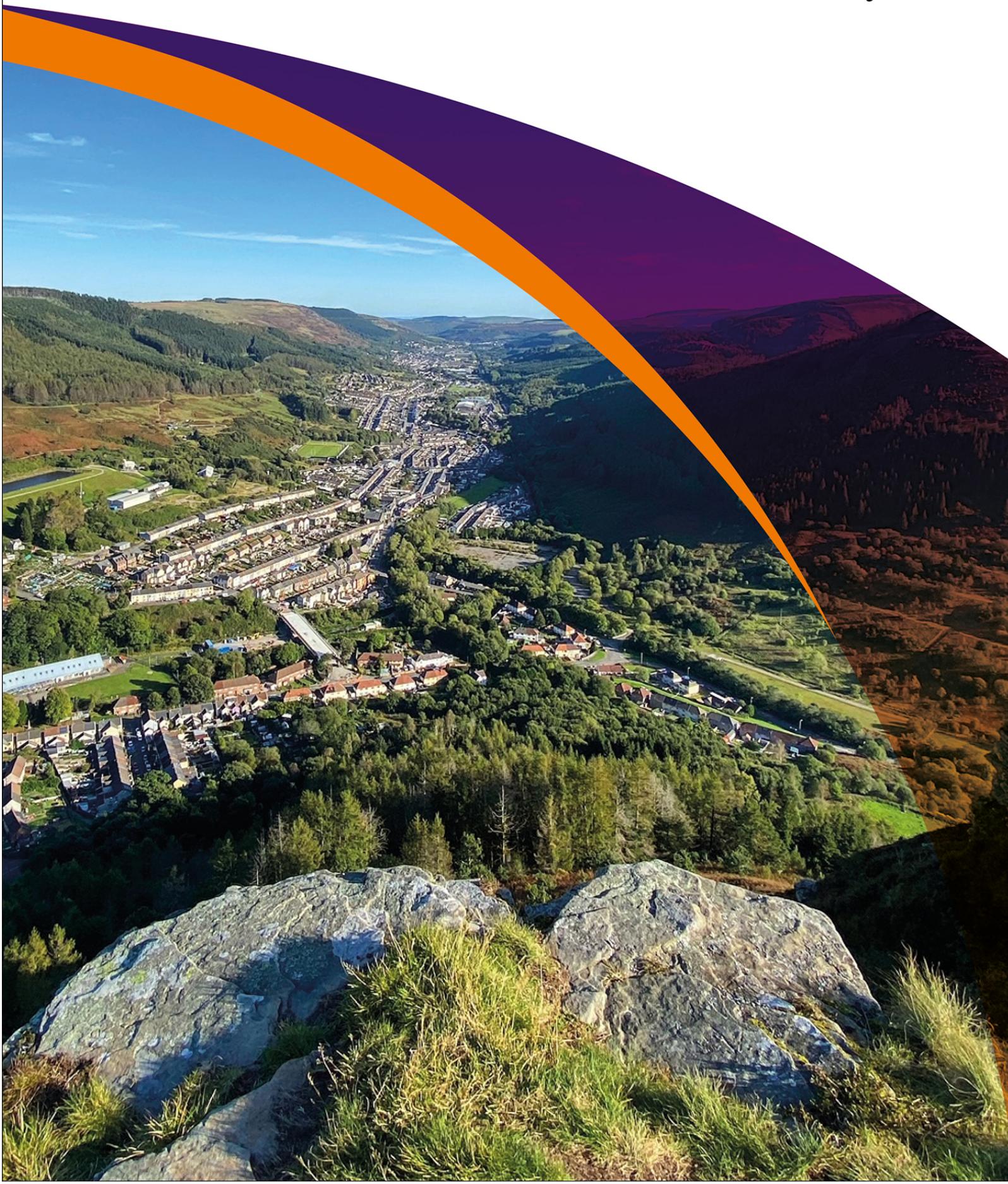


Understanding Treherbert: The past, present and the future

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Summary

Many places in Wales have developed as a result of past industrial activity which has since disappeared. This report looks at Treherbert in the Rhondda Fawr valley.

In Treherbert the development of industry over a hundred years ago fundamentally shaped its growth as the population grew and as businesses sprang up to serve their growing needs. The subsequent decline of Treherbert's main industrial activities has had a profound social and economic effect. It is hard not to feel the community has been overlooked in terms of economic development in recent years by both Welsh Government and the local authority.

However the last hundred years have also seen Treherbert develop unique characteristics that hint at how the community could develop into the future and continue as a thriving prosperous place.

Treherbert is geographically isolated with its location at the top of the Rhondda Fawr valley. This has fostered a sense of resilience and 'do it yourself' attitude. The re-creation of the Treherbert chamber of trade to help local businesses thrive is a good example of this. There is a core of locally-owned small businesses centrally located around Treherbert and Tynewydd high street that can act as a foundation to strengthen the local economy. This could create better jobs closer to home. There is a strong sense of community that has been especially apparent during the pandemic.

It also has key services such as Ty Ross care home, a railway station, two primary schools and a number of community facilities that are vital for making it a place people want to continue to live in. However it has lost a library and swimming pool that are much missed by residents.

The social enterprise Welcome to Our Woods plans to turn Treherbert into Wales' first 'Forest Town' that could significantly boost the economy and jobs, create a unique identity and boost health and wellbeing for the population. There are also emerging tourist opportunities with nearby developments including the opening of Zip World and the Rhondda Tunnel.

1. Introduction

Places across the south Wales valleys have experienced significant changes over the last century. Industrialisation – particularly the opening of pits, ironworks, copperworks and steelworks - triggered rapid growth in places that were once small settlements. People moved in for work and the increased population created the market for consumer and business services and infrastructure to serve local needs. With the societal and industrial shifts, these places have continued to witness change as older industries close or reduce in size and alternative paths and identities emerge.

The foundational economy is said to offer good prospects for places like Treherbert that has been subject to such dramatic changes. The foundational economy provides everyday essentials such as utilities, education, health care and food. By meeting essential needs wherever people are, there is, it is argued, an opportunity to create jobs and grow businesses. However, no two places are the same. Developing the foundational economy will depend on an understanding of the dynamics and potential of different places: what has made it what it is, where it is going next and what the barriers and opportunities are.

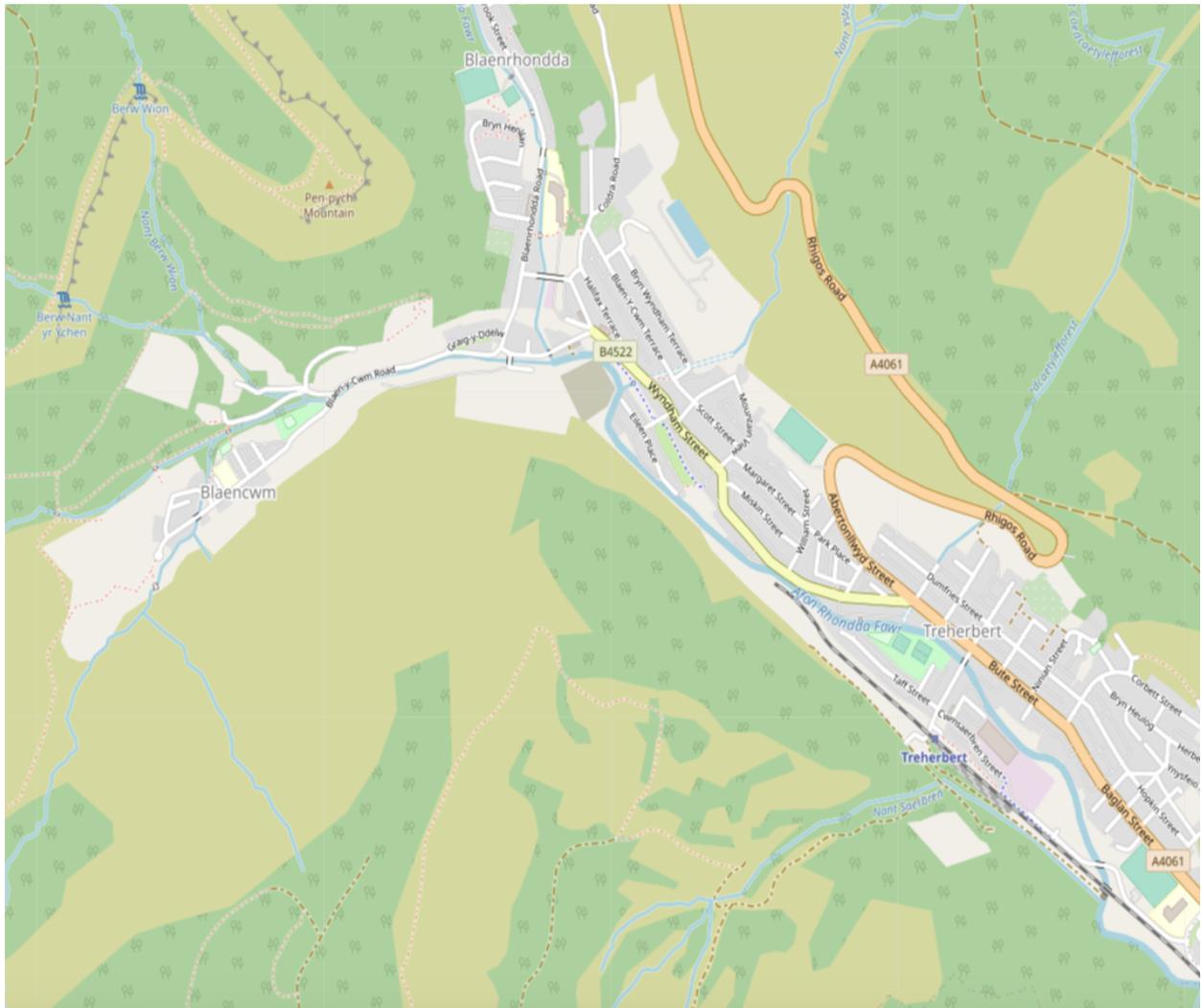
With an eye to the future, this paper examines the development of Treherbert at the northern end of the Rhondda Fawr valley in south Wales over the last hundred years. It seeks to understand how the past and present can inform understandings of opportunities ahead and how they can be grasped. It outlines what local shops and services exist, what has been lost and gained, and what are the emerging opportunities. It is based on a combination of interviews and conversations with residents and stakeholders and through desk research.

The analysis focuses on three themes: industry and retail, local services and community infrastructure (e.g. green spaces, community clubs and amenities such as libraries). It explores what could come next for Treherbert and where the opportunities and capacity to bring about change may lie.

This report is not an exhaustive history of Treherbert and any omissions are not an indication of importance. We hope that in setting out a possible future, people and organisations will be inspired to take action.

2. Treherbert

Treherbert is located at the top of the Rhondda Fawr valley within the county borough of Rhondda Cynon Taf. The administrative ward of Treherbert consists of the communities of Penyreglyn, Treherbert, Tynewydd, Blaencwm and Blaenrhondda. As of 2011 the population is 5,440. All five communities within the ward are interconnected in an almost continuous flow along the main road running through the valley, with the exception of Blaencwm which is slightly – half a mile - to the west of the main road. The majority of commercial premises and amenities are located on or around the high street through Tynewydd and Treherbert.



Map from www.openstreetmap.org under open licence

2.1 Industry and Retail

Around a hundred and fifty years ago Treherbert was remote and rural, with a few scattered farms, until a test coal pit was sunk in 1851 on land owned by the Bute family (where its name originates – Tre or village of Herbert). The test pit indicated that the area was viable for extraction and it began operating as Bute Merthyr colliery in 1855. This was quickly followed by a number of other collieries such as Lady Margaret in 1853, Ynysfeio in Pen-y-engllyn in 1859, Fernhill in Blaenrhondda in 1869 and Hendrewen (Glen Rhondda) in Blaencwm in 1899. By 1900, every village had a pit that was each employing large numbers of people. Shops, services and amenities such as chapels were opened to serve the fast-growing communities.

Although Bute Merthyr closed in 1926, there was still a strong industrial as well as manufacturing base in Treherbert throughout the twentieth century that provided jobs and security. Glen Rhondda closed in 1966 and the final colliery to close in the area was Fernhill in 1978. As part of wider government economic strategy¹ in the 1920s and 1930s factories like Polikoff opened in Treorchy – a little further down the valley from Treherbert. Polikoff later became Burberry and remained in operation until 2007. Other factories included EMI and Rollo Hardies. The latter made, amongst other things, parts for nuclear submarines.



A mural next to the railway station winter 2021 – photo courtesy of Mark Ratinon

Manufacturing is still a feature of modern Treherbert but on nowhere near the scale it once was. Everest Windows began making window parts in 1972 and remains a local employer. It employs around 400 people but only recently avoided administration after

finding a last-minute buyer. However 188 jobs could not be saved due to falling sales resulting from the COVID-19 lockdown.² The furniture manufacturer Thomas Lloyd is another major producer that is still operating in the area.

Today, around one in five people in Treherbert are employed in manufacturing which is almost twice the Welsh average. However, the near closure of Everest and closure of Burberry in 2007 with the loss of 300 jobs³ show that times in the sector are tough. No industry has yet been able to replace the number of jobs once available in Treherbert. This underscores the importance of new sources of more diverse, enduring and sustainable employment.

At its height, Treherbert had a wide selection of shops. In Treherbert and Tynewydd residents fondly remember such a wide variety of shops like Harvard's shoe shop, George the chemist, Wyndham Rees ironmonger, Mrs Perkins baby shop and James Electrical shop. Some simply were stalls in the front room of a terraced house. However, changing habits and trends such as increased car ownership, online shopping and the centralisation of some retail into supermarkets mean there are far fewer today. An example of the abundance of services available in each village can be seen in a survey completed for a new housing development in Blaenrhondda at the base of Pen Pych in the 1960s. The survey showed that there was a sweet shop, post office, three general stores, two fish shops, a barber, ironmonger, hotel, cobbler and baker. Of these only the post office in Blaenrhondda remains today. Few places have a cobbler any longer and there is a fish shop, hairdresser and general store in Treherbert. The post office continues to provide essential services such as basic banking services.

Today the main retail areas are along the high street encompassing Treherbert and Tynewydd. There are a number of general stores, a butcher, florist, hardware store, gift store, pet store, post office and funeral home. Unlike some other places, there are few 'national' chains present, something that could act as a catalyst for regeneration and is said to have been a factor in neighbouring Treorchy's success in winning the title of 'Britain's Best High Street' in 2020. The nearest supermarket is two miles away.

Work by the *New Economics Foundation* shows wealth that is retained locally can generate up to five times more for local economies than money that 'leaks out' to national headquartered stores or services.⁴ Our work exploring household spending patterns in Treherbert found that around ninety per cent of people we spoke to spent £25 a week or more on food and non-alcoholic drink locally. Many residents commented that they had increased their local spend while in lockdown.

Treherbert's chamber of trade recently re-started. It did work in Christmas 2020 to help in instal lights and decorations to improve the look of the high street - a sign of a pro-active approach to growing the identity and sense of pride in the area. It also ran a competition for shoppers over the Christmas period to encourage engagement with local business and to celebrate the festive period in such challenging circumstances

2.2 Local services

Approximately seventy-four per cent of Treherbert's housing stock is terraced. This is far higher than the Welsh average of twenty-seven per cent but typical of many places in the valleys.⁵ There are only a few post-war housing developments, the biggest being an estate in Penyrenlyn built in the 1950s and one in Blaenrhondda in the 1960s. Levels of home ownership and rental levels are roughly in line with the Welsh average. The biggest two registered social landlords, Rhondda Housing and Trivalis, both actively engage in the community and have strong links with local groups, organisations and initiatives. Rhondda Housing works with local firms when maintaining their properties. It has used the same local contractor for electrical work for over 40 years. Trivalis run community programmes from Blaencwm Chapel teaching gardening and food production.

The geography of the valley and Treherbert's position within it makes it fairly isolated at least on three sides, and less well connected compared to some other parts of the valleys. It is at the top of the Rhondda Fawr with steep valley sides. Both roads in and out of Treherbert are single carriageway. The nearest dual carriageway is eight miles away. Many locals told us of challenges getting around, such as to Treorchy where the nearest dentist is. Some business struggle with operating in relative isolation, meaning that their local markets are small.



A view of Blaencwm – Photo by Richard Bradford/Alamy Stock Photo

Public transport is therefore crucial. Around a third of households do not have access to a car.⁶ The road north over the Rhigos mountain was built as a work scheme programme in the 1930s and can be impassable in inclement weather. Treherbert has a rail link to Pontypridd and Cardiff, which takes 66 minutes when operating normally. Before COVID-19 it ran two trains an hour on weekdays, one an hour weekday evenings and a train every

two hours on a Sunday. There are plans for the South Wales Metro to increase the frequency to four trains per hour on weekdays and two an hour on Sundays. Bus services are generally poor in the evenings which hinders the development of a night-time economy. The overall poor transport links and location of Treherbert appears to have created a 'do it ourselves' attitude amongst some businesses and organisations. The recent re-formation of the chamber of trade is illustrative of this.

There are no national cycle ways in this part of the Rhondda Fawr. There are plans, led by The Rhondda Tunnel Society, to re-open the old railway tunnel that connected the Rhondda and Afan valleys. The tunnel was opened by the Rhondda and Swansea Bay Railway Company in 1890 to transport coal from the Rhondda Valleys to the docks at Swansea. If it re-opens the tunnel will reconnect the valleys at Blaencwm at the Rhondda end and Blaengwynfi in the Afan Forest Park. If successful the tunnel would become the longest cycle tunnel in Europe and the second longest in the world. It would also give the Fawr valley its first Sustrans national cycle path.

With the history of heavy industry in Treherbert, its population suffers from higher than average levels of health problems and almost half of those of working age are classed as economically inactive.⁷ Therefore health and social care as well as well-being services are vital. Ty Newydd Surgery and has two GPs and there is another surgery just one mile away in Ynyswen that was built in 2007. The nearest hospitals are the Royal Glamorgan in Llantrisant and Prince Charles hospital in Merthyr Tydfil. The nearest dentists are in Treorchy, two miles away. There is a privately owned care home Ty Ross and a home run by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council for vulnerable young adults.

2.3 Community infrastructure

Treherbert has experienced the loss of some amenities, while others have been re-purposed. The library closed in 2014 but has since taken on a new lease of life as the hub for the activities of Welcome to Our Woods, a group that is spearheading community stewardship of local forestry. There is no longer a youth club although there is a Boys and Girls club next to the railway station. As with many community organisations, it operates on a 'hand to mouth' basis. There was once an opera house that put on plays and operas as well as a miners' lending library that also ran classes in science and history. There was also a swimming pool in Treherbert Park that was built as an open-air pool in 1936. It was converted to an indoor pool in 1992 but closed in 2009. Despite an attempt to transfer ownership from the local authority to a community group, the pool remained closed and was demolished in 2012 to much anger and sadness.⁸ Like other assets, it was a casualty of budgetary cuts during the last economic downturn.

There are a number of organisations that are active in Treherbert. Treherbert Pensioners' Hall hall runs activates, coffee mornings and acts as a polling station. It is currently also used as part of the Rhondda Food Share scheme. The scheme delivers food from local supermarkets that would otherwise go to waste. Valleys Kids offer training and activities for young people. During the coronavirus pandemic they have been an important source of support, providing hot meals and activity packs to some residents. Blaencwm Chapel has a 'pay as you feel' café with food that would otherwise be thrown out provided by the

Fair Share programme. It also has a small allotment and garden which grows small amounts of food for the café and acts as a place of sanctuary for those who need it.



Treherbert Pensioners' Hall – Photo courtesy of John Dean

Welcome to Our Woods is a community partnership that delivers projects to make local natural resources more useful and relevant to the area and the wider region. It is at the helm of a partnership project to take on the management of 1.5km of land surrounding Treherbert⁹. The land is owned by the Welsh Government and managed on its behalf by National Resources Wales. The new management of the land will create jobs through timber felling and forestry. This is part of a wider ambition to make Treherbert Wales' first Forest Town.¹⁰

Separately, there is currently pilot scheme to grow food through hydroponics on the site of Tappers garage. Plans are also in progress by Rhondda Housing to build housing using locally-sourced timber. There is also some feasibility work taking place for an electric car club that would offer residents the chance to hire an electric vehicle. These developments have potential to be linked to nearby opportunities, such as Zip World - a roller coaster and zip line - opening on the former Tower Colliery site. At the time of writing Zip world is scheduled to open in March 2021¹¹ although there is the real possibility it could be delayed due to the pandemic. The interest that the innovations in land management will generate are also likely to draw new and different visitors to the area.

An impact of the pandemic across Wales is that many residents have spent more time in the community, either because they have worked from home, been furloughed, have shielded or because schools have closed. Some Treherbert residents spoke of being able to do simple things like go for a walk or spend their lunch break in their garden which has given them a renewed appreciation of the landscape around them. The area is rich in natural beauty, with local beauty spots including Pen Pych and Cwm Saebren woods. While this is certainly a positive for some and working closer to home has benefits for wellbeing – not everyone has been able to benefit. In fact, our research during the first “wave” of coronavirus indicated that Treherbert may have had the highest number of people still in work out of the three communities. So while there may be an opportunity for some to re-connect with nature and place, not everyone did or can.

There is a significant sporting and cultural life in Treherbert which gives the town a sense of continuity, heritage and place. Treherbert Band has links back to the collieries and are supported by Penycymoedd Wind Farm through their community grant scheme. Clubs like Blaenrhondda FC make use of the local park to practice, highlighting the importance of green space. Blaenrhondda Bowls Club is described by one community activist as a ‘jewel in the crown’ of the area. They told us of one member who attends who lives with dementia, whose condition has improved so much through participating at the club that they were able to travel on holiday with their partner. This illustrates the value of sports clubs that cannot be measured in simple economic terms but has tangible social value.

2.4 Where next for Treherbert?

Treherbert is more geographically isolated than many places in the valleys. While this brings its challenges, it has a good core of small businesses and self-employed people – many of which are centrally located around Treherbert high street - that can act as a catalyst for strengthening the local economy. These businesses provide jobs closer to home and allow for a more robust local economy.

The sense of isolation has created a 'do it yourself' attitude amongst some residents. There is scope to make Treherbert a place people where want to spend more time in and spend their money. The recreation of the Treherbert chamber of trade could help contribute to a collaborative and co-operative business community able to tackle the ongoing challenges facing high streets and small communities in Wales. Neighbouring Treorchy's success indicates the possibilities for Treherbert. However, there is also some concern that Treorchy's success draws trade away from Treherbert. The successes of places that have built a strong sense of identity, local loyalty, and even a 'brand identity' through collaborative and innovative approaches to local businesses and assets show what could be possible in Treherbert.

The plans by Welcome to Our Woods, Rhondda Housing and Skyline to see Treherbert become Wales' first 'Forest Town' have real potential to stimulate the economy but also bring health and wellbeing benefits. The ability to use the land to re-connect with nature will build on the health benefits some have seen during lockdown. Training and employing local people to manage the land will create decent jobs closer to home. West Kilbride in Scotland became Scotland's first 'Craft Town' which created a new identity for the town, acting as a catalyst for further development. Treherbert as a forest town could enjoy a similar trajectory. It must be remembered though that the developments of West Kilbride have taken place over decades, however Treherbert seems to have a firm foundation for taking the concept forward.



A picture of Pen Pych with Pen-y-Cymoedd wind farm in the background – photo courtesy of Mia Evans of Treherbert

The opening of Zip World has potential to draw in visitors, as does the re-opening of the Rhondda Tunnels and visitors interested in innovative approaches to land management. Treherbert already has some locally-owned hotels and accommodation providers – more than Cwmafan and Treharris – that could take advantage of the opportunity of increasing tourism. Improvements to transport links (both public and private) and support to businesses to make the most of increased footfall would really help maximise the opportunity these developments present. Ensuring that these are also locally-owned and rooted can help to stop money leaking out of Treherbert's economy and could stimulate other business services in turn.

The lockdown from the pandemic has meant some residents have been able to work from home, has encouraged more local expenditure and has highlighted the importance of local services in a pandemic. This needs to continue as a way of strengthening the self-sufficiency of the economy. However, a relatively large outward commuting rate serves as a warning about assumptions that "local" behaviours and attitudes can or will be automatically sustained into the future. The ability to enjoy the goods, services and assets in Treherbert depends in part on local, well paid jobs needs being available to more residents.

3. Conclusion

The development of Treherbert, over the last hundred years has been inextricably linked with industry. First with its establishment and expansion and then with its decline and the knock on effects on jobs, a sense of purpose and identity. Treherbert has suffered from both the withdrawal of industry coupled with a geographic isolation that limits its access to other opportunities.

Looking to the future, the community has potential but there needs to a mix of developments to maximise it. The foundational economy is a vital part of Treherbert's economy. However it cannot or be expected to revive or sustain the whole community. It is unlikely to provide enough stable employment or income generation for all. Recognising this and taking a mixed approach to developing the local economy will be key. There is a core of local independent businesses and strong sense of community that will stand Treherbert in good stead. Treherbert still has a 'hub' that can act as the basis for regeneration

Building on Treherbert's 'do it ourselves' attitude, can help to grow more local businesses and make the area more economically self-resilient. The possibility of it becoming Wales' first 'Forest Town' is potentially transformative not only for the economy but for local peoples' lives, promoting a genuine sense of unique identity as an area defined by its future not its industrial past. It could also act as a demonstrator for rolling out similar initiatives in other areas of the valleys or Wales more widely.

There is genuine potential for future prosperity. However it is hard not to feel there is a sense Treherbert has been overlooked regarding economic development policies, by both Welsh Government and local authorities. It does not considered a town by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council like nearby Treorchy which prohibits certain grant funding. It has also lost its swimming pool, library and youth club to cuts. If smaller communities like Treherbert are to thrive over the next 100 years this has to change. There needs to be a recognition that smaller communities are as important as larger ones. Any consideration of wider economic development has to take its unique characteristics into account: the smaller businesses, geographic isolation or poor public transport. Consideration of policy has to involve the community themselves: residents, businesses and stakeholders in direct consultation. They need to be consulted as to their specific needs. It is the community that has the biggest stake in the future of Treherbert.

There is of course no way to be certain about what the next hundred years hold. Economic sustainability, a clear sense of purpose and collaborative approaches will be key for Treherbert to thrive. The foundational economy is unlikely to replace to the same scale of jobs or even wealth that the old industries did. The "original" foundational economy that developed in these places did so in response to an eco-system of more secure employment and an assured level of consumer spending. Treherbert will be to some extent reliant on outside investment and people commuting for work. It remains to be seen whether changes from the pandemic around appreciating the "local" more will embed as a permanent feature of life. Ultimately Treherbert has unique assets that can be nurtured and maximised to ensure it is a place people want to thrive in and spend their lives in.

4. Endnotes

¹ Such as the Special Areas Act 1934 which gave aid to areas (including south Wales) with high unemployment and the following Special Areas (Amendment) Act 1937 which encouraged businesses to locate to these areas through incentives like tax concessions. For a wider understanding of these policies see Rowlands, T, 'Something Must be Done' South Wales v Whitehall 1921-1951, (2000)

² The Guardian, Everest double glazing rescue deal saves 1,000 UK jobs, June 2020, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2020/jun/09/everest-double-glazing-rescue-deal-saves-1000-uk-jobs>

³ Wales Online, Doors finally close on Burberry in Treorchy, March 2007, available at: <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/doors-finally-close-burberry-treorchy-2270847>

⁴ Bevan Foundation, Bevan Foundation explores how to 'plug the leaks' available at: <https://www.bevanfoundation.org/news/2020/11/bevan-foundation-explores-how-to-plug-the-leaks/>

⁵ InfoBase Cymru, Housing (local area), available at: <http://www.infobasecymru.net/IAS/themes/people.communitiesandequalities/housing/profile?profileid=399>

⁶ InfoBase Cymru, Car or van availability, available at: <http://www.infobasecymru.net/IAS/themes/2011census/travel/tabular?viewId=971&geoid=78&subsetId=>

⁷ Understanding Welsh Places, Treherbert, 2020, available at: <http://www.understandingwelshplaces.wales/en/compare/W38000056/>

⁸ <https://www.walesonline.co.uk/news/wales-news/rhondda-cynon- Taf-council-sells-2081531>

⁹ <https://skyline.wales/node/53>

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-53834679>

¹¹ <https://www.zipworld.co.uk/blog/zip-worlds-next-big-adventure-in-south-wales>