



PRESS RELEASE

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'Something Special for the Valleys'

A democratically elected Mayor for the Valleys is a key recommendation in a new IWA study *Futures for the Heads of the Valleys*. Inspired by the success of the London Mayor, the study says the May 2008 elections in London "showed how a democratic post of this sort has the ability to energise the political debate, and draw in candidates who can appeal to the electorate."

A Mayor would also provide the Valleys with a strong executive arm to ensure that its problems are addressed in a more effective way. The study observes that there are widely shared aspirations for improving the Valleys, but says:

"What is missing is a delivery mechanism to ensure that whatever the priorities in terms of aspirations or targets, a strategy for the Heads of the Valleys is implemented."

In his contribution to the book Professor Steve Fothergill, of the Centre for Economic and Social research at Sheffield Hallam University and former Director of the Coalfields Communities Campaign, says the Heads of the Valleys have "the most intractable problems of any older industrial area in the whole of Britain." While there are no "short cuts to regeneration" he calls for the injection of "something special".

The study's answer is a Valleys Mayor. It notes that powers acquired by the London Mayor's office have been devolved from central government rather transferred upwards from the existing local authorities and recommends that this should be followed in the Valleys. Existing local government across the Valleys would continue to carry out broadly its current range of functions, avoiding the necessity for a costly reorganisation.

A Mayor with a strong executive role, following the London pattern, could engage with the following policy objectives:

- Take maximum advantage of the investment opportunities being opened up by the stock transfer of social housing in the Heads of the Valleys.
- Upgrade the skills of young people coming into the Labour Market. The Assembly Government's 2006 *Turning Heads* Valleys strategy commented that only 41 per cent of 15-year-olds in the Heads of the Valleys were achieving 5 GCSEs at A*-C grades, compared with a Welsh average of 52 per cent, which itself is extremely low.
- Improve public transport: it has often been noted that the geography and population density of south-east Wales makes the region ideally suited to the creation of a fast light tram or rail system of the kind that is common in comparable regions across the European Union.
- Develop social entrepreneurship as a well-tried means of encouraging the long-term economically inactive into full-time employment.
- Invest in the environmental improvement opportunities such as the Valleys Regional Park.
- Promote the tourism offer which has a substantial, but largely untapped potential.

An imaginative tourism proposal is put forward in the book by Millennium Centre architect Jonathan Adams, for an 'Eden-style' Spa Hotel at the top end of the Rhondda Valley. This, he says, would have the potential for regenerating a dramatic landscape:

"Were it not for industrialisation, the Valleys would undoubtedly be one of the UK's most visited National Parks. As the scars of industry continue to fade beneath a 're-mediated' landscape, it becomes harder to remember how the Valleys used to appear, and easier to imagine how it might have looked two hundred years before. If, for example, you bring some new visitors to the Rhondda via the Heads of the Valleys and the Rhigos Roads – in other words, so as to avoid urban areas as much as possible – you can be guaranteed that they will be amazed both at the prospect that opens up before them and by the fact that they are but a short drive from England's main motorway network."

Other contributors to the book include the Deputy First Minister, Ieuan Wyn Jones, the Minister for Regeneration Leighton Andrews, Professor Kevin Morgan, of the Regeneration Institute, Cardiff University, and Professor Gareth Williams, also of Cardiff University.

Editors' Note

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Futures for the Heads of the Valleys is available from the IWA at £10 plus £1.50p p&p.