

# The Welsh Heartlands

A strategic and integrated planning approach  
to the sustainable economic renewal of Mid  
and West Wales



A joint proposal by:

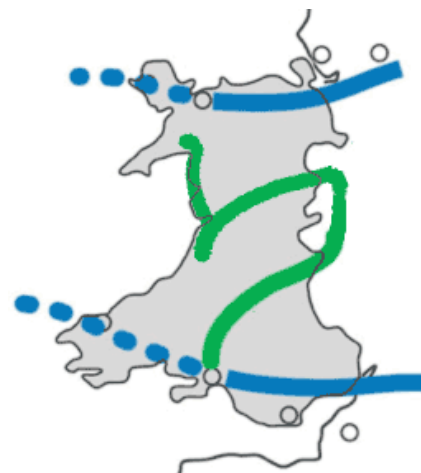
The Calon Cymru Network CIC (CCN)  
The Heart of Wales Line Development Co Ltd (Devco)

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# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. The Need

The rural region of Mid and West Wales lacks a viable, diverse and durable economy with a working population to power it, it needs an economy that does not depend upon agricultural subsidies, tourism and public sector employment. This is a serious problem for Wales now but as accelerating climate change begins to affect our food, water and energy security it will become a national emergency. The rural heartlands of Mid and West Wales need a new (or old) economic foundation - genuinely sustainable horticulture and forestry, in order to prepare for future shocks. It's also in urgent need of affordable housing and working space, and improved connectivity.



## 1.2. Strategic planning for Wales

So it's timely that the Planning (Wales) Act 2015 has introduced the important change to a three-tier planning system. These tiers are the National Development Framework (NDF) to determine matters of National significance, Strategic Development Plans (SDPs) to deal with development of importance to more than a single Local Authority, and Local Development Plans (LDPs) prepared by Local Authorities to handle local issues.

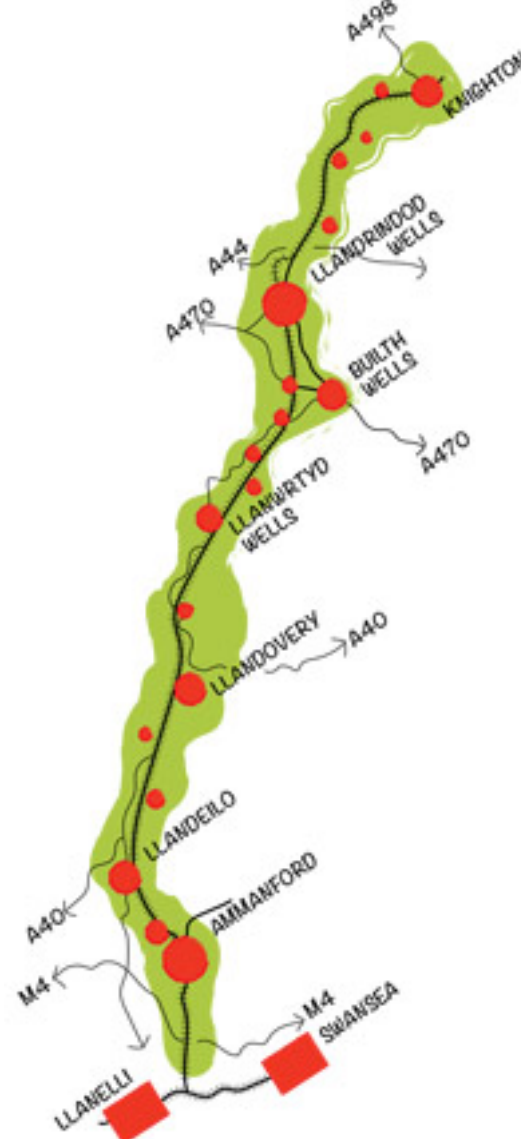
This change should avoid the current difficulties of policy fragmentation and introspective LDPs that struggle with the combination of falling and ageing populations, underused resources and sustainable, but fragile, infrastructures.

## 1.3. "The Welsh Heartlands"

The SDPs would relate to defined Strategic Development Areas, SDAs, and would enable carbon-neutral economic development conforming to the principles set out in Planning Policy Wales TAN6, to be carried out in cross-boundary corridors. The change also provides the opportunity to designate the whole of Mid and West Wales a single planning region, "The Welsh Heartlands" within which the railways, the Heart of Wales and Cambrian Lines, would form the transport basis of a development corridor network. [The railway services are under review in the renewal of the Rail Franchise, due to be implemented in October 2018.]

## 1.4. The Corridors

Managed by joint SDA Boards and with WG representation, the corridors of coordinated planning and sustainable development would benefit all the constituent Local Authorities and communities making a compelling case for the creation of a Welsh Heartlands Planning Region.



Detail of the Heart of Wales line

Affordable, low-impact development projects within these corridors would be carried out incrementally by local non-profit groups and communities in a manner which would be virtually self-financing – and they could begin straight away.

### **1.5. Why bother?**

In the past the Heartlands region may not have been considered a high development priority, by the Welsh Government, but times have changed.

The purpose of this proposal is not to revive Mid and West Wales simply because the region lacks people, but because in a challenging future this “green desert”, the heartland of the nation, will probably be expected to feed, water and supply power to most of Wales and perhaps beyond. This natural region is a vital national resource - it demands a much more productive future and a working local population to drive it.

### **1.6. Summary**

With the designation of SDAs and SDPs, the enabling planning policy framework is in place, the rail infrastructure is too, although it needs upgrading, and much of the land is under-utilised. The need and opportunity are self-evident. This bold initiative would be transformational and of national importance. It offers these outcomes:

- **Productive, regenerative land-use, with extensive community-scale horticulture and forestry.**
- **A sound infrastructure for the regional economy.**
- **A successful and convenient railway. Connecting communities, carrying goods and with a more locally focused management**
- **A balanced, viable population with security for its future generations.**
- **The likely return of young Welsh-speakers from universities, urban employment etc.**
- **Diverse, stable and durable local economies.**
- **Affordable land, housing and workplaces.**
- **A national, mixed forest for climate-change mitigation as well as a resource for local industry and renewable energy.**
- **Sustainable economic development that is virtually self-financing in the long term.**

Wales leads the world with future-aware policies. This is an opportunity to set an inspirational example...a demonstration of how to make sustainable development work, a mainstream reality rather than a fringe activity.

### **1.7. Supportive policies**

The following Welsh policy documents are of relevance:

- The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2016.
- Environment (Wales) Act 2016.
- Planning Policy Wales, TAN6.
- Woodland and Forestry Policy.
- The Future of Land Management in Wales.
- The Brecon Beacons NPA Management Plan to 2020.
- The Inquiry into the Future of Agricultural and Rural Development Policies in Wales.

## 2. The Project and the Proposers

### 2.1. Who we are

The Calon Cymru Network CIC (CCN) and the Heart of Wales Line Development Co Ltd (DevCo) are not-for-profit companies operating mainly in West and Mid Wales. DevCo is a corporate member of CCN and CCN's administrative officer sits on the board of DevCo.

CCN started life in 2009 as a voluntary group of professionals and in 2013 it incorporated as a Community Interest Company. However it has worked in a mutually supportive way with the Heart of Wales Line Forum, and now Devco, since its beginning. Its work has been chiefly on planning studies and regeneration projects in the HoWL corridor, notably in Llandovery and Builth Road. Its members are drawn from a range of backgrounds including planning, economics, architecture, energy, food & nutrition and sustainable farming. CCN is a multi-disciplinary organisation and aims to co-operate with groups such as Growing Mid Wales, Wood Knowledge Wales, and the One Planet Council.

Currently it is completing a LEADER-funded feasibility study for permanently affordable low-impact homes to harmonise with new WG legislation, notably the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and the Environment (Wales) Act 2016. It is focused on sites in and near Llandovery, a small town which exemplifies the demographic, economic and cultural problems of rural mid-Wales. To implement the proposals in this study, CCN is proposing to expand from a mainly voluntary organisation into one that is able to partner others in order to commission specialist research and expertise, and to initiate development projects.

DevCo incorporates the Community Rail Partnership (CRP) known as the Heart of Wales Line Forum. It retains as members the local authorities along the route and is approved by Welsh Government as a recipient of grant funding. DevCo's key aim is to augment the facilities and rail services on the 120-mile railway, which in turn will assist economic development.

Using resources supplied by the Welsh Government and Arriva Trains Wales in 2016-17, DevCo is now established as an independent VAT registered company with offices at Llanelli, Llandovery and Llanwrtyd stations. It has a contract to deliver community rail projects for Arriva Trains Wales and Welsh Government and is discussing how it can deliver other services for the rail industry including Network Rail. Community-Rail 'hubs' are an important part of DevCo's work and It is already developing a number of hub buildings at railway stations, such as the one recently installed at Llandeilo, soon to be fully commissioned for the use of a local organic food company.

Core funding for the rail industry partnership work is expected to come from the winner of the 2018 rail franchise, but the development of the Company and its regeneration projects will require significant additional resources.

### 2.2. Our joint mission

The social, environmental and economic problems facing this region are touched upon briefly in the introduction above and one of the root causes, the unaffordability of land, is at least partly due to planning policies which have lagged behind the changes in British and Welsh society in the last few decades. Nowhere are these problems more evident than in the struggling rural communities of post-industrial Wales.

For many years rural West and Mid Wales have been in economic and social decline. The population of its many small rural communities is diminishing and its age profile is skewed to the elderly. There are few jobs, housing is often snapped up by affluent incomers, the cost of land for housing is prohibitive and the pressure on public services is unremitting. To make matters worse, agriculture is under financial strain while soil-loss and acidification are worsening. **To heal and revitalise the region and to enable it to achieve the aims of recent Welsh legislation, a viable economy, modern infrastructure and affordable living are essential. Young adults should be encouraged to remain, others attracted in, and emigrés welcomed back from the cities. This is the challenge facing the region, as is the case in many other rural areas.**

A greatly improved transport and economic infrastructure is urgently needed so we welcome the apparent shift in approach and why we hope to extend our dialogue with the Welsh Government, the Local Authorities, and the communities to help achieve the status of a regional planning area for Mid and West Wales and SDA designation for the railway corridor network within it.

But at present our joint focus is on the Heart of Wales Line corridor. The service specification for the 2018 rail franchise may provide some improvements but it seems unlikely that it will go far enough to make significantly better use of this major infrastructure resource.

The Heart of Wales Railway is a prime public transport spine through Mid and West Wales, with the potential for more services. CCN backs DevCo's efforts to improve services on the Heart of Wales line, and DevCo supports CCN's aims for the social and economic regeneration of the communities along the line. The region also includes the Shrewsbury to Aberystwyth line, and the potential for a reinstated Carmarthen to Aberystwyth line. Both Devco and CCN hope this comes about. The railway work proposed in this paper, while focused on the Heart of Wales line, will have considerable relevance to the other routes and to the future viability of other rural rail networks.

Our separate and shared tasks in the project are listed in the following section.

### **3. Our Tasks and Programme**

Working on the assumption that both revenue and capital funding can be made available from January 2018 we propose a two-stage project spread over three years.

#### **3.1. Stage 1: 2018 "Preparing the ground" CCN**

CCN is currently a voluntary group with a grant-funded administrator and its members are experienced professionals accustomed to running consultancy businesses. However to deliver our plans we will need to recruit more staff and secure premises, and this work will start as soon as funds are made available (see Appendix).

In Year 1 a lot of preparation will be required and our first task will be to design a comprehensive work plan for the 3-year project, 2018-20, which will be based on the recommendations set out in our forthcoming report focused on Llandoverly. We will commence the following preparatory work:

- The need is for a reformed planning system which will tackle the problems of unaffordable housing and the lack of rural employment, a creative regime which will

enable a viable, sustainable rural economy. We will liaise with Welsh Government and Local Authorities, to advance the progress of a strategic planning regime with its essential checks and balances, a system that will enable rural Mid and West Wales to make more productive use of land within and close to the transport corridors while protecting wilderness areas and biodiversity.

- The bilingual Community Development Officer will ensure that sensitivity to national cultural awareness and development is reflected in all aspects of the studies, proposals and dialogue.
- Analyse digital database of physical characteristics, heritage features, urban development and existing infrastructure etc. of the HoWL corridor.
- Prepare overlay mapping of current and potential land-use at macro and local scales.
- Work jointly on proposals to extend and improve the HoWL infrastructure; possible new railway halts, passing loops and multi-function station “hubs”. Cooperate at every stage on the planning of integrated foot and cycle paths, and the provision of fibre-optic cabling and electric vehicle charging points.
- Arrange for the formation of two Community Land Trusts with memberships drawn mainly from the local communities, one “umbrella/enabling” trust to cover the whole Heart of Wales Line corridor, the other focusing on the Llandovery / Cilycwm/ Llanwrda area.
- Prepare plans and secure consents etc. for the “proof of concept” development of 12 low-cost, highly energy-efficient homes for social housing at Dolau Fields, Llandovery.
- Design a scheme to support the aspirations of the Almshouse Charity of Letitia Cornwallis in Llanwrda. The scheme would include the development of a group of low-cost, energy-generating cottages on the former school site, an adjacent community orchard and allotments, and the restoration of historic Cornwallis House to provide small-scale business premises and community facilities. Study the potential for further measures in housing and integrated food-growing to boost the viability of the village.
- Devise a range of projects and programmes that will support new horticultural enterprises and stimulate the production of fruit and vegetables in the Llandovery / Llanwrda area, to give an early boost to local employment and promote more self-sufficiency in fresh local food.
- Submit proposals to Carmarthenshire County Council for the development of low-impact housing and land-based enterprises on council-owned land near Llandovery, and for ownership to be transferred to selected Community Land Trusts and Co-operatives. Provide preliminary advice and technical support.
- Maintain a continuous programme of discussion with local landowners and mapping further potential land for acquisition. Carry out the preliminary planning and development studies with and for the relevant CLTs.





photo by Colin Baglow

### **3.2. Stage 1: 2018 “Installing the Footings”** DevCo

DevCo is already quite well established but needs to move from being dependent on part-time self-employed staff by establishing a team of paid staff. It also needs to extend the “hub” concept and to achieve a step change in the way the route is operated.

At the time of writing the future of rail services in Wales is uncertain because the outcome of the 2018 refranchising process has yet to be determined. The outcome will be influenced by a mix of factors such as commercial risk, public finances, the attitude of Welsh Government and Transport for Wales, (the ‘arms length’ body set up to procure the franchise and to deal with other issues like rolling stock provision). The views of UK Government and the Department for Transport will also be important. Transport is not a fully devolved matter and some rail routes (ours included) serve England as well as Wales and will therefore remain subject to London based decision-making even if rail is subsequently devolved.

We believe that there is scope to devise a more locally focused method of service provision, fully integrated with other modes of transport and able to spot, create and exploit local opportunities.

This is not an academic matter. Lines like ours are subject to nationally negotiated terms and conditions for e.g. staff pay and service operating standards. Rolling stock policy is also likely to be seen by operators in the context of the wider timetable and stock utilisation picture. A service provided in this way is less likely to meet local needs and will cost more and yield less.

Such an approach requires imaginative- and ground breaking work that will challenge the well-established status quo. When successful it will enable the Heart of Wales Line, combined with the Calon Cymru Network to boost the economy and society of the Welsh Heartlands.

We have much to learn, and perhaps copy, from other initiatives such as the reinstatement of the Welsh Highland Railway, the Borders Railway in Scotland and experience in many European and countries. Our proposed research will cover this, and more.

Our main activities in 2018 will need to be:

- Restructuring and strengthening Development Company staffing, and a campaign to increase DevCo membership
- Extension of the hub network so that it covers Knighton\*, Llandrindod Wells\*, Llanwrtyd, Llandovery, Llandeilo, Pantyffynnon\* and Llanelli (\* denotes new hubs). Craven Arms will also be examined as a suitable site although it is in England
- Recruitment of a part time local rail-community hub manager / social enterprise animateur for each hub
- Working to develop sources of income generation that will help create local jobs and to make DevCo more self-sustaining. This will initially focus on the rail sector (including Network Rail) but will extend into the wider community including fitness, leisure, tourism and transport coordination. There will be some important collaborative work with CCN on the use of locally grown food.
- Development of a strategy to enhance connectivity by bringing about proper modal integration between rail, bus (Community transport, Traws Cymru, Bwcabus and normal service bus), taxi, cycling and walking.
- Commissioning a study into the provision of an improved more locally focused service on the route. This will be based on the AeCom study commissioned by us and WG a few years ago. It will build on the service specification to be provided by the successful franchise bidder, which will probably be known by April 2018. Ways of delivering the rail service in a more cost effective way than at present will be sought.
- Work to develop an internationally attractive rail tourism product, initially on the Heart of Wales line and later on elsewhere on the Wales and Borders network.

### **3.3. Stage 2: 2019 and 2020 “Growing the Project”** CCN / DevCo

Continue the implementation of the listed work streams, with six-monthly reviews to report on progress and propose any necessary changes. By December 2020 CCN plans to see:

- The “umbrella” Community Land Trust, and at least two more CLTs formed and operating.
- Two projects totalling 20 homes within a mile of railway stations nearing completion, with other housing + food-growing projects in the pipeline.
- At least one added-value food enterprise in operation with several market garden and family-scale growers and groups supplying local markets, together with composting and recycling businesses.
- A number of new local woodland and forestry businesses up and running, creating nurseries and producing construction components, biochar and other woodfuels, furniture and craft items etc.



By December 2020 DevCo plans to have delivered:

Improved connectivity by working with the new Operator and Development Partner (OPD) to implement the findings of post franchise research.

- A 10% increase in tourism travel on the Heart of Wales railway.
- A range of innovative public transport-based holiday initiatives.
- Activity-based packages based on the use of the Heart of Wales Line Walking Trail.
- Significant earnings to enable DevCo not to be totally grant dependent.

#### **4. Resources Needed [See Appendix for detailed breakdown]**