

THE SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Tackling social disadvantage is one of 3 major themes which the Assembly has adopted in its strategic plan 'Better Wales'. The plan emphasises the Assembly's commitment to developing better communities where people want to live, work and play; have access to economic opportunities and a pleasant and safe environment.

Better Wales commits to promoting greater equality, creating more jobs, reducing gaps in health, education and social care, improving housing and environments and encouraging partnership and sustainability.

There are no quick fixes. Many communities suffer concentrated and long standing deprivation and are a long way from economic sustainability.

Work has been carried out to put in place comprehensive strategies to tackle social disadvantage:

- The People in Communities Programme is a small scale, intensive programme of community action. It has been operating in eight areas in Wales since May 1999 of which three are in the South Wales Valleys (Rhymney, Caerphilly; Gurnos and Galon Uchaf, Merthyr Tydfil and Rhiwgarn, Trebanog, Rhondda Cynon Taff). £240,000 has been provided through the Programme in these areas. The second phase of projects will shortly be announced and is likely to include more Valleys communities.

People in Communities recognises the need to promote community participation in policies to regenerate deprived areas

The problems of multiple deprivation and social disadvantage experienced by communities in the South Wales Valleys region of Wales are not unique in terms of the broader Welsh, UK or European experience. Industrial decline and restructuring have left populations throughout Europe stranded in areas of high unemployment with a limited capacity to adapt to new economic conditions or to create alternative paths to social and economic recovery. What is unique about the Valleys is:

- The scale of the problem, both in population terms and in the number of communities

affected.

- The degree of poverty and disadvantage and related patterns of social exclusion
- The concentration of problems in a geographically defined area
- The persistence over an extended period of time of a pattern of social disadvantage
- The resistance of the problem to orthodox policy approaches

'Communities First', is the Assembly's vision for the future of the most deprived communities in Wales and the concept of how they can be regenerated. Communities First will target the most deprived communities with action plans developed by and focussing on the needs and priorities of the communities themselves. Commitments to long term resources, support and funding to promote effective partnerships at local level will be required.

A widespread consultation and participative policy development exercise has been embarked upon and firm proposals for the scheme will be published in the Autumn

In many ways these compounded problems have prompted the approach to disadvantage in Wales to be established by the Communities First strategy. Whilst applicable to all communities in Wales, the Communities First approach will have a strong resonance in the Valleys where the community development sector is already well advanced. This is already clearly demonstrated by the number of Development Trusts that have emerged to tackle social deprivation in Valleys communities. The South Wales Valleys have already proved a fertile ground for the area-regeneration strategy which lies at the heart of the Communities First proposal. Whilst not pre-judging the extensive consultation exercise which is underway, it is evident that the formation of multi-agency partnerships in which community members play a key and critical role will be at the centre of the Communities First approach. Valleys culture enjoys a legacy of community and civic participation which ensures that contemporary communities have significant capacity to be involved in the design and delivery of the solution to the problems faced in those communities.

Communities First will consequently, through its partnership approach, provide the integration and strategic co-ordination which previous programmes and initiatives targeted specifically at the Valleys have failed to do so. Whilst not every community in the Valleys will be participating in the Communities First strategy directly, the patterns of deprivation and social disadvantage in Wales will ensure that significant number of communities will be involved. These will form a critical mass which will change the general pattern of service delivery in the whole region. As a result of the Communities First strategy, the Local Authorities, the Voluntary Sector, Health Trusts and the communities themselves will be engaged in a partnership approach to the regeneration of the Valleys which cannot be contained within designated Communities First localities. The strategy will also ensure connection and harmonisation with other Assembly policies in health, economic regeneration, education and training to promote an integrated policy platform to serve the needs of the Valleys.

Other action which will assist Community Development:

- An exercise to identify, assess and where possible rationalise Assembly led programmes which impact on social disadvantage is underway. The aim is to streamline programmes to make them more accessible and flexible and to deliver services better.
- A directory of existing community projects in Wales is being established. Approximately 700 organisations, many of which are based in the South Wales valleys, which have a clear focus on community development and regeneration have been identified. A paper version of the directory will be produced in early Summer with a CD and web site soon afterwards.