



Forty Years of Regeneration in the Upper Afan Valley



A Bevan Foundation Report

Acknowledgements

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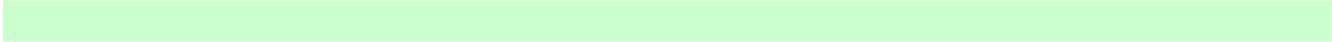
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Foreword

This important report on the future of the Upper Afan Valley which I commissioned as the local Member of Parliament, has been written by its Director, Dr Victoria Winckler.

The report addresses some of the big challenges facing those of us who live in Valley communities – formerly mining communities. Indeed, these are challenges that are faced by so many post industrial communities throughout the world from Abercregan to Appalachia.

I was born and grew up in a neighbouring valley where the central characteristics of our lives in the post-war world was the great sense of hope created by a commitment to full employment, growing educational opportunities for all and the growing welfare state whose main proud feature was our new National Health Service.

The collapse of the coal industry locally and throughout Britain however left a great void. Remarkably, there has been a great resilience in these communities, despite the adversity being faced by them. The resources of hope that the writer Raymond Williams identified during the 1984-85 strike helped to hold these communities together down the decades – solidarity, fellowship, community learning, neighbourliness, partnership, pride in collective memory and collective achievement.

The Gwynfi Co-op, the Glyncorwg Ponds and Mountain Bike Centre, the Croeserw Workingmen's Club, campaigns around the achievement of an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and now the new Community Enterprise Centre are all bright emblems of this resilience.

But we need more than that to sustain a new beginning with the welcome emergence of a different green local economy based in part on leisure, tourism and life-long learning. The key role of our Local Authority, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, and our Welsh Assembly Government in partnership with local communities will I am sure be a feature of the public discussion on our collective future.

I hope this report, to be published appropriately at Croeserw Workingmen's Club - that citadel of community inspiration and hope - will provide an ideal opportunity for the start of our collective action to renew our Valley communities.

Dr Hywel Francis
MP for Aberavon



SUMMARY

This report looks at the regeneration of the Upper Afan valley – what has been done in the past, what is being done now, and what might be done in the future. Its main findings are:

- The collapse of coal mining is the main cause of social and economic disadvantage. For too many people, life is characterised by ill health, lack of jobs, low though improving educational attainment and lack of local services.
- For decades, the government response was inaction, with what was done proving little more than a token gesture that made little impact.
- Today, there is a huge range of activity, including community enterprises and voluntary groups, local authority, UK and Welsh Assembly Government initiatives, and, crucially, the private sector.
- Together, these bodies are transforming the Upper Afan valley. Tourism and community enterprise are both making outstanding contributions to change, with investment in other services as well.
- But the success is fragile. Tourism is vulnerable to recession and competition, the future of a number of regeneration projects is uncertain, and pressure on public spending could see cuts in regeneration and in mainstream services. Socio-economic problems remain.
- Regeneration must continue to be a high priority over the next decade, through long-term commitment not short term initiatives, delivered in a co-ordinated and democratically accountable way.
- The environment – a key asset - needs to be safeguarded, particularly against damaging development.
- The benefits of investment into the area need to be maximised through the tourist pound and securing greater community benefits from any energy generation.
- Community activity needs to be fostered especially community enterprise.
- Travel to work outside the valley is likely to continue to be the norm and requires decent public transport.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Upper Afan Valley is one of the many communities in the south Wales valleys that faces serious challenges following the loss of jobs. Over the years it has seen a number of different approaches to tackling the area's problems, ranging from a Home Office 'experiment' in the 1970s to community co-operatives in the 1980s and 1990s to current Action Plans for the valley. Each regeneration initiative has had its own rationale, and has not necessarily build upon or learned from previous efforts, although some have achieved a great deal. Meanwhile, the communities in the Upper Afan Valley continue to be amongst the most poor and disadvantaged in Wales.

It was to capture and reflect on this history of regenerating the valley that Hywel Francis, M.P., for Aberavon, asked the Bevan Foundation to undertake this study in 2008. The aim was to ensure that the experiences of past regeneration projects were not forgotten, and to consider whether there are any lessons to be learned from these and current regeneration activities. It is not, however, an evaluation of regeneration initiatives, nor a history nor a community study. It is, instead, some reflections on regeneration in the valley over the last forty years which we hope will act as a stimulus for further discussion about 'where next'.

It is important to remember that 'regeneration' is not the only influence on the well-being of residents of the Upper Afan valley. Wage rates, including the National Minimum Wage, taxation and conditions at work are critically important for those in employment, whilst pension and benefit levels, social care provision and education are also vital. However, these issues are outside the remit of this particular report.

The Study

The study involved a brief review of relevant statistics and local research to summarise the issues the valley faces, along with semi-structured interviews with a wide range of individuals and organisations, including local council officers, community development practitioners, local entrepreneurs, local elected politicians and individual residents. A list of all those interviewed is at Annex 1. We have inevitably not been able to interview everybody that may have an interest or involvement in the regeneration of the valley.

Some of the interviews were group interviews and others were individual, depending on the availability and preferences of interviewees, and we also interviewed a small number of people who attended the 2010 River Festival. A first round of interviews was undertaken in summer 2008 with follow-up interviews undertaken in summer 2010. We are very grateful to all those who gave their time and shared their thoughts with us.



It is important to say that the views in this report are those of the report author alone. It was funded by the Parliamentary allowances of the office of Dr Hywel Francis M.P, but the design, conduct and writing up of the study has been entirely independent. The work in 2008 was undertaken by a freelance researcher, John Adam, and that in 2010 and the writing of this report by Victoria Winckler with additional fieldwork by James Radcliffe.

If this report does only one thing (though I hope it does more!) it demonstrates the huge difficulty that *any* regeneration initiative faces. The Upper Afan Valley lost more than three-quarters of its jobs in the 1960s, and has lost yet more since. Replacing those jobs, restoring people's confidence and self-esteem, and improving education and health are long-term tasks. A great deal has been achieved in the last forty years, perhaps more than is widely credited, but there is still a huge amount more to do.

2. THE ISSUES

The Upper Afan Valley is a heavily wooded, narrow and steep-sided valley which some years ago acquired the nickname 'Little Switzerland'. It sits on the western fringes of the South Wales coalfield, about 10 miles north east of Port Talbot. The area consists of a number of towns and villages of varying sizes. The larger villages are Abergwynfi, Blaengwynfi, Cymmer, Croeserw and Glyncoerrwg, while smaller settlements include Abercregan, Dyffryn and Cynonville.¹ Each village has its own identity, character and strengths, such that some people have questioned whether the 'Upper Afan Valley' is a meaningful label for the area. It is, however, one that is widely used in regeneration and which is used as short hand in the rest of the report.

The Development of the Upper Afan Valley

The villages grew up to serve a boom industry which has now disappeared - coal. Mining came relatively late to the Upper Afan, with the opening of the South Wales Mineral Railway in the 1860s which enabled coal to be extracted on a large scale. Glyncoerrwg pit quickly became a booming business, followed by Cymmer in the 1870s, Dyffryn in 1890, and Abergwynfi and Blaengwynfi in 1892/3. Between 1861 and 1901 the population of the parish of Glyncoerrwg grew ten-fold, from roughly 600 people to well over 6,000.

For several generations, jobs for men were relatively plentiful and generally demanded a high level of skills and were for the most part relatively well-paid.² But employment in the coal industry started to decline in the 1960s with the last pit, at Glyncoerrwg, closing in 1970.³ Of the seventeen valleys in the South Wales coalfields, the Afan valley was the first to lose all its pits. Mining jobs were available in nearby pits for some years, but during the 1990s coal-mining almost entirely disappeared from South Wales.

The Upper Afan valley also benefited from a number of manufacturing jobs either in the area or nearby. The steel industry was re-nationalised and received major investment, the petro-chemical industry was developed at Baglan Bay and large numbers of manufacturers were encouraged to open factories in South Wales. Christie Tyler, Fiona Footwear, Action Furniture and others employed a significant number of local people. But the manufacturing sector shed jobs from the 1960s onwards, and today there are no major manufacturing plants left in the Upper Afan valley.

Socio-Economic Disadvantage

The extent of social and economic disadvantage in the Upper Afan Valley is well known and has been set out in many other documents. It is summarised here simply as context rather than to add to the tale of woe.

By any stretch of the imagination, the scale of job loss suffered is huge. The area lost more than three quarters of all its employment in the 1960s, with the closure of its pits, and there have been further losses since with the closure of manufacturing and a number of local services (e.g. petrol station, shops) whilst the increase in public sector employment has been modest and in no way offsets the numbers of jobs lost.

Employment has dropped so dramatically that barely half the population of working age, male or female, was in employment in 2001 (Table 1). Those who do work were predominantly employed in 'process plant and machine operative' or 'elementary' occupations, jobs which are typically low paid and insecure. A substantial proportion travel outside the valley to find work - in 2001, the majority travelled more than 10km, mainly to other locations within Neath Port Talbot, although between a quarter and a third travel to Bridgend County Borough.⁴

Nearly half the population in the Upper Afan Valley is classed as 'economically inactive', with more than three-quarters last having worked more than five years ago or never having worked.⁵ A further 5% of the working age population is unemployed. As a result a relatively high proportion of the population, around four out of ten people of working age, received some form of state benefit in May 2010.⁶

Table 1 Employment, Unemployment and Inactivity, 2001

Percentage of the population of working age

	Cymmer	Glyncorrgw	Gwynfi
In employment	50.1	47.0	47.2
Of which in process plant & machinery and elementary occupations (%)	42.1	41.4	35.8
Unemployed	6.1	5.6	5.3
Economically inactive	43.8	47.4	47.5
Of which last worked before 1996 / never worked	76.0	75.0	73.0
Benefit claimants (b) (% of population of working age claiming job seekers, incapacity benefits, lone parents and other income-related benefits)	34.9	36.1	34.8

Source: all data from 2001 Census, accessed 4th July 2010 www.nomisweb.co.uk except benefits data, from Ward Labour Market Profiles for Cymmer, Glyncorrgw and Gwynfi, accessed 4th July 2010 www.nomisweb.co.uk

Going along with low levels of employment are high levels of other socio-economic disadvantage, which are summarised in Table 2.

In terms of education, around 60% of the population has no qualifications at all and the proportion with higher level qualifications is well below the Welsh and British averages. Although the Valley's five existing primary schools perform reasonably well in Estyn inspections, they face the challenge of children starting school with well below average skills. In Duffryn Afan (which is planned for closure in 2011), Estyn noted that children 'enter the school with an extremely low baseline assessment'⁷ whilst at Abergwynfi Primary School, Estyn commented that 'the annual intake comprises few able and many less-able pupils'.⁸ At Cymer Afan Comprehensive, Estyn noted that its intake was weighted 'significantly towards the lower end of [the] range' of ability whilst achievements at GCSE are below local and national averages.⁹

Ill health is also a significant issue. More than a third of people in the Upper Afan valley say that they have a limiting long-term illness, whilst life expectancy is amongst the shortest in the UK – at 74.8 years in Cymmer it is nearly 3 years less than the figure for Wales. Social housing provides a significant proportion of homes and levels of car ownership are relatively low. More than a third of primary school pupils claim free school meals (at Croeserw primary school nearly two thirds do so¹⁰).

Accessibility is frequently highlighted as difficult. In 2001, more than four out of ten households did not have access to a car. Even when households do have a car, young people or household members who do not have use of the car must rely on public transport. Public transport services are variable: although Blaengwynfi and Cymmer have an hourly bus to Port Talbot, and Cymmer and Croeserw have a service every 15 minutes to Maesteg. Glyncorwg has a service to Cymmer to connect with buses there. However, there are no through services to Neath on weekdays nor through services to Port Talbot on Sundays. Services stop in the early evening (the last bus from Port Talbot is at 1855 although that from Bridgend to Cymmer is at 2220). There were a number of accounts of poor reliability of services and of services not being fit for purpose, in particular being unable to navigate steep and narrow hills sometimes forcing passengers to get off.

Table 2: Selected socio-economic indicators 2001

	Cymmer	Glyn-corrwg	Gwynfi	Neath Port Talbot	Wales
Qualifications (a):					
% with no qualifications	60.8	64.8	58.7	47.0	14
% with higher level qualifications	8	6	7.2	12.9	28
People with limiting long term illness % (b)	37.7	34.4	37.9	29.4	23.2
Life expectancy at birth (c)	74.8	76.4	78.3	76.8	77.6
Tenure, % of households (b)					
Owner occupied	56.1	58.2	65.11	71.3	71.3
LA/HA rented	35.8	32.5	22.9	20.3	17.9
Private rented	3.5	4.2	8.41	5.1	7.4
Households with no car (b), %	41.8	41.4	44.3	30.2	26.0
Percentage primary school pupils claiming free school meals (d)	44.6	36.6	36.0	--	

Sources:

- (a) 2001 Census, ONS – accessed 19 Feb 2009, www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk; Wales data from Welsh Assembly Government (2009) The Levels of Highest Qualification held by Working Age Adults in Wales, 2008 SB 61/2009
- (b) 2001 Census, ONS – accessed 19 Feb 2009, www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk
- (c) Life expectancy at birth for all persons 1999 to 2003, accessed 4th July 2010 <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/product.asp?vlnk=14466>
- (d) Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (n.d.) Neighbourhood Profile for Cymmer, Glyncorrwg and Gwynfi, <http://www.npt.gov.uk/default.aspx?page=5003> accessed 4th July 2010

Given the scale of change faced by the Upper Afan Valley, it is hardly surprising that the population has been in steep decline. Over the 20 year period 1981-2001 it has dropped by nearly a quarter (Table 3) as nearly 2,000 people have left the area. Population loss along with commercial pressures have triggered a contraction in a wide range of public and private services in the valley with the local petrol station, bank, clinic, job centre and a school all closing in recent years.

Table 3 Population Change in the Upper Afan valley, 1981-2001

	1981	1991	2001	Change 1981 – 2001
Cymmer	3,883	3,326	2,883	-25.8%
Glyncorrwg	1,414	1,279	1,166	-17.5%
Gwynfi	2,000	1,741	1,495	-25.3%
Upper Afan valley	7,297	6,346	5,544	-24.0%

Source: 1981, 1991 and 2001 Censuses

Community Views

There has been extensive consultation with residents and community groups on their views of the issues the valley faces, including those undertaken for the Communities First Action Plan in 2006, Neath Port Talbot local development plan, Neath Port Talbot Community Plan and Neath Port Talbot Western Valleys Afan Valley plan¹¹. Indeed some residents have complained of consultation fatigue:

‘repeated investigations into the Afan Valley and its issues had not delivered the hoped for outcomes. The result is that local organisations and residents are becoming disillusioned towards new initiatives.’

Minutes of the Welsh Assembly Government’s Afan Valley Forum on 13th May 2010

The issues raised in these various documents are summarised in the Afan Valley Area Regeneration Plan¹² (with the exception of those concerning wind farms), and are very broadly:

- Shortage of jobs, negative perceptions and the need to make the most of tourism development
- Limited provision of community learning opportunities and lack of information
- Decline of essential services such as banks, shops
- Concerns about house affordability, suitability, design and condition
- Difficult access to health care services
- Unhealthy lifestyles
- Environmental eyesores and derelict buildings / sites
- Public transport frequency, connections between villages and to towns

Further discussions on the issues are taking place in meetings about the latest regeneration initiative and mainly reiterate that they are employment, transport and the environment, with childcare sometimes being raised also. Although we did not undertake extensive interviews with residents, those we spoke to, along with stakeholder bodies, broadly shared these views about both the positive and negative features of the valley.

Some Positives

It is very important to remember that although the Upper Afan valley has more people who are disadvantaged than many other parts of Wales, not everyone in the area experiences social and economic difficulties nor are local services necessarily poor.

More than 1,500 residents of the Upper Afan are employed, either full time or part time, and of those there are nearly 300 people in professional, associate professional and managerial jobs and more than 200 have skilled trade jobs. Nearly 300 people have degree-level

qualifications. More than three-quarters of the population say they enjoy good or fairly good health and six out of ten households have a car. Not everyone, then, is poor or disadvantaged.

Some local services and facilities are good too. Cymer Afan Comprehensive School was described by Estyn as follows:

Cymer Afan Comprehensive is a good school. Its pupils make very good progress during their time at school. There are many good features in the quality of education it provides and in the effectiveness of its leadership and management. Pupils' learning experiences have outstanding features.¹³

Although the school's catchment area was in the most disadvantaged ten per cent in Wales, its achievements were in the top quarter for schools of this kind.

Similarly positive reports have been produced in respect of the area's current primary schools, and on the pre-school playgroups and Flying Start groups:

Croeserw is a good primary school which gives its pupils every chance to succeed in their learning and broaden their experiences and understanding of and preparation for life. They make good progress and enjoy good teaching. The school is well led and it gives good value for money.¹⁴

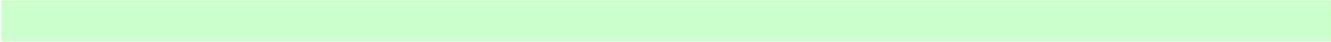
[Glyncorrwg Primary] is a good school with no important shortcomings. Pupils say they really enjoy school and parents are pleased with the quality of education provided.¹⁵

[Abergwynfi Junior] is a good, well-managed school, which is working hard to give its pupils a sound, properly balanced education. Effective leadership is provided by a very capable and enthusiastic headteacher¹⁶



The local environment is outstanding, not only in terms of landscape quality but air and water quality are excellent too. As a result, the three Upper Afan wards are in the ten **least** deprived in Wales¹⁷.

Recorded crime levels in the Upper Afan are around average,¹⁸ with anti-social behaviour accounting for the vast majority of incidents.



The point of briefly describing some of the positive features is not to gloss over the problems that the area faces, but to highlight that not everyone in the area is disadvantaged, and not everyone has borne the burden of social and economic change. Indeed for people with a good income, nice home and a car, the Upper Afan valley offers a good quality of life:

It's great for me, it's a lovely place to live. I've got a job, I've got a car. I can take the dog for a walk in the hills from my doorstep.

In other words, it is not so much the *place* that is disadvantaged, but *some* of the people who live there. This is crucially important to the way in which regeneration is understood and taken forward, as will be seen later.

Conclusion

The late development and early demise of the pits in the Upper Afan valley have left a legacy of disadvantage, with the valley having a higher proportion of residents than average on virtually every measure of socio-economic deprivation. How those problems have been tackled in the last forty years is the subject of the next section.

3. EARLY EFFORTS: THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMME

The *Community Development Project* (CDP) ran from 1969 to the mid 1970s and was one of the very first regeneration schemes seen in the United Kingdom. It was conceived as a way to challenge a 'culture of poverty', and had a strong emphasis on self-help and resident participation.

"CDP is a modest attempt at action-research into the better understanding and more comprehensive tackling of social needs through closer co-ordination of central and local official and unofficial effort, informed and stimulated by citizen initiative and involvement."¹⁹

The CDP in Upper Afan

The Upper Afan Valley was the only CDP in Wales and one of just twelve across the UK. Indeed we were told there had been some reluctance to locate a CDP in south Wales because it acknowledged the existence of poverty, with Glyncorwg eventually being chosen because an adverse report on local education at the time made it hard for the then Glamorgan County Council to resist. The lack of political enthusiasm for the CDP was said to have been a contributing factor to its relatively low profile subsequently.

Like all CDPs, as well as having a small number of community-based staff, the Upper Afan had an equal number of staff in a dedicated research team based in a nearby university – in this case the then Town Planning Department at the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology (UWIST) in Cardiff. However, this CDP was even more research-orientated than most. One member of the CDP staff commented that 'it was much more oriented to research' whilst a reviewer of the CDP final report noted that :

Their principal purpose was study rather than action'²⁰

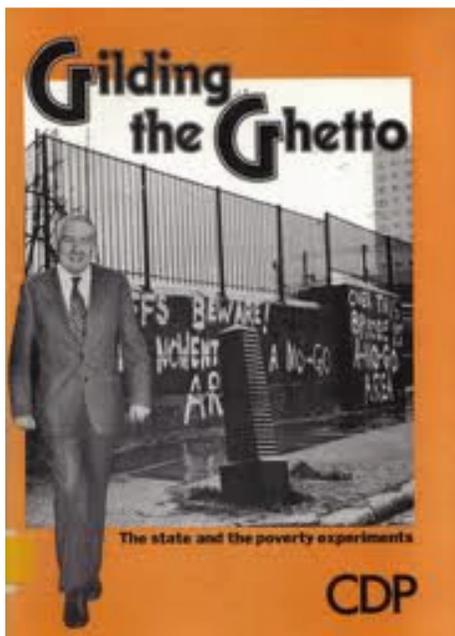
The research was said to have produced 'reams of paper' but none of the reports were seen to have had much impact.

Although the Upper Afan was one of the earlier CDPs, one former member of staff felt it had been slow to get going on the ground partly because of staffing issues. Nevertheless, it did eventually initiate a number of community projects, from the improvement of physical amenities such as Croeserw school and a number of local community centres, to a demand-led transport project, an advice service (jointly with Citizens Advice Bureaux) and several play

schemes. The project itself was housed in Cymmer Resource Centre, and as well as providing administrative resources, e.g. a photocopier, it also housed a badminton court and dark room.

There were various structures in place to engage with the community and bring service providers together, an innovation for the time, but local people's involvement was reported to have been limited. It was suggested that the CDP itself was 'not that good at involving people', as well as having relatively few staff.

In terms of its research findings, the Upper Afan team, like most of the CDPs, rejected the original CDP thinking that poverty was due to the individual characteristics of the area's residents, and instead located the area's problems in terms of larger questions of economic and social change and in particular the process of de-industrialisation. Studies highlighted the extent of job loss in the valley and the process of out-migration for example.



One of the reports from the CDPs

However, whilst other CDPs saw the their area's problems in terms of the wider inequalities and disempowerment of disadvantaged communities in society, the Upper Afan CDP took a 'planning' approach – perhaps not surprising given the research team was located in the Town Planning department of a University. They focused on the geographical relationship between the Upper Afan Valley and the rest of south Wales, arguing that Glyncoerrwg's geographical isolation and 'growth poles' outside the area were key. Clearly, it is impossible to consider Glyncoerrwg without including its relative isolation or the fortunes of the towns that surround it. But these are not the only issue – the question of why a community that had lost more than three-quarters of its jobs, for which it had already paid a high price, was left without any alternative livelihoods or any additional services was not asked.

The Upper Afan CDP closed in 1976 when Home Office funding ended. Afan District Council funded the resource centre until 1981, but the activities gradually ran down and the building was eventually sold in the late 1980s.

The legacy

More than 30 years on, the Upper Afan CDP is still well-known in the area. Most of the individuals interviewed for this report were aware of it, but had a fairly pessimistic view about its impact. One elected member concluded that “I don’t think it worked really” while a community activist felt that it “left no imprint at all.” One public sector worker said that “the Miners’ Museum is their only lasting legacy. That only happened as they had £9,000 left over which they gave over for it. Everything else they were involved with has closed.”

A former member of staff felt that there was little legacy because ‘not a lot was done even when they were there in terms of regeneration’. Only the advice service (now run on an outreach basis by the local Citizens Advice Bureau) and two playgroups remain as a legacy. The CDP was described as ‘the least successful of all CDPs’.

Even the CDP team were downbeat about their impact:

“The assessment of specific schemes have illustrated that in general experimental schemes sponsored by the Project were not effective in promoting policy change. In some cases the CDP funds were used for schemes with limited experimental content (e.g. education) and in others where a programme did reveal a potential for policy change (e.g. Cymmer Afan Youth Wing Transport Scheme) no action followed.”²¹

Conclusion

The conclusion must be that this ‘experiment’ to tackle poverty largely failed the people of the Upper Afan. The combination of the focus on research, a slow start, limited community engagement and lack of political support meant that the project initiated relatively few activities, which had little impact on local social and economic conditions and left virtually no legacy. Whilst the project may have helped to change thinking about the causes of the area’s problems from the personal qualities of Upper Afan residents to the profound social and economic changes it had been through, the way forward was seen to lie not in the regeneration of the Upper Afan valley itself but elsewhere.

The experience of the CDP should also serve as a salutary reminder that government initiatives can come and go all too quickly. The initiative as a whole ran for just seven years and the Upper Afan CDP operated on the ground for considerably less than that. Any of the current regeneration programmes could disappear just as quickly, with equally limited impact and legacy, unless they are more firmly focused on outcomes.

4. SELF-HELP AND SOCIAL ENTERPRISE

The next 25 years saw virtually no government initiatives to regenerate the Upper Afan valley – what action there was (e.g. Programme for the Valleys, EU programmes under Objectives 1 and 2 as well as specialist programmes such as Rechar) covered a much larger area of south Wales, and made little impact on the Upper Afan valley itself.

Despite this, this period was marked by a number of community-led initiatives, some of which have been very successful. During this time the community itself established no fewer than five different community enterprises - the South Wales Miners' Museum (in 1972), Gwynfi Community Cooperative (1991) and the Glyncorrwg Ponds Co-operative (in 1990). The Upper Afan Regeneration Forum and Upper Afan Community transport also emerged during this time, though have now been succeeded by new organisations.

These initiatives have all been very successful, securing millions of pounds in funding, providing vitally important facilities and services and creating modest numbers of jobs.

Glyncorrwg Ponds

The Glyncorrwg Ponds project was the brain-child of a local GP (and political activist) Dr Julian Tudor Hart. He promoted the idea of developing the Corrwg river into a series of off-river ponds which could be used for fishing and boating. The scheme started coming together in 1990 and a co-operative was formally registered in January 1991. Funds were raised from £1 shares sold to the community and the WDA's Community Enterprise Fund then funded a feasibility study. Following competitive bidding, the Cooperative was declared one of five Community Revival Strategy areas in 1992 and received a grant of £477,500.²² This was sufficient to get the ponds project off the ground.



Subsequent funding from the EU, Forestry Commission and Welsh Assembly Government has seen several million pounds invested in the project and its development into a key element of the Afan Forest Park, providing fishing, a caravan park, a network of forest trails for mountain biking and walking, a mountain bike centre (with bike shop, bike wash and café). They employ 26 staff, a number of them local.²³

The success of Glyncorrwg Ponds was attributed to the drive and focus of the volunteers.

What has made it so successful was that at the beginning there were people who were driven and passionate and they had a definite focus on what they wanted ... They haven't been put off by [setbacks] ... they've carried on, they've muddled through, they haven't given up, they haven't let apathy creep in

However tourism is a volatile business and the co-operative has noticed a decline attributable to the recession: "the car parks are no longer full, we just hope it's going to pick up" said the co-ordinator. Competition from other trails and the possible closure of a trail because of wind farm development in the near future are also seen as possible threats.

Gwynfi Community Cooperative

The Gwynfi Cooperative was opened in the mid 1980s, the first retail Co-operative society to be registered for almost 100 years. The previous co-op store had been in the village since 1905, but was due to close in 1983 leaving Abergwynfi and Blaengwynfi without a shop. The impact of its closure was huge:

'To many it was as if they had lost a personal friend, to all it was a very sad blow indeed'²⁴

Inspired and supported by the then Port Talbot Cooperative Development Agency, the community established a new Co-op, with three hundred and fifty people contributing £5 each. The support was considerable – almost three hundred people attended one meeting and £3,000 was raised at once.



The new store opened in December 1984, employing a manager and two staff, and immediately proved popular. Despite competition from major supermarkets, the co-op thrived and by 2007, it employed 8 staff and was the largest local employer. Today it is still thriving and providing a valuable service to the local community.

South Wales Miners' Museum

The South Wales Miners' Museum was established in the early 1970s. Following much hard work by a local committee, it secured premises in Portakabins at Afan Argoed, eventually opening in 1975. It was subsequently rehoused in a new building, within the visitor centre at Afan Forest Country Park, and exhibits now include life-size models of miners dressed in original gear and equipment in a mine-like environment, displays of photographs, documents and equipment, a replica stable, blacksmith shop, lamp room, pithead wheel, haulage engine and coal dram.²⁵

The Museum is a registered charity, run by a committee of local volunteers. Although it has secured several grants, its finances appear to be fragile, with a very low income and variable accounting history,²⁶ and its staffing by volunteers means it is not always open regularly. The museum has been somewhat overshadowed by other mining-related museums, such as Big Pit and Rhondda Heritage Park, and is now effectively subsumed by the Afan Forest. As one resident said:

You're not going to come out of your way to come and visit it, that's the trouble

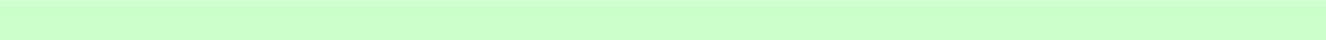
Upper Afan Forum

The Upper Afan Community Regeneration Forum was established in 1996 to promote the regeneration of the area. This too was a community initiative, run by and for people in the area. The forum secured funding for a number of projects during its existence, before being reconstituted as the Upper Afan Forum in 2001/2 with a view to becoming the Grant Recipient Body for Communities First in the valley.

Following a public meeting in 2001, 12 community representatives – four from each of the area's wards – were elected to its board of directors. There has been some change in the board since and today there are eight directors plus the Chairman.

Its original staff of one in 2001 grew quickly to nine (including Communities First staff) by 2008/09, whilst its income in the same year was more than £377,000.²⁷ Following discussions during that year with the Welsh Assembly Government and Neath Port Talbot CVS, the Communities First staff and funding transferred to Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, leaving the Upper Afan Forum with three staff in summer 2010.

The Forum has undertaken a great deal during its life, both in its own right and in partnership with Communities First and other organisations, ranging from setting up and running a food co-op, the 'Valley of a million daffodils' scheme, community events and newsletters and distributing community funding from the nearby windfarm. Most recently, the Forum is working



to encourage adult education. Initially that work was part of the New Learning Network, lead by Neath Port Talbot CVS, and is being continued through a Big Lottery Funded 'Community Learning' project. This, smaller scale, project involves co-ordinating adult education provision such as that provided by WEA, Neath Port Talbot college and others. It also includes community development work, such as a summer festival, and seeking funding for further projects.

With the end of the NLN project and funding cuts, there has been a marked reduction in adult learning provision and a shift towards employment-related learning:

The adult education budget has been cut ... When I came in 9 years ago we probably had 25 courses a year ranging from arts and crafts, quilting and things, to computers to employability courses. Now everything is very focused on employment - its all employment-based learning – which is great – but you need to get people over here that are not ready for the employment stuff, you need some of the softer stuff to encourage them into learning.

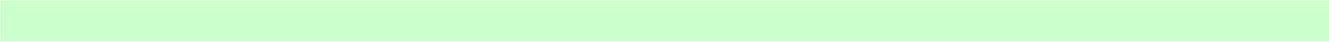
For 2010/11, just four courses had been proposed initially and the Forum had to make a case for additional provision. Funding of courses has also changed, resulting in relatively high fees (said to be £100 payable in advance) that are deterring learners particularly those who are already working. The courses that do run are mainly IT related, and sometimes face difficulties with attendance, attributed to bad weather and poor transport:

It isn't easy to keep the class going at times because of where it is. But because of where it is, we have not cancelled when numbers are low, because there isn't a lot there.

Funding for the Community Learning project runs out in 2011, and it is not clear what will happen subsequently.

The Forum is also delivering an employment initiative, funded by the Department for Work and Pensions' Disadvantaged Areas Fund, to help people back to work. This initiative, which funds one worker, provides advice and support for job search, including access to computers, help with c.v. preparation and making applications, publicises vacancies and so on. It arose because Communities First were overwhelmed with people seeking help following the spate of redundancies locally, and who were not eligible for other support. Since it was established in November 2009, the worker has seen 102 clients of which 30 have found work.

Following the separation from Communities First, there are now effectively two organisations in the valleys whose objectives are tackling poverty and social exclusion and community development. As a worker said:



The objectives of the Forum ... are very much the same as the Communities First programme. On a day to day ... there's not much difference between the two. ...

That similarity was said to mean that 'some of the work does overlap' and that 'it is sometimes difficult.' Efforts are made to co-ordinate their activities through joint membership of boards and co-location of staff in the Afan Riverside Centre in Cymmer. In terms of roles, Communities First tends to focus on the co-ordination of partners and project development, whilst the Forum focuses on project delivery on the ground, although the staff work closely together on some projects e.g. the summer festival and in exchanging project ideas and opportunities.

After the initial difficulties of the transfer of Communities First out of the Forum, the Forum can now see some advantages to the separation:

From an organisational point of view its probably better because while we had a big staff ... we were getting pulled really towards the Communities First programme and not looking at what the organisation wanted to develop, what the organisation wanted to achieve. It was really more about the Communities First programme and what their objectives were.

In addition, the Forum does not have to work within the constraints of the Communities First programme or its management by the local authority, which gives greater flexibility to pursue new projects and new funding for example, particularly as Communities First was perceived to be focusing on helping people into jobs.

With uncertainty (at the time of writing this) about the future of Communities First after 2012, the Forum is looking ahead to its future role. The uncertainty about Communities First highlights the importance of maintaining and nurturing independent community organisations that will carry on irrespective of government initiatives.

Upper Afan Transport / DANSA

Afan Community Transport was set up as an industrial and provident society to provide essential transport services to elderly, disabled or isolated residents who are unable to travel by other means. It was succeeded by Upper Afan Transport in 2002, whose funding, assets and staff were transferred to DANSA in 2009. DANSA is a not-for-profit company, initially established to provide community transport in the Dulais valley. The transfer allows resources and services to be co-ordinated across the Afan and Dulais valleys.

DANSA's work is markedly different to conventional community transport services. Instead of responding to individual needs for transport it develops transport services, through Neath Port Talbot council's Transport for Communities initiative. This scheme supports community organisations to register a bus service that the community needs with the Traffic Commissioner and then subsidises its operation until its viability is proven to a commercial operator, who then takes over the service. DANSA is also one of the partners running the 'Moving On' project which provides demand-led services to young people travelling to work or study outside the valley.

Other Community Groups

In addition to the groups described above, there are approximately 90 other community groups of various kinds in the Upper Afan Valley alone, including sports clubs, arts and crafts groups and many more. There are said to be high levels of volunteering, with the local 'volunteer of the year' awards being very well-attended.

There *is* a lot of activity going on but I think that there's a perception from within the valley that there isn't much going on.

That said, it was also acknowledged that it was often the same people who became involved in everything. Sometimes people got 'burnt out', and at other times it was suggested groups needed new blood, or people with 'different perspectives and different agendas'.

It was suggested that groups needed to co-operate more to provide a 'critical mass', and that there needed to be more emphasis on sharing resources and facilities, both between community groups and between agencies.



At least some of these groups, with the right support, could develop into new social enterprises to provide local goods and services in the future. As one community activist said:

I would hope that ... there'll be more Glyncorwg ponds, more organisations that have grown and that are providing services within the valley.

Conclusions

That a community as small as the Upper Afan valley has generated so many, so successful social enterprises and community groups is extraordinary. It challenges the idea that there is dependency culture in the valley and that apathy prevails. This is not to say of course that some community organisations have not suffered from 'burn out' or would not welcome 'new blood'. Nevertheless, to have five social enterprises that have survived and thrived, and a further 90 groups covering a range of interests, is a very considerable achievement indeed.

Crucially, not only did the community projects established during this time meet the area's immediate needs, they laid the foundations for the interventions that occurred in the next decade. By the time government got involved in local regeneration in the 2000s, there was already in place the basis of a strong tourism 'product' and a considerable amount of community regeneration activity.

The endurance of the community projects, during the period of neglect by government, is also a reminder of the importance of fostering and maintaining a thriving community sector. The proposed 'community enterprise centre' to be based at Croeserw will be a significant help in this respect.

5. A DECADE OF STRATEGIES AND PLANS

After a dearth of government activity in the 1980s and 1990s, the twenty first century has seen a plethora of initiatives aimed at different aspects of the Upper Afan Valley. It is now the subject of the Welsh Assembly Government's Communities First programme, its Strategic Regeneration Areas initiative and is a Tourism Growth Area, and it is also covered by Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council's Western Valleys strategy and associated action plan. Each of these is looked at in more detail below.

Tourism Growth Areas

Although Tourism Growth Areas (TGAs) are relatively unknown as a regeneration tool, it has arguably been the most influential on the Upper Afan valley to date. Afan Forest Park was one of 16 areas designated by the then Wales Tourist Board as a Tourism Growth Area in April 2002.²⁸ Its designation brought forward about £300,000 of funding towards capital projects, funding for preparation of an action plan, and funding for a project officer.²⁹ The TGA funded (and part-funded) eleven projects in the Afan Valley, including mountain bike trails, signage and interpretation, investment in B&B and self catering facilities. Following a review of all TGAs in 2008, the designation as a TGA remains although it no longer brings with it dedicated funding.

The TGA designation was said to have been "critical in moving tourism in the Valley forwards." The initial action plan, for the period 2002-2008, has been followed by a new plan for the period 2008-2011.³⁰ This plan identifies five areas for further development, including community buy-in, commerciality, building on current facilities, promotion and widening the product offer. As no resources accompany the plan projects are taken forward (and funded) through other the regeneration plans and strategies for the area.



Afan Lodge Hotel, Duffryn Rhondda



Queens Guest House, Glyncorrwg

By any measure the investment in Afan Forest Park and the associated Glyncorrwg Ponds and South Wales Miners Museum is proving to be successful. It was described to us as a 'premier attraction' several times. At the ponds, the number of mountain bikers has increased from 5,000 in 1989 to 60,000 in 2009³¹. Visitors to the Visitor Centre have also increased markedly since the first part of the decade, with more than 112,000 visitors to Afan Forest Park visitor centre recorded in 2007³² – a number comparable with visitors to Powis, Pembroke and Harlech Castles.³³ Cycling and mountain biking are the main reasons people visit the park, being cited by nearly two thirds of respondents to the 2009 visitor survey.³⁴ Mountain biking is the activity which shows the fastest growth, with visitor numbers more than doubling between 2003 and 2005 alone, with further growth between 2007 and 2009. Cycling routes in the Afan Forest Park are highly rated by independent sources – they are one of the Independent's five best cycle trails,³⁵ have been voted one of 'What Mountain Bike' magazine's top ten routes,³⁶ and are frequently and enthusiastically reviewed on mountain biking forums and blogs.

Surveys suggest a high level of visitor satisfaction amongst mountain bikers and visitors generally. A survey of visitors in 2009 found that nearly all visitors (99%) would recommend the forest as a place to visit, with eight out of ten having been to the forest before.³⁷



As in many other tourist destinations, maximising the economic impact of tourism for the local community is a challenge. The 2009 visitor survey shows that spending by visitors is up on past levels at an average of £58 per head, rising to £118 per head by those visiting Glyncorrwg visitor centre. Of those who stay overnight, more than half do so within a six mile radius of the forest. Accommodation in the area has increased in both volume and quantity, with 151 bed spaces graded by Visit Wales and a number of ungraded spaces available in

2008, compared with around 12 bed spaces in 2002. A hotel and bunk house have opened since, including the highly-regarded Afan Lodge (favourably reviewed in the Guardian³⁸), increasing the range of provision further. There are also a number of self-catering properties let to visitors – a Google search generated ten different houses and cottages very readily (see Table 5) – as well as Queen’s Guest House and Afan Lodge Hotel illustrated earlier.

Table 5 Selected Accommodation in the Upper Afan Valley

		
<p>Afan Cottage Breaks</p>	<p>Bryn Teg House</p>	<p>Rose Cottage</p>
		
<p>The Lighthouse</p>	<p>Abergwynfi Cottage</p>	<p>Ty Dor, Abercregan</p>
		
<p>Ivy House</p>	<p>Windways Neuadd Afan</p>	<p>Ty Afan</p>

Nevertheless, many interviewees felt that more needed to be done to spread the benefits of tourism. Some felt that encouraging spending in Glyncoerrwg needed to be encouraged:

people who visit the Glyncoerrwg centre don't go into Glyncoerrwg

Mountain biking ... brings hundreds and hundreds of people in to the village. And they spend about £5 on lunch each and then they go away again and that's it

Of course there have to be goods and services that are attractive to visitors in the first place. As one person commented:

We haven't got the things that tourists need here yet – it's a chicken and egg.

Communities First felt that there were opportunities that could be exploited by local people:

A local baguette firm might want to come and start off here, and also cottage industries. I'm working with an artist at the moment to do some work with people on creating art for tourists, using very simple technology, easy things, showing them how they can recycle stuff to make things that tourists will buy to take home. Wimberry jam, you know, we've got a lovely lady who makes all sort of jams – we could sell them from the Mountain Bike Centre ... those are the things we want to see happen.

Some people commented that local people were not aware of how popular the Afan Forest Park is, nor that it is rated as a cycling destination around the world, not just locally. Neath Port Talbot Council and Communities First are working to help businesses make the most of the potential, e.g. by sending an opportunities pack to local shops and pubs, but acknowledged that it was 'difficult' to extend the benefits.

Cycling, and particularly mountain biking, is also being developed elsewhere in the south Wales valleys. In Neath Port Talbot, this will include new trails being developed and a mountain bike centre being developed at Margam Park as part of a multi-million pound project jointly with other local authorities in the region. Whilst council officers see this as strengthening cycling tourism in the area, some local people felt the Afan Forest's niche was threatened by the developments.

It's going outside of the valley, so people can access it from Resolven, they don't have to come up here. That's going to take away ... We've also got Margam Park Cycling Centre of Excellence, wonderful shiny brand new mountain biking centre ... New people coming, they'll be going 'Whoa, brand new shiny mountain biking trail, everybody go down there'. You won't see them and again, it's pulling away the only resource they have here to generate an income.

On the other hand, tourism officers saw the wider development of cycling as strengthening the 'product', in particular encouraging visitors to stay for longer – ideally a week – rather than just one or two nights, albeit that some visitors may stay outside the Upper Afan valley.

The significance of the Upper Afan valley's growing tourism industry should not be underestimated. It has brought the first major public and private sector investment into the valley for decades, and has stimulated the formation of new businesses and the creation of new jobs. Not only is this very welcome in its own right, it is also important as a symbol of hope for the area's future. It is impossible to overstate the need to continue to nurture the valley's tourism growth and to maximise its economic benefits.

That said, tourism is not the panacea for all ills, and all of those we interviewed recognised this, although some were more nervous than others about 'putting all your eggs in one basket'. Tourism will never replace the jobs lost from mining, manufacturing and local services, nor are many of the jobs (e.g. cleaners, cooks) well paid. Its benefits are, at least in the short-term, likely to be highly localised (notably around Afan Forest park) with villages away from the park, such as Cymmer and Croeserw, less likely to experience spin-off effects. Crucially, unless local people are able to make the most of the opportunities that are emerging, by setting up and running new businesses as well as working in them, tourism will not improve the quality of life of the vast majority of Upper Afan residents.

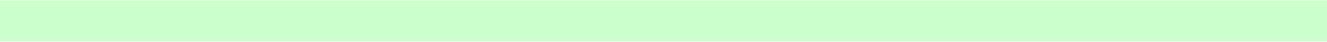
Communities First

Communities First is the Welsh Assembly Government's flagship programme to improve "the living conditions and prospects for people" in the most disadvantaged communities across Wales. The programme was launched in 2001 and was conceived as a long-term strategy to address the deep-rooted social and economic problems of those communities.



A number of shifts in focus within Communities First during its relatively short life, the most recent of which resulted in a significant emphasis on outcomes. Funding for 'core' activities is limited to a small number of agreed headings, whilst funding for other activities must have clearly specified outcomes. Funding is assured up to 2012 but the future of the programme after that date is unclear.

The wards of Glyncoerrwg, Cymmer and Gwynfi were amongst the initial 100 most deprived wards from the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation 2000 to be included in the Communities



First programme. From the outset they were combined into a single Communities First project for the Upper Afan valley. The existing Upper Afan Regeneration Forum was reconstituted in anticipation of becoming the 'grant recipient body' for Communities First, although it did initially employ staff and service the operational requirements of the Communities First Partnership.³⁹ However, as already outlined the staff and funding transferred to the employment of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council in 2009, so that Communities First is now distinct from the Forum.

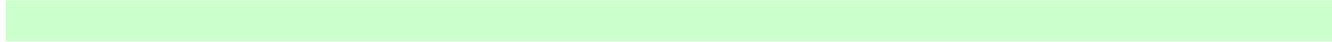
Although the initial period was described as 'difficult', Communities First, like the Forum, felt that there were now some advantages to the arrangement, not least as Communities First had had to be clear about its own achievements – in effect, to prove themselves as a body.

The Communities First partnership has a coordinator, 2 development workers shared between the three wards, and an administrator on a job-share basis.⁴⁰ This resource was said to be modest given that three wards had to be covered, but the request for a third development worker (to give one per ward) had not been agreed.

The Communities First team quickly embarked on an extensive programme of community consultation to produce an action plan in 2006⁴¹. This plan includes more than 10 pages of proposed actions to deliver the vision, which are then prioritised to take forward over the next five years. A change of co-ordinator in 2007 and the subsequent transfer of Communities First to Neath Port Talbot council means that this plan does not drive activities. Instead, Communities First works to an annual work programme and targets, drawn up by the partnership and signed off by the local authority.

Over the years, Communities First has been engaged in a wide array of individual projects, many jointly with the Upper Afan Forum. However the change in circumstances has been reflected in a change in approach, with Communities First now focusing on co-ordinating community activity and agencies rather than itself delivering multiple projects (although they do deliver some projects e.g. a drug and alcohol outreach project). The Co-ordinator described their role as 'enablers', and illustrated how this operated in respect of play groups – rather than the development worker making all the arrangements to set up a play group herself, she would work with and support mothers to make the arrangements themselves, so that in due course the development worker could withdraw from the project.

Communities First also work with outside agencies, bringing them into the valley as necessary. They have consolidated this approach in three sub-groups, concerned with employment, young people and tourism and the environment. The sub-groups are designed to tackle the area's deep-seated problems by co-ordinating service provision in the valley and developing projects where there are gaps.



This shift in role was seen as the right way forward by at least one interviewee, who felt that there needed to be an organisation that co-ordinated all the different activities in the valley and drove forward change. The organisation best placed to do that was, in his/her view, Communities First.

However, the shift away from delivery of projects towards an enabling role does raise the issue of visibility for Communities First:

I think Communities First was doing an awful lot but people didn't see it because it wasn't out there. They see the events, they see the Christmas parties, they see all of the summer beach parties, they see them because they are big things. They don't see that 12 people went on training, that twenty people got jobs last year out of a process that Communities First led them through.

Communities First has undoubtedly done a great deal over the years, both initially with the Upper Afan Forum and now as a separate body. Its more recent focus on tackling the underlying social and economic issues facing the valley and its enabling rather than delivery role are, however, long term challenges and, with uncertainty about the future of Communities First, it remains to be seen if it will be able to change.

Western Valleys Strategies and Afan Plans

Both Neath Port Talbot Council and the Welsh Assembly Government have strategies and plans for the Afan Valley. They are closely related and are considered together. Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council launched a strategy specifically for its valleys communities in 2006 - *Western Valleys Strategy – Positive Futures*.⁴² In it, the Council makes an overarching 'promise':

To ensure that by 2015 the Valleys of Neath Port Talbot become stronger, more vibrant and sustainable places.

Underpinning the strategy is the idea of 'active citizenship', i.e. that individuals in the communities concern must take responsibility for what happens in their area and work in partnership with the Council and others to achieve change. 'Quick wins' were highlighted as important to residents' confidence in the strategy.

The strategy specifically addresses the needs of the Afan Valley (which includes Pelenna ward along with Glyncorrwg, Gwynfi and Cymmer) through an action plan, which was based on the views of the community. The plan includes 26 specific outcomes which range across the economic, social, environmental, educational and health and include specific outcomes, such as to 'evaluate the refurbishment of the Croeserw Community Centre', as well as very

general outcomes, such as 'Improved Health for residents'.

In 2009, the Council revised the Action Plan not least in the light of the Welsh Assembly Government's proposals for its own Western Valleys strategy. The council held a discussion with representatives of groups, organisations and business at the Noddfa Community Centre on 30th March 2009, the conclusions of which were written up into an 'Issues and Alternatives' report.⁴³ A draft Action Plan was published for consultation in late 2009, and contains more than 100 different proposals to be undertaken over the period 2010-2015. The proposals are organised under 4 themes of:

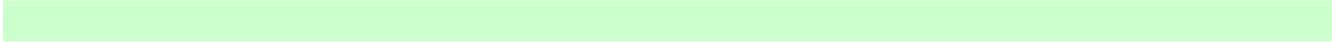
- Strong Economy
- Confident, Healthy & Safe Communities
- Enhanced environment
- Education and Young People

During 2008, the Welsh Assembly Government brought forward proposals to create a *Single Regeneration Fund* (SRF) and *Strategic Regeneration Areas* (SRA).⁴⁴ SRAs are described as:

a strategic and holistic approach to regeneration designed to tackle a range of social and economic issues affecting communities and to target investment in people as well as places

The Western Valleys SRA is part of the Swansea Bay Waterfront and Western Valleys sub-region identified in the Wales Spatial Plan. The Afan Valley is one of nine within the Western Valleys SRA area. Each valley has a Valley Area Regeneration Plan (known by its abbreviation, VARP) which is the principal tool for identifying needs and opportunities, and targeting and developing action. The plans include proposed funding for 2010/11.





The production of the Afan VARP was led by the local authority and developed through an Afan Valley Forum (which is different to the Upper Afan Forum Ltd), which includes stakeholders from public, private and voluntary / community organizations and is facilitated by the Welsh Assembly Government. The material produced for the preparation of the council's Action Plan forms the basis of the VARP, with the VARP being expected to provide funding for a number of the proposed Action Plan projects.

Hardly surprisingly, there is some confusion about the sudden appearance, after a prolonged period of inaction, of not one but two regeneration programmes. The Welsh Assembly Government programme was said to have appeared 'out of the blue' without prior discussion. To add to the confusion, there is a similarity of names for the discussion forums.

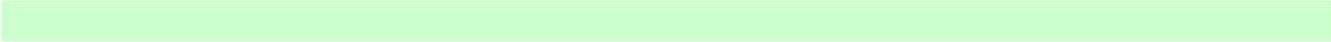
That was a little bit of a tension ... because now we've got another forum. We've got the [Communities First] partnership already, we've also got the Upper Afan Forum and now we're having another forum! So the forum actually resented that they called it a forum because they're already a forum. So 'why are you setting up another forum when you've already got us?'

The Welsh Assembly Government's strategy and VARP have recognized the potential for duplication and have endeavoured to build on the Neath Port Talbot Council strategy and plan:

It was very clear to the people in the Welsh Assembly that we already had [a strategy] for Neath Port Talbot and ... they didn't want to duplicate it. A lot of the strategic visions were the same thing, I mean it's nothing new, it's all the same thing really.

We've tried to look at what's in the Neath Port Talbot one in those local meetings, and said look this is what's been identified as needed in this area is this really what people think? It's tried to embrace it, we've taken the relevant bits

They were said to have been 'brought together' and 'knitted together somehow'. Nevertheless there was some criticism from council officers about the content of the Welsh Assembly Government's strategy (which was said still to be in draft form and not formally endorsed) and VARP, and of the processes used to allocate funding. They were seen by council officers as a 'rush job' that had not been produced in the usual way of setting objectives, analyzing issues and proposing solutions. In addition, the VARP was presented as 'holistic' but as only capital funding was available it could not include actions that are revenue funded, whilst the process of administering funding was described as 'a mess' and 'a shambles'.



There is a strong emphasis in both strategies and plans on tourism and the environment, no doubt because of the emphasis on capital funding. Of the 95 projects set out in the Neath Port Talbot draft Action plan 2009, nearly a quarter (22) concern tourism and a further 13 concern the natural and built environment.

The remaining proposals cover a broad mix of subjects from enterprise and economic activity projects to community safety and transport projects. Unlike earlier strategic documents, proposals for activity to promote good health and support education and learning are included albeit to a limited extent. Health in particular was felt to have had a low profile in the various plans and strategies. It was felt by some that health needs were not well articulated by the community, despite the high levels of ill health in the area and closure of the clinic in Croeserw recently.

I've been amazed, health needs haven't come through in any of these meetings we've had - the health needs haven't been commented on at all – yet it starts there, with people feeling well.

It was also said to have been difficult to engage with the health community in compiling the various documents as well as in developing specific projects. Some of the difficulty can be attributed to the reorganisation of the NHS in October 2009, as well as to the pressure to achieve operational targets in all NHS bodies. When the Local Health Board did eventually become involved, to explore possible use of the new Croeserw Community Enterprise Centre, key decisions had already been taken about the facilities on offer.

It is too early to comment on the impact of either sets of strategies and plans. A progress report for Neath Port Talbot's plan in 2007/08 outlined what had been done since the strategy's launch and included evidence of a considerable amount of activity particularly on tourism-related projects. Certainly, all those employed in various organisations we interviewed were positive about the council's and the Welsh Assembly Government's strategies. Whilst their enthusiasm may have been generated by the prospect of a share in £7 million of funding, it should also be said that both strategies offer the prospect of investment in the Upper Afan valley – something not the derided.

Other investment

Important though the regeneration schemes are, they are by no means the only investment in the valley – in particular there has been or is in prospect significant public sector investment in education and in social and community facilities, and, controversially, in wind energy generation. Total spend on and likely impact of these projects must surely rival that of regeneration projects.

In education, Pen Afan Primary School was rebuilt on the site of Abergwynfi Junior School in 2007/8, at a cost of £4 million, providing seven classrooms, support rooms, an IT suite, libraries and a separate nursery area with facilities being available for community as well as school use. The classrooms, known as pods, are circular and let in natural light and fresh-air without glare, while the building as a whole is highly energy efficient.



From September 2010, Pen Afan Primary and Cymer Afan Comprehensive will have a joint head teacher, with plans in train to extend this arrangement to other primary schools in the Upper Afan valley in due course, effectively integrating education for 3 – 16 year olds.

In the community, Croeserw Community Centre will be replaced by Croeserw Community Enterprise Centre which will include youth, learning and other facilities as well as community activities at a total cost of £3 million, whilst the replacement for Arwelfa Care Home, Croeserw will in due course also provide a better quality environment at considerable cost.

Wind farms are probably the largest single private sector investment the valley has seen for decades. There is one existing farm at Ffynnon Oer, with 16 turbines generating sufficient power for 17,000 homes. The turbines are largely invisible from the valley, and the developers make a small contribution (around £32,000 a year) to a Community Fund to support community projects – a sum which is very quickly spent.

Some subsequent proposals for further turbines have not been successful, but the latest plans, for 84 turbines by Nuon Renewables at Pen y Cymoedd, running from Aberdare to Neath, is still under consideration by the Department for Energy and Climate Change.⁴⁵ The proposed development is on land owned by the Forestry Commission who invited bids to develop a farm, and would involve closure of a flagship Afan Forest bike trail during construction. A Community Fund of £1.5 million is proposed, shared between the many communities affected by the development. Hardly surprisingly, the proposals are highly controversial.

Conclusions

The last ten years has seen a remarkable amount of activity by the Welsh Assembly Government and local authority, all the more so after the dearth of action in the preceding twenty years.

It is very clear that without Welsh Assembly Government, local authority and, through them, EU support, there would have been little if any investment in the Upper Afan valley over the last ten years. The last decade has seen millions of pounds of expenditure on everything from mountain bike trails to environmental improvements to adult education. However it is on tourism that the investment has arguably achieved the most - the growth in visitor numbers and the emergence of a small accommodation sector is a striking achievement.

But welcome though that activity is after so long a period of neglect, it is disappointing that so many of the initiatives raise issues about process and duplication of effort. These questions about the delivery of regeneration should not detract from their achievements, but really ought not to have arisen in the first place.

The challenge of social and economic regeneration remains however. Outside of tourism projects, action has been mostly too small-scale, too short-term and too localised to transform the fortunes of the people of the Upper Afan valley. For example, valuable though the DAF scheme has been in getting 30 people into work in just 6 months, this pales into insignificance against the hundreds who are unemployed and economically inactive, and faces an uphill struggle against the severe shortage of jobs.

6. REFLECTIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

There can be no doubt that the collapse of coal mining has been the main cause of social and economic disadvantage in the Upper Afan valley. For too many people, life in the valley was, and remains, characterised by ill health, lack of jobs, low educational attainment and lack of local services. Tackling this injustice and providing the basis of a good quality of life for all must continue to be a high priority for government and community groups alike.

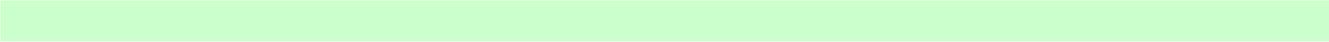
For decades, the government response was inaction, with what was done proving little more than a token gesture that made little impact. Today, there is a huge range of activity, including community enterprises and voluntary groups, local authority and Welsh Assembly Government initiatives, and, crucially, the private sector. Together, these bodies are transforming the Upper Afan valley.

The area's emergence into a premier destination for mountain biking and other outdoor activities is remarkable. The 100,000 visitors a year, the hotel and guest houses, and the possibilities of spin-offs into the wider community were all unthinkable when the pits closed forty years ago.

There are community successes too. People's pride in and commitment to the valley are reflected in the formation, and survival, of no fewer than five community enterprises, an exceptional achievement, and there is also much needed investment in education and social care too.

The success to date can be attributed to two key factors. First, the foresight and ambition of the community which established the Glyncorwg Ponds and South Wales Miners' Museum twenty years ago. These two projects laid the foundations for the subsequent development of tourism in the Upper Afan, in that they helped to change thinking about the valley's future as well as demonstrating the potential for outdoor activities in the area. Second, the community's vision has been backed by a similar vision and by funding of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council and more recently the Welsh Assembly Government. It takes big money to deliver physical regeneration and without their investment it is clear that many projects simply would not have gone ahead.

But although a great deal is being done there is no room for complacency. The problems in the Upper Afan valley remain. There is no more recent data than the 2001 Census on most indicators, but data on Jobseekers' Allowance claimants suggests that after some improvement in unemployment up to about 2007, the recession has taken its toll more recently. Improving social and economic conditions is a major, long term challenge, and it is imperative that the community, local and Welsh Assembly government continue their efforts over the next decade.



It's also important to remember that the successes achieved to date are fragile. Tourism is a volatile industry, vulnerable to changes in consumer spending and to shifting fashions and preferences. On top of this, tourism in the Afan valley is vulnerable to competition from the development of cycling elsewhere in south Wales and to the impact of possible further wind farm development. Maintaining its profile, attracting further private sector investment and ensuring there is community benefit will be significant tasks in the coming years.

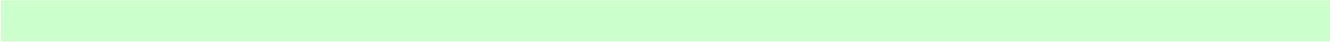
The successes achieved so far are dependent on a number time-limited projects. There is some uncertainty about the future of Communities First and the short horizon of the Western Valleys Strategic Regeneration Area, as well as the ending of the Upper Afan Forum's learning and employment projects. The CDP illustrated vividly that government initiatives can come and go without making any impact - the same must not happen with the current government-led initiatives. It is vitally important that there is a long-term commitment to the delivery of regeneration in the area.

Cuts in public funding are also a significant risk to the area, not only in terms of investment in regeneration projects but also through their impact on mainstream services, be they education, health or leisure activities. How the cuts will impact on the Upper Afan valley remains to be seen, and there could well be solutions to service delivery such as social enterprise which offset some of the worst effects. Making the most of any private sector investment in the area must be a priority given these pressures.

So what next? The next five years will be both difficult and uncertain in terms of the economy and public spending, and it is far from clear what they will bring for south Wales and Neath Port Talbot let alone the communities of the Upper Afan valley. But there are some steps that can be taken.

First and foremost, the progress to date needs to be safeguarded. This could involve better protection for the natural environment – the key asset on which much of the Upper Afan's tourist potential is based, for example through its designation as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. Very careful steps need to be taken to limit the effects of any developments in the area, most obviously future wind farm development, but also competition from other cycling trails and any other developments that may emerge in future.

Second, the benefits of investment into the area need to be maximised. Early work underway to try to capture the 'tourist pound' needs to be built upon, and there is potential for considerably more community benefit to be secured from wind farm development, both existing and future. As in the past, substantial profits stand to be made from exploiting the environment for energy generation – this time round the community should have a reasonable share.



Third, community activity needs to be fostered. The Upper Afan valley should be justly proud of its record of community enterprise and activity to date. Community activity was the only regeneration activity in the valley during the 1980s and 1990s, and as cuts threaten public spending, it could well be that community activity will, once again, hold together the valley's future.

Fourth, regeneration needs to be delivered in a way that avoids duplication of effort, and which is properly democratically accountable and engaged with the community. The CDP showed that regeneration that is not embedded in or accountable to the community will not succeed. More recent regeneration initiatives have recognised this, some more than others, but efforts need to continue to ensure the community as a whole are fully aware of and consent to what is being done in their area, ostensibly for their benefit.

Last, but by no means least, is the question of the Upper Afan valleys connections with the wider world. It *has* to be recognized that the Upper Afan valley is extremely unlikely ever again to have a substantial number of jobs, let alone be able to offer a range of jobs. Travel to work outside the valley, to Neath, Port Talbot, Bridgend and Swansea, is already the norm for those in work, and is likely to continue to be so. However, those without a job need to be able to travel to find work or study, as well as access basic services, but struggle to do so with current public transport services. Improving transport and in particular public transport needs to be addressed as an integral part of regeneration.

The development of the Upper Afan valley in the 19th century saw it change out of all recognition. The closure of the pits in the 1960s saw it change once again. The plans for the valley are bringing yet more change. But the future is fragile – the transformation of the valley will only succeed if there is continued strong commitment, substantial funding, and meaningful support for and engagement with the community.

Annex 1 List of Interviewees

Leigh Acteson, Glyncorwg Ponds Co-operative (2008 and 2010)

Nadia Bogdan, Upper Afan Forum Ltd (2008 and 2010)

Andrea Croxton, Upper Afan Communities First (2010)

Colin Ede, Neath Port Talbot Council (2008 and 2010)

Employment and Skills Support Worker, Upper Afan Forum (2010)

Brian Gibbons, Assembly Member for Aberavon (2008)

Adrian Howells, Neath Port Talbot Council (2008 and 2010)

Lisa Jenkins, Afan Forest Park Co-ordinator (2008 and 2010)

Jane Jones, Gwynfi Councillor (2008)

Alex Marshall, Western Valleys Programme manager (2008)

Lorraine Miles, Neath Port Talbot CVS (2010)

Glyn Rawlings, Glyncorwg Councillor (2008)

Allen Renton, Queen's B&B (2008)

Joan Richards, Business Connect (2008)

Elaine Topping, Workers' Educational Association (2010)

Julian Tudor Hart, former GP in Glyncorwg (2008)

Mary Tudor Hart, former researcher in Glyncorwg (2008)

Dick Wagstaff, Afan Forest Park (2008)

Three residents of the area (interviewed individually) and eight residents attending the River Festival, August 2010

NOTES

¹Where possible the report uses data for the three wards comprising the Upper Afan Valley – Cymmer, Glyncoerrwg and Gwynfi. Sometimes data are only available for these three wards plus Pelenna, in which case we refer to the Afan Valley, rather than Upper Afan.

² Rees G and Stroud D (2004) *Regenerating the coalfields: the south Wales experience* Bevan Foundation Policy Paper No. 5 Tredegar: Bevan Foundation

³ Penn R and Alden J (1977) *Upper Afan CDP Final Report to Sponsors: Joint Report by the Action Team and the Research Team Directors* Cardiff: UWIST

⁴ Neath Port Talbot CBC (2008) *Key Data Afan Valley – LDP overview paper*

⁵ 2001 Census of Population table CAS041 downloaded from www.nomisweb.co.uk on 4th July 2010

⁶ Ward labour market profiles for Gwynfi, Cymmer and Glyncoerrwg, available on www.nomisweb.co.uk, downloaded 4th July 2010

⁷ Estyn (2008) Inspection under Section 28 of the Education Act 2005 - A Report on the Quality of Education in Duffryn Afan Primary School

⁸ Estyn (2003) Inspection Under Section 10 of School Inspections Act, 1996 - Abergwynfi Junior School

⁹ Estyn (2009) Inspection under Section 28 of the Education Act 2005 - A Report on the Quality of Education in Cymer Afan Comprehensive School

¹⁰ Estyn (2008) Inspection under Section 28 of the Education Act 2005 - A Report on the Quality of Education in Croeserw Primary School

¹¹ Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (2009) Afan Valley Issues and Alternatives, available at http://neath-porttalbot.limehouse.co.uk/events/4524/703226_accessible.pdf

¹² Welsh Assembly Government (n.d.) Afan Valley Area Regeneration Plan (Afan VARP), available at <http://www.nptcvs.com/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/05/Afan-VARP-2.pdf>

¹³ Estyn (2009) Inspection under Section 28 of the Education Act 2005 - A Report on the Quality of Education in Cymer Afan Comprehensive School

¹⁴ Estyn (2008) Inspection under Section 28 of the Education Act 2005 - A Report on the Quality of Education in Croeserw Primary School

¹⁵ Estyn (2007) Inspection under Section 28 of the Education Act 2005 - A Report on the Quality of Education in Glyncoerrwg Primary School

¹⁶ Estyn (2003) Inspection Under Section 10 of School Inspections Act, 1996 - Abergwynfi Junior School

¹⁷ Welsh Assembly Government (n.d.) Afan Valley Area Regeneration Plan (Afan VARP), available at <http://www.nptcvs.com/wp-content/uploads/downloads/2010/05/Afan-VARP-2.pdf>

¹⁸ South Wales Police Ward Crime Maps available at <http://maps.police.uk/view/south-wales/neath-port-talbot/neathporttalbot-1/glyncoerrwg/>

¹⁹ Home Office (1971) *CDP: A General Outline. Background Paper* London: Home Office

²⁰ Alan Twelvetrees (1979) Review of Upper Afan CDP Final Report to Sponsors, Community Development Journal Vol. 14 (3): 250-251.

²¹ Penn R and Alden J (1977) *Upper Afan CDP Final Report to Sponsors: Joint Report by the Action Team and the Research Team Directors* Cardiff: UWIST

²² Port Talbot Guardian (1992) 'Ponds plan seeks new life for valley village' *Port Talbot Guardian* 5 November

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- ²³ Minutes of the Meeting of the Afan Valley Area Forum held on Thursday 3rd June 2010 at Croeserw Community Centre, Croeserw
- ²⁴ Pam Murden (1985) Society for Co-operative Studies Bulletin, April 1985
- ²⁵ <http://www.southwalesminersmuseum.co.uk/>
- ²⁶ South Wales Miners Museum (2009) Financial Statements Period From 1 October 2007 to 31 March 2009
- ²⁷ Upper Afan Forum Ltd (2009) Annual Report and Accounts for 2008/09
- ²⁸ The Afan Forest Park (also known as Afan Argoed) was created on local authority land in the early 1970s by the old Glamorgan County Council and the Forestry Commission. It has grown during the intervening years, and now covers over 64 square kilometres with 30,000 hectares of forest and is a popular destination for walking, cycling, orienteering, camping and so on.
- ²⁹ Tourism Company (2008) *Visit Wales: TGA Review - Revised Draft April 2008* London: The Tourism Company
- ³⁰ Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (n.d.) Afan Forest Park Directions and Actions 2008 to 2011
- ³¹ Minutes of the Meeting of the Afan Valley Area Forum held on Thursday 3rd June 2010 at Croeserw Community Centre, Croeserw
- ³² Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (n.d.) Afan Forest Park Directions and Actions 2008 to 2011
- ³³ Welsh Assembly Government n.d. Visitors to Tourist Attractions, Stats Wales Table 004888 at <http://www.statswales.wales.gov.uk/TableViewer/tableView.aspx?ReportId=4888>
- ³⁴ Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council / Forestry Commission (2009) Afan Forest Park Visitor Survey 2009 – Summary of findings
- ³⁵ <http://www.independent.co.uk/travel/uk/activity-breaks/five-best-cycle-trails-1774358.html>
- ³⁶ Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (n.d.) Afan Forest Park Directions and Actions 2008 to 2011
- ³⁷ Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council / Forestry Commission (2009) Afan Forest Park Visitor Survey 2009 – Summary of findings
- ³⁸ Susan Greenwood (2009), Wales on Wheels, The Guardian n , 20th March 2009 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/travel/2009/mar/18/mountain-biking-wales-afan-lodge>
- ³⁹ Upper Afan Valley Communities First Action Plan (2006) available at http://www.neath-porttalbot.gov.uk/PDF/communitiesfirst_afan_valley_action_plan.pdf
- ⁴⁰ Neath Port Talbot Council (2009) *Neath Port Talbot Communities First Organisational Chart* www.neath-porttalbot.gov.uk/PDF/NPT%20C1st%20Org%20Chart%202009.pdf
- ⁴¹ Upper Afan Valley Communities First Action Plan (2006) available at http://www.neath-porttalbot.gov.uk/PDF/communitiesfirst_afan_valley_action_plan.pdf
- ⁴² Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (2006) Western Valleys Strategy - Positive Futures
- ⁴³ Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council (2009) Afan Valley Issues and Alternatives, available at http://neath-porttalbot.limehouse.co.uk/events/4524/703226_accessible.pdf
- ⁴⁴ Andrews L (2008) 'Western Valleys – new high priority area for social & economic regeneration' 14 Nov *Press Release* Cardiff: WAG
- ⁴⁵ http://www.decc.gov.uk/en/content/cms/what_we_do/uk_supply/consents_planning/applications/applications.aspx