

Rhondda Fach Strategic NCN route 881 development: Proposed Route



Discussion document



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March 2019



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Introduction

Rhondda Cynon Taf Council are proposing to construct a walking and cycling route along the Rhondda Fach Valley between Stanleytown and Maerdy. This route will be approximately 7km long and will have coherent, direct, safe, comfortable and attractive route qualities as set out in the Active Travel Act (ATA) Guidance. Sustrans has been commissioned to complete the first three elements of route development in the Rhondda Fach Valley. These are route options analysis, ecology considerations, and community engagement.

As part of the original proposal it was suggested that the route would be split into 3 sections. However after considering the route options on site this was considered impractical and we have therefore consider the whole route as a standalone section. This route would become part of the National Cycle Network (NCN), designated route number 881 and it would be known as the Rhondda Fach Trail. It will be a continuation of the existing route between Porth and Stanleytown.

General information about the scheme

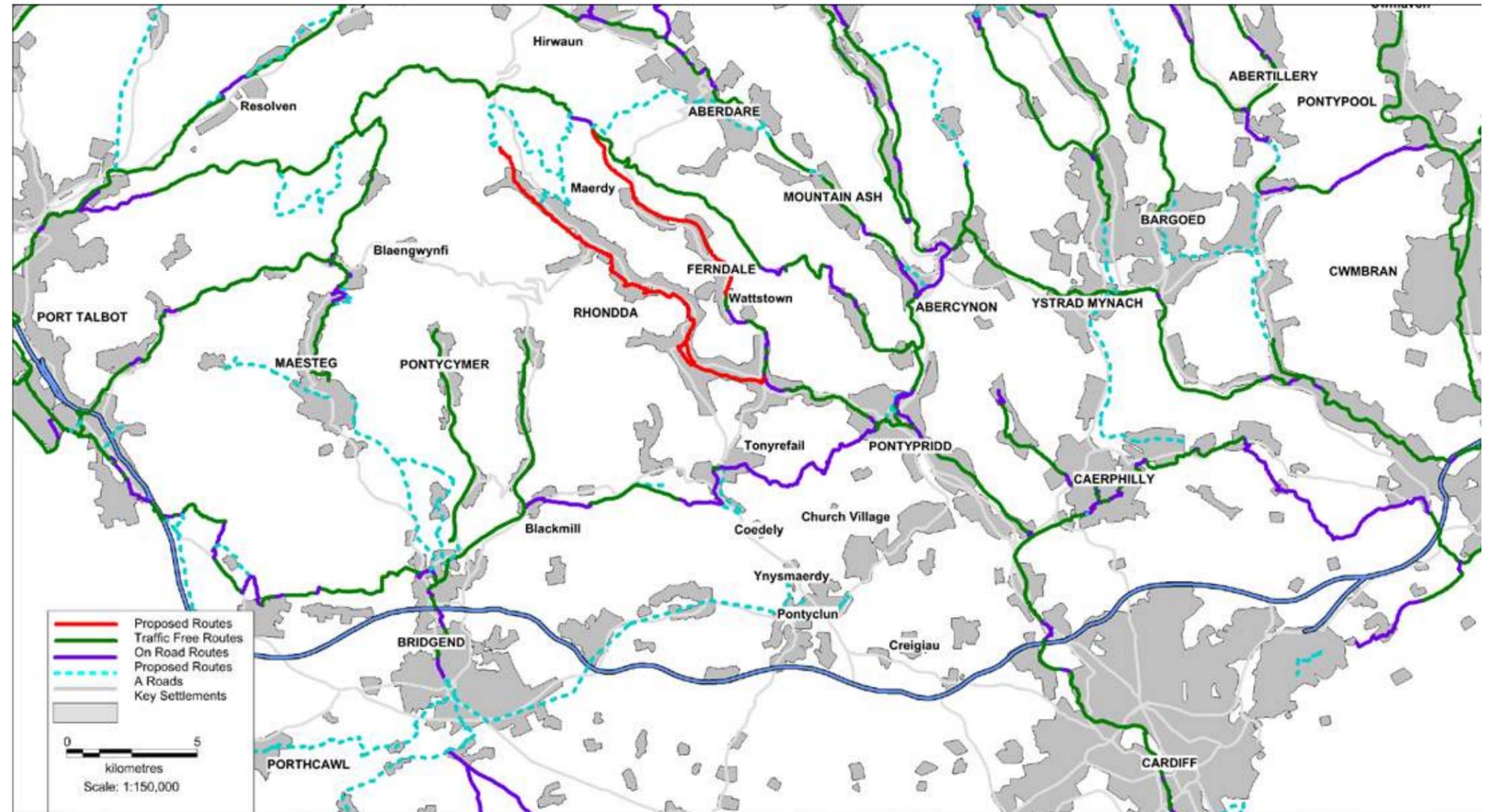
There is already a number of paths and a disused railway line along the valley floor. Much of this route is in poor condition and is only known to local walkers and cyclist (mainly mountain bikers because of the poor surface conditions). These routes would link to existing routes going north and south and have excellent (in the main) gradients for easy cycle use. They are however isolated from most of the built up residential area. Use of existing highways for the route would always involve the main A4233 and it is impossible to overcome the steep gradients of the area.

Context

Four options have been suggested for the route alignment and they vary from a “do nothing” option to heavily engineered solutions.

Using the disused railway alignment appears to be the obvious choice for the route however as part of the options analysis this has just been one of the options considered.

Regional context of the route



Contains Ordnance Survey data © Crown copyright and database right 2016

Considerations

The analysis has considered land issues and importantly how this potential “spine route” will link into the community. Other considerations include:

- Connections to the network and local communities and destinations
- Directness
- Continuity of the route, is it easy to follow.
- Gradients
- Speed differences between traffic and cyclists
- Traffic volumes

- Accident data
- Collision risks and kerbside activity that may result in an accident
- Proposals that may lead to complicated designs
- Potential surface condition and width
- Isolation
- Conflict with other users.
- Cost
- Land ownership
- Deliverability

Gradients

Using GIS techniques the flatness of the land has been analysed and areas with a gradient of less than 5% (1 in 20) have been mapped out. Ideally the main route would remain within these flat areas to provide a route with an acceptable gradient. As would be expected much of this flatter land follows the alignment of the disused railway line.

Future proof design

The proposed design will not have an impact on future transportation schemes because there is either alternative space or enough space to construct a walking and cycling path alongside a bus route or light

rail line. It has been assumed that any future schemes will use the alignment of the disused railway line. The proposal from Maerdy to Ferndale follows the existing riverside path and then crosses over the river to pass behind Taff Street, therefore having minimal impact on the disused railway formation. Here the route might have to change alignment onto Taff Street because of the limited space to the rear of the houses. The route would then re-join the railway formation to pass under Station Road Bridge.

From Ferndale (Station Road Bridge) to Stanleytown the railway formation has sufficient space for both a walking and cycling route and a bus route or light rail line.

Option 1 – do minimum

This proposal would use existing paths and bridges to create a traffic free route alignment and would be accompanied by the installation of minimal signage to guide users along the route. The route would follow the existing path that joins the A4233 just north of Maerdy and then would drop down to cross over the river just north of Ferndale. Passing behind Taff Street and under the Station Road bridge the route would continue to another existing bridge (just north of the sports centre) and again cross the river. Following the path on the west side of the river it would join the disused railway just after passing under the Tylorstown footbridge. It then follows the disused railway line (passing over the river again) to join the existing NCN 881 path at Stanleytown.

Benefits

- A scheme that can be implemented quickly that does not preclude a future schemes;
- The route is direct
- low cost to design and construct, only signage and some minor repairs required;
- Straight forward to deliver.
- Should be easy to follow.
- Formalises a situation along a route that is already used by walkers and cyclists.
- Links existing routes
- Traffic Free (accident data, collision risks with vehicles, traffic speeds

and volumes are not an issue)

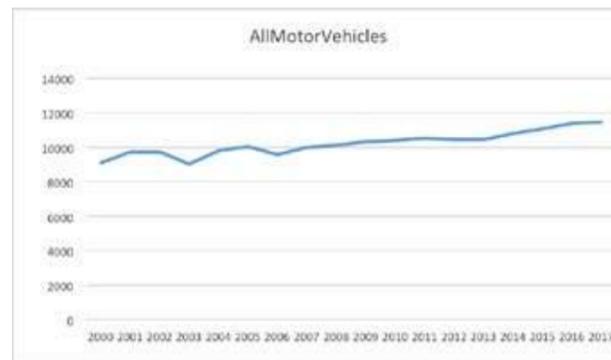
- Suitable gradients (except for one short section)
- Simple design
- Land ownership is either with Railway Paths Limited or RCT

Detriments

- The route is isolated
- Conflict with other users is likely because of some narrow paths
- Proposal does not link to the local community
- Unsafe and not comfortable because of the poor surface. Increased travel times.
- Does not meet current active travel act guidance and therefore unlikely to attract funding.
- Likely to be seen as a very poor route that would not encourage modal shift and not attract visitors to the area.

Option 2 - On highway route

This option would use a combination of the side roads, back lanes and in some areas the only option is the main A4233. Please see map later in the report for the potential alignment. This route would probably only be used by very experienced cyclists and in this case the main A4233 would be used in preference to other routes especially going down the valley. To use a number of quieter roads the route is not direct and because of a number of one way streets around Ferndale some sections are very steep. Overall the route has a poor gradient profile. Probably OK for coming down the valley but not for up! This route would not comply with current ATA guidance and because of current traffic volumes on the A4233 would



be a “Critical Fail” under the audit criteria set out in the ATA guidance standards. That criteria sets a threshold of Traffic volumes at 10,000 AADF (Annual Average Daily Flow) above which it is a critical fail. 2017 figures show traffic volumes to be 11500.

Benefits

- A scheme that can be implemented relatively quickly that does not preclude future schemes;
- Links well to the local community
- Low cost to design and construct, only signage and some minor repairs required;
- Links existing routes
- Route is overlooked and not isolated
- No land ownership issues

Detriments

- The route is not direct
- Does not meet current active travel act guidance and therefore unlikely to attract funding.
- Likely to be seen as a very poor route that would not encourage modal shift and not attract visitors to the area.
- A number of unacceptable steep gradients, some on the busy A4233
- Would be perceived to be unsafe because of traffic volumes. Traffic volumes are above 10,000 AADF (Annual Average Daily Flow) and would be considered a critical fail when compared to the Active Travel Guidance.
- Would be difficult to follow with the proposed route using a number of side streets.
- Gradients are steep in places and off putting to most people
- High possibility of conflict between cyclists with traffic and kerbside activity.
- Road designs may become complicated to improve conditions for cyclists

Option 3 existing river side path

This route is part of a network of paths that lie between the main residential areas and the west side of the river. The route would follow a (mainly) wide existing path that joins the A4233 just north of Maerdy. This path has recently been restored to a rough forestry type track after recent works to install a new water supply main. The path narrows and drops down to exit onto station road near Ferndale Rugby Club. Once over the road follow the entrance to Greenwood park and join the riverside path. The path joins the existing cycle route in Stanley town after one steep up and down section. The proposal would be to upgrade to ATA guidance standards with a sealed surface with a minimum width of 2.5m.

Benefits

- Makes use of existing paths
- Will not preclude other future travel schemes
- Follows the alignment of recent water main works making it easy to upgrade
- Links existing routes and links could be provided into the community
- Route is direct
- Straightforward to follow
- Traffic Free (accident data, collision risks with vehicles, traffic speeds and volumes are not an issue)
- Easy straightforward design.
- Low conflict
- Costs although much more expensive than options 1 and 2 can be kept low be the use of existing paths and works that have been carried out by the laying of the new water main.
- Land ownership all RCT

Detriments

- Does not meet current active travel act guidance and therefore unlikely to attract funding.
- The route is isolated and not overlooked
- Need to upgrade link route into the community increasing costs

- Gradient is poor in some areas.
- Some sections could not be upgraded to ATA standards because of space restrictions.
- Deliverability, straightforward in most areas except for the section to the north and south of Ferndale Rugby Club.
- Refurbishment of existing structures along the route if required

Option 4 disused railway line

The railway line operated until the closure of the Maerdy colliery in 1986 and is now in the ownership of Railway Paths Limited (RPL) who have a very close relationship with Sustrans. The railway has been constructed mainly on the east side of the river and has a number of structures that include retaining walls, culverts and five bridges. One bridge has been completely washed away but the other four can easily be brought back into use.

Benefits

- Makes use of an existing structure and land form
- Design can be incorporated into future travel schemes
- Follows the alignment of recent water main works making it easy to upgrade
- Links existing routes
- Route is direct
- Straightforward to follow
- Traffic Free (accident data, collision risks with vehicles, traffic speeds and volumes are not an issue)
- Easy straightforward design.
- Low conflict
- Costs although much more expensive than options 1 and 2 can be kept low by the use of existing paths and works that have been carried out by the laying of the new water main.
- Land ownership all RPL

Detriments

- The route is isolated
- Difficult in some areas to provide links into the community
- Cost of replacing one bridge and refurbishing others.
- Refurbishment of existing structures along the route if required

Preferred Option

Option 1 could be used while the route is being developed but will be unacceptable in the long term because of its very poor surface, some poor gradients and would not be up to ATA guidance standards.

Option 2 on highway route would only be used by the most experienced cyclists (the ones using it now) and because of current traffic volumes on the A4233 would be a “Critical Fail” under the audit criteria set out in the ATA guidance standards. So this is not an option.

Both option 3 (poor gradients and narrow) and option 4 (Missing bridge) have issues but a combination of both options can overcome these problems. The preferred option is set out in the following pages makes use of option 3, the riverside path to overcome the missing rail bridge and uses the railway formation, option 4, and its existing bridges to overcome narrow and steep sections of option 3. A very important aspect to this route is how it connects with the community and potential links are described below.

Links (see maps pages 9 to 13)

Connecting the main route into the community is the most important aspect of the proposed scheme. Eleven links along the route have been identified, some are just for walkers and abled bodied people but wherever possible multi-use links will be put in place. These links would also be crucial if an alternative transport scheme was constructed in addition to the walking and cycling route such as a bus corridor or light rail link. The links are.

Community link - into Maerdy, to be developed with stakeholders and residence.

- Link 1 From Blake Street to the “Dog Pond”,** refurbish existing steps. Walking only.
- Link 2 From Blake Street to high point of existing riverside path.** Construct new multi-user path.
- Link 3 From Ferndale Community School to path.** Link may be steep in places and work needs to be carried out to discover if the gradients can be reduced. Construct new multi-user route over private land designated for housing development and upgrade existing tracks.
- Link 4 From river bridge to Avon street.** Upgrade existing track for multi-use.
- Link 5 Taff Street multi-user link between houses.**
- Link 6 From Station Road Bridge to Pleasant street via highway.** Multi-user.
- Link 7 From River Bridge to Sports Centre.** Upgrade existing path. Multi-user.
- Link 8 From riverside path to Park View. Upgrade surface and re-engineer to improve gradient.** Multi-user.
- Link 9 From disused railway line formation to footbridge (east side).** Walking only
- Link 10 From disused railway line formation to footbridge (west side).** Walking only
- Link 11 From disused railway line to health centre.** Upgrade surface and re-engineer to improve gradient. Multi-user.

Land ownership

Land for the proposed routes and links are currently either owned by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council (RCT) or Railway Paths Limited (RPL). There is however one short section of land on the proposed link to Ferndale Community School in private ownership (CYM712530)

Ecology (See separate report)

See also Maerdy Trunk Main, Preliminary Ecological Appraisal Report (BS150317) and Maerdy Trunk Main Phase 2 Ecology Surveys Report (DC170717) carried out by Greg Jones

Costs and Phasing

Costs will be established as the scheme develops.

It would be possible to construct the path using a phased approach. Suggested sections would be Maerdy to Ferndale and its associated links and Ferndale to Stanleytown and its associated links.

Signing

The proposed route needs to be sufficiently well signed so that it is easy to follow in both directions. A balance should be struck between providing clear and reliable information, avoiding visual clutter and unnecessary maintenance liability that excessive signing can cause. Care is needed when considering their design and placement. Cyclists Dismount or End of Route signs are not appropriate and will not be necessary on this route. Cycle specific route signing also raises awareness of cyclists amongst other road users and helps to promote the route. It is estimated that 40 signs will be needed to be required to effectively provide good directional signing. At each end of the route destination signage will be provided on conventional metal sign posts. Signs on the common needs to be in keeping with the area and short robust posts with minimal signing are recommended.



Examples of directional signs and short robust posts

Future maintenance

A route that is kept in good condition will be more useful, attractive and popular than one allowed to deteriorate. It will promote walking and cycling. Maintenance can sometimes seem like an afterthought compared to the exciting world of designing and building new routes, but having invested time and money by building the route, it is important that it remains attractive to users. Thinking about who will use the route – will horses ride along it, will tractors cross it, how will maintenance vehicles access the path (and turn)? Pedestrians and cyclists don't normally cause a great deal of wear and tear. It is often other users and the weather that have more of an impact on the condition of the path.

Maintenance should be considered as part of the route development process long before construction starts. A thoughtful design will mean less maintenance in the future. For this route a sealed tarmac surface is proposed at a width of 2.5m. The surface will have a long life needing little maintenance.

A question often asked by funders is how will you maintain the investment they are making? Sometimes money can be put aside from the capital source into a separate fund for future maintenance. Irrespective of what the ultimate arrangement will be, it is essential that the project team has agreed the future maintenance arrangements early in the project's development. More details on maintenance can be found here: <http://www.sustrans.org.uk/our-services/what-we-do/route-design-and-construction/route-design-resources/maintenance-walking-and>.

Sustrans Volunteers recruited from local communities will be able to help with some aspects of maintenance including checking signing, and collecting litter and cutting back vegetation on some traffic-free sections.

Consultation

An initial meeting was held with local councillors to discuss plans in detail prior to public consultation. Councillors unable to attend were contacted by phone and email giving them the opportunity to comment. Councillors were supportive of the project. It was demonstrated to the councillors that the issues raised would be address by the design of the route

Public consultation was carried out via Rhondda Cynon Taf's Council Web Site (<https://www.rctcbc.gov.uk/EN/GetInvolved/Consultations/CurrentConsultations/ActiveTravelProposalsfortheRhonddaFach.aspx>) and through a series of six public events. Conversations were held with 53 people. The events were held at:

- 4#%#19 Ferndale Library, 10am to 12pm
- 4#%#19 Teifi House, Maerdy 1pm to 3pm
- %#%#19 Tylorstown Welfare 9am to 12pm
- 16#%#19 Pontygwaith Community Centre, 2.30pm to 4.30pm
- 22#%#% Rhondda Fach Leisure Centre 5pm to 7pm
- 24#%#% Rhondda Fach Leisure Centre 5pm to 7pm

Points Raised

Project Support

- Overwhelming support for the project, all consultees were positive about the proposals.

Main Concerns

- Will it stop future construction of a new road. Consultees were shown how the alignment of the disused railway line could be used to construct both cycle path and a parallel corridor for a new road or rail/bus route
- The present poor state of existing tracks after Welsh Water had laid the new water main. Both Sustrans and RCT have contacted Welsh Water to insist that the path is improved. Sustrans has received numerous complaints about the present state of the path.
- Illegal use of motorbikes and can areas be set aside for them
- Ensure that there is good links and access controls allow legitimate users to access the route easily.
- Concerns about conflict between users (walkers/cyclists/dog-walkers)

Other suggestions

- Parallel Mountain Bike Route and skills area.
- Additional link to the area of Rhondda Sports Centre. - Route was resurveyed and there is an existing route. However this is very steep but could be upgraded, but only for abled bodied walkers because of the steep gradient.

Conclusions

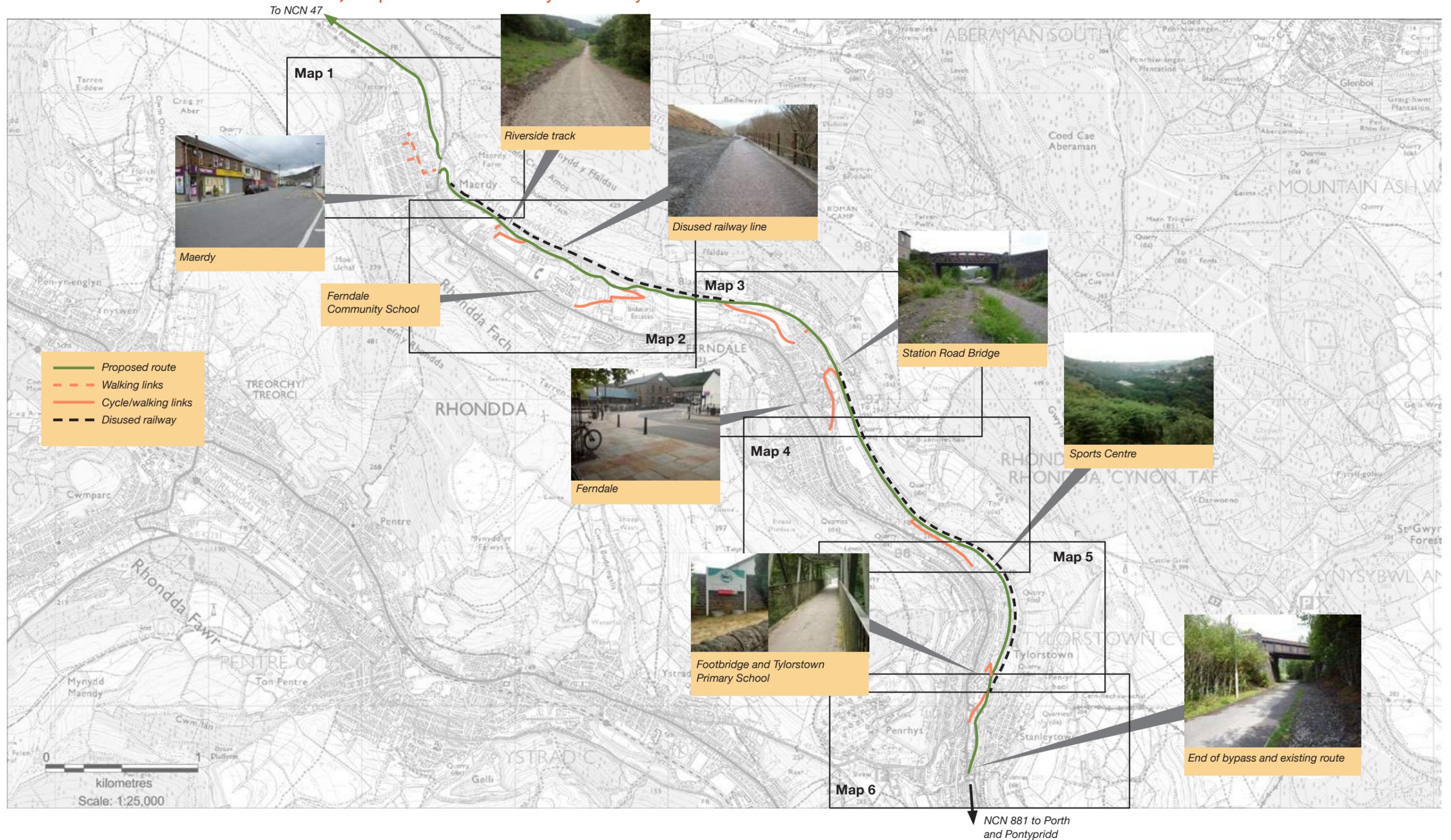
There is overwhelming political and public support to construct this route as soon as possible to provide a high quality walking and cycling route and to resolve the issues raised by recent water main works.

There are few barriers to the main routes construction however the key to the success of the route will be how the local community is connect to it and how visitors are encouraged to stop and support the local community. The report sets out suggestions for these connections.

Next Steps

- Commission and complete in the correct time frames any additional ecological studies recommended in the Preliminary Ecological Assessment (PEA).
- Treat invasive species in areas that co-incide with the proposed route that were highlighted in Dwr Cymru ecological reports
- Carry out suitable topographical studies to inform the design of the steep section just north of Ferndale and proposed links.
- Complete suitable designs that can be submitted for planning permission.
- Apply for planning permission.
- Review funding opportunities for construction and if available prepare bids

Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown

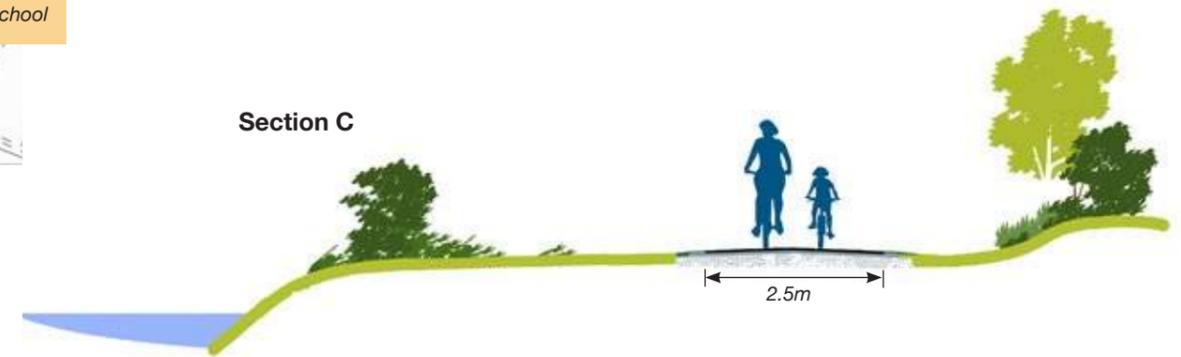
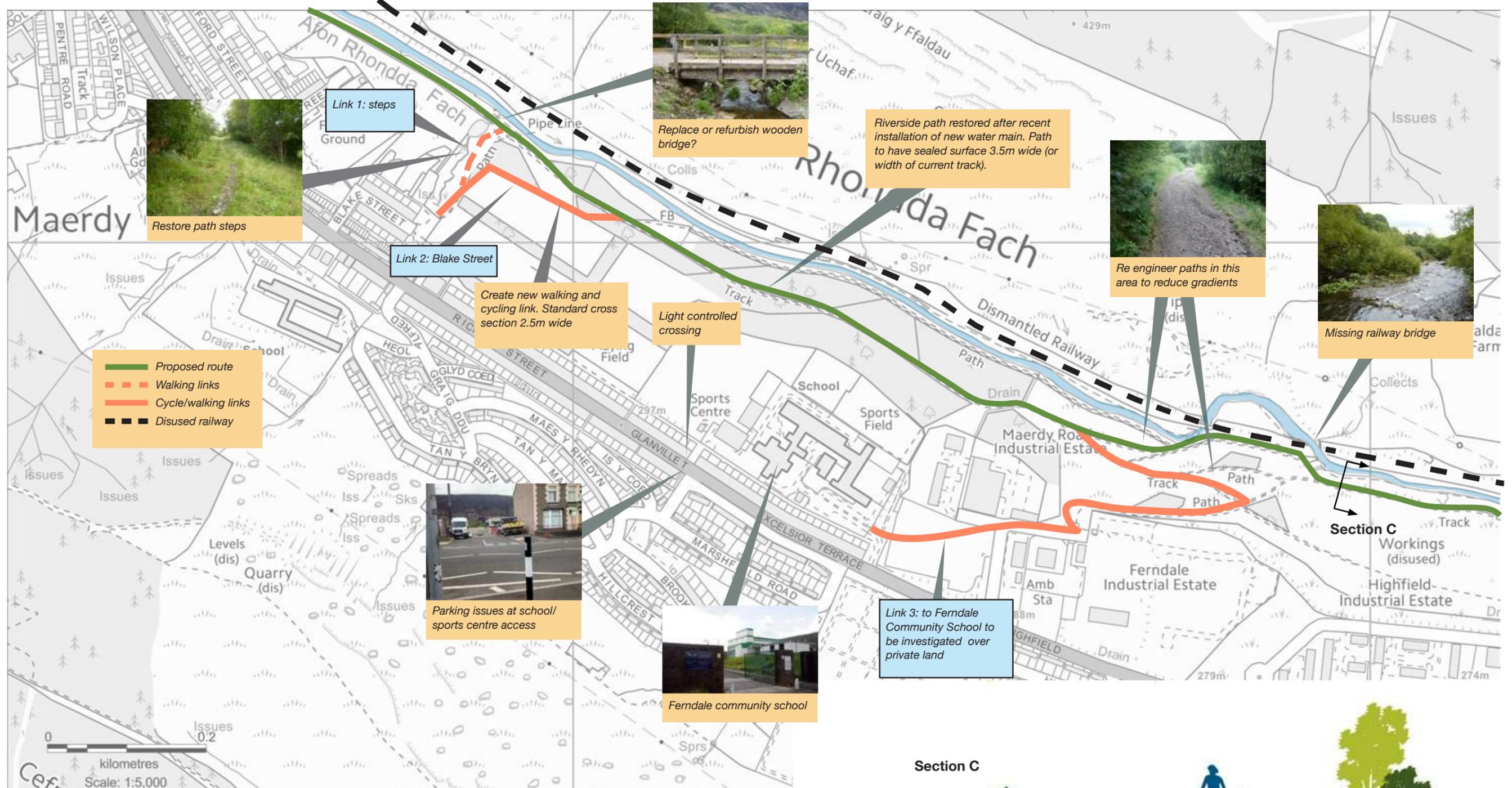


Map 1 - Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown

To Neath Via NCN47

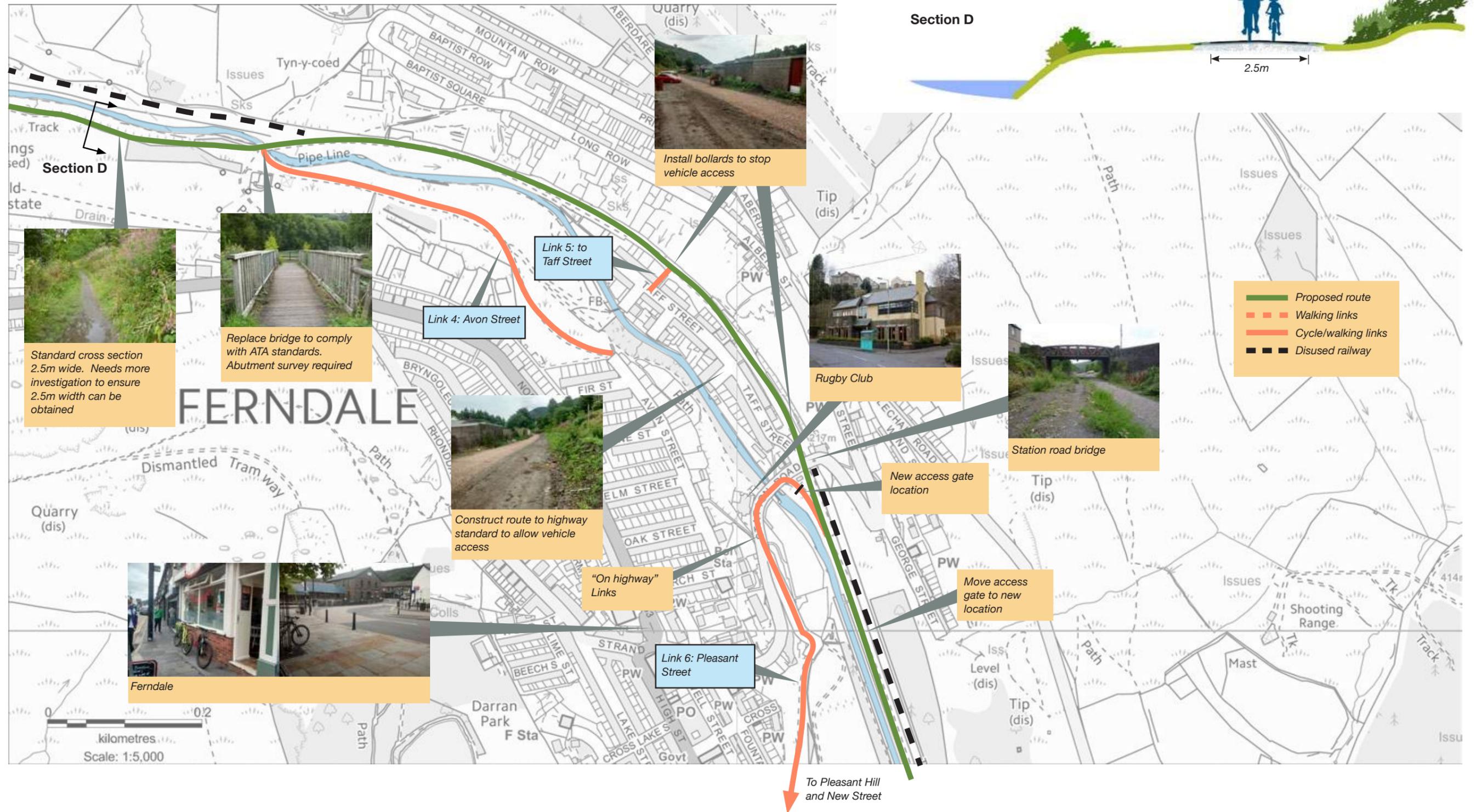


Map 2 - Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown

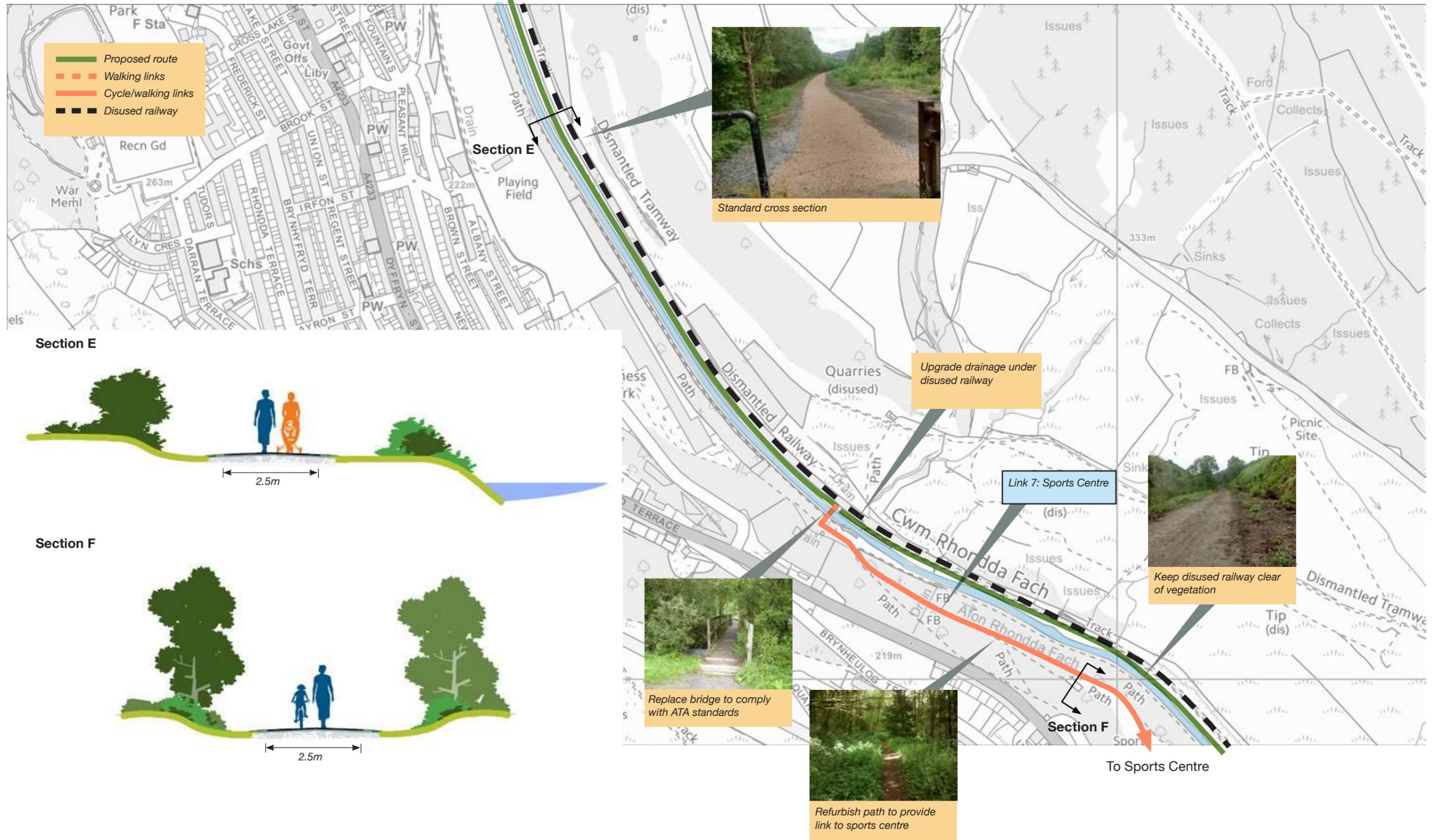


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Map 3 Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown



Map 4 Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown



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Map 5 Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown

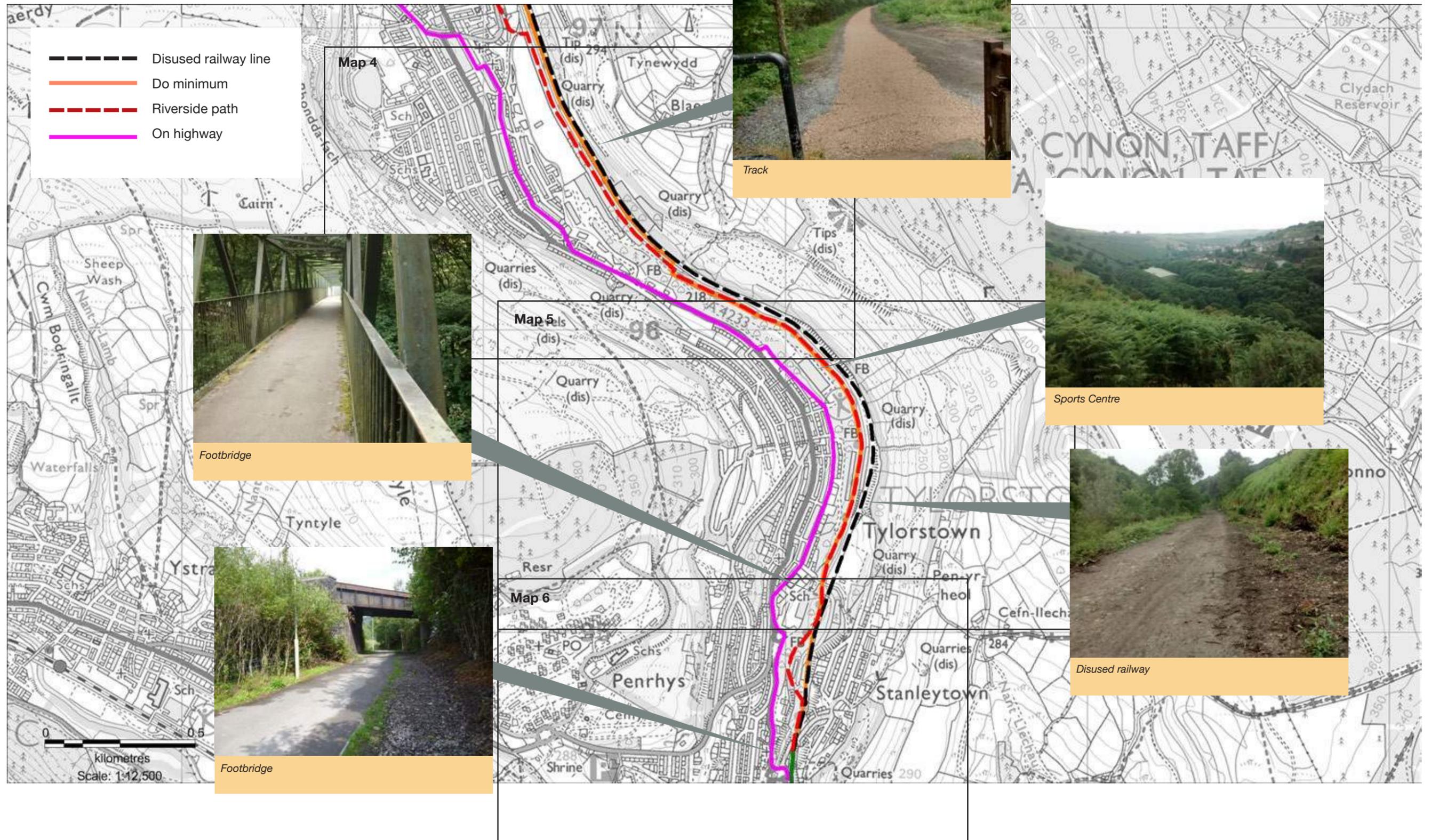


Map 6 Rhondda Fach Trail – NCN Route 881, Proposed Route Maerdy to Stanleytown



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Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Route Options - Overall Map 2

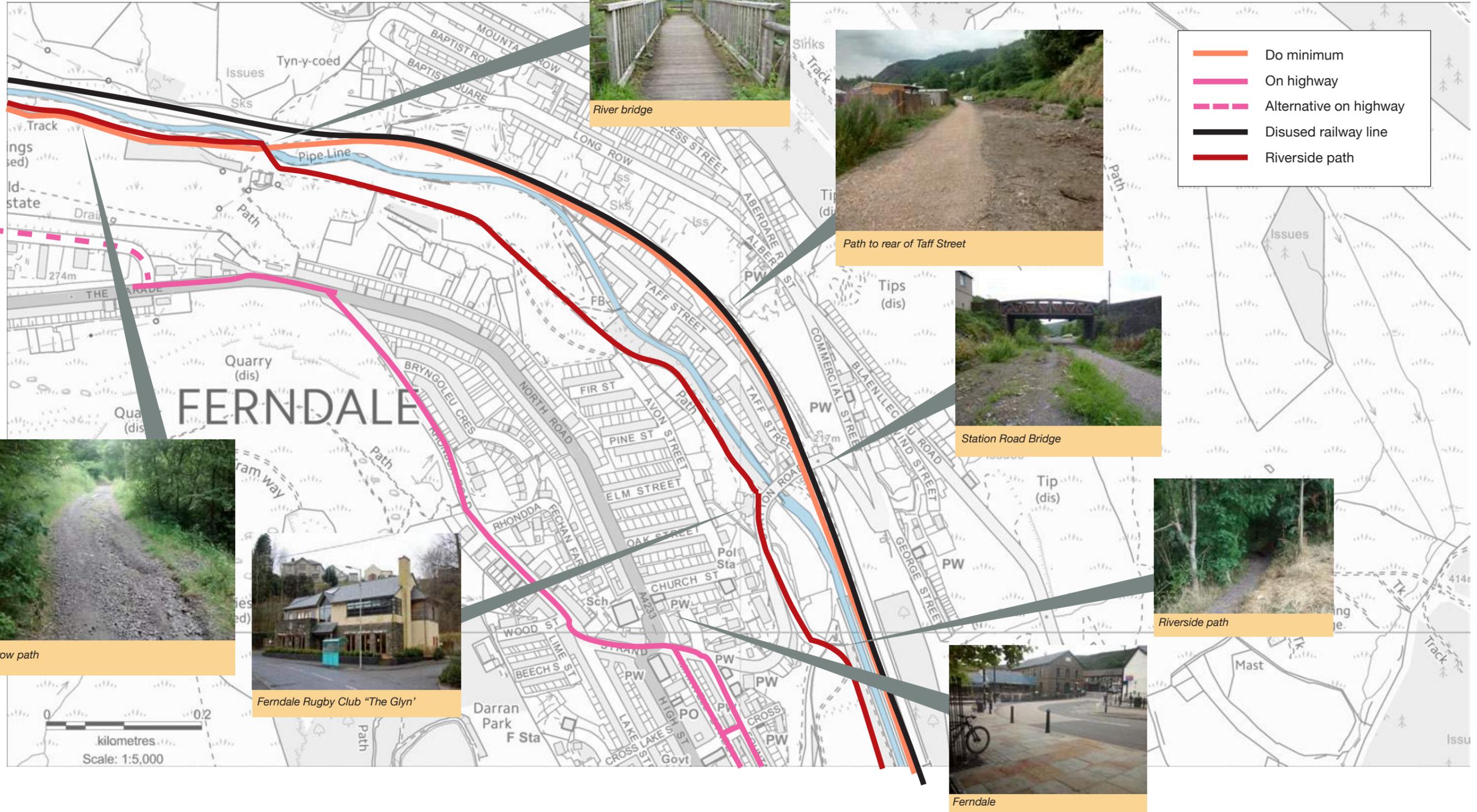


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Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Route Options - Map 1



Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Route Options - Map 3



Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Route Options - Map 4



Track looking north to Ferndale



Track after installation of water main



Greenwood Park



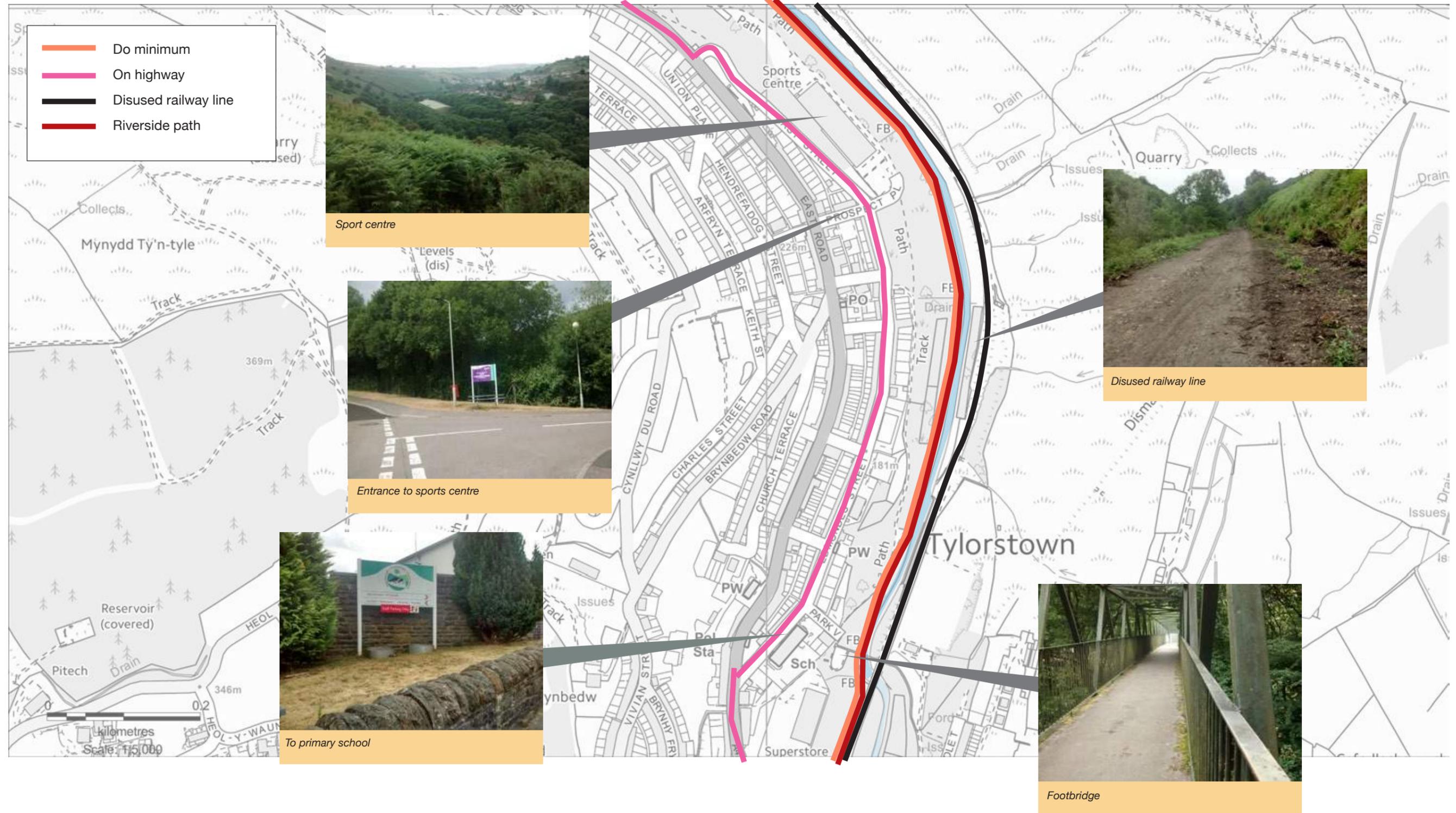
Wooden river bridge



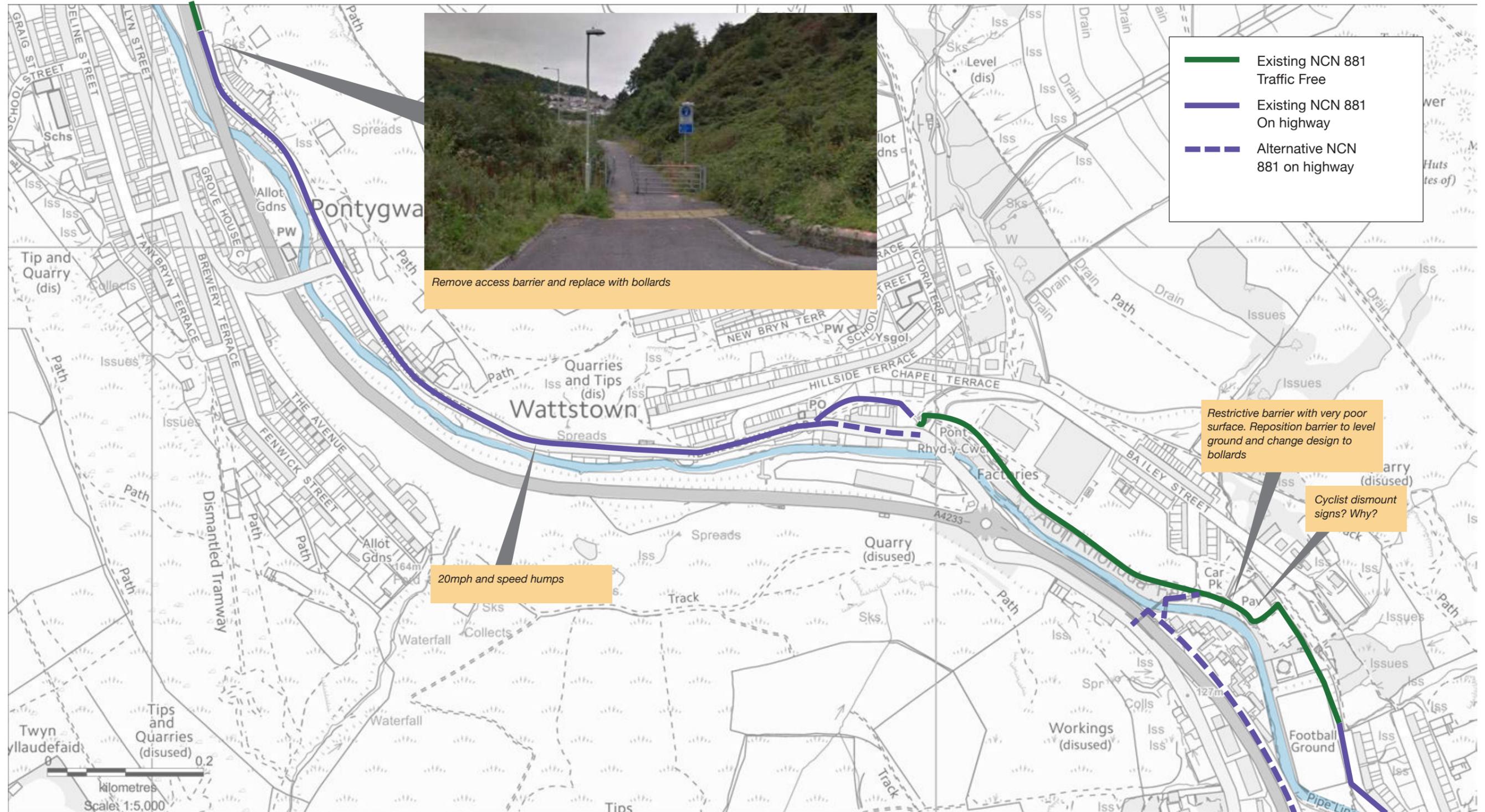
Mining memorial

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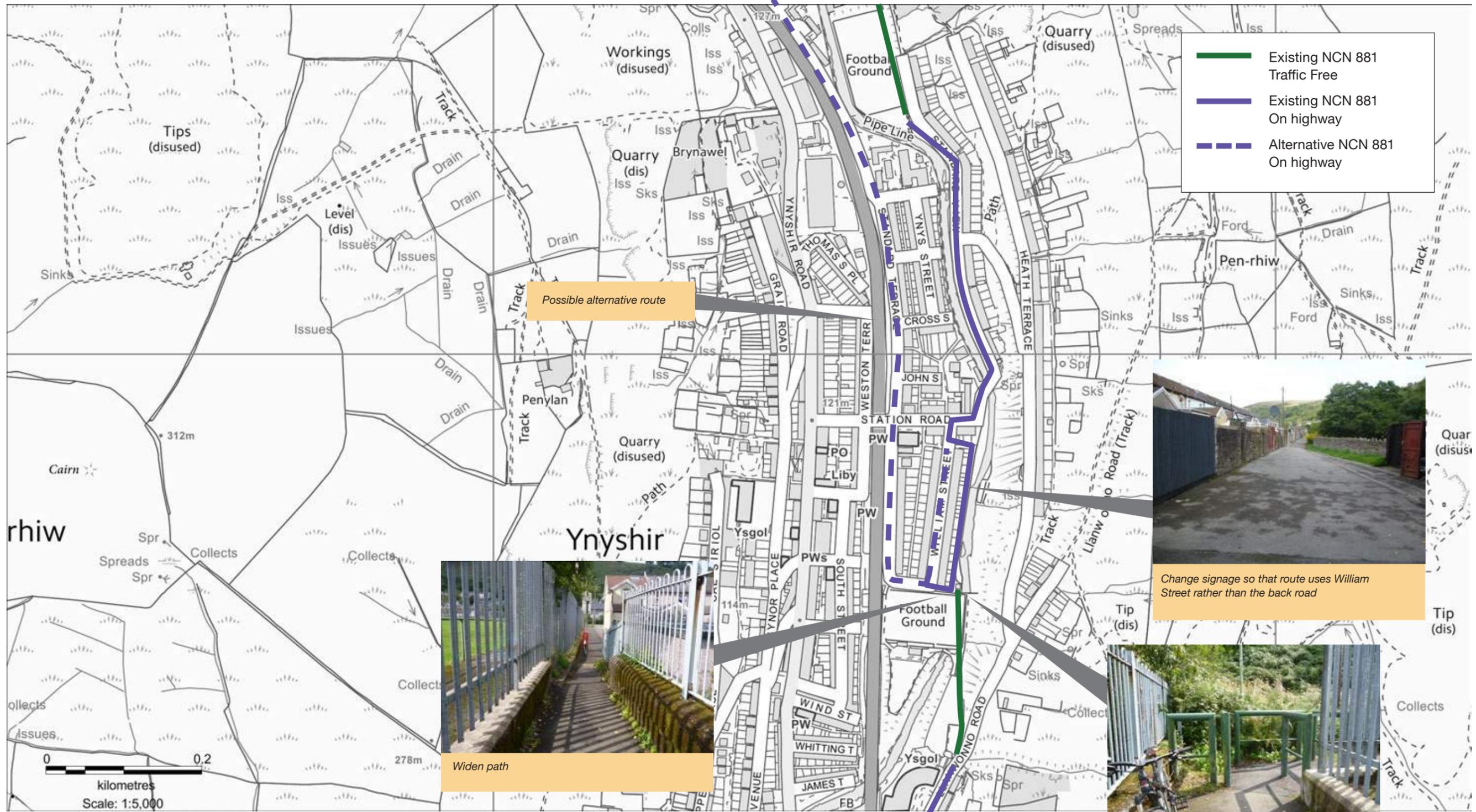
Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Route Options - Map 5



Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Upgrade to existing route - Map 7



Rhondda Fach Trail - NCN Route 881 - Upgrade to existing route - Map 8



Possible alternative route



Change signage so that route uses William Street rather than the back road



Widen path



Very restrictive barrier - remove?

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