

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT)

Tourism Strategy

BACKGROUND SCOPING PAPER

JANUARY 2020

Executive Summary

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) has ambitious plans for tourism and this Strategy sets out the vision and strategic objectives to achieve those plans. The overall objective of the RCT Tourism Strategy is to promote and sustain the economic growth of tourism in RCT.

The vision for tourism in RCT is:

To be a premier destination in the UK for “experience” based visits and vacations showcasing our first class landscape, culture and heritage

Central to this vision is the strength of our natural landscape, culture and heritage. Our landscape is breath-taking and stands alongside any of the more famous destinations in the UK and our social history and heritage assets tell a story of innovation, ingenuity and impassioned, dignified Valleys communities. These unique selling points provide a foundation which this Strategy will build upon and enhance.

We now have a unique opportunity to truly maximise the potential of our assets by establishing Rhondda Cynon Taf as **the** place to be if you want to experience adventure, adrenaline, culture and heritage.

For us to be a truly successful tourist destination it is imperative that we create a series of strategic, ‘big ticket’ visitor attractions that will attract visitors from across the country and even further afield. In order to keep visitors in the area and encourage overnight stays, those attractions will need to promote each other and itinerary packages will need to be developed in partnership with those attractions and other Local Authority areas.

The RCT Tourism Strategy will be the catalyst for future investment and external funding opportunities with priority projects adhering to the destination themes of:

- Product & Attractions
- Skills & Employment
- Accommodation
- Experience
- Accessibility, Infrastructure & Connectivity

These in turn will deliver upon the overarching strategic tourism destination management themes of Economy, Profile, Environment & Landscape and Culture & Heritage.

By setting strategic objectives and identifying key schemes to implement, the RCT Tourism Strategy will equip the Council with a way forward for tourism development in RCT and ultimately deliver against the overall vision and primary economic objective for the Borough.

Introduction

Rhondda Cynon Taf (RCT) is the third largest Local Authority in terms of population in Wales and incorporates the Valleys of The Rhondda (Fach and Fawr), The Cynon, The Taff and The Ely. With a population of approximately 239,000, RCT is centrally situated in the heart of the South Wales Valleys and benefits from excellent transport links, with the Cambrian Way (A470) connecting RCT to Cardiff and Newport in the South and Brecon, Hay on Wye and Builth Wells in the North, travelling through some of the most scenic landscapes Wales has to offer. Destinations such as Bristol & Bath are within an hour and a half catchment of RCT, facilitated by the M4, as are Swansea, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. The A465 also provides access to Waterfall Country and connects RCT to Abergavenny, Monmouth and Hereford.

RCT is bordered by seven Local Authorities¹ and includes the Brecon Beacons National Park within its landscape. This provides many opportunities for collaboration, particularly in the development of tourism packages across the area, which can be further facilitated by the Valleys Regional Park initiative which will connect Gateway sites across the South Wales Valleys and encourage a joined up working approach to community and visitor engagement.

The unique selling point of RCT as a tourism destination is its landscape and environment. The views from the Rhigos, Maerdy and Bwlch Mountains are World class and provide extreme sports and adventure tourists with exciting exploration opportunities. The mountains are tourist attractions in their own right, facilitating activities such as rock climbing, parascending/hang gliding and promoting access to forestry walking, cycling and equestrian routes. The landscape and facilities in RCT also provides opportunities for a range of sports and activity tourism with some of the best vistas in Wales.

RCT benefits from a range of rural and urban environments and a tourism offer which incorporates breath-taking scenery, outdoor activities, a variety of unique visitor attractions and traditional Welsh village communities which provide a warm welcome at any time of the year.

The environment in RCT is rich in biodiversity with ecosystems thriving in the post-glacial and industrial landscape. There are many opportunities for visitors to discover the beauty of Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINCs) and Nature Reserves in the County Borough. RCT has a proud Industrial and Cultural Heritage, being renowned for its mining history, proud communities and entrepreneurial spirit which prompted so many innovations and developments during the Industrial Revolution. There are many built heritage gems to be discovered across the Rhondda, Cynon and Taf Valleys and the social history story and warmth of RCT's communities is at the heart of RCT's tourism offer.

RCT continues to develop as a visitor destination, with an emerging visitor economy which is increasingly important to the Gross Value Added (GVA)² of the area. In 2018,

¹ Powys, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Bridgend, Cardiff, The Vale of Glamorgan and Caerphilly

² GVA is an economic productivity metric that measures a product or services contribution to a sector or region.

tourism in RCT was worth approximately £172 million and attracted around 2.13 million visitors³ which is approximately 5% of the total for the South East Wales Region⁴. Any figures for tourism in the South East Wales region are undoubtedly skewed by Cardiff, but even taking this into account, it is clear that there opportunities to position RCT more favourably in the Welsh Tourism Economy by increasing the number of day visits to the area, and more importantly, overnight stays.

The below table shows the most recent visitor information for RCT.

Table 1

STEAM report 2018	2018	2017	% Change
Economic Impact (£million)	171.79	163.97	+4.8
No. of Staying Visitors (million)	0.524	0.523	+0.2
No. of Day Visitors (million)	1.603	1.565	+2.4
No. of Visitor Days in RCT (million)	1.233	1.232	+0.1
Direct Employment in Tourism (FTEs)	1,436	1,453	-1.2

Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council’s 2016 – 2020 Corporate Plan “The Way Ahead” makes a clear commitment to building a strong economy by supporting job creation, increasing skills for residents and improving footfall numbers across the Borough. This strategy looks to deliver upon this commitment by ensuring more jobs are created and increasing footfall into our towns and villages. The priority to create neighbourhoods where people are proud to live and work is also reflected within this strategy by focusing on the importance of regenerative tourism projects, destination infrastructure, accessibility and connectivity and identifying activity tourism projects which will also support access to the outdoors and provide residents with wellbeing opportunities.

In responding to the Well-being of Future Generations Wales Act and developing RCTCBC Corporate priorities, this strategy has identified the need for a sustainable and collaborative approach to tourism product development and acknowledged opportunities for innovation in relation to carbon neutral “green” tourism and projects which consider the impacts on eco systems, biodiversity and climate.

The Valleys Taskforce and The Valleys Regional Park have identified several Discovery Gateway Sites (Dare Valley Country Park and Ynysangharad War Memorial Park) and have placed importance on ‘landscape, culture and identity,’ ‘recreation and wellbeing’ and communities and enterprise’. The RCT Tourism Strategy shares the aspiration to “Develop a new, positive narrative for tourism in the Valleys and identify projects to meet current and future tourism demand, focusing on the landscape, heritage and people.”⁵

In the National context, Visit Wales’ Partnership For Growth Strategy sets the tone and vision for the tourism sector and this RCT Tourism Strategy aligns with its priorities (Product, Promotion, People, Performance, Place) as well as complementing the Visit

³ Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor - STEAM Figures

⁴ £3142 Million & 44.347 Million respectively.

⁵ Our Valleys, Our Future: Delivery Plan: Priority 3 – My Local Community – Valleys Regional Park

Wales' Thematic Years, The 'Year of Outdoors' for 2020-21. Further strategic context is detailed in Appendix 1.

A range of projects and investment opportunities in RCT are included in this Strategy; many of which can be delivered within the short to medium term, whilst others are ideas for longer-term development. Delivery detail for short, medium and long term actions will be included within the Destination Action Plan, a complementary document which will be developed and reviewed alongside the RCT Tourism Strategy.

Rhondda Cynon Taf Tourism: The Opportunities

In developing this Strategy it is important to understand the key opportunities that exist in RCT in relation to tourism. These opportunities have been identified and summarised under the following themes:

- Product & Attractions
- Skills & Employment
- Accommodation
- Experience
- Accessibility, Infrastructure & Connectivity

Product & Attractions

It is essential that we build upon the existing visitor product and attractions within RCT and that new ones are developed. The success of the RCT visitor economy depends upon having a number of high quality, unique visitor offerings, that can create itineraries and packages to provide short and long stay overnight opportunities.

Responses to a Destination Management Plan survey, undertaken by Rhondda Cynon Taf Council (Nov 2018 – April 2019), indicated that the natural beauty and landscape was a key strength to focus on in the future. Suggestions also included the requirement for new attractions and activities, visitor centres and events to be developed. RCT already has a strong portfolio of attractions and activities from which to build upon, with unique offers to a variety of audiences. A list of known attractions in RCT are included in Appendix 2. Although attracting over 2 million visitors in 2018, it is acknowledged that, in comparison with other Local Authority areas across Wales, this market share of day visitors needs to improve in addition to the market share of people visiting the Borough and staying overnight.

RCT's key attractions perform well year on year and it is important to continue the support and development of these attractions in the future. The below table gives information on the most recent visitor figures for attractions in RCT.

Table 2

Attraction	Visitor Figures 2018
Dare Valley Country Park	107,852

The National Lido of Wales, Lido Ponty	85,135
The Royal Mint Experience	85,108
The Welsh Mining Experience	46,770
Penderyn Whisky	40,786

Although Rhondda Cynon Taf has many unique offers, competition exists for tourists in a wider context including neighbouring Valleys with a similar environment/outdoor activity offer, the Coastal resorts such as The Gower, Porthcawl and Barry, rural retreats in Powys and Monmouthshire and the two major cities of Swansea and Cardiff. It is important that RCT positions itself realistically and strategically with a clearly defined tourism offer that compliments and enhances the wider offer across the region.

Within RCT, demand for walking, cycling and other outdoor recreation activities is at an all-time high, with 55% of Visit RCT’s website traffic for “things to do” searching for information of this type.

A co-ordinated approach to tourism development in the Borough is required to mitigate against silo working and ensure that ideas and projects can be developed for best value across the Borough.

There is significant scope to widen the offer for visitors who are interested in undertaking outdoor activities in the Borough with existing adventure product providers through improving connectivity to other attractions.

Table 2 shows that Dare Valley Country Park received more visitors than other attractions listed in 2018. Currently, some attractions in RCT are primarily community assets rather than established visitor attractions. Although providing a pleasant experience for the local community, they do not attract visitors in a tourism sense, which is classified by the UN World Tourism Organisation as “the movement of people to countries or places outside their usual environment for personal or business/professional purposes”. Work is needed to identify unique selling points and develop these community assets into visitor attractions that people will travel to from outside the locality.

Opportunity

RCT can be at the heart of a premier adventure experience destination in South Wales and through scoping opportunities for new visitor attractions, it is possible to access previously untapped markets in Adrenalin, Outdoors, Adventure and Activity Tourism. The Zip World development and the potential for more major attractions can have a transformational effect on the County Borough as part of an environmentally conscious, national level tourism destination.

A suite of tracks and trails can be developed and existing trails across the Borough can be enhanced to provide a more relaxed outdoor alternative to complement the high octane formal attractions. The visitor enhancements proposed for the Waterfalls Country will provide the opportunity for cross boundary activity tourism package development to encourage overnight stays. A full list of projects proposed for development can be seen in the “Making It Happen” section.

The nature of our landscape, topography and geology lends itself to becoming a go to destination for a range of outdoor pursuits. Working with existing outdoor activity providers, we will look to develop and enhance opportunities and facilities that will place RCT as a premier destination for activities such as rock climbing and hiking.

The potential re-opening of the Rhondda Tunnel and Abernant to Merthyr Tunnel would provide significant tourism opportunities, connecting Local Authorities and associated visitor attractions to RCT and widening the visitor offer across the Valleys.

The VRP Discovery Gateway Sites of Ynysangharad War Memorial Park and Dare Valley Country Park provide opportunities to showcase what RCT has to offer, being a part of a wider network of 'destination gateways' in the Valleys. As a part of the Dare Valley development, a family pump track will be implemented, extending the outdoor offer of cycling to families staying in the area. These gateway sites will provide a springboard for visitors to discover and visit other attractions in the County Borough.

Facilitating a co-ordinated approach for tourism development, through mechanisms such as creating a Strategic Tourism Board and tourism hubs, will build stakeholder and partner relationships, enable joint working and increase understanding of issues that all areas involved in the tourism sector are experiencing.

Visit Wales have expressed an interest in funding a large scale 'wet weather' destination product in Wales. There is no reason why RCT should not be pursued as the location for such major attraction and provide unique family visitor experiences.

Skills & Employment

Improving the tourism economy in RCT means encouraging the development of tourism related skills and supporting the creation of well paid, secure jobs within the industry for local residents.

With tourism in RCT worth over £171 million⁶ to the local economy, it is vital that communities become aware of the importance of capturing the benefits of increased visitors and local businesses develop skills which will benefit the customer service and tourism sectors. The RCTCBC Corporate Plan 2016-2020, "The Way Forward" and "Our Cwm Taf", the Public Services Board Well-being plan identifies the importance of developing skillsets within the local workforce, acknowledging that the strength in RCT's visitor offer stems from our local communities.

According to the Employer Skills Survey: 2017 Wales Data report⁷, there were 1,200 vacancies within the Hotel & Restaurant sector in 2017 due to skill shortages. For existing staff, training is the main issue to address for establishments, with 57% stating that a lack of funding is a barrier to providing appropriate training for specific roles.

Work has been undertaken within RCTCBC to focus on skills development and job creation. The Human Resources department supports local businesses to provide

⁶ STEAM report 2018

⁷ IFF Research for the Department of Education

advice, guidance and signposting for workforce development and in 2018, tourism departments from Rhondda Cynon Taf and Merthyr Tydfil instigated a diagnostic review of the Cwm Taf Tourism Sector which reported that full time positions account for 43% of the sector’s provision and part-time and casual positions relied very much on seasonality. Considering RCT’s current position as an emerging visitor destination this is a positive situation and provides a good baseline from which to improve.

However, according to the 2018 STEAM report, Full Time Equivalent (FTE) Employment in the tourism sector has been falling for the last two years. The table below gives information on the most recent employment figures for tourism in RCT.

Table 3

Year	Total FTE’s	% Change
2015	1,878	+7.7
2016	2,038	+8.5
2017	2,016	-1.1
2018	1,984	-1.6

There is a perception that there are a lack of hospitality and catering skills in the local jobs market and tourism jobs are often viewed as unappealing due to the requirement to work outside of ‘normal’ hours for a minimum or basic wage. Plans should be developed to support HR expertise in the tourism sector, so that local business develop more expertise in appointing staff, apprenticeships, employment legislation and occupational health. It is critical that we work with partners to ensure there are sufficient skills in the sector and that jobs in the sector are seen as attractive.

Poor customer service can be a barrier to a developing tourism economy and training for front line visitor engagement staff, volunteers and service staff (e.g. cafes, pubs and restaurants) is essential to provide a first class destination experience. Funding mechanisms to enable this training in the future need to be explored and opportunities for community partners to take a lead on sourcing funds for customer service provision such as Welcome Host courses should be maximised.

Opportunity

The workforce training compendium developed through our HR service has potential to develop support at a strategic level for tourism related roles and this could include the identification of transferable skills which will benefit new job roles coming into the sector from outdoor activity attractions such as Zip World.

Working with Coleg y Cymoedd and The University of South Wales, there are opportunities to undertake a piece of work to identify skills shortages within the sector and develop courses which will provide the skills required by the industry and facilitate the development of home grown tourism entrepreneurs. This will help to mitigate against the potential issues experienced by tourism businesses in the light of BREXIT.

RCTCBC can explore supporting businesses providing HR expertise on a one to one basis or via a tourism hub networks and using the momentum created by the Valleys Regional Park. Opportunities should be explored to provide work based learning experiences for local people. Welsh Government have identified tourism as one of the

nine Priority Sectors which underpin the Economy of Wales and there are opportunities to add value to the Cwm Taf Diagnostic Review findings by working on a phase 2 review, to engage with Environment, Food and Farming businesses to improve job opportunities within the foundational economy which will provide associated benefits to the tourism and hospitality sector.

As a unique selling point, there are opportunities to promote the use of the Welsh Language within the hospitality and accommodation sectors and provide Welsh Language skills to the local workforce.

Jobs will be created by encouraging inward investment for new products/attractions and facilitating the development of existing products/attractions.

Many tourism attractions in the County Borough use volunteers and this is beneficial not only to the attraction itself but also to the volunteers who spend time within an environment they enjoy building a skillset that can be taken forward in future employment. There are many social and wellbeing benefits to volunteering and opportunities should be investigated with third sector partners.

Accommodation

Accommodation provision in RCT ranges from High End Boutique Hotels to Quality Bunkhouses and Camping facilities. The RCT visitor economy depends upon increasing the amount of accommodation available in the County Borough which is varied in nature, high quality and appeals to a variety of demographics.

The 2018 Diagnostic Review of the Tourism Sector across Cwm Taf illustrates an overall positive picture of accommodation in RCT. There are 44 accommodation providers represented on the Visit RCT and Visit Wales website as of September 2019 and the variety of accommodation available is good, ranging from 4* graded luxury hotels such as Miskin Manor to 4* self-catering properties such as Hendre Fawr House. The majority of accommodation that is graded in RCT receives a 3* or 4* listing which provides a very positive base for further accommodation development. A list of known accommodation providers are included in Appendix 2.

With the rise of activity tourism in the Valleys, potential accommodation businesses in RCT have identified a gap in the market and a number of glamping opportunities have come forward for development within the last year. Airbnb levels have also increased, illustrating the need for more accommodation in the area and the changing habits of visitors towards more high quality, non-serviced accommodation.

Similar to tourism product development, there is currently a perception of a lack of funding available for start-up tourism businesses and feasibility studies which could impact upon a step change in accommodation development. High business rates are also cited as a barrier to home grown business development and inward investment.

Based on current STEAM figures, RCT does not currently have enough bed spaces or accommodation available to satisfy the existing visitor numbers travelling to RCT. With potential projects such as Zip World being based in the area, it is expected that

visitor numbers will significantly increase and therefore additional accommodation developments are vital to capitalise on the associated increased visitor spend. RCT currently lacks hotels that can service large numbers of tourists in key principal towns such as Pontypridd and areas of RCT that will be subject to future development such as the northern Cynon Valley. Developing an accommodation business can be risky and often not providing an immediate return. There are also a number of considerations to take into account which range from uncertainties over BREXIT and future funding opportunities to potential changes in interest rates and the possible implementation of a tourism tax in Wales.

Opportunity

RCT already has a vibrant and varied accommodation offer and opportunities exist to develop more, high quality accommodation which offers something quirky and different to the visitor. There are opportunities to develop large hotels, increase grading levels and encourage high grading aspirations. Support and advice will be offered to places to stay which could provide excellent facilities for activity tourism (such as bike security and drying rooms) and pet friendly venues, so the visitor offer in RCT can be sustained all year around.

The rise of Airbnb in the area demonstrates that there is a need for self-catering accommodation and further work will be undertaken to record, assess and understand the Airbnb sector as a whole, with the aim of forecasting how this emerging sector will impact upon the RCT Tourism economy in the future and how further opportunities with Airbnb can be exploited.

Adventure tourists appreciate the experience that glamping can provide which could be facilitated by developments such as those at Bryn Gobaith Farm in Mountain Ash. There are opportunities to work with social landlords to identify accommodation opportunities. Work will be undertaken to scope out this sector to provide information to prospective developers regarding potential saturation levels and return on investments.

Exciting opportunities present themselves in developing new, sustainable green tourism initiatives which consider biodiversity issues and provide facilities for those visitors who are prepared to pay a premium for a carbon neutral experience.

Llechwen Hall has recently increased its accommodation offer and Lanelay Hall will be developing their overnight stay provision following the implementation of the first class spa and wellbeing facility on site. To complement the Valleys Regional Park investment, Dare Valley Country Park will upgrade their accommodation and camping and caravanning facilities.

There are opportunities for staycations and through Valleys Regional Park and Visit Wales funding alongside assistance from Business Wales, there are potential opportunities to support and develop home grown accommodation provision through developing business and financial planning toolkits. The tourism hubs can facilitate this as well as providing training for the sector.

Experience

The Destination Experience needs to be at the heart of RCT Tourism. To improve the visitor economy RCT needs to provide first class, positive and unique experiences which visitors will want to repeat and tell others about.

Traditionally, RCT has focused upon Cultural and Heritage Tourism as its unique selling point, with an additional offer of walking and cycling. Visitors are coming to the South Wales valleys and RCT in particular for its beautiful countryside and unique environment (part of the County Borough resides in the National Park) and this needs to be developed further, maximising the potential of adventure experiences with the Global Adventure Tourism Market Report 2016–2020⁸ predicting a 46% growth in the adventure market globally by 2020.

It is possible for RCT to position itself as a premier visitor experience destination for adventure (both cultural and activity adventure tourism), outdoor, adrenaline and activity tourism, which will enhance RCT's year round tourism offer.

Another unique selling point of RCT (and the Valleys region) as a destination is the friendly welcome that tourists will receive when they visit. RCT's local communities are vibrant and one of its greatest strengths, however it is important to recognise that more work needs to be undertaken to develop cross boundary and experience based packages and itineraries. At present there is one tourism attraction visitor package in place (Mint, Mine & Vine) but co-ordinating the tourism offer in RCT can be improved to ensure that first class visitor experiences are being delivered which also incorporate accommodation providers and eateries.

There is no easily recognisable brand for RCT Tourism. In order to position RCT as a premier destination in South Wales a clear and distinct tourism brand needs to be developed and adopted by all involved. This includes attractions, accommodation, communities and local services and will rely heavily on partnership buy-in.

Opportunity

Building on the popularity of the *Mint, Mine and Vine* tourism package, which is a partnership project involving The Royal Mint Experience, The Welsh Mining Experience at Rhondda Heritage Park and Llanerch Vineyard, further packages are being developed, led by The Royal Mint Experience, such as Mint & Malt (with Penderyn Distillery) and Mint & Manor (with Llancaiach Fawr). Further opportunities need to be explored which will include other RCT Tourism businesses and attractions e.g. spa treatments at hotels, meals in restaurants and outdoor activities with accredited venues. Opportunities also need to be progressed with other regions and partners to develop interesting and unique experience offers which could be marketed across the UK.

Experience opportunities should also incorporate any emerging tourism themes such as Wellbeing Tourism which is already being identified as a lucrative market by accommodation providers such as Lanelay Hall and potential businesses such as Bryn Gobaiath Farm. The potential of genealogy and packages which promote the Welsh Language and local culture should also be investigated. There are opportunities to

⁸ <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/global-adventure-tourism-market-2016-2020-300343942.html>

grow the events sector and work with Visit Wales to bring specialist and major events to RCT.

The destination experience begins prior to a visitor getting to RCT. There are opportunities to re-brand and position RCT favourably online by providing a mechanism to book and plan a visit and itinerary before arriving. Redeveloping the tourism website to include initiatives such as interactive mapping and the ability to book tickets in theatres and attractions will help to co-ordinate the visitor offer and provide a hassle free, pre-visit experience.

Responding to visitor and resident requirements, the redevelopment of the tourism website for RCT will incorporate interactive mapping, e-commerce functionality and booking systems to improve the customer and visitor experience. There are also further opportunities to explore through social media channels in ways to engage and interact with visitors.

Accessibility, Infrastructure & Connectivity

The success of a tourism destination is reliant upon its infrastructure and connectivity. Transport links and public transport availability, car parking, signage, accessible facilities and understanding how they interconnect is vital to ensure a positive visitor experience.

There are certain areas of RCT that have a good infrastructure and connectivity to the A470, A465 and M4, with the Cambrian Way (A470) connecting RCT to Cardiff and Newport in the South, Swansea in the West and northwards through to the Midlands, travelling through some of the most scenic landscapes Wales has to offer. Destinations such as Bristol & Bath are within an hour and a half catchment of RCT, facilitated by the M4, as are Swansea, Carmarthenshire and Pembrokeshire. The A465 connects RCT to Abergavenny, Monmouth, and the Midlands and positions RCT favourably within the Cardiff Capital Region.

By 2022/23, connectivity into and within RCT will be significantly improved via the Metro and Valleys Lines Electrification. Transport for Wales have indicated benefits such as improved travel times, better commuter conditions and renovated station facilities. Dualling of the A465 will improve accessibility to the North Cynon Valley. However, there are challenges to overcome, particularly in connecting RCT's more rural areas (and by association, tourism interest areas) to existing public transport routes and future Metro developments to reduce the carbon footprint of tourism in RCT.

Natural Resources Wales has also identified the need to encourage user access on its land, not only to connect local communities with their landscape as a part of the Active Travel and Health and Wellbeing agenda but also to encourage a guardianship presence in isolated forestry and rural environments. The opening of forestry routes presents significant opportunities for tourists to explore areas previously inaccessible to them and install infrastructure to service those visitors.

In light of the potential increase in visitor attractions and product in RCT, in particular the adventure/activity tourism developments in the north, plans should be considered to accommodate the increased footfall through the development of car parks, public toilets, park and ride options and public infrastructure. A review of the brown signage approach would be useful to agree a way forward for signage in the digital age.

Many heritage attractions and assets are listed or scheduled and as a result it is difficult to adhere to accessibility requirements for wheelchairs and pushchairs. There is a need to address these issues through partnership working and advice from organisations such as CADW and the Glamorgan & Gwent Archaeological Trust.

By early 2020, Wi-Fi will be available in all of RCT's principle town centres, enabling greater connectivity, way finding and sharing of experiences through associated visitor access to social media. The use of digital media to promote local facilities will clearly have a positive impact on their future viability.

With visitors using mobile devices to search for information (e.g. downloading walks and maps) maximising the provision of Wi-Fi ___33 in certain areas and fully utilising the rollout of 5G connectivity is critical.

Opportunity

There are opportunities to extend the rail line from Aberdare to Hirwaun and work with partners to implement and promote an integrated transport ticketing system which will provide value for money and improve the visitor travel experience. On the road network, opportunities should be investigated for Park & Ride schemes, visitor centres, car parks and public toilets in key strategically important tourism areas of the County Borough which will improve accessibility to RCT's tourism product and encourage travel to other areas across the County Borough.

In undertaking a way finding plan for the Borough in order to assess how people find tourism services and attractions once they arrive at destination entry points (car parks, bus stations and train stations), there are opportunities to ensure that tourism development is undertaken in partnership and collaboration, not just with organisations such as Transport for Wales but with residents in RCT who have the best knowledge of their towns and villages. Co-ordination would mitigate against a piecemeal approach (e.g. wayfinding would connect to signage requirements). The way finding plan could also consider digital opportunities for information sharing and business/product/event promotion via digital displays and mobile apps.

Tourism signage in the Borough should be assessed for suitability, condition and any gaps in provision should be identified. There are opportunities to develop a tourism signage strategy for RCT which will include recommendations for schedules of cleaning and vegetation maintenance.

Urban infrastructure and public amenity development needs to be increased and improved (e.g. car parks and public toilets) in line with new attractions coming on stream and signage to RCT's product and attractions needs to be assessed. This will need to take into account environmental legislation and seek innovative, "green" sustainable solutions for implementation and maintenance. Funding to support carbon

neutral initiatives should be investigated to provide RCT with an opportunity to lead the way in green tourism innovation. In an emerging destination for product and accommodation development there is an opportunity to pilot initiatives, such as carbon neutral places to stay, which intertwine carbon efficient measures and actions which protect biodiversity and manage eco systems effectively.

Opportunities for digital connectivity need to be explored further as walking routes improve and land becomes more accessible for visitors to enjoy e.g. town centre, walking, cycling and equestrian route apps. The use of mobile technology should be investigated to enable online booking of tickets, packages and itineraries through the RCT Tourism website.

Vision & Objectives

The Vision

The vision for tourism in RCT is:

To be a premier destination in the UK for “experience” based visits and vacations showcasing our first class landscape, culture and heritage

Central to the vision is the ability to create a sense of place by boosting the perception and enhancing the visitor experience of RCT, generating a positive environment in which to live, work, visit and invest.

Strategic Objectives

The overall objective of the RCT Tourism Strategy is to increase and sustain the economic growth of tourism in RCT. To achieve this objective, the RCT Tourism Strategy is supported by a series of strategic objectives that will drive its delivery and translate directly into a series of projects and actions:

1. To sustain, develop and enhance new and existing tourism product and attractions in RCT. This includes:

- Facilitating the planning and delivery of flagship tourist product and attractions such as Zip World and the Rhondda Tunnel
- Investigating emerging tourism themes and utilising RCT’s landscape to develop outdoor activity product and packages with partners
- Undertaking a gap analysis of tourism product and attractions, exploring opportunities for wet weather and indoor provision
- Tailoring packages to new markets (including Cultural Adventure Discovery packages) to increase footfall levels for new and existing tourism product
- Encouraging inward investment for creative entrepreneurs
- Working with partners such as CADW and Glamorgan & Gwent Archaeological Trust to develop and sustain RCT’s environmental and built heritage.
- Establish a RCT Strategic Tourism Board
- Developing Discovery Gateway sites as a part of the Valleys Regional Park, which will act as key locations from which to promote a wider tourism offer.

- Explore opportunities to develop key landscape features such as reservoirs as tourism attractions in their own right
- 2. To support the creation of well paid, sustainable employment within the tourism sector by developing and enhancing skills in the local workforce. This includes:**
- Undertaking a skills gap analysis of the sector which will form a baseline from which to develop tourism/visitor related courses with Coleg y Cymoedd and The University of South Wales to address skills shortages in the local workforce
 - Develop a package of support to promote business start-ups and enhanced entrepreneurialism
 - Using the Valleys Regional Park Discovery Gateway sites to provide workplace learning opportunities in tourism and investigating the potential of this linking to formal qualifications in local Colleges/Universities
 - Working with local businesses, communities and the third sector to identify and access funding for customer service training (such as Welcome Host). Implementing this training will have the associated outcome of improving civic pride within local communities.
 - Working with third sector partners and communities to assess the interest in volunteering/guardianship tourism programmes in RCT.
 - Working with RCTCBC's HR team, schools and colleges (e.g. Coleg y Cymoedd and The University of South Wales) to promote the benefits of a career in the tourism industry and supporting businesses in regards to employing the right people, taking on apprenticeships and assisting with HR queries.
- 3. To support the sustainability and development of new and existing high quality, graded visitor accommodation across RCT. This includes:**
- Scoping opportunities for a high end, large hotel development in RCT
 - Investigating opportunities for accommodation that supports outdoor activity tourism and assessing any potential saturation levels
 - Working in partnership with Business Wales and Visit Wales, to develop business and financial planning toolkits to support home grown hospitality sector development which will be supported via the tourism hub networks
 - Assessing opportunities for pet friendly accommodation
 - Working with partners in the sector to develop green tourism initiatives linked to innovation, biodiversity protection and carbon neutral opportunities
 - Connecting with Airbnb accommodation providers and developing an approach to Visit Wales grading (as this will be free in future years) with all accommodation providers across the Borough
- 4. To provide first class, positive and unique experiences which visitors will want to repeat and tell others about. This includes:**
- Redeveloping the RCT tourism website to include interactive features and e-commerce functionality to book and plan itineraries from just one platform

- Working directly with visitor attractions/product and accommodation providers to develop familiarisation visits for tourism trade
- Developing the work of the Mint, Mine and Vine experience and provide easily accessible packages that take the hassle out of planning a stay or a full day's activities for the customer and keeps them within RCT for longer
- Liaising with Visit Wales' Major Events Unit to assess options for delivering specialist, large scale events in RCT
- Working with communities and partners in the tourism hub networks to identify guardianship opportunities (e.g. Blue Badge guides) which will enhance the localised visitor experience.
- Working with partners to develop tourism experience packages which could include bespoke offers such as genealogy and Welsh Language interests
- Developing a mechanism to ensure that tourism venues within RCT are promoting each other, with the aim of increasing dwell times in the County Borough (e.g. leaflet stands or digital interactive displays).

5. To develop and maintain new and existing destination infrastructure, improve accessibility and connectivity to and in RCT. This includes:

- Capitalise on the opportunities being presented through the Cardiff Capital Region City Deal, specifically the delivery of the South East Wales Metro.
- Working with communities, partners and town centre masterplans to deliver way finding plans for tourism in RCT, including signage and public infrastructure audits and interpretation panel assessment.
- Assessing the Wi-Fi connectivity gaps in RCT, particularly in relation to new accommodation, attractions and product development.
- Facilitating better and more productive (i.e. quicker, sustainable etc.) connectivity between new and existing visitor attractions/activities throughout RCT which will include work to explore the sustainability and ongoing maintenance of walking trails
- Working with Visit Wales, Welsh Government and Heritage leaders across Wales to learn best practice in relation to the accessibility of scheduled and listed Heritage assets in the Borough.
- Investigating economic opportunities in the tourism sector afforded by RCT's geographical location and proximity to the M4.
- Investigating the opening up of the Hirwaun railway station and extending the rail link from Aberdare to Hirwaun to provide further public transport offerings to support the activity tourism product in the North of the Borough
- Explore Park & Ride facility options in the Hirwaun/Rhigos/Treherbert area to cater for the large number of expected commuters travelling to attractions in the area
- Work in partnership (e.g. with organisations involved in the Waterfall Country) to develop car parking facilities and public toilets to complement existing provision around Rhigos Mountain and Penderyn. This will mitigate against the issues currently experienced at Pen y Fan
- Working with developers of the A465 dualling to maximise opportunities for routes and trails to benefit accessibility and connectivity to the outdoors for local residents and visitors

- Undertaking an audit of tourism signage in RCT and the surrounding areas (where signs promoting RCT are situated) with a view to creating a tourism signage strategy and way finding plan for the County Borough

Next Steps & Partnership working

By working to deliver upon these objectives we will:

- Work in partnership with the right people and organisations.
- Consult the right people at the right time
- Ensure delivery of the most effective outcomes
- Source funding and investment in a timely and creative way
- Monitor and evaluate to understand and learn from good practice and challenges experienced.
- Review and consider what we can realistically achieve and search for and explore new opportunities

It is recommended that the RCT Tourism Strategy as a partnership document is overseen through the establishment of a RCT Strategic Tourism Board. RCT Council will be responsible for evaluating and reporting to the Board on the Tourism Action Plan, organising meetings and amending or adapting this Strategy in the future. RCT Council will lead on tourism data collection and surveying to inform future STEAM reports and will ensure that economic data in relation to STEAM is shared with the Strategic Board. The work undertaken through the Board can then feed into regular reports to the Council's Finance and Scrutiny Committee with Cabinet making decisions when and where appropriate.

The Tourism Action Plan will be reported upon quarterly. The RCT Tourism Strategy and associated action plan will be reviewed annually with input from the Strategic Board.

Strategic Context

Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The RCT Tourism Strategy will aim to deliver against the priorities to create A Healthier Wales; A Prosperous Wales; Resilient and cohesive communities and A Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh Language

Prosperity For All: The National Strategy 2017

The main priority for the RCT Tourism Strategy will be to enhance, increase and sustain the visitor economy. As a result, we will be aiming to achieve objectives which are set out in the Prosperity For All Strategy under the Prosperous & Secure, Healthy & Active, Ambitious & Learning and United & Connected headings.

Environment (Wales) Act 2016

The sustainable management of natural resources and resilience of ecosystems principles will be embedded into funding initiatives and tourism developments identified through the delivery of the strategy

Cardiff Capital Region City Deal Delivery Plan

The Cardiff Capital Region City Deal Delivery Plan makes reference to 'tourism' and its importance within the region, with the South Wales Metro and other infrastructure developments all expected to assist the area in becoming an improved visitor destination. The South East Wales Destination Investment Plan highlights and prioritises key transformational projects.

Our Valleys, Our Future Delivery Plan

The Welsh Government led Valleys Taskforce engages with local communities to learn what the priorities are for people living and working within the South Wales Valleys area. The Valleys Regional Park has developed as a result of the Valleys Taskforce. The aim of the Valleys Regional Park (VRP) is to unlock and maximise the potential of the natural and associated cultural heritage of the Valleys to generate social, economic and environmental benefits. The RCT Tourism Strategy has incorporated the RCT Destination Gateway sites which the VRP has aligned funding towards and will work with VRP in the future to deliver economic benefits to the tourism sector in RCT.

Our Cwm Taf – Public Service Board (PSB) Well-Being Plan 2018-2023

The Cwm Taf PSB Well-being plan works to deliver upon the Future Generations & Wellbeing priorities and therefore shares elements of alignment with the RCT Tourism Strategy, in particular, the Cultural Well-being, Environmental Well-being and Economic Well-being objectives.

Rural Development Programme (RDP) – Cwm Taf Local Development Plan

This Plan works to support communities in the Borough in Rhigos, Maerdy and Ynysybwll. The visitor economy features as a priority in the Plan and Visit Wales funding is supported by the RDP. Any funding which is applied for (particularly Capital funding) will need to reference the Cwm Taf Development Plan. The RCT Tourism

Strategy shares the same economic and community well-being objectives as the Cwm Taf RDP Plan.

Existing Tourism Offer in RCT

The Royal Mint Experience

Learn about the history of the Royal Mint and see the special coins and rare historical memorabilia that are on display. There are six different zones to explore and visitor hosts are available to answer any questions.

Penderyn Distillery

Award winning Penderyn Whisky, as well as its accompanying range of spirits is enjoyed the world over, and is made from spring water from the nearby mountains. A visit to its Distillery is a must for anyone visiting this area, with masterclasses and guided tasting tours awaiting.

Welsh Mining Experience at Rhondda Heritage Park

A popular visitor attraction in which you can discover the history of coal mining in the Rhondda by going underground with an ex-miner as a tour guide as part of the Black Gold Experience. A fully immersive and interactive experience.

National Lido of Wales - LIDO Ponty

Originally built in 1927, the National Lido of Wales based in Ynysangharad Park has been updated for the 21st Century with a café and play area on site. The lido hosts three heated pools, a main pool, activity pool and a splash pool and is open seasonally.

Dare Valley Country Park

Dare Valley Country Park is the first Country Park in the UK to be created from a former brown field industrial site which once consisted of 19 collieries and drift mines. In its new lease of life it is an outdoor pursuits hotspot with a number of scenic trails, walks, an array of exceptional wildlife species and rugged landscapes. It has been designated as a Valleys Regional Park Discovery Gateway site.

Ynysangharad War Memorial Park

One of the VRP Discovery Gateways, Ynysangharad Park is home to the National Lido of Wales and has alleyways of trees and flower beds to enjoy as well as a Victorian Bandstand. The park hosts a number of large scale events throughout the year

Nantgarw Chinaworks Museum

Nantgarw Chinaworks Museum is the only surviving 19th Century porcelain works in the UK. The Museum brings to life the history of the chinaworks and explains why the porcelain was so unique. There are ceramic artists on site who are producing porcelain again after the recipe was lost 200 years ago.

Pontypridd Museum

The museum depicts the industrial, social and cultural history of Pontypridd, emphasising the distinctive history of the town

Taff's Well Thermal Spring

This is the only thermal spring in Wales and is surrounded by myths and legends

The Grogg Shop Museum

The World of Groggs is a unique, family run craft shop, encompassing hand sculpted and painted figurines, based on personalities from the worlds of sport, rock and pop, cinema and popular culture

Barry Sidings Countryside Park

Packed with trails to explore including a BMX track, fishing pond, café and play area. It is located on cycle tracks

Taff Valley Quad Bike and Activity Centre

Experience the thrill of quad biking whilst enjoying some of the best views of the Taff. There is also an assault course, archery, laser shooting and clay pigeon shooting on site

Aberdare Park

This park is a grade II listed Victorian park with a boating lake, play area, cafe and coronation fountain identical to the one outside the famous Raffles hotel in Singapore

Cynon Valley Museum

Cynon Valley Museum depicts the industrial, social and cultural history of the Cynon valley.

Bronwydd Park

The park offers walking trails into the mountainside and pathways for walking/cycling as well as tennis courts and a play area

Darran Park

This is an Edwardian park which contains Llyn y Forwyn lake, the home of the enchantress Nelferch, famed in Welsh Legend

Cwm Clydach Countryside Park

This oasis of calm with wildlife, biodiversity and stunning views has been created on the scar of a former coalmine

Giles Gallery

An award winning arts and crafts gallery situated in the heart of its community

Llantrisant Gallery

This gallery space offers the artist and viewer a great exhibition setting in the model house in historic Llantrisant

The Workers Gallery & Workshops

Exhibitions change on a regular basis and reflect the many talents of the artists in the working art studio

Phoenix Theatre

A community performance theatre and cinema the frontage of the building is a reminder of its origin as Ocean Collieries Maindy and Eastern Workmen's Library and Institute

Sgwd yr Eira Waterfall Walk

The jewel in the crown of the "waterfall country" is Sgwd yr Eira, one of the most spectacular waterfalls in the UK. Its popularity is enhanced because visitors can walk behind the curtain of thundering water.

Green Meadow Riding Centre

Based in Dare Valley Country Park, Green Meadow provides horse riding lessons and off road hacking as well as riding for the disabled and livery and equestrian supplies

Talygarn Equestrian Centre

Offers a wide range of riding activities for all ages and abilities.

Daerwynno Activity Centre

Open on demand all year, Daerwynno offers accommodation and adventure type activities such as rock climbing, canoeing, and mountain biking and orienteering

Garwnant

In the heart of a beautiful forest, Garwnant is the starting point for walking trails, mountain biking routes and has a fully accessible trail. It has a café on site and is within the Fforest Fawr Geopark, one of the few places in the World designated for its geological significance

Dark Sky Discovery Sites

Dare Valley Country Park – Orion Class
Red Lion Pub, Penderyn – Milky Way Class
Garn Eiddel Car Park, Maerdy – Milky Way Class
Daerwynno Outdoor Centre – Milky Way Class

Coliseum & Parc n Dare Theatres

These performing arts venues in the village of Trecynon (Aberdare) and Treorchy respectively offer a varied programme including comedy, music, drama, cinema, light entertainment and family events.

Treforest Tenpin

As well as bowling lanes, facilities include a pool, table tennis and a wide range of refreshments

Rhondda Bowl

A family friendly bowling centre with 14 bowling lanes as well as a bar, diner and arcade.

Spot Climbing Centre

Spot is a dedicated centre for the best bouldering in South Wales, catering for novices and experienced climbers

Llanwynno Churchyard

This churchyard on top of a mountain hosts the grave of legendary runner Guto Nyth Bran. The celebrated Nos Galan race takes place every New Year's Eve to celebrate his life

Llantrisant Castle

Once a proud edifice in medieval times, Llantrisant Castle represents a magnificent towered medieval fortress reduced to fragments but impressive in its outlook

Ynysangharad Locks

The canal remains are only 0.5km in length but contain a number of significant features – the only remaining intact double lock flight and the only stone tail bridge in regular use

Food & Drink

There's plenty on the menu in Rhondda Cynon Taf. There are a huge range of cafes, restaurants and eateries to appeal to all which include local restaurants that also produce their own beer and ale to accompany their menu and some of the best fish and chips you will find in the UK. Rhondda Cynon Taf is also home to traditions ice cream parlours that sell traditional ice cream, as well as sweet treats, desserts and more. The best of RCT's food and drink is showcased every year at the Big Welsh Bite.

Outdoors & Mountains

The Rhigos Mountain is an impressive landscape which spans an extensive area made up of open access countryside and forestry. Its prehistoric glacial origins provide a fitting back drop to arguably the most historically important colliery in the whole of Wales, the Tower colliery. The Rhigos Mountain, alongside Maerdy Mountain and The Bwlch provide a challenge to road cyclists as well as presenting some of the most beautiful driving routes and scenery in South Wales.

The area's fantastic landscape is rich in biodiversity; there are many different kinds of habitat and wildlife, some of which are truly unique to Wales and England. Much of the open access land is designated as SINCS or SSSIs. There are a number of walking trails, such as the Taff Trail in Abercynon, connecting visitors with Cardiff and Brecon.

Accommodation Providers 2018 as promoted on the Visit RCT & Visit Wales websites

1st Accommodation Ltd	Lanelay Hall
Dare Valley Country Park	Miskin Manor Hotel
Daerwynno Outdoor Activity Centre	Blueberry Inn
Fifth Avenue House	Premier Inn
Dunraven Hotel	Haveli Hotel
Dylan's B&B	The Three Saints Hotel
Hendre Fawr House	Beili Helyg Guesthouse
Hendrewen Hotel	Central Guesthouse
Heritage Park Hotel	Cherry Tree House
Llechwen Hall Hotel	Cross Keys Hotel
Mountain Ash Golf Club	Miskin Hotel
Penybryn Cottages	Smokey Cot B&B
Falcon Inn	The Countryman Inn
South Wales Homes	The Marquis inn
Tir Melys	The Stables at Brook House
Ty Newydd Country Hotel	Ty Andrew Guesthouse
266 Heart of the Valleys Cottage	Cwm Garn Meadows
La Cala	Llantrisant Holiday Cottage
Llia Cysglyd	Llwynau Farm Pine Lodges
Swyn y Gwynt	Troedrhiwtrwyn Farm
Tunnel Cottages	Tylcha Fach Farm
Victorian House	Taffi Campers