



Neath Port Talbot Council

‘Let’s Talk’

Draft report of findings (Deliberative)

Opinion Research Services

November 2021



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1. Executive Summary

Summary of main findings

Deliberative findings

This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of online focus groups and in-depth interviews with **30 residents** of the Afan, Amman, Dulais, Neath and Swansea Valleys.

What focus group participants said about their communities

- 1.1 Participants mostly spoke very positively about their local areas. Community spirit was generally said to be very strong across all of Neath Port Talbot’s Valleys, with residents looking after one another and the provision of many community-led activities such as Christmas events, carnivals, and fundraising sessions at local community-led halls and clubs.
- 1.2 Most participants also spoke warmly about the natural beauty of the area, praising Aberavon Beach, the Brecon Beacons, local forests, and public parks. The ‘Welshness’ of the area was also celebrated by a small number of participants.
- 1.3 There were also many things participants would like to change about their communities, most commonly the provision of better transport links and mental health support. Other desired improvements were around reductions in antisocial behaviour, substance misuse, unemployment, and general deprivation.

What participants said about the impact of the pandemic on their communities

- 1.4 Most participants agreed that the pandemic had brought their communities closer, with residents being more enthusiastic about looking out for one another and providing for the vulnerable. Additionally, many said they had enjoyed the increased time spent with their families whilst working from home or on furlough.
- 1.5 The pandemic has also had many negative impacts though, an increase in mental health issues and loneliness being seen as the most impactful, compounded by an apparent reduction in mental health support provision. The closure of schools was also said to have had a significantly negative impact on children, with many schoolchildren developing loneliness and anxiety as a result.

What participants said about the Council’s impact during the pandemic

- 1.6 Responses to the Council’s presence during the pandemic were largely negative: most participants were either dissatisfied with its efforts or unaware of the services it provided. While the intention was applauded, complaints were made about the food deliveries for vulnerable people, which were allegedly late starting, too difficult to apply for, and substandard in terms of variety. However, the Council was praised for its efforts in providing financial assistance and laptops to struggling families with schoolchildren. The Council’s support for the ‘Street Champions’ scheme was also applauded.

What participants said about the impact of other organisations during the pandemic

- 1.7 Participants spoke positively about the volunteers from within their communities who delivered food and provisions to their neighbours and the vulnerable. Additionally, the volunteers and founders of the 'Street Champions' scheme were praised for their efforts.
- 1.8 Local halls and clubs were also spoken of very highly, having provided street entertainment and food provisions during the lockdowns – and local businesses were praised for offering delivery services and allowing staff with underlying health difficulties to shield. Specifically, the Pen Y Cymoedd Windfarm was commended for donating money to community halls to better provide hot meals for the vulnerable and the elderly.

What participants said about Council services in general

- 1.9 Participants clearly valued public facilities such as parks and outdoor areas, swimming pools, community halls and libraries. However, they also voiced significant concern for the funding of such facilities, with numerous participants expressing concern that many may close within the next few years.
- 1.10 Dissatisfaction with travel was the most common issue expressed by participants when discussing services: it was felt that buses should run more often and offer better links to the larger towns in Neath Port Talbot and the surrounding area.
- 1.11 Many participants also stated their belief that the Council misspends money on facilities that are not required by local communities, and that their council tax does not provide value for money.

What participants suggested the Council should focus on in future

- 1.12 Many participants felt that improvements to public transport should be a priority for the council. Suggestions offered included increasing the number of buses serving smaller areas, community transport schemes, and better linking local bus routes to those traveling into Swansea and larger towns in Neath Port Talbot. It was said that improving public transport would encourage residents to find work, allow schoolchildren to attend extracurricular activities, and enable all residents to spend money and leisure time in the likes of Neath, Port Talbot and Pontardawe.
- 1.13 Participants also advocate an increase in transparency and community involvement in decision-making. Indeed, many residents felt that the council should consider a much wider range of views before spending public money on new facilities – and that funding should be concentrated on maintaining existing facilities, such as swimming pools and community centres, rather than on building new ones. Other suggestions included preventing Council tax from rising and ensuring that schools continue to be funded appropriately.

2. The Consultation Process

Background to the Let’s Talk Consultation

- 2.1 2020-21 has been a time of unprecedented change and uncertainty. The economic and social impacts of COVID-19 have been significant, with many people’s sense of isolation and loneliness increasing as a result of several lockdowns. However, the increased time spent at home has also had more positive impacts, with many people feeling better connected to their families and local areas as a result.
- 2.2 It has been widely suggested that the effects of the pandemic on the British public presents a potential opportunity to re-evaluate what is important to people in their day-to-day lives. Neath Port Talbot County Council (NPTCBC) ran the ‘Let’s Talk’ project reported here to capitalise on this opportunity.
- 2.3 ‘Let’s Talk’ is an open-ended consultation, acting as an opportunity for the public to talk about what matters to them. The aim of the consultation has been to understand what residents feel is important to and how the Council can equip the communities of Neath Port Talbot to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic as positively as possible.

The commission

- 2.4 Opinion Research Services (ORS) - a spin-out company from Swansea University with a UK-wide reputation for social research - was asked to convene and facilitate online focus groups and in-depth interviews with residents of the Afan, Amman, Dulais, Neath and Swansea Valleys. Participants were asked to give their views on the following topics:
 - Things they love about their community
 - Things they would like to change about their community
 - The positive impacts of the pandemic on their community and how to maintain them
 - The negative impacts of the pandemic on their community
 - The Council’s presence during the pandemic
 - The Presence of other organisations and groups during the pandemic
 - General views on council services
 - Ideas for future focus
- 2.5 The focus groups and the in-depth interviews were held on the online videoconferencing platform, Zoom. Each focus group was attended by two ORS staff members, with one acting as the meeting coordinator and the other as assistant and note-taker. Each group consisted of between 3-5 participants, with a total of 23 participants overall.
- 2.6 A further seven in-depth interviews were then held, where a single participant was interviewed by one ORS staff member. As a result, 30 residents of the Neath Port Talbot area were consulted with and given the opportunity to give their thoughts and feelings on the relevant subjects. The dates and number of attendees to each of the focus group and in-depth interviews are in the table below:

Meeting	Date	Number of Attendees
Swansea Valley	4/10/21	6
Afan Valley Focus Group	5/10/21	3 + 3 depth interviews
Neath Valley Focus Group	7/10/21	4 + 2 depth interviews
Dulais Valley Focus Group	12/10/21	5 + 1 depth interview
Amman Valley Focus Group	13/10/21	5 + 1 depth interview

- 2.7 Around half of participants were recruited via Random Digit Dialling (RDD), and the other half via a list of those who had completed the Let’s Talk questionnaire and indicated that they would like to take part in further research. All those recruited were sent all the necessary details in a confirmation email and telephoned a day or two before the events to confirm their attendance. In recruitment, care was taken to ensure that no potential participants were disqualified or disadvantaged by disabilities or any other factors. The recruitment process was monitored to ensure social diversity in terms of a wide range of criteria including, for example: gender; age; working status; and disability/limiting long-term illness (LLTI).
- 2.8 Recruiting for focus groups of this nature can prove difficult because of the broad nature of the topic under consideration. People linked to specific interest groups and who volunteer in their community are more likely to participate, which we found during this study. The quick turnaround for the research was also a limiting factor but by doing some additional interviews we were able to engage with a wider, more diverse set of people. It was agreed that at least six people from each area would be engaged and as the table shows, this was achieved. As standard good practice, all attendees were offered a gift voucher as a thank you for giving up a significant amount of their time to take part.
- 2.9 Although, like all other forms of qualitative engagement, deliberative focus groups cannot be certified as statistically representative samples of public opinion, the meetings reported here gave diverse members of the public the opportunity to participate actively. Because the meetings were inclusive, the outcomes are broadly indicative of how informed opinion would incline on the basis of similar discussions.

The report

- 2.10 This report reviews the sentiments and judgements of focus group and interview participants on what they like and dislike about their communities, the positive and negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their communities, the presence of the Council, volunteers and other organisations during the pandemic, services provided by the Council in general, and ideas for future focus. Verbatim quotations are used, in indented italics, not because we agree or disagree with them - but for their vividness in capturing recurrent points of view. ORS does not endorse any opinions but seeks only to portray them accurately and clearly. The report is an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants.

3. Main Deliberative Findings

Findings from five focus groups with residents

Introduction

- 3.1 This chapter reports the views from five online focus groups with residents of the Afan, Amman, Dulais, Neath and Swansea Valleys, which were independently facilitated by ORS.
- 3.2 This is not a verbatim transcript of the five sessions, but an interpretative summary of the issues raised by participants in free-ranging discussions - and as the focus groups did not differ materially in their views, this report combines the findings from all the meetings in a single account while drawing out any differences in opinion.

What people said they love about their community

Community spirit & community-led events

- 3.3 When asked what they love about their area, almost all participants were very positive about the sense of community across the different towns and villages in the Valleys. Participants praised the community spirit where they live and said that they felt their neighbours looked after each other.

“I love my community. I love that its small and I love that all of us, or a lot of us, know each other and are involved in things together” (Neath Valley Focus Group)

“Everybody is so welcoming and lovely, and when my daughter was seriously ill the lady over the road took my son in and looked after him. It’s just like one massive family” (Neath Valley Focus Group)

“Our sense of community is outstanding. We still ask our neighbours if they need anything down the shop if we pass them. We still make sure ‘Oh, Mrs Jones hasn’t opened her curtains this morning, we better go give her a knock’. A very tight-knit community, very proud people. We’re very much brought together.” (Afan Valley)

- 3.4 People also said that community-led events are frequent in their area and that they are important to residents in maintaining a sense of community. Numerous events were mentioned, including carnivals, Christmas events for children, bingo nights and fundraising events for residents with serious illnesses or who are otherwise vulnerable. It was said that these events are an important part of the community and much of the reason why they love where they live.

“We got together and started building community spirit again, it’s been a huge success. We not only arranged the carnival, but we also arranged the Christmas events” (Neath Valley)

The rugby club had fundraiser last month and raised over £10,000 for the kids.” (Afan Valley)

The natural beauty of the area

- 3.5 Most participants said that the geography of the area is very important to them. The natural beauty of Neath Port Talbot was praised, with the Western Brecon Beacons, Aberavon Beach and the many waterfalls in the area being discussed specifically. In addition, it was said that the footpaths, cycle routes, public parks and forests are important places that people can visit to enjoy and feel safe – and that the area benefits from being near Swansea and the coastline, whilst maintaining its “community feel”.

“Aberavon beach, I think is beautiful because you’ve got lovely walks there and that’s accessible for everybody” (Dulais Valley)

“I think we’re pretty lucky living in this area of the world. We’ve got city, country, and coastline all on our doorstep, so we’ve got a pretty good mix. I think I feel sort of protected living in this area. We’re just outside of the big city and there’s more of a community feel in this area than there would be in Swansea” (Dulais Valley)

Welsh language & culture

- 3.6 Some participants expressed a love for the ‘Welshness’ of their community. The presence of the Welsh language was said to be a very positive attribute that Welsh speakers appreciate, as is the general sense of Welsh culture and heritage. Some also said that the presence of the Welsh language alongside English is beneficial for their children’s learning.

“The Welshness of the area has enhanced our children’s education” (Amman Valley Focus Group)

“One of the main things for this area for me ... is the sense of Welshness. Welsh culture, Welsh heritage and Welsh language” (Dulais Valley)

What people said they would like to change about their community

Better transport links

- 3.7 The most common theme that arose when discussing what participants would like to change about their community was the issue of transport. In almost every discussion, participants expressed their dissatisfaction with the transport links in their community and said they would like to see them improved.

“It is assumed that you can get to a leisure centre or get to where the resources are put. It’s not necessarily recognised that in the more rural areas, public transport is more difficult to get there” (Amman Valley)

- 3.8 Rural villages and small towns in all Valleys were said to have poor transport links with schools and larger towns in Neath Port Talbot. It was said that such issues make it difficult for children (particularly in the Afan and Amman Valleys) to attend extracurricular activities after school, which disadvantages them. Links to towns in Neath Port Talbot were also said to be poor, therefore encouraging residents to shop in towns outside the area such as Ammanford and Carmarthen, rather than supporting towns nearer them like Pontardawe. This was said to have a knock-on impact on the local economy and local businesses.

"I want transport for our children to do extracurricular activities. If they're down the comprehensive in Port Talbot, I want to make sure they can do after school clubs, sports teams and training after school hours. I want them to have exactly the same start as the children all the way down from Cwmafan" (Afan Valley)

"There are over 4,000 people living in the villages around here, they're not encouraged in any way to go down to their third largest town behind Neath and Port Talbot, which is Pontardawe. So... they're not encouraged to spend their money down there, but they can jump on a bus and go down to Ammanford and Carmarthenshire" (Amman Valley)

- 3.9 Transport to Swansea was also said to be poor, with bus times starting too late in the morning and ending too early in the evening. The buses were also said to take too long to reach Swansea. Participants said that this discourages people from working as they would not be able to get to a job in Swansea unless they owned a car.

"If I wanted a job in Swansea and I caught the 7:40 bus, I wouldn't get there in time for 9 o'clock. That's an hour and twenty minutes. It takes thirty minutes in the car. Because of the connections you can't get to a job early in Swansea" (Afan Valley)

"They say they want you to go out to work, well where do you work for three hours a day? By the time you get your bus ... you can work three hours and then you've got to get the last bus home. You're never going to sustain that" (Neath Valley)

Better provisions for mental health and the isolated

- 3.10 A significant number of participants said that they would like to see better mental health provisions in their communities for vulnerable residents. People expressed concern that those suffering from depression and other mental health issues were not being cared for appropriately and that people often do not receive help until the situation has reached crisis point.

"There's also a lot of issues about mental health services and how they provide care and support for people who find themselves in these situations. I think we need to help these people more and have places for them to go so that they're not hanging around in the streets drinking and taking drugs, but that they get the support they need to tackle the issues that they've got" (Dulais Valley)

"I've also seen a massive gap in this county borough for mental health issues, and I mean people who are suffering with serious depression, people who are suicidal. I've had first-hand experience of this and there is no help unless you're really, kind of, knocking on deaths door ... there needs to be more money spent on that type of thing" (Dulais Valley)

- 3.11 Participants also voiced concerns that there are people in their villages who are isolated and unable to socialise. It was said that better provision should be made to help these people socialise, with many suggesting that community-run cafes would be suitable, providing they are made accessible to all people.

"I think there are people hidden away in our communities here who are suffering from social exclusion, social isolation, that the communities don't know about, neighbour perhaps don't know about, and it's a ticking time bomb" (Amman Valley)

Reduction in antisocial behaviour / substance misuse

- 3.12 Numerous participants expressed concern about antisocial behaviour on the part of teenagers and young adults. They said that parks have been vandalised multiple times and that drinking and drug-taking are widespread issues in the area that they would like to see an end to.

“Teenagers and young adults are drinking and taking drugs in public, especially in the local park it is an issue” (Dulais Valley)

“I’ve seen more drugs in this village than when I worked in Ibiza ... It’s rife” (Afan Valley)

Reduction in deprivation and unemployment

- 3.13 Widespread deprivation and unemployment was also thought to be an issue in Neath Port Talbot. Numerous participants said that they did not like visiting Neath town because the levels of deprivation and street drinking meant they did not feel safe.

“Neath has just gone to the dogs. There’s nothing in the town anymore. There’s nothing there apart from charity shops, phone shops, and people drinking in the streets. From growing up and going out around Neath all the time and feeling safe, I wouldn’t feel safe going around there anymore” (Dulais Valley)

“Nothing is encouraging. There are no youth training schemes, no industry, there’s no economy, there’s nothing” (Afan Valley)

Collaboration between the community and the Council

- 3.14 Participants said that they would like to see more communication and collaboration between the community and Council. There was a sense that the Council is unaware of the issues faced by residents in small villages.

“Its little stuff like the post office ... in our village has been shut since February. There are others in the valley but if you haven’t got transport how can you access [them]?” (Afan Valley)

- 3.15 In particular, participants said that elderly members of the population who do not use social media are at a disadvantage because they cannot keep track of what services are available to them. Therefore, elderly residents should, it was felt, be made more aware of council services by other means.

“Get more physical information for elderly groups who don’t have access to social media. Get the messages out to the older generation” (Neath Valley)

Increased litter picking in smaller areas

- 3.16 Litter was discussed on occasion during the sessions. Litter picking on the A474 was praised for its success in improving the area, however residents expressed a desire for smaller roads in villages and towns to be targeted also.

“I think with the type of bins that we have with the open bags, there’s an issue with litter around the valley. I think perhaps there needs to be more litter picks on the roads, especially on the roads where there’s a build-up sometimes between Crynant to Neath ... I wish they’d do a few more rounds than they’re doing” (Dulais Valley)

Improved services for young and disabled people

- 3.17 Participants wanted to see more services for children and young people, such as youth clubs and activity groups. Those with disabilities or from disadvantaged backgrounds were particularly thought to be in need of such services.

“It’s the services that they provide. There aren’t enough services, like I said, for the teenagers especially and people with additional needs. There’s nothing in the area ... for my son and other children that are disadvantaged” (Dulais Valley)

What residents said is important to them

General health and wellbeing

- 3.18 Many participants said that their health and wellbeing, as well as that of their family and the community, was the most important thing to them. As a result, many expressed concerns about health services in the area, with residents struggling to receive healthcare and ambulance waiting times increasing.

“Being healthy and safe more than anything” (Afan Valley)

“My grandmother ... she waited four hours for an ambulance, and this is just one out of probably thousands throughout the County Borough and Wales, and by the time it was too late. She’d gone” (Dulais Valley)

Care for the elderly and the vulnerable

- 3.19 Care for the elderly and the vulnerable was said by many to be of great importance to them. Participants felt that it had become more difficult to access such assistance though, and considered improvements in this area to be a priority.

“I think care for the elderly is extremely important. We’re an ageing population, we know a lot of older people around us, and years ago you had the Home Help. Now everything has to be means-tested or paid for and I think lot of people struggle, or are too proud to say they need help ... I think that is a priority for the authority, is care of old people” (Dulais Valley)

Improving services in smaller rural areas

- 3.20 Some participants felt that smaller areas in the valleys have been forgotten by the Council and so improving communication and services in these areas was very important to them. In particular, the Afan and Amman valleys were said to have been neglected and left with poor transport, poor services for young people and the vulnerable, and digital exclusion.

"In my community of Glyncorrwg and the Upper Afan valley as a whole, I'd like to see extra curriculum activities for under 11s, STEM activities and better access to the digital world ... we are in 21st century poverty" (Afan Valley)

"There was a report that I found written in 2009 written about the Amman Valley ... it mentions social isolation and this was from 2009" (Amman Valley)

Opportunities and education for children

- 3.21 Numerous participants said that their children's education was the most important thing to them. Opportunities for children to attend youth clubs and take part in extracurricular activities were also thought to be essential.

"My daughter's education is what matters most to me at the minute" (Swansea Valley)

"My kids are school age, so education is at the forefront of my mind" (Dulais Valley)

Sense of community and opportunities to socialise

- 3.22 Many residents said that being able to socialise in the community was very important to them as individuals, and in maintaining a sense of community and providing enjoyable experiences for people. Some voiced concerns that many residents cannot afford to attend certain events and have become isolated as a result.

"The light show in Margam park, Illuminate. How inclusive is that? It's quite expensive actually. I'm lucky I can go along and take my kids, not everyone's as fortunate as that" (Afan Valley)

"It feels there are opportunities, but only if you can afford it" (Afan Valley)

Services for residents that live close to county borders

- 3.23 One participant living near the county border with Powys said that accessing services became an important issue for them over the course of the pandemic. They said they had become isolated as a result of not being able to access the services nearest to them as they were 'out of county', suggesting that councils need to look at the provision of cross-border services to ensure this does not happen again in future.

"One of the biggest issues for me, probably because of my location, is cross-border problems. During the pandemic this highlighted cross-border problems. I think we need to open up the borders" (Swansea Valley)

Have the things that matter changed over the last 18 months?

- 3.24 Participants were largely split over whether or not their priorities had changed since the beginning of the pandemic. Many said they had because COVID-19 had made them aware of their sense of community for the first time. Others said it had brought their community much closer and changed their priorities as a result, since they now wanted to make sure that their friends and neighbours were provided for.

"I'd say so. Community spirit is a lot more important now" (Afan Valley)

- 3.25 Others said that their priorities had not changed over the course of the pandemic, because their community had always been important to them. Many of these people suggested that the pandemic had potentially heightened their awareness of just how important certain issues are to them though.

"I wouldn't say I've changed my mind, it just made me more aware" (Afan Valley)

"No, we've been fighting for provisions in Glyncorrwg for the last twenty-five years" (Afan Valley)

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on communities

Strengthened sense of community

- 3.26 Most participants felt that the pandemic had brought their communities closer together. Indeed, many residents said that they had not tried to get to know their neighbours beforehand, but that they had become close friends of the last two years as a result of the past 18 months. Others said that their existing connection to their community and their neighbours had been strengthened.

"We've all clubbed together over this period, and I've joined all sorts of groups locally ... it's been really lovely, and I've made a lot of new friends which live locally that I've never met before, who I've lived alongside for over a decade. In terms of what I've had out of this, or what I wouldn't want to change ... I would hope that those friendships continue, I would hope that that community feel still exists in five or ten years from now" (Neath Valley)

"It's brought neighbours closer. I live amongst mainly elderly, and it has brought us all closer in helping each other out. We now phone each other regularly if we haven't heard of each other ... I couldn't have even told you what my neighbours' names were before the pandemic" (Dulais Valley)

- 3.27 It was said that neighbours began volunteering to collect food and provisions for those who had to self-isolate. Much of this was said to have been done informally between friends, though some community members have volunteered to deliver provisions for larger numbers of people in their surrounding area.

"I had a neighbour knocking my door seeing if I wanted prescriptions, I had people asking if I needed bread or milk. I sat in my garden and everybody that passed stopped and spoke. It did bring back the fact that I was glad I was back in Glyncorrwg" (Afan Valley)

"During the past 12 months, the community spirit in Resolven has been absolutely amazing. Everyone is with everyone. There's a community group we set up on Facebook to see if anybody needed help or deliveries. It's been fantastic" (Neath Valley)

- 3.28 Whilst the majority felt that the pandemic had enhanced their sense of community, a very small number of participants disagreed – but only because they said it was already fairly strong.

"We know most of the neighbours and most of the neighbours know me. A young couple moved in just pre-COVID, and we got to know them. Just from our street to pass the time of day with people, we've got some older neighbours and next-door are checking if they're okay, but it's something that as a community I think we did anyway" (Amman Valley)

Increased quality time with family

- 3.29 Many participants said that being on furlough or working from home allowed them to spend more time with their families, which they enjoyed greatly.

"I think it's given us a bit more flexibility in regards to work/life. Meeting on Zoom, a lot of people working from home. I found that easier with regards to the children ... It doesn't work for everybody, and there should be an option for people to go into a physical building if they want to, but I know a lot of mums who've found that aspect easier going forward, especially with school runs..." (Dulais Valley)

Maintaining the positive impact of the pandemic on the community

- 3.30 Generally, participants said that the positive impacts of the pandemic on their communities would be better maintained by spending money on existing facilities such as village halls and community centres, rather than on brand new facilities. Coffee mornings, youth clubs, evening meal clubs and bingo nights were all suggested as effective means of encouraging community activity. Therefore, participants hoped (but were sceptical) that funding would be provided to existing facilities to allow such events to be held.

"By opening the community centre up. Give it back to the community but give us the funding to keep the building maintained and have the money to pay for professional help to come here" (Afan Valley)

"Ask people what they want. Don't just build a new park or hall and assume we wanted or needed it" (Neath Valley)

"I think there's no public money around. My big worry is that I think a lot of the things that were done in COVID were done for the older generation or families. I think for young people, aged 11-25, I don't see that anybody has the money to spend in supporting them in a way one would want to. I think that's where there will be challenges" (Amman Valley)

- 3.31 Participants also hoped that they would be able to continue a 'blended' approach to work after the pandemic, that would allow them to work from home on certain days. They felt that this would allow them to remain closer to their families in the long-term.

"I think a blended approach helps some ... especially with regards to the workplace ... so with me I can work from home or I can go into the building ... that's beneficial for me for a number of reasons" (Dulais Valley)

Worsening of mental health issues

- 3.32 In terms of less positive impacts, participants felt that existing mental health issues have been exacerbated by the COVID19 pandemic.

"The pandemic absolutely rocked me to my core. I had to have CBT therapy after it because when I was allowed back out, I couldn't physically open my door. I was so scared" (Afan Valley)

- 3.33 Many felt that mental health services, which were already lacking before the pandemic, 'stood back' during the last two years. This was said to have had a further negative impact on those requiring them. Therefore, participants suggested that mental health services must now begin to resume and increase their activity, regardless of the ongoing situation.

"I think a lot of the health services, and especially the mental health services, have sort of stood back a little bit because of the Covid ... and there's lots of people suffering as a result of that. I think that has to stop now. It has to be improved and people have to be helped" (Dulais Valley)

"We can all go out and sit in restaurants and pubs without facemasks and so if you've been double vaccinated then I don't think there's any excuse really for not coming round and knocking on the door and seeing if people are alright" (Dulais Valley)

- 3.34 Whilst some people praised charities such as 'Mind' for their work during the pandemic, people in the Afan Valley said that they did not have access to such services. As a result, they were forced to see their GP, who simply prescribed antidepressants rather than having the root cause of their illness addressed.

"There isn't somewhere like 'Mind' in the Valleys, so you have to go to the doctors to get antidepressants" (Afan Valley)

"The GP finds it easier to calm you down and shut you up than to identify what the problem is. When you go through the NHS, their route is medication counselling. It's not getting to the route of the problem. It took me to have a psychotic break in March to actually be put under the mental health services ... I'm still waiting to see a psychiatrist" (Afan Valley)

Increased isolation of lonely residents

- 3.35 Many participants feared that the number of socially isolated people had grown due to the pandemic.

"Social isolation has been a big thing for a lot of people. They haven't seen anybody, haven't spoken to anybody for weeks. I think that's really impacted on their health" (Dulais Valley)

"It's divided the haves and have nots. It's divided the people who were isolated and those who were able to get support" (Amman Valley)

- 3.36 Others said that isolation has been an issue in the Valleys long before COVID-19, and that rather than increasing it, the pandemic had simply highlighted the issue.

"That was true before COVID as well. But since then, more and more people obviously are staying in" (Amman Valley)

“It carries on from what I said earlier about people not going out ... it’s that social interaction. But then again, most of that social interaction wasn’t there pre-COVID anyway. So, I don’t see a difference in that I don’t see people out on the streets anyway to discuss things. There’s nobody about. It’s like a ghost town at times” (Amman Valley)

Closure of day services and youth centres

- 3.37 Multiple participants discussed the negative impact on the elderly of the closure of day services during the pandemic. Moreover, the closure of cafes and a lack of transport to towns was said to be a significant issue for elderly people and adults with learning difficulties, who could no longer access means to socialise because they could not go online.

“Everything shut down. There were no buses, there was no day services, all the normal places they would go, they were all shut. Taxis weren’t running” (Neath Valley)

- 3.38 The closure of youth centres throughout Neath Port Talbot was also discussed in relation to the negative impact on children and young people.

“I used to run a youth club in Briton ferry, which is quite a deprived area. You’ve got a Gypsy community there, a Travelling community, etc. and they used to come to that a lot to that youth club and obviously that came to an end. It hasn’t started back ... so it would’ve had a negative impact on children” (Dulais Valley)

“As much as I enjoyed the slowness, there were no groups for my kids to go to. It’s a long day in the house with nowhere to go” (Amman Valley)

School closures and the impact on children

- 3.39 Participants displayed a clear concern for the impact of the pandemic on their children and the degree to which they have been isolated as a result of it.

“We have a baby here that had never seen another baby until restrictions were lifted” (Afan Valley)

- 3.40 Participants said their children had developed anxieties about going to school because they were afraid of giving the virus to their family, and about the impact of not being in school on their isolation and loneliness.

“I think that school is a massive social aspect as well for the parents and for children ... I know there was a lot of children who were anxious going back to school and anxious about being out of school because they weren’t seeing anybody. I know there were some children in my son’s class who were only children, so they didn’t see anybody their age for months ... Obviously all the clubs are off and everything, so I think that’s have a massive impact on the children” (Neath Valley)

“I know with my one, I had to take ten weeks off work because she was feeling so anxious because her routine, her friends, everything was just changed” (Neath Valley)

- 3.41 Some participants said that existing antisocial behaviour had become much worse as a result of the pandemic, with teenagers drinking, taking drugs and vandalising parks when not in school.

“It’s just behaviour in general as well. Because they haven’t been kept in line with the school, it’s like they’ve been let off their leads” (Dulais Valley In-depth Interview)

“Children and young adults, there’s been a great increase in gatherings of people smoking, taking drugs in the area, also drinking. And you’re talking 12/13-year-olds with both drink and drugs in the area. I think it’s an issue of they haven’t been able to spend the money elsewhere like they used to, so they see it as ‘we’ve got money, let’s go do the alternative’” (Dulais Valley)

Views on the Council’s presence during the pandemic

General dissatisfaction and unawareness of services

- 3.42 Some participants questioned what the Council does for their community more widely.

“I think everybody shares the same opinion here that we don’t really know what the Council does for us now. So, for us to be talking about what they’re going to be doing in the next five years is a big question” (Neath Valley)

Food deliveries for the vulnerable

- 3.43 The Council’s food deliveries were discussed by multiple participants, who had mixed views on them. Some were aware of vulnerable people receiving the service and so were glad it existed for them.

“I’m aware of the online, of people who could get in touch. And I’m aware of a close friend who had people offering to go to the shop for her. Unfortunately, she was going through a serious illness and had to self-isolate before COVID struck anyway ... There was help where somebody would do the shopping for her. She had plenty of friends to do it for her, but at least then there was only one person, and she didn’t have one, or two, or three or four people getting things for her” (Amman Valley)

Social provisions for adults with learning difficulties

- 3.44 One participant discussed what they saw as the ineffectiveness of social provisions for adults with learning difficulties, explaining that the Council had been too late getting in touch with them and had not considered their needs and abilities appropriately. As a result, many people were unable to benefit from online social sessions because they did not have access to the internet or appropriate equipment.

“When the day services did make contact with their members, I think it was about month three or four, so it was well into the pandemic. They hadn’t checked on these people, bearing in mind lots of them live entirely on their own. They offered them Teams meetings without even checking that they had the equipment or the internet to do it. So, if you had Teams, if you had that right support or you lived with your parents, chances are that you had a laptop or an iPad or something. But a lot of them that live independently don’t have the internet. They didn’t do anything to put that in place ... they didn’t do a lot of real research, they just provided a token gesture. You know, ‘Oh, we’ll contact you if you can access us’” (Neath Valley)

‘Street Champions’ scheme

- 3.45 Many participants discussed the Street Champions scheme: the Council was praised for funding it, and the scheme itself was widely appreciated by the community. As such, it was suggested that the Council should continue to support the scheme.

“I think they were definitely visible through our County Borough councillor in the Dulais Valley ... I would say that I think it’s important the County Borough Council ensure that they play their part in the continuation of that scheme and funding and supporting of that scheme” (Dulais Valley)

Waste collection and recycling centres

- 3.46 Neath Port Talbot’s waste collection services and recycling centres were highly praised for the way they continued to function throughout the pandemic.

“The bin men and the recycling centres. I think that they played an important role by collecting everyone’s waste efficiently. I think that worked well” (Dulais Valley)

“I think they’re very successful in the recycling rates, and that is something where the workmen have done fantastic work, probably in difficult circumstances with members of staff being away” (Amman Valley)

Provisions for schoolchildren

- 3.47 One participant said that they had seen parents of schoolchildren in receipt of free school meals receive financial support during the pandemic. Whilst they thought there had perhaps been too much bureaucracy in the process preventing some people in need from receiving the aid, they commended the Council for what they considered a positive input. The provision of laptops for children attending school from home during lockdown was also praised.

“One thing, I didn’t access it myself, but I know a lot of people did ... the children with the free school meals, when they couldn’t access that, I know that the parents had money transferred to them ... I know that it really helped people who needed it. And I know the schools got access to computers for the children who didn’t have them” (Neath Valley)

Presence of volunteers and other organisations during the pandemic

Foodbanks and volunteers delivering provisions

- 3.48 Most participants discussed the importance and positive impact of volunteers delivering food to the vulnerable during the pandemic.

“Just local people going ‘I’ll help and drop some food off’. How fantastic is that?” (Afan Valley)

- 3.49 Foodbanks were also praised for their work. Some said that the bureaucracy involved in accessing aid from certain charities prevented people from getting what they needed; as a result, residents set up their own food banks to provide for their communities.

“I’m a volunteer in the food bank there [in Resolven] ... we have a foodbank in the centre ... It was part of the Trussell Trust when the food bank was first set up, but it was a couple of times a year sort of thing. You couldn’t go there if you were in need, and we couldn’t see people go without food. So basically, we set up an independent food bank” (Neath Valley)

- 3.50 Indeed, the general consensus from participants was that local communities had largely provided for themselves during the pandemic, through the work of volunteers.

“I guess the community picked up the slack for that really” (Afan Valley)

Contributions of local businesses

- 3.51 Numerous participants praised the efforts of local businesses in supporting the community during the pandemic. Local shops were said to have offered free deliveries to those who were self-isolating, given staff time off if they had underlying health problems, and closed periodically when COVID rates were at their highest.

“Our local shop did free deliveries. You could ring and ask for what you wanted, and they would deliver it to your door, social distanced” (Neath Valley)

“As a community, we look out for each other. Cases in the village skyrocketed last year. The businesses in the area were taking their own decisions to close shops to contain the spread of it in our own community. It wasn’t part of the Government lockdown or anything like that; businesses were taking their own decision” (Neath Valley)

Donations from Pen Y Cymoedd Windfarm

- 3.52 A few participants mentioned the donations made by the Pen Y Cymoedd Windfarm to the area. This was said to have benefitted local community halls, aiding volunteers to provide for the vulnerable.

“The windfarms donated money that enabled us to have kitchen facilities in the hall. Proper kitchen facilities that allow volunteers to cook and provide hot meals for the vulnerable and the elderly, so I know they donated a bit of money toward that” (Afan Valley)

Community/village halls and rugby clubs

- 3.53 Many participants praised their local community/village halls and rugby clubs for providing services and aid to the community.

“Cwmlllynfell has a community hall and that’s about it. We had a community cafe there before the pandemic, which was doing quite nicely, all ages coming along. Then COVID came along, and the manager decided to keep going with the help of volunteers, which was absolutely amazing. All sorts came to help deliver food to individuals in the community” (Amman Valley)

- 3.54 As well as providing cafes, fundraising and delivering provisions to the vulnerable, village/community halls across the Valleys were said to have provided social opportunities for residents through, for example, street entertainers, live music and fireworks displays.

“The hall, which used to be the miner’s hall, in Glyncorwg ... the owner and his family ... was providing meals, had volunteers delivering the meals, they were free for the vulnerable and people could donate if they wanted to. People were sending stuff in for raffles to keep the kitchen open, he was putting on entertainment ... he had fireworks ... Instead of the carnival this year, he paid for an entertainer to come up and down, singing and dancing and doing stuff for the children. It was amazing” (Afan Valley)

“He brought Easter eggs around for children in the village, we had Santa come round with selection boxes. Anything you can think of he did to help keep us going. Everybody put their hands in their pockets and made sure everybody was looked after” (Afan Valley)

Views on general services provided by the Council

Appreciation of parks and general outdoor areas

- 3.55 Most participants spoke very highly of the parks and outdoor spaces provided by the Council.

"Parks and outdoor spaces are really important, places like the Gnoll and Aberavon Beach" (Neath Valley)

- 3.56 Indeed, the Council's investment into Aberavon beach was praised by numerous participants. Access to the beach and its facilities were said to be a great benefit for people.

"Some people can't manage to climb up mountains, but when you go to Aberavon Beach, everyone can access that and walk along the front and have some fresh air and exercise. I think what the County have done with the facilities there is lovely as well for young people and children" (Dulais Valley)

"We also have a lovely beach; they have done a lot of work to that. That is the nicest part" (Afan Valley)

- 3.57 Despite the general appreciation of Neath Port Talbot's outdoor areas, there was some concern about antisocial behaviour in certain parks, particularly in the Dulais Valley. Residents felt that the Council does not patrol or clean the parks sufficiently, with broken glass being and dog faeces being left on equipment.

"It's not having the park, it's just the general outlay and the way that it's operated. We've had dog faeces rubbed all over the equipment" (Dulais Valley)

"It's been done inappropriately. Obviously not enough thought put into it. The location of the park is out of sight of everyone, so they're out of sight and they're out of mind then" (Dulais Valley)

- 3.58 Amman Valley residents also voiced concern over the parks in their area, claiming they are not maintained well enough.

"The park by the school is really outdated now. I'd love to see that come together again. Everything is broken there, there were nails sticking out of the climbing frame last year. The school is right there, kids are guaranteed to use that park every day" (Amman Valley)

Appreciation of public swimming pools and libraries

- 3.59 Many participants were appreciative of the swimming pools and libraries in Neath Port Talbot. Children were said to particularly benefit from the former, and all ages from the latter.

"I think we're very lucky to have a swimming pool down two miles down the road" (Afan Valley)

"My kids access the swimming pools, they love swimming. We've got Vale of Neath pool just across the way" (Neath Valley)

"I think library services are very important. There's a small library in the centre in Cynant that is run by the community centre, but Neath library has always been something I've used, and would like to continue using in the future" (Dulais Valley)

3.60 There were, though, worries about the funding and future sustainability of such facilities.

"It worries me that every community centre, the swimming pool, the gym, and the library, are social enterprises. Every year they have to fight for funding to keep them open and to maintain the building. And that they expect volunteers to run these centres" (Afan Valley In-depth Interview 2)

Dissatisfaction with the Council's decision-making processes

3.61 The majority of participants were dissatisfied with the council's engagement and decision-making processes. People largely felt as though they are not listened to and that the Council makes decisions on local areas without learning what residents there want.

3.62 It was said that because the public is not engaged more often in the decision-making process, money is often spent on new facilities that are neither wanted nor needed – and that dissatisfaction with the council's processes has led to a disconnect between it and the community.

"You always feel that these kind of things, that they don't broadcast it as widely as they should. I think they keep it to very small groups of people who are going to possibly agree with their agenda or ideas" (Neath Valley)

Value for money

3.63 Many participants noted that while residents in Neath Port Talbot pay some of the highest council tax rates in Wales, there is a great deal of dissatisfaction with Council services (or lack thereof) within Valleys communities. As a result, many questioned how money is being spent, and suggested that the services they receive do not represent value for money.

"Our council tax is the third highest in Wales ... and I think we also, up here, have an extra on top called the community council precept, which is just a talking shop ... I don't think it's value for money. What do we get for it?" (Amman Valley)

"They always say 'we haven't got the money'. We have one of the highest tax rates in Wales, where is the money going?" (Afan Valley)

"Money's put in the wrong places here where I am, for definite" (Dulais Valley)

3.64 Again, participants suggested that the Council regularly spends money on new facilities that are not needed, whereas residents would rather money be spent on maintaining existing ones.

"By all the new flats that are being built by the new bus station in Port Talbot, there are all new shops underneath that are all empty. I don't understand why they're building new shops when the old ones are empty. It seems to make Port Talbot look even worse" (Afan Valley)

Council connections with the community

- 3.65 Whilst many participants seemed to be unaware of exactly what is provided by the Council, some went further in saying again that it has become disconnected from its communities. This, it was felt, has led to a depletion in the quality of council services for vulnerable people that has resulted in the feeling the residents must volunteer to take care of people themselves.

“I couldn’t tell you anything about Neath Port Talbot Council, apart from they keep whacking up our council tax” (Neath Valley)

Dissatisfaction over transport

- 3.66 Whilst participants were unsure of the extent of the Council’s involvement in public transport, it was widely said to be a significant problem. Participants agreed that public transport is unreliable and expensive, and that buses do not run often enough, leaving people without cars to become isolated from other areas and Council services and facilities.

“Transport is a problem here... If you don’t have a car, you’re basically stuck here” (Neath Valley)

Suggested ideas for future focus

Improve transparency and communication with local organisations

- 3.67 Participants largely agreed that they wanted to see more transparency from the Council in terms of its decisions on funding, goals, and general service provision.

“I want somebody honest and trustworthy to hold an EGM and say, ‘This is what we’ve heard, this is what our objectives are: transport, education and training. Our objective is to achieve this, we project that this will be achieved by this date, and if it’s not, it will be done over the next year’” (Afan Valley)

- 3.68 Some participants said that they want the Council to work more closely with local charities, volunteers and businesses, in order to create and maintain working relationships that benefit from local expertise.

“It’s all back to respecting what’s already there and recognising that there’s people who already have a huge amount of experience and know what the issues are” (Amman Valley Focus Group)
“More of a partnership approach to service delivery with the wider third sector and local authority” (Afan Valley)

Introduce wider community involvement into decision-making processes

- 3.69 Participants also said that they would like to have more say in the decisions the Council makes.

“Just, support would be nice. To actually listen to the needs of the community and the people that live in the communities and to act upon them. Not a guess of what people need or do what they call a ‘best interest’. Actually listen to the needs of the people and the communities. Each community is completely different” (Neath Valley)

- 3.70 One participant discussed the need for asset based community development to be reintroduced so that communities can have more of a say in how their money is spent on services and facilities. It was suggested that this would ensure funding is spent more appropriately to match the needs of residents.

“There used to be community asset management. So, they were looking at what the community were already offering such as the hall and the organisations. I’m not sure where that’s gone, and I think that needs to be resurrected. It recognised the assets” (Amman Valley)

Reduce bureaucracy and ‘box ticking’

- 3.71 Some participants said they would be more willing to seek help from the Council, or be more involved with the council, if the process for doing so was easier.

“You’ve got willingness, but you can’t do it because of legislation” (Amman Valley)

- 3.72 Other participants said that services should be easier to access, more flexible and involve fewer ‘tick boxes’, so that more people can access the help that they need.

“... I get that they need criteria, but when people are in need, they need to look at people as individuals rather than just a piece of paper. Because that’s what we saw a lot ... Yes, they helped a lot of people, but there were a lot of tick boxes and if you didn’t meet that then you didn’t meet it and that was that” (Neath Valley)

Improve Public Transport

- 3.73 Many participants felt that the number of buses that travel through the towns and villages of Neath Port Talbot is substandard and therefore discourages people from visiting the area’s larger towns for work and leisure. As a result, they suggested that the number of buses serving rural areas should be increased. Those in the Afan and Amman Valleys felt particularly affected, but those in the Dulais, Neath and Swansea Valleys also felt similarly.

“There are no early buses at 6:30 for people working in factories or construction. There are no buses, to my knowledge, after 7:30 at night, so if you work shifts then you can’t get home. Our bus service has gone to one every two hours” (Afan Valley)

- 3.74 As well as encouraging people to visit larger towns for work and leisure, it was said that increasing the number of daily buses would provide a better opportunity for children to attend afterschool clubs, extracurricular activities, and local facilities such as swimming pools.
- 3.75 Some participants suggested that a community transport scheme would be effective in resolving some of the transport issues in Neath Port Talbot if increasing the number of buses is not possible.

“Community transport would be nice, I think. You know, we don’t need a double-decker bus coming into the village empty, picking up one person and off it goes again, but there is a need for community transport. It’s used in other areas quite effectively” (Neath Valley)

- 3.76 This, it was felt, would be an effective way of improving public transport opportunities for disabled and elderly people in particular.
- 3.77 Finally with respect to transport, one participant offered a specific suggestion for improving bus links. The participant (from the Amman Valley) felt that the buses connecting the Amman and Afan Valleys with Pontardawe should link far better with those connecting Pontardawe and Swansea. It was said that this would make it far easier for people without cars to not only access shops in Pontardawe and Swansea, but also allow them to reach Morriston and Singleton Hospitals with far more ease.

“Coming back to the X26 bus which goes down twice a day to Swansea and comes back three times a day as well, why don’t they put on that bus to do an hourly service from these villages, down to Pontardawe. And once you’re in Pontardawe you’ve got the X6 going every twenty minutes ... towards Swansea. Then you’ve got access to the hospitals, Morriston and Singleton” (Amman Valley)

Standardise the roles and expectations of Council officers & LACs

- 3.78 Since participants had such mixed experiences with their Council officers and LACs, it was said that the role should be better defined and standardised. This, it was felt, would help ensure that more officers and LACs are visible in their community, and therefore build better working relationships.

“Some of them are really good. Others aren’t ... the LACs in different areas are doing totally different roles and it needs to be standardised” (Neath Valley)

Increase investment in youth infrastructure

- 3.79 Increasing investment in infrastructure, facilities and services for children and young adults was a very common suggestion from participants.

“They need to invest in the infrastructure of these small communities. They need to come down here, they need to talk to us, they need to look at what we’ve got, and they need to invest in us. Especially our young people ... there’s kids out there, I can see kids out my window now with nowhere to go. They’ve not got the infrastructure” (Neath Valley)

“I want transport for our children to do extracurricular activities. If they’re down the comprehensive in Port Talbot, I want to make sure they can do after school clubs, sports teams, training after school hours. I want them to have exactly the same start as the children all the way down from Cwmafon” (Afan Valley)

- 3.80 Youth clubs and groups for younger children such as scouts and guides were suggested to provide more opportunities for children and young people and to break the ‘benefits cycle’.

“Neath Port Talbot, they spend millions on the beach and it’s fantastic, but what about our children up here who’ve got nothing? No scouts, no guides, no under 11 provisions. What about the children of third generation benefits? It’s a vicious cycle that nobody is prepared to break” (Afan Valley)

“I’m concerned that over a period of time the youth service and opportunities for young people has been scaled back. I think Neath Port Talbot needs to relook at what it can do in partnership with community organisations to support this” (Amman Valley)

Ensure the provision of day services and facilities for all age groups

- 3.81 Although the need for services for children and young people were stressed most often by participants, the provision of day services and facilities for all age groups (particularly the elderly) was also considered essential.

“Provide appropriate groups and facilities for every age group. It’s not just the children, it’s the elderly as well” (Dulais Valley)

Funding for the maintenance of community facilities

- 3.82 Many participants said that they would like to see money spent on the maintenance of existing facilities rather than on building new ones. It was generally felt that this would benefit communities more by allowing them to run their existing provisions more effectively.

“The community centre ... Give it back to the community but give us the funding to keep the building maintained and have the money to pay for professional help to come here” (Afan Valley)

“Fantastic facilities, yes, a swimming pool, a gym and a library two miles down the road, we have a community centre that has old age people down there, bingo, mother and toddler groups, things like that ... but unless someone provides adequate funding, I can’t see them being open in the next eighteen months” (Afan Valley)

Ensure that services are better funded and that council tax is not raised

- 3.83 Many participants urged the Council not to increase council tax or make further cuts to services. There was a strong sense that if it were to do so, the disconnect between Council and community would deepen further.

“Less cuts, no more raises in tax ... that’s a massive thing for me. No more cuts in services and that ties in with everything we’ve said tonight. And more investment in people, in healthcare, social care” (Dulais Valley)

“Don’t rise council tax again. Its causing a lot of bad feeling. I’ve noticed on social media there’s a lot of hate. Its causing a rift between the community and the Council, that needs to be built” (Neath Valley)

Ensure that footpaths & cycle tracks are introduced as per the active travel plan

- 3.84 One participant discussed the Welsh Government’s Active Travel Plan and said that they wanted the Council to ensure an increase in the number of footpaths and cycle tracks throughout the Valleys. It was stressed that whilst the routes would not likely be used for travel to work, they would be enjoyed by residents for leisure.

“It’s needed here. Every place you walk is on a pavement next to a road ... I doubt it very much people would use those routes for work ... but purely as something for active leisure” (Amman Valley)

Ensure that schools continue to receive the funding that they need

- 3.85 Finally, a significant number of participants felt that the most important thing the Council can do is to continue providing adequate funding for schools.

“Education will always be number one for me. Making sure schools are funded appropriately and are funded well enough to get the new curriculum out” (Neath Valley)

Summary of key points from the focus groups

- **What people said they love about their community**
 - Very strong sense of community and togetherness
 - The natural beauty of the area
 - The 'Welshness' of the area; particularly the presence of the Welsh language
- **What people said they would like to change about their community**
 - Improved public transport
 - Improved mental health and loneliness support
 - Reduction in antisocial behaviour and substance misuse
 - Reduction in deprivation and unemployment
 - Increased collaboration and engagement between the Council and communities
 - Increased litter picking in rural areas
 - Improved services for young and disabled people
- **What residents said is important to them**
 - Their general health and wellbeing
 - Care for the elderly and the vulnerable
 - Improving services in rural areas
 - Opportunities and education for children
 - A sense of community and opportunities to socialise
- **Main positive impacts of COVID-19 on communities**
 - Strengthened sense of community
 - Increased quality time with families
- **Main negative impacts of covid-19 on communities**
 - Increase in mental health issues and isolation due to lockdowns and fear of the virus
 - Closure of day services and youth centres, further increasing isolation
 - School closures causing anxiety in schoolchildren and an increase antisocial behaviour among teenagers
- **Views on the Council's presence during the pandemic**
 - Many people were unaware of the services provided by the Council during the pandemic
 - Some appreciated the food parcels the Council had organised, whilst others expressed concern over the quality of the parcels and the difficulty in applying for them
 - Social provisions for adults with learning difficulties were said to be unsatisfactory because their technological abilities and access to technology had not been considered
 - The Council was praised for aiding the Street Champions, who were widely appreciated
 - The Council was also praised for providing funding (in lieu of free school meals) and laptops to vulnerable families while schools were closed
- **Presence of volunteers & other organisations during the pandemic**
 - Residents commended the volunteers who either delivered food and provisions to the vulnerable or who worked in foodbanks during the pandemic
 - Participants also spoke warmly about their local community/village halls for providing provisions to the vulnerable and street entertainment for adults and children
 - The Pen Y Cymoedd Windfarm was praised for donating money to community halls, allowing them to better provide for people

- **Views on general services provided by the Council**
 - General dissatisfaction with public transport across the County Borough
 - Strong praise for the area's public parks and other beauty spots maintained by the Council (Aberavon Beach in particular) – as well as local swimming pools and libraries
 - Inconsistencies in the performances of LACs and Council officers were noted, and there was a sense that the Council has become somewhat distanced from its communities

- **Suggested ideas for future focus**
 - More transparency and community involvement in the Council's decision-making processes
 - Reducing 'box ticking' and bureaucracy for those trying to access services or input into Council matters
 - Improving public transport links across the whole County Borough – and especially between rural valleys and urban centres
 - Standardising the roles and expectations of LACs and Officers
 - Investing in youth infrastructure to provide more opportunities for children and young people
 - Ensuring the long-term sustainability of facilities such as day services/centres, swimming pools and community halls
 - Investing in existing infrastructure rather than building new facilities
 - Minimising council tax increases
 - Continuing to provide adequate provision and funding for local schools.