

More than a bypass: Unleashing the potential of the A465 heads of the valleys road

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Cover image: Industrial units along the A465
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Summary

The dualling of the A465 heads of the valleys road holds incredible possibility. Such a substantial investment demands action to ensure the benefit is maximised for people who live locally as well as people passing through. However, without vision, action and delivery, the latent benefits risk being lost or reaped elsewhere. The need to make the most of the opportunity is all the more urgent because of the pre-existing lack of local jobs and worrying demographic trends. There needs to be careful consideration of how best to drive change and deliver on the ground.

This paper sets out the many opportunities to successfully capitalise on the dualling of the A465, with a particular but not exclusive focus on Blaenau Gwent. As a key east-west economic artery and a gateway to the valleys, the heads of the valleys road offers fast, largely congestion-free journeys in south Wales. This stands in contrast to other significant routes in the region such as the M4 and A470. The road also provides connections to the West Midlands, west Wales and Ireland, making it a strategically important asset for the local and regional economy.

The report recommends key actions to:

- **Strengthen local connections**

Strong connections to the towns and villages surrounding the road are essential. Better transport interchanges and services between the road and the separate investment of the south Wales metro can ensure a well-integrated area, better placed to reap the benefits.

- **Maximise the business benefits**

There is a substantial manufacturing and business base along the road. An extended and enhanced enterprise zone offer with upgraded business premises can help to retain and grow the existing business base and enable them to keep pace with modern business needs. A dedicated business advice and support service can also add value to an improved business offer.

- **Capture spending power**

The annual flow of hundreds of thousands of people along the road also offers scope to capture travellers' spending for the benefit of the local economy. Basic service infrastructure such as service stations, rest areas and accommodation can help to make much more of the road's strategic location.

- **Create a unique visitor destination**

The road's position within an outstanding landscape provides a backdrop to what could be a world-class visitor experience. From peat moors to cave networks to rich flora and fauna and the highest point, its breathtaking views merit more than appreciative glances while passing through. The social and industrial history of the area, from the birthplace of the industrial revolution and the National Health Service to the Chartists and ironmasters, tell an exceptional story about seismic shifts that the area has witnessed.

Taken together, strategic actions and vision can develop the A465 from a bypass to an integral asset to the economic, social and cultural identity of the heads of the valleys.

1. Introduction

This paper explores the potential to build on the sizeable investment of dualling of the A465 heads of the valleys road. It outlines practical actions that could be taken to make more of the many existing assets surrounding it.

More than twenty years since the dualling of the road was proposed by the then Welsh Office, the 30 mile stretch of the A465 that crosses the heads of the valleys straddles seven local authority areas, from Monmouthshire in the east to Neath Port Talbot to the west, with onward journeys to England, west Wales and crossings to Ireland. On completion, it will have involved around £1 billion of investment. While the construction phase of the dualling has already realised proven economic benefits in terms of jobs, apprenticeships and local supply chains¹, securing wider and long-term benefits requires concerted action.

This paper highlights the opportunities created by the improved A465. The Bevan Foundation has previously argued that much more could and should be done to realise the potential.² With sections 1 – 4 now complete or very nearly so, it is timely again to look at the benefits that the upgraded road could bring. This report focuses on the twelve mile stretch between Brynmawr and Merthyr Tydfil, and especially on the part in Blaenau Gwent. Along a road where administrative boundaries mean little to most people who use it, to fully take advantage of the investment of the A465 requires a joined up, collaborative pan-authority approach.

This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive overview of the investment in the heads of the valleys nor of the assets and communities that surround it. What it sets out is a vision of a different and better future, in which the extraordinary assets of this area – from the birthplace of National Health Service and the industrial revolution, the first train to run in the world, a UNESCO world heritage site, and a social and cultural history from Chartists cave to Wales's oldest cinema – are used for the benefits of the people who live there.

This paper has been commissioned by Alun Davies, Senedd Member for Blaenau Gwent and has been written by the Bevan Foundation. The views in the report reflect the Bevan Foundation's expertise in the regeneration of the valleys and are entirely independent of the views of the commissioner or any other individual or organisation.

2. Challenges and opportunities

The entire heads of the valleys area stretches across hundreds of valleys communities, many of which face considerable socio-economic challenges, some deeply entrenched. Despite this, the area also has many strengths and assets which with the dualling of the heads of the valleys road could provide the basis of significant social and economic renewal.

2.1. The opportunities

The heads of the valleys area is well placed in so many ways.

The road itself is a key strategic route. In a Wales and UK context, it links the West Midlands and Welsh borders with west Wales and was previously designated part of a trans-European network because of its connections to Ireland. Not only is it a direct route with little if any congestion, it also provides an alternative to the much busier M4 some 25 miles to the south.

Within south Wales, the road completes the northern part of a network of north-south and east-west routes in south Wales, joining together communities that are otherwise separated by mountains. There is no east-west trainline along the heads of the valleys, the line between Merthyr Tydfil and Abergavenny having closed in 1958. There is no other east-west route in the area that matches the capacity, speed and directness of the A465 - without this key east-west route across the heads of valleys, journeys between different valleys communities would be at least twice as long.

The area has several large markets within easy reach. More than half a million people in Cardiff and Newport are less than 45 minutes away by car, while Bristol's 467,000 people are just over an hour's journey distant. Further afield, nearly 3 million people in the West Midlands are around 2 hours away while London's 9 million people are around 3 hours away.

This strategic location makes the area well positioned to develop a wide range of economic activities. The road has already come to be the focus of economic activity along its length. As well as essential infrastructure of hospitals and educational providers and the headquarters of key local anchor institutions, there are numerous industrial sites along its length. The Welsh Government's Tech Valleys initiative will invest £100 million over ten years in the area. It aims to create 1,500 jobs with a focus on attracting investment in 5G, digital research, motor and battery technology³. There are also longstanding businesses; amongst them Continental Teves and Zorba Foods.

The concentration of economic activity and its importance to the local community is such that the Office for National Statistics designated the heads of the valleys as a Travel to Work Area (TTWA) based on 2011 Census of Population data. A TTWA is a relatively self-contained labour market in which least 75% of an area's resident workforce work in the area and at least 75% of the people who work in the area also live in the area. This Merthyr Tydfil TTWA runs from the Wales-England border in the east to Glynneath in the west, and from Abercynon and Abertillery at its southern edge and into the Brecon Beacons to the north. Within the TTWA is a working-age population of 138,000 people and a total of 74,000 jobs in a wide range of industries.

The unique landscape in the area is also a rich asset. It is the highest open countryside in southern Britain, alongside Dartmoor and Exmoor, with its open moorland being classed as a historic landscape by Cadw. The positioning of the A465 adjacent to large swathes of peat land offers excellent opportunities not only for carbon storage, but also flood mitigation⁴. The countryside has a rich biodiversity, including lapwing, great crested newts and lesser horseshoe bats. The former coalfields also have unique features: a study of fifteen colliery spoil sites in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Neath Port Talbot found that more than one in five of the invertebrate species recorded are deemed a "conservation priority". Some were found to support the only known population of a given species in Wales, Britain or even the world⁵.

2.2. The challenge

The heads of the valleys area also has major challenges. Like many places in the south Wales valleys, there are not enough jobs to meet the needs of the working age population. The shortage is especially acute in Blaenau Gwent. Even compared to its three neighboring local authorities - Torfaen, Merthyr Tydfil and Caerphilly county boroughs - Blaenau Gwent has the largest jobs deficit and lowest jobs density rates of them all⁶. Simply to bring its jobs per head in line with neighbouring authorities would require an additional 5,000 jobs to be created locally. To bring it in line with the Welsh average would require just under 12,000 additional jobs. Of course, there will always be a level of inward and outward commuting in a modern labour market. However, a jobs deficit of this size for a population of approximately 70,000⁷ illustrates the vital need for more jobs locally.

The jobs deficit is reflected in low economic activity rates and high relatively high unemployment, and in below-average pay rates. There is a serious risk that the fallout from the coronavirus pandemic could worsen the economic difficulties further.

Demographic change is a challenge for Wales as a whole, and perhaps even more so in Blaenau Gwent. In relative terms, the population is growing more slowly than the rest of Wales and in recent decades has declined. In the years 1991-2001, the area saw a decline of 3% in the population, making it the only local authority in Wales to have a smaller population than in the ten years previously. More recently the downward trend has slowed but nevertheless it experienced a decrease of 0.2% between 2008 and 2018⁸.

2.3. What should be done?

The heads of the valleys are far from the lost cause or economic basket-case that has sometimes been suggested. The area without doubt has major challenges, almost all of which derive from the rapid economic shifts have occurred in the recent past, but it also has significant opportunities. The upgrading of the A465 provides a unique chance to combine greatly-improved connectivity with the area's existing strengths. Action will help to achieve the maximum benefit of the Welsh Government's investment as well as improving the quality of life for people in the area.

3. Strengthen local connections

The potential benefits of the A465 will only be realised for people in the area if the road has strong connections with the towns and villages that are either immediately adjacent to or within a few miles of the road. However, the current connections between the A465 and the wider population in the area are relatively limited – the focus on the A465 to date has been very much on its role as a through-route. If the potential of increased connectivity is seized it could be an opportunity for areas along the route, bringing people and business into the area and providing improved access to a broader range of employment and other opportunities nearby.

Each town or village along the A465 is in effect the gateway to their valley. Yet at present, not all towns and villages are immediately accessible from the A465, and their valleys are not always signposted from the A465. Nor, on exiting the road, is there necessarily a sense of arriving at a unique destination and its onward attractions. Some places can feel much further away from the road than the few miles that in reality separate them. Improving access between the A465 itself and places 3 to 4 miles of the road is vital if the benefits are to spread.

There have been some concerns about connectivity between the A465 and some communities where the road design has severed local pedestrian routes. A study commissioned by the Welsh Government found that some communities, including Waundeg, Tredegar and Rassau, felt 'cut off' by the A465, and found children and young people were particularly badly affected.⁹ Residents and businesses in Beaufort have had similar concerns about being 'cut off', albeit temporarily, by changes in traffic flow during construction of Section 2 (Brynmawr to Gilwern).

Perhaps ironically, most bus services do not use the new A465, instead following local roads to be closer to passengers. There is only one service that serves the whole length of the Merthyr Tydfil to Brynmawr stretch, the X4, which takes 50 minutes (compared with 20 minutes by car). Travel between locations along the A465 can involve several changes of bus: for example to travel from Rhymney to Ebbw Vale involves going via Merthyr Tydfil and at least one change of bus. Some communities off the A465 have few or no bus services, such as Trefil and Ponsticill, and most industrial estates do not have direct bus services. Bus services in the evenings and on Sundays are often non-existent. With a local population where over a quarter of households have no access to a vehicle¹⁰, the importance of decent public transport connections is even more pronounced.

The impact of the A465 is also limited by the relatively weak connections between the A465 and rail stations at Ebbw Vale, Rhymney and Merthyr Tydfil – indeed the stations are not even signposted from the A465. The stations themselves offer limited car parking. If the connections between the A465 and rail stations were strengthened and coupled with more car parking at stations, the whole heads of the valleys area would be better integrated with and able to benefit from the investment in the south Wales Metro.

3.1. Stronger sense of place

The A465 construction has adopted high design standards that echo and complement the history and landscape of the area, for example the use of local stone, exposed rock, and naturalistic planting. Some features, such as its bridges, are visually stunning. This helps to give the area a strong sense of place. The same cannot be said of some of communities that lie off the A465 – for example there is nothing to say that Brynmawr is the highest town in Wales or that Tredegar is the birthplace of the NHS.

There is scope for public bodies to **work with communities to identify the unique feature** of each place along the A465, which could then be reflected in simple and attractive signage and straplins.

3.2. Develop local interchanges

There is potential to improve connectivity between the communities along the A465 and the route itself by enhancing local interchanges. Caerphilly County Borough Council is developing proposals for an interchange at the junction of the A465 and A469, which would provide bus interchange facilities and a direct bus service to Rhymney station. There is potential to **explore an interchange** providing bus and cycle interchange and onward access, for example in the Rassau area to link Ebbw Vale Town station. The value of an interchange would be increased further if there were direct services from Ebbw Vale to Newport as well as Cardiff.

3.3. Better bus network

The current bus network reflects local demand, especially the needs of those travelling on concessionary fares. As the heads of the valleys area develops and the pattern of demand shifts, bus services will need to change. There is likely to be a need for more services to business and industrial locations, new services for visitor destinations and better cross-region linkages. There will also need to be more services in the evenings and weekends.

Unfortunately, public funding for bus services (as opposed to subsidised travel) has been static whilst costs have increased and passenger numbers have declined. There is scope to **introduce a 'bus development fund'** that allows operators to pilot new routes for a period to test if they meet local needs and how they can operate sustainably in future.

3.4. Better walking and cycling routes

Many communities in the heads of the valleys are within walking or cycling distance of local employment, education and leisure destinations. However, designated routes are mainly focused on leisure routes – walking and cycling to school and work are much less well developed and, as highlighted earlier, some communities feel their routes have been severed by the A465 development.

There is scope to **develop safe routes to school, college and work**, especially connecting communities along the A465, with use of active travel funds.

3.5. Better station facilities

Some heads of the valleys rail stations are no more than bus shelters, with very few facilities. They will need urgent improvement if they are to be not only the origin of journeys down the valley but the destination of people from Cardiff and beyond and a place for interchanging to bus and car for the wider heads of the valleys population.

South Wales Metro and local authorities should **develop Ebbw Vale, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney stations into high quality interchanges**, with car parking, bike parking, bus interchanges, shelter and information points.

4. Maximise the business benefits

Transport improvements can decrease transportation costs, improve access to markets, foster economic integration, stimulate competition, and boost productivity and wages. It is estimated that £1bn of road improvements creates around 2,000 jobs close to their location.¹¹ The increase is even greater in small areas that experience accessibility improvements, with a 10 per cent increase in accessibility resulting in a 3-4 per cent increase in the number of businesses and in employment. The same increase in accessibility was found to boost productivity and average wages by around 2.5-3 per cent. While these gains have been dismissed as 'relatively small', in the context of the heads of the valleys the prospect of 2,000 additional jobs is attractive indeed.

A large number of important industrial areas are located along the road. In Blaenau Gwent they include the Rassau and Tafarnaubach industrial estates and Crown Business Park at Tredegar. A few miles away are Barleyfield (Brynmaur), Festival Drive (Ebbw Vale), and Rising Sun (Blaina). Land is also allocated for development at Bryn Serth and other sites. In Caerphilly there are industrial estates immediately next to the A465 in Rhymney (Heads of the Valleys, Capital Valley and Maerdy Industrial Estates) and several more just a few miles away (New Tredegar Business Park, and Bowen and Angel Lane Industrial Estates at Aberbargoed). In Merthyr Tydfil there are industrial areas close to the A465 at Pengarnddu, Goatmill Road and Pant Industrial Estates, plus several industrial areas at Pentrebach on the A4060 slip road from the A465 to Pentrebach. In total there were approximately 8,000 manufacturing jobs in the industrial areas within a few miles of the route and a further 2,250 jobs in wholesale and transport.¹²

There has been some recent investment in business units in the heads of the valleys. Since its announcement in 2017 and with a focus on Blaenau Gwent, the Tech Valleys initiative has created 100,000 square foot of new and refurbished commercial, start-up and industrial floor-space¹³. Other recent and planned improvements in industrial spaces have come about through investment from EU and Welsh Government funding. Despite this the quality of existing industrial units in the area is variable. Some are outdated and badly in need of renewal, and some are semi-derelict. More units and more contemporary units are required to keep pace with modern business needs.

There is reported to be demand for good quality business premises, especially smaller, starter units which are in short supply in the area. Although inward investment has slowed, Caerphilly County Borough Council reports steady demand for larger, good quality units which are also in short supply.¹⁴

This is a unique opportunity to build on the existing substantial industrial base in the heads of the valleys and to ensure it is ready for the next 20 years. The possible economic benefits for the area will not be realised without intervention by the Welsh Government and local authorities – indeed, without action some businesses might relocate to other places either along the A465 or elsewhere altogether. We therefore recommend the following steps.

4.1. Extend the Ebbw Vale Enterprise Zone

The Ebbw Vale Enterprise Zone covers many industrial areas in Blaenau Gwent. However very similar industrial areas, with similar challenges and opportunities and which are

located only a few hundred metres away, do not have the same status because they are in a different local authority. If the heads of the valleys area is to be developed as a whole then industrial areas should be on a similar footing. The Ebbw Vale **Enterprise Zone should be extended** to include all existing and prospective industrial areas within five miles of the A465.

4.2. Enhance the Enterprise Zone offer

Location in an Enterprise Zone offers additional incentives to businesses. However the benefits are mostly focused on business finance rather than job creation, and the value of an EZ location are not always clear. To make the most of existing and potential businesses located in the heads of the valleys area, and to ensure the benefit flows to people living in the area, the **Enterprise Zone offer should be enhanced** and communicated effectively. The Bevan Foundation has previously¹⁵ called for:

- introduction of a **Job Creation Premium**, which would reimburse employers the equivalent of their employer's National Insurance contribution for each job created;
- introduce a **Valleys Apprentice Premium** to encourage employers to create good quality apprenticeships in manufacturing and related skills.

4.3. Enhance the business premises offer:

Many of the industrial areas along the A465 comprise older-style units and open storage. Some are abandoned or semi-derelict. Run-down units are not attractive to businesses locating in the area and are also detract from the visual character of the area as a whole. **The appearance of and facilities at industrial units across the A465 should be upgraded** to meet high design standards that reflect local character and are consistent along the A465 corridor.

There is also potential to **develop new commercial and business premises** at key locations, including starter office units and co-working spaces, especially in town and village centres close to the A465.

4.4. Provide accessible business advice services:

Good business support will help to ensure that new and existing businesses make the most of opportunities. There is scope to **establish a dedicated Heads of the Valleys business development team**, located in the area with a visible presence. They should provide intensive support to business start-ups, expanding businesses or those under threat and develop local supply chains, both business to business and to fulfil public sector procurement contracts.

5. Capture spending power

The heads of the valleys area has huge visitor potential that must be harnessed to benefit local people.

The road itself is, perhaps surprisingly, a visitor experience in its own right because of its altitude and stunning views. It has been described as 'one of the most spectacular trunk roads in the UK'¹⁶. It is a recommended route on several UK travel websites: on one it is described as one of the UK's most scenic roads¹⁷ while on another it is one of three recommended scenic road trips in Wales:

... taking in a rich array of the history and landscapes of south Wales. It could be driven easily in a morning or – with stop-offs and detours – it could be the basis of a short break.¹⁸

Nearby are other appealing routes: the drive over Llangynidr moor – directly off the A465 - has been rated as one of the top ten drives in the world, on par with Ruta 40 in Argentina and the Atlas Mountains.¹⁹

Despite growing traffic, facilities for travellers are currently limited with only two petrol stations accessible directly from the A465 (east bound at Dowlais Top and at Nantybawch, Tredgar). None offer the range of facilities typically found at service stations such as toilets or cafes. While there are other petrol stations, as well as cafes and other facilities, in towns and villages off the A465, few if any are likely to be open the long hours expected by travellers nor are they easily located being off-route.

An indication of the increased interest is evident in the growing overnight accommodation available. There are relatively new chain hotels in Ebbw Vale and Merthyr Tydfil plus an additional hotel planned at Hirwaun. There is also increasing bunkhouse or backpacker accommodation and there is a fair-sized accommodation offer via websites such as AirBnB, suggesting that there is some demand.

There are a number of tourist developments in the pipeline along the A465 that could significantly increase visitor numbers to the wider area, ranging from Zip World at Hirwaun (attracting an estimated 400 visitors each day or 146,000 visitors per year),²⁰ developments at Cyfarthfa Castle which are expected to create 200 permanent jobs²¹ and plans for the one of the longest indoor ski slopes in the UK and one of the largest indoor water parks at Rhydycar West.²² These developments are on top of more modest but thriving visitor attractions such as Big Pit in Torfaen and Bike Park Wales.

Popular countryside attractions nearby include the Brecon Beacons, notably Penyfan and 'waterfall country' in Neath Port Talbot and Powys. Cultural events in the area are also increasingly important: Green Man festival in Crickhowell attracts around 20,000 visitors in August and Steelhouse Festival near Ebbw Vale attracts around 10,000 visitors in July.

Maximising the potential of visitors to the area should include capturing some of the spending power of people visiting near-by attractions or passing through.

5.1. Establish visitor services

There is scope to **establish a high quality, modern service station** offering electric vehicle charging as well as petrol and diesel fuel – a so-called "future forecourt". It should

be coupled with other essential services such as toilets, café, food and gift shops, and could also provide visitor information. There may be scope for business services to be provided as part of the offer, for example work space and meeting space.

Caerphilly County Borough Council has recently proposed the Rhymney interchange as a potential location for some road services but Ebbw Vale interchange could also be an option. There are examples of some service stations operating as social enterprises²³ which could increase the local benefits.

5.2. Develop visitor accommodation

There is considerable potential to **enhance the quality, range and number of overnight accommodation** options along the route, for leisure, business and industrial travellers. Given the proximity of the area to large markets in the West Midlands and London there may be scope for accommodation for group visits, such as for educational field trips to hostel-type accommodation or for business residentials. Provision of low-cost facilities such as caravan and camping sites may also have potential.

Further work should also be undertaken to improve the standard of the current accommodation offer and to market it effectively, including with signage from the A465. The potential for additional specialist accommodation e.g. for educational and business purposes should be assessed.

5.3. Make more of highest point

Brynmawr is the highest town in Wales and nearby Trefil is the highest village. Not far from both is the highest point on the A465 - at 1,340 feet above sea-level it is one of the highest trunk roads in England and Wales. There is currently a small rest area at highest point, with interpretation boards, on one side of the carriage way that links with the Ebbw Fach trail although it is not obvious to the through traveller.

There is potential to make much more of the elevation of these three places. Elsewhere, places such as Lizard Point, John O'Groats and St David's Head make the most of an extreme geographical position, where visitors will queue simply to be photographed next to a sign and may also then spend some money. Better promotion of highest point, with clear signage, better facilities and easy, safe access on and off the A465 could make much more of its distinctive features.

6. A unique visitor destination

The dualling of the A465 opens up the heads of the valleys area to new tourist markets. Its potential lies in day visitors from south Wales, the West Midlands and south east England, who are interested in the outdoors and in industrial and social history. With the right offer, visitors will support the local economy through their spending.

However, the visitor offer in Blaenau Gwent itself is currently more modest than elsewhere. There are established, small-scale visitor destinations including Bedwellty House in Tredegar, the Roundhouses in Nantyglo and Sirhowy Ironworks, although it is a moot point whether they are of sufficient prominence or appeal to attract visitors in any numbers. In total Blaenau Gwent has 53 listed buildings and 13 scheduled ancient monuments.

There are also other as-yet undeveloped features, in particular features associated with its social and political history such as the Chartists Cave, the boiler house at the former Dunlop Semtex rubber factory and Tredegar Medical Aid society.

There are several countryside parks and nature reserves, including Parc Bryn Bach and Silent Valley Nature Reserve in Blaenau Gwent. Parc Bryn Bach is one of the Valleys Regional Park's Gateway areas. It offers a growing range of outdoor activities, from triathlon to open swimming to outdoor cinema, as well as organising activities that take place off-site, e.g. caving and offering outdoor education. Outside of designated areas, much of the open countryside along the A465 has appeal: large areas are designed as historic landscapes, such as Mynydd Fochriw and Coity Mountain.

There are also some attractive walks and trails in the area covering both natural and historic attractions. Unfortunately, information about the walks can be hard to locate and some literature is not up to date – there is scope to promote the opportunities more effectively.

With careful nurturing, the appeal of Blaenau Gwent to visitors could be increased and visitor spending could help to boost the local economy.

6.1. Develop outdoor activities

There is scope to increase the scale and impact of outdoor activities along the A465, building on the profile and appeal of the Brecon Beacons.

For organised outdoor activities, places with an existing reputation and visitor base such as Parc Bryn Bach could be developed further e.g. by exploring the potential to become a Welsh or UK centre of excellence for some activities, and by increasing local accommodation.

Existing walks and trails could be enhanced significantly, with coherent and effective branding and marketing, support for events such as walking festivals or challenges, provision of up-to-date information to potential walkers, and easy to find access points with car parking and public transport information, and interpretation boards or digital information points en route.

6.2. Tell the area's industrial story

Blaenau Gwent and its environs have an incredible industrial history. The industrial revolution was born in the heads of the valleys: iron was first forged and Trevithick's world first railway journey took place in nearby Merthyr Tydfil. South Wales' only UNESCO world heritage site is at nearby Blaenavon. Ebbw Vale was once the home to the biggest steel mill in Europe, and there are remains of iron workings across the area from Clydach to Cyfarthfa. The grade II listed boiler house of the Dunlop Semtex factory for example is all that remains of the world-renowned construction in the "festival of Britain" style of architecture. Remaining neglected and rather ugly, it is an example of an international architectural hidden gem. This story is almost completely untold.

The attractions across the heads of the valleys could be developed and promoted as a co-ordinated and coherent whole, in a similar way to those at Ironbridge. An 'Industrial Revolution Experience' could not only encourage visitors and educational activity, it could restore pride amongst local residents.

6.3. Share the area's social history

Blaenau Gwent along with the rest of the heads of the valleys has an extraordinary social and political history that is mostly hidden to the casual visitor. There is scope to develop it much more.

For example, the Chartist Cave lies just off the A465. It is where weapons were stored in the Chartist rising of 1839 in preparation for the march to Newport. The cave is difficult to find and visitors passing along the road would not know of its existence as there is no signage. The Nantyglo round towers, less than two miles off the A465 were built by ironmasters as places of refuge should the workers revolt but are somewhat neglected today.

Similarly, the town of Tredegar is home to the birthplace of the National Health Service and its founder, Aneurin Bevan. The Tredegar Medical Aid Society on which the NHS was modelled is a stone's throw from the A465 at 10 The Circle. Having recently been refurbished thanks to the Coalfields Regeneration Trust²⁴, the building, alongside Bedwellty House, Tredegar Town Museum and the Aneurin Bevan Stones, could create a significant draw for visitors interested in the history of health care.

In the interwar years, the town of Brynmawr was the home of a social experiment led by the Quaker movement. Set up to help to relieve mass unemployment and poverty during the interwar years, it has been described as having led to "a major chapter in the social and artistic history of Wales"²⁵.

These are just a few examples of the striking social history of Blaenau Gwent, with many similar examples nearby. There is potential to develop a significant visitor offer based on Blaenau Gwent's extraordinary social and industrial history.

7. Delivery

Realising the potential of the significant investment in the A465 and of other local investments requires effective delivery. If the potential is not fully grasped, there is a possibility that the upgraded route will enable people to travel *out* of Blaenau Gwent, threatening the viability of local businesses and accelerating the decline in population.²⁶ One of the very places that would benefit most from the potential on offer may be at most risk of losing out on it.

Designing an effective delivery mechanism is not easy. The key ingredients of successful delivery are:

- **Effective leadership:** to set out a clear direction, marshal resources and ensure action.
- **Strategic vision:** to recognise the potential in the heads of the valleys area and picture an alternative and better future.
- **An understanding of the area:** to be clear about which are generic challenges that face all places and which are specific to the geography, history and culture of the area.
- **Sufficient resources and powers:** to have sufficient investment capability and the powers to deliver.
- **Good technical skills and capacity:** to deliver the physical, economic and social change needed.
- **Public will and support:** to reflect the needs and wishes of the local community who have been 'done to' for too many years.
- **Clear accountability:** to ensure that people are held to account for the success or failure of interventions – this does not have to be by direct election.

Quite which structures meet all these criteria is a moot point. The heads of the valleys is complex administratively with a total of seven local authorities along the 43 miles from Abergavenny to Llandarcy, with three covering the mere 13 miles from Brynmawr to Dowlais. Parts of the road are also in the Brecon Beacons National Park. The route is also of strategic importance to the ambitions and objectives of both the Cardiff and Swansea Bay City Deals.

The new Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) will be set up as new statutory mechanisms for regional collaboration from April 2021. They are anticipated to become fully operational by spring 2022 after a period of preparatory work and will have borrowing powers. It remains to be seen if they can provide the strategic vision and accountability for the intensive regeneration of one part of their area.

The Bevan Foundation has previously called for a form of long-term, multi-agency delivery to transform the heads of the valleys region. This includes collaborations with organisations who have proven track records for delivery and consideration of penalty clauses or payment by results mechanisms to drive results in delivery²⁷.

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