

# Cynon Valley River Park

## Draft Strategy (15.05.07)

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## **1      Introduction**

The idea of the Cynon Valley River Park is drawn from the Cynon Valley Local Plan, adopted by Rhondda Cynon Taf in 2004. This Strategy updates the original concept, taking in to account changes in the planning context, new development proposals and community aspirations, the adopted Local Biodiversity Action Plan and the Heads of the Valleys environmental programme. The preparation of the draft Strategy has been supported by Heads of the Valleys programme funding.

The Cynon Valley River Park Project is closely targeted; the key focus is on the strategic importance of the flood plain environment and on projects to encourage positive use and management of the floodplain to provide space for natural processes, for wildlife and for people. The aim is to bring together all the relevant green-space projects in the area, large and small, strategic and local, into a coherent and up to date framework which can be used to guide action, and fund raising, over the next 10 years.

The area covered is the valley floor from Rhigos and Penderyn in the north to Abercynon in the south.

The draft Strategy has been prepared by the Countryside Section of Rhondda Cynon Taf Council in consultation with other Council departments, local Councillors, Assembly sponsored public bodies, voluntary organisations, local community groups, Communities First partnerships and interested individuals. The study brief (Appendix One) outlines the process and the timetable. Notes of the consultation meetings in November and February, and a list of others who have commented are also appended.

## **2. Cynon Valley River Park Concept**

The Cynon Valley has a distinctive floodplain. This is a natural feature, created by the River Cynon over the 10,000 years since the last ice age. The industrial revolution led to the development of major settlements and communication links in the Cynon Valley, around the iron works and coal mines. Extensive areas of the valley floor remained undeveloped, with much of the housing located on the lower valley sides. Since the closure of the coalmines, more development has occurred on the flatter land of the valley floor, especially for uses needing large flat sites, such as playing fields, superstores and factories.

The flood plain provides a natural space for the River Cynon to move across the valley floor and to flood after periods of heavy rain. These natural habitats are also important for wildlife. In the modern world, rivers are often constrained by built development; their channels may be fixed in one place with walls, bridges and embankments that need constant attention because of the natural processes of river erosion. Increasingly, undeveloped floodplain is recognised as an important asset, for accommodating floodwater, for wildlife habitat and for public open space.

The Cynon floodplain seems to be getting wetter. It is not clear why this is happening. It may be due to the closure of collieries that pumped groundwater to keep the pits dry, or it may be due to increased rainfall and runoff arising from climate change. Climate change is likely to lead to more rainfall, especially in winter, and to more severe storms and probably more flooding. Government and Assembly policy is discouraging new built development on floodplains where there is a risk of flooding or where it may cause flooding elsewhere (Planning Policy Wales, TAN 15 and the EAW 'Policy and practice for the protection of floodplains').

The value of wildlife habitat is also recognised with UK biodiversity action plans for wetland habitats such as floodplain and grazing marsh, wet woodland, fens and reedbeds. River corridors are recognised in the European Habitats Directive as being important for the movement of wildlife. Protecting habitat at the landscape scale will be key for wildlife adaptation to climate change. The UK is also committed by international treaty to halting the loss of biodiversity by 2010. The river, floodplain and wildlife are valued by local people. They contribute to the local quality of life and attract visitors to the area.

In the 19th century the Cynon Valley was the location for five ironworks, Hirwaun, Llwydcoed, Gadlys, Abernant and Aberaman. These played a significant part in the development of the South Wales Coalfield as one of the most important iron-producing areas in the world. Each was the focus for a network of transport links and water features, some of which still survive on the valley floor, and which help to show how the ironworking process functioned. They are currently the subject of ongoing research as part of the south-east Wales Industrial Ironworks Project. In addition, the presence of the ironworks attracted ancillary industries. Very little research has been done as yet on these and their extent within the proposed River Park is unknown. Most of the sites in the valley are linked by tramroads to the Aberdare Canal, which will be a major feature of the Park.

The floodplain is an important asset for recreation, health and quality of life. It is a green open space on the doorstep for many local people and part of the view for many more. Parks, playing fields and sports facilities in Cynon Valley are frequently located on the floodplain, the river is popular with anglers and there are many footpaths along the valley and linking communities. The flat ground is particularly important for sports pitches and for level routes for walkers and cyclists, in an area where hills dominate. The importance of quality natural environments for physical and mental health is now more widely recognised (Bevan Foundation Policy Paper no 9). As a landscape feature, the floodplain is part of the fabric of everyday life for most people in Cynon Valley.

An attractive environment is recognised as an important element in business location decisions, especially where there is a need to attract or retain specialist staff (for example [http://www.capitalwales.com/region/region.asp?about\\_ID=8](http://www.capitalwales.com/region/region.asp?about_ID=8)). The tourism potential of the area has yet to be fully utilised. The wildlife, heritage and landscape quality could be a major attraction but the tourism infrastructure is not well developed and there are detractions, such as flytipping and other antisocial behaviour.

Protecting the floodplain does not mean that the land is abandoned or that built development is banned. Instead the River Park concept aims to encourage positive use and management of the floodplain to provide space for natural processes, for wildlife and for people. It is important to recognise that all these aspects of the floodplain are important for our quality of life in the long term.

### **3. The Vision and the Partnership Approach**

The vision for the future of the Cynon Valley River Park is based on the concept described above. *We want the value of the floodplain as a natural feature to be recognised, the positive use and management of the floodplain to be encouraged and reflect its value for natural processes, for wildlife, for heritage and for people.*

In the medium term, this could transform the relationship between local communities and their landscape with benefits for biodiversity, the historic environment, health, flood management, recreation, tourism and regeneration. This vision can be realised through small-scale initiatives and major projects, provided they all work towards a common objective.

Two compatible scenarios are described below. The first would require significant funding, phased development over time and a new approach to land management. The second is relatively low key and builds on existing good practice and partnership working by different organisations. There is a gradation of activity level and achievement between these two scenarios that could be adopted as funding opportunities, partner priorities and momentum develop over time.

**Scenario 1: Major Greenspace Initiative:** Within 10 years:

- All the undeveloped land is brought into positive conservation management.
- Biodiversity loss is halted and positive conservation management is protecting and enhancing wildlife habitats.
- Local communities are actively involved in enjoying and monitoring wildlife and in conservation management.
- Wetlands have the capacity to accommodate flood water and high groundwater levels.
- The Cynon Trail is completed and well maintained, with high quality links to communities, employment areas, town centres and to heritage sites and other visitor attractions.
- Well signed facilities for visitors are available throughout the area, with imaginative and accessible interpretation of the heritage and biodiversity.
- Walking and cycling are important means of transport as well as enjoyable recreational activities, leading to lower carbon emissions and a more active and healthier population.
- Positive management and community involvement is addressing issues such as litter, dumping and antisocial behaviour etc.
- All school pupils will have experience of their local environment, the natural and historic processes that have shaped it, the adventure and recreation opportunities it provides and their role in its protection.
- The area supports high levels of public use and is valued by local communities.
- Promotion and marketing encourages locals and visitors to use and enjoy the area.
- Tourism provides employment and income to local businesses and raises the profile of the wildlife diversity and heritage of the Valleys.

### **Scenario Two: Partnership and Good Practice:**

If additional resources are not immediately available, progress can still be made towards the vision for the Cynon Valley River Park by developing partnerships and promoting good practice. The policies of the Environment Agency Wales, the Countryside Council for Wales, the Heads of the Valleys Programme, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council, local Communities First and other community development organisations, RSPB Cymru, the Wildlife Trust, Groundwork, Sustrans, HERIAN and many other organisations support the concept outlined above. All these organisations have active roles in the Cynon Valley and can contribute to the achievement of a shared vision. Appendices include details of the vision, policies and actions that partners bring to the draft Strategy.

Some examples of actions that could be taken forward are given below.

- A replacement planning policy for the new Local Development Plan could be considered by the LDP Living Space group to promote best planning practice for new developments in relation to flooding, access, landscape and biodiversity in the river park area.
- The Assembly and its sponsored agencies such as the EAW, CCW, FCW can promote the vision through their existing policies and practices, such as Tir Gofal funding for farmers, river works in relation to fishing or flood management, protected species work and tree planting advice.
- Land managers, including the Council, can review their practises and look for opportunities to promote the vision.
- Significant portions of the Cynon Trail and a number of key links will be completed with funding currently allocated. Gaps in the strategic network will remain and further funding for negotiations and preparatory work as well as construction will be required. Partnership working will be particularly important to keep the momentum going and deal with the longer lead in times for the remaining construction work.
- Communities First partnerships are currently involved in a range of activities that support the vision. They are also reviewing their action plans and may wish to consider how the Cynon Valley River Park vision can benefit their communities.
- New developments, such as the Valleys Regional Park or the ecological connectivity study for the South East Wales Capital Region (for the Wales Spatial Plan) can also help to implement the Cynon Valley River Park vision.
- Partnerships can also promote joint working for mutual benefit, for example between different interest groups, such as the Wildlife Trust, Communities First and Keep Wales Tidy with the Pwll Waun Cynon clean up, or between neighbours, for example the Council and local farmers to establish grazing management or improve links to open access land.

The next section looks at the key themes for action and this is followed by an action plan to take the various themes forward.

## **4. Key Themes and Actions**

### **4.1 Climate Change**

The importance of the floodplain for water retention in relation to climate change is likely to increase. The Environment Agency Wales has the lead responsibility under the Water Framework Directive and for preparing Catchment Flood Management plans. The Taff and Ely Plan, which includes the Cynon, is currently at the Inception Report stage (August 2006). The EAW has published their policy relating to protection of the floodplain and with regard to culverting (see Appendix 3). The Assembly has set out their planning advice in TAN 15 Development and floodrisk.

Renewable energy generation and energy efficiency are part of the carbon reduction policy agenda for dealing with climate change. There are several projects being investigated in the Cynon valley area. It will be important that these initiatives link into all the themes in the River Park Strategy. The promotion of walking and cycling, as an alternative to driving, is covered under the Cynon Trail theme. Similarly, the importance of habitat protection and ecological connectivity for climate change adaptation is considered in the landscape and biodiversity theme.

#### ***Good practice***

- Regulate and improve discharges to watercourses (EAW)
- EAW development control will determine all applications for flood defence consent.
- Produce Catchment Flood Management Plans
- Assess the contribution to flood alleviation that land use practices might have, especially farming and forestry.
- Prevent inappropriate development within floodplains.
- Ensure new developments don't increase flood risk in neighbouring areas.
- Promote sustainable urban drainage systems in new developments.
- Conserve open watercourses.
- EAW will provide advice to the local authority on flood risk issues in relation to planning applications.
- Cynon Valley River Park planning policy: there is an aspiration for a policy in the deposit draft of the Local Development Plan (LDP), however in order for the Plan to be sound a proper process must be followed. This would include the review of previous Local Plan designations, and the need for a specific policy has to be established through the process. The intention is to set up Sub Groups linked to the Key Themes of the Community Strategy. It is anticipated that this process will inform detailed policy making. The "Our Living Space" LDP Sub Group will therefore be the appropriate mechanism in this instance.
- LDP policies for renewable energy in new development
- Groundwork has developed the Sustainable Business Park Model to enable the climate change agenda to be addressed through business led objectives.
- Student flood study of Dare and Cynon (apr07 completion)
- Atkins flood study of the Dare

- Student project on biomass potential of coppice woodland DVCP (Apr07 completion)

**Potential projects:**

- Seek funding for a water balance study of the Cynon floodplain
- Naturalise the river channel
- Improve and protect water quality and habitats
- Undertake projects arising from the Catchment Flood Management Plan
- Promote farming, forestry and other land use practices identified as contributing to flood alleviation.
- Green Energy Projects: Wildlife Trust SWW is becoming increasingly involved in green energy projects such as micro hydro-electric generation and can offer some expertise in this area.
- Bryncynon The Strategy environment projects, including possible bio-diesel plant
- **Abercynon or Cwmaman? Or both? Primary School (welsh school?) early stages investigating micro hydro**
- Renewable energy /energy efficiency Dare Valley CP
- Flooding of the rail line at Cwmbach
- Flood of public footpath at Tir Founder fields

## **4.2 Biodiversity and landscape**

The Cynon Valley is important for biodiversity, but the valley floor habitats are not as widely known or valued as the hillsides and mountains. There is potential to raise awareness of these important habitats and the species that depend on them. There is also scope to improve the management of land for biodiversity and to involve local communities with wildlife.

Halting biodiversity loss is an Assembly priority and protecting biodiversity, especially in strategic corridors of linked habitats is likely to be key to climate adaptation. Enjoying landscape and wildlife will be encouraged by the improved access opportunities and is a key component of the attraction of the area to visitors.

### ***Good practice***

- Involving local people in the Local Biodiversity Action Plan and existing wildlife activities such as Gardening for Wildlife, Aren't Birds Brilliant, Spring Watch, walks and events etc.
- Encourage support for specialist interests such as the Glamorgan Bird Club, Valleys Bat group and wildlife recording.
- Raising profile of RCT Wildlife Trust local group. This is a relatively new group, but most local groups organise a programme of guided walks and talks in the local area and get involved with practical conservation work.
- Woodland and forestry management for biodiversity
- River management for biodiversity, including enhancements such as dipper nest boxes
- Tir Gofal farm management for biodiversity: a number of new applications submitted, which we are hoping to start processing over the next few months. If a holding is accepted into the scheme, the agreement will be for ten years and with a break clause after five years. Payments can be made for: the whole farm, including an obligatory set of requirements applying to the whole holding, including keeping the farm tidy, retaining all traditional boundaries, retaining a buffer strip around fields, retaining and safe guarding historic features and ensuring public rights of way are open and passable, for the management of existing habitats and environment features, establishment of new habitats and features and one off payments for capital work such as fencing and hedge laying. Tir Gofal is well placed to contribute the Welsh Assembly Government's wider objective to halt the loss of biodiversity and as part of this; the Project Officer will produce a management plan. New agreements will have the option to have a species package drawn up to provide specific management for key biodiversity species.
- Management of Key Countryside Sites for biodiversity
- Ward by Ward biodiversity review
- Reviewing the Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) for the Local Development Plan (LDP)
- A number of sites are already protected for their biodiversity interest including a Special Area of Conservation, of international importance, and a number of Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation. These sites must be managed to maintain them in favourable condition, by 2026 at the latest (Wales Environment Strategy) Hirwaun Special Area of Conservation.

- CCW have a legal duty for the protection, management and enhancement of the statutory protected site series (Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) Special Areas of Conservation (SAC)). This includes ensuring that SAC's are in favourable condition, and SSSI are appropriately managed, Cors Bryn y Gaer in the north of the Cynon Valley at Hirwaun is both a SSSI and part of the Blaen Cynon SAC.
- Ensuring no net biodiversity loss in new built developments
- Engage in the ecological connectivity study for the Wales Spatial Plan SE Wales Capital Region. CCW are currently working on the concept of ecological connectivity. This work is aimed at preparing Wales for the prospect of climate change that, it is predicted, could have a significant effect on the wildlife of Wales. The aim is to provide wildlife with well-connected areas of semi natural habitat which would allow the unhindered movement of wildlife within the Welsh landscape. CCW are working towards highlighting the most important biodiversity connections at a national level, thus helping to plan large-scale connectivity. These large-scale connections can then serve as a framework into which more local biodiversity action can be placed. The Cynon Valley River Park, as a landscape scale project with a floodplain core, valley sides and forestry, is potentially a major landscape unit with a diversity of habitats, and has excellent potential to contribute to the ecological connectivity in this area.
- Mapping and eradication of Japanese knotweed on Council owned land, advice to private landowners.
- Investigate and map links between flytipping and knotweed, develop joint enforcement with Waste Services
- EAW currently seeking to identify large-scale opportunities for habitat enhancements, especially those that provide economic and social benefits, at present there are no specific biodiversity projects recently undertaken or proposed in the Cynon Valley
- Grazing animals project in Dare Valley Country Park, potential to extend, graziers interested.
- Heads of the Valleys Coal Spoil Strategy
- Heathlands on Coal Spoil Strategic Assessment: CCW along with other organisations is realising the biodiversity value of many of the coal spoil areas in the South Wales Valleys and have been working with other partners in South Wales to look at these areas in more detail and highlight their value to a wider audience and initiate more appropriate management where possible. It is hoped that this ongoing work will be relevant to the CVRP project.
- Heads of the Valleys Landscape framework
- Heads of the Valleys Lapwing project: RSPB currently employ an officer (Lynne Osgathorpe) who is developing opportunities for lapwing conservation in the Valleys area and clearly any connections here would need further investigation to assess its practicality, but RSPB Cymru is likely to take a proactive role here if such opportunities are identified.
- **Dualling of Heads of the Valleys road: (including appropriate assessment for SAC)**
- NERC Act Biodiversity Duty.
- Wales Environment Strategy actions; As a key member of local biodiversity partnerships, CCW will contribute to and support the delivery of actions to

achieve targets for Wales set in UKBAP, consistent with the Wales Biodiversity Framework. These actions deliver against Outcomes 19, 20, 21 and 22 in the Wales Environment Strategy

- Hirwaun Ponds
- Ornamental rowans for native and wintering thrushes (Glamorgan Bird Club/RCT)
- Glamorgan Bird Club Hawfinch hotspot project (Glamorgan Bird Club)
- BTO Wetland birds Survey (webs) Bird Count at Tir Founder Fields
- Peregrine Watch at Dare Valley: Partnership project led by RSPB Cymru who currently employ, on a short term contract, Pete Etheridge as a Showing People Birds Officer at the Dare Valley Country Park. His priority is to engage people with birds and in particular the peregrine viewing site. Further development of this role and this work could be considered as part of a partnership project.
- Cwmaman Biodiversity audit (Cwmaman CF)
- Pwll Waun Cynon Wildlife Trust Nature Reserve: improved management partly dependent on finding funds for another member of staff. WT are currently working with Keep Wales Tidy to do a big clean-up event, followed by a series of work party days on the reserve to involve the local community.
- John Muir Award: schools in Bryncynon and Abercynon entering the award
- Identify and promote geological and geomorphological features within the valley
- CCW partnership grant programme with Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC for carrying out positive environmental works for Biodiversity,
- One of CCW's major functions is as a statutory consultee in the planning process. CCW's approach is to promote sustainable and appropriate development that safeguards Biodiversity, Access and the Landscape.
- CCW are also consultees in the strategic planning process of the LDP. The expectation is that our responses would take into account the aims and vision of this proactive and positive project in the Cynon Valley to ensure that development proposals are in line with the Cynon Valley River Park vision.
- Forestry Commission Wales regulatory role, includes providing grants for planting and managing woodlands in the private sector. It also regulates tree felling – issuing licences to allow trees to be felled.

### **Potential projects**

- If funding can be obtained, an audit of landownership in the floodplain is proposed, utilising data from partners and the land registry.
- Identify opportunities to enhance wetlands and wildlife and increase the habitats of LBAP species.
- Cynon Valley marsh fritillary meta population study (Butterfly Conservation, CCW, BBNP, RCTCBC)
- Enhance the conservation value of the corridor
- Provide facilities for wildlife observation and study
- Undertake waterways birds survey (WBS) using British Trust for Ornithology methodology (or possibly Waterways Breeding Bird Survey (WBBS)).
- Cynon Valley bird watchers guide
- Reduce infestation by alien plants/ Control of Japanese knotweed on all land.
- Control the invasive waterweed Crasula at Aberdare Canal

- Diversify flora and fauna
- Grazing Animals Project: building on Dare Valley CP project. CCW are involved in the developing PONT/Grazing Animals Project in Wales. Wildlife Trust can help advise on appropriate grazing for wildlife sites and help with establishing grazing agreements, and the associated welfare implications. WT are a partner in the PONT (Pori, Natur a Threftadaeth) project.
- Grazing management for Pwll Waun Cynon
- Extension of Pwll Waun Cynon Reserve: potential extension, especially to Abercwmboi lakes area and beyond as part of a potential landscape scale reserve. This fits into Wildlife Trust Reserves Acquisition Strategy
- Bringing more valley floor land into Tir Gofal farm management
- Bring Penywaun meadows into positive biodiversity management
- Bring Tir Founder fields into positive biodiversity management
- Review the management of highway verge
- Investigate potential for biodiversity management in parks and playing fields
- Provide support for schools to investigate the biodiversity management of school grounds (Action for Nature for secondary schools, develop something similar for primaries, link to Foundation phase for 3-7 year olds)
- A strategic review of street trees and a Strategic review of Tree Preservation Orders could be undertaken to strengthen the policy framework and protect the woodland resource.
- Woodland management proposals could be investigated and potentially funded from Woodlands for Wales/ Coed Cymru funding.
- Hedges and hedge laying can make an important contribution to the floodplain landscape.
- Undertake projects arising from ecological connectivity study
- Secure biodiversity gain from planned developments and future LDP allocations
- There is also the potential for the establishment of local nature reserves as part of the scheme and CCW would support the Local Authority to that end if appropriate.
- RSPB support actions that deliver on LBAPs and national BAP priorities. In the lower areas of the Cynon Valley River Park we would probably prioritise actions for woodland bird species and wet woodland habitats.
- Opportunities for wetland creation would also be of interest to RSPB Cymru.
- Wildlife Trust is currently seeking funds for a Wildlife Trust Officer to be based in the Valleys and will be dedicated to management of the existing nature reserves, seeking new nature reserves, involving and working with the local communities on our reserves and in the wider countryside, involvement with the local Biodiversity Action Plan implementation, liaising with landowners, formal and informal education work.
- WATCH group: This is an ideal way to nurture future environmentalists!

#### **4.3 Cynon Trail and community links**

The Cynon Trail is a flagship project with huge potential. The Taff Trail provides a local model of the opportunities and the issues that need to be addressed.

Approx. x% of the Cynon Trail will be completed with existing committed funds by March 2008, but there is a need to keep the momentum going to fill the gaps in the Cynon Trail and to develop community links. .

The aim is to complete the trail from Garwnant in the Taff Valley via Penderyn, Hirwaun, Aberdare, Mountain Ash and Abercynon to join the Taff Trail. The spine route should be surfaced to cycle-path quality with ‘access for all’ provision (i.e. suitable for touring bicycles, pushchairs, wheelchairs and mobility scooters). The aspiration is for all Cynon Valley communities to be linked to the Trail, although because of the nature of the terrain, not all these connections will be of cyclepath/access for all quality.

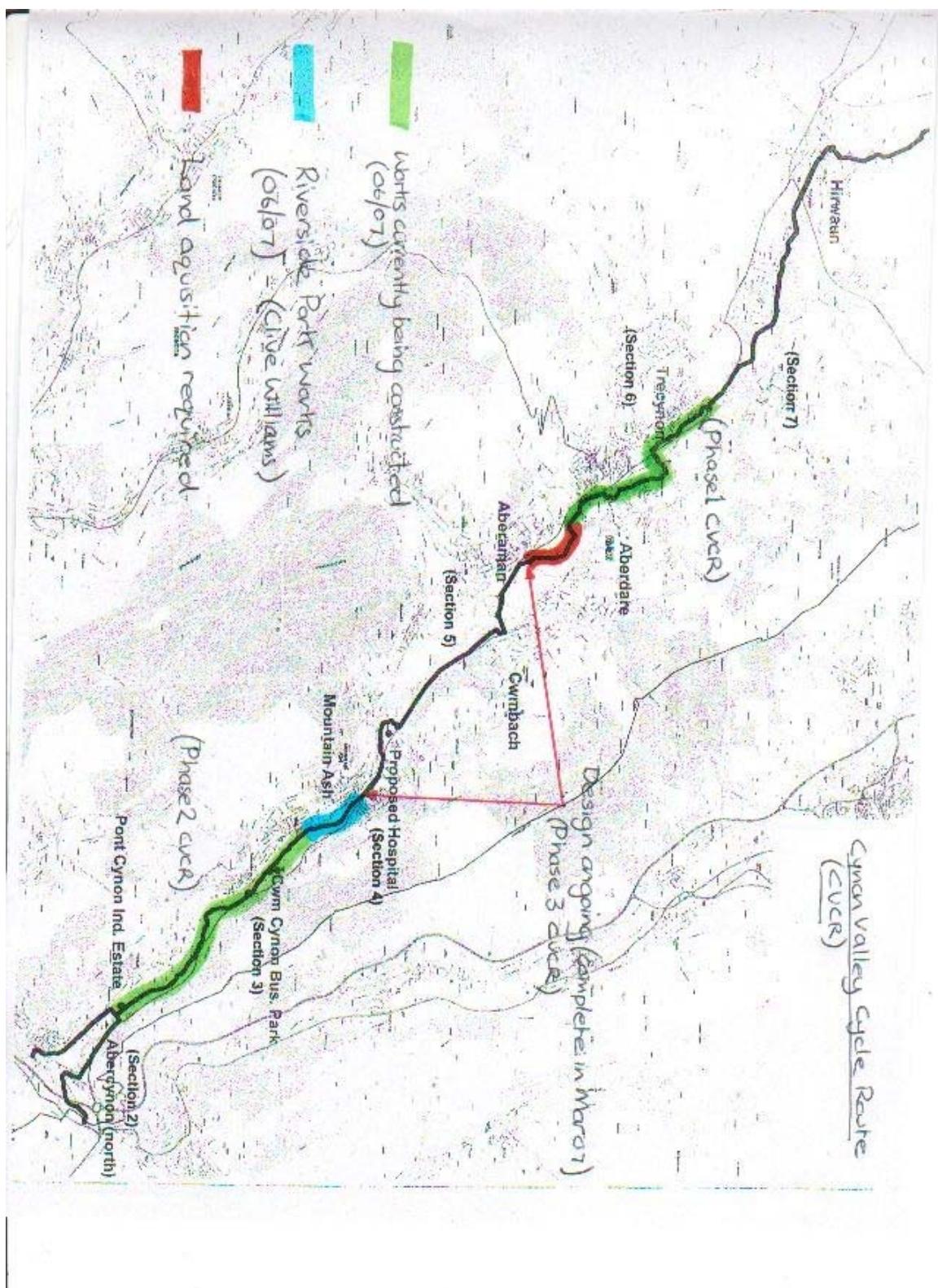
The Trail will require ongoing management, signage and promotion to encourage local use. A marketing initiative, together with the development of supporting facilities, will be required if it is to become a tourist destination. The local health benefits, recreation and travel opportunities for local residents can start to be realised now and these will increase as the length of the route and the community connections improve.

#### ***Good practice***

- Management of the Cynon Trail and the associated green space
- Enforcement against illegal off-road vehicle usage of the Trail and other green space
- Investigate links between existing Trail sections and local communities and facilities
- More ‘safe routes to school’ projects
- More ‘walking the way to health’ and similar projects
- School / Out of school club cycle proficiency and cycle maintenance
- Bicycle user groups at all major employers (including Council and Health Authority)
- Groundwork input to the ongoing development and publicity of the Cynon Trail alongside Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council
- Groundwork projects engaging local communities in promoting use of the Cynon Trail & enjoyment for better healthier lifestyles.
- Groundwork projects to develop and promote recreational cycle and walking routes within the area, including the Cynon Trail and Loops and Links.
- Sustrans has secured funding for an Active Travel programme to be established within RCT starting April 2007.
- Encourage volunteer rangers along the Cynon Valley cycle route
- Develop and promote the Valleys Cycle Network that will include the Cynon Valley route. Funding is being sought, by Sustrans, through the Heads of the Valleys Programme and European funding.
- Proposed Heads of the Valleys Cyclepath (associated with the dualling of the A465)

### **Potential projects**

- Cycle parking in town centres and at facilities and attractions
- Cynon2 Trail / links signage (both directions). Signposting to the Cynon Trail will contribute to its promotion. Signposting of town centres, facilities and attractions from the Trail will promote their use to local people and visitors.
- Promotion of access opportunities: There is potential for circular and linear walk and cycle leaflets, 'access for all' literature, website information. This would help to promote walking and cycling as transport options.
- Making connections with other access opportunities like the Coed Morganwg Way, Loops and Links routes and open access land.
- Land acquisition for the Cynon Trail Aberdare to Aberaman
- Cynon Trail development from Aberaman to Mountain Ash including
  - completing the route through the Abercwmboi development and
  - completing the route through the proposed Mountain Ash Hospital development.
- New hospital workplace activity scheme
- Cyclehire at Michael Sobel Sports Centre / Aberdare train station (funding bid submitted Sustrans/RCT) Bid successful (Mar 2007)
- Cycle hire at Dare Valley Outdoor Education (bid submitted by Education)
- Possible heads of the valleys cyclehire scheme (bid in preparation by Blaenau Gwent)
- Extending the scope of disabled cycling facilities at Michael Sobel Sports Centre
- Community based cycle training for children and adults
- Doctor Bike workshops in association with local cycle shops
- Upgrading of identified community links to the Cynon Trail
- To open up public access to the river corridor.
- Developing opportunities for cycle routes and footpaths alongside EAW flood defences
- **Deal with the flooding of trail at Tir Founder fields**
- Public transport and recreational use: there is scope to promote access to the area by public transport, both for local residents and for visitors, promoting social inclusion and reducing the need to travel by car.
- Walking / cycling route information at bus stops and train stations.
- Public transport provides opportunities for linear walks (and the train for linear cyclerides). In summer, the Beacons Bus operates with a cycle trailer.
- Tir Gofal can provide new permissive access for use by the public
- Horse riding: a working group has been set up to look at the issues around horse riding. The group is gathering information about stables, numbers of riders etc. and will investigate the potential for strategic routes.



- **4.4 Health and Wellbeing**

Quality of Life is a fundamental consideration of the Cynon Valley River Park concept. Our local environment, and how we interact with it, can affect our quality of life for good or ill. Litter, rubbish, burnt out cars, antisocial behaviour all damage our local environment and discourage people from enjoying it. Conversely; attractive, well-maintained and well used spaces often attract more people, providing natural surveillance which discourages antisocial behaviour. Fresh air, green space and exercise all contribute to mental and physical health. Opportunities to socialise, to meet friends and to share family activities also contribute to health and wellbeing. People are more likely to take part, if these opportunities are close to home, easy to use, can fit in with daily routines and don't require expensive equipment or clothing.

*Community Collaboration and Prevention*

**Good practice**

- Support KWT Clean Rivers project where community groups adopt a section of river (currently groups in Penywaun and Aberdare (**Bryncynon? Opsreys?**), gaps in the Mountain Ash and Abercynon areas)
- Support KWT Cymru Lan project where Communities First adopt local areas (**any in CV?**). A major clean up at Pwll Waun Cynon on 30<sup>th</sup> March 07 along with The Wildlife Trust and Fernhill CF.
- Heads of the Valleys Cleanup (KWT)
- Heads of the Valleys Spring Clean (KWT) **are these the same or different projects?**
- Wastebusters, litter, flytipping and pollution enforcement.
- Community garden projects and footpath improvements in Matthewstown and Bryntirion (KWT),
- Rivercare projects in the Aberdare area (KWT)
- Major flytip control in the upper valley around Penywaun (KWT)
- The Forestry Commission Wales is committed to providing open access for legitimate forest users - access on foot, bicycle, and in some woodlands horseback, are encouraged.
- Improvements to access points into FCW woodlands.
- All freehold FC land in Wales is now dedicated under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act as access land. The woodlands on the eastern side of the Cynon Valley and Pen Parc Woodland near Abercynon are access land. The main woodlands on the western side of the valley are leased and not currently open access.
- FC woodlands have a network of roads and paths that are well used by local residents. In addition several long distance routes pass through woodlands in the area. These include the Celtic Trail (Route 47 of the National Cycle network), the Coed Morganwg Way and Loops and Links routes.
- The FCW is the largest single landowner in the area and local communities have been encouraged to be involved in future plans for the woodlands.
- FCW is actively working on projects with Groundwork, Daerwynno Outdoor Centre and Cefn Pennar Welfare Association.
- CCW Accessible Natural Green Space Toolkit to meet the needs of Local Authorities and others for a practical way of managing Greenspace provision.

CCW and the five Heads of the Valleys LAs are currently using the toolkit to conduct a comprehensive audit of the HoV Greenspace resource.

- Allotments and food growing initiatives
- The *Active Living Strategy* is currently being developed by the Active Living Partnership to increase levels of physical activity in RCT. A series of focused actions will be developed within four settings; community and voluntary, health and social care, workplaces and schools. This includes active commuting, work place activity, Walking for health groups and similar
- *Mentro Allan* is a Big Lottery funded programme aiming to increase participation in physical activity in hard to reach groups using the local natural environment. Funding has been secured for four years for a project targeting low-income groups, older people and people with mental health problems. The project will focus on walking and cycling, gardening and outdoor adventure activities.
- An Active Communities officer is based within the Local Public Health Team. The purpose of the role is to encourage and promote active living within Communities First areas and is funded until March 2008. One aspect of the role is the implementation of *Walking the Way to Health* – a programme enabling individuals to become more active through joining a local walking group. There are currently plans to extend this programme to focus on all types of walking in RCT.
- Volunteering out of doors eg Greencare team, Ramblers practical work team
- Promote the environmental education service at Dare Valley
- KWT runs Eco schools and other education programmes within the Valley:
- Input to Communities First holiday play schemes.
- Community audits to investigate potential for local involvement in the Cynon Valley River Park
- Green Care – a dedicated local team of community environmental professionals for delivery of physical improvements within EU Priority 3 eligible areas of Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil. **Proposals for a Cynon Team?**
- Intermediate Labour Market – An initiative currently in development designed to turn the Groundwork Base at Fedw Hir into a centre of excellence for Countryside Management training, and to provide an avenue of training and development for people who want experience in this field and to lead to further employment.
- Support for skills training including countryside initiatives.
- Communities First and Community Collaborations - Community Organisations in the Cynon Valley including Bryncynon, Fernhill, Cwmaman , Penrhiewceiber & Miskin, Cefnpennar , Abercwmboi & Darran Las and Dare Valley Country Park are working with Groundwork to develop a Collective Green Plan to enable their community businesses be sustainable and carbon neutral.
- Groundwork has forged strong links with the local private sector to support Economic Development through Strategic Landscape Improvements and have developed the Sustainable Business Park Model to enable the Climate Change Agenda be addressed through Business Led Objectives.
- Groundwork are committed to continuing its programme of regeneration and sustainable development within the Cynon Valley area.

- Wildlife Trust keen to develop local partnerships, with businesses, partner organisations, schools, and community groups
- RSPB Cymru is developing community support throughout the area, by enabling local, existing and new RSPB members to support the charity in a more proactive way. We are also organising a series of community based talks within the area, in order to inform a wide range of local groups, clubs and societies of the work of the RSPB, and issues surrounding local bird life and their habitats.
- It is hoped future statutory/charitable grants as well as private sector funding will allow RSPB Cymru to develop further, our community orientated work throughout the Rhondda Cynon Taff area.
- Promote opportunities to use the amenities
- Develop and improve fisheries
- Good practice for specialist recreation activities such as canoeing

#### **Potential projects**

- Green Valley Centre: Conversion of redundant horticultural land for a far-reaching project focusing on vocational training, social enterprise incubation, health and nutrition and the environment and conservation. (see appendix ?)
- Cwmaman Environment and Heritage project: including (see appendix ?)
- **Negotiate open access to remaining FCW (leased) land in CV**
- Valleys Regional Park: The concept of the Valleys Regional Park is currently under development with a series of consultation workshops being held across the area under consideration, a swathe of land across south-east Wales from Bridgend to Pontypool. Its aim is to obtain added value from the resources already present, the outstanding scenery and landscapes, networks of rights of way and watercourses as well as the staff and volunteers engaged in their management, through better coordination and a partnership approach to challenges and opportunities. Although still very much “work in progress” the Valleys Regional Park has already obtained substantial support from the Local Authorities involved, from DEIN, CCW, Forestry Commission and the Environment Agency and from a plethora of NGOs. The possibility of international collaborative projects is also being explored.
- There are a number of schools on or close to the floodplain. There is scope for greater schools use of the area for environmental education, physical activity and sport, the outdoor elements of the new foundation phase curriculum and school grounds projects.
- Scope to linking schools up with local reserves and some outreach educational work.
- Encourage people to value and use their local amenity
- Increase opportunities for informal waterside recreation
- Improve access for fishing and introduce people to Angling
- Create waterside features and bridges
- Increase water based recreation
- Improve facilities for canoeing
- Enhance the appearance of the local landscape
- Reduce opportunities for fly tipping and environmental crime
- Remove obsolete and abandoned structures of no historic value.
- Improve the quality of life of local people

- Green Gym
- Groundwork Greencare Cynon Valley hub (funding bid with the Assembly)
- Local food projects: linking producers and consumers, farmers markets, restaurants and caterers. Reducing food miles, promoting local culture, tradition and innovation.

#### **4.5 Heritage and Tourism**

It is recognised that tourism in Cynon Valley is underdeveloped and the Heads of the Valleys programme will be focussing on tourism in the financial year 2008-9. The Cynon Valley River Park could contribute to a tourism product based on a high quality natural environment, with features of historic interest and opportunities for walking and cycling. These, together with events and festivals, are identified as key attractors in the Tourism Opportunities Study for the Heads of the Valleys area of Rhondda Cynon Taff has been prepared by Hyder Consulting for the Council. The floodplain could provide a different tourist experience, an extension of the current Dare Valley offer, based on the Cynon Trail/Taff Trail and wildlife tourism. There is scope for major development over a ten-year period, but it is likely that small-scale initiatives would be favoured initially. Tourist information, signage and interpretation will be important components of any initiatives. Communities First areas and town centres could benefit from the provision of tourism services such as cafes, toilets, accommodation and information centres. Marketing and ongoing revenue support would also be required. The achievement of significant visitor numbers and a substantial visitor spend will be dependant on the quality of the product and the level of marketing achieved.

##### ***Good practice***

- Loops & Links – a network of recreational routes across northern Rhondda Cynon Taff and Merthyr Tydfil, linking communities and well-known trails with the wider countryside and environment.
- Support the annual Valleys Walking Festival
- Promote the existing visitor accommodation at Dare Valley Country Park and elsewhere
- Promote the emerging Cynon Trail
- Tourism website with links to facilities and activities in the Cynon Valley
- Signposting of facilities
- Heads of the Valleys Tourism bid
- Tourism Strategy for Rhondda Cynon Taf (to 2013)
- Support regeneration projects such as the Mountain Ash town centre and Mountain Ash Riverside Park
- Herian Information points (DVCP and Cynon Valley Museum)
- Trail of Light and other arts based projects (HERIAN)
- Interpretation through performance (HERIAN) **not aware of anything in RCT**
- Community heritage training (HERIAN)
- FC audit of designated (SAMS) archaeological sites.
- Blue Plaques Trail
- Heads of Valleys Ironworks Study
- RCT Heritage Strategy
- Tir Gofal: can also tailor management and offer monies to enhance public access and to conserve important landscape and historical features.
- RSPB Cymru 'Aren't Bird's Brilliant' Project at Dare Valley Country Park. This project is centred around public viewing of nesting peregrine falcons at the Country Park. The project will attract 4000 visitors (local as well external) to the site during 2007. We also hope to develop links with the local community by inviting school groups to view these birds as well as experience other

wildlife within the park. This project has and will attract media interest and will direct links with a similar bird viewing project being established within the centre of Cardiff, plus others throughout Wales.

### **Potential projects**

- Aberdare Townscape Heritage (funding bid under development)
- Increase awareness of local history
- Historic environment: initial historic environment audit. The archaeological remains are important because of the light they throw on the development of the 19th century ironworks and on the development of the communities of the Cynon Valley around them. An audit of archaeological sites and monuments would inform decisions on how best to manage the historic environment.
- Following the completion of the audit, decisions should be made as to the best way of conserving and managing the surviving archaeological features.
- A programme of conservation and management should be put in place for heritage features.
- Options for interpretative material and presentations such as on-site information boards, guided walks or self-guided trail leaflets, should be considered.
- Heritage interpretation of communication routes, such as canals, tramroads, railways used for walking and cycling routes.
- Promotion of tourist gateways (Hyder recommendation) G01 Dare Valley Country Park, G02 Garwnant (links Cynon Trail and Taff Trail in the north) and G04 Aberdare Town Centre
- Promotion of local tourist sites (Hyder recommendation) LS1 Mountain Ash town centre, LS3 Penderyn Welsh Whiskey Company, LS4 Equestrian Centre (DVCP and land in private ownership Nof A465 two of 5 possible locations, others in Rhondda), LS5 Local Parks including Dare Valley, Aberdare and Garwnant, LS7 Routes and Trails including Cynon Trail and Loops and Links.
- Tourism signage (Hyder recommendations): strategic, town centres, local and attractions & facilities.
- Tourist accommodation (Hyder recommendations): quantity and location, promotion seminars, improving quality and profile
- Tourism information: (Hyder recommendations): strategic, gateway and local
- Heritage and culture (Hyder recommendations): Herian, Genealogy, Events and festivals, sports.
- Resources and management (Hyder recommendations): tourism development and partnership working
- Public Transport (Hyder recommendations) improvements to weekend and bankholiday services, Beacons Bus, visitor information.
- Green Badge Guiding Accreditation: focus on Tourist Guide level training for local communities with local knowledge
- **GGAT asked that CCW Should be asked about the potential of designating the Cynon Valley as a Landscape of Special Historic Interest.**

## 5. Action Plan

To move beyond good practice and develop potential projects additional funding and staff resources may be required. Individual partners can take some projects forward, others would benefit from a partnership approach. The following action plan sets out how this might be achieved.

### 5.1 Co-ordination

<b>Priority action</b> Set up a Steering Group	Twice yearly meetings to progress the project	From April 2007 Lead RCT Countryside
<b>Priority action</b> Set up a Funding Group	Investigate potential funding sources for specific projects	From April 2007 Lead RCT Regeneration
Agree a mechanism for community involvement	Could be the Area ? Environment Group	From April 2007 Lead RCT Area Regeneration
Newsletter once or twice a year	To disseminate information	From July 2007 Lead Steering Group
Appoint a co-ordinator	Subject to funding	? Lead Steering Group
Local Development Plan Policies <b>Priority action</b>	Living Space LDP group to advise	From April 2007 Lead RCT Forward Plans
<b>Priority action</b> Audit of landownership	Small scale funding required, probably £x00 rather than £x000	Asap Lead RCT Countryside

### 5.2 Climate Change

<b>Priority action</b> Water balance study	Investigate why the floodplain is getting wetter and the future implications, would require funding	? asap? Lead ? EAW?
Adaptation to wetter conditions / climate change	Develop flood storage/amelioration capacity Cyclepath and access adaptation for wetter conditions	EAW via Taff Catchment flood management plan  RCTCBC
Behavioural change to minimise climate change	Green transport promotion, energy efficiency etc. links to awareness raising	RCTCBC
Awareness raising and interpretation of climate change impacts and causes	Link understanding and action	? LA?

### **5.3 Biodiversity**

Biodiversity Management Plan for all the greenspace <b>Priority action</b>	When funding available (possibly RCT/CCW output for 2008/9?)	From 2007/8 or 8/9 Lead RCT Countryside
Bring new areas into conservation management	As a result of agri-environment support to landowners (eg Tir Gofal, CCW partnership funding), planning gain or land purchase (poss HLF funding?)	? could be opportunistic or targeted Lead Steering Group? Input from LDP planning gain policy (2007)
Awareness raising and interpretation of biodiversity value	Link to community involvement and other themes	From April 2007 Lead RCT Countryside

### **5.4 Cynon Trail**

Local Development Plan Policies: Cynon Trail route and community links <b>Priority action</b>	Living Space LDP group to advise	From April 2007 Lead RCT Forward Plans
Filling the gaps in the Cynon Trail <b>Priority action</b>	Route identification, planning gain, land acquisition, funding etc.	From April 2007 Lead RCT Transportation
Complete community links	Route identification, planning gain, land acquisition, funding etc	?? Lead RCT Transportation
Signage, marketing, promotion of the Cynon Trail and community links	Funding required, linked to tourism and health, links to interpretation.	From April 2007 Lead ? RCT Tourism?

### **5.5 Health and Wellbeing**

Green Valley Centre	Proposals under development	From January 2007 Lead The Strategy, Bryncynon
Cwm Aman Environmental and heritage projects	Proposals associated with the Environment Centre at St Josephs Church	From January 2007 Lead Cwm Aman Communities First
Active Living	Developing the opportunities provided by the Cynon Trail to promote active lifestyles	From April 2007 Lead Active Living Partnership
Community involvement	Address local concerns such as flytipping, land management, skills development, capacity building etc.	From Jan 2007 Lead ARP Environment group?

## **5.6 Heritage and Tourism**

RCT Tourism Strategy		From April 2007 Lead RCT Tourism
Heads of the Valleys Tourism bid (yr 3) <b>Priority action</b>	Based on Hyder Opportunities Study	From April 2007 Lead RCT Tourism
Heritage audit	Requires funding	RCT Library Service? RCT Forward Plans?/ HERIAN?
Aberdare Townscape Heritage	Bid under development	From Jan 2007 Lead RCT Regeneration
Heritage interpretation	Links to other themes and community involvement	From ?? Lead ? HERIAN? Or Cynon Valley Museum?