



# *Cwmdulais Uchaf*

## *Communities First Action Plan*

## ***Introduction***

In 2001, the Welsh Assembly Government launched Communities First, a programme of regeneration aimed at cutting poverty and improving the lives of the people living in Wales' most disadvantaged communities. This was a pretty ambitious and open-ended aim; how *exactly* does a government-funded programme, with community development as a central theme, go about improving lives and cutting poverty?

The answers to these questions, and many more, never materialised, and so it was up to local people and Communities First staff working in communities, to grab the programme and make the best of it. It was obvious that Communities First was *not* about large-scale projects as there was simply not enough money in the budget to allow that. It was also not about pumping money into local services, or making grand designs on how to improve them for the majority of the community; again, there was not enough money to do this, let alone the clout to make such radical changes.

So what exactly is Communities First? After much consideration, we have come to the conclusion that Communities First is about learning how to bring about change; it's about learning to work better together; it's about learning how to tackle the deep-entrenched and multi-faceted problems in our communities; it's about learning to value yourself, our community, and other people; it's about learning to expect more out of life, expect better services and expect to know how to access exactly what you need to make a difference to yourself and the community.

Communities First *is* about improving the quality of life in the most disadvantaged areas of Wales. To be able to do this, a team of community development workers are employed to support the participation of community members, particularly those who are most marginalised, in community life. In doing so, communities will become more involved in the decision-making process, allowing them to get the most out of services, and improving things like access to jobs, quality of housing, health services, educational opportunities, financial services, and the environment in which we live.

## ***Involving the Community***

Communities First began to appear in Neath Port Talbot around four years ago, and from early on Dulais Valley Partnership, the local development trust, was keen to be the grant receipt for the programme in this area. The Welsh Assembly Government suggested some initial steps, and the process developed with quite a standard approach; steering groups were formed, from which representatives were elected to sit on a cross sector Partnership. The Partnership spent the next year or so consulting with the community, mainly using a questionnaire, which was delivered to all households and which achieved a return rate of around 50%. This questionnaire was designed using a template from another area and asked questions around a range of issues, attempting to gauge opinion on local services and facilities, education and training, housing, health, employment and quality of life indicators such as transport, the environment and community spirit.

However, this approach had some fundamental flaws. A general consultation had come up with a wide range of issues that were difficult to prioritise because ultimately everything is a priority to someone. About a year ago it was realised that we were never going to progress in a way we wanted because of these shortcomings, and so it was decided that we would try and make sense of all the information that we'd gathered. What we ultimately achieved was a set of diagrams that systematically set out the information into high level aims and lower level objectives and activities that could achieve these aims. These diagrams, by definition, helped us devise priorities, highlighted the work of partners that contribute to meeting our aims, and gave a clarity from which we could progress. These are presented as tables further on.

We have tried to involve the community at every stage of development, and although we have carried out quite substantial consultations we continue to try and find new ways of valuing involvement at all levels. We are currently trying to move away from the conventional methods of participation, such as expecting people to sit on an ever-growing number of committees, and are trying to integrate activities with consultation. This will hopefully allow people to get involved in community life, not just Communities First, while having a chance to get their voices heard.

## ***The Partnership***

In October 2002 a Partnership was formed from representatives of the ward Steering Groups, covering the sectors of Business, Voluntary, Community and Statutory, with each having equal representation (the community sector could outweigh the others). In addition, the Partnership also includes attendance from Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council's Communities First Team, Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Services (NPTCVS), Neath Port Talbot Local Health Board (NPTLHB) and New Learning Network (NLN). The Partnership has since adopted the title "Cwmdulais Uchaf Communities First Partnership" (the Partnership). The Partnership has met once a month for the past three and a half years, discussing community issues and problems, and how we work towards finding and implementing solutions. It is worth noting that while members of the Partnership sit as individuals, many are representatives of organisations who provide activities and services locally, and their contribution to meeting our collective needs is extremely valuable.

However, the partnership as a concept (as opposed to 'the Partnership') is much bigger, and it has become apparent that the networks being established, strengthened and continued, are just as important as any forum. These networks are made up of all the agencies, organisations, departments, community groups and individuals that we work with. Generally, the Communities First Team acts as the lynchpin for these networks but often these networks engage in a great deal of working amongst themselves.

As a result of the extensive networks and relationships at work in our communities, 'the Partnership' is developing into a forum of informed, committed individuals who steer the community development work that the Communities First Team carries out. They set tasks, monitor progress, and benchmark research and projects proposed to tackle the deep-entrenched problems identified in our communities. The Partnership is guided by a terms of reference agreed on by all partners, and has an open membership to anyone in the community.

## *Community Profile*

The Dulais Valley is made up of three electoral wards, two of which, Onllwyn and Seven Sisters, have been designated Communities First areas. The valley itself is a typical ex-coalfield community, situated at the northernmost boundary of Neath Port Talbot County Borough and on the edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park, and so by definition more isolated than most communities. It is known for its strong social infrastructure and volunteer ethos and has several voluntary organisations that have been in operation for many years. A full community profile was written in 2004, and the complete document paints a contemporary picture of the Upper Dulais Valley in terms of its social, cultural and environmental climate. It is hoped that the picture is as accurate as it possibly can be, combining rich subjective opinions with statistical research.

Both communities are typified by the following traits: an ageing population base; high proportion of elderly and retired people; high level of long-term illness; a tendency for outward migration of younger, better qualified people; large number of pre-war houses; low amount of social housing available; above average rate of unemployment; changing employment demographics; a perception of the fear of crime; low number of formally educated people; a rejuvenating environment; under-developed social facilities and a lack of fundamental amenities locally.

From these issues and needs several priorities can be recognised. As a community 12 miles distant of Neath, public transport and infrastructure is a problem. Housing is a major priority in our communities as more and more young people are leaving to pursue careers and education and not returning because of a lack of suitable, affordable housing. The low level of social housing and rental opportunities available also exaggerates this situation. What we are ultimately faced with is an aging community where many of its young people are poorly educated and most disadvantaged; this communicates a need to provide opportunities for education and skills training in suitable, good quality and well-developed facilities that inspire self esteem and community spirit. In summary, young people, transport, community facilities and activities, and employment have been recognised and agreed as priority themes to address.

## *Section 2 – The Action Plan*

This part is the actual plan of actions. Presented over the next six pages are six tables containing our aims, objectives, areas of activities and the actions that are carried out to achieve these. The tables have been developed as part of the ongoing work of our Partnership. They have been informed by a number of consultation exercises, including a community questionnaire, focus groups, fun days and public meetings, as well as individual conversations and rich local knowledge. The actions outlined in the right hand columns contain both our individual pieces of work that we carry out as a community development team, as well as the work of our partners, who contribute a great deal towards achieving our aims.



*The Action Plan*

<i>Active Community</i>						
AIM	SPECIFIC AIM	OBJECTIVES	ACTIONS			PARTNERS
Confident empowered citizens drive change in the community	Local people know what they what and know how to get it	Improve information	Production of Newsletter	Community Directory	Community Notice Boards	Dulais Valley Partnership Dove Workshop Local Community Groups
		Influence service delivery	Regeneration X - Housing Needs research working with young men in upper Dulais Valley to also support their involvement in community life			
		Support Community Groups to take action				
	People feel proud to live in Dulais Valley	To encourage and support the participation of the most marginalised residents and groups	Assessing Community Strengths work	Promotion of CF Trust Fund		Dove Workshop Neath Port Talbot CBC Youth Service Keep Wales Tidy Dulais Valley Partnership
			Resident Participation Project, supporting residents to become involved in community activity, who maybe wouldn't be involved otherwise due to geographical isolation, etc. Current work in Roman Road, Pant-y-Ffordd and Seven Sisters			

<i>Employment</i>						
AIM	SPECIFIC AIM	OBJECTIVES	ACTIVITY		PARTNERS	
To raise the level of employment in Dulais Valley	Improve access to employment	Support the growth of local employment	Improve support available to local private and social enterprises, as well as young entrepreneurs, particularly in the area of tourism	Establish a local Young Entrepreneurs Project	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Economic Development, <i>Dove Workshop</i>	
				Set up local business forum and research business development manager	NPTCBC, Dulais Valley Partnership, Local businesses	
	Reduce the level of economic inactivity	Increase access to jobs outside of the valley	Improve transport links with surrounding employment centres	Improve access to and quality of local skills training and confidence building opportunities	Support Dulais Valley Community Transport's development	Dulais Valley Community Transport Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
					Work with Dove Workshop to research learning needs	Job Centre Plus, Dove Workshop Swansea University New Learning Network
				Link to Job Centre Plus to identify opportunities		

<i>Young People</i>					
AIM	SPECIFIC AIM	OBJECTIVES	ACTIVITY	ACTIONS	PARTNERS
Young people grow up to lead happy and productive lives as citizens of their own community	Informed, skilled young people, who feel they are valued members of their community	That young people access their entitlement to services that meet their needs	Provide generic youth work and support to existing youth organisations and activities in the valley	Support Seven Sisters Youth Club/ YMCA/YPFA/ETC.	Dulais Valley Partnership, Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council Youth Service, Schools, Flexible Learning Programme, Dove Workshop, Onllwyn YMCA, YPFA, + other local youth activities
				Digi Lab/ Youth Drop-in Service/other DVP club-based projects	
		To offer opportunities for young people to expand their horizons	Implement a programme of detached youth work to particularly target the most marginalized young people	Link with NPT Youth Service to develop DVP Youth Work Apprenticeship	
			Develop flexible learning projects to engage young people in a journey of informal community education	Build on work with young men from Seven Sisters	
				Link with local Primary and Secondary Schools	

<i>Community Safety</i>				
AIM	SPECIFIC AIM	OBJECTIVES	ACTIONS	PARTNERS
People feel safe in their community	Lower crime rates and improve peoples' perceptions of crime	Personal safety/home security	Link to NPT Community Safety Partnership	NPTCBC
		Increase Police presence	Support and promote Police Community Support Officers	South Wales Police
		Improve footpaths and street lighting	Link to NPT Neighbourhood Zone Teams	NPTCBC
	Improve road safety	Increase awareness of road safety		
		Eliminate dangerous road sections		

<i>Environment</i>				
AIM	SPECIFIC AIM	OBJECTIVES	ACTIONS	PARTNERS
To maximise the potential of Dulais Valley's outstanding natural beauty to contribute to quality of life	Improve quality of and access to local environment	Increase usage of local env.	DVP Env. Project	DVP, YPFA
			YPFA Woodland Project	
		Improve appearance of street-scene environment	Neighbourhood Zone Teams	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, DVP, Keep Wales Tidy
			DVP Gardening Scheme	
	Rubbish Clearances			
	Improve living standards and access to affordable housing	Increase affordable housing opportunities	Develop and implement affordable housing project	Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council
		Improve quality of housing	Extension of mains gas	NPTCBC, Gas Suppliers, Warm Wales
			Promotion of Warm Wales project	

<i>Health and Well-being</i>				
AIM	SPECIFIC AIM	OBJECTIVES	ACTIONS	PARTNERS
To improve the health and well-being of citizens of the valley	Improve the quality of and access to healthcare	Promote health provision in the valley		
	Promote good health and well-being	Promote a healthy diet	Dove Workshop Market Garden Project	Dove Workshop
			"Get Cooking" Project	
		Promote exercise	YMCA activities	Dove Workshop, YMCA, YPFA
	Dove Workshop Learning Garden			
	YPFA Woodlands Project			

## Section 3 – Current Work

This section outlines the six distinct and separate pieces of work that we're currently involved in. While we are involved in other work and projects that arise, these pieces constitute our core work programme. Each section also contains a sub-section on monitoring change, where we outline the difference that we hope to see by doing the work.



### Current Work

Regeneration X  
Resident Participation  
Assessing Community Strengths  
Community Learning Research  
Youth Work  
Employment and Business Research



### *Regeneration X*

It is widely accepted that across Wales housing is a significant problem. Dulais Valley is no different, and anecdotal evidence indicates that there is a lack of affordable housing suitable for young couples and single people. The consequences of this situation is that people from the valley who are presented with alternative opportunities, take these opportunities and find homes elsewhere. While this is not a major problem, and young people should be encouraged to broaden their horizons, it does leave communities housing people who are, by definition, the most disadvantaged and poorly educated.

The aim of this project is to work with young men living in the valley to identify housing needs and issues, which in turn will provide good quality research to inform an affordable housing project. The thinking behind working with young men is that the project will not only identify housing needs, but also help them think about their futures, community life, and exactly what is important to them.

#### *Monitoring Change*

What we will achieve by carrying out this project is **good quality information and research** that will directly inform an affordable housing project. It will also help **engage young men**, who may not be engaged in community activity, in a process that sees them **thinking differently** about **their neighbourhood**, their **aspirations** for the future, and the **barriers they face** to meeting their needs.

### *Resident Participation*

Much of our work can be categorized as supporting resident participation. While it can be argued that everyone in Dulais Valley is marginalised and excluded in some way when compared to the rest of Wales and Britain, we must recognise the different levels of social exclusion and that some people are more disadvantaged than others.

Our aim is to support residents to become involved in community activity, who maybe wouldn't be involved otherwise due to geographical isolation, physical and emotional barriers, etc. The purpose of such work is that our

communities will become more active, not only in terms of social opportunities, but also in terms of community spirit and a willingness to express opinions and ideas for change. Current work is taking place in Banwen, Pant-y-Ffordd and Seven Sisters.

*Monitoring Change*

This work will increase the **participation** and **involvement** of people in our communities, who may not be engaged in any activity otherwise. The **most marginalized** people in our communities will take **significant steps** to becoming **confident, active citizens** who are aware of their rights and will **have their voices heard**.

*Assessing Community Strengths*

Assessing Community Strengths is a toolkit published by Community Development Foundation. It provides methods to survey community groups and find out exactly what are their strengths, weaknesses, needs and issues. This information is then shared with the representatives of the groups who participate and they are supported to find solutions to the problems and needs uncovered. While this is the primary aim of the work, the process also gives a context to engage with the community groups, as well as providing opportunities to strengthen inter-community relations.

*Monitoring Change*

The surveying of all the groups in our communities will provide a **detailed account of their needs, strengths and weaknesses**, as well as creating a **comprehensive database**. By engaging in this process the community groups will **build on the relationships** between each other, **strengthen local networks**, seek **collective solutions** to collective problems, and improve service delivery by working together with agencies.

### *Community Learning Research*

We are currently working with Dove Workshop to research community learning needs. This is a response to a national agenda, which is hoping that every community across Wales will devise their own learning plan. While most of these plans are being written using existing information, we want to update our research to inform our plans with relevant, contemporary findings. A significant part of this work involves engaging with people who wouldn't necessarily use Dove Workshop or participate in any form of Adult Community Education, and finding out what they would like to become involved in. It is hoped that this will help make centres like Dove Workshop and Seven Sisters Community Hall become more inclusive and offer courses and projects that are more relevant to people.

#### *Monitoring Change*

The research would provide **good quality information** on the **educational needs** of community members, particularly of the **most marginalized groups**, that will in turn inform our Community Learning Plan. It will also help **engage** people in Adult Community Education who **wouldn't necessarily be engaged otherwise**. Fundamentally, it will find out why some people don't use Dove Workshop or its satellites, and provide reasons and ways for them to do so.

### *Youth Work*

Young People have been identified as a priority and we have recognised a need to promote good relationships between all providers of youth activities. Specifically, we have been working in Seven Sisters to ensure that services which young people are entitled to, be delivered. We are also supporting a voluntary youth club operating in Onllwyn YMCA. Ynysdawley Playing Fields Association also operate a voluntary youth club in the lower part of Seven Sisters. Above all, we are trying to make sure that resources are maximised and are used in the best way. To that end, we continue to promote a local youth providers groups, which increasingly involves everyone working with young people in the Dulais Valley.

In addition, we are currently working with Dulais Valley Partnership's Youth Worker in writing a development plan detailing the valley's vision for youth work over the next five years.

*Monitoring Change*

By supporting youth activities, young people will have **access to better services** and facilities that meet their needs and which they are entitled to. By **providing opportunities** and working with young people, we will increase their **participation in community life** and activities, particularly from those who are **most marginalised**. Ultimately, we will help them **improve their confidence, self-esteem and skills** in order to expand their horizons, fulfil their potential and be active, empowered citizens in their community.

*Employment and Business Research*

Access to employment is major problem for most rural communities and this problem has been exacerbated over the past 20 years, as the economic decline in South Wales has meant huge job losses in coalmining valleys. This means that we are in a situation where we have a low number of job opportunities, as well as poor links and substantial distances from employment centres.

The problem of employment is obviously a complex and deep-entrenched one, with issues of poor job opportunities, poor access, high economic inactivity and long-term illness. This makes it a difficult area to tackle and it has been recognised that the biggest difference we can make is to the local business community and potential entrepreneurs. To that end, it has been decided that we develop a local business strategy and seek out funding for a business development manager who will take the strategy forward, supporting local businesses and promoting entrepreneurs in their initial set-up.

*Monitoring Change*

The **research and involvement** of local businesses will not only provide **good quality information** on their concerns and needs, but it will also strengthen **intercommunity relations and networks** among the businesses. This in turn would make the businesses operate more efficiently and lead to **an increase in local jobs**. The initial information gleaned may also help secure funding for a post to take these ideas forward.

*Looking Forward*

It is important to remember that this document is a plan of small, separate actions that are made up of the work of the Communities First Team as well as other partners within, and outside of, the local communities. In turn, these separate actions contribute to the overall aims of the plan, as devised and endorsed by a number of local organisations, businesses and residents of the upper Dulais Valley.

The Cwmdulais Uchaf Communities First Partnership is currently in the process of redeveloping itself to become a more inclusive, responsive and needs-directed partnership. That is, a partnership that is not constrained by formal conventions of incorporated organisations, and much more akin to the inter-community networks that were established in the area during the height of the miners lodge movement. The existing members of the Partnership have set the tasks of involving a broader representation of community groups that work in the valley, and of finding alternative methods of valuing participation. To that end, we are seeking to establish a collective network, or shall we say Partnership, of local community groups, businesses, and individuals, along with regional agencies, national organisations and County Borough Council officials, that can monitor and evaluate all work undertaken to achieve the aims of this plan.

This monitoring and evaluating will take place on a quarterly basis, with a review of the whole plan scheduled annually. As the partnership develops, so will its systems for evaluating; a matrix of indicators will be developed by which all future projects and potential work will be benchmarked. This matrix will help decide how resources and efforts are best used, by determining whether or not a piece of work will achieve our aims, particularly in terms of partnership working and participation. This evaluating system will also assist partners to monitor their own work and how it integrates with the total plan. As the partnership progresses, further sections will be included to explain the details of its monitoring and evaluation systems discussed above.