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# the welsh agenda

iwa

**Lucy Taylor**
On Y Wladfa

**Joe Rossiter**
On health in Wales

**Ken Moon**
On access to land and spaces

Autumn/Winter 2024
Issue 73


## Catching the Waves

**Zoe Dowsett** on surf therapy

**Iwan Brioc** *on his reciprocal well-being model* | **Luke Upton** *on Welsh rugby* | **Rania Vamvaka** *on LGBTQ+ youth homelessness*

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# Editorial
## *Maria Drave*

Since we last published *the welsh agenda* in May, we have had another eventful, and challenging, summer for people and organisations across Wales, the UK, and further afield. With many continuing to navigate the cost-of-living crisis and the climate emergency, the conflicts in Ukraine and the Middle East do not show any signs of slowing down - on the contrary, the numbers of those killed, injured or displaced continues to rise. More and more people are faced with increased levels of poverty and inequality, and a heightened sense of uncertainty and instability.

On a more local note, the UK also faced a summer of change: a remarkable General Election in July, which saw Labour achieve victory across the UK. However, as we wrote on *the welsh agenda* online, this election was marked by a low turnout signalling a widespread disengagement with politics - indeed, with deteriorating living standards, public services and infrastructure, for some, it is difficult to see how, and who, can deliver meaningful change. In this issue of *the welsh agenda*, Tom Collinson talks to the newly elected MP for Swansea West, Torsten Bell, about growth-led government and place-based investing. In the years to come, and with Labour Governments on either side of the M4, we will eagerly follow the relationship between Westminster and Cardiff Bay, to see how new players and new structures interact in the attempt to deliver better for the people of Wales.

Here in Wales, and for a second time this year, we are writing this editorial under a new First Minister. After a turbulent and internally contentious time for Welsh Labour, Wales now has its first female leader, who inherits the enormous task to run a Government which promises to deliver better short-term outcomes for our economy, transport and health services, and lead a divided Labour group into a momentous Senedd election in 2026 under a new system. At an opportune moment for the new Welsh Government, Emlyn Philips discusses Wales on the global stage in his *Wales and Ethiopia* piece, and Rhys Lewis-Jones argues why Wales should have a greater voice in influencing UK foreign policy in *A Welsh Stance on Nuclear Deterrence?*

Talking about the Senedd election, and hot off the press at the time of writing, IWA's former Director Lee Waters MS has just announced he will be stepping down from the Senedd in 2026, after a decade in politics. You can read his reflections on what being a politician has meant to him and the toll it's taken on his mental health in his candid interview with Jennifer Nadel later in the issue.

The complex and sustained challenges Wales faces have hit the public, charity and non-profit sector particularly strongly. Iwan Thomas from PLANED reflects on this in his article on community action and investment; Dr Huw Dylan Owen looks at how demographic changes affect social care services in Gwynedd; Rania Vamvaka explores LGBTQ+ youth homelessness; and Joe Rossiter examines how health could be one of Wales' greatest economic opportunities. In our feature piece, Zoe Dowsett focuses on the vital role of surf therapy in improving young people's mental health and forging strong community bonds.

With the ever-looming 2035 net zero target, we cannot afford an *agenda* without casting our eye on the climate emergency. In this issue, the WCPP share lessons learnt from the recently published report of the Net Zero 2035 Challenge Group; RSPB Cymru advocates for ambitious and robust legislation and policy to protect our vulnerable seabirds; Carwyn Graves outlines new initiatives in Carmarthenshire which aim to transform our relationship with food; and Joshua Jones tours Llanelli through the eyes of an imaginary living thinker in 2100. Current challenges call for a rethink of our economic frameworks, and Iwan Brioc outlines his own model in *The Reciprocal Well-being Model: A New Way Forward for Wales*.

On land use and assets, Dr Sarah Nason and Dr Dani Hutcheon call for urgent community asset reform in Wales, and Ken Moon takes us on a walk around Pontypridd to show us the importance of having free access to the spaces around us. Understanding our country from a different perspective, Luke Upton looks at the tragic fate of some of Wales' brightest rugby names, and Lucy Taylor explores how we might rethink the well-worn narrative and place of Welsh Patagonia on the colonial legacy agenda.

In these challenging times, we are proud to be able to bring together voices (known and new) to seek ideas and solutions to addressing our country's complex challenges. I hope you will enjoy getting stuck into *the welsh agenda* once again. **MD**

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## ARTICLES



## REVIEWS

# Healthier lives, a more prosperous Wales?

**Joe Rossiter** *examines how people's health is Wales' biggest challenge - but could be one of its greatest economic opportunities, too*

Recent reports, both based on English and pan-UK health and social care services, have laid bare the existential challenges facing our public health systems. Firstly, the Darzi report, commissioned by UK Health Minister Wes Streeting, underlined the growing challenges of delivering health services in England. Whilst focussed on the English system, its depiction of health services as in 'serious trouble', certainly has cross-border resonance. This was followed up by the final report of the IPPR's Health and Prosperity Commission, which took a broader UK focus, and made clear the link between health and economic performance, a conversation not currently taking place in Wales.

Both reports have brought welcome attention to the state of people's health across the UK and its nations. Taken together, they can help us set the terms for a reexamination of how we can create not just better health services, but healthier, happier and more productive lives.

The reports land at a point where NHS Wales have reported historically high waiting lists, despite tackling them being a long-term Welsh Government priority. Jeremy Miles, the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care has appointed an 'external Ministerial Advisory Group on NHS Performance and Productivity' which will undertake an independent review of the systems in place to improve NHS Wales. This is welcome, although it represents just the latest in a series of similar commissions and advisory groups. That the group will look at tackling waiting lists specifically speaks to political expediency rather than an appreciation of the larger, whole-systems reform urgently required.

It's clear that health and social care services in Wales are under particular strain, but as a policy generalist, I wanted to try and understand what both reports mean for Wales, with its poorer, less well and older population than the UK average.

On the face of it, UK Government should be looking to Wales to understand future challenges to public health, not just to identify profound problems with a health system bursting at the seams, but also for the opportunity to consider radical reform to how we deliver greater long-term public health.

In a political sense, health and social care will surely take up a lot of oxygen in the run up to the Senedd 2026 election. Indeed, the First Minister has made *'Iechyd da' - A Healthier Wales* the first in her government's four priorities. Likewise, at the recent Plaid Cymru conference, party leader Rhun ap Iorwerth MS used much of his speech to critique successive Welsh Labour governments' poor record on health, signalling what a Plaid government would do differently. As the Welsh Conservatives are wrangling over their stance on devolution itself, it's the poor health and social care outcomes achieved at a devolved level that are at the forefront of the case for articulating the lack of progress made by successive devolved governments.

This article is an attempt to understand the long-term challenges facing health and social care in Wales, how we may improve things, and why creating a healthier population can both raise our collective wellbeing and help unleash Wales' economic potential.

## The problem - a system under strain

Firstly, it is important to establish that whilst health is an issue devolved to Wales, it is, of course, part of a system which is interlinked with services across the UK. Secondly, and equally importantly, spending on NHS services in Wales is reflective of UK Government spending on services in England. This spending acts to dictate uplifts to Welsh Government's annual budget through the Barnett Formula. Decisions that the Chancellor Rachel Reeves is making as I write this, particularly around allocating more investment into NHS England, can, therefore, feed through better funding for services in Wales (if Welsh Government choose to allocate that money to health). UK Government decisions, then, have a profound impact on health and social care in Wales.

Whilst the overall picture for health is similar across the UK, with services failing to deliver for all too many, health and social care providers at capacity, a workforce under significant strain, investment badly needed, and uncertainty over the future of the system's ability to meet continually rising demand, Wales faces a distinct, and more immediately challenging outlook than the rest of the UK.

Wales' population is older and faces more complex health needs than the average UK population. Wales also has higher rates of diabetes and obesity than the rest of the UK: according to Nesta Cymru, a third of adults in Wales are now living with obesity. Mental health across Wales has also been worsening since the Covid-19 pandemic, with these conditions unequally felt across Wales. Our healthcare challenges are distinctly acute. Wales could be acting as a canary in the coalmine for the whole of the UK's health system.

Snowdonia National Park. Credit: Gabriel Kiener, Unsplash

The UK faces significant challenges in order to uphold healthcare standards over the decades ahead, with an increasingly ageing population likely to lead to a significant rise in the costs of providing healthcare across people's lifespan. Such demographic shifts are disproportionately felt here in Wales, with our population already older than England's.

## Devolution, powers and responsibilities

The Secretary of State for Wales recently announced that Welsh patients will be able to access English services in an attempt to tackle historically high waiting lists. Such a move will be welcome in supporting those that have been in distress, discomfort and pain, waiting for much-needed treatment. Yet, this policy represents a sticking plaster to a much deeper wound. When Keir Starmer campaigned to become Prime Minister, he said this was the end of 'sticking plaster politics', yet, this policy appears, on the face of it, just that. Especially given that when it was announced, there was scant detail on what a closer collaboration between health services across the border would look like, and what benefit that would bring for patients either side of the border. Without the detail, the statement of closer collaboration means little.

The accusation from Welsh Conservatives that similar deals proposed by the previous Conservative UK Government were rejected by Welsh Government will rankle with those who see the issue of public health as above party politics.

Such a move also does little to support the alleviation of the systemic challenges facing public health in Wales. It also erodes faith that devolved governments are capable of tackling profound challenges. If patients in Wales are reliant on English health services to get the treatment they need, in an area of policy which is *de jour* devolved, then what does this say about Welsh Government's capability and the devolution settlement itself? Wales can and *should* be able to create tailored, long-term solutions to our health crises. If it can't, then what is devolution for?

Health and social care are meant to be *what* the devolved government does. As I will go on to discuss, these services take up a lot of time and space in Wales' policy conversation. If Welsh Government are looking at short-term fixes to tackle a systemic set of issues, where does that leave devolution, unable to improve outcomes for devolved public services? If this is the case, it represents a damning indictment on devolution as a political project which can achieve meaningful improvements to people's lives.

In addition, health services themselves are managed by seven local health boards, which have direct responsibility for services and the health of their area. Yet, oversight, scrutiny and challenge of these bodies is often complex, becoming increasingly difficult to hold the right people to account for poor performance.

Achieving change to health outcomes in Wales thus relies on behaviour change and transformation across a number of bodies and individuals.

## A budgetary issue

Even a cursory glance at the Welsh Government budget displays the profound challenge that health and social care represent to a devolved government.

Almost half of Welsh Government's budget goes to health and social care - £11bn of £23.6bn at last count (although at time of writing, a new draft budget is shortly to arrive). With need for services continuing to increase as the population grows and ages, and as lifestyle related sickness persists, this is likely to grow even further. Indeed, the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales has highlighted the long-term unsustainability of the nation's direction of travel on health, with his *Cymru Can* strategy noting that services look 'increasingly unsustainable... without substantial changes'.

Put bluntly, health and social care are increasingly dominating public policy in Wales, whilst achieving worsening outcomes.

The long term financial sustainability of local authorities in Wales is also put at increased risk due to the spiralling costs of providing statutory services like social care. Successive local authority budget cuts, combined with the increased demands of statutory services like health, social care, education and housing, have diminished the ability of local government to deviate from Welsh and UK Government policy. Shed of their ability to create services that meet local needs, local authorities are left without the tools to make the interventions they need to improve long-term health outcomes.

**With a healthier population, in every sense, we can simultaneously boost productivity whilst alleviating the pressure on our strained health and social care services**

The Pin Mill at Bodnant Garden. Credit: JR Harris, Unsplash

Local authorities surely have a significant role to play in a healthier, more preventative *health creation* system. Yet, unable to afford much beyond what is statutory, local government are unable to invest in areas which keep people out of frontline health and social care services.

Business as usual is unworkable, unaffordable and performing increasingly poorly. We need a transformation in how our health system works, focusing on keeping people out of frontline services. Central to this transformation is reallocating money towards policies which do just that.

Taking into account the long-term positive impact of creating the conditions for healthy life in Wales is vital for incentivising spending on preventative measures, which create healthy environments for all.

## Unleashing economic potential

In Wales, the poor state of our health is also an economic issue, with ill-health and sickness a considerable drag on Wales' economy compared to other parts of the UK.

This can be seen in Wales' continually high levels of economic inactivity: economic inactivity due to sickness is higher in Wales and the north of England than the rest of the UK.

I argue, however, that Wales has more potential to catch up to other parts of the UK, let alone parts of Europe. With a healthier population, in every sense, we can simultaneously boost productivity whilst alleviating the pressure on our strained health and social care services. It's a dual benefit.

Part of this rests on workplaces in Wales that need to be more open to those experiencing long-term sickness (particularly mental health challenges). This agenda also links to creating good and fair work for all; work which seeks to uphold and even improve people's mental and physical health rather than systematically degrade it.

Areas of economic disadvantage in Wales map across areas of health disadvantage. Tackling regional economic disparities and health disparities are thus two sides of the same coin. Investing in our health and social services is cost-saving in the long-term, providing people with greater access to employment, enabling them to stay in work, thus decreasing Wales' social security spending.

But increasing access to meaningful work and employment, whatever that looks like for individuals, can also help Wales' economy to close the gap between our economic performance and that of the UK average. Solving the economic inactivity and sickness problem offers profound opportunities not only to individuals themselves, but also to our economy at large.

With a number of actors in Wales now looking at establishing a different kind of economy, one which better delivers wellbeing benefits to people across Wales, tackling inequalities in health outcomes alongside incomes can arguably help to raise collective wellbeing.

## So what should the system look like: prevention, lifestyle and extending healthy life expectancy

The case for moving towards a prevention oriented system has never been clearer in Wales, and has been the supposed approach of actors at UK and Welsh level for at least the last decade.

Yet, such a pivot in direction is fraught with political danger. Primarily because the reallocation of resources toward prevention, behaviour change and a move to a community focussed system, means the reallocation of resources on a grand scale.

But, as the Darzi report notes:

*'The state of the NHS is not due entirely to what has happened within the health service. The health of the nation has deteriorated and that impacts its performance.'*

Health services are expected to pick up the tabs for the rest of our economy, which is failing all too many. This can't go on and means that a much broader approach to improving public health is sorely needed.

The recent IPPR Health and Prosperity report makes a compelling argument when it states that we need to move from a 'sickness model of health policy to a health creation one', with interventions taking place outside of the acute point of delivery. Instead, the creation of healthier lives should be a cross-society, pan-government set of activities and interventions, acting to increase healthy life expectancy, reduce health disparities and benefit from the untapped potential of better health on our economic and wellbeing outcomes.

In short, this means moving money and investment away from large hospitals and towards communities.

Nonetheless, with waiting lists spiralling at these hospitals, the call to move much-needed resources away from them is a difficult case to make. Yet, most of health and social care spend in Wales is revenue - mainly the wages of a skilled and dedicated staff. That is not to say that an increase in capital investment is also needed in order to deliver services that are fit for the future as well as increasing NHS productivity, which is curtailed by poor technology and data management systems.

So, what should the overarching mission be for a transformation in the nation's health?

In my mind this should be summed up simply: *Extending the healthy life expectancy of people in Wales, whilst minimising disparities in health outcomes.*

This builds on data we already track through the *national indicators*, and speaks to the socio-economic conditions which all too often shape our health outcomes. The recent Wellbeing of Wales 2024 report notes that the most up-to-date data on socioeconomic inequalities in avoidable mortality shows that the 'proportion of total deaths that were avoidable continued to be substantially larger in the most deprived areas compared with the least deprived areas'. This should shame us all.

Viewing our health policy as a cross-government commitment mobilised not by solely reducing waiting lists (although that is an important immediate indicator), but by creating a healthier Wales for all is vital.

This means that policy must acknowledge that health inequalities, and indeed poor health generally, are driven by diverse and wide-ranging factors, such as transport, housing, employment and access to green space, to name but a few.

We must gear up for this national mission to improve the nation's health by implementing preventative measures across the board which touch on a vast array of policy levers. This also means devolving some money and power closer to communities in order for local government and communities to take a more active role

**Reflecting on the challenges that health and social care services in Wales face, it is at least positive that, at a UK and Welsh level, we are starting to have the conversation around what's going wrong and how we can put things right**

in shaping communities which embed healthy lifestyles. The way we tackle this existential challenge is cross-government, both vertically and horizontally.

We must start making the connections between how we live our lives and our health outcomes as a nation. Making the case for preventative measures will be difficult politically, but is increasingly necessary.

The lesson from the much-discussed 20mph policy, at heart a public health initiative, designed to decrease the frequency and severity of road collisions (alongside encouraging people to travel actively) has been that complexity and a shift to the long term can come at a heavy political cost. This despite the near-immediate benefits of this specific policy. We can't continue to shy away from these political constraints causing Wales to remain the sick man of Britain. We urgently need to break the cycle of poor health and high sickness, poor economic performance and an NHS perennially struggling to meet ever-increased demand. The longer we wait, the higher the cost to us all.

Health is clearly high up the agenda for the remaining 18 months of this Welsh Government and those seeking election to the Senedd in 2026. It's time for Wales to start considering difficult decisions which will protect the sustainability of our vital, free at the point of use, NHS services. This endeavour, as outlined above, needs to be focussed on raising healthy life expectancy and tackling inequalities of outcome for all. A unifying approach, which aims to create a healthier population is urgently required, to reduce our dependence and need for crisis services. If we can create a healthier population across the nation, we should reap the long-term economic benefits of a more productive economy and healthier, happier communities.

Reflecting on the challenges that health and social care services in Wales face, it is at least positive that, at a UK and Welsh level, we are starting to have the conversation around what's going wrong and how we can put things right. This means acknowledging that public health is in a state of emergency and that pouring money into emergency hospital care is not a long-term sustainable strategy. We need to move the goalposts and have a broader, more nuanced conversation around the health of our nation.

How each political party proposes to tackle Wales' health challenge is expected to be at the forefront of all parties' minds over the next 18 months, with the Senedd election creeping into view. We hope that parties come to the table with an acknowledgement that there are no easy answers to solving Wales' health problems. Attempts to portray solutions as *easy fixes* will be a chimera.

With the number of Senedd Members increasing to 96, some of this extra capacity could surely be used to forensically examine the state of Wales' public health, take evidence from subject matter experts and reach a cross-party consensus on where we go from here.

A shift to a preventative and community based approach has been advocated by parties of all colour over recent years, parking the politics and collaborating on the solutions to bring about change.

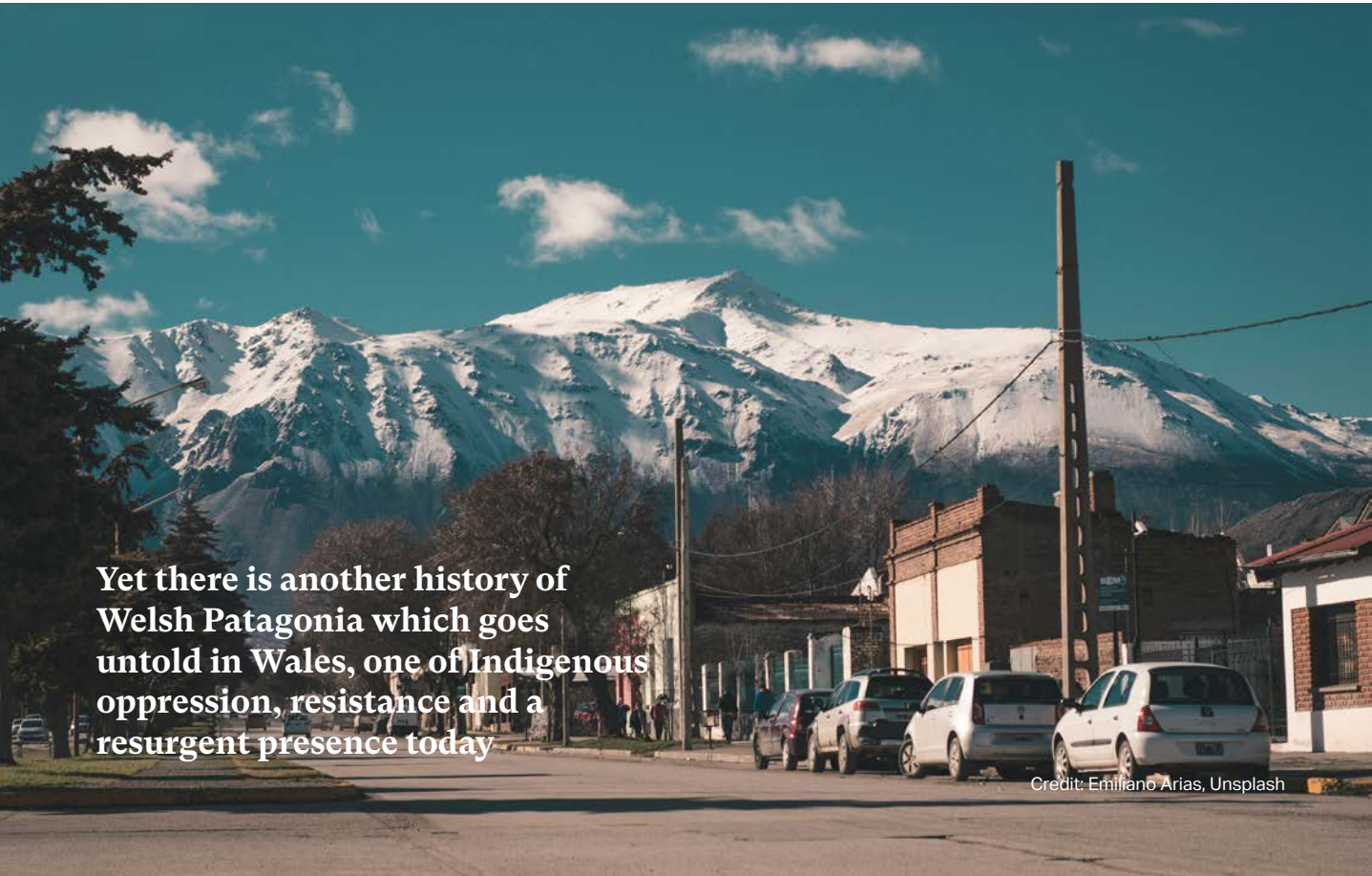
A transition to a preventative approach will come at short-term pain, but it's the only way to improve health and wellbeing for all in the long term. Wales may finally be in the position to have this much-needed conversation - there are few alternatives but to explore the radical ones.

**Joe Rossiter** is Co-Director at the IWA

# Decolonising Y Wladfa Today

*A spirit of decolonial thinking is infusing Welsh public life, inspired by the aspiration that Wales be antiracist by 2030. Yet one area of Welsh culture remains untouched: Y Wladfa, the Welsh settlement in Patagonia. While there are good reasons for this, the time has come to reconsider the well-worn narrative and place of Welsh Patagonia on the colonial legacy agenda*

I was particularly struck by Y Wladfa's absence as I was reading one of the textbooks written for the new Curriculum for Wales which tackles antiracism and colonialism head-on. The textbook *History for 11-14 Years* (2022) breaks new ground, providing a nuanced account of early Islamic empires and critically examining transatlantic slavery, noting its Welsh connections. The chapter on British colonialism is also strong, discussing the devastating



**Yet there is another history of Welsh Patagonia which goes untold in Wales, one of Indigenous oppression, resistance and a resurgent presence today**

Credit: Emiliano Arias, Unsplash

impact on Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and Australia, linking Indigenous oppression to racism. I was surprised, though, that analysis of the Welsh Patagonian settler colony did not feature in this chapter. Instead, it is celebrated as a matter of pride in the later chapter on 'Welsh culture'. Discussion of Y Wladfa thus avoids the controversial 'colonial' label and is carefully avoided in the decolonial debate. This article explores why that might be and suggests ways to open conversations about colonialism in Patagonia.

### Tackling the usual narrative

The usual narrative, taught in schools and reiterated on TV and radio, in coffee table books and Cân i Gymru songs, goes like this: Welsh culture was under threat in Wales, so Michael D. Jones and Lewis Jones masterminded a colony where people could live and rule themselves in Welsh and according to Welsh custom. It celebrates the courage needed to board the Mimosa and start a new life, and admires their enterprise in devising irrigation, building a railway and farming prize-winning wheat. More than anything, it celebrates the capacity of Welsh language culture – manifested by chapels, newspapers and education – to endure. It is important to say that this story is, largely, true. I have read the archives and can confirm that Welsh culture was derided, the colonists were brave, the settlers were resourceful and that Welsh culture indeed enriches Patagonia today.

Yet there is another history of Welsh Patagonia which goes untold in Wales, one of Indigenous oppression, resistance and a resurgent presence today. For those on the receiving end of colonial expansion, this settler colonial initiative was the thin end of the wedge. It enabled state intervention, the capture and enslavement of Indigenous people and the devastation of their societies. This side of the story has not yet registered on the public policy radar.

### Is Y Wladfa colonial?

Suggesting that we consider Welsh Patagonia to be colonialism is controversial and there is a lot at stake. Today, colonialism is seen as damaging and exploitative, so people who have family connections to Patagonia can feel anxious that they might be branded as 'bad'. This is entirely understandable. Welsh national identity is rooted in its reputation for moral action, linked to the central role of nonconformism. This virtue is a powerful political lever to assert Welsh dignity, especially in the face of otherwise powerful actors, like big business or Westminster politics. One demonstration of this virtue is the cultivation of trade and 'friendly relations' with the Indigenous Peoples in Patagonia. However, if this cornerstone of Welsh (Welsh-speaking) identity is shown to be colonial, it disrupts this righteous image and undermines a Welsh claim to power, through virtue. On top of this, asking difficult questions has repercussions not only in Wales but also in Welsh Patagonia. Therefore, there are good reasons for resisting the 'colonial' label, which are justified by three 'moves to innocence' which I have often heard.

Firstly, it is sometimes argued that because the Welsh themselves were/are oppressed, they cannot themselves be colonisers. However, reason tells us that being oppressed oneself is no antidote to oppressing others, and both positions can be true at the same time. We should note the pivotal role of Welsh settlers in North America, Australia and South Africa under clear conditions of colonialism from the founding of Jamestown onwards. Equally, though, actively colonising others abroad does not somehow negate the fact (and pain) of cultural suppression back home. The Welsh can simultaneously be 'colonised' and 'colonising', and Y Wladfa is our very own example. It was imagined, organised, financed, peopled and enacted by Welsh people and in the Welsh language.

**Welsh Patagonia was, and is, made-in-Wales, so there is a lot to lose by picking apart the familiar, feel-good story**

Lihué Calel National Park. Credit: Hardscarf, creativecommons

**This doesn't mean we need to give up our own cherished stories but entails adding Indigenous stories alongside our own, learning to see through the eyes of others, too**

Secondly, some argue that Y Wladfa was qualitatively different, because it arose in defence of Welsh culture. It is true that the Migration Society's aim was to create a place where Welsh people could rule themselves in the Welsh language and according to a Welsh way of life. It is also true that they focused on trade and did not seek to rule over or convert them. A very powerful claim to the distinctiveness of the Welsh Patagonian enterprise relies on the 'myth of friendship' between the Indigenous and Welsh. Because colonisation was peaceful and not violent, settlement on what was once Indigenous land is justified. Indeed, peaceable relations with Native Peoples can be celebrated as a moral triumph and matter of pride. This makes Y Wladfa an inspiring example of ideal Welshness, which is politically empowering. There is a lot to lose, then, in challenging the myth of Welsh moral virtue in Y Wladfa.

The final reason and 'move to innocence' is simpler: it was not the Welsh but Argentina who was responsible for what happened. Again, there is a good chunk of truth to this. Argentina was the state which

claimed ownership over Indigenous lands, making (and breaking) agreements with Indigenous leaders. It was Argentina which sent the army in to 'clear' the land of Indigenous people, imprison and displace them. It was the military who massacred those who resisted, smashed communities and violently oppressed the knowledge, languages and lifeways of Indigenous Peoples. Yet, were the Welsh just innocent bystanders? While it is true that they had little leverage over the state, the Welsh settlement was integral to its plan. Y Wladfa played a crucial pioneering role in the practical enactment of settler colonialism. Their presence drove the process of surveying and reallocating Indigenous lands. Their 'plantation' turned Argentina's paper-based claim over Indigenous lands into reality. In turn, this enabled the state to send in the army to enforce that claim and establish state, not Indigenous, sovereignty over the territory. They also fed Argentina's racialised project by bringing 'desirable Whiteness' to Patagonia to replace 'undesirable Indians'. While the Welsh were only vaguely aware of these bigger dynamics and were not responsible for the violent oppression, they were still a crucial part of the story. And in the end, it was they who benefitted from state expansion on what were Indigenous lands.

## The path to decolonizing Y Wladfa

Bringing Y Wladfa into discussions about colonialism and antiracism is necessary, but quite hard. The abhorrent nature of transatlantic slavery makes it an obvious (and vital) place to start such work. Similarly, discussing the British Empire's pernicious effects is less controversial because English elites bear the brunt of responsibility. However, Welsh Patagonia was, and is, made-in-Wales, so there is a lot to lose by picking apart the familiar, feel-good story. Also, as we have seen, the arguments are not clear-cut but complex and confusing. If we are brave, though, we might put Y Wladfa on the colonial agenda. Given its sensitivity and complexity, we need to think carefully about how to negotiate the difficult conversations and hurt feelings that surround it. Tackling this topic requires careful work, but actually, decolonial approaches offer some potentially useful suggestions.

**Listen to other stories:** listening and learning, with an open heart, about the experiences of other people is the first vital step. This means hearing the hidden stories of those who lived on those lands before the Welsh arrived and whose descendants continue to live there today. The 'usual narrative' makes Original Peoples visible, but only as 'friendly Indians who taught them how to hunt'. This caricature is damaging because the story is only seen through Welsh eyes and Indigenous people are fixed in the past, as if they no longer exist. It is crucial, then, that we hear Indigenous histories on their own terms, and that we recognise the presence and actions of Indigenous Patagonians today. This humanisation – recognising the human experience of others – lies at the heart of decolonial action. This doesn't mean we need to give up our own cherished stories but entails adding Indigenous stories alongside our own, learning to see through the eyes of others, too (as much as we can).

A key area for practical decolonial action is cultural dialogue. Promoting cultural exchange – especially bringing Indigenous artists, makers and thinkers to Wales – could play a crucial role. It would allow us in Wales to meet Indigenous Patagonians, learn of their histories as well as current concerns, such as reclaiming lands, the return of human remains and language revitalisation. Importantly, we must counter the dangerous impression that Indigenous people are 'extinct' by recognising their agency and presence today.

Capel Bethel - Welsh protestant chapel in Gaiman. Credit: Richard Avis

**Formal education is the core arena for discussing ideas and sets our way of thinking that we carry into ordinary life. For this reason, the Curriculum for Wales is very important as an engine of antiracist ideas and decolonial actions**

Making space in our cultural spaces to listen, share and learn from Indigenous Patagonians could generate genuine decolonial conversations.

**Embrace ambivalence and ask questions:** how should we frame our conversations? Decolonial approaches suggest that we resist binary ways of thinking and focus on asking questions rather than seeking finished answers. It is hard for those of us who grow up with Western mind-sets to get to grips with ambivalent approaches – we feel the matter isn't settled and crave the security of a clear view. However, swapping 'either/or' options for 'both/and' leads to more open-ended thinking. In our example, rather than having to decide that the Welsh are 'either' colonised 'or' colonising, we could suggest that they are 'both' colonised 'and' colonising. Importantly, a 'both/and' approach invites us to think about the muddled area between two options and the relationships that go on there. Embracing ambivalence offers uncertainty, but also space to think, talk to others and change one's mind.

Formal education is the core arena for discussing ideas and sets our way of thinking that we carry into ordinary life. For this reason, the Curriculum for Wales is very important as an engine of antiracist ideas and decolonial actions. Given that every Welsh child learns about Y Wladfa at least once in their lives, this is the frontline for conversations about colonialism, racism and Y Wladfa. Learning both Welsh and Indigenous Patagonian histories in parallel would help to open the field for discussion based on asking questions rather than providing answers. This is especially useful where issues are controversial and emotionally charged, as we've seen above.

**Think hard about relationships:** whatever we conclude about the past, we cannot change it, but we can do something about the future. What we do, though, has to be on the basis of equal respect in order to avoid creating damaging relationships. For this reason, actions which seek to decolonise Y Wladfa should build in co-production with Indigenous communities to ensure that it promotes dignity and is of benefit. This entails taking care to work 'with', not 'on' or 'for', Indigenous communities. It is easy for exploitative relations to creep in without us realising, so taking time to assess and reflect as a project progresses is also important (being reflexive). It is possible that both communities find common ground. For example, language revitalisation is extremely important to Welsh speakers in both Wales and Patagonia, and also to those reviving Indigenous languages. However, we should beware that the situations are not equivalent at all, nor are the histories of assimilation, racialisation and oppression. Patagonia's Original Peoples faced genocide, social catastrophe and attempts to eradicate their way of life on a scale that the Welsh never encountered. Nevertheless, finding ways to build honest relationships, acknowledging that past in Patagonia, is an important endeavour that only Wales can accomplish.

**Lucy Taylor** is a Senior Lecturer in Latin American studies and speaks Spanish, Welsh and English. Her book *The Global Politics of Welsh Patagonia* will be published in February 2025 with the University of Wales Press

# Who'll Care?

**Dr Huw Dylan Owen** *looks at the long-term challenges facing social care in Gwynedd, and explores how sustainable services can be supported*

As a schoolchild I always considered my geography teacher's lessons on future demographic changes as something akin to science fiction. We would all, we were told, enjoy longer lifespans which would inevitably lead to a worldwide lack of natural resources. All of this, of course, would happen in a distant future which would not be our generation's to witness. Planning for tomorrow's generations seemed important, but not really all that urgent in the here and now. There was always going to be a reinforcing cavalry that would ride over the horizon to our aid with banners aloft and horns sounding. It is only recently that I realised that this perception of a future challenge was wrong.

Imagine a nineteenth century Gwynedd resident meeting the famed Doctor Who, who whisked them away in a TARDIS through time and space to the present day. Picture the terror of that moment - landing in north Wales in 2024. What would be the most noticeable changes? Cars and electrical technology, of course - nothing too frightening, and perhaps even fascinating to explore. The real shock, however, would come whilst taking a walk along a sunny Llandudno promenade: the sight of hundreds of active and healthy-looking people in their 80s and 90s taking a stroll.

Due in no small part to the high number of infant mortalities, life expectancy for subjects of the Roman Empire was approximately 28 years. By 1850, the United Kingdom's life expectancy was approximately 40 years and dying of old age was an exception to the rule. Today the average life expectancy in the United Kingdom is 81. These are wondrous times, enabling us to appreciate time with grandparents, great-grandparents and grandchildren, and the unprecedented added value provided to our communities, both culturally and economically. The extended lifespan is certainly something to celebrate and enjoy as much as possible, albeit youthful aspirations often lead younger generations further afield and beyond caring distances to their kin.

The Doctor Who co-traveller would not immediately grasp the impact of this positive change on government provided public services. And who could blame them? We ourselves often fail to fully recognise the unique situation we are facing. In social care people talk of re-discovering professional roles and undertaking "good old fashioned social work/occupational therapy like they/we did back in 70s and 80s". The challenge, of course, is that Wales has never before experienced this type of demographic change. The "good old fashioned" ways were effective when demand for services was less than a quarter of what it is today.

With population changes already impacting the delivery of core care services in rural Wales and future projections suggesting a challenging time ahead for social care, the need to plan for today is very real, let alone for tomorrow. In 2022 Cyngor Gwynedd's Cabinet decided to consider the potential impact of demographic changes upon older people's social services in a project called *Llechen Lân* (A Clean Slate).

### You tell me your truth and...

There are two significant demographic statements of fact in Gwynedd, which are probably true across most of rural Wales:

> *The growing elderly population has led to a rapidly increasing demand for care services.*
>
> *The decline in the working-age population is reducing the available workforce to meet this demand.*

These two statements put together already equate to the fact that a significant number of older people who need care must wait for it as the pressure on services grows.

Gathering and analysing local, county, and national data, and reading international literature in order to develop a robust evidence base, Llechen Lân expanded on the situation as it stands. It considers current demographic challenges and projections over the next two decades and its potential impact on the demand for care; on the ability to meet that demand with a decreasing workforce; and on the expected financial pressures.

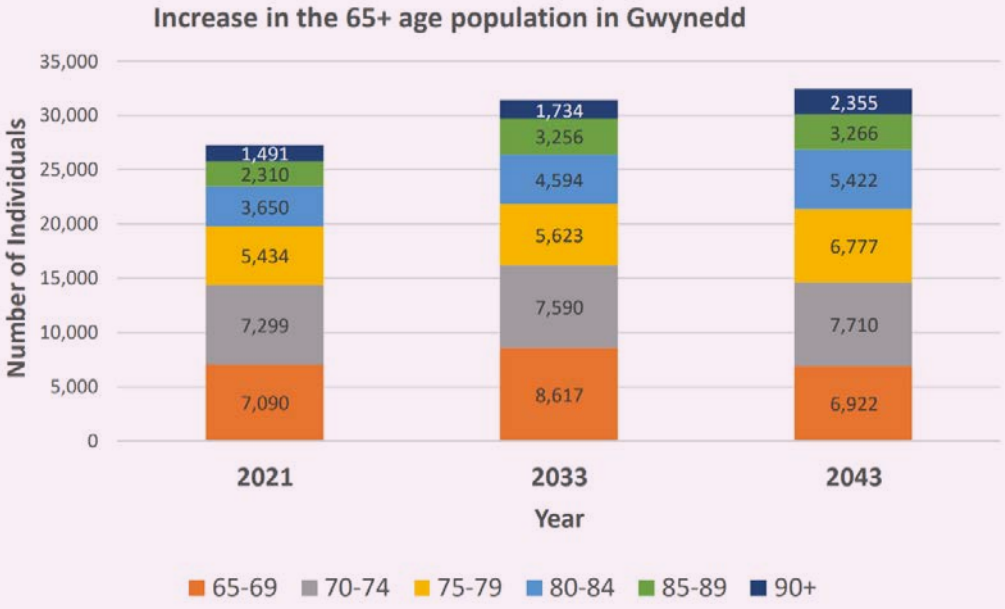
Llechen Lân then considers best practice across Local Authorities in order to explore potential mitigations and to plan Gwynedd's approach over the coming decades. Having considered innovative schemes and projects across Wales and beyond, and assuming Gwynedd could emulate some of the results found elsewhere, the report does provide a glimmer of hope.

### Increases

With the general population living longer, along with significant older aged immigration into rural Gwynedd, the percentage of the population over the age of 65 has risen, with an even more striking increase in those over the age of 85. According to the census, the population aged over 65 grew by 8% in Gwynedd between 2011 and 2021, rising from around 25,100 to more than 27,300.

Our TARDIS voyaging resident would be further surprised if they hopped on a further few decades. Current population projections suggest that the number of people over 65 will continue to increase, reaching 32,500 in 2043.

While there are always uncertainties to consider, such as potential cures for diseases or the impact of pandemics, the Bevan Commission advise that "the average age at which major illnesses are projected to develop is 70 years. With the increase in life expectancy, the years spent with ill health will increase too."




Source:
Llechen Lân Report

## Decreases

According to the census, Gwynedd's working age (16-64 years old) population fell from 75,800 in 2011 to 70,700 in 2021. This equated to an average reduction of 42 people of a working age in Gwynedd every month over the decade. During the same period there was a 7% reduction in the under 16 population (from 20,900 to 19,400).

At the time of increasing demand for health and social care in Gwynedd, the workforce population is shrinking rapidly, with half of the county's care staff aged over 50.

## Impact

Having considered the demographic projections, Cyngor Gwynedd anticipates a rise in demand for social care of 57% by 2043 (including the 11% of individuals assessed for care who were waiting for provision at the time of the report).

The situation presents a double-edged sword: while the rising demand for social care will require an additional 1,000 staff members, the diminishing pool of available workers will make it increasingly difficult to meet these needs.

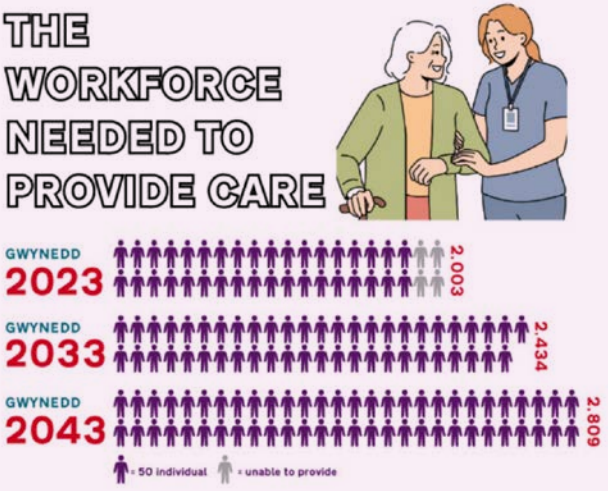
Even if the workforce to provide the services were to miraculously materialise, the accompanying financial implications would be drastic. With fewer Council taxpayers and a decreasing population leading to smaller overall budgets, the projected additional costs for traditional care services alone are estimated to reach £24.3m annually by 2043 (excluding any inflationary increases).

To reiterate, the additional £24.3m required does not take inflationary increases over the period into account.

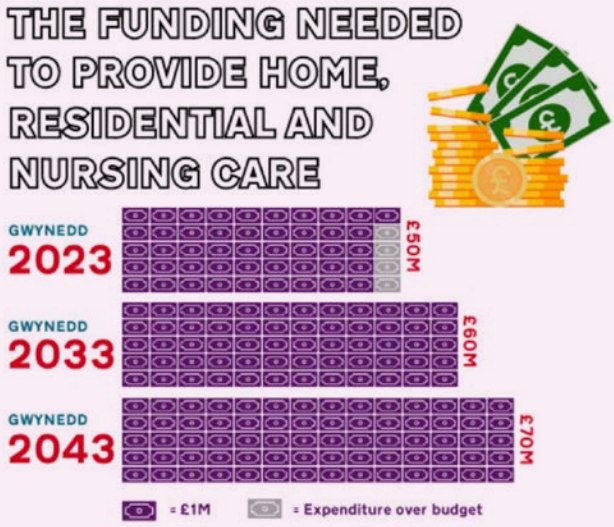
The overarching message from Llechen Lân is that social services for older people in Gwynedd have reached a tipping point. Assuming that significant additional funding and a growth in working population figures are highly unlikely, the need for a change in provision and practice is essential. If we do not change the way we operate, it will not be possible to provide social care as we currently know it.

## Llechen Lân

However, the report is not a single vision of doom. It acknowledges that different ways of working could be adopted or reinvigorated to make a positive impact.




Source: Llechen Lân Report




Source: Llechen Lân Report

**The Llechen Lân research demonstrates that keeping the status quo and continuing to operate as we do now would result in a projected 57% increase in required provision. Should the workforce be available, this would equate annually to an estimated £24.3m in additional costs compared to current provision (does not include inflationary growth)**

The working group - made up of finance officers, research statisticians, and social services practitioners - explored best practice and innovation across rural Local Authorities. Having measured their impact upon service demand, it has been recognised that by operating differently, social services in Gwynedd could reduce demand and pressure on services for older people.

This will require a renewed emphasis on strengths-based working, integrating multi-disciplinary enabling services, increasing unpaid carers' support, driving innovation with direct payments, adopting Technology Enabled Care, Artificial Intelligence and robotics, ensuring easily accessible information and advice, investing in dispersed extra care provision, development of a Care Academy, ensuring cross-authority collaboration, partnering with the third sector, and a reinvigoration of outcome-based commissioning.

Gwynedd is a great place to live, to work and to raise a family, and as a Council we must make sure it is also a good and safe place to grow older. In fact, last year, we secured Age Friendly status for the county from the United Nations and have committed to putting measures in place to support this. If we are to take further steps along this path, wider planning must include evidence-based fiscal planning and should encourage community and economic developments within the county.

Promoting independent living and reducing reliance on traditional services to move towards the pattern already seen in some similarly rural counties, could reduce the increase in demand compared to current provision to 34% (equivalent to around £15m in additional costs) if the workforce were available.

Moving further than this, to innovate and lead the way in developing services into the future, could further reduce the gap to around 18% (equivalent to around £8m in additional costs).

Recognising that neither the workforce nor the finance will be available, the Council has set on a course to make radical changes to enable more people to live their best lives independently.

### Tipping Point

In the films I enjoyed growing up, there was always hope for rescue from beyond the hills. The soldiers awaiting the cavalry, and their blaring horns heard from afar. That is how it was with the cowboys, the astronauts, and even in the comics where Roy of the Rovers regularly saved the day. From the reinforcements in Independence Day when the hero arrived with one rocket left ("Sorry I'm late Mister President!"), to Gandalf's arrival at the battle of Helm's Deep at the last critical moment, or the wonder of the T-Rex destroying the Velociraptors in Jurassic Park just in time to save the little family!

Sometimes, working in adult social services, things can seem gloomy. Where are the 'cavalry' or 'reinforcements' going to come from? Is there an army of carers on the other side of the hill about to reach us? Is there a Dr Who style sonic social screwdriver to turn things around at the last moment?

One thing to remember is that we are not alone. The demographic graphs for America lead the way in oblong shaped population pyramids and if Technology Enabled Care, Artificial Intelligence and robotics are going to thrive, the United States may well be the place for it to happen.

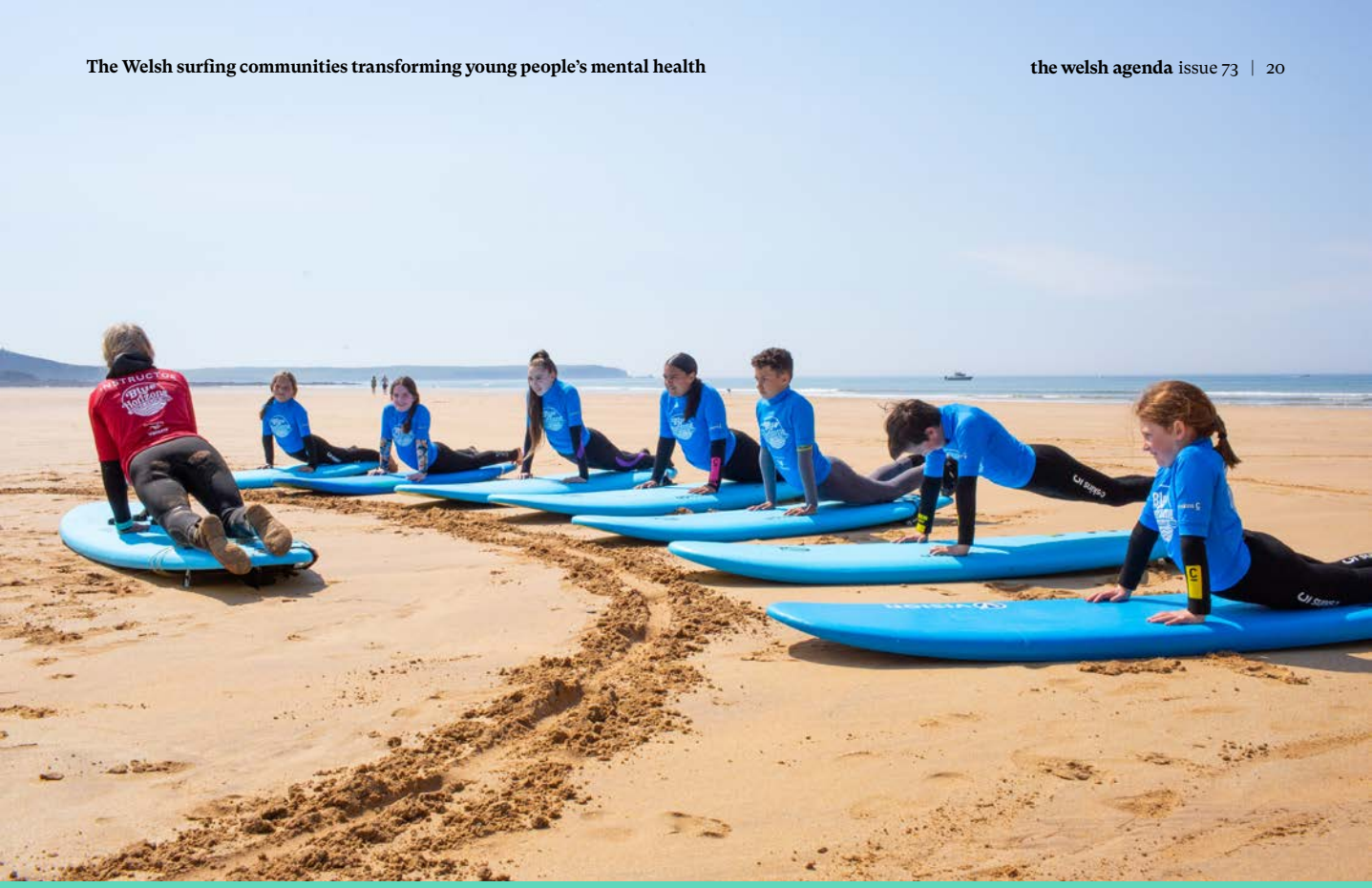
There is no 'cavalry' of course and there are no easy answers. But there are certainly things we can do to make the best use of what we have; to increase available services; and to reduce demand. Success is enabling people to live their best lives without care and without equipment where possible. Success is ensuring that people are not alone and that they continue to be a valued part of their community.

Whether full community engagement is possible for everyone or not, even small changes could go a long way. International research shows that multi-disciplinary strengths-based working and making full use of enabling and recovery services, in conjunction with Technology Enabled Care, can significantly reduce the need for traditional social care. If social services in Gwynedd succeeded in innovating and changing their method of operation so that what is offered matched the lowest provision of care available in comparable rural counties in Wales, the increase in demand could be reduced.

However, even then and in all possible case scenarios, a significant gap will remain between the required provision, the funding and workforce available to deliver it. Radical ideas and an open and honest national conversation are urgently needed to address this challenge.

**Dr Huw Dylan Owen** is the Statutory Director of Social Services at Cyngor Gwynedd

*The Llechen Lân Project Team were: Aled Davies, Alun Williams, Elin Jones, Emyr Edwards, Gwyn Parry, Jessica Mullan, Lois Owens, Manon Pritchard.*
*For more information, please read the report: Llechen Lân or email dylanowen@gwynedd.llyw.cymru*



Blue Horizons Surf School Pembrokeshire

# The Welsh surfing communities transforming young people's mental health

**Zoe Dowsett** *explains how surf therapy, now an officially recognised therapy by the NHS, can play a significant role in improving mental health amongst children and young people, and contribute to forging strong communities in Wales*

*Images: Becky Tooby*

On a sunny Wednesday afternoon, Faith, 18, and Jenny, 21, are chatting enthusiastically about the recent spell of sunny weather and confidently predict that they'll get some great waves today. They're surf coaches, about to teach an exhilarating surf session on scenic Aberavon Beach.

Both caught the surfing bug early: Faith was just five years old when she had her first lesson and Jenny wasn't too much older. Now, over a decade later, the pair are currently working their third summer as certified coaches. "Teaching was something I always loved to do and I like that I can share surfing with other people," says Faith, while Jenny describes the joy she gets from seeing people overcome any fears they have about learning to surf: "Some people come and they're so apprehensive. They think, 'I won't be able to catch a wave' and then when they can actually do it, it's lush to see how happy they are."

One of those happy students is Chelsea, 17, who has been taking lessons with Surf School Wales for around three years. Like thousands of young people across the country, COVID lockdowns had a detrimental impact on her mental health. "I was having quite a lot of issues with school and we tried to get referred through to CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), but unfortunately, the waiting list was just too long," she explains.

A few years ago, she started getting support for her wellbeing through Platform, a mental health and social change charity. Since 2020, Platform has had a partnership with Surf School Wales to offer lessons for young people like Chelsea who are struggling with their mental health. Chelsea took Platform up on their suggestion of trying surf lessons and they've been life-changing for her. She's gone from being nervous about struggling with school and getting on a board, to hitting the waves most weeks.

"I trained to be a peer mentor with Platform about two years ago, and that means that I can help other young people. Now I'm a Youth Advisor with Platform and I also volunteer and have my placement with them," says Chelsea. She now plans to study health and social care at college.

Youth mental health is in a well-documented crisis. A study from Cardiff University revealed that post-COVID, nearly a quarter of young people in Wales have high levels of mental health symptoms. Although there were concerns about young people struggling before the pandemic, multiple COVID lockdowns and the ensuing isolation and disruption to education are still being acutely felt by teenagers.

Worryingly, this crisis is happening against a backdrop of cuts to vital services. The last Welsh Government budget saw the need to find millions of pounds of savings, including £65m from the health service alone. Youth services across Wales have also been slashed over the last decade: according to a report by the YMCA, in 2022-2023 there was 23% less spent on youth services than in 2010-2011. The real-world impacts of these cuts are mental and physical health services being

pushed to breaking point. In the face of these cuts, an increasing number of surf schools are stepping up and offering community classes and a type of mental health support that's been growing in popularity: surf therapy.

The origins of surf therapy are thought to trace back to the 1970s when soldiers returning from the Vietnam War were prescribed lessons to help process the trauma of the conflict. Several decades to 2017, and a formal network of surf therapy groups, the International Surf Therapy Organization (ISTO) was established and the NHS now officially recognises it as a form of therapy.

"I learnt from an early age that surfing could be a great place for respite. You leave all your worries on the beach," says Dr Jamie Marshall, a leading researcher in surf therapy. Hooked on surfing from the moment he caught his first wave, Jamie found it provided a welcome escape when he was being bullied at school. He has extensively researched the positive impacts of surfing, including analysing the wellbeing of people who had surf lessons with The Wave Project, a surf therapy charity. He found clear data that confirmed improvements in participants' wellbeing and resilience.

**Youth mental health is in a well-documented crisis. A study from Cardiff University revealed that post-COVID, nearly a quarter of young people in Wales have high levels of mental health symptoms**

"It wasn't so much that participants learnt to surf, but that they were able to learn to surf; something they perceived as impossible before. I remember overhearing a conversation between one of the participants and a volunteer, where they described how life was like surfing: 'We can't control the waves or difficult things in life, but we can learn how to ride them with our friends.'"

That outlook resonates with Phil Owens, who has been surfing for over 40 years. His relationship with the sport goes beyond it being merely a hobby. When he


describes surfing, he talks of the flow state of being on the waves and how the experience of being in the sea makes you feel part of your environment. "For me, it just feels spiritual because it reminds you there's something bigger than you out there," he explains.

In 2019, Phil ended up needing to take time off work because of his mental health. He'd stopped surfing regularly because life got in the way, so a counsellor suggested he return to his favourite sport. He took their advice and five years later, Phil now runs Surf Therapy, a community interest surf club which offers surfing sessions for people who are struggling with their mental health.

What started as a club specifically to support men now offers surfing sessions for groups including young offenders and young refugees. A typical surfing programme lasts between 8-10 weeks and in that time the group learn to surf, be mindfully present in the water and connect with their environment. Phil explains: "For the young people involved, surfing gives a focus and introduces positive risk-taking. They get their adrenaline rush, their excitement, from the surf not by committing a crime or taking something."

The concept of Blue Mind, a term coined by Marine Biologist Wallace J Nichols, is often mentioned as a key aspect of surf therapy. In a TED talk on the subject, Nichols explains the concept as "the mildly meditative state we fall into when near, in, on, or underwater." In Phil's lessons, the Blue Mind concept is given a figurative symbol: a blue marble. Every student is given a marble which represents the world covered in water. One of his students has since told him: "Whenever I get angry, I get my blue marble out and it takes me back to the beach where I'm calm again."

While the act of surfing, the immersion in water and disconnection from daily stress can improve our wellbeing, it can also build communities who've come together to engage in an exhilarating activity. Tirion Eilir Haf Jenkins is a PhD researcher at Cardiff University, whose research focuses on a case study of a


women's surf club on the Gower Peninsula. She fell in love with surfing around a decade ago after catching her first wave in California and later set up Gower Women's Surf Society after returning to Wales and finding surfing alone to be "a miserable time".

"From my research and experience, what I've noticed is that it's not just the act of surfing that is actually contributing to a positive sense of wellbeing. It's really about the mechanisms around surfing itself that are vital. It's the coffee and chat in the car park before a surf. It's being able to laugh and share a wave with a friend," says Tirion.

Friendship and community are key to the surfing philosophy of Blue Horizons, another community interest surf school that runs lessons for young people, including adaptive lessons for students with physical disabilities. Keen surfers Emma-Mary Webster and Ollie Bird started the club to improve people's physical and mental wellbeing. "What we didn't realise is the effects that the club would have on the wider community," explains Ollie.

They describe how many young people they teach didn't have a social life before starting lessons with them; how local parents juggling work and childcare are given a couple of hours respite by the beach while their children surf. They mention a student with autism who could barely look them in the eye when they started lessons, who now confidently bounds up to instructors and can't wait to get in the sea.

While many of their students go on to be excellent surfers, Ollie explains that "surfing is only a small part of what we do." During their lessons, students are immersed in a vivid landscape that changes colours constantly. Sometimes they spot schools of fish, dolphins and compass jellyfish. It's a forced break from social media and doom scrolling that many of us rarely give ourselves. "You can't take technology out on a surfboard yet, thank God," says Ollie.

While surf therapy and community surf clubs aren't a silver bullet to address the growing youth mental health crisis in Wales, they're clearly a welcome and positive step forward. They're affordable, accessible and growing in number, giving young people the space to take a break from tech that infiltrates every aspect of their lives and a chance to forget worries that they shouldn't have.

As Ollie from Blue Horizons explains: "I think any surfer will tell you that it doesn't matter what's going on in your day, to get your wetsuit on and jump in the sea and catch some waves or float about...your mind space frees up." That's definitely something we could do with more of.

**Zoe** has worked in communications and content writing for charities and lifestyle websites for around 10 years, and has written for film, culture and lifestyle publications

# Wales and Ethiopia: a tale of two nations on the global stage

**Emlyn Phillips** *reflects on the future of Wales as part of a declining transatlantic bloc or pivoting closer towards the once-again rising powers of Africa and the East*

Credit: Aboodi Vesakaran, Unsplash

Wales is getting poorer. Welsh Government data shows that 16% of adults in Wales are materially deprived, with 28% of our children in poverty. Fears are growing that poverty is becoming normalised. Might we as a nation one day become poorer than some African countries, such as Ethiopia?

It's not unthinkable. As a thought experiment, comparing Wales with Ethiopia gives us cause to reflect on our own future place in the community of nations because, as the world shifts to a multipolar system, the West's dominance is ending. My focus on Ethiopia will be explained as we go along, hopefully avoiding the usual pitfalls of writing about Africa.

World Bank data suggests that Ethiopia, with a population larger than the UK, has been held back by a lack of access to two key resources: electricity and water. That is now changing. Its Grand Renaissance Dam on the Nile is complete (despite concerns from neighbouring Egypt and Sudan over the effect on their own water supplies) and promises both water and plentiful energy. More electricity will come from nuclear power plants being developed with support from China, Russia and South Korea. With a new Chinese-funded railway to the coast in Djibouti, and a planned Red Sea port in neighbouring Somaliland, Ethiopia will have excellent connections with the international economy - and will be well placed to exploit them, having become a full member of the BRICS group in 2024 along with Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, joining the existing members: Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa. There's a Welsh connection: Ethiopia's port deal involves recognising Somaliland's secession from Somalia, making an independent country of the region from which Wales's own Somali population hails.

Although ongoing internal conflicts mustn't be downplayed, Ethiopia is potentially positioned for significant economic growth. We shouldn't be surprised if they eventually become richer than we are – because that's the historical norm. It may be useful to consider how Wales and Ethiopia have been linked in the past.

## A shared Roman heritage

Let's go back to the year 324, when Constantine the Great became sole ruler of a Roman Empire that he would make Christian – both the wealthy Greek-speaking East

**In modern times, the 1920s and 1930s saw industrial Wales already past its peak, suffering extreme poverty and unemployment. 'Something must be done', said the Prince of Wales – but nothing was**

and the poorer Latin-speaking West. Constantine knew Britain well, having campaigned here against the Picts, and it was British legions which first proclaimed him Caesar. To consolidate his government, he built a new eastern capital: Constantinople (today's Istanbul).

Soon afterwards, the kings of Axum converted to Orthodox Christianity. Axum was a kingdom, already ancient, covering today's Ethiopia and Eritrea, at times expanding into Sudan and Yemen. As a Christian state, it became closely allied with the Romans of Constantinople. For centuries, Axum's African elite spoke Greek, using the language for their administration, state symbols and coins. Controlling the Red Sea, Axum monopolised the lucrative trade route between the Romans and India, and was considered one of the great nations of the age[1].

While Axum flourished, Britain collapsed. The Romans left, the petty Celtic kings who filled the vacuum fought each other, and pagan invaders conquered them one by one. Wales remained independent, but its princes were paupers compared to the kings of Axum. Still, even after Rome itself fell, some Welsh princes received financial support from Constantinople – so Welsh envoys presumably visited the imperial court. Did they mix there with Ethiopian diplomats?

During the Middle Ages, Ethiopia was ruled by emperors claiming descent from King Solomon and Yemen's Queen of Sheba. They were important enough to discuss dynastic marriage with the powerful royalty of Aragon in Spain (as the Tudors later would), and maintained diplomatic relationships with the Muslim rulers of the Holy Land, with the Pope in Rome – and with the schismatic antipope in Avignon supported by Owain Glyndŵr, who hoped to re-establish an independent Welsh church under the antipope's authority. Glyndŵr's Welshmen perhaps mingled with Ethiopians in Provence.

By the 1660s, under the emperors Fasilides and his son Yohannes – their Greco-Roman names reflecting Constantinople's enduring influence – Ethiopian artists, architects and philosophers flourished. Ethiopia maintained diplomatic and trade links with the Ottomans, with the Yemeni Imamate, and with the Mughal rulers of India who, at the time, controlled the largest economy in the world. Wales was still a neglected backwater, its coastal communities raided for slaves by African pirate fleets.

In modern times, the 1920s and 1930s saw industrial Wales already past its peak, suffering extreme poverty and unemployment. 'Something must be done', said the Prince of Wales – but nothing was.

Africa had been colonised, after the Conference of Berlin divided the continent between European countries in the 1880s. Ethiopia, though, was still free and unconquered, having defeated the Italian army sent against it. Here, the 1920s and 1930s saw its emperor, Haile Selassie, modernising the country. He adopted European practices and technologies, built infrastructure and schools, introduced cars, and cemented his country's independent status by joining the League of Nations.

Left alone, Selassie's Ethiopia might well have become an industrial nation and a power in the world once again – but Mussolini invaded and Selassie was forced into exile. After the Second World War, Ethiopia was once again free – but Selassie lost his momentum as conflict intensified in the separatist province of Eritrea. In 1974, he was murdered by elements of his army, who ruled as a Marxist junta until 1991. It was during this period that Ethiopia drew the world's attention through BBC reports of famine, and the Live Aid concerts organised in response.

The industrial revolution gave the European powers a huge technological advantage. Their rivalry and need for resources led to the 'Scramble for Africa', and the process of colonisation which saw many ancient and sophisticated societies crushed. Most of us in Wales have never heard of them, but readers may want to discover the histories of the Swahili city-states of Eastern and South-Eastern coastal Africa, linked with Persian aristocracy, which traded as far as China, or the vastly wealthy and sophisticated empires of west Africa.

Ethiopia wasn't colonised by Europeans – but, as

we've seen, it was once very much a part of the Roman world. It's not unreasonable to say that Wales and Ethiopia respectively formed the North-Western and South-Eastern limits of Rome's civilisational space. For most of the many centuries since Constantine, the territory that is now Wales has been a backwater: far from the world's power centres, unimportant, and poor. For 1500 years, Ethiopia was significantly richer, more cosmopolitan, more powerful – and far more integrated into global diplomacy and trade. Ethiopia was free and independent; Wales, mostly governed from outside.

## Western identity in crisis

Which brings us back to where we started.

The West is in the midst of a crisis in its worldview, and Wales is no exception. In 1992, Francis Fukuyama proclaimed 'the end of history'. The end of the Cold War and the demise of Soviet communism, he suggested, left the liberal universalist ideology of the West as the only remaining, and only valid, model of governance. In this triumphalism, he reflected a worldview that endures today: the unspoken and unquestioned assumption that the West is globally dominant by right, and that our values are, and should be, universal.

The trouble is that this implies that other worldviews and other value systems which conflict with ours are illegitimate and wrong, and that it's our right to change them – by force if necessary. That led to military interventions in Yugoslavia, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria and elsewhere, justified on 'moral' grounds.

The use of force has extended to the economic sphere as well. A recent example would be the issue of LGBTQ+ rights in Africa: something which, like it or not, African cultures view very differently from Western cultures. The World Bank cancelled all future loans to Uganda because of the government's laws on gay rights, while the IMF threatened to cancel US$ 3.8 billion of funding to Ghana over a similar law. This raises an important question. Is the West rightly enforcing universal norms on African governments which violate them? Or is this colonialism, with Western countries using their economic power to impose their own values on African cultures that don't share them?

Whichever view you take, the fact is that the West's influence over Africa is rapidly diminishing – and this is also a consequence of Western decisions taken in the 1990s.

That decade saw globalisation emerge once the Soviet threat had disappeared. First of all, smokestack industries were shipped overseas, followed rapidly by other manufacturing. 'Outsourcing' was followed by 'offshoring' as the fashionable buzzword. The arrival of the dot-com bubble provided cover: we were told that we would all learn to code, and that our innovation and creativity would keep our economies booming. Soon, though, those jobs would be outsourced, too, accompanied by reports of thousands of Western professionals, particularly in IT, having to train their Asian replacements. It turned out that the rest of the world is just as innovative and creative as we are.

Credit: Sintayehu Arega, Unsplash

## A new world order

The effect of this has, effectively, been to set Europe's post-colonial influence in reverse. For the first time since the Industrial Revolution, economic and technological dominance is returning to India and China, accompanied by Russia – and as Asia rises, it's beginning to lift Africa with it.

That includes Ethiopia which, via its BRICS membership, is simply reestablishing its ancient and fruitful trading relationship with India, Iran and China – and plenty of other African countries are likewise turning their backs on the Western institutions which have held back their development and kept them poor.

Unlike the IMF, whose development loans are often conditional on the recipient implementing

**For the first time since the Industrial Revolution, economic and technological dominance is returning to India and China, accompanied by Russia – and as Asia rises, it's beginning to lift Africa with it**

privatisation, deregulation, and/or social policies, the projects funded by China or Russia avoid such terms. They are without doubt problematic in other ways, but China, nevertheless, has a record of waiving African governments' debt. China has built huge amounts of infrastructure, including ports and railways in Kenya, Tanzania and Nigeria, or hydropower plants in Uganda, bringing jobs and training to millions. Russia is building nuclear power plants in Burkina Faso, Mali, Rwanda and elsewhere, and is increasingly replacing western forces in providing security in countries in the Sahel and central Africa.

As we in Wales plan for our future in a multipolar world, our first challenge is to respect that African governments are sovereign, and are free to make decisions in their own interests – and they're looking East, to the BRICS. They're not dependent on the West anymore.

The second challenge is to understand and accept that what we are experiencing is actually a return to the historical norm. Fukuyama was wrong: history didn't end when the Cold War did. Our set of cultural values is not universally shared or admired, and we'll have to deal with that. The last couple of centuries were a brief historical blip when, to misquote Hilaire Belloc, we had got the Maxim gun and Africans had not.

African nations were once affluent for a reason. They are rich in natural resources. And they are, as they have always been, well situated for trade with Europe, the Indies and China. A generation from now, with Chinese and Russian assistance, their economies and societies will likely be thriving. Can we realistically look around and say that of our own?

So our third challenge is to ask ourselves: where do we in Wales see our future, particularly as we consider the prospect of independence? Would we anchor ourselves to a transatlantic bloc which is in decline?

Credit: Clay Knight, Unsplash

Or would we identify as a former colony, and join the mosaic of states and cultures which have historically made up the Silk Roads running from Africa to Asia?

The West is currently struggling to adapt to China's rise. A world in which Africa is once again more affluent and influential than us may well be coming. Are we ready for the time when it arrives? ➤

**Emlyn Phillips** is a writer, coach, trained hypnotherapist and a former university senior lecturer. With qualifications in International Relations, Computer Science, Business Administration, and Applied Linguistics, he takes a cross-disciplinary approach to analysis, reinforced by many years of living in non-western societies

1 See: Doyle, T.E. (2013) 'Liberal democracy and nuclear despotism: two ethical foreign policy dilemmas', *Ethics & global politics*, 6(3), pp. 155–174.

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BLAKE MORGAN

# The darkness at the heart of some of Welsh rugby's brightest names

**Luke Upton** *looks back at the tragic fate of some of Wales' most fascinating and loved rugby players, and reflects on what this can tell us about the country we live in*

Credit: Mitchell Orr, Unsplash

Around ten years ago, in a previous working life, I spent two days at the Hotel Krasnapolsky in Amsterdam reporting on a conference about biofuels. Amid the keynotes, seminars, tiny cakes and large Heinekens, I had a persistent nagging feeling that the name of this hotel, to which I'd never been before, was somehow familiar. It was only on the final afternoon, hiding from someone wanting free publicity or exhausted from hearing the terms "innovative" or "revolutionary" on heavy rotation, that it suddenly came to me.

This was the hotel where Carwyn James died.

He suffered a massive heart attack whilst shaving, banging his head on the bath on his way down for bad measure. The year was 1983, he was 53. A heavy smoker and drinker, the doctor declared it natural causes. More colourful accounts of the hours before his death reputedly existed, but editors saw no merit in publishing, if indeed they existed at all.

The hotel in Paris where Oscar Wilde died has a suite named after him.

But there was no memorial to James that I could find, no tourist money to be made from this lonesome death.

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Like many, I'd always found Carwyn James a fascinating individual. A sort of Welsh Brian Clough, both defining a sporting era whilst also being semi-detached from it. I'd been given my late grandfather's copy of the Alun Richards book on this legendary Llanelli and British and Irish Lions coach, and it opened my eyes to not just a remarkable figure, but how sports people could have a hinterland that extends far beyond just the pitch.

The world of Carwyn James was in part a warm bath of Welshness; rugby, the chapel, Cymraeg, famous teams in red bravely defeating powerful foreign foes but this was sharply juxtaposed with a streak of individuality: a love of classical music, a passion for Russian literature and an eschewing of the green, green grass of home for coaching in small town Italy. And more. Much more.

Yes, James was a man of the 1960s, involved with the nascent Welsh nationalist movement and with an early awareness of the role that mass media played on public opinion, but he also existed somewhere else. Not always an unhappy man, but often a lonely one.

**Like many, I'd always found Carwyn James a fascinating individual. A sort of Welsh Brian Clough, both defining a sporting era whilst also being semi-detached from it**

Clem Thomas, he of another remarkable CV: butcher, Lion, cattle dealer, Liberal Party Parliamentary candidate, Observer journalist to name just a few of his many hats, and a playing colleague of James' from schoolboy rugby, described him as a "bard among bricklayers" but knew his troubles, too: "... he had no wife or children to confide in. He was in many ways a man in torment. He was private and lonely and found refuge in his own and his beloved country's passion for the game of rugby."

James and Thomas are to me hugely appealing characters. Talented, complex, flawed, and mercurial. I could read about them for hours. A lifelong rugby fan, I've never been interested in statistics or tactics. The videos and Twitter accounts minutely dissecting games, whilst delighting many, leave me cold. I just don't really care.

In the dog days of the amateur era, the first thing I'd look for in the match programme was the bit in the team profiles that said what the player's day job was. Teacher, farmer, policeman, chartered surveyor, brewery reps – there always seemed to be brewery reps - steel worker, doctor. I was too young for the colliers. Having married into an Irish family, I now enjoy learning about the jobs that the still amateur GAA players do. Taking pleasure in the thought of them running out in front of tens of thousands of fans on a Sunday, then, on Monday teaching kids about the ancient Egyptians or giving a quote for a kitchen extension.

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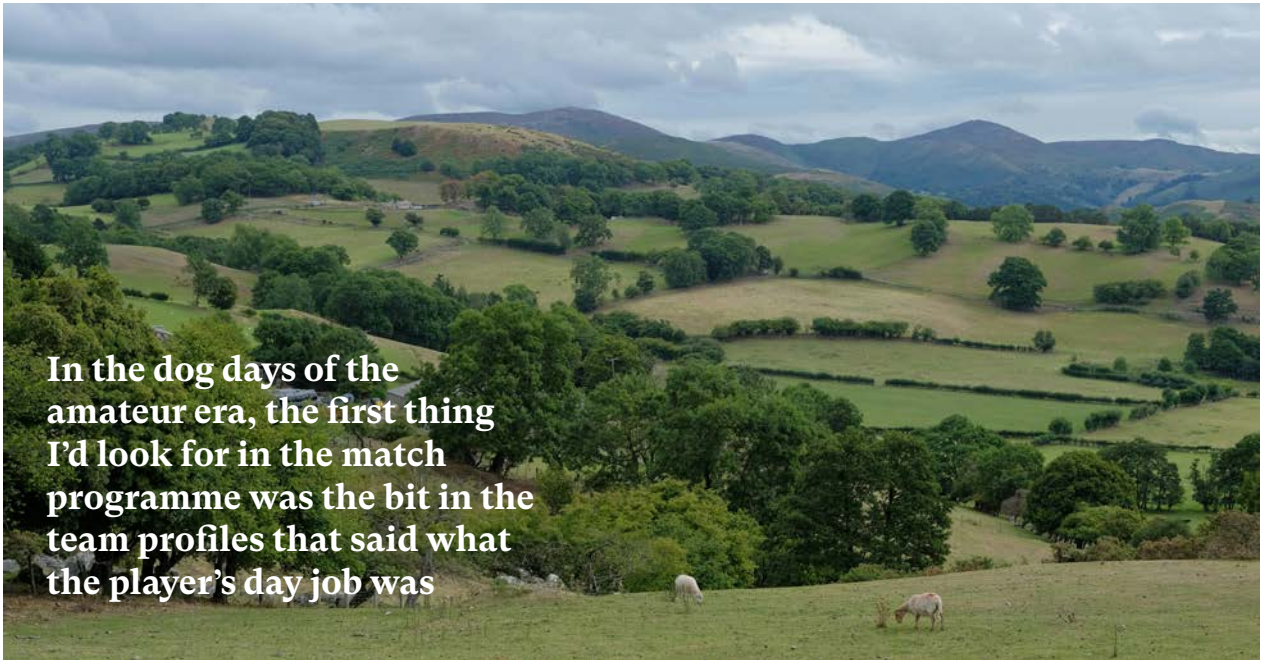
One of James's proteges on and off the pitch was Ray Gravell. As a player, he was a lineman for the county (though Carmarthenshire rather than Oklahoma), later he would become a member of Equity, a broadcaster, author, activist and Grand Sword Bearer at the Eisteddfod.



**In the dog days of the amateur era, the first thing I'd look for in the match programme was the bit in the team profiles that said what the player's day job was**

Credit: Sebastian Herrmann, Unsplash

Ray o'r Mynydd, as he was known in bardic circles, was born in Kidwelly and moved to the nearby village of Mynyddygarreg when he was three, and although rugby took him all over the world, he never really left. I have written about Gravell and spoken to his teammates, and listening to the details of his life, it seems less a chronology of events and more a series of remarkable moments lit up by the charisma and passion of the man known universally as Grav.

Charisma and passion, yes, but with a deep-rooted uncertainty and shallow confidence beset by the most awful of tragedies. His father suffering the physical and mental injuries of a colliery accident went up to a nearby mountain and shot himself whilst his son was playing in a trial match. It was Gravell, aged just 14, who found him – "I rushed forward, but as I touched his clothes, I knew it was all over."

Ifan Gravell had taken his dog, Mac, and the faithful companion refused to leave his master's body. Men from the village had to come up to remove the desperate hound and allow the body to be removed.

The mountain was Mynydd-y-garreg.

The Mountain of Stone.

Ray o'r Mynydd.

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As Gravell's career was winding down in the 1980s, David 'Dai' Bishop was winding himself up.

Born on Halloween in 1960, in Adamsdown, a working-class suburb of Cardiff, raised in the family pub and a regular user of holy water blessed by the local priest, Bishop represented a very different Wales. A welder and sales rep in his Union days and a talented all-round sportsman, as a youth he had boxed and played baseball to an international standard.

Even as a teenager, he'd already had brushes with the law. His quick thinking and bravery saw him rescue a woman and a baby from a swollen River Taff, for which he received a medal for bravery from the Royal Humane Society. Though he was presented with it in prison whilst on remand. And this all before his rugby career properly started.

A legend for Pontypool but only capped once for Wales, a suspended sentence and an unprecedented 11-month ban for breaking the jaw of an opponent, blotted his already dirty copy book in the eyes of the WRU top brass. This being the 1980s, his response was to get on his bike, and go north to turn professional in rugby league.

Once retired, the anti-establishment spirit that had been the driving force of his career, became channelled into darker places and Bishop suffered from drug addiction and depression. Now clean, he still cuts an

emotive figure for those who saw him play.

Could Bishop's career be a strawman for writing about Wales in the 1980s? Too much conformity and too little money? No real place for a maverick, even in an era grey with disappointment. With frustrations ending in exile or addiction?

Maybe.

Or perhaps he just wanted to do his own thing?

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Dai Bishop is good friends with Non Evans, one of Wales' greatest ever players with 64 tries in 87 games. Though rugby is only part of her story. The almost superhuman drive required to compete at an elite level of sport is rare, but Evans summoned it up in rugby, judo, wrestling, weightlifting, and powerlifting. No one else has done this. Plus, she was on Gladiators, the ITV Saturday tea-time favourite in the 1990s recently triumphantly returned to our screens. All whilst remaining firmly amateur and juggling various full-time jobs with playing, whilst her male contemporaries zoomed into the professional era.

Evans, like Bishop, struggled with her mental health when retired, telling me: "I have a bit of an addictive personality and this helped me achieve in my career, giving me the focus and motivation to do what I did. But when the sport fell away, there was an emptiness, and other things came into its place… I hit some big lows. And they have been well publicised."

Depression, anxiety and drinking filled the void left by sport, exacerbated by the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Reaching the bottom, before working back upwards, she is now in a far happier, secure place and when I talked to her from her home in seaside Mumbles, I asked if there were similarities between her, Bishop and Gravell. She nodded in instant agreement: "I think a lot of us are a little insecure. We need to prove something. To someone or themselves. They both had this side to them. And I certainly have."

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Graham Greene was supposed to have said that all "true artists" are born with a "sliver of ice in their heart" and having written three books about rugby in recent years, and interviewed many former internationals from Wales and beyond, I think we can extend this view to many sports people as well.

Compulsion, single-mindedness, anxiety, arrogance, doubt, depression, denial, nemesis and hubris are all to be found in the minds of our sporting stars.

For those of us in Wales, it's not hard to find this darkness and confusion in the lives of our biggest cultural figures as well: Dylan Thomas, Richard Burton, Gwen John, Roald Dahl, Jan Morris, Richey Edwards to name but a few. I would rank James, Gravell and the rest as matching these icons for the brightness of their talent, the despair that sometimes enveloped them and their importance to our perception of Wales.

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Credit: Tatiana Alves, Unsplash

**But this view, as inaccurate as it is tedious, wilfully ignores the rich cultural hinterland of many of the biggest figures in Welsh rugby, and the deep-rooted complexities within them**

There's been a recent trend by some in Wales to dismiss rugby's long-standing position of sporting primacy, particularly when compared to the electric rise of Welsh football over the past decade. The zeitgeist capturing FAW, with a Wal Goch and Yma O Hyd versus the WRU, with its Three Feathers and military bands, seems an easy, even irresistible story. On social media (where else?) there has been sometimes a quite visceral hatred of Welsh rugby and its culture by a vocal minority of Welsh football fans. They view the sport in Wales as old fashioned, royalist and unionist when compared to the hip modernity of Welsh football, rugby fans being more Stereophonics and 'jeans and sheux' than Adwaith and bucket hats.

But this view, as inaccurate as it is tedious, wilfully ignores the rich cultural hinterland of many of the biggest figures in Welsh rugby, and the deep-rooted complexities within them. These individuals I've sketched here, James, Gravell, Bishop and Evans, aren't just fascinating personal stories, but also give us a helpful route into understanding the Wales in which they lived.

And they aren't the only ones. There are the racist attitudes that drove Billy Boston from Butetown to rugby league greatness in the 1950s, the mixed response to games against apartheid in South Africa, the double standards of finance during the amateur game, the open sexuality of Gareth Thomas and Nigel Owens, through to the recent news around misogyny at the WRU and the ongoing debate about where our professional regions should be (and how they should be paid for) – just some of the issues that belong to both rugby and Wales itself.

===

The Manic Street Preachers' knowledge of Welsh politics and culture is matched only by their passion for sport, and their 2013 song, *This Sullen Welsh Heart* has been a real earworm whilst writing this piece, perfectly encompassing some of the themes that I've tried to briefly explore.

> *"This sullen Welsh heart*
> *It won't leave, it won't give up*
> *The hating half of me*
> *Has won the battle easily*
> *The battle easily*
>
> *The act of creation saves us from despair*
> *A phrase that keeps repeating in my head…"*

For some of Wales' greatest rugby players, the act of creation on the pitch did save them from despair, whilst others were engulfed by it when their playing careers ended. Whatever your view of rugby, if we look in the right places, there's a great deal we can understand about the country through the varied lives of its players.

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**Luke Upton** is a former business journalist, and now Head of Communications for a charity. He is the author of three rugby books: the non-fiction *Rugby's Greatest Mavericks* and *Hard Men of Rugby* and the satire *Absolutely Huge*

# A Walk in One's Orbit

*In the spring of this year, 2100, Mr Hugh Winfried Aristotle Owen, one of Wales' greatest living thinkers, was commissioned to report back on how 76 years of policy and politics, since the last survey in 2024, have affected Welsh communities.*

*He decided to go back to a place that weighed heavily on his mind, where formative experiences and memories had shaped the man, the great thinker and writer he had become, the birthplace of his renowned cynicism. Mr Hugh Winfried Aristotle Owen decided to begin his report by visiting, and photographing, his hometown of Llanelli.*

*A town once known for its tinplate industry, and the exportation of coal and tin across the globe, with a booming market and nightlife, the late 20th Century saw the decay of Llanelli and other towns like it due to years of poor policy decisions and mass privatisation.*

*The implications of these decisions saw the continued decline of Welsh towns, well into the 21st Century. Now, at the dawn of a new century, Welsh Government is taking stock of their bearings, and the work that still needs to be done.*

*While they endlessly debate the matter, the town has stood still for 76 years.*

*Mr Hugh W.A. Owen is considered one of Wales' greatest writers and thinkers, because there aren't many of them left. These are his thoughts.*

**Evidence of governmental or council policy to invest in and support local businesses is lacking — but lacking implies the existence of abundance, of which there has never been**

My great–grandmother used to work at the fishmonger's stall in the market in Llanelli. She had hair as black as her living room stove, and she had a general aura of liquorice and ankle cream. She often had a limb or other in a bandage. Even as a child, I remember being taller than her. She was horrible and mean, her Sunday dinners were wet. I grew up believing my great-grandfather, her husband, died in a mine explosion. In school I told the other children *he got exploded to death*. When I was older, I found out he died of mining-related illnesses – his lungs, or something. Anyway, she was heavily compensated after his death, and she was made a very rich woman, but she still went to work every day in the market, until cancer meant she could work no more.

The first time I had food poisoning was from a stall in the market that sold burgers and milkshakes. I didn't touch a hotdog ever again.

Not much left of the market now, or even the high street. The birth of the hypermarket killed the local shops. Evidence of governmental or council policy to invest in and support local businesses is lacking — but lacking implies the existence of abundance, of which there has never been.


082
Time Past
And Present

**Whenever I plummet down the spiral of doom, I like to think of policymakers and politicians as teenagers in an ill-fitting suit, graffitiing the walls of their offices with half-thought brain experiments**

Felinfoel Brewery, I love that sign. I feel a certain swell of local pride whenever I see the Felinfoel Dragon. I'm glad to see there is still local industry, albeit few and far between, and mostly automated. Some of my friends still swear by Double Dragon Stout - it's one of the only beers available these days. One of those friends has a heart defect, and he believes it's the only thing keeping him alive. I've never liked it. I'm not into ales.

I walk down this alley into town almost every time I'm here (which, admittedly, isn't often), especially when entering the West End. Isn't that arrow oh so inviting? I like walking down there and looking at all the teenage graffiti. There's a comfort in knowing there are other people, young people, looking to make sense of things, showing all their workings-out on the wall. Whenever I plummet down the spiral of doom, I like to think of policymakers and politicians as teenagers in an ill-fitting suit, graffitiing the walls of their offices with half-thought brain experiments. An amusing thought, but terrifying to some, perhaps.

At the end of the alley is – was – an amusement arcade and a bingo hall. Both look like they haven't been open in years, decades even. I wonder if you were to break in, the floors would be riddled with cigarette butts, burn marks. Unclaimed bingo prizes, spilled drink. I like this side of town, the West End. There used to be a lovely family-owned Italian restaurant, it was there for years. Gone now. Brand new flats built there instead, uninhabited. There's hardly anyone left to live in them, and there's no point in building anything else.

It's quite depressing when antique sellers and charity shops close for good. If they can't sell anyone's old tat, then what? There's so much stuff in the world, we're drowning in stuff. What if sea levels aren't rising, but this little island is slowly sinking under the weight of all its stuff?


26
TRADE REFUSE

My uncle took me to the cinema at Theater Elli to see a horror film about a haunted town when I was 13. I wasn't quite old enough yet but the cinema stewards never checked how old you were, plus my uncle was 6ft 4 and known in the town. He was banned from quite a few pubs, the ones still operating. The seats' kingly red was faded streaks, lumpy and sharp springs, the cinema room musty with age and neglect. We were the only ones there, at least in my memory.

My uncle gave a lot of big talk on the walk down the hill to the theatre, and during the trailers, wet whispers in my ear. He said I was going to be so scared that I'd be shaking in my seat. He flinched at every jump-scare. I didn't tease him for it though. He was sleeping on the sofa at my parents' house at the time and I think this trip to Theatre Elli was more for him than me.

When we exited the building and I looked out across the junction, at the abandoned church with the overgrown garden, the local council building now used as a soup kitchen, my cousin's carpentry shop, all boarded up, it's difficult to distinguish between the events of the film, and that of reality. What happened when?


PILATES
LLANELLI
FIGHT CLUB
ZUMBA

Before Celtic Vapours there was a shop that sold trinkets for goths and hippies — weed grinders, incense sticks and holders, crystals and stones that are said to contain spiritual power and integrity, however vaguely. I think the proprietors may have offered piercings too — I at least remember all the girls who hung around the skatepark got new jewellery for their lips, noses, eyebrows, belly buttons there. The guy who owned the shop was rumoured to be a pervert. He had a ponytail. No one ever said those two things were related, but when one was brought up, the other was not far behind.

My first job was for a catering company. The founder of the company was also the landlord of a pub on the corner of one of the busiest crossroads in the town. I was 16 or 17 at the time and was often called on to work the bar underage. He used to try and run his hands through my hair. *I love your hair*, he said. He had a bit of a reputation for liking younger boys. He was a character, although not a very well liked one. Towns like these are full of *characters*. What I mean to say is, narrative cliché is difficult to avoid when the people themselves lead cliché lives. Like actors contracted to fulfil a role they don't care for. Every town is a soap opera.

I've never set foot in Celtic Vapours or Seren Nails. They're not exactly inviting. In fact, Celtic Vapours appears closed. I wonder if anything will replace it, knowing the answer...


Celtic Vapours
E-liquid & E-Cigarettes
4 Vaughan Street
Llanelli
01554 754 487
Seren Nails
Professional Nail Care American Style
NAILS
Walk-ins
Welcome
NAILS
& SPA

**Consumerism is cyclical in nature — when there's nothing left, it eats its own tail.**

The Polish delicatessen replaced a record shop all those years ago and has now, in fact, been replaced by a record shop. Consumerism is cyclical in nature — when there's nothing left, it eats its own tail. A rock music themed steakhouse was opened, then closed, became a Polish-only bar, which then became a Chinese-owned nail technician bar. It now stands empty. The greasy spoon at the end of the street also sells delicious Thai curries.

My Korean neighbour studied to become a doctor, and, inevitably, became a doctor — after a slight detour as a spoken-word poet — in London. Sometimes he comes back on weekends to drink because it's still cheaper to drink here than it is in London. We — myself, my uncle, neighbour, their friends — would climb the wall into the yard of my primary school to play basketball, and that was the only place where there was a hoop. Why did we play basketball? I guess it felt quite international, and almost made us forget where we were.

The point is, the Polish have left. The Chinese, Turkish, Koreans, Italians, Greeks, Romanians, Bulgarians, Indians, they're all leaving. Everyone dreams of being somewhere else, don't they? Somewhere with opportunity, I suppose. When they're gone, I'll miss walking down the streets my parents said to be careful on when I was young, and not seeing food and goods from all over the world.


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They say that at the end of the world there'll still be car parks. Well, I don't know if anyone has said that. Surely someone must've. Buildings demolished to become car parks. Pubs, community centres, blocks of flats, cinemas, bowling alleys, bingo halls. Even the shops.

A friend of mine died in a car park. He should have been buried there, too, to be discovered again hundreds of years from now, resurrected like Richard III. Everytime I walk past that car park I think of him, the friend. Such a public happening soaks into the fabric of its environment. Stone becomes damp with memory.

Who will park their cars there when there's no more fuel, no more people to drive and park their cars, no reason to, and nowhere to go?

Towns like this are mouldy with the grief of their inhabitants, rising sea levels, the failure of governmental infrastructure to turn the tide. But at least there's always space in the car parks. What went wrong?

And when?

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**Joshua Jones** is a queer, neurodivergent writer and artist from Llanelli, South Wales. He co-founded Dyddiau Du, a library and experimental artspace in Cardiff

# *'Politics is a public service':* Lee Waters discusses political careers

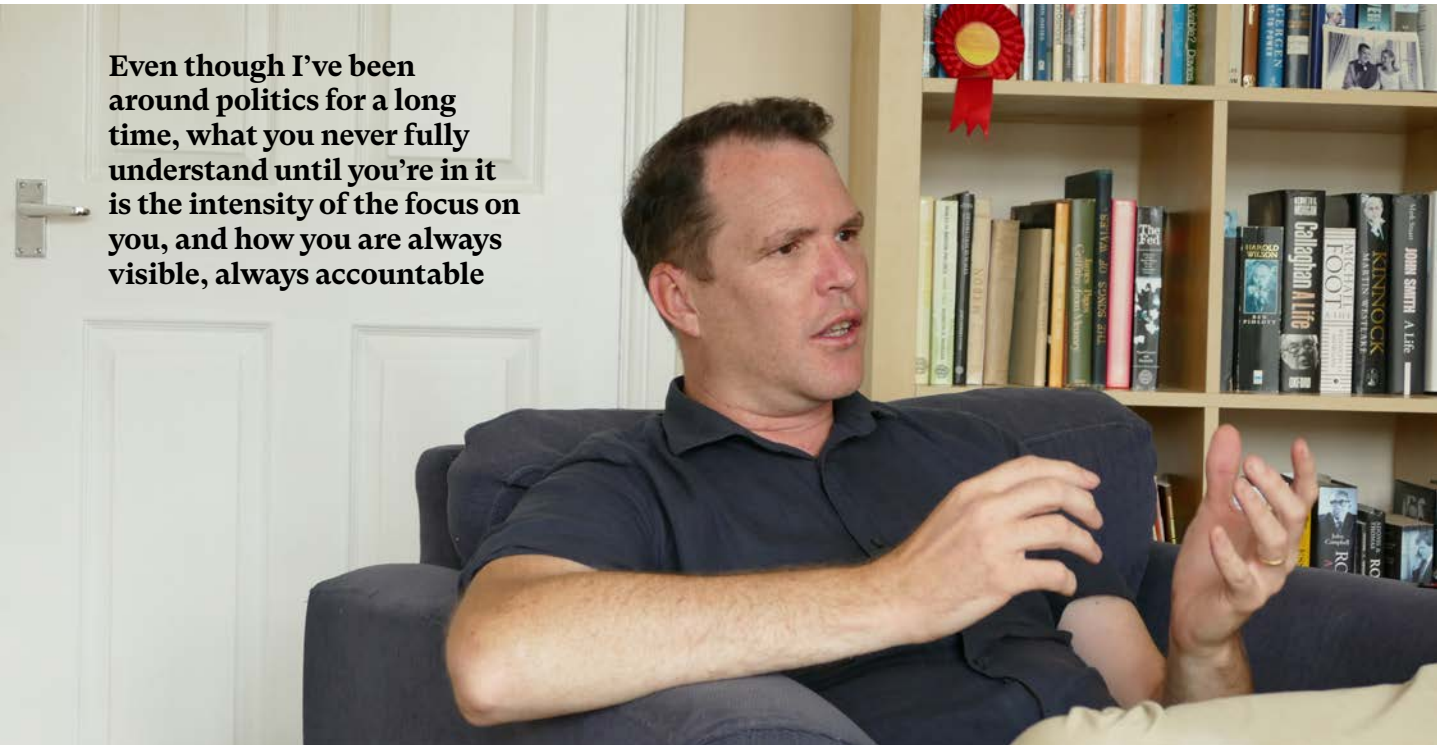
**Lee Waters** *talks to* **Jennifer Nadel**, *Co-founder of Compassion in Politics, about being a professional politician and the toll of contemporary politics on mental health*

**Jennifer Nadel:**
*It's a very stressful job, isn't it?*

**Lee Waters:**
Of course it is. And I knew that going into it, you know, it's also a really stimulating and interesting job. And the two come together. Even though I've been around politics for a long time, what you never fully understand until you're in it is the intensity of the focus on you, and how you are always visible, always accountable. And people project onto you what they think you are and what they think you stand for. And that can be really uncomfortable. I'm somebody who's values-driven, works very hard and is making family sacrifices, to do this role. But the standard assumption now about politicians is that they are venal. And that wears me down and gets quite depressing.

**JN:** *And what is the impact of that on your mental health?*

**LW:** Well it's cumulative. When you are feeling resilient, you can shrug it off and see it for what it is. You know, politics is not a place for shrinking violets. You have to have a baseline level of resilience. But when you're not



feeling great, then these things do chip away, and they do wear you down. Because of some of the controversial positions I've taken, the weight of the insults and the abusive comments day after day after day after day, that really I find quite hard.

**JN:** *Has it affected your capacity to do the job to the best of your ability?*

**LW:** Of course it has. I've had a couple of periods of burnout and depression where I just couldn't face talking to, or seeing people. Thankfully, I got better and I've been able to develop some tools to help me. But then you're back to it. It's pretty relentless, and it certainly can have an adverse impact. But, you know, this isn't meant to be easy. This is tough stuff we're doing and there's a reason for that and I accept a lot of that, but I don't think people appreciate quite how much we give ourselves to do this job.

**JN:** *You say this isn't a job for shrinking violets. But does it have to be this tough? Does it have to be this way?*

**LW:** Well, that's the question, isn't it? And it's complex because quite a lot of this is about the breakdown of trust, and the breakdown of deference – which is a good thing. Social media gives people the ability to let you know instantly what they think and expect a response. All of this is kind of now baked in. So the conditions are pretty challenging. And it's hard to see them changing for the better in the foreseeable future.

**JN:** *Are there any measures you would like to see introduced that could make it better?*

**LW:** It's difficult, isn't it? You can take an HR approach to this and say, there should be support available, there should be counselling, there should be this, that and the other – head massages... There's no argument for not doing that, other than people thinking that an already pampered group of people are pampered even more, and deepening the level of distrust and resentment they feel. But I think the issues are more systemic than that. It's about the perception of why people go into politics. And as politics has become more and more of a career, because the points of entry are so difficult and so narrow,

**We need to remind people more that politics is a public service. It shouldn't be a 30-year career choice, it should be a 10-year burst in your career where you give something back**

it attracts quite a self-selecting group of people. And then because the points of exit are so difficult, it's very hard to go on and get a useful career after politics, because you are sort of toxic, you are shop-soiled goods. So as a result of that, people tend to stay in politics because they don't really feel they have anywhere else to go, they've narrowed the career options so much that they feel trapped. And that then compounds the problem because it creates more of a career politician. And I think that is the heart of the problem. We need to remind people more that politics is a public service. It shouldn't be a 30-year career choice, it should be a 10-year burst in your career where you give something back.

**JN:** *What about political education? So that people understand a bit better what it is you're doing, what you can and can't do?*

**LW:** Yeah, absolutely. It's all part of a circle really, isn't it? If we remind people that politics is a public service, and a calling that is part of a civic duty, a civic spirit. And as part of that, you then would have more education and understanding of what politics is and how politics works. Because the level of basic understanding amongst lots of people is very low.

**JN:** *Is there an extent to which politicians don't help themselves and have contributed to this worsening, toxic situation?*

**LW:** Oh, of course, you do get people coming into politics because they are vain and they're egotistical and they love the attention and you know, they have other less high-minded motivations. That's human nature. That's inevitable. But that's not true of most people. And most people are trying their hardest. But I think about how people respect or react to the local doctor or the local head teacher, and the way they would speak to them. And I think it's changing for the worse. But generally, people would never dream of treating a local figure in the way they think it's perfectly okay to treat a politician because they just see us as punch bags and fair game.

**We're facing profound challenges: globalisation, austerity, existential challenges, like climate change... And so it's very hard to demonstrate to the people who voted you in that you're doing what you said you would do**

**JN:** *And you had your own experience. There was a policy that you cared deeply about and you got that over the line to reduce the speed limit to 20 miles per hour. And what's happened since then?*

**LW:** One of the reasons I came into politics is because I believe climate change is a massive problem. It requires a real effort to respond to it urgently. And that involves doing things that are hard to persuade people of in the short term, because they involve change. One of the things we have to do is to reduce our dependency on cars, and we have to change our attitudes to driving. So we brought in a reduction of the speed limit, to have 20 miles an hour as the standard limit in residential areas. There's been a very severe backlash to that, with a petition of half a million people, vandalism of the road signs, and a huge amount of abuse and insults directed at me, and anybody who puts their head above the parapet to defend it. As a result, people are self-censoring because they are scared. It's a really ugly atmosphere. And you know, that has been true of anything which threatens cars. The person who brought in the breathalyser had death threats, the guy who introduced the first crossings... So that's not a new thing. But I worry that with climate change, doing hard things is gonna get more and more important and the backlash people can expect from it is going to get worse. I feel quite pessimistic about that and the ability to persuade people to come into politics to perform that critical role.

**JN:** *Is there a danger that the bullies will win in the end if people are frightened of pushing ahead with difficult policies?*

**LW:** Well, it's one of the reasons why I think we should promote politics not as a career, but as a calling, and [promote the] expectation that it's not something that

you will do for the rest of your life. And I think if you change that framing, and change the expectations, maybe you may get politicians who are more willing to take challenging positions, because their whole future and livelihood doesn't depend upon it.

**JN:** *So are you saying that in the current situation, there is a very real danger that people won't do what's right for fear of the backlash that could follow?*

**LW:** Politics is really hard to get into, you have to be really determined. You have to do all sorts of things that you wouldn't normally do. And then when you get into it, there are a whole set of expectations on you and your own expectations of what you want to achieve. And you quickly discover, change is really hard to achieve. It is very slow, people are impatient, there isn't the money that you'd want. And so that expectation you had for yourself and built up in others in an election campaign soon becomes tested. And people's instant assumption is that you have failed, you've done something that they don't agree with, you've failed to follow through on your promises. And that starting assumption that you are basically venal and rotten is confirmed instantly.

**JN:** *One politician we spoke to said that there's a danger that we have broken politics because we have broken politicians, what would you say to that?*

**LW:** Well, I think the idea that there was some golden age is a little fanciful. You know, any reading of political history will show that hostility towards politicians is not a new thing. The pamphleteers of the 1800s would freely libel people in an anonymous article, so this is not a new feature. I don't think politicians have ever been held in very high regard. And I think it's right to have a degree of scepticism, that's a healthier democracy. But there's a difference between that and the level we are now seeing, and it's getting worse. I think the other thing that's going on in parallel is getting harder to change things. We're facing profound challenges: globalisation, austerity, existential challenges, like climate change, that there aren't simple answers to. And so it's very hard to demonstrate to the people who voted you in that you're doing what you said you would do, and you're adding value to your communities.

**JN:** *My burning question was whether you've got any examples of you being targeted.*

**LW:** Well, I have plenty of examples. But none that I especially want to tell, because people are already thinking politicians are 'other'. They think they're feather bedded... And then they come on the radio and say 'everyone is horrible to me'.

**JN:** *So can you give me an idea of the everyday things that happened to you as a politician that maybe listeners may be shocked to hear about?*

**LW:** They might be shocked to hear some people come up and thank me and praise me as I'm shocked when that happens. You know, it's not all negativity. But inevitably, you remember the negative encounter, you remember the hostile experience, and that's the one that stays with you and shakes you. And then of course, you get so much online comments and abuse, because people think it's safe, and they probably wouldn't say it to your face. And although you can rationalise that and say, okay, well, you know, if I saw them in the pub, I'd just ignore them, when it comes at you, in written form... That's, that's pretty miserable.

**JN:** *Thanks so much for your time, it was powerful.*

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**Lee Waters** is the Welsh Labour and Co-operative Member of the Welsh Parliament for the Llanelli constituency

*This is a transcript of an interview conducted for the Radio 4 documentary Broken Politicians, Broken Politics, which was broadcast on 20th May 2024.*

# Reaching Net Zero by 2035?
## *Reflections on supporting the Challenge Group*

**Dr Jack Price,** *Research Associate at the Wales Centre for Public Policy, sets out the challenges and opportunities for Wales of accelerating the nation's delivery of net zero*

Wales aims to reach net zero by 2050. But could it get there faster? That was the question asked by the Wales Net Zero 2035 Challenge Group, which recently published a series of reports fulfilling its commission under the Labour-Plaid Cymru Co-Operation Agreement to 'examine potential pathways to net zero by 2035'.

The need to reach net zero is well-understood. The challenge of doing so is becoming clearer. What is needed are ambitious, but grounded and realistic ways to get there. In our work for the Challenge Group we looked at the evidence across their five challenge areas and the broader trends to try and identify opportunities for Wales to accelerate the transition. Here, we look at our reflections across each of the areas and what they mean for Wales and the work of WCPP.

### Speeding up the transition

The Challenge Group's remit was established by the Co-Operation Agreement, but in practice the 2035 target has been understood as looking for ways to accelerate the transition to net zero. It is important to be clear that the evidence suggests the 2050 target will be extremely challenging to reach, requiring ambition and large-scale change; 2035 would require an unprecedented-in-

Credit: Polly Thomas

peacetime mobilisation of resources to achieve.

Inaction and delay, however, carry their own risks. These include risks to the biosphere (such as ecosystem breakdown and an increase in extreme weather events) and human risks, such as increases in the cost of mitigation and adaptation efforts and increases in forced migration. At a time where government, at all levels, is increasingly constrained in what it feels able to do, it remains nonetheless imperative that climate change is properly addressed. The work of the Challenge Group is particularly useful in identifying areas where the transition may be accelerated and where efforts can be fruitfully concentrated now.

## The challenge areas

The Challenge Group looked at five challenge areas:

1. How could Wales feed itself by 2035?
2. How could Wales meet energy needs whilst phasing out fossil fuels by 2035?
3. How could Wales heat and build homes and workplaces by 2035?
4. How could people and places be connected across Wales by 2035?
5. What could education, jobs and work look like across Wales by 2035?

It also produced a cross-cutting report, 'Enabling the transition to net zero by 2035'.

We sought to respond to each question with useful, independent expertise to help the Challenge Group to consider the questions they faced. However, our work remains independent of the Challenge Group, who are responsible for the reports and the conclusions that they have drawn.

## How could Wales feed itself by 2035?

The question of agriculture and how it might change to support the net zero transition is highly contested. Ongoing controversies around the proposed Sustainable Farming Scheme, as well as longer-running issues surrounding the idea of rewilding, have highlighted the way in which policy, however well-intentioned, can run into trouble if it is not accompanied by genuine dialogue and understanding between government and the people that government is supposed to serve.

Our evidence review reflects a consensus that a reduction in livestock numbers and the use of land for 'carbon sinks' will be necessary to reach net zero, as well as the importance of dietary changes. It is important to be clear that land will need to be used for carbon sequestration and biodiversity (such as through planting trees, nature-friendly farming, or uplands restoration) if Wales is to hit its net zero targets. This land can and should be managed and owned by farmers, but these changes will require lower livestock numbers, particularly as livestock are a source of emissions.

Our report also, however, reflects on the issues faced by farmers and rural communities, particularly the challenging economic context and the changing nature of agricultural subsidies.

It is no exaggeration to say that, for many within farming, these issues are perceived, and indeed experienced as existential. Profitability is low and frequently non-existent, and, while subsidy rates for the Sustainable Farming Scheme have not yet been published, they are likely to be both lower and differently-targeted than those of the Basic Payment Scheme they will replace. Apart from economic arguments, agriculture in Wales is culturally important both for its role in rural communities and as a bastion of Welsh language use.

These are serious issues and should be addressed accordingly. To the credit of many involved in these debates, there are signs that this is starting to happen. Involving farmers and others within agriculture in the discussion around subsidies, land use, and potentially different farming methods could be a productive way to move forward.

## How could Wales meet energy needs while phasing out fossil fuels by 2035?

Energy is an interesting area for discussion because, as the Challenge Group set out, electricity generation already has a formal target for decarbonisation by 2035, with the new UK government seeking to accelerate this to 2030.

Achieving this ambition will be difficult, as energy generating infrastructure is not being built at anywhere near a fast enough pace. Our evidence drew on research

within the sector highlighting that, as of 2022, new build generation needed to be deployed at more than double the best achieved built rate historically, and sustained each year until 2035. There are no signs that this has happened hitherto.

Wales is limited in what it can achieve by itself, as large energy projects (with the exception of onshore wind) are reserved to the UK Government and Wales is integrated into the GB energy system. Coordination will therefore be crucial, particularly in those areas which the Welsh Government is responsible for.

One part of this is planning for onshore wind and other energy generation projects below 350MW capacity. The Infrastructure (Wales) Bill, currently making its way through the Senedd, aims to speed up the process of consenting and planning permission for such projects. This, and other efforts to streamline the planning process, will be crucial to mobilising and building infrastructure. Our evidence draws on examples from other countries where similar streamlining has been effective.

In the Netherlands, for instance, offshore wind areas are identified, permitted and consented, and connected to the grid; projects are given the go-ahead before they are put out to tender. This significantly reduces the risk for developers and has resulted in a considerable ramping-up of offshore wind capacity in the country, with some wind farms operating without public subsidy.

Some might be concerned that a more streamlined planning system could ignore public fears or objections to new developments. Our work presents a case that meaningful participation in the planning system need not come at the expense of speed. We identify three features of effective engagement: that it comes early in the planning process to reduce conflict later on; that it is genuinely participatory; and that it has a meaningful impact on plans.

Planning reform is a necessary, but not sufficient, accelerator of action in energy as in other policy areas. Other factors such as changing and upgrading the operation of the grid and accessible finance will be equally important. Given that, as a result of the transition, electricity demand is expected to significantly increase,

Newport. Credit: Polly Thomas

staying still is not an option. Reliable, funded, and low carbon energy generation will need to be rapidly rolled out if Wales is to meet its net zero goals.

## How could Wales heat and build homes and workplaces by 2035?

While the Challenge Group looked at all buildings, the evidence we provided to support the work of the group focused on residential buildings. Wales has some of the least energy-efficient housing stocks in Europe, with around a quarter of homes over a century old.

Reducing residential emissions requires reducing the emissions of new buildings, as well as reducing those from existing stock. For new buildings, it is important to be aware of emissions associated with creating building materials such as steel or concrete. Optimising build standards, perhaps using lower-carbon materials like timber where possible or using modern methods of construction which can be more efficient, could help to mitigate emissions in the building process. Designing homes to be energy efficient and to use low carbon technologies from the start, such as by requiring heat pumps instead of gas boilers in new builds, could support the reduction of residential emissions further by ensuring that new builds do not add to the total emissions produced.

For existing stock, decarbonising home heating will require a mixture of energy efficiency measures as well as 'fuel switching', replacing emissions-producing heating systems with low or zero carbon options. Efforts to reduce demand may also be an option, particularly if the build rate for electricity generation does not keep up with increases in energy demand.

Energy efficiency measures are important, but our research suggests a so-called 'fabric first' approach, which prioritises increasing efficiency before other decarbonisation routes are pursued, might not be feasible over the timescale needed. We might also bear in mind the Jevons paradox, where increases in efficiency of a process result in more, not less energy being used, because people can get more output for the same cost. If energy efficiency improvements mean it costs less to heat my house to 18 degrees, I might choose to heat it to 20 at the same cost as before, increasing energy demand overall. This is no bad thing if it leads to more comfort or reduced levels of fuel poverty, but this increases total energy demand and potentially increases emissions unless home heating systems are also decarbonised.

In certain types of home, insulation might be needed to ensure that heat pumps work most efficiently. Heat pumps are the most decarbonised heating system that most homes will use in the future, but there are currently significant barriers to uptake. These include cost, as heat pumps are often comparable in running costs to gas boilers while being more expensive to install, as well as other concerns such as the difference in operation compared with a gas boiler and the potential for installation to be complex.

Decarbonising homes has the potential to be extremely expensive, with some estimates for retrofitting every property in Wales to be more energy efficient and less emissions intensive running into the tens of billions of pounds – a sum well beyond anything that the Welsh Government can mobilise. There will therefore need to be a mix of finance and incentives deployed, depending on home tenure and household income levels.

## How could people and places be connected across Wales by 2035?

Transport is a significant emissions source in Wales and has been the subject of a number of high-profile recent interventions such as the development of the South Wales Metro and the introduction of the 20mph speed limit in built-up areas.

Our work in this area has used an avoid – shift – improve framework for journeys. *Avoid* means not taking journeys, such as through hybrid or remote working reducing the need to travel to the workplace. *Shift* refers to changing the mode of transport people use – for instance, taking a bus or train instead of a private vehicle. And *improve* is used where existing transport options could be made less emissions intensive, such as replacing petrol-driven vehicles with electric vehicles.

Modal shift is a key Welsh Government approach, asking people to reduce their car use and take more journeys by public transport or active travel. Wales has missed its active travel targets up to now, but there are lessons that can be learned from other countries such as Denmark in providing accessible and connected cycle infrastructure to promote cycling where it could

Credit: Luke Porter, Unsplash

feasibly replace shorter car journeys. Shorter journeys also represent the majority of journeys taken and so can bring a disproportionate benefit on emissions reduction.

Public transport is currently undergoing changes in parts of Wales through the Metro programmes, and with the introduction of bus franchising it may see more change in the future. This gives the public sector a larger role in the commissioning and planning of routes and services. Our evidence review shows that, while it may be difficult to achieve modal shift in the short term, integrated ticketing systems across different public transport modes and the provision of suitable routes and infrastructure can help support greater use of public transport.

Modal shift is usually considered easier to achieve in urban than rural areas, but initiatives like car clubs, carpooling or demand-responsive public transport might support some rural residents.

Where journeys cannot be avoided or shifted, improving journeys looks at measures such as promoting the electrification of transport, such as incentivising electric vehicle usage or electrifying rail and buses. Many of these policies are already in place on a UK basis, or are being undertaken in Wales.

## What could education, jobs and work look like across Wales by 2035?

Wales has significant skills challenges, including falling participation rates in higher, further and adult education, a high proportion of low-skilled adults, and consistently lower productivity than the UK as a whole. These challenges exist independently of the net zero transition, but the transition will require the development and deployment of new skills in Wales.

Our work in this area builds on our other work supporting the development of the Welsh Government's net zero skills action plan, and work on lifelong learning and access to tertiary education. In each of these, we identify barriers to access or participation, many of

which are formed during compulsory education. Any strategy to develop skills to support the transition must therefore be mindful of the existing low skills base in Wales, and uneven and low participation rates (particularly among people from more deprived socioeconomic backgrounds, and disabled people).

Skills needs will differ by sector, although all jobs will be, to some extent, affected by the transition. There is potential, where a skilled workforce already exists, for workers to be retrained to fill new roles: for instance, oil and gas workers in Wales will possess many of the skills needed to work in the green energy sector.

In some areas, there are supply and demand issues that can affect the availability of skills. For instance, we have heard that it is not technically challenging to retrain a gas engineer to fit heat pumps. However, there is limited demand for heat pumps, meaning there are also limited incentives to retrain; conversely, the absence of skilled installers might in turn negatively affect the demand for heat pumps. Overcoming situations like this (perhaps by otherwise incentivising retraining) will be critical to avoid skills bottlenecks developing, hampering the transition.

This area also covered the future of work. Despite enthusiasm in some quarters, a universal basic income seems difficult to implement due to its excessive cost. Trials elsewhere have found limited support for claims around universal basic income, although some research is positive around increased well-being for recipients. A four day working week is likewise popular with employees, and seems to reduce absenteeism. Both options, in theory, offer opportunities for people to gain new skills to adapt to the green economy, but there is as yet limited evidence as to how well this translates in real-world situations.

## Reflections

The work we have undertaken highlights the scale and breadth of the net zero challenge. Climate change, as we put it in our recent blog for the IWA, is a 'wicked' problem. Tackling it will also require addressing Wales' low skills levels, low levels of productivity and economic growth, and ensuring a just transition for those affected by decarbonisation efforts, such as steel workers in Port Talbot. It also means looking at climate change adaptation and risk management, recognising that extreme weather events are now more likely, and putting measures in place to support greater resilience.

All of this requires additional funding, which will necessarily come from both the public and private sector. The UK's historically low rates of investment will need to change so that infrastructure can be developed and deployed. The Welsh Government will need to work with the UK Government, focussing on tangible delivery. Incentives will need to be put in place to facilitate the transition, guided by the work of the Challenge Group and others.

The work of the Challenge Group shows that there are areas where the transition might be accelerated, but getting to net zero will neither be easy nor uncomplicated. We are attempting an energy transition of the sort which previously has taken many decades, perhaps centuries, in, at most, a quarter of a century. And, in most realistic pathways, we will still rely on technological developments that are as-yet untested at scale to get to net zero.

The good news is that because climate change is a wicked problem, addressing it could have a number of benefits beyond emissions reduction. Economic growth and development and a better standard of living are prizes that could be won through strategic, pragmatic investment in decarbonisation and green technology across Wales and the wider UK. ▸

## Find out more

At WCPP, we are developing a programme of work to further the transition to net zero in Wales and address some of the challenges that remain. We would be delighted to hear from those with expertise or interest in tackling these issues.

Our blog for the IWA, *Reaching net zero in Wales*, is available at https://www.iwa.wales/agenda/2024/09/reaching-net-zero-in-wales/

The reports WCPP prepared for the Wales Net Zero 2035 Challenge Group can be found at https://wcpp.org.uk/project/net-zero-35/

The reports of the Wales Net Zero 2035 Challenge Group are available at https://netzero2035.wales

Credit: Andy Watkins, Unsplash

Credit: Mathew Browne, Unsplash

# Swansea Growth Story

**Tom Collinson** *sits down with new MP for Swansea West,* **Torsten Bell** *to discuss the role of place-based investing*

The Chancellor of the Exchequer has promised to rebuild the foundations of the British economy, to end stagnation and make 'every part of the country better off.' Fundamental to achieving the Chancellor's goal is the task of increasing the level of public investment from the Treasury and crowding-in private investment. Yet, what this actually means for people and places is seldom described with much detail. One place where this can be explored is Swansea, a city undergoing sizable public investment in the midst of economic contortions and stagnation. I recently sat down with the new Member of Parliament for Swansea West, Torsten Bell, one of the most vocal campaigners for public investment to understand its effects.

Torsten Bell is a noteworthy new representative for Swansea. Despite having neither lived nor worked in Swansea - or Wales - prior to the election, Bell has made up for his lack of Welsh credentials through the national platform he has built as a policy analyst. Prior to being elected, Bell worked as a civil servant, special advisor and was most recently chief executive of the think-tank, the Resolution Foundation (a position he held for nine years). Over the last year, he has also become a minor YouTube star. Two appearances on the PoliticsJoe podcast, as the 'economist (who) explains why Britain is poor', have generated over 2 million views. He has since appeared on both the BBC and Channel 4, armed with data to explain the country's woes and how to fix them. Bell's recent book, *Great Britain? How We Get Our Future Back* has been well reviewed across the British commentariat.

The spotlight is not new to Bell, who is regarded as one of the most influential new Labour MPs and

**Despite having neither lived nor worked in Swansea - or Wales - prior to the election, Bell has made up for his lack of Welsh credentials through the national platform he has built as a policy analyst**

Credit: Ifeoluwa A, Unsplash

is touted by some to be a future chancellor. Bell has distanced himself from any exaltation, noting his contentment to learn from the backbenches. However, it is not an unreasonable prediction to make. Bell first gained notoriety in politics as an advisor to Ed Miliband during the 2015 UK General Election. Following the election, Andrew Neil asked Bell if he was responsible for the infamous 'Edstone', a 12ft stone tablet inscribed with the Labour Party's six pledges, promised to be mounted in the Rose Garden of No. 10 if Miliband were to win a majority. The stone never made it to Downing Street; Milliband resigned as party leader and Bell jokingly replied that the Resolution Foundation would not be engaged in any stonemasonry.

Today, Bell's economic thinking is far removed from the austerity-lite policy of Milliband and Balls. 'Things are going to get built', Bell wrote on X in July, reflecting his stance on the active role the UK Government should play in generating growth and reducing inequality, both intergenerationally, regionally and across the earnings and wealth distributions. The central message of Bell's book, which is a synthesis of the research published in the Resolution Foundation's Stagnation Nation (2023) report, is that the UK has stagnated economically over the last 15 years, while simultaneously becoming more unequal. The State has a duty to address this, according to Bell. The solutions offered are densely packed in his tract. They include higher public investment, improved tax collection and a more robust welfare state; revising the benefit system and the level of active support for those without employment.

I met Bell in Swansea's Old Police Station. The venue, chosen by his parliamentary caseworker, was a fitting place for a conversation on economic regeneration and growth. Built in 1912, it is one of the only pre-Second World War public buildings still standing in Swansea. There aren't many structures which offer signs of former - or current - opulence and wealth but this might be one. The building was purchased in 2003 by the housing association Grwp Gwalia, renovated and re-opened in 2010, as student accommodation, with an arts centre and coffee shop. Adjoining the building is the Alex Design Exchange, run by the University of Wales Trinity St. David, another repurposed building, originally opened in 1887 by Prime Minister Gladstone as a library with a cupola and ornate two-storey circular reading room. Bell tells me he is waiting on his new office to be ready, which will be based in the Albert Hall on Craddock Street, a historical gem that once hosted both Charles Dickens and Oscar Wilde for public readings. After years of vacancy, the building recently reopened as a food court.

These developments are all part of wider plans by the City and County of Swansea to regenerate the city as a centre for retail, business and culture. Rob Stewart, leader of the City and County of Swansea, stated 'there have been a huge number of recent improvements in Swansea, where a regeneration programme worth over £1bn is ongoing.' Along with retrofitting and refurbishments, there are new buildings appearing: a music arena, library, student flats and office blocks. The main centre, Castle Gardens - once a flowery garden, though now heavily concreted, has also been earmarked for renewal.

The goal of these investments is to drive growth, develop high-value sectors and employment opportunities. They are, however, within a context

of a city centre that has begun to appear increasingly tired and depressed over the last 10 years, mirroring the timeframe of the UK economy's stagnation. Major retail stores have closed and have left behind rows of un-let units, alongside budget stores and charity shops on the city's main shopping streets. This being said, both Bell and I agree Swansea is a beautiful place to be (especially when the sun is shining).

Unlocking investment is a major theme in Bell's book, a key contention of which is that Britain has not invested enough in its future. Significant for Bell is the lack of spending on 'place-based' investments. These include investments in transport links, offices and homes. Swansea is never mentioned in Bell's book, which instead focuses on Britain's 'second cities' such as Manchester and Birmingham as areas in which to build his place-based approach to development. The challenges raised by Bell are nevertheless as pertinent to Swansea as anywhere else. Economic statistics show Swansea to be remarkably normal and typical of the wider UK growth story. Productivity growth has largely mirrored the UK from the late 1990s to 2022 while also outperforming Wales as a whole. Along with store closures and increasing poverty in the city centre, wage growth across the area has been slow, and the collapsed manufacturing sector in the city is a story well-known in many other cities throughout the UK. Bell's maiden speech to the House of Commons noted typical (real) wages in Swansea had 'not risen by 1 pence since 2010'. 'That is what economic failure on a colossal scale looks like,' Bell concluded.

Credit: Ifeoluwa A, Unsplash

**Along with store closures and increasing poverty in the city centre, wage growth across the area has been slow, and the collapsed manufacturing sector in the city is a story well-known in many other cities throughout the UK**

While investing in growth is vital, Bell is a pragmatist on what this means. What policy makers do to support growth must be bounded by the realities of the service-based economy the UK has become. It is not to get lost in marquee sectors or rhetoric of 'Global Britain' at the frontlines of innovation, or slogans of 'green jobs for all!'. While there is a place to promote sectors such as pharmaceuticals or aeronautics, according to Bell, it is an unhelpful way of thinking about economic development; what is more important is that public investment develops highly-functioning cities. Investing in a larger stock of high quality housing and office space is *the* industrial strategy for a service-based economy like ours, Bell tells me.

The emphasis on place-based investing makes sense in a place like Swansea, which is a city built on a sweeping long bay. The last 25 years has seen contractions in the productivity of most manufacturing sectors in the city, along with very weak growth in sectors associated with heavy industry, such as transportation and storage. However, these declines have been offset by growth in 'professional industries', notably research and development, and administrative activities. It is a story of growth where human capital is replacing industrial capital. Institutions such as Swansea University have been an important focal point for this growth, whose new Science and Innovation Bay Campus opened in

2015 on Jersey Marine Beach, with the help of European Regional Development Funding, at a cost of £450m.

According to Bell, the problem is not deindustrialisation *per se*. It is that as a country, we are not making a success of it. Industrial policy, for Bell, is about promoting 'what we are good at.' In his book, Bell makes the point that no country has ever successfully reversed its changing industrial structure. Instead, successful policy should be about creating cities which make doing business in sectors such as research and development easier and which attract talented individuals to study and to work. This is at least the plan for Swansea University, whose marketing campaigns on the London tube and at international school fairs extensively use the shore-lined city to attract students, researchers and teachers alike.

It is a bold message for a Labour Member of Parliament to pose a strategy for economic development which relies on finance, research and other professional sectors. But Bell understands both the role of private business and the State in driving growth. On the one hand, there is what he calls the importance of 'shared burdens and shared rewards', which means a number of State-led interventions, such as tighter labour market enforcement, self-employment protection, increasing pay for social workers and overall higher spending on universal credit to provide claimants time to find suitable employment. These policies would be financed through more intelligent tax policy, which include a more efficient means of collecting inheritance tax along with a more radical and perhaps politically questionable policy of taxing the mileage of electric vehicle drivers through the installation of black boxes to make up for the loss of Fuel Duty brought on by the declining sales of petrol and diesel vehicles. Arguably needed as the combustion engine market shrinks, but posed by Bell as a solution in a slightly blase fashion.

On the other hand, backing high value service-based sectors through place-based investing is a private form of 'shared rewards.' Bell acknowledges the role market forces play in raising wages when one sector grows. There is reason to be sanguine about unbalanced growth because wage growth in strategic sectors translates to wage growth in less productive sectors across the labour market. Bell points me to work from the Resolution Foundation, for example, which shows that hairdressers benefit from the rising wages of 'strategic sectors' in the labour market, even if the hairdressing business is not becoming more productive itself.

Along with the rest of the country, Swansea will wait to see if the new UK Labour Government can support growth and raise living standards through the type of place-based investing Bell is a proponent of. There is, however, at least one reason to be gloomy. In conversation, Bell paints an opportunistic picture when it comes to Swansea's prospects. However, the data tells a more questionable story of whether the place-based and university-led strategy of economic development is working. ONS internal migration statistics from 2023 show a net outflow of people between the ages of 25 to 40 from the city. ONS business dynamism data also shows a declining rate of new job creation in the city, a rate that is below most other parts of the country. While the university is the central magnet for attracting young people and a large anchor institution for the economy, it is far from clear whether Swansea is doing much to retain graduates with well-paying jobs or opportunities to start a business through its place-based investments and attempts to revitalise the city.

One reason for this is that the impact of place-based investing is slow. Michael Gove's Levelling Up White Paper was perhaps the definitive statement on place-based investment and billions of pounds were awarded to local authorities from the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities through a series of Levelling Up Funds to achieve the goals the paper set out. The impact of these investments has been described by the Institute for Fiscal Studies as 'glacial'. They also did very little to sway the recent election, which only reflects the lack of impact these investments have had so far. A new music arena or a few new blocks of flats does not seem enough to spur growth, opportunity and change. Perhaps, it is a matter of just doing more. Local authority finances have evidently been squeezed over recent years and any pots of Levelling Up money or Shared Prosperity funds are not enough to reverse the trend of stagnation. Still, there feels the need for a wider conversation on growth and how it is delivered, particularly in places such as Swansea.

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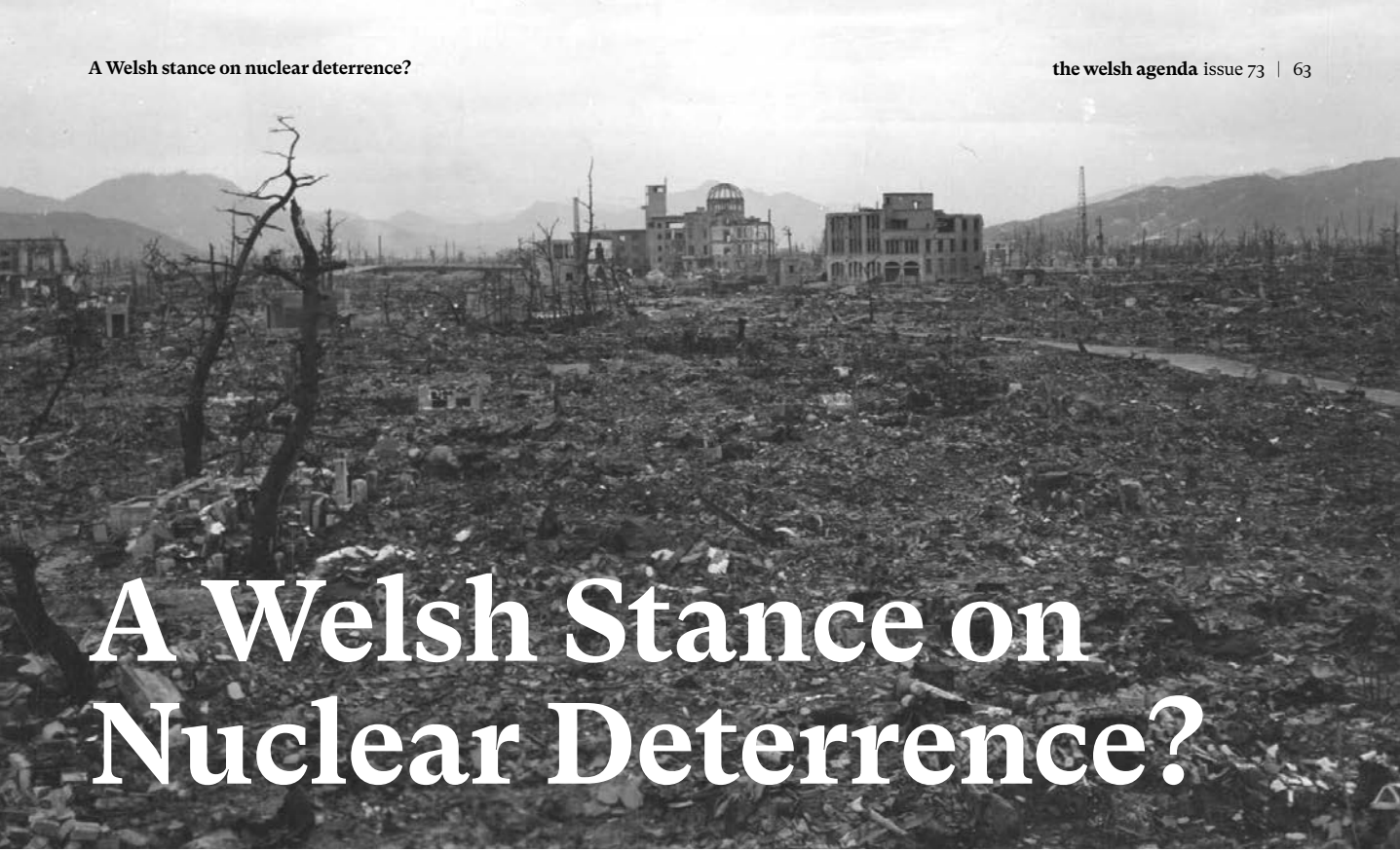

# A Welsh Stance on Nuclear Deterrence?

Credit: US National Archives

**Rhys Lewis-Jones** *explains why he thinks Wales should have a greater voice in UK foreign policy when it comes to nuclear weapons*

The absence of a Welsh Government stance on nuclear deterrence tacitly subsumes its international security interests into the UK Government's. Scotland, on the other hand, declares it will pursue unilateral nuclear disarmament (Scottish Gov., 2024), intimately related with the present stationing of the Vanguard Class submarines at HM Naval Base Clyde. Does the Scottish Government's clear position on the possession and deployment of nuclear weapons inform us, then, as to Wales' future path, with its own devolved government and aspirations for some of statehood? Whilst a seemingly admirable approach, upon closer inspection, nuclear abolition remains problematic at best. In the first instance, Scotland's position seems to satisfy the major legal and ethical concerns over the threat to use, or actual use of, thermonuclear force. This directly contradicts, however, the UK Government's position: that these weapons are deployed "to deter the most extreme threats to our national security and way of life, helping to guarantee our safety, and that of our NATO allies" (UK Gov., 2024). An independent Scottish nation would seek to join NATO – a "nuclear-armed alliance" as it repeatedly states.[1] Despite a change of government, with Keir Starmer at the helm in 10 Downing Street, this stance *will not change*. Indeed, Starmer seems hell-bent on cementing himself as a steady hand in all-things security and defence.

A rock steady nuclear posture obfuscates the real threat of nuclear risk over the coming decade. Should the war in Ukraine deteriorate – drawing NATO members into direct conflict – this may initiate a nuclear-armed 'hot war'. Whilst a worst-case scenario, we should at least consider this to be a possibility. Far from guaranteeing our national security and way of life, the active deployment of the UK's nuclear deterrent – Trident – integrates the United Kingdom in NATO's nuclear

planning group (NPG). Consequently, this contribution to US nuclear strategy renders most NATO member states subservient to *US foreign policy* and its interests as the hegemonic leader of the Western (liberal) world-order. We should not forget that European NATO members rely on the United States' extended nuclear deterrence to support national security. This 'nuclear umbrella' consists of the forward deployment of US nuclear weapons, both at UK sites and other NATO storage locations in Europe. Putin's tactical nuclear weapons exercises in May and June of 2024, however, remind us of Russia's willingness to apply nuclear coercion in line with its interests. The UK's deterrent and its direct involvement in NATO's NPG – declared a worthy and just enterprise – obscures the tangible risk of nuclear war. Any nuclear exchange heralds the ultimate failure of nuclear deterrence. The devolved governments have no say in this sphere of national defence.

Contemporary scholarly work on the Cuban Missile Crisis (1962) has revealed that at several points over the course of the Cold War, our collective survival rested in part on a phenomenon of 'luck', in effect, gambling with humanity's future.[2] In one sense, we are living in a 'future' or 'the future' in which such crises did not lead to collective annihilation. We should not be so naive in the twenty-first century.

Public discourse on security matters remains centred on concern for *national security*. It is claimed Trident and the US nuclear 'umbrella' protects our territorial integrity and deters major (great-power) war. In my own research, however, I develop a theoretical framework of 'existential security'. This framework differs from national security insofar as it seeks enduring security for our species and the avoidance of civilisational collapse – which could alter humanity's trajectory. Notably, this differs from the purely humanitarian concern for loss of life and suffering posed by nuclear use. All-out nuclear war remains a threat to humanity due to the risk of a nuclear winter, which scientists like Carl Sagan exposed as early as the late 1970s.[3] Even a regional (read *smaller*) nuclear war could have dire consequences due to the climatic impact of nuclear weapons: injecting vast amounts of soot into the atmosphere and thereby reflecting the sun's heat. Crop failures would likely follow, raising the distinct possibility of a global famine.[4] Successive generations deserve to inherit a planet free from the drastic effects of nuclear winter, which could entail a true struggle for survival – an end to our 'way of life' in a stricter sense than that implied by the UK Government declaration above.

**Any nuclear exchange heralds the ultimate failure of nuclear deterrence. The devolved governments have no say in this sphere of national defence**

The UK Government's stance on nuclear deterrence, let alone Wales' lack of one, is not as unburdened as it seems. This stance *silences* critical voices via a narrative of necessity, leaving deterrence practice largely unchallenged in the public sphere. However, policy experts on nuclear escalation risk confirm that there are distinct pathways to nuclear use. The prospect of a direct conflict between NATO and Russia or the US and China are of particular concern to them.[5] That said, should we appease a man like Putin, with his expansionist ambitions, over fears of nuclear war? Unfortunately, the scale and predicted consequences of total war may force us to consider compromises at the very least.

The Scottish Government's position on deterrence and nuclear disarmament raises more questions than it answers in many ways. Firstly, it reveals much of the inadequacies of the UK Government's stance, present in its claims over deterrence during successive changes of government. Secondly, we need to ask why the Welsh Government has failed to participate in this crucial debate when it has developed a progressive position as a 'Nation of Sanctuary' for refugees and asylum seekers? Thirdly, in anticipation of critiques from deterrence advocates, would Scotland go on to rely on the UK's extended deterrence post-independence? Is this free-riding permissible with the inordinate cost expected to reach 6% of the UK defence budget - about £3bn for 2023-24. More sharply perhaps, is Scotland's stance on nuclear abolition meaningful if it still leads to a reliance on the UK-NATO's extended deterrence? These

**The collective Welsh voice on the deterrence system – an 'exterminist structure' – is effectively *silenced* due to an entrenched institutionalised practice, sustained by the UK's political system**

questions speak to a theoretical future only, yet are pertinent due to resurgent nuclear risk and the objective threat of mutual annihilation.

Why should Wales take a stance *now?* I return to the concept of 'silencing', as advanced by feminist International Relations theory.[6] The collective Welsh voice on the deterrence system – an 'exterminist structure' – is effectively *silenced* due to an entrenched institutionalised practice, sustained by the UK's political system. The fact that we are living in times of heightened nuclear risk is obscured by maintaining the *status quo*, apparent in statements like "NATO is a nuclear-armed alliance", despite being ethically and legally contentious. Uniquely for Wales, our capacity for dissent is stifled by a Welsh Labour Government tethered to the whims and wishes of a Labour national government, unlike Scotland. In the realm of normal politics this is a nuisance to some and an outrage to others. However, heightened tensions with Russia – and for the eagle-eyed a crisis on the horizon over Taiwan – answers to *nuclear politics* only, with its extremity concealed in plain sight.

In my own lifetime and that of my parents' and grandparents', none of us have ever voted in a referendum on the retention of the UK's nuclear deterrent –tantamount to 'nuclear despotism'. No one I have ever met has participated in any such vote. Paradoxically, nuclear policy is set apart from normal politics and yet it is *normalised* to the greatest extent possible. Worse yet, even a Welsh Government stance on Trident, following Scotland's precedence, will not fix the underlying issues here. Renewed great-power conflict increases nuclear risk whilst raising prospects of a major conflict. Wales should have a free voice to critique the UK's foreign policy, whether it be arms exports to Israel or continued reliance on thermonuclear weapons for 'security'.

**Rhys** is a PhD candidate at the school of Law & Politics at Cardiff University. His thesis focuses on nuclear politics

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2 Pelopidas, B. and Lebow, R.N. (2023) 'Facing Nuclear War: Luck, Learning, and the Cuban Missile Crisis', in *The Oxford Handbook of History and International Relations*. Oxford University Press, pp. 705–720.

3 Turco, R.P. et al. (1983) 'Nuclear Winter: Global Consequences of Multiple Nuclear Explosions', *Science*, 222(4630), pp. 1283–1292.

4 For example, see: Xia, L. et al. (2022) 'Global food insecurity and famine from reduced crop, marine fishery and livestock production due to climate disruption from nuclear war soot injection', *Nature Food*, 3(8), pp. 586–596.

5 Zysk, K. (2018) 'Escalation and Nuclear Weapons in Russia's Military Strategy', *The RUSI Journal*, 163(2), pp. 4–15; Talmadge, C. (2017) 'Would China Go Nuclear?: Assessing the Risk of Chinese Nuclear Escalation in a Conventional War with the United States', *International Security*, 41(4), pp. 50–92.

6 Sweden adopted a Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) in 2014, see: Wright, K.A.M. and Rosamond, A.B. (2024) 'Sweden, NATO and the gendered silencing of feminist foreign policy', *International Affairs*, 100(2), pp. 589–607. See also: Brown, L.R. and Considine, L. (2022) 'Examining "gender-sensitive" approaches to nuclear weapons policy: a study of the Non-Proliferation Treaty', *International Affairs*, 98(4), pp. 1249–1266.

# Navigating the intersection of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and social vulnerability in Wales

*In Wales, much like in other parts of the world, LGBTQ+ youth grapple with alarmingly high rates of homelessness and housing instability. Often driven from their homes by familial rejection, discrimination, and a dearth of support networks, these young individuals are left to navigate the streets in search of safety and acceptance. Yet, this journey is rife with daunting challenges, including exploitation, victimisation, and mental health struggles,* **Rania Vamvaka** *explains*

*This article delves into the interconnected issues of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and social vulnerability in Wales, examining their root causes, implications, and proposed interventions to address these pressing challenges.*


Credit: Marek Studzinski

## Homelessness: Why are LGBTQ+ youths at higher risk?

LGBTQ+ youth homelessness poses a critical challenge in Wales, underscored by statistics that reveal a disproportionate representation of LGBTQ+ individuals among these populations. The rejection and lack of acceptance experienced within families and communities often compel these young people to seek safety and affirmation elsewhere. Consequently, they face heightened risks of exploitation, victimisation, and mental health issues, magnifying existing vulnerabilities and hindering their educational attainment and progression.

Data from Upstream Cymru, a school-based programme aimed at preventing, reducing, and identifying young people at risk of reaching a crisis point, highlights the gravity of this situation. A significant percentage of LGBTQ+ youth report experiences of homelessness or housing instability, with transgender and non-binary youth being particularly vulnerable, facing higher rates of homelessness compared to their cisgender LGBQ+ counterparts. Moreover, factors such as familial mistreatment or abandonment due to LGBTQ+ identity significantly contribute to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness, emphasising the necessity for targeted interventions and support services.

The rejection, discrimination, and lack of acceptance experienced by LGBTQ+ youth within their families and communities can precipitate homelessness, as they may feel compelled to leave home in search of safety, affirmation, and support. Overall, 28% of LGBTQ+ youth report experiencing homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives.

Once homeless, LGBTQ+ youth face increased risks of exploitation, victimisation, and mental health issues, exacerbating existing vulnerabilities and fostering a sense of isolation.

## How early intervention can help young people

Early intervention and prevention programmes are pivotal in tackling the root causes of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and educational vulnerability. By identifying and mitigating risk factors early on, these initiatives aim to prevent situations from escalating to the point where youth feel compelled to run away or go missing. Upstream Cymru's holistic approach, which encompasses family support, mental health services, and community resources, showcases the comprehensive support necessary to tackle the multifaceted challenges faced by LGBTQ+ youth.

Since 2020, Upstream Cymru has surveyed over 4,460 pupils across Wales, identifying 14% as being at high risk of homelessness. Among these high-risk individuals, 65% were previously unknown to support services, underscoring the significance of early identification and intervention. Following screening, Upstream Cymru's specialist support has yielded positive outcomes, with 91% of high-risk young people successfully supported to remain at home safely, 84% of families achieving personal support goals, and 51% of young people expressing greater optimism about their future.

Furthermore, education plays a pivotal role in preventing homelessness and enhancing outcomes for LGBTQ+ youth. School-based initiatives provide vital information on personal safety, healthy relationships, and available support networks, empowering LGBTQ+ youth to assert their rights and seek assistance when needed.

By promoting social and emotional learning, resilience, and positive coping mechanisms, education equips LGBTQ+ youth with the skills required to navigate challenges and reduce vulnerability to homelessness and exploitation.

Collaborative efforts between organisations like Llamau and Dyfed Powys Police Service are

**By addressing root causes such as familial rejection, discrimination, and lack of support networks, and implementing early intervention programmes like Upstream Cymru, we can mitigate the risk factors contributing to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and educational disengagement**

**44% of PoC LGBTQ+ youth have experienced homelessness or housing instability, surpassing rates among White (27%), Black (26%), and multiracial (36%) LGBTQ+ youth.**

**Transgender and non-binary youth, including 38% of transgender girls/women, 39% of transgender boys/men, and 35% of non-binary youth, report higher rates of homelessness compared to cisgender LGBQ+ youth (23%).**

**16% of LGBTQ+ youth ran away from home, with 55% citing mistreatment or fear of mistreatment due to their LGBTQ+ identity. Additionally, 14% were kicked out or abandoned, with 40% attributing it to their LGBTQ+ identity.**

indispensable in addressing the pressing issue of missing children, particularly care-experienced youth who are disproportionately affected. Adopting a multi-agency approach, these initiatives aim to identify underlying reasons for homelessness and missing incidents and provide targeted support and safeguarding measures to prevent recurrence.

Carmarthen consistently reported the highest number of referrals to Llamau and Dyfed Powys Police Service, amounting to 39 cases in 2023. Of these cases, 18 were recorded as male, 21 as female; 1 transgender was recorded in Ceredigion. Reasons for going missing included wanting to be with friends/peer pressure (24%), school-related issues (12%), arguments at home (11%), and the need for personal time (10%). Pembroke consistently had the highest number of cases involving arguments at home, while Powys had the highest number of cases related to wanting time with friends/peer pressure, and Carmarthen had the highest number of cases linked to school-related issues.

Insights from Llamau's debriefing services are invaluable for understanding the complexities of missing children cases and tailoring interventions accordingly. 25% of debrief referrals indicate signs of possible child sexual exploitation, underscoring the need for targeted support and safeguarding measures. Llamau's interventions aim to prevent repeated instances of going missing and reduce the risk of future homelessness by addressing underlying factors such as family breakdown or substance misuse.

Despite the critical work of Llamau's Missing Children Service, demand surpasses available resources. Increased funding is crucial to expanding and sustaining these interventions, safeguarding the rights and well-being of all children and young people in Wales. LGBTQ+ youth homelessness adds another layer of complexity to this picture. LGBTQ+ youth are disproportionately affected by homelessness due to family rejection, discrimination, and a lack of support networks. Llamau's services must cater to the specific needs of LGBTQ+ youth, providing safe spaces and tailored support to prevent homelessness and exploitation.

In conclusion, the intersecting challenges of LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and social vulnerability in Wales necessitate comprehensive and targeted interventions. By addressing root causes such as familial rejection, discrimination, and lack of support networks, and implementing early intervention programmes like Upstream Cymru, we can mitigate the risk factors contributing to LGBTQ+ youth homelessness and educational disengagement. Moreover, education plays a pivotal role in empowering LGBTQ+ youth with the knowledge and resources to navigate challenges and assert their rights. Collaborative efforts between organisations, policymakers, and communities are essential in safeguarding the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ youth and ensuring equitable access to housing, education, and support services. Through concerted action and advocacy, we can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for LGBTQ+ youth in Wales and beyond. ➤

**Rania Vamvaka** is Policy & Research Lead and LGBTQ+ Network Lead at Llamau

# *The Reciprocal Well-being Model: A New Way Forward for Wales*

**Iwan Brioc** *explains why his Reciprocal Well-being Model goes beyond traditional frameworks, asking us to rethink our values, systems and perceptions*

Wales is on the brink of a transformative revolution in how we think about well-being, thanks to the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (WFG Act). But turning this vision into reality is no easy task. As we stand at this crucial moment, we need a holistic and systemic approach that integrates not just individual well-being, but the well-being of communities and the environment. The Reciprocal Well-being Model, which I developed, offers such an approach, providing a comprehensive framework to tackle the complex issues we face today.

In creating this model, my aim was to go beyond traditional well-being frameworks that often focus solely on personal health or economic prosperity. The Reciprocal Well-being Model challenges us to rethink our values, our systems, and even how we perceive ourselves and our place in the world. It's a model rooted in reciprocity, meaning that true well-being is achieved only when there is a balance of giving and receiving between individuals, society, and the natural world.

## Rethinking Well-being: A Systems Approach

At the core of the Reciprocal Well-being Model is the idea that well-being is not a linear journey, but a cyclical process. Traditional models like Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggest that we must achieve one level of well-being before moving on to the next. In contrast, my model sees well-being as a dynamic system in which various domains — such as the environment, culture, society, and the individual — interact with one another.

This is not a new idea. Indigenous cultures have long understood the interdependence of humans and nature. But modern society has largely forgotten this lesson, instead placing human beings at the centre of everything. We've become a consumer-driven society, valuing individuals based on their economic contribution rather than their intrinsic worth. This, in turn, has led to the environmental degradation, social isolation, and mental health crises that we face today.

In developing the Reciprocal Well-being Model, I sought to bring this understanding back to the forefront. I wanted to create a framework that recognises the importance of the environment not just as a resource, but as something we must nurture and love if we are to thrive. In this model, I use the term "re-enchantment" to describe this process of falling back in love with the natural world, with each other, and with life itself.

**In creating this model, my aim was to go beyond traditional well-being frameworks that often focus solely on personal health or economic prosperity**

## The Radical Shift Wales Needs

The Well-being of Future Generations Act gives Wales a unique opportunity to lead the world in creating a more sustainable and just society. But to fully realise the potential of the Act, we must go beyond surface-level changes and embrace a radical shift in consciousness. This is where the Reciprocal Well-being Model can play a crucial role.

For too long, we've been operating under what I call the "illusion of society" — the idea that our value comes from our ability to consume and produce in a market-driven economy. This illusion has permeated every aspect of our lives, leading to a society that prioritises economic growth over human and ecological well-being. But this model is not sustainable, and it's time for a change.

The Reciprocal Well-being Model offers an alternative. It suggests that well-being is not something that can be achieved in isolation. Rather, it is a collective endeavour that requires all of us — individuals,

**At its heart, the Reciprocal Well-being Model is about love — love for ourselves, for each other, and for the planet. It's about recognising that we are all part of the same system and that the health of one part affects the health of the whole**


Credit: Iwan Brioc

communities, governments, and businesses — to work together. It calls for a shift away from individualism and towards a recognition of our interconnectedness. Only by fostering reciprocal relationships between ourselves, our communities, and the environment can we hope to achieve true well-being.

## A Practical Framework for Policy

One of the strengths of the Reciprocal Well-being Model is that it provides a practical framework for implementing the Well-being of Future Generations Act. The Act outlines seven goals for Wales: a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a resilient Wales, a globally responsible Wales, cohesive communities, a prosperous Wales, and a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language.

Each of these goals aligns perfectly with the seven domains of the Reciprocal Well-being Model: the environment, culture, infrastructure, society, the outer self, the inner self, and the concept of "no self." For example, the goal of a healthier Wales is supported by the model's emphasis on both personal and communal well-being, while the goal of a resilient Wales is reflected in the model's focus on environmental sustainability.

By applying the model's framework, policymakers can create strategies that address these goals holistically rather than in isolation. For instance, instead of simply focusing on economic growth as a means to achieve prosperity, the Reciprocal Well-being Model suggests that true prosperity comes from a balance of social, environmental, and economic well-being. This approach ensures that the health of both people and the planet are treated as interconnected priorities, essential for a prosperous and resilient Wales.

## The Role of Context-Oriented Arts

A key component of the Reciprocal Well-being Model is the role of Context-Oriented Arts (CoArts) in driving social change. I believe that art has a unique ability to shift consciousness and foster deeper connections between people. CoArts uses creative activities to engage communities in a reflective process that encourages both individual and collective transformation.

The creation of a Context-Oriented Arts Network (COAN) could be instrumental in implementing the Reciprocal Well-being Model. By using the arts as a catalyst for dialogue and reflection, we can help people re-engage with their communities and the environment. CoArts activities can serve as a platform for exploring new ways of thinking about well-being and for developing the skills and mindset needed to bring about the radical shift that the model advocates.

## Comparative Assessment: The Reciprocal Well-being Model vs Other Well-being Models

To fully appreciate the strengths of the Reciprocal Well-being Model, it's helpful to compare it with other established well-being models. Each model has its own merits, but the Reciprocal Well-being Model stands out for its holistic, systemic approach.

## Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

One of the most well-known well-being frameworks, Maslow's hierarchy outlines a linear progression from basic physiological needs to self-actualisation. While Maslow's model is valuable for understanding individual psychological growth, it falls short in addressing broader societal and environmental factors. In contrast, the Reciprocal Well-being Model integrates personal, social, and ecological domains, recognising that individual well-being is intertwined with the health of society and the environment.

Maslow's model also tends to emphasise a top-down approach to well-being, where certain needs must be met before others. My model, however, is cyclical and non-linear, allowing for a dynamic flow between domains. This flexibility is particularly important in a rapidly changing world where environmental and social conditions are constantly shifting.

## OECD Better Life Index

The OECD Better Life Index measures well-being across multiple areas such as income, health, education, and work-life balance. It's a useful tool for comparing well-being across nations, but it lacks the depth of the Reciprocal Well-being Model, which incorporates not only these measurable outcomes but also the relationships between them.

For example, the OECD index might highlight disparities in income or education, but it doesn't

address how these disparities affect social cohesion or mental health. The Reciprocal Well-being Model goes further by examining how these factors interact within a system. If income inequality leads to a breakdown in social relationships, this will affect both individual and community well-being. By focusing on the flow of well-being between domains, my model provides a more comprehensive understanding of the root causes of well-being or ill-being.

## PERMA Model of Well-being

The PERMA model, developed by psychologist Martin Seligman, focuses on five key aspects of well-being: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Achievement. While the PERMA model offers a strong psychological perspective on well-being, it is primarily focused on individual experiences and does not fully consider the role of the environment or societal structures in shaping well-being.

The Reciprocal Well-being Model expands on PERMA by incorporating societal and environmental factors into the equation. Positive emotions and relationships, for example, are essential components of well-being, but they are influenced by external factors such as social inequality or environmental degradation. By integrating these wider contexts, my model offers a more nuanced and interconnected view of well-being.

## Doughnut Economics

Kate Raworth's Doughnut Economics model is perhaps the closest parallel to the Reciprocal Well-being Model. Like my model, Doughnut Economics recognises the importance of balancing human needs with planetary boundaries. It provides a framework for ensuring that everyone has access to life's essentials — such as food, water, and shelter — while respecting the limits of the Earth's ecosystems.

Where the Reciprocal Well-being Model differs is in its emphasis on personal and community well-being alongside ecological sustainability. Doughnut Economics is primarily concerned with macroeconomic policies, while my model focuses more on the micro-level interactions between individuals, society, and the environment. Both models advocate for a systems-based approach, but the Reciprocal Well-being Model adds a layer of psychological and social well-being that is not as prominent in Doughnut Economics.

## Why Wales Needs the Reciprocal Well-being Model

Wales has a long history of resilience and innovation. We have always been a nation that values community, culture, and the land. The Well-being of Future Generations Act reflects these values, but legislation alone is not enough. We need a framework that helps us put these values into practice in a way that is sustainable and inclusive.

The Reciprocal Well-being Model is that framework. It provides a roadmap for achieving the goals of the Act by recognising the interdependence of all aspects of well-being. It encourages us to move beyond narrow definitions of success and to embrace a more holistic view of what it means to live a good life.

At its heart, the Reciprocal Well-being Model is about love — love for ourselves, for each other, and for the planet. It's about recognising that we are all part of the same system and that the health of one part affects the health of the whole. By nurturing these relationships, we can create a future that is not just sustainable, but thriving.

## Conclusion

Wales has a unique opportunity to lead the way in creating a more just, sustainable, and thriving society. The Well-being of Future Generations Act sets out a bold vision for our future, but to achieve it, we need more than just policies and programmes. We need a fundamental shift in how we think about well-being, one that recognises the interconnectedness of individuals, communities, and the environment.

The Reciprocal Well-being Model offers a way forward. By embracing this model, Wales can not only meet the goals of the Well-being of Future Generations Act but go beyond them, creating a society that values reciprocity, connection, and love. It's time for us to wake up and fall in love with the world again — and in doing so, create a better future for ourselves and future generations.

**Iwan Brioc** is the Artistic Director of Theatr Cynefin and is a qualified mindfulness teacher

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WALES&WEST UTILITIES

# Perthyn a Hiraeth ym Mhontypridd

Cattle, Cefn Eglwysilan. Credit: Ken Moon

**Ken Moon** *looks at the importance of having free access to the spaces where we live, play and work*

Many of us have enjoyed accessing different spaces around our town over the years.

Spaces that provide us with a strong sense of *Perthyn*, of feeling related to and belonging with these places. People make spaces, places, and in the act of doing so name them. In their turn, these places may also leave us with a strong sense of *Hiraeth*, a longing for spaces that hold a special place in our hearts, long after we have left them, or they us.

For those who have grown up ym Mhontypridd, memories of accessing land around our communities go back several generations. Childhood memories of exploring, Winberry picking, den building, fire lighting, camping, and swimming surrounded by nature creating a strong sense of connection, of Perthyn, to these special places.

For those of us who have moved here in later life these memories have been formed more recently. Visiting places where we go to get away from our everyday cares, to walk, run, cycle, exercise dogs, or, inexplicably, leave pants in the bushes for litter pickers to find. Places we can go to be with nature in our own myriad ways. Places that we return to time and again, feeling welcomed, nurtured, loved.

Such places may become sacred to us, deep bonds formed through the ritual of repetition, quiet places where we can commune with something greater than ourselves. Places becoming imbued with deeper meaning. Places where we may have scattered the ashes of our loved ones; places of remembering providing a connection to our ancestors.

We can become so used to being able to freely access spaces, of thinking of them as public places where we belong, that it rarely occurs to us that these spaces are places that belong to others. It can come as an unpleasant surprise when we find ourselves made to feel unwelcome or excluded from such places.

Foxgloves sunset Cefn Eglwysilan


Keep Out, Y Graig

**We can become so used to being able to freely access spaces, of thinking of them as public places where we belong, that it rarely occurs to us that these spaces are places that belong to others**

What becomes of our sense of Perthyn, when all we have left is our Hiraeth?

Those who grew up ym Mhontypridd can fondly remember the unwritten laws and customary rights of access between those who own these places, and those who access them for a variety of purposes. Customs of access etched deep into the relationship between those who have been farming here for generations, and those who settled later.

*"I really had no idea how lucky I was growing up in the area when the farmers and landowners had a deep connection to the land and recognised it was OK to share. There was an unwritten understanding, 'you don't interfere with my farming, and you can wander where you like'"*, recollects Robert Peterson, from *Save Craig Yr Hesg*.

It is often not until such places are advertised as being for sale, change hands, or become fenced off that our feelings of *Berthyn a Hiraeth* become more strongly felt. And when we see places, where we were once welcome, become adorned with 'keep out' and 'no trespassing' signs, we find ourselves 'displaced'.

Yn Gymraeg the names given to places are themselves imbued with meaning, often relating to the way in which such places have been accessed and used by *y Cymru* who belong to them. If we take the time to listen, we can learn a great deal about the story of a place from the names they have been called since people have known them.

Y Graig is a space that was once so well known as a place of rocks, and of quarrying them, that this is what the place is still known as today. In an earlier time, other people may have known this bryn by another name, but 'the Graig' is the name by which it is known by most people living ym Mhontypridd today.

As I write, I can look southeast towards Caerdydd from my desk window in Pwllgwaun, a damp pool of a place, past the shoulder of Maesycoed, a once wooded field place, towards Y Graig, the rocky place. And once in a while, Y Graig will call to me, cast its spell of Perthyn upon me, and cause me to leave my desk to fill a deep Hiraeth.

I leave my front door and walk through the lanes of my children's own formative years, briefly joining the flow of the Afon Rhondda as it runs past Y Clwb Rygbi. Crossing Sardis carpark, I traverse the culverted and buried Nant Gelliwion stream, and on its long-buried bank take the cut through to follow the route of the old Barry Railway.

**Despite the power of ownership to exclude us, Perthyn a Hiraeth remain powerful forces that connect people to their landscape by their very interactions with the places that matter to them**

This route carries me past the site of Graig railway station, demolished to be replaced by the now itself obsolete telephone exchange. I cross the raised walkway above the carpark of Ysbyty Dewi Sant and where the line of the old railway tunnels beneath Y Graig I join the steepness of High Street before turning into Graig Street, beyond which lies Y Graig.

At the end of Graig Street, a steep footpath climb brings me to the Pontypridd Circular where it passes into the open space of Y Graig. Like many *mynydds* of the Cymoedd Cymru, Y Graig is a landscape of once open grassland slowly becoming scrub woodland, a *ffridd* of a place where residents are accustomed to roam at will in place of cattle.

Here in recent years observant residents have reported that their accustomed right to roam has become diminished. Small plots of land changing hands have borne testimony to new signs warning the unwary to 'keep out – private property'. As much as people feel that they belong to Y Graig, Y Graig itself also belongs to other people; a tapestry of ecology, reflecting an underlying tapestry of ownership.

From this elevated position above the town, my eyes are free to fly across the valleys to the surrounding hills and mynydds. Looking South from Y Graig, my vision is free to soar to the whaleback hill that became a mountain. Y Garth rises from the sea of surrounding urbanity that is Dinas Caerdydd, and the commuter villages of Tonteg, Church Village and Llantwit Fadre, like a humpback whale breaching the open ocean.

Y Garth, the enclosure yn Gymraeg, is ironically the nearest area of open access land for the people of Caerdydd to escape to. A place that was so full of meaning for the ancient peoples of this landscape that they built five bronze age burial mounds, three of which can still easily be seen, strung out along its ridge running from east to west.

During the Covid-19 pandemic many of us used our hour of daily exercise to lose our sense of time exploring

Landraw Farm Fields

the landscape around us. And many also found the time, inclination, and resources to fulfil a long-held dream to become owners of land, using their new rights of ownership to exclude others.

But long before the pandemic, the people who lived in this area were finding that their ancient rights of access to land were being challenged by new landowners.

When William the Conqueror led his Barons on a royal 'pilgrimage' to St Davids in 1081, much of lowland Glamorgan came under the sway of the Norman Marcher lords, who quickly set about acquiring the rich farmland, and the right to rule over the population of the 'kingdom of Glamorgan', under their own Marcher laws.

Over the following decade, the lands south of Y Graig to Y Garth became a fiercely contested border. One of the principal tools by which the Marcher Lords excluded the indigenous Cymry from their own lands was through the imposition of 'forest law'. From the Latin 'foris', these laws operated outside of common law barring the common folk from practising their traditional grazing or foraging rights from lands held in common.

Historically then, unlike woodlands, forests were places of exclusion.

Today, nestled on the northern banks of Nant y Fforest, above the Treforest Campus of the University of South Wales (on which sits Ty Fforest or Forest House), lies Fferm Forest Uchaf. Following the Pontypridd Circular Walk from the open landscape of Y Graig towards Fforest Uchaf farm takes you part of the way along the route of an ancient trackway which once carried farm traffic between Y Graig and Y Fferm Forest Uchaf.

Where this trackway crosses the boundary to the farm today there is a style, from which a well-marked footpath takes you through pleasant rolling fields of mixed grazing, past a large and inviting pond, and along this ancient trackway through the yard of Fferm Forest Uchaf, and then beyond to join the course of the Nant-y-Fforest.

Despite the idyllic surroundings of Fferm Forest Uchaf, residents have long reported being made to feel deeply unwelcome for simply going about their ancient right to walk along this old trackway. This itself is a form of exclusion. The more unwelcome people feel in walking these old paths, the less likely they are to walk them, and the less people walk them, the easier it becomes for landowners to legally remove that right.

Mynydd Y Glyn

Trackway, Mynydd Y Glyn

Access has been restricted in recent years to the land holdings immediately above Y Graig, with signage appearing on fences warning walkers that places where they had once roamed, are privately owned with 'no public right of way'.

The open accessible nature of Y Graig and Y Garth are vitally important places that are very valuable to people who live in the area. So much so that when a large tract of Y Graig appeared on the open market during lockdown. The community attempted to purchase and protect their access to it but had their offer refused.

In the opposite direction northwest of Y Graig looking out across Y Cymoedd Gelliwion towards Maesycoed, lies the ruin of Llandraw Farm, Mynydd Y Glyn rising sublimely in the distance.

Yn Gymraeg the word Llan demotes an enclosed settlement of the early Celtic Church, usually followed by the name of its founding saint. In this case, however, 'draw' translates into 'yonder', implying that this may have been the farm of the nearby religious communities of Llanwonno or Llantrisant.

Cattle, Cefn Eglwysilan

Prior to the pandemic, Llandraw Farm was another place to which I often found myself drawn. Myself and others found the ruined farmhouse, and the fields surrounding it, to be imbued with a deep sense of Berthyn a Hiraeth. A place of deep spiritual meaning to those who once had the privilege of spending time there and are no longer able to.

Bereft of their spiritual connection to this place, those affected spoke of how being excluded had a deep impact on their mental health, at a time when they really needed to connect to the land.

Above Llandrw Farm lies Mynydd Gelliwion, an area of open access forestry managed by Natural Resources Wales. This monoculture woodland climbs towards a large area of open access hillside, and the summit of Mynydd Y Glyn. At 362 feet above sea level, this is a wonderful area of open access land to walk or ride to, a great place to sit and enjoy uninterrupted views across the surrounding hills towards Mor Hafren, the Severn Sea.

Here, local renewable energy firm Pennant Waters, *"a local company based at Hirwaun and operating nationally"* and *"Wales' largest home-grown renewable energy company"* has submitted plans for *"up to seven wind turbines with a blade height of up to 155m"* which could generate *"up to 30MW of electricity"*.

Whilst they generate much needed renewable energy, the imposition of such schemes on our local landscapes is another means by which people are feeling excluded from their own landscape, their sense of Perthyn being gradually eroded.

Returning our focus to Y Graig and from there looking directly north out over the Afon Rhondda, we can see the community of Graigwen, 'white rock'. The rock that may have given the community its name is now known locally as Eagle Rock, for the way it overhangs the 'hollow' in which sits the community of Pantygraigwen.

Here, behind the houses on Aelybryn, the eyebrow of the hill road, lies another parcel of land that changed hands during lockdown. Again, residents wanted to protect this land, discussed a community purchase and pooled their resources to purchase the land for community use, but were outbid at auction.

Several years previously, having seen the woods above Graigwen pass through the hands of one developer after another, a local resident stepped in to secure the woodlands, allowing the local community the time they needed to come together and raise the necessary funds to purchase the woods.

Within site of Graigwen Woods another recent land purchase means residents no longer feel free to roam where they once did. Beyond these fields runs the Pilgrimage Way to Penrhys known locally as the Darren Ddu, 'black edge', road. Crossing this ancient way brings us to the fields above Craig-Yr-Hesg, the rock of sedges.

Here the community of Glyn Coch, the 'red valley', has fought a long running campaign to save their place of belonging from an international quarrying concern. But the fences have gone up excluding generations of residents from their precious green haven; their exclusion reinforced by bailiffs legally empowered to act in compliance with the laws of property ownership.

Returning to centre ourselves one last time upon Y Graig, we can look east across the Afon Taf, beyond Pontypridd 'common' (a common that is not a common) and raising our eyes upwards above Pontypridd golf club we can see the summit of Cefn Eglwysilan, the ridge of the church enclosure. From this, the highest mynydd in the area, a walk up the trig point rewards those who climb its summit with uninterrupted views in all directions.

But here again, this sense of unspoilt isolation is threatened by another renewable energy firm, Bute Energy, who are pushing hard to develop the Twyn Hywel Energy Park. This will see the construction of 14 200-metre wind turbines, on much of the open access land surrounding the village, and former stronghold of Ifor Bach, Synghenydd.

Below the Eglwysilan road renewable energy firm Renantis has recently started a public consultation for their "emerging plans for a new solar farm", Glyntaff Solar around Byn Tail, 'dunghill', Farm. Between them, these two schemes will radically transform the landscape on the northeastern bank of the Afon Taf.

And here we come full circle, from Y Garth to the south, Mynydd Y Glyn to the northeast, Craig Yr Hesg to the northwest, and Cefn Eglwysilan to the west. In each direction our eyes come to rest on areas of belonging from which the people of Pontypridd are finding that their ancient rights of access are being taken from them once again.

This is one town, in one valley, bearing witness to a pattern repeated across Cymru.

Despite the power of ownership to exclude us, Perthyn a Hiraeth remain powerful forces that connect people to their landscape by their very interactions with the places that matter to them. Whilst ownership confers the power to exclude, Perthyn a Hiraeth bestow powers of inclusion upon us. These landscapes call out to us, invite us to appreciate them, welcome those of us who would care for and look after them.

As we hear the call, the voice of this landscape is heard by others, too. And so, as communities of Perthyn, we must find ways to work together, to find a new balance between the needs and desires of those who own, or seek to own land here, and those who would work to prevent the exploitation of our land, and our exclusion from it.

Our Hiraeth can be felt most keenly precisely because we have been excluded from the places that matter to us, the places where we feel our sense of Perthyn most strongly.

It is people who make the spaces in our landscape places, who connect with them, access them, use them, bestow names upon them. And it is people who have created these landscapes over hundreds of generations, who have lived within the land creating rich tapestries of biodiversity through farming and forestry. But most Cymry living *yn Ngymru* today are struggling to live sustainably in the landscapes of our ancestors.

How can our communities be true to their *Gwlad*, and live sustainably within our landscapes, if we are unable to access, or have little control over our own *Tir?* In the absence of community access to land, then one of the only ways communities will get to decide how the land around where they live can be managed sustainably will be by becoming the owners of the lands that surround them.

It is the stories of Perthyn a Hiraeth, of the communities fighting against inappropriate developments on their doorsteps, of ownership and exclusion, of failed attempts to secure access and ownership, and of the inspirational community purchase of Graigwen Woods, which have inspired the setting up of a new community organisation, Tir Pontypridd.

Tir Pontypridd is setting out to purchase land for community use. Learning from those ancestors who once saved a small proportion of their weekly wages to build the community infrastructure so desperately needed for their wellbeing in the industrial valleys, Tir Pontypridd is inviting their local community to join in membership, paying a little each month to buy land today for future generations tomorrow.

**Ken Moon** is Chair of Tir Pontypridd and a Sustainable Futures Coordinator at the office of Heledd Fychan MS

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# Transforming Wales's relationship with food

Credit: Beth Jnr, Unsplash

*As a new food education charity for Wales Cegin y Bobl launches, founding Trustee* **Carwyn Graves** *examines how we can bring about a healthier food environment in Wales*

Wales has a food problem. This is well-documented and spans the whole gamut: from a skyrocketing diet-related disease bill at the NHS, nature in freefall, farming loss-making at best and crippling food insecurity that affects 1 in 5 of children in Britain. Thankfully, a huge array of nimble and ambitious civil society initiatives are now springing up to turn the tanker around, from securing land for *new* farming entrants in Powys to putting Welsh veg straight onto school plates. And we think that in Carmarthenshire, there is to be found another part of the jigsaw that may just transform the nation's relationship with food.

## Cooking – with chefs

Cook24 is a groundbreaking project developed by Coleg Sir Gâr with Simon Wright, the food critic and restaurateur based in Carmarthenshire, who in his own words has spent over 15 years trying to get government to take food – that basic building block of our lives – seriously. The innovation in Cook24 (which has been backed by Carmarthenshire County Council through UK Government funding) was to take the skills and passion that already exist within the best of our independent hospitality sector, and use those, directly, to teach children and adults from all parts of the community to cook fresh, affordable, local and delicious food from scratch. Now in its third year of delivery in community centres, schools and foodbanks across the county, the evidence is accumulating that this is not just a nice idea – but one that can make a substantial difference, and potentially fill a major gap in skills and resilience that has opened up in our nation's fabric.

Courses are deliberately hands-on, face-to-face and intensive, for the most part spanning 6 or 8 weeks in half-day chunks. With groups of varying shapes, sizes and ages, the consistent approach taken is built

around empowering people in their relationship with food and particularly with cooking from fresh, raw ingredients – most importantly, of course, veg. For children, this means instilling autonomy and a sense of confidence in the kitchen – which in turn means giving 7-year-olds sharp knives and heat. But that 'common sense' approach seems to have made all the difference – especially for those children whose relationship with both food and education has been most challenging.

As a primary headteacher in an ex-mining village in Carmarthenshire recently told us: "We've seen a real shift in some of our kids who we find hard to engage with in the classroom… now they're absolutely thriving and developing their skills within the cookery lessons." Or there's 9-year-old Bill (name changed), who thinks his life course has been transformed through doing this – he now cooks for his parents at home and wants to go on to become a chef. Similarly with adults, such as the cohort of foodbank users in Llanelli, 90% of whom stopped using it after the course because of the pride they had in their new skills, the confidence they had to use those skills - and at the end of the day, that sense of achievement in taking some basic ingredients and transforming them into good food.

## Connection

The stories proliferate and continue to come every week as delivery will continue on the ground until December. But a common thread runs throughout: the connection created between inspiring cooks and children or adults on the one hand, and the connection between us as humans and real food on the other. That connection – whatever exactly it means (and a team at the University of Plymouth are now researching Cook24's impact) – seems to be the key ingredient in these stories of change.

In the case of foodbank users, that means building on and working with the approach developed by leaders in the sector, such as Myrtle House in Llanelli, where the wraparound, humane support makes the difference between someone emerging out of crisis or simply left hanging. The value they see in Cook24 is its ability to help lift people out of crisis. And in the case of children, given what we now know about the way life trajectories in health can be set to a significant extent by childhood dietary habits, the connection forged between children and real food at an early age now is likely to save the NHS

**But a common thread runs throughout: the connection created between inspiring cooks and children or adults on the one hand, and the connection between us as humans and real food on the other**

Credit: Polly Thomas

**In a period of ever-increasing global instability and significant links between food insecurity at home and the threat of far-right radicalisation, there is a strong case to be made that meaningfully and seriously working to bolster communities' resilience around food has the potential to have wider benefits than merely health-related ones**

billions of pounds in preventable disease down the line.

In one sense, this is intuitive knowledge – memorably put decades ago by chef Alice Waters: 'once people get connected to real food, they never change back.' That 'real food', at great cost to us all, has been seen as a middle-class, foodie preserve – probably familiar to many readers of this piece. But what if it was within our ken to democratise that access, too?

### Cegin y Bobl

As with all projects backed by the Levelling Up, Shared Prosperity Fund programme, Cook24 reaches a cliff-edge in December of this year, with the natural order of things being that the project closes shop; the relationships, approach and infrastructure that built the innovation all lost. Another successful project to sit alongside all the others that produced an interesting, but short-lived impact in one county.

Amongst those that have observed the work in action over the past year - be it participants, teachers, parents, educationalists, media or Senedd politicians, the most common question is "why can't this happen across Wales?" A very good question. And in a period of ever-increasing global instability and significant links between food insecurity at home and the threat of far-right radicalisation, there is a strong case to be made that meaningfully and seriously working to bolster communities' resilience around food has the potential to have wider benefits than merely health-related ones.

Credit: Polly Thomas

Credit: Polly Thomas

And so, rather than accept the normal course of things, a large group of us from across Wales have come together to form a new national charity to take on the work of Cook24 and roll it out across the nation – wherever it's needed. Cegin y Bobl: the people's kitchen. As founding trustee Simon Wright put it: "I think this is what we have been crying out for as a society. If we don't tackle these issues around food head on now, then when? This is about tapping into the passion and skills that already exist out there in every community to make a real difference in a way that Government simply can't."

At the intensive level of intervention Cook24 has developed, we now know it would cost around £1.8 million a year to deliver in all primary schools across Wales over the course of five years – before, of course, starting again as a new cohort of students start. Both cheap and expensive, depending on how you look at these things. But why be content with that? This autumn, dozens of primary school teachers across Carmarthenshire are taking week-long food leadership courses with Cook24, to enable them to embed the central place of food in the curriculum and school day; in other words, embedding the legacy so that this work can be done at scale.

This is serious work that has to be deliverable at scale, in different ways in different communities, nimbly and fast. It's the best of small-scale business working with the public and third sectors to do what neither could do alone. But to get there, we need the nation's help. We are in conversation with a number of major funders, whose help we will absolutely need to get this off the ground. And we have just launched a crowdfunder that has already secured over £25k of a £250,000 target needed to secure the foundations of the work for the future. If just a thousand people make a one-off gift of £250 – an alternative Christmas present perhaps? – we will have secured the future and can work with the nation to transform our relationship with food, for the better. ▸

**Carwyn Graves** is a founding trustee of Cegin y Bobl, which includes prominent chefs and food educators from across Wales. He has left his role as a lecturer at UWTSD Lampeter to work on this, which focuses on the area his work as an author of titles including Welsh Food Stories (best food book of 2022 BBC Food Programme) and Tir: The Story of the Welsh Landscape has focused on.

CEGIN Y BOBL
THE PEOPLE'S KITCHEN

# Giving Rural Communities a Stake: *Insight from across the Devolved Nations*

**Dr Sarah Nason** *and* **Dr Dani Hutcheon**
*unpick new research which calls for urgent community asset reform in Wales*


Credit: Polly Thomas

Having property interests in community assets (including ownership, lease or other forms of control) positively impacts communities in Wales. Our recently published research, *Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations*, examined community assets in their different policy and legal contexts across the UK's four nations. We focused on the transfer of public assets to rural communities, but much of the learning also relates to the transfer of private assets, and to transfers to urban communities.

Across the UK, the Rural Assets project aimed to understand the impacts of community asset acquisition processes on the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities. It achieved this by collecting data over a two-year period through interviews and knowledge exchange events with communities, public authorities, support organisations and policymakers. The research was co-funded by the Nuffield Foundation and British Academy as part of their *Understanding Communities* programme. This programme funded six projects, each exploring what makes communities stronger or weaker in the face of rapid socio-economic change. Other projects included *Nature-based Integration* (exploring how the innovative use of nature can facilitate social integration between diverse communities); and *The Role of Communities and Connections in Social Welfare Legal Advice* (examining how different communities, including a rural Welsh community, look for social welfare rights advice on matters such as debt, benefits and housing, and relationships between community connectedness, advice, problem resolution, and wellbeing).

## Community assets in Wales: where are we now?

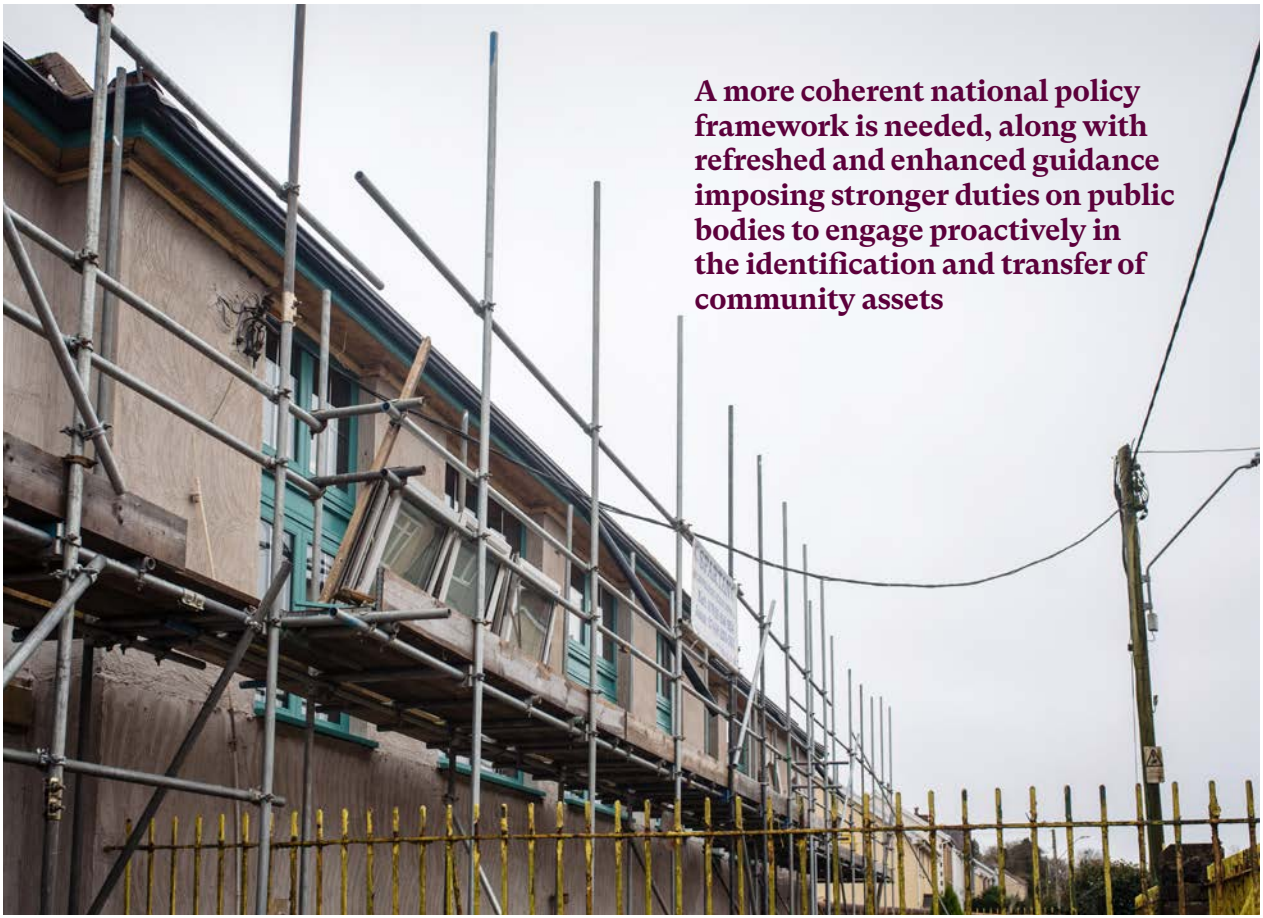
Our research found that across the UK, community acquisition of public assets is promoted at a policy and public authority level to strengthen local social and economic infrastructure and boost community sustainability, but that policy agendas in each of the UK nations have focused on disposing public assets for financial cost-saving in a context of ongoing austerity budget cuts. Specifically in Wales, we found that key drivers for rural communities to try and acquire assets were: to meet the needs of the community that were not being met by council services; for control and ownership of local socioeconomic development; and to protect the Welsh language locally. The key driver for public authorities in Wales to transfer assets to communities was for financial/cost related savings.

**There are also limited funding options for rural communities to purchase, operate, and specifically to maintain local assets, with a lack of coordination in the funding that is available**

Some of the factors that make it difficult for rural communities in Wales to acquire assets include: a lack of capacity in rural areas due to smaller population sizes, underdeveloped skills and knowledge, and limited numbers of volunteers. It can also be challenging to ensure that community asset projects are representative of the needs and wants of entire communities, not just those most active in community development.

On behalf of Welsh Government, Ystadau Cymru has published *Best Practice Guidance* on the transfer of land and other assets from the public sector to communities in Wales. However, what our research showed is that guidance needs 'significant strengthening'. A key problem is the continued lack of clear and coherent processes for community asset acquisition at a local authority level. Despite the guidance provided by Ystadau, there is varying practice amongst local government in Wales, resulting in what was described as a 'postcode lottery'. Local authority culture was also found to hinder processes. Some public bodies are simply unwilling to even consider transferring an asset, and some lack trust in the capability of rural communities to deliver services and facilities. The research showed that authority processes can also be complex, lengthy and bureaucratic. This was found to take its toll, with volunteers becoming exhausted and burnt out, and communities faced with stress and worry about the future sustainability of assets, especially where they have been taken on due to threat of closure, rather than genuine choice.

Most public bodies in Wales can transfer land and other assets to communities at less than market value where conditions relating to social, environmental and



**A more coherent national policy framework is needed, along with refreshed and enhanced guidance imposing stronger duties on public bodies to engage proactively in the identification and transfer of community assets**

Credit: Polly Thomas

economic wellbeing are met. Nonetheless, our study showed that tools for communities and local authorities to measure such outcomes were generally lacking. There are also limited funding options for rural communities to purchase, operate, and specifically to maintain local assets, with a lack of coordination in the funding that is available. On the other hand, barriers facing public authorities in Wales wanting to transfer their assets to communities include resource pressures and limited opportunities to train staff on processes.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. Our research showed that going through asset transfer processes can empower rural communities in Wales by bringing people together for a common purpose, reinforcing their shared heritage and identity, strengthening social bonds, catalysing co-production, and giving people a voice and platform to engage in community development. Furthermore, community spirit can be lifted, and wellbeing and resilience enhanced. Key to facilitating asset transfers to rural Welsh communities is having supportive and encouraging public bodies, including local authorities; support from local and national organisations, such as the Plunkett Foundation, Building Communities Trust, DTA Wales, Cwmpas, and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, who are seen as invaluable in guiding people through processes; and the skills and drive of rural communities, particularly being able to harness the capacity of professionals, either locally or through connected networks.

## What can we learn from elsewhere?

The voluntary transfer of assets, through ownership, lease, or other rights, from public bodies to communities, is common practice across the UK's four nations. However, in England and Scotland, communities have additional legal rights as against both public and private owners.

Northern Ireland does not yet have this kind of legislation, but its overarching policy framework is clearer, and, from our research, seems to have more effective political support than is currently the case in Wales.

Under the Localism Act 2011 in England, communities can list assets as being of community value, and when an owner decides to sell a listed asset, there is a set period during which the asset cannot be sold, allowing the community time to develop a bid to acquire it. Welsh Ministers have declined to bring the Localism Act 2011 into force in Wales, stating the need to develop more 'Wales-specific' rights and processes. In Scotland, land reform legislation gives communities rights to buy land and other assets where certain conditions are met, with other recent, though as yet rarely used legislation, giving communities the right even to force an unwilling owner to sell. There is also Community Empowerment legislation, which gives communities additional rights so that public bodies *must* agree to a community's reasonable request for the transfer of an asset, with clear routes to appeal if the public body refuses.

The lack of statutory rights for communities in Wales is well recognised, including recently in a 2022 report of the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee into *Community Assets*. In 2024, Welsh Government set up a Community Assets: Task & Finish Group to advise Ministers on the recommendations of the Senedd report, particularly those relating to support for communities, including financial support, and the legal framework for empowering communities in Wales. The Commission is due to complete its work in 2025.

## Where do we go from here?

With several consultations and inquiries completed, a Task and Finish Group set up, and numerous 'talking shops' still taking place, the big question is 'what next?'

There is consensus that reforms are needed in Wales, and that new primary legislation to empower communities should be on the agenda. Our research in England and Scotland shows, however, that legislation is not a panacea, and that even when legislative procedures are available, communities and public bodies alike often choose to proceed through informal processes. Similar to the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFGA), community empowerment legislation catalyses cultural change, but can lack teeth, and its implementation can be poorly resourced, negatively impacting accountability. WFGA itself, with its focus on cohesive communities, is viewed as a proactive lever supporting community asset acquisition, but problems around implementation remain.

Our research strongly emphasises the need for standardised, streamlined and consistent asset acquisition processes across all public bodies in Wales. A more coherent national policy framework is needed, along with refreshed and enhanced guidance imposing stronger duties on public bodies to engage proactively in the identification and transfer of community assets. Further resource support and training are required for local authorities to enable them to fully engage with and embed community asset acquisition into their everyday practice. Rural communities need additional tailored policy support, upskilling and capacity building within local community groups, and strategic capital funding specific to community asset acquisition.

One commonly repeated reason for the delay in taking action to empower communities in Wales is the need to carefully tailor proposals to the specific context of Wales. Our research, however, suggests that there is much that unites rural communities across the UK in terms of what drives, and what frustrates, the acquisition of assets. In conducting its work, the Community Assets: Task & Finish Group should fully explore what might be meant by the context of Wales, and how this can be harnessed as soon as possible to empower rather than disempower communities.►

**Dr Dani Hutcheon** is a Research Fellow at the Yunus Centre for Social Business and Health at Glasgow Caledonian University; **Dr Sarah Nason** is a Senior Lecturer in Law at Bangor University.

*The 2022 report of the Senedd Local Government and Housing Committee into Community Assets was informed at its outset by the IWA's Our Land: Communities and Land Use report.*

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# Protecting Welsh seabird islands

Manx Shearwater, Credit: Greg Morgan

*Habitats in Wales are vital for seabirds - protecting their vulnerable nesting colonies from predators through biosecurity is one way of ensuring they don't disappear*

Every spring our islands and cliffs come to life with the sounds and smells of hundreds of thousands of returning seabirds, with several of Wales' offshore islands being globally important for these iconic species. Indeed, Wales remains the most important country in the world for breeding Manx Shearwater, with over half of the global population nesting in underground burrows on our islands. The fourth largest gannetry in the world can be found on RSPB Grassholm island, with Wales also being home to the largest Arctic Tern colony in the UK, located on the lower lying Skerries, an islet off the coast of Anglesey.

Seabirds are a key indicator of the overall health of marine ecosystems. However, seabird populations globally are declining faster than any other bird group, and sadly, threats to these species are increasing. These include climate change impacts, entanglement in fishing


Seabirds under pressure. Credit: RSPB

Jinx at Senedd. Credit: Welsh Government

Jinx and Greg. Credit: Greg Morgan

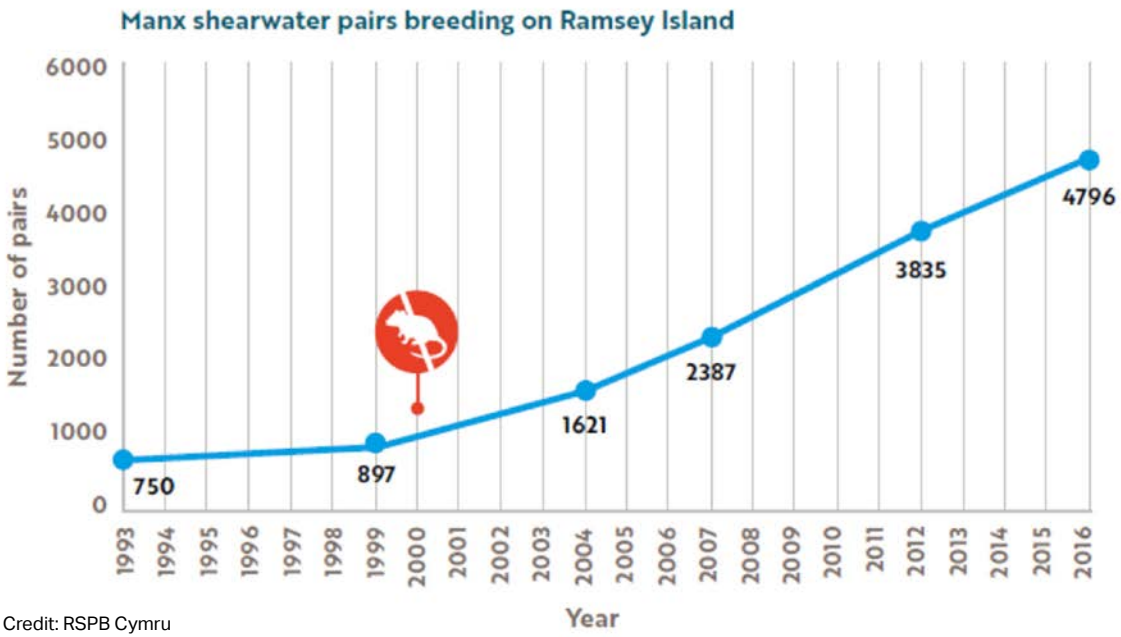
gear, disturbance, inappropriate developments, loss of habitat and predators.

In Wales, a recent review of breeding seabirds, undertaken by the RSPB on behalf of Natural Resources Wales, the British Trust for Ornithology, and the Welsh Ornithological Society, saw Gannets added to the Red List of Birds of Conservation Concern Wales (BoCCW) for the first time. In parallel, publication of a seabird update to the Birds of Conservation Concern UK report saw five new species of seabird, including Arctic Tern and Great Black-backed Gull, added to the UK Red List. We should be profoundly concerned about the ever expanding size of the Red List.

## The role of biosecurity in protecting seabirds

Biosecurity is the practice of protecting important wildlife and the places that support them from the threats posed by new diseases, invasive plants or animals that do not naturally occur there. Coordinated and robust biosecurity is an essential part of protecting Wales' seabirds, helping to improve the resilience of their populations in the face of escalating pressures. More than half of Wales' breeding seabirds are dependent on islands with an absence of rats because seabirds nest in or on the ground, or on cliffs that rats or other mammalian predators can access. However, the accidental introduction of predators to an island is easily done. If predators were to become established in these locations, the impact on these breeding populations would be devastating.

Just one pregnant female brown rat can wreak havoc on a seabird island, producing a colony of 300 rats in just over eight months. Seabirds have not evolved to defend themselves from these skilled hunters, and invasive predators can quickly decimate breeding colonies by eating eggs, chicks, and adult birds. For example, the population of Puffins on Ramsey Island in Pembrokeshire was decimated by rats in the 19th and 20th century. Eradication and conservation efforts by the RSPB have seen a great recovery of other species, such as the Manx Shearwater, whose population increased from a few hundred pairs in 2000 to over 6,000 pairs by 2022 after the eradication of rats. However, Puffins have yet to come back to the site. It is, therefore, vitally important to stop invasive non-native mammalian predators reaching Wales' seabird islands in the first place.




Credit: RSPB Cymru

The threats to these most important sites are ever present, as highlighted by incidents of shipwrecks on Skokholm earlier this year and off Skomer in December 2022. The Biosecurity for Wales team assisted the Wildlife Trust of South and West Wales in the emergency response that followed both events, to establish whether rats had made their way onto the seabird islands. Thankfully, in these instances they had not.

## Biosecurity for Wales

The Biosecurity for Wales team includes a lead and supporting Biosecurity Officer, trained surveillance volunteers, members of the Wales Biosecurity Forum, Jinx - a Conservation Detection Dog (CDD) and a handler. The use of a CDD is a new tool to protect seabird islands in Wales. Their use is growing in the UK, but Jinx is one of only a few that are trained specifically to detect rats to assist with biosecurity projects.

This experienced group manage, coordinate and support the delivery of effective biosecurity for all of Wales' most important seabird islands. The work encompasses a range of specialist activities which include surveillance and monitoring, responding to suspected or confirmed incursions of rats onto islands, raising awareness of biosecurity among stakeholders, boat operators and the public, supporting the production of Island Biosecurity Plans and ensuring they are being implemented effectively.

## A commitment is needed to ongoing biosecurity

Despite the obvious need for this protection to be in place, when the current funding for Biosecurity for Wales ends in March 2025, there is no provision to maintain the activities and outputs of the project beyond this date. As a result, coordinated Welsh island biosecurity is likely to end, putting critical seabird populations at risk and potentially resulting in the need for expensive eradications, as is currently the case on Puffin Island, Anglesey, where a large population of rats has established.

Work to eradicate rats from Puffin Island took place over the winter of 2023 and 2024, however, there were still signs of their presence towards the end of the eradication period. As a result, further effort is required to eradicate the remaining rats and ongoing monitoring will also be required to evaluate the effectiveness of the work. Current estimates of costs of the eradication, when volunteer time and the use of Biosecurity for Wales resources are factored in, are in excess of

£100,000. Island eradication programmes are typically considerably more expensive than this, for example, the £4.5million required to restore biosecurity on Rathlin Island (Northern Ireland) to protect seabirds. The lessons from Puffin Island and elsewhere show that investing in effective prevention is much more cost-effective than having to deal with an incursion, as eradications require large amounts of resources, both people and money.

We welcome the commitment by the Welsh Government to publish a Welsh Seabird Conservation Strategy. It is vital that the plan is brought forward at the earliest opportunity, with dedicated funding available for identified actions, which must include the provision of in-perpetuity biosecurity for Welsh seabird islands.

If we are to meet Wales' statutory biodiversity commitments and improve the resilience and secure the future of our globally important populations of seabirds, we must ensure that safe breeding sites are provided for these iconic species. We are at a critical time and urgency of action for seabirds is paramount. We will continue to be a voice for nature, advocating for legislation and policies that are both ambitious and robust and drive the range of actions needed to protect our vulnerable seabirds.

**Rowenna Haines** is Senior Marine Policy Officer for RSPB Cymru (Maternity Cover). Rowena champions the policies, plans and actions that our seabirds need to enable their populations to thrive - these include development of a Wales Seabird Strategy, protection and good management of marine protected areas for seabirds and their forage species, resourcing of biosecurity measures to safeguard breeding colonies and strategic, spatial planning to ensure that marine development is in harmony with nature.


Siop Havards Newport community share offer

# Releasing the Power of Community Action and Investment

**Iwan Thomas**, *Chief Executive of PLANED, details some of the challenges, frustrations and opportunities for Wales' third and community sectors, and those working in it*

Working within the third sector can be one of the most rewarding roles in a career for a broad variety of reasons, but it can also be one of the most challenging.

Alongside the freedom away from the bureaucracy and time delays often found in larger statutory organisations, there is sadly an increased cycle built around the competition for funding, which detracts from the golden thread of what the sector has at its core - people and communities.

Whilst all organisations who serve and support communities are facing challenges through the cost-of-living crisis, and the constant shadow of the continued legacy of Covid-19, it is the third sector which is likely most adversely affected.

Across Wales, staff within local authorities and other statutory bodies are afforded greater protection due to full-time contracts, and a flexibility of roles which enables managers to move staff to where funding is available.

Within the third sector, the lack of longer term funding is well documented, but I, and many other leaders across the sector, are increasingly frustrated and concerned at the genuine lack of appreciation by both UK and Welsh government officials especially, at the inability to retain valued skills and knowledge of great colleagues due to short term funded contracts.

Regular meetings with Welsh Government officials and Ministers consistently raise this point, and kind words of understanding are routinely given.

Yet, within a sector that is leading front line delivery and innovation within our communities, to often steer away unnecessary demands upon our statutory services, surely these should be equally supported and funded?

With a significant number of civil servants now leaving pre-Covid lavishly furnished offices empty to work from home, how many of these roles are actually needed?

Across communities where every pound of funding has to be applied and begged for, there is an increasing awareness that the current system in Wales is broken. Those people working in communities to empower and support people in need have no long term job security to enable a sustainable deployment of resilience, whilst many civil servants are enabled and often feel entitled to work at home and only engage via Teams online.

People and communities need people to be seen and engaged in person within their communities, and the growing movements we are seeing across Wales are calling for greater cohesion and support to recognise the innovation and impact that community organisations across Wales achieve.

Recently in north Wales, community organisations came together for two days to discuss the challenges, but more importantly, the potential opportunities and solutions that exist within communities across Wales - not in Cardiff Bay.

Via the likes of Cymunedoli and Community Movement Cymru, the realisation is that a shift in tone is needed in that Welsh Government in general needs to realise that the solutions to socio-economic well-being for Wales lie outside of the Cardiff bubble.

The greatest innovations in community resilience are generated and delivered in places within Wales as far away from Cathays Park and the Senedd as they can be.

It is here that key contributions to the overall

**Across communities where every pound of funding has to be applied and begged for, there is an increasing awareness that the current system in Wales is broken**

Team working at Pembrokeshire County Show


Two of our three micro-enterprise coordinators

**No two communities are the same, but by listening to, and respecting the people who live and work there, the wider third sector in Wales is enabling a genuine movement for change and greater respect**

solutions needed to deliver a prosperous Wales based on fairness, equity and aspiration, all currently exist and are being enabled and empowered within individual communities.

Yet, with these proven local and transferable examples in existence, whilst there are warm words from officials and ministers, it feels to many that we simply get a nice pat on the head, and are told to just carry on.

With a growing collaborative consensus amongst community organisations across Wales, we now want to see these solutions, which we freely present and promote, to inform policy and delivery on a national basis as part of the solution for a renewal of the Welsh social and economic landscape.

Government is there to serve the people and its communities, yet the relationship of late feels disempowering and a lack of willingness by government to co-produce with the third sector, if continued, will not support those people in communities who rely on these projects and organisations.

Talk of a national community strategy and other initiatives by Welsh Government as justification of their response does not yet feel genuine for some, and the engagement of more academics than practitioners is often a red flag moment.

Academics have long had a positive and worthwhile role in supporting the work of community organisations and the impacts for people in those communities in the past. However, there is a further worrying trend that within the increasingly financially challenged environment, many academics are seeing the medium term salvation of their departments and staff being delivered on the back of an exploitation of community organisation projects and solutions.

A recent FOI to Welsh Government illustrated that a Welsh university leading an Ireland-Wales tourism based project took over the equivalent of €1.6 million of public funding to retain staff within their hillside campus, whilst the two Welsh community organisations who had given all the information to support the initial bid and its delivery were then told they had to bid in competitively for a total of less than 10% collectively of the actual grant awarded. Yet, it was these community organisations who undertook all of the project delivery within communities based on their existing funded work, so apart from developing a website and funding trips for university staff across Wales and Ireland to witness community projects, what did €2.4 million actually deliver in terms of change and impact for communities here in Wales?

Research can be, and when appropriate and needed, invaluable, but again, community organisations found the recent award of £5 million to fund research led by Aberystwyth University via the LPIP programme a strange and worrying decision.

Community organisations across Wales have an abundance of data and qualitative evidence which they routinely promote and share to inform change. Do desk-based researchers embedded within the campus institutions really need £5 million to produce a report for Welsh Government just to present content and recommendations which are freely and routinely shared with them by the sector as current and practical solutions? Academic support which is community led and wanted is invaluable, but surely the bulk of this £5 million should have been directed to current delivery, and the solutions within communities that are already there? We don't need £5 million spent on yet more research, to tell us what we already know - this is the response from tens of community projects across Wales who struggle to secure £5,000 per annum, and would hugely benefit from a windfall for three years to inform actual demand and delivery.

PLANED, as the organisation I work with, is currently working with academics in institutions

Promotion event Llanelli

including Bangor University as well as locally the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, as we feel they understand the realities of community delivery and innovation from a practical and lived experience.

The increasing numbers of community share offers we see across west Wales as one example, is testament to the lived and practical actuals which continue to be delivered without national fanfare, but are recognised locally and regionally for significant positive impact they enable sustainably.

Indeed, the PLANED team have, over the last three years alone, worked with, and empowered communities to raise almost £1 million pounds in share offers to purchase a number of pubs, chapels and shops across west Wales to retain and develop these premises as genuine and sustainable community hubs and assets.

Yet, one academic with a national profile announced earlier this year that a community asset purchase and share offer which they'd been leading was akin to being the first of its type and set the example for the rest of Wales.

As was pointed out on their LinkedIn page as a response to this proclamation, elsewhere in Wales, organisations had been doing this for a number of years already, very successfully at that, but often without great fanfare as we simply do what we do, focusing on the sustainable outcomes with and for our communities, rather than content for regular column inches.

For us, it is about working in communities, co-producing and producing, and working with people who genuinely care about the well-being of their communities, and not those looking to further their own click bait and awards potential.

Communities are complex, exciting, challenging and innovative. No two communities are the same, but by listening to, and respecting the people who live and work there, the wider third sector in Wales is enabling a genuine movement for change and greater respect.

Welsh Government talks about the importance of communities, but has yet to demonstrate genuine empowerment to the organisations embedded within our communities to help them deliver longer term what we all want - a stronger and more resilient Wales where people can remain to live and work in the communities of their choice, with services and facilities that enhance their wider wellbeing.

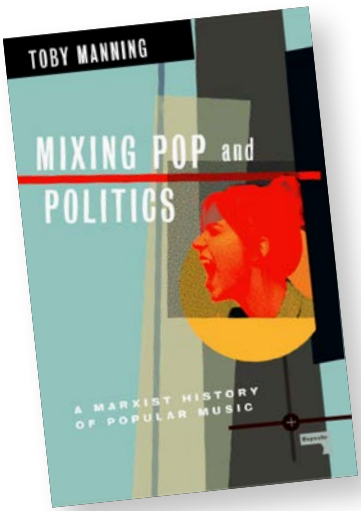
From community assets and share offers, to micro enterprises and community land trusts; from community fresh food vending and hundreds of other community projects already co-produced with the people who need them: the solutions and innovations that Welsh Government need are already here in communities across Wales, supported by long established community organisations who focus on delivery through co-production.

Appreciating the significant challenges across Welsh Government on a daily basis, the ask from third sector community organisations who daily support prevention, education and resilience for those who need it, is to please listen, engage, and help us to help you deliver policies which are developed by real people, and not solely by academics and officials far removed from the realities of community delivery and engagement.

People who work in our communities across third sector organisations do so because they are passionate, skilled and committed to making a genuine difference. Yet, without a change in narrative and action by Welsh Government on a longer term footing to this key sector, we risk losing a lifeline of innovation, continuity of expertise and compassion, and services through projects and initiatives which empower and sustain the basic fundamentals of the socio-economic well-being across the communities of Wales.

**Iwan Thomas** is Chief Executive of PLANED

# *Mixing Pop and Politics:* A Marxist History of Popular Music




**Toby Manning**
Repeater Books

*Review by Rhian E. Jones*

From the support of UK grime artists for Jeremy Corbyn in the run-up to the 2017 general election, to Charlie XCX's recent anointing of Kamala Harris as 'Brat', the intersection of popular music and politics is often unexpected and usually welcome – although the list of musicians objecting to the Donald Trump campaign's use of their songs is now long enough to merit its own Wikipedia page. Toby Manning's *Mixing Pop and Politics: A Marxist History of Popular Music* is a counter-intuitive but convincing look at the history of pop through the lens of political philosophy.

The book's title, taken from Billy Bragg's 1988 anthem 'Waiting for the Great Leap Forwards', is a useful place to start. Bragg's song, itself surveying the developments of previous decades from a gloomy left perspective in the midst of Thatcherism, is a throwback to the days of mass – if mundane – left-wing organising and unapologetically activist pop stars. Yet the line chosen for the book's title is one that undercuts the song's ebullience, when a question to the narrator on the point of 'mixing pop and politics' is answered – or rather evaded – with 'embarrassment and my usual excuses'.

There is, indeed, a certain tendency to treat cultural critiques of popular art as pretentious, unnecessary, or disingenuous. Even left-wing thinkers like Theodor Adorno have regarded 'mass culture' as frivolous and frothy, unworthy of serious analysis. More modern critics claim that pop should be appreciated for its very superficiality, with no deeper understanding worth attempting – not everything in music, we are told, has to have a 'message' or even a 'meaning'.

When 'political music' *is* taken seriously, its definition seems to be restricted to the undeniably and outspokenly political, like the links between 50s/60s folk and the peace and civil rights movements, or campaigns like Rock Against Racism and Red Wedge (ably chronicled in Daniel Rachel's 2016 *Walls Come Tumbling Down*). *Mixing Pop and Politics* goes beyond these limits, and Manning's writing is refreshingly free of either embarrassment or excuses in its engagement with the political potential of music for its producers, listeners and consumers.

Songs, like everything, are products of their time. As this book argues, they don't need to be explicitly or earnestly political

in order to reflect the conditions of their era and the changes and challenges that shaped it. Accordingly, Manning uses a musical chronology to tell a social and political history of the last 75 years in the US and UK, from postwar Fordism to 60s and 70s liberation and post-90s neoliberalism.

This political history is interleaved with the rise and development of popular music, its selling and consumption, as well as related trends in contemporary fashion, TV and cinema. As this timeline demonstrates, politics and pop culture can, at times, be impossible to separate, from the birth of both rock 'n' roll and the 'teenager' as marketing demographic in the early 1950s; through the expression of the 60s swing towards social and sexual revolution in folk, soul and psychedelia; and 70s disco, glam and punk as 'cultural class war'.

The politics of pop, as Manning also notes, can be reactionary as well as radical. In the 80s, the overtly progressive music of 2Tone, postpunk and early hip hop formed part of a broader left counter-culture under Thatcher and Reagan, while other music captured and celebrated – both seriously and satirically – the decade's conspicuous consumption and the chance to 'get rich quick'. As the Cold War ended and the 90s progressed, 'mixing pop and politics' became desperately untrendy, with the liberal triumphalism of Blairism reflected in the cultural sphere by the boorish hedonism of late Britpop and the Spice Girls' shallow liberal feminism. But on the margins of pop and politics, there were still edgy exceptions, from Rage Against the Machine to the UK's rave-inspired protests against the 1994 Criminal Justice Bill.

> Manning's writing is refreshingly free of either embarrassment or excuses in its engagement with the political potential of music for its producers, listeners and consumers

While some critics have lamented the lack of imagination and appeal of post-millennial music, Manning still finds plenty to comment on in the last few decades, whether for the worse – a return to gender essentialism among female stars and a more generally insecure, consumption-driven 'depressive hedonia' – or the better: the odd strand of celebratory nihilism, in response to the 2008 financial crash, of what Manning terms 'austerity dance', and the more direct 'rebirth of radical pop and politics' under the brief optimistic insurgency of Corbynism and Bernie Sanders.

Throughout this narrative, themes and conflicts emerge, not least the evolving responses of the state to music, whether official suspicion and surveillance, or more subtle attempts to sideline or suppress its more subversive aspects. It's here that pop can become accidentally or incidentally political, with the very visibility of women, working-class, black, Asian and gay musicians and fans helping to broaden the concept of who art and culture is made by and for. Within music itself, Manning is attentive to the interplay of racial and sexual politics as well as the too often neglected axis of class. As the music genres covered in *Mixing Pop and Politics* range beyond pop, so the Marxism of the book's subtitle is, thankfully, not limited to dogma and doctrines. Manning focuses more on eclectic left ideas of freedom, utopia and solidarity, and how these impulses recurrently find expression – and sometimes opposition – through music.

At over 500 pages and densely thicketed with references to both cultural theory and chart positions, the book is undeniably monumental, but the scope of what it covers means that it has to be. Its coverage is, however, largely restricted to the UK and US, and it would be interesting to see similar projects that enlarge this scope. Its definition of 'popular music' as music that charted also means that more – frequently politicised – underground scenes and DIY subcultures are relegated to the background. Nonetheless, this is an ambitious and fascinating book, written with, alongside humour and insight, an obvious love of music – something missing surprisingly often from cultural analysis of this kind.

**Rhian E. Jones** is a writer, critic and broadcaster

# Odyssey '84

**Kaja Brown** *reviews Tim Price's latest theatrical endeavour, Odyssey '84*

*Photos: Mark Douet*

Tim Price's latest theatrical endeavour, *Odyssey '84*, is a dynamic production that explores the 1984 Miners strikes through the lens of a Welsh miner, John, and his wife, Penny. As soon as the curtains are lifted, we are dropped into the action with John surrounded by armed men, ordered under the threat of torture to tell his story. After some initial panic and confusion, John states that it all started with a letter. The scene changes as we are thrown into the past, where John is at home with his wife, squabbling over a letter he received about whether the Miners are going on strike. Initially, Penny is against John striking as she is worried about their finances and supporting their family. John is cagey about what he really wants, but when he finds his friends and fellow union members picketing in front of the mine, he agrees to join them.

This is the beginning of John's Homeric Odyssey which will take him halfway across the world in his efforts to support the Miners back home. Meanwhile, Penny deals with her own struggles back in Wales: handling a surprise pregnancy, and volunteering at the pop-up food bank in their local community centre.

Odyssey '84 is visually stunning, with special effects and light manipulation adding to the atmosphere of each scene. The set featured the same brutalist slate-grey concrete background throughout the performance, however, it was used in such a dynamic way that it didn't subtract

Odyssey '84 shows how the closures of the coalfields weren't just about losing jobs - they were about the economic and emotional suffering of communities, and the British Government controlling working class people

from the performance. The wall moved at regular intervals, giving the actors more or less space on the stage, and providing an air of either claustrophobia or isolation. The soundtrack was equally evocative, with synth and electro hits from the 80's that married well with the choreography on stage.

Some of the choreography used dance and visual actions to symbolise developments on stage, such as the men recruiting other miners on the picket line. Although there were no words exchanged in this part of the scene, the actions demonstrate the gravitas and meaningful discussions taking place between the men, conveying solidarity in a way that perhaps words couldn't do justice. Odyssey '84 engages all of the senses, drawing the audience in with each song and visual effect.

Odyssey '84 is a collaborative project, directed by Joe Murphy, written by Tim Price, with help from communities across South Wales and the Big Pit museum. Tim Price is well-known for having written the critically acclaimed 'Nye,' which covers similar Welsh socio-political themes. Odyssey '84 comes 40 years after the Miners strike that rocked the nation and sang to the world. Price has emphasised the importance of the 1984 Miners strike, arguing that the trade union's defeat paved the way for the privatisation of steel, railways, gas and water. This shows us how the events, which took place in the 80's, are still affecting us today. Personally, many (myself included) could argue that all of those industries should be nationalised again, as we are still bearing the costs of privatisation. For instance, we can see how gas companies are making millions while people struggle to pay their bills, railway workers are being underpaid and forced to go on strike, and British waterways are filled with sewage. These are just a few of the effects of privatisation which demonstrate how private companies are made for profit, not for people.

The play ends with Penny declaring that she will continue to make food packages for as long as people need them. A sign is unfurled with the name of a modern food bank, again demonstrating that these issues are still prevalent today.

An interesting element of Odyssey '84 is how it takes Wales to the global stage. Cymru is sometimes derisively called a small country, which diminishes Wales' scope and culture. This play illustrates how Wales has made waves across the world, providing an example to other nations and movements of political protest. The performance depicts how a variety of countries have raised funds

for the Miners strike, and shows John and his fellow countrymen travelling all over to receive these funds and make sure they get back to the N.U.M (National Union of Miners). This display of global solidarity also demonstrates how the Miners' plights were universal, with many people able to sympathise and relate.

The Miners Strike was huge. It has been deemed the biggest industrial dispute in post-war Britain. Roughly three quarters of the UK's miners went on strike to oppose state sanctioned pit closures, which were expected to cause 20,000 job losses. South Wales coalfield was unique in that only six percent of its miners ever crossed the picket line. Police brutality was rife during the protests as Thatcher wanted to give trade unions less power. Odyssey '84 shows how the closures of the coalfields weren't just about losing jobs - they were about the economic and emotional suffering of communities, and the British Government controlling working class people. Striking workers' much seen slogans such as "Coal not dole" and "Close a pit, kill a community" demonstrate the weight of the situation. It was a time of much political turmoil, not just for the miners, but other demonised and minoritised groups, including the LGBTQ+ community who were facing up against Section 28 and the HIV crisis.

PRIDE, a film that explored queer protest and solidarity with the Miners, was my favourite movie as a teen. I watched it six times in the cinema. At an age when I was coming to terms with my own queerness, watching PRIDE provided me with an inspirational story to look up to that explored queer history as well as the Miners Strike. My love for the film influenced me in many ways, and played a part in my decision to move to Wales for university. So you can imagine my excitement when I saw LGSM (Lesbians and Gays Support the Miners) depicted in Odyssey '84. I only realised afterwards that the actor who portrays John, Rhodri Meilir, was also in PRIDE. I did allow myself a fangirl moment when I got to talk to him after the show, but I was also curious as to why he wanted to take on this role. Meilir told me that he was attracted by John's Homeric journey; how the character develops and isn't the same at any point in the play. He saw this as a challenge and was eager to get involved.

This display of global solidarity also demonstrates how the Miners' plights were universal, with many people able to sympathise and relate

When you first watch the play, you may wonder why it was named after the Odyssey, as, at first glance, there don't seem to be a lot of parallels. The most obvious similarity is that John goes on a long journey, far away from home, to eventually return to his wife to find that both of them have changed. Indeed, this is similar to Odysseus who went on a great journey after the Trojan war, not returning home for twenty years. There are also some more subtle parallels,


including how the LGBTQ+ club scene, which involves drug-taking, can be related to the lotus eaters. There are also some similarities between Odysseus exploring the underworld and John and his friends going underground in the mines and finding dead people. Although the Odyssey is an interesting context for the play, I wish the parallels were a bit more obvious and braver in their examples.

Despite focusing on important historical and political moments in Welsh history, some parts of Odyssey '84 fell a little flat with me and maybe felt a little trite. In the LGSM scene, I thought having a man with assless chaps was a bit stereotypical and was used as a cheap gag for the audience rather than a real nod to LGBTQ+ culture. I also wasn't sure about the very heteronormative distinction between the stay-at-home wife whose journey surrounds having a baby versus her husband who is off fighting for the greater good. The use of the pregnancy to show passage of time was interesting and the loss was sensitively done, but it added little to the overall narrative. I would have liked to have seen more of Penny's altruistic community efforts, as we only really got a glimpse of it, and it could have perhaps been developed more. However, there was a lot to like in the play, and the audience really enjoyed all the nods to Welsh culture, with inside jokes being met with raucous laughter and the ending receiving a standing ovation.

Overall, I think that Odyssey '84 is a powerful performance with interesting themes and a good depiction of a very important part of our recent history. It is a play which effortlessly marries political themes and tragedy with lighthearted scenes and humorous, heartfelt moments and is well worth watching.

**Kaja Brown** is a queer and disabled writer and intersectional activist living in South Wales. Kaja often explores themes of social justice, disability, LGBT+ life and environmentalism in her writing

*Odyssey '84 was shown at the Sherman Theatre.*

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