

Wales Spatial Plan Swansea Bay: The Waterfront & Western Valleys

AREA VISION AND OVERVIEW

The vision for Swansea Bay – Waterfront and Western Valleys Spatial Plan area is:

A network of interdependent settlements with Swansea at its heart which pull together effectively as a city-region with a modern, competitive, knowledge based economy designed to deliver a high quality of life, a sustainable environment, a vibrant waterfront and excellent national and international connections.

The area as a whole will only succeed if Swansea and the other settlements in the area pull together for mutual benefit. This means the whole of the area needs to be seen as a city-region, harnessing the strengths of all of the settlements. The area has some key advantages – it has a city on the doorstep of an outstanding waterfront against the backdrop of the Welsh valleys with one of the foremost UK research led Universities in its area.

The further development of a sustainable knowledge-based economy lies at the heart of the plan for the region. Through creation of high added-value jobs, the benefits flow to the whole economy, creating new opportunities for all wishing to enter the workforce throughout the region. Critical to this agenda is the creation of a vertically integrated education/skills strategy. The goal being to constantly improve the skills profile, giving new and existing workers the opportunity to develop, update and refresh their skills, creating a highly skilled region. Higher Education, Further Education and schools must work together to deliver this agenda.

The challenge now is to take action that enables Swansea and the whole of the city-region to be recognised across the UK and Europe as a premier place to live and work in a modern sustainable way that spreads benefits throughout the area. As part of this the area needs to become recognised as a leader in dealing creatively with the issues posed by climate change.

The critical factor will be to develop a strong network of urban centres across the region which spread prosperity to surrounding smaller settlements. As a city-region Swansea must flourish at its heart but the city can not do this without the rest of the region fully functioning.

The first step will be to regenerate the city and town centres across the region and offer residents a full range of services and amenities in a pleasant environment. Good retail, housing and leisure facilities will encourage growth in the settlements and improve their attractiveness in a way that enables prosperity to spread out to the valleys and rural communities.

Draft as at 15 November

This will be complemented by the regeneration of the coastal zone which will create a thriving retail, leisure and business offer along the waterfront within a sustainable environment, with full regard to conservation and enhancement of biodiversity.

To capitalise on this development it is vital that the urban settlements and the waterfront are well connected by a range of sustainable transport options so people can move easily between where they live and key services and facilities. Most key settlements will also act as transport hubs for their hinterlands. Meanwhile the region as a whole needs to improve its international accessibility to attract investment to the region.

Regeneration and infrastructure play a large part in realising this Vision but there are also many social factors which need to be addressed. Relevant agencies need to focus on raising skill levels and helping people in to work in urban centres and smaller valleys communities through a joined-up approach so that everyone can have the opportunity to share the prosperity.

Access to services which support a vibrant population is also a key factor and development of health, social care and support services that are able to deal with different needs will remain a priority. With a changing demography, notably an ageing population, and new residents attracted by local economic developments, health and related services will need to be flexible and provide services and facilities of the highest standards possible. There will be a focus on prevention and interventions in care, alongside delivering services that deal with illness and treatment when this arises

The development of health services cannot take place in isolation from other issues, with clear links to education, leisure, environment, housing and economic inactivity. In particular, transport plans will need to be able to support proposals to improve access to services, both specialist and general.

The Vision recognises that Carmarthen plays a pivotal role in linking the area to the Pembrokeshire and Central Wales Spatial Plan areas. There are also links to Central Wales via Llandeilo and Ystradgynlais. Links to South-East Wales are important to help build a stronger momentum for growth across South Wales as a whole.

The aim of the Wales Spatial Plan is to bring together key players from each sector within the region to work in partnership to address these priority areas for development and bring 'Swansea Bay: The Waterfront and Western Valleys' towards a sustainable and successful city-region by the second quarter of the 21st Century.

CRITICAL ISSUES AND INTERVENTIONS

Representatives of key sectors have been collaborating through the Wales Spatial Plan process to develop a set of interventions to address the areas which have been identified for development within the region.

Building Sustainable Communities

The renewal of city and town centres, and development of a stronger retail/leisure offer, is a starting point for the area, not only to create jobs but also to enable the area to attract and retain skilled workers and young people.

The Spatial Plan Group identified ten hub settlements within the area, each with a key role to play in making the city-region a success. City and town centre regeneration in these hubs is a priority. Another eleven settlements were identified as supporting communities with a strong role to play in the future development of the region.

Swansea is the area's only city. It needs to act as a dynamo, for the benefit of the area as a whole. To address this Swansea has adopted a regeneration framework which will be implemented over the next 15-20 years and will play a large part in the Spatial Plan process.

The other nine hubs are Carmarthen, Ammanford/Cross Hands, Llanelli, Gorseinon/Penllergaer, Pontardawe/Clydach, Maesteg, Neath, Port Talbot, and Porthcawl/Pyle each of which will develop a strategy for town centre regeneration if they have not already done so. Work continues to define the future roles of these towns, so that as far as possible they complement each other rather than compete.

A number of other smaller settlements with a wider spread across the region were identified as supporting communities. Many are dependent on the hubs for some key amenities. These communities are Burry Port/Pembrey, Dulais Valley, Glynneath/Resolven, Gowerton/Waunarwydd, Kidwelly/Trimsaran, Llandeilo, Penclawdd/Crofty, Pontarddulais, Upper Afan Valley, Upper Amman Valley, and Ystalyfera/Ystradgynlais, with their links to the Central Spatial Plan area.

City and town regeneration will build on best practice, with a coherent programme for a settlement running over a number of years, with strong community involvement, associated training and business support, using local people, produce and suppliers wherever possible.

If the hubs are successful, they will benefit the surrounding smaller settlements, rural and valley communities by offering access to jobs and amenities. The focus for these areas will be to create pleasant places to live with small-scale development of attractive and affordable housing.

Draft as at 15 November

From an early analysis, local authorities estimate that the scale of housing needed in South West Wales will exceed the level predicted in the WAG Household projection which anticipates an additional 43,300 houses being needed across South West Wales by 2021. (nb this figure relates to the SWW regional area and includes Pembrokeshire but excludes Bridgend and Powys).

The location of new housing will be a key influence on the pattern of development in the area. The emphasis will be on the hubs, while also seeking to revitalise and sustain smaller centres and valley communities.

The aim will be to create sustainable places through the co-location of housing, jobs, facilities/infrastructure leisure and access to key support services for these new housing developments and for the existing population. Housing should be attractive, affordable and sustainable. Improving the energy efficiency of the current and new-built housing stock is an important objective to reduce carbon emissions from domestic housing which is on a rising trend and is an area where the Assembly Government and local authorities need to work together. Major developments of new housing should be near public transport nodes, and here higher densities of housing should be favoured, to foster use of public transport and opportunities for combined heat and power schemes. The planning tests need to be applied carefully to applications for out-of-town developments, so that the viability of town centres is not undermined.

In health there are a number of plans under development which will transform care services. These include proposals for a single major hospital site for Swansea as well as larger provider organisations that can add stimulus to regenerating the area, including the proposed merger of Bro Morgannwg and Swansea NHS Trusts with an aim of teaching status linked to the University.

Sustainable Accessibility

Internal links

Current car usage trends point to increasing congestion within the area if action is not taken. The overall priority is making better use of the area's existing transport infrastructure, to deliver more efficient and sustainable transport. A range of attractive public transport options are critical to the creation of an effective network within the region and the key settlements must act as transport hubs for smaller surrounding settlements.

In preparing the Regional Transport Plan the South West Wales Integrated Transport Consortium (SWWITCH) is using the following key principles as parameters:

- The emphasis on strengthening the area's hubs and supporting communities, both in terms of retail, town centres and housing, should create a framework within which SWWITCH can facilitate better public transport and reduce reliance on the private car;

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- Existing strategic employment sites must be better served by public transport, and new ones need to be in locations that will be well-served by public transport;
- Health care, education and leisure services need to be easily accessible by public transport from both the key settlements and more remote Valley communities.
- Innovative public transport services and car sharing need to offer improved opportunities for concentrations of economically inactive people, both in the main settlements and in the smaller settlements and more remote Valley communities, to gain access to jobs;
- Safer routes for walking and cycling need to be developed and promoted.

External links

The area needs to improve its accessibility to London, and internationally, to help it attract investment, and appeal to and retain a professional workforce on the scale necessary to function as a successful city-region. This is especially true for the knowledge economy and high value-added services, for links to contacts in international science, finance and business.

Action to make the area more accessible by road and rail to Cardiff, Bristol and London, and to the international economy is therefore important to achieving the vision. Substantial investment is already being committed to the new proposed M4 around Newport and the Port Talbot distributor road to alleviate congestion along the motorway. The impetus for rail will be on ensuring that the needs of the region are reflected in the forward investment plans of Network Rail, as agreed with the Department for Transport and Welsh Assembly Government. The Spatial Plan Group also supports the Welsh Assembly Government decision to commission a study to investigate short, medium and long-term options for improving rail links to London.

Links West with Ireland should also be maintained through the Cork-Swansea ferry service and the possibility of an enhanced role for the deep-water harbour at Port Talbot should be explored in partnership with the private sector.

ICT – A Digital Region

ICT can assist in overcoming challenges of geography and time by making services available at the desktop or on the move, around the clock. A prime example of this is the raft of e-Government initiatives being developed by national and local government that are making public services more accessible.

The region is making good progress towards making availability of broadband ubiquitous. Provision of free broadband access in public buildings e.g. libraries, negates the need to invest in expensive equipment at home, making the Internet available to all.

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The problems of climate change are being targeted through increased home working/ flexible working and the development of solutions that will further reduce the need to travel to work.

However, accessibility depends not only upon infrastructure, its availability and uptake, but also the scope, maturity and integration of applications which are using it. The next challenge will be to continue increasing its uptake, along with development of skills for its use and adoption of applications for its exploitation.

The penetration of IT into all sectors of the economy has made ICT skills themselves of crucial importance. Even basic ICT skills are becoming a pre-requisite for most jobs and the emergence of the Knowledge Economy is making acquisition of higher level skills increasingly important. The Regional Knowledge Economy Group has stressed in its work the importance of vertically-integrating such skills provision through the education sector.

Building on the accessibility agenda ICT is playing a significant role in skills delivery. This is already being achieved through mechanisms such as distance learning, use of technology in the classroom, and of course the educational power of knowledge made available via the Internet into the home, workplace and on the move.

ICT also plays a critical role in the Knowledge Economy, both as a tool and as a sector itself. Traditional sectors are seeing the opportunities of the online economy as we aim to move businesses across the region up the 'e-Commerce ladder'. Our region is also home to a number of emerging Knowledge Economy sectors including life science, automotive, aerospace and professional and financial services.

As a sector itself the region is home to a number of leading research and development centres and activity in both education and private sectors to build upon. These include the Blue-C life science supercomputer, the Institute of Advanced Telecommunications at Swansea University, expertise in Digital Media at Swansea Institute of Higher Education, and facilities such as the BT 21CN test bed at their Swansea centre.

ICT can play an important role in tackling economic activity through facilitating engagement with sections of the community and assisting in upskilling. Along with provision of new opportunities, ICT can also remove barriers to becoming economically active as part of a change of culture.

Technology also plays a key role in the healthcare environment. New technologies make it less necessary to require people to always travel to their nearest large hospital, but increasingly accessing these through local GP surgeries and pharmacies; assistive technology can be used to maintain and monitor people safely in their home environment; telehealth allows people to be assessed remotely without always travelling to specialist centres some

distance away; ICT is critical to improving the coordination of services, particularly across health and social care.

Promoting a Sustainable Economy

The region has a rich and diverse economic base. It is important to maintain and build upon strengths in sectors such as high added value manufacturing, financial and other professional services, agriculture and forestry, and the creative industries. Throughout these and emerging sectors such as life science, nanotechnology, ICT and low-carbon technologies, innovation is a key driver for growth and sustainability. Key to the future of the economy as a whole will be developing and exploiting the skills of the region so a strong higher and further education presence within the region will be marshalled to strategically support a developing knowledge-based economy. In addition to this sustainability will be promoted by making best use of local people, produce and suppliers. Public services themselves are amongst the largest employers in local communities and have a role to lead by example in best human resource practice and stimulating employment and growth.

Building a Knowledge Economy

The region has recognised the importance of the KE and worked in partnership on a range of initiatives for some years and in recent times the City and County of Swansea has led the coordination of the development of a KE Strategy. It is particularly encouraging that the neighbouring Spatial Plan region of Pembrokeshire is integrated as part of that KE partnership. Much has been achieved, for example, the Technium project was initiated in the region and has realised a distributed network of open innovation centres across the integrated region.

The region will build on early success to develop and implement a KE Strategy, that is integrated with skills and learning initiatives and those addressing the critical issue of economic inactivity. The KE Strategy will mesh with key Welsh Assembly Government policies such as the Science Policy for Wales, W:AVE, Wales for Innovation, Reaching Higher, the Beecham Review, and work within the innovation agenda described by UK Government and the European Union.

The Technium Steering Group, a private-sector led partnership involving HE, FE, local authorities and WAG will lead the development and delivery of KE Strategy. This modified steering structure will be charged with ensuring a coherent programme, minimising duplication and replication, and maximising the impact achieved using the resources available.

A number of fundamental issues are emerging from work already undertaken including:

- There is an urgent need to develop an Innovation Park Strategy. An Innovation Park would co-locate HE and FE skills and research initiatives with the role of a Science Park together with other knowledge-intensive activity, supported by a public and private sector

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KE infrastructure. The model preferred would include at least one major Innovation Park and a distributed network of smaller satellites based around the Technium network. This would differentiate the region from other competitors and give a unique proposition to inward investors and indigenous entrepreneurs alike.

- The need to build upon expertise already assembled in specific sectors, capitalising on significant earlier investment. These include Life Science, Digital Media, Creative Industries, Telecommunications, Nanotechnology, Energy, Environmental Science and Low Carbon Technologies.
- The need to recognise the KE is not the exclusive domain of science and technology. It is critical that other skills such as law; business; finance; marketing; communications; creative industries and management are seamlessly integrated into the KE strategy.
- **Building on the existing medical school and further developing the university links across all areas of health and social care delivery. This would facilitate attraction of high-calibre research, development of international reputation and achievement of excellence in health care delivery and research.**

Better Skills and Learning

The legacy of industrial change and social deprivation means that Swansea Bay Waterfront and Western Valleys have faced a big challenge over recent years. Considerable effort has been made to improve and change the infrastructure of the area from one dependant on heavy engineering, coal and steel production. In general the South West Region of Wales has fared well over recent years to attract new industry. The improvements to transport infrastructure and the gradual migration of industrial and commercial developments along the M4 corridor have especially affected the Swansea Bay Waterfront and Western Valleys spatial plan area.

Former industries tended to be labour intensive but the skills required were often low level and therefore those with low skills were easily able to find well paid employment. Consequently engagement in learning was not seen to be crucial to attaining a reasonable standard of living. The attraction of high value, higher skilled employment to the area is seen as an imperative and therefore it is necessary to change the attitudes and mindsets of the employee population to one where the gaining of skills is seen to be the norm.

Developing an integrated skills strategy is of critical importance to the regional agenda. High-level skills are a prerequisite for any Knowledge Economy and those skills must be created and sustained in the region. The Higher Education sector, led by Swansea University, must lead a strategic programme to develop high-level skills, specifically targeted to support priority sectors, but also to supply the generic business, legal and financial skills

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necessary for a sustainable knowledge and innovation based region. Higher Education must also work with Further Education and Schools to ensure that there is a pipeline of relevantly skilled individuals capable of supporting this critical agenda.

Economic inactivity rates remain high, especially in deprived areas and the communities furthest away from the M4 corridor. Specific action to reduce this inactivity is key to skills development and all relevant agencies are linking together to develop a strategy. In Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire, Swansea and Neath Port Talbot measures such as Jobcentre Plus's 'Want to Work', 'Pathways to Work' & 'Workways' schemes have been utilised to address the barriers that prevent individuals being available for employment. In the social inclusion agenda enabling people to engage in society as economically active individuals is a key initiative. The skills agenda is linking with the Economic Inactivity and Knowledge Economy projects to ensure consistency of approach. Addressing such a critical area would positively impact on the future health status of the Swansea Bay areas, leading to a healthier and more productive workforce in the future.

Effective action to raise levels of skills and education has to start pre-school. The Flying Start programme should be used to target areas of deprivation, to help all children have a decent start in life. The RAISE programme helps schools in deprived areas to lift attainment. The Basic Skills Strategy tackles poor literacy and numeracy at all ages. The Welsh Baccalaureate has a key role to play in helping equip youngsters with the skills they will need later in life, either in employment or as lifelong learners. Wider vocational opportunities, made available through the development of the 14-19 curriculum, coupled with the continued expansion of Modern Apprenticeships, will all help to raise education and skill levels long-term. Schools, colleges and training providers need to collaborate to provide the range of opportunities that are needed. To this end, the Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills (DCELLS) will develop integrated Local Learning Networks wherever practicable and facilitate collaboration between Providers of learning by supporting more Pathfinder studies.

A key priority is to ensure that the area has a sufficiently strong and innovative network of vocational skills providers, with the capacity to respond to demand from individuals and employers and to underpin the developing knowledge economy. As a result of a tendering process, new contracts concentrating on quality provision and relevance to skills needs have been issued to Work Based Learning providers. The DCELLS will work with Spatial Plan partners, the further and higher education providers and private and voluntary sector training organisations and Job Centre Plus to take this forward, through, for example, the development of a regional approach to the assessment and commissioning of skills provision within selected key sectors. It will also be important for Spatial Plan partners to work with employers in the area to ensure that they demonstrate support for raising the skills of all their workforce – for example through the Basic Skills Employer Pledge, and to develop closer working with Sector Skills Councils.

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The DCELLS has undertaken a major review of its National Learning and Skills Assessment and early indications are that the priority areas for South West Wales and consequently the Spatial Plan area are;

- To work with key stakeholders to provide viable and sustainable routes into employment for the economically inactive
- To provide targeted support for training in the social care sector
- Through collaboration and joint working, develop learning responses to meet individual and community needs identified in the Wales Spatial Plan and local regeneration strategies

These are in addition to the national priorities which include “To support the skills and training needs of the Built Environment”. Additionally DCELLS on behalf of partners has through its planning process worked to ascertain current supply patterns with local colleges which will be matched against identified demand to prevent duplication and ensure that the supply of more appropriately qualified leavers closely matches that demand.

Economic Inactivity

Despite the improving economy, many people, particularly in the more deprived and remote communities, remain economically inactive. Tackling this is a key challenge for the economy, social justice and health – unemployment is the enemy of well-being. Concerted action is being taken to give people who are economically inactive the chance to take part in the economy.

Within the framework of the Spatial Plan, key stakeholders are developing a collaborative strategic application for EU convergence funding. This bid aims to provide a strategic single gateway for all clients to be assessed and offered access to services (mainstream, existing & added value new convergence projects) taking a flexible approach that best fit their needs. The strategic gateway will ensure that employment-related services in the area, across the continuum of exclusion from work, are demand-led, client-centred and joined-up so that they work well for both the economically inactive/people seeking work and employers (private, public and voluntary sector) seeking staff. This application will build on current best practice models including the *Want2Work* pilots and other exemplars.

Links with action by the Department of Work and Pensions and Jobcentre Plus will also be important. Wherever possible, links will be made between such work to provide individuals with skills and support, with initiatives that generate employment including construction work linked to housing refurbishment under the Welsh Quality Housing Standard, town centre renewal, and waterfront projects. It will be important to ensure that the geographical pattern of provision caters for people in more remote communities as well as those in the larger towns.

Action to help people back to work, work with families under Flying Start, coupled with the work being done through a wide range of measures to tackle the deep-rooted patterns of ill-health in deprived communities in the area. Improving access to information on, and the development of facilities for,

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public transport, car sharing, walking and cycling will also help to reduce barriers facing economically inactive people.

Economic activity rates are low among some ethnic minority communities, and especially among females in some ethnic minority groups. In the interests of social cohesion it is important to develop culturally-sensitive tailored support for people in such communities to become economically active, and to improve their linguistic skills in English or Welsh, using EU funding.

Strategic infrastructure

Strategic Employment Sites will be key investment and employment locations in determining the future function and inter-relationships of settlements. They will need excellent public transport links so people, including those living in the more deprived areas, and more remote valley communities, can access them. The list of sites is under review but those currently identified are:

- Baglan Energy Park (Strategic Site)
- Coed Darcy (Strategic Mixed Use Site)
- Cross Hands Food Park (Sector Specific Strategic Site)
- Dafen/Llanelli Gate (Business/Employment Site)
- Fabian Way Gateway (Strategic Mixed Use Site)
- Felindre (Strategic Site)
- Llanelli Waterside (Strategic Mixed Use Site)
- SA1 Waterfront (Strategic Mixed Use Site)
- Swansea Vale (Strategic Mixed Use Site)

It is also important that investment in public utilities and ICT services are carefully prioritised to fit in with the pattern of settlements and employment sites emerging.

The Waterfront

Individual authorities will have their plans for regeneration in key settlements and surrounding communities but the collaborative priority for the Spatial Plan area is the big opportunity to regenerate the waterfront. A Waterfront Masterplan covers development based on land and water to create a vibrant and distinctive waterfront from Pembrey to Porthcawl without compromising the natural environment. It has been developed in partnership to bring together existing proposals and identify new opportunities and enhance the links between the Western Valley communities and the coast.

The Plan recommends that key interventions will include developing marinas and waterways to act as catalysts for growth, as well as maximising the coastal route for tourism growth creating a Swansea Bay Coastal Path, linking communities to the coast through sustainable transport options, waterfront regeneration to facilitate the growth of the Knowledge Economy within the Swansea Bay area both in terms of creating high quality employment sites and the environment and lifestyle to retain and attract skilled workers. The

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Masterplan also recognises the opportunities offered by the unique environmental assets within the zone, whilst also addressing the need to tackle challenges faced by climate change. Progress made by the Swansea Bay Partnership will be built on by widening the remit of the Group to reflect the whole of the Waterfront area and include regional partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors. Action will be linked to training and help for people who are economically inactive to get jobs, as well as to wider community involvement and maximise opportunities to improve the area's health through Waterfront activities. The Masterplan will support sub-regional working to improve the tourism offer including accommodation, catering, retail and strategic events.

Tourism

The area is exceptional in terms of its potential for tourism and leisure. The Gower is world-famous, but the area has other attractions that deserve to be no less widely recognised, including the wider coastline, the Black Mountain and Afan Forest. Tourism and leisure, allied to culture, have the potential to improve health and quality of life, raise economic activity, enhance regeneration and conservation and improve overall sustainable development across the wider region. Tourism has a particular role to play in providing jobs in the more remote Valleys communities, allied to outdoor activities and recreation. The area also needs to draw on its link with the Beacon Beacons National Park to help strengthen its image for tourism.

In the past five years there has been a significant increase in new hotel development particularly in Swansea. Tourism in the region also remains seasonal, with a clear peak in the third quarter of the year. The challenge is to take tourism up-market while also increasing off-peak business.

The Welsh Coastal Tourism Strategy will guide the sustainable progress along the Welsh coastline and actions will focus on maritime, activity based and environmental tourism as well as co-ordinating a strategic events programme allied to a Waterfront branding.

A Tourism Study has developed an action plan with a number of projects to improve the tourism, culture and leisure offer in the region which have direct links to the other priority areas for the Spatial Plan area, especially economic inactivity, skills, transport and the Waterfront Masterplan. Tourism has the potential to link outdoor activities in the Valleys with outdoor activities along the waterfront.

The study's strategic approach is to:

- create an all year destination;
- to concentrate on 'place making' creating attractive and distinctive urban and rural environments people will wish to visit;
- to develop centres of excellence for sport, recreation and activity holidays;

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- and to strengthen conservation and interpretation of culture and heritage in its own right while also providing a leisure and tourism resource.

Underpinning this approach is paying equal attention to the needs and opportunities presented by local people, and visitors and being aware of sustainability issues in all aspects of planning and management.

Valuing our environment

The natural environment underpins the success of the area. It is central to the quality of life of residents, visitors and employees and is vital in ensuring that we retain jobs, attract inward investment and diversify our local economy.

The area has a large number of significant environmental assets, many of which are designated as being of National and European importance such as the Special Areas of Conservation in Carmarthen Bay and the coal measure grasslands of Mynydd Mawr. Its landscape is also nationally recognised through such designations as the Brecon Beacons National Park, and the Gower Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It benefits from historic landscapes and parks, beautiful beaches, rolling sand dune systems, dramatic upland valleys, extensive woodlands, and vibrant waterways. The area is rich in industrial heritage, in prehistoric sites and archaeological features. The rural environment forms an important backdrop to the urban areas and tourism, recreation, forestry and farming play a significant role in the local economy.

The Swansea Bay: Waterfront and Western Valleys Area Spatial Plan Group has a key role in developing tailor-made local action under the Welsh Assembly Government's Environment Strategy for Wales. The group in consultation with key stakeholders have identified strategic intervention opportunities for the area summarised into the following key issues / priority areas:

- Reduce the areas carbon footprint.
- Ensure local communities are resilient to flood risk.
- Protect and enhance the biodiversity of the area and manage the risks of the disconnection and isolation of habitats arising from changes in land use and climate.
- Manage our important landscape and geological features sensitively.
- Provide a high quality built environment with easy and sustainable access to between employment centres, residential areas, local green space and the wider countryside.
- Align strategic infrastructure investment to our spatial development aspirations.
- Utilise natural resources more sustainably.
- Protect and enhance the quality of our rivers and bathing waters.
- Maximise the tourism and recreation opportunities provided by our high quality environment without causing it damage.

- Facilitate and support the forestry and agriculture sector to continue to become more sustainable, protecting valuable habitats, developing greater synergy with tourism and leisure, and developing local products that add to the area's appeal.
- Foster respect for the environment and empower local communities and businesses to become actively involved in positive actions towards achieving the area's vision for sustainability.

Respecting Distinctiveness

Each town and city needs to foster its own distinct sense of identity, building on its history and culture. The aim is to create a network of settlements with real character which complement each other and add strength to the attractiveness of the region as a whole. The area's distinctive quality of life will be a critical factor in enabling it to compete with city-regions that are closer to the UK's economic centres of gravity. Few other places offer a world class waterfront and valleys of outstanding beauty combined with modern, city living. Strengthening its distinctive character is therefore a priority.

Conserving and celebrating the area's heritage and development in terms of sites, buildings and people is one aspect of this. New development must add rather than subtract character. The quality of the design of buildings and public spaces in the area's city and town centres needs to be high, giving places wherever possible a distinct sense of identity, and fostering a sense of civic pride and community. Local authorities will work with the Design Commission for Wales to encourage best practice in creating distinctive, safe and sustainable development through the design. The same principles apply to the regeneration of the waterfront. A regional Partnership Approach will add value to marketing the choice and quality of life on offer to residents and visitors to the area as a whole

Welsh language and culture

Swansea Bay and the Western Valleys have much that is distinctive in cultural terms. Many of the communities in the area are traditional heartlands of the Welsh language. The area is rich in archaeology and history, and was an early cradle for the industrial revolution and Swansea also has a strong heritage in the arts. This is not only an integral part of what the area has to offer in terms of tourism and leisure but also offers a base on which to foster a bi-lingual cultural identity that is proud of its heritage, confident and outward-looking. The presence of minority ethnic communities in the area needs to be embraced for the positive part it can play in this vision. These are areas identified by the Spatial Plan Group for further consideration.