Tackling rural depopulation

Overview

Wales is not alone in seeking new ways to meet the challenges posed by rural depopulation. Across Europe, almost two-thirds of rural regions, containing 40% of Europe's population, are shrinking (EPSON, 2020). Many rural communities are not only growing smaller in absolute numbers. They are also ageing as younger people leave an area, local birth rates fall, and the ratio of working age to retired residents declines. Some rural places also attract additional older residents as retirement destinations.

Depopulation is not, however, a uniquely rural experience. Urban areas can face similar challenges, particularly where their economies have been strongly linked to a declining industry, or where they are poorly positioned to compete in increasingly global markets. For some countries local patterns feed into a larger picture of national population ageing and decline.

For Wales as a whole, current population projections predict modest population growth for the next two decades. However, this picture is underpinned by much bigger increases in older age groups, a decrease in the number of children and a plateauing of the working age population. There are also likely to be considerable differences between different parts of urban and rural Wales, as discussed by Mike Woods in an accompanying think piece on rural out-migration in Wales (2023).

Population ageing and decline pose significant challenges because they bring with them mutually reinforcing economic, social, and cultural consequences. A reduced working age population impacts on labour supply with knock-on effects for employers and the wider economic viability of an area. If local businesses close or relocate, they take with them employment opportunities for the remaining population. Labour shortages affect public services, vital to supporting an ageing population. The deterioration of local services, especially if accompanied by loss of commercial and leisure facilities, may influence the decisions of younger people and families to leave. The interconnectedness of these impacts can create a negative spiral effect (EAG, 2021). As people and businesses leave an area, it becomes increasingly difficult either to retain existing residents or to attract potential newcomers.

Policy responses to population challenges

In Wales, Scotland and many other parts of Europe, local authorities, regional and national governments, as well as supranational organisations and funders, including the European Commission, have been seeking effective policy responses to population challenges.

Where policymakers are concerned to tackle wider national patterns of population change, it is important that policy take account of the unevenness of national trends. As noted above, an overall trend towards growth or decline, often breaks down into a much more diverse picture across subsets of population and geography. At the local level, areas (both urban and rural) often show fluctuating patterns of growth, stability and more or less severe decline (EAG 2022). In Wales, as Woods discusses in his think piece, a generalised picture of rural population stasis is locally quite varied with

moderate or substantial decline in many areas, as well as more buoyant and growing populations in some rural wards, especially those close to larger conurbations (2023).

Moreover, even where places demonstrate similar trends, the underlying reasons, and therefore potential solutions, are not necessarily the same (Dax and Copus 2022). **There is increasing consensus that to work well, responses need to involve local stakeholders and to build on a close understanding of the local dynamics of change.** Exploring the assets, challenges and aspirations of specific places is an important part of this. **Effective solutions also require inputs of resource, capacity building and strategic policy framing from regional and national levels.**

Place-based approaches are gaining popularity as part of wider policy responses to population concerns; however, questions remain about how to bring these different dimensions together to best effect, and what success would look like. New mechanisms are needed to evaluate the impacts of local interventions and initiatives on their own terms, whilst also understanding how these might fit with the desired goals and outcomes of national strategies and policies. Here it may be useful to explore and learn from a variety of experiences and initiatives from elsewhere in the UK and abroad.

A view from Scotland

Within the UK, Scotland faces significant population challenges, particularly, but not exclusively, in its rural and island communities. The [most recent population projections](#) from National Records Scotland suggest that the trend in population growth which began in the early 2000s, will peak in 2028 with numbers declining thereafter. Importantly, these projections also show **a continuation and exacerbation of existing issues of population imbalance, in terms of both population-ageing and the geographies of population decline** (Hopkins and Piras, 2020).

The Scottish government has committed to provide national leadership and develop a cross-cutting response. An inter-ministerial population taskforce was established in 2019 and published Scotland's first [population strategy](#) in 2021. Delivery of the strategy is an ongoing priority, and an action plan for addressing depopulation is expected later this year. **These national policy frameworks draw on and seek to support policy proposals and strategies at local and regional levels**, for example, the repopulation zones initiative of the Convention of the Highlands and Islands.

Image from [Highlands and Islands Enterprise -My Life in the Highlands and Islands Research report](#)

This work, whilst still in its early stages, includes an appetite for a learning approach to the development of policy design, implementation, and evaluation. The Scottish government's independent expert advisory group on migration and population (EAG), established in 2018, provides analysis, advice, and critical reflection on proposed initiatives. Concrete proposals, for example for a [rural visa pilot scheme](#), have been developed through consultation and engagement with academic experts, local government, and other stakeholders.

The Scottish government and local authorities have also expressed strong interest in mutual learning through international exchange of experience and practices, exploring successes and challenges and gaining new ideas around what does, and does not work. Two significant aspects of learning since the establishment of the EAG have related to: (i) the role of migration in policy responses to rural depopulation, and (ii) the value of place-based policy for addressing

population concerns. The following two sections draw substantially on the work of the EAG in these areas.

The role of migration

Unsurprisingly, policy responses to depopulation concerns often include an interest in attracting new people to affected areas. Whilst retaining existing residents is of course also key, in areas where depopulation is combined with significant ageing, **migration presents sometimes the only means to rapidly increase the working age population**, to fill vacancies in key services, retain local businesses and employers, and begin to redress the demographic imbalance in the longer term (EAG, 2019).

Nonetheless, **the role that migration can realistically play in tackling depopulation should be considered with care**. EAG research and reports have stressed the need to move away from the hope that newcomers can replenish populations to a predefined 'optimum' number. Instead, **migration should be viewed strategically as part of wider initiatives to make places attractive and liveable for local populations as a whole** (Pinilla and Sáez, 2021). This is termed strategic mitigation, an approach which seeks to maintain communities' economic and social viability and where outcomes would be evaluated in terms of community well-being rather than demographic or economic growth (EAG 2022).

> 'The goal of strategic mitigation in population policies is to ensure continued economic and social viability for communities. Success is measured primarily in terms of community well-being rather than demographic or economic growth'.
> (EAG 2022, p. 3)

In Scotland, policymakers continue to view migration as an important lever to tackle population challenges. National policy initiatives have included the Fresh Talent post-study work visa for Scotland, launched in 2004, a chapter on migration in the 2021 population strategy, and the rural visa pilot proposal published in 2022. Local authorities have also looked to attract new or returning residents as part of their own population strategies. Argyll and Bute, for example, set up a [rural resettlement fund](#) between 2016 and 2018, to encourage people and businesses to relocate to the area. Shetland council have established a '[Promote Shetland](#)' website and marketing service highlighting cultural events, the area's wildlife and nature, and what life is like for Shetlanders.

Policy initiatives at both local and national levels are complicated by the distribution of policy levers and resource across multiple levels of government. Since migration policy is a reserved matter for the UK government, both devolved national and local governments must focus efforts on other policy areas as part of a strategic mitigation approach. This may happen alongside lobbying for change to make the UK immigration system better meet population needs. Policy areas under devolved and/or local powers, such as **housing, transport, early years support, as well as marketing initiatives and integration support can all play a significant part in both retaining and attracting residents.**

Research conducted by [Highlands and Islands Enterprise](#) in 2022, for example, provides important insights into existing residents' experiences of local services, employment opportunities, housing and infrastructure, as well as their attitudes to newcomers and their own current intentions regarding future moves or longer term stays. The survey showed that pride in the area and perceived better quality of life were key factors influencing decisions to stay in or move to an area. Housing, job opportunities, and support for local businesses and trades were identified as top priorities for communities

to thrive. There was an urban/rural nuance to these findings: in towns, employment opportunities, better paid jobs and social activities were the highest priorities; in rural areas, housing, digital connectivity, more working age people moving to the area and transport connections were felt to be most important.

This kind of insight can act as a baseline for understanding local assets and challenges and how these relate to population change. International studies and comparisons can also provide helpful insight into what makes some rural places more successful than others in both attracting and retaining population (Kull et al., 2020).

Are place-based approaches the answer?

The multi-layered responses and initiatives mentioned above fit within a broader shift in policy thinking about effective responses to rural development and population concerns. More recent policy frameworks from the European Commission, as well as from national and subnational governments across Europe, have stressed **the need for place-based approaches, prioritising well-being, access to basic services, and more inclusive rural development** (Dax and Copus, 2022). This contrasts with approaches focused on a quest for economic growth and competitive incorporation into global markets which dominated policy thinking at the turn of the 21st Century.

Certainly, wider structural issues, the consequences of national policies and trends, play a significant role in shaping local contexts and producing uneven opportunities and challenges. Nonetheless, **underlying economic and social processes combine with local migration histories, natural resources, cultural assets and aspirations in diverse ways and demand tailored rather than general solutions.** A place-based perspective starts from a recognition that the specific

characteristics, histories, and resources of specific localities matter.

This should not be taken to imply that there can be no learning across places, no transferability of effective interventions, and no strategic co-ordination or framing of place-based solutions. In its most recent report, the Scottish government's independent expert advisory group on migration and population (EAG) explored examples of national policy frameworks aiming to support place-based responses to population challenges from four European countries (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) and Canada (EAG 2022). Such international learning is helpful but comes with a caution that the distinct economic, social and policy contexts of different nations and regions must be taken into account.

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The report suggests several broad lessons which can be learned. These focus on:

- Different approaches to spatial targeting;
- The importance of coherence;
- The need to go beyond generalised strategies and policy intentions;
- The need for clarity as policy goals shift; and
- The crucial role of community involvement in policy-design and implementation.

Taking up the final point, the remainder of this paper explores place-based approaches from the perspective of locally-grounded interventions and initiatives, looking to see how these have been designed and what frameworks for evaluation exist or might be developed.

Designing and evaluating local interventions

Across Europe national, regional, and municipal governments have been seeking ways to link wider policy frameworks to local interventions and outcomes. This requires tangible processes, resources, and networks, to join up, support, and share learning between projects, as well as to understand how they contribute to wider policy goals and measurable outcomes. **Models developed in other contexts and with direct reference to specific challenges may be instructive but will need to be adapted when developing an approach which might work well for Wales.**

The EU-funded REGINA project, led by Nordregio, has focused on the needs of remote rural communities facing socioeconomic and demographic challenges linked to the potential opening or closure of natural resource-based industries. The project has developed a six-step process to support local authorities and communities to:

- Identify core challenges and opportunities;
- Produce projections for population and labour-market change;
- Assess the social and economic impacts at community-level; and
- Develop strategies and policies that optimise local benefits and minimise potential conflicts.

The model includes information on mapping local interventions to wider governance structures, policy frameworks and potential funding streams. It also includes a detailed toolkit for managing local participatory planning and monitoring of interventions. The model has been used to develop diverse local projects with support from a variety of local stakeholders, municipal authorities and private and third sector partners.

Storuman municipality, in western Sweden, for example, has used the demographic foresight model to understand some of the challenges it faces. An initiative to encourage migration to the area was developed with a 'move to Storuman'

webpage. This provides links to job vacancies, as well as to information about access to accommodation, schooling and childcare, educational, cultural and leisure opportunities. There is an ambassadors' programme featuring the stories of those who have moved successfully, with more than 60 stories showcased on the website since the programme began in August 2020. The ambassadors' programme also provides contact points and befriending support for new arrivals.

Monitoring and evaluating local policy interventions and projects, particularly in terms of how they meet the wider objectives of national strategies and policy frameworks remains challenging. The social impact management plan developed by the REGINA project envisages an ongoing and iterative monitoring process, based on the same participatory model as for the initial design process.

This is envisaged as a reflexive process to be planned as part of the original design. The outcomes to be monitored therefore are agreed through the participatory planning and are assessed by surveying both direct participants and wider groups of local stakeholders. The results are shared with stakeholders at all levels as well as the wider community of municipal residents, and subsequently feed back into further planning. It is less clear what mechanisms provide oversight of how such outcomes fit with wider policy frameworks and goals.

In Spain, the regional government of Aragon allocated EU-LEADER funding to 'Pueblos Vivos' as part of its Programme for Rural Development 2014-2020. Pueblos vivos is a platform which brings together local projects, actions and initiatives designed to counter depopulation and attract new residents to rural areas. These range from region-wide projects to improve transport connections and digital access, to smaller scale initiatives led by local action groups providing welcome, or matching those wishing to move to available housing and job opportunities.

As a platform, Pueblos Vivos has developed an evaluation framework which scores each project for its impacts in relation to:

- Reducing depopulation
- Stimulating economic activity
- Generating employment
- Improving wellbeing and quality of life
- Raising awareness of the fight against depopulation

It is not clear however, how each of these aspects are assessed in practice, whether there is a process of self-assessment or a set of qualitative and/or quantitative criteria to be met.

There does not appear to be a straightforward answer to how robust evaluation processes should be developed. An alternative may be to think about evaluation in reverse. A different Nordregio project studying 'attractive' rural municipalities in the Nordic region began from identifying 14 case studies of successful municipalities and working back from this to seek to understand what made them more attractive for both people and jobs (Kull et al. 2020). Success was measured in the process of selecting municipalities as case studies, based on quantitative analyses of positive trends in population and labour markets. Working back from here researchers sought to understand what combinations of local characteristics, local, regional and national policies and local social or cultural projects might have contributed to this success.

Whichever approach is adopted, a key point remains that **evaluations need to be well-matched to the underlying theory of change and that this needs population policy to begin from well-defined and realistic goals**. If these goals are shifting to the more qualitative criteria linked to strategic mitigation as outlined above, then evaluations should also align to these (Dax and Copus 2022).

Conclusions

Tackling rural depopulation is a shared challenge across many countries including Wales. Yet the commonality of the challenge does not translate into an easy set of 'off the peg' solutions. **Effective policies will need to be alert to the complex dynamics of multi-level policymaking and governance, as well as economic structures, social and cultural histories, all of which differ between national contexts.** So, whilst examples from other countries are useful, it is also vital to keep in mind how contexts differ. In the Welsh (and Scottish) context this means, for example, thinking about **what the relationship between policy and resource is** (including the mechanisms by which resource is distributed) and **how the sharing of power both between devolved and UK governments and with local authorities might facilitate or create barriers to implementing ideas developed elsewhere**.

Moving to a more local level, place-based interventions need to consider and work with the actual resources and dynamics of different places. This includes **thinking about the precise configuration of actors** (across different levels of government but also local community stakeholders, private and third sector bodies and other partners) who should be involved. It requires **a clear process and accessible tools for understanding and communicating the direct and indirect consequences of the challenges faced**. It means developing a set of interventions with **sufficient local buy-in, capacity and resource to address these**, with realistic outcomes as part of both planning and evaluation processes.

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