

THE SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

APPROPRIATE AND ACCESSIBLE TRAINING

Background

Improving skills and preparing people for work have a key place in the strategy for the Valleys. The economic and social history of the South Wales Valleys has left a particularly difficult legacy in terms of skills and the levels of economic activity. High levels of inactivity (for example 35% in Merthyr Tydfil in 1997-98, the highest in Wales) combined with a preponderance of poorly-paid jobs in low-growth sectors result in a considerable degree of social disadvantage and poverty (for example in 1997 over 60% of households in Merthyr, Blaenau Gwent and Rhondda Cynon Taff had annual incomes of below £10,000). For many individuals, and for communities as a whole, a key part of the solution is to have in place a comprehensive menu of training, advice and guidance programmes that will help people obtain good jobs. This must, of course, go hand in hand with economic development measures to increase the supply of such jobs.

Skill Levels

Skill levels in the Valleys are relatively very low. For example, in 1997 37% of the working age population of Merthyr had no qualifications, compared to the all-Wales figure of 22% and the near-by local authority areas of Monmouthshire and the Vale of Glamorgan where the figure was 15%.

The Future Skills Wales study, an on-going programme of research into skills issues in Wales, has found that the amount of training undertaken in the Valleys is also very low. While across Wales 54% of the adult population had been engaged in some form of training or learning in the 12 months to August 1998, this dropped to only 31% in Merthyr with most other Valleys areas also recording low figures. The conclusion is that skills levels are low in the Valleys and likely to get relatively lower in comparison to other areas if present trends continue.

New Skills Unit

Further research will be undertaken through Future Skills Wales to help shed light on a range of skills issues, and this will be supported by a new Skills Unit that has recently been established. This project is undertaken by a partnership that includes employers, the trades

unions and local government. In addition, the Skills Task Force has been appointed by the Assembly to take a strategic look at the results of the research so far. Its report will contain recommendations for action and these will be feed into a comprehensive skills action plan that will form part of a revised National Economic Development Strategy. The Regional Economic Forums have also prepared action plans to address the issues raised by Future Skills Wales.

In taking forward the skills agenda, the Assembly will work closely with the National Training Organisations which are employer-led bodies responsible for skills and training in their sectors. Support will continue for Cygnor NTO Cymru.

Training Infrastructure

One of the problems that has beset post-16 education and training has been the complex and overlapping arrangements for work-based training through TECs and education through FE colleges and school 6th forms. The Assembly has taken radical action to put in place from April 2001 a common post-16 education and training structure that will streamline provision and improve partnership. Community Consortia for Education and Training are being established across the Valleys which will have a key role to play in the new arrangements.

Transition from School to Work, Advice and Guidance

Youth disaffection and youth unemployment is a serious problem in the Valleys. Surprisingly high proportions of young people are not in education, training or employment. The reasons often go back into childhood, home circumstances and the culture of local community. As part of the solution the Assembly's **Youth Access Initiative** supports a range of positive action undertaken in and out of schools by local partnerships.

The **Youth Gateway** has also been introduced to help tackle these issues. Run in the Valleys by the Careers Service, this provides in-depth assessment and guidance for young people to help them embark on a learning and employment path that is right for them.

Careers Wales will be established throughout Wales from April 2001 onwards as an all-age guidance service providing information and advice on learning and career opportunities. It will draw together the current work of the Careers Service, the local adult guidance networks and the national helpline **learndirect** to make access to high quality information and advice readily available at a range of local outlets. It will provide practical help to ensure individuals are able to make informed choices and reasoned decisions on all learning and career options, and with referral to in-depth careers guidance where necessary, it will offer support to the low waged as a means of helping to level-up skill levels and move out of the low paid trap.

Training for Young People Programmes

The discredited YT programme is long gone and in its place the Assembly operates with the TECs a range of programmes to improve the skills levels of young people and ensure that employers in the Valleys receive the supply of skilled recruits that they need. The programmes fall essentially into two levels:

- Skillbuild, which is a range of preparatory training to improve the motivation and basic skills of young people;
- Skillseekers, which is an integrated suite of skills programmes delivered in conjunction with employers, comprising National Traineeships and Modern Apprenticeships.

The Assembly is currently reviewing the Skillseekers programmes with its partners and will draw up an action plan that the new Council for Education and Training in Wales can take forward when it takes over from the TECs next April.

Training for Adults and the Unemployed

a. Assembly-Funded Initiatives

Work Based Learning for Adults

This Wales-wide programme helps long-term unemployed people aged over 25 who are in receipt of Job Seekers Allowance, and others at risk of exclusion from the job market, to secure and sustain employment.

The programme has three main components:-

- *Employability Training* which provides help with key skills and work disciplines for people who need to improve their basic employability skills.
- *Recruit and train* which provides "employed status" training and encourages employers to recruit from amongst long-term unemployed and other disadvantaged people.
- *Occupational skills training* which provides unemployed people with job-related skills, linked to their career aspirations and the skills needs of the local labour market.

Individual Learning Accounts

This Wales-wide initiative encourages individuals to take responsibility for investing in their own futures by offering a facility to save money to pay for their own learning and by providing incentives to do so.

Individual Learning Accounts are available to everyone, but subsidised accounts will be targeted at those in work (in particular people without qualifications and in low-skill jobs; people who wish to develop skills in short supply; and employees in small firms) and at people returning to the labour market.

b. Initiatives Reserved to the UK Government

New Deal for Young People

New Deal for Long Term Unemployed People

New Deal for Lone Parents

These Wales-wide programmes provide support for jobless people seeking employment through a combination of personalised advice and guidance, and access to training.

New Deal for Disabled People

This New Deal is being piloted in several areas of GB, including parts of the South Wales Valleys. The "Eastern Valleys" Personal Adviser pilot has been operating since September 1998 in Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, north-eastern Rhondda Cynon Taff and southern Powys. This has proved particularly successful in helping participants facing severe barriers to work - in May 2000 celebrating its 500th job entrant.

Employment Zones

Employment Zones have been developed in areas with particularly high and persistent long-term unemployment, to help unemployed people claiming Job Seeker's Allowance to achieve a successful and sustainable entry into employment. An *Employment Zone* began operating in Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly and Merthyr Tydfil in April 2000.

Under *Employment Zones*, money attributable to the participants as benefits, training and jobsearch are pooled into personal job accounts to pay for help in overcoming employment barriers. This may include jobsearch support, training and more innovative use of funds. While *Employment Zones* are funded primarily by DfEE, the Assembly contributes some funding in lieu of *Work Based Learning for Adults*.