

WELL-BEING ASSESSMENT BRIEFING DOCUMENT: CULTURE

1. Introduction

Through the Understanding Our Communities project, public services are gaining a better understanding of the good things about communities, what matters to people and how their experiences and what they have to offer can help us to plan and provide services.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act has been put in place to make sure that public services are doing all that they can to improve the cultural, economic, environmental and social well-being of people and communities, and working in ways that will help to create a Wales we want to live in, now and in the future.

The Act means that public services will have to:

- Think about the long term;
- Look to prevent problems;
- Look to contribute towards the Act's seven well-being goals in all that they do;
- Work better with each other; and
- Work better with people and communities.

Under this Act, public services must carry out and publish a Well-being Assessment, which looks at the state of well-being of people in the area, people within specific communities within that area and think about what this picture is likely to look like in the future.

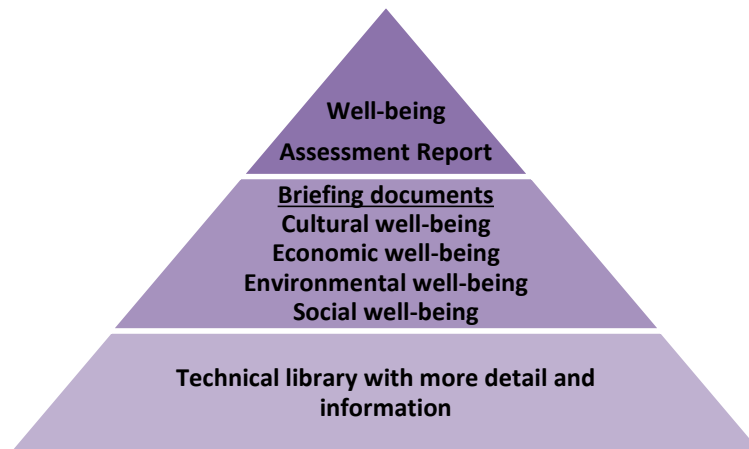
In Cwm Taf, we have been collecting lots of information for the Assessment, from the people making policy and commissioning decisions about services, the people delivering services and the people receiving services.

We then spent some time, talking with these people about the headlines that emerged under each theme and really thinking about how they affect well-being and what the impact of these headlines is likely to be on communities, now and in the future.

A summary of the headlines relating to cultural well-being are contained in this document. The document shows both how each headline relates to well-being and how cultural well-being relates to the other well-being themes.

The headline information across all themes of well-being is reported in the overall Cwm Taf Well-being Assessment. Each level of this Assessment is supported by a more detailed level of data and information. All of the information gathered throughout the project to inform these headlines will also be available in an online library.

Figure 1: Structure of Cwm Taf Well-being Assessment



2. Cultural well-being

‘Celebrating success, valuing our heritage, culture and language will strengthen our identity for future generations.’¹

Wales is wealthy when it comes to culture. Our language, history, music, theatre, writing, dance, art, sport, festivals, media and our differences define us as a nation. Here in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil, we are known across the world for our history of coal-mining, our politics, our musical talents and our sporting stars.

This chapter explores what culture means to the people of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf. The chapter is about how we live now; looking at statistics on how many people take part or go to ‘cultural’ activities, understanding the things we enjoy doing and the effect they have on our well-being and thinking about how our culture can be used to our advantage in the future of Cwm Taf.

¹ [“The Wales We Want” report \(2015\)](#)

3. Headlines

People need to feel part of their community and many want to offer their time, skills and connections.

Community spirit connects people, makes them happy and improves well-being. The communities in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil (Cwm Taf) have a particularly strong community spirit, with people talking about the friendly, welcoming streets, places and public areas where they live. This was about a 'time and a place' but also about the 'networks' that people belonged to, such as the Welsh speaking community.

The culture within a community can be a very local thing, depending on the history of the town, people who live there today, the activities that go on there and its potential for the future. These things are not easy to pin down, but are the heart of any community. People who were not linked in to local activities, the people around them or the area's history seemed to feel lonely and negative about the future.

The feeling of 'being part of the community' is more than just individual happiness and linked to activity on a community level; how connected the community is; how much people can offer and how organised the community is. People felt that they have the answers to many of the problems facing their communities, but felt powerless to change things without the help of services.

Having family and friends close by was seen as good for social well-being and something quite unique to Cwm Taf. There are also many activities and social groups that bring people together, such as dancing, parent and toddler groups, community classes, gardening clubs/allotments, church groups, choirs and older people's dinners – these were all mentioned across Cwm Taf. Face-to-face events and activities happening locally were seen as the best way of bringing the community together, but the power of social media and the internet for finding useful information, organising things and meeting like-minded people was also talked about.

People that take part in these cultural activities felt it was important to keep them going for their own well-being. Finding information about what was happening and promoting opportunities for getting involve was critical, like through online information, community 'gossip' and display boards. There are also some examples of people who work in the community and make connections between activities, services and members of the community (like Communities First workers or Community Co-ordinator posts).

Although many of the cultural activities are at ‘grassroots’ level, there are examples of these leading to communities coming together for a common cause such as businesses being set up and buildings / land being taken on by community members. In this way, organised communities can have a positive effect on the local economy and environment. For example, environmental projects like community gardening, clearing land and looking after paths can have an economic impact through growing and selling produce, encouraging tourism and volunteering giving people new skills and confidence.

Like all communities, the communities in Cwm Taf are changing. The community spirit of the area has grown through the history of Cwm Taf, whereas the increase in digitalisation means more people are spending time indoors and don’t know their neighbours or their community as well as they might have done. It was felt that if this continued into the future, it would be bad for people’s health, crime would increase, people would become lonelier and there would be a need for more services to step in and ‘save’ the community from breaking apart.

Examples that we can build on:

Community activity is not new; community groups across the UK have been coming together for years to achieve things together. In Wales, there have been more and more groups taking over buildings, land and services e.g. there is a Leisure Trust in Merthyr Tydfil running libraries, the leisure centre and other facilities. There is also a community engagement programme called ‘RCT Together’ in Rhondda Cynon Taf, where groups have come forward and successfully taken on services or buildings once owned by the Council.

There are community groups across Cwm Taf active in their local environment, taking ownership for their surroundings, building on what’s there and working together to achieve something different e.g. *Friends of Parc Taf Bargoed* and ‘*Welcome to our Woods*’: a project in Trehebert.

What more do we need to know?
Individuals and community groups often feel frustrated when working with public organisations. How can we work better together in future and how can public bodies cut some of the ‘red tape’ that stops opportunities from being realised?
How can public bodies connect people better so that they can get involved in their community and the place that they feel connected to?
How can a more formal approach to volunteering (linked to culture and activity in the community) help people learn new skills and find work?

Our heritage and history, landscape and buildings should be celebrated and used in the future.

When we think about what culture means, the word ‘heritage’ is often mentioned. ‘Heritage’ can mean history, belonging and culture. In Welsh, it is *‘etifeddiaeth’* which literally means ‘inheritance’ and suggests how our heritage is something to be passed on through the generations. The landscape, buildings, natural environment and languages spoken in Cwm Taf are the things that help people feel like they belong, which has a positive effect on their happiness and well-being. The heritage of Cwm Taf can also bring economic benefits to places across the region through tourism and celebrations within local communities.

The potential of assets such as Cyfarthfa Castle Museum in Merthyr Tydfil (which was the third most popular free attraction in Wales in 2014);² the Rhondda Heritage Museum; and more modern projects like the Canolfan Soar and Redhouse in Merthyr Tydfil were seen as brilliant venues to showcase our heritage. This includes arts, performance, history and selling local food, drink and gifts.

In a similar way, the amazing natural landscape in Cwm Taf has a good effect on people’s physical and mental health. From playing outside, gardening, rambling and exercising outdoors, learning new skills in the forests to the great variety of natural life that lives in the countryside in Cwm Taf, the environment has great potential to help us live well. The landscape of Cwm Taf has been moulded by the humans and industry over the years, which is a unique selling point to encourage visitors and people to live and work here in the future.

The South Wales Valleys, the buildings and the traditions grew out of the industry in the 19th century. Small villages suddenly became ‘boom towns’ and by 1914, Wales almost matched the USA in terms of people moving from all over to here for work. The different nationalities coming together has created the businesses, buildings and cultures that we see today across Cwm Taf. The non-conformist religion became well-established and chapels were built across the area. Theatres, miners’ institutes and clubs began to be built too.

Many of these buildings that were central to the community stand today. Some continue to be entertainment venues and meeting spaces, whilst others are home to specific services, community enterprises or privately run. Buildings are important to communities and provide a place to come together, find out what’s happening, get involved in activities or just meet and socialise. The idea of multi-purpose buildings and landscapes came up many times in our discussions as the main strengths of Cwm Taf with ideas around the

² [Welsh Government \(2015\) "Visits to Tourist Attractions in Wales 2014: Report for Visit Wales"](#)

private sector, public sector and communities working together to make the most of the things that are already here.

This rich history is known worldwide and presents an opportunity for business and tourism. Many people felt that although the industrial past of Cwm Taf is important, business and community activity are what defines the area now in the 21st century. It was felt that there are opportunities here for more locally produced food, drink and gifts to be produced and marketed as from the area. There was also potential for businesses and social enterprises to use the richness of history, landscape and built environment here to make money for the community and have a positive impact on the social, economic and environmental well-being of the region.

Examples that we can build on:

There are many buildings, sites and parcels of land that can be celebrated across the region as part of our heritage – the tourism and heritage services in the area have done a lot of work on promoting these, but it is also for communities to understand their own stories about their area and share them widely.

Examples across Europe demonstrate the economic value of heritage e.g. the value of tourism in Ireland, the attractiveness of locations due to landmarks³ but connectivity (transport, information and location) is really important to make the most of this.

What more do we need to know?
How can businesses in Cwm Taf help with this? How do they see their role or contribution to improving people's well-being?
How can we get communities sharing their positive stories more widely with the rest of the world to attract more visitors and celebrate our culture? Does social media have a part to play here?

Taking part in things seems to be good for everyone's well-being.

Research has shown that taking part in something creative or something that helps people relax (like exercise, playing sport, singing, art, acting etc.) is very good for well-being.⁴ These things can make a difference to people's lives, in encouraging them to socialise, get out of the house and meet new friends, helping people get

³ [Case studies included in Europa Nostra \(2015\) Culture Heritage Counts for Europe](#)

⁴ [See, for example, Arts & Health South West](#)

over problems in their lives and giving people new skills, which can lead to opportunities and work.

Research by the national Arts Council has shown that taking part in the arts can help communication, well-being and employment / educational prospects. In one study, 53% of people who took part said they had improved their quality of life and well-being as a result of taking part in a project.⁵

“It’s made me want to do more training because I’ve been here it’s made me feel I can have a go at something.”

(someone that took part in the Valley and Vale Projects)⁵.

In particular, people who were unwell, elderly or frail said that looking forward to something was very important to their recovery and their well-being. This was often about an activity in the community linked to art, leisure or culture. There are now many services that make this connection; such as books being prescribed by the doctor to help people understand their condition and help themselves, singing for people that have breathing difficulties and singing / poetry-reading for people with dementia and their carers.

Exercise, playing and watching sport has a similar positive effect on physical and mental well-being because it involves improving fitness and feeling part of a bigger network. The assets (the buildings / facilities) in the area that help people do this were seen as really important (like the natural environment, swimming pools, leisure centres and cycle / walking trails). Specific mention was made to the Taff and Trevithick Trails, Bronwydd and Abercynon swimming pools, the National Lido of Wales in Pontypridd, Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Centre and use of the outdoor parks, fields and land.

There has been an increase across Wales since 2010 in the number of people going to and taking part in arts activities. In Cwm Taf, a study showed that there is a lot of people going to, and taking part in, modern dance. Most people went to events in their local neighbourhood or county, rather than further afield. This was echoed by conversations with people, who said they would much rather socialise in their local community. The most common barrier to people going along or taking part in a creative activity is time. But there is also a link between how wealthy somebody is and whether they take part in activities across the whole of Wales.⁶

⁵ [Arts Council for Wales \(2010\) ‘Findings from the pilot of the Community Arts Evaluation.’](#)

⁶ [Arts Council for Wales \(2015\) ‘Arts in Wales Survey Report’](#)

Examples that we can build on:

It is clear that there is a lot going on in Cwm Taf compared to other parts of Wales and that people are well-connected in organising activities and finding out about what's going on. The thriving music scene in Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf is part of this with choirs, the Merthyr Rock festival in recent years and the Merthyr Rising festival going on in 2016 – a festival of arts, ideas and music. As well as small music venues across the region, there are a number of historic music venues such as the Pop Factory in Porth and the Muni in Pontypridd. Youth services across the region also offer opportunities for young people to develop their creative skills, including the 'SONIG' Youth Music Industry Programme and through Canolfan Soar.

There are many leisure and creative activities aimed at people who have not been very involved in the past. Being involved in creative things can take people's minds off everyday things, help people to achieve other things in their lives and increase confidence, build new friendship groups and new skills. For example, a project delivered in Communities First areas in RCT is aimed at people who suffer from certain mental health conditions but focusses on arts, artefacts and heritage. Similarly, projects aimed at young people have increased confidence, skills and helped people to meet others e.g. digital media development; the 'Take Part' programme and the 'Up and Coming' MAGNET project.

What more do we need to know?

The economic climate has meant that some projects have struggled over the last decade but people involved in these activities felt strongly that they cannot disappear in the future because of the benefits they have in bringing people and communities together. There are some reports that show how valuable taking part in social and cultural activities are for people's health but there is a need for more evidence to be collected to help build a case for using culture to overcome long-running problems or as ways of involving people.

How can the public bodies in the area work together with communities to get rid of some of the difficulties people have in getting involved? For example, giving people the confidence and help to go along to activities in their community or making sure communities can easily use the countryside around them to enjoy outdoor hobbies.

Language is an important part of who we are and makes us feel like we belong.

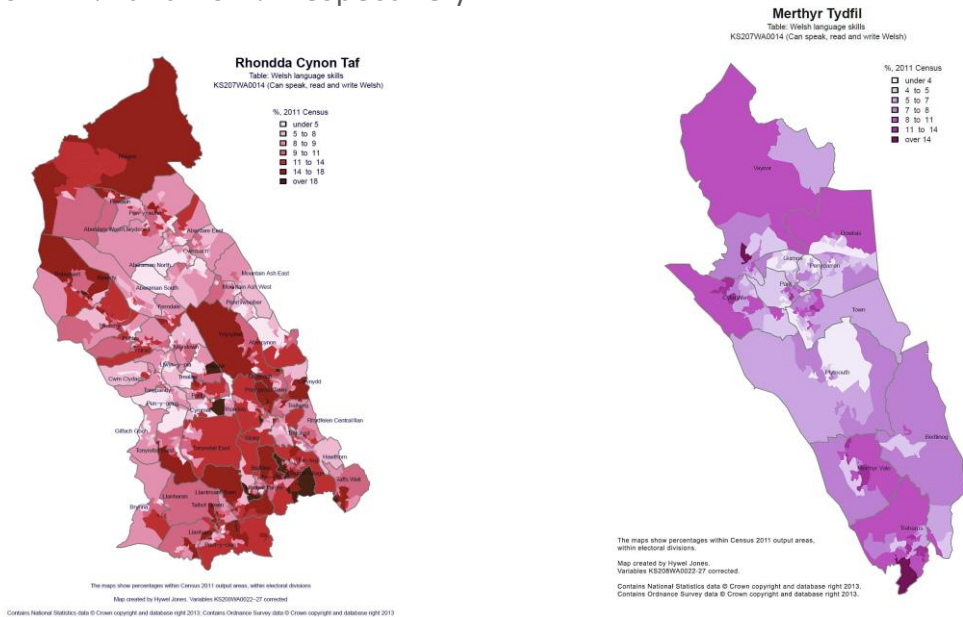
As well as the area that we live in, the language that we speak is an important part of our culture and who we are. The industrial boom meant that many people moved

from around the world to Merthyr Tydfil and Rhondda Cynon Taf for work, bringing a range of languages to the South Wales Valleys. There is a need to recognise this as part of our wider heritage but also to welcome the number of languages being spoken in Cwm Taf today.

The main languages spoken here are Welsh and English, but other languages recorded on the Census (2011) included Polish; Portuguese; Arabic; Chinese; and Filipino. But this does not include the households that might have English or Welsh as their main language, but often speak other languages to relatives and friends.

Although the number of people speaking Welsh is going down overall in Cwm Taf, more children and young people are now able to speak Welsh, which is promising for future generations growing up in the area. The following maps highlight the level of Welsh language skills according to the Census in 2011 by area:

Although the average across Rhondda Cynon Taf is 12.3%, some areas like Llantwit Fardre and Hirwaun are as high as 17.1% and 16.4% respectively. In Merthyr Tydfil, Treharris (11.7%) and Cyfarthfa (10.7%) have the highest percentage of Welsh speakers.



Language is part of who we are and the local cultural history of Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil. But being bilingual also has an effect on the jobs that are available to us, the opportunities that are opened up and the networks that we can move in. For these reasons, there is now a national target of one million Welsh speakers by 2050 across Wales. This equates to around a third of the current

population and would be an equivalent of 100,000 Welsh speakers across the Cwm Taf region by 2050.

The growth in Welsh speakers in some age groups is positive, but we need to carry on growing this. If we could reach one million Welsh speakers across Wales by 2050 and help more people to continue to use their Welsh language skills after they leave school, we can make sure that more people experience the sense of community and belonging which comes from sharing the skill to speak our beautiful, historical language and contribute to the vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language of Wales.

As the maps above suggest, there are pockets of Welsh speakers across Cwm Taf, who access all sorts of opportunities to use the Welsh language. We need to work together to keep some of this going and encourage more people to get involved, while also encouraging more families to put their children through Welsh medium education, to learn and use the language.

Examples that we can build on:

The annual Merthyr Tydfil Global Village Festival is about welcoming all languages, cultures and celebrating the different people that live in and around Merthyr Tydfil. In RCT, there is an annual 'Parti Ponty' festival, celebrating the Welsh language and Welsh culture – as well as many smaller events and groups across the region that bring people together to speak their native tongue and take part in activities.

There are many new projects beginning to help grow the number of Welsh speakers across Wales, including in Cwm Taf. Some learning could be used from other areas that have been successful, such as the Basque region in Northern Spain.

What more do we need to know?

Organisations in Cwm Taf will need to make sure all staff have a positive attitude towards learning Welsh and other languages, and that they can talk about the benefits of being bilingual to others.

More information is needed on how speaking other languages can have an economic effect on well-being, leading to better opportunities, work and pay.

4. Links to other well-being themes

Cultural well-being does not stand alone and has many links with the other well-being themes.

Culture is what brings people together and, from this, they have the power to achieve bigger things. People are more likely to get involved in a cultural activity

(including all of those mentioned in this chapter) than something more serious. Getting members of a community together can have the effect of organising the community more effectively, which has positive social effects on health and, depending on the issue, can lead to a positive effect on the economy and the environment of the area. The strength of community spirit in Cwm Taf needs to be used effectively in the future in this way.

Social media can be considered a 'cultural' topic, but it has been discussed in terms of connecting people and organising things across all aspects of well-being.

Even though culture is linked to the very local place that we live in or come from, it connects people across geographies through common interests and talents. A common theme of this work is connecting people and places physically across Cwm Taf through walking, cycling and transport routes but also through their common history and future. A focus on one thing in a place could have a very positive effect on how that community operates and what it can achieve.

Awareness, marketing and promotion of what's going on with regards to culture is also a common theme. This is not only to benefit the social effect of being involved in cultural activities, but to attract visitors to the area through marketing the landscape, buildings and cultural activities. It was noted the powerful impact that having people based in communities, finding out what's going on and enabling the community to work together to achieve more, has had in certain areas of Cwm Taf. Moving funding towards this sort of work was seen as having a positive effect on communities and the people within them.