Could you please write to the Committee with further details about their findings?

My comments referred to research by Dr Rhys Dafydd Jones and Dr Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins as part of the Horizon 2020-funded project [IMAJINE](#), examining migration and geographical inequalities.¹ The interviews that they conducted with in-migrants and local residents in Ceredigion and Swansea produced four findings that are pertinent to this question.

First, they found in-migrants from parts of England who had been attracted to move to Ceredigion or Swansea by lower property prices and cost of living than in their previous home area, which enabled them to 'upgrade' their lifestyle (e.g. by buying a larger house, or by moving closer to the coast) for a more affordable price. Some had consciously taken a pay-cut or forgone opportunities for career progression in order to improve their lifestyle and/or because lower property prices allowed their lifestyle to be maintained on a lower salary.

Second, within the above trend, they also identified 'return migrants' who had moved back to Wales and/or to the countryside having lived away, but who had not returned to their actual home area but rather had moved to a location that offered a comparable experience either at a lower cost or with greater employment opportunities. This dynamic was also noted in a dissertation by one of our Masters's students on youth out-migration from Gwynedd, with particular reference to coastal rural communities with high property prices and competition from second homes and holiday lets.²

Third, my colleagues observed that lower property prices in the case study areas had a limiting effect on onward migration from Wales, with some interviewees stating that they had not felt able to pursue career opportunities, especially in parts of England, because they would have not have been able to afford to buy an equivalent property to their home in Ceredigion or Swansea.

Fourth, while the in-migrants in the study had been attracted by comparatively lower property prices, they still had greater purchasing power than many existing local residents in the area. As such, they were able to out-

¹ This study is reported in Bryonny Goodwin-Hawkins and Rhys Dafydd Jones (2022) '[Rethinking lifestyle and middle-class migration in "left behind" regions](#)', *Population, Space and Place*, volume 28, article e2495.

² Ffion Owen (2018) 'Youth out-migration from rural Gwynedd, Wales', Unpublished dissertation, MSc Welsh Politics and Society, Aberystwyth University.

compete would-be local purchasers, with the effect of exacerbating issues of housing affordability and prompting out-migration.

It should be stressed that the above findings are based on qualitative research and we have not conducted quantitative research to determine the scale or significance of these reported dynamics, or to evaluate their economic impact. Further research is required on these points.

2. What research have you undertaken about the economic and social contribution of older people?

Research on the social contribution of older people through volunteering in Wales has been completed in the ESRC [WISERD Civil Society Research Centre](#) by my colleague Dr Jesse Heley and his researchers. This research has involved interviews and observation with volunteers aged 50 and above contributing to a variety of organizations, including community enterprises (such as village shops), museums and tourist sites (inc. the National Botanic Garden of Wales), and with branches of national bodies (inc. the University of the Third Age, and Royal British Legion). The research indicates that these organisations are highly dependent on older volunteers to function who, by extension, fulfil an important function in servicing the social and economic vibrancy of those localities of which they are part.³ The data suggests that the profile of these volunteers is predominately white-British and middle class in terms of their occupational backgrounds.

Older volunteers were also found to be important caregivers in rural communities, both in formal settings (such as the Royal Voluntary Service and Meals-on-Wheels provision) and through informal and ad hoc care, for example picking up prescriptions and groceries for less mobile neighbours or providing childcare (especially as grandparents). These contributions are increasingly important given the reduction of physical, in-person services and public transport infrastructure in many rural localities.

The prominence of older people in performing these roles within communities reflects relative time availability, mobility and financial independence (and decreases with increasing age beyond retirement), as well as the demographic ageing of communities through out-migration of younger generations. Research in WISERD has indicated that third sector and voluntary organizations in Wales are finding it increasingly difficult to recruit younger volunteers into senior roles. This reflects shifting attitudes and propensities to volunteer among younger people, but also a reduced capacity to engage in the context of cost-of-living increases and shifting working patterns. However, the ability of older people to volunteer may also be constrained by the indirect effects of gaps in service provision in rural parts of Wales. For instance, difficulties in accessing childcare in more rural areas places greater demands on informal childcare by older relatives or neighbours, reducing the time that they have available to volunteer in other community activities.⁴

3. How should transport interventions be aligned with other policies, such as on housing, attracting businesses and graduates?

While we have not focused specifically on transport in our work, it has been a repeated theme in studies that we have undertaken, as a factor in the out-migration of young people from rural communities and in the challenges facing rural businesses. Difficulties around transport often arise because of a disconnection between decision-making on transport (including both on provision of public transport services and on transport infrastructure) from issues of economic development, housing, and public services (including healthcare and education). As such, we would welcome the alignment of transport interventions with other policies and make several specific observations.

First, transport connections are an important factor in where young people who leave rural communities decide to go. Young people from rural communities in North Wales wishing to experience life in a city tend towards cities in England such as Manchester, Liverpool and Chester because they are more accessible than cities in

³ These findings are reported in Laura Jones, Jesse Heley, J., and Sophie Yarker (2020) 'Retiring into civil society', In *Civil Society through the Lifecourse*, Bristol University Press, and in Sophie Yarker, Jesse Heley, and Laura Jones (2020) '[Stewardship of the rural: Conceptualising the experiences of rural volunteering in later life](#)', *Journal of Rural Studies*, volume 76, pages 184-192.

⁴ This finding was reported in Jesse Heley and Laura Jones (2013) '[Growing older and social sustainability: considering the 'serious leisure' practices of the over 60s in rural communities](#)', *Social and Cultural Geography*, volume 14, pages 276-299.

South Wales. If it is considered to be desirable to encourage young people to stay in Wales, which is a political judgment, improvements to north-south transport connections within Wales are an essential requirement.

Second, at a local scale, there is emerging evidence that the deterioration of bus networks is increasing inequalities between urban and rural communities. More systematic and up-to-date research is needed, but we have qualitative evidence from interviews and workshops that individuals living in rural communities without (regular) access to a car are limited in their employment options, and conversely, individuals may be limited in being able to buy cheaper housing in some rural areas as they would not be able to easily access their workplace. Where bus services exist, their frequency and routes mean that using them travel to key services can take significantly longer than travelling by car. The table below, taken from the [Evidence Report for the Rural Vision for Wales](#) that we produced with the WLGA, shows comparative average travelling time by car and by bus to key services for residents in villages, hamlets and open countryside in 2019. The divergence is likely to have increased in the intervening period.

	By private car	By public transport
Pharmacy	18 minutes	1 hour 47 minutes
Food shop	9 minutes	1 hour 29 minutes
GP surgery	17 minutes	1 hour 46 minutes
Post office	10 minutes	1 hour 32 minutes
Primary school	8 minutes	1 hour 21 minutes
Secondary school	21 minutes	1 hour 59 minutes
Public library	19 minutes	1 hour 52 minutes
Sports facility	21 minutes	2 hours 10 minutes
Petrol station	13 minutes	n/a

Average travel time to key services for residents of villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings in sparse areas of Wales, by private car and public transport, 2019. Table from A Rural Vision for Wales: The Evidence Report, Data Source: Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, Stats Wales.

These figures point to the opportunities as well as the challenges that can arise from integrating transport interventions with public services planning. Rethinking how public transport is supported, including replanning routes and timetables, as well as the balance between bus services and support for community transport schemes, can contribute to increasing overall accessibility to key local services, even if these are rationalised or restructured in the context of fiscal constraints. Planning for new housing development and employment creation could subsequently be added to this framework. Powys County Council is currently conducting some interesting work on this point, modelling configurations of public transport routes and timetables to increase accessibility to local service centres that would serve neighbouring villages. They perceive that investment in public transport could help to unlock a more cost-effective organisation of public services that is also more equitable in terms of access.

Third, transport planning should be aligned with economic development strategies not only with regard to accessibility for business travel, or the movement of raw materials and products, but also for its impact on the capacity of businesses in rural areas to recruit, train, and retain employees, especially school-leavers. In a preliminary interview for the [Rural Wales Local Policy and Innovation Partnership \(LPIP\)](#) I heard from one sizeable employer in Mid Wales about how they had taken on and trained school leavers at 16, including a day release course at college. The specialist course was not available at local FE providers, so the trainees had travelled to a college in South Wales by bus, as they were too young to drive. However, recent changes to the bus timetable meant that this was no longer feasible. The young people now faced a decision about whether to leave the company and move in order to train, and the business faced losing employees and needing to recruit older replacements post-training. We do not know how widespread this experience is, but it is a question that we intend to explore in a planned survey of rural businesses in Wales by the LPIP this autumn. The example does however point to the need to align policies for transport, economic development, and skills provision.

4. The Census showed us the overall number of Welsh speakers in Wales is falling, although the exact pattern varies across Wales. What do you think is driving those changes?

In responding to this question, I have incorporated information provided by Dr Huw Lewis from his research on the Welsh language in the Centre for Welsh Politics and Society.⁵ The observation that the overall number of Welsh speakers in Wales is falling, but it is also important to note that the Census data focuses only on language ability; they do not offer insight into where and how often Welsh speakers use the language from day to day. As a result, the Census data should be considered alongside data from the [Welsh Language Use Surveys](#) that are commissioned jointly by the Welsh Government and Welsh Language Commissioner. When these other data sources are also taken into account, a series of sometimes contradictory trends are revealed. These trends have been increasingly evident since about the 1970s and they have remained relatively consistent post-devolution. They include:

- a consistent decline in the language's traditional demographic strength across parts of west Wales (both at local authority level and LSOA level), with striking signs of growth across many parts of the east and south east (particularly around Cardiff);
- a consistent growth in the numbers of Welsh speakers among younger school-age groups that does not seem to be maintained over time and reflected in later increases among older age groups;
- a significant growth in the numbers that learn the language as a second language through education, and a parallel decline in the numbers that acquire and speak the language at home;
- a decline in the numbers that claim that they speak the language daily, and an increase in the numbers that speak it occasionally (with this trend being particularly pronounced in the 16-29 age category);
- a striking increase in the numbers that claim basic competence in the language, alongside a decline in the numbers that claim fluency.

Our understanding of the drivers behind these trends is at present only partial and there are still gaps in the evidence base that would be required for a comprehensive analysis. However, combining the language data with results from other research including the survey of rural young people, several probable factors can be suggested.

First, the net out-migration of young people from Wales, and especially rural Wales, also has an impact in reducing the number of Welsh-speakers in Wales. This is because young people are the age cohort with the highest proportion of Welsh-speakers and have benefited from teaching of Welsh in schools. Previously, there had been a trend of young Welsh-speakers from rural areas moving to Cardiff, notably to take advantage of the expansion of jobs requiring a degree of Welsh language competence in sectors including government and the media. Although we have not analysed detailed data, this trend appears to have slowed and the Rural Youth Survey indicated that a significant number of young Welsh-speakers are moving outside of Wales for education and employment opportunities, especially from North Wales. Overall, 32% of first language Welsh-speakers completing the survey expected to move outside Wales in the next five years.

Second, young Welsh speakers leaving Wales are not being replaced by older Welsh-speaking in-migrants. The notable trend of in-migration into Wales are retirement migration from England into coastal and rural areas, and working-age migration to the M4 corridor and parts of North Wales from adjacent regions in England, attracted in part by lower house prices and cost of living. There is limited data on the language competence of these in-migrants, and some will be returning Welsh-speakers, but it is a reasonable assumption that the proportion will be smaller than the third of young out-migrants who are Welsh-speakers.

Third, as Census data on language ability is self-reported, we do not fully know how in-migrants who have learnt some Welsh describe themselves. This may be an explanatory factor in the increase in number of people reporting basic competence in Welsh alongside a decline in the numbers that report fluency. This has implications for how the effectiveness of schemes to encourage new residents to learn Welsh is assessed.

In summary, it is too simplistic to attribute the decline in Welsh speakers in Wales directly to limited employment opportunities or competition for housing with in-migrants or second homes. These are factors in the reduction of Welsh-speakers at a local scale in certain communities, notably in north-west Wales and

⁵ This research is reported in Rhys Jones and Huw Lewis (2019). *New Geographies of Language: Language, Culture and Politics in Wales* (London: Palgrave Macmillan) and in Huw Lewis and Elin Royles (2022). 'Towards a million speakers? Welsh language policy post-devolution', in Jane Williams and Aled Eurig (eds). *The Impact of Welsh Devolution* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press)

Carmarthenshire, but they do not explain the subsequent decision of individuals to move outside Wales rather than to other localities in Wales. Furthermore, the Rural Youth Survey found that first language Welsh speakers were more likely to want to remain in their local area (41% compared to 24% of all others), less likely to think that they will need to move for employment, education or training (75% compared to 82%), but more likely to think that they will need to move to find appropriate, affordable housing (54% compared to 45%). They are also more likely to intend to move back later in life (68% compared to 52%).

5. The Committee has received evidence that housing affordability and availability is affecting the movement of people in Wales, particularly young people. What immediate measures would you advocate to alleviate the housing shortages that communities are experiencing now?

The dynamics of access to housing affecting the movement of people in Wales are complex and involve both housing affordability and housing availability and both property purchases and the rental sector. The latter is particularly important with respect to younger people, who face challenges in being able to afford to buy a property that are general across the UK, but whose ability to find suitable rental properties can be exacerbated by local factors. These include the conversion of long-term residential rental properties into short-term holiday lets, especially in coastal and rural locations. For example, we reported in the Rural Vision for Wales Evidence Report that there was a 915 per cent increase in whole property lets in Gwynedd listed on AirBnb between 2017 and 2019. As such, action to alleviate housing shortages require multiple parallel measures to be taken. For smaller rural communities, limited availability of properties suitable for ‘down-sizing’ by older residents wishing to remain within the community has an impact in blocking access to larger houses for families.⁶ On the basis of our research we recommend the following actions:

1. Require planning permission for the conversion of long-term rental properties or permanent residences into holiday lets, with impacts on housing availability in the community as a criteria for assessment, in order to safeguard access to rented housing especially in coastal and rural localities.
2. Review planning policy guidance with the objective of rebalancing social, cultural, economic and environmental well-being. Consideration might be given to allowing local planning authorities to make exceptions for single-dwelling construction for occupation by existing community residents or their family members where the lack of availability of appropriate housing in the community through the housing market can be demonstrated (and subject to infrastructure constraints). Other actions could include provisions for planning authorities to set aside development land specifically to meet local housing needs and encouragement for the construction of smaller properties in villages aimed at facilitating downsizing by older residents to release housing stock.
3. Incentivise the conversion of former retail and office properties in town centres to residential properties. Many town centres have suffered from the closure of shops, banks and other services, largely reflecting national trends in customer behaviour and retail practice. While there is often an understandable desire to retain properties in retail use, many are of a size and form that reflect demands of retail chains at the end of the last century and not the requirements of small local businesses and have remained unoccupied. Enabling the conversion of such properties to housing (including rental housing) could help to rejuvenate town centres and provide affordable housing, especially for young people. A strategy would require revision of local plans and planning policy guidance and coordination between local authorities, housing associations, and developers.
4. Consider measures to improve housing affordability, potentially including implementing rent controls or rent stabilization measures to prevent excessive rent increases and ensure that rents remain affordable for tenants; providing financial assistance to low-income households, such as housing benefits or rent subsidies, to help cover housing costs and prevent homelessness; and supporting first-time homebuyers through schemes such as shared ownership, equity loans, or government-backed mortgage guarantees.
5. Support community-led housing initiatives, such as cooperatives, community land trusts, and self-build projects. These projects empower communities to take control of their housing needs and create sustainable, affordable housing solutions tailored to local circumstances. Cooperative housing schemes have potential to provide options for young people and others to find affordable accommodation in rural communities with limited housing supply, and might present new uses for large properties in villages such as former schools or pubs as an alternative to conversion to single dwellings or holiday lets.

⁶ This finding was reported in M Woods and E Strub (2015) [The Montgomeryshire Villages Project](#). Report to MCRA.

Policies to support rural housing cooperatives could include promotion of cooperative housing models to community councils and other community groups, provision of guidance and advice for new housing cooperatives, arrangements with banks and building societies to ease mortgage lending, and proactive planning policies favouring conversions for cooperative housing.

6. Are there any international examples that struggling communities can learn from, of people pooling resources or doing things differently, to remain viable?

There are a numerous examples of community action in various parts of the world to counter marginalization and depopulation. I've outlined below a few examples that I discussed in a briefing paper for the Wales Centre for Public Policy,⁷ along with others that I and colleagues have come across in projects including [ROBUST](#) and [GLOBAL-RURAL](#) as well as cases highlighted in the [RURALIZATION](#) project for which I was a member of the advisory board.

Castel de Giudice, Italy – Located in the Apennine mountains, Castel de Giudice is in a region characterized by youth unemployment, depopulation and an ageing population. The village has bucked these trends through a series of projects led by the municipal council and leveraging external funding, including converting the former school into an assisted care home for elderly residents, restoring abandoned stables as a hotel, creating an organic apple company on disused land, and promoting a community beehive and a rural brewery. It has also established a community cooperative company and adopted a plan for restoring uninhabited houses. Priority has been given to initiatives led by young people and to attracting in-migrants.⁸

Far North Coast of New South Wales, Australia – Since the 1990s, the Far North Coast region has promoted creative and cultural industries as a way of keeping young people in the area. Initiatives have included funding youth music and arts festivals to provide spaces for young people to develop creative skills, training programmes, assistance for local cultural entrepreneurs to access wider markets, and creative industry precincts to house businesses. A Youth Arts Network has used youth-specific arts events to mix community development and employment strategies, including workshops in smaller communities to demonstrate avenues to employment in the creative sector.⁹

Graz-Umgebung, Austria – The GUSTmobil project is a micro-public transport service launched by 29 municipalities to connect dispersed rural settlements away from main public transport routes. The project combines ride-sharing and ride-hailing provided by taxi companies under contract. Trips are booked by phone or on an app, which also provides real time public transport information to allow journeys to be connected and to avoid duplication of public transport services. A network of 1800 collection stops enables easy access to departure and arrival points and fares are calculated according to distance and number of passengers, starting from €3 for up to 3.5 kilometres.¹⁰

Punkalaidun, Finland – The small rural community in south-west Finland had experienced long-term depopulation before the local government, the Lutheran church, and other stakeholders combined to launch the 'Come Home' project. Unlike initiatives focused on young people, this scheme aimed to attract retirement migrants and especially return migrants to the region. Its main focus was on promoting Punkalaidun as a 'good place to live', partly through external publicity and partly through small improvements to the village landscape and local amenities and community events.¹¹

Smithers, Canada – To address the issue of youth out-migration, this small town in British Columbia produced a brochure called 'Kids Came Back', featuring local young people who moved away for

⁷ M Woods (2023) [Rural Youth Out-Migration and Population Change in Wales](#), Briefing paper for the Wales Centre for Public Policy.

⁸ From the [RURALIZATION Good Practice Guide](#), see also www.comune.casteldelgiudice.is.it

⁹ Cited in the WCPP briefing paper, see also C Gibson (2008) [Youthful creativity in regional Australia: panacea for unemployment and out-migration?](#) *Geographical Research*, volume 46, pages 183-195.

¹⁰ From ROBUST Good Practice Example '[GUSTmobil – a regional micro-public transport system](#)'.

¹¹ From the [RURALIZATION Good Practice Guide](#), see also www.punkalaidun.fi

education but returned, becoming successful members of the community. The brochure is used by local businesses in recruiting workers and in schools and colleges to discuss opportunities in the area.¹²

Trepassey, Canada – A remote community in Newfoundland, Trepassey lost two-thirds of its population following the closure of its fish processing plant in the 1990s. The decline was only halted when the community rallied together to buy back the plant site and construct two factory units aimed at attracting inward investment. One unit remains empty, but the other was occupied by a Norwegian company – from a similarly peripheral locality – which created 60 jobs. To attract retirement migrants, effort has been put into retaining a local health clinic and into promoting a lively programme of cultural activities. An annual music festival has been established, which attracts tourists. Trepassey has also made effective use of its diaspora, including mobilizing former residents to vote for it on a television programme offering a community regeneration project.

I hope that this additional information is of assistance to members of the Committee in completing the Inquiry.

Yours sincerely



Professor Michael Woods
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¹² From [Rural Youth Out-Migration and Population Change in Wales](#), Briefing paper for the Wales Centre for Public Policy see also [Attracting Young Professionals to Rural Places - CERIC](#)