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Community culture and development challenges in left behind places: the impact of historical legacies in the South Wales Valleys

Emma Halford [a,b], Robert Huggins [a,*], Richard Gale [a]

[a] School of Geography and Planning, Cardiff University, United Kingdom
[b] Welsh School of Architecture, Cardiff University, United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

So-called 'left behind places' often face significant development challenges due to entrenched path dependencies. A key policy issue is that interventions may fail to account for the influence of community culture, which remains shaped by historical legacies. This paper examines how historical continuity and adaptive change interact to form contemporary community culture in the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys of South Wales, UK. It finds that in these former coal mining areas local cultural contexts are central to understanding the persistence of 'left behindness', with inherited cultural traits both enabling and constraining development. In particular, strong traditions of community collective action continue to engender resilience but often manifest in a 'survivalist' rather than forward-looking orientation. However, the study also identifies instances where 'left behindness' has catalysed both individual and collective agency, leading to positive local development. Effective leadership emerges as a key factor in overcoming cultural inertia and unlocking new opportunities. The findings highlight the need for policies that engage with community culture as a dynamic developmental force, leveraging its strengths while addressing its constraints to promote more sustainable development pathways.

1. Introduction

Despite decades of regional policy interventions, left-behind places often struggle to break free from entrenched negative path trajectories (Houlden et al., 2024; MacKinnon et al., 2024). Place-based approaches to development have sought to address these challenges through context-specific interventions (Beer et al., 2023). However, many such strategies overlook the role of community culture in shaping individual and collective motivations (Tierney et al., 2023). In response, this study examines the influence of community culture on development challenges in the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys of South Wales, a region where historical legacies continue to shape contemporary socio-economic conditions. The study is framed by a conceptual lens that considers community culture as an evolving relationship between historical continuity, adaptive change, and leadership.

By deploying a novel conceptual framework informed by critical engagement with the literature this research investigates the following question: How have historical experiences of deindustrialisation and coal-mine closures shaped present-day community culture and developmental trajectories in former mining areas? Drawing on in-depth interviews and fine-grained community-level insights, the study finds that community culture is central to understanding left-behind places, with contemporary cultural traits being deeply embedded in historical legacies. However, rather than viewing these cultures as static or entirely determined by the past, this study highlights slow-paced cultural adaptation across generations. While collective solidarity, equity, and cohesion remain defining characteristics of these communities, they coexist with developmental constraints rooted in long-standing social hierarchies and industrial identities (Huggins et al., 2021). Importantly, cultural differences emerge not only from historical settlement patterns and valley topographies but also from variation in community agency and leadership. Some communities have more successfully harnessed collective action to maintain services and improve local conditions, demonstrating that cultural traits can be mobilised in progressive ways. This highlights the importance of leadership and external perspectives in shaping trajectories of change.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. The next section critically examines the literature on left-behind places, leading to a framework for analysing the role of community culture and historical legacies in forming patterns of local development. This is followed by an exploration of the historical context of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys, the methodological approach, and the presentation of empirical

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: hugginsr@cardiff.ac.uk (R. Huggins).

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findings. The paper concludes with a discussion of the study's key insights and implications for policy and practice.

2. Community culture and left behind places

Economic decline affects places unevenly, with some regions more adversely impacted than others (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; MacKinnon et al., 2024). These regions often exhibit what has come to be referred to as a 'left behind' status, a term which has gained prominence in the UK, especially in relation to the South Wales Valleys (Morgan et al., 2019; OECD, 2020; Davenport and Zaranko, 2021). Despite decades of regional development policies, these areas continue to struggle economically, a pattern exacerbated by the decline of their traditional industries. The term 'left behind' has been used to describe places that lag behind economically and socially, but its application risks oversimplifying the complex cultural, historical, and economic trajectories that shape these communities (Pike et al., 2023). As argued by Pike et al. (2023) and Tomaney et al (2023), the term 'left behind' is diffuse in connotations and application, incurring the risk that widely divergent places are bundled together into an amorphous category, obscuring the very different historicity, as well as economic and social trajectories, these places follow.

Despite – or indeed on account of – its breadth, as Pike at al. (2024) suggest, the term 'left behind' has the potential to move the debate concerning spatialised disadvantage beyond a narrow, metricised focus on socioeconomic inequality, to providing a wider framing that also encompasses social, political and cultural dimensions. In this sense, the concept of left behind places is a relational one that seeks to encompass multiple conditions concerning spatial injustice (Pike et al., 2023). In general, the term left behind has come to define a whole range of different types of lagging regions and localities, often without identifying the nature and implications of this variety (Connor et al., 2023; Nilsen et al., 2023). In the context of this paper, a left-behind place is one that manifests a socioeconomic environment that is economically uncompetitive with significant levels of deprivation and social inequalities.

A clear conceptualisation of community culture may help illuminate how such places can overcome their challenges, as culture, in its many dimensions, influences the capacity of communities to navigate socioeconomic difficulties (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023; Tomaney et al., 2023). In recent years, emerging studies have begun to incorporate the cultural dimensions of left behind places, recognising that economic decline is not merely a question of material deprivation but also of cultural and psychological factors (Hannemann et al., 2023; Huggins and Thompson, 2021). This hints at the possibility that historical legacies may significantly impact the contemporary cultural aspects of life in left behind places. As such, understanding the cultural characteristics of these communities is essential for effective regeneration and policy formulation, especially when addressing issues of collective identity, social cohesion, and local agency (Huggins et al., 2021). The role of culture in forming these elements is likely to be significant as it directly influences the way communities respond to external interventions and how they perceive their own capacity for change (Tups et al., 2023).

Community culture in the form of shared beliefs, social norms, and cultural practices is likely to influence development paths in lagging regions (Ettlinger, 2003; Huggins and Thompson, 2015). It can impact on the way in which communities respond to change and how individuals within these communities perceive their place in the world. While terms like 'social capital' (Putnam, 2001) have been used to describe certain elements of community culture, they often fall short of capturing the full complexity of cultural dynamics, particularly in left behind areas. Social capital tends to focus on networks and relationships, but community culture also involves qualities such as collective memory, place attachment, and historical narratives that frame local identities (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). It is these elements of culture that may play a critical role in determining how communities adapt to economic decline and, perhaps more importantly, how they envision their future.

As a concept, community culture is largely place-bound and is formed by both fixed and evolving factors (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005; Huggins and Thompson, 2021). On the one hand, cultural values are embedded in the historical and social fabric of a community, influencing collective norms and behaviours (Kockel, 2002; Emery, 2018; Martin and Sunley, 2022). On the other hand, these values evolve over time as they interact with new external pressures and internal aspirations. Thus, community cultures are not static but are instead moulded by the ongoing negotiation between tradition and adaptation (Massey, 1995; Robertson et al., 2010). This negotiation is particularly relevant in places with long histories of industrial decline, where the past may continue to exert a significant influence on the present and future (Eriksen et al., 2023; Storper, 2013). Therefore, in broad alignment with recent scholarship on the 'moral communities' of left behind places (Dale, 2002; Wuthnow, 2018; Tomaney et al., 2023; Tomaney et al., 2024), community culture is influenced by a continued attachment to, and investment of meaning in, identities and customs associated with the industrial past.

The conceptual framework of community culture presented here seeks to identify the role of culture on the development and regeneration of 'left behind' places. As illustrated by Fig. 1, this framework integrates ideas from scholarly work on local agency, path dependency, and place attachment. It builds on an understanding of community culture as a force that influences the capacity of communities to respond to socioeconomic challenges (Huggins and Thompson, 2015). The framework unpacks and connects concepts relating to the (1) foundations, (2) formation and (3) evolution of community culture.

Fig. 1 organises the concepts of formation, foundations, and evolution of community culture from left to right for clarity, but this visual arrangement does not imply a linear or temporal progression. Rather, these three elements are best understood as coexisting and interacting dimensions of community culture that operate concurrently within any given place. Each dimension captures a distinct aspect of cultural dynamics: formation refers to the deep-rooted legacies and structural conditions that influence a community's historical trajectory; foundations refer to the enduring norms, values, and place-based identities that sustain cultural meaning; and evolution reflects the adaptive or resistant behaviours through which communities respond to changing internal and external conditions. In essence, these dimensions are analytically separable but empirically entangled, with each one continually influencing and being influenced by the others.

2.1. Foundations of community culture

At the core of this conceptual framework lies the notion of community culture being founded on a set of shared beliefs, values, norms, and practices that define the social fabric of a community (Licht et al., 2007; Peet, 2000; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). These cultural elements are influenced by both historical and contemporary forces and shape how communities interact, perceive themselves, and respond to external changes (Huggins et al., 2021). Cultural values and norms are a key pillar of community culture and represent the shared beliefs that guide behaviour and social interactions within a community. They determine how individuals cooperate, interact, and engage with one another (Hofstede, 1991; Guiso et al., 2006; Huggins and Thompson, 2025).

Values and norms play a vital role in shaping community culture, particularly in relation to collective action and social cohesion. These values influence how individuals interact with one another, how they perceive external opportunities, and how they contribute to community development. For example, more collectivist communities tend to emphasise group cohesion and shared responsibilities, which can promote trust and cooperation among community members (Hofstede, 1980). In contrast, individualistic communities may place greater emphasis on personal achievement, which can stimulate entrepreneurial activity but may also undermine collective efforts (Wennberg et al.,

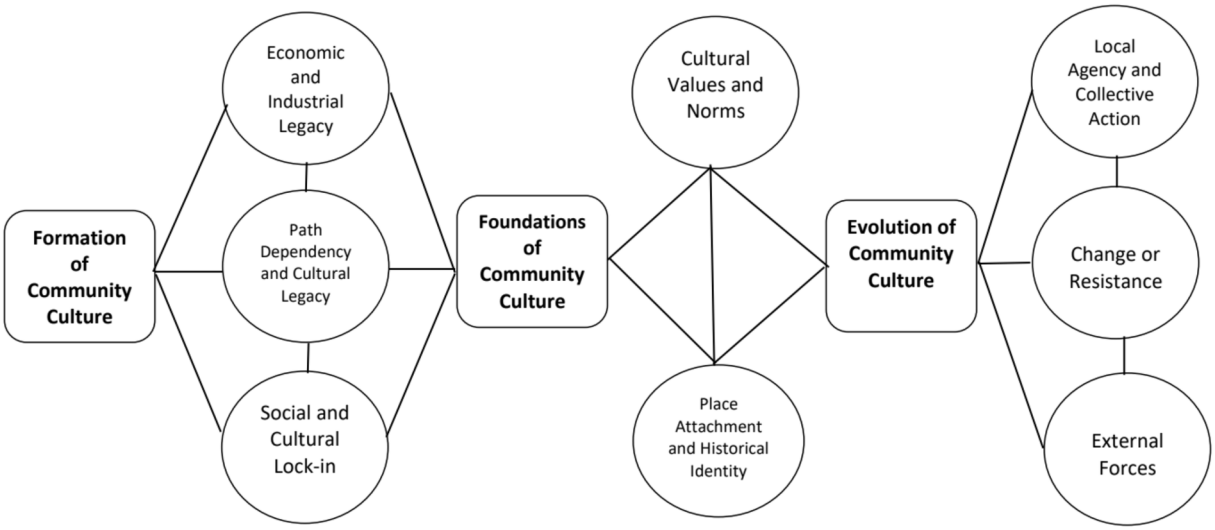

Fig. 1. Community Culture Conceptual Framework.

2013).

Alongside these values and norms, place attachment and historical identity define community culture and refer to the emotional and psychological bonds that individuals and communities have with their place of residence (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). In left behind areas, this attachment is often closely tied to the community's industrial past, which can influence both nostalgia and resistance to change. This attachment can be a source of resilience but also a barrier to adaptation (Mihaylov and Perkins, 2013).

Place-making strategies, which focus on leveraging local assets to stimulate regeneration, are particularly relevant for left behind places. These strategies should be attuned to the specific cultural characteristics of a place, recognising the role of social cohesion, place attachment, and historical identity in influencing local responses to regeneration efforts (Barca et al., 2012; Martin et al., 2016). Effective place-making in left behind areas is likely to require interventions that resonate with the cultural values of local communities, ensuring that development is not just economically driven but also socially and culturally meaningful (Pike et al., 2007; OECD, 2020).

2.2. Formation of community culture

Key components of the conceptual framework are necessarily the factors underlying the formation of community culture, in particular factors concerning path dependency and cultural legacy. Path dependency refers to how the historical trajectory of a community influences its present and future behaviour (Bole et al., 2024; Waterton and Smith, 2010; Jolly et al., 2020). Past events, decisions, and investments may lock communities into specific trajectories that can be difficult to alter. These trajectories are influenced not just by economic factors but also by the cultural meanings attached to past experiences and the social structures that persist over time (Pierson, 2004; Grimshaw and Mates, 2021). Once a community follows a particular developmental path – stemming from past economic successes, failures, and decisions – experiences related to such development may become ingrained in the cultural fabric of the community, locking it into particular economic and social paths (Pierson, 2004).

From the perspective of economic and industrial legacy, areas with a history of industrial decline, such as the South Wales Valleys, path dependency can become manifest as strong cultural ties to industries that are no longer economically viable. The decline of coal mining and heavy industry in the South Wales Valleys created a legacy of economic hardship that is deeply ingrained in local culture and collective memory (Morgan et al., 2019; Tomaney et al., 2023). Communities in these places often retain a strong attachment to their industrial past, which can appear in both nostalgic and adaptive forms. This industrial legacy is likely to contribute to a community culture marked by traditional gender roles, moulded by the male-dominated nature of former industries such as coal mining and steel production (Huggins et al., 2021). As such, gender norms and expectations may continue to influence patterns of labour market participation, social identity, and regional development trajectories.

The cultural identity of these areas is not solely defined by the loss of industry but also by the ways in which communities have negotiated these losses and adapted to new realities over time (Huggins and Thompson, 2021; Oazimi, 2014; Robertson et al., 2010). This creates a tension between the community's past and the potential for future development (Rodríguez-Pose and Storper, 2006; Storper, 2013; Huggins et al., 2021). In particular, communities that have been economically reliant on a single industry or sector may experience cultural lock-in, whereby social norms and practices become rigid and resistant to external changes (Massey, 2004; Grimshaw and Mates, 2021). The continuation of these patterns can undermine attempts to diversify or adapt the local economy. Understanding the culture of left behind places, therefore, requires a recognition of the path dependency that often governs their socio-economic development.

2.3. Evolution of community culture

When considering the evolution of contemporary community culture, frameworks should acknowledge that culture is not just a passive backdrop but an active driver of change or resistance. It interacts with both economic and social forces, influencing how communities respond to regeneration efforts. In the face of economic decline, cultural resilience can foster local pride and a sense of shared identity, which can be harnessed for positive change. Communities that retain strong cultural values may be more willing to engage in efforts that align with their historical and social context (Huggins and Thompson, 2021). However, culture can also serve as a source of resistance to change. Communities may feel that new policies or external interventions threaten their cultural integrity, leading to resistance against changes that could potentially improve economic conditions. This is particularly relevant in communities where local identity is deeply rooted in past economic structures (Rodríguez-Pose et al., 2023). Overall, community cultural evolution is likely to be identified through observable shifts in key areas such as social values, beliefs, and attitudes; the strength and nature of social cohesion; and the emergence (or erosion) of new forms of collective action and local leadership.

Central to the evolution of community culture is the concept of local agency, which refers to the ability of individuals, organisations, and leaders within a community to initiate and drive change. Local agency is often framed in relation to social cohesion, which refers to the extent to which community members share a sense of solidarity, mutual support, and collective responsibility (Abreu and Jones, 2021; Bole et al., 2024). Building on recent behavioural approaches to regional development, human agency is understood to be mediated by cultural factors that determine whether agency is expressed as transformational, reproductive, or conservative in nature (Huggins and Thompson, 2025).

Strong local leaders or grassroots organisations can act as agents of change, mobilising the community around new development opportunities. These agents must navigate the cultural landscape, understanding the values and social norms that may facilitate or hinder change (Rekers and Stihl, 2021; Sotarauta, 2016). This 'change agency' refers to intentional action aimed at disrupting, reconfiguring, or creating new structures, institutions, or economic paths (Grillitsch and Sotarauta, 2020). Change agency is considered to be central to understanding how actors initiate or support transformative regional processes, often through institutional entrepreneurship, strategic visioning, and the mobilisation of resources (Sotarauta et al., 2023).

Recent research has highlighted the role of human agents and the networks they form in driving positive change in left behind areas (Rekers and Stihl, 2021; Huggins and Thompson, 2023). These individuals or groups serve as catalysts for transformation, often working within the constraints of local culture to mobilise support for regeneration efforts. In many cases, local leaders and community organisations are best positioned to understand and address the specific cultural characteristics of their communities. As indicated above, they may possess a unique understanding of local values, norms, and social dynamics, which can be critical for designing interventions that are culturally sensitive and likely to succeed (Blažek and Květoň, 2023; Sotarauta, 2016).

While local agency is crucial, it is important to recognise that change is rarely the result of isolated efforts. System-level agency, involving coordinated action across multiple stakeholders, is often necessary to address the complex challenges faced by left behind places (Jolly et al., 2020; Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2022). Effective change may require collective action that integrates local culture with external resources, ideas, and opportunities. The challenge lies in ensuring that collective action respects and builds on the cultural foundations of the community rather than undermining it (Tomaney et al., 2024).

Social cohesionrepresents a double-edged sword as it seeks to balance collective action with individual freedom and adaptability (Wennberg et al., 2013). On the one hand, it can facilitate collective action and reduce social instability, contributing to more inclusive development (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). On the other hand, it may stifle individual ambition and limit a community's ability to engage with external opportunities, as individuals may feel pressure to conform to established norms and practices (Legros and Cislaghi, 2019). In contrast to change agency, these norms and practices become manifest in the form of reproductive and maintenance agency that stabilise, preserve, or incrementally adapt existing structures and practices (Bækkelund, 2021; Jolly et al., 2020; Stihl, 2024). Reproductive agency refers to resistance to novel or disruptive activity as well as purposeful efforts to sustain current development paths (Stihl, 2024). This includes actions such as routine entrepreneurship and institutional work aimed at preserving prevailing established norms (Blažek et al., 2024). Maintenance agency, in particular, refers specifically to efforts aimed at preserving existing power relations and dominant institutions, sometimes to suppress or prevent change (Baumgartinger-Seiringer, 2022).

In left behind places, where social norms are often strongly entrenched, such dynamics can be especially pronounced. Understanding the balance between social cohesion and individual agency may therefore be a key factor in designing successful regeneration strategies (Rodríguez-Pose and Storper, 2006; Goczek et al., 2021). Furthermore, a community's social cohesion can either facilitate or hinder regeneration efforts. While strong social ties can lead to collective action and support for local initiatives, overly cohesive communities may also resist external interventions or new ideas that challenge existing norms (Robertson et al., 2010).

Finally, a key feature impacting on local community cultures is the influence of external forces. Successful regeneration and development may require the integration of external opportunities with local cultural values (Jolly et al., 2020). While local agencies can act as change agents, effective transformation often necessitates external support and resources. However, these external interventions will be required to respect and build upon the cultural identity and social dynamics of the community (Dinmore et al., 2023). For example, policy interventions and external support in the form of government programmes, funding, or expertise are only likely to be effective when they are formulated in a culturally sensitive manner and designed in a way that resonates with local values and norms (Oazimi, 2014). Interventions that disregard the community's cultural context risk alienating local populations and failing to achieve lasting impact (OECD, 2020; Tomaney et al., 2024). Place-making strategies are particularly relevant in this context, as they leverage the community's cultural assets – such as historical buildings, local arts, or community networks – to stimulate development and regeneration. By focusing on the unique cultural characteristics of a place, regeneration strategies can be both economically viable and socially meaningful (Barca et al., 2012).

Based on the conceptual framework of community culture outlined above, the remainder of this paper seeks to examine the nature of such culture in the so-called left behind communities of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys of South Wales.

3. The Rhondda and Cynon Valleys: Historical context

Discovery of high-quality steam coal in the 18th Century resulted in rapid transformation of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys' previously agrarian economy into an internationally significant hub of industry, notably coal mining and iron production (Hughes, 1994). The development of collieries became concentrated in the Rhondda Valleys, with over 70 collieries established (Carpenter, 2000; May, 2003). Similarly, circa 53 collieries were operational during the peak of production in the Cynon Valley but with extraction initially conducted on a much smaller scale due to coal deposits lying closer to the surface (Aberdare Online, 2023).

Dangerous and hazardous underground conditions prompted many families to develop strong religious affiliations (Kidger, 2012). In the 19th century, it was estimated that one chapel was built every eight days in the valleys (Herbert and Jones, 1988), and by the early 1890s there were 151 chapels seating 85,000 people (nearly 75 % of the population) in the Rhondda and 180 chapels in the Cynon Valley (University of Wales Swansea, 2002). Crucially, communities were keen to improve their quality of life and self-funded a range of facilities including hospitals, institutes, theatres, outdoor swimming pools and libraries (Baggs, 2004; Kemp, 2010). Education was seen as a route towards personal betterment through which individuals might avoid working at the coal face (Francis, 1976; Williams, 1998). At this time micro-level communities forged very strong identities, which consequently contributed to well-documented tribal rivalries, most notably evident between local rugby and other sports teams (Selway, 2023; Curtis, 2007; Walker, 2021).

The majority of the Valley's many collieries had closed by 1936. By the 1980s, only a couple of collieries remained: Maerdy and Tower collieries which survived until 1995 and 2008 respectively (Morgan, 2008; Smith, 2013). The perseverance and determination of Valleys' communities to retain mining employment had resulted in the industry's protracted decline (see Fig. 2). While successive economic development strategies helped diversify employment opportunities, many residents needed to commute significant distances to take advantage of these,

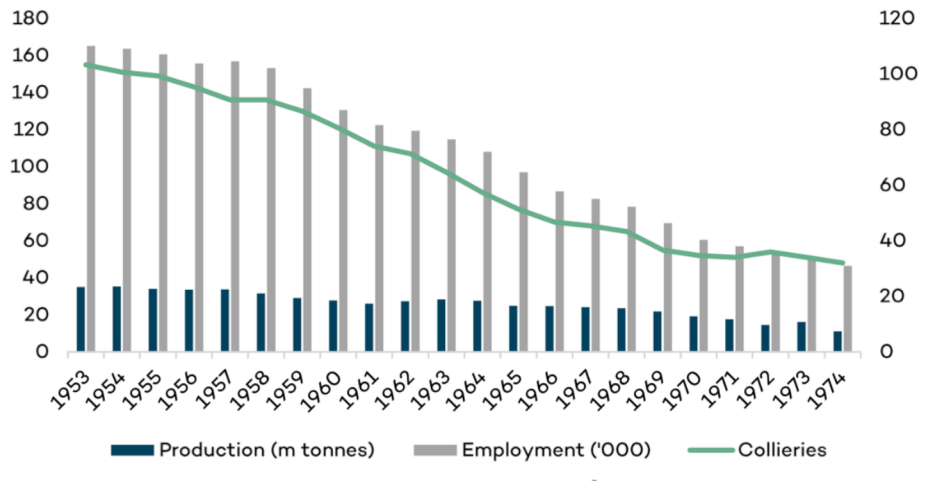

Fig. 2. Production, Employment and Total Number of Collieries in Wales (1974–96) (Kitson and Merrill, 2017, p. 4).

with some settlements in the study area being reduced to little more than ‘ dormitory suburbs’ of Cardiff (the major city in Wales) and neighbouring cities on the coastal belt.

Today, populations in both the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys (see Fig. 3 for the location of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys within the wider sub-region) exhibit largely homogenous socio-economic

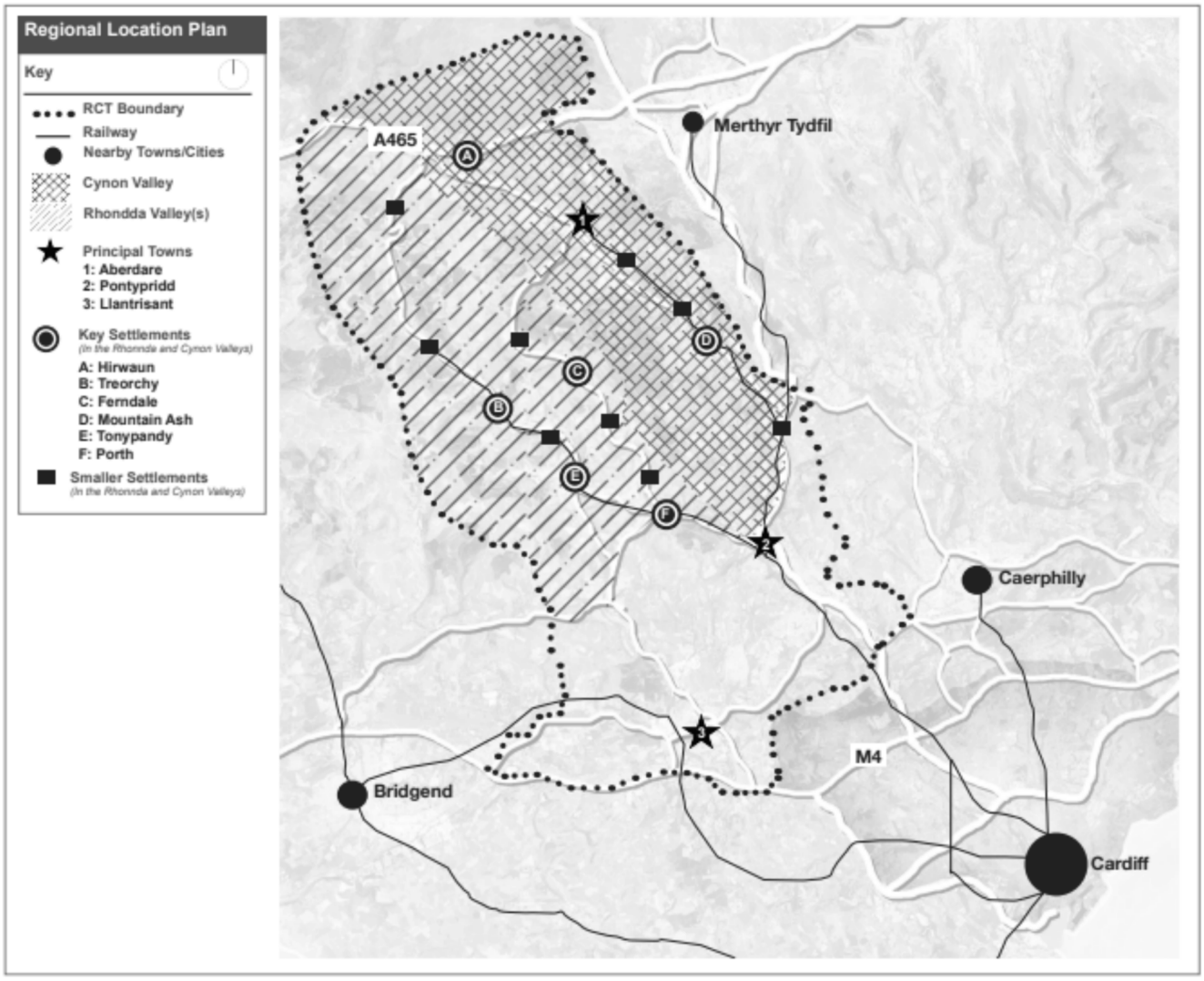

Fig. 3. Location of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys within the Wider Sub-Region Source: Rhondda Cynon Taf Local Development Plan.

characteristics. In terms of scale, at the longest point the Rhondda Valley is 26.01 km with a maximum width of 2.2 km, and the Cynon Valley has a length of 20.82 km and a maximum width of 1.5 km. These dimensions indicate the rather unique topography of the area. Both Valleys continue to experience persistently high levels of multiple deprivation following the demise of heavy industry, with several communities within the top 10 % most deprived in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019a; Huggins et al. 2021). There is a particularly high concentration of areas classed as the 'most deprived' in the Rhondda Valleys: 71.4 % of Lower Super Output Areas (LSOA) in Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority area are within the 50 % most deprived in Wales, the third highest number amongst Welsh Local Authorities (Welsh Government, 2019a). Large percentages of residents suffer with health problems: 62.1 % of Rhondda Valleys residents and 56.3 % of Cynon Valley residents live in health deprivation hotspots, compared to the Welsh average of 19.3 % (Welsh Government, 2019b). Low-income levels persist in both study areas: average annual household incomes in the Rhondda (£22,465) and Cynon (£23,618) Valleys remain considerably below the Welsh average of £36,866 (Office for National Statistics, 2021b).

Historically, the overwhelming support within the study area for a single political party, the Labour Party, indicates widespread commonly held political beliefs (Williams, 1998). Such unity of political affiliations over generations indicates that the area's history has continued to influence cultural values and beliefs, despite residents no longer being connected via singular employment opportunities. More recently there is evidence of attitudinal change through an apparent dissatisfaction with key Labour Party policies. For example, a majority of residents across the study area voted to leave the EU despite the Labour Party campaigning to remain and the considerable investment made in the area via sustained EU Cohesion funding over many decades (Cataldo, 2016; Jones, 2016; Awan-Scully, 2018). Yet this wholesale shift in residents' perceptions is nonetheless illustrative of communities that remain united in their attitudes and values: characteristics known to greatly influence the cooperative nature of a society (Performance and Innovation Unit, 2002). Residents in both study areas exhibit low levels of educational attainment: 28.3 % and 26.3 % of residents in the Rhondda Valleys and Cynon Valley respectively have no qualifications compared to a Welsh average of 19.9 % (Office for National Statistics, 2021a).

4. Methodology

The case study comprises the former coalmining communities of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys in South Wales, which as indicated above were once central to one of the fastest-growing industrial economies in the world (Hughes, 1994). Following the demise of heavy industry these communities continue to experience persistently high levels of deprivation and, as already highlighted, several communities are amongst the most deprived in Wales (Welsh Government, 2019c; Evans, 2024). Overall, the study area includes two principal towns: Pontypridd and Aberdare, which serve as key economic and service hubs. In addition, several other important settlements – Treorchy, Tonypandy, Porth, Ferndale, Mountain Ash, and Hirwaun – are recognised as strategically significant in terms of local development planning (Fig. 3). In the analysis to follow, Treorchy is found to stand out for its notable success in addressing the long-term impacts of economic decline with the example of effective regeneration initiatives.

Studies to-date have utilised varying methodologies to explore a diverse range of cultural characteristics, at national, regional, and local levels. Such studies place a strong reliance upon interpretation of large-scale data sets to demonstrate causality between cultural factors and the determinants of economic growth (Harrison et al., 2000; Huggins and Thompson, 2023). Consequently, the complexity and nuances of the social dimensions of community culture continue to be largely overlooked. This more local-level study seeks to address this shortcoming through locally derived insights and perspectives generated via in-depth, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, enabling multi-dimensional discussion and thematic analysis. This approach avoids over-reliance on quantitative information and provides a richer understanding of the factors influencing contemporary culture (Creswell, 2009; Brannen, 2005). The analysis is structured to reflect the key dimensions of the conceptual framework for community culture presented above.

In terms of the sampling strategy adopted, initially several experienced local authority officials were identified for interview, to provide expert perspectives on regeneration challenges. These interviewees were then asked to identify other local authority officials and appropriate external contacts to expand the sample. This 'snowball' sampling strategy quickly identified an appropriate and consistent sample frame of participants. To mitigate any potential lack of diversity, research was undertaken to identify gaps in participation within the following groups: business community; older generation; younger generation (18–35-year-olds); community groups involved in the delivery of local projects; and neighbourhood network attendees.

The sampling strategy employed – focused on active community groups identified through local authority contacts and desk-based research – the study predominantly engages individuals already involved in community activities. As such, a potential limitation is that the levels of community cohesion and collective action observed may be inflated, as disengaged or less active residents are underrepresented. However, the interview data facilitates a discussion of the attitudes and likely cultural values of these residents. The sample is necessarily weighted towards older participants as this reflects the demographics of the groups accessed. In particular, it became apparent during interviews that individuals actively involved in community activities were most inclined to engage in the study and future studies would benefit from a wider-reaching sampling strategy to engage such people.

The initial interviews were undertaken with local authority officials experienced in the delivery of physical and social regeneration within the study area. In addition to obtaining their responses to the research questions, information was sought on available local-level data and key community actors who could subsequently be approached. Following this, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with most undertaken in community settings to enhance opportunities for any observational findings. Participants were given the option of being interviewed as part of a group or individually to ensure that they were comfortable. All interviews were audio recorded, enabling more effective interaction with interviewees, and were subsequently fully transcribed for thematic analysis. In total, there were 88 participants engaged in the study. A cross-section of community representatives varying in age and interests were interviewed consisting of 21 local authority officials and 67 residents (see Appendix 1 for comprehensive details of the interview and focus group schedule).

The interview topic guide covered the following core areas: (1) *interviewee context*: gathering information on residency history, family background, employment status, session purpose, hobbies, and local group involvement; (2) *community perceptions*: exploring perceptions of community openness, community activities, local social connections, and community cohesion, and demographics; (3) *attitudes to education and employment*: understanding the educational background, attitudes towards further education, career aspirations, job preferences, willingness to commute, and openness to undertaking training for different employment opportunities, exploring aspects of education andcareer choices, and professional development; (4) *community values*: addressing personal and community values, definitions of success, awareness of social issues, perceptions of community values, changes over time, caregiving responsibilities, engagement in volunteering, and the continuity of generational values, exploring the dynamics of individual and collective values, community engagement, and intergenerational shifts; and (5) *community action:* investigating awareness of and attitudes towards local community-driven initiatives, participation in collective activities, involvement in community groups or projects, and

perceptions of community interest in local activities.

The interview proforma was designed to be a relatively 'loose script' (Johansson, 2004), and this allowed respondents to discuss significant issues and experiences in their own words, rather than making a response to a pre-defined set of factors (Bauer, 1996; Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). A thematic analysis was undertaken using a two-stage process. First, the transcripts were examined according to themes 2–5 indicated above; and second, within each theme a further round of analysis allowed the salient factors underpinning each to emerge and be coupled with relevant quotes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The following section outlines the key findings from this analysis.

5. Examining the community culture of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys

This section presents the analysis of the key findings from both the interviews and focus groups organised by the conceptual framework developed above. It begins by outlining the findings relating to the foundations of community culture in terms of cultural values and norms, along with place attachment and historical identity. It then addresses the formation of community culture based on issues of legacy and lock-in. Finally, it considers the evolution of community culture relating to change and resistance from the perspective of local agency, collective action and the role of external forces. The section presents a range of interviewee quotes to substantiate the findings and their interpretation, and for most elements many other similar quotes could have been included.

5.1. Foundations of community culture

A core characteristic of community culture in the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys is a strong attachment to fairness and equality, rooted in the history of mining communities. This has engendered a strong sense of social responsibility, with many interviewees expressing a commitment to caring for others and sustaining communal values through voluntarism and mutual support. However, embedded cultural norms also exert pressure on individuals to conform, discouraging those who might seek personal advancement.

Negative social norms have developed in certain areas, reinforced by shared socio-economic struggles. Some interviewees indicated that these norms become manifest in ways that hinder local economic activity, with business owners engaging in competitive rather than collaborative behaviour. Others noted that external perceptions of the valleys were often formed by negative portrayals, influencing local self-esteem and ambition.

Overall, there is a strong place attachment in these communities, with historical identity playing a key role in establishing community pride. Older residents, in particular, associate their identity with past industrial success, while younger generations express frustration with the region's continued portrayal as economically disadvantaged. There is relatively limited engagement from younger residents with community projects, and when asked, younger volunteers confirmed that their involvement was largely influenced by their parents' longstanding immersion in such projects. One local authority official, experienced in working with young people, highlighted a more general difference between the attitudes and perceptions of older and younger generations:

> 'When I've asked young people to collate images that they feel best reflect where they come from, very few choose to include images of collieries, with many expressing considerable frustration around how the valleys continue to be negatively portrayed' (Interviewee 11).

Furthermore, there is a high degree of resentment towards authority and formal institutions, with distrust and discontent concerning the perceived intentions and capabilities of such institutions, most notably policies associated with local government (referred to as the 'local authority'). This suggests the perception of an ongoing culture of paternalism, whereby decisions are made for communities rather than with them, reinforcing feelings of exclusion, disempowerment, and a lack of genuine voice in shaping local development priorities. Few interviewees could identify any benefits delivered by previous regeneration initiatives in their areas. Others referenced collective feelings towards 'top-down' regeneration initiatives, with one interviewee observing that 'people have had so much done to them here and not with them' (Interviewee 12). Several interviewees commented on the existence of a 'blame culture' whereby individuals actively seek to discredit public institutions, regardless of whether they are genuinely at fault or not:

> 'Local construction workers recently downed tools on a project because they'd heard a rumour that the Council hadn't paid a bill, which simply wasn't true' (Interviewee 6).

Interviewees highlighted the existence of a community culture within some towns based on the identity of groups of individuals facing similar significant socio-economic challenges. Such groups appear to be generating 'negative' social norms to greater or lesser degrees such as through anti-social behaviour. However, interviewees that had moved into the locality from elsewhere acknowledged that local people had been generally friendly to them, but also commented that existing residents hold expectations around new residents engaging proactively in community life if they are to be accepted:

> 'I moved here from London and people overall have been welcoming but I have found that in order to be properly accepted I've had to get involved in local stuff, so I started Welsh lessons' (Interviewee 83).

Many interviewees highlighted differences in attitudes and motivations across individual micro-communities:

> 'In Porth the community is very similar to everywhere else in the Valleys but for some reason everyone seems out to get one another. I've seen business owners purposefully do things to reduce trade for other businesses' (Interviewee 15).

Other interviewees pointed to varying degrees of community ownership displayed by communities within the same case study area. For instance, a considerable number of interviewees described noticeable differences between Treorchy, Tonypandy and Porth, three towns only a few miles apart, with one resident observing:

> 'In Treorchy people take pride in the appearance of the town. For example, if there was someone being disruptive in the street, the police would be called to sort it out whereas, say in Tonypandy, which is only up the road, people would just leave them to it' (Interviewee 38).

These reflections highlight the ways cultural characteristics influence individual actions and attitudes differently at a micro-community scale. It became clear that micro-level tensions can manifest themselves in obstructive group behaviour that reduces a community's ability to work with other nearby communities to address shared challenges effectively. Reluctance amongst local groups to work together was identified by local authority officials involved in community asset transfers:

> 'We have lots of community groups telling us that they either need extra capacity in their buildings or have spare capacity that they aren't sure what do to with it, yet often such groups are unwilling to work together to address and solve problems themselves' (Interviewee 13).

Interviews with such groups confirmed the reluctance to work together, with interviewees expressing a strong preference to 'figure it out themselves'. This suggests that connections across communities have weakened over time, with individual communities pulling in different directions rather than together, as they once did, towards

shared objectives. A further indication of weakening cohesion across communities was reflected in the finding that over a quarter of all interviewees commented on the considerable investment and development ongoing in Pontypridd – the largest town in the locality – with many seriously questioning how such investment benefitted them in their own community.

When residents were asked about such new facilities in Pontypridd, an overwhelming majority said they did not regularly visit the town because of poor connectivity and high public transport costs. Indeed, they displayed a strong inclination to stay as local as possible. Such comments indicate that the benefits of strategic investments are not perceived to be 'trickling down' to all equally. Similar perceptions were exhibited during numerous group discussions, suggesting a lack of knowledge and degree of scepticism regarding the objectives behind local and regional development plans and initiatives in general.

Overall, the perceived weakening of cohesion represents not only a current snapshot but also a shift over time. Several interviewees reflected on how relationships between communities had changed, often contrasting the present-day reluctance to collaborate with past experiences of more unified efforts and shared goals. These retrospective comparisons suggest that community culture is not static but has evolved, with many participants identifying a decline in the sense of interdependence and collective purpose.

5.2. Formation of community culture

The industrial past of the Rhondda and Cynon Valleys has clearly influenced the prevailing community culture. A legacy of coal mining has created strong collective identities, with many older residents displaying nostalgia for the past's vibrant social scene and collective action. However, this industrial history has also led to a dependence on external economic forces, with few perceiving benefits from past regeneration initiatives.

The majority of interviewees affiliated strongly with the collective values of their predecessors, notably caring for others, voluntarism and the prioritisation of pursuing community objectives. In general, older residents displayed a particularly strong affiliation with the values of previous generations that accompanied the area's heavy industrial past. They also displayed a higher propensity to engage in collective activities delivering community benefits, as evidenced by previous generations during the miners' strikes:

> 'There is still a large group of us that meet regularly at the chapel to lend an ear' (Interviewee 43).

The long-standing industrial legacy has reinforced specific community values, such as fairness, equality, and shared struggles. The uniformity of the built environment, notably the housing stock, has further supported these beliefs, maintaining a sense of socio-economic parity among residents. However, this cultural legacy has also contributed to low aspiration levels, particularly among younger generations, who often replicate the occupational patterns of their parents, limiting engagement in further education and entrepreneurship:

> 'Most don't go to 'uni' here, we don't need to because our parents didn't' (Interviewee 26).

The extent to which individuals place importance on self-sufficiency and contributing to society is likely to be significantly related to prevailing community cultures resulting in a form of learned helplessness. Interviews provided evidence of greater short-term orientation across the locality with low levels of self-sufficiency motivation observed, coupled with a reliance on financial support from the government:

> 'Many people tell me that they don't need my help to find a job because they get paid by the government' (Interviewee 14).

This socially accepted reliance on external support appears to perpetuate a culture that deters individuals from pursuing personal betterment, something mining communities formerly prided themselves on. The interviews revealed overwhelmingly low levels of personal aspiration and achievement motivation. Many were not prepared to contemplate undertaking any job that was not local in nature and required further training.

Such observations indicate the lasting effects of a dominance of unskilled occupations in previous generations, with many jobs requiring little education, resulting in low incentives for residents to acquire greater education. Younger residents (aged 18–35) exhibited particularly low levels of aspiration, many having chosen to follow similar occupations to their parents, notably in low-skilled, low-income jobs. This reflects the strongly generational nature of embedded community cultures with the post-industrial legacy of the area continuing to constrain individual aspirations greatly. Others indicated feelings of inferiority, reflecting Thomas' (1992) observations that Welsh people often perceive themselves as second class citizens in comparison to their English counterparts, with one interviewee commenting:

> 'We're from the Rhondda and my daughter has got a good, high-paid, job now and lives in Cardiff (capital of Wales). However, she has low self-confidence sometimes when it comes to career progression because she always says that she's just a girl from the valleys' (Interviewee 5).

In summary, there appears to be a cultural belief that people from the valleys are not worthy of higher paid jobs because this is not what their family achieved in the past, with the influence of the area's historical legacy negatively shaping how people think about their self-worth.

5.3. Evolution of community culture

Despite the general reticence of local government, some interviewees noted that strong local leaders have played a key role in motivating communities to engage in more progressive local-level projects, producing successful outcomes in some communities. One local authority official described the experience of delivering workshops in the study area:

> 'People were very good at nodding and talking in meetings, but it proved difficult to get anyone to do anything. Every now and again though I'd strike gold and find someone that would really rally the troops and make things happen' (Interviewee 19).

This indicates that embedded community cultures continue to be characterised by leader/follower dynamics, reflective of those exhibited by former mining communities. Several residents and business owners highlighted how some key actors who have moved back to the area, bringing fresh perspectives, have played an important role in mobilising the community to support an array of community-led initiatives. A number of interviewees noted that historically, leadership emerged strongly during the miners' strikes, rooted in the region's nonconformist religious traditions and collectivist cultural norms. Notable figures such as Tyrone O'Sullivan and Arthur Scargill were instrumental in the 1984–85 miners' strike – O'Sullivan notably led the worker buyout of Tower Colliery, while Scargill headed the National Union of Mineworkers.

Contemporary leadership is also evident, notably in Treorchy through Adrian Emmett, a local entrepreneur who returned after gaining experience in London's hospitality sector. Emmett spearheaded a collective effort among high street businesses to revamp the town's image, using social media and high-quality visuals to create a sense of vibrancy and attract visitors. While his efforts were initially met with scepticism, his local roots and personal investment earned community trust. However, some focus group participants noted tensions, suggesting his leadership style pushed a personal agenda. Additionally, strong female leadership emerged in the Cynon Valley, particularly through older women with deep community ties. One standout example is the Lee Gardens Community Pool group in Penrhiwceiber, led by a retired

headteacher, which secured the vast majority of local funding for community development. Although there are clear economic challenges, strong local leadership has enabled certain communities to drive positive change. Treorchy, for example, has demonstrated the potential for collective action, with business-led initiatives fostering economic revitalisation:

> 'Treorchy is a great example of what's possible when the community gets behind an idea – who would have thought we could win the Great British High Street of the Year award' (Interviewee 30).
> 'If it wasn't for a couple of key people, the high street wouldn't be where it is today. People need a bit of a push sometimes and some inspiration!' (Interviewee 16).

Such successes, however, remain the exception rather than the rule, as many communities continue to rely on external support rather than self-driven initiatives. Interestingly, local authority officials interviewed for the study noted that Treorchy had received considerably less public funding than other town centres, which was partly due to the business community's 'do-it-their-self attitude' (Interviewee 18). Similarly, important local leaders were highlighted by residents, with one commenting on the Lee Gardens initiative:

> 'There are a few good community projects going on in Cynon, such as what [the] Lee Gardens Pool Group are doing up in Penhriwceiber. They're normally run by well-known people who have good community relationships' (Interviewee 16).

Interviews with the individuals involved in such initiatives revealed that the motivations underpinning their involvement continue to be heavily influenced by overriding collective social norms and values, which can place substantial personal obligations on project members. Such projects are largely focused on sustaining existing community activities rather than supporting the development of new and more diverse initiatives. In this case, strong collective cultural systems can also result in negative outcomes, by affecting the extent to which individuals pursue personal creative, entrepreneurial objectives. Such dynamics were expanded upon by one interviewee who noted that 'no-one is against anyone getting on – as long as it isn't one of us!'. This suggests that community members are not expected to set themselves apart from the crowd. Given the strong equitable beliefs observed within the study area, this assertion reflects concern over associated social stigma, potentially a strong disincentive for anyone contemplating 'going it alone', for example as an entrepreneur.

In general, there remains significant resistance to external interventions, with a general scepticism towards the effectiveness of local and regional development plans. This culture of resistance within the community is rooted in historical struggles against economic and social marginalisation. This culture manifests itself in a collective mistrust towards external interventions and a reluctance to engage with formal institutions, which are often viewed with distrust. While this resistance may promote resilience and solidarity, it can also hinder collaboration and limit opportunities for positive change, as local actors remain wary of top-down approaches and imposed policies.

Many interviewees displayed an inclination to remain within their immediate locality, citing poor connectivity and high transport costs as barriers to accessing wider opportunities. Furthermore, some noted that while investment in larger towns such as Pontypridd has been substantial, it is not perceived to benefit outlying communities, with it noted by one interviewee that many individuals 'displayed a strong inclination to stay as local as possible' (Interviewee 75).

While external investment has introduced new economic and social dynamics, the impact has been uneven. Areas with improved housing and infrastructure, such as Aberdare, have seen an influx of new residents, leading to some shifts in community engagement patterns. However, broader socio-economic challenges persist, with a reliance on government support and limited pathways for upward mobility remaining dominant. Among those interviewees that actively supported community activities to enhance community well-being and reduce the impacts of observed high levels of multiple deprivation, there was a desire to bring people together to strengthen community solidarity, for example:

> 'We feed hundreds of people at the community centre regularly. They don't just come because the food is cheap, they come to catch up with everyone. It's what we do here, we don't want to be strangers' (Interviewee 65).

Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the important role local volunteers play in sustaining such activities, one resident commenting 'we couldn't deliver all of the activities and events if it wasn't for the hundred or so local volunteers we have on our books' (Interviewee 70). Interviewees pointed to poor connectivity and considerable shared challenges associated with persistently high levels of multiple deprivation as reasons prompting strong community cohesion in their areas:

> 'All these services are so important to help get people through, but we need to ensure they are delivered locally because it's still difficult for people to get in and out of the Rhondda valleys, particularly the Rhondda Fach [one section of the Rhondda valleys] where the road literally stops' (Interviewee 49).

The reason most noted by interviewees underpinning strong cohesion was a general desire for fairness and equality between community members. Strong cultural beliefs of fairness and equality can be reinforced by the physical characteristics of places. Communities may have to fit within the physical environment in which they are based, while cultures may also drive the development of the physical and built environment, either positively or negatively:

> 'I think we're all the same really and it'll always be that way. We might not all be working down the pit anymore, but we all live in similar houses, don't earn a lot and still go down the rugby club on a Saturday night' (Interviewee 41).

Interviewees further highlighted the importance of a greater mix of housing to the attraction of new residents:

> 'Parts of Aberdare, at the top of the Cynon Valley, are quite affluent because of their proximity to the Brecon Beacons and because of the new housing being built. I think there are more, different, people coming in which we've noticed by increased levels of engagement in local events' (Interviewee 52).

Overall, the analysis highlights a deeply embedded community culture formed from industrial history, social values, and collective experiences. While resilience and cohesion remains strong, persistent cultural lock-in, resistance to change, and low aspiration levels present ongoing challenges to economic and social transformation.

6. Discussion

This study provides insights into the enduring cultural characteristics of historic mining communities and their implications for local development. By examining these characteristics through the conceptual framework of community culture, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the relationship between culture, identity, and economic resilience in post-industrial regions (Huggins and Thompson, 2015). The key themes and findings are summarised in Table 1, and the findings align with and expand upon existing literature highlighting the duality of post-industrial community cultures, being simultaneously adaptive and constrained by historical legacies (Tomaney et al., 2023; Bright, 2016). The persistence of intra-community cohesion and collective action resonates with research on solidarity and camaraderie in post-industrial places (Wuthnow, 2018). However, these same cultural legacies also impose constraints.

The survivalist mindset prevalent in some communities reflects a 'reflexive conservatism,' emphasising preservation of traditional ways of

Table 1
Summary of Key Themes and Findings.

Keys Themes	Summary of Findings
Social Values, Beliefs and Attitudes	High levels of resentment towards authority and formal institutions; reduced trust evident in both valleys. Strong affiliation with socialist values, particularly among older residents—emphasising care, voluntarism, and collective goals. Older generations more inclined toward collective activities. Uncertainty around the extent to which younger generations identify with these inherited values.
Social Cohesion	Strong desire across participants to enhance community solidarity. Volunteerism remains central to the delivery of essential local services. A strong sense of fairness and equity among community members, influenced by the valley's topography. Increased housing diversity due to flatter terrain is beginning to reshape these dynamics.
Collective Action and Local Leadership	Local leaders are vital in mobilising progressive, grassroots initiatives. Effective leaders tend to have deep credibility, often through long-standing community ties or having left the area and returned. Leaders perceived as insiders ("one of us") are more positively received than external figures.

life in response to industrial decline (Huggins et al., 2021). This conservatism contributes to localised competition rather than strategic collaboration, mirroring the challenges of building inter-community bridges (Tomaney et al., 2023). Furthermore, the survivalist mentality in some communities can also be understood through the lens of cognitive and cultural lock-ins, where past patterns of behaviour and thinking become entrenched and paternalistic, limiting the ability to adapt to new opportunities (Hudson, 2005; Wuthnow, 2018). These cognitive and cultural constraints appear to reinforce the survivalist mindset, perpetuating a cycle of reproduction, whereby traditional ways of life are maintained potentially at the expense of innovative, forward-thinking approaches to development. Furthermore, while education was once viewed as a key pathway to personal betterment and social mobility, this traditional value has been increasingly eroded over time as persistent deprivation and limited opportunities have weakened its perceived efficacy and relevance.

Despite the persistence of historical legacies, adaptive change is evident in cases such as Treorchy, whereby leadership and external perspectives have catalysed positive transformation. This supports the view that collective solidarity can facilitate resilience and adaptive responses to social and economic decline (Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). The return of a local leader with business experience exemplifies the potential of strategic leadership in overcoming community stagnation (Robinson, 2007). However, contemporary distrust toward leaders and institutions highlights the tension between collective solidarity and acceptance of entrepreneurial initiatives. This tension reflects broader debates on the balance between collective and individual agency in community development (Huggins and Thompson, 2021).

Historical legacies in left-behind regions such as the South Wales Valleys clearly continue to influence contemporary values and beliefs, presenting significant socio-economic development challenges. These predominantly working-class communities exhibit a slow pace of behavioural change, rooted in long-standing socio-cultural homogeneity. While strong community solidarity and cohesion have fostered well-organised collective agency, much of this action remains survivalist rather than strategically developmental. These findings can be interpreted through the lens of different forms of agency. The persistence of solidarity and tradition reflects forms of reproductive and maintenance agency, whereby established norms are preserved and change is resisted (Bækkelund, 2021; Baumgartinger-Seiringer, 2022). In contrast, instances of leadership-driven renewal, such as in Treorchy, exemplify change agency, where new possibilities are being imagined and enacted (Huggins and Thompson, 2025). This variety in agency reflects the culturally embedded nature of behavioural change formed by both individual and collective efficacy, optimism, and imagination (Huggins and Thompson, 2025). It further highlights the importance of nurturing enabling environments for transformative action in post-industrial regions whereby the persistence of multiple deprivation and the continued inward identification within micro-settlements can present barriers to regional development and cultural change (Tomaney, 2016).

From a policy perspective, the findings emphasise the need for better social infrastructure to connect communities and promote collective agency (Tomaney et al., 2024). Addressing agency and leadership deficits is vital give that historically these communities mobilised themselves through visionary leadership to achieve significant social and political changes (Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2022; 2023). Additionally, barriers to individual ambition, including community suspicion and negative groupthink effects, further complicate efforts toward socio-economic progress. The persistence of self-doubt among individuals who achieve employment success suggests that cultural influences extend beyond the community, influencing personal identities and motivations (Obschonka et al., 2018).

More positively, it is also clear that strong collective norms around fairness, mutual support, and social responsibility stemming from the mining heritage can motivate local actors to initiate community projects and sustain civic life. Committed individuals with deep community ties have mobilised others around shared goals, often without substantial public support. These examples illustrate that community transformation is possible from within, particularly when leadership aligns with local values and earns trust through demonstrated commitment. In terms of policy, the persistence of collectivist traditions, including those rooted in non-conformist religious values and historic labour activism, can potentially provide a latent cultural resource that interventions can better recognise and support. Either way, endogenous change is likely to require nurturing local leadership capacities, supporting peer-led learning across communities, and investing in infrastructure that enables informal networks to scale their activities more effectively. Furthermore, all generations must be involved in shaping the future of these communities but policy should prioritise engaging younger people who may be more open to new ideas but face limited opportunities to act locally. Bridging intergenerational gaps will require the cultivation of inclusive community networks that build mutual respect, shared purpose, and collaborative leadership across age groups.

From a theoretical perspective, this study advances the conceptualisation of community culture as a dynamic interaction between historical continuity and adaptive change. Unlike constructs such as social capital (Putnam, 2001), this approach encompasses affective ties, place attachments, and historicity. By framing community cultures within the concept of 'moral communities' (Wuthnow, 2018; Tomaney et al., 2023), shaped by generational reproduction and reflexive conservatism, the study highlights the capacity for both resilience and constraint. Policymakers and practitioners should focus on nurturing inter-community collaboration and supporting leadership development to overcome defeatism and resource fragmentation. Future policy research could explore the intersection of nostalgia and adaptability in formulating development outcomes, as well as comparative studies across different post-industrial regions.

7. Conclusion

This study examined the utility of community culture as a concept for understanding the emergence of left-behind places, the influence of historical legacies on contemporary culture, and the role of agency, community action, and leadership in overcoming development challenges. First, the study finds that community culture is integral to understanding left-behind places, with embedded cultural values and norms shaping individual and collective motivations. These industrial-

era characteristics continue to influence the adaptability of communities to socio-economic changes. Second, historical legacies in places like the South Wales Valleys have a lasting impact on contemporary community culture, simultaneously generating strengths such as social cohesion and solidarity while perpetuating weaknesses such as insularity and a survivalist mindset. While the paper focuses on these former coalfield valleys in South Wales, similar patterns of culturally rooted collective agency, leadership-driven mobilisation, and uneven public sector engagement have been observed in other structurally disadvantaged regions across Europe (Blažek and Květoň, 2023; Blažek et al., 2024; Bole et al., 2024; Dale, 2002; Stihl, 2024). However, the distinctive historical legacies of religious non-conformity, industrial militancy, and weak local institutional capacity in the South Wales case point to both shared and divergent pathways of community-led transformation.

Finally, agency, community action, and leadership emerge as key factors in addressing development challenges. While bottom-up initiatives driven by community agency show promise, their success often depends on strategic alignment with top-down policies and overcoming community-institution mistrust (Sotarauta and Grillitsch, 2022). These complexities indicate the importance of recognising the strength and depth of community cultures when designing policies and interventions. Policymakers should bridge leadership deficits and tailor interventions to the specific characteristics of community cultures. Aligning government investment initiatives with these cultural foundations can reinforce social cohesion and collective agency while promoting innovation and connectivity. Addressing these challenges will require sustained commitment and inclusive community engagement to harness the strengths of left-behind places and drive meaningful change.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Emma Halford: Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Robert Huggins:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Conceptualization. **Richard Gale:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization.

Appendix Table 1

Interviewee Number	Type of Participant	Type of Interview	Organisation/ Group	Description	Location	Length
Interviewee 1	Senior Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	45 mins
Interviewee 2	Senior Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	45 mins
Interviewee 3	Regeneration Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	1 hr 15mins
Interviewee 4	Town Centre Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Aberdare Library (Cynon Valley)	45 mins
Interviewee 5	Town Centre Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	45 mins
Interviewee 6	Town Centre Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	45 mins
Interviewee 7	Regeneration Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	45 mins
Interviewee 8	Regeneration Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Online	45 mins
Interviewee 9	Grants Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Council Offices, Pontypridd	45 mins
Interviewee 10	Grants Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Online (x1)	45 mins
Interviewee 11	Community Development Specialist	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Park and Dare Theatre, Treorchy (Rhondda Fawr)	30 mins
Interviewee 12	Community Development Specialist	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Online	45 mins
Interviewee 13	Community Development Specialist	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Online	45 mins
Interviewee 14	Neighbourhood Network Coordinator	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Y Hwb, Ferndale (Rhondda Fach)	30 mins
Interviewee 15	Neighbourhood Network Coordinator	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Porth Plaza (Rhondda Fawr)	30 mins
Interviewee 16	Neighbourhood Network Coordinator	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Cynon Linc, Aberdare (Cynon Valley)	30 mins
Interviewee 17	Neighbourhood Network Coordinator	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Aberdare Library (Cynon Valley)	30 mins

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Interviewee Number	Type of Participant	Type of Interview	Organisation/ Group	Description	Location	Length
Interviewee 18	Funding Specialist	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Online	30 mins
Interviewee 19	Heritage Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Rhondda Heritage Park, (Rhondda Fawr)	45 mins
Interviewee 20	Heritage Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Rhondda Heritage Park, (Rhondda Fawr)	30 mins
Interviewee 21	Outreach Officer	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council	Local Authority	Rhondda Heritage Park, (Rhondda Fawr)	30mins
Interviewee 22	Organisation Member Age range: 45–60 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Welcome to Our Woods	Community member-owned development organisation based in Treherbet (Rhondda Fawr)	The Old Library, Treherbet, Treorchy	1hr 15mins
Interviewee 23	Organisation Member Age range: 45–60 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Welcome to Our Woods	Community member-owned development organisation based in Treherbet (Rhondda Fawr)	The Old Library, Treherbet, Treorchy	1hr 15mins
Interviewee 24	Organisation Member Age range: 45–60 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Welcome to Our Woods	Community member-owned development organisation based in Treherbet (Rhondda Fawr)	The Old Library, Treherbet, Treorchy	1hr 15mins
Interviewee 25	Organisation Members Age range: 45–60 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Welcome to Our Woods	Community member-owned development organisation based in Treherbet (Rhondda Fawr)	The Old Library, Treherbet, Treorchy	1hr 15mins
Interviewee 26	Volunteer (age 20–30 yrs old)	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Welcome to Our Woods	Community member-owned development organisation based in Treherbet (Rhondda Fawr)	The Old Library, Treherbet, Treorchy	1hr 15mins
Interviewee 27	Attendee at Treorchy Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Treorchy Community Centre (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 30mins
Interviewee 28	Attendee at Treorchy Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Treorchy Community Centre (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 30mins
Interviewee 29	Attendee at Treorchy Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Treorchy Community Centre (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 30mins
Interviewee 30	Attendee at Treorchy Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 45–55 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Treorchy Community Centre (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 30mins
Interviewee 31	Attendee at Treorchy Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–45 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Treorchy Community Centre (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 30mins
Interviewee 32	Attendee at Treorchy Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 65–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Treorchy Community Centre (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 30mins
Interviewee 33	Attendee at Porth Neighbourhood Network Meetin Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Porth Plaza (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 20mins
Interviewee 34	Attendee at Porth Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Porth Plaza (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 20mins
Interviewee 35	Attendee at Porth Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Porth Plaza (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 20mins
Interviewee 36	Attendee at Porth Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Porth Plaza (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 20mins

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Interviewee Number	Type of Participant	Type of Interview	Organisation/ Group	Description	Location	Length
Interviewee 37	Attendee at Porth Neighbourhood Network Meeting Age range: 35–75 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Neighbourhood Network (Local Authority Led Group)	Local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups.	Porth Plaza (Rhondda Fawr)	1hr 20mins
Interviewee 38	Business Representative Age range: 40–65 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Treorchy Business Improvement District	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	Treorchy Highstreet	45 mins
Interviewee 39	Business Representative Age range: 40–65 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Treorchy Business Improvement District	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	Treorchy Highstreet	45 mins
Interviewee 40	Business Representative Age range: 40–65 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Treorchy Business Improvement District	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	Online	45 mins
Interviewee 40	Former Miners Age range: 70—90 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Friends of RHP	Local community group made up of people with an interest in supporting the Rhondda Heritage Park (Museum & Attraction).	Rhondda Heritage Park (Rhondda Fawr)	30mins
Interviewee 41	Former Miners Age range: 70—90 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interview	Friends of RHP	Local community group made up of people with an interest in supporting the Rhondda Heritage Park (Museum & Attraction).	Rhondda Heritage Park (Rhondda Fawr)	30mins
Interviewee 42	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 43	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 44	Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 45	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 46	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 47	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 48	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 49	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 50	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 51	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Chapel, Rhondda Fawr	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Chapel, Gilfach Goch Rhondda Fawr	1hr
Interviewee 52	Representative from the Business Community Age range: 35–55 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	'Our Aberdare' BID	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	CORE Building, Aberdare Highstreet (pre-closure)	45mins

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Interviewee Number	Type of Participant	Type of Interview	Organisation/ Group	Description	Location	Length
Interviewee 53	Representative from the Business Community Age range: 35–55 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	'Our Aberdare' BID	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	CORE Building, Aberdare Highstreet (pre-closure)	45mins
Interviewee 54	Representative from the Business Community Age range: 35–55 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	'Our Aberdare' BID	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	CORE Building, Aberdare Highstreet (pre-closure)	45mins
Interviewee 55	Representative from the Business Community Age range: 35–55 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	'Our Aberdare' BID	A Business Improvement District (BID) is a business-led and business funded body formed to improve a defined commercial area.	CORE Building, Aberdare Highstreet (pre-closure)	45mins
Interviewee 56	User of Cynon Linc, Aberdare	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Individual users were identified to speak to by staff at Cynon Linc,	Cynon Linc is a vibrant community hub, available to all ages and abilities, set in the heart of Aberdare town centre.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	15 mins
Interviewee 57	User of Cynon Linc, Aberdare	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Individual users were identified to speak to by staff at Cynon Linc,	Cynon Linc is a vibrant community hub, available to all ages and abilities, set in the heart of Aberdare town centre.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	15 mins
Interviewee 58	User of Cynon Linc, Aberdare	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Individual users were identified to speak to by staff at Cynon Linc,	Cynon Linc is a vibrant community hub, available to all ages and abilities, set in the heart of Aberdare town centre.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	15 mins
Interviewee 59	User of Cynon Linc, Aberdare	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Individual users were identified to speak to by staff at Cynon Linc,	Cynon Linc is a vibrant community hub, available to all ages and abilities, set in the heart of Aberdare town centre.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	15 mins
Interviewee 60	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 61	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 62	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 63	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 64	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 65	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 66	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 67	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 68	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins

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Interviewee Number	Type of Participant	Type of Interview	Organisation/ Group	Description	Location	Length
		Discussion		deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.		
Interviewee 69	Attendee at a North Cynon Neighbourhood Network Meeting	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	North Cynon Neighbourhood Network (Local authority led)	Neighbourhood Networks are local partnerships of council services, organisations and local groups that are working together to deliver services and activities and to develop communities further.	Cynon Linc, Aberdare. (Cynon Valley)	40mins
Interviewee 70	Volunteer at Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (An Asset Transfer) Age range: 20–70 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	Lee Gardens Pool Committee is a registered charity set up and run by volunteers. The group was formed in 2015 to bring the community swimming pool back into use following its closure in 2013.	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	15mins each
Interviewee 71	Volunteer at Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (An Asset Transfer) Age range: 20–70 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	Lee Gardens Pool Committee is a registered charity set up and run by volunteers. The group was formed in 2015 to bring the community swimming pool back into use following its closure in 2013.	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	15mins each
Interviewee 72	Volunteer at Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (An Asset Transfer) Age range: 20–70 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	Lee Gardens Pool Committee is a registered charity set up and run by volunteers. The group was formed in 2015 to bring the community swimming pool back into use following its closure in 2013.	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	15mins each
Interviewee 73	Volunteer at Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (An Asset Transfer) Age range: 20–30 yrs old.	Semi-Structured 1–1 interviews	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	Lee Gardens Pool Committee is a registered charity set up and run by volunteers. The group was formed in 2015 to bring the community swimming pool back into use following its closure in 2013.	Lee Gardens Community Pool Group (Cynon Valley)	15mins each
Interviewee 74	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 75	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 76	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 77	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 78	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 79	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 80	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins
Interviewee 81	Attendee at over 55 s craft & chat group Age range: 60–85 yrs old.	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Over 55 s group at Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash	Community group, associated with the church that provides social activities for local people.	Providence Baptist Church, Mountain Ash (Cynon Valley)	45mins

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Interviewee Number	Type of Participant	Type of Interview	Organisation/ Group	Description	Location	Length
Interviewee 82	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins
Interviewee 83	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins
Interviewee 84	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins
Interviewee 85	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins
Interviewee 86	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins
Interviewee 87	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins
Interviewee 88	Attendee at Knit & Natter group	Semi-Structured Focus Group Discussion	Knit & Natter group	Local group for those looking for social opportunities in the local community. Hosted at Hirwaun Library.	Hirwaun Library, (Cynon Valley)	30mins

Appendix 2. Interview Proforma

Interview / Focus Group Structure

The following semi-structured approach was adopted for all 1-1 interviewees and focus groups. Questions are deliberately open ended to provide interviewees with an opportunity to add additional personal insights which may enhance findings. Questions are also designed to spark discussion between interviewees, taking part in focus groups, generating further opportunities for observational findings.

General Introduction / House Keeping

- Participants introduced to the overarching aims and objectives of the research, how long the interview/focus group will take and the general structure/nature of questions.
- Explanation of why I personally have chosen to investigate the topic of community culture, in the context of place-based development, and opportunity provided to all participants to ask any questions before the interview/focus group commences.
- Confirm receipt of all consent forms from all participants.

Getting to know the interviewee/s:

- Are you from the area? Have you always lived in the area, or have you moved away at any point?
- Are your family from the area? Has anyone moved away?
- If you are employed, what type of job do you do?
- What brings you to this session today?
- Do you have any hobbies? Are you part of any local groups?

Social Cohesion Exploratory Questions:

- Do you think that the local community is particularly open to new people moving into the area?
- What is it like to live in the Rhondda or Cynon Valleys? Do you think there are any differences between these area in terms of community culture?
- Are there many activities/groups running within the community? Are you involved in any groups in other areas in the valleys?
- To what extent do you think the community is 'tight knit'? Do you know a lot of people locally?

- If you had to describe the people that live in the Rhondda and Cynon valleys in three words, which words would you choose? Would the words be the same for both areas?

Embracement and Long-Term Orientation Towards Employment Exploratory Questions:

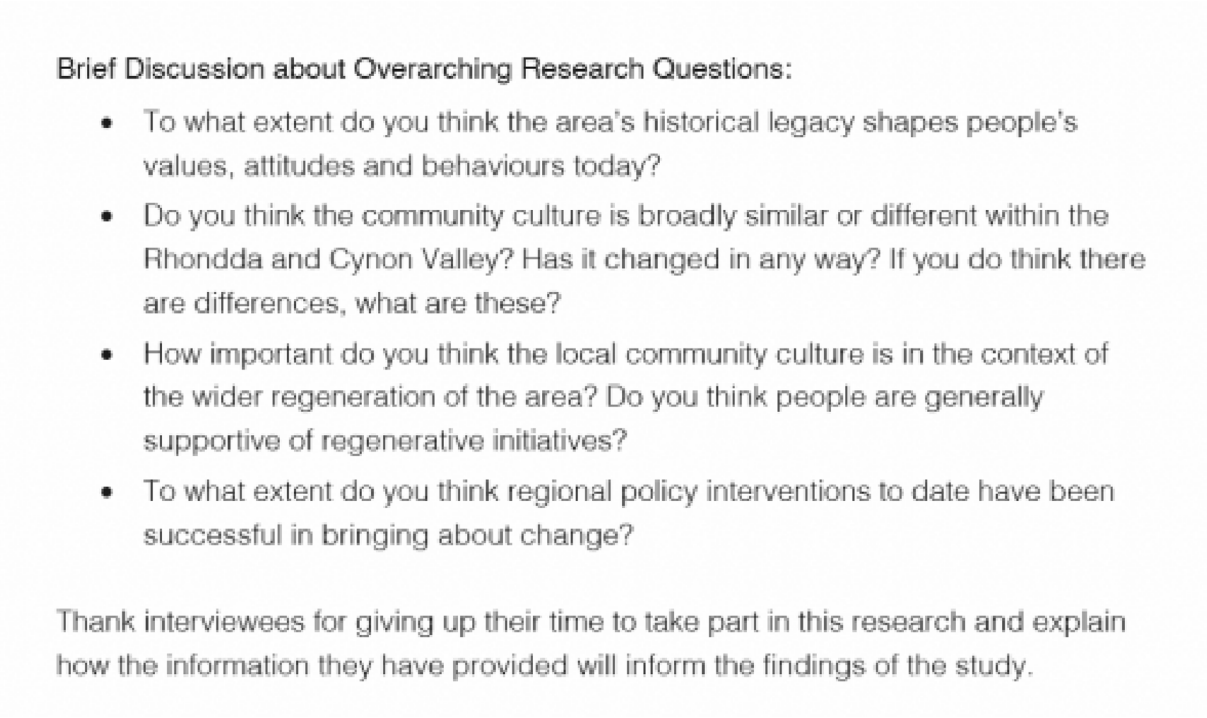
- What level of qualifications do you have? Did you ever think about gaining additional qualifications?
- What do people think, generally, about individuals attending college/university?
- What type of job do you do? Have you ever wanted to do something else?
- How far are you willing to travel for work?
- Would you undertake training to gain different employment?

Social Values, Rules and Norms Exploratory Questions:

- What matters most to you? What matters most to your community?
- What do you define as success?
- Are you aware of any social problems within either study area?
- What types of values do you think people in the area have?
- Do you think these have changed over time? Are they related to former mining communities?
- Are you / do you know of anyone who is caring for someone?
- Are you engaged in any volunteering, or would you? Do you know whether other people locally volunteer their time?
- Do you think people continue to exhibit the values of previous generations?

Collective Action Exploratory Questions:

- Are you aware of many community-led groups/projects in the local area?
- To what extent do you think people engage in collective activities locally? Can you give any examples?
- Are you part of any groups / involved in any projects? If so, what type of activities do they undertake?
- Do you think there is an appetite, by the community, to do things locally?



Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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