HOPE

HATE

CHARITABLE TRUST

HOPEFUL TOWNS

HOPEFUL TOWNS LOCAL REPORTS

PORT TALBOT

OCTOBER 2020

This report has been published as part of HOPE not hate Charitable Trust's Hopeful Towns project.

The project aims to better understand what makes a place confident, optimistic and open, and to help towns across England and Wales to fulfil their potential. We want to address the root causes of hate, to stop divisive narratives from taking hold in the first place. And we want to promote policies which champion the value of towns, and stress that every town matters.

As well as producing research to understand risk and resilience in our towns, we're working with local partners in towns to develop local solutions and will be building a Towns Leadership Network to push for positive change across Britain.

Email us via towns@hopenothate.org.uk to get involved or find out more

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INTRODUCTION

As part of our wider Hopeful Towns project, we have been working with community leaders and local decision-makers in two pilot areas – Port Talbot in South Wales and the Gravesend/ Northfleet urban area in Kent. Through exploring underlying challenges and potential solutions in these places, we hope to better understand the policy context in different types of town.

1.1 ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report looks at Port Talbot. It is based on detailed meetings and conversations with community leaders and key stakeholders – both from within Neath Port Talbot Council and from the private and third sectors. The aim is to understand the themes and challenges for local decision-makers and stakeholders.

The report feeds into a wider HOPE not hate Charitable Trust programme, Hopeful Towns. The programme was created this year. It aims to grasp why many of the most challenging communities in terms of far right activity or hostility to migration are smaller settlements away from the big cities – and to understand what can be done to address this. The work relates to HOPE not hate Charitable Trust's wider goal of tackling racism and the far right by focusing on the root causes.

Our 2018 report, *Fear, Hope and Loss*, highlighted the relationship between economic decline and low social resilience, and forms the research basis for the Hopeful Towns programme. Meanwhile our 2020 analysis, *Understanding Community Resilience in Our Towns*, drilled down into the different types of town community. The latter looked in detail at the factors which can amplify or dampen hostility to change and difference, defining 14 types of challenge facing English and Welsh towns.

Our two local reports (here and in Gravesend/ Northfleet) will accompany the above documents and feed into our new Towns Leadership Network. They aim to examine local challenges and opportunities in towns, via discussions with those who really know their communities. Through doing this we hope to understand both the national policies that are most needed and the local initiatives and interventions which are most likely to succeed.

1.2 THE PORT TALBOT CONTEXT

Port Talbot is a town on the South Wales coast, stretching along the north-east shore of Swansea Bay. It boasts a glittering cultural history, a strong sense of community, and genuinely breathtaking natural surroundings. It remains most famous, however, for the Port Talbot Steelworks, which has been the chief source of employment for much of the town's modern history.

The works are a defining part of the local skyline and, like many industrial towns, Port Talbot has a complicated relationship with its largest industry. 4,000 people work at the steelworks – far fewer than the 18,000 that did in the 1960s, when the works were the largest single employer in Wales, but still enough to impact nearly every household in Port Talbot. It remains the largest steel plant in the UK, hence has often been a focal point for news and campaigns about steelmaking and the future of UK industry.

These headlines often mean that Port Talbot is defined more by the steelworks than by the more organic parts of the community's identity: its personality, its environment, and its culture. There is a genuine warmth to the town - a common theme in every conversation we had there. Large amounts of social capital create an openness and a sense of belonging that is hard to find elsewhere.

The natural environment is a core part of Port Talbot's identity, with the town centre acting as a divider between its 'green and blue' sides. To the southwest is Aberavon Beach, one of Wales' longest coastlines and a popular surfing destination; heading northeast takes you into the expansive Margam and Afan forests.

These surroundings are a core source of community pride, and are considered by many of the people we spoke to as key to the town's future.

Port Talbot's cultural history is also impressive, and the town boasts native sons in Michael Sheen, Sir Anthony Hopkins and Richard Burton. It has set the scene for important events in British culture, including Port Talbot's 72-hour and 13,000-strong retelling of The Passion – which remains "the most ambitious piece of theatre Wales has ever seen" (BBC). More recently, *We're*

Still Here was a critically-acclaimed, site-specific production, telling the story of the 'Save Our Steel' campaign through local voices.

The far right have never established a presence on the local council, despite UKIP and Brexit Party campaigning across much of south Wales. There are strong local bonds in the town and a small but active BME Community Association.

Nevertheless, the extreme deprivation in parts of Port Talbot, the ongoing existential questions for the steelworks and a departure of younger generations to the big cities all pose significant threats for future resilience to change and difference.

WHAT IS A 'HOPEFUL TOWN'?

We use 'Hopeful Towns' to describe places which are 'resilient' in a number of ways, when it comes to the issues HOPE not hate is looking to address. This definition of 'resilience' or 'hopefulness' is based on the following things:

- the extent to which a place is **confident, open and optimistic**
- how much the community there is able to **adapt to change or absorb shocks**
- how much agency residents feel, and how much trust there is likely to be for decision-makers, outsiders and each other;
- how **positive** residents are about **racial and cultural difference**
- how able the community is to **withstand abrupt demographic shifts or one-off flashpoints**, without these events escalating
- and, correspondingly, **how predisposed a place is to welcome migrants, refugees or other new groups**

In our primary engagement work we break this down further, to the following potted definition: *"A Hopeful Town is a place with a confident, welcoming and optimistic local identity – which does no not represent fertile territory for the far right or those promoting anti-inclusive narratives."*

METHODOLOGY

This report has been compiled thanks to two rounds of engagement with community stakeholders from across Port Talbot. The first of these was a summit with a number of attendees, held in February. The second was a series of subsequent one-on-one interviews with the same group of attendees, drilling down on the topics discussed.

This format was necessarily different from that which was first envisaged, thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed. This prevented us from carrying out further face-to-face summit meetings, and means that doing so will remain a challenge in the future. However, it also allowed much deeper engagement around the issues at play – albeit carried out over Zoom or by phone – in a way that a continuation of the group format might not have done.

The participants for our engagement were identified based on an initial phase of desk research by HOPE not hate, during which we developed a longlist of potential attendees. Neath Port Talbot council then supported the recruitment group, adding their own contacts and reaching out to the potential participants.

The table below shows more detail about the two phases of engagement.

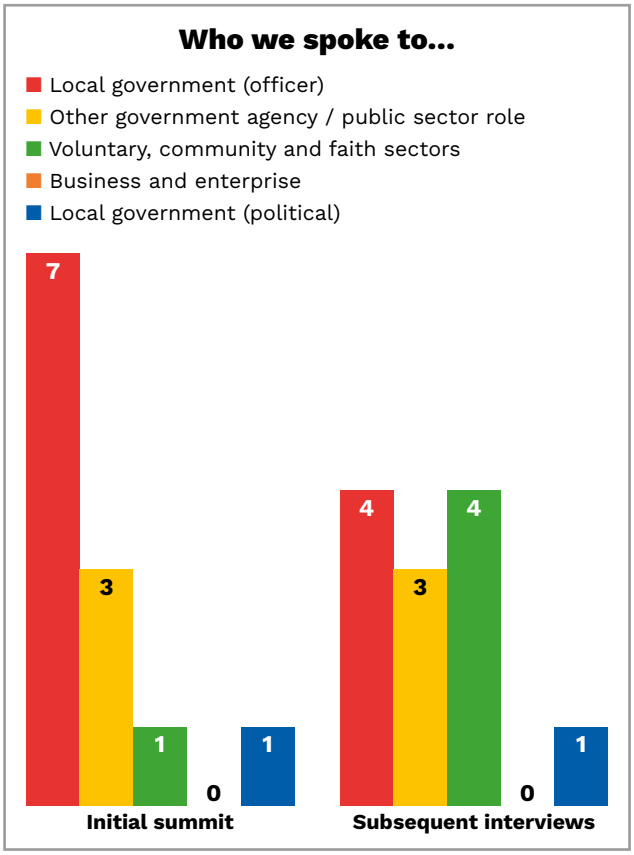
Phase	Format	Contri-butors	Timescale
Initial 'summit' meeting	Group discussions, exercises in pairs	13	2.5 hour morning event, 13th February 2020
Subsequent depth interviews	Remote interviews, via Zoom or phone	12	April-June 2020, 45-60 minute conversations

The summit session was split into: a) an icebreaker, b) an overview of the project background, c) a challenges and opportunities voting exercise followed by a discussion, d) a review of our attitudinal data, e) a narrative exercise around the towns' identities and f) a brainstorming session about big picture visions.

The subsequent depth interviews, meanwhile, followed a topic guide – although they remained fairly open-ended – allowing participants to lead the conversation as much as possible. The topic guide was broken into the following loose themes: a) key info about the stakeholder, b) discussion of the area in the 'hopeful towns' context, c) local challenges in being a hopeful town, d) where solutions might be found, within the town and beyond, e) challenges in contributors' individual roles.

Many of the stakeholders took part in both the group session and the interviews. However, the pressures of COVID meant that this was not possible with everyone – especially for those in officer roles, who were dealing with the impact of the pandemic on services. In total we spoke to 20 different stakeholders at least once as part of the engagement.

Attendees ranged from community police officers to religious figures or those working in the arts sector. The chart below shows the breakdown, by sector of work, of those who took part in the respective phases.



WHAT OUR RESILIENCE ANALYSIS TOLD US ABOUT PORT TALBOT

	Port Talbot	Neath
a. Traditional demographics		
b. Visible decline		
c. Shrinking and ageing		
d. Uncertain industrial futures		
e. Cross-cutting deprivation		
f. Competition for resources		
g. Rapid change		
h. Migration in the community		
i. Authoritarian footprint		
j. Strong national identity		
k. Fewer cultural opportunities		
l. Fewer heritage assets		
m. Less connected	N/A	N/A
n. Coastal challenges		

HOPE not hate's 2020 report, *Understanding Community Resilience in our Towns*, looks at 862 towns across England and Wales.[1] The report uses an index of data for every type of place, to identify 14 different sorts of challenges which can enflame hostility to change and difference in a town. These range from 'Visible decline' to 'Rapid change' to 'Strong national identity', and can feed into problems in different ways.

The table to the right shows the clusters which Port Talbot fits into. (Dark yellow indicates that a town *fully* meets the criteria for a characteristic; pale yellow shows that a town meets *most* of the criteria. Interestingly, Port Talbot does not fall fully into any of the clusters, but falls 'mostly' into a large number).

Some UK towns fit into none of the clusters, meaning there are few challenges for resilience. The most vulnerable towns fit into 7 or even 8. The average town fits into 3.17 clusters, and Port Talbot fits into 6.75. Neighbouring town Neath, which shares Port Talbot's Local Authority, is also shown in the table above, and falls into 4.75 clusters.

Many of the characteristics which Port Talbot fulfils relate to decline of different sorts – including 'Shrinking and ageing' populations and 'Uncertain industrial futures'. These describe the potential for narratives of loss when it comes, respectively, to the demographic future of the area or to confidence in the strength of the economy. The phenomenon of younger people moving elsewhere to work or study, means that Port Talbot's population grew by 8% between 2002 and 2018, for example – whereas the average town saw an 11% increase during the same period.

Meanwhile, the 'Coastal challenges' and 'Visible decline' categories reflect more obvious decline when it comes to social issues and the public realm. For example, the death rates from drug use in Port Talbot are much higher than regional averages.

A number of the Welsh valley communities directly north of Port Talbot have fairly similar challenges, relating to longstanding industrial decline and ageing communities. Indeed, many of the challenges faced by Port Talbot are likely to be more acute in these valley communities.

Alongside this, Port Talbot partly fulfils characteristics like 'Fewer cultural opportunities' and 'Fewer heritage assets'. The names for these categories are slightly misleading, and are not intended to describe an absence of culture – south Wales obviously being a very culturally rich place. Rather they reflect Port Talbot having less easy access pathways into the arts, less opportunities for cultural mixing/ cultural exchange, and fewer of the characteristics (city status, for instance), which often confer prestige upon a place.

[NB: Our data did not allow us to accurately look at the 'Less connected' category for Welsh towns, even though a number would potentially be within this grouping].

3. THEMES AND CHALLENGES

When it comes to resilience there were a number of clear themes that repeatedly came up during our conversations with community leaders and local stakeholders. These are distinct from one another, although there are areas of significant overlap.

Each theme comes with an attendant set of potential challenges (some of which have already arisen) and with a related set of potential opportunities (some of which had already been seized).

3.1. OLDER COMMUNITIES WITH LESS HISTORY OF DIVERSITY

The first of the challenges described in Port Talbot related to experiences of and diversity difference, in a town – and an area of the UK – where migration is not a big part of the local history.

Only 3% of Neath Port Talbot's population are BAME.[2] While this is hardly out of step with the Welsh average (outside of Cardiff, Newport and Swansea), it suggests that the conversation around immigration and cohesion will be different to that in other, more diverse towns.

One local educator, for instance, described Port Talbot as being very different to places where they have worked before, where "it was nothing different to the children to have four or five different religions within a classroom, you know, to have 20+ languages spoken…it is just expected."

This comparative lack of migration in Port Talbot means that a vocabulary around discrimination is not present in the same way as is the case in places with a history of multiculturalism.

> **"Challenging racism, things like that, they weren't on [the Port Talbot kids'] agenda, whereas for our Salford and Manchester kids they are. For [the Port Talbot kids], it was a lack of opportunity they were talking about - it was, you know, money, poverty. Things to do. Culture was a big thing."**

This does not mean that Port Talbot necessarily has a harder time fostering inclusion – for example the town does not fall into our 'Authoritarian footprint' category, whereas much more diverse towns like Boston or Burnley have been much more successfully coveted by the far right and the populist radical right. But the comparative lack of diversity can still lead to 'old-fashioned' or racist language, with latent attitudes about different groups going unchallenged in people's daily lives.

Several of those we spoke to saw an age dynamic to all of this. One participant reported that attitudes are "generational," and are formed "through ignorance." In the more rural and remote areas around Port Talbot they told us that some older people still use the term "Paki shop" to describe corner shops run by south Asian families. "In many cases, it's not maliciously said…it's not being fortunate enough to travel around," the contributor explained.

> **"There's only so much you can do to change the attitudes of 60- and 70-year-olds. There is a younger generation and in thirty years this hopefully won't be an issue."**

Another participant described their experiences as a person of colour: "In the early 1980s there were a lot of far right movements going on in the east London area, so [my dad] decided to move

to a quiet place and he chose Port Talbot. This is how we're here now."

This is striking, as places like east London have tended to become much more liberal towards migration in past decades, as they have become more diverse. Towns like Port Talbot have not necessarily gone on the same journey.

With all of the above said, it is worth noting that Port Talbot was regarded by some participants as visibly diverse compared to the valley communities nearby. One person told us that "the town has good representation for BME groups," and talked positively of a number of churches which "cater for, mostly, the Polish and Romanian communities, etc."

It is also worth noting that the town has settled a number of Syrian families recently. A stakeholder who was involved in this reported that, while "some [refugees] did have…hate crime related issues", most are "comfortable where they are and have decided to stay." Another told us that the resettlements were a "really good area of work" for local diversity and inclusion, providing a basis for further cohesion work. Thus, the demographic makeup of Port Talbot is slowly changing.

However, compared to other places – including our other pilot town, Gravesend – it remains the case that experiences of diversity in Port Talbot are relatively few and far between.

3.2. TIGHTLY BONDED LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Our research with stakeholders suggested that communities in Port Talbot have what is sometimes known as strong 'bonded' social capital – i.e. supportive connections between people with similar demographics and life experiences. The participants who we spoke to repeatedly described an extremely warm, friendly and tight-knit community.

> **"The Welsh in general are very welcoming anyway… I've never seen any [anti-social behaviour] if I'm honest. But…what it would be like if there was more [diversity], I don't know."**

However, some of those we spoke to also suggested that this there is less by way of 'bridging' capital – that is, less ability and readiness to build connections with new communities.

"A lot of the places we work in have got very, very settled populations, people who've been there for generations...that brings lots of strengths in terms of the mutual support we can give each other. But if you're from outside those circles, that can be more of a barrier as well."

Our conversations also identified low-level tensions between different local communities. "There was definitely an aspect of 'they're from the valleys, they're a bit weird'," said one respondent, who reported that "a definite separation from the Cymmer girls and the Port Talbot girls."

This sense of a tight-knit community, bordering on insularity, was linked by some to attitudes about change and difference – a lack of openness not to immigration specifically, but outsiders in general.

Direct, 'real' and honest language was seen as a factor in breaking through this. "If we listen to the language used by people who are clearly engaging in healthy, positive relationships at a local level, I think we can learn quite a lot from that. And we may find that language differs quite a lot from area to area as well," said one respondent, when talking about the caginess of language in a lot of charity and local government work.

This opinion chimed with that of a youth worker, focused on tackling extremism, who said that too much anti-racism and integration work is inaccessible. People "want to speak theological, professional stuff that they should use for an academic conference, that's not where it is. Do you see Tommy Robinson talking that way? No."

The stakeholder added that it was more important to "talk, in a youth club setting or a classroom setting, in a language that the kids understand."

3.3. SETTLED COMMUNITIES – AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Another factor to arise was a lack of transience in Port Talbot, manifested by a lack of through traffic. Many stakeholders said that local people "don't travel" and that those from outside often "drive past the town."

Transport connections were a factor in this, but were only part of the story. "A lot of our parents are very unwilling to travel outside of Port Talbot," reported a stakeholder from a local school.

"Parents won't turn up to the appointments because they worry about cost of public transport [and are] worried about going too far afield. Even the beach is very under-used."

"Transport just shouldn't be an issue for young people...that is just a really easy barrier for us to remove."

A lack of reliable public transport also impacted young people, narrowing the range of experiences open to Port Talbot's youth and exacerbating the "enclave" effect. "Transport was a huge barrier," said one youth worker, in discussing a joint project they worked on between Port Talbot and nearby Cymmer, "There was just a massive distance between them. Not because it was [actually far between the two places] – it was literally that there was one bus a day."

It was acknowledged that the town of Port Talbot itself is not as remote as some areas – it "dwarfs" places nearby, according one participant, and has a good train service.

But it was nevertheless seen as a place that people from outside seldom came to and that residents seldom leave. This can lead to

a risk that people "have this sense of fear of something they don't know," as one interviewee put it, adding that this fear was "absolutely not what you get from a settled white working class community in Cardiff."

This often fed into a discussion of education – with younger people leaving the town for better employment, and cycles of deprivation remaining among those who did not.

> **"[The area boasts] people who have advanced in science and technology and industry and history, who've become professors at universities, who are great in the arts and music... It's incredible, I've never been to a place with such talent. And yet, people's aspirations for themselves can sometimes be rather low."**

This led on to a related theme: social media and news consumption. Several stakeholders reported that the lack of through traffic can lead to a reliance on social media for news of what is happening elsewhere – with tales from other places always heard at a step removed.

When combined with a lack of education about how to consume news or question what we hear, this was said to create some pretty unsavoury impressions of people outside of Port Talbot. The experiences of the stakeholder below are worth quoting in full:

> **"You know, it's a nice town to live in. If you're from an ethnic minority background, however, you still get that element of social media hatred, lurking around... Someone may not say something to me face-to-face – they just say hello, smile and that's it. But deep inside, they may have certain feelings that are not so nice towards me, which they find it difficult to express. And as a result, they find it better to express that on social media.**
>
> **"If you look at my social media page I've got, you know, hundreds of friends who [I've known] from a very young age. And when I notice things that they share on social media that I know are not true – [that are] promoting hatred – this makes me think that, although he calls me a friend...when he's home he's reading stuff [where] it's quite blatant that it's wrong.**
>
> **"Some of my friends were even sharing stuff that was quite clearly far right material, without knowing that it would offend me or my community."**

One example of the form this takes is the 'Port Talbot Debate and Argue' forum – an 11,600-person-strong Facebook group focusing on local issues, which warns that 'IF YOU ARE EASILY OFFENDED BY DIFFERENT OPINIONS THIS IS NOT THE PLACE FOR YOU'.

The site was raised by several participants as promoting "negative feelings" about outsiders. And while the official rules of the group claim to outlaw

"racism, hate speech or personal threats," there are frequent examples of bigotry, sexism and conspiracy theories.

The social media/ news consumption factor was a particular concern when it comes to middle-aged and older residents only just going online. One stakeholder described "a middle ground of parents that missed out on education," giving the example of "a 50 year old who's new to Facebook...and all of a sudden...he sees a fake post about Islamophobia... [He doesn't] have the ability or the knowledge to actually dig deep to find out whether the story is real."

This is not helped helped, according to another stakeholder we spoke to, by the lack of a national discussion in Wales about on migration and social change: "In Wales the national conversation is terribly weak. Not in terms of the quality of it, but the broadcasting of it is terribly weak."

Many agreed that the path forward here related to education – both in schools and for older residents. "Why are we not teaching that in schools? Why are we not having critical thinking lessons?" asked one youth worker, who noted that politics and critical thinking is much more present in private education. "We consume all day...now especially with phones. [We need to give young people] the space to know what bits you can push away."

3.4 STEEL, GLOBALISATION, AND BREXIT

Steel came up less than we expected during the research phase – partly because people wanted to focus on other things, and partly because it was 'taken as read' by some to be part of the landscape. Most suggested that the feelings in the town towards the steelworks were complex.

One stakeholder reported that the steel industry, despite being in decline, remained totemic, creating a "common thread" through people's lives: "Something that employed so many people in an area is going to create those natural links."

> **"The steelworks sort of sits there. [It's] that tie to the industrial past. But it's dirty, and it's noisy... [Port Talbot is] kind of proud of it but ashamed of the pride, it's a conflicted town really."**

Another stakeholder stated that "people are not going to see Tata Steel as a positive... They'd only realise it if it closed down. That'd be the end of the town... that's a problem."

When the steelworks was raised in relation to resilience, it was often cited as the area's primary

TAXI CASE STUDY

One high-profile incident in Port Talbot's recent history was that of a racist job advert for a taxi firm. The company advertised for new drivers, but stated that "we do not want Pakistanis" – prompting a number of negative news articles about the area.

One participant reported that the issue reflected a refusal among some local people to take taxis driven by people who are not white Welsh. This was often said to take the form of advice given by older residents, who told younger people going for nights out in Port Talbot to avoid black and Asian drivers.

There was also a structural dimension to the issue. "There used to be taxi marshals," which eased the problem, the stakeholder explained. "Those taxi marshals were recruited by the Local Authority through their community safety partnership, the Safer Neath Port Talbot initiative. That funding was provided by the Police and Crime Commissioner, and it worked really well, in terms of management and tackling issues on the spot. But since austerity came in the money was cut down, and Local Authorities had no option but to cut down on those resources."

The same respondent pointed out that the episode was based on the scapegoating of specific ethnic groups (in this case the Pakistani community), based solely on stereotypes. A meeting with the local area's BME Taxi Association, for example, revealed that "there are around 44 taxis [driven] by people from BME backgrounds in the area. Amongst them there are just four or five Pakistani drivers... But [people say they're all] from Pakistan."

In describing the specific circumstances of the taxi case, meanwhile, another respondent explained that, on issues like this, "National legislation is limited in what it can do," and often ends up trying to "fit square [pegs] into round holes." The issues at play were very localised and required local knowledge, applying to a specific set of economic, cultural and policy issues that were particular to Port Talbot.

In many ways, this reflects how tensions and flashpoints often arise, and why there is no one-size-fits-all policy to creating hopeful towns. The Port Talbot taxi episode bubbled up from short term policy pressures (the decision to cut taxi marshals). But it played into the fears of tight-knit, non-diverse, older populations, particularly in the areas immediately surrounding the town. These groups were often basing their judgements on third party news stories or hearsay from social media.

Hence, the episode arose through a concoction of almost all the themes identified in this report.

example of decline and loss. The decline in the number of jobs at the plant – and constant threats of closure – were regarded as a casualty of globalisation. And the plant's high profile Indian ownership was seen as reinforcing this in some quarters, dovetailing a sense of economic decline with a hostility to foreigners.

Two of our stakeholders talked about Brexit in this context, either as the culmination of these sentiments, or as the catalyst for them. For some, the prevalence of Tata steel in the news at around the time of the EU Referendum was instrumental in the area voting Leave.

> **"Brexit...I think kid of muddied the thought a bit locally. You know, the immigration issue came up, [and] we have Tata Steel based in Port Talbot. Tata is an Indian firm, and obviously they're dictating how the industry should be, what happens to the plant in Port Talbot."**

> **"The industry itself was struggling, internationally...but I don't think people saw that. People saw a business run by an Indian firm, based in India, where they were making decisions in Mumbai [and] ignoring Port Talbot."**

Another contributor reported that "where the industry is dying - it breeds a sense of worry about the outside... That lack of industry, that reduction of services is going to breed distrust."

The same contributor added that national governments "have the power to say 'we're gonna lose this industry because that's just the way the world's working at the moment, but we can put things in place that's gonna make it more attractive for people to come in and set up this kind of industry'."

> **"Often there's a sense of perceived injustice and a lack of confidence in the system. Trust in the system is very low."**

Others also talked of resentment among locals towards a distant and unfeeling economic and political system – with the steel industry and Brexit acting as proxies for these deeper issues.

3.5 THE TOWN'S REPUTATION AND IDENTITY

Perceptions came up a lot in our initial meeting and in the subsequent conversations. There was a sense among many that the town is under-appreciated. This related to the aforementioned idea that Port Talbot is somewhere "people drive past" – and to the idea that it is known for its steel industry and little else.

In the initial steering group this was particularly apparent – with the town centre cited as an important piece of the puzzle, thanks to its status as the part of Port Talbot which visitors were most likely to see. One participant admitted that if they themselves wanted to meet someone for a coffee they would head elsewhere. While not everyone agreed, the general consensus was that too few non-residents go out of their way to visit the town, and that the 'Port Talbot offer' should be better understood and promoted.

"I think it's the perception [from within], and probably just as much as the perception from outside" said one participant. "When you've got people on the outside [saying] 'it haven't got this, it haven't got that' people tend to believe it. We need to change that and tell them the positive things."

There was a tacit acknowledgement from most that these factors play into questions about resilience and whether the area is 'hopeful', according to our definition. Certainly, wider research by HOPE not hate suggests that a clear and distinct place identity can be an important buttress against narratives of decline and division.

A number of ideas and solutions were put forward in relation to perception, relating in particular to high street regeneration. One person suggested a compulsory purchase of empty shops or those not being put to productive use.

> **"Retail is a massive area. I don't know what the answer is on policy, but what I do know is [we need to] make things a little bit simpler. Pop-up shops and things like that you know, all the empty shops - let's try to get them filled...it alters the whole perception of the high street."**

Meanwhile, others we spoke to suggested that Port Talbot might do well question its ultimate purpose as a place. Several respondents reported anecdotally that better paid employees in the town tended to commute in from local cities, and one asked why this was not the other way around – with Port Talbot trading on its affordability and the better quality of life available there.

> **"We never think 'let's get people to move here and commute to Cardiff. You can jump on the train and be in Cardiff within half an hour. But we never think to say those things. [We're] just this little town in the middle...we don't do enough about promoting some of the good things."**

The idea of Port Talbot as a commuter town for employees in the nearby big cities is an unusual one, and might not immediately speak to everyone. However, with COVID-19 triggering an exodus from big cities and a shift to remote work, it is perhaps not as outlandish as all that. Indeed, Victoria Winckler, Director of the Bevan Foundation, wrote earlier this year that it is time for a 'Work from Wales' campaign, directed at people currently living in big cities.[3]

3.6. JOBS AND CYCLICAL DEPRIVATION

Port Talbot is a long way above the Welsh average for every type of deprivation. It scores especially high for income, employment, education, health and physical environment deprivation.

"It's overwhelmingly about class and socio-economic factors" said one stakeholder, when asked about resilience and cohesion. "Everything reflects that really."

Indeed, poverty came through as a central issue in many conversations. In our group meeting, concerns around the steelworks and unemployment among young people were said to be set against a backdrop of wider poverty and worklessness. And in our subsequent interviews one stakeholder told us: "We have got so much poverty, people struggling, people on low incomes... If you're working hard and you can't afford to feed your kids...it's going to cause resentment."

Several people pointed out the link, whether direct or indirect, between deprivation and resilience. Attitudes towards migration and

multiculturalism were seen by some as stemming from the tendency to 'turn inwards' or circle the wagons when times are hard.

> **"Deprivation does play a big part... Poverty, lack of regeneration, [it] makes people worry, and it makes people feel a bit hostile... They do get a bit wary, and start feeling depressed. This is where people start thinking negatively about who they are, where they live, and what happens locally."**

> **"People have got so many challenges of their own that they're likely to be, understandably, very inwardly focused. And therefore [they] perhaps misunderstand the issues that might, say, face new families that move onto their estate from different backgrounds."**

"Some of the brightest, upcoming people will go elsewhere because there's nothing to keep you here," said one person we spoke to – who also talked about the impact that these narratives of departure can have on how people that have stayed feel about the area.

Conversely, there was some discussion of the solidarity which deprivation can bring in certain communities or on particular estates. "The culture and the nature of the people in the town [stems from the fact that] they do tend to pull together and think 'well, you know, times are hard, and we need improve things. We need to get together and do something'. There is that solidarity".

In many ways this intersects with – and helps to explain – the 'bonded' social capital described earlier on (whereby strong ties exist between groups with a shared identity, but where there is less bridging capital with those who are different).

> **"You do see a certain kind of resilience, sometimes not the ideal kind of resilience... but there's that certain kind of toughness that brings people together."**

Meanwhile, the cyclical nature of deprivation in the town was raised multiple times, as was the challenge of breaking up pockets of entrenched poverty.

One local educator described "parents who have never worked, [for whom] self-esteem is a major factor." They added that "When it comes to something like hope, unfortunately [many of our] parents are very dismissive about their children's chances in the future. Conversations about things like university are quite often laughed at."

Another person we spoke to described two estates with quite similar socio-economics, but with big differences in terms of outlook and resilience. On one of the estates patterns of recurring poverty had established themselves, they said, whereas in the other it had not. Breaking intergenerational cycles once they have set in in a neighbourhood was seen as very difficult.

This cyclical aspect arguably makes poverty in Port Talbot quite distinct from deprivation in some other places. It may feed into the challenges around a lack of transience or through flow described earlier, as well as reinforcing pessimism about the future.

Among our stakeholders there was a degree of frustration about the difficulty of trying to address unemployment and poverty using local tools when, to large extent, these things are caused by national policies.

> **"In terms of equality we could definitely do more locally. But as you'd imagine some of it would be directed from a national level...a lot of it would have [to have] a national steer."**

This reflected a sense of resignation which we have found in other parts of the UK, about a political and economic system that either not seem to 'get' places like Port Talbot and the people there, or that does not make the effort to 'get' them. "We were always going to struggle in an area like this" said one community leader. "All those things that were going on, bringing people in the community together, they're quite often the first ones that are cut off the budget."

4. ASSETS AND ANSWERS

Many of the themes we have explored in these conversations – an uncertain industrial future, cyclical poverty, difficulties accessing travel – occur at a macro-economic level. These factors, each of which creates obstacles to resilience, are hard to overturn without the system as a whole shifting gears and doing more for places like Port Talbot.

However, there is a strong sense of civic pride in the arwa and an engaged set of community leaders, and it is clear that there are local steps which can and do bring about positive change.

Our conversations revealed a number of clues about where answers are likely to come from. These are clearly not 'silver bullets', but they point towards potential solutions for Port Talbot and for other places like it.

4.1. THE ROLE OF EDUCATION AS A ONE-STOP-SHOP

Education is important in building resilience everywhere, but was seen as particularly vital in Port Talbot. The issues we discuss above – relatively closed-off communities, a lack of opportunity and diversity, and intergenerational poverty – push home the value of education as a driver of resilience.

This was stressed by several of our local stakeholders – both through the interviews and at our group meeting. To an even greater extent than in many other parts of the country, education is vital to the town's future. This applies to schools and young people, but also in relation to adult education and training.

We spoke to one local educator about their work and ideas, and found that really positive things were already happening – particularly in relation to the role of schools as hubs for other key services. This included mental health, adult education and employment. The stakeholder in question's response is worth quoting in full:

> **"If any of our children needed a speech therapist you had to go to Swansea, but our parents were not turning up to the appointments because they didn't have the confidence to travel... We have our own speech therapist now... [We] provide everything in house – so that rather than parents having to go for a consultation somewhere or a meeting somewhere they can come to us.**
>
> **"We've got a school-based counsellor on site because the external services [sometimes have] an 18-month waiting list. There are lots of different things attached to living in a deprived area – [for example] the number of adverse childhood experiences some of our kids have is very high. They want to see a counsellor the day after something's happened, rather than 18 months down the line. [And] as a spin off from that we've got a counsellor for the parents now as well, so they can access that service.**
>
> **"We've just really, really gone to town on the school being the centre of the community in terms of [saying]...'it's not [the head teacher's] school, it's not the governors' school, it's the parents' school'. There's a learning room for the parents where they can come in and choose which course they want to do – we have some doing sign language, some doing parent law. We've got a family engagement officer who organises social events where teachers and parents go out."**

This is supported, at the school, by an active effort to engage and win the trust of local parents. "There was a lot of distrust between staff and parents, maybe because of parents' experiences with schools themselves," the same stakeholder explained. "We had to reach out a lot and demonstrate to them: 'we're just like you and this is your school and you use it how you want to use it. The services are there for you to use'. And it's been really successful. We've had impacts on things like attendance. Behaviour has improved."

Now, according to the participant, there are 12 parents working towards teaching assistant qualifications from the school – many of whom were in unemployed beforehand.

This active effort to place the school as the centre of gravity for the community had clearly had some success with the example in question. It seems that the sense of ownership encouraged by this example and others like it are vital – not just in reversing socio-economic cycles, but in increasing trust and agency and improving resilience.

> **"[We're] putting the school – like schools used to be – at the centre of the**

> **community... Our parents wouldn't have the confidence to go to council offices, or to citizen's advice. But they're comfortable to come here and they're comfortable then to get their questions answered."**

In discussing resilience more generally, one participant told us that "the first thing you've got to do is basically break down untruths and educate people." Perhaps there is a space for this to be done via the education system in its conventional forms, with schools acting as the nucleuses of wider community shifts.

4.2. INDIVIDUAL, COMMUNITY-FACING ROLES

Across all of the themes we talked about, one thing which really came through was the importance of having individuals in community-facing roles, and of having them there for a sustained period. This was seen as vital in helping to build trust and create a sense of continuity.

As with education, this is of course true everywhere. But the existence of staff whose job is explicitly to build community ties is arguably especially acute in Port Talbot – with its patterns of intergenerational deprivation and tightly bonded social capital.

Different examples of this emerged from different sectors, among those we spoke to. A good example were Family Liaison Officers (FLOs) in schools – who are "worth their weight in gold...particularly in areas like this," as one stakeholder put it: "It's not just linking with the parents – it's all those little feelers you've got in the community."

> **"In Wales it's seen as a bit of a luxury to have [FLOs] – of 60 primary schools in the area, perhaps 10 have them. In Powys FLOs are paid less because it's not respected as much. At our school we're lucky that our FLO grew up in the area and can go out and speak to the local community."**

> **"The problem is that at a national level there is a lot of resource not being spread. Until recently [we had] just one [cohesion] person covering three Authorities. You can't do the intensive work needed."**

Cohesion and community engagement staff at councils were also regarded as key by many of those we spoke to. "These people make a difference. Having a really active Hate Crimes Officer that's well aware of what's going on in the area...having a [good] Community Cohesion Officer. Over time, they will make a difference. It's the small things that make a difference."

4.3 A CULTURAL IDENTITY BASED ON PLACE

Lastly, in terms of solutions and assets, there was a lot of talk of cultural projects which give the town an opportunity to tell its story – and of the positive impact that the arts can have.

Much of this centred on Michael Sheen's production of *The Passion* – the largest and best known cultural event to come out of the area in recent years, and one which clearly helped the town to be more confident and optimistic.

However, positive accounts of the role the arts can play did not end here, and there were a number of other examples cited. These included, for instance, 'Port Talbot Steels Your Imagination' – a campaign on pride and hope, run by working class 12-13 year old girls.

Meanwhile another stakeholder described in positive terms a community project they had worked on relating to mapping and protecting 'bee-lines' (that is, the routes which bees take to pollinate).

> **"In 2010/2011 Michael Sheen and National Theatre wales did a huge amount of community engagement in the run up to his production of The Passion. For a while after that, people...felt good about their town and about themselves, because what he did was enable them to open up their story."**

What was clear was that these sorts of initiatives had to come from within the community. One youth worker, who had travelled from elsewhere to run a local project, pointed out that anything "off the shelf" was destined to fail. They described how, in work with young people, they began with a 'manifesto' for the local area, and started by asking "What's great here? How do we put Port Talbot on the map?"

Of course, the arts clearly has a role to play in place identity for almost every town across England and Wales. But again, it appears that this is especially acute for a town like Port Talbot, where the community's identity and reputation is so heavily focused around a single shrinking industry. By continuing to find new and creative ways of telling the town's story, it seems that there is a means of coming out from the shadow of the steelworks – helping in the process to challenge narratives of decline.

CONCLUSIONS

One thing which was clear from our research was that Port Talbot, while experiencing similar problems to many post-industrial places, has major things going for it. The town has an enviable sense of community, a strong cultural history and a set of natural assets that many other communities would kill for.

Time and again we have found that strong local identities are key to helping our communities face the world with confidence and optimism. With a glittering cultural heritage, a proud industrial history and expansive natural assets, Port Talbot is better placed than many to leverage feelings of local pride into openness and hope. The tight-knit bonds within its community, while perhaps intimidating or insular at times, are also an asset which cannot be underestimated.

Although "old-fashioned" views and racist language need to be confronted immediately whenever they occur, most of the challenges that we heard about in our conversations were not about overt nationalism of xenophobia. Rather, they reflected tight-knit, older, non-diverse communities – often cut off geographically, and frequently caught in cycles of deprivation. Where there were overt resilience issues – such as with the racism of the taxi company described in our case study – the issue was often to do with very settled traditional communities, without much experience of change or difference.

The town's reputation – and its sense of having a centre-of-gravity – is central to addressing these issues. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, a sense of decline or of faded grandeur can easily feed into low social resilience – especially among the communities described above. Secondly, the more the area establishes itself as a destination in its own right, the more it can benefit from the positive elements of younger, transient populations and of contact with those from different backgrounds.

Cultural projects which allow people to tell the story of Port Talbot in its own words can support this. So too can locally-anchored education initiatives, which build trust and forge connections with communities that might otherwise be tempted to turn inwards.

Below are some recommendations for further initiatives, which could support the above in small ways:

- Explore the success of existing 'community anchor' projects in Port Talbot, such as in some in its schools – look at means of replicating these elsewhere in the area;
- Look at resources and advice for local cultural institutions on how to make the most of empty spaces on the high street – so as to populate the town centre and reverse narratives of deterioration;
- Provide social media education, particularly for older residents, and potentially run this alongside the roll-out of a 'rebuttal' toolkit, which helps community leaders to confront online misinformation;
- Build on the learning of successful arts initiatives in the past, to develop guidance for other local organisations on collective storytelling and cultural events;
- Explore alternative transport projects, to loop in the valley communities and make it easier for residents of Port Talbot to explore the area's natural assets.

NOTES

1 https://www.hopefultowns.co.uk/the-report

2 https://statswales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Equality-and-Diversity/Ethnicity/ethnicity-by-area-ethnicgroup

3 https://www.bevanfoundation.org/commentary/remote-working-could-bring-new-opportunities-to-wales/

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