



Rural Youth Out-Migration and Population Change in Wales

Overview

Forecasts suggest that Europe is about to enter a period of significant depopulation, with Eurostat projecting that the total population of the European Union will [decrease by 6% by 2100](#). For Wales, the models are both more sanguine and more variable, with population growth slowing or plateauing from the mid-2020s. Population growth in Wales is only maintained by net in-migration, with deaths exceeding births.

The **evolution of Wales's population will be geographically uneven**. Growth is expected to be concentrated in larger towns and cities. The population of rural areas is projected to be largely static or falling, continuing existing trajectories. There are already over 200 rural wards in Wales where the population decreased in the last decade, and these are likely to be the places that continue to lose population in the future.

Understanding and tackling rural population matters both because of the impact on the viability of local community facilities and service, but also because of the contribution of rural population change to the overall development of the population in Wales. People who leave rural communities do not necessarily move to other places in Wales. Many migrate outside Wales, affecting the net migration figures for Wales as a whole. **If rural out-migration were to accelerate it could tip Wales into population decline.**

Just as population change is geographically uneven, there are **demographic differences in the pattern of migration to and from rural Wales**. Overall, there is net in-migration by older people into rural areas but net out-migration by younger people, including from communities that are otherwise growing.

A [Survey of Young People in Rural Wales](#) in 2021 (Woods and Utz, 2022) found that **two in every five young persons in rural areas anticipated moving outside Wales in the next five years**. As such, rural youth are a key group both for maintaining balanced and buoyant communities in rural areas, and for the population development of Wales as a whole.

There are many reasons why young people move away from rural Wales, but **employment opportunities and access to affordable housing are among the most significant**. A substantial proportion of young out-migrants are **'reluctant leavers', who could be enticed to stay** (or to return after studying) by actions aimed at improving access to suitable jobs and housing, and improvements to transport and social infrastructure.

Actions need to be appropriately targeted, with an emphasis on supporting entrepreneurship, matching skills and economic investment, and promoting sectors such as the creative economy. Lessons can be learned from examples of existing good practice in Wales and elsewhere (Center for Rural Innovation, 2021; Gibson, 2008; Mathieu et al., 2022). Relevant Scottish experience and practice are explored in a companion think piece by Professor Rebecca Kay on [Tackling rural depopulation](#) (2023).

Who is leaving rural Wales and where are they going?

In the decade from 2011 to 2021 the population of the nine rural counties of Wales was essentially static, falling by a little under 1,000 people overall. This followed a trajectory of slowing population growth since the 1980s.

The picture of stasis however disguises considerable variation in local level population change. Although some rural wards close to towns expanded rapidly in this period – mostly linked to extensive new housing development – there were 236 rural wards in Wales that lost population. These were especially located in upland areas of Mid and North Wales and the Brecon Beacons, on the Isle of Anglesey, and along the coasts of Cardigan Bay and Carmarthen Bay (Figure 1).

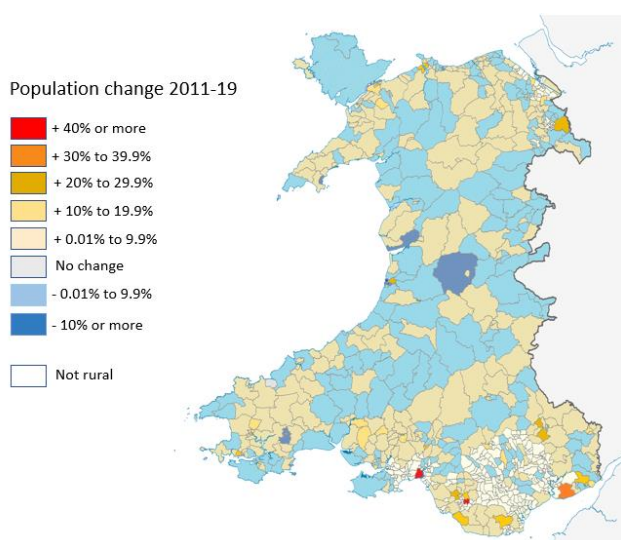


Figure 1: Population change in rural wards in Wales, 2011-2019 (Source: [Rural Vision Evidence Report](#))

As with Wales as a whole, the population of rural Wales has been maintained only due to migration. Without migration, the population of rural Wales would have dropped by around 20,000 people since 2011 through natural change. In-migration from other parts of Britain and internationally has balanced negative natural change and out-migration combined for rural Wales overall, but in those communities experiencing depopulation in-migration is not sufficient to make a difference.

Quite complex migration flows with and beyond Wales underlie these aggregate figures. People moving from rural local authority areas in Wales are more likely to move to England than to other local authority areas in Wales: [between 2010 and 2020](#), 209,447 people moved to England from rural LAs in Wales, and 180,759 moved to other local authority areas in Wales. However, more people move into rural Wales from England than migrate from rural Wales to England: 209,447 people moved from rural LAs in Wales to England between 2010 and 2020, while 249,229 people moved from England into Welsh rural LAs.

Overall, therefore, despite substantial areas of rural depopulation, net migration to and from rural local authorities is contributing to the increase in Wales's population, not detracting from it.

Yet, there are also significant differences in [migration patterns by age group](#). In 2018-19 **every rural local authority in Wales experienced net out-migration of young people aged 16-24**, but all except Gwynedd experienced net in-migration by people aged 65 or over. Retirement migration is often directed at coastal communities or more accessible rural areas, whereas youth out-migration pulls from all parts of rural Wales. This imbalance contributes to pockets of depopulation.

Youth out-migration is central to rural depopulation

An [online survey](#) of 1056 young people aged between 14 and 25 living in rural Wales, conducted in summer 2021 by the [ROBUST project](#), reinforced the identification of rural youth as a key group leaving Wales. Only 18% of the survey respondents thought that they would still be living in their local area in five years' time. Fewer than a sixth thought they would move to a large town or city in Wales, and less than one in ten thought that they would move elsewhere in rural Wales. By far the largest segment – 42% - anticipated moving out of Wales (Figure 2).

In the next 5 years do you think that you will....

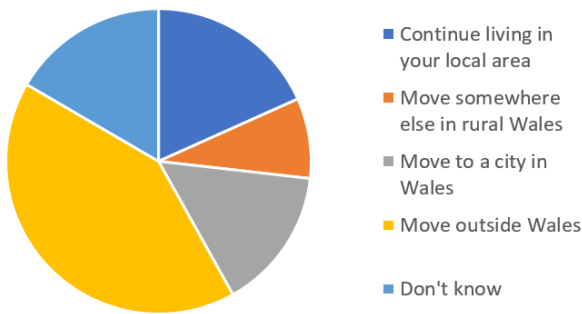


Figure 2: Expectations of migration by young people (aged 14-25) living in rural Wales, 2021 (n=1056) (Source: [Survey of Young People in Rural Wales](#))

Why do young people leave rural Wales?

The reasons why young people move away from rural Wales are diverse, but **concerns around education, employment and housing are all common**. The survey of [Young People in Rural Wales](#) found that 81% of respondents thought that they would need to leave their local area for education, employment, or training, and 48% thought that they would need to move away to find suitable, affordable housing.

For many young people, going to university is the decision that takes them out of rural communities, and frequently out of Wales. This can be an opportunity to experience life in a 'big city', which some find in Cardiff or Swansea, but which for others, especially in North Wales, might more logically mean Manchester, Liverpool, or London. Some respondents reported **perceptions, in some cases instilled by schools, that they would need to look outside Wales for a 'good' university or to study the course that they wanted**.

Regardless of motivation, a significant number of young people considered that if they went to university outside Wales they did not expect to return to Wales, citing perceived better employment opportunities elsewhere.

The survey however also included older respondents who had moved back to parental homes in rural Wales after graduating, in some cases due to constrained options during the Covid-19 pandemic. While some of this group

had found jobs and planned to stay, others expected to move away again, notably to find employment in the field that they studied. In particular, rural Wales was considered to offer limited job opportunities in engineering, computing, biosciences and creative industries. Even some young people who had found jobs in rural Wales perceived that they would need to move for career progression.

Young people who have not gone to university, especially those entering 'trades', for example as an electrician or a plumber, were more likely to plan to stay in rural Wales, although some anticipated having to move to a new area to set up their own business.

Housing affordability was widely seen as a push-factor that will compel young people to leave rural areas, but was not commonly presented as an explanation for moving to a particular place. Where it was, the moves envisaged tended to be relatively local, for instance into a town such as Aberystwyth or Bangor. Although there were frequent references to competition with second homes or holiday lets, the comments of survey respondents generally indicated little detailed knowledge of comparative house prices. Only one respondent noted that *"I find that the only housing I will be able to afford is in rural Wales"*.

Beyond employment and housing, the survey of [Young People in Rural Wales](#) found lifestyle choices to significant in shaping the migration expectations of young people. Many of the survey respondents who identified as gay, transgender or non-binary – though not all – expressed a desire to leave their local area (and in some cases, Wales) due to experiences of discrimination or abuse, or frustration at the lack of appropriate social spaces and support networks. More broadly, 40% of all respondents said that they would prefer to live in a large town or city, often attracted by perceived wider social and entertainment opportunities and a more cosmopolitan culture.

From these results, the [Young People in Rural Wales](#) report categorised rural young people into three groups. **Intending leavers** make up

half of the cohort, who do not want to stay in their local area. Two-thirds of these want to live in a city. Only 10% of young people are **likely stayers**, who prefer to live in a rural area (or have a neutral attitude) and who do not consider that they will need to move for housing, employment, education or training. The remaining group are **reluctant leavers** or **potential stayers**, who would prefer to stay in their local area (or at least are open to staying) but think that they will need to move away. This group is 40% of survey respondents, or, scaled up to the whole population, around 40,000 young people in rural Wales. It is these individuals who are the key to addressing rural out-migration.

Four in ten young people in rural Wales are 'reluctant leavers' or 'potential stayers'

What can help to keep young people in rural Wales?

There is no single policy intervention that would solve the issue of youth out-migration from rural Wales, however **a package of measures**

focusing on employment, housing, and infrastructure could make a difference.

The survey of [Young People in Rural Wales](#) found that more than half of respondents reported that changes including 'more jobs appropriate to intended career', 'better paid jobs', 'more affordable housing', 'more entertainment and leisure facilities', and 'better transport connections to larger towns and cities', would make it more likely that they would stay in their local area (Figure 3).

Interventions need to be appropriately targeted to be effective, especially at the specific factors emphasized by 'potential stayers'. The availability of affordable housing, better paid jobs, and, to a lesser extent, support to start a business, are all more important to this group than to young people in rural Wales as a whole.

Similarly, creating more jobs in rural areas is not sufficient in itself. Employment opportunities need to be well paid and to match the career aspirations of young people. These however do not necessarily align with the priorities of economic development programmes, including the growth deals in [Mid Wales](#), [North Wales](#) and [south west Wales](#).

What would make it more likely that you would stay in your local area?



Figure 3: Potential changes that would make it more likely that young people in rural Wales would stay in (or return to) their local area (n= 1056) (Source: [Survey of Young People in Rural Wales](#), 2021)

When asked by the survey of [Young People in Rural Wales](#) about their interest in selection of industries and sectors, only 13% of respondents expressed an interest in working in green technology or renewable energy, 12% in information technology or computing, 8% in biotechnology, 6% in hi-tech manufacturing, 4% in food processing or marketing, and 3% in digital agriculture (although some of these figures are skewed by the under-representation of men in the survey sample).

By far **the most popular sector was creative industries, selected by a third of survey respondents**, followed by healthcare (21%) and conservation / environmental management (18%). Farming continues to be of interest to around a tenth of young people, including 15% of young men – higher than the current proportion of the workforce in rural Wales employed in agriculture.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, there were predictions that the normalisation of remote working could help to stem rural depopulation – both through remote workers moving into rural communities for lifestyle benefits, and by enabling rural young people to access a wider range of jobs while remaining in their local area. The [Young People in Rural Wales](#) report however questions this assumption. Although 28% of ‘potential stayers’ said that more opportunities to work from home would make it more likely that they would remain in their local area, when asked about their preferred working environment, **fewer than one in ten survey respondents selected working from home for a large company or organization**. A quarter indicated that they would prefer to work for a large company or organization in a workplace. Interestingly, the most popular option among young men was running their own business, selected by a third (Figure 4)

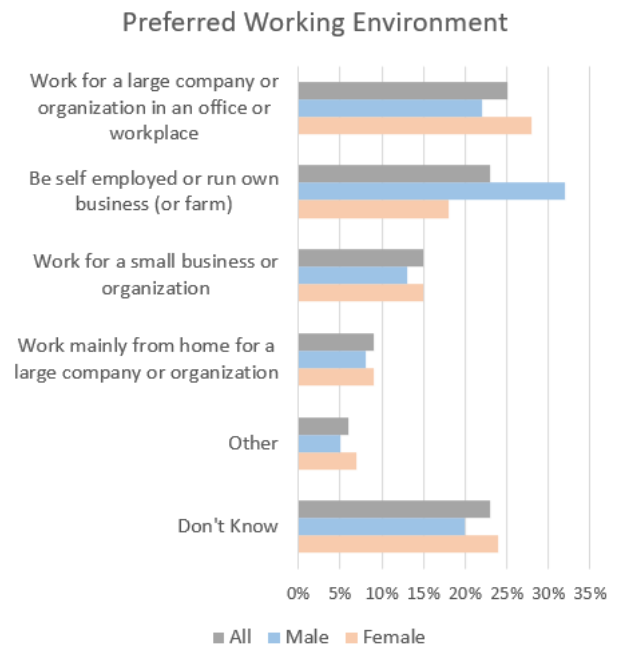


Figure 4: Preferred career working environment for young people (aged 14-25) living in rural Wales, 2021 (n=1056) (Source: [Survey of Young People in Rural Wales](#))

What can be done – learning from what works in Wales and beyond

Wales is not the only nation with youth out-migration and depopulation in rural areas. Similar challenges are faced across [Europe](#), North America, Australia and elsewhere. No region has found a solution that has entirely stemmed or reversed youth out-migration, but initiatives have been tried that have had some success in addressing contributing factors. Together with existing examples of good practice in Wales, these can be drawn on to guide a series of prospective interventions:

1. **Support Young Entrepreneurs.** Many young people are interested in running their own business as an option that could help them stay in rural Wales, but they often don't know where to start. Menter Môn's [Llwyddo'n Lleol 2050](#) scheme in Gwynedd and Ynys Môn is internationally recognised as a successful model for supporting young entrepreneurs, including seed corn funding, training and mentoring to develop an initial

business idea. The [EYE in Rural](#) project has similarly developed resources to support young rural entrepreneurs in Greece, Poland and Spain, including an entrepreneurship handbook, an online educational module, and pilot training and tasters.

2. **Develop the Creative Economy.** In

Australia, cultural entrepreneurship has been observed to be a key strategy allowing young people to stay in rural regions such as the [north coast of New South Wales](#), where lifestyle opportunities are attractive.

Developing the creative economy as a way of providing livelihoods for young people in rural areas has two elements: attracting medium-sized creative businesses that can offer a core of salaried jobs; and infrastructure to support creative freelancers. Both can be delivered by hubs such as [Yr Egin](#) in Carmarthen, which hosts the head office of S4C as an anchor company and provides studio, meeting and post-production facilities for hire, as well as an enterprise hub offer services and incubation space for local entrepreneurs. The [Rural Vision for Wales](#) proposed replicating the Yr Egin model in other parts of rural Wales, with hubs focused on film, music, design and computer games.

Irregular incomes mean that creative entrepreneurs often need to combine several jobs or activities. This can be challenging in rural areas, although there are examples of individuals combining freelance work in art, music or design with farming, local food production, or tourism activities in a 'rural gig economy'. The [Center on Rural Innovation](#) in the United States has recommended several actions for supporting rural gig economies, including connecting freelancers with local businesses, digital platforms to promote opportunities, building a flexible training ecosystem, and creating spaces and places where gig workers can meet and network.

3. **Align Career Aspirations, Skills and Economic Investments.** Economic investment programmes in rural Wales are prioritising new sectors such as green technology and bioscience, which have potential to provide well-paid, skilled jobs. In order to ensure a dividend in creating opportunities for local young people (not just qualified in-migrants), effort is needed to promote working in these sectors through schools and to provide related training through local FE and HE providers with flexible modes of delivery.

The [Campus Coutances Métiers de nature](#) in northern France presents an example of a former agricultural high school that has pivoted to training 'nature professionals' for a range of careers in farming, conservation and environmental management to support nature-driven local rural regeneration. In Wales, a re-thinking of rural education and training could build on existing innovative providers such as [Black Mountains College](#) and the [Centre for Alternative Technology](#).

4. **Facilitate Co-operative Housing for Rural Young People.** Housing availability and affordability is one of the more intractable problems contributing to rural youth out-migration. Co-operative housing projects can form part of the answer by providing opportunities for young people to move out of parental homes in communities where rental markets are limited and to share the costs of property ownership. Former pubs, chapels and schools and derelict farm buildings can be appropriate sites for redevelopment as co-operative housing in smaller villages.

[Wild Peak Housing](#) in Derbyshire, which has renovated farm buildings to house up to ten adults and their dependents, and the [Tombreck Farm](#) project aiming to build eco-houses for rent or shared equity ownership in Scotland, are examples of co-operative rural housing models that could be adopted in Wales.

5. Promote Rural Living to Young People.

Many of the reasons that young people leave rural Wales are shaped by perceived challenges not by actually encountered obstacles. Campaigns to promote rural living to young people, highlight role models and examples, and give access to information resources, and may therefore be part of the answer to youth out-migration.

Similar promotional campaigns have been successfully run in other parts of the world. In Canada, for example, [Project Comeback](#) involved the small town of Smithers producing a brochure called 'Kids Came Back', which features local young people who moved away for education but have returned and become successful members of the community. It is used by companies in recruiting workers and to discuss with local young people the opportunities in their area.

About the author

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