

THE SOUTH WALES VALLEYS

ENVIRONMENTAL IMPROVEMENT

Background

BetterWales.com recognises the importance of quality of life issues including environment policy and targets. Sustainable development is identified as one of three key themes running through the Assembly's strategic plan. The need to make sustainable development central to our thinking applies as much to the Valleys as it does to the rest of Wales. Similarly the significance of the impact that the local environment makes on people's day-to-day lives is as relevant to the South Wales Valleys as it is elsewhere.

BetterWales.com included a number of relevant commitments and these are annexed to this paper, together with other planned actions. All the papers being prepared as part of this Valleys action plan address progress being made on the broader sustainable development front so this paper focuses on action being taken to tackle those environmental problems that might be considered of particular relevance to the Valleys communities.

Environment Agency Wales activity

The Environment Agency Wales is an Assembly Sponsored Public Body which regulates many activities and processes that impact on the environment including industrial and business activities that cause, or have the potential to cause, pollution to air, land and water. The Agency has prepared Local Environment Agency Plans (LEAPS) for all the areas within the South Wales Valleys. They identify the key environmental issues for each area and set out the actions needed to solve them. Each one is prepared in consultation with the local communities and organisations. The relevant plans are those for Swansea and Llanelli; Neath Port Talbot and Bridgend; Taff; Eastern Valleys; and Rural Usk Areas. These can be viewed at the Agency's web site - www.environment-agency.wales.gov.uk.

Air quality

The Assembly has participated in the publication of the UK Air Quality Strategy. This sets out the current concerns about air quality and introduces a strategy to tackle these problems over the next five to ten years. Following on from the Strategy, technical guidance and new air quality regulations are being introduced to achieve the strategy's objectives. Each local

authority is required to assess air quality against standards set out in our Air Quality Strategy and where appropriate develop a plan to improve air quality to meet national standards, which primarily reflect health considerations.

Waste

Current waste management practices in Wales are not sustainable: about 95% of our municipal waste goes to landfill. In addition, about 10 million tonnes of commercial, industrial and construction/demolition waste annually goes to landfill. As well as the more general picture, there are particular sensitivities in a number of Valleys communities relating to the certain land fill sites for example Nant-y-Gwyddon.

The National Assembly is committed to reviewing *Waste Strategy 2000*, which was published on 25 May. We aim to prepare a Waste Strategy for Wales during 2001-2. Our strategy will focus on policies designed to deliver a substantial increase in recycling. It will create a framework in which these options are fully explored before less sustainable options, such as incineration with energy recovery and landfill are considered.

The results of fly tipping scar much of the Valleys. As well as being unsightly it can present a real risk in terms of public health. Fly tipping is a criminal offence, the penalties for which in a magistrates' court include fines of up to £20,000 and 6 months imprisonment. The Environment Agency has made very clear its willingness to take a tough line with those responsible.

Land Reclamation

The WDA's land reclamation work has made and continues to make a major contribution toward removing some of the eyesores remaining in the Valleys. This work is covered in the economic development paper.

Water Pollution

Improvements to the aquatic environment will be delivered as a consequence of Dwr Cymru's environmental programme for the next five years. The programme was drawn up by the Environment Agency Wales in consultation with the company, approved by the Assembly, and allowed for by the Office of Water Services in setting price limits. Over one thousand sewage discharges will be improved by the end of 2005.

The Valleys will be a major beneficiary. Improvements to many of the trunk sewers serving the Valleys are planned including the Western and Eastern Valley Trunk Sewers; the Rhondda; Ystradyfodwg and Pontypridd; Amman Valley etc. The programme promises to deliver major improvements to the rivers that are an integral part of the Valleys landscape. But the benefits will be wider: improvements to sewers which are currently overloaded will enable economic development in some of the more deprived urban areas of Wales. The planned reductions of over 10% in Dwr Cymru's water charges will also be a benefit to consumers and the wider economy.

Part of the legacy of the demise of the Valleys' coal industry is pollution of water courses from abandoned mines. From 1 January 1999 mine owners and operators have been required to give the Environment Agency six months' notice of closure to allow pollution prevention measures to be taken. For mines abandoned after 31 December 1999, the long-standing exemption from legal controls for those permitting pollution of water courses has been completely removed.

A remediation programme to tackle minewater pollution is also in place. This is based on the 'priority list' of serious minewater outbreaks which need remedial pollution treatment, developed in 1996 and agreed and updated by the Environment Agency and the Coal Authority. The programme is delivering real results. For example, at the site of the former Taff Merthyr Colliery in South Wales, the largest wetland system to be constructed by the Coal Authority is taking shape at the hub of the Taff Bargoed Millennium Park, a major land reclamation project by Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council. This flagship wetland scheme, costing over £1 million, is the central piece in a jigsaw, which is creating a new community park on land incorporating the sites of the former Taff Merthyr, Deep Navigation and Trelewis Collieries.

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KEY PRIORITIES

RESULTS BY MARCH 2003

DELIVERY AGENT

Sustainable development

1. Make sustainable development central to policy and practices	As required by the Government of Wales Act, publish a sustainable development scheme in 2000	Assembly and partners
2. Improve air quality	Reduce the number of days which fall below air quality standards by developing a National Air Quality Strategy in 2000 and ensuring that local authorities introduce air quality plans where necessary, to respond to local conditions	Assembly and partners
3. Introduce a more sustainable waste policy	Publish a Waste Strategy for Wales focusing on policies designed to deliver a substantial increase in recycling	Assembly and relevant partners
4. Improve river quality	Require water companies to invest in the protection and improvement of river water to benefit the environment, public health, tourism and the economy	Water companies and Environment Agency Wales