

Wye Valley AONB Villages - Plan for the future

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our communities and natural environment face significant and imminent change from the climate emergency and post-Covid recovery. These are radically changing the way we think about our communities and environment. We need to change our day-to-day life and leave behind many of the accepted approaches we have become used to such as our over reliance on car use. Remote working, online shopping and the internet are radically changing the way we live, access services and seek information.

Against this backdrop of major change, the natural beauty, local resources and human history of the Wye Valley has attracted residents, businesses and visitors for centuries. Each of these are intrinsically linked meaning that a careful balance is key to success or indeed failure. Where an imbalance occurs it becomes obvious. Local concerns over river pollution, speeding cars through the villages or the impact of large numbers of visitors to Tintern during peak times demonstrate how this delicate balance can shift the wrong way. To compound these challenges is the complex geography of the area as the convergence of multiple local authorities and the Wales-England border. Gaining consensus and consistency in policy, financing and governance is challenging.

Despite these challenges the area benefits from notable advantages. Beyond the obvious quality of the landscape, active and engaged community council's and residents are providing energy and ambition. Many independent local businesses have become part of the fabric each marketing the area to broad audiences and providing local jobs. The borderland location should become a point of celebration rather than a source of inertia. Success will mean embracing innovation, fronting up to contentious issues such as traffic, developing

new partnerships, accepting trial and error and building on the existing natural assets. It will require investment in a way that delivers far wider benefits to our health, our environment, our local communities and our local economies.

The question for the Wye Valley, its communities, businesses and visitors is how can this balance be struck and what does it look like?

The "Wye Valley AONB Villages Plan for the Future" sets a vision for change through short, medium and long-term projects aimed primarily at the villages that are located within Monmouthshire. At the heart of the study is a response to the community's concern over road safety. The plan provides a strategy for reducing vehicle speeds and increasing the use of sustainable transport such as walking, cycling and public transport. Importantly road safety is not considered in isolation. In recognition of the fact that within the Wye Valley tourism, landscape, local economy, governance, placemaking and transport all impact one other, the plan proposes measures for all of these six themes.

This has led to the creation of a **six-point plan for change** which responds to the six key themes identified with an emphasis on delivery. Phasing has been a key issue and the plan provides clear proposals for immediate changes to the villages such as gateway signage through to longer term aspirations for sustainable transport and tourism.

1 Ensure safe and sustainable transport

by delivering coordinated changes to the streets across the villages to make them slower for traffic, more attractive and safer for pedestrians and cyclists. To reduce car dependency 'Sustainable transport' including buses, walking and cycling should be improved by grouping bus stops, cycle hire and storage, tourist attractions and new public spaces at key locations such as Tintern as 'mobility hubs'. Bus services should be improved particularly during high season for both local people and tourists. Extending the Wye Valley Greenway could have a catalytic effect on walking, cycling and tourism if it were to be extended to the north and should be assessed for viability.

2 Conserve and enhance the landscape by working with other local authorities, agencies and land owners across the length of the River Wye to improve the health of the river as part of a 'whole catchment study'. To encourage community participation a 'Green Village' initiative is proposed to deliver small scale projects such as community food growing and habitat creation. A pilot should be delivered to test new farming practices that deliver wider benefits to nature such as less pesticide use and habitat management.

3 Enable sustainable tourism by updating the tourism strategy for the area around a business case which will provide a basis for measuring impact. The unique border location should be celebrated as a place where visitors can move between countries with just a few steps. A simple and effective brand should be developed along the lines of Iceland's Golden Circle or Scotlands North Coast 500. Delivering better tourism 'infrastructure' such as improved signage and wayfinding, bold village gateways and more opportunities to meet local people, eat local food and experience the authenticity of the valley should be considered.

4 Retain and improve the network of unique villages by recognising the distinct history and character of each of the villages and reflecting this in the proposed changes. Tintern for example has a much greater need to support tourism than a village such as The Narth which is much more attuned to local community life.

5 Support the local economy by working to delivering of high speed internet access with partners. It is recommended that a 'local circular economy' approach is adopted to support local business and to attract specific Welsh Government funding. This approach encourages local producers and supply chains to work closely with each other to retain money within the area for the people who live there rather than export to other areas. To allow people to work locally and attract new entrepreneurs new premises that allow 'co-working' or shared office space should be delivered. To ensure that local people can continue to live in the area, the Wye Valley Local Housing Needs Requirements should be updated to deliver affordable housing.

6 Provide joined-up governance by establishing a delivery group between key partners such as the local community council's, Monmouthshire County Council and the Wye Valley AONB. Cross border working with adjacent Local Authorities such as Forest of Dean District Council will be essential in sharing ideas and pooling resources. Both recommendations will be critical in making the plan a reality.