



ROBUST RURAL-URBAN UPDATE

Rural-Urban Outlooks: Unlocking Synergies (ROBUST) is a European research project that advances our understanding of the interactions between rural and urban areas. Its main premise is that strong, mutually-supportive linkages between rural and urban areas are key to realising smart, circular and inclusive development for a sustainable Europe. ROBUST kicked off in June 2017 and will run until May 2021. The project brings together 24 European partners representing both research- and practice-oriented organisations. They work with 11 regional Living Labs and five Communities of Practice.

Mid Wales Living Lab

Rural Wales faces major challenges: remoteness, infrastructure, market and service access, a changing agricultural economy and a post-Brexit future. How can rural-urban connections help tackle these? Current city-led growth models are not always the answer for predominantly rural regions. The [Mid Wales Living Lab](#) links researchers at Aberystwyth University with the Welsh Local Government Association to find new ways to grow positive rural-urban connections at a distance from the city.

Our work combines research and practical action. We identify and test how smart development informs inclusive regional growth. We assist and assess new initiatives, and we engage stakeholders in a strategic vision for rural Wales. Three of ROBUST's Communities of Practice help us expand what we learn. The Sustainable Food Systems CoP puts a key Welsh industry into European perspective. Through the Public Infrastructures and Social Services CoP, we share solutions for service delivery. The Cultural Connections CoP reminds us that Welsh culture and the arts are vital for regions to thrive.



Looking Back: Activities in 2019



The team hit the road in 2019, visiting 8 rural local authorities across Wales. From north to south, we learnt how diverse parts of the country experience rurality differently. There are also shared challenges, which won't be solved by reducing rural policy to agriculture or environment. Rural Wales needs strategic vision, not just scenery, to stay liveable. We heard how opportunities for positive change include innovative responses to market failure and taking risks on new ideas.

We were on the road again to [join the Gloucestershire Living Lab to talk sustainable food ...](#) at a motorway stop. Gloucester Services partners with a local charity and supports over 130 producers within 30 miles. The visit was food for thought – especially for Living Lab members in Monmouthshire, who are exploring dynamic procurement systems to get local food onto public plates.

2019 bore fruit as we led on the [ROBUST Cultural Connections mid-term report](#), now available online.



Looking Ahead to 2020

What will 2020 bring for rural Wales? Brexit looms but the real challenges will follow the formalities. We'll track developments and look to scale solutions. Three practical case studies will headline our Living Lab work in the new year.

Linking with projects in Monmouthshire will help us learn from big data for sustainable local food. In Carmarthenshire, we'll connect research on the foundational economy to the council's new 'ten towns' regeneration initiative. Over in Pembrokeshire, following the Ancient Connections arts project will show how Celtic heritage becomes contemporary, and why culture matters for place-making, too.

Plus, we're hatching plans for the Living Lab to be the spark for co-creating an ambitious policy vision for rural Wales. Follow our progress – and stay connected.

Local Contact Information

Mid Wales Living Lab

Tim Peppin

Cyfarwyddwr Materion Adfywio a Datblygu Cynaladwy / Director of Regeneration and Sustainable Development

Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru / Welsh Local Government Association

tim.peppin@wlga.gov.uk

wlga.cymru / wlga.wales

The report has 3 lessons for rural-urban cultural links and practice-based examples. 1) Coordinate cultural life by connecting people with activities and events. 2) Enhance inclusive identities between people and place. 3) Celebrate rural culture as unique, valuable and alive.

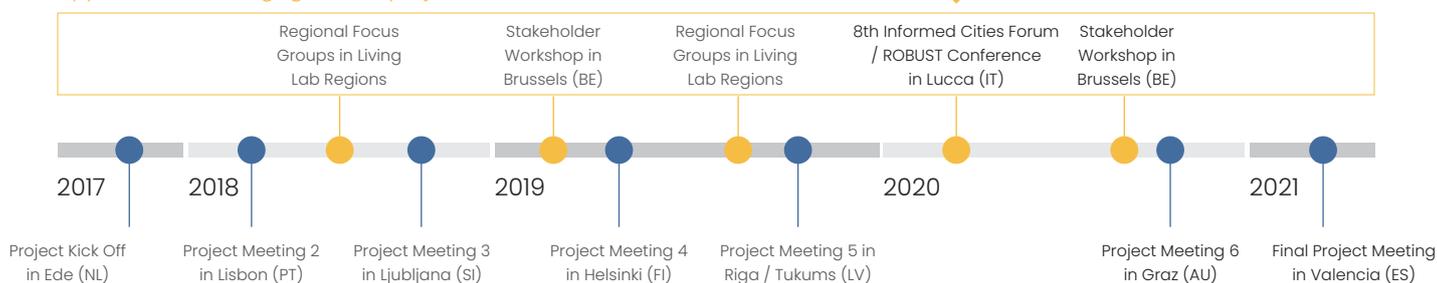
The WLGA rural conference in September advanced policy agendas. Speaking from the podium, Aberystwyth's Professor Michael Woods said that policies too often treat rural Wales as a "failed urban". How can we instead reimagine rural growth as smart and sustainable? Then, at our first Living Lab regional workshop, public, private and voluntary sector stakeholders called for a partnership approach to rural development across sectors and scales, between communities and government – and explored the obstacles to making it work. Key lessons included: true co-production, systemic change and community engagement.

Finally, our academic work saw us present research from Wales at conferences from Italy to Aberdeen. 2019 was a busy year – and there is much more to come.

ROBUST Project Timeline

The 8th Informed Cities Forum is taking place 2-3 April 2020. For more information, visit the [Informed Cities website](#).

Opportunities to engage in the project



Learn more about ROBUST

ROBUST Project Coordinator
Prof.dr.ir. JSC (Han) Wiskerke
Professor and Chair of Rural Sociology
Wageningen University
info@rural-urban.eu

To learn more about the ROBUST project and to get the latest information about cutting-edge research on rural-urban issues visit www.rural-urban.eu

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