

# Rural communities

## Research Briefing

July 2024



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The Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister is holding a session on 12 July 2024 with the First Minister, Vaughan Gething MS, focusing on issues affecting rural communities.

This briefing sets out some of the key topics the Committee may cover.



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# 1. Introduction

On **12 July 2024**, the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister is scrutinising the First Minister, Vaughan Gething MS, on issues affecting rural communities. This meeting's topic was **agreed by the Committee** at its meeting on 26 April.

There are a range of policy areas affecting 'rural communities' and this briefing seeks to cover some of those that the Committee may discuss with the First Minister.

## Implications of the 2024 General Election

The Labour Party's General Election manifesto said it would **"reset" the UK Government's relationship** with the Welsh Government, as well as its equivalents in Scotland and Northern Ireland. It also said Labour's "planned investments in public services" would mean **"an additional £195m of funding" for Wales**. Further details are available in the **"Welsh devolution and the Wales Office" section of the manifesto** itself.

Following the General Election result, the **First Minister said on 5 July** this is a "major opportunity to re-set relations and begin a new era of partnership".

## Programme for Government annual report

The Welsh Government published its **2024 Programme for Government annual report** on 9 July. This sets out its perspective of progress against each of the 10 'well-being objectives', which the Programme for Government is structured around and the 115 commitments that sit beneath the 10 objectives.

There is a debate on the annual report scheduled in the **Senedd on 16 July**.

## 2. Agriculture and environment

### Sustainable Farming Scheme

The **Sustainable Farming Scheme** (SFS or ‘the scheme’) is the Welsh Government’s proposed new agricultural policy to replace the **EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** system of support for farmers.

The CAP system has largely been maintained in Wales since EU exit while the new scheme is developed. During this time there have been **multiple consultations** and a **co-design exercise** on the scheme.

**The SFS proposals** are a significant departure from the CAP’s **Basic Payment Scheme (direct payments)**, with more emphasis on reward for public goods, such as required environmental actions. The SFS is intended to reward farmers for delivering actions based on **Sustainable Land Management objectives** (listed in the Agriculture (Wales) Act 2023) to:

1. produce food and other goods in a sustainable manner;
2. mitigate and adapt to climate change;
3. maintain and enhance the resilience of ecosystems and the benefits they provide; and
4. conserve and enhance the countryside and cultural resources and promote public access to and engagement with them, and to sustain the Welsh language and promote and facilitate its use.

The **Welsh Government’s position, for example as set out in July 2018**, has been that supporting improved environmental management will enhance food production, as they go hand in hand. The then Rural Affairs Minister, Lesley Griffiths MS, maintained that as food has a market value it should not be classed as a public good, and so should not be directly funded by the state. Instead the scheme design aimed to support farmers and food production through the various sustainable land management actions.

The **most recent consultation**, which closed in March 2024, was described as the “final step” before the SFS’s introduction in 2025. However, following strong reaction from farmers (outlined below), in May the new Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, Huw Irranca-Davies MS, **announced a delay** to the scheme’s introduction - from 2025 **to 2026**.

There will now be an SFS 'Preparatory Phase of activity' in 2025. A new SFS **Ministerial Roundtable** made up of stakeholders has been established for further consultation.

The budget for the scheme isn't known yet. The **consultation stated** the Welsh Government will pursue, at least, the same total level of funding from the UK Government as in 2024-25. It expects the UK Government to provide an inflationary uplift in funding, highlighting the inflationary pressures which have impacted the farming industry.

There was some **disagreement** between the previous UK Government and the Welsh Government on the level of replacement funding provided for Welsh agriculture since EU exit.

The Rural Affairs portfolio **incurred reductions** in the current budget, following the Welsh Government-wide reprioritisation exercise.

(There is information on the possible implications of the SFS on the Welsh language in chapter 6 of this briefing.)

## **Stakeholder reaction to the proposals**

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Farmers have **protested against** the proposals.

Senedd Research has produced an **article** and a longer **Research Briefing** on the SFS proposals, and stakeholder reaction.

The Senedd's Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure (CCEI) Committee and Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs (ETRA) Committee have both **undertaken work on the SFS**. The CCEI Committee has published a **summary of the evidence** it received.

Some of the key points from stakeholders include:

**Engagement** – Farming representatives felt the co-design work didn't translate to proposals that would work for farmers, and that they hadn't been listened to.

**Payment methodology** – There was consensus that the 'costs incurred and income forgone' payment methodology alone wouldn't provide meaningful income. Farming unions warned this would risk farm business viability. The proposed social value payment was deemed to be complex and not ready for roll out.

**Budget** – There was concern that the budget for agriculture wouldn't be sufficient to match the ambition of the scheme.

**Tree cover** – Farmers were concerned that a scheme requirement to plant trees (the 10% tree cover rule) would take land out of food production and that the approach was too inflexible. Environmental groups highlighted the importance of tree cover to tackle the climate emergency and that trees can be integrated into farming systems to improve agricultural productivity.

**Action layers** – There was concern from farmers that the number of actions required to receive the universal payment made the scheme too onerous. Environmental groups were concerned the more advanced actions, which would have the biggest environmental benefit, would be brought in later.

**Tenant and common land farmers** – It was felt that the proposals wouldn't work for tenant farmers or common land farmers, precluding them from the scheme.

**New entrants** – There was concern the scheme would not support new/young entrants to agriculture.

## Corporate purchase of farmland for woodland creation

Media reports in 2021 highlighted rural community concern about large companies outcompeting local families to buy farms to plant trees for carbon offsetting. The then Minister for Climate Change, Julie James MS, said in October 2021 there was potential for a “real problem”.

An expert working group was established to investigate alternative financing models and issues of local control and ownership. The Woodland Finance Working Group reported to the Welsh Government early in 2022 and its report and recommendations were published on 14 July 2022, the day before the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister's session with the then First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS.

At that meeting, the then First Minister and his official highlighted changes to the woodland creation grant to make it easier for farmers to access. The then First Minister also said:

... we want to make sure that the commercial investment that comes into Wales is organised in a way that is to the benefit of Wales rather than primarily to the benefit of the investor.

The working group noted concerns raised “about the impact of large companies based outside of Wales purchasing land for woodland creation”, which it said include:

- loss of agricultural land and impacts on food production;
- loss of economic returns to communities from land ownership change;
- concerns about non-native conifers being planted;
- a concern about carbon offsetting and carbon being ‘lost’ from Wales;
- lack of ability of local communities to influence projects; and
- the impacts on local culture and Welsh language of the loss of farming communities.

While the working group stressed it was “important not to minimise concerns about the impact of woodland creation on local communities”, its analysis found examples of this type of project were “anecdotal” and there was little evidence to suggest it is widespread.

Furthermore, the working group found “very few” woodland creation schemes had gone ahead without Welsh Government funding through the (then) Glastir Woodland Creation Scheme. Projects funded by the Glastir Woodland Creation Scheme are required to have plans consistent with the UK Forestry Standard, which includes a requirement to consult local communities.

The working group concluded that improving opportunities for farmers to plant trees, rather than restricting who can plant trees, is a better way to address land ownership issues.

In addition to the issue of land ownership, the working group’s **recommendations** included:

- A proportion of the woodland creation budget over the next 3 years should be used to pilot approaches to securing private finance. The working group should scope what these pilots will involve by the end of April 2022, considering options including a carbon guarantee and partnership arrangements to deliver blended finance options.

- [The] Welsh Government should commission a feasibility study for a Public Interest Company focussed on delivering woodland creation through funding projects delivered by Welsh Government, financed by issuing green bonds. This company could also have responsibility for creating the National Forest in Wales. The study should be completed within 12 months.

Tree-planting has been below Welsh Government targets for a number of years: only **an average of 428 ha of new trees** were planted per year in the decade to March 2022. The **Welsh Government's target** is to plant 43,000 ha of new trees by 2030 (almost 5,000 ha per year), rising to 180,000 ha by 2050 (over 6,000 ha per year) to help reach net zero, consistent with **Climate Change Committee advice**.

**Latest figures** (2022-23), show 1,190 ha of new trees planted, more than double the annual average of the previous decade but still considerably short of the target. A **recent paper** from the Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs says figures for 2023-24 are expected to show around 600 ha of new planting. He acknowledged a “rapid increase is required”.

### 3. Transport

In an **April 2024 opinion piece**, Professor Stuart Cole, Emeritus Professor of Transport Economics and Policy at the University of South Wales, reflected on the **transport priorities** of the new First Minister and his new Cabinet Secretary for Transport and North Wales. Professor Cole suggests:

It has been clear for over forty years that rural Wales has lost out on Welsh Government transport investment and day-to-day expenditure when compared with urban areas.

He asks whether a different approach to evaluating transport schemes in rural areas is needed and says “seeing public transport as a socially [necessary] service must be the new philosophy”.

#### Modal shift targets

The **Wales Transport Strategy** (WTS) set a target that 45% of journeys will be made by walking/wheeling, cycling or public transport by 2040 (from a baseline of 32% in 2021).

In a **March 2024 statement** the Welsh Government acknowledged that achieving such targets will require a different approach in rural areas. It also issued guidance on **Sustainable transport in rural areas** to inform **Regional Transport Plans** currently in development.

The guidance acknowledges that those in deeply rural areas will continue to be “heavy vehicle users”. It highlights the need to work with the private sector to deliver Ultra-Low Emission Vehicle charging infrastructure in rural areas.

#### Roads review

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The Welsh Government published the **final report of the roads review panel**, and **its own response**, in February 2023. It led to a number of planned road building projects being cancelled. Senedd Research **published an article** at the time which provides further detail.

As a backbench Member, the now Cabinet Secretary for North Wales and Transport, Ken Skates MS, **was critical** of the review. In April 2024, as Cabinet Secretary, he reportedly **told North Wales Live** he would consider putting some of the cancelled road projects back on the table. He **recently said** that although the road building tests are a “helpful filter” there is a need to ensure the framework is “fit for purpose”.

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## Transport poverty

A **Wales Centre for Public Policy report from 2016** said that public transport in rural areas is “infrequent, inadequate and more expensive than elsewhere”. A 2022 **Sustrans Cymru report** emphasised that people living in rural areas of Wales are some of the worst affected by transport poverty, where a household would need to spend more than 10% of its income on the costs of running a car.

The Senedd’s Climate Change Environment and Infrastructure (CCEI) Committee has previously **recommended the Welsh Government bring forward proposals to address transport poverty** including subsidised fares. In response, the then Deputy Minister for Climate Change, Lee Waters MS, **told the Committee** that the Welsh Government has:

... been working really hard to try and get a flat £1 bus fare, which I think would have been a significant intervention ... We haven’t been able to do that, not because we don’t want to do that.

**In May, the Cabinet Secretary for North Wales and Transport** said the planned bus Bill will bring “huge opportunities” for integrated transport and “fairer fares.” Asked about free bus travel for young people, **as is available in Scotland** (and recently **explored by the Petitions Committee**), he said he was “very interested in this sort of initiative and the potential to go even further”.

## Bus franchising

The **Welsh Government’s 2022 bus reform White Paper** proposes legislation that would require bus franchising throughout Wales, and permit the establishment of new municipal bus companies. Responsibility for planning most bus services will pass from local authorities to Transport for Wales (TfW) and the Welsh Ministers.

The Cabinet Secretary for North Wales and Transport has **told the Senedd** he intends to introduce the Bill by spring 2025. TfW and the Welsh Government published “**Our roadmap to bus reform**” in March, outlining how franchising would be implemented.

In 2022, **the CCEI Committee heard evidence** from the **Confederation of Passenger Transport (CPT)** that franchising is “typically quite challenging for smaller operators”. The CPT also said:

The evidence in New Zealand, where they moved from a deregulated to a franchise market, showed quite a lot of contraction in the SME sector, and the municipal company struggled as well.

**Evidence** from **Transport for Greater Manchester (TfGM)** and the **Urban Transport Group** highlights this has also happened in England where franchising has been introduced.

Discussing the challenges in rural areas, the former First Minister, Mark Drakeford MS, **previously told the Committee for the Scrutiny of the First Minister** “what we need is demand-responsive travel and flexi systems where you generate your timetable on a daily basis”.

A demand-responsive **Fflecsi bus service** currently operates in a number of locations across Wales. In July 2023, the then Deputy Minister for Climate Change **told the Senedd** the Fflecsi service is “likely to be part of the patchwork that we tender as part of the franchising”. He also said “there’s nothing intrinsically impossible for a rural area to have a quality bus service” and pointed to examples in other European countries with “areas far more sparsely populated than Wales, where they manage to have a very frequent, high-quality bus service”.

The existing Fflecsi bus service developed from the original Bwcabus service which operated in Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. The service was withdrawn in late 2023 due to lack of funding prompting **concern from passengers**. The issue has been **debated in the Senedd** and raised with **the Petitions Committee**.

## Rail services

The CCEI Committee’s recent inquiry into rail services explored issues such as franchise commitments not being met, **poor performance of TfW rail services**, and the **additional funding** provided for rail services during 2023-24. It made a number of recommendations in its **May 2024 report**.

The **Committee heard** that “some of the most negative experiences” are on lines in rural areas. On the Heart of Wales line, Community Rail Network told the Committee:

... We’ve heard about some very negative experiences on that line of late through late-notice cancellations, and uncertainty about whether there will be onward travel provided, and, sometimes, a long wait for that.

It also emphasised that those in rural areas have less choice for alternative travel options in the event of cancellations/delays.

While TfW **publishes rail performance data** it does not publish a breakdown by individual rail lines. However, **analysis by Senedd Research** shows services across

the Wales and Borders network as a whole are less punctual than the Core Valley Lines specifically. In a **statement last month** the Cabinet Secretary for North Wales and Transport suggested TfW rail performance has “turned a corner”.

In April, **TfW announced** it had completed its timetable review in light of changing travel patterns post pandemic. **Changes impacting rural areas** include the removal of some services between Machynlleth and Pwllheli and a reduction in services on the Heart of Wales line – an issue which has been **raised in the Senedd**. The CCEI Committee was **previously told**:

... the Heart of Wales line—it could be ... something really special, as famous as the West Highland railway line, as famous as the Settle to Carlisle line, but at the moment it does feel like it’s somewhat bottom of the pile.

## **Metro projects**

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**Metro systems are being developed** in north Wales; Swansea bay and west Wales; and south Wales. **TfW has recently referred** to the north and west Wales projects in particular as “regional transport planning”, rather than “Metros”.

RailFuture previously **suggested to the CCEI Committee** that the north Wales and Swansea bay / south west Wales projects – which would serve more rural areas as opposed to the more developed **South Wales Metro** project - are “just a concept” and little progress has been made in terms of actual delivery. TfW refuted this claim and described these as “development programmes”. Its **Chief Executive, James Price, said** “the bigger challenge... is are those schemes going to get funded and where might that funding come from”.

## 4. Economy, tourism and digital connectivity

### Regional Economic Frameworks

In December 2021, Vaughan Gething MS, then the Minister for Economy, published a **written statement** highlighting the publication of **Regional Economic Frameworks for the four economic regions** – North Wales, Mid Wales, South West Wales and South East Wales.

At the time he stated that the Regional Economic Frameworks will “play a key role in delivering our [**Programme for Government commitment**] of progressing our Economic Recovery & Resilience Mission and should inform our collective efforts”. (This programme is called the **Economy Resilience and Reconstruction Mission**.)

More recently, in November 2023, while still the Minister for Economy, he published the Welsh Government’s **Economic mission: priorities for a stronger economy**. This document sets out the Welsh Government’s intention to “agree a new, shorter set of priorities with regions to focus on urgent opportunities”. No timescale was given for when this would happen.

### Second homes and short term lets

Under the **Cooperation Agreement** the Welsh Government introduced several measures to help address the impacts of large numbers of second homes and holiday lets:

- Increasing the maximum discretionary council tax premium that local authorities can charge on second homes **from 100% to 300%**. For the year 2024-25, 15 local authorities are charging a second home premium, with two charging premiums of more than 100%.
- Changing the thresholds for non-domestic rates, **with the aim** of ensuring that properties listed for non-domestic rates rather than council tax are being let regularly as part of genuine holiday accommodation businesses. From April 2023, properties must be available for let for short periods totalling 252 days or more in a 12-month period, and actually let for 182 days or more, to be **listed for non-domestic rates**.
- Introducing changes to planning legislation aimed at helping local planning authorities to manage second homes and short-term holiday lets. This **legislative change** introduced three new use classes: ‘main home’, ‘secondary home’ and ‘short-term holiday let’. It also empowered local planning authorities

to consider whether planning permission should be required to change a property from one use class to another within a particular area.

- Running a **pilot scheme in Dwyfor, Gwynedd** to trial the introduction of various new measures to manage the number of second homes and short-term lets.

There are also some proposed measures to tackle the impact of second homes and holiday lets that have not yet come into effect:

- Proposed changes to allow variation of Land Transaction Tax rates for second homes and short term lets in some local areas, which were **consulted on in 2021**. The **Cabinet Secretary said in March 2024** that the Welsh Government is continuing to engage with local authorities to explore the proposal.
- Plans to introduce a statutory registration and licensing scheme for all providers of visitor accommodation. Legislation is **expected to be introduced** to the Senedd before the end of this year, focusing initially on short-term lets.
- **Proposals**, which the Welsh Government is working on, to give local authorities the power to introduce a visitor levy.

Between 2023-24 and 2024-25 the **number of second and empty homes** in Wales reduced from 24,170 to 21,931. There is no comparable data on numbers of short-term holiday lets.

## Digital connectivity

Back in 2014, only 55% of residential premises in Wales could access broadband at speeds of 30 Megabits per second (Mbps) or higher, compared to 75% across the UK as a whole. In 2024, **this figure had increased to 96% (UK average 97%)** following **significant investment from the Welsh Government**. This is the sort of speed that enables one person to stream 4K/Ultra High Definition video or for several devices to work simultaneously.

Over the past decade, Welsh Government broadband policy has had two main prongs: giving grants to individuals, and paying broadband providers (in every case BT) to deploy fast broadband en masse outside of commercially viable areas.

Telecommunications is a reserved matter. In 2022 then **Deputy Minister, Lee Waters MS, felt** that, through spending the Welsh Government's funding on a non-devolved function, "the UK Government is making us spend money in ... areas where we shouldn't be spending money ... we were letting the UK Government off the hook".

## 5. Housing

### Rural social housing

The Local Government and Housing Committee's **inquiry into social housing supply** has heard evidence that, while there are barriers to delivering new affordable housing across Wales, there are additional challenges in rural areas.

Rising costs in land, materials and borrowing were cited. Some witnesses said that **construction costs are higher** in rural areas and suggested that grant levels should be higher for rural development.

Some stakeholders have welcomed the **First Minister's manifesto commitment** to establish an affordable homes taskforce to **address planning backlogs**.

Phosphates are **still a barrier to building homes** in some parts of rural Wales. The previous First Minister convened a series of **river pollution summits** to try to identify solutions.

### Rural homelessness

A 2019 academic **article on homelessness prevention** in rural Wales found that people in rural areas who are homeless or at risk of homelessness face distinct challenges:

- The limited housing stock exacerbates difficulties finding accommodation that is affordable and in the local community.
- The sparseness of services in rural areas may create additional barriers to getting support.
- There are some indications that homelessness may be under-reported in rural areas, both because it is less visible and because people may be less likely to seek help.

The Welsh Government has concluded its consultation on the **Ending Homelessness White Paper**. A Bill is due to be laid this Senedd term. The **proposed changes** include measures to support earlier prevention, an end to the priority need and intentional homelessness tests, and the creation of new duties on public bodies to identify people threatened with homelessness and refer them to support.

The White Paper does not include any specific measures on rural homelessness. Several respondents to the consultation **called for bespoke services** tailored to rural homelessness. Generally, respondents welcomed the ambition of the White Paper, but this support was heavily caveated by the scale of resource as well as widespread cultural change that stakeholders felt would be necessary to achieve the White Paper's vision.

## 6. The Welsh language

### The Welsh language, agriculture and rural Wales

While Welsh-speaking communities can be found across Wales, it is in rural and post-industrial north and west Wales where the highest density of fluent Welsh speakers live. Agriculture often forms the backbone of these communities with **2021 Census data showing that the agricultural sector** employs the highest percentage of Welsh speakers. The Welsh Language Commissioner's **5-year Report on the Position of the Welsh language 2016-20** noted that:

There are areas in west, mid and north Wales where around a third of the local population is employed in the sector, and where over 90% of the agricultural workforce speaks Welsh.

In 2021, the **Welsh Language Commissioner wrote** to the Chair of the Culture, Communications, Welsh Language, Sport and International Relations Committee noting specific concerns about the potential impact of changes to post-Brexit agricultural funding in Wales on the “continuity of the Welsh speaking agricultural community”.

The Commissioner expressed concerns about the impact of any new scheme on “smaller family farms” which could undermine communities where the Welsh language is still thriving.

### Sustainable Farming Scheme and the Welsh language

As highlighted in chapter 2 of this briefing, the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS) is intended to reward farmers for delivering actions based on **Sustainable Land Management objectives**, which includes the objective to:

... conserve and enhance the countryside and cultural resources and promote public access to and engagement with them, and to **sustain the Welsh language and promote and facilitate its use**.

A summary of the Welsh Language Commissioner's **response to the SFS (March 2024)** places emphasis on the critical relationship between agriculture and rural Wales and the use of Welsh as an “everyday natural language”.

The Commissioner's summary describes the Welsh Government's findings in its **impact assessment** for the scheme as concluding that “changes to the support system could negatively affect rural Welsh-speaking communities”. The impact assessment looks specifically at the difference between Welsh-speaking and non-Welsh-speaking farmers. It found that “Welsh speakers were more likely to feel part

of the rural community and reported higher levels of involvement in social and farming organisations than those who did not speak Welsh.” Crucially, the impact assessment states that:

Given that these Small farms are more likely to be in receipt of BPS [the Basic Payment Scheme], then it follows that they will be more likely to be impacted by any changes to the support system ... If farms are unable to continue trading, then there could be subsequent impacts for the local farming community, the local rural community, and the Welsh language.

Referencing the Welsh Government’s document on the **Potential economic effects of the Sustainable Farming Plan**, the Commissioner highlights the estimated overall output loss of £125m a year and an 11% reduction in farm labour. Whilst the extent to which the economic impact assessments considered the implications on the Welsh language is not clear, the Commissioner is certain this is a “glaring weakness” in the process, and is concerned that the Welsh Government had:

... produced a Scheme that could undermine one of the intended objectives for sustainable land management ... to ‘maintain the Welsh language and promote and facilitate its use’.

## Commission for Welsh-speaking communities

In August 2022, the then Minister for Education and the Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles MS **established a Commission** to explore the future of the Welsh language in communities across Wales. It was established in response to the Welsh language 2021 Census results, which showed a decrease in the number of people who speak Welsh, and further decline as a community language. It was also in response to the recent **“socio-economic and societal crisis which has developed in Welsh-speaking communities”**.

The **Commission’s position paper** of June 2023 noted that the “future of agriculture is important to the future of Welsh as a community language”, and that the sector and its culture are “central to the social fabric of Welsh-speaking rural areas”. The paper also notes that even in areas of Wales where Welsh is not the majority language, the language plays an “important community function” and:

... raises the question of whether such areas should be designated as areas of (higher density) linguistic significance even though the percentage of Welsh speakers in the community as a whole is below 50%, and sometimes significantly lower.

The Commission is expected to **publish its final report and recommendations for the Welsh Government in the 2024 National Eisteddfod**.

## Arfor

Arfor is a programme developed following an agreement between the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru, made as part of their discussions on [the Welsh Government's 2018-19 draft budget](#).

A [pilot was launched in 2019](#) with £2 million in funding to assist four local authorities (Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Gwynedd and the Isle of Anglesey) to develop new and innovative methods to support economic development in these areas. These four authorities are generally considered to be strongholds for the Welsh language, and are, on the whole, rural in geography.

The pilot scheme sought to:

- promote enterprise and support business growth in areas with a high proportion of Welsh speakers;
- generate more and better paid jobs to retain local people in these areas;
- promote the wide ranging value of the use of Welsh and bilingualism in business; and
- encourage the businesses and people who move to rural areas to value and use the Welsh language.

The pilot ran until March 2021. According to the [Arfor programme website](#), 154 businesses were supported, with 238 full-time and 89 part-time jobs created, and 226 jobs safeguarded as part of the pilot. An [evaluation of the pilot programme](#) set out lessons to learn from the pilot, including:

- that some of the business support schemes trialled have the potential, if structured correctly, to increase the use of Welsh within the workplace;
- that further work is needed to understand what types of jobs encourage Welsh speakers to live within the Arfor region; and that
- for the programme to have a significant impact and a constructive legacy, the learning must be shared, and schemes must be mainstreamed.

In 2021, the [Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru agreed](#) to undertake a second phase of the Arfor scheme with [funding of £11 million](#) to support it. There are [five different workstreams within Arfor 2](#), which include:

- [Llwyddo'n Lleol](#) – a £3 million scheme for young people and young families under 35 to increase job opportunities within communities;

- **Cymunedau Mentrus/Enterprising Communities** – a fund that offers support to private/community/social enterprises to develop new services/products within communities;
- **Cronfa Her/Challenge Fund** – this £2.6 million fund will support individuals with innovative ideas to meet the economic needs of the Arfor region;
- **Bwrlwm Arfor** – this will provide business resources and a community hub to support bilingualism and use of the Welsh language.

## 7. Healthcare

**Written evidence** from the Welsh Government in 2019 (from Vaughan Gething MS when he was Minister for Health and Social Services) to the Fifth Senedd's Health Social Care and Sport Committee identified the following challenges for providing health and social care services in rural areas in Wales:

- difficulties in recruiting and retaining healthcare professionals in rural or remote locations;
- how best to provide services in areas where populations are widely dispersed and travel distances are seen as a major barrier to accessing health and care services; and
- an ageing population which is growing faster in rural than in urban areas.

From 2009 to 2013, the Welsh Government had a **Rural Health Plan**, which focused on improving access to health care, integrated services, and community cohesion and engagement. In 2019, as the then Health Minister, Vaughan Gething MS was **asked why** the Welsh Government's current long term health and social services plan, **A Healthier Wales** (2018), makes no specific reference to rural communities. He said:

We now have a coherent health and social care plan for the country, and that is not just a plan for urban Wales or a plan for rural Wales; it is a plan for Wales ... I really don't want to get diverted from delivering the vision in 'A Healthier Wales', because then the coherence we have could easily disappear if I set off and try and have specific plans on geographic locations.

He also argued that a "rural-proofing approach" is embedded in every part of the Welsh Government's policy formulation.

### Workforce and recruitment

**Research suggests** that within rural areas the availability of services and the health workforce play a more significant role in health outcomes than in urban areas, but recruiting and retaining the workforce can be particularly challenging. A **Public Health Wales Spotlight Paper** (2022) on the impact on rural communities of the "triple challenge" of Brexit, the Covid-19 pandemic and climate change highlights that NHS providers in rural areas are "more likely to have experienced exacerbated workforce issues and poorer financial situations during the pandemic".

The NHS Wales **10 year workforce strategy for health and social care** (2020)

says that Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) will develop targeted schemes to address significant shortages of health professionals, particularly in rural and remote areas. The **Train Work Live campaign**, launched in 2016 and delivered by HEIW, aims to market Wales to healthcare professionals. It has targeted recruitment campaigns at GPs, mental health professionals, nurses and midwives, dentists, and pharmacists.

From September, the **Welsh Government will be funding** up to 140 places at the new North Wales Medical School. The Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care, Eluned Morgan, said that this will “ensure that training opportunities and the provision of qualified doctors are spread across Wales”.

The Welsh Government’s long-term plan for health and social care, **A Healthier Wales**, sets out a shift from the provision of health care services in hospitals to communities, which is of particular significance to rural areas where travel distances can be a barrier to accessing care. The number of GP practices in Wales has fallen in the last 10 years from **470 practices** in 2013 to **374 practices** in 2023. A number of GP practices in rural areas have recently closed, for example since 2022, **4 GP surgeries in Hywel Dda University Health Board** have handed back their General Medical Services (GMS) contract and the health board’s deputy medical director of primary care has said that patients **may need to travel further** to get to their GP surgery.

## Wales Air Ambulance

The Wales Air Ambulance is a partnership between the charitable trust and the NHS Wales Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer Service (EMRTS). It provides advanced, lifesaving medical care across Wales by helicopter and rapid response vehicle, from four bases in Caernarfon, Llanelli, Welshpool and Cardiff.

In April, the NHS Wales Joint Commissioning Committee (JCC) **approved the recommendation** of the **Emergency Medical Retrieval and Transfer Service Review** that the Welshpool and Caernarfon bases should be consolidated into a single site in north Wales, with an exact location to be decided at a later stage. This aims to address variation in utilisation rates between bases and unmet need, where critical care is required but no resources are available, which is currently highest in north Wales.

## 8. Education

### Rural schools

In the previous Senedd, when Kirsty Williams was Cabinet Secretary / Minister for Education, the Welsh Government had a '**Rural education action plan**'. This followed the **agreement of certain education priorities** with the former First Minister, Carwyn Jones, which underpinned her **appointment to the Cabinet** in June 2016.

There was a **Small and Rural Schools Grant**, worth an annual £2.5 million over five years between 2017-18 and 2021-22. In a **paper to the CYPE Committee on the 2022-23 budget**, the then Minister for Education and Welsh Language, Jeremy Miles MS, confirmed that this grant **ended in March 2022**, with the annual £2.5m repurposed into the Welsh in Education Grant.

Another policy change aimed at supporting rural communities was a revision in November 2018 to the **School Organisation Code** (which governs how local authorities take forward school closure/amalgamation proposals) to include a presumption against the closure of 218 'rural schools' listed in the Code. This does not mean a rural school will never close but the local authority must follow "a more detailed set of procedures and requirements" when proposing to close a rural school (see **section 1.8 of the 2018 Code**).

### Learner travel

The Welsh Government began reviewing learner travel arrangements in **November 2019**. Initially this was in relation to post-16 learners, but subsequently **extended in 2020** to include 4–16 year-old learners and **extended further** in March 2022 to consider a complete revision of the Learner Travel Measure.

In March 2024, the Welsh Government published the **Learner Travel in Wales analysis and evaluation: recommendations report**, which found that due to the forthcoming reform of the bus industry and budgetary constraints that there "should be no immediate amendment to the legislation which underpins Learner Travel in Wales". It recommended that changes are made to statutory guidance to support a more consistent approach to learner travel provision across Wales.

## 9. Food and drink

The Welsh Government's latest **economic appraisal for the Welsh food and drink sector (2022)** shows that the food and drink supply chain employed 233,500 people and had a Gross Value Added of £6.11 billion in 2021. The Welsh food and drink supply chain includes manufacturing and related packaging, agriculture and fishing, retail and wholesale, and non-residential catering. Many businesses in this sector **provide significant employment in rural communities**.

The Welsh Government's **Vision for the Food and Drink Industry** was published in November 2021. It aims to:

- ensure an environmentally and socially responsible supply-chain with an international reputation for excellence; and
- grow the industry at a higher rate proportionally to the rest of the UK.

The vision focuses on food manufacturing and processing and there have been recent calls for a more overarching strategy for the food system as a whole, including from Peter Fox MS in his **Food (Wales) Bill**, the Senedd's **Economy, Trade and Rural Affairs Committee**, and the **Future Generations Commissioner**. The Welsh Government has resisted these calls saying it already has a strategic approach including specific **targets and progress indicators**, and if gaps are identified new policies are created.

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs, Huw Irranca-Davies MS, has said a document entitled **'Food Matters: Wales' will be published soon**. He said it will "summarise and bring together all the major policies and activities relevant to food happening across government". The Welsh Government is committed to **publishing a community food strategy** by the end of 2024 which will "be about invigorating and supporting grass roots food related initiatives".

The Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs made a **statement to the Senedd** on 25 June on producing food sustainably within the Welsh food system. He set out the support in place for Welsh food and drink manufacturers to "decarbonise, to improve the delivery of positive environmental and social impacts, and to respond to the climate impacts on food production".