

Written evidence submitted by

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Reasons for submitting evidence:

Our combined research explores migration to and from and continuing to live in rural and economically deprived regions of Wales (and rural areas more broadly), and the socio-economic and demographic factors at work in these areas. Relevant research projects we have undertaken include:

- Horizon 2020 IMAJINE (726950) project: qualitative interviews with long-term residents, UK in-migrants and EU migrants in Swansea and Ceredigion (Goodwin-Hawkins, Dafydd Jones).
- ESRC WISERD Civil Society Research Centre (ES/L009099/1): qualitative interviews with EU citizens active with civil society in Wales (Dafydd Jones)
- Horizon 2020 CHIEF (770464) project: mixed-methods project across nine countries examining challenges faced by young people around cultural socialisation and in accessing environments for cross-cultural interactions; including comparative work across rural and urban regions (Jones)
- Horizon Europe RUSTIK project: research-for-policy partnership with Monmouthshire County Council to improve data on rural areas to support socio-economic and demographic transitions (Goodwin-Hawkins, Jones, Morse).
- A PhD (funded by the then Welsh Language Board) on belonging among young non-Welsh born residents in western Wales, awarded by Bangor University in 2014 (Cunnington Wynn)
- Wavehill Evaluation for Arfor 2 Project, which seeks to create opportunities for young people and families (≤ 35 years old) to stay in or return to their local communities (Cunnington Wynn)
- UKRI Rural Wales Policy and Innovation Partnership Phase1, Aberystwyth University: Part of the project designed to support local and national policymakers in tackling levelling up challenges, driving sustainable and inclusive economic growth, and reducing regional disparities in the UK (Cunnington Wynn)

We remain at the disposal of the Committee should any additional written or oral information be required.

Summary

In this submission, we advocate a nuanced perspective on population change in Wales and argue for improved data and evidence to inform policy decisions. We observe that the questions used in the Call for Evidence reflect common assumptions about population change, especially concerns over ‘keeping’ younger people. However, we note that the evidence base is currently lacking in several key respects. There is hence a risk of policy decisions being taken on the weight of hunch and anecdote. Moreover, we note that area statistics show differential patterns across Wales, and that there remains a need to interrogate the specific impacts occurring at a local level. Indeed, we caution against reading the statistical stories told by declining working-age populations in some areas as automatically indicating real-world challenges.

Out-migration is one driver of population change. In contrast to classic views of moving ‘A to B’, the research state-of-the-art understands migration as non-linear. We draw from this perspective to suggest closer attention to return migration. We argue that a lifecourse perspective will help understand the reasons younger people leave the countryside, and how returning may become desirable. This perspective provides for a more nuanced understanding than that which the call for evidence frames, which is a more linear, one-way understanding of migration (i.e., leaving, and not returning). This approach broadly relates to younger people leaving to explore new and different life experiences or to obtain training, skills, education, and employment experiences than those typically afforded in the areas they grew up. There is not necessarily a desire to not return (although it may not be a return to the exact area that one left); broader structural issues, such as the affordability of housing or suitable work opportunities, can limit opportunities for return migration, or direct to where people may ‘return’. Adopting solutions that acknowledge these complexities and create opportunities for a return at later stages in life (typically for mid-career work opportunities or for raising young children onwards, rather than retirement), including affordable and suitable housing, will work with these inclinations, rather than trying to prevent young people from leaving, and potentially reproducing resentment and stigma around not being able to ‘leave’. We also note the challenges in presenting statistical data relating to Wales. There is a need for more support for Wales-related population data to be processed and discussed, utilising the ONS Data Campus in Newport; such an endeavour would allow more engagement between policy-makers, practitioners, and academics.

1. What are the underlying drivers of changes in Wales’s population highlighted by the 2021 Census, in particular depopulation and ageing in some areas?

1.1 The reasons behind population changes are diverse and complex. While many areas of England have seen a growth in population, this has not been observed to the same extent in Wales. Indeed, Wales’ population change is characterised by small growth in some local authority areas (LAAs), stagnation, or a decline in other areas. Many of Wales’ predominantly “rural” areas have shown a decline in population from 2011 and 2021 (see Figure 1 below.). Powys and Pembrokeshire recorded a small growth, and an

above average growth in Denbighshire, Monmouthshire, and the Vale of Glamorgan. It is not clear what accounts to the former, but the latter two's proximity to Cardiff and new housing developments are likely to contribute. Data from the 2021 England & Wales Census of Population at Medium Super Output Areas (MSOAs) indicate more variety in rural areas, but population growth appears tied to areas with new housing developments. Given general trends in newbuild housing size and prices, it is likely that these are occupied by families, which may contribute to a further growth in the population. Local contextual factors are likely to be at work. Figure 2 below illustrates that while a range of settlement types are represented in all quartiles of population change, the areas that have lost people show a rural trend, and the areas that have gained people have an urban emphasis. In LAAs covering larger areas, such as Powys and Gwynedd, it is probable that there are also internal factors to consider. These may include 'in-situ ageing', whereby longer-term residents have remained within communities where they have made connections (see Smith et al., 2021), as well as retirement migration (Stockdale, 2014) where older people will migrate to an area which typically has lower house prices to release capital (or secure a home), or live in a rural settlement to access amenities or its perceived idyllic qualities (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022). There is less academic research on the former in Wales, but research in the Calderdale area (Smith et al., 2021) suggests an effect of 'saturated gentrification', whereby opposition to new housing developments (including smaller, more affordable units) limits opportunities to downsize within communities where people have developed meaningful social connections.

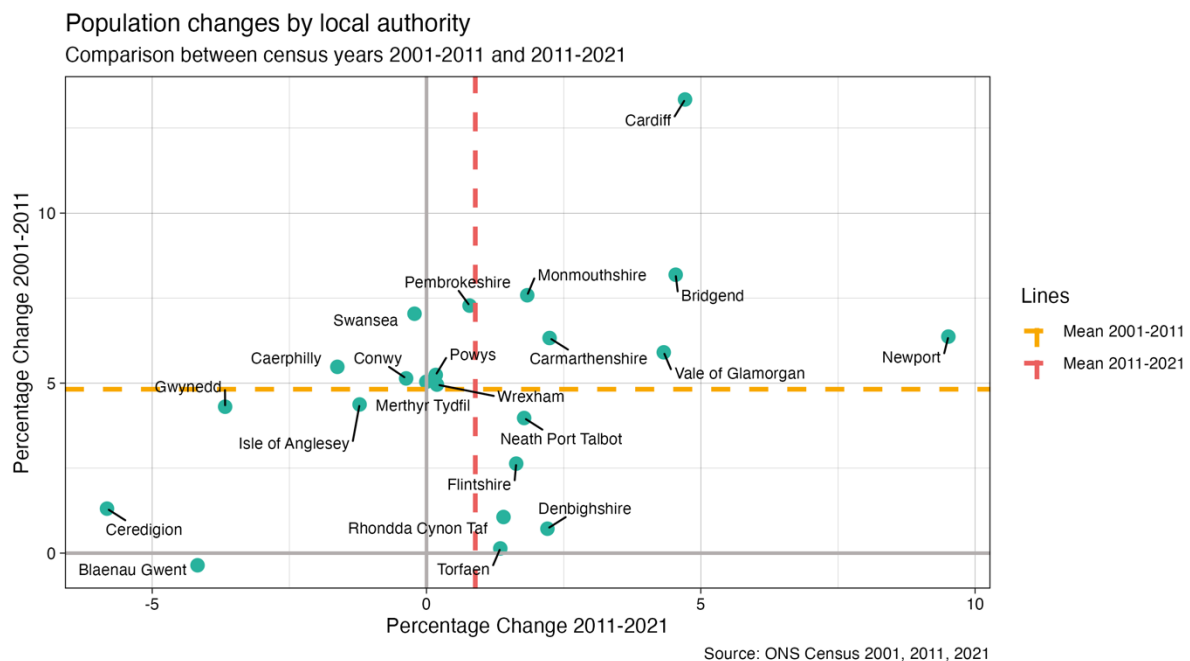


Figure 1 shows population change by local authority between the 2001-2011 and 2011-2021 census years. The data show variations between local authorities, with Ceredigion and Blaenau Gwent most notably experiencing population loss, with gains in other areas.

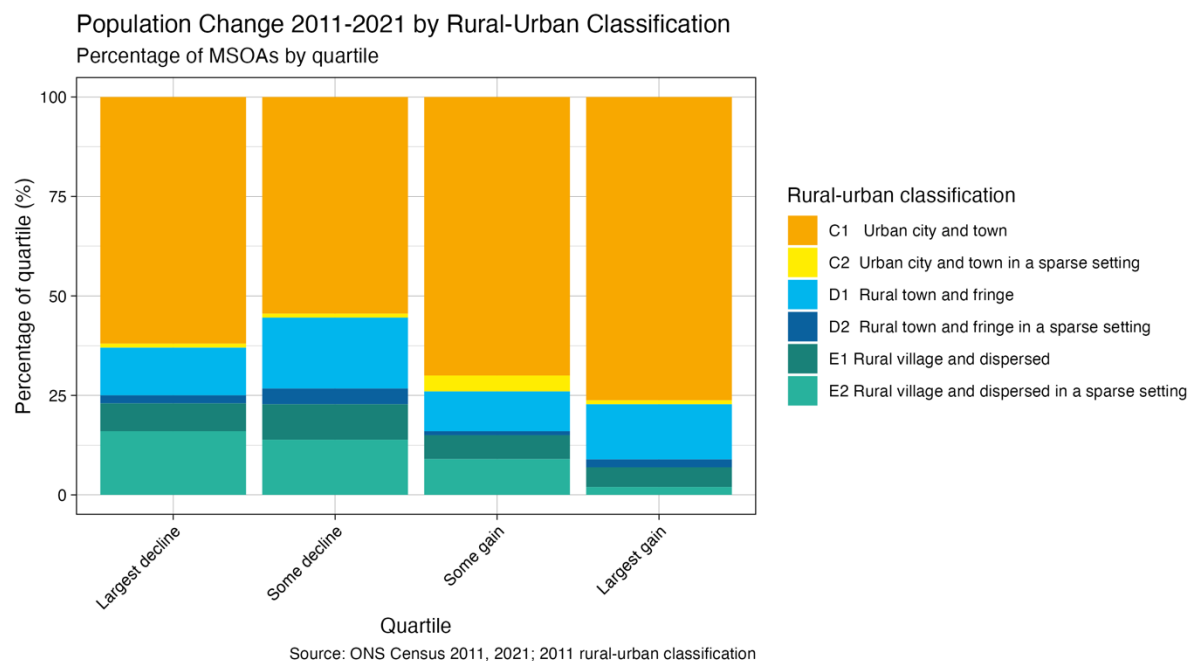


Figure 2 shows the 2011-2021 population change by quartile, breaking down MSOAs via ONS settlement type.

1.2 Longstanding planning regulations and conventions have placed restrictions on housing developments in rural areas. For example, since last year, the Welsh Government has taken broad and radical steps to find balanced solutions to managing the large number of second homes and short-term holiday lets in the Dwyfor area. Other areas, such as part of the Wye Valley, have restrictions imposed on building due to river pollution (specifically, the presence of phosphates). There are sometimes mobilisations against such developments, drawing on perceived need, scale, aesthetics and perceived rural character, environmental and social impact, and potential impact on the Welsh language. Furthermore, there are also concerns that such developments do not include sufficient percentages of affordable housing (Hill, 2022). The limitations placed on local authorities building new housing from 1981-present also means a likelihood of insufficient affordable housing within some localities where there had been a desire to stay, as well as whether the housing meets the needs of those from whom it is deemed necessary (Bramley, 2018).

1.3 Another factor contributing to the decline is younger people leaving some localities. We discuss this in more depth in the next section. However, we note three factors in particular: young people leaving for opportunities; leaving due to competition for housing; and rural incomes being insufficient for younger migrant workers to enter the UK.

1.4 The Total Fertility Rate across England and Wales has been fairly consistent since the early 1970s (ONS, 2021). There was a small increase between 2002 and 2012, peaking at 1.94, before gradually returning to 1.58 in 2020. A figure of 1.61 was recorded in 2021. Evidence suggests that younger people (effectively the generation known as 'Millennials', born c. 1982-1997) have faced several crises over the last fifteen years,

from the 2007-08 global financial crisis, uncertainty around austerity, Brexit, the COVID-19 global pandemic, and the 2022-23 cost of living crisis, and have consequently postponed having children due to worries around being able to afford the costs of raising children (Hall, 2022). Moreover, the growth of single-person households and people not in a relationship may suggest a contentedness in not seeking a partner (which is obviously not a pre-requisite for having children but appears to remain the main pattern of deciding to have children). Consequently, the pattern appears more as a generational difference, and the rural-urban demographic differences accounting for this urban-rural shift, although some other factors (such as higher wage opportunities, more options around schools or childcare) may also contribute to this difference.

2. Are young people leaving Wales? Why?

- 2.1 Some young people are indeed leaving Wales. The reasons for this emigration are numerous and complex (Owen, 2018). However, it is not surprising, given that the threshold of young adulthood in the lifecourse is associated with exploration, new experiences, and the broadening of horizons. The reasons for leaving may include opportunities for travel or experiencing living elsewhere, to work, or to study or obtain training. While some may wish to return and do so, younger people moving away produces later 'legacy shrinkage', impacting the 'natural' change through fewer births while the preponderance of typically older people will mean more deaths.
- 2.2 Around 29,000 Welsh resident students study outside of Wales, including 39% of undergraduate students. There are some areas of specialism that aren't available in Wales. Historically, medical and dentistry degrees could only be obtained in Cardiff, and there was no vet school in Wales. Recent developments in Swansea, Bangor, and Aberystwyth Universities have contributed to training opportunities in these fields. However, there are areas in which there are limited opportunities for study or training in Wales. The Welsh Government funds undergraduate students otherwise resident in Wales who go to study elsewhere in the UK in the same way as it funds those students remaining here, thus facilitating educational out-migration. The Seren Network, established by Lord Murphy, also promotes Oxbridge and the Russell Group for high-achieving sixth-former students. As there is only one Russell Group institution in Wales (Cardiff University), there is effectively an encouragement of people to leave Wales for higher education.
- 2.3 There is a trend of young people moving to, or returning to, Cardiff. The city offers a range of opportunities for work, study and training. However, there has also been a rapid increase in house prices in the last few years, attributed to the removal of tolls on the second Severn crossing and post-Covid housing dynamics. This may prompt buying in neighbouring LAAs with cheaper properties, which have typically seen a stagnant or declining population. Cardiff and Newport have both seen a growth in population between 2011 and 2021, as well as rapid house price increases in the LAAs in the vicinity of the bridge: Monmouthshire, Blaenau Gwent, Torfaen, Newport, and Cardiff have all reported considerable growth in average house prices between 2022 and 2023 (Land Registry, 2023).

- 2.4 More broadly, we need to consider the framing of 'leaving'. This often implies a one-way movement. This is problematic, as current studies of migration have moved away from an 'A-to-B' route, to ones that are more complex and cyclical. These include work on 'liquid migration' (Engbersen, 2013), which accounts for more dynamic experiences of potentially multiple migratory journeys, which may be short-term in nature. These may include: moving away to university; returning 'home'; moving to a third destination for work; and then a fourth for further study, and so forth. Leaving does not equate to never returning. However, there may be factors that limit the feasibility of doing so. This could include a lack of employment opportunities, lack of suitable or affordable housing and, in some, cases a lack of investment in basic public services. Since 2010-2020, there has been a 17% reduction in core Welsh Government funding for local government in Wales (Audit Wales, 2021). For services already stretched before COVID-19 hit, the pandemic has created new challenges like its longer-term health impacts, backlogs of patients on waiting lists and lost learning in schools, colleges, and universities.
- 2.5 Similarly, work on return migration has emphasized that many emigrants return (Alexander, 2023). There is no clear pattern from the literature (much of which focusses on rural Ireland (Farrell et al., 2012; Ní Laoire, 2007), with many comparable factors to Wales) of the duration of time 'away'. Nonetheless, return migrants typically return to the country of origin, although not necessarily the same locality or region, after gaining some qualifications, training, or skills. There is no apparent pattern as to when return migration takes place. There are several reasons for return migration, including affective (i.e., a desire to be 'home'), relational (e.g., to be near family or friends), economic (potential financial gains from work with, skills, connections, and experience), cultural (including wishing to access particular cultural and linguistic services), and environmental (wishing to be within a particular natural, social, or cultural context).
- 2.6 To this end, we note that there are emerging accounts of people returning to more rural areas of Wales from Cardiff. The growth of house prices, as well as competition for school places are typical 'push' factors, while being able to afford more salubrious surroundings (or to afford to buy somewhere at all), being close to parents (potentially coupled with care for children and parents) and living in areas where Welsh is more prominent as a community language may be considered as 'pull' factors (Owen, 2018; Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022). However, this return migration may not be strictly to a locality once left (if there are two partners who have both previously moved to Cardiff, it is unlikely that they will both be from the same vicinity), but to a 'similar' place that may be more affordable or with additional services that meet needs. The limited housing stock in more rural areas produces competition. Younger people are in a less favourable position to compete for housing where there is a demand due to typically lower earnings. Generational purchasing power differences are also notable, given the increased house prices relative to earnings.
- 2.7 Younger people, typically aged 16-24 (but not restricted to this bracket), are at the cusp of adulthood. A lifecourse perspective (which accounts for different potential stages of life rather than determining patterns by age) often associates this with experimenting, developing, and learning to be an adult. An important aspect here is experiencing the

wider world. Various youth citizenship schemes, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award or the NCS, have emphasized this aspect through expeditions. The traditional student experience in the UK of attending a residential university is another example, and in comparable work in a rural region of England, older members of a farming community cited young people moving away to attend university as a threat to the community as some did not return having experienced 'a bigger view of the world' (Jones & Tonkiss, forthcoming). Younger people may wish to leave their localities of origin, and experience a different lifestyle, different places, and different cultures. Others may wish to escape a traumatic context or situation. It would be problematic and counterproductive to try and limit younger people from leaving areas. Rather, more attention should be given on how to facilitate return migration. One aspect to note is the potential for quality of life associated with return migration (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022). These may include material (e.g., cheaper or 'better value' housing than in large cities), relational (e.g., being near friends and families), and affective (e.g., being in and having access to places or environments that help wellbeing). Remote work may be one potential avenue of facilitating return migration (Welsh Government, 2022a).

3. What are the main impacts of the decreasing number of economically active people in Wales?

3.1 As we are not specialists in this aspect, we will limit ourselves to note that there can be several impacts. It may also contribute to stigmatise Wales as a 'left-behind' country, further encouraging out-migration. However, it is not currently particularly likely to mean lower revenue for Welsh Government funding as the Barnett Formula is calculated on population (although this could, as noted, decline); UK Government public spending considerations are not solely driven by income tax revenue; Local Authority funding and revenue generation is not predicated on economic activity status; tax generation from economically active people will vary by how much people earn; economically inactive people may be quite wealthy (and can afford not to work in the case of many early retirees), particularly considering generational divides and the ability to have accumulated assets compared to younger generations.

3.2 People who are economically active can be underemployed. Evidence has shown that people want to work more and in a job that matches their skills, qualifications, and aptitude (Bell & Blanchflower, 2013).

3.3 Economic sustenance is an important consideration, but so are other factors to achieve a better quality of life. People may also be willing to trade lower salaries for better lifestyles (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones 2022). People may consider taking jobs that are paid less if it allows them to follow their passions, live in a region they want to, and has a lower cost of living to facilitate this trade.

4. What will the impact of population trends be on the demand for and delivery of public services, including housing, education and healthcare?

4.1 Two factors are important here: the aging population and shortage of certain jobs, which evidence suggests is exacerbated by Brexit (Davies, 2021). The aging population in some areas may be associated with in-migration, but also from in-situ aging. A combination of both in areas with limited housing opportunities may also impact on younger demographics in an area. Older people are more likely to require medical attention and health and social care. Facilities such as surgeries, pharmacies, clinics, and day centres are likely to be in demand in the future due to this demographic profile. However, there are current demands for health and social care workers to meet this demand. These are jobs which require medical knowledge and training and a caregiving, compassionate, and patient attributes. Employment in this sector was a key feature of post-2004 EU migration to the UK. Following Brexit and the resultant changes to UK immigration policy, it is harder for people to migrate to the UK to undertake these jobs. Similar effects can be seen in agriculture (both around agricultural workers and food processors, and also veterinary workers), where there are labour shortages in sectors which were previously associated with EU migrants (Neal et al., 2021). It would be detrimental to assume that younger people should return or move to rural areas to undertake these kinds of jobs, which they may lack the skills, attributes, or desire to do.

While evidence has shown that older people can be active volunteers in communities (Heley and Jones, 2013), data on voluntary participation during Covid suggests that older people stepped away from volunteering during the pandemic, and have taken longer to re-engage with volunteering, if they do at all (Hardill et al., 2022). Shielding, vulnerability, and chronic health conditions contribute to this withdrawal. As such, it is likely that the voluntary care given by older people is also in danger of declining, jeopardising such facilities as community transport, food banks, and so forth.

5. What steps should the Government take to mitigate the challenges of population change in Wales? How can young people be incentivised to stay?

5.1 As we note in 2.1 above, there are numerous reasons why young people leave rural areas (Stockdale, 2004). Many young people will have desires to experience different places and lifestyles, or take advantage of opportunities, including work, training, and educational experiences not available in rural areas or in Wales more broadly. There is often a discourse of rural or Welsh young people being seen as community assets that deny individual agency. Furthermore, people who remain in rural communities can be subjected to stigma, in that they have not been 'successful enough' to leave. Facilitating return migration, as well as opportunities for people to gain appropriate employment and training is an important aspect.

Alongside suitable employment opportunities that are fulfilling, appropriately challenging, paying a living wage, and align with young people's skills, aptitude, and longer-term career plans, there is a need to consider broader quality of life issues. As Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones (2022) note, quality of life is a considerable draw for in-migrants to some economically-peripheral regions. Thus, emphasis shouldn't be limited to investment for job creation, but also on relational, material, and affective quality of life. This includes suitable and quality housing (a single 24-year-old without children may not necessarily wish to live in a three-bedroom house, which may bring

higher costs through upkeep and council tax). There also needs to be consideration of time and opportunities for leisure, access to public transport, access to public services, and access to green spaces. The relatively lower housing prices in many rural areas compared to metropolitan areas may be one incentive for such in-migration (Goodwin-Hawkins & Dafydd Jones, 2022). These considerations may also sustain the use of the Welsh language in such communities (Powell, 2021).

6. How can educated and skilled migrants be encouraged to fill labour shortages?

6.1 Labour shortages are not usually in areas in which 'educated' and 'skilled' migrants have experience or wish to work. As we have noted in 4.1 above, much of the shortages in rural Wales are related to agriculture and food processing, hospitality, and health and social care. These are not always roles that are usually regarded as 'skilled' (which often overlooks the aptitude, interpersonal skills, and technical knowledge needed). Foundational economic approaches emphasize the centrality of these kinds of work for the consumption of essential services as well as the significance for jobs and public spending. They are also usually lowly-paid roles. Two possibilities suggest themselves:

- I) revising UK migration policies so that those working in these sectors can be prioritised. The CPID recently recommended the Youth Mobility Scheme so that younger people could move to work in the UK, and potentially address some of these shortages (Davies, 2021).
- II) ensuring that those working in these sectors are paid a living wage. Approaches such as adopting a Universal Basic Income (as recently trialled by the Welsh Government) could ensure that such jobs could be undertaken without falling into in-work poverty.

These approaches would allow those who have experience, aptitude, and desire to work in these sectors to make a living in doing so. There is evidence to suggest that many migrants to the UK are 'underemployed' (i.e., working in a job that does not require the skills, knowledge, or qualification that they have), with many qualifications not properly recognised (Chiswick & Miller, 2008). This can often lead to frustration and seeking alternative work. Employing people with the skills, aptitude, and desire to work in these roles, and ensuring that they can make a living in doing so, is a more appropriate strategy.

7. How important is migration, both from within the UK and outside the UK, to enable Wales to grow its population and minimise the reduction in the numbers of people of working age?

7.1 The 2021 Census showed a very small increase in Wales' population. It reached 3,107,500 people, an increase of some 44,000 (1.4%) since the 2011 census. Wales population increased by 153,000 (5.3%) between 2001 and 2011. This growth, the largest recorded since 1921, was largely attributed to migration, with 92% of the increase coming from internal migration within the UK or international migration from outwith to Wales (ONS, 2012). The 2021 Census data also notes that the number of

people born outside of the UK resident in Wales increased by 48,000 since 2011 (Welsh Government, 2022b). Thus, international migration helps sustain Wales' population.

7.2 Wales' population is also greying: 21.3% of Wales' population was aged 65 or older in the 2021 Census, up from 18.4 in 2011 (Welsh Government, 2022c). The number and proportion of those aged 90 or older has also increased to 29,700 (1%), up from 25,200 (0.8%) in 2011. Given the long-term trend of more people living longer, there is likely to be demand for increased health and social care workers to help support this population. By the same token however, increased life expectancy raises questions about presuming that economic activity ends at age 65. Improving knowledge of the older working population in Wales would be beneficial.

7.3 While the 2021 Census gives an overall picture of population stabilisation through a small increase, the population only grew in 13 LAAs, with others noting a decline in population; Newport, Cardiff, Bridgend, Monmouthshire, and the Vale of Glamorgan saw a more substantial growth. As we have discussed throughout this paper, there is a need to think about distribution of the population across Wales, and to attract people to areas that have seen decline as well as to areas which have recorded a population growth. This helps sustain services in areas recording a population decline, as well as avoiding additional pressures on areas which have recorded an increase in population. As Goodwin-Hawkins and Dafydd Jones (2022) argue, the differential in housing and other costs of living may attract people to such areas based on quality of life potential.

8. Does the Shortage Occupation List and the Skilled Migrants list currently meet Wales's needs?

8.1 We do not respond to this question.

9. How can the UK Government's immigration targets better reflect Wales's social and economic needs?

9.1 The UK Government's immigration targets reflect a long-term desire to reduce net immigration to less than 100,000. The current policies favour high-earning migration (we note that this isn't the same as high-skilled: there is ample evidence of international migrants working in positions for which they are over-qualified, and of qualifications from outside the UK not always being given due recognition – see Chiswick & Miller, 2008). This is likely to favour urban areas than rural areas, given factors like competition and demand, and the location of specialist positions and industries, and the location of larger businesses and organisations that have the specialisms and knowledge to complete the sponsorship process. Given Wales' lower GDP than the UK (Hansard, 2023), it is more challenging to find a suitable position in Wales that meets the financial threshold. The 2021 Census showed a decline of EU citizens living in Wales. The combined effects of Brexit and Covid-19 are also likely to play a role here. International migrants to Wales are typically younger, and post-2004 migrants from the EU (while still

having an urban trend) are more likely to live and work in rural settings (agriculture and food processing, tourism and leisure, construction) than other migration cohorts. As roles in rural-based employment sectors generally pay less than those located in urban areas, it will likely be harder to find jobs above the income threshold for migrants to the UK. The shortage of jobs in rural areas are often in low-paid sectors.

Research from IMAJINE recounts many EU citizens who have made West Wales and the Valleys (specifically Ceredigion and Swansea Bay) their home. They held professional jobs (although not always commensurate with their skills and qualifications), but wanted to live in the region, valuing the quality of life afforded. Similarly, research from WISERD Civil Society recounts EU citizens in Wales being active members of civil society in their communities (Guma et al., 2023) and developing strong affective attachments with Wales (Guma & Dafydd Jones, 2021), although the 2016 referendum result did challenge that affective belonging (Guma & Dafydd Jones, 2019). Many of those interviewed would not qualify for entry under the current immigration regulations yet were valued members of their community. Focussing purely on economic metrics for migration loses sight of the broader contribution international migrants to Wales can make for communities, including wanting to continue to live there.

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