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Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council



TOURISM STRATEGY

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Executive Summary

Tourism is a relatively new discipline to the authority and the production of this strategy will provide strategic direction and guidance to develop tourism in Blaenau Gwent. This development will improve the quality of life for local people and visitors alike by, attracting inward investment, and developing new and upgrading existing tourism product and maximising marketing opportunities.

An action plan has been produced that will develop all aspects of tourism with the aim of increasing the volume and economic benefit of tourism within the area. The plan will provide strategic focus in developing opportunities for local government, private and community enterprises. It is important, however, that any development should be sustainable, environmentally, economically and culturally.

In addition to the development of the Tourism product, it is essential that all marketing avenues be explored to maximise the opportunities that exist. Every effort should be made to local tourism operators to engage in these activities. The effective monitoring of markets and marketing activity, collection of statistical evidence, and research activities that will analyse the effectiveness of the strategy is critical for the economic sustainability of tourism in the area.

The Tourism strategy can be delivered by building on the following:

- **OUR ENVIRONMENT** - nearly three quarters of Blaenau Gwent can be counted as green areas and open countryside, contrasting from dramatic valleys to desolate open moorland. These contrasts provide a wonderful scenic backdrop for tourists and give the opportunity of exploration on foot or cycle for all ages and abilities.
- **OUR DIVERSITY** - Blaenau Gwent is a small mosaic of the many features of Wales, however, due to our size and diversity there is no dominant brand that makes us a tourist destination. We therefore have to work in partnership with other groups and consortiums to maximise our tourism potential.
- **TOURISM FORUM** - The establishing of a new tourism forum to develop tourism product and maximise other opportunities that exist. The forum should draw membership from the business and voluntary sector but any member should be committed to attracting and welcoming visitors, from both within Blaenau Gwent and further a field.
- **MARKETING** - All efforts must be made to secure the support of our tourism businesses and community groups to marketing campaigns to extend the coverage of our area in tourism brochures and further raise the Blaenau Gwent profile.
- **MARKETS** - South East Wales is still heavily reliant on visitors from the UK who make up 89% of the total. The English regions are the most important to the region with 59% of domestic visits. Key areas within the English regions are South East, South West, London, North West, West and East Midlands. The M4 and M5 corridors tend to drive these markets along their axes.

- **MARKET SEGMENTATION** - Primary segments in the UK market are affluent early retired, affluent empty nesters and better off families. Secondary segments are pre-family professionals and risers. These are key Wales Tourist Board markets.
- **ACCOMMODATION** - It is clear that a proportion of our accommodation stock has no wish to be involved with the tourism market. Once these businesses are removed from the equation we are left with a small but committed group of businesses with good quality premises. It is a priority to have these premises graded and fully active within the Wales Tourist Board marketing schemes.
- **ATTRACTIONS** - A variety of attractions exist in Blaenau Gwent, however, they are all free of charge at the point of entry and are mainly for the benefit of the local community. There is a need to develop new attractions that can bring in both day and stay visitors from out of the area.
- **ACTIVITY** - Activity holidays are becoming an important segment of the market especially for short breaks. The developing of the areas as a centre for a diverse range of activities for all ages and to suit all pockets is a key marketing opportunity.

CULTURE – Blaenau Gwent has a rich and diverse heritage and culture. Many of the traditions that we take for granted are of prime interest to tourists. It is essential that we harness everything that our community offers to give visitors a taste of Wales and the flavour of the valleys. The Herian project focuses on engaging communities in telling their story and this will be an integral part in achieving this.

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Blaenau Gwent Vision Statement

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council was established following Local Government Reorganisation in Wales in 1996. The Community Plan identifies the Authority's vision as:

To enhance the quality of life for the people of Blaenau Gwent by providing/enabling services in partnership that help create and regenerate a more caring, prosperous, vibrant safe and healthy community.'

The appointment of the Tourism Manager is a new service area within Leisure services and it reflects the authorities commitment to the production and implementation of a tourism strategy and the benefits that this will bring to the area.

1.2 Tourism Mission Statement

'To improve the quality of life for locals and visitors alike by enhancing the image of the area, attracting inward investment developing new and upgrading existing tourism product and increasing tourism revenue and expenditure.'

1.3 Community Services

The Leisure Division of the Community Services Department is responsible for the management and provision of Cultural Services in Blaenau Gwent. Cultural Services is constituted of the Arts Development Service, Heritage, Libraries and Tourism. Tourism and Heritage operations are recent additions to the portfolio.

Individual Service strategies are being formulated to inform future direction and investment. There is an established three year Library Plan and Business Plan. Draft Arts Development and Heritage Strategies have been completed recording a five-year vision for the services. The tourism strategy will complete the service strategies for the Cultural Services Division.

All Cultural Services Plans and Strategies identify the Authority's priority to increasing participation, capacity building and addressing the social inclusion, life long learning and healthy living agenda. Strategies highlight the Authority's commitment to maintaining existing service levels and provide the basis for continuous improvement in the provision of Cultural Services.

1.4 Tourism

Tourism as a discipline will crosscut the whole of the Authority, planning, transport, environmental maintenance, education, leisure, economical. The Leisure Division are working collaboratively to promote tourist, cultural and sporting activity in Blaenau Gwent. The key to driving the service forward will be this strategy. The document will map areas of work for future development and investment. (*Action point1*)

Consideration may also be given to create a tourism taskforce from across all departments to galvanise these efforts.

1.5 Purpose

The purpose of this strategy is:

- To demonstrate Blaenau Gwent's commitment to tourism.
- To produce a framework for action for tourism in Blaenau Gwent that will develop all aspects of tourism and thereby increase the volume and economic benefit of tourism within the area.
- To evaluate current tourism product.
- To provide strategic advice and guidance in developing opportunities for the development of tourism in Blaenau Gwent.
- To establish the authority's priorities and delivery timescales in relation to tourism.
- To deliver the proposals through investigating funding avenues and marketing opportunities
- To establish effective monitoring, collation of statistical evidence, and research activities that will analyse the effectiveness of the strategy.

1.6 Aim

The aim of this strategy is:

- To ensure tourism development is sustainable environmentally, economically and culturally.
- To improve the quality of existing and new developments in response to customer and industry, needs and to increase the competitiveness of our operators in order to increase their prosperity.
- To improve the image of the area.
- To respond to customer and operator needs.
- To develop partnership working to increase effectiveness.
- To provide a base for funding applications and marketing purposes.
- To develop closer Local Authority and Business links.
- To instil greater confidence in existing and potential private sector developers.

1.7 Consultation Process

A consultation process will be undertaken to establish the views of relevant individuals and bodies both within and outside Blaenau Gwent. The strategy will then be amended with any relevant observations.

1.8 Timescale

The draft strategy will be produced by Spring 2004 followed by a two-month consultation period. It is envisaged that the amended strategy will be published by the end Summer 2004.

The strategy will cover a five-year period with annual reviews to give the flexibility that is required by the ever-changing nature of tourism markets.

2 BACKGROUND

2.1 Previous Strategies

The first Blaenau Gwent Tourism Strategy was produced in February 1993 following the success of hosting the National Garden Festival at Ebbw Vale in 1992. The strategy covered a two-year period with the recommendations of two yearly reviews. The subsequent turn over of tourism officers and redesignation of the post to major on heritage shifted the emphasis of the strategy.

2.2 New Post

The re-establishment of the Tourism post in November 2002 restored the authority's commitment to this service area and hence this strategy.

2.3 Geographical context

Blaenau Gwent sits in the north east of the South Wales Valleys and on the Southern edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park. It comprises of the top sections of three valleys, The Sirhowy, The Ebbw Fawr and the Ebbw Fach. Due to its position on the edge of the South Wales Coal Field and the Limestone and Ironstone areas to the north, it was the scene for the early iron industries. The landscape reflects much of this history with ribbon development along the valley bottoms and sides. The valley sides were once heavily wooded but were devastated through the need for fuel and timber that serviced the industrial revolution. Most of the spoil tips that once littered Blaenau Gwent have now been reclaimed and utilised for development or environmental purposes.

The Countryside and Landscape strategy 1998 analysed land utilisation within the County Borough:

- Open Countryside 45%
- Defined urban area 23%
- Enclosed Agricultural land 20%
- Urban Fringe 9%
- Recreation sites 3%

It also analysed Land reclamation and found that since 1972 15% of the total land area of Blaenau Gwent has been reclaimed and only 2% remained to be reclaimed. Of this 2% a substantial amount has since been reclaimed with only two small areas remaining one of which, Brynmawr Patches, is an important archaeological site.

These statistics reveal that nearly three quarters of Blaenau Gwent can be counted as green areas, contrasting from dramatic valleys to desolate open moorland. These contrasts provide a wonderful scenic backdrop for tourists and give the opportunity of exploration on foot or cycle for all ages and abilities.

2.4 Tourism Forums

A tourism Forum was set up during the lead up period to the National Garden Festival, however, this forum has since disbanded and no forum for tourism business or organisations exists within the geographical boundary of Blaenau Gwent. (*Action point 2*)

3.0 WORKING TOGETHER

3.1 Blaenau Gwent

Currently there are no tourism partnerships or consortiums based on the geographical area of Blaenau Gwent. The Tourism Forum that previously existed was a combination of tourism businesses including Hotels and Guest Houses along with other interested parties and individuals including Local History Societies and local historians. Following the National Garden Festival, the impact of tourism to the local economy declined. Similarly, many of the embryonic tourism businesses either closed or relocated to more prosperous areas. The knock on effect of this was a reduction of tourism business members on the Tourism Forum. The emphasis of the group evolved from tourism to heritage interests and the forum eventually became the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Forum. The Forum now comprises entirely of Local history groups and individuals who inform each other of their activities and does not impact on tourism in the area.

The need for a new tourism forum is essential to develop tourism product and maximise other opportunities that exist. Any new tourism forum should draw membership from the business and voluntary sector but any member should be committed to attracting and welcoming visitors, from both within Blaenau Gwent and further a field. (*Action point 2, 13, 15 & 16*)

3.2 5-Counties/Greater Gwent

Wales Tourist Board (WTB) have received funding from Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) to distribute in the five counties area affected by the closure of Corus on tourism initiatives. These initiatives include:-

- 10% top up for existing WTB accommodation schemes.
- Capital projects of below £10k for accommodation linked to activity tourism related upgrades.
- Welcome Golfer marketing packages.
- Events coordination and development.
- Herian (South Wales Industrial Heritage Initiative).
- Monitoring and research – STEAM (Scarborough Tourism Economic Activity Monitor).

In addition to this, Blaenau Gwent received specific funding to deliver projects at Parc Bryn Bach (golf, cycling, and Hotel developments), Bedwellty Park, Roundhouse Towers, Heritage through Living History and Interpretation, Tourist Information Centres, Regional and local marketing, Adoption of STEAM and to appoint a dedicated Tourism Development Officer.

The distribution of these funds is short term but it is imperative to work with local tourism businesses to maximise the opportunities that exist. (*Action point 9&10*)**3.3**
Valleys of South Wales

The Valleys Consortium is one of the 12 marketing areas in Wales. The membership consists of Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council, Caerphilly CBC, Merthyr Tydfil CBC, Neath and Port Talbot CBC, Rhondda Cynon Taff CBC, Torfaen CBC and the WTB. The consortium market Heritage Breaks in the Valleys of South Wales including the production of the brochure and web site. Blaenau Gwent are now full members of this consortium and it is essential that we take an active role in what is the main UK consumer marketing tool for the area. It is imperative to raise the profile of Blaenau Gwent and establish it as a key destination within the Valleys of South Wales.

All efforts must be made to secure the support of our tourism businesses to this campaign to extend the coverage of our area in the brochure and further raise the Blaenau Gwent profile. (*Action point 5*)

It is the intention to rationalise the marketing for 2004 to reflect the niche qualities of the product and target the markets more accurately. The literature for the new campaign will comprise of a Heritage Breaks guide that will be visually strong, selling the region and proposed trails. The guide will be distributed independently as well as within a pack combined with the inserts. The Wisdom and Walks trail inserts will cover six segments with suggested itineraries and will be distributed in response to targeted activity.

The segments are:

- Heroes of the Revolution – using key personalities to tell the story of industrial heritage in South Wales.
- Folk Law & Fairy Tales – the itineraries will cover heritage attractions & locations using myth, legend & faith as the theme.
- Outdoor & Active – this segment will relate to walking, cycling, golf and other activities.
- Artists Impressions – arts, crafts and literature links will be used to take the visitor around the region.
- Genealogy – giving information on how to trace ancestors.
- Festival of Walks – events listing of walks throughout the region.

The pack is flexible to complement the marketing activities of local authorities.

3.4 South East Wales

Since 1991, for tourism purposes, Wales was supported by three regional tourism companies to undertake regional activity on behalf of its trade members. At that time, Blaenau Gwent fell under the provision of Tourism South and West Wales. The National Assembly reviewed this structure and decided to divide Wales into four areas in line with the four regional economic fora, each managed by a regional tourism partnership.

Blaenau Gwent lies within the Capital Region Tourism (CRT) area that is defined as the local authority areas of Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Newport, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Torfaen, Vale of Glamorgan and Brecon Beacons National Park Authority. The directors of CRT are comprised of one member from each of the aforementioned local authorities along with eleven members elected from the trade covering tourism, hospitality and leisure industries. The new company is a streamlined organisation emphasising the delivery of product led marketing initiatives. CRT is a private company limited by guarantee with membership drawn from local authorities and trade. The company receives core funding from WTB and draws down other funds from, for example, ELWa (Education and Learning Wales) and ERDF (European Regional Development Fund).

The mission statement for CRT is:

‘Through genuine partnership working, to lead South East Wales in fulfilling its tourism potential as both the essential gateway to Wales and a destination of world class quality in its own right, in way which bring clear, lasting and increasing benefits to the resident communities and businesses of the region.’

The work of CRT is divided into four sub-groups for management and specialist product groups dealing with:

- Cultural and Heritage;
- Events Tourism;
- Business Tourism;
- Short Breaks Tourism
- Golf Tourism.

CRT have just completed the review of their Regional Tourism Strategy, ‘Competing with Confidence’ to bring it up to date and to reflect the significant changes that have occurred over the past two years. The consumer propositions identified in the strategy as priorities for regional investment are divided into urban, regional and WTB propositions;-

Urban Propositions

- Business Tourism - 3*+ accommodation, meetings and conference capacity, incentive opportunities, exhibition space
- Urban Breaks: range of accommodation, cultural and sporting events, retail, food, entertainment, attractions

Regional Propositions

- Heritage Breaks: 3*+ accommodation, attractions, events, “soft” activities
- Luxury Short Breaks: resort hotels, country house hotels, 4*+ accommodation, food, “soft” activities
- Golf Tourism: courses, range of nearby accommodation, food

“Big Country” Propositions

- Breaks based on Coastal and Rural Activities: range of accommodation, rural attractions watersports, cycling, walking

It is essential that tourism operators, with our help, maximise the opportunities presented by the revised strategy in terms of inward investment and marketing. (*Action point 9&10*)

CRT also act as secretariat to the South East Wales Economic Forum – Tourist Implementation Group (SEWEF TIG). SEWEF is divided into The Regional Economic Strategy Group, Tourist Implementation Group, Skills Group, land and Property Working Group, Business Support Consortium and The Marketing, Promotion Inward Investment Group. Membership of the TIG consists of Local Authority Tourism Officers, CRT, WTB, Welsh Development Agency (WDA) and University of Wales institute Cardiff (UWIC). Its Terms of Reference include the implementation of tourism projects and the review of the Regional Tourism Strategy. It's key priorities for the coming year is to complete the review of the Regional Tourism Strategy and revise the Action Plan, Agree the regional tourism investment framework, make progress on the skills deficit and improve the packaging and distribution of product offers. Our continued presence at this forum is key to driving the tourism potential of Blaenau Gwent forward. (*Action point 5*)

3.4.1 Southern Wales Consortium

Up until recently, the consortium only partially covered the area and did not fully address the potential from travel trade and group travel markets from overseas. Business tourism was also undersold with the Cardiff Conference Bureau covering the city and the remainder of the region largely untapped. The Southern Wales Consortium is now made up of the local authority areas of Blaenau Gwent, Bridgend, Caerphilly, Merthyr Tydfil, Monmouthshire, Newport, Powys, Rhondda Cynon Taff, Torfaen and Vale of Glamorgan along with Wales Tourist Board, Capital Region Tourism and The Cardiff Initiative. It covers the three areas of Travel Trade, Overseas Consumer and Business Tourism. Two officers based at Bridgend CBC cover the Travel Trade and Overseas markets while an Officer based at Newport CBC covers Business Tourism. Blaenau Gwents contribution to this consortium gives our tourism operators the opportunity to expand into new markets, which include:-

a) Travel Trade and Overseas

The previous Trade Travel Campaign only partially covered the region and concentrated on the UK travel trade sector, essentially UK based coach operators, tour operators and group organisers.

With the start of BMI Baby low cost flights to Cardiff and the Ryder Cup in 2010, the developing of both these campaigns into a significant effort to make an impact on the travel trade both in the UK and in our overseas target markets is imperative, whilst continuing to build on the previous investment and presence built up in the consumer overseas sector.

The target markets for UK travel trade are City, Coast, Countryside and Event based short breaks from:

- England and Wales based coach operators
- Tour operators and group travel organisers

- Niche Group Travel operators for golf, activities and heritage.

The target markets for overseas travel trade are:

- UK based incoming ground handlers for North America, Northern Europe and Ireland (BITOA).
- Tour operators, group organisers in North America, Northern Europe and Ireland already running programmes to Britain (to expand itineraries and packages involving SE Wales).
- Carriers, especially BMI baby but also ferry companies.
- Specialist niche operators for golf, heritage and activities including walking and cycling

The campaign for Consumer Overseas will concentrate on the following primary markets:

- North America (USA & Canada)
- Northern Europe (France, Netherlands, Holland, Germany & Belgium)
- Ireland
- Australasia (Australia & NZ)

There is also considerable potential for the region in entertainment/culture/sporting events, together with niche markets for golf and other activities linked to higher earners.

b) Business Tourism

Previously Business Tourism was included in the Travel Trade portfolio .Until the appointment of a dedicated officer for the business and conference trade, SE Wales was only covered by the Cardiff conference bureau who obviously were concentrating in the capital. In the short period that a dedicated officer has been in post over £1m of business has been secured. There are several venues in our area that lend themselves to providing exhibition and conference facilities, and with the right marketing some of this business should soon be heading toward Blaenau Gwent. (Action point 11)

3.4.2 Southern Wales Attractions Partnership (SWAP)

SWAP combines the skills and experiences of six local authorities and over 40 attractions and is backed by CRT and WTB. Now in its third year, SEWAP replaced the highly successful Gwent Association of Tourist Attractions.

SWAP aims to:

- Increase visitor numbers to the region,
- Create growth in the value of tourism,
- Create new and safeguard existing jobs in tourism,
- Benefit Small and Medium Enterprises (SME) by maximising investment and spreading business outside of the main Summer Season.

SWAP produces two English and bi lingual brochures and maintains a web site (www.outandaboutclub.com) in addition to other public relations campaigns. The campaign is a cost effective way for attractions small and large to reach larger market areas including overseas. At present, only Parc Bryn Bach is active in the campaign, but it is hoped that as our attractions increase and develop that the number of Blaenau Gwent attractions taking part in the Partnership will also increase. Likewise as the number of attractions increases, so will the profile of Blaenau Gwent. (*Action point 10*)

3.5 Wales

Wales Tourist Board in their Strategy 'Achieving our potential' set a hierarchy of tourist destinations targeting:

- a) Strategic Tourism Destinations – areas of national importance that will raise the profile of Wales as a tourist destination.
- b) Regional Tourism Destination Areas – areas within each region that will raise the regional profile.
- c) Special Tourism Destination Areas – areas that have the potential to develop to become attractive to niche markets such as Cycling, Walking, Golf, Industrial Heritage, etc.
- d) Rural Tourism Destination Areas – packaging accommodation and activity products to establish Wales as a prime rural destination for UK and Overseas markets.

Currently, Blaenau Gwent does not lie within a Tourism Growth Area (TGA) but an announcement is due shortly on the TGA for Herian that will probably extend from Swansea to Monmouthshire. There are also plans to extend the Brecon Beacons TGA southwards to include fringe authorities. Ironically Blaenau Gwent may soon be covered by two TGAs. The benefits from lying within a TGA include enhanced granting ratios and additional marketing opportunities.

Many of the market niches that are target areas for WTB are key areas for Blaenau Gwent, such as Outdoor Activities, Walking, Cycling and a greater involvement in these marketing activities is essential for the development of tourism in the area. (*Action point 5*)

3.6 Herian

Herian is a WTB initiative that covers Industrial South Wales. Originally set up to cover South East Wales it now extends from Carmarthen in the west to Monmouthshire in the east, from the heads of the valleys down to the coastal ports. Capital funding is available for projects that fit in with its priorities and it is essential that in addition to the audit of sites that a development programme of projects is drawn up to target this funding. (*Action point 17*)

- **Interpretation** of the regions cultural heritage with particular emphasis on the impact of the industrial revolution and the region's role in making Wales the first industrial nation.
- **Access** to industrial heritage assets and the surrounding countryside via trails and cycleways
- **Information** facilities at key industrial heritage and supporting sites.
- **Art and Sculpture** along trails and cycleways and within urban settlements and specific sites that involve local communities.
- **Educational and lifelong learning facilities** at heritage assets and other sites. which assist young people and adults gain a greater understanding of their cultural heritage.
- **Signposting, routeway marking and signage (including name plates/plaques)** along trails, cycleways and within urban settlements and specific sites that assists local people and visitors explore the cultural landscape.
- **Picnic areas and vantage points** together with associated car parking and toilet facilities.
- **Architectural creative floodlighting** of industrial heritage assets, prominent buildings and other sites.
- **Theatrical and 'animation' equipment and facilities** that enable performances and events to take place, at heritage sites, community and educational establishments, which tell the story of the cultural heritage of industrial South Wales.

4.0 **Key Issues**

4.1 **Market Analysis**

4.1.1 At present, there is no detailed analysis of the market for Blaenau Gwent, therefore, we have to rely on the statistics for South East Wales (S.E.W.)

- The area is still heavily reliant on visitors from the UK who make up 89% of the total.
- South East Wales receives nearly double (40%) the proportion of tourists from Wales (21%).
- The English regions are the most important to S.E.W. with 59% of domestic visits but the whole of Wales is more reliant on the market with 77% of visits. Key areas within the English regions are South East, South West, London, North West, West and East Midlands. The M4 and M5 corridors tend to drive these markets along their axes.
- Scotland and Northern Ireland are responsible for 2% of visits to S.E.W.
- S.E.W. has a greater share of the Overseas market than the rest of Wales. Other Europeans make up the largest proportion of the Overseas market (40.2%) with the Republic of Ireland, Germany and France being the most important countries.
- North America (17.4%), Australia & New Zealand (14.9%) and Africa (9.9%) are the largest incoming markets outside of Europe.

4.1.2 Market Segmentation

- Primary segments in the UK market are affluent early retired, affluent empty nesters and better off families. Secondary segments are pre-family professionals and risers. These are key WTB markets.
- However, primary segments in our key English regions are affluent early retired couples, affluent working empty nesters, younger professional couples and groups, younger better off families, older better off families, middle / lower income families, older less well-off couple and groups, business travellers, young rising singles/students. These are key CRT markets.

4.1.3 It is important to match target market segments with market niches or themes. The following scenarios are, therefore, the best way forward for our area.

- Business Tourism
 - affluent working empty nesters
 - younger professional couples and groups
 - business travellers
 - young rising singles/students
- Urban breaks
 - affluent working empty nesters
 - younger professional couples and groups young rising singles/students
 - Overseas
- Heritage breaks
 - affluent early retired couples
 - affluent working empty nesters,
 - younger professional couples and groups, younger better off families
 - older better off families
 - young rising singles/students
 - Overseas
- Luxury breaks
 - affluent early retired couples,
 - affluent working empty nesters,
 - younger professional couples and groups
 - younger better off families
 - older better off families
 - business travellers
 - young rising singles/students
- Activity breaks including walking, cycling, golf, outdoor active
 - -affluent early retired couples
 - affluent working empty nesters
 - younger professional couples and groups
 - younger better off families
 - middle / lower income families

- older less well-off couple and groups
- young rising singles/students

4.2 **Visitor Surveys**

It is essential to undertake visitor surveys of both the day and stay visitor markets to evaluate the benefit of existing marketing and identify shifts in future tourism trends. This can be best achieved through :

- Continued membership of STEAM .
- Close involvement with The Wales Tourism Research Partnership to identify best practise.
- Joint surveys with CRT members to be undertaken every 2 years
- Local survey including face to face surveys at Visitor Attractions and self completion surveys at accommodation providers and events.

(Action point 6 &7)

5.0 **DEVELOPMENT**

5.1 **Tourism Infrastructure**

5.1.1 Transport

a) Rail

At present, the nearest rail links are at the Valleys line station at Rhymney and West coast mainline at Abergavenny.

Valleys lines are essentially access to and from Cardiff but this links up with the Great Western line giving links eastward to London and westward to Swansea, Fishguard and the Republic of Ireland. Rhymney station has excellent bus links (Route 20) to Tredegar including Parc Bryn Bach.

Abergavenny Station links to the X3 service between Cardiff and Hereford via Pontypool and Cwmbran. However, a short walk into the bus station will enable visitors to access the X4 service between Hereford and Cardiff via Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Merthyr and Pontypridd.

The proposed passenger rail link to Ebbw Vale has been announced with the work on the 15 km. dual track and six stations is scheduled to start early 2004 with the service to be up and running during 2005. Two of the six stations will be located at Ebbw Vale and Llanhilleth. The service to Cardiff is due to commence in 2005 and to Newport by 2009. *(Action point 8)*

b) Air

Our nearest International Airports are Cardiff International, Birmingham and Bristol. Schedule flights link up the area with Europe and North America and many new economy operators offer a wide range of low cost options across Europe. All airports have limited public transport links, however, car hire is available at all three airports. Public transport limitations make it difficult to promote the area as a short break destination however low cost travel have

extended opportunities for family and friends living overseas or even distant areas of the UK.

c) Road

The M4, M5 and M50 combined with the A470 and A465 Heads of the Valley roads give excellent motorway links to the area from the South East, South West, Midlands and London. The current dualling works can only improve this access. However, there is always the fear that the upgrades will take traffic through the area rather than bringing them to the area. It is, therefore, essential that the area is promoted through appropriate tourism signage and interpretation at all opportunities.

Government support for public transport is maintaining the services to the area, the X4 service for example, between Hereford and Cardiff via Brynmawr, Ebbw Vale, Tredegar, Merthyr and Pontypridd along with the X15 and X16 services that link Brynmawr, Nantyglo, Blaina and Abertillery with Newport and Cardiff respectively give good value quick links from our major towns to the area. However, many of these routes only operate Monday to Saturday or have a limited service on Sundays making it very difficult for visitors without a car to have a weekend break in the area.

5.2 Accommodation

Our known existing stock and capacity is enclosed as Appendix 1. It is clear that a proportion of this stock has no wish to be involved with the tourism market. Once these businesses are removed from the equation we are left with a small but committed group of businesses with good quality premises. It is a priority to have these premises graded and fully active within the WTB marketing schemes. (*Action point 3*)

a) Hotels

At present there is only one WTB graded hotel with accommodation in the area (in Ebbw Vale), however, there are proposals at advanced stages for a hotel development at Parc Bryn Bach. We are fortunate that the hotel in question is of a high standard WTB graded 3 star and is actively working towards 4 star status.

b) Guesthouses

There are currently six Guest Houses operating in Blaenau Gwent, two in Tredegar, one in Ebbw Vale, one in Nantyglo, one in Blaina and one in Abertillery. Only one is graded to date but three of the remaining five are currently going through the grading process. Only one of the three is not reliant on tourism trade.

c) Public Houses and Restaurants with rooms

At present there are five businesses under this category but none are graded. Few see their facilities as tourism dependent and are reluctant to put in the necessary investment to develop their business along this route. However with statutory registration on the horizon there is a likelihood that they may be forced into improving their standards to stay in business.

d) Bunkhouses

There are two Bunkhouses in Blaenau Gwent, Hobo Backpackers and Parc Bryn Bach, both in Tredegar and both are graded 3 star. Between them they can lodge almost 50 guests and due to their proximity there is a potential to accommodate large groups and coach parties. Both premises are geared up to activity tourism with drying areas and secure cycle garaging.

d) Self catering

There is only one self catering unit in the area, located in Tredegar and is graded at 4 star. The cottage can sleep six and expansion of the business is currently being investigated.

e) Caravan and campsites

There is only one site in Blaenau Gwent at Tredegar, however, it has been established for many years. It is currently graded 2 star but facilities are due for refurbishment and expansion in 2004.

It is clear however that to realistically increase the impact of tourism in the area that the volume of accommodation needs to be increased across all accommodation sectors. Officers in the Leisure and Strategy and Regeneration Divisions are working with existing businesses and potential developers to increase both the quantity and quality of the bed stock in the area. (*Action point 9*)

5.3 Attractions

A variety of attractions exist in Blaenau Gwent, however, they are all free of charge at the point of entry and are mainly for the benefit of the local community. There is a need to develop new attractions that can bring in both day and stay visitors from out of the area. (*Action point 4 & 10*)

a) Parc Bryn Bach

The country park was constructed following a large land reclamation scheme in the 1970's and has been recognised as the second most popular country park in Wales for many years. As well as the caravan and campsite and bunkhouse accommodation the park is renowned for its wildlife habitats centred around the lake and the Countryside Centre housing tourist information, restaurant, exhibitions and gift shop. The park hosts many activities including walking, jogging, cycling, angling, windsurfing, model boating and flying, Quad biking and Newfoundland Dog training, several of which, in themselves, are a further attraction to visitors. The park is in the process of developing its cycling infrastructure with an internal cycle track completed and with mountain bike, disabled and BMX track due for construction. There are also plans to develop a golfing facility on site. The park continues to be the site for major events in Blaenau Gwent with an estimated capacity for 25,000 visitors including on site parking. (*Action point 14 & 18*)

b) Festival Park

Ebbw Vale hosted Garden Festival Wales in 1992. As well as reclaiming a site contaminated by mining and steel working, a fine legacy remains for residents and visitors to Blaenau Gwent. Some of the site has been developed for housing and business/industrial units however much of the site has been retained as a modern and innovative park. There are extensive mature woodlands with an owl sanctuary, wetlands, formal parkland, the large environmental sculpture of Mother Earth and many miles of paths and trails. The site is capped with Festival Shopping, a factory outlet retail park. The dual appeal of the attractions makes it the top visitor destination in Blaenau Gwent drawing visitors from across south and mid Wales and the Borders.

c) Heritage sites

There are a diverse range of heritage sites in Blaenau Gwent by nature, size and importance. The hillsides are scattered with over 500 sites dating back to prehistoric times. The medieval church at St Iltyd's contrasts with the fortified Ironmasters residence at Roundhouse Towers. There is the Georgian splendour of Bedwellty House and Park along with the recently restored Ironworks at Sirhowy. Smaller but no less important are the Cholera Cemetery set high above Tredegar or the industrial Brinore Tramroad. The recording, conservation and development of these sites are dealt with fully in the Blaenau Gwent Heritage Strategy.

d) Local museums and galleries

Many local museums have now been developed at Abertillery, Blaina, Brynmawr and Tredegar with small but enthusiastic groups of volunteers. Their size and operating hours vary but the interest they command within the community is growing. There are also several archive groups set up recording photographs and memories of past times. These will be of immense importance to genealogy tourists that are growing sector of the market.

e) The Great Outdoors

The geographical context of the area was laid out in the background information of the strategy and its importance can never be underestimated. Whatever the accommodation or attractions can offer it is the dramatic backdrop that our location gives is unequalled in the UK. It is something that we take for granted but is a dramatic contrast to other areas. For generations the visual image that the valleys conjured up was one of pitheads and coal tips. Massive land reclamations schemes now see the valleys green again and visitors go away with a totally different view of the area. It is essential that we make every effort to replace old preconceptions with new dramatic and vibrant images. This is being done in part through 'Heritage Breaks', the WTB area marketing campaign for the Valleys of South Wales and will be continued through the the Herian project (*Action points 5 & 17*)

5.4 Activities

Both the Government and Assembly sponsor campaigns for healthy living that encompass all aspects of our lifestyles. The move toward healthy eating is matched by the take up of health and fitness activities across all ages and social classes. Many of these activities have become leisure pursuits rather than chores and have also become a driver in holiday choice. Activity holidays are becoming an important segment of the market especially for short breaks. The developing of the areas as a centre for a diverse range of activities for all ages and to suit all pockets is a key marketing opportunity.

a) Golf

Golf is high on the agenda of both WTB and CRT Strategies due to the high value of the golfing tourist. WTB Campaign promotes golfing in Wales as 'Golf as it should be' contrasting it with 'stuffy golf' found elsewhere in the UK. CRT have developed the marketing campaign 'The Greens of Southern Wales' concentrating on the whole experience or 'apres tee' with golfing packages including course fees, accommodation and other off course activities. There is only one Course in Blaenau Gwent, however, it is the highest course in the UK and therefore is a desirable product to have in the portfolio. Proposal for further developments at this site are currently going through planning. Parc Bryn Bach has been identified as a site for further golfing developments that are being drawn up at the present time. With the added benefit of the low cost, quality accommodation in the area, Blaenau Gwent can offer low cost options to the market. (*Action point 5 & 18*)

b) Walking

Walking has always been an important aspect of the tourism market in the adjacent area of the Brecon Beacons. The turmoil that the Foot and Mouth outbreak caused to the tourism economy highlighted the importance and value of the Welsh countryside and the walking opportunities it offers. The proximity of Blaenau Gwent to the Beacons and The Black Mountains offers opportunities to our accommodation providers and contrasting opportunities to the visitor. Three major trails and numerous shorter ones commence in Blaenau Gwent and the introduction of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act will open up further areas of the countryside to visitors.

The importance of walking is highlighted in 'Best foot forward' the WTB strategy for walking tourism. Almost three quarters of UK holiday visitors and two thirds of overseas holiday visitors to Wales go walking at some point of their holiday. Over half of the day visits to Wales include walking and is estimated to bring £550 million into the economy. Walking visitors tend to be less seasonal and can boost the shoulder season and contribute to the development of sustainable tourism. (*Action point 5*)

c) Cycling

The popularity of cycling has rocketed in recent years. It transcends the enthusiast and is enjoyed by all ages, all abilities, can be tailored to suit all pockets and has become a family activity. The importance of cycling is highlighted in 'Moving up a gear' the WTB strategy for cycling tourism. Wales is recognised as a top destination in the world for mountain biking and a wealth of cycling trails and other facilities are being developed to enhance and compliment existing amenities. Cycling forms a major part of the 'Vision for the Future' for Parc Bryn Bach and the recently opened 'Y Tri Chwm' route covering the Sirhowy, Ebbw Fawr and Ebbw Fach valleys is the first recreational cycling route in the area. This along with other cycling routes that are part of the Blaenau Gwent Cycling Network are not only beneficial to our communities but will attract many visitors to the area. There are also proposals for a Heads of the Valley Cycleway that will give a continuous link between Abergavenny and Neath.

The potential for growth in the cycling market is recognised in the WTB cycling strategy 'Moving up a gear' where they estimate that it is currently worth £18 million and estimate that this value will rise to £34 million by 2007. Cycling is environmentally sustainable, there are a great variety of cycling opportunities for all abilities throughout Wales and encompasses our natural environment, culture and heritage. WTB have set three key product areas for development and promotion, Mountain Biking in Wales, Wales Cycle Breaks, Family Cycling and Cycle Touring. (*Action point 5 & 18*)

d) Outdoor activities

The importance of the natural environment has been highlighted several times already and the opportunities that it offers both in Blaenau Gwent and nearby are key to the Outdoor and Team building activities being developed at Parc Bryn Bach. The demand for adventure tourism is highlighted in Time for Action, the WTB adventure tourism strategy. Adventure tourists involve these activities as the main or secondary reason for the visit. Across Wales they account for 1.25 million visits and spend in the region of £180 million. They now account for 4% of the domestic market that is comparable to walking. Indicators point to continued growth in this market and the combination of fine natural resources, easy access to English market and the high value of an adventure tourist make it a key area for Blaenau Gwent to tap into. (*Action point 5 & 18*)

5.5 Service Industries

When visitors come into an area many of the people they meet are not our designated tourism businesses but may be the attendant at the petrol filling station or newsagents, they may be the barmaid or waiter. It is important to encompass a wide a range as possible of frontline employees to ensure that every visitor to the area receives a good welcome. This in some part is covered by the training section of the strategy, however, getting the employers to recognise the importance of good customer relations and employee training is essential and much of this can be delivered through the welcome host scheme that delivers training for all front line staff and managers.

5.6 The wider community

Wales has a rich and diverse heritage and culture that is highlighted in part in the WTB Sense of Place tool kit. Many of the traditions that we take for granted are of prime interest to tourists. It is essential that we harness everything that our community has to offer to give visitors a taste of Wales and the flavour of the valleys. Attractions such as our museums are all run by small but enthusiastic groups of volunteers who not only provide an invaluable service to their community but also offer areas of interest to tourists. An area that is ripe for development is our musical heritage. An evening spent at a choir practice is a lasting memory for the visitor and the real flavour of Welsh culture and heritage. Many of our choirs already open their rehearsals to visitors all that is required is the organising and promotion of these sessions.

5.7 Training

There are many opportunities for tourism related training in Wales. The Welsh School of Hospitality, Tourism and Leisure Management is based at UWIC where they offer HNC, Degree and Masters courses in Tourism and Hospitality Management. There are also many other vocational courses organised by Wales Tourist Board, Tourism Training Forum for Wales and UWIC. It is essential that our Tourism Operators grasp every opportunity available to develop themselves and their employees in order to enhance their businesses and improve their service delivery. The tourism market gaining in competitiveness and to secure the retention of existing customers and encourage new visitors we must ensure that the product we deliver is of the highest quality.

UWIC, supported by CRT is facilitating demand led training across SE Wales in the SPICE (iii) project. The training is delivered through the development of tourism clusters and one of the first priorities following the establishing of a Tourism Forum in Blaenau Gwent will be to develop this training. (*Action point 12*)

6. SUMMARY

Blaenau Gwent is a small mosaic of the many features of Wales, however due to our size and diversity there is no dominant brand that makes us a destination. We therefore have to work in partnership with other groups and consortiums to maximise our tourism potential.

Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council has already demonstrated its commitment to tourism in securing a dedicated officer for tourism development and funding from Corus Regeneration package. The evaluation of our existing tourism product has commenced but this requires continual monitoring and updating.

An action plan has been produced that will develop all aspects of tourism and thereby increase the volume and economic benefit of tourism within the area. The plan will also provide strategic advice and guidance in developing opportunities for the development of tourism in Blaenau Gwent for both local government, private and community enterprises. It is important, however, that any development should be sustainable, environmentally, economically and culturally and in response to operator, customer and industry needs.

In addition to the development of the product, it is essential that all marketing avenues be explored to maximise the opportunities that exist. Every effort should be made to local tourism operators to engage in these activities. The effective monitoring of markets and marketing activity, collection of statistical evidence, and research activities that will analyse the effectiveness of the strategy is essential for the economic sustainability of tourism in the area.

Finally, in order to deliver the actions outlined in the strategy, the council will seek to identify appropriate funding and resources required to secure the delivery of the action plan. As tourism in Blaenau Gwent develops, further capacity and expertise from other areas will need to be harnessed to benefit the local economy e.g Coleg Gwent, Learning Campus on the Corus site. The shortfall in tourism training is already evident across the country and the drive to stimulate training in tourism related areas is essential.

7. ACTION PLAN

No.	Item	Description	Review	Responsibility
1	Tourism Strategy	Draft strategy for tourism development and marketing by June 2004.	Annually	Tourism Manager (TM)
2	Tourism Forum	Establish Tourism Forum for businesses, operators and community groups by Dec. 2004	Ongoing	TM, Local businesses, Community groups
3	Accommodation Database	Survey and record all accommodation providers within the area and maintain database by June 2004.	Annual	TM, Accommodation providers
4	Tourism Product Database	Survey and record all tourism product within the area and maintain database by June 2004.	Annual	TM, Local businesses, Community groups
5	Partnerships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continue to develop existing and develop new partnerships. Include Blaenau Gwent product in three WTB niche marketing campaigns for the 2005 campaigns. 	Ongoing	TM, Local authorities, Welsh Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies, Non-Governmental Organisations, Local businesses, Community groups.
6	STEAM	<p>Establish membership of and continued involvement in STEAM as a method for measuring local tourism statistics.</p> <p>STEAM will be used to measure the improvements in Action points 9-12 & 16 by aiming to increase tourism revenue, tourist days, tourist numbers tourism supported employment by 3% annually.</p>	Biannually	TM, Local businesses,
7	Visitor Surveys	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued involvement in national and regional surveys. Undertake and evaluate local visitor surveys at Events, Attractions and Accommodation providers during 2004. 	Annual	TM, Local businesses
8	Transport	Support local and national transport initiatives that affect Blaenau Gwent including the passenger rail link and cycle networks.	Ongoing	TM
9	Accommodation	Support and develop, existing and new accommodation providers to improve quality and increase capacity and occupancy levels.	Ongoing	TM, Local businesses
10	Attractions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Support and develop, existing visitor attractions to improve quality and sustainability. 	Ongoing	TM, Local businesses, Community groups.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and develop new attractions enhance diversity and provide additional places to visit and things to do. • To encourage attractions to become members of SWAP- target of one new Blaenau Gwent attraction per year for the next three years. 		
11	Conference Venues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Support and develop, existing venues to improve quality and sustainability. • Support and develop new venues that enhance diversity of sites within Blaenau Gwent • To encourage venues to become involved in the Newport and South East Wales Conference guide - target of five venues this year and one new Blaenau Gwent venue per year for the next three years. 	Ongoing	TM, Local businesses
12	Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey and record all community groups and initiatives within the area that will be of interest to tourist and maintain database by Dec. 2004. • Encourage community to engage with tourism market. 	Annual	TM, Community groups
13	Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Encourage tourism operators to engage in training opportunities. • Develop training programme in conjunction with local tourism operators and UWIC by Dec. 2004. 	Annual	TM, Local businesses, Community groups
14	Signage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write Strategy for tourism signage in Blaenau Gwent by Dec. 2005. • Investigate funding avenues and implement strategy 	April 2009	TM
15	Web sites	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain Blaenau Gwent input on WTB's DMS and CRT's CMS • Develop and maintain tourism aspect of Blaenau Gwent web site by April 2005. 	Ongoing Ongoing	TM, Welsh Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies,
16	Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Survey and record all Events within the area that will be of interest to tourists and maintain database by Oct.2004. • Encourage and support the development of key regional / 	Ongoing	TM, Local businesses, Community groups

		<p>national events.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Produce 'Whats on Guide' in 2004. 		
17	Herian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Undertake an audit of heritage sites by July 2004. • Draw up a development programme of projects to maximise funding opportunities by Jan. 2005. 	Annual	TM, Heritage Officer
18	Parc Bryn Bach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To develop the park in line with the strategic document 'The Vision for the Future' 	Ongoing	TM, Manager PBB, Divisional manager

8. APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Business	Number	No. Rooms/units	Capacity	Graded
Hotels	3	31	58	1x3*
Guest Houses	6	27	61	1x2*, 3 awaiting grading
Pub/Restaurant with rooms	5	26	53	
Bunkhouses	2	10	48	2x3*
Self Catering	1	1	6	4*
Caravan and Camp sites	1	32	32	2*
Total	18	102	258	