

Feasibility study of MTB trails in the Three Valleys, Bridgend

Prepared for Bridgend Borough Council by



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A submission by:

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Summary

Back on Track Mountain Bike Solutions were commissioned in January 2010 to test the feasibility and scope for mountain bike trail development and subsequently mountain bike tourism, in the three valleys of the Llynfi, Garw and Ogmore, (they will be referred to collectively as the Three Valleys through this study) in Bridgend County Borough Council.

Findings:

- There is a basic need for the provision of off road cycling facilities in the Three Valleys, to provide a leisure pastime for the many casual cyclists, young and old, in the study area
- Whilst mountain bike trails are a successful tourism driver, and well developed and designed trail centres can attract up to 200,000 visitors per year;
- A full blown trail centre within the Three Valleys is not a viable option at this time
- Smaller off-road cycling hub sites utilising existing supporting facilities provide the best opportunity for trail development within the Three Valleys, creating a modest tourism product, providing cycling facilities for the local population and supporting the wider South Wales Centre of Excellence
- The Ogmore and Garw valleys each have their own character and terrain that suits a different grade of mountain bike trail.
- The Llynfi Valley does not offer the same potential to develop mountain bike trails.
- The Llynfi Valley with the largest population will support a regional standard BMX facility.

Study Background

Mountain biking is a growing recreational activity in the UK, and Visit Wales estimates that mountain biking as a whole, is worth £23.4m to the Welsh economy. Bridgend is currently un-represented in this market, as no formal off-road cycling facilities exist. The wider South Wales area has a number of technically advanced mountain bike centres, which have expanded in recent years both in the product provided, and in visitor numbers. This concept

will be evaluated for the Three Valleys, which offer the potential to provide a mountain bike centre which is within 15 minutes of junction 36 of the M4.

This study sets out to identify the feasibility for providing such a facility, which could include off-road trails for family/beginner riders, as well as providing more challenging routes for experienced riders.

The main aim of the study is to determine the scope and feasibility of a mountain biking tourism product in the three valleys, and to establish its viability, if such a centre is not feasible alternative designs will be provided of the best methods and areas for development (if applicable). The brief sets out the original objectives and requirements for the study as follows:

Initial Three Valleys Brief:

Objective

The project aims to assess the potential for a tourism destination based on mountain biking (MTB) routes within, and connecting, the three Bridgend valleys.

It is proposed that the Consultant will look at the following issues for the study area of three Bridgend valleys (Llynfi, Ogmore and Garw):

- Suitability of terrain / terrain character for each valley;
- Accessibility by road / bike;
- How it could link with Afan Forest Park and
- Marketability and potential as a tourism product.

The Study Area

The Three Valleys have no formal off-road cycle centre; it is used by mountain bikers including the informal Garw Mountain Bike club, and predominantly by cyclists living in the area. There are a number of cross-country trails around the valleys as well as informal downhill tracks, which are not maintained and are only recognised as 'wild trails' by the Forestry Commission; that is to say, they tolerate their current informal usage levels but would not support an increase in their usage or any formal activity. In the past the area has

hosted mountain bike events; 'The Rat Run' was hosted in Blackmill in the Ogmore valley, and proved a popular and successful event. The areas relative proximity to population centres and major transport arteries suggests that it has good potential to increase cycling subject to the appropriate facilities, management and land owners consent.

The image below shows the location of the study area:



The Three Valleys Area of the Llynfi, Ogmore and Garw

Community Consultancy

During the course of the study meetings were held with the mountain bike sub group which further steered the course of the study, with the following stakeholders attending:

Andrew Lloyd-Hughes	Aled Singleton	Mark Harris	Wyn Davies
Karl Luxford	Rhianon Dafydd	Justin Griffiths	Sadie Sweeney
David Pugh	Gina Gavigan	John Pritchard	Alice Brown
Louvain Lake	Andy Mckay	Ian Whitcombe	Brent Davies
Graham Muschialli	Andrew Mason	Leigh Tuck	

Also there has been some consultancy with some key members of the community:

John Lusardi – Local cycling enthusiast representing the Ogmores Valley

John Pritchard – Local cycling enthusiast for the study area

Andrew Joseph – Local cycling enthusiast representing the Llynfi Valley

Colin Wakefield – Local Business owner of Rush cycles

Jason Vernon – Local Business owner of Bike it Cycle Shop

Mathew Pinches – Member of Garw Valley Mountain Bike Club

Karl Luxford – Country Ranger for the Garw Valley

Andy Mckay – Bad Bikes, Blackmill

Louvain Lake – Representative for Ogmores Valley CC

Further Background

Mountain Bike Trails and Forest Trail Centres

Mountain biking, and the creation of waymarked trail destinations supported by visitor centres, have been recognised by The Forestry Commission Wales as being extremely successful in driving visitor numbers, increasing new visitor spending and supporting local economic and business development. (*Forestry Commission Wales Strategic Plan for Mountain Biking 2005-2007*).

Across Wales, Scotland and more recently in England, trail centres featuring purpose built mountain bike trails and bike friendly facilities have been created. These are located almost exclusively on Forestry Commission land and take the form of a prescribed forest loop made up of purpose built singletrack trail and are for cyclists only.

There are two main forest trail centres in close proximity to the three valleys. The nearest trail centres being that of Afan forest and Glyncoirwg which together form the Afan Forest Park (35 minutes by car) and Cwmcarn (approx 50 minutes by car) drive each way. Data collected from the Afan Forest Park Trail counters for 2008 indicated that there were 72,168 visits to these locations throughout the year.

Trail centres have seen a huge growth in the number of users as the expertly designed trails cater specifically for mountain bikes and give riders a great riding experience. They have made what was a relatively inaccessible sport for the masses, accessible to almost anyone. Riders no longer have to be able to map read and deal with ever changing trail conditions. Modern trail centres have well built sustainable trails that challenge and excite riders in a relatively safe environment, and all they have to do is follow the arrows, plus a 15km trail centre ride can offer more fun and trail features than a 50km traditional hilltop ride ever could. Importantly, with sound construction techniques and materials it is possible to ride them year round. Currently both Afan Forest Park and Cwmcarn cater for the enthusiast or Sport rider and do not have provision for the beginner mountain biker. There is room for expansion in these markets.

Visitor Centres

While many riders when surveyed claim it is the quality of the trails and the great natural environment that draws them into an area, it is also plainly clear that the additional facilities that a bike focussed visitor centre can offer, enhances their experience, encourages them to stay longer, spend money and boosts the likelihood of them visiting in the first place. This is apparent when you compare some of the other existing Forestry Commission sites that do and do not have a visitor centre or supporting facilities, the visitor numbers are generally half those found at the facilities-focussed trail centres, if not lower whilst the trail itself may well be of similar quality.

For a rider to be able to get basic spares and servicing for their bike within easy reach of the trails, be able to get a coffee and warm food, wash their bike and get changed indoors are all important factors in the overall trail experience and, more importantly for a community, are all ways of generating revenue.

A successful centre will have provision for the following:

Car Parking: There needs to be sufficient car parking space available. Riders are generally happy to pay for parking that is of a good standard and secure. If a centre were to be used for a large annual event, there would need to be the capacity to provide additional temporary parking.

Bike Wash: Riding in the UK is for the most part a somewhat messy experience due to our often inclement weather; riders invest thousands of pounds in their bikes and like to look after them. A basic bike washing area, preferably with power washers, is considered an essential facility.

Information Point: The Visitor centre should also serve as the point at which riders can find out: the latest trail conditions and updates, view trail maps, book skills courses, get general advice on riding in the area and this should also be the point at which accidents on site are managed in partnership with the landowners.

Café: Perhaps the most successful bike cafe's are those found at Glentress and Glyncorrwg both of which were set up by bikers, for bikers. The formula is simple: Good quality, healthy food, real coffee, a relaxed 'rider-friendly' atmosphere, bike magazines, good photography

on the walls and bike videos of the area and other inspirational footage playing on screens, couple this with Wi-Fi internet access and you're onto a winner.

Bike Storage: Riders will not stop to use the cafe and après ride facilities if they do not feel their bikes are safe. Generally, at the end of a ride, bikes will be washed and put in/ on the car. However this can depend on the perceived security of the car park, closeness of the car park to the café and visibility. Cafe's can incorporate a balcony area where bike racks are installed which helps users feel at ease that their bike is close to hand and safe. Any other form of bike storage areas should be visible from the café.

Showers/ Changing/ Toilets: For years mountain bikers have been used to stripping off and changing into clothes to travel home in out in the open car park. Still muddy underneath this is not a nice prospect when facing an hour plus journey home. The biggest improvement suggested by respondents to the Wales Mountain Bike Survey 2002 was the provision of showers, and new visitor centres include them wherever possible.

Shop: A fully stocked bike shop is not essential, but at the most basic level, the ability to provide spares is essential. In the case of the three valleys there is 'Rush Cycles' and 'Bike It' both located near the bottom of all three valleys. This is close enough to the riding areas that riders can drive to collect spares in a short space of time, but it would be more beneficial if they, or a new enterprise, had a presence at the trail head, so any mechanicals can be dealt with there.

Camping/ Accommodation: As the trail network expands riders will be attracted from further away and there will be more call for accommodation. A basic camping facility should be found at or nearby the trailhead areas, with provision to expand to nearby areas for events camping. The local community should be encouraged to offer B&B.

The Evolution of Mountain Bike Facilities:

As mountain biking has continued to grow biking centres have evolved to bring mountain biking to more users. Traditionally most, if not all, mountain bike developments followed the trail centre formula, but more recently where trail centres are beginning to reach saturation point, land managers have restricted areas available/suitable for development or funding has been insufficient new models have been formed and successfully delivered. These are the main three:

A Trail Centre - As previously detailed, these sites would typically provide enough riding in one area to fulfil all riders' needs and helps contain and manage the use of mountain bikes in an area whilst providing economic benefit to often deprived towns or rural areas. They will have a designated car park and often facilities such as toilets, showers, cafe, bike shop, bike wash. To date the vast majority of these trail centres have been provided on forestry commission land and have trail loops of around 15km to 25km. The trails are expertly designed to provide an exciting and interesting ride in a safe environment. Project costs can vary from £200,000 to in excess of £1,000,000.

A Community Trail - These are short trails that serve a local community, no different in concept to a sports pitch or a playground facility. Well designed trails will attract people from surrounding communities and often further afield to the facility. These are often funded by community grants. Budgets for these shorter community trails can vary between £20,000 and £60,000 and give great value for money. They can be true mountain bike trails in forest and hillside terrain around communities or skills development loop and pump tracks located in the community itself. This is often a favoured approach by local authorities or where multiple land owners restrict larger trail development. These trails can often bring mountain biking to the people, utilising parks and smaller areas of recreation land in and around conurbations and help younger people utilise the trails that cannot travel to the big trail centres.

A Linked Set of Neighbouring Smaller Community Trails - Using the community trails format above but spread between nearby towns or villages these linked trails effectively create a much larger trail offer, but without the need for the visitor centre and central facilities - This is the way that many local authorities will head, as they don't own large forestry blocks but can link a number of smaller community trails that each individually offer 2-4km of technical riding with cycle paths or suitable PROW's. Lancashire is pioneering this approach at present both in Rossendale and in the West Pennines. In Rossendale they are utilising old quarries in their ownership to create shorter technical rides, linked by the local bridleway network. In this way they meet both the requirements of the shorter community trails that people can tackle in a shorter space of time(after work etc) and the longer rides offered at trail centre that provide a full day out for the rider and will draw in tourists for a day or possibly even a weekend on the bike. Importantly the spend in an area can be more widespread as people move between communities, as the reality of a trail centre is often that all the money goes to one or two businesses.

The case for Mountain bike trails

Many land agents and Government Bodies are realising the important economic and health benefits that mountain biking can bring to an area, when expertly designed facilities are created.

There are statistics available from various surveys to support the development of these purpose built bike trails:

Bike Ownership: CTC and the National Byway estimated that there were 23 million bikes in ownership in 1998, and this has grown exponentially year on year. The bicycle association estimated that 33% of households had at least one bike in 1995 and Mintel estimated one in three adults owned a bike. British cycling estimate that there are 2 million bikes sold each year.

Tourism Value: The well-publicised Coed-y-Brenin survey estimated that £40 is spent per overnight visitor. A study by The Peak National Park in 1996 estimated that on average cyclists spend £25 per cycling day, and indicated an expected growth in visit expenditure at 5% per year.

Health Benefits Regular cyclists enjoy a fitness level equal to that of a person ten years younger (National Forum for Coronary Heart Disease) and Cycling at least twenty miles a week reduces the risk of heart disease to less than half that for non-cyclists who take no other exercise (British Heart Foundation).

Mountain Bike User Groups and Graded Trails.

Mountain bike trails use a similar grading system to skiing, with colour coded blue, red and black routes to denote their difficulty. The several user groups within mountain biking tend to match up with particular grades of trails.

It is important for any project and design to have a firm grasp of which user groups they are aiming their product at and likewise which grade trails they will design. Similarly it is important to evaluate whether the terrain is suitable for the grade. The following categories are most often used to define and identify the target market for any given trail development:

A **Blue route** is aimed at novice mountain bikers, leisure riders and families who want to try out real off-road riding in a managed environment. With little off-road experience necessary to enjoy the trails, the routes have shallow gradients with a confidence building uniform width and smooth surface. These are however off-road mountain bike trails and are not suitable to everyone as they still require some basic bike handling skills and are not suitable for bikes other than mountain bikes.

Red routes are designed for experienced off road riders, usually sport and enthusiast users. The routes require more physical strength and technical skill often with steeper climbs and descents and technical trail features.

Black Routes are designed for expert mountain bikers; generally they feature many technical features along their length that require more advanced riding techniques to tame. Similarly Black trails will often pose a more physical challenge with greater distances or more strenuous climbs.

Typically the users of a **Blue** trail are family groups, young and/or beginner/novice mountain bikers or more experienced riders looking for a shorter ride or warm up trail. This is where the larger numbers of riders are found; they will typically be day visitors or will ride a bike trail as an activity on a holiday. With around 9 million recreational cyclists (5 million children) and 800,000 regular cycle users there is a large potential user group for blue graded trails. (Source: www.ctc.org.uk). It is important to note that just because a trail is deemed easier by grading does not mean that it should be any less fun to ride.

Users of a **Red** trail are regular mountain bikers with more skill and fitness. They will travel long distances to visit new or well reputed trails and often stay in an area to ride more than one day.

Users of a **Black** trail are generally keen and passionate mountain bikers who have built up a higher level of skill. These riders are always seeking the best and most challenging trails travelling long distances and often abroad. There are fewer user numbers here due to the higher skill level and experience required. It is this end of the trail spectrum that earns the Kudos for a trail development within the mountain bike industry and media.

The well documented successes of the current forest trail centres have not happened by chance. A lot of planning, design and subsequently money has been invested into these centres to create purpose built mountain bike only trails, which provide a fun, safe and exciting experience to the rider.

Facilities have been developed at all the major sites to both create a more pleasant enjoyable experience for the visitor and crucially to create revenue from the visitor as use of the trails is generally free of charge.

Transport Links

Both the Ogmore and the Llynfi valleys provide access from the North and the South whereas the Garw can only be accessed directly from the South. Visitors travelling by car from the surrounding valleys to the North of the Garw would have to access via either the Ogmore or the Llynfi valley. There are mini hub sites that could support trail development present in both the Ogmore and the Garw valleys. An existing focal point for the Llynfi valley is less obvious and a dedicated car park to support a trail offer would need to be created as most of the parking provision is currently located in the town centre at Measteg car park. The two suitable existing parking sites in the Garw valley are the Calon Lan car park and the disused Garw Fechan FC recreation site. In the Ogmore valley the two suitable sites would be the existing car park in Blackmill that serves the no 4 cycle trail and the car park for the Ogmore Life Centre. All of these car parks would support small sized trail developments.

All the areas are crucially within 20 minutes of the M4 Corridor, where tourists are likely to access the area from.

M4 Junction 36 Sarn to:

Blaengarw = 17mins

Blackmill = 7mins

Ogmore Vale Life Centre = 14 mins

Maesteg = 14 mins

To maximise the projects wider success, it would be necessary to plan for the development of public transport links. It is one thing to develop a network of mountain bike trails within 1 hour of a large conurbation, but it will not reach its total capability if many of those people who would love to ride them cannot access them due to poor public transport facilities.

It will be important to review regional public transport development plans to address these issues. The most effective method of doing this is to make alterations to buses to accommodate bikers. Bike racks can be provided on the back of buses or better still space can be allocated inside where users will feel much happier about the safety of their bikes.

For the product to be all inclusive, this issue should not be overlooked as it will allow the trails to be accessed by Bridgend's population.

Taken from the Department of Transport's website: 'With buses, this is a matter for local bus operators to consider. Since deregulation in 1985, the majority of bus services are provided on a commercial basis by private operators. Decisions such as where to run services, the frequency of those services, the timetables, the type of vehicle used and the level of fares charged are mainly a matter for the commercial judgement of the operator concerned. It would be for the operator of a bus service to decide whether they will allow the carriage of bicycles on their routes.'

Suitability and Terrain of Each Valley:

Llynfi Valley - The broader and shallower nature of the Llynfi Valley would lend itself to slightly easier trails. It has the largest population and much of the valley floor and some of the valley sides are taken up by buildings and roads hindering trail layouts. The valley does not have much tree cover which would leave trails here exposed to the elements of wind, rain and sun. Much of the land on the hillsides is reclaimed coal tip which is not suitable for trail construction as bench cut trails rely on stable soils and these spoil tips are too fragile to support a sustainable trail offering. There is considerable evidence of anti social and illegal use of off-road motorbikes and quad bikes which would be a concern regarding damage to any potential trails developed as the trails would be out in the open and hard to close off access.

Garw Valley - The Garw valley has great potential as a mountain bike destination, through the valley there are predominantly steep sides which would suit a technical trail development similar to those found in Cwmcarn and Afan Forest. The terrain is very favourable to mountain bikes with side slopes that suit bench cut trail construction and good ground shapes to work with that would provide an interesting and exciting trail. The hidden valley of the Garw Fechen country park, a disused forestry recreation site offers an excellent site for developing trails with good tree cover which would allow the trails to be used in most conditions, and has the potential to support a small scale trail centre development with shallower slopes to build Blue trails through to technical terrain and long distances available to create Red and Black trails. Similarly the Calon Lan park would provide a good hub for

expert trails at the head of the valley but the terrain here would make it more challenging to provide a beginner trail.

Ogmore valley - The Ogmore valley from Blackmill up to Nantymoel has a mixture of side slopes but is predominantly steep side sloped. The best access up onto the valley sides is that from Blackmill where the mouth of the valley is shallower and the slopes can be accessed without crossing the roads, this gains access to a reasonably large forestry block that could support short to medium length trail loops. There are a wide range of landowners and tenants in the valley that would need to be onboard with the project to allow development here.

Evaluating the suitability of the three valleys to be directly linked into one off-road trail system highlighted a number of potential problems:

- The gradients and more importantly the distances involved to link over the valleys and to stay within the required gradients recommendations would mean that Blue routes could not be constructed.
- While Red and Black routes would be feasible between valleys, much of the terrain lacks the forest cover of the neighbouring trail centres.
- The available forest blocks are almost exclusively in ownership or management of the Forestry Commission.
- The scale and scope of these trails linking between the valleys is really dependant on the ability and the resources to create trails in the Forest blocks (see following heading - consultation with the forestry commission).

Individually the Garw valley stands clear as the valley that offers the best terrain to develop trails and specifically the old FC recreation site of Garw Fechan Country Park or a smaller development in the Bleangarw community woodland.

The Llynfi valley is disjointed and presents problems when looking to create a MTB trail development with no focal point and many roads interrupting the valley sides. It does however have the best transport links and largest population. A regional size BMX track development has recently been approved planning permission in Caerau and this should be promoted and linked to the wider Three Valleys area by the joining of the community routes across the base of the valleys.

The Ogmore valley has two potential hub sites in Blackmill and at the Ogmore life centre however after evaluating the access to the terrain from the life centre it could only support an expert trail running through FC land. Blackmill however at the mouth of the valley would allow trails to rise up the gentler valley sides and create a Blue graded family route, this would be favourable here allowing the Garw valley to support a short expert trail. To create a trail of this nature would involve multiple land owners and management negotiations.

The most favourable areas with the best terrain and potential to develop a MTB specific trail offer are those with good tree cover and the very best sites in the study areas are generally on or run through FC land. Consultation and support from the FC was identified as a key component to the study.

Consultation with the Forestry Commission:

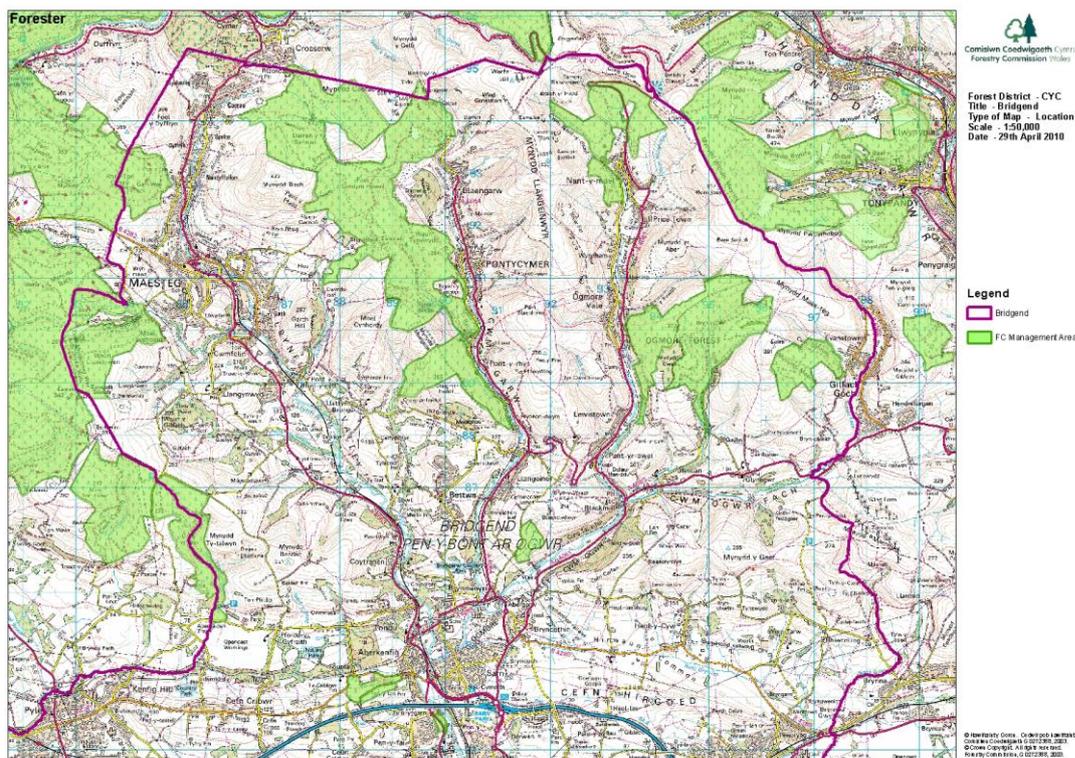
As one of the largest landowners in the three valleys, and one which holds perhaps the best potential land for trail development, the Forestry Commission's stance on trail development and their support is crucial, and was identified as having a large bearing on the outcome to the study.

Rowan Sorrell of Back on Track Mountain Bike Solutions Ltd undertook consultations with Dai Jones and Peter Cloke, Forest District Manager and Deputy Manager for Coed-Y-Cymoedd Forest District, and their finding is discussed below:.

The Forestry Commission are happy in principle to permit trail development within their Forest, however there are a number of caveats. F.C.W are approached by a number of Councils and organisations in relation to cycle trail development. FCW now have six existing Mountain Bike Centres which they will continue to resource and have a fixed position in relation to new development proposals:

1. Build costs, maintenance, inspection and responsibility for the trails must be undertaken by a third party.
2. New trails should not be designated as rights of way as this can conflict with forestry operations due to closure notices and statutory maintenance requirements. Trails would simply be open access.

3. As a 'good neighbour' any neighbouring landowners would need to be comfortable with the proposals too to avoid complications if cycling was to overspill from prescribed routes into other areas of ownership.
4. Use of existing forest roads or tracks to access through their land is permissible as long as it meets with their OGB 37 guidance
5. There should be a clear exit strategy for the project should the third party operation cease.



The image above shows the Forestry Commissions land ownership within the three valleys, marked in Green.

As a result of their stance it means that any new sizeable developments will be increasingly difficult to launch as previously FCW undertook a large proportion if not all of the responsibility for the trails on their land. It is clear that whilst FCW are happy to work with partners and facilitate trail development on their land any third party will have to ensure and prove they have the resources to manage and maintain these trails with an exit strategy that will more than likely include removal of the trail at the end of the contract term.

Current Policies and Strategies

Reviewing various strategic documents from The Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), Visit Wales and the Forestry Commission, it was evident that a mountain bike development in the Three Valleys would fall in line with many of the objectives and policies in these documents; these widely cover tourism, outdoor activity, physical recreation and rural development. Whilst some areas of the Three Valleys fall outside of the rural development plan, the whole area is well covered by the Forestry Commissions and Visit Wales' cycling strategies.

From an economic development perspective the plans for a cycle centre in the Three Valleys would help to support the rural economy and provide opportunities for diversification into tourism, which is an important sector both nationally and locally.

However when evaluating the potential for a 'trail centre' a poor strategic fit was found with the South East Wales Economic Forum's survey and report titled 'Off Road Cycling Centre of Excellence in South Wales'. A successful European bid has been completed off the back of this report for 5 million pounds, which involves a second phase of development of the existing F.C. mountain bike centres at Afan and Cwmcarn, adding more expert level trails and beginner or entry level routes. There are also plans to develop new a new trail centre in Gethin Woodland park, Merthyr Tydfil with supporting facilities, these *honey pot* locations will be marketed together to create an overall brand and firmly place South East Wales on the map as one of, if not 'the' best mountain bike area in the UK. The study regarding this strategy does not include the Three Valleys or indeed any sites in Bridgend, and as such it will not be possible to draw down any money from this large convergence bid to realise trail development in the study area.

Possibilities

At present there is no provision for off-road cycling in the Three Valleys for the population that live in the area or for any visitors. Creation of facilities can serve to meet national health objectives for the population residing in the area and help to encourage participation in a healthy and fun pastime whilst also creating a product that will draw in cycling tourists.

The proposed trails in the Three Valleys have the potential to create an off-road cycling product and promotion of general cycling and mountain biking in South Wales. There is a need to diversify the market appeal of the existing mountain bike centres by providing entry level and expert facilities. The location of the Three Valleys in Bridgend could sit well as a

supporting site to Afan and Cwmcarn as it is located between the two bike centres and could serve to provide a smaller scale entry level trail and an enthusiast offer.

Feasibility Issues

To create an off-road cycling centre of a sizeable nature – that is ‘a trail centre’ would put the area in direct competition with the centres in Afan and Cwmcarn which have been identified for further development in the centre of excellence study. This would be seen as a poor strategic fit and would raise displacement issues that would most likely lead to a lack of available funding streams. This is a large blow and with the well researched and structured plans now being put into place for South Wales the creation of a trail centre in the Three Valleys area is not viable.

A mountain bike trail centre development is not feasible at this time; the terrain offered in the Three Valleys does mean that this may be re-visited in the future if the mountain bike market continues to grow.

Tourism Potential

While assessing the tourism potential it was clear from early on in the study that whilst the product with the greatest impact and growth in tourist numbers is that of a full scale trail centre, with trail network and supporting facilities, this was not a viable product in the Three Valleys due to the close proximity of two existing centres and the plan to develop both these sites further and the creation of a new centre in Merthyr Tydfil as part of the Centre of Excellence project.

The catchment and accessibility of the Three valleys is good, and any well designed and implemented mountain product will no doubt benefit from the nearby existing mountain bike centres by providing an alternative ride or more likely an additional part of a weekend break for tourists. A smaller scale development can provide a complimentary venue to the centre of excellence plan rather than detract from it, and the Three Valleys area will gain extra visitors due to the draw of people into Afan from over the bridge.

A smaller scale development based around small hub sites that can provide the necessary supporting facilities from within the community is where the focus should lie in the short term,

this will provide recreation and leisure facilities both for the residual population and for tourists to come and enjoy off-road cycling. The Valleys each have their own specific terrain and character and as such will support a different type of trail. Longer term it will be easy to expand on the trail offer once established and proven. The study found that both the terrain and the best strategy for trail development pointed towards a Blue graded trail in the Ogmore valley and a Black graded trail in the Garw with both sites having a supporting pump track located at the car park.

Looking at the bigger picture, currently there is only one Blue graded trail in South Wales and this is one and a half hours away by car in Brechfa, there will be one trail built in Afan forest park as part of the new developments there but compared to the five red graded trails in the area they are considerably underrepresented. Similarly there is only one Black trail in Brechfa and there will be one new trail built in Afan so by creating a Blue and Black trail in the Three valleys will help to find a balance in the trail products in the wider picture and support the centre of excellence rather than detract from it, this should also help when marketing the trails.

Marketing

Ideally the trails in the Three Valleys will be marketed under one umbrella title or brand to stop any of them from being isolated and to improve the usage at all of the sites.

It would be wise to approach the chair of the South Wales Centre of Excellence project to look at incorporating into their branding as by providing trails in areas where the project is less strong should allow for a partnership where both parties gain from their ties.

Evaluation of Existing Tracks and Trails

Suggestions were put forward by the Mountain Bike project work group, that existing routes, tracks and trails could be utilised and formed into loops to create the mountain bike offer. It became a key component of the study to evaluate the suitability of these existing public rights of way and forest roads as potential mountain bike routes. The advantages of this were seen as having a large amount of terrain that could be accessed without the large expense of cutting new purpose built trails.

Findings:

- The three valleys have a poor coverage of Public Right of Way (PROW) and the existing bridleways that run from the valley bottoms up and out of the valleys are generally very steep and unsuitable.
- Whilst some sections of trail were found to be suitable they were few and far between and so disjointed so a trail could not be formed by these tracks alone.
- The inconsistent trail surfaces of these trails would mean that the trail grading would have to be black (the hardest grade) which mitigates some responsibility on the trail surface. Though the trails themselves are not technical or interesting enough to draw in the expert riders that ride these black graded trails.
- The Forestry Commission have undertaken a 2 year Health and Safety review relating to the management of mountain bike trails on their estate. Forest roads are a source where a large number of accidents occur and many of the routes put forwards used large portions of forest road. In fact a key driver in the forestry commission creating purpose built mountain bike trails was to increase recreation in the forest estate and to remove bikes from the potentially very dangerous haul roads. The exception to this only comes when travelling on flat ground with good sightlines or uphill where speeds are much lower.
- Similarly putting mountain bike trails onto Bridleways is not good practice, many of the bridleway sections are washed out and not sustainable to bikes, and the potential user conflict and risk of collisions with increased activity of bikes is too great on descends.
- Crucially, they would offer a very poor experience to the user in comparison to the purpose made centres found nearby which are designed especially for mountain bikes and are interesting and exciting to ride.
- Legally there are key phrases and issues which again I would argue support the case for creating sole use trails and limiting the risk and liabilities of the landowners, and this would certainly be best practice. Landowners and managers have a duty of care to their neighbour in this case this could be walkers, cyclists and horse riders. 'Foreseeability' is another key word used in the law courts, if it is foreseeable that increased usage on these trails could cause conflict and accidents and/or that the trails surfaces are not consistent and change with the seasons creating potential hazards then this would be viewed as a foreseeable event which would leave the landowners/managers open to claims.
- Essentially by way marking the forest tracks, trails and PROW the landowners would be 'raising the game' in terms of the usage and unless there was a very clear management structure of this - that is regular inspections and maintenance of the

trails and all potential conflict areas were designed out of the loops then they would be leaving themselves open to problems down the line.

- The expense and resources to carry out this effectively would easily meet or exceed the cost of building purpose built trails whilst the product and experience would be inferior.
- Discussions with the rights of way officers also seemed to support the findings; that is they did not have the resources to support increased usage and wear on the trails and they expressed serious concerns about user conflict on the trails.

Provision for cyclists living in the Study Area

Whilst conducting the study it became apparent that there is a total lack of off-road cycle facilities in the Three Valleys. Currently the nearest facility is that of the Afan Forest Park which enthusiast cyclists living in the study area are accessing both by bike and car. This still leaves the vast majority of younger cyclists I witnessed who do not have the interest or inclination to cycle such long distances, stuck playing with mountain bike and BMX bikes on the streets and building small dirt ramps on the side of the cycle path. Leisure provision at a basic level is needed to engage these bike owners, and to give them somewhere dedicated to ride their bikes and be safe whilst developing skills. With most children playing with their bikes on the street; creating safe and progressive skills development trails within the three valleys will cater for these users who currently have nowhere to ride. A project goal should be to deliver mountain bike skills areas, pump tracks and short loop trails in the three valleys that are accessed by the community cycle routes. They should be sizeable, credible and well designed so that they also offer a draw from surrounding areas as well as meeting the needs of the local population.

At present these small pump tracks and BMX tracks are not widespread in South Wales so the catchment can be quite sizeable. The nearest facilities are located in:

Barry Sidings Country Park, Trehafod, Rhondda Cynon Taff

Bryn Bach Park, Tredegar, Bleanau Gwent

Maindee Leisure Centre, Cardiff

Trail Developments and the Hub Sites

The terrain in Ogmore and Garw valleys offers potential for mountain bike development. The Llynfi Valley does not have the same potential with terrain less desirable to bikers and many constraints in place that would restrict or prevent the layout of trails (roads, coal tips, lack of tree cover).

The review of the existing tracks and trails found them not to be a suitable solution to the project.

The full scale - trail centre model is not a viable project due to the proximity to the existing trail centres in South Wales, the FC's stance on new trail development and the likelihood of obtaining the large pot of funding that would be required for this being very small due to displacement issues.

The study then focussed on delivering a scalable mountain bike and off-road facility that looked to address these main points:

- Easily accessible by the local residents by means of community cycle routes
- Provides an exciting and fun introduction to mountain biking.
- Based in locations where the local community can provide the supporting facilities to attract tourists.
- Looking at the wider picture of South Wales and providing for gaps in the current off-road offer.

The proposed development would focus the mountain bike offer in the Garw and the Ogmore valleys which offer the best terrain and would provide off-road pump tracks/skills development tracks in each of the three valleys. Pump tracks are trails built on level ground that develop the off-road skills for riders both on bmx and mountain bikes, they are very popular with young riders and older enthusiasts alike and require relatively little space and money to build.

The Llynfi valley has a site identified for a national standard BMX track in Caerau, and this will form the main offer in the valley with a potential second site at Groundwork's recreation site in the old ironworks in Tondu. An off-road/bmx track was constructed a few years ago there but a site visit revealed that it has been very poorly executed and is really in a dangerous and unkempt state. If Groundwork's show interest in the project and can be incorporated in the development works it would provide good coverage through the whole study area. I have conducted a site survey but Groundwork's have not been formally approached at this stage.

The Garw and Ogmere valleys would have hub sites where the pump trails would be located and the start and finish of the mountain bike loops would be located. The two hub sites identified are those of the cycle trail car park in Blackmill, and the Calon Lan car park in Bleangarw. Both have adequate car parking for developments of this size, offer the best access to suitable terrain to develop into mountain bike trails, have supporting facilities present in the surrounding community and land adjacent to the parking suitable to develop the pump trails.

The community owned woodland in Bleangarw would serve as the focal point for the descent of the trail, the woodland is managed by the community council and has steep and technical terrain suited to narrow bench cut trails. Having made an enquiry to the Forestry Commissions they have indicated that they would allow their land to serve as a climb and access to the community woodland. The terrain here would suit an expert black graded trail. The community council currently has two rangers who could undertake the routine maintenance and trail inspections. This puts this area in a great position to launch trail with everything in place to manage the facility once created. The lower loop would be a shorter red graded trail.

A BMX/MTB pump track would be located adjacent to the Calon Lan car park which will serve as a facility for the people in the valley and also as a skills development /warm up trail for visitors travelling to the valley.

Blackmill would serve as the hub site for the start of a blue graded beginner trail, the terrain is best suited for this development here and the cycle trail allows for riders to stay off the road for its entire length. The trail would be a newly constructed mountain bike specific trail to meet suitable gradients and surfacing requirements of the grading, this would make the trail more inclusive and lead to less management issues in the longer term. The side slope becomes quite steep as the trail traverses further down the valley and the trail will have to be over engineered to prevent a hazardous drop of the side of the trail, this will be addressed by keeping the speeds lower on these sections of side slope and by making the bench cut wider than the trail width itself. Demarcation will define the trail on the inner side of the bench cut.

Similarly to Bleangarw, Blackmill has potential nearby to the car park to locate a pump track / skills training trail in the Heritage field. Both this trail and the one in Bleangarw could be accessed from the whole of the valleys via the cycle routes.

Feasibility Issues:

Ogmore Blue Trail

If the bridleway is used for the Blue route climb it will need to be surfaced - there is a need to check with farmers whether they are needed for vehicle access as this could cause rutting and damage to the trail.

New trail runs across farmers land on the descending leg and also the bridleway climb - livestock could create a hazard both by causing trail damage but also potential collisions. Solutions to this need to be discussed with the landowner/farmer - possibly fencing off the trails, this would also help with gate management (people not closing stock gates behind them).

The preferred route would involve constructing trail on FC land, so an agreement and contract would have to be made with the Forestry to cover the new trail. If the relevant resources and consents are not available at this time a slightly shorter loop trail that runs through the fields and private woodland could be created with the potential to expand in the future.

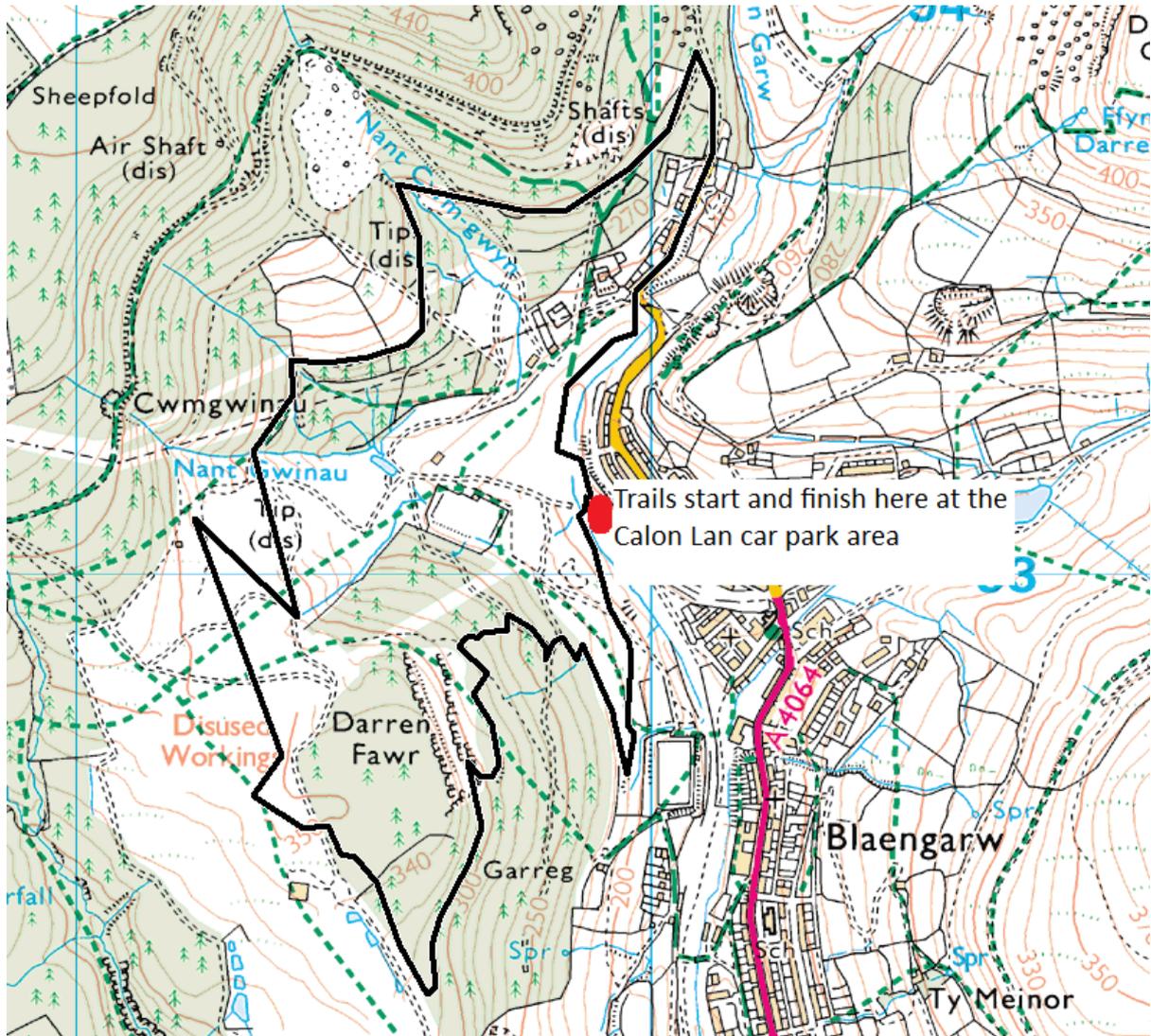
Garw Black Trail

Climb is through FC land; approximately 250m requires some re-cutting/drainage works.

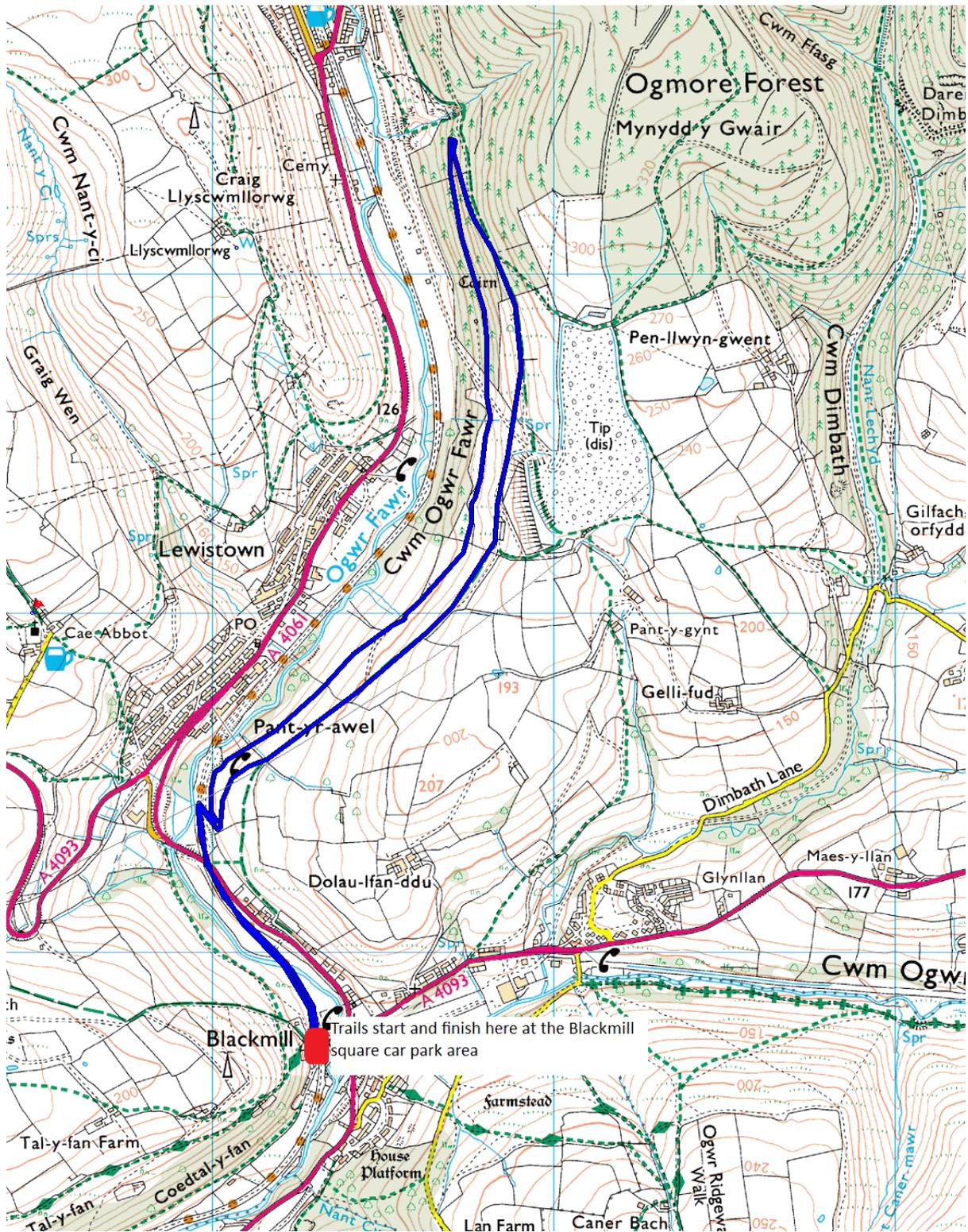
Climb then crosses coal tip, ground is of poor quality here. Need to check with coal authority whether a bench cut trail would be permitted on this made up ground. Trail would have to be surfaced due to poor materials.

There is evidence of heavy use by motorcross bikes, there will have to be a plan to combat and police this before creating a trail, as they could cause expensive damage to the trails ruining them before they are open to the public.

Trail Routes



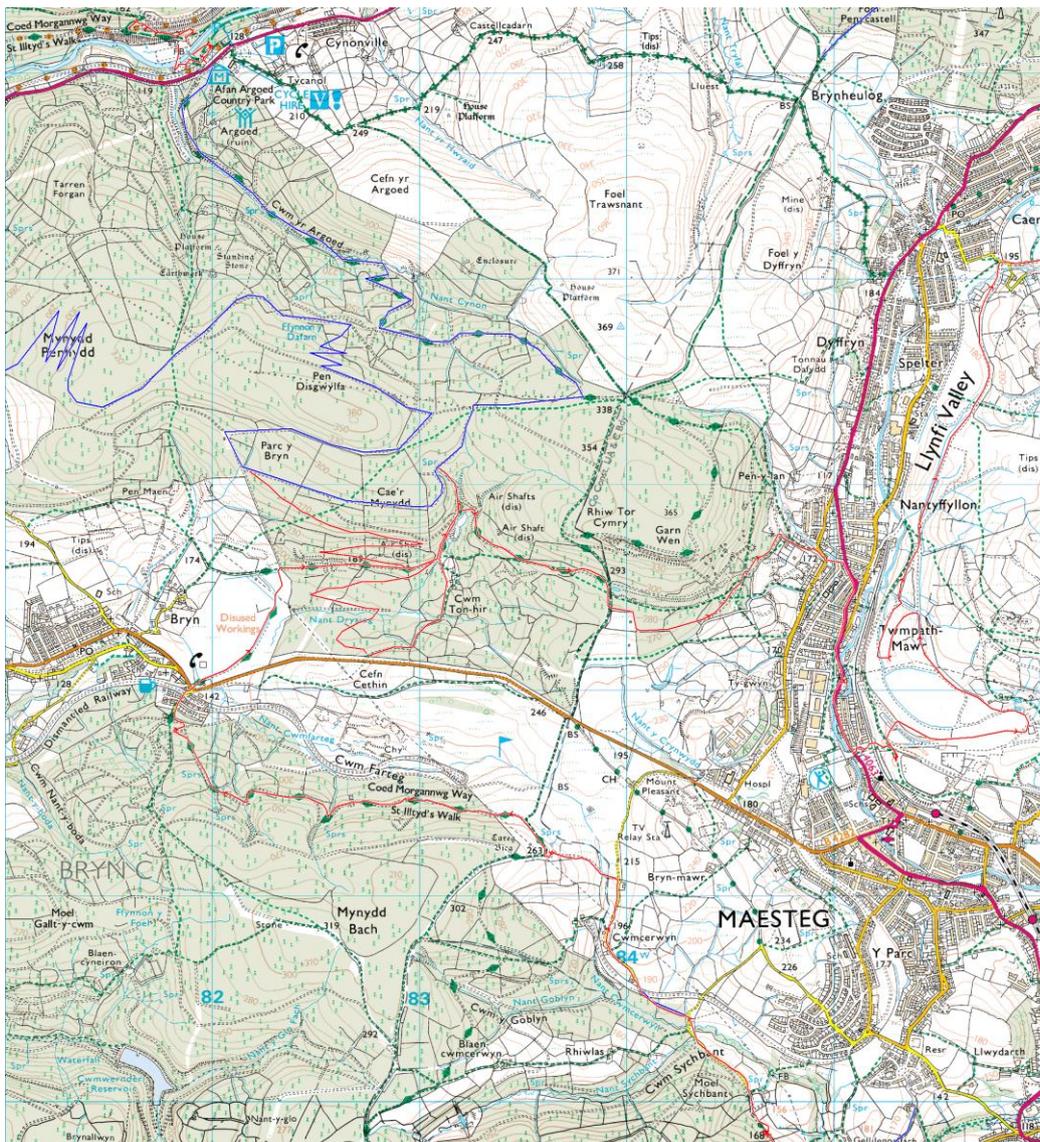
The above map shows the Black graded technical trail in the Garw valley. The trail is 6km long and utilises existing forest roads to climb much of the way up onto the coal tips. The final section of the climb switchbacks across the coal tip and then enters the Darren Fawr community woodland at the top of the climb and start of the descent. The descent is tight and technical and will largely be built using hand building techniques rather than machinery to make the most of the available terrain.



The image above shows the Ogmores Blue graded trail, the trail is 6 km long and has a steady climb for the first half of its length followed by a flowing singletrack descent through the forest and then back through the lower slopes of the farmland.

Links To the Afan Valley Trails

It would be possible to link the study area to the Afan Forest Park by means of an off-road cycle trail, some enthusiasts in the area are already doing this as they ride from their homes to the trails in the Afan forest park. With no mountain bike trail development in the Llynfi valley it would have to be asked what creating these links would bring to the area, it would allow mountain bikers living in Maesteg to access the trails without using the car but it would not be suitable for the same reasons mentioned earlier in the report to have the descent coming down the forest road so a new trail would need to be created. The estimated cost for this is £68,000 and it would certainly not bring tourists from Neath Port Talbot into the Bridgend borough. The community link that is in construction from Croeserw over to the Llynfi Valley is the best linkage to pursue at present as a purpose built off-road link will do little to benefit the area.



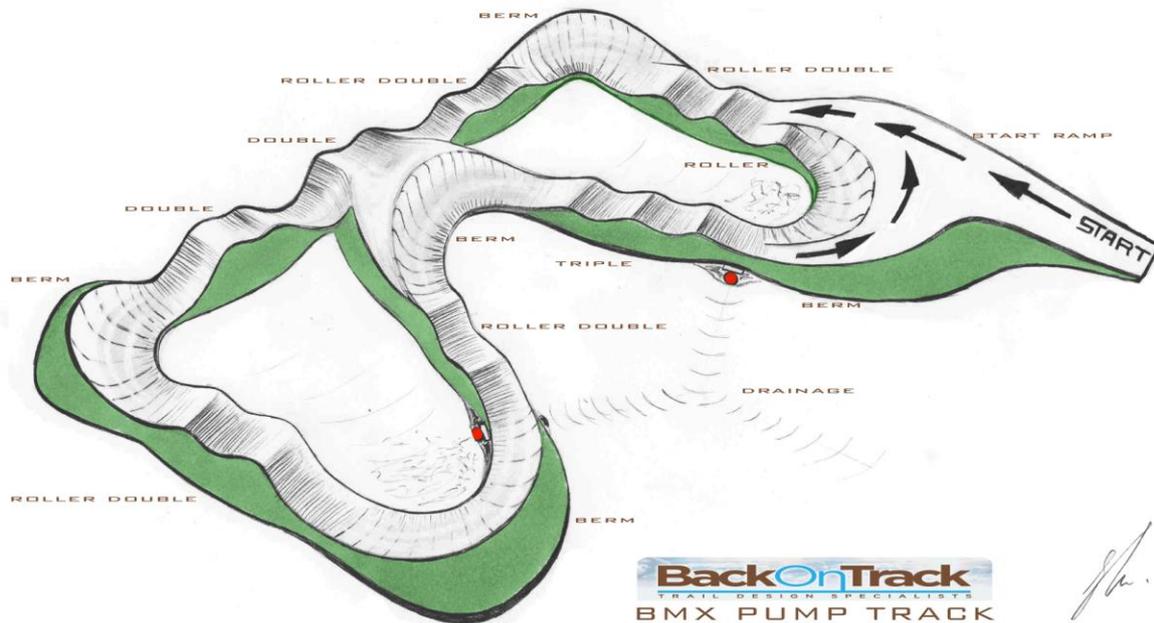
Map shows the Penhydd Trail in Blue and the potential off-road mountain bike trail links over to the Llynfi Valley in red.

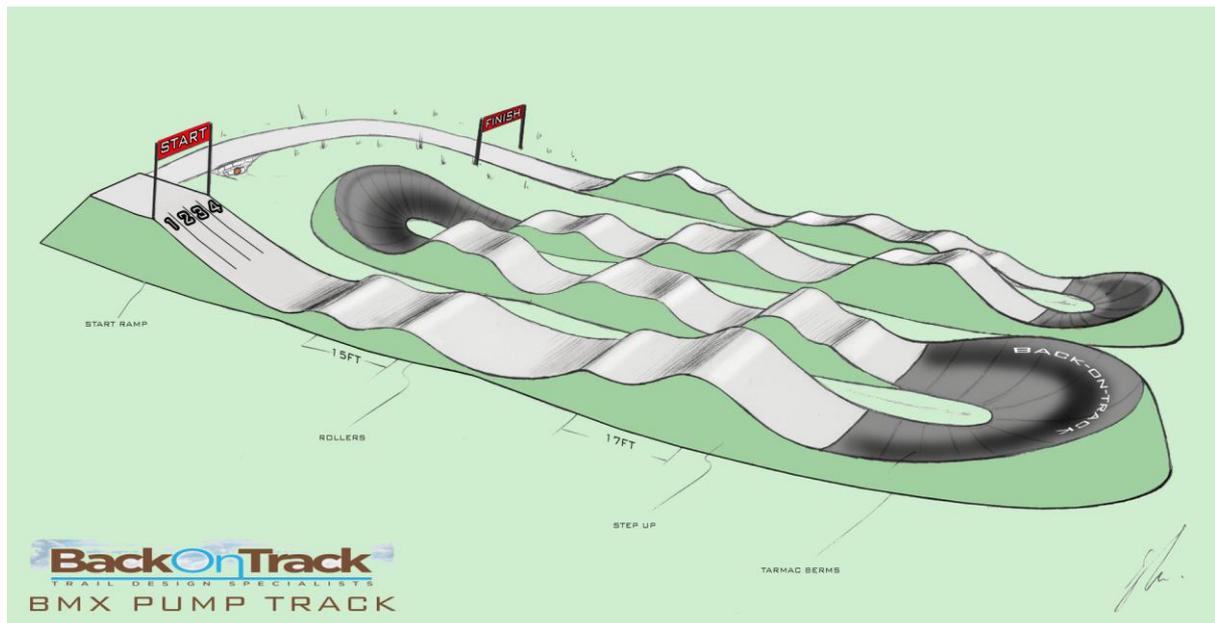
Project Costs

The costs to develop the pump tracks of a good standard with tarmac berms, start ramp and stone dust trail surfacing would be between **£30,000** and **£50,000** per track depending on the size of the area and the design of the trail. A £30,000 track would be built to a good standard but would be smaller with less line options. A track at £50,000 would feature a very high level of design and would be larger with more line options that will help prevent riders becoming bored with the facility over a number of years.

It is possible that the location at the head of the Garw valley would inflate material import costs somewhat. Some materials may be able to be sourced through the council to negotiate better rates.

Examples of pump track designs:





The mountain bike trails costs are reflected by the grading, that is a Blue Graded trail will usually be significantly more expensive than a Black trail due to the width and amount of imported surfacing required.

The mountain bike trail in the Ogmore valley would be expected to cost between **£85,000.00** and **£120,000**. Factors that will influence costs are the need to fence off or provide stock gates for the trails through farmland, the necessary tree clearance through the steep side sloped woodland and any land owners agreements that may need to be worked out.

The cost to construct the trail itself (excluding tree corridor clearance and fencing etc) is **£85,000.00**

The mountain bike trail in the Garw valley is significantly cheaper to construct due to the small amount of surfacing required for the whole trail and the good stone surface allowing for technical and sustainable trails to be built by hand. The build process would cost **£55,000.00** excluding tree clearance.

Maintenance and Trail Management

Bike trails require maintenance, sustainable building techniques can help to minimise this but it should be clear from the outset that there needs to be some provision for maintenance to look after the trails once in place.

BMX and Pump trails are constructed with tarmac berms and start ramps to minimise maintenance. The jumps and straights are built up from a crushed stone aggregate sub-base and surfaced with a crushed limestone dust surface layer / wearing course. This requires inspecting every 3 months and re-surfacing with a thin layer of limestone dust if necessary.

The mountain bike trails have various grades of importance regarding maintenance - that is a blue graded trail for beginners has a higher need for maintenance should any issues arise than that of a black expert graded trails where riders are more skilled and expect challenging and technical ground conditions.

The presence of rangers in the Garw valley is a huge plus point as if their term of work continues they can keep on top of preventative maintenance before any issues that may require more serious repairs arise.

The blue trail in the Ogmere Valley would be constructed with crushed stone aggregates that form a solid trail bed and the gradients would be gentle that prevent excessive wear, there will need to be an inspection regime set up (monthly ridden recorded inspections and quarterly walked formal inspections) and some resources available for any maintenance if required.

The FC currently has a budget of £5,000 per trail per annum, to keep on top of general maintenance. This would be more than adequate for trails of this length. Sustainable methods of generating some income to contribute to this are car park charges, bike wash charges or contributions from mountain bike events held at the facilities.

Developing Mountain Bike Businesses

There will be opportunities for the local community to develop and create small businesses to support these new facilities. At present there are two bike shops, Rush Cycles and Bike It both located near the base of the three valleys near where they split and so they are well placed to benefit from and offer support to the development. Bad Bikes in Blackmill run a scheme where they work with children to develop their interest and skills on bikes and the proposed pump track in Blackmill will be a key facility for them to develop the business. Specialist mountain bike or bmx coaching qualifications *must* be in place to deliver this safely and effectively. The local pub and cafe in Blackmill can develop their business and should look at offering bike friendly food and drink, alongside their existing trade. In Bleangarw the small visitor centre can provide the point of contact and information point but there is an opportunity to offer a small food and drinks stall from the car park or for the cafe in the village to increase its trade. The proposed pump trail in the park will allow sports development officers to work with school groups and local youth groups and a youth cycling club culture can be developed.

There will be a modest opportunity to increase bed space primarily in bed and breakfast or bunk house type accommodation for overnight visitors.

Further Suggestions for the area

Events can really help to establish an area on the map and once the new trails have been created it would be great to host an event to launch them. The Rat Run was a successful event and something of this Enduro format is perhaps the best way to bring in the target market. Similarly fun events and open days can be held on the pump trails and sports development officers can work with school groups, bike clubs and youth groups to help promote off road cycling as a great way of getting fit and having fun on two wheels.

Study Outcomes

The final suggestions found from the study are as follows:

- To help develop the regional level BMX facility in Caerau
- To approach Groundwork's in Tondu and put the trail development project to them with the intention that they will re-develop the off-road cycle track in the ironworks.
- To create a Blue Graded novice mountain bike trail from Blackmill

- To create a Black graded expert mountain bike trail in Bleangarw
- To provide pump tracks at both the hub sites in Bleangarw and Blackmill.
- To link and market all the sites under one umbrella brand (ideally including the centre of excellence branding) rather than individually.
- To work on the community links between the three valleys so that the cycle paths in each valley are linked across the flat mouth of the valley. This is a key process to bring the hub sites together for users without vehicle access.
- To investigate the potential for buses on these routes to carry bikes.
- To create a workgroup for local businesses to allow them to adapt and cater for users of the bike facilities.

Next steps

1. Call a meeting with all interested parties, landowners etc to discuss the issues with trail delivery and management/resources.
2. Look at planning permissions for the pump trails and mountain bike trails.
3. Evaluate funding streams available to facilitate development.
4. Approach Groundworks to see if they would like to become part of the project group and help save their current area set aside for bikes with a proper design.
5. Contact relevant persons involved with the 'centre of excellence' project to see if the Three Valleys developments can be incorporated with their branding exercise for the area.

