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Rethinking Regeneration:

the Heads of the Valleys

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The Bevan Foundation

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CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	04
I INTRODUCTION.....	05
II CHALLENGING SOME MYTHS.....	07
There are plenty of jobs.....	08
Let them commute	09
Lack of Ambition	10
Everything is Awful	11
Beyond myths.....	12
III TOWARDS JUSTICE FOR THE HEADS OF THE VALLEYS.....	13
The Challenges	13
Turning Heads.....	16
IV NEW DIRECTIONS.....	18
1. More funding.....	18
2. Action on what matters.....	19
3. Public engagement	25
V CONCLUSIONS.....	26



Abstract

There are a number of ideas about socio-economic disadvantage in the Heads of the Valleys which are widely held but which have little foundation. These ideas have hindered efforts to regenerate the area. A new approach is needed which recognises that addressing the area's problems is a matter of social justice, and that a significant effort by government will be needed if Assembly Government targets are to be achieved in the Heads of the Valleys. The Heads of the Valleys programme is a 'first' and complements other substantial investment in regeneration but more is still needed. The paper calls for more funding, more to be done to create jobs, enhance skills and improve health, and for greater transparency and accountability in the programme's management.



I Introduction

On every measure of deprivation and disadvantage, two areas in Wales are always top of the table – Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent. Be it economic inactivity, illiteracy, poverty or ill health, these two areas – and the communities that immediately surround them in Torfaen, Caerphilly and Rhondda Cynon Taf – stand out as some of the most disadvantaged in the UK. These statistics are all too well known and are not repeated here.

The debate about what should be done to address these problems goes back almost as long as the problems themselves. In the debate, various ideas about the Heads of the Valleys and its residents have come to be widely held, if not always clearly articulated. Many of these ideas – or myths - are unfounded and are deeply unhelpful to the task of regenerating the Heads of the Valleys because they provide an excuse for little if any action.

Improving the lives of some quarter of a million people in one of Europe's most disadvantaged areas is a question of social justice. It should be a top political priority for both the Welsh Assembly and UK governments. The Welsh Assembly Government has set itself various targets to be achieved in Wales, mostly by the end of the decade. The challenge of meeting these targets in the Heads of the Valleys is even greater than elsewhere. But this challenge must be met if the people of the Heads of the Valleys are to enjoy the same quality of life as everyone in the rest of Wales.

The Bevan Foundation was at the forefront of calls for public investment in the Heads of the Valleys area (see for example Winckler 2003 and Slater 2004). Our work resulted in the announcement of the Welsh Assembly Government's Heads of the Valleys programme in July 2004 which was followed by the Assembly Government's strategy for the Heads of the Valleys, *Turning Heads*, launched in 2006 (Welsh Assembly Government 2006). The Heads of the Valleys programme, together with other substantial Welsh Assembly Government and EU investments in the area, amount to a multi-million pound injection of cash into the regeneration of the area.

Following the Assembly elections in 2007, the new Assembly Government signaled in its *One Wales* programme of government that the Heads of the Valleys programme would continue. However, 2008/09 is the last year of the three-year action plan included in *Turning Heads*. Given the commitment in *One Wales*, there is likely to be a further action plan, perhaps for the period 2009/10 – 2011/12, which ought to be in preparation in coming months. It is therefore timely to take stock of progress to date, and outline some pointers for the future direction of both the Heads of the Valleys programme and other activities in the area.

This paper presents a personal view of the regeneration of the Heads of the Valleys area. It starts off by considering some of the myths about its people and communities, myths which are pervasive and sometimes offensive. It then goes on to outline the scale of the challenge that all government and statutory bodies face if the Heads of the Valleys is to enjoy the same prosperity and well being that are sought for other parts of Wales. Finally, the paper outlines some directions which the next phase of the Heads of the Valleys programme should consider. These are not fully worked up proposals, not least because we have undertaken and

published this work completely unfunded. However I firmly believe that the ideas set out here would, in my view, achieve more on the ground and in so doing would help to address a very deep-seated, long standing social injustice.



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II CHALLENGING SOME MYTHS

The seemingly intractable nature of problems in the Valleys has generated much interest and debate over the years. From the pages of the Western Mail to learned articles and papers to conferences and private discussions, the plight of Valleys communities is analysed and solutions proffered. However, much of this debate is couched in terms that, if applied to any other group of people in contemporary society, would be quite unacceptable.

These 'myths' matter. They are not only often insulting to people who live and work in the Valleys but they are a real barrier to developing policies that would genuinely address the area's needs. At worst, they are an excuse for doing nothing.

Seventy years of help

It is often said that the Heads of the Valleys area has received help for decades, since King Edward VIII proclaimed in Merthyr Tydfil in 1936 that 'something must be done'. For example:

The Valleys comprise the largest long-lasting regeneration region in the world. They were first established as an area for economic assistance by the Special Areas Act in 1934. More than 70 years later many of the same problems addressed by that Act persist: unemployment and economic inactivity, under-developed communications, poor housing, and low levels of workforce skills.

Osmond (2008)

It is unarguably the case that the Heads of the Valleys area has been eligible for special help for many years. This started with its designation as a Special Area in the 1930s, further Special Development Area and Development Area designations in the 1960s and 1970s, continuing with Peter Walker's Valleys Initiative and Programme in the late 1980s and early 1990s, culminating in the area's current Tier 1 Assisted Area status. In addition to this UK government help, the Heads of the Valleys has also been eligible for support from various European Union regional aid programmes since the mid 1980s, not least the current EU convergence programme.

But, despite the designation of the area for various sorts of 'special help', it is far from clear that the governments of the day were serious about regeneration and that these various programmes have actually delivered any lasting improvements. For example, the first source of government support, the Special Areas scheme, saw over 2,000 factories being built in the Midlands and Greater London between 1932 and 1938. South Wales' Special Area saw just 235 factories in the same period, not one of which was built in the Merthyr Tydfil area (Morgan 1991 p.341).

Efforts to bring industry into the area in the immediate post-war period saw more success. In Merthyr Tydfil, well-known names set up including Teddington's, Kayser Bondor, O.P., Thorne's, Hoovers and Lines Brothers, and the post-war period was of course the heyday of the Ebbw Vale steelworks. But, valuable

though these jobs were while they lasted, few of the jobs created during this era remain. Almost all the post-war investments have disappeared or are a shadow their former selves – Annex 1 lists some of the businesses in Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent that have vanished in the last twenty years or so. It is a roll-call of policy failure.

The main tools of ‘regional policy’ continued to be development area status, construction of advance factories and the attraction of inward investment in the 1970s and 80s, but few new employers did come to the area during this era. Instead the story was one of closure and job loss not new business and expansion.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw Peter Walker’s Valleys Initiative and David Hunt’s Programme for the Valleys, which promised £900 million investment across the south Wales valleys. At the time these programmes were widely believed to be a re-packaging of existing expenditure – no-one outside the Welsh Office was able to identify any ‘new money’. Today, the only visible legacy of these efforts is the chain of Weatherspoons pubs in valleys towns.

Similarly, the early EU aid programmes (the Mid Glamorgan NPCI, the Industrial South Wales Objective 2 programmes and the Rechar programmes) struggled to deliver real impact on the ground, given the lack of financial additionality and shortage of public sector match funding in the early years of the programmes. More recently, the Objective 1 programme for 2000 – 2006 promised much for disadvantaged communities in West Wales and the Valleys, and it has without question co-financed a number of projects in the Heads of the Valleys area. According to the WEFO website, a total of 81 projects in Blaenau Gwent and 42 projects in Merthyr Tydfil have been approved up to 23rd April 2008, bringing in £59m in grant. Despite this impressive figure, the allocation of EU grant per 1,000 population of working age is *lower* in the Valleys than in other parts of West Wales and the Valleys. The most disadvantaged areas have benefited least.

So, whilst it is true to say that the area has been *eligible* for regional support for more than 70 years, that is not to say that the area has *benefited* from regional aid. In terms of the long-term impact on the region, it is not that the Heads of the Valleys have failed but rather there has been a failure of policy and will.

There are plenty of jobs....

The second myth I want to challenge is that there are plenty of jobs available in the Heads of the Valleys area. Proponents of this myth point fingers to the recent growth in employment indicated by official statistics or to local employers which have difficulty filling jobs, and scratch their heads about why people do not take these jobs.

Without doubt, there are *some* jobs available in the local labour market and it is also true to say that there has been *some* recent growth in employment in the Heads of the Valleys area. This growth is extremely welcome and has contributed to optimistic cries that the Valleys are ‘on the up’ (e.g. Williamson (2008)).

But we need to put this recent growth in employment into context. Two swallows



do not make a summer, two thousand jobs do not make a boom. Looking back to the 1950s, there were almost 30,000 people in employment in Merthyr Tydfil and almost 40,000 people in employment in Blaenau Gwent (Vision of Britain website). By 1995, employment in the two areas had declined to 17,000 and 18,000 respectively. It is worth pausing to remember the impact of those recessions. In today's era of single figure unemployment, it is hard to believe that Merthyr had an unemployment rate of 17% in 1992 (Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council 1999). Towards the end of the twentieth century, fortunes began to change although not spectacularly so. Whilst employment in Merthyr Tydfil started to increase with more than 4,000 new jobs created in the borough between 1995 and 2006, Blaenau Gwent did not fare so well as the growth in the late 1990s was offset by job losses from the closure of the steel works, resulting in no net change.

The important point is that the number of jobs in these two local authorities has still not recovered from many years of recession – the area is still short of approximately 30,000 jobs compared with employment levels in the 1950s, and has not even recovered to mid 1970s levels. That there is a shortfall of jobs is also evident in other statistics too. Jobs density – the measure of the number of jobs per 1,000 people of working age in an area – is also well below the Welsh and British averages. Blaenau Gwent has the lowest jobs density in Britain outside London (a dubious honour it shares with South Tyneside) whilst all the Heads of the Valleys authorities are in the lowest third of authorities for jobs density. Unemployment is still all too present, with the unemployment rates for Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr in March 2008 being well above the Welsh and British averages at 4.6% and 3.7% respectively. And the numbers of vacancies reported to Jobcentre Plus are also low in relation to the numbers of unemployed people. In March 2008 there were 1,101 vacancies on the books of Jobcentre Plus in the two areas, compared with 4,100 people who were unemployed. A much higher proportion of these vacancies is for sales and customer service jobs – more than 40 percent compared with a Wales and England proportion of 16 percent – some of which are paid on a 'commission-only' basis. There is also an issue about the quality and range of jobs that are available locally, which makes a difficult situation even worse.

So, whilst there might be *some* jobs available locally, it is invidious to argue that there are *sufficient* jobs. Not only has the Heads of the Valleys area never regained the employment levels enjoyed in the early 1950s, it has still to regain fully the jobs lost in the 1980s and 90s. Unemployment is above average, the density of jobs is way below average. The Heads of the Valleys remains a long, long way off full employment.

Let them commute

But what about jobs in Cardiff? Many commentators suggest that residents of the Heads of the Valleys should travel to Cardiff to find work. The view that there are plenty of jobs in Cardiff, which are relatively easily accessible, is part of the wider argument that the Heads of the Valleys belongs to a Cardiff 'city-region'. The idea of a Cardiff 'city-region' has justified, amongst other things, massive investment in the regeneration of Cardiff Bay and other facilities, as investment in the city is argued to benefit not only the inhabitants of Cardiff and environs but the valleys

too. Public transport, these commentators claim, is 'good' and so there can be no valid reason why someone cannot travel to find work – other than the lack of willingness. For example:

Decent transport links exist between the Valleys and the more prosperous southern coastal towns and cities so why are people not jumping on the trains to Cardiff to work?

Morris (2008)

Those who make such claims clearly rarely enjoy the reality of a daily commute to Cardiff. Journeys by public transport to and from Cardiff are long (typically an hour by train where there is a service and close to an hour and half by bus), are of variable frequency and cost a substantial chunk of a weekly wage. Any journey involving more than one bus or train, e.g. to get from home to the station or from the destination station to a workplace, becomes very arduous indeed. Add to that the lack of local services in the early morning and evening to enable someone to get to / from the main bus or train station, and it is astonishing that *anyone* travels any distance from the Heads of the Valleys to work.

Yet amazingly, more than a third of residents of Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil *do* travel to work outside the authority in which they live, although most travel to immediately adjacent authorities. This statistic is often cited as proof positive of the Cardiff city region. However, the proportion of workers who travel to Cardiff from the Heads of the Valleys is negligible. Only 2,000 people commute from Merthyr to Cardiff, less than 10% of Merthyr workers, whilst the proportion of Blaenau Gwent workers who do so is even lower. Less than 2 percent of Cardiff's workforce comes from these two authorities – indeed more people commute to Cardiff from outside Wales than commute from Merthyr and Blaenau Gwent put together. Improvements to the Merthyr railway line and the re-opening of the Ebbw Vale could well, in time, substantially improve travel to work for those in striking distance of a station, but any impact is yet to be seen.

The idea that Cardiff serves a broad hinterland, which extends as far north as Hirwaun, Cefn Coed and Rassau has, in my view, little foundation. Indeed I believe the city-region idea is deeply *unhelpful* to attempts to regenerate the Heads of the Valleys, because it justifies the continued pouring of investment into the capital, ignores the need to generate jobs locally and condemns residents of the Heads of the Valleys to long, tedious and costly journeys.

Lack of Ambition

The fourth myth I want to consider is about the culture and values of valleys residents. It is often claimed that the regeneration of the Heads of the Valleys is hampered by a 'lack of ambition'. Closely associated with this 'lack of ambition' are allegations that the area suffers from a 'dependency culture' and is too 'parochial'. It is hard to cite evidence of these views because they are rarely aired in print, but they are nevertheless frequently heard at conferences, business clubs, in high-level advisory groups, and in discussions with government officials.

Unfortunately, these views about people who live in the south Wales valleys are not new. Almost thirty years ago, Graham Day argued that the idea that 'under-



developed regions' owed their state to traditional values and cultures of their people had crossed from international development theory to be applied to regions in the developed world, including Wales. He also pointed out that as long ago as the 19th century the economic plight of Wales was attributed to 'the retarding effects of the Welsh language and 'Welsh way of life" (Day 1980). Such a view would, today, cause outrage if it was applied to the Welsh economy which, after all, continues in a relatively parlous state - and it should cause the same outrage when it is applied to the Heads of the Valleys.

And even if – and this is a big if – there *is* a culture in the Heads of the Valleys which is any more complacent, dependent and inward-looking than any other part of Wales, then this culture has not come out of the blue. The values that are reviled are not intrinsic to the character of people born here, nor do Heads of the Valleys communities receive special 'low ambition' versions of their daily newspapers or TV channels. People's values are profoundly shaped by the economic circumstances in which they live. And if those circumstances are ones in which they (or their friends, family and neighbours) have been cast onto the jobs scrap-heap, not just once but over and over again, with loyalty and hard-work earning little reward, and if their pleas to government for help have not borne fruit, then of course they will feel despondent and cynical. And when this experience is common throughout a community, rather than just being an individual experience, it can be all the harder to see alternatives. By way of illustration it is worth looking at a recent study of people living on Incapacity Benefit in Merthyr Tydfil (Buck et al 2006) which found that:

There are large numbers of people in the community living in poverty, and stress and depression are common problems. In this setting, it can be difficult to make a change, and there may well be feelings of resentment towards those whose situation improves, and frustration at being left behind.
p.30

and

There was a feeling of having been let down by the government, who were seen to be giving them scraps to live on rather than providing jobs.
p. 32

In other words, people's values and culture *reflect* the social and economic conditions in which they live – they do not cause them. If people have a negative view of their ability to improve their lives or the willingness of governments to act then it reflects decades of neglect and recession not some cultural quirk of a quarter of a million people.

Everything is Awful

The fifth myth is that everything in the Heads of the Valleys is awful. The myth goes like this: everyone is poor, everyone is unskilled and unqualified, the schools are terrible, the housing is run down, crime is rampant, and so on. Indeed, the very name of Merthyr Tydfil is synonymous with poverty and deprivation. This myth is widely promulgated by the media – the TV programme *Location, Location,*

Location famously labelled Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent as amongst the worst places to live in the UK and every time there is a report on sickness, unemployment or teenage pregnancy it is inevitable that a journalist is dispatched to the area to cover the story. However, this view also permeates many policy reports and discussions. The quotation below, although apparently trivial, was given in response to a AM's question about what the Welsh Assembly Government were doing to support the provision of 'hospitality' for businesses in the area. It shows a civil servant's mindset about the area – it is most unlikely he would have said the same thing about, say, Brecon or Haverfordwest:

'... we are looking at what might seem to be really simple things, like whether there is a pub [in the Heads of the Valleys] where you can take your kids on the weekend without feeling scared - '

National Assembly for Wales Enterprise and Learning Committee (2007)

Anyone who is aware of the 'geographical fallacy' will know that not everyone who lives in a deprived area is deprived. And so it is with the Heads of the Valleys. For a start, not everyone is out of work – almost two thirds of the population *is* employed, working in a wide range of industries and occupations. Some of the jobs people do are routine, but they also include doctors, professors, managers and directors – not many, but some. Similarly, there may be a relatively low proportion of the population with higher level qualifications but that is not to say that *no-one* has these qualifications – around one in seven people in Merthyr and Blaenau Gwent have qualifications equivalent to NVQ level 4 or above. And to take another example, it is simply not the case that the area is crime ridden - overall crime rates in Blaenau Gwent are below the England and Wales figures, as are rates in Merthyr Tydfil for all crimes except criminal damage and vehicle and other theft. Crucially, the overall crime rate for both authorities is well below that of Cardiff.

Just as not everyone who lives in the Heads of the Valleys is disadvantaged and deprived, so not all public services in the Heads of the Valleys area are poor and overstretched. In fact, they are sometimes outstanding. Some schools are highly rated by Estyn and have won awards for their achievements against UK or GB wide competition. Local health services, too, have won national recognition for their excellent work, and there are many other examples across public services. This is an issue on which the Bevan Foundation would like to undertake further work in the near future.

Beyond myths

I have spent some time looking at and, hopefully, debunking these myths because they are pervasive and they damage the future development of the Heads of the Valleys. Taken together, the ideas that the area has already had plenty of help, that there are plenty of jobs if not locally then in Cardiff, that the problem is the culture and anyway, it is not worth saving, can amount to an excuse to do nothing. It is all the fault of the people who live there, it is said, and nothing to do with the ravages of the economy or the failure of government policies. This way of thinking simply lets the powers that be off the hook.



III Towards Justice for the Heads of the Valleys

Improving the lives of some quarter of a million people in one of Europe's most disadvantaged areas is a question of social justice and should be a top political priority for both the Welsh Assembly and UK governments. Public policy should focus on the real and pressing task of ensuring that social and economic conditions in the Heads of the Valleys are equally as good as those anywhere else in Wales.

The Welsh Assembly Government has specified what 'good' social and economic conditions are in a range of targets for the whole of Wales. These targets are many and various and cover everything from eradicating child poverty and fuel poverty, to achieving full employment and raising Gross Value Added, to increasing educational achievement and raising the levels of qualification held by the population. Although crude, the targets are an important expression of both government ambition and of what constitutes a 'good life'.

It is vital that the Heads of the Valleys area hits these targets, along with the rest of Wales. If the Assembly Government's targets are the standards which are sought for Wales in 2010, 2020 or whichever is the specified date, then they are the standards that should apply throughout Wales, to all people, wherever they live. There should be no question of the Heads of the Valleys being allowed to lag behind, whilst other areas over-perform, so long as the average comes out at the right figure. If it is desirable that a target is reached, it is desirable that it is reached everywhere.

It is worth emphasizing that this is a different argument to the prevailing view that economic conditions in the Valleys must improve so that they are not a brake on Wales' performance. This view goes as follows:

for Wales to be a healthy society, all its parts need to be fully functioning and contributing to the increasing wealth and prosperity of the nation as a whole.

Unless the problems of the Valleys can be solved it will be impossible for Wales as a whole to improve its relative position among British regions or aspire to offer all its citizens a standard of living
Institute of Wales Affairs 2006

This view regards the poverty of the area as a statistical obstacle to overall Welsh performance, rather than a question of equality and justice. I have a different view.

The Challenges

The challenges are huge. Table 1 illustrates the scale of the changes estimated to be required to achieve selected targets in Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil. Even if the target year is deferred, the prospect of getting more than 11,000 people into work in these two authorities alone should be enough to concentrate minds.

Add to that, the requirement to help more than 10,000 adults to gain a qualification and a further 10,000 to qualify at NVQ level 4 or above, and to take almost 9,000 children out of poverty and nearly 70,000 households out of fuel poverty and the challenge is clearly very substantial indeed. And if that is not enough, there ought to be more than 69,000 adults exercising five times a week!

As the date for achieving many of these targets looms, it looks as if few will be achieved in Wales, let alone in the Heads of the Valleys. Nevertheless the figures for Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil are extremely useful because they illustrate the true scale of the change needed if the people of the Valleys are to enjoy the same levels of wellbeing as the rest of Wales.



Table 1 Welsh Assembly Government Targets in Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent

Target	Current position		Target		Change needed to meet target	
	Merthyr Tydfil	Blaenau Gwent	Merthyr Tydfil	Blaenau Gwent	Merthyr Tydfil	Blaenau Gwent
Increase employment rate to 80% by unspecified date(a)	62.8%	66.7%	80%	80%	5,500	5,400
	19,900	27,000	25,400	32,400		
Reduce the proportion of adults of working age without qualifications to less than 10% by 2010(b)	21.8%	25.8%	10%	10%	3,780	6,230
	7,000	10,200	3,220	3,970		
Increase the proportion of adults of working age with a level 4 qualification to more than 3 in 10 (b)	17.4%	13.2%	30%	30%	4,100	6,700
	5,600	5,200	9,700	11,900		
Eradicate child poverty by 2020	4260	4875	0	0	4,260	4,875
	29%	29%	100	100		
Adults to undertake at least 5 x 30 minutes of moderate intensity physical activity per week by 2025 (c)	12,700	15,800	43,700	54,500	31,000	38,700
	38.1	34.1	0	0	8,000	8,000
Eradicating fuel poverty in all households by 2018 (d)	8,000	10,000	0	0		

Notes

- (a) current figures are from June 2007 Annual Population Survey
- (b) current figures are 2006 data supplied by the Welsh Assembly Government
- (c) target from Climbing Higher, current participation from Welsh Health Survey 2003-4, adult pop = all 16+ from APS 2005
- (d) housing research report HRR3/05

Turning Heads

It was, therefore, a significant moment when Andrew Davies AM, then Minister for Economic Development, announced a programme for the Heads of the Valleys in July 2004. Although there was a subsequent lack of momentum (it took nine months to produce a draft strategy for consultation, *Heads we Win*, and a further fifteen months to produce the final strategy), in 2006, the final programme was launched, along with a commitment of £140 million of special funding over a 15 year period (equivalent to £10 million a year).

For the first time, there is a government initiative specific to the regeneration of the Heads of the Valleys area. For the first time, there is new, additional funding available for a range of different regeneration schemes in the area. For the first time, a programme's management is actually based in the Heads of the Valleys (in Ebbw Vale).

The Heads of the Valleys Programme has the potential to transform the area's economy and employment, environment, health and skills – according to the strategy anyway. But its potential goes even deeper than that – it could also change attitudes and expectations, by providing opportunities and restoring faith in government intentions – in other words, it can give people hope. Its significance, therefore, lies as much in its 'soft' achievements, such as increasing confidence, as in its more conventional 'hard' outputs. With so much resting on the programme, it is worth looking at it in a little more detail and considering whether it is capable of meeting the massive challenges outlined earlier.

First of all, the programme is very modest – just £10 million a year. This sounds a lot, but on the scale of regeneration expenditure it is very little indeed. Whilst I accept that the programme has, to its credit, not 'packaged up' the substantial investment already being made in the area, particularly in strategic transport, the sum available for regeneration is nevertheless relatively small. It is equivalent to the cost of building one new primary school a year or constructing just ½ mile of 3-lane motorway. The Wales Millennium Centre would have taken more than ten years to build if funded at this level. It has to be said, is this really enough to tackle some of the worst social and economic problems in Europe?

Second, programme expenditure to date has prioritized environmental schemes. Table 2 summarises the expenditure profile of the programme's first three years, from which it is clear that almost half the money will go to the natural, built and historical environment. Tourism and leisure developments get a fifth of the funding, with just 15% going to the economy and a mere 6.7% on education and health together.



Table 2 Heads of the Valleys Programme Expenditure 2006/7 – 2008/9

Strategic theme	2006/07 £m	2007/08 £m	2008/09 £m	Total £m	Percentage of expenditure
Natural, built and historical environment	6.75	5.0	2.0	13.75	45.8
Vibrant economy	1.25	1.5	1.75	4.5	15.0
Educated, skilled and healthier population	0.5	0.75	0.75	2.0	6.7
Tourism and leisure	0.75	0.25	5.0	6.0	20.0
Public confidence in the future	0.75	2.5	0.5	3.75	12.5
Total	10	10	10	30	100

Investment in the natural and built environment can bring some quick wins (Assembly Government officials have also reported that local environment improvements were what local communities said was their priority during consultations (Hall 2006)). Indeed the programme is already contributing to some very welcome face-lifts across the Heads of the Valleys area. However, it is debatable whether the emphasis on environmental improvements is the right one in the long term. In an area which faces very deep-seated and long-standing socio-economic problems, questions must be asked about whether spending half the funding on the environment and allocating more to 'raising public confidence' than to health and education projects, is the right balance.

Third, there are issues about the programme's engagement with non-governmental organizations and the public. The programme is managed by a programme board, which is chaired by the Assembly Minister for Economy and Transport and involves 'senior representatives from stakeholders'. It is supported by a programme team (most of whom are seconded on a part-time basis) and a number of strategic programme groups. Those who are involved in the programme's management are doubtless well informed about it, but it is more difficult for those who are not involved to keep up to date. Very little information is available publicly about the programme, and there has been little engagement with the wider community until a conference held in February 2008 (which was over-subscribed so not all interested parties could attend) whilst there has been minimal local media coverage.

With the next phase of programme funding, for 2009/10 – 2011/12 looming, it is timely that some of these issues be addressed. So how might the next phase of the programme look?



IV New Directions

Over recent years, many individuals and organizations have produced ideas about ways to regenerate the Heads of the Valleys. These have ranged from the sensible and feasible – many of which, such as the Ebbw Vale rail line, are now a reality – to the weird and wonderful, such a Wild West theme park, now relegated to history. The Bevan Foundation, too, has been a key contributor to this debate, generating proposals specific to the Heads of the Valleys as well as more general ideas which are of particular relevance to the area.

The rest of this section brings together these ideas, and some new thinking, into a set of ‘directions’ which we suggest should be carefully considered by the Welsh Assembly Government and all those with responsibility for regeneration in the Heads of the Valleys – including some Wales-wide bodies who seem to think their responsibilities end at the M4.

Two caveats. First of all, there is no ‘magic wand’ or ‘silver bullet’ that will change the fortunes of the Heads of the Valleys. It is naïve to think that deep-seated, multiple deprivation and disadvantage could be solved if only someone, somewhere could find the answer. Indeed, I think this search for a magic solution may have paralysed efforts in the past. But there isn’t a magic solution. What the Heads of the Valleys area needs most of all is serious and sustained effort across the range of different public services – the kind of regeneration effort that is the norm in many other parts of the UK - that will give the area the kinds of opportunities and services that are taken for granted elsewhere.

Second, it is clear that seventy years of deprivation and decline cannot be overturned overnight. Quick fixes and big bangs might have short-term appeal, but as we have seen with inward investment, unless change is rooted in the local economy, society and environment it simply does not last. The next recession, the next credit crunch, the next crisis, will wash imposed change away. Real transformation comes when change comes from within, when it is rooted in local action. The fifteen year time horizon of the Heads of the Valleys programme is welcome, but within it the emphasis must be on achieving change that is sustainable not just cosmetic.

The rest of this section outlines three key ways in which I suggest the Heads of the Valleys programme needs to develop. These come under the heads of more funding, action on what matters, and better public engagement.

1. More funding

The Heads of the Valleys programme has been allocated £10 million a year, for the next 15 years. There is no commitment to review this allocation, nor even to increase it to take account of inflation. The extent to which current funding is over-subscribed, if at all, is unknown. However, as the current funding is relatively modest compared with the scale of the task faced, it is likely that new, and significant, opportunities may emerge that will need more funding than the programme is capable of supporting.



A key direction for the future must be a substantial increase in programme funding – a doubling in the cash allocated to the programme would still amount to less than £100 per resident over its life.

It would be a shame indeed if progress stalled because of the modest funding available.

2. Action on what matters

The second change that should be considered is to complement the focus on environmental improvements with substantial investment in the fundamentals of regeneration. Appealing and quick to deliver though environmental improvements may be, no-one, no matter what their perspective, has to my knowledge ever suggested that a poor environment is the root cause of the area's difficulties.

The Bevan Foundation argued for a programme for the Heads of the Valleys in order to maximize the development potential of the dualling of the A465, as well as to address the area's long term and deep seated problems. Yet the current programme's investment in jobs, skills, and health – surely the foundations of prosperity – is minimal. This must be rectified urgently. The mantra 'jobs, skills and health' should lie at the heart of the next phase of funding.

The rest of this section identifies possible actions around the following themes.

- A focus on full employment
- Supporting social infrastructure
- Investment in learning and skills
- Better health
- Greater public engagement

A focus on full employment

I am convinced that more can be done to support the creation of jobs in the Heads of the Valleys. In 2003, a Bevan Foundation report found that people in the valleys felt that little was being done by the then WDA to create jobs in their communities. More recently, Leighton Andrews AM described his impressions of what government was doing to create jobs in his constituency as follows:

After my election to the Assembly in 2003 as Labour AM for the Rhondda, I met the WDA to discuss their plans for the regeneration of the area. It was a dispiriting meeting. Their approach to regeneration wasn't holistic; it wasn't integrated across their own departments; and it certainly wasn't strategic. I left the meeting feeling that the WDA's approach to the Valleys consisted of providing industrial sites, and doing some land reclamation. Otherwise their plan for my constituents appeared to be "let them commute".

Andrews (2008)

Although some of the 'basics' of supporting the economy and employment are at last being put into place (e.g. a new business centre and the creation of small social economy team in Merthyr Tydfil), the Assembly Government's Department for Economy and Transport has a weak local presence, and there are claims that



there is no support available to new businesses at the time of writing.

There needs to be a much more concerted effort by the Welsh Assembly Government to encourage jobs in the Heads of the Valleys. What is abundantly clear from the experience of the last 50 years is that inward investment will not, alone, solve the area's problems. Jobs come in, when conditions are favourable, and then they go. To imagine that inward investment is the solution when so many jobs are moving overseas is a fantasy.

Instead, there needs to be a 'home grown' approach, in which growth is embedded into the local economy and will, over time, become self-sustaining. This is most likely to arise through jobs which are created by local enterprise, whether by individual entrepreneurs or social enterprises is not important. The Heads of the Valleys has had amongst the lowest rates of business starts in the UK, but this is not to say that there is no prospect for success. Indeed, some authors have been dismissive of the potential of start ups:

given the low skill levels in the Valleys ... the likelihood that individuals will be able to start anything but the most basic businesses ... is not strong.

David 2004

Yet there is potential. Between 2004 and 2006, for example, more than 600 businesses registered for VAT in Merthyr and Blaenau Gwent alone, all of them businesses with potential for growth and also potentially needing support. No lesser authority than Professor Dylan Jones-Evans has said that there is 'an urgent requirement' to increase the low levels of enterprise and that the Heads of the Valleys 'drastically require additional support to encourage entrepreneurial development' (Jones-Evans n.d.). Yet the geographically targeted support he has called for is not in place.

It is vital that a pro-active programme of enterprise development, specific to the Heads of the Valleys and offering comprehensive, top-quality support to businesses, is put in place alongside a complementary programme of social enterprise development.

The jobs that do exist in the area must also be protected as far as possible. Manufacturing remains extremely important to the Heads of the Valleys, providing 9,400 jobs – almost a quarter of all jobs - in Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent alone, yet it faces substantial threats. We should not throw up our hands in despair in the face of globalisation and let these jobs leak away. Instead, the Welsh Assembly Government needs to develop a strategy to foster and protect what manufacturing remains in Wales.

Employment growth must be complemented by help to get people into jobs. The latest reforms to welfare to work programmes, such as New Deal, are likely to bring many changes that will help people in the Heads of the Valleys to find work, including measures that the Bevan Foundation and others have argued for such as providing assistance at a much earlier stage of unemployment and defining a sustainable job as one that lasts for six months rather than a mere 13 weeks as at present. The Heads of the Valleys 'City Strategy' is adding value to standard provision, but there is potential to do even more.



It seems to me that welfare to work is stuck in the mindset of getting people off benefit, which is not necessarily the same as helping people back to work. I would like to see the welfare to work agenda in the Heads of the Valleys transformed into a comprehensive system of support for people to find work and learn new skills. It should be available to anyone, at any time, to do anything. It should vigorously promote a pro-work message, and proactively engage with people from all backgrounds and in all communities. Provision might include:

- allowing participation in a return to work programme at any time including during the first six months of unemployment;
- allowing participation in a return to work programme by anyone who wants help to find a job, including people in receipt of any benefit and those who do not receive any benefit at all such as non-working mothers, unpaid carers, and people working in the informal economy;
- protecting participants' benefit entitlements so that there is no risk to them trying out a return to work, and ensuring that there is financial support during a transition from benefit to work;
- providing on-going support during the early months of working life to people who need it;
- including support for people to manage health conditions that may impact on their ability to find work (irrespective of their benefit status);
- recognizing and addressing in sympathetic ways issues about confidence in returning to work;
- encouraging local employers to develop employment policies that enable people to return to work, such as that pioneered by the former North Glamorgan NHS Trust, and in particular encouraging other local public sector employers – including the Welsh Assembly Government;
- including vocational education and training as legitimate 'outcomes' for welfare to work programme participants, where appropriate, rather than requiring take up of a job which is inevitably at entry level.

It should be noted that there are other aspects of the welfare to work reforms that bring strong risks, however, to people in the Heads of the Valleys. In particular the threat that benefit claimants who do not comply with requirements to look for and find work will have their benefits 'sliced' – so-called 'conditionality' – could hit some of the area's poorest and most disadvantaged hard (Buck et al 2006).

2. Supporting social infrastructure

“Social infrastructure” is a clumsy term that briefly appeared, courtesy of the European Commission, in the early 1990s but has since gone out of vogue at least in Wales. Clumsy though it is, it is nevertheless a useful way of describing all those services that support a strong and vibrant economy and labour market as well as a healthy society. It also highlights an area in which the Heads of the Valleys are, mostly, highly deficient.

Over and over again, people looking for work in the Heads of the Valleys cite childcare as a barrier to getting a job. Working parents, employment agencies and employers alike all say that there is a shortage of good quality, affordable and flexible childcare in the area.

There are undoubtedly fewer childcare places in relation to the number of children in Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent. The Bevan Foundation's study in 2005 found that there was a shortfall of childcare places in these two authorities compared with the Welsh average (The Bevan Foundation 2005). The recent 'assessment of need' for childcare in Merthyr Tydfil painted a damning picture of the availability, cost and adequacy of childcare for working parents (Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council 2008) – such as:

- there are fewer daycare places per 1000 children than the Welsh average for all ages of child and for pre-school children;
- there are a limited number of places for babies and few vacancies;
- only 7 out of 34 schools in Merthyr offer before school care and only 3 out of 34 schools offer after school care;
- holiday care has been 'decimated' by the de-registration of local authority schemes for under-8s;
- many parents found childcare unaffordable, inflexible and offering little choice.

The study concluded that the lack of childcare was a significant barrier to employment and cost the local economy at least £3m per annum.

The Bevan Foundation has previously called for childcare to be available free of charge for all pre-school age children whose parents want it, and for free after-school and school-holiday care for all under 14s whose parents want it. This approach could be piloted in the Heads of the Valleys area with the Heads of the Valleys programme pump-priming provision where local childcare needs assessments have identified a shortfall that is hindering return to work.

Local transport

The Welsh Assembly Government has done a great deal to improve the strategic transport in the Heads of the Valleys, through improvements to the A465, reopening the Ebbw Vale rail line and building a passing loop to enable increased frequency of services on the Merthyr rail lines. Together with the Rhymney and Aberdare lines, it is now easier to get in to – and out of - the Heads of the Valleys than ever before.

But this is just the first step. Few people live within a short walk of a railway station, nor does everyone without a car (more than a quarter of households in Blaenau Gwent and Merthyr Tydfil are car-less) only want to go up or down their valley. They need reliable, frequent and affordable bus transport.

Whilst day-time services in the Heads of the Valleys area are relatively frequent along main routes, some communities (particularly small villages) and some key destinations (such as Prince Charles Hospital) are nevertheless poorly served.



This is bad enough but the real difficulties start outside weekdays and day time, in the early morning and evenings, and on Sundays. Almost all commercial services stop at 6 p.m. which is too early to get workers traveling from Cardiff and Newport from the train station to their homes. It is impossible to hold a 9 – 5 job in Cardiff and live in Gellideg if you travel by public transport.

The Welsh Assembly Government provides funding to local authorities to purchase non-commercial services – typically evening and Sunday provision. However the level of funding received by the Heads of the Valleys authorities is simply too small to purchase good quality non-commercial services. For example in 2007/08 Merthyr Tydfil received £167,189 and Blaenau Gwent received £181,584. Just over £3,000 a week doesn't buy much by way of bus services to serve the 125,000 people who live in these two authorities. A recent Bevan Foundation report (Winckler 2006) called for the Local Transport Services Grant to be trebled to enable local authorities to purchase more and better quality non-commercial bus services. In the absence of such a move Wales-wide, the Heads of the Valleys programme could very valuably provide some support.

But local travel is not all about cars, buses and trains. Walking and cycling are extremely important accounting nationally for more than half of all journeys to work by full time workers of less than 1 mile. They are also an important element of journeys by bus and train, to get to and from the bus stop or station. Although there has been some investment in provision for tourism and leisure cycling, provision for cyclists away from dedicated routes is almost non-existent, with few of the facilities such as advance stop signs, cycle crossings or even cycle parking that are becoming the norm in many other towns. Whilst the Heads of the Valleys may be have a challenging topography for cycling and walking, there is still much more that could and should be done to make cycling and walking more attractive. Not only would this improve local accessibility it would also help levels of physical activity and would contribute to making the Heads of the Valleys an attractive stopping place for people walking and cycling long-distance routes in the area. The proposed Heads of the Valleys cycle route paralleling the A465 is still some way off and, although very welcome and in great need of being urgently progressed, it also needs to be complemented by local provision.

Investment in Skills and learning

The third area that I suggest needs considerably more emphasis is skills and learning. There has of course been mainstream investment in learning outside the Heads of the Valleys programme, e.g. the RAISE initiative provided additional funding to schools which have a high proportion of disadvantaged pupils – a total of more than £1.3 million in 2006/07 for Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenau Gwent alone. Higher education is being developed through the merger of Merthyr Tydfil college with the University of Glamorgan and through the new University of Wales Newport campus at Ebbw Vale, although there is some uncertainty about the future of the Learning Campus in Merthyr Tydfil (which has changed its name to 'a Learning Quarter'). However, the Heads of the Valleys programme itself has included no more than a token sum for education and learning to date – a mere £0.5 million a year which is shared with health. How this money has been used is not clear.

The programme urgently needs to embrace the learning and skills agenda. Most important of all, there needs to be an unequivocal commitment by the Minister for

Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills to a substantial investment in learning in the Heads of the Valleys, including:

- increasing the capacity of local further education colleges so that no-one able and willing to learn is turned away;
- bringing the Merthyr Lifelong Learning Campus and Ebbw Vale University campus to full fruition;
- providing intensive remedial support so that no child leaves school without basic skills appropriate to their age.
- substantially expanding out-of-school, informal learning, including youth services and facilities, for 14 – 19 year olds who are (or risk becoming) disengaged from formal learning.

Better Health

The fourth area which the Heads of the Valleys programme needs to embrace is health. The future direction of travel for health care in the Heads of the Valleys is unclear. Health Minister Edwina Hart announced on 2nd April 2008 a series of structural changes to the NHS in Wales, which could see Merthyr Tydfil LHB merge with Rhondda Cynon Taff LHB (they already share a Chief Executive) and Blaenau Gwent LHB merge with the other Gwent LHBs. Just the day before the Minister's announcement of these structures, North Glamorgan NHS Trust merged with Pontypridd and Rhondda NHS Trust to form a new body, Cwm Taf NHS Trust.¹ Accompanying these structural changes, Prof Mansel Aylward has been commissioned to undertake a review of health care provision in the North Glamorgan area. Just about the only certainty is that new hospitals will be built in Ystrad Mynach, Ebbw Vale and in Mountain Ash.

To date health has had a very low profile in the Heads of the Valleys programme, with just £0.5 million a year funding (which is shared with education) and, until April 2008, a strategic manager whose input was just one day a week. The increase in the programme's staffing levels to one person full time since that date is very welcome but the challenges faced in the Heads of the Valleys are even greater than in other parts of Wales. The programme urgently needs to embrace the health agenda.

As with learning and skills, there needs to be a clear statement from the Minister for Health about the future of health care in the Heads of the Valleys. Moreover, there needs to be a major initiative – some sort of health improvement zone - to improve public health in the area. This would bring together all the statutory bodies as well as the private and voluntary sectors to deliver a 15 year programme to promote good health in the community, including everything from healthy life styles and personal responsibility for health, to enhanced occupational health, and better emotional wellbeing. Crucially, not only should provision be based on sound evidence of what works, but it should also be willing to innovate and try untested approaches.

¹ on which I am a non-executive director.



3. Public engagement

Last but by no means least there needs to be far greater public engagement with the regeneration of the Heads of the Valleys in general and with the Heads of the Valleys programme in particular. I have already argued that the programme is of great symbolic significance, as well as practical importance. Its success will not only be the improvements (hopefully) delivered on the ground, but also the re-engagement of people who feel alienated from and neglected by the political process.

Unfortunately there has been little engagement in the programme outside those involved in its delivery, other than a conference held in February 2008 for voluntary sector groups. There is potential to provide much more information about progress, about how funding is being used (other than the allocations to local authorities and occasional projects), and about the programme's impact. Objective 1 and convergence funding have set a standard for transparency e.g. listing the names of all those involved in programme management, making minutes of programme management meetings and papers available, providing a full list of projects funded etc. which needs to be matched by the Heads of the Valleys programme.

The communications process should also be two-way, providing an opportunity for stakeholders, businesses, community groups and the wider public to feed in their views and comments about the programme in general and about specific proposals.

Lastly, there needs to be much more scrutiny of the Heads of the Valleys programme, both within the National Assembly for Wales and elsewhere. I have identified few substantial questions being asked about its progress or performance. Politicians, whether local or regional AMs, MPs or local councillors, need to hold the Welsh Assembly Government to account for the Heads of the Valleys programme.

V CONCLUSIONS

The fortunes of the Heads of the Valleys have been on the agenda for years. During this time many views have developed about the area and its people which have purported to explain why the area's problems have persisted. These views are, I have argued, unfounded and unhelpful. The idea that there has been a great deal of regeneration activity, that the problems persist despite jobs being available, that the area is uniformly awful, and that the problem somehow lies in the culture of its residents must be quashed once and for all. We should never again hear the idea that the problems of the Heads of the Valleys are caused by the problems *in* the Heads of the Valleys, and not by the vagaries of the economy or by a failure of policy.

The regeneration of the Heads of the Valleys must be a major priority of the UK and the Welsh Assembly Governments. The people who live in the Heads of the Valleys are entitled to enjoy the same quality of life and standards of living as those in other parts of Wales – and they are entitled to expect our politicians and politicians to do a great deal more to bring social and economic conditions up to scratch. This is not a matter of economic efficiency (though it would doubtless be useful in this regard) but a question of social justice.

If we take the Welsh Assembly Government's targets as indicators of wellbeing, it is clear that there is a huge amount more still to be achieved if the people of the area are to enjoy anything like the same standard of living as people in the rest of Wales. The challenge is so great I fear that the powers that be may shrug their shoulders and dismiss it as too great. This must not happen.

The Heads of the Valleys programme is extremely important and its significance is symbolic as well as practical. However after three years of operation its next phase needs to be substantially different to its first phase if it is to achieve its full potential.

First, it must have more funding. It is frankly ridiculous to expect £10 million a year to tackle such deep-seated and serious problems as those in the Heads of the Valleys. A starting point might be a doubling of funding - £20 million a year – which is linked to inflation and subject to three-yearly review.

Second, the programme needs to engage with the underlying causes of poverty and disadvantage – the shortage of jobs, the lack of skills, and poor health. Without getting the basics of jobs, skills and health right the programme is doomed to tinker only at the margins.

And third, it needs to engage more effectively with people within the Heads of the Valleys area. The programme must not be imposed from above – it needs to be owned, and have the belief of, the people whom it is supposed to serve.

There are fragile shoots of change showing across the area – we cannot afford for them to be allowed to wither.



Annex 1 Examples of Businesses Closed since mid 1980s

Merthyr Tydfil

Thorne Electrical
 Halla (300 promised)
 Bairdwear
 Green Waste Recycling
 Bluebird Toys (100)
 Triang Pedigree
 Welsh Products(80)
 Shaunabath
 Gee Tee Industrials
 Ballito Hosiery (370)
 Berlei
 British Steel, Dowlais (Closed 1987)
 Welling Enterprises Ltd
 E Camilant and Co
 Clarke Engineering (60)
 Croda Wales Ltd (70)
 Efi Astex Ltd
 Envit Ltd (140)
 Kayser Bonder
 S Leffman Ltd
 Merthyr Engineering Co
 Moss Gear Company (250)
 Parpri Ltd
 Pyke and Associates
 Dare Dynamics
 Barvic Engineering
 G & J Metal Products
 Fabcraft Engineering
 Supac Electrical
 Merthyr Vale Colliery (1000 jobs lost 1989)
 Deep Navigation Colliery
 Lady Windsor Colliery
 Lewis Merthyr Colliery
 Hoover (7,000 at peak – 600 in Dec 2007)

Blaenau Gwent

Artsmagic
 Burlington Cotton Mills (50)
 Merryweather
 Star Micronics
 Bosal (150)
 Woodhead
 Arctic Circle
 Minds Eye
 Yajima (100)
 EPC
 Techboard
 Exel Industries
 Papermarc Merton (90)
 Glenrock Recycling
 Lefray
 Bertand Faure (290)
 Green Waste Recycling
 Matrix
 IRCA
 Kaywool
 Rimflex
 Boing Inflatables
 Advance Moulds
 JK Paints
 Kine Engineering
 BEWA
 Wetherby Ash
 G B Brittons Tuff (65)
 Anacomp/Control Data
 Coils UK
 3M
 Bristol Bending
 Alliance Integrated Solutions
 West Heat Eltra
 Medallion
 Molly Press
 Air International
 Waterfit
 Marine Colliery
 Semtex
 Dannimac
 Lifestyle
 Access Mechanical Handling
 Hugh Phillips Engineering
 Aeromotive UK
 APAC
 ECAM
 Scandinavian Designs
 M&N UPVC
 System 41
 Swatch Gallery
 South Wales Rubber
 Intersewing
 Creative Print and Design
 Continental Teves
 Yuasa Battery (330)
 Corus (10,000 – 1964, 800 – 2002)



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