RURAL PLANNING IN THE 2020S

Technical Report 4

National Policy Reviews (UK and Ireland)

June 2022

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Acronyms

AONB	Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
BMV	Best and Most Versatile
BNG	Biodiversity Net Gain
COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
CSO	Central Statistics Office
DAERA	Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
DEFRA	Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs
DCLUC	Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities
DfC	Department for Communities
DfI	Department for Infrastructure
DNS	Developments of National Significance
ERDF	European Regional Development Fund
ESS	Ecosystem Services
EU	European Union
IWA	Institute for Welsh Affairs
LAG	Local Action Group
LCA	Landscape Character Assessments
LDP	Local Development Plans
LNR	Local Nature Recovery
LPA	Local Planning Authority
LR	Landscape Recovery
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NDF	National Development Framework
NHA	Natural Heritage Area
NI	Northern Ireland

NIAO	Northern Ireland Audit Office
NIEL	Northern Ireland Environment Link
NIHE	Northern Ireland Housing Executive
NPF	National Planning Framework
NPF4	National Planning Framework 4
NPO	National Planning Objective
NPPF	National Planning Policy Framework
NPWS	National Park and Wildlife Service
NSS	National Spatial Strategy
OPD	One Planet Development
pNHAs	Proposed Natural Heritage Area
PD	Permitted Development
RNA	Rural Needs Assessment
RSE	Royal Society of Edinburgh
RSES	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies
SAAO	Special Amenity Area Orders
SACs	Special Area of Conservation
SDP	Strategic Development Plans
SFI	Sustainable Farming Incentive
SPA	Special Protection Areas
UK	United Kingdom
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

Document purpose

This Technical Report details the national planning policy landscape across the different nations under study in the Rural Planning and the 2020s report and how the Forces for Change – Climate Change, the Countryside as a Site for Adaptation, COVID-19 and Brexit – are playing out in these different contexts. These complement the Thematic Reviews (Technical Report 1) carried out by the project team, which assess the different national planning policy contexts across different thematic issues.

This document is one of five Technical Reports that accompany the main Rural Planning in the 2020s Report, available on the RTPI website:

- Technical Report 1 – Thematic Reviews
- Technical Report 2 – Housing Market Analysis
- Technical Report 3 – Roundtable Analysis
- Technical Report 4 – National Policy Assessments
- Technical Report 5 – Case Studies

Summarising the Extant Rural Challenges facing the UK and Ireland

The range of challenges facing rural areas were explored through national policy assessments carried out by the nation leads for the Rural Planning in the 2020s project. These provide deeper analysis of how the Forces for Change under study – climate change, the countryside as a site for adaptation, COVID-19 and Brexit - are playing out in different nations of the UK and in Ireland. Here, we summarise the key challenges that are either specific to a nation or shared by rural areas everywhere before presenting the national policy assessments carried out by the nation leads.

Shared issues facing rural communities in the UK and Ireland

The **COVID-19 pandemic** looms large in the national policy assessments, having acted as a 'stress test' for all rural areas. It has brought a number of key issues into sharper relief, including digital access, the pressures on local services, health and well-being across rural communities, and the supply of affordable housing.

Shared issues across the entire study area include the following:

Uncertainties and inconsistences in how rural areas are defined and therefore in the application of policies and approaches. In Northern Ireland, for example, just two types of rural area are used in classifications, compared to six discrete types in Wales and Scotland. Classifications have some impact on discourse on how the needs of rural areas are understood, whether there are significant contextual differences and therefore a requirement to plan differently.

A concern for **population aging** is found across all nations, raising questions around economic productivity, the pattern of service provision (and especially healthcare and linked mobility) and patterns of housing occupation (and opportunities for rematching needs and provision). The level of concern for aging varies, being most acute in remoter rural areas (e.g., parts of Scotland) where there are particular challenges around servicing the needs of older people.

In-migration and growth pressure are reported for all nations, though patterns are of course geographically variably. In England, this is manifest as second home buying, which is also the case in parts of Scotland. Both countries are seeing conversion of homes to holiday letting. In Ireland, dispersed building in the open countryside evidences demand for rural homes. Some parts of Wales are experiencing depopulation, but this is balanced by acute housing demand pressure elsewhere, including for second and holiday homes. The population of rural areas in Northern Ireland has been growing three times faster than in urban areas.

The need for improved **digital infrastructure** is commonplace, with very poor service coverage in less accessible rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic increased reliance on digital connectivity, which impacts on economic activity, service delivery and on the well-being of rural communities.

Housing affordability, tied to the undersupply of homes and increased demand pressures, is another common challenge, but one which spikes in particular locations. It is a very pronounced issue in the South East of England, but also present in coastal amenity areas and some near urban locations across the UK and Ireland. The patterning of demand, evidenced by house price growth during the pandemic, is detailed in the next part of this report. Housing affordability is one of the most publicised issues facing rural areas today, with a range of policy interventions and investments present across the different nations.

Quality of life and well-being is of increasing concern across many rural areas. Improved quality of life and well-being are sought by people moving to rural areas and accessed through the housing market. But the operation of that market can diminish well-being for other households, who find themselves unable to access housing at an affordable price and are therefore either displaced from communities and from social networks or find themselves in homes unsuited to their needs and suffering the consequences.

The **decline of rural services** has been a longstanding concern for many rural areas, rooted in the viability of public provision and the thin market for private delivery. Services often withdraw

to larger centres, increasing car dependency amongst those needing to access shops, post offices and so forth. Irregular public transport provision is therefore a closely related concern. There are examples of greenways being developed in some places, enabling cycling and walking, but these are not always a viable answer for least accessible places where long distances separate people from the services they need.

Land management is another common challenge for rural areas, heightened by competing demands on land resources. The use of land for carbon storage, green offsetting and flood mitigation can create landscape conflicts, changing the character of the landscape and sometimes conflicting with other priorities including access and the promotion of tourism. Land management issues may be particularly acute in National Parks or other designated areas, erecting barriers to green transitions in the form of renewable energy production of offsetting uses. There is a feeling that strategy and policy has not yet caught up with these challenges.

Key differences between the nations include:

Those which are spatially variable, being more pronounced in some areas than others. One of the most obvious examples in cross-border **Brexit tensions** affecting Ireland and Northern Ireland. These tensions have been manifested in numerous uncertainties and in a political fallout that may ultimately change north-south relationships on the island of Ireland. But most differences are more subtle, reflecting geographical contrasts or levels of amenity. Rural Ireland has different housing challenges compared to the UK, with a tradition of allowing single homes in the open countryside presenting landscape and sustainability challenges (and challenges for an aging population). The economic fallout from the **pandemic** has been felt more keenly in remoter rural areas, including in Scotland.

Patterns of development, and the balance between nucleation and more distributed growth, remains a critical challenge for rural planning. Nations differ in their responses to this challenge: some have taken a softer approach, traditionally allowing one-off home or small development clusters; others, notably England, has pushed hard for nucleation – development in key service centres to the exclusion of lower tier settlements. There are challenges with both responses. The first presents clear service challenges; the latter starves smaller settlements of development opportunities and accelerates gentrification processes. There is a need to reconsider growth and development patterns in rural areas, striking a different balance in many cases between strong nucleation and unfettered development in open countryside. The national policy assessments look more closely at strategy and policy. We pull out some of the key points below.

Policy and Practice across the UK and Ireland

Each nation has its own governance and policy arrangements. These are a product of devolution settlements across the nations of the UK and are detailed in the national assessments. Here, we set out some cross-cutting themes: these relate to **fragmentation and poor coordination**, **biodiversity net gain (BNG), well-being and resilience**, and **local capacity and resourcing**.

Fragmentation and Coordination

The fragmentation of governance arrangements is a common thread within the national assessments. Rural challenges are both complex and interconnected. Complexity and the breadth of issues faced in rural areas drives a tendency to distribute responsibilities across different government departments and agencies. But interconnectivity means that the sense of distributed responsibility is regularly questioned, by local authorities and rural lobby groups and ultimately by civil servants and national governments.

The call for 'joined-up strategy' is answered in various ways. Northern Ireland's Rural Policy Framework initiative acknowledges the interdependencies of rural policy domains. The Scottish Government's Place Standard tool aims to foster greater policy integration. Debate in Ireland has also challenged the logic of distributed responsibility for aspects of the rural policy agenda attention has been given to building an evidence base to support greater strategic integration, but there is so far limited evidence of a cross-cutting approach to tackling the challenges of rural places.

BNG, Well-being and Resilience

Emergent concerns in rural planning are being given greater attention in policy debate. Given the importance of rural areas to Welsh national identity, community well-being features prominently in planning discourses in Wales and is supported by the Welsh Rural Observatory, a National Plan, and by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Well-being – a relatively new concern for planning – has been joined by other concepts such as Ecosystem

Services (ESS) and brought under the purview of the planning systems.

The importance of these concepts lies in their capacity to bridge across the traditional silos of environment, economy and society. Ecosystem Services (ESS) links these things together, revealing for example the socio-cultural, economic and environment value of landscape. The embedding of 'bridging concepts' in the planning system instils a concern for 'building healthy functioning ecosystems which support social, economic and ecological resilience'.

However, there is a danger that such bridging concepts are replaced with narrower targets. This has happened with the role assigned to planning in England for delivering BNG from 2023. This is arguably a technical and mechanical focus that does not locate biodiversity in a broader suite of related concerns, and also raises further questions over the capacity of local authorities to take on new responsibilities. A broader focus for land use planning, emerging from wider debate, is different from the accumulation of new responsibilities that are poorly linked together.

Local Capacity and Resourcing

Relating to the above, the lack of resources for rural planning is apparent across all nations and is today linked to the Forces for Change: to supporting rural economies in the context of Brexit, planning for the fallout from the pandemic, developing effective strategies and policies to mitigate climate change impacts, and grasp the adaptation potential of rural locations. All of these challenges require skills and capacity within local government. They compound the pressures associated with service decline, existing patterns of population growth, aging and housing affordability.

NATIONAL POLICY ASSESSMENTS

National Policy Assessment – Wales (by Neil Harris)

Introduction

The purpose of this policy evaluation is to examine the planning policy framework in Wales and its effectiveness in addressing the land-use planning challenges in rural areas in Wales. This evaluation documents some of the definitions used in other reports to define rural areas in Wales and captures through secondary sources some of the recent challenges and changes in rural Wales. The following section introduces the legislative and planning policy framework that has been established in Wales since 2015. The 'Forces for Change' impacting on rural areas are then examined in terms of their application to Wales. The planning policy framework is then examined in more detail before outlining the Wales-specific dimensions of the thematic areas reviewed in other parts of the Rural Planning in the 2020s project. A concluding section outlines some key points in evaluating the effectiveness of the planning policy framework in supporting planning in rural areas in Wales.

Defining Rural Wales and its Key Characteristics

The Rural Vision produced for the Welsh Local Government Association in 2021 identified the challenges of defining and classifying 'rural Wales' and set out a series of different ways of doing so (Woods et al, 2021, p. 3). These included: (1) defining rural areas as the nine predominantly rural local authorities in Wales – at 82 per cent of the land area of Wales and 32 per cent of its population, and (2) these local authorities and other areas outside of these predominantly rural local authorities that previously qualified for European Union (EU) Rural Development Programme support. The latter definition adds an additional 15 per cent of Wales' population as living in rural areas. The report concludes that "on either definition, rural Wales is a diverse territory encompassing communities in very different settings" (paragraph 3.3). Figure 1 below, reproduced from the report, identifies the very significant extent of rural communities across Wales and their differing characteristics.

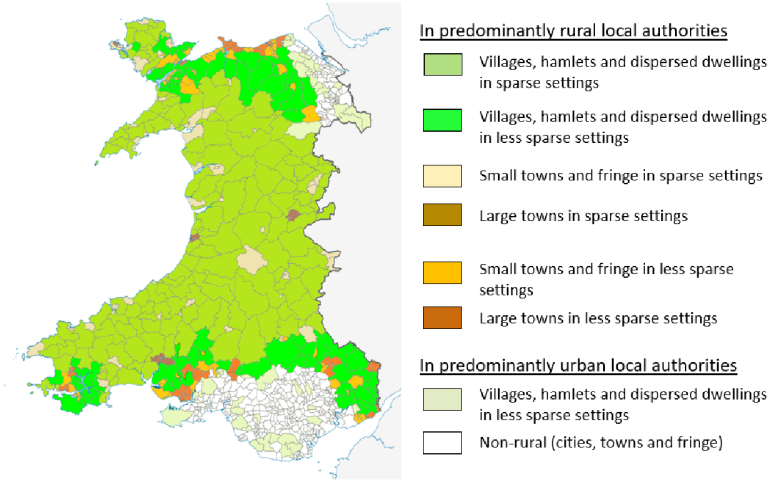

Figure 1 Typology of areas within Rural Wales using ONS classifications of settlement type and setting – reproduced from Woods et al (2021)

The Rural Vision work for the Welsh Local Government Association also presented a detailed and evidence-based socio-economic and cultural profile of rural Wales (Woods et al, 2021). This identified a series of different trends and trajectories in rural areas of Wales. Some of the most relevant of these addressed in that evidence-based report that relate to the role of the planning system include:

1. An increasing rural population over the past twenty years with a focus on population growth in more accessible rural areas and especially in rural towns;
2. A decrease in population in a significant number of rural wards – with population decrease focused in coastal communities and attributed in part to an increasing number of second and holiday homes in these areas;
3. Internal migration from other parts of Wales and the rest of the United Kingdom has been the most important driver in rural areas with an increasing population;
4. Rural areas in Wales have an older age profile than urban areas in Wales – and there is an increasingly marked demographic ageing of rural Wales population over time. This is resulting in some rural wards having 30-40 per cent of the population aged 65 or over;
5. The importance of the public sector and service industries to rural economies in Wales;
6. A fall in direct employment in agriculture in rural areas of Wales yet with some local rural economies continuing to have much higher-than-average direct employment in agriculture;

7. The dominance of livestock farming in the agricultural sector in Wales and the majority of farms in Wales being defined as very small;
8. High concentration of the pressures and benefits of tourism in selected parts of Wales;
9. The very significant value of natural capital and ecosystem services delivered by rural areas;
10. The significant proportion of Wales's land area designated as National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONBs) and some of the challenges this presents for renewable energy generation, economic diversification, and delivery of affordable housing;
11. Increasing challenges of financial viability in delivery of a range of public services to rural communities in Wales, alongside dependence on use of private motor vehicles to access these services;
12. A decrease in the proportion of people able to speak Welsh in rural communities in Wales.

This summary account based on the report for Welsh Local Government Association highlights the many issues facing rural areas in Wales. These include some of the key ones that can be addressed through the land-use planning system.

The planning system in Wales

Planning in Wales is a devolved activity and establishing the national legislative and policy context for planning is the responsibility of Welsh Government. There has been significant legislative change in recent years. This change encompasses both planning legislation - such as the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 - and wider legislation that has important influence on the shape and operation of the planning system. Important examples of the latter include the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Active Travel (Wales) Act 2013. Stakeholders in the Wales roundtable noted the innovative and potentially very significant emphasis of the Well-being of Future Generations Act in delivering more sustainable rural areas. Local planning activity is delivered by 25 Local Planning Authorities (LPA) – these comprise 22 all-purpose, unitary authorities and three National Park Authorities. One of the principal functions of each LPA is to prepare a Local Development Plan.

The planning framework in Wales established through recent legislative reforms comprises four different levels. There are three statutory levels of plan-making at national, strategic and local levels. The publication of Future Wales in 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021) presents the first national planning framework with 'development plan' status. This can be expected to strengthen national planning objectives and policies in local planning decisions. Work is beginning on Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) in various parts of Wales. This work is at an early stage and is intended to deliver a more strategic approach to planning policy across a number of constituent LPAs. The current version of Future Wales provides some direction to future work on SPDs by setting out key issues to be addressed in each of the SPD areas alongside some policies to be developed and articulated through them. Local Development Plans (LDPs) comprise a third statutory plan-making level – and these are an established part of the planning system in Wales. Some stakeholders have expressed reservations about the ability to secure sufficient resources, capacity and expertise to deliver SPDs and LDPs in a timely way. This reflects wider concerns about resources available to deliver an effective planning system in Wales (Auditor General for Wales, 2019). The three formal and statutory tiers of plan-making in Wales are complemented by an informal opportunity for the preparation of non-statutory Place Plans that may be prepared by communities and adopted by LPAs as supplementary planning guidance. There is potential for Place Plans to be a vehicle for local rural communities to engage in placemaking and the planning system. Their potential is examined in some of the thematic sections below.

In summary, significant effort has been made to put into place in Wales a distinctive and effective planning framework for the delivery of sustainable development, including in rural communities. This has been shaped by and will support wider government agendas – including those on well-being, sustainability, and active travel. Some parts of this planning framework are still to be delivered in practice, yet there will in due course be an integrated, formal and integrated planning system designed to deliver planning outcomes.

Rural Wales and the Forces for Change

Brexit

Stakeholders at the Wales roundtable identified two key dimensions to Brexit in impacting on Wales and land-use planning issues. The first of these is increased exposure to generalised global instability – for example in energy and food supply – that may play out in terms of changes in land use pressures. Increasing pressures to move towards greater self-sufficiency in energy supply are influencing demand for on-shore and off-shore energy production. Participants in the roundtable anticipated that policy approaches to renewable and other forms of energy production will need rethinking in light of these pressures. The second issue relates to agriculture. Stakeholders noted that Brexit effects on agriculture had yet to be fully realised with legacy arrangements linked to the Common Agricultural Policy still maintaining some stability in agricultural practices. More significant impacts are anticipated from 2024 when new systems for agricultural support will be affected – and stakeholders anticipated that significant funding and policy innovation will be required. Trade deals with major exporters of meat and dairy products – such as New Zealand and Australia – were also noted as having potentially very significant impact on Wales' agricultural practices given the significance of upland lamb farming in rural Wales.

COVID-19

Participants in the Wales roundtable identified three important elements for rural planning in Wales arising from COVID-19. First, participants reported some experience in increasing migration to rural areas as a result of COVID-19. This was in some areas exacerbating already existing pressures on affordability of and access to housing within rural communities in Wales. The high proportion of second and holiday homes in some rural areas, alongside migration into rural communities in Wales more generally, was noted as presenting concerns for the prevalence of Welsh language speakers in rural communities. Participants noted that the significance of this issue varied between rural communities across Wales, yet some rural communities were noted as significant and critical in supporting the ambition of one million Welsh speakers by 2050. Second, participants highlighted the challenges of sustaining public transport services in rural areas with reduced passenger usage of public transport services due to coronavirus restrictions. There were also concerns at local levels about being able to deliver national ambitions for public transport without significant increases in funding and support. This results in concerns for increasing dependency on private motor vehicles to access rural services

across Wales counter to policy ambitions for decarbonisation. An increasingly aged population and increased incidence of health issues within the population is creating pressures on community transport that cannot be met without enhanced resources. Third, COVID-19 has in some communities reinforced the importance of localised foundational economies with an emphasis on goods and services for the local economy.

Climate Change and the Countryside as a site of adaptation

The force for change of the countryside as a site of adaptation in addressing and responding to climate change is that which secured most discussion at the Wales roundtable. A wide range of issues were identified as significant including agriculture and climate change, managing phosphates and nitrates and the wider implications of these for a series of land use planning issues, transport, housing, and the use of Welsh in rural communities.

Stakeholders at the roundtable noted that phosphate levels and their management was having very significant impacts on the ability to plan for rural communities, including in relation to delivery of housing in rural communities. Planners reported having insufficient policy tools and instruments to be able to effectively respond to these issues. They pointed to a lack of national leadership on this issue and a need for more joined-up approaches to be able to meet other, wider planning objectives expected of local planning authorities.

In transport, stakeholders noted the need for significant improvement in charging networks and capacity for electric vehicles if rural areas are to play a role in decarbonisation of travel. The dependency on community transport in the absence of commercial operator interest in rural communities is also identified as a significant challenge.

In housing, stakeholders at the Wales roundtable noted the significant pressure on rural housing markets generally, but especially in key tourism areas with a high concentration of second and holiday homes. This is creating difficulties for local people to compete in the housing market and also impacting on the vitality of rural communities with up to a third of the housing stock in some communities not being used as primary residences. This was also noted as impacting on the demographic profile of communities with younger people being unable to stay in local communities.

Resources

There are already some well-documented concerns about the resourcing of the planning system in Wales, especially in terms of the resourcing of LPA planning functions (Auditor General for Wales, 2019). Some of the additional resourcing concerns highlighted in the present study include capacity of LPAs in rural areas to deliver Local Development Plans, especially given the increasingly complex challenges presented by regulations on phosphates and nitrates. The project also heard of reservations about resources and capacity to deliver a new tier of Strategic Development Plans – with budgets and resources to support strategic plan-making being very limited given the significance of the task. Finally, various sectors important to the functioning of rural areas, such as transport, housing, and agriculture, identify a need for additional resource in coming years to help deliver national policy ambitions on accessibility to services, housing and increased self-sufficiency in food and energy.

Assessment of success of policies, schemes and processes put in place to address the Forces for Change

Planning policies, schemes and processes

This section explores how national-level planning policies in Wales address some of the specific issues facing rural areas. It firstly examines rural areas and rural planning issues in the national development framework Future Wales. It then explores these issues in Planning Policy Wales and some of its supporting technical advice. The material below highlights a detailed national framework of policy and advice to support planning in rural areas.

Future Wales – The National Plan 2040

The Future Wales Outcomes identified by Welsh Government in its National Development Framework specifically highlight rural areas - the second outcome is stated as ‘A Wales where

people live in vibrant rural places with access to homes, jobs and services' (Welsh Government, 2021, p. 55). Several other Future Wales Outcomes support many of the issues and challenges facing rural areas – including tackling health and socio-economic inequalities, supporting the Welsh language, promoting digital connectivity, and promoting the sustainable management of natural resources.

The Future Wales Outcomes are supported by policies – including some policies focused specifically on rural areas. Policies 4 and 5 of Future Wales address rural communities and the economy. The policies focus well on the range of issues facing rural areas – including those explored in the thematic reviews for the Rural Planning in the 2020s project – such as assessing rural needs, delivering age-balanced communities, housing affordability, access to services, and mobility. In summary, Future Wales defines outcomes that recognise the specific needs of rural areas and establishes high-level policies supporting rural communities and the rural economy. The supporting text also recognises the wide range of different types of rural areas and communities in Wales and therefore reflects some of the understanding of different categories of rural areas highlighted in the above section on defining rural Wales. It is nevertheless important to recognise that some of the stakeholders in the Wales roundtable felt strongly that the national policy framework in Wales emphasises cities and towns to the neglect of rural areas – and that rural areas had been neglected in comparison with funding streams also favouring towns and cities.

Planning Policy Wales

Future Wales is a recent addition to the planning framework in Wales. Planning Policy Wales is a long-established vehicle for dissemination of Welsh Government's land-use planning policies. Edition 11 of Planning Policy Wales was published in February 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021b). Planning Policy Wales states that its role "is to ensure that the planning system contributes towards the delivery of sustainable development and improves the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales" (paragraph 1.2). The document is set within the context of the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 and directed to supporting the delivery of sustainable development. Planning Policy Wales promotes the creation of sustainable places through 'placemaking'. The Welsh Government states that '"Placemaking" is a holistic approach to the planning and design of development and spaces, focused on positive outcomes. This approach recognises the distinctiveness of different places, including rural areas and communities. Planning Policy Wales sets out a series of 'national sustainable placemaking outcomes' grouped into five categories. These are generally aligned closely with the promotion of sustainable development as defined in the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015.

A section on placemaking in rural areas recognises some of the additional challenges of delivering on planning policy objectives in rural areas, including in terms of transport accessibility and the location of development. There is regular recognition throughout Planning Policy Wales of the ways in which the distinctive needs of rural areas should be accounted for in local planning policy and decision-making. Planning Policy Wales also specifically enables some exceptions to controls on new dwellings in the countryside – for example, for rural enterprise dwellings, One Planet Development, and affordable housing on rural exceptions sites. Planning Policy Wales was referred to specifically by stakeholders at the Wales roundtable as being deficient in its address of rural planning areas and issues – with rural areas being 'second class citizens' in relation to urban counterparts.

Technical Advice Note 6: Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities

Planning Policy Wales is supported by a series of technical advice notes. Technical Advice Note 6: Planning for Sustainable Rural Communities was published in 2010 and delivers technical advice on a series of rural issues outlined in Planning Policy Wales. Advice focuses on supporting agricultural diversification and supporting the rural economy, various forms of dwellings designed to support rural enterprises, farm continuity, affordable housing, and low-impact development in the form of One Planet Development. There is also advice on supporting development for sustainable agriculture. Separate and detailed practice guidance is also available on One Planet Development as a supplement to Technical Advice Note 6.

Thematic Reviews – in a Wales context

Six thematic reviews have been completed as part of the Rural Planning in the 2020s project addressing different themes closely linked to planning for rural areas. This section examines some of the Wales-specific dimensions linked to these thematic reviews. The section builds on and develops some of the issues highlighted in the earlier sections on the planning policy framework in Wales and its support for planning rural areas.

Community-led and neighbourhood planning

The ‘placemaking’ approach outlined in Planning Policy Wales provides an opportunity to facilitate localised action and initiative, including in rural communities. There has nevertheless been less emphasis in recent years on formalised community-level land-use planning in Wales than in other parts of the United Kingdom and Ireland. In Wales, there has been some take-up of the opportunity for local communities to prepare Place Plans. These have typically been taken up by small towns within rural communities where the Local Planning Authority has been active in promoting consideration of Place Plans. Some Place Plans have subsequently been endorsed or adopted as supplementary planning guidance as a way of giving some degree of weight to community planning activity in planning decisions.

The limited status afforded to Place Plans in comparison with similar community planning activity in England in the form of Neighbourhood Planning, as well as more limited financial and other support, has meant that Place Plan preparation has been limited to certain well-organised communities. There has nevertheless been some preparatory work in supporting Place Plans through the work of Planning Aid Wales, the development of the Understanding Welsh Places initiative by Carnegie UK Trust and the Institute for Welsh Affairs, and the Shape My Town toolkit co-produced by The Design Commission for Wales. These have largely supported proactive communities in exploring the possibility of Place Plan preparation.

In Wales, Place Plans may be adopted as supplementary planning guidance by the relevant LPA when complete. Place Plans in Wales may also adopt a wider scope than Neighbourhood Plans in England, given the lack of formality of process and prescription as to content. Place Plans will nevertheless continue to need to align with the Local Development Plan – and reflect a land-use planning focus - as a means of accruing some weight as supplementary planning guidance. They present much more like the parish planning experiment conducted in England from 2001 which saw 4,000 such Plans produced in the period 2001-2014 and which acted as a wider basis for local priority setting and action (see ACRE 2014; Parker, 2016). We have learned that Place Plans can be prepared successfully by proactive rural communities, often focused on small towns, and that these can be successfully adopted as supplementary planning guidance by LPAs.

Preparation of Place Plans also appears to be most successful when the LPA considers their role carefully as part of the wider Local Development Plan process, with Conwy County Borough Council promoting the use of Place Plans as part of its Local Development Plan activity. Examples where Place Plans have been produced include Crickhowell in the Brecon Beacons,

Welshpool and Mold (Future Generations Commissioner, 2020). The promotion of the concepts of well-being and placemaking in national planning policy in Wales also offers a supportive environment for the further development of Place Plans alongside community planning activity. Some of the constraints on the roll out of Place Plans continues to be the status of the documents produced, especially compared to Neighbourhood Plans in England, and the capacity and resources of both LPAs and community and town councils.

Rural Housing and Community Change

The 'Rural Housing and Community Change' thematic review identified a series of significant housing issues facing rural areas in Wales. These include housing affordability in relation to local earnings, scarcity, and limited housing supply – especially within attractive amenity areas – and localised pressures created by second and holiday homes. These issues take on particular importance given their interrelationship with strategies designed to sustain the Welsh language in rural areas.

The thematic review identified some 'depleting areas' in rural Wales with a decline in the local population, yet also identified areas in Wales characterised as 'exchanging areas' with significant change in the profile of the population, often resulting from a free market in housing alongside supply-side constraints associated with planning for protected areas such as National Parks. Brexit is also noted as enhancing the 'reshoring' potential of second homes which, alongside COVID-19 impacts, has the potential to accelerate second and holiday home ownership in parts of Wales.

There have been recent concerns about significant increases in house prices in rural communities in Wales, although income to house price ratios still appear lower than in many other parts of the United Kingdom. In terms of housing affordability, Wales has a similar ratio of median house price to median gross annual residence-based earning as some parts of England at 6.34 in 2021 as evidenced in ONS data[1] (for example, North West and Yorkshire and the Humber). The ratio for Wales is at its highest since 2007 and follows a period of greater than a decade where the ratio was relatively stable within a range of 5.47-5.78. Ratios in a number of rural counties in Wales are significantly above the Wales average (e.g., 7.71 in Ceredigion, 7.06 in Gwynedd). The address of rural housing supply and affordability in some rural areas is

1 https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/housing/bulletins/housingaffordabilityinenglandandwales/2021

intricately interwoven with considerations of support for the Welsh language and predominantly Welsh-speaking communities. Delivery of housing in rural communities in Wales can therefore be politically contentious. There are also particular constraints on supply of rural housing given the extent of coverage of three National Parks in Wales.

There are planning policies in Wales designed to promote delivery of affordable housing in rural areas, including rural exceptions sites policies, although these tend not to deliver 'at scale'. These policies are restricted in part by landowners not bringing forward land and a decline in support for Rural Housing Enablers. The thematic review identified a reduction in some parts of the UK in the number of houses delivered through rural exception sites – and while research in Wales has explored how to enhance delivery or affordable housing in rural areas through exception sites (RTPI Cymru, 2019), there is still likely to be a limit to the effectiveness of the tool in terms of scale of delivery.

There has also been some experimentation and diversification with other forms of exceptions for rural housing – e.g., for rural enterprises, farm succession, One Planet Development. The One Planet Development planning policy is one of the more innovative of these in terms of rural living and sustainability. Wales has adopted an innovative approach to One Planet Development as a form of Low-impact Development (LID). Maxey (2009, p.8) attributes the following characteristics to LID: locally adaptive, diverse and unique; made from natural, local materials; of an appropriate scale; visually unobtrusive; enhancing biodiversity; based on renewable resources; autonomous in terms of energy, water and waste; increasing public access to open space; generating little traffic; linked to sustainable livelihoods; coordinated by a management plan.

The movement appears to have gained particular traction in Wales, building on a long tradition of embracing alternative technologies and lifestyles. Harris (2019, p.32) notes that since devolution the Welsh Government has looked to deviate from English planning practice, developing models of development that are more embedded in Welsh contexts and connect with particular opportunities for living differently in Wales. Many of its One Planet Developments, supported through the granting of 'exceptions' to standard planning practice, seek different human-nature relationships that protect biodiversity and promote landscape restoration. In the few schemes that have progressed, there has been a focus on new forms of housing development in the open countryside. Indeed, after years of local wrangling, the Welsh Government published a 'One Planet Development' practice guidance note in 2012 (Welsh Government, 2012).

The planning system in Wales has been less inclined to use permitted development (PD) rights to support conversion of agricultural buildings to residential use compared to England. The thematic review identifies a significant number of conversions in rural areas across England using permitted development rights – up to 4,000 units since 2015. The scale of potential delivery in Wales will be more limited yet there may be scope to evaluate whether use of similar permitted development rights could contribute to rural housing supply.

There has recently been an increased focus on revisiting the impacts on rural communities in Wales of concentrations of second and holiday homes. This follows a period of limited policy and legislative change on this issue since the issues were last examined in relation to planning in the early 2000s. The recent exploration of these issues has been prompted by established concerns about sustaining the use of the Welsh language in rural communities and complemented by additional concerns about housing affordability and sustaining the vibrancy of rural communities and economies. Recent research reports have added to the evidence base and explored potential tools for managing the localised impacts of second and holiday homes in communities most affected by these (Brooks, 2021). Welsh Government has now also consulted on potential instruments and actions to help rural communities manage the impacts of second and holiday homes. Some of the stakeholders involved in this project extended a cautious welcome to these proposals – and while there is some uncertainty about how such tools will be implemented and what their impacts will be, there was some support for introducing new tools and assessing their impacts.

The Ecosystem Services Approach

The ecosystem services approach has been embedded in policy approaches in Wales for the best part of a decade (Welsh Government, 2012). Legislative changes in Wales in the past five years, including the introduction of the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015, have promoted enhanced connections between ecosystem services and the concept of well-being. The approach to ecosystem services in Wales also connects well with the full spectrum of the four categorised elements of ecosystem services (see full thematic review). For example, there is a recognition of some of the contributions that upland habitats can make to cultural inspiration, including art and poetry (Natural Resources Wales, 2016).

The Welsh Government, like many others, declared a climate emergency in 2019. Oxfam (2020) in its assessment of an ‘environmental ceiling’ in Wales identifies very significant negative impacts of both climate change-inducing activities and land use change, as well as biodiversity loss – with a clear picture that these need to be tackled urgently if Wales is to work within its

environmental limits. The Natural Resources Wales assessment of biodiversity (Natural Resources Wales, 2021, p. 7) reports that “the overall trend is one of serious decline, reflecting the global situation and internationally recognised nature emergency”. The emphasis then is on biodiversity recovery through more rapid and transformative action, working with the legislative and regulatory framework introduced in the past five years. In the same assessment, concerns are expressed for serious biodiversity loss in Wales, with 1 in 6 species that have been assessed in Wales at risk of extinction.

Land use and soils is defined as one of the eight ‘cross-cutting themes’ in assessing the state of natural resources in Wales. Natural Resources Wales (2021) anticipates a very significant reduction in the extent of best and most versatile (BMV) agricultural land from 2050, principally due to changing water availability. The same report also identifies the need for diversification in agricultural practices and calls for further development of “precision farming, agro-ecological systems, agroforestry, low-impact regular and irregular silvicultural systems and innovative horticultural systems” (p. 10). Some of the additional headline data and projections related to land use and soils include (Natural Resources Wales, 2021):

1. ‘Woodland area in Wales has increased from approximately 303,000 ha in 2010 to approximately 309,000 ha in 2019. This is a positive trend, although it has fallen short of the level of ambition for new woodland creation to tackle the climate emergency during this period’
2. ‘The area of the best and most versatile land is predicted to change from 22 per cent to 9 per cent by 2080 in Wales according to the latest climate change high emissions”

Key drivers in Wales of relevance to land, soils and natural resources include: changing land ownership, including transfers between public and private sectors and the capacity this results in for public bodies to ensure progress towards more sustainable management of natural resources; dependency on export markets for some Welsh agricultural products, including lamb, and agricultural produce more generally, with attendant concerns and uncertainties arising from Brexit; an agricultural sector with a high proportion or small and very small farms; challenges of promoting participation in Agri-environment schemes for reasons including complexity and limited interest in schemes generally (Natural Resources Wales, 2021).

In Wales, tourism supports 10 per cent of the Welsh tourism economy and is actively promoted through Natural Resources Wales Area Statements as they relate to Ecosystem services and tourism, such as the Reconnecting People and Places Statement in mid-Wales. In Northern Ireland, tourism has taken a hit since the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 is exemplary in that it has promoted explicit consideration of the linkages between ecosystems and well-being. This was initially recognised and developed in a first State of Natural Resources Report (Natural Resources Wales, 2016). This work has focused especially on how ecosystems can contribute to the promotion of a resilient Wales, particularly in the context of climate change, as well as across the complete range of well-being goals. This focus on ecosystems and resilience requires 'building healthy functioning ecosystems which support social, economic and ecological resilience'.

Land used for renewable energy development has continued to increase to meet the target of 70 per cent of Wales's electricity consumption from renewable energy sources by 2030 (48 per cent in 2019). (Natural Resources Wales, 2021). The Welsh Government has also promoted One Planet Living and has also used the planning system to enable One Planet Development in rural areas as a way of promoting land-based enterprises and exemplars of living within environmental limits.

Agricultural Transitions and the relationship between rural planning and changes to agricultural practices

The thematic review on agricultural transitions identified that planning systems do not regulate many farming practices – and that the promotion of more sustainable farming practices often lies outside of the statutory planning system. There are some exceptions – for example in planning policies supporting the economic diversification of farm businesses. Future Wales 2040 specifically notes the importance of supporting agricultural diversification in its intended outcomes and high-level policies. A further key social sensitivity is the strong continuing connection between culture and agriculture (Berry, 1996) that is particularly prevalent in deep rural areas, where hamlets and small villages retain a farming base. For example, the prevalence of the Welsh language is higher among the Welsh farming community (Welsh Government, 2019) and language is an important social connector in remote farming-based communities.

Tourism and the Rural Economy

Welsh Government has been promoting growth in the tourism economy across Wales and has

set specific targets for its growth (Welsh Government, 2020). The strategy has been one of increasing the number of overnight visits, increasing visitor yields, and promoting the occupancy capacity that exists outside of peak seasons. There are risks of reliance on domestic visitors. Some areas within rural Wales have developed a focus on outdoor sports activities. Some of the key issues facing the planning system is promoting more accessible locations for tourist activities and reducing reliance on private motor vehicles as a means of accessing tourist facilities. Case Study 9: Moving to a more sustainable tourist economy (Snowdonia National Park/Parc Cenedlaethol Eryri, Wales) in Technical Report 5 highlights some of the acute challenges arising from high numbers of seasonal visitors to tourist attractions, especially in sensitive landscapes.

Rural Mobility, Connectivity and Energy

In Wales, the government is using a value-based approach to systematise an integrated and collaborative approach across policy frameworks. The strategic approach is set out in Future Wales: National Plan 2040 - which replaces the former Wales Spatial Plan (which did not have development plan status) - as a 20-year national development plan for the nation, its National Development Framework (NDF). The NDF is part of the national strategy, Prosperity for All, within the country's strategy to address climate emergencies and contribute to sustainable development and is informed by the pioneering Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015. This Plan divides Wales into four regions - North Wales, Mid Wales, South West Wales and South East Wales - and each region is expected to create SDPs which feed into LDFs. The National Plan also sets out a framework for national large scale infrastructure projects through the Developments of National Significance (DNS) process and identifies National Growth Areas and Regional Growth Areas which will offer greater, connected services (South West, Mid and North Wales). The Plan also aims to promote connected, inclusive and healthy places, which enable "vibrant rural places" with access to homes, jobs and services, promote sustainable travel, and create decarbonised and climate-resilient places with reduced pollution.

Wales also has a series of thematic Plans which fed into the National Plan 2040, including a Transport Strategy (Welsh Government, 2021) and its plan Prosperity for All: A Low Carbon Wales (Welsh Government, 2019). The National Plan 2040 also lists key challenges in line with the Rural Planning in the 2020s project: Climate Change, COVID 19 and a Low-carbon economy. In relation to energy, the National Plan is explicit about the need to meet international climate change targets and to "combat the climate emergency" (Policy 17). It is also supportive of large-scale, on-shore wind – something that our roundtable participants in England argued was missing in the English policy context.

The Natural Resources Policy also sets out how to promote a circular economy and the decarbonisation of the economy through energy and transport choices. The government is actively pursuing Integrated Active Travel Networks, which it will keep under review (see Wales Transport Strategy, 2021c, p.57); it has also produced extensive and detailed guidance relating to the design of sustainable transport user needs in related guidance to accompany the Active Travel (Wales) Act (2013). The Welsh Government further intends to set out how it will deliver enhanced EV provision through its Electric Vehicle Charging Strategy. Wales has a target of 70 per cent of Wales's electricity consumption from renewable energy sources by 2030 (compared to 48 per cent in 2019) (Natural Resources Wales, 2021). However, some national entities such as the Institute for Welsh Affairs (IWA) are calling for Welsh Government to go even further, to deliver 100 per cent energy from renewable sources by 2035 (see Re-energising Wales, IWA, 2019) - including a strengthened community energy sector - amid a stalling renewables sector whereby value is not always accruing to local communities, businesses and the public sector.

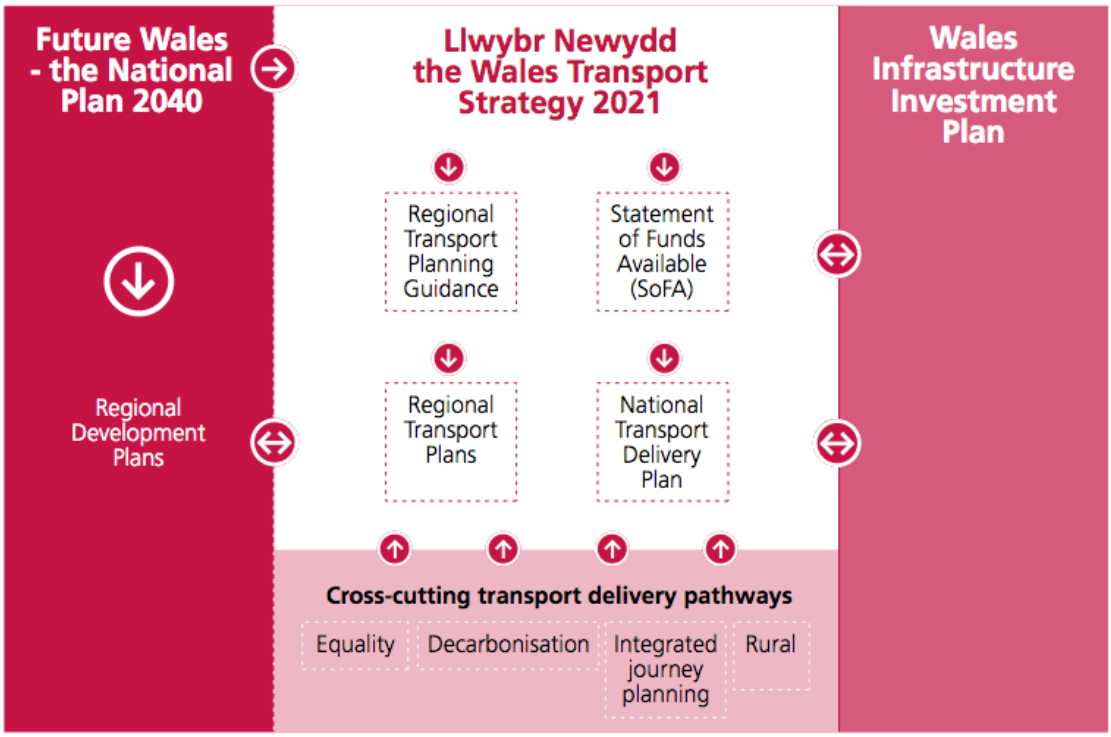

Figure 2 Policy framework for Transport Planning and Delivery in Wales (Wales Transport Strategy, 2021c, p.44)

Fundamentally, the presence of the Ways of Working associated with the Well-being of Future Generations Act 2015 is having a synergistic effect which sews these values through different plans and strategies. The Government is also using the Well-being Goals (related to the Well-

being of Future Generations Act 2015) to shape how to effectively monitor and evaluate the impacts of transport planning in society (see Wales Transport Strategy, Welsh Government, 2021c, p.49). As illustrated in the figure below, these values are reproduced across the Welsh policy landscape, and specifically across 'mini-plans' within the Transport Plan for different transport modes as well as the third sector. The Active Travel Act Guidance (Welsh Government, 2021d).

Figure 3 Example of value-based integration within 'mini-plans' (Bus network, Wales Transport Strategy, 2021c, p. 63).

Conclusion and evaluation

This section concludes with some key points of evaluation on the planning framework in Wales and its approach to supporting effective rural planning:

1. The Welsh Government has in recent years established a strong statutory planning framework focused on plan-making at national, strategic and local levels. Welsh Government has placed sustainable development and place-making at the centre of its policy. There is positive recognition of the distinctiveness or rural areas at each level of the planning framework, including in Future Wales Outcomes and policies.
2. Planning Policy Wales recognises some of the distinctive challenges facing rural communities and economies and Welsh Government has incorporated this into its policy, advice and guidance. There are nevertheless some concerns that the needs of rural areas in Wales are not as well understood or addressed as the needs of urban areas in national planning policies.
3. Some of the policy initiatives in Wales to address rural housing in its various forms have been experimental and innovative. The One Planet Development (OPD) policy has attracted particular interest during this project from other parts of the United Kingdom. Local experience in Wales suggests differing experiences with this policy, with planners suggesting some challenges in managing and dealing with applications.
4. There has been more recent exploration of some of the ways in which some long-standing issues of pressures on rural housing markets in Wales can be addressed, especially in coastal communities impacted by second and holiday homes. There are some reservations and uncertainties about how some of these tools to promote local affordable housing and the sustaining of rural populations will work out. There is nevertheless a sense in which there is some progress and action on these issues.
5. The evaluation of the legislative and policy framework in Wales in supporting rural planning is generally a positive one. This is especially so in placing sustainable development at the centre of the planning system and promoting a placemaking approach. The key challenge is putting in place the resources and capacity to implement policies and deliver the Future Wales Outcomes and national sustainable placemaking outcomes in rural areas and ensure the effective integration of policies and initiatives locally.

National Policy Assessment – England (by John Sturzaker)

Introduction

Town and country planning and rural development are “devolved matters” in the UK, so they differ between the UK nations, with the devolved administrations in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland respectively devising their own approaches. There is no parliament or government for England, so these areas of policy are under the jurisdiction of the UK Government, via various departments. The two most relevant are the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC) and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA). The roles of the latter include devising the *Rural-Urban Classification*[2]. This classification is used to define the extent of rurality both of places, at the scale of census Output Areas and other “small area geographies”[3]; and of local authorities.

Using this classification, the latest statistics used by DEFRA show that in 2020 the population of England was estimated at “56.6 million, of which 9.7 million (17.1 per cent) lived in rural areas and 46.9 million (82.9 per cent) lived in urban areas” (DEFRA 2022, p. 11). Of that 9.7 million people, 5.2 million lived in settlements defined as “Rural Town and Fringe”; and 4.4 million in those defined as “Rural Village and Hamlet”. In this policy assessment, as indeed in the Rural Planning in the 2020s project overall, we have not attempted to provide our own definition of rurality, nor do we necessarily endorse those used by governments. However, in order to attempt to describe and analyse rural areas, it is necessary to use such definitions to contextualise what follows. Hence, using these definitions, we can note some key statistical factors relating to rural England.

The first is that, in common with many other parts of the world, rural England has an ageing population, as illustrated by Figure 4 below which shows 25.4 per cent of the rural population in England are aged 65 and over, compared to 17.1 per cent of the urban population, and the

2 https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/rural-urban-classification
3https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1009128/RUCOA_leaflet_Jan2017.pdf

"more rural" an area is, the larger its proportion of those aged 65 and over (this statistic, and all others unless cited differently, are from DEFRA, 2022). This poses various challenges regarding service delivery. Up to 2020, the populations of rural areas and urban areas were growing at a similar rate. Possible changes as a result of COVID-19 are discussed below.

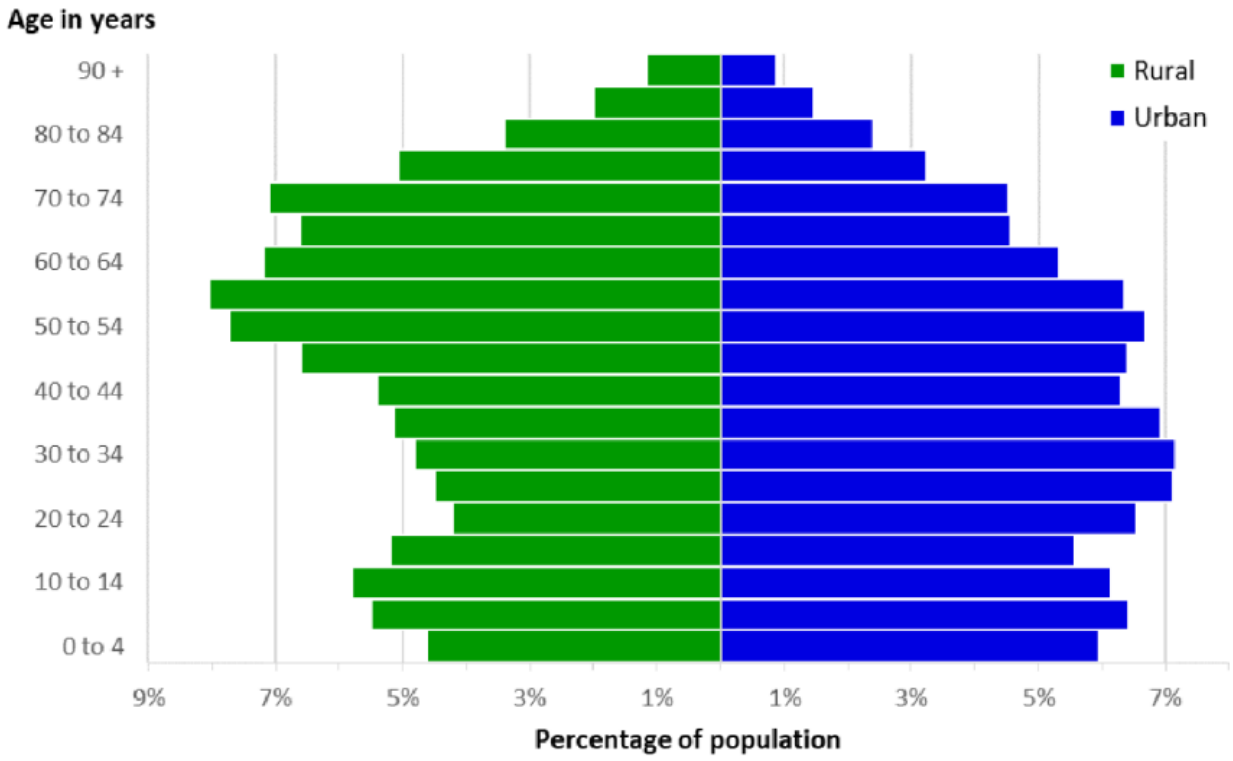

Figure 4 Percentage of population within age bands by rural-urban classification in England, 2020 (Source: Defra, 2022, p. 12)

The second factor relates to the economy of rural England. Unemployment and economic inactivity are lower in rural areas than urban areas, but the dynamics of labour and housing markets result in some particular features of the rural economy, including that "in 2020 average residence-based earnings were lower than workplace-based earnings in urban areas, whilst average residence-based earnings in rural areas are higher than workplace-based earnings because people living in rural areas may work in urban areas in higher paid jobs" (DEFRA, 2022, p. 35). A significantly larger proportion of workers in rural areas worked from home, even prior to COVID-19 in rural areas – 25 per cent compared to 16 per cent in urban areas. Rural areas have a lower Gross Value Added (GVA) per workforce jobs than do urban areas, but there are more businesses per head, and proportionately more small businesses, in rural areas than urban.

The third factor is the accessibility and connectivity of rural areas. People living in the most rural areas "travelled almost twice as far per year than those in the most urban areas (DEFRA, 2022, p. 75). A significantly larger proportion of these journeys was made using a private car (87 per cent compared to 67 per cent in the most urban areas); and a smaller proportion of rural households have no access to a car (10 per cent compared to 27 per cent in urban areas). For that 10 per cent, of course, this lack of access may result in significant challenges with access to services – for example, secondary school pupils in the most rural parts of England have an average trip of 7.6 miles to get to school, compared to 2.9 miles in the most urban; and less than 50 per cent of rural villages, hamlets and isolated dwellings have easy access to a good bus service. In terms of broadband connectivity, 10 per cent of premises in mainly rural areas did not have access to superfast broadband in 2020, compared to 3 per cent in urban areas.

Fourthly, looking at housing and deprivation in rural England, there is a higher proportion of second homes in rural areas than urban – around two per cent compared to below one per cent. As discussed in the main body of the report, these figures are much higher in some places, and have increased rapidly in recent years (see below). Excluding London, housing affordability is worse in rural areas than urban, in part due to the earnings discrepancy noted above and in part due to demand from second and holiday homeowners and retirees. In general, the more rural an area, the less affordable housing is, with the ratio of lower quartile house price to lower quartile gross annual residence-based earnings as high as 9 in the most rural areas, compared to 5.5 in some urban areas (i.e., a household would need a mortgage of 9 multiples of their income to afford a house, compared to 5.5. multiples). Relative and absolute poverty is lower in rural areas than urban areas, as is fuel poverty[4], but the fuel poverty gap[5] is much higher in the most rural areas - £585 compared to the England average of £216. This is because "Homes in rural areas are typically less energy efficient and can be more reliant on potentially more expensive heating fuels" (DEFRA, 2022, p. 145) such as oil or Liquefied Petroleum Gas (LPG).

Finally, and ending this section on a positive note, on most factors relating to health and well-being, rural areas perform better than urban areas in England. Life expectancy is higher; infant mortality is lower; reported life satisfaction is higher and anxiety lower; reported rates of loneliness are lower; satisfaction with the local area as a place to live is higher, as are

4 Fuel Poverty is defined as: "where a household is living in a property with a fuel poverty energy efficiency rating of band D or below in a home that cannot be kept warm at reasonable cost without bringing their residual income below the poverty threshold" (Defra, 2022, p. 145).
5 Defined as: "the additional income which would be needed to bring a household to the point of not being fuel poor" (Defra, 2022, p. 145).

volunteering rates; and average crime rates are lower.

In relation to some of the factors briefly summarised here, the Forces for Change we have used in this project are having, or may have, particular effects in rural England. In the next section we analyse these interactions.

Rural England-specific - Forces for Change

Brexit

As noted in the Agricultural Transitions thematic review in Technical Report 1, the post-Brexit scheme for financial support for agriculture in the UK is still being finalised. However, the Agriculture Act 2020 gives three option themes as part of the new environmental land management schemes (ELMS):

1. Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), launched in October 2021 with three payment levels – basic, intermediate and advanced levels of ambition – to assist the adoption of progressively advanced environmentally friendly agricultural practices in part or all of a landholding
2. Local Nature Recovery (LNR), to be piloted from 2022 and to be available for multiple landowners to participate in a recovery project in a given area
3. Landscape Recovery (LR), also to be piloted from 2022 to assist with large-scale environmental projects

The evidence from our roundtables is that all these options, but particularly the second and third, will require a different approach to planning for agricultural development than is currently the norm in England. We return to this below.

COVID-19

Our roundtables highlighted various ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic had, and continues to have, impacts in relation to rural planning. There was acknowledged uncertainty about the long-term trends, but broad consensus that some of the changes to living and working habits will remain in the medium term at least.

As noted above, population growth in rural areas of England has been at similar levels as in urban areas in recent years. There may be pressure for more population growth in some rural areas as a consequence of COVID-19 but constraints on the housing market in rural areas, a policy approach in place over many years and maintained in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF), currently limit the extent to which this growth can happen.

A particular impact of COVID-19 on planning was identified, a consequence of the greater levels of homeworking seen during/since the pandemic. Local Planning Authority (LPA) planners reported that this had led to more enquiries about potentially unauthorised development, as people have observed things happening whilst they were at home during the day, and due to working at home may be less tolerant of noise, etc. from construction work. This is presumably not unique to rural areas, but the resource challenges noted below in relation to rural LPAs make it particularly challenging for them.

As widely reported, the pandemic led to more people seeking to utilise green spaces, including in rural areas, during the pandemic (see the Green Infrastructure and Nature Recovery Networks thematic review in Technical Report 1 for a more detailed discussion). Our roundtable participants confirmed that, whilst some of the more intensive peaks in usage may have abated, there was a noticeable increase in rural tourism, particularly in hotspots such as National Parks (although a non-English context, our Case Study 9: Moving to a more sustainable tourist economy (Snowdonia National Park/Parc Cenedlaethol Eryri, Wales) in Technical Report 5 illustrates some of the challenges around this that are also shared by National Parks in England, and some tentative measures the planning system can use to mitigate the impacts on rural communities).

A specific issue around the growth in demand for domestic tourism, often in rural areas, is the pressure on LPAs to accept change from ‘traditional’ campsites to different forms of accommodation, including more provision of pitches for campervans, or ‘glamping’ options. These changes are often controlled through conditions on planning applications, with LPAs in

several places reporting pressure to accept such changes, with the concomitant change to the market served, but some were resisting this.

Our roundtable participants reported that the pressures of Brexit and COVID-19 together on supply chains have led to a demand for more seasonal workers in agricultural businesses in some regions, notably the greater South East. This in turn leads to a requirement for more accommodation for these workers. Given the time which it can take for rural planning authorities to process planning applications, in some cases these workers are being accommodated in tourism accommodation, in turn placing more demand on that sector.

Climate Change and the Countryside as a site for adaptation

The Agricultural Transitions, Green Infrastructure and Nature Recovery Networks, and Ecosystem Services thematic reviews in Technical Report 1 discuss in some depth the impacts of climate change on those sectors and land uses, and our roundtables provided vivid illustrations of the consequences for rural communities. Many of these impacts are negative, for example flooding and extreme weather events causing loss of livestock and crops, and damaging sensitive landscapes and designated areas, with in some instances planning permission being required for interventions to adapt to the greater frequency of these events.

We also heard, however, about the scope for rural areas to play an ever-greater role in the mitigation of, and adaptation to, climate change. The thematic reviews again discuss these issues in depth, but examples include the use of land as a carbon sink; greater and different forms of renewable energy production (wind, solar, biofuels, hydro); natural flood management, whether by planting trees or allowing land to return to its role as a flood plain. Many of these changes can have significant impacts on the landscape, biodiversity and/or local people, and require planning permission, and we heard from several roundtable participants that current policy and interpretation thereof may not always be well set up to consider the advantages and disadvantages in a holistic manner.

A particularly specific example was that some roundtable participants noted that climate change was leading to changes in crops which could be grown across England, which in turn might require different buildings or other practices. This might be reflected in the need for polytunnels, sometimes approved with conditions requiring them to be removed outside of the traditional season for a given crop, to remain in situ all year, and we heard about the reluctance of some LPAs to accept this.

Resources

The particular issues for rural LPAs as a result of reductions in resources due to austerity were highlighted through our roundtables. These include the pressures on already small teams of planners in rural local authorities (perhaps three planning officers in some instances); the significantly larger geographical area of rural planning authorities, and the demands of site visits in these contexts (at least one mentioned that this might mean a site visit might take a whole day); the added complexity of planning in rural LPAs, including for example landscape constraints and now BNG and related approaches; the reduction in staffing of non-statutory teams such as landscape/ecology officers meaning that planning officers in rural authorities are having to deal with BNG and other related matters without the necessary training/skills; in many rural local authorities enforcement and monitoring is particularly under-staffed, so the scope for checking on approaches such as BNG in practice is limited;

In this section we have highlighted several of the ways the Forces for Change have impacted upon rural areas in England. In the final section of this document, we assess how existing policies, etc. are addressing the Forces for Change at present, and identify some areas where changes may be needed.

Assessment of success of policies, schemes and processes put in place to address the Forces for Change

This section is structured around several themes, derived from, and in some cases pulling together issues from several of our thematic reviews.

Rural housing

The Rural Housing thematic review in Technical Report 1 examined current planning policy

approaches and identified several possible changes to help address the shortages in available housing in many rural parts of rural England. These were discussed in the Rural Housing roundtable, and below we summarise some of this discussion.

1. *Facilitate the provision of additional private housing, through national and local flexibilities in policy and practice.* This is clearly a contentious issue, with no consensus amongst participants as to whether additional private housing was desirable – a decision of course for LPAs, guided by the requirements in the NPPF to deliver a five-year supply of housing land. One argument for more private housing is the post-2014 NPPF/Planning Practice Guidance (PPG) policy of a higher, 10 dwelling, threshold on sites from which LPAs can apply requirements for affordable housing provision. As has been argued by various rural stakeholders since, and before 2014, a 10-dwelling threshold means much housing development in rural areas does not deliver any affordable housing through planning gain, a perverse situation given these, as noted above, are the areas with the largest problems of affordability.
2. *Facilitate the provision of additional public and third sector housing, through a combination of planning flexibilities and national support*. The situation in relation to planning gain means, as discussed at some length in the Rural Housing thematic review, that rural exception sites are the only way to deliver affordable housing in many rural communities, and that this form of delivery has fallen by a third in the five years to 2022. The Rural Housing roundtable felt that the First Homes Exception Site policy[6] has reduced the number of other forms of affordable housing being delivered.
3. *Support Community-led housing, including through the system of Neighbourhood Planning.* Several participants in the Housing and Community Change roundtable observed that there was an under-representation of households in need of affordable housing in policy-making, at every scale including Neighbourhood Planning. This can mean that other priorities or interests dominate decision-making
4. *Use Permitted Development Rights to advance the conversion of farm buildings to residential use*. There were strong opinions on the use of Class Q amongst our roundtable participants. Essentially, those from the private sector argued that the use of Class Q was a strongly positive planning policy, allowing flexibility for rural businesses; whilst local authorities were concerned at the loss of rural buildings for economic use. A change to Class Q to require delivery of affordable housing or community-led housing, as suggested in the Rural Housing thematic review, might provide a way forward that retains some flexibility for landowners but ensures community benefits.
5. *Restrict the occupancy of new housing to full-time residents and seek to restrict the*

6 See: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/first-homes

conversion of existing homes to second home use. The proposed introduction of restrictions of this sort in Wales received general support in our roundtables, and we suggest the UK Government watch with interest to observe how the restrictions work in practice.

6. *Where appropriate, support alternative forms of low-impact development (LID) through the planning system*. Case Study 3: Supporting Low-impact development though exceptional planning rules (Lammas One Planet Living Development, Wales) and Thinkpiece: One Planet Development, Wales (by James Shorten) – both in Technical Report 5 - illustrate the scope for such approaches to make a positive contribution to rural communities. A recurring theme in the roundtables was the need to consider the sustainability of proposed development in a more rounded way, moving away from the approach often dubbed the "sustainability trap".

Transport and Connectivity

The Transport, Connectivity and Energy thematic review in Technical Report 1 identifies several key aspects of transport planning policy, including paragraphs 104-113 of the NPPF, related to sustainable transport, and the National Model Design Code, which includes measures aimed at decarbonising transport. Reintroduced Local Transport Plans are also part of the policy response, and there are various other policy documents focussed upon Decarbonising Transport. However, there are challenges around the integration between planning and transport across England, particularly in rural areas (see the Transport, Connectivity and Energy thematic review). Our roundtable participants supported the idea that these policy areas needed to be better integrated, particularly in two-tier authorities, where transport planning is led by county councils as opposed to LPAs. Further challenges in rural England relate to the limited provision of public transport, with commercial realities suggesting it is unlikely to ever be an effective alternative for some proportion of rural communities. Participants in our North West/North East England roundtable specifically discussed the issues of integrated rural transport, in terms of buses and how services could be provided and integrated into the wider public transport system in the area. Case Study 5: Decarbonisation through more sustainable transport (Cornwall, South West England) is an excellent example of one solution to this at a large scale, as is Case Study 16: The Haltwhistle Partnership and Our Future Towns at a much smaller scale (both of these cases are in Technical Report 5).

Energy

Various specific issues relating to energy policy came up in the roundtables. As noted in the introduction to this assessment, the fuel poverty gap is much higher in rural than urban areas, a situation worsened by the situation in Ukraine and recent rises in energy prices. The contribution made by rural areas to alternative energy sources is therefore very significant to reducing both national and local energy costs.

At the time of writing, the UK Prime Minister (leader of the Conservative party) had recently proposed a loosening of existing restrictions on planning permissions for onshore wind, introduced (by the Conservative party) in 2015, through the NPPF (currently Footnote 54). Our roundtables highlighted these restrictions as seriously limiting the opportunities for more renewable energy provision in rural England, but after opposition from within his party, it seems the Prime Minister has decided not to loosen them (see Mason et al., 2022).

Beyond this specific policy on onshore wind turbines, the NPPF is broadly positive towards renewable energy provision, including solar farms. Our roundtables identified the scope for solar farms to co-exist with other land uses, e.g., grazing, as a positive feature, and illustrative of the multiple functions which rural land can sustain. To encourage different forms of renewable energy, it was suggested at the South East England roundtable that nationally-derived targets for renewable energy provision, akin to the standard methodology for establishing “objectively assessed need” for housing, should be introduced.

Roundtable participants in the private sector reported that in recent months they had seen a sharp increase in interest in small scale renewable energy schemes for the first time since Feed in Tariffs were removed in 2019. They also, however, noted challenges around connectivity of any new provision of energy, renewable or otherwise, into the National Grid – this has planning implications, as many forms of connectivity require planning permission. Case Study 13: Bridport Cohousing Microgrid, Hazlemead, Dorset in Technical Report 5 illustrates challenges and opportunities at the local scale.

Agricultural Transitions, the Environment and Biodiversity Net Gain

The current approach to planning for agriculture is essentially still that instituted by the 1947 Town & Country Planning Act and accompanying legislation, i.e., one which in general removes agricultural development from the remit of the planning system. A number of roundtable participants argued that this bifurcated approach is particularly unsuited to innovative approaches to land management such as nature and landscape recovery; and that land use and environmental planning needed to be integrated. The RTPI argues for this approach in England, through *Local Environment Improvement Plans* (see RTPI, 2021b), and Case Study 12: The Food Farming and Countryside Commission Land Use Framework (in Technical Report 5) approach is similar.

The concept of Regenerative Farming (discussed in Case Study 15: Post-Brexit environmental incentives (ELMS trials and regenerative farming in North East and West England) in Technical Report 5) received considerable discussion at more than one roundtable, and the difference of this approach to traditional agriculture. Again, the consensus was that for these approaches to succeed, planning would need to adapt and recognise that traditional understandings of what agriculture is, as reflected in policy and guidance, may need to change.

The increasing number and scale of areas affected by Natural England's withdrawal of support for development where phosphate/nitrate pollution might impact on designated sites was identified as a major, and unsustainable, limit on development in a number of areas.

Community planning

As noted in the thematic review on Community-led and Neighbourhood Planning in Technical Report 1, an increasing number of Neighbourhood Plans are now in place in England, but evidence as to their innovation, i.e., going beyond local plans, remains scant. Opinions differed in our roundtable on Community-led and Neighbourhood Planning on the extent to which the Neighbourhood Planning system in England was fit-for-purpose – some felt Neighbourhood Plans should be lighter touch, as per DLUHC's ongoing trial; others felt the statutory weight afforded to them was essential, and any dilution of this was inappropriate. Conversely, others referred to the holistic nature of the Parish Plan approach as being more helpful than the narrow, land-use focus of Neighbourhood Plans, suggesting that such integration of land-use and other forms of planning was more appropriate in rural areas.

Green Infrastructure planning and Ecosystem Services

Our thematic reviews on these topics go into considerable detail on policy support for innovative approaches to rural land use, and our combined roundtable on these themes provided plentiful evidence of their scope for positive change, but a recurring theme was that the English planning system was not in its current form well-structured for supporting such innovation. At present the fact that environmental governance tends to sit within DEFRA's remit (including for example the 2018 25-Year Environment Plan (DEFRA, 2018)), with tensions reported by roundtable participants between DEFRA and DLUHC, can lead to poor integration.

A specific example discussed was the challenges around implementing the new BNG approach, as has been covered extensively elsewhere. Our roundtable participants were in agreement that BNG was a positive addition to tools for integrating land use and environmental planning, but greatly concerned at the expertise and workload implications of it.

Integrated approaches such as the Land Use Framework pilots mentioned above, and discussed in Case Study 12 in Technical Report 5, were seen to have the potential to bring transformative change to rural areas, but at present these are small in scale and require significant efforts to bring together the fragmented governance approach referred to here.

The Planning profession

Several times in our roundtables, non-planners expressed the view that there is a lack of rural planning expertise in LPAs. They ascribed this to several factors, including the difficulty in attracting and retaining staff in rural LPAs, which might not be seen as "cool enough" for graduates to work in (or affordable enough) – some LPAs are now paying supplements to attract staff; presence of urban-raised and trained planning officers in rural LPAs and the lack of rural planning content in (RTPI-accredited) planning schools.

National Policy Assessment – Scotland (by Leslie Mabon)

Introduction

The purpose of this policy assessment is to provide an overview of the main drivers for change facing rural communities and rural planning in Scotland; outline the Scottish planning system and other relevant policy areas with potential to drive rural planning; and evaluate the effectiveness or otherwise to date of these policy areas with reference to scholarly, policy and news media sources. We examine how the Forces of Change - COVID-19, Brexit, climate change and the idea of the rural as a site for innovation - have played out in rural Scotland. We then outline the Scottish planning system and provide an inventory of other relevant policy areas. We then explore how the current state of play across the thematic areas of rural housing; community planning; ecosystem services; agriculture; tourism; and transport, connectivity and energy.

Figure 5 Scottish Government Urban-Rural Classification (Gov.Scot, 2018)

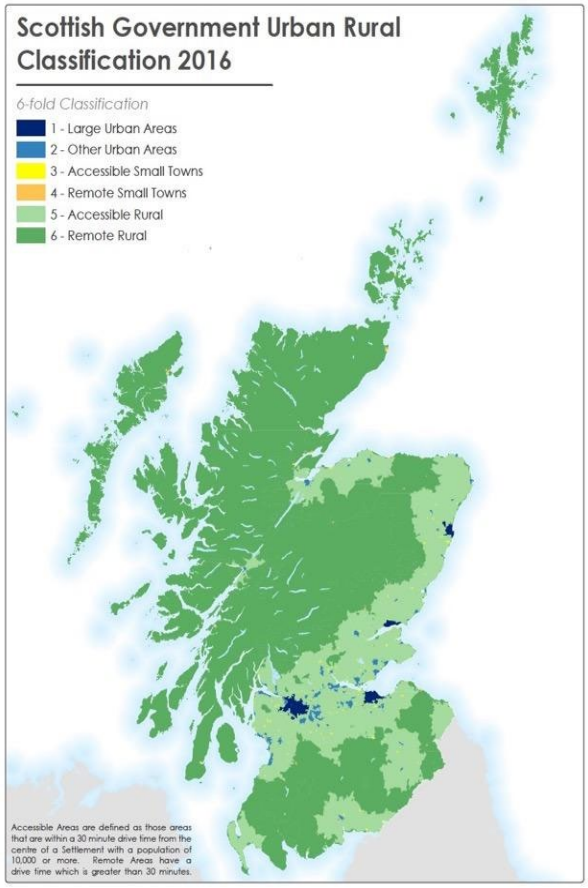

Figure 5 shows how Scotland is divided across the urban-rural gradient. Several factors are worth pointing out from this figure. First is that many of the 'remote rural' areas in Scotland are also island communities, which poses additional planning challenges over and above those faced by rural communities elsewhere in the UK. Second is that there is heterogeneity within what may be considered 'rural', including smaller towns. These different gradients of rurality may face different planning challenges. Third, whilst rurality in Scotland is often associated with the north and north-west of the country, as the Figure shows there are significant areas of 'remote rural' in regions such as Dumfries and Galloway which may have significant planning support requirements, but which perhaps do not get the policy or media attention of Highland and Island rural communities.

Remote rural communities make up 6 per cent of Scotland's population, and accessible rural communities 11 per cent. Both remote and accessible rural communities have a higher proportion of people aged over 55, as shown in Figure 6.

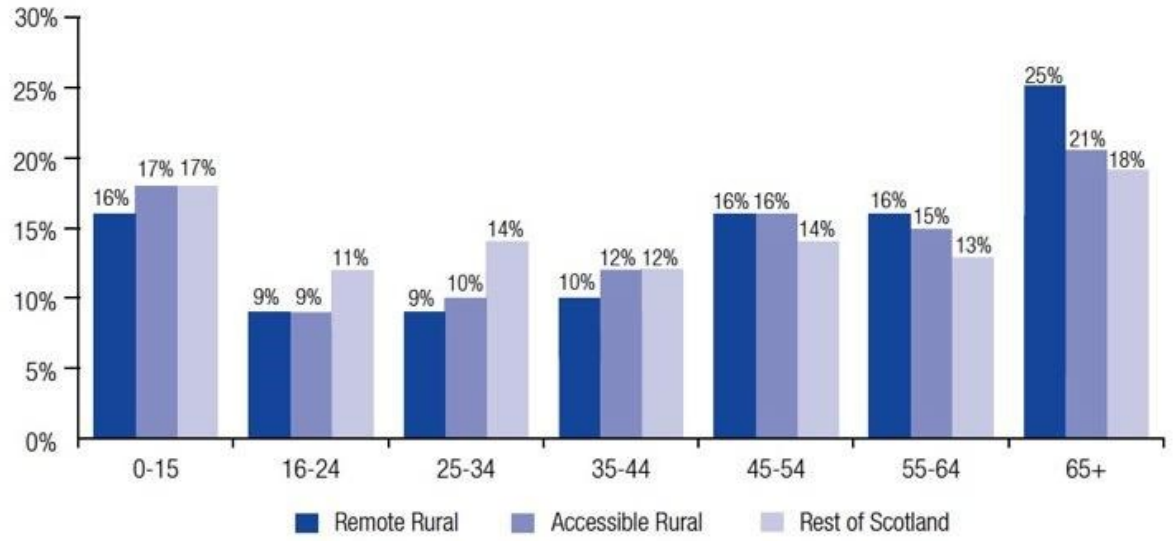

Figure 6 Age distribution of population by geographic area (Gov.Scot, 2018)

Forces for Change

COVID-19

There remains a need for planning interventions to enhance the resilience of rural communities to deal with continuing, fluctuating impact of COVID-19 (including future waves or variants and managing the removal of restrictions). The Scottish Government has stated that it has placed a 'well-being economy' which prioritises well-being rather than narrow measures of economic growth at the heart of its COVID-19 recovery strategy (Scottish Government, 2020). The need for robust interventions and responses to COVID-19 is even greater in rural contexts, which in Scotland have higher proportions of elderly people and/or people living in poverty and have disproportionately faced a burden from the negative impacts of COVID in terms of infections, health outcomes and economic impacts (Kulu & Dorey, 2020). The effects of COVID-19 on rural communities have, however, received less attention in public discourse than their urban counterparts.

In a review of impacts of COVID-19 on Scotland's rural and island communities, researchers from the James Hutton Institute noted a breadth of impacts specific to Scotland's rural communities (Currie et al, 2022). It was noted that rural communities are facing burnout post-COVID; that the rural economy needs to be more diverse to remain resilient to future shocks; that a switch to more digital forms of communication has enabled greater participation from rural communities (albeit with concern over digital divides); and broad support for Scottish Government responses to COVID-19 for rural communities. It was also acknowledged, however, that many of the mental health and economic impacts of COVID-19 on Scotland's rural communities may take time to manifest themselves fully.

Brexit

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) in 2019 produced an advice paper on environmental governance in Scotland, with a strong emphasis on implications post-Brexit (RSE, 2019). Whilst environmental policies in Scotland relevant to rural areas – especially for areas such as agriculture, aquaculture, and fisheries which are major drivers of Scotland's rural economy - remain aligned with EU Directives at present, the RSE expressed concern that the loss of independent oversight by the EU Commission presents a significant challenge to ensuring the maintenance of environmental standards, as there is currently no body in the UK or Scotland that could replace the independent, supranational scrutiny and assessment role of the EU Commission. The RSE also noted that post-Brexit, development and agreement of common frameworks on the environment between the UK and Scottish Governments is crucial as and when new regulatory bodies are set up post-Brexit; and expressed concern about the loss of Scotland-EU research mobility and collaboration post-Brexit on the creation and sharing of science-based evidence on best practice in areas relevant to the rural such as food, agriculture, land use, forestry, water, climate, soils, health, rural economy, communities, animal and plant disease and biodiversity.

In terms of the rural economy, Brexit has presented multiple challenges for Scotland's rural communities. These have included a loss of workers in sectors such as hospitality and land-based industries, with the Isle of Mull-based Ethical Shellfish Company citing a loss of European national workforce post-Brexit as one of the reasons why they decided their business could no longer be viable in April 2022 (Ethical Shellfish Company, 2022). It has also been claimed that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund – the UK Government-administered replacement for the European Social Fund and European Regional Development Fund – falls short of completely replacing the previous EU funds which were critical to bringing infrastructural developments such as the University of the Highlands and Islands and the European Marine Energy Centre in Orkney (Roger, 2022). Island communities in Scotland have been particularly hard hit by Brexit,

losing £20m of EU funding in the first year of Brexit, however it has also been argued that Brexit has only served to intensify and worsen existing pressures relating to the rural economy, jobs and transportation (Jeffay, 2022).

Climate change

The main climate threats faced by rural communities in Scotland include increased frequency and severity of riverine flooding (as seen with the flooding faced by Ballater in Aberdeenshire over 2015-16); stronger and more regular extreme storms and associated damage to power lines, communications and transportation infrastructure (as seen with the series of storms which hit northern Scotland over early 2022); potential for coastal erosion due to sea level rise; and impacts on farming, fisheries, forestry and aquaculture from rising temperatures, changing weather patterns, and ocean acidification.

A commentary on climate justice published ahead of COP26 in the Scottish Geographical Journal notes that Scotland arguably has a favourable governance and legislative landscape for climate action that reduces risk to marginalised groups, especially in rural areas. The commentary notes that Scotland's place-making agenda[7] may be of particular value in supporting climate responses for marginalised communities, given its links to climate change adaptation and its partnership ethos in managing complexity; but that in rural areas, climate justice can interplay with issues of land ownership and environmental conservation, meaning these issues need to be considered holistically (Mabon et al., 2020). Indeed, as outlined above and also later on in this summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has served only to highlight the complex and inter-related challenges faced by Scotland's rural communities in responding to shocks and stresses (Kulu and Dorey, 2020; Jeffay, 2022), which may not be readily apparent in more urban-focused climate justice research and practice to date.

Thus far, structured planning for climate change adaptation has focused on Scotland's city regions, however in early 2022 of Highland Adapts[8] was launched as a climate change adaptation programme to link communities, businesses, land managers and public sector actors. Highland Adapts represents a major initiative to plan for climate change adaptation in a predominately rural region of Scotland. Similar initiatives in recent years such as the development of community resilience programmes in the Scottish Borders (see e.g., Fazey et

7 See: https://www.placestandard.scot/ and Case Study 10: Engaging communities in assessing ecosystem services and broader place value (Scotland) – the Talking About Our Place toolkit in Technical Report 5.
8 See: https://highlandadapts.scot/

al., 2021) illustrate a growing commitment from central and local governments in Scotland to developing partnerships for adapting to the impacts of climate change.

Countryside as a site for adaptation and innovation

Scotland's response to the climate crisis presents potential opportunities for innovation in the countryside. There is acknowledgement at national government level of the imperative to understand the jobs opportunities associated with Scotland's climate response. This interest is reflected in the establishment of a Just Transition Commission, tasked with (among other goals) advising on how Scotland can plan and implement a transition to environmentally and socially sustainable jobs, building on the strengths in Scotland's workforce (Just Transition Commission, 2021). Skills Development Scotland have also produced a climate emergency skills action plan (Skills Development Scotland, 2020) with the goal of identifying opportunities and challenges to developing new, quality green jobs associated with Scotland's response to the climate emergency.

Skills Development Scotland (2020) categorise jobs under the climate emergency as fitting into: new and emerging jobs (e.g., technologies and actions that did not exist previously); jobs affected by transitions that will need enhanced skills e.g., architects, environmental consultants; and existing jobs that will be needed in greater numbers. The Green Jobs Taskforce Report (2021) identifies jobs and innovation opportunities in each of the following categories:

1. New and emerging jobs: engineering for resilient infrastructure; construction and environmental monitoring; or adaptation finance (insurance and green bonds). Also, adaptation jobs and skills for existing sectors such as housing and construction, water, infrastructure, local government, and nature conservation;
2. Jobs affected by transitions that will need enhanced skills: heating and cooling (need to consider heat pump installation alongside wider measures for energy efficiency).
3. Existing jobs that will be needed in greater numbers: building retrofit sector, to make buildings able to cope with conditions for which they were not designed.

Rural planning: policy and practice

The Scottish planning system

An overview of the structure of the Scottish planning system is as follows:

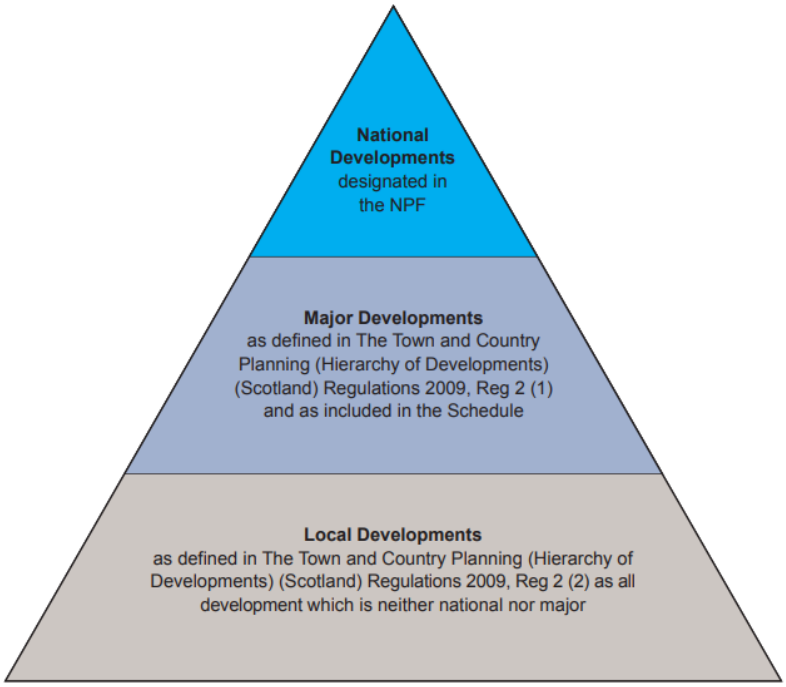

Figure 7 The structure of the Scottish planning system (Source: Scottish Government, 2009)

Table 1 national and sub-level organisation and planning instruments

Level	Organisation	Instruments
National	Minister for Public Finance, Planning and Community Wealth Cabinet Secretary for Rural	Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 National Planning Framework: Scotland 2045

	Affairs and Islands Minister for Environment and Land Reform	
Local	Planning Authorities (32 council areas)	Local Development Plans Strategic development plans (cover four largest city-regions – Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh Glasgow – and deal with region-wide issues crossing boundaries of council areas) Supplementary guidance (e.g., development briefs and master plans for sites and small areas) Local place plans: a new right for communities to produce their own plans, containing the community's proposals for the development and use of land. Enables communities to feed ideas and proposals into the planning system Open space strategies

Each council area in Scotland is covered by a local development plan, which sets out where most new developments are proposed and the policies that will guide decision-making on planning applications. The National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) was laid in Scottish Parliament on 10 November 2021 and is currently under consideration. This was supported by a public consultation period which closed at the end of March 2022. Regulations and guidance for implementing the future Local Development Planning system are also in draft, with the public consultation period closing at the end of March.

Table 2 Legislation and policy areas with potential to drive or influence rural planning

Policy domain	Key national policy/legislation	Lead national government division
Spatial planning	National Planning Framework 4 (NPF4) (draft 2022) Local Development Planning Regulations and Guidance (draft 2022)	Local Government and Communities
Climate change	Scotland's 2018-2032 Climate Change Plan Scotland's Climate Change Adaptation Programme: 2019 to 2024	Energy and Climate Change
Energy	Scottish Energy Strategy	Energy and Climate Change
Biodiversity	Scottish Biodiversity Strategy	NatureScot
Community empowerment	Community Empowerment Act (2015)	Local Government and Communities
Land use and land reform	Third Land Use Strategy 2021-2026 Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016	Environment and Forestry; Agriculture and Rural Economy
Agriculture	Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) (during EU transition period) Good Food Nation Policy	Agriculture and Rural Economy
Economy	National Economic Transformation Strategy	Finance and the Economy
Forestry	Scotland's Forestry Strategy 2019-2029	Scottish Forestry Forestry and Land Scotland
Marine	Scotland's National Marine Plan (includes aquaculture, coastal fisheries, and offshore renewables)	Marine Scotland

Tourism	Tourism Scotland 2030	Culture and Major Events
Transport	National Transport Strategy	Transport Scotland

Assessment of how well policies respond to thematic areas and Forces for Change

Rural housing and community change

The Planning (Scotland) Act of 2019 makes increasing the population of rural Scotland an outcome that should be addressed by the National Planning Framework: Scotland 2045. Pressure on affordable housing arises in rural areas due to strong demand for buying for short-term lets (e.g., Airbnb) and second homes has the dual effect of raising property values and selling prices (with properties often selling for 10-20% over the asking price (Cox 2022)), thereby pricing younger locally-based buyers out of the market, and also reducing the availability of long-term stable rentals. In response, the Town and Country Planning (Short-Term Let Control Areas) (Scotland) Regulations 2021 enables a planning authority to designate all or part of its area as a short-term let control area. A Short-term Let Control Area is not a ban on short-term lets *per se* but allows planning policies to be used to assess applications which change the use of a property to a short-term let and allow communities and individuals the right to make representations through the planning process. Similarly, the short-term lets licencing scheme means that all short-term let properties in Scotland will have to be licenced to ensure safety and suitability. Local authorities must establish a licensing scheme by 1 October 2022, and existing hosts and operators must apply for a licence by 1 April 2023.

Scotland also faces a shortage of skilled workers in the construction sector in rural areas, especially on island communities. This results in long lead-in times for new-builds and for maintenance or upgrading of older properties. Anecdotal evidence suggests this shortage of construction workers may be exacerbated by the lack of affordable housing in rural Scotland as outlined above. Similarly, long lead-in times, high costs and complicated procedures for applying for subsidies and support for installation of energy-efficient or net-zero technologies. This runs the risk of new technologies such as heat pumps being delivered first and foremost to already affluent and engaged households, and not to lower-income or more vulnerable households who may benefit most from such interventions.

There is also limited availability of housing association or social housing, and complexities associated with self-builds. There is growing interest in and awareness of the potential for community-led housing initiatives to fill this gap. Rural Housing Scotland, for instance, have worked with communities across Scotland to support community-led housing projects.

The Community Empowerment Act (2015) in Scotland gives greater potential for communities to buy land, acquire property, and initiate community planning partnerships. However, it is vital to ensure that – in rural communities in particular – there are people with the skills, time and expertise to be able to realise the potential of community-led planning and housing, and that community organisations are appropriately supported with access to funding and to knowledge and expertise.

Community-led and neighbourhood planning

As above, the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act (2015) gives greater potential for communities to buy land, acquire property, and initiate community planning partnerships. Government Guidance on the implementation of the Act defines community planning as “how public bodies work together and with the local community to plan for, resource and provide or secure the provision of services which improve local outcomes in a local authority area, with a view to reducing inequalities” (Scottish Government, 2015, p.4). The Community Empowerment Act requires community planning partnerships to publish a Community Plan (covering the whole community planning partnership area); and a Neighbourhood Plan for smaller areas (population less than 30,000) in the authority which experience the poorest outcomes.

The Planning (Scotland) Act 2019 introduced provision for Local Place Plans. Local Place Plans give communities an opportunity to develop proposals for the development and use of land in the place where they live, and to feed these into the planning process. Local Place Plans must be prepared by a Community Body; be a proposal as to the development or use of land; and fulfil the necessary legal requirements. Local Place Plans are an emerging area, with regulations to support preparation, submission and registration of Local Place Plans coming into force on 22 January 2022.

In the context of planning for resilience to climate change, Baxter (2019) finds that the success of community planning initiatives in Scotland rests on the ability of the partnership to understand

local issues and access expert knowledge; and the ability to access higher levels of power to be able to communicate these requirements to key decision-makers. Conversely, Baxter also argues that a lack of capability to work together or to take action can hinder the ability of community planning in Scotland – in the context of climate change – to address issues that will enable communities to enhance their resilience.

Ecosystem Services, Green Infrastructure and Nature Recovery

Scotland has a relatively long history of engagement with ecosystem services and green infrastructure within land use and planning, as illustrated by the work of NatureScot (formerly Scottish Natural Heritage) on GI[9] and also the Sottish Forum on Natural Capital[10]. It is well understood that actions such as peatland restoration have significant potential within Scotland to act as carbon sinks and hence support meting climate targets; and may also help to reduce the impacts of climate change on rural communities through erosion control and runoff reduction (Mabon, 2021).

A key issue at present in the context of rural planning, ecosystem services and green infrastructure concerns the question of in whose interest such actions happen, and how ecological protection or restoration may run up against other social and economic activities that happen within Scotland's rural landscapes. It has been argued, for instance, that large-scale proposals for carbon sequestration through reforestation in Scotland driven by corporate landlords have failed to consult with adjacent communities, or to consider the meanings and histories that residents ascribe to rural landscapes (MacDonald, 2021). Recent Scottish Land Commission research has likewise shown that natural capital approaches may be driving up land values (Mcmorran et al., 2022). Similarly, it is crucial that planning for nature recovery or nature-based solutions is respectful of the breadth of social and economic activities that occur in Scotland's rural communities, embeds equality and a just transition as a core principle, and allows for the possibility of peopled landscapes (Davidson, 2021a).

9 https://www.nature.scot/green-infrastructure
10 https://naturalcapitalscotland.com/

Agricultural transitions

As outlined under 'Forces for Change', a critical issue for agriculture in Scotland concerns future subsidy and regulation following the UK's departure from the European Union, and also the possible effects of changes in environmental regulation post-Brexit on how farming practice takes place. There is in Scotland identified potential for agriculture to support the country's climate change response, through carbon sequestration via crop choice, expanding woodland, restoring habitats and enhancing soil; smart water management; and new practices and crops to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. The research and demonstration farm at Glensaugh, managed by the James Hutton Institute, provides a testbed for putting climate-positive agriculture principles into practice[11].

Nonetheless, the potential of agriculture in Scotland to contribute to Scotland's climate response and to nature-based jobs comes against a backdrop of a declining and ageing workforce in the sector. This is an issue that has been identified by both NatureScot and Skills Development Scotland (NatureScot, 2020; Skills Development Scotland, 2020), who both note the need to update the image and training of the agricultural sector in Scotland in order to attract the younger workforce necessary to realise potential for agricultural transitions.

It is also important in the Scottish context to note the role that the marine environment – especially aquaculture – plays in supporting jobs, livelihoods and economies in rural communities. The Scottish Government supports ambitious plans by the aquaculture industry in Scotland to double the economic contribution of the aquaculture industry to £3.6 billion by 2030, and to generate over 9,000 new jobs in the sector. New aquaculture developments are handled through the planning system at local authority level, for nearshore developments within 3 nautical miles of shore. Salmon farming developments can prove contentious (Billing, 2018), and planners may not yet have the knowledge or skills to manage new developments in areas such as shellfish and seaweed. Any assessment of agricultural transitions and food and drink within the planning system in rural Scotland therefore needs to be cognisant of the possible impacts – both positive and negative – of aquaculture and any other marine developments which may be handled through the planning system. Indeed, the independent review of the current regulatory framework for Scottish aquaculture undertaken by Prof Russel Griggs in early 2022 recommended that local authorities give up their planning rights for aquaculture to the Scottish Government but remain as statutory consultees to the process in a way that would allow them to inform the planning and consenting process more broadly (Griggs, 2022).

11 https://glensaugh.hutton.ac.uk/climate-positive-farming/overview

Tourism and the rural economy

Tourism has long been a significant contributor to the rural economy in Scotland – in particular, the Highlands and Islands. In recent years, the promotion of tourist routes such as the North Coast 500 and of film locations in Scotland's rural landscapes (and subsequent conspicuous consumption at some these sites on social media through sharing of images) has served only to increase the visibility of tourism in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. However, the extent to which tourism of this nature brings sustainable and meaningful benefit to rural communities, or whether benefits outweigh negatives such as littering, traffic congestion and visual blight from camper vans, is more open to question.

It is also important to note that a strong reliance on tourism – combined with multiple other pressures outlined in this policy assessment – have the potential to create a challenging environment for other activities within the rural economy in Scotland and may not provide solutions to issues such as depopulation (Davidson, 2021b). For example, the Ethical Shellfish Company based on the Isle of Mull took the decision in April 2022 to close their business. In a lengthy statement released to announce the closure, the company blamed the culmination of a breadth of pressures facing the rural economy in Scotland for making their business no longer economically viable. These pressures included a loss of business during COVID-19, loss of European workers as a result of Brexit, challenges in finding accommodation and business premises due to a predominance of short-term lets and second homes, increased health and safety regulations, and climate change causing declines in shellfish stocks (Ethical Shellfish Company, 2022).

Rural Transport, Connectivity and Energy

Scotland's rural areas – both on- and offshore – have significant potential as sites for renewable energy, especially wind energy and also potentially wave and tidal. However, there remain concerns over the extent to which renewable energy developments bring meaningful benefits to host communities. These issues were raised during the recent Scotwind licencing round for offshore wind developments off the coast of Scotland, when the Scottish Trades Union Congress argued there is a need to build infrastructure that will enable fabrication of offshore wind turbine components in Scottish yards, and to ensure local content in supply chains[12]. Principles of Community Wealth Building, a policy action promoted by the Scottish Government

12 https://stuc.org.uk/media-centre/news/1636/stuc-on-scotwind-leasing-announcement

which aims to redirect wealth back into local communities with a strong emphasis on fair employment and shared ownership of the local economy, may help to promote development in a way that benefits host communities of net-zero infrastructure. It is especially important that coastal communities in rural areas in Scotland receive infrastructural investments that will allow them to take on fabrication, installation and port work – and that provision for making these improvements are considered within planning practices.

Community energy offers another means of bringing financial and societal benefit to rural communities through renewable energy in Scotland[13]. A vital challenge, however, lies in ensuring that less advantaged communities – especially those without experience of engaging with the planning system – are supported so that they can apply for and realise community energy projects within the provisions of the planning system.

Some of the most important transportation and connectivity issues facing rural communities in Scotland, such as the ageing and unreliable nature of the ferry fleet, lie outside of the scope of rural planning. However, the extreme weather events of Spring 2022 illustrate the importance of planning for climate-resilient transportation and connectivity infrastructure if rural communities are to remain resilient, connected and thriving in a climate-changed world. Such planning needs to encompass both road and rail (e.g., landslide and flood protection); and also flexibility within the ferry fleets and port infrastructure.

13 See, for example https://communityenergyscotland.org.uk/

Conclusion

Perhaps the critical point to take away from the Scottish policy assessment is that rural planning cannot be considered in isolation from the multiple other pressures and challenges faced by rural communities in Scotland. Planning can, however, be an important means for resolving these challenges and enhancing rural community resilience. Key messages are as follows:

1. Although there have been significant steps in Scotland towards community empowerment and community planning, there remains a difference in capacity between communities. This is especially true of Local Place Plans, which currently do not have any proposed funding attached. It is imperative that less advantaged rural communities, for instance those in more deprived areas or without access to financial and social capital, are well supported to be able to engage with the planning system and to access the range of funding and support opportunities available to them;
2. Related, across a breadth of policy areas, the rural landscape in Scotland offers significant opportunity for bringing benefit to the country as a whole. These areas include energy production, carbon sequestration, tourism, and food security. Nevertheless, consideration should be given to how the planning system may ensure that the benefits of such developments (e.g., infrastructure, fair and decent work, housing, income) accrue to the rural communities who have to shoulder a disproportionate burden of new developments, and to ensure that communities are able to accept or reject these proposals on their own terms;
3. In the Scottish context, it is especially important to remember that many rural communities are also island communities, and that the marine economy plays a significant part in supporting coastal communities (both on islands and on the mainland). Cognisance should hence be given within the planning system to making connections and synergies with marine planning and policy where possible.

National Policy Assessment – Northern Ireland (by Neale Blair)

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to explore rural planning issues in Northern Ireland (NI), a devolved nation of the UK, and identify the core components of the rural planning policy environment. At present, the policy environment is particularly active. This dynamism is a consequence of: activity occurring *within* the planning system (preparation of Local Development Plans, LDPs); *ancillary* policy creation (such as DAERA's Rural Policy Framework, DAERA, 2022) and implementation (the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's Reaching Rural Strategy, NIHE, 2021); and *external* influences (NI Audit Office report into planning in NI, (NIAO, 2022)). The report will review the current state of these influences and reflect on the role of planning in shaping rural futures.

Definitions of 'rural'

Across the devolved UK, and indeed between both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland, there is no consistent or single definition of what constitutes 'rural'. In NI, the adopted baseline position – established by the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) in 2015 – is that 'rural' comprises two elements: 1) settlements with a population of less than 5,000; and 2) areas of open countryside (NISRA, 2016). In addition, a drive-time analysis of settlements across NI with populations of less than 10,000 indicates there are several settlements located 20- and 30-minutes from the town centre of a settlement with 10,000 people or more. This is designed as a proxy for accessibility to services and is intended as a further indicator of 'rurality' that can be applied by public sector policy makers and data users (Figure 8).

Key rural statistics and policy context

NI has an estimated population of 1.9 million. Around 36 per cent of the total population lives in rural NI which comprises 80 per cent of the land mass (DAERA, 2022, p.43). Over the period for which comparison data is available, 2001-2020, overall population growth in rural areas (20 per cent) has been proportionately higher than in urban areas with a ratio of 3:1, an increase of over 100,000 to almost 700,000 inhabitants. Whilst there are continuing challenges for rural dwellers, as outlined later in this report, there clearly remains a strong rural demand. That said, additional data would help clarify the extent of intra-rural movement. For example, anecdotal information indicates some families are choosing to move home to be closer to schools and other public services, or indeed are forced to do so because of school closures or changes in family support networks[14].

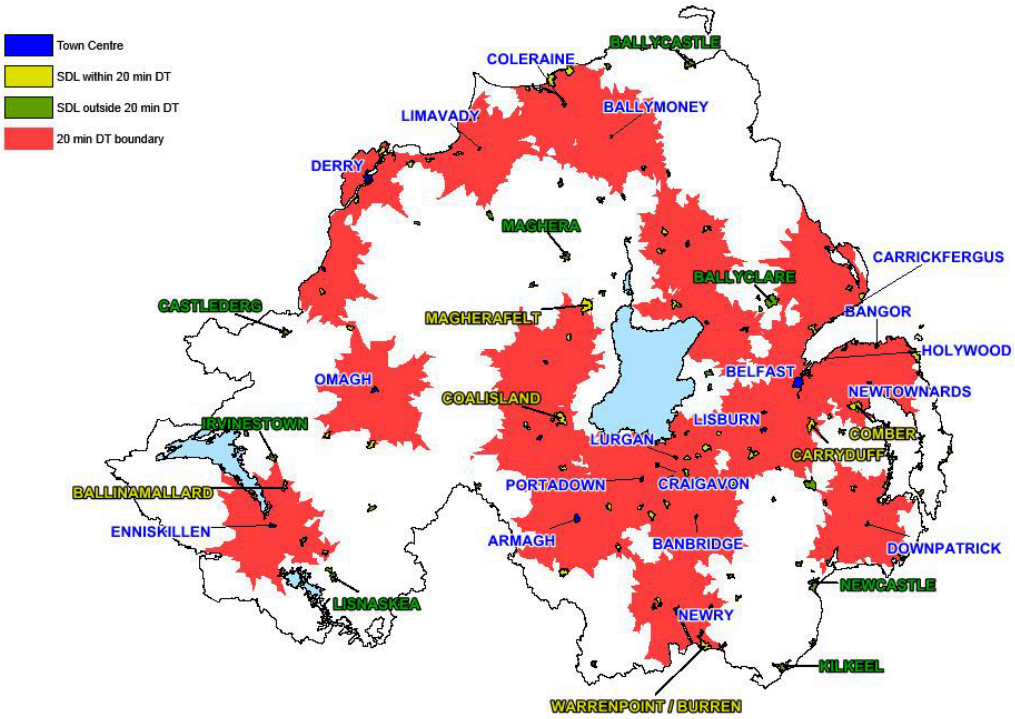

Figure 8 NI Urban and Rural areas with 20- and 30-minute 'drive time' boundaries from settlements with a population of 10,000 or more (NIHE, 2021, p.10). reproduced under © Crown copyright and database rights NIMA MoU 207.2.

14 See also comments from elected Members in relation to rural policy: DCSDC, 2017, p.20.

The most recent analysis of public data by the NI government (DAERA, 2021, p.3) highlights the following rural dynamics:

1. **Increased levels of commuting** amongst rural workers compared to their urban counterparts;
2. The majority of **NI businesses are located in rural areas**, but tend to be comparatively smaller both in terms of employees and turnover, leading to a more distributed economic impact;
3. Observed **higher levels of employment in rural areas**, though this cannot necessarily be considered as an indicator of affluence given the **higher levels of fuel poverty** amongst rural households compared to urban households;
4. Rural housing market patterns differ to urban areas in terms of **home ownership levels and house prices**, both of which are **higher in rural areas** than towns and cities.

In addition, quality of life indicators – such as happiness, life satisfaction, and life expectancy – are higher in rural areas than in urban areas, though levels of relative or absolute poverty experienced by rural pensioners are higher compared to urban pensioners; emergency service waiting times are also generally higher in rural areas. Added to this is the continuing preference to be located close to relatives (source: interview), and a strong sense of 'attachment' to land in Northern Ireland, across all communities. This approach to ownership means that land often does not come up for sale on the open market. There remains, as noted in the 2015 Land Matters Taskforce report, "a strong preference for rural dwelling, outside of nucleated settlements, with a perception that family members should be able to live on family land" (NIEL, 2015, p.5).

Furthermore, NI's rural settlement pattern – see Figure 9 below; also exhibited elsewhere on the island of Ireland – is dispersed, especially in the west. Farming practices are a key contributor to this, particularly very small farms (FODC, 2016, p.6). Inevitably there are implications arising from this settlement pattern, with increased public service delivery costs leading to scrutiny over long-term viability of those services, and this is now connected to spatial planning outcomes. In both policy and legislative (Local Government Act (Northern Ireland) 2014) terms, there is a statutory link between service delivery and spatial planning in NI. The community plan – a strategy for improving social, economic and environmental well-being at local government district level – must be taken into account when an LDP, explored below) is being prepared (see for example: Mid and East Antrim, 2019, p.9). In the Institute's response to the draft Rural Policy Framework the RTPI also makes the case for trans-governmental integration of public policy domains across rural spatial planning issues (RTPIa, 2021).

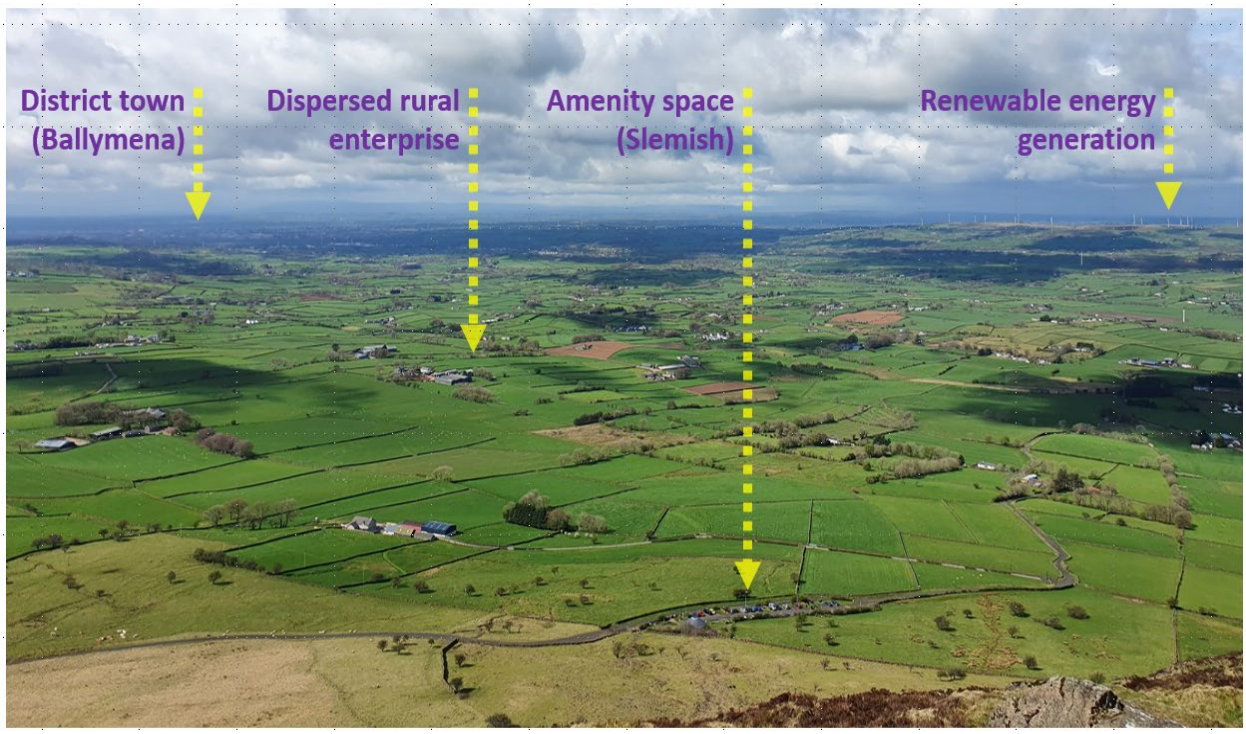

Figure 9 Rural NI – sample activities on the land and relationship with district town: view from Slemish Mountain (image taken by the author)

Forces for Change

Brexit / cross-border

Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK with an EU-land border. The border is 310 miles long and is mainly in rural areas of NI. The NI Protocol has ensured there are no visible customs checks on the border that would otherwise hinder trade and movement of people. Considerable social, economic and environmental links exist between rural areas of both jurisdictions. Examples are: family / cultural connections on either side of the border; living in one jurisdiction and working in another; retail in towns such as Enniskillen and Strabane with considerable rural hinterlands that project across the border; river basins that extend across both jurisdictions including the Erne and Foyle systems. It will therefore be important going forward that trans-boundary planning – a hallmark of European spatial planning – continues on the island of Ireland. Mechanisms for doing so include the Framework for Cooperation (DRDNI/DOELG,

2013), which enables local authorities on either side of the border to work together on spatial planning matters. Whilst there is funding support for the PEACE+ programme[15] through to 2027, changes to eligibility for European funding, such as the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) which provided 'core funding' for NI government departments, will consequently impact on rural development opportunities.

Rural Policy Framework for NI

Recently launched (DAERA, March 2022) this framework will initiate a 7-year programme of priority areas for intervention across five thematic pillars (p.18). As noted above, all the pillars will – to varying extents – intersect with spatial planning for rural areas. There will likely be a range of implementation challenges, particularly in terms of leadership and responsibility for rural development (Newcastle University Centre for Rural Economy, 2017).

Access to services

Essentially this relates to the (financial) sustainability of public services over the medium- to long-term. Costs tend to be higher in rural areas because of distributed settlement patterns, lower population densities, fuel costs, and so on. In addition, for some services it is difficult to recruit staff with the requisite professional skills, particularly in healthcare (Impartial Reporter, 2022). This is exacerbated by an ageing population profile. The reality of service delivery costs in rural areas is often avoided by stakeholders, impacting on debates that need to take place on "inevitable future changes" (Sherry and Shortall, 2019, p.343). This in part reflects a siloed approach to decision-making, in that those making spatial decisions in Northern Ireland have little responsibility for delivery of such services.

Declining Village and town retail functions

Rural towns and villages continue to struggle to retain viable retail services. Whilst the pressures facing town and village centres are not new, and indeed are not restricted to rural settlements, the 'domino' effect of one key closure – such as a bank or post office – can be devastating. This has been accelerated by the effects from the COVID-19 pandemic, increased

[15] https://www.seupb.eu/PEACEPLUS

online shopping and decrease in footfall. A possible response to this is for NI village centres to "become home to community hubs" (The Executive Office, 2022, p.13) and investment from the Rural Business and Community Investment programme, the latter a part of the recently launched rural policy framework (DAERA, 2022). It remains to be seen whether small businesses can sustain the various impacts – e.g., from increased rents; lower turnover – whilst waiting on government funding / initiatives to make a difference.

Increasing financial burdens: cost of living and property markets

With inflationary pressures in the national / global economy, supply chain issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impact of war in Ukraine, disposable incomes are being squeezed across NI. Rural areas tend to be impacted disproportionality as a result *inter alia* of increased fuel costs and poor public transport networks provision. Anecdotal evidence suggests that households are becoming more selective in undertaking journeys. In addition, average house prices are growing faster in some rural market areas (Ulster University, 2022), inevitably impacting on the ability of some households to join the market and also influencing land acquisition costs for housing associations. This is further exacerbated by the short-term holiday lets, boosted through the pandemic by staycation demand (Irish Times, 2021).

Planning

Planning in NI operates under a two-tier system. Central government, in the form of the Northern Ireland Executive and associated departments, sets strategic policy and decides on regionally significant developments. Local government, organised across eleven boroughs and districts, has responsibility for creating development plans, development management, and enforcement. These arrangements have been in place since 2015 following a review of public administration that reduced local government from 26 councils, configured mainly around market towns distributed across NI, to 11 councils.

At the central government level there is, though, fragmentation of responsibility linked to spatial planning (McKay and Murray, 2017), which is symptomatic of challenges within the NI planning system as compared to elsewhere (NILGA, 2022). The Department for Infrastructure (DfI) is the 'lead' department in many regards, incorporating the office of Chief Planner for NI, and associated roles such as setting strategic planning policy and monitoring of local government planning performance. Alongside DfI is the Department for Communities (DfC), responsible for

housing, and regeneration. The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) also has a range of roles that interface with the planning system, including provision of environmental advice, as well as leading on rural development. Public sector policy and delivery fragmentation in NI are not unique to the planning system and can be observed in rural development particularly with regard to health and education (Newcastle University Centre for Rural Economy, 2017, p.3).

Following the Planning (NI) Act 2011, and similar to other jurisdictions, NI has – in legislation at least – a plan-led system. Work is ongoing to establish up to date LDPs, incorporating the 'Plan Strategy' and the Local Policies Plan (LPP) for each local government district[16]. So-called 'legacy' development plans, in several instances adopted more than 20 years ago, continue to inform current development management decisions as part of the transitional arrangements (DoENI, 2015, p7). When complete, the 'core' planning policy hierarchy in NI will comprise the Regional Development Strategy (RDS) 2035 (DRDNI, 2010), the Strategic Planning Policy Statement (SPPS) (DoENI, 2015), and the two-part LDP. That said, the influences which guide creation of the LDP are much wider as demonstrated in Figure 10, below.

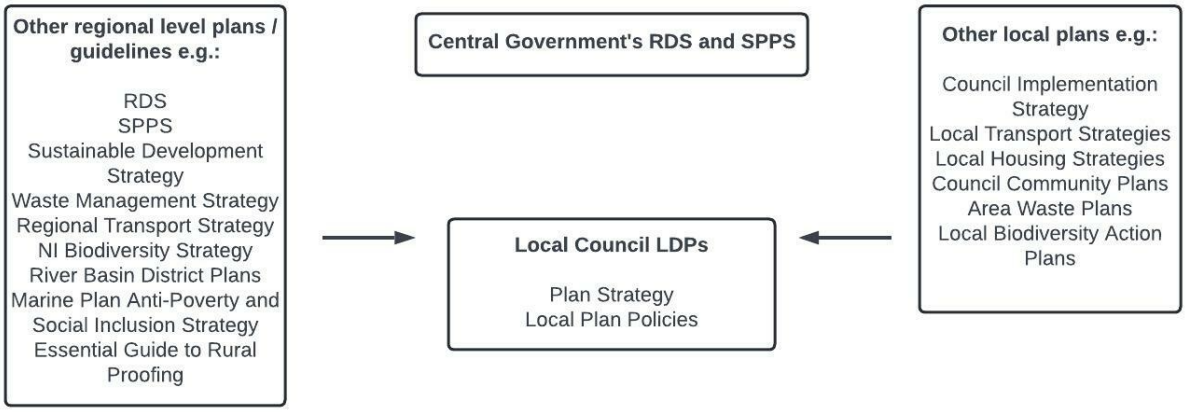

Figure 10 Planning hierarchy and links with development plans in Northern Ireland (adapted from Cave and Semple, 2018, p.11)

16 For information on progress with the LDP independent examination process see: https://www.pacni.gov.uk/local-development-plans

Rural planning policy

In the context of rural policy, as included under 'Other Regional level plans/guidelines' in Figure 10, the NI government has pursued rural proofing, an approach that reviews "existing and new policies to ensure that urban and rural residents receive equitable access to a common set of policies and programmes" (AFBI, 2017, p.4). As is the case elsewhere in the public sector – such as the NI Housing Executive – this approach now features within the LDP process as a 'Rural Needs Assessment' (RNA), a requirement of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016. As described in one draft LDP, the RNA will "ensure that the social and economic needs of people in rural areas are taken into account when preparing the LDP" (ANBC, 2019, p.23). Essentially this sets RNA and rural proofing – along with other assessments and appraisals – at the heart of the LDP process, which in turn will impact on future development management decisions through the plan-led system. RNA and rural proofing should not, though, be considered as the 'panacea' that will somehow resolve all rural issues. As Sherry and Shortall argue, "[this approach] assumes a rural/urban binary, and the justification for the approach is entirely dependent on rural being equated with neediness" (Sherry and Shortall, 2019, p.342). Rather, there must be a recognition that, "some rural regions are thriving and rural is not simply a category of need or disadvantage" (ibid., p.343).

Review of planning policy

As noted above, 'transitional arrangements' will continue to apply until the Plan Strategy has been adopted. There are a number of rural planning-related policies out-with the SPPS that will continue to influence development management decisions across NI for the foreseeable future. Selected example documents pertinent to this research include PPS 2: *Natural Heritage*; PPS 15 (Revised): *Planning and Flood Risk*; and "relevant" (DoENI, 2015, p.8) provisions of '*A Planning Strategy for Rural Northern Ireland*'. Material considerations also 'in play' include '*Building on Tradition – A Sustainable Design Guide for the Northern Ireland Countryside*'.

Whilst PPS 21: *Sustainable Development in the Countryside* attracted controversy when first introduced[17], the more recent (2021) reaction to Planning Advice Note (PAN) '*Implementation of Strategic Planning Policy on Development in the Countryside*' (August 2021) demonstrates the highly emotive nature of planning permission for rural dwellings. This PAN, intended to ensure "consistent interpretation of the policy [SPPS]", was instead widely perceived to place increased

17 See for example: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/northern_ireland/foyle_and_west/8011834.stm

restrictions on securing planning approval for countryside development. It would appear that any initial concerns of potential inconsistency in development management decision making across the eleven local councils in relation to rural dwellings has been lost in the intensity of reaction and opposition[18] to the now-withdrawn PAN. This matter was also highlighted in the recent NI Audit Office (NIAO) report 'Planning in Northern Ireland' (2022, p.38 and 39), which criticised the NI planning system across both tiers of operation. The report argued that single rural dwelling planning applications are "rarely the most complex" but constitute a "disproportionate use of committee time and focus" with committees "excessively involved in decisions" (ibid.). This was evidenced by the percentage of planning applications for single rural dwellings versus the overall percentage of planning committee decisions. Notably, though, the report did not make a specific recommendation in relation to this issue. The operation of PPS 21, alongside the SPPS provisions on dwellings in the countryside, continues to divide opinion across sectors and professional interest groups. For example, the RTPI advocates "removing the support for single dwellings in the countryside unless directly linked to rural enterprise" (RTPI, 2021a), and farming organisations seeking the opposite through relaxation of planning policy.

Rural housing policy

Housing growth capacity is established at the local government level based on indicators contained in the RDS which can be challenged at the Independent Examination stage of the LDP preparation process. To date, local authorities have typically opted to seek an increase in the overall number of units in the LDP above the original allocation. Local Planning Authorities can generate an assessment of potential capacity based on the Housing Evaluation Framework of the RDS (see Table 3, below).

Table 3 Housing Evaluation Framework (source: source: DRDNI, 2010, p. 43 & 44)

Housing Evaluation Framework for Northern Ireland – designed to "assist judgements on the allocation of housing growth"	
Resource Test	Studies should be carried out to assess and detail the existence of community assets and physical infrastructure such as water, waste and sewage, including spare capacity.
Environmental Capacity Test	An assessment of the environmental assets of the settlement, the potential of flooding from rivers, the sea or surface water run-off and its potential to accommodate future

18 See for example: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-northern-ireland-58942511
https://www.farminglife.com/country-and-farming/irwin-voices-concern-on-planning-rules-on-farms-3354256

	outward growth without environmental degradation should be made.
Transport Test	Studies should be carried out to assess the potential for integrating land use and public transport and walking and cycling routes to help reduce reliance on the car.
Economic Development Test	The potential to facilitate an appropriate housing and jobs balance and to unlock any major strategic development opportunities should be assessed and detailed.
Urban and Rural Character Test	Assessment should be made of the potential to maintain a sense of place, and to integrate new development in a way that does not detract from the character and identify of the settlement.
Community Services Test	The potential to underpin and, where necessary, reinforce the community service role and function of the settlement should be assessed and detailed.

Going forward, there is evidence of consistency in approach across NI to the type and form of residential development that will be approved in rural areas, as stipulated within the SPPS (DoENI, 2015, pp.52-55). By way of illustration, in relation to dwelling on a farm business, both the Antrim and Newtownabbey Draft Plan Strategy (located in the east of Northern Ireland) and the Fermanagh and Omagh Draft Plan Strategy (predominantly rural, west of Northern Ireland) set the same benchmark of businesses that are currently active and established for a minimum of six years. Indeed, there is also similar – albeit nuanced – language in relation to the level of facilitation that will be given to new residential development in the countryside, with reference to "managed" growth (FODC, 2018, p.71) and the "balancing" necessary for sustaining rural communities and protection and enhancement of the countryside (ANBC, 2019, p.148). It is important to note, though, that the construction of single dwellings is one of several housing dynamics that exist in rural areas. For example, there is the issue of 'hidden need' in terms of social and affordable housing, arising from a perception amongst those on housing waiting lists that there is no available rural stock which then results in applicants seeking accommodation in urban areas instead (source: interview). Furthermore, rising construction costs (as noted below, including land acquisition) are impacting on the development plans for social housing providers and the ability to meet demand in rural areas.

Selected other relevant recent rural policies

Rural Policy Framework for NI

As noted above, a Rural Policy Framework (RPF) for NI has now been adopted. This is intended as a follow-on from the Rural Development Programme (RDP) 2014-2020 and is a policy response designed to "*improve linkages; provide greater accessibility to jobs, healthcare, broadband, education and training, social and other opportunities to help sustain and improve the economic outputs and sustainability of rural areas*" (DAERA, 2022, p.4). Given the recent adoption of the policy framework, it will be some time before outcomes can be meaningfully measured. That said, it is important to note there are a range of measures within the policy framework that will find expression through spatial planning, including *inter alia* community development, health and well-being. A key success factor will be the extent of connectivity across public policy making, with "all [government] departments… collectively responsible" (DAERA, 2022, p. 119) for management and delivery of measures contained within the RPF.

Village Renewal Scheme (VRS)

Turning to focus on physical interventions in rural areas, the VRS is one of the more visual (and tangible) outcomes of the now-defunct RDP. The VRS was designed to provide financial support of £8m for a) drafting integrated village plans; and b) renewal of rural villages through village plans to stem the rising tide of decline. The scheme, funded through the NI Rural development LEADER programme[19], was designed as an integrative measure. This included a specific requirement to link with financial support across different government departments and agencies (DAERA, 2016). Crucially, and building on the notion of 'integration', village plans – and associated follow-up activities – had to ensure compliance with the local council community plan[20].

The overall impact from the VRS 20214-2020 is to be determined, though annual updates have been provided from DAERA to the EC. Disbursements continued beyond 2020, as a consequence of delays arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

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[19] https://www.leader-programme.org.uk/

20 Note: as highlighted elsewhere with this research, the concept of community planning in Northern Ireland differs to that in England, and is closer to the experience of Scotland in terms of service delivery, etc.

With an emphasis on a bottom-up approach across RDP delivery – of which VRS was a part – local community participation was a key feature. Across NI, ten Local Action Groups (LAGs) were established as partnerships involving local government in the area, a range of rural stakeholders, and also individual from the local rural area. Following the subsidiarity model, LAGs had responsibility for the allocation of funding to rural development projects in the local area.

Reaching Rural: Rural Strategy 2021-2025 (NIHE, 2021)

This is a further example of 'ancillary' strategy that has a direct influence on rural development in terms of NIHE social housing investment (Theme 2: Enabling the provision of affordable rural homes, NIHE, 2021, p.27), and also impacts on the creation of LDPs. The Strategy identifies a figure of 672 new homes in rural areas to meet projected housing need (ibid, p.29) and is framed as a "'whole system' approach" to social housing in rural areas (ibid, p.15) – not just buildings, to include community development. Of note is the title of 'Place Shapers' within NIHE in the identification, design and delivery of projects with housing associations, and also the role of NIHE as a service provider, reflecting the NI community planning approach.

Conclusion: reflections on the role of planning in shaping rural futures

Rural planning in Northern Ireland is at a key juncture. Changes are occurring through the evolving public policy environment at central and local government, and the lived experience of rural dwellers arising from shifts in the economy (e.g., necessity of diversification; Brexit impacts) and environmental priorities (e.g., climate change mitigation). As in other sectors of planning across NI, fragmentation is an issue[21]. Coordination is therefore central to achieving progress in spatial planning – particularly given the influence of one decision / policy from one area on another.

21 Including in relation to regeneration powers in NI. See for example: www.theplanner.co.uk/news/belfast-city-council-bangs-drum-for-wider-powers

Local government has a key integrative role given the current approach to local planning: preparation of the LDP, which must reflect the council's community plan and priorities and, crucially, is obliged to be 'rural proofed'. What might be termed 'front end' planning policy in rural areas – i.e., where there is the most interface between the public and the planning system, such as the consideration of single dwelling applications – is significantly influenced by wider policy (and political) agendas. Certainly, planning policy has a key role in shaping rural futures. The question for planners and planning going forward, though, is whether the role is one of 'leadership', or 'facilitation', or both. Given the complex challenges of *inter alia* rural decline (and indeed growth), village and rural town regeneration, and the fact that rural areas are not homogenous and differentially experience socio-economic impacts, the reticulist skills of planners are required now more than ever. Consideration therefore needs to be given on how planners – in various organisations / institutions – and planning can best engage with rural issues, policy, and communities over the next decade.

National Policy Assessment – Ireland (by Mark Scott)

Introduction

The purpose of this profile is to provide an overview of rural planning in Ireland with the aim of capturing key drivers of rural change, along with an overview of the rural planning policy framework in Ireland.

While rural Ireland's population split has declined to 37 per cent in 2016 from 48 per cent in 1971, in absolute terms, the overall rural population has increased, and many rural locations, particularly those accessible to urban centres, have continued to experience high levels of population growth, underpinned by a strong cultural preference to live in houses in the open countryside, rather than within villages and small rural towns.

'Rural' is defined by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) as the population residing in all areas outside urban centres of 1,500 or more inhabitants. However, the CSO has attempted to capture a more nuanced picture of rural life, classifying rural Ireland into three categories: (1) rural areas with high urban influence (16.1 per cent of the national population); (2) rural areas with moderate urban influence (12.5 per cent of the national population); and (3) highly rural / remote rural areas (8.8 per cent of the national population), with the three categories based on dependency on urban centres for employment (CSO, 2019). A further 13 per cent of the population lived in towns with populations of between 1,500 and 10,000. While the rural population is significant and politically important, historically planning practice in rural places has tended to be marked by incremental decision-making and intense localism, while planning practice has often been perceived as a barrier to rural economic development.

The assessment examines illustrative forces of change shaping Ireland's rural places, focusing on demographic and housing change and the decline of rural towns and villages, then addresses planning policies and practices shaping rural places and how these relate to wider policy domains impacting on rural localities. This includes a review of rural settlement planning and landscape planning. Finally, a reflection on how planning could move centre-stage in managing rural spatial change through embracing a wider, integrative agenda is set out.

Forces for Change

Rural housing

The defining characteristic of Ireland's rural settlement system is its highly dispersed and scattered geography of rural housing (see Figure 11 and Figure 12). Historically, single rural dwellings tended to be concentrated in peripheral rural areas; however, analysis by Keaveney (2007) suggests that since the 1990s the construction of single rural houses has become more concentrated in peri-urban or accessible rural areas and within scenic coastal locations. More than three in four private households in all rural areas live in detached homes (42.1 per cent nationally, compared to 75 per cent in rural). Houses in rural areas are more likely to be older in construction, less likely to be connected to the internet, and are generally located at greater distances from key services (CSO, 2019). Single detached ('one-off') houses in the open countryside comprise approximately 70 per cent of rural dwellings, with the remainder of dwellings located in rural clusters, villages or small rural towns (Keaveney, 2007). These 'one-off' rural houses, defined by the CSO (2016) as occupied detached houses with individual sewerage systems, total 442,699 dwelling units or 26 per cent of Ireland's housing stock in 2016. As noted by Keaveney, despite declining household size, 'one-off' dwellings constructed during the Celtic Tiger era were on average much larger in size, reflecting a growing affluence during the Celtic Tiger years.

Although houses with five rooms account for the largest proportion of rural dwellings in 2002 at over a quarter of all housing stock, the number of dwellings with eight rooms or more had the strongest growth over the period 1991 to 2002, which accounted for nearly a third of all new rural dwellings constructed in that period. Almost 40 per cent of houses constructed in the state between 2011 and 2016 were one-off houses, comprising over half of all dwellings constructed within seventeen counties (CSO, 2016). Further analysis by Foley and Scott (2014) also suggests that new rural houses built since the 1980s have tended to be located closer to the roadside (rather than on rural lanes) and increasingly have been built on elevated sites. Taken together, these factors (larger houses on more prominent sites) amplify the visual impact of new rural housing construction. However, this high proportion also reflects the wider collapse within the housebuilding sector in the aftermath of the economic crisis of 2008/09. For example, while over 70 per cent of new dwellings built in 2011 were in rural areas, by 2018 this pattern had reversed and more than 70 per cent of new dwellings had been built in urban areas. Over 83 per cent of one-off houses were located more than 1 km from a settlement, while 65,583 (15.4 per cent) houses were more than 5 km from their nearest town. Just 1 per cent(4,635) of occupied one-off houses did not fall within a 10 km radius of any town in 2016 (CSO, 2016).

Figure 11 Dispersed rural settlement pattern, Co. Donegal (source: Mark Scott)

Figure 12 Large rural dwellings in open countryside, Co. Clare (source: Mark Scott)

Demand-side explanations behind rural housing change in Ireland, confirm a popular preference for living in the open countryside via two national studies (see Gkartzios and Scott, 2010; Scott et al., 2010 and 2013; Scott et al., 2017). The first of these studies, based on a representative national sample, suggested that among recent house movers (less than five years in current property) in rural Ireland, around half had moved from a city or large urban area, often searching for a more affordable housing option, while half were relocating within the local area or from a similar rural area. However, of the urban-to-rural movers, approximately one half of these were actually moving from an urban area *back* to their original home environment – termed a *return to roots* relocation by Gkartzios and Scott (2010). In this sense, a counter-urbanisation narrative provided only a partial explanation for rural housing trends, while gentrification – with consequences for local affordability or displacement – was also less noticeable in Ireland than within UK or US studies, as demands for housing in rural places were accommodated through facilitating new house-building rather than the intense competition for scarce rural housing experienced in England

(Gkartzios and Scott, 2012).

The more recent survey (2013) was focused on five predominantly rural counties – Sligo, Longford, Monaghan, Offaly and Wexford (see Scott et al., 2017). In this second survey, house price was also an important factor for recent movers to rural localities, but of equal importance was the perceived quality of life of rural places along with the ability to self-build a house – i.e. residents obtaining responsibility for, and control over, the development of their own dwelling (Bossuyt et al, 2018) rather than buying from a developer and a key motivating factor in moving was the importance of relocating closer to family networks. This was particularly important for couples with new children or those with elderly parents, who were seeking support or contributing to family support networks. In summary, demand was often shaped by 'soft factors' – existing social networks, family, community belonging, lifestyle and identity – and less by more objective 'hard factors' such as distance to work or schools, transport networks or local services. Community and family networks were also more important than the physical features of the countryside (scenery, green space), which contrasts with the experience of other countries, such as England, the US and Australia (Gkartzios and Scott, 2010). Understanding these social norms are critical in understanding entrenched dispersed settlement patterns. The detached rural house is idealised while the system becomes self-reinforcing as rural residents often seek planning consent to build homes close to family networks as an essential support mechanism.

Rural housing outcomes are, of course, the result of the interplay between demand-side *and* supply-side explanations. Local planning decisions have generally accommodated new rural housing, reflecting the local political priorities of elected representatives and a perception amongst rural dwellers that new housing brings benefits to local communities. Deconcentrated land ownership, often the result of historic land reforms, is also of critical importance in terms of influencing access to land for a potential 'one-off' house. The availability of or access to land emerges as a major driver of household location decisions, rather than more conventional factors such as closeness to amenities, distance to schools and employment. Heaphy and Scott (2021) illustrate how new self-build properties are often enabled through accessing land through family and social networks, which further consolidates pre-existing dispersed patterns of settlement, reflecting social and political norms that support rural living. A legacy of dispersed rural living is self-reinforcing as networks of families benefit from further consolidating of social bonds and support, local landowners financially benefit from the ability to sell occasional sites for housing, and politically, support for planning applications is an effective way for local councillors to build local electoral support. This method of housing supply enabled many people to enjoy homeownership who, perhaps, would not be able to access it, given the house price inflation of the Celtic Tiger years. However, this approach to housing supply in rural areas is not without costs. For example, these may relate to (Scott and Heaphy, 2022): landscape fragmentation; increased car dependency; reliance on individual septic tanks (on-site water treatment systems) with risks posed to groundwater pollution; increased costs of service provision; and impact on the functioning of rural towns and villages (further discussed

below).

Moreover, this dispersed settlement system increasingly intersects with a trend towards *ageing* rural places to create a critical set of challenges around healthy ageing in place. As highlighted in the '*National Positive Ageing Strategy*' (Government of Ireland, 2013), the ageing of Ireland's population will represent one of the most significant demographic and social developments that Irish society has encountered. Issues related to healthy ageing in rural places include: housing provision related to later life transitions; availability of care homes in rural contexts; the cost of social care provision delivered 'in home' within highly dispersed rural geographies; and rural mobilities and inclusion, for example, how do older people adapt when they give up driving? The number of those aged 65 and over rose by 102,174 between 2011 and 2016. The old age (65+) dependency ratio in 2016 was 20.4 per cent, compared with 17.4 per cent in 2011[22]. However, higher old age dependency ratios are a feature of predominantly rural counties in the west and border areas, such as Mayo (28.3 per cent), Leitrim (27.4 per cent), Roscommon (26.8 per cent) and Kerry (26.7 per cent)[23]. How we plan for the ageing of our population, how we choose to address the challenges and maximise the opportunities, will determine whether society can reap the benefits of the so-called *'longevity dividend'* (WHO, 2007).

Vacancy in rural towns and villages

Rural towns and villages have faced significant challenges over the last decade or more. The global financial crisis of 2008/09 and the housing market collapse had significant implications throughout Irish society, including within rural places. In recent years, the Irish economy has recovered (GDP in Ireland rose by 5.1 per cent in 2016, 7.8 per cent in 2017); however, this growth has been largely concentrated in Ireland's capital city, Dublin, suggesting that Ireland's recovery has been spatially uneven. Indeed, analysis suggests that Ireland's recovery can be best described as a two-tier development, with the gap in economic activity between Dublin and areas beyond its catchment zone deepening during the recovery, primarily due to the effects of agglomeration economics and the growing transnational tech sector being located in Dublin (O'Donoghue et al., 2017). As a result, Irish rural towns and villages were still experiencing the fallout of austerity and economic restructuring when faced with the COVID-19 pandemic and various national lock-downs.

'High streets' outside of Ireland's cities have struggled to maintain vibrancy over the last decade or more, with increasing vacancy rates impacting on their vitality. In common with

22 Dependents are defined by the Central Statistics Office (Ireland) for statistical purposes as people outside the normal working age of 15-64. Dependency ratios are used to give a useful indication of the age structure of a population with young (0-14) and old (65+) shown as a percentage of the population of working age (15-64).
23 See https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/ep/p-cp3oy/cp3/aad/

rural regions globally, Ireland's towns and villages face a series of interconnected challenges as outlined by Doyle et al. (2021: 18) and summarised in Box 1 below, illustrating how multiple drivers of change become compounded in a rural spatial context.

Box 1: Drivers of change – vacancy in rural towns and villages (source: Doyle et al., 2021: 18)

Digitisation: the increasing digitalisation of economic activity (including an exponential rise in online shopping);

Changing consumer behaviour; increasing broadband availability;

Changing demographics (with more people choosing to live in larger urban centres and a subsequent decline of the rural population);

Smaller countries like Ireland that have traditionally relied on indigenous retailers are now exposed to a global market, particularly when local or sole traders tend not to have an online presence.

Consolidating these global trends has been national factors that have 'hollowed out' rural towns over recent decades. This includes the tendency to accommodate rural housing in the open countryside rather than *within* villages (outlined above) that reduces daily footfall and daily vibrancy. Furthermore, planning authorities have often permitted retail functions (e.g. supermarket chains) to be located on the edge of rural towns, again reducing footfall within the core town/village. And austerity has led to a withdrawal of public services in rural places, which has symbolic significance as a narrative of rural decline (e.g. closure of post offices or *Garda* stations).

Commercial vacancy rates are reported quarterly in Ireland through the GeoDirectory and the publication of the 'GeoView Commercial Vacancy Report'. As recorded by Doyle et al. (2021) at the end of 2019 (Quarter 4), the national commercial vacancy rate stood at 13.3 per cent, with vacancy rates continuing to rise in most of Ireland's local authorities. The five local authorities with the highest vacancy rates were all located in the west of Ireland (predominately rural), with County Sligo recording the highest vacancy rate at 18.9 per cent. A more recent study by the Northern & Western Regional Assembly (NWRA, 2022), a predominately rural region, recorded significant vacancy rates within its local authority areas. The residential vacancy and dereliction rate of the Region is 10.1 per cent, or double the State average of 4.9 per cent. The commercial vacancy rate is 13.3 per cent compared with a State average of 11.4 per cent. Of the 244 towns and villages in this region, 175 (or 71.7 per cent) of these settlements had a residential vacancy above the national average of 4.9 per cent. Similarly, 145 of these towns and villages (almost 60 per cent) had a commercial vacancy rate above the national average. This study also highlighted that the Northern & Western Region accounted for 36.7 per cent of the total number of vacant and derelict

properties nation-wide, despite accounting for 17.6 per cent of the state's population (in 2020) and 19.4 per cent of the national building stock.

While the *COVID-19 pandemic* presented significant challenges for rural places, particularly for retail and rural services, the pandemic has also opened some opportunities. These primarily relate to new remote working patterns, which have reduced rural to urban commuting (which in turn has brought some vibrancy to villages/towns dominated by commuters) or has provided opportunities for return migration to rural places. There has also been significant policy interest in remote working hubs to accommodate remote working within co-working environments. The Minster for Rural & Community Development launched the National Hub Network in 2021 with an online portal (connectedhubs.ie) connecting 227 remote working hubs that have been established in the last year (funded by the Government's rural development strategy, *Our Rural Future*, DRCD, 2021). This has also been supported by policy and legislative proposals on remote working rights.

Summary of Forces for Change

While the above discussion focuses on issues surrounding the rebalancing of the Irish rural settlement system, it also reveals wider Forces for Change that are impacting on rural Ireland (but common across rural regions in Europe). These represent both challenges and opportunities for rural places and in summary include:

- Climate and biodiversity crises
- Energy security and food security
- Digitisation
- Ageing places
- Housing demand and community needs

Rural planning: policy and practice in Ireland

Introduction

The Irish planning system was established with the Local Government (Planning and Development) Act 1963, which introduced a system of statutory development plans and system of development control, based on the British model of town and country planning. While Ireland has a significant rural population, Greer and Murray (1993) suggested that historically, the fate of smaller settlements and rural areas in Ireland received less than significant attention from planners. Rural areas were perceived to equate primarily with agriculture while also characterised by a lack of development pressure due to a stagnant economy and historically high levels of out-migration and emigration. This 'framing' of the rural often led a minimal planning response to rural issues, which in turn led to facilitating the proliferation of dispersed, one-off dwellings in rural areas and incremental change in the Irish landscape (Johnson, 1996). Commentators such as Aalen (1997) and McGrath (1998) have argued that planning practice in rural places was driven by the priorities of a few individuals, an intense localism, and the predominance of incremental decision-making. In this context, the regulation of housing development and local decision-making worked in line with a localistic set of considerations in which development to meet local needs is routinely seen as an intrinsic part of rural life. In the Irish case, these socio-cultural norms have often been translated into a pro-development attitude among local political elites (Scott, 2008), often leading to a laissez-faire approach to regulating new development (Gkartzios and Scott, 2009) and a tendency to celebrate physical development as quick-fix rural development.

However, the so-called Celtic Tiger years witnessed a significant shift in Ireland's economy and society as a buoyant economy and a reversal of historic emigration led to new demands on rural places and an increased demand for housing in rural areas, both to satisfy local need and also in-migration patterns. To put rural housing growth into context, it is worth briefly considering the wider housing boom from the mid-1990s. Between 1993 and 2001, the annual real growth rate of the economy in Ireland was more than double the average recorded over the previous three decades – 8 per cent compared with 3.5 per cent– and throughout the 1990s Ireland significantly outperformed all other European Union (EU) countries (Clinch et al., 2002). By 2000, average incomes were far higher than they had been in the 1980s; there had been significant growth in employment, and unemployment fell from 16 per cent in 1994 to 4 per cent in 2000 (Honahan, 2009). This changing economic context, along with a growing population and immigration, had also been translated to the construction sector with rapid house building activity.

The period 1994 to 2004 had seen approximately a 200 per cent increase in new house

building, which has been driven almost wholly by the rise of private house building (Scott et al., 2007). As recorded by the National Economic and Social Council (NESC) (2004), this increase in the level of overall construction is unprecedented and is also exceptional when compared to other European Union (EU) countries, both in terms of new construction as a percentage addition to the current stock of dwellings and also when the number of new dwellings is assessed relative to the size of the population. Rapid housing construction was not only a feature of Irish urban centres, but rural areas also witnessed rapid change. For example, over one quarter of the housing units built between 1991 and 2002 were detached dwellings in the open countryside (Walsh et al., 2007). Similarly, over the last decade, rural towns and villages within commuting distance of larger urban centres have also witnessed a rapid expansion of house-building activity (Meredith, 2007).

Planning reform

Since 2000, the Irish planning system has experienced substantial reform and modernisation. This includes:

- The introduction and consolidation of comprehensive legislative reform (the Planning & Development Act 2000 (as amended);
- The introduction of national level spatial planning – the National Spatial Strategy in 2002 replaced with the National Planning Framework in 2018;
- The introduction of a new regional tier for spatial planning following the 2000 Act with regional planning guidelines recently replaced with new Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies;
- A growing body of ministerial planning guidelines on a range of planning concerns;
- An emphasis on evidence informed planning practice to counterbalance speculative housing development and ‘over-zoning’ for residential land-uses.

The planning system’s key features are outlined in Table 1 below, along with the most relevant ministerial guidance for planning authorities related to rural planning.

Table 4 The Irish Planning System

Level	Organisation	Planning Instruments
National	Minister for Housing, Local Government & Housing (Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage) Minister for Rural & Community Development	National Planning Framework: Project Ireland 2040 National Spatial Strategy 2002-2020 Ministerial Planning Guidelines (over 30 sets of guidelines) Rural related ministerial planning guidelines: Draft Wind Energy Development Guidelines, 2019 Wind Energy Guidelines, 2006 Sustainable Rural Housing Planning Guidelines, 2005 – new rural housing guidelines are due for publication in 2022 Quarries and Ancillary Services Planning Guidelines, 2004 Landscape and Landscape Assessment, Consultation Draft of Guidelines for Planning Authorities, 2000 Town Centre First Policy (2022)
	An Bord Pleanála –Planning Appeals Board	Planning Appeals Strategic Infrastructure and Strategic Housing
	Office of the Planning Regulator	Independent assessment of all local authority and regional assembly forward planning, including the zoning decisions of local authority members in local area and development plans
Regional	3 Regional Assemblies established on Jan 1st 2015 Replaced the 8 Regional Assemblies and 2 Regional Assemblies	Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies (RSES) (adopted in early 2019) Metropolitan Area Strategic Plans (for 5 cities) Regional Planning Guidelines (replaced by RSES)
Local	Planning Authorities (31 City or County Councils)	City or County Development Plans

		Local Area Plans Development Management

National level planning for rural places

In this section, we focus on the key policies and practices shaping rural places through the planning system as defined by legislation. However, it is important to note that rural places are shaped by a range of territorial and sectoral policies that range from rural development to broad countryside management policy. These often have different lead government departments and distinct legislative requirements. These are summarised below inTable 5. Notably, the current programme for government commits to publishing a new National Land Use Strategy, which has the potential for integrating these various policy strands.

Table 5 Policy domains with rural planning implications

Policy domain	Key national policy	Lead department
Spatial Planning	National Planning Framework (2018)	Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage
Landscape	National Landscape Strategy (2015)	Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage
Biodiversity, national parks, natural heritage	National Biodiversity Action Plan (2017-21) – new action plan forthcoming	National Parks and Wildlife Service, Department of Housing, Local Government & Heritage
Rural Development	Our Rural Future (2021)	Department of Rural & Community Development
Forestry	*Project Woodland* (forthcoming) (national forestry strategy) Forestry licensing	Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine Coillte (state owned forestry company)
Agricultural policy	Common Agricultural Policy Harvest 2020, Food Wise 2025, Food Vision 2030	European Union Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine
Climate Action (including targets with land use implications e.g. renewables, afforestation,	Climate Action Plan 2021 National Adaptation Framework 2018	Department of Environment, Energy and Communications

land based carbon sinks)	National Mitigation Plan 2017	
Land Use	Commitment to publishing a *National Land Use Strategy* (date to be confirmed)	Department of Environment, Energy and Communications

From a policy perspective, undoubtedly the issue of planning for rural housing has been one of the most controversial and contested aspects of planning policy and practice throughout Ireland. As the wider planning system in Ireland evolved, so too have approaches to managing rural housing, and over the last two decades practice has shifted from a largely local decision-making process towards greater influence from a national policy direction. While the *National Spatial Strategy (NSS)* (DOELG, 2002) published in 2002 failed to provide a definitive statement on rural housing, the strategy did introduce two key concepts for rural planning. Firstly, it provided a useful typology of rural Ireland, which provided belated recognition that rural places are not homogenous across Ireland, but instead experience different development pressures, demographic forces and trajectories. Secondly, the NSS distinguished between so-called urban-generated rural housing demand (essentially counter-urbanisation pressures) and rural-generated (or local) housing demand, with greater restrictions on the former. These themes were further elaborated with the publication of the government's *Planning Guidelines for Sustainable Rural Housing* (DEHLG, 2005).

Following extensive lobbying from a range of pro-rural stakeholders and local elected representatives in rural areas, these guidelines provided an assumption in favour of accommodating further new housing development in rural areas. In summary, the guidelines provide that: (1) people who are part of and contribute to the rural community will get planning permission in all rural areas, including those under strong urban-based pressures, subject to the normal rules in relation to good planning; and (2) anyone wishing to build a house in rural areas suffering persistent and substantial population decline will be accommodated, subject to good planning. In this context, it is worth noting that the term 'good planning' refers to issues surrounding siting, layout and design, rather than planning in a strategic or spatial sense.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the key area of innovation in relation to local planning practice for rural housing following the NSS and rural housing guidelines related to the emergence of detailed local authority *design guidance for new rural housing*, which emphasised 'quality' rather than quantity or distribution of new housing. Virtually all non-metropolitan Local Planning Authorities have some form of design guidance for new rural housing (Scott et al., 2013), which given the prevalence of self-build housing and the absence of architects from the design process, potentially performs a central role in promoting 'good design' principles and mediating the relationship between landscape and the built environment. Furthermore, design guidelines represent a more *proactive* approach by local authorities to address design issues than the traditional reliance on *reactive* and incremental development control

decision-making, and provide a greater degree of certainty and additional transparency for potential applicants for planning permission. In a review of published design guidelines, Scott et al. (2013) noted marked similarities in relation to desired design outcomes (based on vernacular design principles) but also insufficient guidance in relation to sustainable design practice, which is perhaps a missed opportunity to promote low environmental impact development as an alternative design narrative.

The publication of the *National Planning Framework (NPF)* in 2018 (Government of Ireland, 2018), represents some continuity in relation to planning policy for rural housing, following some of the themes outlined in the NSS. For example, National Policy Objective (NPO 19) seeks to: “ensure, in providing for the development of rural housing, that a distinction is made between areas under urban influence, i.e. within the commuter catchment of cities and large towns and centres of employment, and elsewhere” (Government of Ireland, 2018, p. 74). This spatial distinction is elaborated as follows:

In rural areas under urban influence, the NPF seeks to facilitate the provision of single housing in the countryside based on the core consideration of demonstrable *economic or social need* to live in a rural area, aligned with siting and design criteria for rural housing in statutory guidelines and plans, and having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements.

In rural areas elsewhere, the NPF outlines that the provision of single housing in the countryside should be facilitated based on siting and design criteria for rural housing in statutory guidelines and plans, having regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements.

While this represents continuity with previous policy in terms of recognising different types of rural areas, the NPF places much more significant emphasis on villages and rural towns to serve as ‘rural hubs’ with potential to rebalance the rural settlement system. Therefore, there has been a renewed interest in reviving the fortunes of rural villages and small towns, particularly their residential function as a potential alternative to housebuilding in the open countryside, and as a means to ensure the future viability of rural services and retail functions. The NPF has a specific focus on activating the potential for the renewal and revitalisation of smaller towns and villages, with measures introduced to address the vacancy levels within village cores discussed above. This includes financial support for village regeneration through the *Town and Village Renewal Scheme* (funded through the National Development Plan), and further advanced by the recently adopted *Our Rural Future* strategy (DRCD, 2021) which has established a ‘Town Centre First’ rural strategy which prioritises rural villages and towns for future public sector investment, provides additional resources for local authorities, seed capital for increasing housing supply, and funding to

enhance the public realm.

New approaches are being developed to encourage this active rebalancing of the rural settlement system. For example, National Planning Objective (NPO) 18a supports the proportionate growth of rural towns, including developing a programme for increasing housing provision through providing serviced sites (i.e. connected to critical infrastructure) to attract people to build their own homes within a village or town (NPO 18b). Some local authorities, such as Tipperary, are experimenting with assembling serviced 'cluster' sites to enable self-build housing within or in close proximity to existing settlements to capture the demand for self-build housing through a plan-led approach. Recognising the entrenched popularity of self-build within rural areas, the LPA has experimented with alternative approaches to encourage self-build housing development within existing settlement clusters or villages. This approach is based on the local authority providing 'serviced sites' (i.e., connected to existing water, waste and electricity infrastructure) which will then be made available for sale to the public to design and build their own houses to a low carbon energy standard (Tipperary County Council, 2018). A pilot scheme has secured central government funding (€551,854) in 2021 within the village of Kilsheelan, in partnership with Tipperary Energy Agency and a local community organisation. The aim of the scheme is to accommodate the cultural preference for self-build on land acquired from social networks, through providing a feasible alternative to housing in the open countryside.

Moreover, the NPF also highlights that decision-making around rural housing in the open countryside must now have regard to the viability of smaller towns and rural settlements (NPO 19), recognising the relationship between limiting housing supply in the open countryside and the sustainability of rural villages. This is being monitored through the *Office of the Planning Regulator* (OPR) in their statutory role of providing an assessment and making observations during the drafting of statutory plans to ensure consistency with relevant regional or national policies. For example, in recent written observations on the draft county development plan for Mayo County, the OPR (2021) highlighted the need for a plan-led approach (rather than incremental, case-by-case decision-making) to housing in the open countryside, which should examine the balance of distribution between housing in the open countryside *and* villages in order to meet wider local authority, regional and national planning objectives, and the need for the local authority to develop a clear evidence-based approach to determine the existing demand and local need for rural housing. This represents a significant departure from more localised incremental decision-making. New ministerial guidelines for planning authorities on rural housing are expected in 2022.

Town Centre First

The Government's new *Town Centre First Policy* (Government of Ireland, 2022) was published in early 2022, jointly prepared by the Department of Rural & Community Development and the Department of Housing, Local Government & Housing (lead department for planning). The stated aim of this policy is to '…create town centres that function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live, work and visit, while also functioning as the service, social, cultural and recreational hub for the local community' (p. 5). The Town Centre First policy covers a wide range of settlement types, inclusive of small towns with a population of 400-5,000 (441 settlements), medium towns with a population of 5,000-20,000 (62 settlements), and large towns with a population of 20,000+ (19 settlements), but excluding Ireland's five cities of Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford. The Town Centre Policy aims to develop both a national and local framework for town and village renewal. The local delivery approach is outlined in Figure 13 below, while the national dimensions include:

1. To establish a network of Town Regeneration Officers;
2. To develop a capacity building programme for Town Teams;
3. To mainstream the Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check model (see Box 2) into a national, integrated and scaled-up Health Check Programme;
4. To provide a Town Centre First Toolkit to include a new web portal;
5. To support Town Centre First Plans through a targeted investment programme – this includes funds from the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, Town and Village Renewal Scheme, and the *Croi Conaithe* (Towns) Fund;
6. Assist 'pathfinder towns' to act as demonstration cases;
7. Enhance data needs to effectively understand change within Irish towns;
8. Establish a new Town Centre First Office to lead implementation.

Box 2: The Heritage Council's Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme

Instrumental in shining a light on the fate of Ireland's rural towns and villages has been the *Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme*, launched by the Heritage Council and its partners in 2016. The programme aimed to develop a co-ordinated action-learning training programme for key stakeholders and to undertake baseline surveys ('health checks') of the vitality of town centres as basis for developing support and evidence for

effective action. indeed, a key contribution of the programme has been to identify evidence gaps in relation to understanding spatial change and in developing data-driven local recommendations. The process comprises a 15-step assessment process (which has enabled comparisons across towns) based on GIS land-use surveys, recording of vacancy rates, and business and residents' surveys. The pilot programme initially targeted 15 towns, with a further list of towns on standby. The Town Centre First policy has further indicated a mainstreaming of the programme's methodology to be applied to wider town renewal. The Collaborative Town Centre Health Check Programme demonstrates the value of evidence and data to drive renewal efforts, while its collaborative approach involving a range of local stakeholders in collaboration with the private sector and universities illustrates the importance of social learning and trust-building in local renewal efforts.

Further information can be accessed at:

https://www.heritagecouncil.ie/content/files/Policy-Paper-on-the-Collaborative-Town-Centre-Health-Check-CTCHC-Programme.pdf

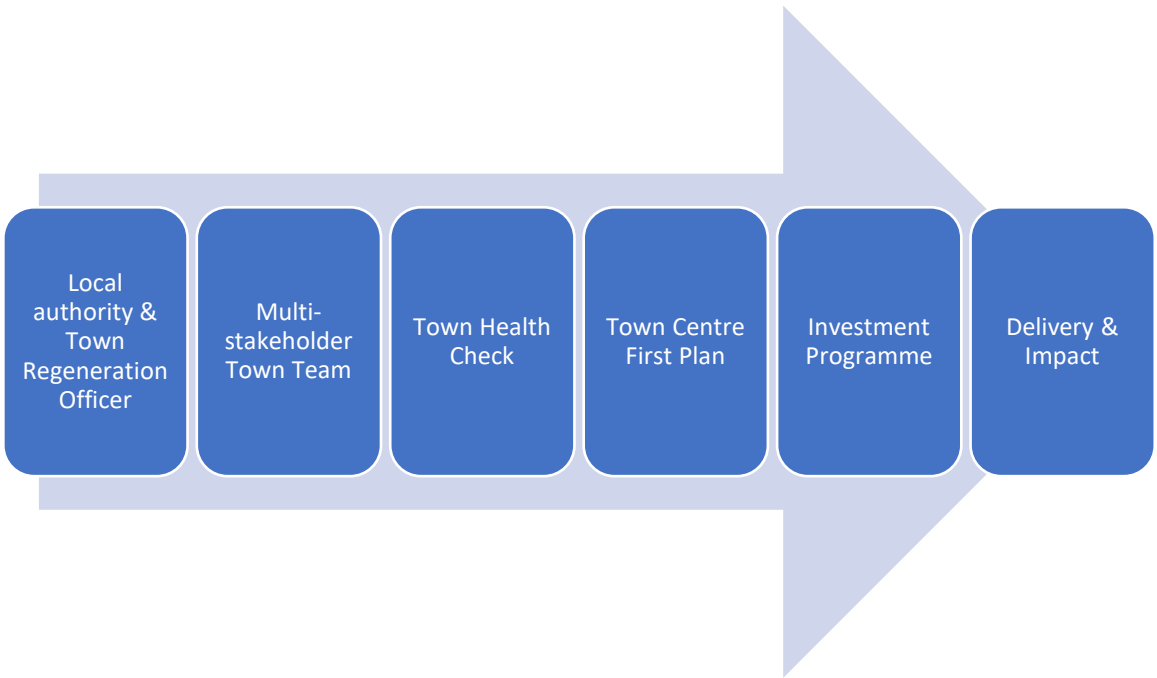

Figure 13 Key dimensions of a local Town Centre First Strategy (Government of Ireland, 2022)

Landscape planning and management

The *European Landscape Convention* (ECL), adopted in 2002 in Ireland marked a significant sea-change in approach to landscape management – from an approach focused primarily on prestigious or highly prized landscapes to one that recognises the importance of *all* landscapes, which in turn can have a positive impact on quality of life and well-being. This is inclusive of damaged or degraded landscapes, which implies a change of emphasis from narrow protection towards a more proactive management approach that incorporates restoration. Despite adopting the ECL, progress in developing an Irish landscape policy has been slow; however, the publication of the *National Landscape Strategy for Ireland 2015-2025* (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015) has marked an important milestone. This strategy recognises that:

Our landscape reflects and embodies our cultural values and our shared natural heritage and contributes to the well-being of our society, environment and economy. We have an obligation to ourselves and economy and to future generations to promote its sustainable protection, management and planning (Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, 2015, p.8)

Landscape is central to national, regional and local identity. Moreover, Ireland's landscape is highly valued by visitors and of critical importance to the tourism sector, and at the same time landscape values are expressed through artistic, cultural, and spiritual practices. Landscape character is central to understanding place-based identity and a sense of place that often interrelates to local community identity. To understand local distinctiveness, Landscape Character Assessments (LCAs) have been advanced to understand the differences between landscapes and to enable decision-makers to manage environmental and spatial change in the context of character and distinctiveness – i.e. what is it that makes every landscape distinctive and how sensitive is a landscape to change?

To partly address these themes, the government published *Draft Guidelines for Planning Authorities on Landscape and Landscape Assessment* in 2000 (Department of Environment and Local Government, 2000). These guidelines were never formally adopted beyond their draft status, and the mainstreaming of landscape assessment into planning policy has been uneven. For example, in relation to rural settlement planning, Scott et al. (2013) notes limited evidence that LCAs were integrated into decisions regarding planning applications for rural housing. A key stated aim of the National Landscape Strategy is to develop a *national Landscape Character Assessment*, whereby the landscape of Ireland will be identified, characterised and mapped to underpin effective spatial planning and to provide landscape-centred decision-making. The strategy outlines the need for an evidence-based national landscape character map to be followed by new statutory guidelines planning authorities on

local character assessment (under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act (as amended)).

However, to date, the national LCA map and new guidance has not been published, suggesting slow progress in this area. Local LCAs are on an *ad hoc*. basis, informed by the 2000 *draft* guidance. Moreover, the Heritage Council (2021) also note that the regional level represents a policy deficit, with an opportunity for regional landscape character assessments to integrate with Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies and to assess landscape character and values across neighbouring local authority boundaries. More recently, the National Planning Framework (Government of Ireland, 2018, p.70) identifies a national policy objective to 'protect and promote the sense of place and culture and the quality, character and distinctiveness of the Irish rural landscape that make Ireland's rural areas authentic and attractive places to live, work and visit'.

Heritage and conservation are institutionalised into a range of legal frameworks at national and EU level. This includes the National Monuments Acts 1930-2004 (archaeology); the Wildlife Acts 1976 and 2000 (nature); the Planning and Development Act 2000 (as amended) (built and natural heritage); and additional EU Directives, specifically for the Conservation of Wild Birds (1979) (Birds Directive) and for the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora (1992) (Habitats Directive). These EU protected sites are transposed into statutory development plans through the planning system. These legal frameworks provide the basis for a series of landscape designations that relate to nature, heritage or landscape conservation – outlined in Table 6.

Table 6 Landscape and natural heritage conservation

International Agreement	Focus
1971 UNESCO Man and Biosphere Programme	*Biosphere reserve* – 2 exist in Ireland – Killarney National Park and Dublin Bay
1971 the RAMSAR convention on Wetlands of International Importance (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO)	*Ramsar Sites*: The convention entered into force in Ireland on 15 March 1985. Ireland currently has 45 sites designated as Wetlands of International Importance (Ramsar Sites), with a surface area of 66,994 hectares. All Ramsar sites in Ireland are within Special Protection Areas (SPAs) or Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) – see below – which provides legal protection.
1972 UNESCO Convention of World Cultural and Natural Heritage	*World Heritage Sites* – 2 sites designated in Ireland: Sceilg Mhichíl and Brú na Bóinne
2001 UNESCO Global Geoparks	UNESCO Global Geoparks are single, unified geographical areas where sites and landscapes of international geological significance are managed with a holistic concept of protection, education and sustainable development. There are currently 3 Geoparks in

	Ireland: Burren and Cliffs of Moher Geopark; Copper Coast Geopark (Waterford); and Marble Arch Caves Global Geopark (Fermanagh and Cavan)
1979 EC Directive on the Conservation of Wild Birds	*Special Protection Areas:* Ireland is required under the terms of the EU Birds Directive (2009/147/EC) to designate Special Protection Areas (SPAs) for the protection of: Listed rare and vulnerable species; Regularly occurring migratory species; and Wetlands especially those of international importance. A programme to identify and designate SPA sites has been in place since 1985 and Ireland's SPA Network now encompasses over 597,000 hectares of marine and terrestrial habitats. The terrestrial areas of the SPA network include inland wetland sites important for wintering waterbirds and extensive areas of blanket bog and upland habitats that provide breeding and foraging resources for species including Merlin and Golden Plover. Private agricultural land represents a share of the SPA network.
1992 EC Directive on the Conservation of Natural Habitats and of Wild Fauna and Flora	*Special Areas of Conservation:* Prime wildlife conservation areas in the country, considered to be important on a European as well as Irish level. The Directive lists certain habitats and species that must be protected within SACs. Irish habitats include raised bogs, blanket bogs, turloughs, sand dunes, machair (flat sandy plains on the north and west coasts), heaths, lakes, rivers, woodlands, estuaries and sea inlets. The areas chosen as SAC in Ireland cover an area of approximately 13,500 sq. km.
National instruments	
National Parks (National Park and Wildlife Service, NPWS)	6 National Parks: Glenveagh, Wild Nephin, Connemara, Burren, Killarney and Wicklow Mountains
Natural Heritage Areas (NHAs)	The basic designation for wildlife is the Natural Heritage Area (NHA), established by the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000. NHA is an area considered important for the habitats present or which holds species of plants and animals whose habitat needs protection. To date, 75 raised bogs have been given legal protection, covering some 23,000 hectares. These raised bogs are located mainly in the midlands. A further 73 blanket bogs, covering 37,000ha, mostly in western areas are also designated as NHAs. The Geological Survey of Ireland (GSI) is compiling a list of geological/geomorphological sites in need of protection through NHA designation. In addition, there are 630 proposed NHAs (pNHAs), which were published on a non-statutory basis in 1995, but have not since been statutorily proposed or designated. These sites are of significance for wildlife and habitats and cover approximately 65,000ha.
Nature Reserve	Established by the Wildlife Act 1976, these are areas of importance to wildlife, which are protected under Ministerial order. Most are owned by the State. However, some are owned by organisations or private landowners. The 1976 Act also established *Refuges for Fauna* as a further site-based mechanism to protect species at risk (again through a Ministerial Order).
Special Amenity Area	Planning authorities are empowered but not obliged to make a

Orders (SAAO)	SAAO when an area requires additional protection. Formal procedure: must be confirmed by Minister Only three designated – Howth Head, Liffey Valley, Bull Island (Dublin)
Tree Preservation Orders	Can prohibit the cutting down, topping, lopping of trees Simple procedure, and widely used. Orders can protect a single tree, group of trees or woodland on the basis of amenity value.
County Development Plans – 'protected views' and County Geological Sites	To protect locally important landscapes or geo-heritage sites, mainstreamed within statutory County Development Plans

Conclusion

The discussion in this review has primarily focused on issues surrounding the rebalancing of the Irish settlement system, through focusing on settlement and housing dynamics, identifying drivers of settlement change and finally the evolution of policy and practice to shift the balance of development from a dispersed rural settlement system to the virtues of development focused on rural towns and villages.

This emerging policy agenda represents a paradigm shift in Irish planning practice, from an approach characterised by facilitating incremental housing development to an approach based on evidence, focused on enhancing the role of villages and towns as rural hubs, and strategic investment. However, there is a substantial legacy of dispersed rural housing and connecting rural housing debates to broader questions of sustainability and community vitality is critical. This rebalancing of the rural settlement system also enables an opportunity to explore enduring rural concerns (economic vitality, rural services etc.), but also to address emerging drivers of change, particularly in relation to an ageing population, the implications of energy transitions and climate actions, and the growing importance of digitalisation.

While this paper has focused on rural settlement questions, rural planning in Ireland needs to embrace a much wider agenda through an imaginative engagement with the rural dimensions of planning. The renewable energy transition is growing in significance, not only in relation to climate action imperatives but increasingly in relation to global energy security and cost of living concerns. While planning increasingly addresses climate action, the full implications for and potential of rural places is often neglected. For example, a zero-carbon land-use policy will result in an increased roll-out of renewable energy infrastructure and a

rural landscape comprising wind turbines, solar energy farms, and farmland converted to planting bio-energy crops. A zero-carbon rural land-use system also entails using land to create natural stores of carbon through afforestation and peatland or wetland restoration, while also requiring shifts in farming practices to reduce emissions, through a combination of improved livestock and soil management practices and also through the release of farmland from productive uses. Land use is also critical to adaptation, particularly in relation to flood risk management and the protection of urban areas and critical infrastructure through upstream nature-based solutions. Planning is marginal to some of these debates, but there are explicit spatial elements to decision-making to maximise the potential of land-use. To advance aspects of this agenda, the forthcoming National Land Use Strategy, sitting alongside the National Planning framework, may provide an opportunity to guide the future of land-use which is focused on rural well-being.

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