

ONE PLANET DEVELOPMENT

In-depth research by BRETT SANDERS shows that Wales's landmark policy is in need of some relaxation. Illustrations by OPD resident NATASHA LONGWORTH.

One Planet Development (OPD) is the Welsh Government's national Low Impact Development (LID) policy. Introduced in 2010, as part of Wales's broader sustainability agenda, it allows for the development of new residential smallholdings in the open countryside, in return for meeting strict sustainability benchmarks that provide social and environmental benefits. The policy documentation uses Simon Fairlie's 1996 definition of LID almost verbatim, and its modelling is similarly rooted in Fairlie's notion of LID as a social contract.

I have been studying OPD since 2016. My recently completed PhD thesis aimed to establish whether OPD has delivered a genuine opportunity for individuals and families to develop new residential low impact smallholdings in rural Wales. I analysed the policy's operation and impact over its first 11 years, systematically examining its implementation across three key stakeholder groups: OPD applicants, decision makers (professional planners and elected members of planning committees), and local communities. I conducted 53 interviews across these stakeholder groups, in addition to assessing archival records of all 55 OPD applications determined between 2010 and 2021. This is, to date, the only independent review of the policy. The One Planet Council, the policy's grassroots advocacy group, has recently published its own appraisal covering the same period (see page 56). It is encouraging to see major overlaps in the findings of the two studies, particularly around the issues of accessibility, diversity, and Welshness.

This article gives a brief overview of my findings about the policy's broader impact, and argues that the policy's modelling has limited its appeal to a somewhat narrow demographic. It shows how professional planners initially struggled to adjudicate OPD applications due to a lack of priming for the policy, including a lack of specific guidance or training. Whilst this has since been largely overcome, deficient decision making by elected councillors on planning committees, often rooted in poor policy knowledge, is still affecting the implementation of OPD. Councillors' concerns often reflect those of local communities, as shown in third party representations to OPD planning applications. Overall OPD is a positive step towards delivering sustainable and subsistence-based lifestyles in the open countryside. It is, however, currently too complex and rigid to be widely appealing and accessible beyond a relatively small number of pioneers.

Towards Ecotopia?

It is clear that OPD has facilitated low impact developments in Wales since 2010. By the end of 2021, 39 of the 55 determined OPD applications had been approved. The policy is functioning, with new smallholdings across Wales developing a variety of land-based enterprises, products, and building vernaculars.



This success is rooted in the Welsh Government providing a legitimate policy pathway for those seeking to develop subsistence and land-based lifestyles. The fundamental achievement of the policy, compared for example to England, is the opening up of a legal space which explicitly allows for low impact residential development in the open countryside. This means that OPD has made land available at agricultural prices, which for most people is key to being able to develop a subsistence lifestyle. It provides options beyond the previous unattractive choice between being dependent on the existing limited stock of expensive smallholdings, generating significant commercial profits to satisfy other rural planning policies, or the long and arduous process of moving onto land without planning consent and seeking retrospective permission.

However, in developing such an exceptional right, the policy's modelling is stringent and strictly regulated. OPD applicants must demonstrate that they can satisfy their 'minimum income needs' from the land, create autonomous energy, water, and waste systems, and build a zero-carbon dwelling, all within a five-year period. While doing so, they must conform to an ecological footprint which requires a very significant reduction in consumption compared to a typical Welsh (or Western) lifestyle. This is highly ambitious, and a number of applicants suggest that seven to ten years would be more appropriate.

The application process is rigorous and onerous, with applicants having to produce a management plan, a legally binding document, typically around 90 pages in length. This requires significant academic and technical skills, including detailing business plans, architectural drawings, and wider environmental, transport, and social assessments. These management plans are often compared to a Master's level dissertation. Given that the day-to-day life of a successful OPD applicant is inherently practical, there is an evident tension in OPD's design, between the academic demands of the application process and the policy's lived experience, rooted in land-based activities.

Successful OPD applicants are also subject to ongoing compliance monitoring whereby failure to reach stated targets can, as a last resort, lead to loss of planning consent and, crucially, residential permission. OPD therefore carries an inherent risk, particularly as the policy is incomplete, with no guidance from the Welsh Government as to what may happen if an applicant fails to meet their targets as a result of illness, old age, or natural disaster.

As the relatively small number of applications indicates, OPD in its current form is only likely to appeal to a narrow demographic. This is defined by those motivated by issues of sustainability, wishing to live a subsistence lifestyle, with the academic skills to navigate the application process, including the writing of the management plan, land-based skills, and a willingness to accept the risks associated with compliance monitoring, as well as having sufficient financial capital to invest in the project. As a result of this, the trend in OPD applicants shows a bias towards university educated, often English, incomers and a negligible uptake from Welsh farming communities, a reality which has affected the policy's implementation at the (very) local level.

Planners

OPD's implementation at the local level has also been affected by the confluence of three other key issues: the axe of austerity cutting the resources available to Local Authorities after 2010, the pressures on local housing in rural Wales, not least due to growing second home and holiday home ownership, and concerns over local identities in the face of these changing rural social and economic dynamics.

OPD was introduced in 2010, following the 2008 financial crash and subsequent years of austerity measures. It therefore arrived at a time when additional financial support was unavailable, meaning that Local Authorities have engaged the policy with limited capacity to implement it successfully. The most obvious indicator here is the time taken to reach a decision on OPD applications. The average time taken to determine OPD applications in 2010-2021 was 68 weeks. The average in areas with the highest concentration of OPD applications (Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, and Ceredigion) was 40 weeks. Across Wales in 2014-2019, the average time taken to determine all planning applications was 11 weeks, whilst 82.5 percent of applications were determined within their allotted time period.¹ While the planning system has been affected by austerity measures, OPD applications have been disproportionately affected with longer determination times.

As with most planning applications, there are two ways in which OPD applications are determined: via Delegated Decision, in which a professional planner makes an informed decision, or by a vote of elected officials at a Planning Committee. The overall picture is that OPD has been more successfully implemented by professional planners than by elected councillors serving on planning committees. This can, for the most part, be explained by contrasting levels of knowledge of the policy in the two respective branches of the decision-making apparatus.

OPD is a novel and complex piece of planning policy. From a planner's point of view, OPD represents a departure from planning orthodoxy by allowing for residential development in the open countryside. It also introduces some very new ideas and concepts. Planners now have to decipher complex management plans that include less widely understood concepts such as 'permaculture principles'.

Going well beyond their comfort zone of considering objective data against set benchmarks, they must now also judge a new subjective variable, the 'minimum income needs' of OPD applicants. Beyond more easily understood costs, such as Council Tax and internet connections, decision-makers have to assess the feasibility of an OPD applicant's declared basic lifestyle needs, such as food (beyond that grown or reared on site), clothing, and leisure activities. As one planner put it, OPDs "are unique and interesting and it's not just about development, it is also about lifestyle, and we are not used to assessing lifestyle, so we must be able to understand it".² The policy's successful implementation therefore rests upon a successful training programme for its adjudicators.

However, in the context of austerity cuts and no technical detail to accompany the policy's emergence in 2010, planners initially received no training or guidance beyond three pages of policy documentation. As a result, it was not until the publication of specific technical guidance in 2012, and the formation of grassroots advocacy group the One Planet Council in 2015, that the policy started to gain momentum, as applications began to successfully navigate the planning system. Some 87 percent of successful applications in the period of 2010-2021 came in the period after 2016. In some respects, the policy was stillborn, until the Welsh Government's 70-page policy guidance and the One Planet Council started to deliver training to planners.

Councillors

While there do now exist pockets of expertise for OPD applications, particularly in west Wales where the majority of OPD sites are located, the same cannot be said for elected members of planning committees. Councillors have often approached applications from the perspective of existing notions of rural land use, notably urban containment and traditional agricultural methods.

There has also been some resentment about this national policy being imposed on Local Authorities by the Welsh Government, superseding local policies, draining limited resources, and affecting community cohesion. This was in evidence when Carmarthenshire passed a moratorium on OPD in October 2020. The Chair of the Planning Committee stated that OPD represents a resource burden on Local Authorities without



additional funding from the national government, particularly with regard to the requirement for ongoing compliance monitoring. It was also suggested that the policy had not met the needs of any stakeholder group, since it was too rigid for applicants, whilst offering an unfair advantage to ‘newcomers’ to develop homes in the open countryside where local people had, it was argued, been unable to do so.³

One of my key findings was that councillors’ decision making for OPD applications has often been deficient, and frequently based on political objections pertaining to perceived flaws in the policy, not with the specific applications under review. The upshot of this pattern is that councillors have often based their judgements not on a sound knowledge of the policy and material planning matters, but on broader issues pertaining to perceived injustices to local communities, the location of the application site, or a perception that the site was too small to support the applicants. It is revealing that these concerns are largely mirrored in those of local communities, as revealed by representations submitted to Local Authorities during the consultation period of OPD planning applications.

Objectors and Supporters

Seeking to facilitate community acceptance, the OPD policy framework includes ‘Community Impact Assessment’ as part of the application process. This compels applicants, as part of their management plan, to identify both negative and positive community impacts, and demonstrate how negative impacts will be mitigated.⁴

As part of OPD planning applications (as with most planning applications), local communities are invited to take part in a public consultation. The research identified that of the 51 OPD applications where the data was available, 513 third-

party representations were submitted to Local Authorities in the period of 2010-2021. Of these, 318 (62 percent) were in support of applications, while 195 (38 percent) objected. This indicated that the requirement to engage the local community has, to some degree, been successful. In fact, in only 24 percent of the OPD applications considered had there been a greater number of objections than expressions of support.

There was, however, a revealing indicator of the demographic of those responding to OPD applications. This was made possible by Carmarthenshire County Council’s unique approach to data protection. It is the only Local Authority that publishes the personal details of those that engage in the public consultation. The availability of this data allowed the proportion of respondents who were from the local area to be measured. (For the purposes of the study, this was defined as living within three miles of the OPD site being considered.)

Based on an analysis of 93 representations derived from nine OPD applications in Carmarthenshire where the addresses of the respondents were available, 90 percent of the objecting representations were from those who lived within a three-mile radius, while only 33 percent of supporting representations came from this demographic. Moreover, while the average proximity to the applicant site was around a mile for objecting representations, this compared with 27.8 miles for those supporting the application.

A further significant finding here was that while local resistance was based on a perception that the OPD would have negative impacts on local resources and infrastructure, the broader ‘non-local community’ support for OPD applications was often based on mitigating global environmental issues such as climate change. For example, 30 percent of supporting representations referred to the applicant site’s contribution

to Wales's sustainability agenda, and 50 percent suggested that the OPD site would, if approved, be making a positive environmental contribution.

Of responses directly addressing the proposed OPD's community impact, 55 percent of supporting representations claimed that this would be positive, particularly due to the provision of produce, which 51 percent of respondents noted would increase the local resilience of the rural economy. Alongside this, supporting representations often sought to act as guarantors for the character of the applicants. In fact, in 44 percent of supporting representations the authors note an existing relationship with the applicants, with 57 percent of these vouching for the applicant's personal attributes, such as knowledge, work ethic, and dedication to finding new ways of living sustainably in the open countryside.

By contrast, 59 percent of opposing representations were concerned over the impact of the proposed OPD's impact on transport issues, such as local traffic. A further 51 percent of objecting representations claimed that the applicant site was unsuitable for OPD owing to factors such as limited access, the size of the site, or the quality of the soil to support a permaculture-style project.

Communities

It is clear that the key issues raised by local objectors to OPD applications are a largely a mirror of those made by elected councillors at planning committees. While OPD has been well received by a broader environmentally conscious audience, it has often struggled, even with a specific Community Impact Assessment, to convince immediate neighbours of its benefits.

Some of the major concerns of local communities are exemplified in a letter submitted to Carmarthenshire County Council. Objecting to an OPD proposal, a local resident wrote:

'My family have lived in Llanboidy for over three generations, and about twenty years ago, we bought a plot on the immediate boundary of the village hoping to build a home for our son who is a school teacher in Bristol who would dearly like to come back to his roots with his family. Despite several attempts at planning, and to the Local Planning Department, the applications have been turned down. The village of Llanboidy is dying on its feet. We need affordable houses there to keep the local community going, unfortunately local youngsters cannot afford to buy. We need young families in the School, Church, Chapel, Shop and Post Office and the Village Hall. If I'm not mistaken the residents of this 'Community' will not contribute to any of the aforementioned.'⁵

The letter reveals a view of OPD applicants being associated with a separate and distinct 'Community' who would, the objector implies, be able to develop homes where the existing community cannot. The perception of unfairness and the disadvantaging of people with local 'roots' represented a threat to the sustainability and identity of a local Welsh village.

These concerns must be considered in the broader context of rural housing and, in particular, the effect of rising holiday and second home ownership. This longstanding issue has been exacerbated by the increasing number of people working from home since the Covid-19 pandemic. In Pembrokeshire, 6.45

percent of the housing stock is now registered as second homes.⁶ This has affected the capacity of local people to afford housing and stay in their local communities. In Carmarthenshire, house prices rose by 19.9 percent in 2021, leaving home ownership unobtainable for many of its existing residents.⁷ This has been labelled 'cultural genocide', as the local identity of rural farming communities is perceived to be changing due to the economic environment of the housing market.⁸

The intersection of community acceptance and OPD is, then, rooted in perceptions of social equity and rural identities, especially Welshness. Given that there have only been a relatively small number of applications since 2010, owing to the stringent nature of the policy benchmarks and the limited demographic of the policy take up, OPD has struggled to move beyond a reputation of being associated with the arrival of incomers with 'alternative' lifestyles into often Welsh speaking farming communities.

The combination of the policy's name, its public facing imagery, and its inherent focus on developing new ways of living in rural spaces, has sometimes served to associate it with the disruption of rural Welsh identities, in particular the cultural meaning of land and farming methods, and the perceived dilution of Welsh-speaking communities. In fact, 21 percent of objecting third-party representations raise the issue of the 'identity' of the area, revolving around fear of a changing demographic away from land being occupied by Welsh farmers, in addition to threatening the sustainability of the Welsh language.

In one example in Powys, each of the five objections to one OPD application raised the same issue: the proposed OPD site would change the character of the local area, given that as one objector put it, 'the surrounding area comprises of farms being farmed by Welsh farmers whose family have owned the farms for generations'.⁹

These issues, when combined, have resulted in objections to OPD applications being articulated in narratives of unfairness, 'not in my back yard' (NIMBY) attitudes, and concerns over local identities which, to some degree, are rooted in legitimate existing local issues.

Conclusions

In summing up the experience of OPD since 2010, the policy should be celebrated as a bold and ambitious framework that allows for the development of land-based subsistence lifestyles in rural Wales. OPD represents a unique opportunity in the UK. Nevertheless, though the policy is functioning, there is scope for the Welsh Government to simplify and streamline its complexity and to reduce the bureaucratic demands on its key stakeholders.

The question, then, is not whether the policy has successfully facilitated LID in Wales. It has. The real question surrounds its scalability, and its ability to attract applicants from a wider demographic base, which could allow OPD to more meaningfully contribute to Wales's national sustainability targets.

There are several things that could help. Firstly given the evident challenges in implementing OPD, additional funding to train

decision makers would improve decision-making and help to speed up the determination periods. Whilst the One Planet Council has commendably trained a number of planners, it is clear that elected councillors sitting on planning committees would benefit from specific OPD training.

The Welsh Government could make council or disused land available on a tenancy basis to those seeking to pioneer low carbon lives. This would reduce the cost of entry to OPD, particularly to young people from Wales. Though OPD makes land available at agricultural rates, the capital investment required for the land, infrastructure, and home build, not to mention consultant fees, still puts the opportunity well out of reach to many from less affluent backgrounds. If OPD is to conform to the social, economic, and environmental pillars of sustainability, it will need to become more accessible and attract a more diverse demographic.

The establishment period could be elongated to seven or ten years. Interviews I conducted with current and prospective applicants identified that turning an oft-unloved bare field site into a successful residential and sustainable smallholding capable of meeting their 'minimum income needs' within five years was a tough challenge, especially for those without a background in land-based activities.

A longer establishment period would likely make the policy more accessible to a wider demographic base. It would also encourage greater experimentation with crops, and approaches to land-based enterprises which are currently too risky in the context of the ongoing compliance monitoring and the potential loss of OPD's exceptional right to live in the open countryside, should targets be missed.

In the context of risk, the Welsh Government could also plug the gap in the policy with regard to the impact of missing key benchmarks as a consequence of illness, old age or natural disaster. The recent Covid pandemic, for example, has shown that events out of applicants' control may affect their ability to meet their targets. Alongside this, the ongoing compliance monitoring could be rebranded as a 'reporting' exercise. This would change the narrative, from a surveillance regime that requires Local Authorities to interrogate the annual report to submitting an annual audit, one that requires less forensic detailing of an applicant's lifestyle.

The policy as it stands is overly bureaucratic. Though this was, to some degree, an understandable outcome of producing a novel policy framework that allowed for residential development in the open countryside, the policy has shown no sign of abuse, so a relaxation of the burden of proof, both at the application stage and in the ongoing monitoring, would serve to make the policy more appealing whilst simultaneously reducing the resource requirements of the policy on Local Authorities.

Finally, the policy's Community Impact Assessment would benefit from making specific mention of Welshness, particularly around the Welsh language. These and other improvements could be made by renewing the OPD Practice Guidance, which is now 11 years old. The first version helped to keep the policy alive. An update could serve to widen the policy's appeal, scalability, and, ultimately, its continued growth and success.



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