Placecast Episode 12 with Professor Michael Woods - Transcript

Rhian Curtis:

Rhian introduces the episode in both English and Welsh.

Welcome to Placecast. The interview you're about to listen to is with Professor Michael Woods, the Director of Cymru Wledig LPIP Rural Wales. This interview will be conducted in English. Enjoy.

Nicola Headlam:

Welcome to Placecast, a Local Policy Innovation Partnership Hub production based at the University of Birmingham. Placecast is essential listening for those keen to explore the ins and outs of knowledge mobilisation for influence in central and local government. Based on the view that it is only through animating the power of place-based leadership that the wicked problems of 2025 can become more manageable.

I'm here today with Professor Mike woods, who is the Principal Investigator of the LPIP based in rural Wales, who has a long and distinguished social science career, largely in Wales. And you're a Aberystwyth, aren't you, Mike? That's right. Yes. Brilliant. Well, it's lovely to talk to you. So obviously you've worked on Welsh matters for a really long time. Can you tell me what got you interested in work? The Welsh scale.

Michael Woods:

I mean, the simple answer to that is that I got a job with a Welsh university. But I'll preface that a little because my interest starts, I think, with been interested in what's happening in rural areas. And that's interest I first picked up at undergraduate level, partly having been from a family who moved from a larger town and, that struck me as and then the kind of lectures as an interesting social development.

And I pursued that through my PhD. as well. And then I got a job in Aberystwyth in 1996. And together with colleagues here, we started doing work around rural Wales. And this is what also got me started to think more about issues around regional development and economic development. Because some of my colleagues were already working in that space.

We had within the university, a rural service research unit, which had been particularly working with small communities and doing community appraisals and so on. And the first funded project, which I was very involved with colleagues, was looking at partnership working in rural regeneration in Mid Wales and the borders. So that's where it all started. and it's developed from there.

Nicola Headlam:

I won't embarrass by suggesting your career is as old as Welsh devolution, because everybody's very excited about the fact that the Senedd election coming up in May of next year is the seventh general election in Welsh devolution. So in a sense, and I'd love to know your view on this. It feels like that's a set of institutions which is somewhat mature.

Michael Woods:

Yeah, I think that's right. I mean, my, my career predates devolution as, as we started working it out about before we got about, there were interesting series of developments. I think it is a very mature set of institutions now, but it's taken time to evolve to that. And there have been adjustments. So particularly when we think about regional and rural development in Wales, prior to the devolution, we had a Welsh development agency, but we also had a Development Board for Rural Wales, which was set up in the 1960s and we're still going in 1990s when I started working in this space. Actually, I think that in many ways it's still fondly looked back on as a organisation which had a clear remit, initially responding to a severe problem of depopulation and a need for modernisation in rural Wales, but then to actually to helping to attract in various industries.

And I think changing its focus over time to smaller scale growing indigenous businesses and so on. Just prior to devolution, this got merged into together with the Welsh Development Agency, a larger, but still standalone, authority. And there were concerns then about some of the distinctive rural elements being lost with that. And then we got devolution and got the establishment of the National Assembly, for Wales.

And one of the rallying calls, in the early days of the assembly from, people like Eluned Morgan, who became the second First minister, was that this should be creating more government. But actually, this is democratising governance in Wales, and therefore it was a rallying call to the bonfire of the Quangos. And therefore we got after a few years, the Welsh Development Agency got incorporated into the governance structures of the Welsh Government itself.

And there's pros and cons about that. There is a sense of it being placed more centrally, that there's democratic control over that. But I think there's also been some concerns that when something goes into government that gets lost with the larger machinery and that sense of having a clear organisation doing this for rural areas. And so we had recently the Royal Welsh Show, which I'm sure we'll talk about later on, you were there, Nicola for that.

There's a launch by the Welsh Government Association of their rural manifesto for the elections next year. One of the key asks they have in that manifesto is the re-establishment of some kind of public body for rural Wales and the various options being talked about. One of its really is going back to a sense reinventing the Development Board for Rural Wales, one of which is a kind of commissioner model.

One of it might be some kind of organisation pot co-owned by the local authorities. But there is a sense there that there is still a gap for an organisation which can focus more specifically on Rural Wales. I think you're right in that we have got to a point in Welsh devolution, where the institutions are mature enough to actually deal with that.

And at one time the emphasis was all about we need to establish the legitimacy of the Welsh Government and the Welsh assembly, as it first was, and now the Senedd, reluctance there to really empower teirs of government and the empower agencies which were beneath that. I think we're now getting to the point where the Welsh institution can be confident enough to start giving away some of that power again so it can be most reflected to place-based interests.

Nicola Headlam:

Interesting. I've just been listening to a talk from Kevin Morgan. You only know him very well. Yeah, obviously, his work covers both the rural and urban context. His senses some impatience, certainly within the Cardiff capital region with the sort of institutions of devolution, they feel quite jealous that Manchester's apparently appears them to have more, more freedom and flexibility.

But then I was saying, well, again, this Welsh mesh that I observed so clearly from from the outward program of the LPIP over the summer and others, it feels like in some ways a more solid foundation to begin to be, to the specificities can come, come back to the centre again.

Michael Woods:

I think it's part of this messing of the devolution in Britain, which we're trying to work through at the moment and I think we know for a long time Wales and Scotland to be the ahead of the of England itself, having that devolution, which is, the kind of initiatives of the last few years and the both governments which has set up the city mayors and the combined authorities and so on, are, of course, then taken devolution further in England and the same words being used. And this is one of confusing things, you know, we're told what devolution of, of context and actually is quite different in terms of the constitutional and legalistic setting of these things. and the scale is different.

So we're talking about city, region, cities within England, and we're talking about nations in Scotland and then in Wales. So that raises the issue, which is, within Wales, a city like Cardiff, which would see itself as the equivalent of a, a Birmingham, I certainly a Leeds or somewhere else which is getting these kind of powers now in England and we all give the same level of powers within Wales. We know it's compared to the Welsh Government, and I think that's one of the challenges is which is going to have to be worked out more in this next time with the Senedd. Because it is that sense of it won't be an exact match because the whole point is in England, you're missing that national scale.

So there are things being made coming down to the combined authorities, coming down to the mayors, which are sitting with the Welsh government in Wales and probably quite properly, should be sitting with the Welsh government. But then there's a question of how much within Wales can we get further devolution down to some of the city regions within Wales, but also, again, other regions. The reason we're dealing with in rural Wales, the challenges there is we don't have a central point.

To organise a city region around. We are a very different shape of area. So if you start devolving things to city region, say Cardiff, what do you do with the more rural areas in Wales? And that's a bigger challenge in Wales would be in England, simply because of our Geography.

Nicola Headlams:

And I think to be fair, if you aren't chafing somewhat against the strictures of devolution kind of everywhere, then there's nobody at all satisfied with things as they are.

But I think certainly working with the weft of policy with for certainly what I witnessed you doing and how clear it is of the ways in which your work can directly connect with decision makers. A lot of English scholars would kill for, you know, three days.

Michael Woods:

Absolutely. And this is the great thing about working in a small country. And it's one of the things that's kept me in Wales over the last 30 years. There is that proximity to, politicians, to policy makers, to institutions, which doesn't exist if you're working even in England.

That gives us a level of access. It gives us a familiarity with individuals we meet and that has allowed us to build the relationships. As we all know, relationships is what critical in this space of policy informed research. Or research about policy, it's having those working relationships, it's working through them. And we're in a very fortunate position in Wales to do that.

Nicola Headlams:

So I guess moving on to how you became engaged with the LPIP program, in a sense, it really felt to me like projects and the funding you already understood all the relationships in the network were on the piece and this is giving you a chance to take them a step further or to build on, existing kind of relationships in the space. Is that how it works?

Michael Woods:

It is. It is building upon a series of relationships people have and previous projects. So one of the things I was previously involved in was the Wales Royal Observatory. This was established back in 2003 and came out of again, conversations between people like Terry Marden and, Mark Goodwin and people in the Welsh government around some of those meetings.

Some of the formal connections of saying what there was was a need for better evidence base for rural policy in Wales and Welsh Government then funded this Wales Rural Observatory, which was a partnership between Aberystwyth and Cardiff universities. It subsequently became funded through supported through European funding and more directly tied to the rural development program. So it ran for ten years in total.

In that time, we did a series of different, projects, all needs identified by Welsh Government. We ran a number of surveys, and then we got to the end of the European funding period. And for various reasons, the funding didn't continue beyond that. And for the intervening years, I've had a number of conversations with various people in this space of say, well, we need something like the observatory back.

There's a missing piece in our policy research jigsaw now, in fact, actually the last data we have these things is what is the observatory was doing and that's now out of date. So we had those set of connections there. And, I was very interested to go along to an early briefing session, which UKRI ran about ideas of what it still then called, actually, local policy innovation observatories. And the term certainly resonated. And saw that as an opportunity to do something again of this nature. But I also wanted to take, two key lessons. I think, from what we had done, in the observatory into the new LPIP. And one of those is that I wanted us to be more inclusive in terms of who we were involving and the pool of expertise we're drawing upon.

So the observatory had been established between Aberystwyth and Cardiff, and there were a small group of us involved. And I wanted to open up this opportunity to engage other expertise within the Welsh universities and to allow opportunities for people to become involved. And the second thing is I wanted us to be working with a wider range of audiences and users.

So we had been working directly with the Welsh Government previously. They had set our agenda and whether or not anything we did saw the light of day and the public was up to the Welsh Government. Most of it did eventually. But some of it sat on that desk of ministers and senior civil servants for quite some time till it go there.

So with this one, what I wanted us to work with a broader range. We quite deliberately didn't have Welsh Government as a core partner although we were working closely with them in many ways. But we built together other partners from local government, from the civil society, various community organisations, social enterprises and drawing about the wider pool to think what are the needs there?

What are the broader needs, which exist with rural Wales? And we will use some of us existing networks to do that. We brought people together for the workshop. We had a bit of funding of course and seed funding to organise that workshop, and we collectively co-designed what the LPIP would look like and what its themes would be. So these have been core principles of how we've approached this.

The other change, I think was important, which reflect what was happening more broadly by intervening decade, was the significance of working with communities. And involved in community, like researching what we're doing. we're having just as going out and researching them. And so that's become another central tenant to the approach.

Nicola Headlam:

And we have spoken of obviously having been at the Eisteddfod and at the Royal Welsh, some of those around female entrepreneurship, around crime and reporting in the rural context and around cultural heritage, they have a very specific flavour, but they certainly had the, the feeling of being highly co-produced pieces of work. They were academic facilitated, really, rather than just, I've got a bright idea kind of led, it felt to me anyway.

Michael Woods:

Absolutely. And, it starts really a lot of what we do, we call it responsive research. So we our looking to our stakeholders and partners to say, what do you need us to do? So the idea comes to from there. But you're absolutely right.

The way we were designing them, the way in which we are following up that work, we're working closely with various partners. You know, things like the crime survey. We had workshops, we brought together people in police force and Welsh government and local authorities to say what should be on this survey. And then that helped us to deliver that.

The women in farm entrepreneurship, designing that work with the farming unions and with other groups, and we got their input in terms of what we should be asking. So that nature co-production is really the that's been one of the most rewarding aspects about the LPIP actually, you know, working with those partners and getting to understand well what they need and what we can provide for them.

Nicola Headlams:

So I don't want to make it sound like it's all everything is perfect over there in that green valley far away. But it certainly feels to me both through connecting, through the kind of way in which your various legs and arms have worked, but also that propinquity, that that closeness to power. I mean, certainly again, at the Royal Welsh Show, which we mentioned launching your manifesto for rural Wales, feeding that directly into the Welsh LGA and then more or less having it, you know, repeated back to you kind of chapter and verse in select committees in the Senedd and others. It feels like it's a really exciting place to take, co-produce, research and then take it in quite rapidly, actually into practice.

Michael Woods:

It is. And I think this is a close step which allows us to do some of that. But again, I think you're right. I say, you know, we shouldn't just rest on our laurels. I'll actually have. Yeah, look at this.

[Inaudible]. This is challenging. There it is. challenging to make those connections at times. And there are a lot of work needs to go into setting things up, building those relationships. There are some aspects of policy where and certainly some of the people I would work with in terms of the, community engagement, community development would be critical of Welsh Government in terms of the emphasis it puts on communities.

But there hasn't been a kind of explicit community strategy, a policy. And to some degree, the kind of localism agenda which was played out in England wasn't replicated in Wales. So that some of those tools, which of those are different. So I think there are areas which are and there's still room for improvement around that and then there is the other big challenge, which is course it's one thing to actually speak to people and get people, you mentioning what your doing. Its another for actually that to really feed through into policy and to deliver impacts on the ground.

And I think this is, again, a challenge or something we need to take on board of our way of working. That trying to inform policy from academic work is a long term game. In a long play game. You're not going to see immediate impacts from that, usually. There may just the odd time, you know, but the government needs a really quick response.

But usually it'll take time to do that. We did work 20 years ago that eventually became legislation, sorted and went out. And we did report for Welsh government on that, that eventually led to legislation. But it was eight years between when we submitted a report and when that legislation appeared. And that was for a specific piece of work with what people had commissioned with the intention of it feeding into policy and this legislation.

So these things take time. And I think that's one thing we approached in the whole LPIP programme, what we've got limited funding, amount of time. At present, we're not going to see the full benefits of this in this period, we're going to hopefully see these things being picked up and talked about by policymakers. We may start getting to policy documents

And so on, maybe want to give it to other programs. But actually seeing the delivery of these impacts and ideas, it's going to go beyond that. And see the difference it makes to people's lives and communities, which is really what ultimately end the day were about. You know, that may take ten years to achieve. So we've got to be prepare to take the long view.

Nicola Headlam:

Brilliant. So I'm going to ask then about so so the ways in which you've worked, definitely exemplify sort of place-based scholarship, place-based leadership. Can I ask you what is the potential for this work reaching maturity and becoming fully embedded. So the way you've described, sort of, from research question, through being co-produced into a finding into, to and back out from policy as being a long term process.

But I just wonder, do you feel that, a fully a kind of fully mature place-based funding settlement for rural Wales, can you imagine what would change as a result? And what might the size of that prize be?

Michael Woods:

The price on that is a approach to coming to. And it's across all policy areas, it’s supporting the economy

But it's also about how we deliver public services. it's also about how we support culture and so on, is we recognising that there's not a single solution which fits everyone? This is the basis of a place-based approach. How do we develop policy which is responsive to the needs of individual, places? And then, even more than that is responsive to the needs and interests of both communities within and how do we involve communities in that. So that's the goal we’re working towards. I think we're in a time where there is increasing interest in that, across different parts of the political spectrum, across different tiers of government involvement, elected in land and the civil service elements of government.

So there's a willingness goodwill here. The threat is that the short termism of policy isn’t prepared to wait for this to be demonstrated. And that could be another fad along which actually pushes us out before been allowed to do that. But I'm hopeful that actually there is a recognition of the need to change some of the structures and the processes their to allow this. It’s not easy because it often involves organisations giving up some of their power to the vision the day, and being more open to suggestions. It's not just the research link, which is it's challenging. It's actually about how policy itself works and is organised and there are vested

interests for who may or may not be keen to do it. But if we can start to demonstrate the value of this approach, and if we can particularly warn about the dangers of not taking the approach to meet the, I mean, the the wake up call, I think is what we have seen over the last several years in Britain and elsewhere, which is, a sense of what I call spatial injustice, the sense of people, in places feeling that they're not being listened to, that they're being marginalised, they're being ignored and that contributing to a fragmented political, environment. And, you know, to one degree, some of the opportunity is from some of us new political players who actually are quite community orientated. And wanting to do more, but it's also from the established political parties seeing that threat to that position from new players and actually being persuaded that one of the ways to address is to take action, which can, you know, be more place-based approach so that you're speaking directly to the interests of some of those voters who maybe are feeling a bit disconnected at present. I think there's an opportunity in the current political climate that we have to actually position and advance this place-based approach as part of the answer.

Nicola Headlam:

So sort of go deep rather than wide in a sense. Yeah, I, I, I couldn't agree more. I mean, I was quite, again, back to the Royal Welsh.

How surprising the [Inaudible] of the day that I was there, Princess Anne on on one side of the showground, and then there was Farage on the other. And I know that that. And then the polling isn't, isn't perfect in Wales for the sample sizes. Partly, but the Senedd election could return a completely unknown quantity really, in terms of the kind of networks that you describe, you might, you know, some brand new players to, to deal with it.

We voters would say we watch and wait. So in terms of solutions then can you describe something that's worked well in this space. So either the rural white paper that you mentioned or the observatory work. And again what are the characteristics of doing deep work, well?

Michael Woods:

I think in terms of things in work. Well, I mean, I think it again, these take longer to actually say we we've delivered something here.

Let me mention a couple of things. I think one is in terms of how we connect, policy through to research, and make a difference. And I think, the example there I think I mentioned earlier, what we're doing with town and community parish councils and that sense of there being an underused resource. Really local-scale community government, concerns there about levels of participation in them, about their capacity to do things.

And we were commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government as it was at that time, to do some work about the potential of that sector. And it started from a point, as is often the case, that they knew very little about what was currently happening. And I think over the intervening ten, twenty years from that, the work we did has then underpinned a host of initiatives which have increased visibility of that sector.

It's increased the powers available to that, so they've received additional powers and some of those are using them proactively, in terms of things like engaging with the climate crisis and

installing electric vehicle charging points and looking at community energy projects and promoting awareness around that. Others have responded to the cost of living crisis and things like food banks, so they found a the role of then of using some of the additional powers is really ultimately come out of the work we were doing, at that time from that.

And we've also helped improve training resources for that sector. So our work led into a kind of, the consolidation of the representative bodies to speak to one voice. So there's lots of things about actually, you're sowing the seeds through this research of flowers, which you're not considering to be involved in, but were blossom from this and can make a difference in improving their impact.

So I think that's an example of, of what research is fed into a place-based approach or helping to consider a place-based approach. I think actually, for example, I will give you is actually around the delivery side, I'm going to flag something, which again, is still, I think a concern for us in Wales at the moment, which is, the great benefit we had over a twenty year period of community-led local development in rural Wales.

With European funding, leader schemes. Wales was one of the real pioneers in this space. There was, some community-led projects which predated, those European programs of really place-based action in communities of trying to work out what those communities wanted and empowering from that. And that approach fed through. So some of the work done in the Welsh leader groups established ways of working, which were adopted and across Europe.

And there was a real benefit, I think, that these did help to regenerate the economy in most parts of Real Wales, and in particular helped to establish a sense of place identity, and to think about how you built economies around that. So it helped support the growth of tourism, which community embedded, helped to that protect and promote that cultural heritage.

It creates a soft infrastructure, as I call it, for rural communities to come together and meet. And it's a great success story there which unfortunately has not really been continued post-Brexit, because actually that's we've had to restructure those policies after Brexit. The tendency it's been, on the one hand, to try to integrate, environmental protection in with agricultural policy to rethink that space, but also to come up with a more kind of regional based approach to, looked at economic development.

We didn't really recognise the real dimensions, and rural community development in the community led, local developed approach has fallen between those stools. And that's a real challenge, I think for us that we've lost something there, and I think it's something which hopefully by talking about place-based approaches and recognise the significance of that we can try to get back.

Nicola Headlam:

Is so interesting, isn't it? 60 years of the Regional Studies of Association event today. And you know, we really didn't make the connection between such good work like that and the European funding that we'd had in areas. And as a result, the public didn't see the benefit or feel the benefits of what were funding streams. And I've always been interested in how far we, as a sort of regional studies community, are responsible for not communicating clearly enough. Kind of.

Michael Woods:

I think, part of the problem here, is that it's natural that the way we work in academia is that we kind of go through fashions. If you like our waves of interest, let's put it that way. When something is new, we want to explore it, and we do research on it, but then we actually have to find what we've worked out, how that's working.

We've done the basis of that and therefore the cutting edge of the work moves elsewhere. I think that European work, in particular in rural development, which is the area I know the best, has happened. So there's a lot of really interesting work done in the 1990s, the beginning of the 2000s. And I say quite a lot of that done in Wales.

People like Peter Bignell, people like, my, my former colleague Bill Edwards, people like Ryan Day did a lot of work on this. And, you know, out of that came this idea of a new approach to rural development and recognition that was a new rural paradigm from built from the bottom up. But we did that. We documented that and it was all published and people moved on elsewhere.

And the later schemes continued, the work continued, but we were continuing to publish, and we were speaking about it. So maybe that's why I said so. It dropped after. Basically word is from that. But I think that's it. I think I think we also have to, I don't think should beat ourselves up as academics about some of us.

Maybe this comes back to us how we communicate things publicly and how actually, we need to do that in ways which isn't always talked about. The latest time we've got, the latest thing we're playing with but recognising it's broader. So I think there's also some that were we fit into this model, if we're talking about co-production and co-design in collaboration working endeavours, we have certain things we can contribute as academics, as researchers.

And the most important of that thing of the starting point of understanding what's happening, getting to that initial data, thinking about what's new and how we innovate it. Actually some of that. We're not necessarily the best place people to go and implement that. We're not necessarily best place people to actually do emotional work about that and to explain these things in the larger sense, and make sure about these programs, you know, what they're contributing is recognised by the public.

So maybe that's how we gain we need to think about how we work with others and the division of labour, which is part of those partnerships.

Nicola Headlams:

You spent a lot of time understanding the Welsh context. What's informed your thinking about good international lessons to import or steal?

Michael Woods:

As I said at the beginning, I know I've spent 30 years working in Wales and that's be a great place to start with an immediate doorstep laboratory. But I've always had broader interests, I've been interested in what I call the global countryside, and then figure out how globalisation works out of that. And the way I got into that work was really beginning to think, well, okay, the work on

looking at in Wales or to some extent in England, how is this different elsewhere? And how is it by shape that?

So part of I started thinking about Europe and, and lessons from elsewhere and the governance and expanding beyond that. And it's been interesting for example, doing work in rural developed in China and thinking about this and how what similarities and what possibly could be learned coming back from these things. So, the research is certainly a lot of space for international learning.

That's where international networks are important, whether they're the kind of the academic networks. And I've been, you know, I've learned a lot from involvement with the Regional Studies Association as you mentioned, but also groups like the European Society of Rural Sociology and others, which it provides about space for working members. I've been involved in European wide projects, and they've been really important in terms of helping facilitate this kind of show them knowledge of what works well.

And we certainly, before we did, the LPIP were part of a project called ROBUST which looked at rural urban differences, again, with a kind of participatory model. So we were working in collaboration the Welsh Local Government Association in Wales and the Rural Vision for Wales. But we still have elements of that for what people are doing in Austria.

But it's an interesting example. It's about, you know, local service provision and bridging rural-urban gaps. So we still have elements of it from some of the examples in the Netherlands and so on. So we're learning cooperative aspects. We went to London. That was really important to have those opportunities. I think one of the things I also, I think, become increasingly concerned with in recent decades, is having two way conversations and to realising that we the ways we've done things in Britain and Europe aren't necessarily always the only way of doing things. So in an academic space of rural study, you know, Britain has been one of the key, one of the leading nations in terms of, doing real research that actually Wales in particular has to been, you know, lots of concepts and theoretical ideas and agenda setting that are coming out from us. And that's been picked up and used by people all over the world.

But sometimes I'm thinking, well, I'm not quite sure how well this fits. We can be kind of using some of these ideas, which actually came out of critiques of the policy environment in Britain. You know, do they really transfer there? So you start having conversations about what's happening here and where that might be different. Okay. What I then became conscious of was not being the expert coming in to tell those countries something, but also listening and thinking, okay, there is something different here, but what we're talking about in Britain perhaps doesn't apparently translate?

Some if it does, and some you can use to equally order things which are happening in these countries as well, which you can bring back here. And therefore China, I think, it's quite interesting because despite being a one party state, in a way, there's actually quite a bit of autonomy from local scale actors, government actors there, and thinking about some of the models they have really of community owned businesses and what their delivering.

Yeah, that's something we can learn some of that. So the work I've done at colleagues in Taiwan, we've talked about the Chinese idea of guanxi, which is about a reciprocal gift relationship being

so important. Well actually that does exist in forms in Britain, we just don't call it that. But it's also important the way people work, especially in rural areas.

So let's learn from some of these concepts and ideas as well. Some interesting work in Japan about how they're trying to deal with ideas of multi locality people living in different spaces. There's a really interesting policy in Japan, which allows you to divert some of your income tax to a region where you don't live or work, but you just have some affinity with, because income tax is to some degree devolved.

So you could actually or it could be you ancestral home, there's a family company, you still have a connection. You pay some of your income tax back there. It may just be the place you like going on holiday.

Nicola Headlam:

Gosh you can imagine the sort of Welsh diaspora in England. Imagine how that would translate exactly. One is for for Wales from, you know, having holidayed there, you could have a legacy relationship that we really are.

Michael Woods:

Exactly. The one that concerns you got in Wales is about young people leaving rural Wales again away, and the concerns about future populations. And one of the reasons for me, concerned about that, is that it gives us an aging population and it reduces the local earning population, and it has impacts upon our revenue generation. So the other ways of actually tapping into that diasporas that’s there to bring some of that back.

And I'm not expecting that policy to be adopted overnight, but I think it's an example of radical ideas you see elsewhere in the world, which make us stop and think about, could we do something similar here back in Wales, back in the UK?

Nicola Headlam:

That's really innovative. That's really got my, my that's really animated me that. Okay. So I mean, clearly there's another year to roll on the LPIP itself.

What are you yourself working on next. What's next for you Mike?

Michael Woods:

We still got a lot to do. We've got year to go. We are kind of like 20 or so months into this project. I kind of feel we’re now up and revving all engines and everything's happening. So there's a lot happening, some exciting things happening with just the last couple of weeks.

Awarded the series of funding grants for a new set of community led research projects, which are coming up on call. We've had of people coming to us with their ideas and some really interesting work, you know, what with your work, what can projects working with ethnic minority

and refugee and global majority, populations about the understanding of climate change and the need around that and how to integrate into a lot of the environmental action. Really interesting project, which is partly involving a theatre company working with young farmers around issues of mental health.

So there's, you know, exciting work being done there. We are about to commission a series of small policy focused projects which will be commissioned from researchers outside the LPIP we've got an interesting range topics there. Innovation labs will be working with small groups through a process of thinking about a desired change or an objective and barriers to that, and how we overcome that and the solutions to that.

And where now at the stage of, workshops are completed, but we're selecting ideas from them to test as a proof of concept and an intervention. So one of those we can go, which is the first one really getting going, is about using food as a way of tackling social isolation and building community cohesion in communities. So doing support of working with people in communities and the kind of community kitchen dash communal meal model to bringing people in the community together. Around a meal. Using locally produced food, cooking together, planning the event together, and doing something which actually the whole communities extended eat together. So that was a really exciting project coming out of this. One of the big things we still need to do, one of the and most of my work plan, it's now being implemented. One of the things we still have to do is what we call some dialogues. And what we're going to try to do there, is to tackle some of the wicked problems facing rural Wales. And use that as a way, drawing together some of those dispersed projects we're funding.

So in that so for example, there's lots of work we're doing around food in different ways. I just mentioned one of them there at the beginning. So the community led research projects are doing that. We've got another project which is kind of about a more traditional research project doing that. Let's bring together all of those participants. Let's bring together all the evidence we're generating through that and get go after a couple of days working through that to try to come up with something central answer to these big, wicked challenges.

So that's a big piece of the jigsaw which we'll be doing next year.

Nicola Headlam:

Brilliant.

So underpinning all this work, there must be such a some characteristics then you've met a lot of people. You've probably had more. Can you think of a specific person who's a really good broker, as in, takes the ideas and can bring them into a different context and aligned with that? Obviously a broker needs to dock with a place leader.

Can you think of a really good place leader from your career?

Michael Woods:

Yeah, I take it. I think in terms of brokering, I do you have particular interests here in thinking about this in terms of individuals inspirational in, in linking communities, focus on that aspect of how to engage with communities and to bring them through. And there's two examples I'm

going to give one person I knew in one person I didn't know that I'd learned about. In the fact the first person I didn't know and learnt about is an American geographer called William Bungay, or Bill Bungay who was, based, I think, in Chicago in the 1960s.

He reacted against the traditional form of how geography really done up things. I wanted it to be more organic from the bottom up, and he set up stall, I think it's Chicago could be Detroit. One of the two. I think he might have done it in both cities at different points of his career if I remember correctly. But literally getting a shopfront open it up to people and communities and saying to what interest you?

What's the problems here? What can we do? It wasn't a time to participate about what we're using there. It's still often the research is doing something about responding to us community communities. It was brokering that relationship between the community, academia, brokering the access to knowledge of those communities. And then, you know, reflect, set an example to the is for a colleague of mine who I worked very closely, my first came to Aberystwyth, who we sadly lost to illness about 15 years ago, called Bill Edwards. He was someone who was an old style academic in many ways. Very careful about what he did take time to think through these things, you know, really vast knowledge, a really sharp, brain.

But someone who was necessarily switched on to, you know, the conveyor belt of your part of academia keep producing things. But what he's really excellent to do is working in communities. And he really made an investment of that of working with organisations. as I said, I mentioned it earlier, but, he did a lot of work doing community praise or to individual foundation and working through them.

He helped design, the jigsaw scheme, which is an early community development program in rural Wales, and that came out a real passion for people and for communities. And the fact that he needed to put their interests first and we should be working with them. And it didn't matter that lead to a journal paper or something. It was about creating something better for that community.

And that again, inspires me as someone who's brokering something in that way. I just say you then perhaps need to place leaders to work with. And again, I think coming from a rural context does a different model. I say sometimes we talk about place leaders. We've got the kind of hero model, and we're talking about the, you know, the big city leaders, city mayors, high profile and how we can change things.

Yeah, you don't really get that in rural locations the same way. What this is much more about is about people working quite quietly in different spaces. and often it does come just to individuals, but often it's about those collaborations, which are there and I think there's been a whole series of people I've worked with at different times.

I've come across you've you've done that, who've been, you know, pioneering some of those, initial leader programs. so, like Joan Ashby in West Wales, who's just set up one of us first, leader groups in Wales, and it's really active in developing, those ideas. Others more recently who have been working one of the people who actually came to our event to play the Royal Welsh Show. But we've done work is a Councillor down in cardigan here. Clive Davis, who has over period of years been, you know, was a key person working with us in a community about taking that town and initially thinking about how do we bring new technology into here and get him ready for setting up a public Wi-Fi scheme, but then built upon this and how they used the data, the data they were generating, data analytics, they were using that in all kinds of ways. So,

in terms of how they respond to, tour parties coming of cruise ships which dock at Fishguard, and they've got the information, know exactly where they want to come in, and they know what shops they're interested. And they used all this data to generated from having created this local Wi-Fi system and network and this, this whole kind of thing snowballed out of this. They're now talking about community housing, and they'll come out talking about other actions. And really, that is now from having been a slightly run down community a few decades ago, is really a vibrant town, a lively town, lots going on. It's attracting people in, they're coming to it because they want to live there and they want to visit there. And again, I think there individuals who've been involved in helping to take the community in that way. So yes, I think that's the the place leaders, I think, in a rural context, are people who are catalysts, not people who are commanders.

Nicola Headlam:

Very good, very infectious. Your passion for your place. I can feel it.

Just before we finish, I'm going to let you have a wave of my place-based innovation magic wand. You got to be careful with it because it can grant you wish. You have absolute power to do one of these things, but you must use your powers to make a tangible change to a specific place. Your change will be specific, measurable, actionable, recordable, and transferable.

Smart magic is hard to get hold of at the moment and is subject to a 20 year reducing multi-year budget settlement. You can have, for rural Wales, a 10 million pound project fund. Half an hour with the cabinet. Now this is writs obviously UK centred on the cabinet. It can be the cabinet in the Senedd and a slide deck.

You've kind of done that already. Editorial control of the front page of a tabloid newspaper. A clause to insert into a bill. A simple message that goes viral and social media on TikTok. Or anyone as an advocate for your work or and this is really one for the nerds. The answer is something that has bothered you forever, which would you like?

Michael Woods:

That's a really, tricky question. And I think I'm going to cheat slightly because I'm going to go for the slide deck and the cabinet meeting.

Nicola Headlam:

Yes. Very good. Yeah I wish I knew I know I can see from your face you want the money as well. That's fine.

Michael Woods:

What that allows is to pay because actually spend what I do with that. What I do is that I think you need to actually make a case to the cabinet for this approach we've been talking about. And actually to talk about the need to unlock some of the blockages there. And some of them come

from, rules about how government works and treasury rules and other things and short term project funding, whatever. And actually, I think I'd use our slide deck and half an hour to do, is to present a vision of what can be achieved for rural Wales.

If we allowed that the potential of the liberty to come through and to do that, and to be quite specific with them about what might be the how to remove some of the blockages to achieve that.

Nicola Headlam:

We just had a presentation, again, this Regional Studies thing about, some of the work of the GMCA and their saying that probably 50% of their work is crunching through with different government departments, what they expect from funding streams, and just look how mad, how why do we do this to ourselves?

We tie ourselves up and so much kind of you know, the transaction cost of that is just extraordinary when you think that it could be used for much more benign things. Right? There you are. So I see what you do with the place-based magic wand, and they will all see the world like you do at the end. Excellent.

I mean, it's been a really inspiring conversation. Thank you. And I really enjoy getting to see some of the work up close over the summer as I said. We set out to mine insights from experts, real world case studies, in this case from rural Wales, practical tips and career advice. I'm not sure about that. And to spotlight solutions as well as to waive the place-based innovation magic wand. And we have. Thank you very much Mike Woods.

Michael Woods:

Thank you, Nicola.