

Economic Development and Transport Committee

Date: Thursday 13 May 2004
Venue: National Assembly for Wales, Cardiff Bay
Title: Policy Review – Economic Inactivity

Briefing note to the Welsh Assembly Government on Initiatives developed by the Aberfan and Merthyr Vale Youth and Community Project in using Community Transport in addressing issues of Social Inclusion.

The Aberfan and Merthyr Vale Youth and Community Project is a registered charity that was established in 1994 to address issues of economic and social deprivation caused by the demise of the coal industry.

The project is based in the former coal mining village of Aberfan which is situated 20 miles North of Cardiff and 4 miles South of Merthyr Tydfil.

In 1989 our colliery closed with the loss of some 1000 jobs and within the radius of four miles a further five collieries closed with the demise of a further 5000 jobs.

The mining industry had traditionally provided employment on our doorstep for many unskilled people and literally one could fall out of bed and into work.

The result of the closures meant unemployment rates of over 28%. As a consequence of unemployment many young people who subsequently left school with no qualifications turned to alcohol and drugs to alleviate their boredom and crime to pay for their habit.

This resulted in as many as twelve cars being stolen every night, high incidences of burglaries, criminal damage and drug abuse was rife with trading openly taking place on the streets.

At a public meeting held in 1994 attended by some 400 people the finger was clearly pointed at the young people of the area as the cause of these problems. The general public wanted the young people excluded from the meeting as they feared retaliation if they spoke up about the problems of the area. The young people were allowed to stay as members of the public and retaliation did indeed take place.

As a consequence of the meeting the young people came to me as the local County Councillor and openly admitted that they were the cause of the problems but had nothing to do or no where to go and

what clearly came across was the utter hopelessness and despair of the youngsters many of whom had left school being unable to read and write, with no communication skills, little confidence, self esteem or motivation and with no prospect at all of gaining employment.

Two youngsters had hung themselves publicly, one from a tree in the village, another from the local hospital railings. Two others had deliberately overdosed on a cocktail of drugs and alcohol.

Many were outside the normal benefits system and support mechanisms as they distrusted authorities and lived an existence of crime and drugs.

In 1994 I therefore established the Aberfan and Merthyr Vale Youth and Community Project, a registered charity to tackle the problems and break the vicious circle of unemployment, hopelessness and despair, drink/drugs and crime.

We started by tackling the issues of literacy and numeracy, IT skills, self esteem and motivation. We went out to employers asking them to take on young people for work experience this was prior to the governments own New Deal Programme. Out of the first batch of 30 young people we were successful in placing 15 into full time work, 14 into full time training and we had one failure but we established that the person needed medical intervention as a result of major psychological problems.

We were aware that many of the young people had excellent skills in stripping down motor vehicles and selling the parts for drugs and a great fascination with cars. So we introduced a motor project, which built on their skills but provided them with a proper training environment where qualifications could be acquired via the Open College Network and the responsibilities of car ownership developed. Qualifications in motor maintenance, health and safety, first aid as well as basic skills were acquired by people who had never had any qualifications at all.

We soon identified that whilst we could get work placements and work experience for people transport was a barrier to employment. Whilst transport links in the South Wales Valleys North/South were good. East/West Links are extremely poor and public transport after 6pm is non existent. So we devised a scheme to address this issue. The Transport to Employment and Auto Diversion Scheme.

A partnership approach was adopted between our project, Working Links, a public/ private organisation (DWP/ Capp Gemini Ernst Young) created by Central Government to tackle long term unemployment and the local youth offending team.

Building on the earlier success of the auto project, the project acquired a lease on a newly equipped workshops paid for by European Funding, the Youth Justice Board and a number of vehicles were acquired from grant aid provided by Working Links.

The scheme works by leasing vehicles to individuals identified by Working Links for a period of 15 weeks at a cost to the individual of £15 per week inclusive of insurance costs.

The scheme allows the individual to get to employment that is not accessible by public transport.

It allows the individual to demonstrate to an employer that they are capable of being employed.

It enables an individual to go to the bank at the end of the lease period with three months pay slips to access a loan to purchase a car which would not be possible for someone on income support or other state benefits.

It also encourages car sharing where a group of individuals are able to find employment at one location.

The other side of the scheme relates to young people who have poor attendance at school, have been excluded from school or are on the fringes of crime or involved in the criminal justice system.

Youngsters turned off by the National Curriculum are encouraged to participate in an alternative educational programme that focuses on their practical competences with accredited qualifications being achieved.

A compact is developed between the individual and the school whereby the individual is required to attend two days at school and three days in the workshops.

At the workshops they learn about motor maintenance, workshop safety, servicing vehicles, changing tyres, exhausts, administrative system's as well as challenging their behaviour and addressing basic skills.

We have referrals via the Youth Justice Team from the Courts in terms of Community Reparation Orders where youngsters undertake valeting our fleet of vehicles

We also have referrals from the Courts under the auspices of Intensive Supervision and Surveillance Orders (ISSP's) where intensive work is done on a one to one basis on challenging behaviour, consequences of drug and alcohol abuse, responsibilities of car ownership including the need for having insurance.

Young people have the opportunity of acquiring their theory driving test utilising computers and we also provide some driving lessons. Working Links have also identified groups of individuals who have not acquired a driving licence and places these individuals on driving courses which can be expensive and with no guarantee of success.

As a solution to this problem we went to the United States to view a simulator that can be used not only to train individuals for acquiring driving car skills but also HGV, PSV and Emergency Vehicles.

The acquisition of this machine would enable individuals to 'get up to speed' before undertaking the

official test and thus reducing the cost of lessons.

Many schools in the United States where the legal age for driving is 16 use these simulators as part of their curriculum and emergency services use them for training of their staff.

We see the acquisition of this machine as providing great potential not only for training but also partnership with other agencies like the police, fire services, bus company's and also as a revenue generator in the long term sustainability of the project.

The project has also acquired a number of minibuses that are used to transport groups of individuals who are unable to drive to employment outside the area. Sony at Bridgend, some 40 miles away provides such an example.

The minibuses are also used within the community to transport children to school where transport is not being provided by the local authority under the two mile limit.

We have introduced in the last six months and piloted a Dial a Ride Scheme for the elderly. We found that whilst many elderly people were entitled to free transport under the Welsh Assembly Government Scheme many lived away from the main bus routes and often public transport was non existent after 6pm. This resulted in elderly people being isolated, a dependency on local shops for food often at premium prices, the missing of surgery and hospital appointments and a lack of a social life.

The Dial a Ride Scheme offers elderly people free transport to the local supermarkets, town centre, hospital and surgery appointments. The scheme has been a phenomenal success the only draw back is that the scheme is only available for the Merthyr Vale Electoral Division but demand shows that there is a need for a Borough Wide Scheme.

The project aims to provide such a scheme in partnership with a number of statutory and voluntary bodies as there are potential savings to be made by shared arrangements.

The Transport to Employment, Auto Diversion Project and the recent Dial a Ride projects started as pilot scheme and have proved to be very successful in getting people back to work, challenging youngsters on the fringes of crime and indeed involved in the criminal justice system and in engaging elderly people. The statistics reveal a major reduction in auto crime in the area, over 1000 people entering the employment market as well as increased transport usage by the elderly.

The transport to employment scheme has now over forty vehicles and has been extended to include the County Boroughs of Merthyr Tydfil, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen. It has also been introduced to Rhyl in North Wales which is seen as one of the government's hot spots for unemployment and crime.

In addition, as a result of a presentation at the New Deal Conference in Birmingham, a Transport and

Social Inclusion meeting at the House of Commons and a Community Transport Event at the ODPM interest in the schemes have been shown from Scotland, Northern Ireland, North East and South West of England.

The overall scheme is financed by contributions of a number of partners including Working Links, Youth Justice Board, South Wales Constabulary, Youth Offending Team, Education Department of the local authority and all the contributions are used as matched funding against the European Objective One Programme.

The capital costs of the project have all been covered and the ongoing revenue costs are dependent on statutory agencies buying into the scheme.

The scheme is managed by a Project Manager, Two Mechanics, Administrator, youth worker and some Sessional Workers who report to a steering group consisting of all partners, including Working Links, Youth Justice Team, Probation, Police, Fire Service and Community Transport Association. This group in turn reports to the Aberfan and Merthyr Vale Youth and Community Project's Management Committee who has overall responsibility for the financial management and administration of the project

A community project that started some ten years ago with £4,000 from Mid Glamorgan County Council now employs over 40 people with a turnover of £450,000

and not only covers transport initiatives but crèches, parent and toddler groups, after school clubs, youth clubs, community café, website design service for SME's, advice and guidance . educational and IT courses for the community .We have brought back into use three derelict buildings in the regeneration of the community and given hope to people who previously faced despair.

In recognition of this work we have been awarded the Lithianthus Award for Partnership Working in the field of community regeneration, the Queens Golden Jubilee Award, HSBC/CEW Top Ten Regenerators in Wales Award, Road Safety Council Award for its contribution to road safety.

We have received a number of Ministerial Visits including Steven Timms MP of the Department of Trade and Industry, Edwina Hart and Brian Gibbons of the Welsh Assembly Government. You are all however welcome to come to the project if you are in Merthyr Tydfil.

**Jeff Edwards MBE OStJ JP
Chair.**