

Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee

Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language

Evidence Paper on the Ministerial Taskforce for the Valleys

In July, I announced the establishment of a Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys. Using the strengths of the public, private and third sectors and the ability of the Welsh Government to act as a catalyst the taskforce will work over the lifetime of this Assembly to spearhead the regeneration and sustainable growth of the valleys.

This new approach to investing in the future of the valleys will engage and empower local communities and ensure we are maximising opportunities for inward investment and economic growth.

The South Wales Valleys area generally underperforms Wales as a whole across a range of economic indicators with people experiencing higher levels of deprivation and lower levels of satisfaction. We know that household incomes lag behind other areas and analysis of the impacts of welfare reform in Wales shows that local authorities in the valleys have been disproportionately affected.

A key role of the taskforce will be to work with people living in the valleys, businesses, local government, the third sector and civic organisations to address these issues and to promote the valleys as a place to live, work and invest. In particular, we must now concentrate on creating new jobs and opportunities in valleys communities where work is difficult to find as well as increasing connectivity to enable people to travel to work further afield and access services.

A focus on the regeneration of the South Wales Valleys and an emphasis on jobs and growth is not new. There has been significant investment in the regeneration of the valleys region since the 1960s. In that time, we have moved from top-down, single-themed physical regeneration projects to working in partnership with community-focused initiatives to develop skills and jobs, in addition to environmental improvements. A high-level review of previous regeneration initiatives has been undertaken to ensure lessons learned can be applied to the work of the taskforce.

The diversification of the economy of the valleys has already begun. New industries are already being supported, with the Welsh Government taking forward a broad range of actions to support the creation and retention of jobs. This includes action to stimulate economic activity and jobs in the short term, such as attracting inward investment, business start-up and finance support. The Welsh Government is also working to address longer-term issues through strategic investments in transport infrastructure, superfast broadband and support for innovation.

The Welsh Government has encouraged and supported the development of city regions – the Swansea Bay City Region, which is made up of the four local authorities of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Neath Port Talbot, and Swansea and the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal, which brings together 10 local authorities in South East Wales.

The Cardiff Capital Region City Deal, with joint funding agreed by the Welsh and UK governments, will support the 10 local authorities to work together to oversee delivery on a range of issues from housing and business support to planning and transport. The South Wales Metro will play a major role in enhancing connectivity across the region, which will bring a wide range of benefits, not least the ability for people to travel around the region more easily, to access employment and the facilities and services which sustain communities.

A key role of the taskforce will be to build on these existing developments and ensure their benefits are felt disproportionately by valleys communities. Creating opportunities in local communities and ensuring the benefits of inward investment are retained and shared in the valleys will be a fundamental priority.

The taskforce will work closely with the Cardiff Capital City Region, the Swansea Bay City Region and the Metro programme, with the view to guarantee maximum benefits for communities in the valleys.

The Ministerial Taskforce will meet for the first time on 22 September to discuss its forward work programme for the next five years. Thereafter, it will meet on a quarterly basis, although meetings may be more frequent during the first year.

The first meeting of the Ministerial Taskforce will focus on promoting regeneration and economic growth; improving mainstream services, in particular health, education and housing; and community engagement. A range of experts, including representatives from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) have been invited to attend to provide evidence to inform the development of taskforce priorities and our programme of work.

As chair of the taskforce, I want to deliver tangible results which improve the lives of the people living in some of Wales' most disadvantaged areas. My immediate priority will be to consider how we can increase economic development and regeneration, improve business efficiency and competitiveness, increase employment and earnings, develop the right skills and support sustainable development.

Members of the Taskforce include the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy and Infrastructure and the Minister for Skills and Science as well as a small number of external expert advisory members.

The Taskforce will remain in place for five years, with its work underpinned by a taskforce board, led by senior Welsh Government officials. A key role of the board will be to advise members of the taskforce on the delivery of key priorities, different approaches to engagement and how the taskforce will work with existing programmes and policies to ensure an integrated approach to economic development and the delivery of local services.

Over the next five years, the taskforce will engage with all Welsh Government Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers as improving outcomes in the South Wales Valleys is the collective responsibility of all Welsh Government Departments.