Talk Valleys: Engagement Programme

Final report

Commissioned from Arad Research by the Welsh Government

July 2017
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1. Introduction

The Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys was set up to develop a fresh approach to improve prosperity in the south Wales Valleys. It has gathered evidence at its meetings and from other engagement activity. This report presents the findings from engagement activity undertaken between April and June 2017 and these findings have contributed to the development of the taskforce's high-level plan, Our Valleys, Our Future, which is now available.

1.1 Summary of the Engagement Approach

The Welsh Government commissioned Arad Research to report on the public engagement events and to facilitate further engagement activities to inform the work of the Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys. Events were held across the South Wales Valleys during spring 2017:

- Engagement activity arranged and facilitated by the Welsh Government:
  - Public events – four public events where the public could voice their views to the taskforce members.
  - Themed meetings – during the public events it became clear that there were audiences and topics that needed further discussion and seven themed meetings were organised to focus on certain topics.
  - Welsh Government staff engagement sessions – six group discussions and an internal online discussion forum.
  - Welsh Government-led communication activity which included messages posted on the Talk Valleys Twitter and Facebook social media accounts and an invite for the public to get in touch by direct email.

- Supplementary research undertaken by Arad:
  - Ten focus groups with residents (nine groups) and businesses (one group) within the south Wales Valleys and two focus groups (one with residents, one with business) outside the south Wales Valleys.
  - Online survey of people living and working in the south Wales Valleys residents.

- 520 individuals took part in face to face engagement exercises and a further 777 shared their views via the online survey.

All of these sources have informed this report and a brief description of each is provided below.

1.1.1 Welsh Government public events, themed meetings and internal staff engagement sessions

Welsh Government’s Talk Valleys team undertook four public meetings. These public meetings in Mountain Ash (audience of 62), Merthyr Tydfil (50), Cymmer (43) and Banwen (40) provided opportunities for members of the public to engage with various members of the Valleys Taskforce and discuss key priorities for improving prosperity in the Valleys. It

also provided opportunities for members of the public to learn more about the work of the Valleys Taskforce. Arad received audio recordings of these public meetings and analysed the recordings to identify key themes and priorities raised by members of the public. Additionally, some members of the public provided comments on feedback sheets at the end of these public meetings which were shared with Arad. (Total audience of approximately 195).

**Welsh Government’s Talk Valleys team undertook six themed meetings.** Arad received audio recordings of these public meetings and analysed the recordings to identify key themes and priorities raised by participants (Total audience 171).

- Tredomen Business & Technology Centre in Ystrad Mynach. 
  Audience: Businesses from Caerphilly county borough council (48 participants).
- Flying Start in Glyn Neath. 
  Audience: Parents and staff of the Glyn Neath Flying start group (16 participants).
- Bron Afon Housing Association, Pontypool. 
  Audience: Bron Afon residents (33 participants).
- Ysgol Cwm Rhymni, near Blackwood. 
  Audience: Vocational qualifications department staff and pupils from years 10 -13 (34 participants).
- Ferndale Community School, Maerdy. 
  Audience: Parents, staff and pupils (37 participants).
- Group convened by Disability Wales. 
  Audience: Members, stakeholders and partners (5 participants).
- Business breakfast at the University of South Wales (USW), Treforest. 
  Audience: Businesses, stakeholders, training providers from across the South Wales Valleys and USW business school representatives (46 participants).

**Welsh Government’s Talk Valleys team undertook six staff engagement sessions with Welsh Government staff who live and/or work in the Valleys.** These meetings provided opportunities for Welsh Government staff to provide their own views on the key priorities for improving prosperity in the Valleys as well as talk about their own experiences of living in the Valleys, travelling to work and accessing transport services etc. Arad received audio recordings and notes from these staff engagement sessions and identified key themes and priorities raised by Welsh Government staff (total audience 83). An online discussion forum was set up for staff and comments from this also shared with Arad.

### 1.1.2 Focus groups

**Arad undertook ten focus groups - seven groups of south Wales Valleys residents; one group of business owners or managers based in the Valleys; one group with residents living outside of the Valleys and one group of business owners or managers based outside the Valleys.** (Total group participants 71).

The focus groups were convened to enable a broad discussion about people’s priorities for their local area. The groups were held in five locations across the south Wales Valleys – Pontarddulais, Abertridwr, Neath, Cwmbran and Gilfach Goch, and one location outside of the area – Bridgend. The locations were selected in order to cover a range of geographical
locations in the south Wales Valleys and also to fill location gaps in other Talk Valleys public engagement activity.

A total of 71 individuals attended these focus groups (with six participants in each group, except one group with five). Participants were recruited from within the six different geographical locations with the recruitment carried out by specialist recruiters who used a screening questionnaire to identify individuals whose characteristics met the sampling criteria. All participants were given a small payment in recognition of the time and effort taken to attend the focus group.

Purposive sampling criteria were used to ensure participants were recruited with a mix of characteristics. This method of sampling was used to ensure that a full range of views and experiences can be captured. The groups were deliberately composed so that each group contained participants who had enough in common to generate some shared experience, and the main criteria used for resident’s group allocation were; economic activity, age group; household composition and Welsh language. Figure 1 shows the composition of each group. Two of the focus groups were conducted through the medium of Welsh. Participants from other target groups were included across the different groups: disabled individuals, individuals from black or minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds and individuals of different religions and faiths.

**Figure 1. Focus group composition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locations</th>
<th>Group 1</th>
<th>Group 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Location 1</td>
<td>6 x Parents of school-age children. <strong>Welsh-medium group</strong></td>
<td>6 x In work or self-employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 x female; 2 x male. 3 nursery or primary school aged children, 1 secondary school aged children, 2 both.</td>
<td>4 x female; 2 x male. All in employment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location 2</td>
<td>Group 3</td>
<td>Group 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 x Young people aged 18-25 not in education, employment or training.</td>
<td>5 x Parents of school-age children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4 x female, 2 x male. 5 unemployed, 1 studying less than 16 hours a week.</td>
<td>3 x female, 2 x male 3 secondary school aged children, 2 both nursery or primary school aged children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location 3</td>
<td>Group 5</td>
<td>Group 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6 x Young people aged 18-25 in education, employment or training. <strong>Welsh-medium group</strong></td>
<td>6 x Residents aged 50+.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3 x female; 3 x male All were in employment.</td>
<td>3 x female; 3 x male 2 in employment, 1 semi-retired, 2 retired, 1 unemployed / between contracts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Location 4**  
**Group 7**  
6 x business owner/managers.  
2 x male; 4 x female  
2 x sole traders, 3 x micro business, 1 x medium-sized business  
Mix of sectors: hospitality, craft, construction, logistics, cleaning

**Group 8**  
6 x people with a business interest unemployed and/or economically inactive.  
2 x female, 4 x male.  
4 unemployed, 1 caring for family and 1 employed less than 16 hours a week.

**Location 5**  
**Group 9**  
6 x Young people aged 18-25 in education, employment or training.  
4 x female, 2 x male  
2x university, 1 x college, 3 x employed.

**Group 10**  
6 x unemployed or economically inactive individuals and those on insecure contracts.  
3 x female, 3 x male  
4x employed zero-hour contract, 2x unemployed.

**Location 6**  
**Group 11**  
6 x residents based outside the Valleys.  
3 x male; 3 x female.

**Group 12**  
6 x businesses owners/managers based outside the Valleys  
4 x male; 2 x female.  
Mix of business size; mix of sectors.

The focus groups were facilitated by a moderator using a topic guide, which was used to help focus and shape the discussion, while allowing each group to discuss relevant issues in an open way as they arose. The focus group questions were developed from the issues arising from the open meetings and participants’ views were gathered on:

- General perceptions of their local area and the wider south Wales Valleys;
- Whether they feel proud of living and/or working in the Valleys and why;
- The quality of working life and employment opportunities, local services, community life and the physical environment of their local area, as well as how these could be improved;
- Key future priorities that would make the most difference to their lives in the Valleys; and,
- Sources of information about local news and events.

Each group discussion lasted around one and a half hours. All groups were audio-recorded (with participants’ consent) and notes prepared for analysis. At the end of each group participants were asked whether they wished to opt in to receiving further information about the Valleys Taskforce.

### 1.1.3 Online survey

**Arad facilitated an online survey of residents who live and/or work in the south Wales Valleys.** The survey ran from Friday 5th of May 2017 until Monday 26th June and was completed in part by 777 respondents. The survey was open to those who lived or worked in the south Wales Valleys. The majority of respondents (88%) lived in the Valleys, with the remaining 12% working, but not living, in the Valleys.
A convenience sample approach was taken to the survey. The public circulation of the survey was initially delayed due to restrictions in the pre-election period and the survey was initially circulated through emails to around 80 community organisations based and/or working in the south Wales Valleys, asking them to circulate to their contacts and circulate internally within the Welsh Government to staff living and/or working in the south Wales Valleys. This snowball approach may have an inherent bias as these organisations’ contacts would not necessarily be representative of the whole Valleys population. Towards the end of the survey period the link to the online survey was circulated more widely via Welsh Government contacts and social media accounts (twitter and Facebook).

The survey sought to gather respondents’ views on:

- What has encouraged them to continue to live/work in the Valleys, or to move to the Valleys;
- Whether they feel proud of living and/or working in the Valleys and why;
- Satisfaction with their local area in terms of working life, local services and community life;
- The quality of a range of aspects of working life, local services and community life in the Valleys and how these could be improved; and
- What else the Valleys Taskforce could do to support the Valleys now and in the future.

The online survey comprised quantitative and qualitative questions relating to the above themes. All responses to quantitative questions were analysed and key results are presented as charts and written explanations in appropriate sections of this report. In order to identify headline findings arising from open-ended qualitative responses, the following procedure was followed:

- A coding framework was developed based on the key broad-level themes (such as transport, housing and job opportunities) emerging from qualitative fieldwork and early engagement events (such as public meetings and staff focus groups).
- A series of key words were identified for each theme (such as transport, roads, congestion, traffic for the ‘transport’ broad-level theme).
- A lexical search was undertaken using these key words on all responses to relevant questions, using qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA); responses were then automatically coded with the relevant broad-level theme. Based on this automatic search, the approximate number of references to each broad-level theme was noted.
- Key sub-themes arising under each broad-level theme were then identified manually by researchers.

Further analysis of the qualitative responses will be carried out during summer 2017 to identify any additional broad-level themes or sub-themes in addition above those already identified, with the aim of informing the Taskforce’s Delivery Plan that will be published in autumn 2017.
1.1.4 Additional online communication

The Welsh Government also led external and internal communications exercises to both raise the profile of Talk Valleys and the work of the taskforce and to offer extra avenues for the public to get in touch and share their views. Feedback from these exercises were shared with Arad.

- A Talk Valleys email box was set up for the public to get in touch (299 correspondences from 183 people).
- The Welsh Government facilitated an internal online forum among its staff.
- A Talk Valleys Facebook page was set up (which received 294,034 page impressions, and 70,183 unique users) and material tweeted using the hashtag #TalkValleys (795 tweets using the hashtag, 531 retweets, total potential reach of 495,000). Social media use by the Welsh Government however was restricted during the month running up to the general election and was not fully used as part of the engagement exercise.

1.2 This report

This report outlines the key themes and findings emerging from the engagement activity. It is based on the complete range of views expressed during the engagement exercises and is structured around the three key themes:

- Section 2: good quality jobs and the skills to do them;
- Section 3: better public services;
- Section 4: community.
2. Good quality jobs and the skills to do them

**Common themes on good quality jobs and the skills to do them from the engagement events**

- There are limited job opportunities locally, especially jobs with progression prospects.
- A prevalence of zero-hours contracts, temporary and agency work.
- Need to support people to get into employment.
- Local businesses need further business support and guidance to develop the local economy in the Valleys.

This chapter summarises feedback from the online survey; formal public meetings; focus groups with residents and businesses; meetings with young people and parents of school-aged children; and social media comments.

### 2.1 Not enough job opportunities

Survey respondents were asked to provide views about their local area as a place for working. In total, 23% of respondents are ‘very satisfied’ with the area in which they live as a place for working, 38% are ‘fairly satisfied’, 12% are ‘neither satisfied nor dissatisfied’, 14% are ‘fairly dissatisfied’ and 12% are ‘very dissatisfied’.

**Figure 2. Survey respondent satisfaction with the area in which they live as a place for working**

Survey respondents were also asked to rate certain aspects of working life and the economy in their area. A total of 65% noted that local salaries are ‘poor’, 27% noted that local salaries are ‘adequate’, 7% noted that they are ‘good’ and only 1% noted that they are ‘excellent’. A total of 65% also noted that access to local employment opportunities close to
home is ‘poor’, 25% noted that access to local employment opportunities is ‘adequate’, 9% noted that access is ‘good’ and only 1% noted that access is ‘excellent’.

**Figure 3. Survey respondent ratings of access to local employment opportunities close to home and local salaries.**

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in an open-ended question on working life and the economy. Jobs and careers were raised 352 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- A lack of job opportunities in the south Wales Valleys;
- A need for more jobs in general, including jobs suitable for young people and older adults;
- A need for better jobs, such as jobs that can support families, can help people to feel pride in their work and jobs that offer a suitable salary;
- A need for jobs to be accessible for those living in the Valleys, particularly in terms of transport and location;
- Insufficient investment from the public and private sectors to provide such jobs;
- Too many zero-hours contracts and temporary or part-time work available in the Valleys; and
- A lack of good quality, suitable job opportunities that allow for career development.

*Even though the Valleys have gone through a long period of high unemployment, pit/factory/business closures, in the majority the people are positive for the future and want to work in/support new investment/job opportunities.*

*Give people jobs they want to do and are proud to work in.*

*People desperate to find a job, but with less prospects.*

*I think the amount of part time jobs and low paid jobs is a great concern in the Valleys.*

*Bring investors to the area who will create jobs, but not zero hours contracts.*

*(Survey comments)*
Focus group participants were also asked to describe working life in their area and in the Valleys generally. There were concerns regarding various aspects of economic life and the type of jobs available in the region in all the group discussions. Across focus groups, participants described a limited jobs market, a prevalence of zero-hours contracts and temporary agency work, issues regarding travel and transport to education and employment and a lack of career progression prospects.

Only jobs in the areas are zero-hour contract work, or call centre work. There’s no chance of a career and progression within your job in the Valleys. (Focus group participant - Male, 25, employed as a teacher).

Need more opportunities to improve yourself. Those that do work end up in a dead-end job and lose all ambition to go any further because they think that’s the best they can do. If there was more opportunity for people to progress, they’d have more motivation. I think that’s the other thing, you go into the job market and you see the jobs available and you go right, I’ll go into care, I’m never going to change, it’s going to be minimum pay for the rest of my life, doing the same job day in and day out. There’s no need to be motivated to improve, because there’s nowhere else to improve to, that’s it. There’s that glass ceiling. (Focus group participant - Male, 30’s, unemployed)

Issues related to young people were discussed during several engagement events and in relation to jobs and skills there was a perception that there were no opportunities for young people. Many in the focus groups expressed a concern that the local job market was not able to sustain young professionals seeking a meaningful good job with promotion prospects, while young people in one group explained that ‘young people don’t want to stay in the area, as there are no jobs after finishing education’. On the other hand, one group felt it was particularly difficult for over-50s to find work and that many of the available low-skilled/paid jobs were not offered to those with experience.

The lack of suitable jobs and a ‘lack of career development opportunities’ was a common theme across most of the meetings. Better jobs are needed closer to where people live ‘as a lot of people will not or cannot travel distances to work’. Discussions centred on the need to create sustainable opportunities locally and bring jobs to the Valleys, alongside a cultural change to encourage people to travel outside their immediate locality for work and training.

### 2.2 Creating job opportunities

Valleys residents in the focus groups said that attracting more business investment to the Valleys should be a priority. Some participants in focus groups noted however that many towns were over-dependent on large employers and that this often left towns vulnerable in the event of these businesses leaving. There was a discussion in some groups about the challenges linked to attracting business investment since the Valleys and its people were often portrayed negatively in parts of the media, meaning businesses could be discouraged from investing in the area.

In contrast, businesses (including those based outside the Valleys) tended to express positive views about the workforce in the Valleys and saw the workforce as a plus point in attracting new investment. Some of the businesses noted that, in their view, south Wales residents were ‘hard-working’ and tended to show ‘greater loyalty’ by staying in the same
job for a longer period of time than average, offering an advantage to smaller businesses in terms of continuity and recruitment costs. Some participants suggested that this might stem from the more limited choice of job opportunities available in the south Wales Valleys.

There needs to be a way of persuading businesses that would otherwise start-up in Swansea or Cardiff to start-up in the Valleys. The Government should be able to do something in order to make the area more attractive to businesses. (female, 25, nurse, Neath Port Talbot)

There's a cycle of [large] companies leaving and towns declining, then another company moving to a nearby town and that area improves. (Survey response)

Young people in focus groups were of the view that more should be done to attract hospitality businesses, such as restaurants and bars, to towns in the south Wales Valleys. This was seen as having two benefits: providing more employment opportunities and making the area more attractive to residents, particularly for young people.

The variations in levels of investment and business activity across different parts of the Valleys was raised in Welsh Government staff engagement activity. Regenerating town centres was a key priority for some staff living in Valley communities, particularly in the 'upper Valleys'. However, some participants contrasted the high levels of investment seen in parts of towns such as Merthyr Tydfil with the lack of opportunity in surrounding areas. Some highlighted perceived barriers to investment in town centres created by high business rates and car parking charges while others noted how some local authorities (e.g. Rhondda Cynon Taf) had removed some parking charges in town centres in an effort to make them more attractive. Some highlighted a need to recognise that businesses were more likely to be attracted to 'hub' areas and that it would be more challenging to attract businesses to more remote areas.
2.3 Business support

Survey respondents were asked to rate certain aspects of business support in their area. A total of 65% of respondents said the attraction of companies into the Valleys is ‘poor’, 20% said this is ‘adequate’, 13% said this is ‘good’ and only 2% said this is ‘excellent’. In addition, a total of 54% said support for local businesses to establish and grow is ‘poor’, 28% said support is ‘adequate’, 15% said support is ‘good’ and only 2% said support is ‘excellent’.

**Figure 4. Survey respondent ratings of support for local businesses and attracting companies into the Valleys.**

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Businesses were raised 302 times in these responses. These comments included views that:

- Local businesses should be supported to develop the economy in the Valleys;
- Small businesses needed support to grow and develop, including grants for establishing businesses, support with rent and rates and location support;
- This type of support is important in encouraging new businesses to establish themselves in the Valleys and for external businesses to invest or move into the Valleys; and
- Attracting new businesses into the Valleys is key for developing the Valleys economy and that there is scope to attract small and large businesses to industrial areas and town centres.

*Introduce low rental business premises to allow people to start their own business or introduce discount rental rates to start new businesses.*

*I know businesses can flourish even in small towns, maybe you need to have roadshows/open days at community halls to explain to people how they can set up new local businesses, the process and business ideas.*

*(Survey respondents)*
Two focus group discussions were held with business representatives and covered the topic of jobs and skills. Representatives from businesses both within the south Wales Valleys and based outside the Valleys expressed similar concerns about the opportunities for businesses and wider employment in the south Wales Valleys. Businesses noted that the economy of the Valleys has been in general decline for years, particularly in terms of industries such as manufacturing. They emphasised that the transport infrastructure, particularly the quality of the road network, is generally poor (though some towns are good public transport hubs) and that this discourages new businesses from investing in the area and makes it difficult for existing businesses to expand and reach their clients.

*The amount of companies that won’t come across to us because of the bridge and these are companies that we need to come to us, but with bridge costs and traffic through Newport, they won’t. (Male, manager of large business)*

Businesses also highlighted a lack of suitable business premises in the Valleys, both for smaller and larger businesses; smaller businesses struggle to afford the rent and rates for premises, while larger businesses struggle to find suitable large-scale sites. They note that this lack of suitable business premises also discourages new investment in the area. As such, both existing businesses and new businesses often need to expand to larger cities such as Swansea, Newport or Cardiff rather than the Valleys.

*Things like rates and rent and things like that. I’d love to open up a shop. I’ve love to be able to run a craft school from there, but I’ve got absolutely no chance of being able to afford the rent or the rates. At the moment, I rent a little room up in a community hall now and again to do my classes. (Focus group: Self-employed, female, craft sector)*

Businesses based in the Valleys expressed fairly negative views on the support available to establish and grow a business, noting that they wouldn’t know where to turn for advice or practical support such as completing tax returns or claiming funding support. Businesses based in the Valleys also noted that there are plenty of training opportunities available for themselves and staff members, but that these opportunities are rarely affordable. On the other hand, businesses based outside the Valleys perceived that more support is available to businesses within the Valleys than those outside, and that there is plenty of training available.

*Everything I’ve done, I’ve done on my own – trial and error. And sort of, if it hasn’t worked, it hasn’t worked, you keep on going. I didn’t know and still don’t know certain things, like if there’s things I can claim or can’t claim. (Focus group: Self-employed, female, craft sector)*

*You can’t do a course if you’ve already done a course, or if they think you’re over-qualified, you have to pay for it then. (Focus group: female, local business manager)*
Businesses were fairly positive about the suitability of the workforce in the Valleys and noted that there are plenty of opportunities to subcontract locally. However, businesses based in the Valleys also noted that fewer younger people are motivated to seek work in the Valleys and that there is still a need to upskill staff.

2.4 More help to get jobs

Survey respondents were asked to rate help for unemployed people to seek work and support to develop people’s skills. A total of 48% said help for unemployed people to seek work is ‘poor’, 33% said help is ‘adequate’, 7% said help is ‘good’ and only 2% said help is ‘excellent’. In addition, 45% said support to develop people’s skills is ‘poor’, 32% said support is ‘adequate’, 20% said support is ‘good’ and 3% said support is ‘excellent’.

Figure 5. Survey respondent ratings of support for unemployed people to seek work and support to develop people’s skills

Source: Survey respondents; N=601 and 640 respectively.

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in an open-ended question on working life and the economy. Help to get jobs was raised 76 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- A need to support people into work;
- A need for specific support including help with job searching and developing CVs, investment in training and development and providing one-to-one intensive support where necessary;
- A need for such support to be available for different age groups, including young people and older adults;
- A need for such support to be accessible, such as by ensuring Jobcentres are in accessible locations; and
- A need to support career progression for those already in work, to provide good quality careers.
More drop-in facilities for the unemployed to get help with benefits, job search, CVs etc.

Further investment in training and development to help people into work but also to help peoples career development - not just for those on benefits only.

Make sure that people who are out of work can access support and help they need to get jobs.

(Survey responses)

Residents in the focus groups also called for more employment-focused support. While there was generally positive feedback on the training opportunities available, residents explained that the main challenge for many young people was travelling to college. Some noted there was training provision locally (naming private training providers and their local college) but they felt that there weren’t job opportunities for those who go on their courses; they referred to friends who had followed courses but who hadn’t subsequently been able to find work. Some young people not in education, employment or training felt there were limited training opportunities that also provided work experience or a job placement. This type of opportunity was considered to be attractive to these young people.

It takes me three buses to get to university, and they don’t have a student ticket. The cost adds up. (Focus group participant, female, 21, student and care worker)

College is so hard to get to, all the buses are full, and the kids have to depend on their parents not working, or they can’t get a lift back (Focus group participant, female, 40, zero-hour contract worker)

Contributors to the public meetings drew on observations of what worked in the past to recommend a focus on ‘real’ skills:

Many years ago, I worked for the construction training board and our mantra was real training, real skills, real jobs, and that’s been missing for a number of years. We have to training people in skills that they’re going to be able to use rather than go from one training scheme to another with no opportunity for employment.

During one themed meeting, there was a discussion about the need for the development of employer-led skills to ensure people can access employment and that there is a good skills mix. This includes exploring how vocational training can be integrated into the education system and exploring how better apprenticeship and higher education opportunities can be provided which are aimed at different ages.
2.4.1 Availability and the cost of childcare

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Childcare was raised 34 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- A need for affordable, accessible childcare to ensure parents can enter work or progress in their careers;
- A lack of available childcare;
- Both the expense of childcare and the low salaries of those working in the sector;
- A need to improve specific aspects of childcare, such as wrap around provision.

More generally, residents in focus groups were of the opinion that their areas were generally well served with support and activities for younger children and families, especially from those who had experience of Flying Start.

In the themed meetings, parents highlighted the cost and availability of childcare, particularly the lack of care for children aged under two years of age. Parents report that the limited spaces for very young children mean that parents / carers have to travel further to access childcare. Parents also reported concerns over the cost of childcare. These factors were felt to result in people who 'cannot afford to work'. It was also highlighted that the times/ days of childcare does not take into account shift work and unsociable hours like nurses.

2.4.2 Careers Advice and work-skills for young people

There is a lack of consistent, fully-informed careers advice for young people according to some survey and focus group respondents. Some young people in the focus groups noted that further education and other training courses did not provide them with work experience. These young people felt that there were a lack of work placements and that these types of opportunities would be likely to attract them into training courses. The link between education and the world of work was emphasised in public meetings and particularly the themed meetings with schools and businesses. Some participants were of the view that there was a need to promote greater employer engagement in schools and to provide more work experience opportunities for learners.

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Young people and careers advice were raised 151 times in these responses. These comments included views that:

- Young people need improved careers and employability support;
- Key elements of support include high quality careers guidance, training opportunities, informal opportunities such as youth clubs to develop skills and support to develop and achieve their career aspirations;
- Volunteering opportunities and volunteer groups can play a key role in developing the employment-related skills of young people; and
- There are not enough career and progression opportunities available to encourage young people to stay in their local areas.
Careers advisors should be passionate about helping younger people.

Encourage and provide free courses for younger generation and unemployed to develop skills to help them gain a job.

A better future with more employment opportunities for young people - stop the Valleys brain-drain.

(Survey responses)
3. Better public services

**Common themes on public services**

- There was a call for services to be better joined up and for residents to be involved in decisions.
- Transport challenges was a key theme across all engagement activity in all areas, and many residents raised concerns about transport as a barrier to accessing employment.
- There were some generally positive views on health services but some issues on access to GP services; hospital access and mental health services.
- The lack of affordable housing was a key complaint as was the fact that there many empty houses in poor repair near to new estates of unaffordable housing.

3.1 Public services need to be better joined up

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions on public services. A need for more joined-up services was raised 26 times in these responses. These comments included views that:

- The public sector needs to plan more strategically on a local, regional and national level to ensure that services are provided consistently across regions; and
- Service delivery should be better integrated, making it easier for the public to access the support they need in a timely manner.

*The councils need to work together more, see service provision on a regional footprint.*

*They should make sure that communities are involved in the decisions made as there doesn’t seem like there is much joined up thinking.*

*(Survey responses)*

Similarly, in one public meeting, there was a concern that local government is not engaging with residents and a sense that there is a need to change the culture. There was a feeling that decisions are made without enough opportunities for people to have a say and that services working in silos were felt to cause problems. In another public meeting, there was a request for the taskforce to ‘work on community spirit’ through getting people engaged in making decisions about their community, but acknowledge that people ‘are sick of being told what they need’. This topic was covered also in Welsh Government staff engagement sessions, with an emphasis on the need to join-up campaigns, use existing channels and contacts and to ‘go to where the people are rather than expecting them to come to meetings’.
3.2 Facilities and services for communities

Survey respondents were asked to rate local community facilities. A total of 34% said community facilities are ‘poor’, 38% said they are ‘adequate’, 25% said they are ‘good’ and only 3% said they are ‘excellent’.

Figure 6. Survey respondent ratings of local community facilities

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Community facilities were raised 196 times in these responses. These comments included views that:

- There is a need to make better use of existing community facilities and centres and examples were given of existing centres, halls and facilities which could be used to provide excellent services and social meeting places for people of all ages; and
- Numerous venues or facilities have closed down in recent years, often due to loss of funding.

Focus group participants agreed that facilities had closed, feeling that this reflected the fact that their area had been ‘forgotten’. Some participants highlighted the contrast between declining or closed-down community facilities in their area and others. For example, several participants in Caerphilly referred to the limited facility in their town centre and contrasted this with the re-opened Ponty Lido. These participants noted that the former open-air pool in Morgan Jones Park previously provided a good facility for families but that this was now largely closed down (some splash pads are now open in the summer).

*If they can do it [re-open the Lido] in Ponty then why not in Caerphilly. (Focus group participant, female, Caerphilly)*

The challenge of maintaining local community venues and facilities was also raised in Welsh Government staff engagement events with some participants emphasising the link between leisure facilities and other aspects of community life such as health, morale and
perceptions of the area. Positive examples of communities taking over the management of community assets were raised by participants (e.g. Bethesda Chapel, Penrhiwciber). However, the importance of external funding and support to enable this type of community-led initiative was also emphasised. The potential benefits of community asset transfers on community cohesion and ‘a sense of local ownership’ was emphasised but questions were raised about the levels of awareness of sources of funding and support for these types of activities in communities. Welsh Government staff suggested that collating and sharing examples of good practice in local ownership of community assets could help promote this type of approach.

Young people in particular felt there was a lack of facilities for sports and leisure locally and this was reinforced by parents in focus groups who noted that many of the locations they could take their children were out-of-town and therefore only accessible by car. The closure of play areas due to a lack of funding was a commonly raised issue among parents in some cases, participants felt that these facilities had become ‘eyesores’ as they declined and had been vandalised. In the focus groups, there were varied opinions about local leisure facilities. Residents in some areas (e.g. Neath Port Talbot, Torfaen) thought that they were well served by leisure facilities, especially those with a car. However, there were pockets of complaints about leisure facilities across all groups – in addition to the challenges of accessing leisure (including sports, cinema, restaurants) without a car, the main concern was the lack of a centre for leisure activities in some communities and that the leisure locations weren’t always serviced by public transport. There was an unprompted discussion in three of the focus groups in separate areas about socialising and the lack of places to go out of an evening, and there was a general perception among focus group participants in many areas that ‘everything is less local nowadays, there’s no banks, leisure facilities or libraries nearby’. Leisure facilities and opportunities were considered an important issue in the Welsh Government staff engagement with staff emphasising the link between leisure, health and well-being.

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_There’s not enough for young people to do. They hang out on the streets, drinking, smoking and littering. (Focus group: female, 25, works in Swansea)._ 

_Youth Club gives a sense of belonging to children, and can show a better path to teenagers. It’s a really important part of the community that’s missing at the moment. (Focus group: female, 24, care worker, Rhondda Cynon Taf)_ 

_The cubs and brownies have 30 kids attending, and we have a long waiting list. There’s not enough room for other groups in the venue. We want to get them engaged, but there’s no funding. (Focus group: male, 34, unemployed, Rhondda Cynon Taf)"

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Focus group discussions covered wider services and a lack of police stations and lack of visible police presence was cited as an issue by some participants in the focus groups. As well as affecting perceptions of community safety, it was believed to be an issue that could influence the condition of an area’s facilities indirectly as a lack of police presence could lead to more anti-social behaviour and damage to community assets.
### 3.3 Health services

Survey respondents were asked to rate local health services. A total of 30% said health services are ‘poor’, 40% said they are ‘adequate’, 26% said they are ‘good’ and 4% said they are ‘excellent’.

**Figure 7. Survey respondent ratings of local health services**

![Bar chart showing percentage of survey respondents rating health services as Excellent, Good, Adequate, and Poor.]

Source: Survey respondents; N=693.

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Health was raised 155 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- Health as a key element of wellbeing and that improving the health of those living in the Valleys is important for the future of the area;
- A need for localised, accessible services (particularly GP services and hospitals);
- A need for more staff and better salaries;
- Difficulties in arranging appointments and access services in a timely manner; and
- Insufficient funding for healthcare to provide services to the whole population.

*We need to communicate better, especially in Social Services, Hospitals, Sheltered housing, surgeries (doctors), share information.*

*(Survey response)*

Focus group participants in two areas in particular (groups in Swansea and Neath Port Talbot local authorities) reported pressures on GP surgeries and hospitals; a pressure which they felt was now being exacerbated by new housing developments locally. In some areas there were complaints that their local hospitals had been downgraded or had lost their A&E departments. There was a perception that patients had to travel far for treatment, and were often referred to a hospital quite some distance away rather than the one closest to them because of the boundaries of health boards. As a result, group participants...
reported not being sure where they were supposed to access A&E in particular. For example, group participants in Caerphilly had often gone to Ystrad Mynach hospital but then been referred to the Royal Gwent due to a lack of staff – this was frustrating for the group. Some had gone to the Health hospital in Cardiff but been ‘told off’ for not going to Ystrad Mynach.

3.4 Mental health services

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Mental health was raised 17 times in these responses. These comments included views that:

- Some people do not feel supported by mental health services;
- Mental health services need improvement;
- There is a general lack of available mental health services;
- Services which are available are difficult to access;
- More mental health support for children, young people and adults is needed; and
- Improved community support for mental health would be valuable.

_We need much better mental health facilities at the moment there are hardly any and access to them is very difficult._

_Mental health support for young people is desperately needed._

_(Survey responses)_

Similarly, at the public meetings, questions raised about health services tended to focus on difficulties with access and the closure of local services and mental health was a significant barrier which was raised on multiple occasions in the public meetings.

3.5 Quality, availability and affordability of housing

Residents taking part in the engagement activity referred to poor quality housing and complained that too many empty properties, (both housing and commercial property) can have a detrimental impact on the wider community. A small number of survey respondents commented on the quality of housing and empty properties in their area, and that more could be done to encourage the renovation of empty properties and improve some poor-quality housing. Residents in the focus groups too noted that many existing buildings are empty and in need of repair, which means the streets and surrounding areas are not aesthetically pleasing. Some participants emphasised that these empty buildings should be developed before new estates are built.

_Encourage people to renovate empty properties with support of skilled trades people then live in that property supported by housing benefit themselves rather than private landlords doing that process._ (Survey response)
There are empty buildings all over the place that aren't being refurbished, while there are new houses being built all the time. (Focus group participant, female, 60, zero-hour contract worker)

There are no jobs, then people don't have money to buy houses and some are left empty and derelict for years. (Focus group participant, female, 54, unemployed)

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Housing raised 203 times in these responses. These comments included views that:

- People chose to live in the Valleys because of comparatively reasonable cost of housing;
- The Valleys offer affordable housing compared to city areas such as Cardiff and Swansea and that this has encouraged people to stay in the area;
- There is still a shortage of good-quality, affordable housing.

Many residents commented that there is too much new housing being built in their area, taking up all available space and reducing the amount of open spaces in the area. They noted that this housing is not affordable, particularly considering the lack of employment opportunities and the number of zero-hours contracts in the area. In particular, residents noted that there remains a shortage of housing for young people and families in need, as well as a lack of suitable sheltered housing and social housing. Similarly, some participants noted that not enough of the new housing is social housing. Many noted that investment in affordable housing is necessary, but there was a discussion in the groups that infrastructure (such as transport and public services) must be able to respond to any increases in population.

Making more affordable housing available for families in need would be an advantage as all too often poor housing adds to the problems these families are already facing, the other shortfall is in respect of housing for needy youngsters especially those leaving care. (Survey response)

They’re going up anywhere, any little space and they’re going up…posh housing, if you’ve got a bit of money you can afford it…it’s only affordable if both parents have got well-paid jobs. (Focus group participant, female, carer, 30s)

There’s no chance of saving to buy a house or provide for your family on a 0-hour contract, and that’s all that’s available here at the moment. (Focus group participant, male, 25, teacher).

A small number of similar comments were raised in the staff engagement sessions and housing was a peripheral point in public meetings. Staff noted that the standard of housing in some areas is poor, including in social housing despite the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and that ensuring people have safe, good quality homes is key for wellbeing and family life.
3.6 Public transport and travel

Survey respondents were asked to rate local transport services. A total of 44% said public transport services are ‘poor’, 28% said they are ‘adequate’, 24% said they are ‘good’ and only 4% said they are ‘excellent’.

Figure 8. Survey respondent ratings of local transport services

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Transport was raised 502 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- The general poor quality of public transport;
- The need to improve road infrastructure, particularly in terms of ensuring a good road network across the Valleys;
- A need to improve train and bus routes;
- Traffic congestion as a significant problem facing Valleys transport infrastructure;
- Transport as prohibitively expensive on occasions; and
- Transport difficulties making it challenging for residents to access work opportunities, support and services that may be available close to their local areas.

In the focus groups, there was often a mix of opinion on transport, even within an area, with some praising the bus service while others complained that the services were being reduced or did not go to anywhere except the major centres. Others complained about the lack of train connections especially late in the evening. Public transport was reported to be better to and from the larger cities (Newport, Cardiff and Swansea) albeit slow and unreliable for some. However, there was unanimous complaints in all engagement sources that transport across the Valleys and between communities was poor or non-existent. Furthermore, ‘there’s no consistency with the bus routes, they change the numbers and cancel services without warning’.
If public money could just focus on getting the transport infrastructure right, it is third world at the moment, whether rail or road, the government at national, Welsh and local levels needs to work more effectively together.

Transport links have to improve to widen the workforce opportunities.

(Survey responses)

At some of the public meetings points were made about transport across regions being disjointed and costly and similar concerns were expressed in the Welsh Government staff engagement sessions, who said that ‘investment in transport links is needed to encourage growth’. Disjointed public transport was believed to make it difficult for old people to access support services, and make it difficult, slow and expensive for young people trying to access further education.

Have to swap at least once to get a train or bus to anywhere in the Valleys. (Focus group participant, female, 25, civil servant)

Transport is critical and is the number 1 investment priority, as no large-scale company would move to the Valleys because of the poor transport. (Public meeting contribution)

Road traffic
Residents in all areas explained that having a car is essential to access to full range of services, leisure and employment. Roads were described as ‘ok’ but were often ‘gridlocked during rush hour if something happens.’ Survey respondents commented that the road infrastructure needs improvement, particularly in terms of ensuring a good road network across the Valleys. Many also commented that traffic congestion is a significant problem facing Valleys transport infrastructure and that public buses or trains can be prohibitively expensive. Residents in the focus groups also complained that ‘the minor roads are terrible’ and generally ‘the roads can’t deal with the that many people, as the public transport is so poor’. They noted that the transport difficulties make it challenging for residents to access work opportunities, support and services that may be available close to their local areas.

Complaints were made in several of the focus groups about parking costs, which were thought to affect town centre trade. ‘Prohibitive’ car parking charges was also raised in Welsh Government staff engagement sessions and forum discussions although there was no consensus as to whether there should be a push for more free parking or not.

The roads are a barrier for businesses. Investment in transport links needed to encourage growth – this needs to be cross Valley. There is always an expectation that people should travel to Cardiff for work – why should they have to? And often it’s not possible in a reasonable time (Welsh Government staff engagement meeting).
You have to have a car to get from A to B in the Valleys, but there isn’t much parking at all (Focus group participant, male, 25, industry worker).

I think if you’re able to improve the roads, you’re going to get more people staying local, more business coming in, it’ll have a snowball effect (Focus group participant, 30s, male, unemployed).

**Travel and Transport to work**

Residents in the focus groups felt that industrial estates were poorly served by public transport and that this often made it difficult for those without cars to reach employment opportunities. This accessibility of jobs was an issue raised in several groups, and the young residents in particular noted that retail and café jobs tended to be out of town and they were reliant on parents or friends for lifts as public transport connections did not match shift hours.

There was a commonly held view across all focus groups that ‘you have to travel to get to a good job’, and ‘if you want a professional job, you have no choice but to go to a big town or city’. This commuting out of the Valleys was viewed as putting pressure on transport systems, especially the roads and was viewed as affecting housing and community life. Furthermore, it meant that many people cannot physically get to work within a reasonable time, let alone manage childcare around that.

I used to work in McDonalds, which was 15-minute drive away, but it would take me three buses to get there. (Focus group participant, female, 21, care worker)

Public transport around Cwmbran is good, but road network across Valleys in general is poor – bad condition, bad network of roads and congested. Infrastructure needs improving to encourage businesses. (Focus group participant)
4. My local community

**Common themes on local communities**

- There is a sense of pride about living in the Valleys.
- Valley areas perceived to be safe and friendly with a very strong sense of community.
- There is beautiful countryside and attractive towns but a perception that we are not making the most of the rich natural resources and cultural heritage.
- Residents wanted to see town centres improved.
- Many called for better maintenance of the natural environment, both for the benefit of local people and for increasing tourism.

4.1 Perceptions and sense of pride

Residents expressed a sense of pride associated with living in the Valleys with three quarters of the survey respondents answering that they were proud to live or work in the Valleys. A total of 43% noted they are ‘very proud’ to live and/or work in the Valleys, 32% noted that they are ‘fairly proud’, 19% noted that they are ‘not especially proud’ and 4% noted that they are ‘not at all proud’.

**Figure 9. Survey respondent pride to live and/or work in the Valleys**

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Respondents provided 487 comments on why they are, or are not, proud to live in the Valleys. These comments included perceptions of:

- A strong sense of community in their areas, including the friendly and welcoming nature of the people living in the Valleys and residents’ willingness to work hard and support each other through difficult circumstances;
• Strong cultural roots and heritage in the Valleys, particularly if they were born and raised in the area;
• The beauty of the natural environment as a particular source of pride; and
• Negatively, some social deprivation, lack of investment and lack of suitable investment in the area.

It was clear from residents’ responses to the survey and from the focus group discussions that much of that sense of pride came from the strong sense of community in their area, including the friendly and welcoming nature of the people living in the Valleys. In particular was the perception that people are willing to work hard and support each other through difficult circumstances. Many also noted they feel proud because they have strong cultural roots and heritage in the Valleys, particularly if they were born and raised in the area. Respondents also emphasised the beauty of the natural environment as a particular source of pride. However, some respondents noted that they are not proud of the social deprivation, lack of investment and lack of suitable investment in the area.

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I am proud to live in the Valleys because of the people, the character of the area, heritage and family roots.

Family have always lived in the Valleys for generations and people still care for each other.

I am proud of the heritage of the area and the friendliness of the people but not of the infrastructure that supports the Valleys or the services.

(Survey responses)

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Focus group participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of the south Wales Valleys and when asked to summarise their local community and the south Wales Valleys in three words, participants tended to more frequently mention positive aspects such as ‘close community’, ‘friendliness’ and ‘family’ (see figure 1). Residents often noted that the Valleys are seen as having a strong sense of community and a ‘small community feel’; they emphasised that communities are seen as welcoming and friendly. As such, they felt that the Valleys are generally safe and pleasant as a location for family life.
Source: Focus group participants; N=71

Many residents emphasised the ‘scenic countryside’ as a positive aspect and many referred to the area as ‘quiet’, although for some (particularly young people) this was a less positive attribute. Particular emphasis was placed on the countryside in the Valleys; participants emphasised that the Valleys provide beautiful open spaces. Many residents emphasised the word ‘central’, referring to the accessibility of the area to nearby cities and rural areas, however other respondents had concerns about a general lack of accessibility across the Valleys and associated isolation.

*Small community feel, because pretty much anywhere in the Valleys that you go, whether they know you or not, they will welcome you into the community in general.*
*(male, 20s, unemployed)*

Several individuals had returned to the Valleys following a period of living and working elsewhere, drawn home by the sense of community and family. Some participants noted that there were plenty of community activities for children and families. However other residents felt that many local leisure facilities had shut down over the years and some community events stopped as a result of Communities First funding cuts; they complained that facilities such as cinemas, arcades, swimming pools and play facilities were now often in ‘out of town’ centres such as Nantgarw and Merthyr meaning that they were less accessible to many families.

A small number of comments relating to community life were raised in public meetings: one student emphasised that the local youth club had provided numerous opportunities for her and another member of the public emphasised the importance of communities feeling a sense of ownership over their community assets.

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*Word clouds are a visual method of displaying the frequency of words used by participants. The larger the word in the image, the more frequently it was used by participants.*
I think it’s really important to highlight the number of opportunities my youth club has provided me in exploring different avenues and how fantastic the youth workers in my youth club are because they’ve opened up so many avenues and other career opportunities that I didn’t realise existed.

Funding has come in, you’ve had regional parts with millions put into this area but these people haven’t seen it. People in this area they are up for building their own community, they just want the resources and the support. It’s not about money, it’s about community.

People in this area they are up for building their own community, they just want the resources and the support. It’s not about money, it’s about community.

(Comments in public meetings)

The description of the Valleys and their home areas was not universally positive however and many focus group participants also referred to less positive aspects such as ‘poverty’, ‘deprivation’ ‘run-down’ and ‘lack of opportunities’. Participants also identified a perception of the Valleys by other as an area of relative deprivation, high unemployment and declining economy. They noted that there are pockets of poverty across the Valleys and that some towns or areas are fairly run down. Similarly, they identified a perception that some areas are ‘rough’ and struggle with drug and/or health problems.

There’s a lot of unemployment, poor services and transport and the area is generally poor. (Focus group: male, 34, teacher, lives outside the Valleys)

Everyone thinks that the Valleys are a dead-end place with no opportunities. The negative news coverage portrays us to be unemployable. (Focus group: male, 45, self-employed property developer)

4.2 Making the most of natural resources and cultural heritage

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Natural resources and heritage was raised 336 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions that:

- Natural resources and cultural heritage are a key benefit of, and reason for, living or working in the Valleys;
- Protecting natural resources is an important element of support to the Valleys, including educating residents and visitors about the value of the natural environment;
- Improving community life in the Valleys involves making better use of the natural and cultural resources that already exist in the Valleys; and
- That more investment or resources could help ensure natural resources are well-maintained (such as by clearing litter) and protected.
Connect and encourage a network of community heritage, leisure, environment projects that play to our marvellous environment.

Although I live in an ex coal mining area, nature has reclaimed the old mines and the local farm provides beautiful fields of wild flowers which encourage wildlife.

(Survey responses)

Focus group participants held mixed views relating to the physical environment in the south Wales Valleys. Several participants highlighted the good accessibility of natural resources within the Valleys, highlighting the attractiveness of areas such as the Afan Forest and Cwm Carn. Many participants were of the opinion that there are some nice rural walks in their area and, in general, parks were well looked after, however there was a perception that we are not making the most of the rich natural resources and cultural heritage of the Valleys. Several participants (including those outside the Valleys) were of the view that more should be done to promote and ‘make the most’ of the Valleys’ natural resources and cultural heritage. For example, one participant believed that the area should be marketed more like the Forest of Dean to attract outsiders and another noted that creating a camp for children and young people (similar to the Urdd camp at Llangrannog) could be of benefit in promoting a more positive perception of the area.

Comments were made about the need to improve public areas, a few participants commented that some buildings have become run down, others are derelict, and require a considerable amount of work to improve them, and creating a poor impression when visitors arrived in an area.

I volunteer and run a dance class in the community. The building needs work, and looks tired, differently to using buildings in Swansea, that are up-to-date and look good. (Focus group: female, 25, civil servant)

The big, old and empty buildings let the town down and make the area look run-down. (Survey response)

Individuals attending the public meetings expressed concerns about a lack of pride and community spirit in areas, where parks are not in a good condition and littering and fly tipping is a significant issue. It was suggested that a major clean-up of some areas would help and the changes to a reduction in the duration of bin collections and tightening of waste disposal has led to an increase in fly tipping. A suggestion was made to look at a scheme where councils collect household waste at a reduced/low cost.

4.3 Increase tourism

Survey respondents were asked to rate tourism and heritage in their local area. A total of 30% said tourism and heritage are ‘poor’, 30% said they are ‘adequate’, 32% said they are ‘good’ and only 7% said they are ‘excellent’.
Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Tourism was raised 90 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions that:

- Focusing on tourism should be a key focus for investment;  
- The natural beauty and outdoor activity opportunities in the Valleys (discussed in section 4.2) provide a good foundation for tourism;  
- Tourism could be encouraged by regenerating town centres and maintaining the natural environment to encourage more visitors; and  
- Focusing on tourism will develop more job opportunities and encourage further investment from businesses.

The Valley towns and villages are ripe for the tourist industry. For mountain biking, climbing centres, walking holidays, welsh cookery courses, painting courses.

Continue to promote the area's natural beauty and opportunities for leisure and tourism. It's a hidden gem and the world does not revolve around Cardiff.

Tourism needs to be maximised and invested in as it could create lots of jobs closer to home.

(Survey responses)

Tourism was a topic in the focus groups and public meetings too and a common theme in many engagement events was that the cultural heritage 'needs better advertising'. Residents in many areas made reference to local tourism and cultural assets which were poorly maintained, not sign-posted, difficult to reach or at risk of closure. Tourism was seen as way of encouraging some employment in the groups also.
You should be looking in the areas of tourism, you should be looking in the areas of heritage, you should be looking in the areas of culture...also sport.

(Public meeting)

4.4 Town centres need to be refocused

Survey respondents were asked to rate their local town centres. A total of 57% said town centres are ‘poor’, 29% said they are ‘adequate’, 13% said they are ‘good’ and only 1% said they are ‘excellent’.

Figure 12. Survey respondent ratings of local town centres

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Town centres were raised 117 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- A need to reinvigorate town centres in the Valleys;
- The deterioration of town centres and high streets in recent years due to the decline in small businesses;
- Town centres seeming abandoned and becoming ‘run down’ as a result;
- A need for investment, support and encouragement to bring small, local businesses back into town centres; and
- Such development of town centres potentially attracting more businesses and visitors to the area.
There needs to be a coherent strategy developed, starting with investment in infrastructure and looking to regenerate town centres. This means shifting the focus from out of town retail store developments to more indigenous businesses.

Look at the town centres some of which are deteriorating rapidly. This could be achieved by bringing in well know retailers into town centres rather than out of town parks.

(Survey responses)

When commenting on the town centres, some focus group participants mentioned that many shops had closed in their areas and that many new businesses don’t remain open for a long time. The area doesn’t attract a great footfall and so shops are struggling to stay open.

Businesses are constantly changing hands on the main street, each shop don’t last long. There’s not as much foot fall in the town centre anymore. (Focus group: Female, 34, nurse)

Lots of shops in the town centre have shut down, with problems with council business rates. There’s a lack of re-generation in the Valleys. (Focus group: Male, 52, civil servant)

The future of town centres was discussed in the public meetings and it was felt that the town centres need to change and adapt to modern times and look at opportunities around Wi-Fi hotspots and move away from a traditional perception of how town centres were developed in the past.

We all know strings of settlements where the quality of the built environment is very poor. We also have oodles of young people desperate to live in towns, not stuck out on estates, who want communication, transport and connectivity, who want Wi-Fi hubs, cafes, small gyms, leisure opportunities, who want to mix on the streets in our towns and I think we can hit so many agendas if we seriously consider small, town centre hard, fast regen of housing above shops, in derelict buildings, transforming all sort of buildings. (Member of the public, public meeting)

Similarly, the topic was raised in Welsh Government staff engagement, with questions posed about the changing role of some town centres and the implications of their future. Some were of the view that the decline of town centres reflects a wider global trend and that this should be borne in mind when designing policy.

4.5 Renewable energy

Survey respondents were given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Renewable energy was raised 12 times in these responses. These
comments included perceptions that the Valleys have good potential in terms of renewable energy and that further support and development is needed to capitalise on this opportunity.

Manufacturing, infrastructure and renewable energy could all be areas with potential. Could the Valleys become a new green or renewable energy hub?

(Survey response)

The renewable energy sector was a focus of discussion in one of the public meetings. This was considered by some to be a sector that could provide good opportunities for local communities. However, some also felt that there has been a lot of foreign investment in wind and solar power, which did not always benefit the local community. Some participants perceived that there would be opportunities lost if capitalising on this sector was not a priority for the Valleys Taskforce.

4.6 Better maintenance of physical environment

Residents highlighted the attractive natural landscape, referring to the benefits of living near parks and green spaces. This was considered to be an attractive aspect of the area for parents, in particular, but was also raised by young people as a positive aspect of living in the south Wales Valleys.

It’s family-orientated and there’s greenery – there’s plenty to do with both younger and older family members. School holidays begin and you’re never really short of anywhere to go with the kids. (Focus group - male, unemployed, 30s)

Survey respondents were also given the opportunity to provide additional comments in open-ended questions. Maintenance of the physical environment was raised 142 times in these responses. These comments included perceptions of:

- A need to maintain the physical environment more effectively, including the rural environment, town centres and parks;
- A need to maintain the cleanliness and regenerate town centres;
- A need to protect the natural environment from damage;
- A need to focus on fly-tipping and littering in both town centres and the natural environment;
- A need for both individuals and businesses to take responsibility for maintaining the physical environment, as well as a need for public services to deal more effectively with issues such as fly-tipping.

Fly tipping is a big issue which affects how outsiders see the Valleys and is ruining the beautiful countryside and providing a poor impression to both visitors, customers and business looking to use the area.
I think that some factory owners should be brought to task about the state of their premises. Some present a dirty, uncared for environment and would benefit from landscaping and general maintenance. It should be incumbent upon them to help the environment by caring for their grounds.

So many improvements have been made to date in Merthyr (and surrounding Valleys) however the amount of rubbish around the road side, especially slip road and goat mill road is horrendous.

(Survey responses)

Many residents, especially in the focus groups, felt that the physical environment needs to be better maintained. Some participants raised issues with litter on side streets, fly-tipping and burning rubbish in the countryside. Overall, focus group participants felt that some areas needed improving, including the tidying up of parks and public areas. The following comments were provided:

There’s a nice walk nearby, by the waterfalls, but there’s mess everywhere. Teenagers light fires and leave rubbish as they don’t have anything else to do. (Focus group, female, 54, unemployed)

It’s a real shame, when parks and public areas do break, or get run down as they don’t get fixed and are then an eye sore. Young people then cause more damage as they are broken already. (Focus group, female, 25, civil servant)

I’ve seen [the town] decline over the years, it’s losing its character. (Focus group, male, 60, zero-hour contract work)

There were complaints by residents in some of the focus groups about the lack of maintenance of local parks and public areas, explaining that ‘no parent will take their child to a park that has glass on the floor and teenagers swearing and drinking’. However, in other areas there was praise for both the council and local volunteers for maintaining the play and ornamental parks in the area. Litter and fly-tipping complaints were also raised in a small number of public meetings.

This is massive, it’s not just cigarette tips we’re talking about, we’re talking about general household items, ridiculous amount of things because they can’t get rid of them in the council depots…and they just can’t be bothered.

(Public meeting)
5. Summary

People who live and work in the South Wales Valleys were asked about what they want to see happen in their local communities now and in the future. This report has set out the evidence provided in those engagement activities and will inform the work of the Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys. The following key themes emerged:

**Good quality jobs and the skills to do them:**
- There are limited job opportunities locally, especially jobs with progression prospects.
- A prevalence of zero-hours contracts, temporary and agency work.
- Need to support people to get into employment.
- Local businesses need further business support and guidance to develop the local economy in the Valleys.

**Better public services:**
- There was a call for services to be better joined up and for residents to be involved in decisions.
- Transport challenges was a key theme across all engagement activity in all areas, and many residents raised concerns about transport as a barrier to accessing employment.
- There were some generally positive views on health services but some issues on access to GP services; hospital access and mental health services.
- The lack of affordable housing was a key complaint as was the fact that there many empty houses in poor repair near to new estates of unaffordable housing.

**Common themes on local communities:**
- There is a sense of pride about living in the Valleys.
- Valley areas are perceived to safe and friendly with a very strong sense of community.
- There is beautiful countryside and attractive towns but a perception that we are not making the most of the rich natural resources and cultural heritage.
- Residents wanted to see town centres improved.
- Many called for better maintenance of the natural environment, both for the benefit of local people and for increasing tourism.