

Vibrant, Productive Heartland or Stagnant Rural Hinterland?

The case for designating Mid-Wales a Strategic Development Area

A proposal by Calon Cymru Network and the Heart of Wales Line Development Company, (2017)

“Everyone in this country, wherever they may live and work, needs a strong, confident and sustainable countryside. It is of huge value to us all: environmentally, socially and economically, and will be instrumental in tackling climate change.”

– The Rural Challenge: Achieving Sustainable Rural Communities for the 21st Century, by The Rural Coalition (2010)

“Meanwhile an on-going dilemma in rural Wales, in both Welsh and English speaking communities, is maintaining the balance between sufficient development to maintain a viable community whilst avoiding levels of development that would destroy its character and social cohesion. This key issue for rural Wales has yet to be satisfactorily addressed by a Welsh Government.”

– Roger Tanner: *Brave New World; Planning under the Welsh Government 1997-2014*

Mid-Wales: Past, Present and Future

Defining ‘Mid Wales’ as encompassing the current Local Authorities of Carmarthenshire (part), and the whole of Ceredigion and Powys it is clear that a combination of topography, soil quality, climate, poor communications infrastructure and relative remoteness have resulted in a scattered population with few urban centres, and a rural economy typified by low incomes; characteristics shared with other rural parts of Wales but with Mid Wales having its own particular problems. Looking around the ‘Region’ one can see evidence of a larger and less fractured community in the past. Everywhere there are signs of previous cultivation and enclosure high up on the hillsides, abandoned farmsteads and mines, ruined watermills on almost every sizeable stream, an abundance of small churches and chapels-remnants of a world before the industrial revolution.

Agriculture remains the most visible activity in Mid Wales but employs a tiny fraction of the previous workforce and is becoming increasingly ‘industrialised’ with large intensive rearing units for chickens and egg production and, more recently, dairy cattle. These units, utilising the benefits of economies of scale, are usually highly dependent on road transport and demand large quantities of energy, whilst offering little in the way of additional local employment.

One of the positive aspects of industrial revolution investment, the railway network, has survived in part, but is not used by the majority of inhabitants and businesses who rely to a great extent on private road transport; not an indicator of their affluence but of necessity. This makes the area's economy particularly reliant on oil and its by-products and vulnerable to price fluctuations and forthcoming reductions in reliance on fossil fuels. Public services are the major current source of employment but are themselves under threat from budgetary constraint and are becoming increasingly focussed on the few urban centres, with rural facilities disappearing apace.

Whilst it is easy to idealise the past and see nothing but problems in the present, it is possible to envisage a future where Mid Wales prospers as an essential element in the revitalisation of the country as a whole and acts as an exemplar of low impact, truly sustainable development nationally and internationally.

Much is already happening at the individual and community level but what is so far lacking is any coherent plan of action which is fit for purpose at local and national government levels and within which community initiatives can flourish.

A Plethora of Initiatives up to 2015

Since the 1950's there have been a number of initiatives and bodies set up to consider/address the problems facing Mid Wales.

The most concrete achievement was the expansion of Newtown following the setting up of the 'Mid Wales Newtown Development Corporation' in 1968 resulting in a doubling of that settlement's population and some success in attracting employment. However, this proved to be a 'one off' with limited benefit to the area as a whole. Aberystwyth is now often referred to as the forthcoming 'regional capital' with the setting up of Welsh Government Offices and an influx of private investment but, again, it is questionable whether this will, in itself, provide benefit to the area overall, given its location on the western seaboard.

The list of bodies set up over the years to look at the problems of Mid Wales includes:

- The Development Board for Rural Wales (assimilated into the now defunct Welsh Development Agency).
- Central Wales Economic Forum.
- Mid Wales Transport Collaboration Board.
- Powys Regeneration Partnership.
- Tourism Partnership Mid-Wales.
- Mid Wales Regional Committee.
- Growing Mid Wales.

Strategies which have affected/ affect Mid Wales include:

- One Wales-Connecting the Nation (2007)

- The Wales Transportation Strategy (2008)
- Regional Transport Plan.
- Mid Wales Joint Local Transport Plan.
- Winning Mid Wales (2015).
- Strategic Search Areas (TAN8).2005
- Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities (TAN6).2010.
- Wales Spatial Plan
- (2004/2008).
- Planning and Energy Act 2015.
- Wales Rural Development Programme 2014-2020

The coming of devolution to Wales has delivered a degree of independence which promises the ability to revitalise the nation. However, over the years, there has been the perennial problem of 'departmentalisation', with initiatives being developed without full involvement of all the functions necessary for successful implementation (e.g. the lack of initial involvement of the transport section in the formulation of the wind farm strategy proposed in TAN8).

Planning Policy Pre-2015

"The planning system has always been more urban in focus, perhaps because the view was originally held that agriculture would remain outside planning control and planning's rural role would largely be restricted to protecting the countryside and agricultural land from built development. Historically, there has been little incentive to develop a stronger grasp of the detail of how rural communities functioned through agriculture, land management, landscape character, biodiversity and the rural dimension to key services, housing and transport.

"Clearly the bulk of rural policy is made outside the planning system under the broad overarching banner of Rural Strategy.... There is, however, plenty of scope for rural planning policy to work in a much more co-ordinated and integrated way with the rest of rural policy..."

David Alexander: *Rural Policy, Rural Communities and the Planning System.*

Whilst the Wales Spatial Plan came close to developing a set of regional entities and connections between them its contents were: *"vague and unoriginal-largely a summary of what different Welsh Departments were planning to do anyway"* (Tanner).

Not being linked to land use or to a development plan the Wales Spatial Plan has largely been ignored in the process of producing the Local Development Plans which began to replace Unitary Development Plans in 2010.

The Local Development Plans themselves, based on existing Local Authority jurisdictions have, in spite of intentions to the contrary, been largely abbreviated versions of the former Unitary Development Plans with only token acknowledgement

of wider, strategic relationships. Each LDP has offered a spatial strategy and policies within its area but without any wider, regional context. Dissatisfaction with the inability of the Local Authorities to work together with shared vision and resources has resulted in Welsh Government considering a radical re-organisation of Local Government and is also reflected in the emergence of the Planning Act of 2015.

Ceredigion's Local Development Plan was adopted in 2013 and Carmarthenshire's in 2014, and it is anticipated that the Powys Plan will be finalised in 2016. Whilst all these documents acknowledge, and seek to address, the problems of provision of services, employment and housing in their areas, whilst factoring in sustainability, they follow the traditional approach of projecting future growth and accommodating it within a settlement hierarchy base on existing population centres and current levels of services. Disappointingly none of them have included policies which fully and truly reflect the radical opportunities offered for rural development in TAN 6 and particularly they fail to acknowledge and accommodate 'One Planet Development' as part of their sustainable thinking or policy formulation.

Whilst the surviving railway network features as infrastructure in the plans it is not accommodated as offering an opportunity to maximise future sustainable development or seen as an important element in the area's revitalisation.

Individually the Mid Wales Local Development Plans are reasonable approaches to their area's development in the short term but they are reactive and inward looking and, taken together, do not offer a template for successful future strategic development.

Planning Policy from 2015

The passing of the Planning Act in 2015 with the setting up of a National Development Framework, within which will sit both Local Development Plans and new Strategic Development Plans, provides an important opportunity for a much needed coherent approach to the future development and prosperity of Mid Wales.

This is a very significant step as the setting up of a land use strategy will provide a focus and framework for all the forward planning activities of national and local government which has, so far, been conspicuously lacking.

Unfortunately, insofar as can be ascertained at present, the current thinking of Welsh Ministers and officials is to focus Strategic Development in the most populated urban areas i.e. A South Wales City Region/Regions and the North Wales Corridor along the A55. This is symptomatic of a long standing mind set where the predominant emphasis is on urban Wales with the larger part of the country seen as not requiring strategic initiatives, unless it be for large scale renewable energy projects (which assist national targets but do not provide substantial long term benefits to the communities in which they are placed).

In the Development Plan Prospectus published by Welsh Government it is stated that:

"SDP's will only be required in areas where there are matters of greater than local significance."

and...

"Strategic Development Plans will provide a consistent, cost effective and efficient approach, with key decisions taken once at the strategic level. This will allow larger than local issues such as housing numbers, strategic employment sites and supporting transport infrastructure which cut across a number of local planning authority areas and often frustrate the LDP process, to be considered and planned for in an integrated and comprehensive way."

Given these statements it is considered that there is, in fact, a compelling case for a Strategic Development Plan to assist with the challenges and future development of the rural heartland of Mid Wales which, along with its endemic problems of insufficient housing provision (particularly of an affordable nature), high unemployment and inadequate transport infrastructure, offers an environment wholly suited to new forms of sustainable rural development strategically planned, along with a coherent approach to sustainable recreation and tourism which would be of benefit to both urban Wales and the economy as a whole.

There is no inherent reason why rural areas, where appropriate, do not deserve a strategic approach within a national development context and, indeed a national development framework without such is likely to lack cohesion. There are examples of strategic approaches to rural development world - wide but there is now one closer to home in the form of the Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland which, whilst its approach may not be transferable to Wales, offers some useful guidance.

Conclusion

The Relevance of the Heart of Wales Line Forum and Calon Cymru Initiative

It is acknowledged that, whilst to many the case for the setting up of a Strategic Development Area for Mid Wales is self-evident, there is a need to provide justifications for such an approach. Further work will be needed to persuade Welsh Government, as the 'directing authority', to set the process in motion.

Whilst Local Planning Authorities would have an essential role to play in developing an overall strategy their approach, so far, has been based on traditional thinking within their own areas. It is suggested here that the LDP's so far produced should sit within and be assessed against a new strategic context.

There is, in fact, a very short time scale for the case to be considered before areas are designated and Strategic Planning Panels set up.

It is, therefore, of great relevance that a considerable amount of work has been undertaken already by the Heart of Wales Line Forum in association with the Transport Minister and others to improve the railway service through Mid Wales, and by Calon Cymru who have provided a vision of strategic development based on 'one planet' policies linked to the railway network.

It is suggested, therefore, that the work of these two bodies form the basis for further discussion and consideration by Welsh Government as it has the potential to act as a template for Strategic Planning for Rural Wales far beyond what is currently achievable through the implementation of individual Local Authority Local Development Plans.