

Dadansoddi ar gyfer Polisi



Analysis for Policy



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

Social Research Number:  
19/2021.  
Publication Date:  
16 March 2021

# Valleys Taskforce: Stakeholders Interviews

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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## Valleys Taskforce: Stakeholder Interviews

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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## **Glossary**

<b>Acronym/Key word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
EnRAW	Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being
EU	European Union
HoV	Heads of the Valleys
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GVA	Gross Value Added
IRT	Integrated Responsive Transport
KPI	Key Performance Indicator
MS	Member of the Senedd
TRI	Targeted Regeneration Investment
VRP	Valleys Regional Park
VTF	Valleys Taskforce

# 1. Introduction

1.1 OB3 Research, in collaboration with Dateb, was commissioned by the Welsh Government to undertake qualitative interviews with key Valleys Taskforce (VTF) programme stakeholders.

1.2 The aims of the study were to:

- summarise the progress made by the VTF since it was established in 2016, specifically around the three priorities and seven workstreams
- identify how the VTF has worked and how effective this has been as a regional approach to policy development and delivery.

1.3 The ten objectives of the study were to:

- identify and set out the key drivers, including policy drivers, behind the VTF
- determine the success, or otherwise, of the VTF in achieving its aim and objectives
- gather evidence on whether, and in what way, the VTF has benefited Valleys communities
- identify how well the VTF programme has worked with, and added value to, other economic initiatives in the Valleys
- determine the extent to which various project activities in the VTF programme have been well integrated and are starting to deliver collective benefits
- review the effectiveness of VTF programme governance, management systems and delivery arrangements
- determine how well various stakeholders have worked together in the VTF
- identify examples of effective joint working between partner organisations
- gather evidence on how lessons from the VTF programme are informing and shaping future work

- identify areas of good practice from within the programme which have the potential to be applied to other parts of Wales.

1.4 This report sets out the findings of interviews with 32 stakeholders, conducted during November 2020.

1.5 This report is presented in seven chapters as follows:

- chapter one: this introduction to the report
- chapter two: outlines the study methodology
- chapter three: provides an overview of the VTF
- chapter four: presents the findings of the study in relation to what the VTF set out to achieve
- chapter five: sets out the findings of the fieldwork about how the VTF has worked
- chapter six: considers the VTF achievements and difference made to date
- chapter seven: presents our conclusions on the work of the VTF based on the study findings.

## **2. Methodology**

2.1 This chapter sets out the method deployed for undertaking the study, the profile of interviewed stakeholders and discusses some of the key methodological considerations.

### **Method**

2.2 The study, undertaken between September and December 2020, involved the following elements of work:

- an inception stage, which included a virtual inception meeting with Welsh Government officials and the preparation of a refined methodological approach and project plan
- desk-based research, which involved a light-tough analysis of relevant Welsh Government policy and strategic documents; as well as a detailed review of programme documentation including a theory of change logic model for the programme, delivery plans and annual reports, governance structures, press releases, Ministerial statements, minutes of meetings and papers submitted to the VTF
- preparing a qualitative discussion guide for interviewing stakeholders (set out at Annex A) and a supporting Privacy Notice for the study
- receiving a database of 62 stakeholders who had agreed to be approached for interview and selecting an initial sample of 30 individuals to contribute to the study. Individuals were selected at random, ensuring a cross-section in terms of role (Ministerial Taskforce member, Programme Board, other); nature of involvement (VTF priority themes) and type of organisation (public, private and third sector). In two cases, substitute stakeholders were selected in line with the sampling approach adopted

- interviewing a total of 32 stakeholders<sup>1</sup>, of whom five were current or previous Ministerial Taskforce members and three were Programme Board members
- synthesising the findings of the fieldwork and desk-review and drafting of this report.

### **Profile of stakeholders interviewed**

2.3 The profile of the stakeholders interviewed was as follows:

- five were Welsh Government officials
- ten were Local Authority officials
- six were from not for profit or third sector organisations
- four represented the private sector
- two were based in the education sector
- three were from other public sector organisations, including the health sector
- one was a current Member of the Senedd (MS)
- one was an independent individual.

2.4 Excluding the eight Ministerial Taskforce and Programme Board members, the remaining 24 stakeholders were recorded on the programme's database as having an interest in at least one of the seven strategic themes covered by the VTF, in order to ensure good coverage of its work programme.

### **Methodological considerations**

2.5 The following issues need to be considered in relation to the methodology adopted for this study:

- all interviews were undertaken virtually via Microsoft Teams in order to minimise face-to-face contact during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. This is not thought to have influenced the study findings in

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<sup>1</sup> The total number of contributors exceeded the target as some selected stakeholders invited a colleague to join the meeting.

any particular way: indeed, it proved an efficient approach to undertaking fieldwork over a relatively short period of time; and in some cases, allowed stakeholders to easily invite colleagues to join discussions

- the findings of the study draw upon stakeholders' perceptions of the achievements and effectiveness of the VTF. It was not expected that these views be considered and triangulated against other data, notably socio-economic data for the Valleys or citizens views about the work of the VTF.

### **3. Overview of the Valleys Taskforce**

- 3.1 This chapter sets out an overview of the VTF including its establishment, governance arrangements and implementation.

#### **Background**

- 3.2 The VTF programme was established in July 2016 by the then Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language, Alun Davies AM. Its establishment represented a new way of working on a cross-governmental basis to try to tackle the ‘unique set of deep-rooted challenges, largely caused by the decline of heavy industry and the end of coal-mining’<sup>2</sup> across the south Wales Valleys. It was also an effort to respond to the significant dissatisfaction expressed by the community about their insecurity and future prospects, and to improve the future prosperity of the Valleys.

#### **Evidence of need**

- 3.3 The vision and priorities of the Taskforce were informed by an initial programme of consultation with the community, including formal public meetings, focus group sessions and social media engagement. An initial programme of public engagement events<sup>3</sup> found that community members believed that there were very few job opportunities available locally and that zero-hours contracts, as well as temporary and agency work were prevalent across the area. They identified the need for local businesses to access further support and guidance.
- 3.4 In terms of achieving better public services, this initial research pointed to the need to join up services, address transport issues and overcome the lack of affordable housing, particularly since there were many empty houses in poor repair. In terms of their community, local people expressed positive views in that they had a sense of pride about living in the Valleys and that they felt it was a safe place to live. However, they wished to see better maintenance of the natural environment and the maximisation of the rich natural resource and cultural heritage at their disposal.

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<sup>2</sup> Welsh Government (2017) Our Valleys, our Future p.5

<sup>3</sup> Arad Research (2017) [Talk Valleys: Engagement Programme: final report](#)

3.5 The VTF also drew upon research and analysis, including statistical and economic data such as those gathered via local service boards' wellbeing assessments<sup>4</sup> to set out the baseline position for the programme's overarching priorities, and to measure the progress achieved over time. In our view, the research findings provide a strong rationale for intervention given that the Valleys area broadly underperforms across a range of economic indicators, fares worse than Wales in terms of deprivation indicators and experiences inequality across a range of health, well-being and education indicators.

3.1 The work of the VTF was also informed at a later stage by a citizen survey, undertaken between March and May 2019 with a sample of 609 individuals<sup>5</sup>, with the intention of building upon other data such as that available via the National Survey of Wales.

### **Strategic planning**

3.2 The VTF published its first plan of action *Our Valleys, Our Future*<sup>6</sup> in July 2017, setting out three overarching priorities for

- good quality jobs and the skills to do them
- better public services
- my local community.

3.3 It has published three delivery plans<sup>7</sup> – the first two covering 2017 and 2018, whilst the third has covered a three-year period between 2019 and 2021. Each delivery plan set out a number of detailed actions (e.g. 60 actions in the 2017 plan and 46 actions in the 2018 plan) which were expected to be delivered.

3.4 The VTF's first delivery plan, published in November 2017, set out how the three over-arching priorities were expected to be achieved and the timescales for doing so. In the accompanying written statement<sup>8</sup> the

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<sup>4</sup> Welsh Government (2017) [Our Valleys, Our Future Evidence Paper](#)

<sup>5</sup> [Valleys Taskforce Citizen Survey: summary](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Our Valleys Our Future: introduction](#)

<sup>7</sup> [Our Valleys, Our Future: delivery plan](#)

<sup>8</sup> [Written Statement - Our Valleys, Our Future: Delivery Plan](#)

Minister, Alun Davies, emphasises that the taskforce would be ‘a long-term piece of work’ as the issues facing the Valleys ‘are deep-rooted and generational’. The statement makes it clear that the taskforce ‘is not about fixing the South Wales Valleys’ but rather ‘to build on ... assets to bring about lasting social and economic prosperity for all our Valleys communities’. The statement notes that ‘the taskforce also has a role in shaping the work of the Welsh Government, particularly in changing and setting government policy in relation to the Valleys’.

3.5 The first delivery plan sets out an ambitious target of helping 7,000 unemployed or economically inactive people living in the Valleys into work by 2021 and Strategic Hubs were identified as an important mechanism to realise this target.

3.6 In July 2019, the Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport, Lee Waters MS (who took over the role of taskforce chair in 2018), announced that the VTF would focus upon seven priority themes<sup>9</sup> and these are confirmed within the current delivery plan for 2019 to 2021<sup>10</sup>. They are summarised at Figure 3.1:

**Figure 3.1: VTF priorities and themes**

<b>Priority 1</b> Good quality jobs and the skills to do them	1. Strategic Hubs 2. The Foundational Economy 3. Entrepreneurship and Business Support
<b>Priority 2</b> Better public services	4. Housing 5. The Innovation Fund 6. Transport
<b>Priority 3</b> My local community	7. Valleys Regional Park (VRP)

3.7 In addition, the geographical boundary of the Taskforce was extended to include the Gwendraeth and Amman Valleys in Carmarthenshire, as shown

<sup>9</sup> [Written Statement: Update on the Ministerial taskforce for the south Wales Valleys](#)

<sup>10</sup>Welsh Government (2019) [Our Valleys, Our Future: 2019 to 2021 delivery plan](#)

at Annex B, on the basis that this area demonstrated similar characteristics to the south Wales coalfield area covered by the VTF.

3.8 In its third and current delivery plan, the key actions for each of the seven priority themes are set out as being:

*Priority 1: Good quality jobs and the skills to do them*

- Strategic Hubs: to attract private sector investment, promote business start-ups, support economic regeneration, relocate public sector jobs into hubs and support the Heads of the Valleys (HoV) economic strategy.
- Foundational Economy: roll out of the Foundational Economy Challenge Fund and Better Jobs Closer to Home scheme
- Entrepreneurship and business support: joining up approaches and current provision, business start-up surgeries, extra support for the foundational economy e.g., Valleys Pitch-It event, peer to peer support; and support for unemployed and inactive people.

*Priority 2: Better public services*

- Housing: roll out of the Rhondda Cynon Taf Empty Homes Grant Scheme as well as engagement with Cardiff City Deal and the Development Bank for Wales.
- Innovation Fund: to develop an alumni programme for all secondary schools and improve engagement between schools and community partners.
- Transport – to facilitate collaborative working between partners to improve the quality, frequency and affordability of travel.

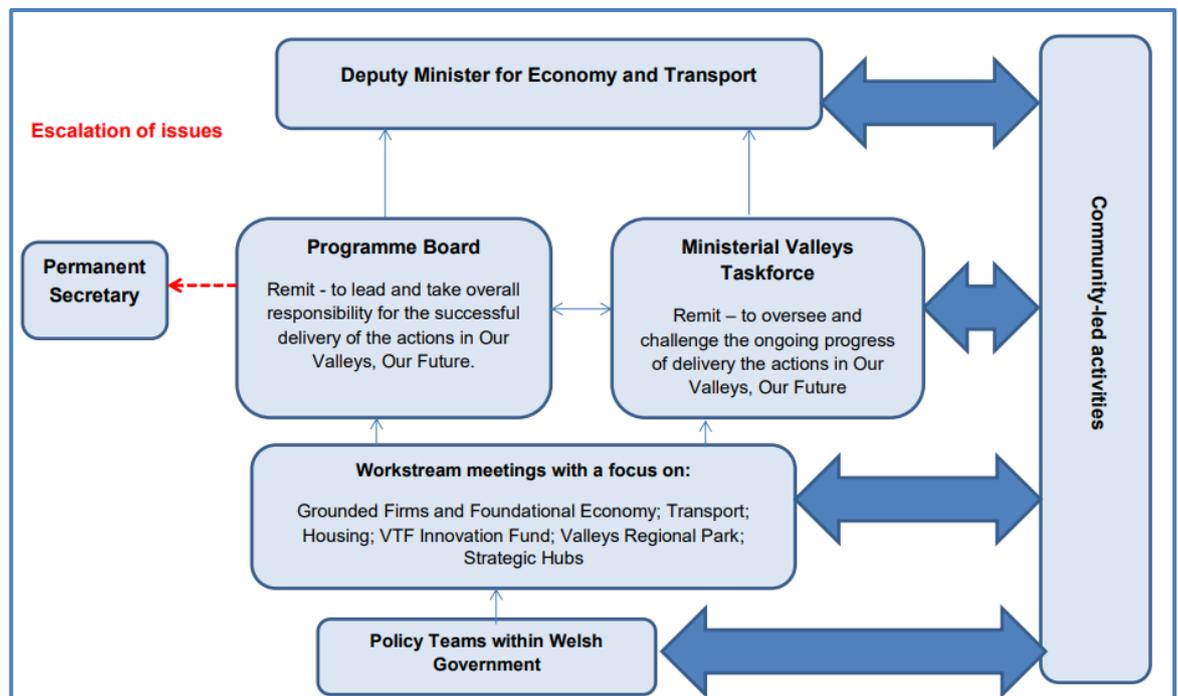
*Priority 3: My local community*

- Valleys Regional Park (VRP) – to establish this project which would deliver initiatives across the three workstreams of landscape, culture and identity; recreation and wellbeing; and communities and enterprise.

## Governance arrangements

- 3.9 The governance arrangements for the VTF have remained broadly consistent over the programme's duration, although membership has evolved over time.
- 3.10 A Ministerial Taskforce, currently chaired by the Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport and attended by eight members, oversees and challenges the VTF delivery. It is supported by a Programme Board, which takes responsibility for programme delivery. The Programme Board is attended by Welsh Government officials and chaired by the Welsh Government's Director for Climate Change, Energy and Planning. Workstream sub-groups support delivery of the VTF, with sub-groups in place for each of the seven priority themes. In addition, a small core Welsh Government VTF team drives and monitors programme implementation. The governance arrangements are summarised at Figure 3.2.

**Figure 3.2: VTF governance arrangements**



Source: Paper presented to the VTF, June 2019<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> [Paper 3: Valleys Taskforce priorities and ways of working](#)

## Implementation

3.11 Whilst it is not the intention of this chapter to offer a detailed overview of what the VTF has implemented to date, it is important to draw out some key issues raised by the Ministerial Taskforce, to set out the context for some of the points raised by stakeholders.

### *Original vision*

3.12 Initial papers submitted to the Ministerial Taskforce sets out clear terms of reference for the VTF, making it explicit that the VTF would work across the whole duration of the current Government given that a 'long-term approach is required'<sup>12</sup>.

3.13 The original purpose of the VTF was set out as being to:

- provide clear, realistic, evidence-based advice and recommendations to inform and steer the work of the Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys to help achieve the ambition and vision set out in Our Valleys, Our Future
- lead and take overall responsibility for the successful delivery of the key actions and activities set out in Our Valleys, Our Future.

3.14 Initial documentation to the Ministerial Taskforce also notes that the VTF would be expected to achieve the following vision by 2021:

- to 'have brought a share of the growth seen south of the M4 corridor into the valleys and created good-quality jobs, with fair terms and conditions for employees'
- 'will have enabled people living in the valleys to access the right skills training to gain work and will have supported businesses to grow and thrive across the South Wales Valleys'
- 'people living in South Wales Valleys communities will no longer feel disenfranchised and remote from the work of the Welsh Government or its priorities'

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<sup>12</sup> [Remit of Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys](#)

- ‘will have worked with the health service and with local government to improve access to local services, which respond to people’s needs. By 2021, the valleys will no longer be regarded as a place of deprivation but will be recognised as a tourist destination, attracting visitors from across the UK and beyond.’<sup>13</sup>

*A change in direction*

3.15 The appointment of a new Chair for the VTF at the start of 2019 provided an opportunity to review programme implementation. Several issues were discussed during the January 2019 Ministerial Taskforce meeting<sup>14</sup> which are worth noting below, not least because they were also raised during interviews with stakeholders. The issues included:

- concerns that the taskforce was focusing upon too many areas
- concern that additional funding would be required to realise particular targets
- a need for greater clarity surrounding how members could better support the delivery of key themes
- how best to maintain and build upon the success of initial engagement work
- how members could contribute towards engagement activity to ensure that the delivery agenda of the taskforce was more widely understood
- a need to focus upon the vision that VTF was not intended to be a delivery mechanism but rather a vehicle for developing a new strategy for the Valleys
- a need to strengthen relationships between VTF and local authorities and drawing upon examples of good practice across local authorities
- a need to adopt greater consistency across Strategic Hubs investments.

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<sup>13</sup> [Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys](#)

<sup>14</sup> [Taskforce for the Valleys meeting: 28 January 2019](#)

- 3.16 VTF minutes and papers from January 2019 onwards capture a shift in emphasis for the VTF, including the adoption of seven new priority themes, supported by individual workstream groups. In addition, whilst Strategic Hubs would remain a 'strategic planning tool' it was agreed that this would not be the 'sole focus of spending' for the VTF fund. By January 2020, the VTF had moved its focus to the concept of anchor towns. Minutes of the Ministerial Taskforce meeting from October 2019 note that the VTF is a 'different place to what it was 10 months ago' and that the role of the Taskforce had changed.
- 3.17 By mid-2019, revised terms of reference were adopted for the Ministerial Taskforce which set out the purpose of the VTF as being:
- 'to advise the Welsh Government on a new approach to investing in the future of our valleys. An approach which will engage and empower local communities, build on their assets and restore a sense of hope and aspiration'<sup>15</sup>.
- 3.18 It goes on to state that:
- 'The primary focus of the taskforce will be to engage and involve people living in the valleys, existing businesses, local government, third sector and civic organisations in developing a cohesive approach to promote the region for investment, to better co-ordinate existing investment, and to address issues such as transport, connectivity, housing and social deprivation'.

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<sup>15</sup> [Paper 3: Valleys Taskforce priorities and ways of working](#)

#### 4. Findings from fieldwork: What VTF set out to achieve

##### Key findings

Stakeholders thought that:

- there was a strong case for intervention given that the Valleys region has faced long-term socio-economic disadvantage
- the VTF was a well-intentioned effort which had the potential to adopt a different approach to improve the prosperity of Valleys communities, compared with previous delivery initiatives
- it had been appropriate for the VTF to be established with a region-wide Valleys remit as this would provide a strong advocacy voice for the Valleys, in keeping with an increasingly place based and regional approach to policy development and programme delivery across Wales
- the VTF's priorities and delivery plan had been well informed by initial community engagement activities and views
- the VTF had been established with very ambitious aims and objectives, but questioned whether these were achievable within the timescales set
- the aims of the VTF were two-fold: many stakeholders considered the aim of the VTF to establish a cross-governmental, spatially based approach which would coordinate existing policy and interventions to increase the impact of current resources in the Valleys. Others placed greater emphasis upon the VTF being a delivery vehicle which would fund specific interventions for the benefit of the Valleys communities
- there had been a shift in VTF's priorities and delivery plans over time, driven by political influences rather than informed by evidence about the effectiveness of interventions

- 4.1 This chapter presents the feedback from stakeholders about what VTF set out to achieve, including consideration of its aims, objectives, and priorities.
- 4.2 It is important to note that many stakeholders who had not been involved with VTF from the outset and/or who have only been involved with very specific VTF initiatives, felt unable to comment on its formation.

### **Key drivers to establishing VTF**

- 4.3 Stakeholders unanimously agreed that there was a need for intervention across the Valleys region, due to the sustained long-term socio-economic disadvantage it had endured following its post-industrial decline. Many stakeholders regarded the establishment of the VTF as being a well-intentioned objective to tackle very fundamental and deep-rooted issues faced by many Valleys communities. Some stakeholders recognised that the establishment of the VTF had also been politically driven with the outcome of the EU referendum across the Valleys pointing to significant disillusionment within communities. One such stakeholder observed that ‘people felt that they were not being listened to’. It was also noted that its establishment had been set out as a commitment within the Welsh Labour manifesto leading up to the 2016 elections.
- 4.4 Many welcomed an intervention being established with a region-wide - Valleys remit, as this recognised and validated the whole identity of the Valleys area. Stakeholders argued that the model potentially offered a ‘Valleys based solution’ which reflected the distinct culture, topography, and economic context within which the Valleys existed:
- ‘I interpret it as acknowledging that there is a discrete type of economy within the Valleys. There is something going on that is unique so needs its own unique approach.’
- 4.5 Stakeholders also thought that the specific focus on the Valleys region aligned with the increasingly place based and regional approach to policy development and programme delivery in neighbouring areas such as those covered by City Deals. It was argued that the establishment of the VTF meant that the Valleys had a ‘stronger lobbying’ voice meaning that it would not be left behind other regional identities:

‘[the VTF would] act as a counterbalance in policy terms – to balance opportunities and investment in the Valleys with the investment in cities’.

- 4.6 Several stakeholders were aware of, and had been involved with, previous interventions and policy approaches which had tried to improve the prosperity of Valleys communities. Whilst the success of these individual initiatives were thought to have varied, stakeholders observed that they had not collectively improved the economic prosperity of the region. One such stakeholder argued that ‘despite receiving recurring funding, [the Valleys] is still struggling with economic deprivation’. As a result, it was widely recognised that a different approach was needed, which did not merely serve to replicate previous programmes or projects:

‘there have been numerous attempts in the past. This was a more pragmatic, action-based outcome for development – and you can’t fault that. It is the right thing to do’

‘It’s the tenth incarnation of initiatives trying to tackle deprivation of the Valleys. It’s about trying to get existing pots of intervention money where needed.’

- 4.7 Stakeholders consistently adopted the view that the VTF intended to tackle a cross-section of issues, arguing that it was established to address more than achieving economic prosperity by focusing on other priorities such as public services, health and wellbeing, poverty, social inequality, and the regeneration of town centres.

- 4.8 Many stakeholders were aware that the VTF’s priorities and delivery plan had been informed by evidence gathered during the initial engagement exercise. Most stakeholders regarded the initial engagement work as having been genuine, extensive, and thorough, and considered it a strength of the approach adopted in comparison with previous initiatives:

‘the difference this time was that it should be all about what the residents wanted [to see] happening. We did a lot of community involvement early doors.’

- 4.9 Most stakeholders also believed that the feedback gathered during engagement events had directly informed the VTF’s three key headline

priorities around work, public services, and community. A few stakeholders recalled their involvement in these engagement events, and reflected upon the genuine attempt to listen to community issues:

‘I remember going to a meeting in one of the Valleys north of Bridgend. The biggest issue for the people there was public transport, the area was so impermeable and had unreliable transport to get from the top end of that Valley down. That was the one thing that would make the biggest difference to them.’

- 4.10 A small number of other stakeholders were more critical of the engagement work undertaken. They were concerned that as it had only been started once the Taskforce had been established, the community had been unable to contribute ideas about the structure of the delivery mechanism they wanted in place. A couple of stakeholders questioned whether the right terminology had been adopted for the ‘Taskforce’ itself, as the name was considered to have negative connotations:

‘When I heard about the Taskforce – I thought it was really patronising. You almost imagine a gang jumping out of a tank coming to sort us out’.

### **Understanding of aims and objectives**

- 4.11 Stakeholders understood the aim of the VTF programme to be two-fold. Many stakeholders, most notably those who had been highly involved with the VTF, emphasised the VTF’s overall aim to establish a cross-governmental, spatially based approach which would coordinate existing policy and interventions and increase the impact of current resources in the Valleys. The VTF was not considered by these stakeholders as a traditional delivery programme, but rather a mechanism which set out to influence and gain leverage over policies and interventions already in place, to further accelerate and amplify improvements. The objective was to work with existing schemes to ensure that they adequately addressed the needs of the Valleys. Amongst the comments expressed by these stakeholders, was an understanding that the VTF was about ‘tackling systemic barriers affecting the region’.

- 4.12 Other stakeholders, particularly those who had been less involved with the VTF at a programme level, placed greater emphasis upon the overall aim being about making a difference to Valleys communities by developing and delivering tangible initiatives. Within this remit, stakeholders believed that the VTF was intended to identify and plug gaps within existing interventions and help fund activities which were not funded via other sources. Whilst those most closely involved with the VTF stressed that the programme was never intended to be a delivery vehicle, not least because it was never allocated significant implementation funds, it nonetheless did secure its own funding over time which allowed it to deliver specific interventions.
- 4.13 Given that some stakeholders perceived the VTF to have been more of a delivery mechanism which funded specific interventions, they assessed the achievements of the programme based on this understanding. This is an important point to consider as it has bearing upon contributors' perceptions of the success or otherwise of the VTF. Many of these contributors were more critical of the VTF's impact as they expected the programme to have delivered a greater number of more tangible interventions and deliverables.
- 4.14 Indeed, some would have preferred the VTF to have been geared more towards delivery from the outset so that it could have achieved more for the Valleys communities during a short-term period rather than be primarily focused on 'programme bending'. A small number of stakeholders compared the VTF with a predecessor initiative, the Heads of the Valleys (HoV) programme, adding that the higher level of resources and funding attached to HoV meant it could deliver greater benefits for the community than the VTF approach could achieve.
- 4.15 Stakeholders emphasised the important role which was expected of the VTF to bring those stakeholder organisations which operated or funded interventions in the area together and establish collaborative working between them. Some also argued that the VTF had a key role to promote existing policies and initiatives across the Valleys by helping to disseminate information and facilitate collaboration between delivery providers and the Valleys community. One such stakeholder observed that the VTF aimed:

‘to bring together all Welsh Government initiatives and raise their profile across the Valleys’.

- 4.16 There was a consistent view that the VTF had established an ambitious set of aims and objectives. Some stakeholders suggested that the wide range of priorities had possibly been overly ambitious. Several of the stakeholders argued that they would have preferred the VTF to have either focused on a narrower range of policy areas and/or concentrated on delivering fewer, more substantive projects. One such stakeholder suggested that the VTF had ‘spread the jam too thinly’ and using the Strategic Hubs priority as an example, argued that investment across a smaller number of sites might have been more effective than selecting seven sites, as had been the case.
- 4.17 In terms of ambitions, stakeholders were mindful that the VTF had no specific KPIs in place other than its headline target of creating 7,000 quality jobs. It was perhaps unsurprising therefore that many stakeholders found it difficult to comment on the extent to which the VTF had achieved its ambitions, citing a lack of clarity as to whether the headline jobs target had been achieved or not. The ‘jobs created’ target was considered to be challenging, not least because of the difficulty associated in measuring and directly attributing outputs to the work of the VTF but also because of a perceived lack of baseline data in place at the outset to allow for the tracking of progress over time.
- 4.18 Many stakeholders recognised that the issues could never be fully addressed by the VTF within the timescales set but that it ought to generate some ‘turning [of] the tide’ in terms of economic and social prosperity. In this respect it was argued that the VTF needed a longer timeframe to achieve its aims and objectives.
- 4.19 Stakeholders readily acknowledged that the VTF’s priorities changed over time, and there was a strong suggestion that these changes were a result of political influences and preferences, rather than on evidence of whether particular approaches had been effective or not. Stakeholders acknowledged that VTF priorities and preferences had changed when Deputy Minister for Economy and Transport was appointed as the

Ministerial lead and Chair of the VTF. Some stakeholders thought that there had been an increased focus on economic priorities from that point forward. A couple of stakeholders expressed concern that some initiatives kick-started by the VTF but had been bought to a swift close without a thorough review of their achievements. On the other hand, a small number of stakeholders thought that the approach taken by the new Chair had been a strength, showing the VTF as capable of being adaptable and flexible, and responding to opportunities as they arose.

4.20 In terms of priority areas, one area of discussion raised by several stakeholders was whether the VTF should have concentrated its efforts and resources on specific geographical areas of need and opportunities within the Valleys region. The Heads of the Valleys (HoV) was identified as a particular area of need and it was noted that the VTF had possibly failed to maximise upon the opportunities arising from the new A465 road investment:

‘I remember one workshop on the A465 – we discussed everything other than the road. We have a major road development – now that should be a catalyst. There is no call to action on that’

‘When you look at the A465 there are no access points to industrial parks off it, no services, no brown tourism signs’

‘There has been so much investment in the road (HoV) but we haven’t nailed the benefit for the communities’.

4.21 It was observed that whilst the HoV had received initial focus by the VTF, there had been a shift over time to concentrate on other geographical areas of the Valleys. Stakeholders commented:

‘it’s changed a little bit. It’s moved away from that and is focussing on creating exciting jobs for the South of the region and tapping into the Cardiff market’

‘the Taskforce was very much skewed to towns closest to Cardiff, Swansea and Newport ... there was no logic to this, northern Valleys towns were in more need for investment’.

4.22 Others questioned whether there had been a lack of focus upon skills and education by the VTF, and there was a strong suggestion that this should have been at the forefront of the VTF's agenda, alongside its economic priorities.

**What success of the VTF should look like?**

4.23 Many stakeholders who had been closely involved with the VTF appreciated that it would be challenging to identify the successes of the programme given that the VTF was not intended to be a 'project with predetermined outcomes.' A small number of stakeholders found it difficult to identify what the success of the VTF ought to look like as it was a 'difficult concept to get your head around' given its wide range of priorities and no specific delivery vehicle.

4.24 In the main, stakeholders suggested that the success of the VTF should be measured against two elements. The first was macro level changes to socio-economic performance and 'whether there's been any closing of the gap' in terms of indicators such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross Value Added (GVA), employment levels, earnings, qualifications and poverty indicators. It was commonly accepted however that the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 would have had a significant negative impact upon the VTF's ability to achieve any meaningful impact upon these indicators.

4.25 The second measure of success was whether VTF had succeeded in delivering 'well-developed projects' which had brought about direct benefits to Valleys communities. Aligned to this, other stakeholders suggested that a higher degree of engagement and participation from across Valleys communities on existing mainstream programmes ought to be another outcome for the VTF.

4.26 Many contributors were realistic about what could be achieved by the VTF, given its duration and funding constraints. Stakeholders were mindful that whilst the VTF's ambitions were high, they could not be fully achieved over a four-year period. As a result, some questioned whether a longer-term mechanism could be put into place which would go beyond the current term

of the Welsh Government, adding that the issues faced by the Valleys 'required a consistent, long-term solution'. One stakeholder noted that:

'In an ideal world I would love to see that the Taskforce had had a tangible impact upon the Valleys. In reality, the timescales meant that this was never a real possibility. Its success must be assessed against the relatively modest resources allocated to it, and whether it's added value'.

4.27 A few stakeholders emphasised that an important role for the VTF was to deliver pilot projects which tested new approaches and ways of working. Thus, capturing and disseminating lessons from these at a broader level would be a key outcome of its work. If successful, stakeholders considered that the VTF had a role to help scale up or transfer effective practices to other areas across the Valleys and beyond. Some stakeholders suggested that this piloting function had become more prominent over time, and whilst the majority were comfortable with this, a small number questioned the underlying rationale for VTF being a testbed for activities which could be replicated beyond the Valleys, on the basis that the region required distinct and tailored solutions. These stakeholders also argued that some pilot projects were not necessarily suitable for scaling up but were more suited to being transplanted to another locality whilst retaining their small-scale focus. Others argued that solutions to the issues faced by Valleys communities did not always need to be innovative, but that the VTF found these ideas to be more desirable and 'politically attractive'.

4.28 Several of the stakeholders thought that the success of the VTF ought to be assessed against the extent to which it had achieved 'programme bending'. This would involve the VTF having had an influence upon the way policy was developed and how mainstream funding could be used across the region. It was suggested that it would be equally important to assess whether this influence endured beyond the VTF programme period. Indeed, some thought that a key measure of the VTF's work would be the extent to which the Valleys continues to be a prominent consideration for Ministers and policy makers.

- 4.29 Many stakeholders also placed emphasis upon the success of the VTF as having achieved ‘integrated responses’ across different policy areas to the challenges experienced by the Valleys communities. Stakeholders frequently stated that this would be evident through greater cross-working within and between organisations, including within the Welsh Government and between local authorities as well as between different sector-based organisations e.g., between health, housing, social care, business support and education etc.
- 4.30 Other success factors were also set out by stakeholders. These included whether VTF would leave a legacy post March 2021, be that in terms of ways of working or continued project intervention. They also included taking into consideration the views of community members and whether they felt there had been any material difference to their communities by the end of the programme period.
- 4.31 Two key external factors were highlighted by stakeholders as having had a bearing upon the VTF’s ability to achieve its outcomes. These were:
- the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020 which had not only hampered organisations’ ability to engage with the VTF agenda, due to the need to prioritise emergency planning and response, but had also adversely impacted upon the socio-economic characteristics and wellbeing of the Valleys communities
  - financial austerity conditions which organisations, particularly local authorities, faced over the duration of the VTF. The VTF’s rationale was based upon the premise that it would be possible for public sector organisations to deviate resources into VTF priorities. However, financial constraints impacted upon the level of funds and staff which could be allocated to the work of the VTF. Some local authorities reported that they had struggled to engage with the VTF because of a lack of time and funds on their part and that this had bearing upon the delivery of some initiatives (such as the Integrated Responsive Transport (IRT) pilot).

## 5. Findings from fieldwork: Way of working

### Key findings

Stakeholders thought that:

- the VTF governance arrangements have been appropriate. Strengths included commitment from strategic players, effective leadership and a transparent way of working. Weaknesses included over complicated structures and a lack of formal community input to the Ministerial Taskforce
- the Programme Board had functioned effectively but that the effectiveness of the working sub-groups varied
- the lack of a substantial capital and revenue funding had hampered the VTF's efforts. Stakeholders considered the Welsh Government operational team to have been under-resourced
- promoting the work of the VTF had not been a priority and more could have been done to publicise what was happening under the VTF banner
- the VTF had engaged effectively with, and strengthened connections between, key stakeholder organisations from across a wide range of sectors and geographical areas. Several samples of effective joint working between partner organisations were identified as having come about due to the VTF
- two sectors, health and education, and existing regional structures (notably City Deals) were thought to have been less engaged with the VTF.

5.1 This chapter considers stakeholders' views about the VTF's governance and implementation arrangements. It also discusses how different stakeholder organisations worked together within the VTF and the alignment of the programme with other policies and approaches.

## **Governance and management arrangements**

5.2 Stakeholders were broadly content with the governance arrangements adopted by the VTF and highlighted its strengths as being

- its ability to gain input and commitment from strategic players,
- strong and effective leadership via the Chair,
- the status and recognition it commanded generally.

One stakeholder observed that the:

‘VTF, as a whole, as a body, is good. It balances political and officer input and business community involvement’.

5.3 Several stakeholders also highlighted the transparent way of working across the VTF as a strength, adding that the publication of reports and minutes of the Taskforce in the public domain was welcome.

5.4 The main point of criticism raised by stakeholders related to the fact that the VTF’s governance arrangements were overly complicated, and because of that:

‘it’s got lost in an over-complicated structure ... everything got swallowed by the structures. It could have had a much simpler structure. It had too many sub-groups’.

5.5 In terms of the Ministerial Taskforce membership, stakeholders conveyed mixed views. Some thought that the Ministerial Taskforce had been convened with an appropriate set of members which were drawn from across a broad range of policy areas and sectors. One such stakeholder observed that the Taskforce had ‘a useful cross section of stakeholders’ which allowed it to challenge and shape the programme agenda. Others questioned whether Taskforce members held the most appropriate positions to be able to influence decisions regarding the use of existing funding and provisions and concluded that it had acted more as an advisory body because of this gap.

5.6 Stakeholders acknowledged that there had been a change to the overall number and members of the Ministerial Taskforce at its mid-point stage and

thought that this shift had resulted in a change of focus and priorities for the VTF. Some also thought that there had been delays in decision making during the transition process itself. Some stakeholders thought that the reduction in the number of members of the Ministerial Taskforce made it easier to reach decisions. Others were concerned that decisions were being made without adequate consultation with sectors or that key players were not represented around the table.

- 5.7 The main issue raised by stakeholders in terms of governance arrangements related to the lack of formal community input to the Ministerial Taskforce itself, with a view that it had possibly been ‘too top-down’ as a result. One such stakeholder suggested that they would have liked to have seen a ‘citizens jury’ model in place whilst another would have liked to have seen a formal ‘community voice’ representative on the Taskforce.
- 5.8 Overall, the Programme Board was considered to have functioned effectively and had appropriately focused upon programme delivery and operational issues. The Programme Board was also considered a useful forum to monitor progress and facilitate connections between different policy areas. Some stakeholders suggested that the communication of the Ministerial Taskforce strategic direction could have been better filtered to the Programme Board to ensure that it consistently translated the Taskforce’s priorities into operational commitment.
- 5.9 It was suggested that the Programme Board could have adopted a greater focus on evaluating initiatives and capturing lessons learnt, to counterbalance the Ministerial Taskforce’s focus on ‘ideas and aspirations.’ In particular, a few stakeholders suggested that there had been a missed opportunity to explore good practice and lessons learnt from across the wide number of Challenge Fund Foundational Economy projects delivered as part of the VTF. It was suggested that VTF could explore this aspect before the end of the current programme of work, to identify which projects (including those funded via the Challenge Fund) were working well and whether they could be rolled out or transplanted to other locations.

- 5.10 Stakeholders suggested that the effectiveness of the working sub-groups varied. Some working groups were considered to be working well and these tended to be groups which were well attended, had genuine engagement from members, were supported by Welsh Government secretariat, and were driven by enthusiastic and committed chairs. They were also considered to be working groups which had been able to make good progress against specific deliverables, such as the housing sub-group around the delivery of the Empty Homes Grant Scheme. Working groups which were regarded as being less effective tended not have achieved as much in terms of tangible deliverables. Some questions were also raised around their membership e.g., some lacked community representation or lacked diversity in terms of members.
- 5.11 A few members of working sub-groups did not feel particularly well informed about other activities being undertaken under the VTF's banner, and these tended to be individuals who were not involved with any other activity other than those covered by their sub-group. These individuals argued that they were unable to act as effective champions for the VTF as a result.

### **Delivery arrangements**

- 5.12 One of the key discussion points raised by stakeholders in relation to the VTF's delivery related to funding, and whether the lack of a substantial funding stream had hampered its efforts. Those who had been closely involved with the VTF appreciated that one important objective for the VTF was to pool existing budgets and use resources in the most effective way for the benefit of the Valleys. Those less involved tended to be more critical of this approach and thought that the VTF should have had a dedicated capital fund in place from the outset to achieve a greater level of impact.
- 'It started with good intentions. Lots of commitment from Welsh Government and the ten Local Authorities initially. It should have had a dedicated resource. A £40-50m budget was needed. It would have had more teeth then.'

- 5.13 A similar view was conveyed about VTF's lack of revenue funding and whether this had restricted the programme from appointing the necessary staffing capacity from the outset. In the case of one project, the Valleys Regional Park (VRP), the initiative had to appoint seconded staff at the outset to manage delivery until revenue funding eventually became available through the VTF to allow it to recruit employed staff.
- 5.14 There was a consensus that the Welsh Government operational team had been under-resourced given the scale of ambition set for the VTF:
- 'The VTF came with a Minister after the election saying, "we will do something in the Valleys ... get ready for it". It had a big roadshow ... and then nothing ... I thought they would appoint some individuals. But they only have a small team'.
- 5.15 This resulted in challenges for a small number of stakeholders to engage with the team, with some suggestion that doing so became more difficult over time. It was suggested that the delays associated with obtaining approval and accessing funding via the core team had hampered some organisations' ability to deliver initiatives within the timescales set. Amongst the comments made were:
- 'they seem stretched – if I ask for a meeting it usually takes a good few weeks before I can get a date from them to meet up'
- 'I'm not sure if VTF has been adequately resourced by the Welsh Government. Actually, from what I see, it hasn't been. We chase our tails. We're ready to do things and can't do things on time because of a lag in Welsh Government'.
- 5.16 Despite the comments on capacity, stakeholders commented positively about the commitment shown by the VTF team within Welsh Government to the programme and several examples were cited whereby communication and collaboration with Welsh Government officials had been good.
- 5.17 Communication and promotion was another common theme raised by stakeholders in relation to the work of the VTF. Stakeholders were aware of the VTF's social media presence, observing that this presence was largely

professional and corporate in its nature. A small number were aware of the social media presence being achieved through the VRP project, which was known to have a broader and larger following due to it having adopted the existing 'Love My Valley' identity.

5.18 Some stakeholders felt that on balance, promoting the work of the programme had not been a major priority for the Taskforce. Stakeholders who had been involved in various initiatives observed that they had not received any guidance on the branding and marketing of VTF funded activities. They were also mindful that many opportunities had been missed to promote successful projects which had been funded under the auspices of the VTF. As a result, it was argued that those based within the Valleys, be they organisations or communities, had no obvious means of being informed about the practical differences being made by the VTF.

5.19 Many stakeholders, particularly those who considered VTF to have a delivery function, suggested that more could have been done to promote what was happening under the VTF banner, particularly given the extent of community fatigue with short-term initiatives:

'I don't think it sold itself well enough. It's not visible enough and it's struggled because of that'

'People I've spoken to do not understand what the VTF is doing for them and what difference it's making'.

### **Collaboration between stakeholder organisations**

5.20 One of the key strengths of the VTF was considered by stakeholders to be its ability to bring people and partner organisations together in a constructive way. Stakeholders thought that the VTF had engaged with a broad range of stakeholder organisations albeit that some players and sectors were less represented than others. The two main gaps identified were organisations from the health and education sectors. One stakeholder from an education background observed that the sector could have come on board at an earlier point:

'education was late coming to the table which was a shame .... people assume that schools are too busy to get involved but let us be the decider'.

- 5.21 Across the health sector, it was noted that only one Health Board had actively engaged with the VTF to date. Whilst appreciative of the recent impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the health sectors' capacity to engage, stakeholders observed that engagement with other Health Boards, Regional Partnership Boards and Public Services Board operating across the Valleys area could have been stronger. Some were hopeful that this would change in light of VRP's focus on the health and wellbeing agenda and its efforts to engage the public health sector.
- 5.22 In terms of geographical coverage, it was suggested that the VTF had secured effective engagement across the majority of the 10 local authorities operating across the Valleys region. Some stakeholders expressed a view that engagement with those authorities whose boundaries fell entirely within the VTF area seemed to have been greater than those with only part of their boundaries covered by the VTF footprint. A handful of stakeholders observed that two of the authorities whose boundaries are only partly covered the VTF footprint, Swansea, and Neath Port Talbot, appeared to be the least engaged with the work of the VTF.
- 5.23 Most stakeholders believed that the VTF had served to strengthen connections between stakeholder organisations - although there was less evidence in place to suggest that it had changed behaviours for the long-term. Many examples were cited of joint working having been instigated between partner organisations, and that the VTF had helped to facilitate initial discussions which gave rise to these developments (e.g., business surgery events).
- 5.24 The fieldwork found that some local authorities considered themselves to have better working relationships with each other and with the Welsh Government at the time of the fieldwork, although acknowledged that this might be in part due to the joint COVID-19 response as well as the work of the VTF. One such LA commented upon the closer collaboration with Business Wales which had come about in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and wished to see this approach continue.
- 'We've had a say in developing it and that is working much better'.

5.25 Some stakeholders took the view that collaboration between different organisations, had been facilitated by the fact that much of the VTF funds had been made available and distributed across all local authority areas. Had the VTF invested in a more targeted way, across fewer sites or selected local authority areas, collaboration might not have been as easy. Several examples were cited of VTF funded projects which had adopted this distribution approach, including

- the Strategic Hubs project which had invested in at least one strategic site per local authority area
- the VRP which made available capital funding to Discovery Gateway sites across all local authority areas and
- the Foundational Economy grant scheme.

5.26 Several examples of effective joint working between partner organisations were identified by stakeholders, including:

- consultation events held by the transport sub-group which had been well attended by politicians, stakeholder organisations (such as Transport for Wales, local authorities, transport operators) and the general public
- placemaking planning with collaboration across representatives from Welsh Government, transport, regeneration, housing, and local authorities
- co-operation between local authorities, particularly in relation to the Empty Homes Grant Scheme and the Discovery Gateway initiative which forms part of the VRP
- joint working between various partners including Development Bank for Wales, Business Wales, Coleg y Cymoedd, Federation for Small Businesses, local authorities, Superfast Broadband, Be the Spark and others on business surgery and business 'Pitch It' events
- collaboration between Coleg y Cymoedd and Business Wales to host and promote Massachusetts Institute of Technology masterclasses,

which had resulted in Business Wales tapping into a new audience of businesses.

5.27 Four specific examples of collaborative working are set out below:

#### **Collaboration between local authorities on the Empty Homes Grant Scheme**

Stakeholders highlighted the collaboration between local authorities on the VTF Empty Homes Grant Scheme as an example of good practice. The collaboration included:

- sharing of surveyors across the region to support those authorities which did not have this capacity in place
- local authorities providing training to staff across other authorities
- standardising surveyors' job descriptions and adopting an agreed rate of pay
- agreement to a single Service Level Agreement for the scheme.

Stakeholders suggested that this approach resulted in greater consistency in how the VTF initiative was applied across the region. Praise was offered for the work undertaken by RCT as lead authority:

'the team there set it up really and it's been good to work with them. RCT had a programme in place already and knew what they were doing so we could roll-it out'.

#### **Collaboration on a community transport pilot project**

A joint approach was adopted to establish a community transport pilot project which intended to address the fact that community transport was 'one of the most important issues' raised during the consultation process. The pilot project for the Neath Valley involved local authorities, community transport organisations, Welsh Government staff and experts from third sector organisations. The pilot was fully scoped and costed by the group and was considered by contributors to be a good example of a co-produced plan. However, in this case, stakeholders reported that the pilot had been put to hold due to financial resources being allocated to COVID-19 relief efforts but there was a desire to re-ignite the idea in the future.

### **Collaboration between Business Wales and the care sector**

An interesting collaboration was developed via the VTF between the care sector and Business Wales, after the Welsh Government Health and Social Services division engaged with Business Wales to identify how social care providers based in the Valleys could become more sustainable. The pilot sought to improve engagement with, and support for, care homes and domiciliary care providers across three local authority areas (Bridgend, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil). It involved collaboration between Business Wales, the Welsh Government Health and Social Services division, local authority social care commissioning teams, NHS and the Care Inspectorate Wales.

The pilot involved engagement events to recruit businesses, a follow up diagnostic session between care sector businesses and Business Wales advisors, and a series of workshops which diagnostic sessions had revealed to be areas of concern for care sector businesses. They included finance, budgets, tendering and human resource management. Initially, Business Wales had sought to contact care providers directly but had found the sector largely unresponsive. Collaboration between social care commissioning officers within local authorities and Business Wales led to greater take up of provision across targeted authorities. Following the successful delivery of the pilot project, it was extended to two other authority areas, in Neath Port Talbot and Cardiff.

The project was considered to have improved Business Wales' understanding of the social care sector and the issues facing social care businesses. It was also considered to have helped further its understanding of how to successfully engage with social care businesses.

### **Collaboration via the Alumni programme**

As part of the Alumni programme, the VTF brought together schools from across the Valleys area to discuss opportunities. It was noted that this was a rare opportunity for schools to meet with others from outside their local authority and educational consortium area. It provided them with an opportunity to collaborate with schools which faced similar issues to themselves by virtue of their being located within the Valleys area.

### **Alignment between VTF and other national or regional approaches**

- 5.28 Several stakeholders explored the extent to which VTF had worked with the two City Deals, when asked about collaboration with regional structures. It was noted that Cardiff City Deal had been represented on the Ministerial Taskforce which meant that alignment between the two structures would have been explored, but despite this it was felt that there had been no tangible collaboration to stem from this. Stakeholders commonly suggested that collaboration with regional partnerships such as the City Deals had been a missed opportunity, despite the efforts to scope possible opportunities.
- 5.29 It was also widely recognised that the increasing regionalisation agenda, and the establishment of Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) as new statutory mechanisms for regional collaboration across local government, raised questions about the compatibility of the VTF footprint given that it would straddle two regions. The proposed CJCs are expected to exercise functions which are also the focus of the VTF's work relating to strategic development planning, regional transport planning and economic wellbeing. Many stakeholders suggested that the VTF needed to reflect upon the development of the CJCs and consider what impact this would have upon the need for, and remit of, a Valleys based entity in the future.

## 6. Findings from fieldwork: Achievements and difference made

### Key findings

Stakeholders thought that:

- it was difficult to come to a firm view about the progress made by the VTF, not least as it did not have specific indicators in place to assess performance
- progress had been hampered by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during 2020, particularly VTF projects or ideas which were in their infancy or under development at the outset of the pandemic
- the VTF had effectively brought organisations together, which was resulting in increased collaboration and co-production, including cross governmental working between different Welsh Government departments
- the VTF had effectively championed and advocated the Valleys cause, and several examples were cited where VTF led discussions had influenced existing mainstream policies, approaches and funding decisions
- initiatives supported by VTF had predominantly been small-scale and low impact, reflecting the limited funding and capacity available
- the Empty Homes Grants Scheme and the VRP were two of the VTF's most noteworthy and successful projects
- being associated with the VTF offered community groups and existing initiatives increased traction and status, which in turn led to increased interest and support from other organisations
- the VTF 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 VRP.

6.1 This chapter considers stakeholder views on the progress made by the VTF and the extent to which it is achieving its aims and objectives. It also considers the successes of specific initiatives and the difference made to existing policies as well as to Valleys communities. The chapter sets out some illustrative examples of these achievements at a programme and project level and is not intended to report upon all of VTF's activities.

### **Overall progress**

6.2 Many stakeholders found it difficult to come to a firm view about the overall progress being achieved by VTF, not least because it did not have specific measures or indicators in place which they could take into consideration. Some were aware that VTF had an ambitious job creation target but felt largely unsighted about the progress being made against this indicator.

6.3 Stakeholders widely recognised that the VTF's way of working to implement initiatives on a cross-policy basis meant that progress would always take longer due to the need to secure approval, as well as funds, from a wider range of decision makers than would otherwise be the case. Despite this, most stakeholders believed it to be appropriate in principle that the VTF had tried to work in this way.

6.4 Stakeholders provided a range of examples and positive feedback to suggest that the VTF had made good progress in bringing organisations together, which was resulting in effective collaboration and co-production efforts. However, there was a view that these efforts did not always materialise into concrete deliverables which led to some taking the view that the VTF had been 'more talk than action'. Stakeholders also considered the VTF to have made good progress in terms of identifying new ideas and had been prepared to take risks and enable stakeholder organisations to fund innovative concepts and models of working.

6.5 There was a clear consensus that progress had stalled over the course of 2020 due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic upon the work of the VTF, with organisations having to divert resources and effort away from VTF priorities to respond to the impact of the crisis. During this time, some working-group members observed that their engagement with the VTF

diminished. For instance, one member of a working group observed that they were unsure if the VTF still existed as they had not heard anything since attending the last sub-group meeting in January of this year.

6.6 The COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact upon the progress of those projects or ideas which were still in their infancy or under development at the outset of the pandemic. Several examples were offered by stakeholders of these ideas either put on hold or ‘fizzled out’ over the course of 2020. By way of example one stakeholder observed that proposals for a community transport pilot project which had been fully scoped and costed prior to COVID-19 had not progressed and seemed unlikely to do so. Some Foundational Economy Challenge Fund projects were equally affected by COVID-19 and were known to have been put on hold. For instance, one town centre project which intended to provide pop up retail opportunities was put on hold.

6.7 Stakeholders also had the impression that a few of the VTF’s earlier ideas appeared not to have come to fruition given that it was ‘very difficult to see what has come of them’. These were thought to include the Better Jobs Closer to Home project, community hubs as well as a shared apprenticeship scheme.

### **Extent to which VTF is achieving aims and objectives**

6.8 Most stakeholders considered that the VTF was achieving its objective of bringing together and facilitating conversations between different policy makers and stakeholder organisations and facilitating discussions across different policy strands.

6.9 Stakeholders also commonly believed that the VTF was successfully championing the Valleys cause and effectively advocating and demonstrating the need for a Valleys-specific intervention across mainstream approaches. A few argued that it was successfully ensuring that the Valleys voice was being heard ‘around the right tables’ and this resulted in the area gaining a higher political and policy profile:

‘If it wasn’t for the Taskforce, you wouldn’t see the Valleys being talked about so much in the Senedd and in cross-party stakeholder groups.’

- 6.10 Some concern was expressed by a few stakeholders that the profile and weight carried by the VTF had diminished over time, and that this was illustrated by the appointment of a Deputy Minister, rather than Minister, to chair the VTF.
- 6.11 A more mixed view was conveyed about the tangible difference being made by the VTF, with stakeholders drawing upon their perception of specific initiatives and projects to inform these opinions.
- 6.12 A key message from a cross-section of stakeholders suggests that whilst the VTF has been able to instigate and support the delivery of a wide range of initiatives, these have predominantly been small-scale and low impact. It was suggested that this might reflect the limited funding and capacity available within the VTF. Comments from two stakeholders echoed the views of many:

‘It’s all been smaller scale projects. I guess it all builds up, but you’d expect the VTF to be funding things that are meaty and at scale’

‘There has been a mixed message – initially there was all this talk of being strategic and building these sites at scale and pace – getting traction and then it’s all been blown west and become skewed towards the small-scale funding’.

### **Project level achievements**

- 6.13 Two VTF projects were highlighted by stakeholders as noteworthy and successful. These were the Empty Homes Grants Scheme which contributes to the VTF’s housing priority theme and the VRP:

## **Priority 2, Theme 4 Housing: Empty Homes Grants Scheme**

The Empty Homes Grants Scheme, which was already in place across Rhondda Cynon Taf, was rolled out via the VTF to other local authority areas. Rhondda Cynon Taf was tasked by the TF to administer the scheme across the Valleys, ensuring that a consistent model was applied.

The scheme initially offered an empty property grant of up to £20,000, but this was increased to £25,000 to accommodate renewable energy costs, to property owners to transform empty homes back into residential use. During the pilot phase of delivery within Rhondda Cynon Taf, between 2016 and Feb 2019, a total of 130 empty homes were bought back to use. Demand for the scheme during the first roll out phase was strong with 319 applications received between July 2019 and March 2020, and funding for £4.5 fully committed. The second roll out phase has been delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic, but it is expected that the £10m budget allocation will be committed.

Whilst the scheme has not been formally evaluated, stakeholders considered the initiative to be a success as it directly supports house buyers by making a housing investment a viable option. Stakeholders also considered the scheme a success in helping to address the negative impact of derelict, unmaintained properties within communities and increase the availability of housing stock locally.

Stakeholders also considered it to be effective as good practice was rolled out from one authority to other areas:

‘That’s a model that we haven’t had before, and it works. It’s building on a model of good practice’.

The availability of the scheme has also influenced local authorities housing funding decisions, as they were required to match fund the VTF investment provided via the scheme. In one case for instance, a local authority which has allocated match funding to the scheme argued that it would otherwise have not happened.

Whilst the host authority intends to continue with the scheme post VTF, other local authorities were uncertain whether they would be able to continue funding a similar scheme despite regarding it positively, thereby raising questions over its sustainability.

### **Priority 3, Theme 7 My local community: Valleys Regional Park**

The VRP forms a key component of the VTF's third priority around My Local Community. It has been established as a project led by Bridgend County Borough Council and has a small core delivery team in place. The project has secured £7.7million capital and revenue funding via the VTF to deliver activities across three workstreams (Landscape, culture and identify; Social prescribing and wellbeing; and Communities and Enterprise). It also has a remit to explore long-term options for establishing a Regional Park entity and has secured ESF funding to allow it continue post VTF, up until 2023, to achieve its longer-term objectives. Stakeholders considered the VRP to be a key element of VTF's work which would continue on a long-term basis and form part of VTF's legacy.

#### *Discovery Gateways*

Stakeholders considered that one of the key achievements of the VRP has been the capital investments made across 12 Discovery Gateway sites, predominantly country parks, to improve facilities such as play areas, visitor centres, facilities, walking and cycling trails. Whilst some of these were under development at the time of fieldwork, stakeholders pointed to those which had already been completed:

'you can see things in Dare Valley – a refurbished hotel and a play area. A new family bike track. We got stuff there in the last 18 months and it's made a big difference'.

Stakeholders were less clear about the added value which had come about as a result of this investment in terms of collaboration between Discovery Gateway sites however, adding that the funding had not yet led to any tangible wider benefits other than those created via the direct investments.

- 6.14 Three Priority 2 potential developments and initiatives were also considered by stakeholders as ones which appeared promising. These were the Alumni programme (Priority 2, Theme 5), the Integrated Responsive Transport Programme (Priority 2, Theme 6) and the Empty Homes Pilot for Tenancy Occupants (Priority 2, Theme 4), albeit that they were yet to be delivered or to achieve any specific outcomes. These are considered in turn:

### **Priority 2, Theme 5 Innovation Fund: Alumni programme**

The VTF identified an opportunity to build upon and extend effective alumni approaches which were already known to be in place within one school (Ysgol Lewis Pengam) and one college (Coleg y Cymoedd) across the Valleys. Stakeholders reported that there was an opportunity to better utilise the network of people who had previously attended a school or college in the Valleys, as role models to motivate young people about what they could potentially achieve whilst living and working in the Valleys. An initial meeting, where other schools were invited to attend, provided an opportunity to share current practices and determine levels of interest.

The concept has since been taken forward by Careers Wales but, whilst it is likely to be put into operation soon, stakeholders considered the idea to have stalled at the time of undertaking the fieldwork, in part due to the effects of COVID-19 but also because it has been challenging to agree upon an appropriate delivery model.

### **Priority 2, Theme 6 Transport: Integrated Responsive Transport (IRT) pilot project**

This initiative between Transport for Wales and Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council will involve introducing a flexible bus service across two routes within the county. The project is intended to address the concerns about public transport raised by community members during the VTF's engagement exercise. Citizens will be able request a bus from virtual bus stops, meaning that a more flexible bus service will be in place for people allowing them to be picked up and dropped off at places other than dedicated bus stops. Transport for Wales will fund this initiative from within its existing funds and has recently awarded a contract for this service to be delivered. It was too early to come to a view about the success of the initiative as the service was not fully operational at the time of undertaking the fieldwork.

A similar approach has been tested previously in other parts of Wales (including Rhondda Cynon Taf, Pembrokeshire and Conwy) but it would not have come about in Blaenau Gwent had it not been for the impetus of VTF and the strong community need expressed via its engagement exercise.

### **Priority 2, Theme 4 Housing: Empty Homes Pilot for tenancy occupants**

An Empty Homes pilot for tenancy occupants has been developed via the VTF, largely as a spin out to the Empty Homes Scheme for owner occupiers. Four Local Authorities were invited to participate, of which three (Carmarthenshire, Bridgend and Swansea) have committed to its delivery and provided funding. These local authorities did not participate in the Empty Homes Scheme, due to concerns that it would only be available across restricted areas within their county. The pilot has yet to become operational due to the impact of COVID-19, but stakeholders suggested that there is commitment on the part of all organisations to see it delivered in due course. Given that the pilot is still under development, no outcomes have been achieved although stakeholders are hopeful it will make a positive contribution to the amount of affordable rental housing across the three authority areas. The VTF's role has primarily been to identify an opportunity and drive forward the idea, as it has not directly funded the pilot.

- 6.15 Stakeholders recognised that the Foundational Economy Challenge Fund had not been a distinct Valleys or VTF project, but rather a national approach which had been topped up with additional VTF funding. The focus of the fund is to test new and innovative approaches, raise the profile of the foundational economy and stimulate debate and learning on what works. Whilst this approach was considered to have been largely appropriate, stakeholders had little evidence to draw upon about the difference which VTF resources had made. Despite this, an example of how the Challenge Fund has been put into operation was provided by Rhondda Housing Association:

### **Priority 1, Theme 2 The Foundational Economy: A Challenge Fund project**

One Foundational Economy funded project delivered by Rhondda Housing Association for circa £100k funding has involved appointing a development officer to support local businesses based in Tonypany and Treherbert. The project has supported the re-establishment of a chamber of trade and delivered an on-line Christmas campaign for high street retailers. The project had operated within a very difficult climate over its delivery during 2020, and this has had a bearing upon its deliverables. In terms of outputs the project is working towards getting high street buildings back to use and is focusing on four main buildings to achieve this, including the Big Sheds regeneration project in Tonypany.

The project has also allowed the Housing Association to explore and implement changes to their internal procurement policies and processes in order to better support local providers. A new policy is now in place which has a focus on community benefit commitments. The intention is to promote future tendering opportunities to local businesses via meet the buyer events, post COVID-19.

Without VTF funding being channelled through the Foundational Economy Challenge Fund the Housing Association would not have been in a position to prioritise these developments.

- 6.16 Across the entrepreneurship and business support priority area, two small-scale initiatives were considered to have been successful, in addition to the work between Business Wales and the social care sector (set out at Chapter 5):

### **Priority 1, Theme 3 Entrepreneurship and Business Support: Pitch It initiative**

Be the Spark, Business Wales, the Development Bank for Wales, and Angles 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 purpose of the initiative was to provide an opportunity for businesses to pitch for loan funding provided by Angel Investors and the Development Bank for Wales. A call to businesses in need for investment resulted in a good response, with some 80 expressions of interest being received. Following a shortlisting process twenty businesses were invited to a semi-final stage and five progressed to the final stage. In all, two businesses secured loan funding and a small number of businesses took up the offer of mentoring support. Businesses which did not secure investment benefited from feedback from entrepreneurs and business investors.

### **Priority 1, Theme 3 Entrepreneurship and Business Support: Peer-to-Peer Support Network Pilot**

Business Wales commissioned a peer-to-peer support programme, including a series of monthly one-day network meetings, to ten business leaders based within the Valleys. The network meetings included guest speakers, action learning sessions and peer-to-peer clinics. An independent evaluation of the initiative<sup>16</sup> found that participant feedback about the sessions was very positive and that their involvement with the network helped give them fresh perspectives, build 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 and the evaluation suggests that this medium did not lend itself as well to the delivery of interactive presentations or spontaneous discussions between participants.

The evaluation concluded that the network was effective in helping to develop leadership capacity within businesses across the VTF area. It also achieved positive effects upon the businesses which participants led. These included introducing more professional structures and practices, tackling long-standing problems, improving organisations' approaches to marketing and customer relations and putting in place arrangements to facilitate growth.

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<sup>16</sup> Dateb (2020) The Evaluation of the Valleys Taskforce Peer to Peer Support Network Pilot (unpublished)

- 6.17 An early VTF intention was to create seven strategic hubs across the south Wales Valleys to focus public money and provide opportunities for the private sector to invest and create new jobs. They were intended to align closely with the regional priorities of the TRI and Building for the Future programmes. However, the strategic hubs approach seemed to have stalled in recent years:

### **Priority 1, Theme 1 Strategic Hubs**

Stakeholders suggested that the mapping for strategic hubs had started well with a real attempt to try to align strategic hubs to job creation. The objective was to be strategic and focus on key areas on the basis that the benefits would 'spread out' from these hubs. The pending investment in the Metro at the time had also encouraged a more joined-up approach to maximise the important opportunities that would emerge in towns such as Caerphilly, Pontypridd and Cwmbran, from the transformation of the rail services.

Whilst it proved a difficult concept to sell initially, particularly to local councillors who wished to see a strategic hub in each local authority, stakeholders reported that the Taskforce made an early strategic decision to focus resources on a small number of key towns.

Feedback suggested that initial work was undertaken successfully, with funding made available to produce master planning documents for selected key towns. In addition, the VTF facilitated discussions and engagement events within each designated hub area to collect views and to begin to shape a direction of travel.

Stakeholders believed that progress had 'petered out' over time, with no clear explanation as to why strategic hubs were no longer a priority for the VTF. Many stakeholders expressed their continued support of the concept of investing resources into key sites and felt that they had been brought to a close without a clear rationale for doing so or evidence of the difference made.

There was a view amongst stakeholders that no real alternative plan was in place to replace the strategic hubs nor was there compelling evidence that a different approach could deliver better outcomes: 'the idea has been scrapped. I'm not sure what the cunning plan is now.'

Many felt that this was a shame as the idea of focusing regeneration investment on key strategic hubs rather than broad spread was sound.

## Impact on policy making

- 6.18 The fieldwork found good examples of where VTF led discussions had been able to influence existing mainstream policies, approaches and funding decisions. These included influences upon Welsh Government decisions as well as Local Authority level decision making. For instance, the Empty Homes Grant Scheme (for owner and tenant occupants) had a direct impact upon local authority decisions to allocate funding towards this initiative. Across the Welsh Government, the discussions within the VTF had a direct impact upon the Targeted Regeneration Investment programme, resulting in secondary towns being identified for regeneration support and informing a more strategic future regeneration programme:

### **Welsh Government Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) Programme**

The Targeted Regeneration Investment (TRI) programme is a key Welsh Government fund used to transform strategically selected towns on the premise that targeted investment will achieve greater, more focused impact.

Via the VTF, Local Authority feedback pointed to a need for the Welsh Government's TRI programme to be adjusted across the Valleys so that support could be made available for regeneration investments across secondary towns. A discussion between Welsh Government officials and various local authorities resulted in TRI funding being made available to towns such as Maesteg and Bargoed in addition to strategic towns such as Bridgend and Caerphilly. This approach was applied across several local authority areas across the Valleys and in all, projects to the value of £3million were proposed. They involve projects in receipt of up to £250k grant funding to improve property frontage and improve/create homes above shops.

Whilst the original intention had been for the VTF to fund these investments across secondary towns, in the event, underspending due to project slippage, meant that projects across the south-east Valleys were funded via the WG's TRI scheme whilst south-west projects were funded via the VTF. In total, VTF provided £700,000 funding towards developments across the VTF area. In this case, it was argued that the VTF helped identify the needs for smaller scale regeneration projects across the Valleys area.

Given that the TRI funded projects were only getting underway at the time of undertaking fieldwork it was considered impossible to identify the impact it would have upon the Valleys. Nonetheless, stakeholders were confident that the investments across secondary towns would help improve property appearances and facilities as well as stimulate further investment in the future.

In the absence of VTF, stakeholders thought that the TRI programme might have explored a similar outcome anyway in that Welsh Government officials would have sought other projects to invest in light of the programme underspend, albeit that the additional funding for the south-west authorities would not have been available. The VTF was thought to have accelerated the process and allowed the Welsh Government to fund projects at a quicker pace than would otherwise have been the case.

The experience and feedback captured via the VTF has also informed the Welsh Government's policy for future towns regeneration, which is looking to adopt a more flexible approach to accommodate LA priorities in the future:

'we recognise that whilst priority towns is appropriate, we also need some flexibility to respond to opportunities across a wider network of towns where they arise'.

- 6.19 Feedback from local authority stakeholders also suggest that the discussions facilitated via the VTF and lessons being learnt are having a bearing upon their own policies and practices. For instance, one local authority is revisiting its economic and skills strategy and considering how to achieve a better balance between providing support for foundational activities and anchor companies. In this case, the local authority wishes to continue to provide a competitive, innovative environment that will attract investment, but give greater support to local businesses operating in the foundational economy. In another case, a local authority argued that the VTF has added value to its work since it was able to double its investment in particular initiatives, such as the Empty Homes scheme and landscape part developments funded at its Discovery Gateway park.
- 6.20 In terms of impact upon the health sector, one Health Board reported that their collaboration with the VTF was leading to a more joined up approach

in that they were exploring social prescribing opportunities via the VRP which would involve GP referrals. Whilst the COVID-19 pandemic had halted these developments over the course of 2020, they were hopeful of reinstating plans in the new year.

- 6.21 There was also some evidence that work undertaken under the VTF banner has helped to inform funding decision making. For instance, it was reported that the VRP project had been asked to comment upon the strategic fit and alignment of Enabling Natural Resources and Well-being (EnRAW) funding applications which had been submitted to the Welsh Government and were expected to be delivered across the Valleys area. Applicants had been notified that the VRP would be advising upon the suitability of applications, which encouraged discussion between applicants and the VRP to improve alignment.
- 6.22 Other stakeholders were generally less sighted about the effectiveness of the VTF in leveraging funds, with one such contributor observing:
- ‘I guess it is trying to pull everything in the Valleys area into one place within themes. And is trying to pull money from everywhere. But it is hard to see where funds have been leveraged. It is hard to see what they do. It is difficult to see what has been achieved’.
- 6.23 Several stakeholders were mindful that the VTF had identified opportunities and helped to facilitate cross governmental working between different Welsh Government departments, although external stakeholder organisations were not always sighted about these. One such example cited was cross governmental working between health and business support, stemming from the social care project. Welsh Government officials, in particular, considered the VTF to have been an effective mechanism for testing how different funding streams could be better aligned and argued that there was far more discussion across Welsh Government departments now as to how investment could be aligned with the priorities for the Valleys. Welsh Government stakeholders argued that the VTF had:

‘certainly formed a very useful centrepiece to layer that [cross-policy working] across. It was always going to be a huge cross cutting programme’

‘I accept that the VTF is not the only organisation pushing for this strategic, cross-policy way of working but it has helped. The key consideration is how do you sustain this cross-policy working once the VTF comes to an end?’

- 6.24 It was suggested that cross governmental working which had been encouraged via the VTF had been furthered at pace as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, given the need for different Welsh Government departments and external organisations to plan their emergency response. In some cases, stakeholders considered the pandemic to have had a greater impact on this than the VTF:

‘The biggest thing that has made a difference in the way Welsh Government works is not as a result of the Taskforce, but Covid’.

- 6.25 Some stakeholders did not think that all Welsh Government departments had engaged with the VTF to the same extent and raised concerns about the lack of engagement and collaboration with some of these. Perhaps in their defence, a couple of Welsh Government stakeholders noted the difficulties facing officials in trying to engage with a myriad of regional partnership entities across Wales and the demands this placed on their time. As a result, it was argued that a regional entity such as the VTF required an adequate level of dedicated resource to maintain momentum and ensure the focus across the Welsh Government:

‘it needs that capacity. We are being dragged in so many directions.’

- 6.26 Another impact of the VTF’s work was considered by stakeholders to be the increased status offered to community groups and existing initiatives by being associated with the programme, and the benefits gained of securing the VTF’s support. It was suggested that support from, and association with, the VTF had led to ideas and projects gaining traction and status, which was evident from increased interest and support from other organisations as a result. One community group for instance reported that

the interest shown by the VTF in their work led to them revisiting their aspirations and:

‘made us realise that we can achieve bigger things. Getting their endorsement has been great. It gave us implicit support. This has strategically placed us in a better place’.

- 6.27 The following is an illustrative example of how the work of the VTF has helped to establish better connections between community groups and a local authority:

#### **Difference made to community groups**

Two community groups reported that the VTF, through its VRP project, had led to improved collaborations between the groups and representatives of their local authority. These groups had found it challenging to identify the right contacts within the local authority and develop close relationships with them. One of the VRP officer conveners set up an introductory session between the projects and 15 local authority officers for them to gain a better understanding of the projects and their future ambitions. The fact that the meeting was convened by a VTF-funded project meant that it carried more status than a meeting which might have been called by the community groups directly and was considered to have been better attended and supported as a result of it being arranged under the ‘VTF-banner’.

#### **Benefits for Valleys communities**

- 6.28 Stakeholders considered the VTF to have had a fairly limited direct impact upon the Valleys communities over its duration. Where stakeholders believed it to have made a difference, the positive impact was mostly associated with tangible initiatives such as the Empty Homes Scheme, Foundational Economy Challenge Fund projects and elements of the VRP project. Stakeholders observed that recipients of the Empty Homes Scheme would have benefited from gaining access to affordable housing whilst investment at Discovery Gateway sites via the VRP would have resulted in increased local visitor interest and use of the enhanced spaces.
- 6.29 Many stakeholders found it difficult to identify any impacts upon the Valleys communities, with one expressing a view:

‘Honestly? I don’t know. What can we tell the Valleys people? What is fundamentally different from five years ago? Probably not a lot’.

6.30 Many stakeholders thought that the fairly limited direct impact of the VTF was in keeping with its overall objective, in that it was never expected to transform the socio-economic circumstances of the Valleys during its lifespan.

6.31 Having said that a couple of stakeholders from community groups who operated at a local level did suggest that the work and investment made by the VTF was starting to be noticed across specific towns, such as Treherbert and Tonypany:

#### **Difference made to towns**

A couple of contributors suggested that there was clear evidence that a greater level of funding was being directed to the Rhondda Cynon Taf towns of Treherbert and Tonypany as a result of the VTF. In particular, Treherbert was benefiting from three Foundational Economy projects funded via the Challenge Fund. It was suggested that this funding and interest was helping to raise the profile of the two towns ‘they’ve championed the towns, and this has helped to gain support from other organisations.’ There are high expectations that the regeneration of the Big Sheds project in Tonypany will have a marked impact upon the town’s vibrancy and appeal.

#### **The future**

6.32 Several stakeholders voiced their views and thoughts about the future of the VTF and what approach, if anything, ought to be in place after the programme comes to its end in March 2021. The key points and lessons learned observed by stakeholders included:

- a need to ensure that there is a continued focus on addressing the specific socio-economic issues being faced by the Valleys, although the mechanism and delivery model to achieve this requires further consideration
- that consideration be given to the role that CJsCs could play within any future model or approach

- that any future approach can be sustained for a much longer term and be adequately resourced, in terms of staff and capital funding, to deliver ambitious objectives
- that any future approach is appropriately informed by, and steered by, community engagement
- that any future approach focuses on a smaller number of key priority areas
- a view that there was scope to build upon the existing VTF structure, thereby avoiding introducing a new 'scheme' or 'brand'
- a desire to see the successful initiatives and approaches which have been piloted and funded by the VTF continue in the future:  
‘the challenge going forward is that we don’t want to lose the good bits of VTF’.

## **7. Conclusions**

- 7.1 This chapter presents our conclusions, drawing upon the desk review and stakeholder interviews, and offers recommendations for the Welsh Government to consider for the future.

### **Conclusions**

- 7.2 The research has shown that there was a strong underlying rationale for establishing a mechanism that focuses upon the Valleys as a region. There was a clear need for intervention and an approach which would place the needs of the Valleys at the forefront of policy development. The VTF recognised that the issues to be addressed needed a long-term solution, yet the model adopted was time-bound by the current programme of government. To achieve the aims which VTF set itself, the intervention mechanism should have allowed for a much longer-term commitment to be adopted from the outset. Whilst the effort to implement a cross-governmental, spatially based approach should be commended, it would have benefited from being planned as a longer-term commitment. This raises fundamental questions about the type of structure which is best suited to address the deep-rooted issues facing Valleys communities and should be reviewed by the VTF for the future.
- 7.3 A key strength of the approach adopted by the VTF has been the effort to engage communities to elicit their views and opinions about the priorities which the VTF should focus upon. It is evident that the feedback gathered was used effectively to inform the priorities of the work programme. Whilst this engagement effort absorbed significant time and effort on the part of the VTF and its stakeholder organisations, it no doubt distinguished the VTF from the methods adopted by predecessor programmes and should be considered good practice in terms of any future approaches.
- 7.4 The VTF started out with a very ambitious set of aims and objectives but lacked the resources and capacity to deliver on these effectively. There has been a clear shift in the VTF's priorities and focus over time, and whilst this could be interpreted as a strength in terms of flexibility and adaptability, some stakeholders perceived these changes to have largely come about as

a result of political decisions rather than robust evaluation evidence for what was or wasn't working at the time.

- 7.5 The VTF has succeeded in part in achieving its aim of influencing and gaining leverage over policies and interventions which were already in place, to accelerate and amplify improvements for the Valleys. In this sense it has played an important advocacy role for the Valleys by ensuring that a greater focus is given to Valleys specific issues across mainstream policy and service delivery. It has also functioned effectively as a conduit to facilitate relationships and encourage collaboration and co-production across different policy areas. It has contributed and helped to reduce silo working across a number of policy areas, particularly within Welsh Government, and the research found several examples of effective cross-policy joint working which had been instigated by the VTF. As it draws to the close of its current programme, the VTF now needs to consider how this cross-policy approach can be sustained and extended to avoid stakeholders returning to previous ways of working and de-prioritising the Valleys in their wider policy considerations.
- 7.6 The VTF has been able to make good progress across some specific priorities since it was established. The feedback from stakeholders points to two examples in particular (the Empty Homes Grant Scheme and the Valleys Regional Park) as being successful interventions. The evidence suggests that these have been effective because of the direct benefits they have generated for the Valleys communities, the extent to which the activities can be sustained post current programme period, the fact that they have been of sufficient scale to make a meaningful difference and, in the case of the Empty Homes Grant Scheme, scaled up a successful initiative from one to many local authority areas.
- 7.7 There is no doubt that the VTF's progress during 2020 has been severely hampered by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and this will have a significant negative impact upon the VTF's ability to achieve and report upon a positive contribution to Valleys socio-economic indicators.

- 7.8 Many stakeholders felt unsighted about the success of and difference made by VTF to the Valleys communities and put this down to a lack of knowledge about what the VTF had achieved. This suggests that the VTF has possibly not sufficiently prioritised work to communicate its practical achievements. We do not think this should be a criticism of the VTF's work, given that much of its focus has been upon operating behind the scenes, but there needs to be a recognition that public awareness of the difference achieved by the VTF will be lower as a result. Perhaps of greater concern is the view conveyed by stakeholders that several potential pilot projects or interventions which they had been involved with seem not to have materialised into any concrete deliverables. It is important to bear in mind of course that COVID-19 impacted on some of these and that by their very nature, not all pilot ideas would work.
- 7.9 Some stakeholders perceived the direct benefits to the Valleys communities from the work of the VTF to be limited. In practice, the VTF was never designed to be a direct delivery mechanism with significant funds to deliver large-scale interventions to Valleys communities. Nonetheless, the VTF did function to some extent in this way and because of this, stakeholders have assessed its performance on this basis in a fairly negative way.
- 7.10 In terms of working with other economic initiatives, there is evidence that the VTF has collaborated effectively with other initiatives and organisations, but that collaboration with regional partnerships (specifically City Deals) has been less effective. The VTF will need to consider how it embraces the development of the CJs and what impact their introduction will have upon the need for, and remit of, a Valleys-entity in the future.
- 7.11 The feedback suggests that programme governance and management arrangements were broadly appropriate. Having strong Chairs in place for the Ministerial Taskforce and transparency of working were highlighted as strengths. The main weaknesses of the arrangements adopted were the lack of community representation within governance structures, an under-resourced operational team and possibly an over-complicated governance structure in terms of having seven working sub-groups. A key issue raised

in relation to the delivery arrangements was whether the VTF ought to have been established from the outset with an adequate level of revenue and capital funding in place to enable it to achieve its ambitious aims and objectives.

- 7.12 The fieldwork identified several lessons from the VTF's experience over its four-year period. One key lesson is that the VTF would, considering its fairly limited capacity and resources, have benefited from prioritising its efforts to focus on a narrower range of policy areas and fewer, more strategic projects. Another key lesson is that the VTF would have benefited from reviewing its sector and policy coverage at its mid-point stage to identify, and where appropriate address, any gaps in terms of its reach into these. In the case of the VTF's delivery to date, these gaps were considered to have been most evident in health and education.

### **Recommendations**

- 7.13 Taking into account the views offered by stakeholders, we suggest that the Welsh Government considers the following recommendations:

**Recommendation 1:** On the basis that the Valleys area continues to experience deep-rooted issues and inequalities when compared to the rest of Wales, there is a strong case for continued intervention and focus on the Valleys as a regional entity

**Recommendation 2:** That consideration be given to the most appropriate structure which would be best suited to address the needs of the Valleys in the future, ensuring that this structure allows for a long-term approach to be adopted and which reflects the establishment of CJs across Wales

**Recommendation 3:** That the scale of ambition set out for any future Valleys-based intervention be appropriately matched in terms of capital and revenue funding resources, recognising that this is likely to be impacted by budgetary challenges post COVID-19

**Recommendation 4:** That any future Valleys-based intervention adopts a narrower range of priorities and considers supporting a smaller number of larger, more strategic projects

**Recommendation 5:** That any future Valleys-based intervention builds upon effective community engagement approaches adopted by the VTF and considers how this engagement could be sustained and built into future programme design and governance arrangements

**Recommendation 6:** That any future intervention clearly articulates, via a theory of change approach from the outset, short term delivery goals (e.g., within the term of one government) and longer-term transformational outcomes and aspirations

**Recommendation 7:** That consideration be given to how some of the successful interventions piloted via the VTF (notably the Empty Homes Grant Scheme and the Valleys Regional Park) can be sustained in the future.

## **Annex A: Discussion Guide**

### **A: Background**

What is your current role?

In what way have you been involved with the VTF?

- Nature and duration of involvement
- Member of Taskforce, Programme Board, policy team etc
- Area of policy interest (three themes and seven priority areas<sup>17</sup>)

### **B: What VTF set out to achieve**

What were the most important drivers to the establishment of the VTF?

- Why is the VTF needed?
- What key issues was it designed to tackle?
- Which key policies and strategies informed the development of the VTF?

What do you understand to be the aims and objectives of the VTF?

- How, if at all, have these changed over time? Why is this?
- How engaged have stakeholders been in contributing towards any changes to the aims and objectives of the VTF?
- To what extent have the VTF's priorities been appropriate?

What should 'success' of the VTF look like?

- What outcomes would you expect to see being achieved now?
- What outcomes would you expect to see in the longer-term?

### **C: Way of working**

What are your views about the VTF programme's governance and management arrangements?

- How appropriate are these arrangements?
- Are the right members involved and appropriately engaged?
- What has worked well and what could have been improved?

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<sup>17</sup> Housing, The Foundational economy, Entrepreneurship and business support, Transport, Strategic hubs, The Valleys Taskforce Innovation Fund, and The Valleys Regional Park.

What are your views on the VTF delivery arrangements?

- What has worked well in terms of programme implementation?
- What could have been improved?

How effectively have different stakeholder organisations worked together within the VTF?

- Have the right partners and organisations been involved?
- What are your views on the level of commitment and engagement which stakeholders have brought to the table? What accounts for strong or weak engagement?
- What challenges have been faced and how could they be overcome?

Can you identify one or two examples of effective joint working between partner organisations?

- Who are the partners and how did it come about?
- What does this example involve?
- What was delivered/has been achieved to date?
- Why do you consider it to be effective?
- What evidence do you have about the difference it is making?
- To what extent would the joint working have come about in the absence of VTF?

Which other policies and initiatives across the Valleys area have you been involved with since the VTF was established (e.g. City Deal, other funding streams)?

- How has VTF worked with these initiatives?
- What added value has VTF been able to contribute to these other initiatives?

#### **D. Success and difference made**

What are your view on the overall progress made by the VTF programme to date?

- How does this differ across the three themes and seven priority areas and what accounts for this?

To what extent do you think the VTF is achieving its aims and objectives?

- What evidence do you have to support this view?

Thinking about specific VTF projects which you have been most involved with, how successful have they been?

- What has the project achieved to date?
- What evidence do you have of the benefits achieved by the project(s)?
- To what extent can the project(s) be scaled up or transferred to other areas?

What difference is the VTF making to the way existing policies are being implemented?

- What evidence do you have that VTF has
  - influenced policy development and decision making, including within Welsh Government?
  - led to cross-governmental ways of working (i.e. moving away from silo working)?
  - enabled the leveraging of existing funds and resources into addressing the priorities of the VTF (e.g. by influencing the allocation of partner organisations' funds into the Valleys area)?
- To what extent would these changes have happened in the absence of VTF?
- How sustainable are these changes? What legacy can VTF expect to generate?

What benefits has the VTF generated for the Valleys communities?

- Ask about the difference made across seven key priority areas?
- What evidence do you have to support this view?
- Which elements of the VTF (e.g. individual projects) are making the greatest difference to the Valleys communities?

## **E: Challenges and lessons learned**

[Where appropriate] What challenges, if any, have you faced when working and collaborating with the VTF?

- Prompt about partnership working, approachability of the Taskforce, communication and budgets
- What were the implications of these challenges?
- How, if at all, were these challenges resolved / could be resolved in the future?

What are the key lessons you would highlight from your involvement with the VTF?

How, if at all, have any lessons from the VTF programme been used to inform and shape future work?

- In what way are these lessons being applied to regional policy development?

What, if any, good practice from the VTF programme could be applied to other parts of Wales?

- How could any good practice inform other regional development approaches?

# Annex B: Valleys Taskforce area map

