

## VALLEYS REGIONAL PARK

### Maximising the social, economic and environmental potential of the Valleys' natural and cultural heritage assets

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Authors: Andrew Osborne - Torfaen County Borough Council  
Dr David Llewellyn - Blaengad Cyf., BRO Partnership, University of South Wales and Cardiff Metropolitan University

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- The natural and cultural heritage of the Valleys are amongst their greatest assets. Maximising their socio-economic potential can and should play a vital role in the future sustainability of the Valleys.
- Strong evidence is emerging globally showing the effectiveness of harnessing and optimising natural assets for regeneration and sustainable economic development, e.g. Detroit Future City<sup>1</sup>, the Mersey Forest<sup>2</sup>, and Stuttgart City Region Landscape Parks.<sup>3</sup>
- Previous studies showed that a lack of coordinated, collaborative strategic action was a major obstacle to realising this potential in the Valleys.<sup>4</sup>
- Moreover, the Valleys still suffer from negative external perceptions, even within Wales, impacting adversely on their attractiveness to business and as place to live and visit. The Emscher Landscape Park in Germany, amongst others, showed that similar negative images can be overturned, contributing vitally to economic development.<sup>5</sup>
- Progress on these issues was made by developing the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) concept<sup>6</sup> (Appendix 1). This involved Welsh Government, Local Authorities, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) - then comprising the three separate bodies - and a wide range of third-sector and community organisations. The VRP operated successfully between 2009 and 2013 (Appendix 2).<sup>a</sup>
- As indicated in the Valleys Task Force report, *Fifty Years of Regeneration in the Valleys*, the VRP provided a strong evidence base and key lessons for tailoring this approach to the area's' unique assets.<sup>7,8</sup>
- The VRP approach should work with and augment other key initiatives such as the Metro, town centre regeneration, tourism development, social housing improvements, renewable energy generation, and local foundational economy approaches such as the Tredegar *Deep Place* study.

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<sup>a</sup> Appendix 2 shows the outputs achieved through the VRP programme with the support of EU funds during the period 2009-2013.

- Subsequent efforts to build on the VRP model include NRW’s area-based trials, e.g. in the Rhondda, and successful collaborative working by the three eastern Valleys authorities (Torfaen, Caerphilly and Blaenau Gwent) focused on improving upland management, landscape crime including fly-tipping, and action for pollinators.<sup>9</sup>
- Green Infrastructure was identified as a growth opportunity in the Cardiff City Region Growth and Competitiveness Commission report<sup>10</sup>, citing the VRP as an example. A proposal for a Valleys Landscape Park was developed for the Cardiff City Region by the 10 SE Wales local authority environment leads and NRW, building on the VRP model.<sup>11</sup> Adopting the approach would complement City Deal investment, focusing activity at a community level, but **would not** seek funding from it.
- The VRP concept affords excellent opportunities to help address some of the major challenges and opportunities in the Valleys, including skills, training and employment, enhancing health and wellbeing, and renewable energy:<sup>8</sup>
  - Community organisations are increasingly developing their own initiatives to support local socio-economic development based on the natural resources, e.g. A Natural Future for the Rhondda (Treherbert), A Vision for our Valley (Ynysybwl), the Ebbw Fach Trail, Awel Co-op Wind Farm (Tairgwaith). This reflects growing identification by Valleys’ communities with their natural assets and awareness of the associated opportunities. However, such community-based developments require focused strategic support to maximise the benefits.<sup>12</sup>
  - High-quality, multifunctional green space close to where people live and work is important for their quality of life. For example, a recent VRP-supported study published in the British Medical Journal (OSEM) showed some of the important beneficial health impacts of community activity in the outdoors.<sup>13</sup>
  - Evolving renewable energy schemes in the Valleys offer opportunities to provide vital local revenue streams and address local fuel poverty. However, community-based energy production is struggling to become widely established.<sup>14</sup>
- The VRP Future Options Study<sup>8</sup> set out a clear vision for future development of the VRP approach, together with possible options for effective governance and operational delivery.

## REFERENCES

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## APPENDIX 1 – Regional Parks

A Regional Park is not a planning designation and is neither a National Park nor Country Park. Individual Regional Parks are unique and develop their own definition and vision based on their local characteristics, needs and aspirations. Consequently, they adapt to local circumstances, embrace innovation and entrepreneurship, and engage and engender community support. Importantly, all Regional Parks use environmental enhancement as a foundation for social and economic improvement.

## APPENDIX 2 – VRP Outputs (2009-13) included

- 39 infrastructure and landscape projects were completed and 40 interpretation projects and events took place
- 151 km of new and improved managed access to the countryside were created
- 30 new direct jobs were created in visitor centres and other developments
- Employment through work directly on construction and site development was estimated to equate to 60 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) jobs
- Visitor spending at 24 capital investments equated to supporting 87.3 FTE jobs
- A sample of eight events were estimated to generate an additional GVA to support around 3.5 FTE jobs for one year
- A World Responsible Tourism award-winning Community Tourism Ambassadors programme trained 543 people, who acquired recognised qualifications
- A highly successful exemplar anti fly-tipping initiative was implemented