

Ein Cymoedd  
Ein Dyfodol



Our Valleys  
Our Future



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government



# The Valleys Taskforce, 2016 – 2021: a final report



@TalkValleys

#OurValleys



# Contents

Foreword	Facts and figures
<b>3</b>	<b>15</b>
What is the Valleys Taskforce?	Case studies
<b>4</b>	<b>16</b>
How did the Taskforce choose its priorities?	What lessons have been learned?
<b>5</b>	<b>28</b>
What were the Taskforce's objectives?	Independent feedback
<b>6</b>	<b>29</b>
How did the Taskforce operate?	Reflections
<b>8</b>	<b>31</b>
What has the Taskforce achieved?	The future
<b>9</b>	<b>33</b>

As the Valleys Taskforce reaches its conclusion, it is timely to take stock of what has been achieved and what we can carry forward to support future work with Valleys towns and communities.

We have worked with the independent agency OB3 Research to compile this report, which aims to tell the story of the Valleys Taskforce programme. It draws upon a wealth of information and knowledge, including ministerial announcements, progress reports and communication campaigns, as well as commissioned independent research.

These insights into the achievements of the Valleys Taskforce have been used to inform our recommendations for the future.



# Foreword



## **As the Valleys Taskforce comes to a close, it is timely to reflect on the progress made over the last five years.**

There was understandable scepticism when the Taskforce was first set up in 2016. People had seen initiatives come and go, and this would be another well-meaning programme that was surely doomed to fail. This report is an honest story of the progress made so far, and while there are many positives to be taken, there are certainly lessons that we can learn from.

My first initiative on becoming the chair of the Valleys Taskforce two years ago was to look across the Valleys for existing good practice to share.

Building on the extensive programme of open meetings and consultation that my colleague Alun Davies MS and other Ministers undertook, I met with every local authority leader in the Taskforce area to ask them to identify successful initiatives that had originated in their areas, which we could spread across neighbouring authorities.

We decided to focus on areas where we knew we could make a real difference, and which could be delivered quickly. You will see more information on the progress made on those actions throughout this report, and I am extremely proud of the impact those actions have made within communities within a relatively short space of time.

As we have approached the end of this Senedd term, I have been conscious of the need for the outputs of the Taskforce to go well beyond this term of government. We have worked hard to embed our work in the long-term plans for the Welsh Government and via partnership working.

The Taskforce has discussed what we believe the strategic priorities should be for any future delivery programme to focus on, and set them out clearly for an incoming government to consider. There is no denying that more needs to be done, and the challenges faced by the Valleys have only been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This work cannot end here. The solutions lie within, and require all of us to work closely together with continued dedication to make a positive difference to every person living and working in the south Wales Valleys. I am looking forward to seeing what comes next.

**Lee Waters MS**  
**Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport**

# What is the Valleys Taskforce?

**The Taskforce is a cross-governmental body that was set up to coordinate policy and interventions in the south Wales Valleys, increasing the impact of current resources. It piloted new approaches to tackle a unique set of deep-rooted challenges – many of them connected to the decline of heavy industry and the end of coal mining across the area.**

It was established in 2016 by Alun Davies MS, then Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language, in response to significant concerns expressed within the communities about insecurity and lack of prospects. As the Taskforce's first chair, Alun Davies strongly believed that the programme should be driven by the views of Valleys communities, and set out to engage in a meaningful conversation with local people.

The Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport, Lee Waters MS, took over the role of Taskforce chair in 2018. He sought to build upon this initial momentum by identifying successful local initiatives that could be replicated or scaled up across the Valleys.

The overall aim of the Taskforce has been to improve the prosperity of people living and working in the Valleys. It intended to:

- take a long-term approach to addressing the issues facing the Valleys. It was not intended as a quick fix or a short-term delivery programme.
- provide a voice for the Valleys and advocate on their behalf. It was intended to increase focus on the Valleys and give them status as a geographical entity.
- be informed and driven by the needs of local communities.

Alongside elected members of the Senedd, the Taskforce has included independent experts, representatives from key sectors and other individuals with a background in the Valleys.

When first established, the Valleys Taskforce area ranged across nine local authorities: Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Swansea and Torfaen. Its boundary was extended in 2019 to include the Gwendraeth and Amman Valleys in Carmarthenshire, recognising that they are also part of the south Wales coalfields.

**“ Using the strengths of the public, private and third sectors, and the ability of the Welsh Government to act as a catalyst, the Taskforce will work over the lifetime of this Assembly to spearhead the regeneration and sustainable growth of the Valleys.**

Alun Davies MS, Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language (September 2016)

# How did the Taskforce choose its priorities?

The Taskforce set out to identify the community priorities and needs that would inform its programme of work. Led by Alun Davies MS, it spent its first year listening to people who lived and worked in the Valleys. This research and engagement – supported by the social-media tag #TalkValleys – found community members wanted the Taskforce to address three issues:

- create more quality job opportunities locally, and address temporary and zero-hours work.
- improve public services, particularly transport and affordable housing.
- maintain and make greater use of the local natural environment and cultural heritage.
- or school, or to access training and leisure facilities.
- improving education outcomes for children, closing the attainment gap.
- establishing a Valleys Landscape Park, later renamed Valleys Regional Park, to maximise use of the natural environment and heritage.
- creating vibrant and attractive town centres.
- making the Valleys a recognised tourist destination.

In response to these findings, the Taskforce published its first plan of action, *Our Valleys, Our Future*, in July 2017. This set out three overarching priorities – ‘Good quality jobs and the skills to do them’, ‘Better public services’ and ‘My local community’ – and presented a vision for the Valleys by 2021, including:

- closing the employment gap between the Valleys and the rest of Wales by helping an additional 7,000 people into work.
- giving local people access to the right skills to gain work.
- supporting businesses to grow and thrive.
- ensuring that public services respond to people’s needs.
- supporting people to lead healthier lifestyles.
- providing joined-up, affordable public transport to help people get to work

“ .....  
**Our Valleys, Our Future is not simply a plan for the Valleys. It is a plan from the Valleys. This taskforce will not be another case of the government deciding what is right for the Valleys. If we are to succeed, local communities and local people must be at the heart of our work.**  
.....  
Alun Davies MS, Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language (July 2017)  
.....

# What were the Taskforce’s objectives?

Work programmes to achieve the Taskforce’s three priorities were set out in annual delivery plans published for 2017 and 2018. Its initial actions were focused on influencing and shaping mainstream policy and provision to better address the needs of Valleys communities. The emphasis was on developing effective links between different policy areas, making better use of existing resources and funds.

As the programme gathered momentum, the Taskforce adopted a greater delivery remit by funding specific interventions across the Valleys.

To find these initiatives, such as the Empty Homes Scheme led by Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council, extensive engagement took place between Lee Waters MS, other Members of the Senedd and leaders of the local authorities.

The objective was to identify successful interventions that were already in place within the Valleys, and that could be replicated or scaled up to benefit the wider Valleys area.

The Taskforce concentrated on projects and activities through which it could make the greatest difference over its duration.

As such, some initial plans, such as community hubs, were drawn to an early close.

The shift in focus was reinforced by the introduction of seven priority themes, underpinning the Taskforce’s three overarching priorities.

 <b>Priority 1</b> Good quality jobs and the skills to do them	 <b>Priority 2</b> Better public services	 <b>Priority 3</b> My local community
 Strategic Hubs	 Housing	 Valleys Regional Park (VRP)
 The Foundational Economy	 The Innovation Fund	
 Entrepreneurship and Business Support	 Transport	

## What were the Taskforce's objectives?

“

While the Taskforce will continue to work to deliver all the actions included in Our Valleys, Our Future: Delivery Plan, our efforts will focus in particular on seven priority areas.

I am keen that the solutions we support to regenerate our Valleys communities draw on good practice from within our communities.

Lee Waters MS, Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport  
(July 2019)



## How did the Taskforce operate?

**The Taskforce’s governance and delivery arrangements included a ministerial taskforce to oversee the programme, seven working groups to correspond with each of the priority themes, a programme board with responsibility for delivery, and a small Welsh Government team to drive and monitor implementation.**

Building upon its initial outreach work, the Taskforce continued to engage with Valleys communities to shape its priorities, and with stakeholder organisations to inform and co-develop policy. From the outset, it worked in partnership with stakeholders from across the region to identify the areas where intervention from the Taskforce could have the greatest impact.

The Taskforce listened and responded to the views of stakeholders, using the evidence to influence existing and emerging Welsh Government policy. While genuine partnership work can be time-intensive and take longer to reach a consensus, this was seen as a necessity to achieve a truly regional approach.

The Taskforce and its key partners co-hosted a number of well-attended engagement events. These focused on specific policy proposals, such as strategic hubs, the Valleys Regional Park, business surgeries and transport.

A successful social media and branding campaign was developed, focusing on community engagement and pride in the Valleys as a place to live and work.

New social media channels and a dedicated website were established, developing ‘The Valleys, Heart and Soul of Wales’ as a brand and engaging with all primary schools through the Sing Loud, Sing Proud project.



A communications report has also been published along with a short film on the progress of the Taskforce.

The coronavirus COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact upon planned engagement activities during 2020. Face-to-face networking events and business surgeries had to be postponed because of the government restrictions that had been imposed.

# What has the Taskforce achieved?

## Strategic Hubs

The Taskforce designated seven strategic hub areas: Ebbw Vale, Merthyr Tydfil, Pontypridd/Taffs Well, Cwmbran, Northern Bridgend, Neath, and Caerphilly/Ystrad Mynach. These were intended to serve as a focus for scaling up and spreading good quality projects and initiatives designed in the Valleys.

These areas benefited from focused public investment – which, in turn, attracted private sector capital investment, creating jobs and opportunities for people living in and around the south Wales Valleys. In October 2018, the Taskforce was provided with £25m over two financial years to support the development of the strategic hubs.

The Taskforce worked to maximise the benefits to the Valleys from infrastructure projects, such as those relating to housing, transport, the South Wales Metro and improvements to the A465 Heads of the Valleys road.

Local authorities in each of the strategic hub areas progressed a range of priority projects, all with different funding packages, delivery models and timescales.

Revenue funding of £600,000 was provided via the Taskforce to three local authorities (Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf) to develop strategic masterplans for future regeneration activity. These plans set out how new bus and rail investments would help provide integrated transport solutions, contributing to the regeneration of town centres and their wider communities. The Taskforce also contributed £650,000 towards the redevelopment of Maesteg Town Hall, helping to transform it into a multi-use facility for learning and training as well as culture and the arts.

This was part of a larger funding package, including European funding, Heritage Lottery Funding and contributions from the local authority and Awen Leisure Trust, which managed the property.

---

## Supporting 7,000 jobs

The ultimate vision was to close the employment gap between the Valleys and the rest of Wales by 2021, through helping an additional 7,000 people into work and creating thousands of new, fair, secure and sustainable jobs. The Taskforce also wanted to ensure people living in the Valleys would have access to the right skills to gain work, and that businesses would be fully supported to grow and thrive.

The activity undertaken through these employability programmes has resulted in more than 7,000 people in the Valleys being supported into work.

Better Jobs Closer to Home pilots were also rolled out, creating 132 new jobs that still exist today.

Valleys enterprises, supported through Business Wales, have helped to create more than 3,000 jobs in the area since April 2018. The service has also helped support the creation of more than 700 new enterprises during the same period.

Although Business Wales operates on a national level, it has been a core enabler of the wider Taskforce delivery programme.

## What has the Taskforce achieved?

This was in tune with the ethos that the Valleys Taskforce should not be about replicating what was already available, but should apply policies and programmes in an effective, cross-government way to generate better outcomes.

There is still work to be done. Between 2017 and the year ending September 2020, the employment rate in the Valleys Taskforce area has remained at 71%\*.

Across Wales, the employment rate has increased to 73%, from 72% in 2017.

Work is ongoing to understand the widening of the gap, and the impact of COVID-19 on employment rates in the Valleys compared with the rest of Wales – as it is known that Valleys communities have been hardest hit by the pandemic.

\* Source: Annual Population Survey

---

## The Foundational Economy

The Taskforce recognised the importance of supporting the foundational economy – organisations and businesses that provide basic services and products within their communities. These operate in sectors including health and care services, food, housing, energy, construction, tourism and high street retail.

The Taskforce provided a contribution of £2.4m to the Welsh Government's Foundational Economy Challenge Fund. This is an all-Wales initiative that has supported a series of experimental projects, trialling new approaches to strengthen the foundational economy. Funding was allocated to 27 Valleys projects through the fund. A Community of Practice was also established to bring likeminded projects together, sharing experiences and helping to inform future policy.

Organisations supported through the Challenge Fund included:

- Simply Do Ideas, which used its grant to test their digital platform that supports challenge-led innovation – allowing SMEs to respond quickly and securely to real-time client briefs. Working with Life Sciences Hub Wales, the project reported that more than £6m of PPE products were procured by the NHS from suppliers engaged on the platform.

This resulted in an approximate GVA (gross value added) to the Welsh economy of £34m, giving Wales the opportunity to become a world leader in challenge-led innovation.

- United Welsh Housing Association, which received a grant to work with partner housing associations in Blaenau Gwent. This enabled them to map their work plans and supply chains to explore how the power of their collective spend could better benefit local suppliers and communities. The project allowed them to engage with businesses to tackle future needs, and work to remove previously unidentified problems of 'boom and bust' demand. More significantly, the collaborative work practices enabled by the grant are now influencing wider policy, thanks to the insight that pooling budgets and work programmes can guarantee a steady pipeline of work for smaller local suppliers.

The Taskforce has also supported the foundational economy by working with Public Services Boards and the Centre for Local Economic Strategies (CLES) to explore how spending by public sector bodies could be adjusted to better benefit local economies. All Valleys-based Public Services Boards have signed up to this work.

# What has the Taskforce achieved?

## Entrepreneurship and business support

The focus of this priority was making more effective use of Welsh Government resources, including Business Wales, to support entrepreneurs and the business community across the Valleys.

This activity was seen by those involved with the Valleys Taskforce as one of the most successful examples of cross-government working within the programme.

It involved adapting existing provision to meet the needs of entrepreneurs and businesses more effectively – such as through delivering a Pitch It session for new start-ups and drop-in surgery sessions for local businesses.

A small number of pilot projects were also funded and delivered, such as the Peer-to-Peer Entrepreneurs Network and support for care businesses.

These were intended to target new audiences and better meet the needs of Valleys-based businesses.

Between April 2018 and October 2020, 4,082 Valleys-based entrepreneurs and businesses engaged with Business Wales.

### They reported:

- the creation of 722 new enterprises
- the generation of 3,310 additional jobs
- exports of £83.4m in overseas trade.

An independent evaluation of Business Wales in 2019 found that since the current service was introduced in 2015, new jobs created by supported businesses in the area had created gross value added (GVA) of almost £60m to the Valleys economy.



# What has the Taskforce achieved?

## Housing

The Taskforce’s main achievement under this priority was the roll-out of the Rhondda Cynon Taf Empty Homes Scheme across the Valleys, bringing vacant homes back into use. During the Talk Valleys Engagement programme, feedback from one focus group was: ‘There are empty buildings all over the place that aren’t being refurbished, while there are new houses being built all the time.’

This represents a good example of how the Taskforce identified a successful project that addressed the needs of local communities, and proved able to replicate it across the Valleys region. The scheme brought together key partners from local authorities, the Welsh Government, registered social landlords and the Development Bank of Wales to establish and implement roll-out.

The Taskforce contributed £10m to the scheme, enabling each applicant to apply for a grant of up to £20,000, and by September 2020 it had received more than 600 applications. Under phase two of the grant, applicants were able to apply for an additional £5,000 to support energy efficiency measures and the decarbonisation agenda.

The Empty Homes Scheme has resulted in direct benefits for those who accessed grant funding to purchase and refurbish empty homes, as well as for local suppliers who had the opportunity to obtain 2,000 hours of work per grant awarded.

Local communities have benefited from having fewer derelict properties, improving the appearance of the built environment.

The success of the scheme led to an additional allocation of £2m in funding.

One successful grant applicant in Carmarthenshire says:

“ .....  
**I was awarded £10,000 from the Empty Homes Scheme, which was a huge help – I was able to get a new kitchen, and plaster the outside of my house, preventing damp. Without the grant I would never have been able to do this.**  
.....



# What has the Taskforce achieved?

## The Innovation Fund

The main achievement of the Innovation Fund was to establish a new alumni scheme. Initially working with 10 secondary schools across the Valleys, this initiative will develop a network of alumni volunteers to serve as relatable role models for current pupils – and by helping their former schools, these alumni can contribute to their communities and share valuable experiences.

Careers Wales was appointed to deliver the project, and was allocated almost £70,000 to recruit at least 20 alumni for each of the schools involved. Planning commenced during 2019, and, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the focus shifted towards digital engagement with pupils, rather than face-to-face.

To support the initiative, the charity Future First – which has more than 10 years' experience of delivering alumni schemes – has developed a toolkit of guidance and resources that all secondary schools will be able to access. An important element of the project will be to explore how the scheme can be sustained beyond the lifespan of the Valleys Taskforce and rolled out across Wales.

Another initiative supported by the Innovation Fund is the Crucible project in Merthyr Tydfil, which aims to draw in half a million visitors a year and create hundreds of new jobs. The Taskforce has allocated £1.28m of funding towards activity, including the production of an archival study that will help create the blueprint for this landmark project in the north of the Valleys.

---

## Transport

This priority aimed to identify and drive forward innovative transport solutions that addressed community needs. They included developing active travel options, integrating public transport collaborating with Transport for Wales, and maximising the economic benefits of investments to improve the A465 Heads of the Valleys road. While this theme was well informed by community views, delivery of these objectives was impeded by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Valleys to Work pilot project was launched, providing two community minibuses so that people from the Upper Rhondda Fach could travel to work in areas outside their immediate locality, including Treforest and Llantrisant.

Take-up of the service was good. The first service was fully utilised during its initial month of operation, as it allowed people to travel to and from work at a time when public transport was unavailable.

# What has the Taskforce achieved?

## Valleys Regional Park

The idea behind the Valleys Regional Park was to unlock and maximise the potential of the natural and cultural heritage of the Valleys, generating social, economic and environmental benefits.

A delivery team was put in place, hosted by Bridgend County Borough Council, to establish the Regional Park. Its initial tasks included developing a network of Discovery Gateway sites, starting the Guardians scheme, and instigating pilot schemes – including one to introduce co-working spaces. Most importantly, it took steps to secure future funding for the Valleys Regional Park, so that it could be sustained over a long-term period.

The Valleys Taskforce provided £7m in funding to enhance capital infrastructure across the 12 Discovery Gateway sites.

The Valleys Regional Park team has gone on to secure European Social Fund (ESF) and Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding to support its future work.

A key consideration in the next phase of work will be the development of a permanent operating model, ensuring the concept is sustained.

A Valleys Regional Park partnership has been established, involving collaboration across 13 local authorities, and an executive group, including members of both the Cardiff Capital Region and Swansea Bay City Deal. An independent evaluation is being undertaken on the work of the Regional Park to assess the impact it has made so far.



# Facts and figures

## Our Valleys, Our Investment

A summary of the Taskforce's contribution since 2016



The Welsh Government invested **£12m** into the Empty Homes Grant. **Over 600 applications** have been received for the Empty Homes Grant.



Over **600 people** from across the valleys attended Taskforce events focussed on local community issues, transport, business support and landscape and environment.

**£100k** invested into expanding the Big Bocs Bwyd pilot into the valleys. Five schools will have access to Big Bocs Bwyd containers which will provide families with food and develop food literacy.

**£7m** invested to develop 12 Discovery Gateways across the Valleys.



Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly and Pontypridd each provided with **£200k** to develop ambitious integrated transport hubs.

**£250k** invested in Transport for Wales led integrated responsive travel scheme in Blaenau Gwent.

**£39k** invested in a peer-to-peer network bringing together 10 Valleys based business founders to offer mutual support and boost resilience.



**£2.4m** provided to support **27 experimental projects** aimed at strengthening the foundational economy.

**£650k** invested into the re-development of Maesteg Town Hall.



**9 local authorities** applied for up to **£3m** of funding to support smaller town centres with COVID recovery. Four remote working spaces created to support the Welsh Government's ambition to enable 30% of people in Wales to work closer to home.

**£170k** was invested to develop remote working hubs at Llyn Llech Owain and Parc Bryn Bach.

The Valleys Taskforce has helped more than **7000 people** get into employment.



**£75k** invested in the development of a pilot Alumni scheme for 10 secondary schools in the Taskforce area. **230 alumni** working with Careers Wales to develop networks with their former schools – offering support and guidance. Secondary schools across Wales are able to access a toolkit, developed by Future First, to support them to develop their own alumni scheme and help young people get the best start to their future careers.

Valleys based business Dog Furiendly secured a **£75k** investment from a syndicate of South Wales-based angel investors and Angels Invest Wales following a Dragons' Den style pitch event hosted by the Valleys Taskforce in partnership with Be The Spark.

**£1.28m** invested in development of a world renowned culture and heritage project at Cyfarthfa Castle.

## Case Studies



### The Foundational Economy Challenge Fund

**This fund has supported a wide range of innovative projects. For example, Elite Paper Solutions showed how social enterprises could play an increasing role within the foundational economy, and how the fund could help to upskill disadvantaged individuals, developing a more diverse workforce.**

Elite Paper Solutions is a social enterprise based in Merthyr Tydfil, which helps individuals furthest from the labour market to gain employability experiences and skills. It received a Foundational Economy Challenge Fund grant, enabling it to deliver larger-scale contracts in its area of work around document management storage and data shredding.

The grant was invested in capital and revenue items, including the engagement of an employment advisor to help more people benefit from the new opportunities that became available.

The enterprise increased its revenue by £90,000 through new contracts, leading to the recruitment of nine new staff members. Elite was also able to provide greater training and work experience opportunities for disabled people, pupils with additional learning needs and long-term unemployed people.

Another example, led by Rhondda Housing Association with partners including Welcome to Our Woods and the Treorchy Chamber of Trade, helped revitalise local high streets in Treorchy, Treherbert and Tonypany.

A development officer was appointed to support the work during what proved to be a very difficult time for high-street retailers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The project involved research with staff and contractors, followed by the implementation of new procurement policies and practices.

A key lesson from the project was that the term 'foundational economy' did not resonate with individuals or businesses: phrases such as 'working with us' and 'supporting local businesses' were better understood.

## Case Studies

### Peer-to-Peer Support Network

**Business Wales delivered a peer-to-peer support network programme, including a series of monthly one-day network meetings, to 10 business leaders based within the Valleys. The meetings included guest speakers, action learning sessions and peer-to-peer clinics.**

An independent evaluation found that participants rated the sessions positively. The network helped provide them with fresh perspectives, built their confidence as leaders and made them more resilient in the face of business challenges.

The network was forced to meet virtually, due to the COVID-19 pandemic – something that hindered the delivery of interactive presentations and spontaneous discussions between participants.

The evaluation concluded that the network had effectively helped to develop leadership capacity across the Taskforce area.

Positive effects on the businesses included the introduction of more professional structures and practices, tackling long-standing problems, improving approaches to marketing and customer relations, and putting in place arrangements to facilitate growth.

### The Access Programme

**A £2.2m Welsh Government employability scheme has been delivered across the Taskforce region since October 2017, helping people to improve their employability skills and to secure work. By August 2020, the Access Programme had supported 2,969 unemployed adults.**

The support, delivered in conjunction with Career Wales, has included:

- a vocational training grant of up to £1,500 to help individuals update their skills.
- support to remove barriers to vocational training.
- a contribution towards wages and help with training costs for recruiting employers.

An independent report, Evaluation of the Access Programme: 2017 to 2019, found that the programme had been delivered successfully, and that its multi-agency approach worked effectively.

A quarter of participants were found to have secured good employment outcomes, and the availability of vocational training grants played an important role in helping participants find work.

## Case Studies

### The Pitch It initiative

**Be the Spark, Business Wales, the Development Bank for Wales, and Angels Invest Wales collaborated to arrange a Pitch It event for the Valleys area, drawing upon the successful delivery of a similar event in Cardiff.**

The initiative provided an opportunity for businesses to pitch for loan funding from angel investors and the Development Bank.

A call to businesses in need of investment resulted in 80 expressions of interest. After shortlisting, 15 businesses were invited to a semi-final stage, with five progressing to the final.

Two businesses secured loan funding, while others took up the offer of mentoring support.

Businesses that did not secure investment received feedback from entrepreneurs and business investors.

DogFuriendly was one of the successful businesses, securing a £75,000 investment to expand its online travel platform which helps owners find dog-friendly places to visit across the UK.

Support from a committed board of investors has proved a lifeline for the business during the COVID-19 pandemic, helping it to increase its community of users and work strategically with a greater range of partners.



## Case Studies

### Better Jobs Closer to Home Pilots

The Taskforce launched four commercial pilots in response to the TUC Wales Better Jobs Closer to Home campaign. These used procurement legislation to help existing and new factories provide employment and training opportunities for disadvantaged people in the most deprived areas of Wales.

The four pilots, which resulted in the creation of 132 jobs, involved:

- creating new jobs in Ebbw Vale, in the garment manufacturing sector. This pilot appointed a social enterprise partner to operate a manufacturing unit.
- providing full-time employment for existing part-time staff at EBO Signs in Ebbw Vale – an existing social enterprise that employs disadvantaged people.
- establishing a paint re-engineering plant in Rhondda Cynon Taf. This created new jobs and reduced embodied carbon in the construction supply chain in Wales.
- increasing waste paper demand for Elite Paper Solutions in Pentre-Bach, Merthyr Tydfil. This created opportunities for people to gain vital work experience.



## Case Studies

### Big Bocs Bwyd

Five schools across the Valleys area have been given access to a Big Bocs Bwyd – a converted shipping container where they can learn about food and grow their own produce. The initiative was funded via £100,000 from the Taskforce in partnership with the Valleys Regional Park, and was trialled in two schools in Barry before being extended across the Valleys.

Each container offers secure storage, a shop facility, raised beds for growing plants and a small group meeting space. Schools have been supported to maintain the facility, and are able to sell any surplus goods on a ‘pay as you feel’ basis.

Pupils involved with the scheme benefit from improved knowledge about growing and preparing food, and develop enterprise skills through selling the products they have grown. Local families are able to access free or cheap healthy food.



The schools to benefit from the Big Bocs Bwyd containers are:

- Cyfarthfa Park Primary School in Merthyr
- St Margaret’s Catholic Primary School in Aberdare
- Cwmfelin Primary School and Garth Primary School in Maesteg
- Ammanford Nursery School, Ysgol Bro Banw and Ysgol Gymraeg Rhydaman in Ammanford.



Lee Waters MS, Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport, says:

**The benefits of the innovative Big Bocs Bwyd Project are clear to see. Developing greater food literacy among children is absolutely key to building confidence around how to process and cook different foods, and the learning resources on offer will help them to understand and appreciate the connections between food, nature and the economy. The project is also important in offering good produce to local families for free or at affordable prices, which will benefit their people’s health and wellbeing.**

## Case Studies

### Collaboration with the care sector

**Through the Valleys Taskforce, the Welsh Government Health and Social Services Department and Business Wales collaborated to deliver a pilot project for social care providers based in the Valleys.**

This aimed to support and improve engagement with care homes and domiciliary care providers across three local authority areas (Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil).

The pilot, which also involved local authority social care commissioning teams, the NHS and Care Inspectorate Wales, began with engagement events to recruit care sector businesses.

There were follow-up diagnostic sessions involving these businesses and Business Wales advisors, and then a series of workshops on topics that had been identified as areas of concern, such as finance, budgets, tendering and human resource management.

Following the successful delivery of the pilot project, it was extended to two other authority areas: Neath Port Talbot and Cardiff.

It has led to greater appreciation within Business Wales of the issues facing the social care sector, and helped further its understanding of how to successfully engage with social care businesses.

### The Integrated Responsive Transport (IRT) pilot project

**This collaboration between Transport for Wales and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council will introduce a more flexible bus service across two routes within the county.**

The project is intended to address concerns about public transport that had been raised by community members during the Taskforce's engagement exercise. This will allow passengers to request a service at virtual bus stops, allowing for pick-up or drop-off at places other than dedicated bus stops.

Transport for Wales will fund the initiative from its existing funds, and has recently awarded a contract for delivery of the service.

## Case Studies

### Community Hubs

The Taskforce explored how to bring together a range of public services under one roof in community hubs. It worked with local authorities, the NHS and third sector organisations to identify where existing hub services had gaps in their provision.

Opportunities for supporting the community hub approach were mapped across Welsh Government departments.

A series of networking events were held, enabling public sector and third sector partners in the Valleys to share good practice and to develop guidance for those wishing to develop new hubs.

One such community hub was established in Ferndale, Rhondda Cynon Taf.

The concept is also being taken up by Transport for Wales and the Valleys Regional Park, to provide places where members of the local community can meet, access services or organise community events.



# Case Studies



## Discovery Gateways

As part of the Valleys Regional Park, 12 country parks and heritage sites have been identified as Discovery Gateways. These have been provided with funding to maximise the potential of the area’s natural and cultural assets.

Improvements to the sites have included play areas and visitor centres, as well as walking and cycling trails. Examples include a £612,000 investment at Parc Bryn Bach, Tredegar.

This has brought improvements to the bunkhouse and visitor centre, the development of a new wooden play area, and better active travel routes to link the park with local communities.

The sites are expected to work together, encouraging users of each Discovery Gateway to visit others.

Mark Drakeford MS,  
First Minister of Wales, says:

“ .....  
**As well as becoming destinations in their own right, Discovery Gateways have a great opportunity to tell the stories of the Valleys and encourage local people and visitors to explore the surrounding areas – including local towns and villages and the wider landscape.**  
.....

Many local people reported that being able to access local green spaces was important to their mental health and resilience during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The investment has also been used to develop a remote working hub with undercover outdoor meeting facilities, helping people benefit from the natural environment during the working day.



## Case Studies

### Valleys Regional Park Guardians scheme

This scheme, delivered by a team of seven Guardians employed by Groundwork, aims to connect people with their local landscapes. The Guardians work with children, families, elderly people and other groups to get them involved in environmental volunteering, conservation work, wellbeing walks, bushcraft activities and the creation of community gardens.



A range of partner organisations refer people to the scheme, including schools, GP clusters, housing associations, Jobcentre Plus, family centres, local councils for volunteer services and hospitals.

Participants benefit from improved mental and physical health, greater confidence, increased pride in their local area and the chance to learn new skills and qualifications. Local communities benefit from the conservation and reparation work carried out by local teams.

One participant became a volunteer after being furloughed from her job during the COVID-19 pandemic. She became involved with a local eco-project, and gained experience of growing vegetables and fruit, rearing chickens, making bird boxes and creating raised bed areas for bee-friendly plants and flowers.

“ .....  
She says:  
**I’ve come to really enjoy my time as part of the eco-group, meeting people and making new friends, getting out in the fresh air and gaining new experiences. I have learned many new skills – I can now confidently use a drill, hand saw and hammer. I love to see the community making full use of its new eco-garden, which I’ve helped create’.**  
.....

# Case Studies



## Transforming Towns

The Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) programme is a Welsh Government fund that provides investment to support strategic Welsh towns.

The Taskforce worked closely with local authorities and Welsh Government regeneration colleagues to develop further projects that could be funded across smaller Valleys town centres, complementing TRI investments.

These additional projects across south-east Valleys authorities were funded via TRI underspend, with £2m allocated to the developments.

The Taskforce provided £700,000 across the small town centre projects identified in Carmarthenshire, Neath Port Talbot and Swansea.

The Taskforce was able to reallocate funding originally set aside to extend the TRI programme. It supplemented this with funds that had been allocated to a western Valleys transport pilot that had been unable to go ahead because of the impact of COVID-19.

As a result, £3m was allocated to Valleys town centres bearing the greatest economic risk from the pandemic.

This is in direct response to a recent study by the Centre for Towns, which identified the places across the UK at greatest risk of economic threat from COVID-19.

Of the 20 towns cited as suffering the worst effects of absolute deprivation, 10 were in Wales and seven within the Valleys Taskforce area.

Examples of projects supported by this funding include:

- grant support for businesses across the region to undertake enhancements to their premises, such as in Clydach and Pontarddulais in the Swansea local authority.
- provision of outdoor seating and meeting facilities at Nantymoel, Bridgend.
- purchase of heavy-duty gazebos to host outdoor events and festivals, such as across Neath Port Talbot.
- development of accessible natural environment spaces, such as at Ogmere Vale Washery, Bridgend.
- digital infrastructure developments in town centres, such as free access to town centre wifi in Blaenau Gwent.

## Case Studies

### Remote working hub pilot projects

The Taskforce has provided £344,494 to support the development of four remote working hub pilot projects across the Valleys region.



Two of these will be based in Rhondda Cynon Taf and two in Caerphilly. They will be located at:

- Rhondda Housing Association, Tonypany
- Llwynypia Courthouse, Tonypany
- The Winding House, New Tredegar
- Ty Penallta, Ystrad Mynach

A further £170,000 was provided to develop remote working hubs at two of the Discovery Gateways, Parc Bryn Bach and Llyn Llech Owain.

The focus of these hubs is on the benefits of incorporating nature into daily routines and wellbeing.

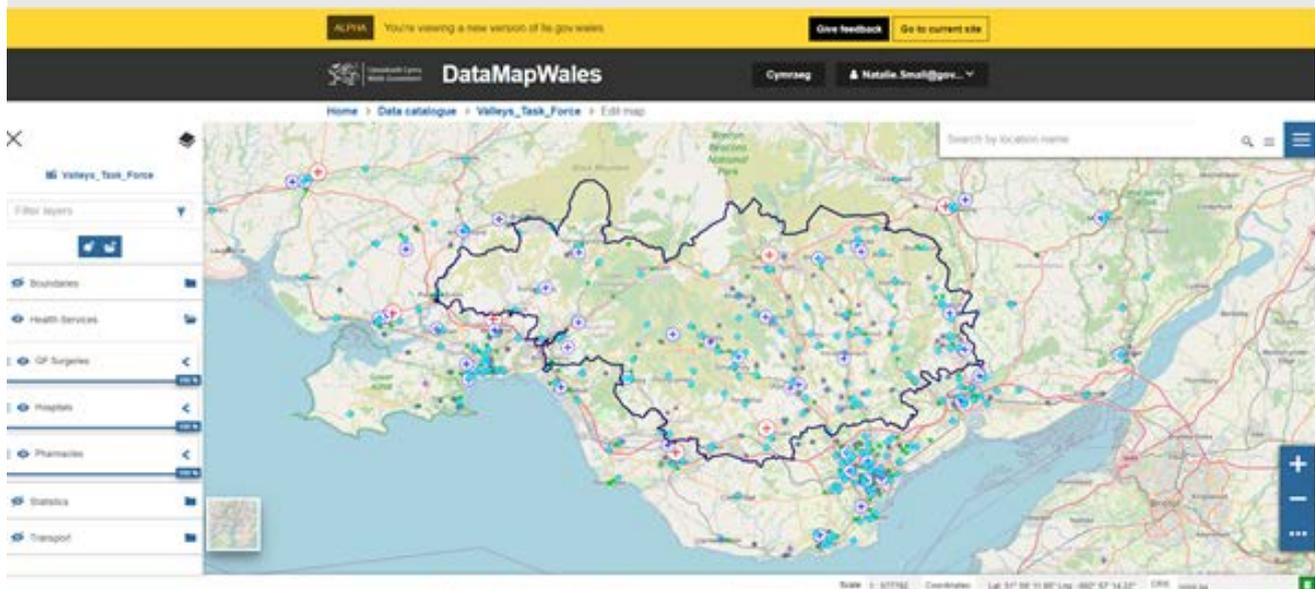
These facilities will be developed into spaces that can accommodate the needs of professionals and small-business owners. In most cases, access to private meeting rooms and café facilities will be available.

The outcomes of this pilot will help inform the approach to the Welsh Government's long-term ambition to see around 30% of Welsh workers working from or near home.

## Case Studies

### Data Map Wales

The Taskforce collaborated successfully with other Welsh Government departments on the development of a digital map profile for the Valleys, using the data mapping tool Lle. It brought together disparate information from across the Valleys area on a variety of themes, helping the Taskforce visualise the differing needs of local communities on a single data-driven map.



The information mapped by the tool included local authority areas, schools, medical practices, transport routes, enterprise zones and regionally important companies.

It also incorporated a wide range of statistics such as unemployment rates, school attainment levels and community safety. This data has helped the Taskforce understand where interventions were needed, where they would have the most impact, and how to identify and engage the right stakeholders.

The map helped to build momentum for the development of Lle into a more comprehensive geo-portal, named Data Map Wales (DMW).

This aims to provide a shared platform that will benefit a wider range of public bodies, helping them to publish, maintain and provide better public access to the data they keep. Data Map Wales has the potential to strengthen the services provided by the public sector to communities all across Wales.

# What lessons have been learned?

**The main lessons learned by the Valleys Taskforce from its own experiences will provide valuable help in informing future approaches:**

- It is important to have strong political leadership driving the programme forward – internally within the Welsh Government, externally from stakeholder organisations, and more broadly from communities and people within the Valleys.
- Having the right people on the Taskforce is key, and it is vital to have the right balance between political members and individuals from a wide range of sectors. Members need to have the right expertise, and to be clear about the contribution they can make.
- Initial engagement with (and commitment from) senior representatives across stakeholder organisations is critical. This needs to be supported by meaningful collaboration with officers from these stakeholder organisations, building on networks and relationships that already exist.
- Successful public engagement must utilise existing networks effectively, and draw upon local authority representation at public meetings. It needs to be coordinated via a central unit to avoid duplicating effort.
- Any cross-government programme must allocate time for engagement with Welsh Government staff to raise its profile and improve understanding of its objectives. This internal audience is as important as the external one in ensuring commitment to common outcomes.
- Communicating the achievements of a cross-government programme can be challenging. Distributing regular newsletters to stakeholders is an effective way of keeping people informed of the progress being made.
- An ambitious programme delivery plan needs to be appropriately financially resourced. This relies on engaging finance leads at an early stage of development. A pooled budget for future cross-government delivery would be worth exploring.

# Independent feedback

**Members of the Valleys Taskforce thought it important that any lessons gleaned from its experience should be captured and used to inform future approaches. As such, an independent review led by OB3 Research was commissioned by the Welsh Government. An online survey of stakeholders was also administered directly by the Welsh Government.**

The review by OB3 concluded that there was a strong case for establishing a mechanism to address the long-term socioeconomic issues facing the Valleys, and that the Taskforce had the potential to deliver a different, tailored approach to improve the prosperity of these communities.

Having a region-wide remit helped to provide a strong advocacy voice for Valleys communities, in keeping with an increasingly location-based and regional approach to policy development and programme delivery across Wales.

The review also found that the Valleys Taskforce priorities and delivery plan were well informed by initial community engagement activities and feedback.

Stakeholders thought the Taskforce had made good progress in bringing representatives from different organisations and policy strands together, resulting in effective collaboration and co-production efforts.

Many of these collaborations were found to involve cross-governmental working between different Welsh Government departments. Multiple examples were identified where Taskforce-led discussions had been able to influence existing mainstream policies, approaches and funding decisions.

**In terms of the way of working, the review found that stakeholders thought:**

- governance arrangements had been appropriate. The main strengths were identified as commitment from strategic players, effective leadership from the chair and a transparent way of working. The programme could have benefited from a simpler structure and greater formal community input to the ministerial taskforce.
- the programme board had functioned effectively, and had undertaken an effective monitoring role.
- the working sub-groups that had functioned most effectively were those that were well attended by engaged members, and driven by committed chairs.
- the lack of substantial capital and revenue funding had hampered the Taskforce's efforts, and the Welsh Government's operational team could have been better resourced.
- the Taskforce had engaged effectively with key stakeholder organisations from across a wide range of sectors and geographical areas, and strengthened connections between them.
- two sectors, health and education, and some existing regional structures (notably City Deals) had been less engaged with the Valleys Taskforce.

# Independent feedback

## **In terms of achievements, the review found that stakeholders thought:**

- it was difficult to come to a firm view about the progress made by the Taskforce, partly because it did not have specific indicators in place to assess performance.
- progress had been hampered by the impact of COVID-19 during 2020. This particularly affected Taskforce projects or ideas that were in their infancy or under development at the outset of the pandemic.
- the Taskforce had brought organisations together effectively, resulting in increased collaboration and co-production. This included cross-governmental working between different Welsh Government departments.
- the Taskforce had acted effectively as a champion and advocate for the Valleys. Several examples were cited where Taskforce-led discussions had influenced existing mainstream policies, approaches and funding decisions.
- initiatives supported by the Taskforce had predominantly been small-scale and low impact, reflecting the limited funding and capacity available.
- the Empty Homes Grant Scheme and the Valleys Regional Park were two of the Taskforce's most noteworthy and successful projects being associated with the Valleys Taskforce offered existing initiatives and community groups increased traction and status. This in turn led to increased interest and support from other organisations.
- the Taskforce had a fairly limited direct impact upon the Valleys communities. Positive impacts were thought to be mostly associated with initiatives such as the Empty Homes Scheme, Foundational Economy Challenge Fund projects and the Valleys Regional Park.

## **The Welsh Government's online survey of 37 stakeholders who had been involved with the Valleys Taskforce\* found that:**

- 46% thought the Taskforce had targeted the right things, while 22% thought it had not.
- 76% thought the work of the Taskforce had changed over the course of their involvement, while 24% thought it had not.
- 60% thought the Taskforce had led to better communication with others in their priority area, while 5% thought it had not done so.
- 65% thought the Taskforce had led to increased opportunities for partnership working, while 8% thought it had not.
- 65% thought the Taskforce had sped up the things they had been involved with, while 8% did not think this had been the case.
- 49% thought the projects they had been involved with would not have gone ahead without the Taskforce, while 24% thought they would still have gone ahead.
- 42% thought the Taskforce had made a difference to the Valleys communities, while 14% thought it had made no difference.

**\* A proportion of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with these statements.**

# Reflections

**Very few would argue against the need for additional intervention and support to address the issues facing the Valleys.**



The Taskforce had this objective at its heart. It set out to place the needs of Valleys communities at the forefront of policy development, using a new, cross-governmental approach. Individuals were committed to making the Taskforce work, and ensuring it did not encounter the same issues faced by previous short-term delivery programmes.

People have mixed views about the success of the Valleys Taskforce. Many members of the public were simply unaware of its existence. This is perhaps not surprising, as the Taskforce focused much of its resources and effort on changing ways of working – something that should lead to real and sustainable changes in the future. The progress made during the final year, when the delivery of funded projects should have been at its highest, was severely hampered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Valleys Taskforce has had an important role to play in piloting new approaches and ideas.

Not all of these were expected to succeed. Several potential pilot projects could not be turned into deliverables. Others, such as the Empty Homes Grant Scheme and the Valleys Regional Park, enjoyed greater success: they were of sufficient scale to make a difference to communities, and were highly regarded by stakeholders.

They will continue to exist independently of the Valleys Taskforce, providing further evidence of their value.

The Taskforce has sought to influence and gain leverage over policies and interventions that were already in place, accelerating and amplifying improvements for the Valleys. It has served as an important advocacy body, providing the Valleys with a sharper focus on mainstream policy and service delivery.

# Reflections

It has helped with relationship development, encouraging collaboration and co-production, and it has helped to reduce silo working across different policy areas – particularly within the Welsh Government.

There have been many strengths to the approach taken by the Valleys Taskforce. It was successful at eliciting community feedback about the priorities it should take – responses that were then used effectively to inform the programme's development. This approach distinguished the Taskforce from its predecessor programmes.

There are many changes and improvements that could be taken on board to inform any similar programme in the future.

## These include:

- ensuring the community is better represented within formal governance structures.
- making sure the operational team is appropriately resourced to meet the programme's objectives.
- simplifying the governance structures for overseeing delivery.
- making funding available from the outset that is sufficient for the programme's level of ambition.



**Nobody is denying that the south Wales Valleys continue to face many challenges, but the Taskforce has shown at least that the solutions to their problems lie within.**

Lee Waters MS, Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport  
(December 2020)

# The future

## The current Valleys Taskforce programme ends in March 2021.

Options for the future regeneration and longer-term sustainability of the south Wales Valleys are being actively discussed by Welsh Government ministers.

A provisional recommendation for future delivery options to be considered by the incoming administration, with regard to affordability and alignment, has been agreed.

On meeting to consider this, members of the Taskforce felt strongly that there must be a continued focus on regeneration of the Valleys, with a specific emphasis on the Northern (Heads of the Valleys) and Western Valleys areas.

The agreed recommendation is to retain a cross-government ministerial group to oversee the continuing regeneration of the Valleys for a transitional period, with the aim of greater responsibility being devolved to local delivery partners.

Whatever is put in place after March 2021, it is imperative that it builds on our commitment to the development of more economically resilient communities in the Valleys.

The Valleys Regional Park will continue after 2021, as it has secured European Social Fund (ESF) and Rural Development Programme (RDP) funding until 2023.

This will allow it to explore long-term governance and find the most appropriate operating model for a Regional Park entity – including consideration of whether the land should receive any special designation.

### Further reading

Talk Valleys Engagement Programme: Final Report (2017)  
<https://gov.wales/talk-Valleys-engagement-programme-final-report>

Evaluation of the Access Programme (2017-2019)  
<https://gov.wales/evaluation-access-programme-2017-2019>

Our Valleys, Our Future: Delivery Plans (2017, 2018, 2019-21)  
<https://gov.wales/our-valleys-our-future-delivery-plan>

Valleys Taskforce: Stakeholder Interviews (2021)  
<https://gov.wales/valleys-taskforce-stakeholder-interviews>

Valleys Taskforce Stakeholder Survey (2021)  
<https://gov.wales/valleys-taskforce-stakeholder-survey>