

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru / National Assembly for Wales  
Pwyllgor yr Economi, Seilwaith a Sgiliau/ Economy, Infrastructure and Skills  
Committee  
Bargeinion Dinesig ac Economïau Rhanbarthol Cymru / City Deals and the  
Regional Economies of Wales  
Ymateb gan Rob Thomson / Evidence from Rob Thomson

Merthyr Tydfil Heritage Trust has for some time been seeking information about how the proposals for Cardiff Capital Region's City Deal and the Metro will impact on our town and communities. This is principally because development, regeneration and redevelopment is often in conflict with heritage assets, the local environment and community facilities.

- 1.1 We are aware that the City Deal involves more than the 'spatial economy'. Our own interest in heritage, natural environment and culture is related to 'tourism', education and community.
- 1.2 But at this point, we have no clear idea of how the city deal will work in relation to Merthyr Tydfil (or other Heads of the Valleys towns). Our concern is that this may reflect a lack of clarity and purpose within the city deal partnership about the next steps forward. Or a lack of transparency. Possibly the absence of a plan.
- 1.3 Yes, we know a little about the Metro. Although that also seems beset with uncertainty as private sector bus and train operating companies bid to build Metro infrastructure.
- 1.4 The 'Growth and Competitiveness Commission: Report and Recommendations' (2016) advocates a long-term strategy that involves multiple interventions, rapid implementation, integration of governance and progress in five-year development cycles. This is a macro view.
- 1.5 Our concerns start at local level. But we have a wider cross-regional view of tourism and heritage.

## **2 The current position with regard to the signed Cardiff Capital Region and Swansea Bay City Deals and the next steps planned to take them forward**

- 2.1 Given that we have not seen much in the way of communications at local level (Metro pronouncements and consultations apart), it was no surprise that within a week of the City Deal being signed the Cardiff Capital Region (CCR) was complaining about "misinformed and mistaken comments" and claiming that "the City Deal will create social and economic benefits for the whole city-region, not just for Cardiff".
- 2.2 We are aware of a report 'Impact Study: Regeneration and the Metro' submitted to the Welsh Government by planning consultants The Urbanists in 2013. This included Merthyr Tydfil as one of nine potential Metro development areas.
- 2.3 But we are also of the view that – more than three years on – there is little or nothing known publicly about whether the development proposals in the Impact Study are being:
  - moved forward already behind the scenes
  - left in limbo for the City Deal to start or
  - abandoned.

- 2.4 In spite of the aspirations of Cardiff Capital Region and the City Deal to move towards regional decision-making on planning and development – hopefully in an open and transparent way – we have to live in the ‘here and now’ in Merthyr Tydfil because change is already upon us.
- 2.5 Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council decided in 2016 to revise the Local Development Plan. It said this was necessary because the current LDP had been over-ambitious in going for ‘enhanced growth’ and was failing to meet its targets for new build housing. The local authority also said this analysis was backed up by population projections.
- 2.6 The Heritage Trust pointed out to Merthyr Tydfil CBC that it had made the case for revising the Local Development Plan using Welsh Government 2011 population estimates rather than the more recent 2014 projections.
- 2.7 There is a marked difference in the two sets of figures. The Welsh Government seemingly accepted the council’s proposal without noticing or correcting the oversight.
- 2.8 Two major sites that are of heritage, environmental, green space and community importance could be re-zoned for redevelopment – Hoover (residential use) and West Merthyr (commercial leisure).
- 2.9 Council planning officials are recommending revising the current house-building targets downwards and suggest that turning over the Hoover site to residential development could accommodate most if not all of the construction needed under the revised LDP.
- 2.10 Merthyr Tydfil Heritage Trust has already filed notice of its opposition to the redevelopment of the southern section of the main Hoover site – the original factory façade, main office, gatehouse and sports field.
- 2.11 But there is a further twist in that a previous proposal to provide a ‘park and ride’ site on the corner of the sports ground adjacent to Pentrebach railway station was revived in the Southeast Wales Valleys Local Transport Plan (2015) as part of the Metro. This also now threatens the Hoover sports ground.
- 2.12 We are concerned that the emerging redevelopment of Hoover will not meet the recommendations of The Urbanists that Metro developments should be:
- built to high standards of design
  - in accordance to Metro station design principles and
  - controlled by supplementary planning guidance.
- 2.13 There is also the worry that Cardiff Capital Region may be tempted to offer national housebuilders more scope to invest in large scale developments by cutting planning ‘red tape’.
- 2.14 The Heritage Trust is also concerned that local authorities like Merthyr Tydfil may be ‘jockeying for position’ by tinkering with their local development plans instead of working in partnership on a strategic development plan for the region that meets the spirit and letter of the City Deal proposals.

### **3 The intended impact of the City Deals and the way in which this will be governed, funded and monitored**

3.1 The Heritage Trust is of the view that the chances of positive outcomes from the Cardiff Capital Region and the City Deal will be greater if there is more open and transparent communication that builds trust and confidence in planners, funders and investors.

#### **4 The degree to which the growth and city deals could solve or exacerbate existing inequalities, both within and between regions**

4.1 The Heritage Trust is concerned that the existing inequalities impacting severely on Merthyr Tydfil and Heads of the Valleys communities could – in spite of good intentions – be exacerbated by the City Deal.

4.2 In the heritage, cultural and tourism sectors there are various inequalities that are not always apparent at regional or national level.

4.3 For example, although the economic impact of tourism in the region is £2.5bn annually approaching half of this (45 per cent) is in Cardiff's city limits. The capital also attracts 52 per cent of all visitors and 64 per cent of business visitors. "...in a UK context there is significant room for Cardiff to improve as a visitor and conference destination" (Growth and Competitiveness Commission: Report and Recommendations).

4.5 Heritage is likewise reported as 'strong' in the Growth and Competitive Commission's recent report. Yet heritage visitor centres of scale and size to produce economic impact are few and far between. Other smaller heritage attractions and assets are not equipped to receive and provide hospitality for visitors. Some in local authority control are constantly under threat of closure. Many rely on volunteers.

4.6 Across the Southeast Wales Valleys heritage assets lie derelict and neglected in swathes.

4.7 For example, Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust carried out a survey (funded by Cadw) of major ironworks sites in 2005 and reported that this could pave the way for a much bigger restoration and interpretation project in the future. Nationally important ironworks buildings and structures reviewed included Clydach Gorge, Ebbw Vale, Sirhowy, Cyfarthfa, Ynysfach, Gadly, Hirwaun and Neath Abbey. Little or nothing has been done since the report.

4.8 There is also the rich heritage of railways – tracks, bridges and tunnels. A national asset in terms of providing cycle ways, footpaths and bridleways for local people and visitors alike. And the legacy of the coal industry where there are still a few significant sites to be preserved and restored.

4.9 In contrast to these 'have-nots' are the few other heritage centres that are subsidised by the Welsh Government – mostly clustered around Cardiff and the M4 (the notable exception being Blaenavon).

4.10 The cultural sector also is predominantly focused on Cardiff – as a result the national centres of excellence for the performing arts are based there. This is an observation and not a comment.

4.11 Will the City Deal (and the Metro) be able to deliver an adjustment in these inequalities? Or will the Metro facilitate further centralisation of heritage, culture and tourism?

#### **5 The degree to which the growth and city deals co-ordinate with Welsh Government strategy**

5.1 The Heritage Trust is keen to see that progressive policies in relation to health, social care, well-being, natural environment, active travel and transport are all effectively put into operation to improve towns and communities in the South Wales Valleys.

5.2 Heritage, in our view, has a key role to play in the local community as well as in tourism and the wider economy.

5.4 The Growth and Competitiveness Commission has also underlined the importance of “green and blue infrastructures (including upland areas, forests, parks, rivers and coastlines) that play an important role, both as drivers of economic opportunities and in supporting more inclusive economic growth. Evidence suggests that green infrastructure can support urban tourism, improve a region’s image, help to attract and retain higher value industries and employees, as well as generate positive effects on health, wellbeing, climate mitigation and property values.”

5.5 The Heritage Trust’s concern is that while the Welsh Government ‘talks the talk’ it may not always ‘walk the walk’. Clearly, the cut-backs in funding for Wales from the UK Government make this very difficult.

5.6 Questions need to be asked about whether, for example, the Metro can deliver the full benefits of massive investment if there is not the follow through in local communities in terms of active travel routes, cycle ways, footpaths, local road infrastructure, bus services and community bus services that are vital. Yet responsibility for this is handed down to financially hard-hit local authorities.

5.7 Can local authorities deliver on tourism? At least one has claimed it can’t raise even a few hundred pounds for a tourism leaflet. In Merthyr Tydfil the tourist information office was closed down.

5.8 Can Natural Resources Wales deliver on the natural environment? Currently it has to examine the feasibility of re-opening Cwmcarn Forest Drive because of lack of funding. It’s record on handling river and water-course pollution has come under fire.

## **6 Final word:**

6.1 Merthyr Tydfil Heritage Trust is a voluntary organisation that, as a building preservation trust, was involved in the rescue and restoration of heritage building in Merthyr Tydfil over three decades. Now the Heritage Trust works with Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council – jointly setting up the Merthyr Tydfil Heritage Forum in 2011.

6.2 We are generally optimistic about the possibilities of future redevelopment and regeneration in the county borough and in the South Wales Valleys –also and about Cardiff Capital Region and the City Deal.

6.3 But we are also wary of the pitfalls of development and the planning system.