

NEATH PORT TALBOT VALLEYS ACTION PLAN

Comments by the Bevan Foundation

1. Introduction

The draft Valleys Action Plan is a welcome commitment to recognise the specific challenges facing the Neath Port Talbot valleys. Basing the plan on the views of people in the area is also a very welcome approach.

In taking forward a plan, we recognise that the geography of Neath Port Talbot's valleys is particularly challenging, with the major valleys converging on different coastal towns and some communities looking outside the authority's boundaries for services. We also note that there are several distinct 'clusters' of problems, e.g. the Afan Valley (Cymmer, Gwynfi and Glyncothrog LSOAs) and western valleys, where the challenges may be different.

We also acknowledge that there have been numerous attempts to address the valleys' problems, most of them not especially successful not least because there is no quick fix.

2. Reversing economic decline and improving jobs and skills

The aim of creating employment opportunities is very welcome, but we'd suggest it should be at the centre of the strategy and developed further. The long-term future of these communities depends on a resilient economic base, which will only be provided through a *combination* of:

- thriving local businesses (of all kinds) within the valleys
- good access to economic opportunities outside the valleys

The idea of 'inclusive growth' might be useful here because it involves ensuring that economic growth achieved through the City Deal benefits all parts of the city region (i.e. it is geographically inclusive) and all groups of people (including people in low paid jobs and who are not currently working).

We have identified three key ways of achieving inclusive growth:

- **Stimulating economic growth within the valleys**

There is much that can be done to support and encourage businesses to start up and flourish within the valleys including:

- Increasing the procurement of goods and services by **all** public bodies from local suppliers. This involves considering how contracts are packaged, considering supply chain development etc.;
- Provision of small-scale, affordable workspaces for freelancers and self-employed workers (e.g. that at Dove Workshop, Banwen);
- Development and promotion of local 'niche' products (e.g. whinberry jam; miners' lamps etc);
- Support and development for sectors with potential e.g. social care, tourism.

While there are some proposals in the draft action plan, we'd anticipate that achieving measurable impact will need a step change in intervention.

- **Improving access to jobs created in Swansea / Neath / Port Talbot with a step-change to public transport.**

As the action plan recognises there is an issue of access to services but access to work is vital too. It is likely that some people living in the valleys will want to travel to work to access the wider opportunities available in the larger towns. Detailed mapping of public transport provision against employment opportunities undertaken by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (see Annex) shows that Neath Port Talbot has one of the highest proportion in Wales of deprived Lower Super Output Areas classed as 'disconnected'.

Community transport and demand-responsive services are useful but are not a substitute for scheduled services for travel to work. There ideally needs to be a region-wide approach (as in the metro idea) which caters for travel-to-work and not just the retirement market.

Ahead of the metro, we wonder if the council could use its local transport powers to subsidise some non-commercial services at times and costs appropriate for workers? It could be run as a pilot in an area with the greatest access problems, perhaps as a statutory quality partnership with an operator?

In addition, could it pilot flexible, efficient and affordable demand-responsive services that are more like a taxi than current demand-responsive services?

- **Supporting people into work**

The plan also recognises that helping people into work is important, but we would question whether DWP and Welsh Government programmes are of sufficient scale, reach and impact. We've suggested that action to help people into work needs to be linked with a detailed understanding of job and training opportunities in the local labour market, and should follow the 'gold standard' of what works¹ i.e. combined pre-employment training, a work placement and a guaranteed job interview.

We recognise that not everyone is able to compete in the open labour market and we have suggested that public bodies consider introducing 'intermediate labour market schemes'. These offer people furthest from the labour market secure, paid work together with training, personal development and job search activities, often delivering services for community benefit.

- **Spatial planning**

Elsewhere in the south Wales valleys we have urged that one or two locations be identified as 'growth poles' where services and investment can be concentrated and which can counter the focus on the city within the city deal. While we initially saw these as being sub-regional centres (e.g. Merthyr Tydfil) we can see benefits in identifying and supporting a limited number of local growth hubs.

¹ See XXXXXXX

The geography of Neath Port Talbot's valleys makes the choice of a local growth hubs less obvious, but we'd suggest that – not withstanding possible political issues – it could help to improve access to jobs and services.

3. Improving skills of young people and adults

It is strikingly clear that people with few qualifications are very much worse off in the labour market than those with higher level qualifications. Not only do they have lower pay but they are more likely to have insecure work. It is widely forecast that automation, and to a lesser extent Brexit, will reduce both the numbers and quality of semi- and unskilled jobs, so upskilling the existing and future workforce is a key task.

We would suggest that broadening the actions in the action plan beyond the proposals for training in adult social care should be considered, including:

- High quality and universal early years provision;
- Careers advice, guidance and information for all pupils from year 7;
- Effective support and guidance for young people who leave school without 5 GCSEs A-C;
- Bite-sized, flexible adult learning provision in a wide variety of vocational areas;
- Developing clear progression pathways into occupations available in the Swansea City region.

There may also be potential in major regional employers e.g. health care providers, education establishments, housing associations, collaborating in their workforce planning to create training and recruitment opportunities in growth hub areas.

4. Community regeneration

Many of the proposals for community regeneration support local economic development and might be better regarded as such. There is additional potential for community regeneration to support the infrastructure of a caring and supportive society, including thriving community organisations of all kinds and well-used community spaces (including parks and playing fields, not just indoor facilities).

Small-scale 'community chest' type funding can stimulate local organisations, along with support for good governance.

5. Oversight and Monitoring

This is vital and needs to be coupled with scope to adapt and respond to feedback when things are working (or not), capacity to develop and seize new opportunities (perhaps with seedcorn funding) and maintain leadership.

ANNEX CONNECTIVITY OF LSOAs IN WALES

Source: Overcoming deprivation and disconnection in UK cities, by Alasdair Rae, Ruth Hamilton, Rich Crisp and Ryan Powell.

