Recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic: Land management, travel and transport

Introduction

This paper was written in August 2020. It is one of a series of six briefings that were commissioned by the Counsel General and Minister for European Transition to inform and challenge the Welsh Government's strategy for reconstruction and recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.

The briefings focused on topics selected by Ministers. They built on our work to support earlier roundtable discussions convened by the Minister. They helped to frame and inform the work of an Expert Group[1] which met with the Minister between July and September 2020. We wrote up the Group's conclusions which informed Cabinet discussion of the Welsh Government's priorities for tackling the economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

This paper focuses on land management, travel and transport.

Key messages

- A convergence of environmental and economic factors create a fundamental challenge to Welsh agriculture, particularly cattle and sheep farming.

- Mindful of the political, social and cultural challenges of transitioning away from certain types of farming, it will be critical to work with communities to develop a shared vision for the future.

- The transition can then be supported by securing the local supply chains, e.g. nurseries need certainty over demand for saplings; and targeted training programmes and curricula adaptation.

- There would appear to be value in proactively identifying areas where afforestation is most viable, and targeting investment and support accordingly.

- Scope for continued or increased home working is likely to be limited to specific sectors, especially in parts of the public sector.

- Providing local and distributed workspace options in towns and villages may allow 'closer to home' rather than 'from home' working.

- Adapting to new or flexible working methods and locations could help reduce road congestion at peak times.

- Given the uncertainty around future travel behaviours, the focus in the short-

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[1] The Expert Group comprised four standing members: Torsten Bell (Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation), Rebecca Heaton (UK climate change committee), Paul Johnson (Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies) and Miatta Fahnbullah (Chief Executive of the New Economics Foundation).

term should be on the perceptions of the safety of public and active transport.

- Over the longer term, investment in fixed and flexible transport infrastructure is needed; but the Government's aspirations for a reduction in private car usage require better integration of planning and transport decisions. Development decisions should be made with a view to promoting the alternatives to car use.

Land management

The vast majority of Wales is used for agricultural purposes (90% of the total land area), almost 80% of which is permanent grassland or rough-grazing (Welsh Government, 2019a).

Prior to the current crisis, agriculture in Wales was already facing multiple challenges:

- Changes in trading relationships post-Brexit are likely to challenge the economic viability of lamb and beef farming;

- Emissions targets require increased afforestation, agro-forestry and restoration of peat bogs[2], as well as a

reduction in the consumption of dairy and meat products[3];

- Current approaches to land management have, in part, caused a loss in biodiversity; and

- Reducing risks of flooding or drought requires a change in land use and land management.

This convergence of factors suggests a need for a fundamental shift in land use and land management in Wales. Against this backdrop, one of the impacts of 'lockdown' has been a recent drop in demand for certain agricultural products, particularly dairy and red meat, with a consequent impact on revenues for the sector in Wales.

The Welsh Government has articulated proposals for its future support of farming and land management in Wales through its Sustainable Farming Scheme (see Welsh Government, 2020a). This would incentivise farmers to pursue environmental outcomes, and provide farmers with capital investment, business advice and support, and skills development; but it would not subsidise food production.

> **Farmers will need support to develop new skills to diversify the use of the land they manage in a way that is socially, economically, and environmentally viable**

By implication, and considering the wider factors outlined above, food production in Wales will decrease and be replaced by land management

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[2] Woodland represents 15% of the total land area in Wales, one of the lowest rates in Europe where woodland area averages 38% (Forest Research, 2020; Trent, 2019). Tree cover is higher at 16.3% in 2013, which is mid-range compared to global averages (NRW, 2016). However, it should be noted that competition for land is expected to be higher in small countries with a high population density such as the UK (Woodland Trust, 2011).

[3] The top three agricultural outputs by value in Wales are milk, cattle and sheep (CCC, 2020).

for environmental and wider societal aims, however there are challenges to this:

Acceptability: There is opposition to change. Research suggests that among farming communities, diversification is seen as 'second best' to food production (Senedd Research, 2019). Recent consultations on a post-CAP system for supporting agriculture in Wales have also shown that representative groups for farmers want continuity of financial support, and a reduction in transaction costs/regulatory burden (Welsh Government 2019b; 2020a); in effect, arguing for sustaining more or less the current levels of food production.

This opposition is compounded by concerns about the impact on the Welsh language. Farming communities in west and north Wales are among the only communities where Welsh is spoken by the majority. Advocates for the Welsh language argue that any threat to the viability of these farming communities is also a threat to the Welsh language (Scourfield, 2020).

Given the need for change, and the social and cultural significance of agriculture in Wales, efforts should be made to foster a shared vision for the future of land management and land use in Wales; and to acknowledge and address the various impacts on affected communities.

> **There may however be greater scope for home working in some sectors. Where these practices maintain or even improve performance and wellbeing, they should be encouraged and supported through increased digital inclusion**

Delivery: The Climate Change Committee (CCC) has suggested an ambition of planting 152,000 hectares of new woodland in Wales by 2050; equivalent to planting around 5,200 hectares a year (CCC, 2020). Modelling commissioned by the CCC and the Welsh Government suggests that this is technically feasible.

But deliverability is a challenge. A key barrier to afforestation, in particular, is that the land required for planting trees directly competes with agricultural land, which currently receives more public subsidy for this purpose. The Welsh Government has struggled to meet its current target of planting 2,000 hectares of new woodland a year and has recently announced an increase in investment (£10m over three years). The lack of locally grown saplings requires increased importation, bringing with it additional risk to land managers as a result of the increased risk of disease (McAleenan, 2019).

Furthermore, the CCC modelling demonstrates that not all land would be viable for afforestation, suggesting a need for active targeting of certain areas. The types of trees being planted is also important, as well as where they are planted – for example, whilst heterogenous forestry types (e.g. industrial tree planting of coniferous woodland) may be beneficial for sustainable forestry, it is less beneficial for biodiversity or conservation. Natural forests on the other hand can provide up to 40 times the carbon storage of a plantation forest of the same size, and provide more biodiversity benefits (Trent, 2019).

Skills: Farmers will need support to develop new skills to diversify the use of the land they manage in a way that is socially, economically, and environmentally viable. In the case of afforestation or agroforestry, training will also be needed to ensure targeted land management. The curricula of agricultural colleges may need to be adapted and subsidies may need to be targeted to ensure that both the current and next generation of land owners in Wales are encouraged to diversify their land's use in line with environmental aims.

Engagement: Engaging with land owners therefore requires a navigation of a complex set

of competing issues. Bottom-up approaches that aim to work with communities to encourage uptake of new land management practices will be needed, framed by a common understanding of what 'success' at the local and national levels would look like. The aim should be to encourage innovation and new business models that can sustain effective land management in the longer term, with less continued dependence on subsidies.

Funding: The UK Government has committed to sustaining funding levels post-CAP until the end of the parliamentary term, but the future funding envelope is unclear. The Welsh Government has been explicit that decisions on funding will need to follow UK Government decisions. Funding for forestry in particular could be a challenge, given the necessary scale.

Work, travel and transport

Working from home

Across the whole of the Welsh economy, the scope for working from home may be limited. Wales has a greater proportion of workers on low pay and people who are unable to work from home (Resolution Foundation, 2020). Key sectors of the Welsh economy – education, health, tourism, social care and hospitality – are among those most affected. Some of these may adapt or decline, but for many of these workers, their jobs will continue and will require them to be present in a workplace.

There may however be greater scope for home working in some sectors, especially in parts of the public sector where the use of remote meetings and conferences could continue, albeit to a lesser extent. Where these practices maintain or even improve performance and wellbeing, they should be encouraged and supported through increased digital inclusion. However, the impact of changes should be closely monitored as Bloom et al. (2015) found that home working increased productivity but reduced employee happiness.

Home working affects people in different ways (e.g. due to childcare commitments or the appropriateness of the home space). Supporting blended and balanced approaches to working patterns may be more suitable, and providing local and distributed workspace options in towns and villages may allow 'closer to home' rather than 'from home' working.

Cities, connectivity and agglomeration

It is still unclear how the Coronavirus pandemic will impact travel behaviours in the long-term. They are likely to be affected by working practices, by changes in shopping behaviours and by perceptions of the safety of public transport.

It is difficult to predict the extent to which recent trends will be sustained and if so, for how long. While this presents a challenge for decisions about long-term investment in fixed infrastructure, if existing assumptions are maintained it also presents an opportunity to embed changes. For example, recent changes could be sustained by investing in areas to support people to switch to public and active transport.

But concentrating economic activity remains a strong indicator of economic performance and productivity. In Wales, as elsewhere, cities play an important role in improving economic resilience. While the Coronavirus pandemic has threatened many aspects of daily life in urban areas, it has done so temporarily, and cities and

the people in and around them often adapt to their new environment rather than permanently abandon it.

Power and Katz (2016) outline five main elements that have supported the recovery of post-industrial cities and regions:

1. Investment in restoring urban centres, upgrading public transport and renewing neighbourhoods' appeal to residents and investors.

2. Environmental reclaimation from industrial damage, reclaiming industrial wastelands and buildings to create new green spaces that improve the well-being of local communities.

3. Rapid growth in services and smaller enterprises allowing them to act as catalysts for growth and to replace large industry. Skills remain a major barrier but universities and technical colleges can work with cities to upskill and retrain graduates.

4. Smart planning of integrated urban areas to maintain population density, with a focus on community development.

5. Finding new uses for old buildings, infrastructure and heritage sites. More broadly promoting reuse of existing resources and the circular economy.

Many of these elements remain compelling in the context of the Coronavirus pandemic. Research by the Wales Centre for Public Policy on areas such as inclusive growth, innovation and economic resilience highlights the importance of knowledge sharing, connectivity and collaboration to improve economic performance.

Transport

Increasing the critical mass of firms and population is one of the potential benefits of the South Wales Metro (Morgan, 2018). This is based on evidence that investing in infrastructure to strengthen transport connectivity can be a potential driver of productivity across the region it serves. For example, modelling has shown how Birmingham's economic performance is hindered by an outdated and inadequate transport infrastructure (Forth, 2018).

More flexible working patterns in the future have the potential to cut car usage, but this relies on maintaining good public transport links and promoting its safe use

Certain sectors have been identified by the Welsh Government and by experts as key growth industries. Many of these, including domestic tourism in particular, will rely on good public transport networks. Sustainable and flexible travel options are linked to broader initiatives such as the Transforming Towns package (Welsh Government, 2020b). However, flexible provision is still dependent on good, fixed transport infrastructure.

Fixed transport infrastructure could refer both to roads and public transport. Four-fifths (80%) of people in Wales travel to work by car, compared to an average of 68% across Great Britain (Department for Transport, 2019). More flexible working patterns in the future have the potential to cut car usage, but this relies on maintaining good public transport links and promoting its safe use. There is an opportunity to consider what mode of transport use is wanted – car or public – and develop strategies to realise this.

There is also potential to better integrate planning decisions and investment in transport. Decisions about new developments, whether housing, hospitals or office spaces are often made without due consideration of transport objectives (or wider objectives about 'place').

Transport infrastructure policy could do more to not only respond to forecasted need, but to shape it too. People use cars because it is convenient. If the goal remains to cut car usage in Wales, planning and transport infrastructure decisions should seek to make the alternatives more appealing.

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Our other work on the Coronavirus pandemic

We have conducted a range of projects to provide policy makers and public services with independent evidence on economic and social recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition to papers prepared for the Expert Group convened by Welsh Government Ministers, we have led a comprehensive assessment of the evidence on Supporting Public Services for the UK Government's initiative on 'Rebuilding a Resilient Britain' led by Sir Patrick Vallance; published the conclusions reached by six expert roundtables on recovery from the pandemic; published an analysis of responses to the Welsh Government's consultation on 'Our Future Wales'; and produced a series of blogs on key issues including: loneliness in the lockdown, the implications for the Welsh economy, the importance of a green stimulus to aid recovery, and the future of health and social care.

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Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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