

RHONDDA CYNON TAF COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

**LOCAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN (2006-2021)**

# **Settlement Strategy Background Paper**

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## Introduction

This paper will:

- Explain how the settlement strategy for the Local Development Plan (LDP), consisting of Principal Towns, Key Settlements and Smaller settlements was developed.
- Explain the role different settlements in the hierarchy will play in delivering the Preferred Strategy.
- Explain the development and role of the settlement boundaries in the strategy.

## Context

### National Guidance

#### **People, Places, Futures - The Wales Spatial Plan (Adopted 2004 Updated 2008)**

The Spatial Plan process is exploring how the settlements in South East Wales should develop in the future to achieve its stated goals. 14 hub settlements have been provisionally identified as having a critical role to play in the success of the city-region. These are: Aberdare, Abergavenny, Barry, Blackwood, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Cwmbran/Pontypool, Ebbw Vale, Llantrisant, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, Chepstow, and Pontypridd. These settlements must be successful in their own right and, where appropriate, function as service and employment hubs for surrounding settlements. These hubs will provide the central framework around which

high capacity sustainable transport links will be developed. A wider range of facilities and services, which add to employment opportunities, should be delivered locally within the hub settlements to reduce the overall need to travel.

### Regional Guidance

#### **Heads of the Valleys**

*Turning Heads... A Strategy for the Heads of the Valleys 2020' (June 2006)*

The Heads of the Valleys Strategy outlines a programme for regenerating the northern Valley areas of South East Wales. In Rhondda Cynon Taf the strategy area includes Treorchy, Treherbert, Ferndale, Mountain Ash and Aberdare, all of which are important settlements within the region, this is reflected in their position in the settlement hierarchy.

Aberdare is particularly highlighted as being an important settlement particularly due to its location close to the Brecon Beacons National Park and the A465.

In a recent report, only two towns within the Heads of the Valleys (Merthyr and Aberdare) were included in the list of the 700 most significant retail centres in the UK. These towns in the area need significant investment, as they are often run-down and offer little in the way of entertainment, cultural or leisure opportunities, which the strategy seeks to support.

## **Preferred Strategy**

### **How the Preferred Strategy was developed**

This Preferred Strategy Option emerged directly through community involvement and has the most community support.

The Rhondda Cynon Taf LDP strategy will provide the planning framework within which the Plan's objectives, policies and proposals are to be set. The strategy has been derived having regard to the national, regional and local policy context, social, economic and environmental factors, and the availability of land suitable for development and the unique characteristics of the County Borough. It is clear from an examination of these factors that Rhondda Cynon Taf is an area of great social, economic and environmental diversity.

In order to provide a geographical context for the different socio economic factors at work in Rhondda Cynon Taf and importantly define a strategy area boundary, consideration was given to the following:

- Demographic Factors,
- Housing Market, and
- Characteristics of Settlements

### **Demographic Factors**

The population of Rhondda Cynon Taf has been subject to significant change over the last 30 years. The 1981 census showed the combined areas of Rhondda, Cynon Valley and Taff Ely as having a population of 244,800. The impact of

changes in the labour market that resulted from the closure of operational coalmines during the mid 1980's meant that by 1991 the population had declined by 12,219 to 232,581. The 2001 census shows that the population of Rhondda Cynon Taf had stabilised with a resident population of 231,946.

The apparent stability in the overall population of Rhondda Cynon Taf between 1991 and 2001, however, masks important variation in the population pattern within the County Borough. The 2001 census figures show clearly a decline in the population of 28 electoral wards and growth in the population of the remaining 24 wards.

The Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) published in 2005 identifies multiple deprivation at small area level for the whole of Wales. The index presents deprivation as being made up of 7 distinct dimensions— income; employment; health; education; housing; physical environment; access to services. The IMD shows clearly the geographical spread of deprivation in Rhondda Cynon Taf. The northern part of Rhondda Cynon Taf showed a significant presence of deprivation in terms of income, employment, health, education, housing and access to services. The southern part of Rhondda Cynon Taf showed a significant presence of deprivation in terms of the physical environment.

### **Housing Market**

An examination of recent house building trends in Rhondda Cynon Taf indicate clearly that there are geographical disparities in the housing market.

The replacement Mid Glamorgan Structure Plan (1991–2006) identified a dwelling requirement figures for the 3 former local plan areas as follows;

Rhondda	1,800 Dwellings
Cynon Valley	2,500 Dwellings
Taff Ely	7,400 Dwellings

An examination of the house-building rate for the period 2001 to 2006 inclusive gives a clear insight into the trend in the housing market in Rhondda Cynon Taf. *Table 1* illustrates house-building rates for sites of over 10 units on a local plan basis

*Table 1: House Building Rates for 2001–06*

	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
<b>Rhondda</b>	12	13	13	7	0	33
<b>Cynon</b>	72	68	70	60	42	50
<b>Taff</b>	425	399	646	433	502	200
<b>Total</b>	509	480	729	500	544	283

Between 2001 and 2006 a total of 3,045 dwellings were constructed in Rhondda Cynon Taf. Of these 2,605 dwellings or 85% of new dwellings were constructed in the south of the County Borough.

**The settlement strategy in RCT - a Hybrid Strategy  
– Combined Growth / Local Needs Strategy**

A hybrid option was chosen to meet all the strategy objectives. It would encourage sustainable growth where it is achievable, yet at the same time in areas where potential for large scale growth is constrained, will allow for appropriate expansion of individual settlements, particularly where it can achieve regeneration aims.

It would allow development to accommodate local needs in selective locations would contribute to the viability of centres whilst larger scale development would increase retail catchments. By encouraging a balance of large-scale growth and additional smaller scale expansion there would be less pressure on more environmentally sensitive areas and more opportunities for phased and managed growth.

A spatial strategy that advocates a single approach would be inappropriate and fail to positively address the needs of the County Borough as a whole. The preferred strategy for Rhondda Cynon Taf will therefore advocate a different approach for development in the north and in the south of the County Borough. In doing so the strategy defines and explains the role that principal towns, key settlements and strategic sites will play in achieving the spatial objectives of the plan.

The LDP strategy will seek to promote sustainable regeneration for the County Borough as a whole. The strategy area will divide the Borough into two distinct parts: -

- Northern Strategy Area, and
- Southern Strategy Area

For the purposes of the LDP, in the Northern Strategy Area the emphasis will be on building sustainable communities and halting the process of depopulation and decline. In the Southern Strategy Area the emphasis will be on sustainable growth that benefits Rhondda Cynon Taf as a whole.

### **The North and South Strategies - Key Issues**

A detailed explanation of the development of the preferred strategy and process is contained in the Preferred Strategy Background Paper November 2007.

### **Settlement Hierarchy**

#### **Roles of settlements in delivering the Preferred Strategy**

Settlements have a key role to play in delivering the Preferred Strategy. Our settlements currently serve a broad range of functions from providing daily essentials at a very local level to major regional educational and employment centres.

Within these areas the strategy recognises the important role principal towns and key settlements play in providing services of both local and county importance. Where possible, development will be focussed on the Principal Towns and key settlements of the County Borough in order to support and reinforce the important role these centres play as places for social and economic activity. For the purposes of the LDP strategy, principal towns are defined as Pontypridd, Aberdare and Llantrisant. These towns are important hubs for activity by acting as gateways for new investment, innovation and sustainable development.

The principal towns of Aberdare and Llantrisant are areas in which significant new housing; employment and retail development will be accommodated. Topographical constraints mean that significant growth will be difficult to accommodate within the principal town of Pontypridd. The emphasis in this area will be on consolidation and redevelopment. Land for residential development to accommodate the needs of the growing population of Pontypridd will be provided in the surrounding settlements of Church Village, Llantwit Fardre and Beddau.

Key settlements are geographically smaller and less strategically significant than the Principal Towns, nevertheless these settlements provide important services and act as centres for commercial and community activity. For the purpose of the LDP key settlements are defined as Tonypany, Tonyrefail, Treorchy, Mountain Ash, Porth, Ferndale, Llanharan and Hirwaun. These key settlements will act as the focal point for growth in Rhondda Cynon Taf over the plan period. The settlements of Llanharan and Hirwaun are presently less significant than the other key settlements identified in the strategy. These areas are however, in excellent strategic locations and are capable of assimilating significant additional residential and commercial development.

The existing settlements of Rhondda Cynon Taf already play an important role in the Borough and already have established functions. The aim of the preferred strategy is to build on the roles of these settlements and continue to

support them to maintain and improve on the success they have achieved.

The Council undertook an assessment of the roles and functions of settlements. More detailed information including the results of the assessment can be found in the Roles and Functions Topic Paper (March 2008). This sought to provide a qualitative and quantitative understanding of settlements using empirical evidence. Using this assessment the Council identified 3 categories of settlements: Principal towns, key settlements and smaller settlements.

### **Principal Towns**

A Principal Town is defined in this context as the highest order settlement in the settlement hierarchy. These are settlements of regional importance and have higher order services and facilities. They are hubs of activities with convergence of public transport, good infrastructure and are areas of high investment. The Principal Towns are also identified in the Wales Spatial Plan as important areas capable of assimilating regeneration and investment.

Three Principal Towns were identified in the Preferred Strategy in Aberdare, Llantrisant (including the Talbot Green area) and Pontypridd. In identifying these areas their characteristics and roles and functions were analysed which produced a hierarchy of settlements within the Borough. Principal Towns are those with higher order functions, have a range of services including professional and administrative, have a range of retail facilities, and are accessible through a

range of travel modes. They also act as a transport hub to the valleys and beyond.

Principal towns will play an important role in the delivery of the preferred strategy by creating areas in which significant new housing; employment and retail development will be accommodated. Topographical constraints mean that significant growth will be difficult to accommodate within the Principal Town of Pontypridd. The emphasis in this area will be on consolidation and redevelopment. Land for residential development to accommodate the needs of the growing population of Pontypridd will be provided in the surrounding settlements of Church Village, Llantwit Fardre and Beddau.

Principal Towns were identified by developing a methodology, which assessed the role and function of each settlement. The methodology focussed on services and facilities in the towns and also what role and function the settlement has in the hierarchy. Principal towns are those with higher order functions and services.

The selection of Aberdare, Llantrisant and Pontypridd was further supported by the Wales Spatial Plan, which identified these settlements as hub settlements. The plan aims to ensure that these settlements are successful in their own right and, where appropriate, function as service and employment hubs for surrounding settlements.

### **Alternatives Considered**

During the designation of Principal Towns other settlements were considered. Principal Towns have to fulfill a role of

serving a Regional area. They have certain higher order functions located within them in order to meet their role and function. Other settlements in Rhondda Cynon Taf whilst being important and serving a certain function, only three settlements possess the services, functions and strategic location to be called a Principal Town.

Principal Towns should have good transport links across the area to encourage new investment. Along with this public transport links to the wider borough and wider region have to be sufficient to allow people to travel by different modes of transport. It is also important that there is land available within or near Principal Towns for expansion and new development within these areas.

All of the major settlements were looked at and analyzed in this way in order to make sure the correct settlements had been selected.

### **Key settlements**

A key settlement is geographically smaller and less strategically significant than a Principal Towns, nevertheless these settlements provide important services and act as centres for commercial and community activity. Key settlements will act as the focal point for growth in Rhondda Cynon Taf over the plan period.

The settlements of Llanharan and Hirwaun are presently less significant than the other key settlements identified in the strategy. These areas are however, in excellent strategic

locations and are capable of assimilating significant additional residential and commercial development.

Key settlements will play an important role in the delivery of the preferred strategy by providing support for Principal Towns and servicing a local area. Development will be focussed on these settlements, as they are already sustainable and thriving centres within the Borough.

The key settlement centres of Rhondda Cynon Taf are expected to act as district retail centres, where the emphasis will be on convenience shopping with an element of day-to-day comparison shopping. Key settlement status also relates to the population size of a settlement as well as its function.

Key settlements were identified by the services and facilities that exist in them.

The services that define a key settlement include:

- The availability of a school (primary and secondary);
- The availability of a Post Office service;
- The Proximity to an 'A' classification road highway network; and
- Frequent public transport (train and bus services).

The facilities that define a key settlement include:

- A convenience store;
- A GP Practice;
- A3 Use (A public house; Restaurant, Takeaway);
- A Place of Worship; and
- A Public Library.

### **Smaller settlements**

Smaller Settlements are defined as local and neighbourhood centres, which provide local retail and services such as convenience goods, primary schools to local areas. They provide the 'top-up' shopping, which supports the key settlements.

Smaller settlements will play an important role in the delivery of the Core Strategy by meeting the following objectives:

- Protecting, where appropriate, their role as local employment centres by safeguarding sites that provide opportunities for local businesses to develop and expand; and
- To retain and reinforce their role in helping to meet the needs of local communities by preventing the loss of existing facilities and services, and allowing for appropriate provision of additional facilities and services.

The focus of development in local and neighbourhood centres should be assisting re-use and small scale provision of new development. Such developments could include the re-use of existing buildings for appropriate forms of employment or community facilities.

In identifying Smaller Settlements, the settlements that were rated 'poor' were deemed to be unsustainable, in unsustainable locations for new development, with low levels of community facilities. Therefore settlement boundary was not identified around those settlements. The settlements

without a settlement boundary are Blaencwm, Coed-Ely, Groesfaen and Talygarn. Previously Blaencwm had been considered as a part of Treherbert, however, its physical separation from the settlement would mean that to allow Blaencwm to grow further would exacerbate unsustainable patterns of development.

### **Position of towns in hierarchy**

There are iterative relationships between the preferred strategy and the settlement strategy. The strategy is informed by settlements in the Borough, and the delivery of the strategy is dependent on the roles settlements play and how they will develop over the plan period.

Empirical identification of Principal Towns, key settlements and smaller settlements means that the settlement strategy is not intended to favour one settlement over another. It is not selecting one potential growth area over another; rather it is providing an understanding of roles settlements can play and potential to develop over the plan period. Availability of developable land for example is an important consideration.

On this basis a principal town is not 'better' than a key settlement, or the lack of a Principal Town in an area does not signify an intention by the Council to not seek development in an area. The LDP will allow consideration of proposals across the entire plan area. In principal, proposals including significant proposals, that support the delivery of the strategy and are appropriate forms of development will be supported in key settlements and elsewhere.

## Settlement Boundaries

### Purpose of settlement boundaries

Residential settlement boundaries provide certainty for members of the public and developers about the development limits of urban areas, they maintain the integrity and character of towns and villages and protect the countryside from incremental urbanisation. The LDP aims to restrict the development of new dwellings outside the urban areas of the authority. The Borough currently has three separate local plans with three different policy areas but the introduction of a new Plan will now require the authority to produce new policy boundaries for the borough.

### Definition of settlement boundaries

The LDP will employ a different approach to the application of residential settlement boundaries in the Northern and Southern strategy areas. In the Northern Strategy Area, except the Principal Town of Aberdare, development will be permitted within and, where appropriate, adjoining defined residential settlement boundaries. In the Southern Strategy Area development will only be permitted within defined boundaries. This approach recognises the important role that development of small sites play in ensuring the provision of new housing in the Northern Strategy area. Development will not be permitted in either the Northern or Southern Strategy Areas in small settlements that do not have defined residential settlement boundaries.

### Starting point - Where did the sites come from?

In September 2005 the authority wrote to potential landowners, identified agents and developers giving them the opportunity to identify and promote any areas of land they considered suitable for residential or commercial development. The deadline for the submission of sites for inclusion in the LDP process was 31<sup>st</sup> August 2006.

The authority also asked for any sites outside the existing settlement boundaries of the County Borough, as identified in the authority's three local plans, to be brought forward for consideration and possible inclusion within the settlement limits.

### Classification

Sites of less than 0.3 of a hectare had not been considered as part of the Candidate Site assessment process but were instead considered when the Council undertook the process of defining residential settlement boundaries.

There are four settlements in the borough that have no designated settlement boundaries in the Deposit Draft LDP, Blaencwm, Talygarn, Groesfaen and Coed Ely. These settlements were omitted from the list because they fail to provide basic local services and therefore are considered to be unsustainable locations for new residential development.

### Methodology

*Deposit plan*

The methodology employed for the Settlement Boundary Review required consideration of the relationship between the candidate site and the existing urban area.

The Settlement Boundary Review has assessment criteria that are similar to that of the first stage Candidate Site Assessment methodology. The issues assessed under the methodology included the current use and condition of a site, its topography, and its relationship with adjacent land uses, access and other possible constraints that would prevent any development of a site. The assessment determined whether or not the site should be included in the urban area or considered to be part of the countryside.

Candidate Sites adjoining the existing settlement boundaries that were approved for housing allocations were included within the new settlement boundary. Previous housing allocations that were considered suitable to be carried forward into the new LDP were also included inside the boundary.

With regard to the strategic sites of each strategy area, the settlement boundaries were extended to encompass areas of each site that were allocated for residential use.

#### *Alternative sites*

From the site allocation representations that were submitted during the Deposit Plan Consultation, 103 amendments to the settlement boundary were identified. Some of these sites were previously settlement boundary sites that were

assessed during the original settlement boundary review. The remaining sites were new requests to amend the settlement boundary.

The sites were assessed using the same Settlement Boundary methodology used at the Pre-deposit Plan stage. From the list of 103 sites, only 7 amendments to the settlement boundary were recommended.

#### **Planning applications**

While reviewing the settlement boundaries of each Local Plan area, extant planning permissions for residential developments adjacent to the boundaries were identified.

Sites with extant planning permission within the last five years were included with the boundaries, as the principle for development of these sites has been approved by the Council.

Since the previous Pre-Deposit Plan settlement boundary review, there were instances where planning applications had been approved on Alternative Sites that were seeking settlement boundary amendments. For consistency, the sites with extant planning permissions were also taken inside the settlement boundary and the Alternative Sites were approved.

#### **Anomalies**

At the Alternative Site Consultation stage the Council originally advertised the Mountain Ash Hospital site in Part A of the Alternative Site Register as a 'New Site' for residential

development (AS (N) 102). However, the site was not submitted as a 'New Site' but instead was submitted to be included within the residential settlement boundary and to be shown in Part B of the register. As such the site was assessed against the same criteria as the other sites in Part B of the Register.

Allotment gardens, parks, recreation grounds and cemeteries adjoining the existing local plan settlement boundaries were excluded from the new settlement boundaries. This was to protect the local amenity of communities.

School buildings at edge of settlements were taken inside the settlement boundary.