



Levelling up in practice >

Interim report from Barry

RESEARCH NOTE

Adam Hawksbee, Luke Stanley, Shivani H Menon

Introduction

This is the fourth interim report from Onward's research into Levelling Up in Practice.

Our first interim report set out the purpose of this programme.¹In summary, we are working to develop a prototype methodology for levelling up, rooted in evidence and informed by the views of local communities. By taking the insights from the Levelling Up White Paper and applying them to specific places across the country, we want to generate an actionable toolkit for local leaders to improve their areas.

We believe this methodology for Levelling Up needs to be different from past attempts at regeneration. It needs to make places great to live in as well as making them wealthier, prioritise the social fabric alongside economic fundamentals, and bring opportunities to where people live already - rather than expecting them to move. And our methodology needs to marry consistency and flexibility: clear and replicable enough as a playbook that different communities can adopt it, but not so rigid that it ignores the nuances of local context.

Our approach combines three steps:

- *Data Diagnostics* - understanding the economic and social characteristics of an area through a range of quantitative datasets and building a typology of places so that local leaders can identify relevant comparators;
- *Field Visits* - conducting qualitative research in a series of places across the UK, including focus groups with members of the public and discussions with businesses, community groups, local and regional government, schools, colleges, and universities;
- *Levelling Up Playbook* - identifying shared challenges to form the building blocks for a set of replicable and scalable interventions. These will primarily be low-cost, fast-acting, evidence-based interventions, within the gift of local leaders without recourse to central government.

In the spirit of sharing and learning, we will regularly publish interim research which summarises what we have learnt in each place and offer initial thoughts and recommendations. These will serve to prompt discussion and unearth common themes, and improve the robustness of the prototype once all the research has been concluded.

Our first three reports shared our learnings from Oldham, South Tyneside, and Walsall, bringing together a range of data with views from members of the public and leaders from the public, private, and charitable sectors.

Our research in Barry

The fourth place we have focused on is Barry, which we visited in August 2022.

We are extremely grateful to the individuals and organisations who gave their time to speak to us - including Alun Cairns MP, the member of Parliament for the Vale of Glamorgan; Mark Hooper, a local councillor representing a ward of Barry on the Vale of Glamorgan Council; Dennis Harkus of Focus Barry; Paul Haley of Pride in Barry; and Lorraine Gittins, Rosie James and Lynn Crease from The Bridge Between Community Centre and Barry Uniting Church.

Barry

“It’s already getting there. Crime is falling, things are getting better. And Gavin and Stacey has put us on the map”

Mark, database administrator

Barry is a town of around 50,000 people in the Vale of Glamorgan, 9 miles south west of Cardiff. Originally a small village, Barry expanded significantly during the 1880s after the development of the local docks, and was the largest coal port in the world in 1913. Following this expansion, Barry absorbed neighbouring villages including Cadoxton. While the significance of Barry as a port declined through the 20th Century, Barry Island became a popular tourist destination, benefiting from local rail infrastructure developed to feed the port. In 1966, a Butlins Holiday camp was opened on the island, which remained in place through to 1996.

Barry has faced real challenges in the last fifty years. The Welsh Indices of Multiple Deprivation show that most deprived neighbourhoods in Wales have persistently been in Barry, with this share improving only marginally since 2011: 5 areas in Barry were among the 10% most deprived in Wales in 2011, falling to 4 in 2014 and 3 in 2019.

But Barry is already well on the way to levelling up. The clearest sign of its renaissance is in the built environment. There have been a number of successful regeneration projects in Barry, including the revitalisation of the Waterfront, which has delivered more than 2,000 new homes in the last eight years and boosted house prices.² In 2019, the town had the highest house price growth in Great Britain³. Between 2017 and 2021 increase in house prices in Barry (39%) was higher than both the Vale of Glamorgan generally (36%) and the average for Wales (29%).

And there is more to come. A proposed development on a small peninsula of land in the centre of Barry, “the Mole”, could see further regeneration - if the area succeeds in securing backing from the Government’s Levelling Up Fund. The £20 million project would deliver a new marina, along with more housing, co-working spaces, and a new water sports facility that local clubs can use as a community space.⁴

Figure 1: Barry Waterfront, August 2022



Discussions with the local council and community leaders make clear that this regeneration hasn't happened by accident. Community groups have been working for decades to bring forward new sites, originally becoming involved in the early 1990s, after the Vale of Glamorgan Council purchased large swathes of derelict industrial land on the waterfront. Activists like Paul Haley, the former chair of local community group Pride in Barry, have advocated for the development of the Marina for over 14 years.⁵ And these community-backed proposals have been worked up and championed by local politicians, both from the council and representatives in Westminster.

Local entrepreneurs have also played an important role. In 2015, Vale of Glamorgan council and the Welsh Government invested £1.6m to save an old pump house by the waterfront.⁶ This created the condition for Simon Baston, a local businessman, to buy the site and convert it into 'The Pumphouse' - a popular coffee shop and co-working space. Simon also created "Goodsheds" nearby, a "container village" hosting restaurants, retail units, apartments for short-term lets, and workspaces for start-ups. This has created a new centre of activity for Barry on the waterfront, even as the older and more traditional high street in the centre of town has struggled.

Barry's regeneration has also been helped by good fortune, with "Gavin and Stacey" generating interest in the town as a tourism destination. Local entrepreneurs and business owners have taken advantage of this buzz: Marco's cafe, which featured heavily in the series, and other local retailers have launched themed products and signage to attract day trippers. And the local council has worked hard to capitalise on this interest in the town via greater tourism promotion.

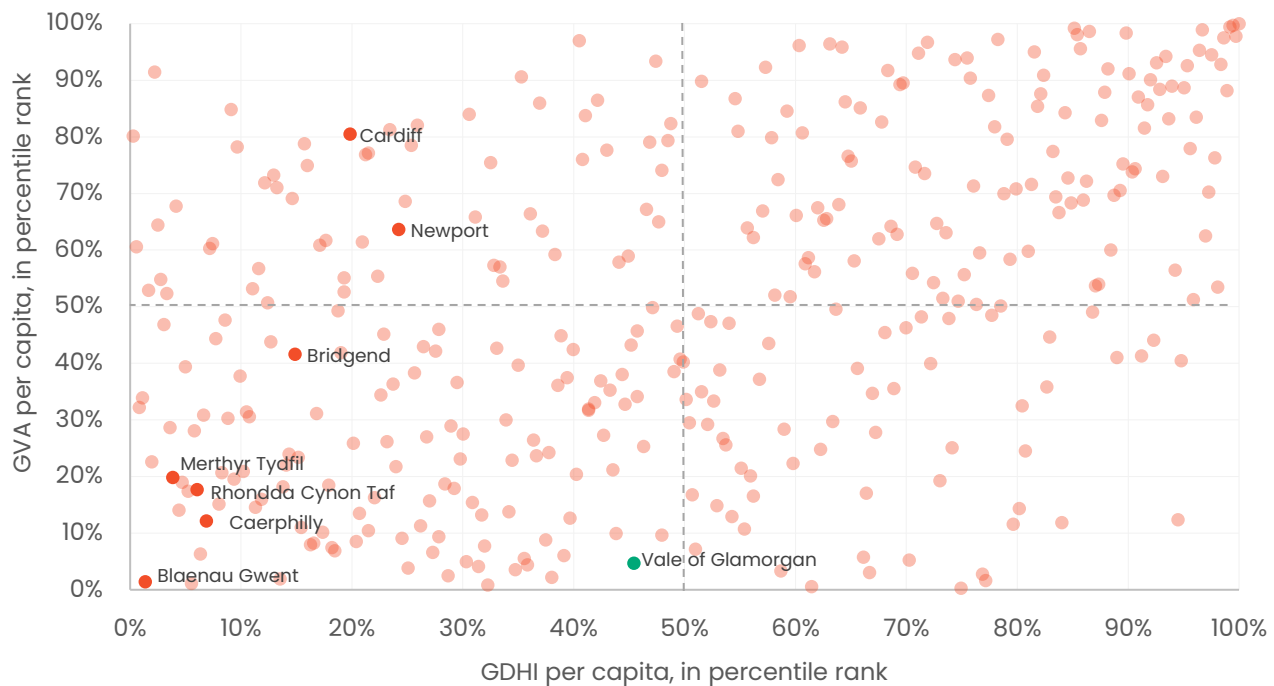
But this recent upswing isn't completely visible in some of the data on the economic and social strength of the area. While averages across the Vale of Glamorgan are reasonably high, this often obscures challenges in Barry.

On the economy, the Vale of Glamorgan looks like a typical commuter suburb. Levels of productivity are very low, with GVA per capita at £14,706, around £8,600 less than the UK average and placing it in the 5th percentile. This is a wider problem across Southern Wales, with similarly low productivity in neighbouring local authorities like Rhondda Cynon Taf, another commuter town. But data on household incomes is more positive for the Vale, with a GDHI of £20,000, far closer to the UK average, in stark contrast to other local authorities across Southern Wales, including Cardiff, which report far lower average incomes.

While productivity and income data is not available for Barry, there appears to be a stark economic divide both between both the town and the rest of the Vale and between the east and west parts of the town itself. For example, parts of Gibbonsdown, in North East Barry, have some of the highest levels of deprivation in the Vale of Glamorgan, while parts of western Barry, like the Baruc ward, are among the least deprived areas of the Vale. Deprivation in the town ranges between LSOA Gibbonsdown 2, the 105th most deprived of the 1909 such areas in Wales, through to Baruc 2, the 65th least deprived LSOA in Wales.⁷ The economic divide between Barry and the rest of the Vale was raised repeatedly by people we spoke to in the town. Locals saw it as deeply frustrating, as the affluence of the rest of the county prevented them from being considered for funding from the Welsh Government or the European Union.

Figure 2: GVA per capita vs GDHI per capita

Source: *Onward Analysis of ONS Regional Accounts, 2019*

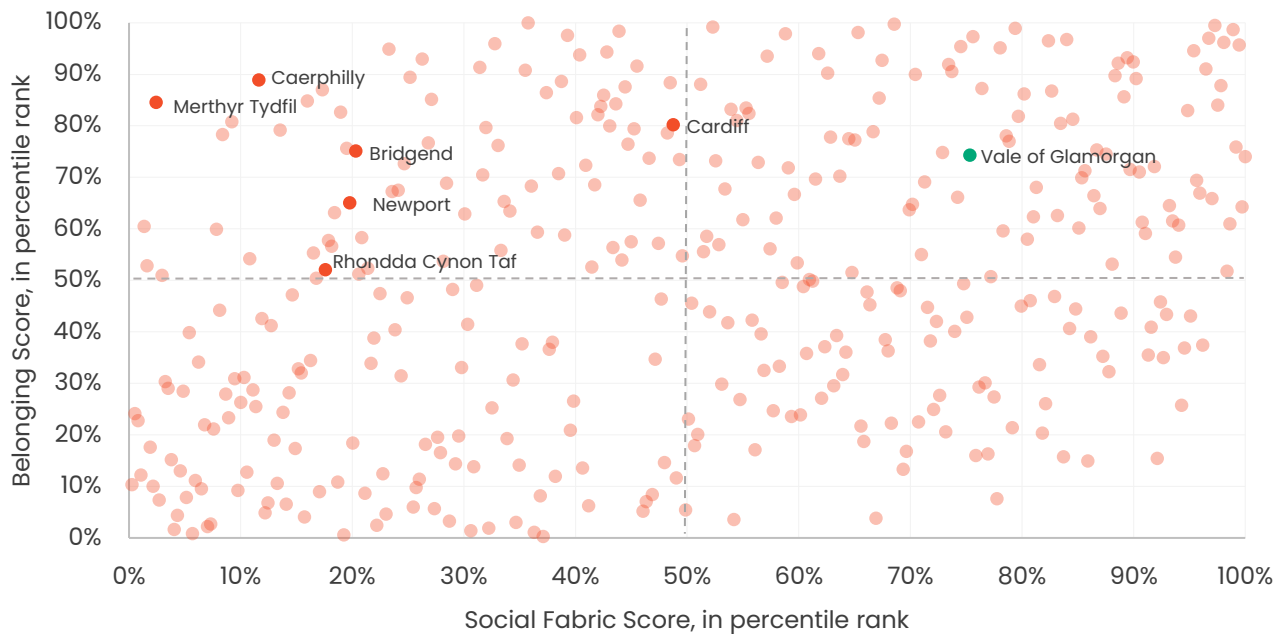


Our data on the strength of community within Barry is also encouraging. While data is not available for Barry specifically, the wider Vale of Glamorgan reports the highest level of community strength, as measured by Onward’s Social Fabric Index, in all of Wales.

On the extent to which Vale of Glamorgan residents feel they belong to their local community, the data is less exceptional, with scores comparable to that of neighbouring Bridgend and below that of Cardiff, but still above the national UK average. This data chimes with the findings of our focus groups, discussed below, in which a number of respondents expressed pride in Barry and pointed to the role of community activities, such as the local “GlastonBarry” music festival, in bringing people together.

Figure 3: Social Fabric Index score vs Belonging

Source: Onward Social Fabric Index and Understanding Society Belonging Score, 2020



This data underscores the strength of community and belonging in Barry, while our qualitative research highlights the extent to which the community’s “can-do” spirit has spurred the economic rejuvenation of the town.

The rest of this report will explore in greater detail the progress in Barry to date and what more can be done to build upon this, further address the challenges facing the town, and capitalise upon Barry’s opportunities. We will explore these within the four headings of the Levelling Up White Paper, as well as discussing what Barry can tell us about the “Levelling Up in Practice” playbook.

1) Boost productivity, pay, jobs, and living standards by growing the private sector

“If you want a half decent salary in Barry you’ve got no chance”
Ben, process engineer

Broadly speaking, there are three important strands to Barry’s local economy: tourism, other industries present in the Vale such as employment in manufacturing and public services, and the town’s increased role as a commuter town for Cardiff.

First, on tourism, there has been a resurgence in visits to Barry. Between 2012 and 2018, the estimated number of visitors to Barry Island soared from around 300,000 to 425,000, an increase of 42%.⁸ ⁹Many locals pointed to the “Gavin and Stacey Effect” as one of the driving factors of this upswing in tourism, with the show, first airing in 2007, driving national awareness of Barry as a tourist destination. This is corroborated by academic research which found almost 20 different news stories by Welsh and UK national press promoting Barry as a tourist destination in the four years after the series began. Some of these billed Barry as a “forgotten resort” while others noted that the show had put Barry “on the map”, a phrase we heard from locals on multiple occasions during our own visit.¹⁰

Figure 4: Tourist attractions on Barry Island, August 2022



Some locals also pointed to Gavin and Stacey as helping Barry reinvent itself by creating a new “cafe culture” on the island. The show prominently features a local cafe, Marco’s, which some locals told us had helped generate greater footfall to cafes on the island. Crucially, this “cafe culture” appears to attract different kinds of visitors than those coming to visit Barry Island’s amusement attractions, helping the town attract visitors all year round and easing seasonal pressures. And the revitalisation of the Island has been supported by the Vale council’s £3.3m renovation of the promenade, which provided new street furniture, toilets, and beach huts.^{11 12}

One of the factors preventing the visitor economy in Barry reaching its full potential is the low level of overnight stays by tourists, as evidenced by the relative lack of hotels in the town. Given that overnight stays generate significantly more for the local economy than day trips, Barry is not currently generating as much revenue from its reputation as a tourist destination as the town could be doing. Some steps have already been taken to address this, with the Vale council supporting a new Premier Inn as part of the Waterfront’s redevelopment in 2013.

However, even if Barry were to maximise the benefits of the tourism economy in such a way, employment in this sector tends to be poorly paid. The latest figures show that the average weekly wage for someone employed in accommodation or food services across Great Britain is £286, half the average wages of those employed across the economy (£613).¹³ Therefore, to prevent Barry becoming trapped as a low wage economy, more must be done to support skilled jobs in other industries within the area, which the Vale council have included as a priority in their Barry Growth Programme.¹⁴

Second, on industries in the Vale more broadly, the industry-mix of employment has changed significantly in recent years. Between 2015 and 2021, the proportion of Vale residents employed in financial and insurance has grown 67%, with similarly large increases in professional, scientific and technical services (63%), and public administration and defence (35%). Each of these increases have been far faster than the average increases for Wales generally.

By contrast, there have been significant reductions in traditional staples of the local economy: mining, quarrying and utilities (63%), manufacturing (36%), and wholesale (17%). Again, each of these declines have been far faster than the average declines across Wales, showing the extent to which Barry and the Vale are transitioning rapidly to a new economy.

Figure 5: Change in share of employment by industry, 2015-21

Source: Business Register and Employment Survey

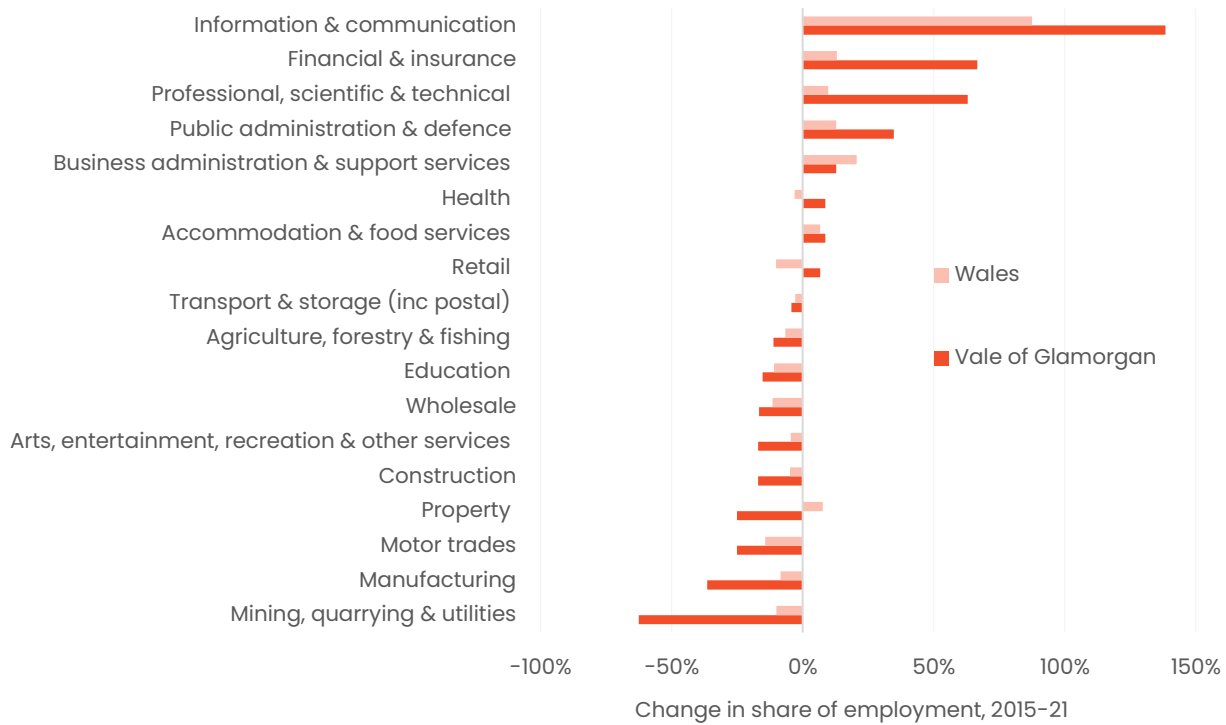
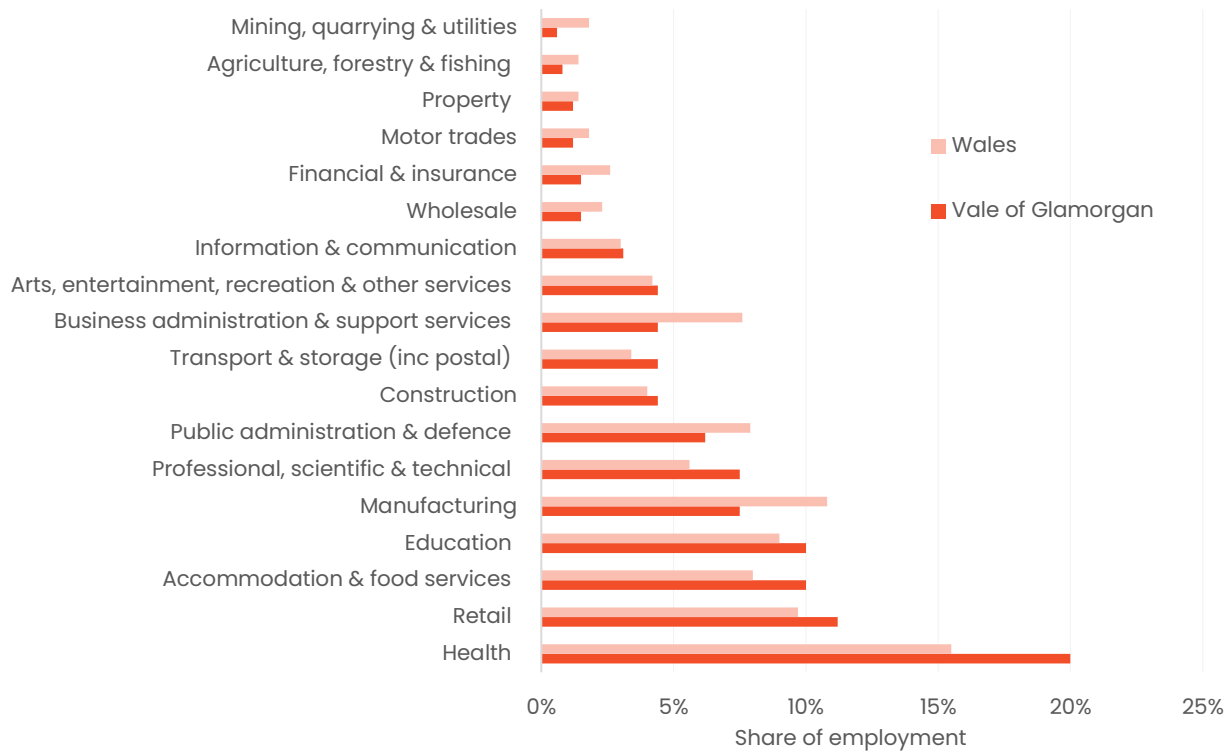


Figure 6: Share of employment by industry, 2021

Source: Business Register and Employment Survey



Despite these changes, employment in the Vale in many of these traditional sectors, such as manufacturing, remains above the average for the UK (9% to 8%). The decline of manufacturing in Barry can be exaggerated. As recently as 2020, Aston Martin opened a new factory in St Athan, within the Bro Tathan Enterprise Zone which is now employing over 700 people in well paid jobs.¹⁵ And last year Forward Waste Management opened new premises in Barry producing equipment for waste management and recycling operations across the UK.¹⁶ Harlech Doors, a large manufacturer previously based in Cardiff has also relocated to Barry, bringing further jobs to the area. But participants in our focus groups, particularly those from less affluent backgrounds, are still keen to see more manufacturing jobs brought to the town.

So what more can be done to bring skilled, technical jobs to Barry to compliment roles in the tourism industry? One attempt so far has been to position the Vale as a clean growth hub. In 2021, then-leader of the council Neil Moore outlined his ambition for the Vale to achieve this by investing in green technology.¹⁷ The Barry Growth Programme also includes an aspiration for the town to lead on decarbonisation.¹⁸ However, Barry's biomass burner, which began construction in 2015, has been unpopular with the local community, while legal problems resulting from the plant being built differently to approved plans have also been a source of local controversy.¹⁹

Third, many Barry residents working in professional jobs are employed in Cardiff and either commute in or work from home, with the town benefiting from its proximity and connectivity to the nearby city. While there is no specific data for Barry, the prevalence of commuting across the Vale of Glamorgan area is highlighted by the fact that average resident weekly pay for the local authority is £61 more than that of average workplace weekly pay, equivalent to 10% more.²⁰ Most Vale residents are commuters into Cardiff, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Bridgend, even though the number of jobs per capita within 5 miles is greater in the Vale (45 jobs per capita) than in Rhondda Cynon Taf (24) and Bridgend (20).²¹ Participants in our focus groups told us that while there were lots of retail jobs in Barry, "you need to go to Cardiff for office or call centre jobs" while one local community leader told us that Barry "is and always will be a dormitory for Cardiff".

Looking at the number of jobs reachable within 90 minutes on public transport, it is clear that Barry and other eastern parts of the Vale disproportionately benefit from proximity to Cardiff. However, these benefits are not spread equally across Barry. Those living in the best connected LSOA within Barry can access 455,600 jobs within 90 minutes of travel, 24 times the amount that can be reached by those in the worst connected one (18,900 jobs). This is despite the town having significant transport infrastructure, including four train stations.

Figure 7(a): Jobs reachable within 90 minutes on public transport in the Vale of Glamorgan

Source: Onward Network Effects data, 2021

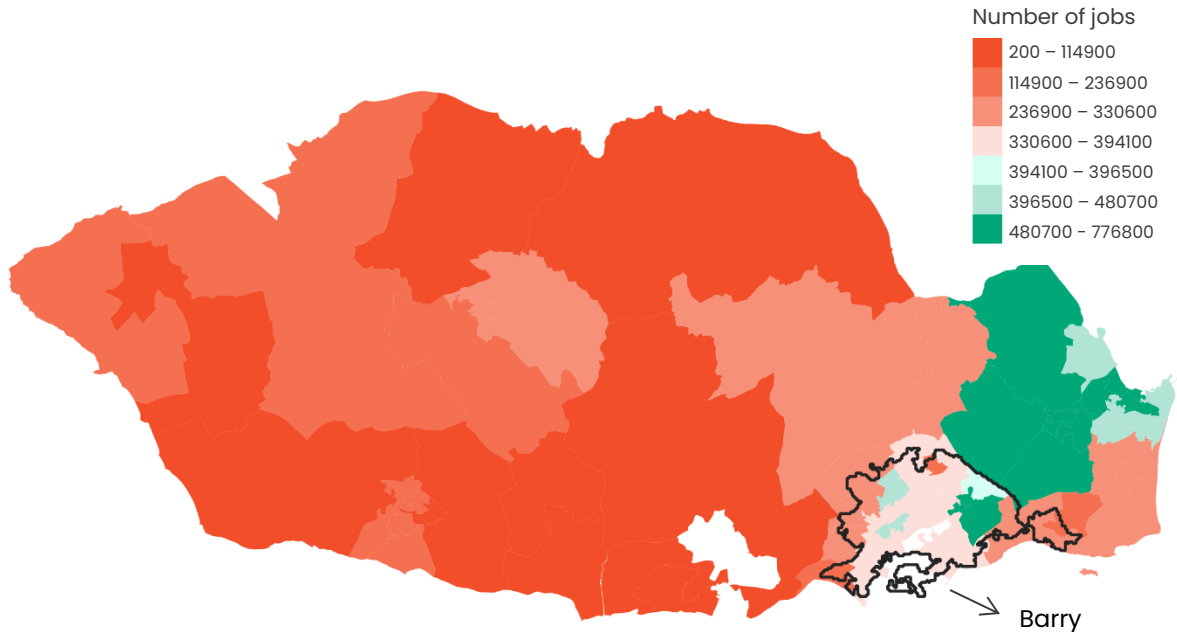
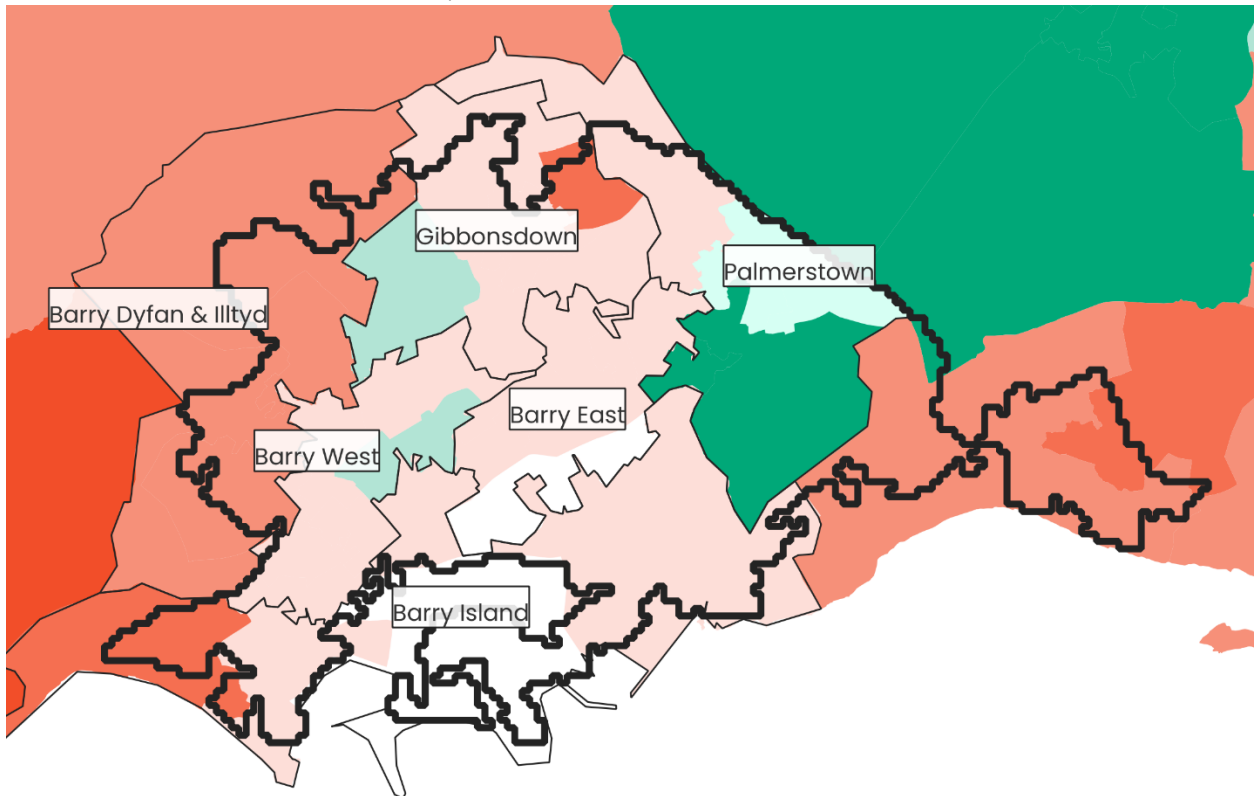


Figure 7(b): Jobs reachable within 90 minutes on public transport in Barry

Source: Onward Network Effects data, 2021



Levels of commuting in Barry and across the Vale is likely a result of the lack of high-skilled jobs: Rhondda Cynon Taf, Cardiff and Bridgend have more employment prospects in traditionally higher skill sectors. But data on change in industry mix over time shows that this shift to higher skilled jobs has gradually been happening in the Vale. This is also reflected in the NVQ Level qualifications data - the Vale has 49% of its population educated to NVQ4 or above, compared to 38% in Wales and 44% in Great Britain.

What might this mean for the levelling up playbook?

So there are three problems facing Barry's economy, which interventions should seek to tackle. First, Barry is not unlocking the full economic benefits of its position as a renowned tourism destination, due to a lack of overnight capacity. Second, Barry risks being overdependent on low-paid jobs in tourism and needs to diversify its economy and bring more skilled jobs to the area. Third, Barry is dependent on Cardiff for professional occupations, and can do more to help local residents to work remotely in order to boost access to these jobs. There are a number of actions that could help address these problems.

First, the local council could work to encourage more overnight visits to Barry in order to unlock even greater tourism spending within the town's economy. One way to achieve this would be to work with short-term letting platforms to better advertise options for staying in Barry, helping encourage more visitors to stay locally rather than in Cardiff. Airbnb, for example, is seeking to champion underlooked tourism destinations around the UK to spread the benefits of tourism more evenly across the country.²² While more short-term lets in the town could impact house prices, which are already growing rapidly, the Welsh Government's proposals for a licensing scheme for holiday lets will help clamp down on second homeowners misusing these platforms.²³ This would build on the work the Vale council is already doing in promoting Barry and signposting to existing accommodation via its website.

Second, more can be done to attract skilled jobs to the town. Companies offering skilled work are already increasingly coming to Barry and the Vale, as shown by the new Aston Martin manufacturing plant. The council could build on this record by working with the local college campus to strengthen links with potential employers. For example, the council could put on more regular career and job fairs in Barry, set up work experience programmes with skilled employers across the South of Wales, or create a careers role model scheme whereby skilled workers come to the local college campus to talk about their jobs, building on existing efforts in this area by large employers in the town. As the Careers and Enterprise Company have noted, UK literature suggests that career events are "consistently effective" in boosting young people's educational and employment outcomes.²⁴ And on job fairs specifically, international studies show that while attendance at these events "does not facilitate direct matches with a job-fair employer, attendance leads to a large increase in reported formal sector employment", suggesting they play a role in "encouraging individuals to move to the formal sector and for conveying information about labour market prospects."²⁵ Anything that builds links between the local college campus and skilled manufacturers will help showcase the talents of the people of Barry and help attract greater business presence in the area.

Third, the council could provide more workspaces within Barry. Broadly speaking, the people of Barry are relaxed about the town's developing position as a commuter hub for Cardiff. This is welcome, and recognises the reality that there will always be better job opportunities in a capital city like Cardiff than in smaller towns. But for those who would prefer to work within Barry rather than commute into Cardiff, the delivery of more workspaces within the town could help them work locally, increase footfall for the local high streets and boost the local economy. The plan to deliver more co-working spaces within the Mole development, as well as Simon Baston' Tramsheds, are steps in the right direction. One model for providing even more coworking spaces would be for the Vale council to buy up vacant high street units on Holton Road and offer them to a coworking provider rent free. This would build upon their existing work with Town Square to facilitate more co-working spaces across Barry and mirror action taken by other councils such as Leicester and Islington.²⁶

2) Spread opportunities and improve public services

"The A&E is open 9-3. So if you are going to break your arm, make sure it's before 3pm"
Leanne, social worker

There is a stark poverty divide within Barry. While the growth in tourism, skilled work, and commuting into Cardiff discussed above have benefited Barry's economy, these benefits have not been spread evenly. The west of the town is much more affluent, including Barry Island, with its tourist attractions and cafe culture. By contrast, the east is far more deprived, with high concentrations of social housing and empty high street stores. Many residents we spoke to also pointed to this geographical divide within Barry, with some describing Gibbonsdown area in the North East as "one of the most deprived areas of Wales".

Despite levels of deprivation, Barry has not benefited from economic development investment in the same way that other areas of Wales have done, due to the town being within the boundaries of the affluent Vale of Glamorgan County Council. As local MP Alun Cairns has pointed out, West Wales and the Valleys have received more than £5 billion from the EU since 2000 but the town has missed out because the Vale's affluence has meant Barry did not qualify as a priority area.²⁷

This divide is highlighted by data on educational and health deprivation for the town. Comparing Barry with the Vale of Glamorgan more broadly highlights that educational and health deprivation is much more prevalent in the town than the rest of the Vale. For example, across the Vale just 3 of the 79 LSOAs (4%) are in the top decile for education deprivation in Wales, but all 3 of these are in Barry. There is a similar trend for health deprivation, with the most unhealthy areas of the Vale concentrated in Barry.

Figure 8(a): Education deprivation in the Vale of Glamorgan

Source: Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019



Figure 8(b): Education deprivation in Barry

Source: Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019

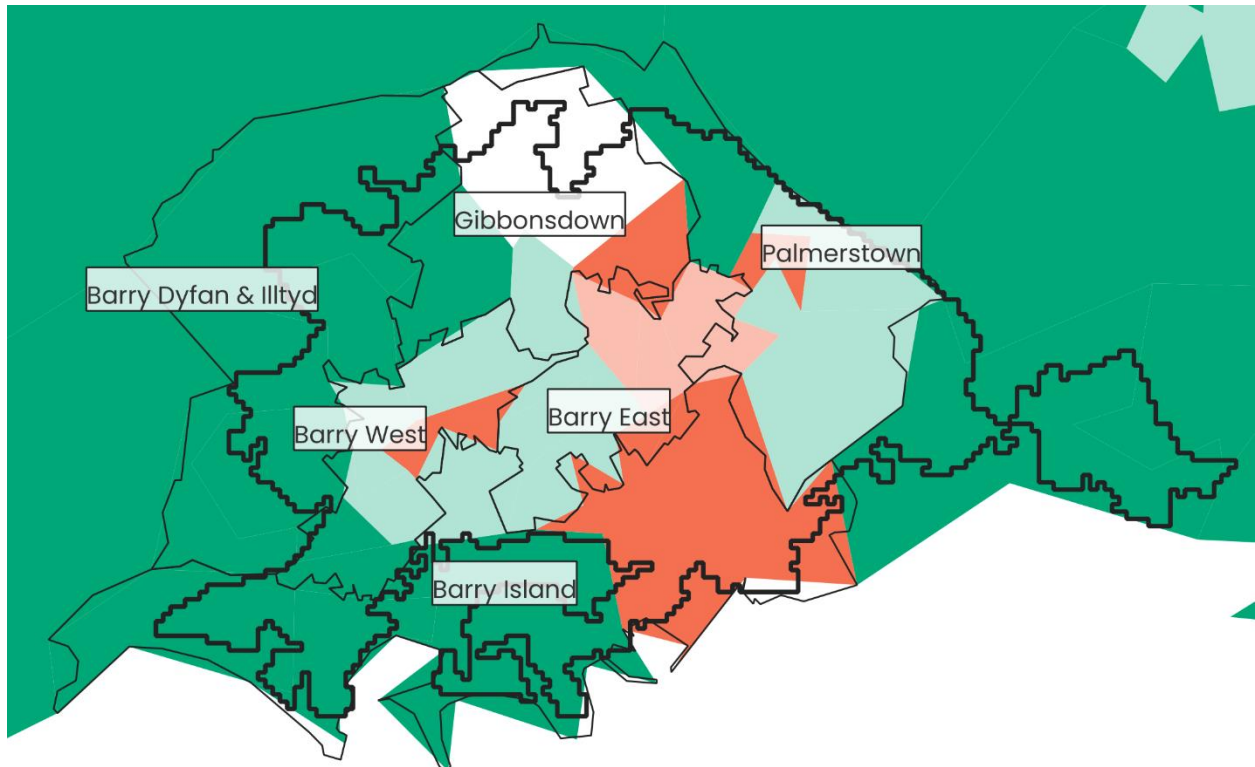


Figure 9(a): Health deprivation in the Vale of Glamorgan

Source: Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019

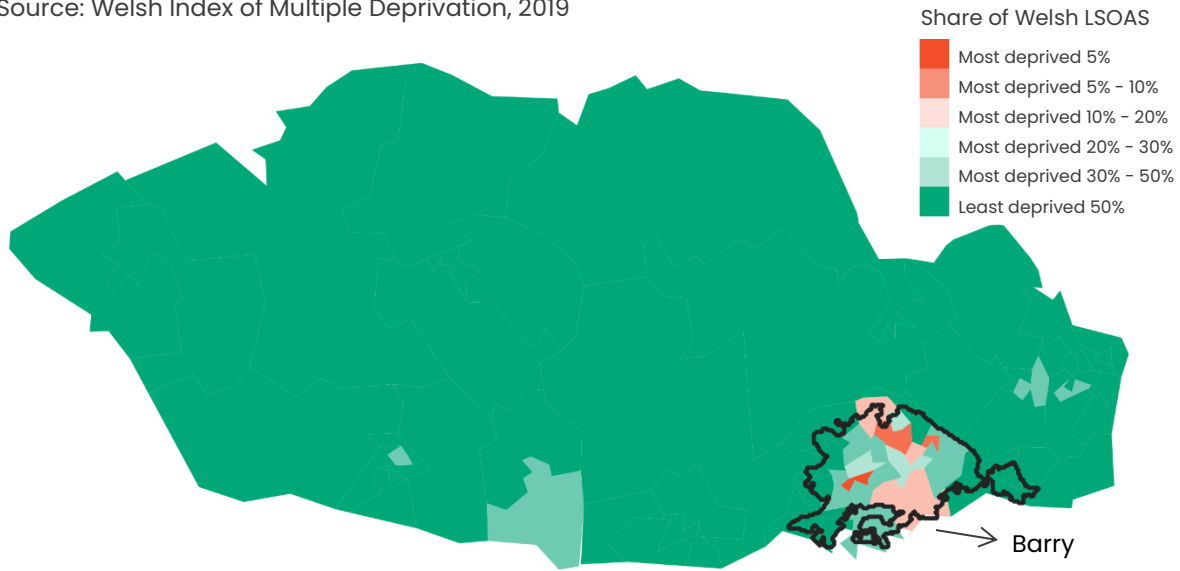
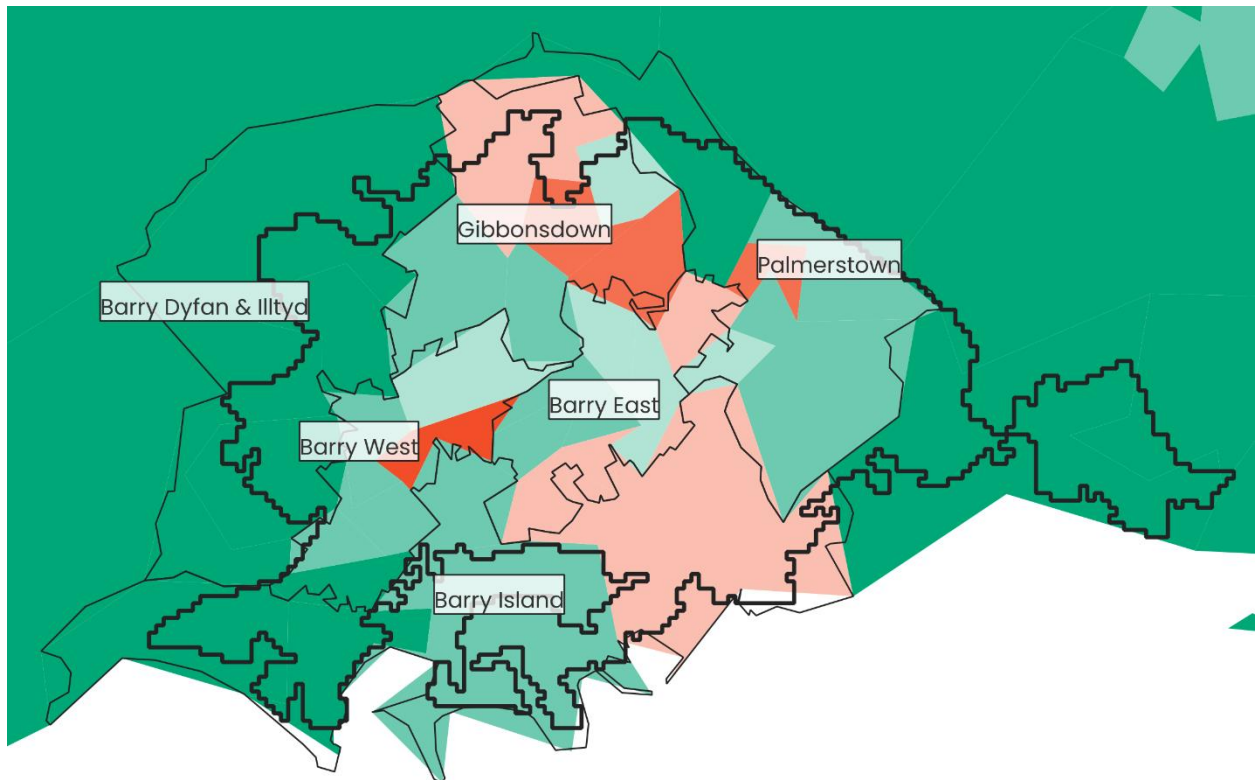


Figure 9(b): Health deprivation in Barry

Source: Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation, 2019



Higher levels of health deprivation within Barry are matched by resident concerns about health services in the town. A number of participants in our focus groups criticised the decision to close the local A&E, claiming that it made it harder to access care in the event of an emergency. While Barry Hospital does host a Minor Injury Unit, this is only open between 9am and 3.30pm on Mondays to Fridays, in contrast to the 24/7 service of an A&E department.²⁸ Some residents expressed concerns that they would have to drive to a neighbouring town in the event of an emergency in order to receive care. Regardless of the clinical case for the closure, which may have merit, this reduction in public confidence is concerning.

By contrast, public confidence in Barry's education system was much higher, with participants in our focus groups noting the strength of local schools. There appears to be very little divide in school quality between the East and West of Barry. For example, Barry Island Primary, in the more affluent West of the town, received three "Excellent" and two "Good" ratings at their last official inspections, the same as that of Cadoxton Community Primary in the East of the town.²⁹ Indeed, local people reported that problems in specific schools across Barry were less to do with deprivation or geography, and more to do with certain schools having poor leadership.

Barry has also benefited from the 21st Century Schools Programme, a collaboration between the Welsh Government and local authorities to provide a long term strategic investment in educational estates across Wales. Through this programme, the Welsh Government, Vale Council and others are investing £130 million in expanding or rebuilding schools across Barry.³⁰

Opportunities for a high-quality technical education in Barry have also improved in recent years. In 2015, the local college Cardiff and Vale College opened a new campus in the centre of Cardiff to cater to 4,000 students as well as thousands more on apprenticeships, short courses, and employer training.³¹ The college is also planning to open a new campus on Barry Waterfront to replace its existing campus in the town on Colcot Road. A new Advanced Manufacturing Centre for the College is also being set up by the nearby Cardiff Airport, which will help support the aerospace and automotive sectors in the area.³² One local we spoke to suggested that the renewed success of the College and its expanding presence in Barry was instrumental in influencing Aston Martin's decision to open their new nearby factory in 2020.

What might this mean for the local playbook?

The council and public service leaders have done a lot to date to improve the quality of Barry's public services. There are two remaining areas where efforts should be focused. First, more needs to be done to restore public confidence in health services. Second, steps should be taken to improve educational attainment in specific schools which struggle with poor leadership. There are two actions that could be taken to achieve these aims.

First, the Vale council could work with local health leaders to improve health services within Barry. To a certain extent, this is already happening, with the Vale council currently working with the Cardiff and Vale University Health Board to restore a local medical centre, the Broad Street Clinic,

which was in danger of shutting down.³³ The council could explore using vacant stores on the high street to serve as community clinics or diagnostic hubs to increase the visibility of services. Steps such as increasing social prescribing or investment in community health services could also provide health support to individuals that are likely to be harder to reach for statutory services. Actions such as these will help restore Barry residents' confidence that they can access health services within the town.

Second, the council should ramp up support for schools struggling with poor leadership. One option to help achieve this would be to encourage greater mobility for senior teachers, including head teachers, between schools across the town. Those teaching at the more successful schools could be encouraged, potentially using financial benefits, to relocate to some of the less successful schools, to improve teaching there. This would mirror the national scheme seeking to encourage teachers to move to more disadvantaged schools.³⁴ It would also build on the existing scheme where each school in Barry has a shared Challenge Adviser from the Central South Consortium (a joint education service for local authorities in South Wales) to raise standards and share best practice.³⁵

3) Restore a sense of community, pride, and local belonging

"When it was the Queen's Jubilee there were street parties. You wouldn't get that if there was no community spirit"

Lynn, retired NHS administrator

Barry residents are overwhelmingly positive about their town, with locals reporting a strong sense of both pride in place and community, and relatively low levels of concern about crime and anti-social behaviour in the area. This starkly contrasts with some of the other areas which Onward has visited as part of this Levelling Up in Practice programme. So what is driving these high levels of pride, community strength, and low levels of concern about crime?

First, local people in Barry reported a strong sense of pride. This was particularly prevalent within our focus groups, with one woman, stating that "if anyone outside of Barry criticises Barry, I get quite defensive". Asked to describe Barry, participants stated they had "nothing but positive" things to say, that the town had "potential" and was "vibrant", and had started "going in the right direction". One of the aspects of the town that residents were most proud of was the local football team, Barry Town United F.C., with many locals raising the fact that the team had played in Europe after winning the Cymru Premier and Welsh Cup during the 1990s and 2000s. Other residents pointed towards the natural beauty of Barry and its beaches as a source of local pride.

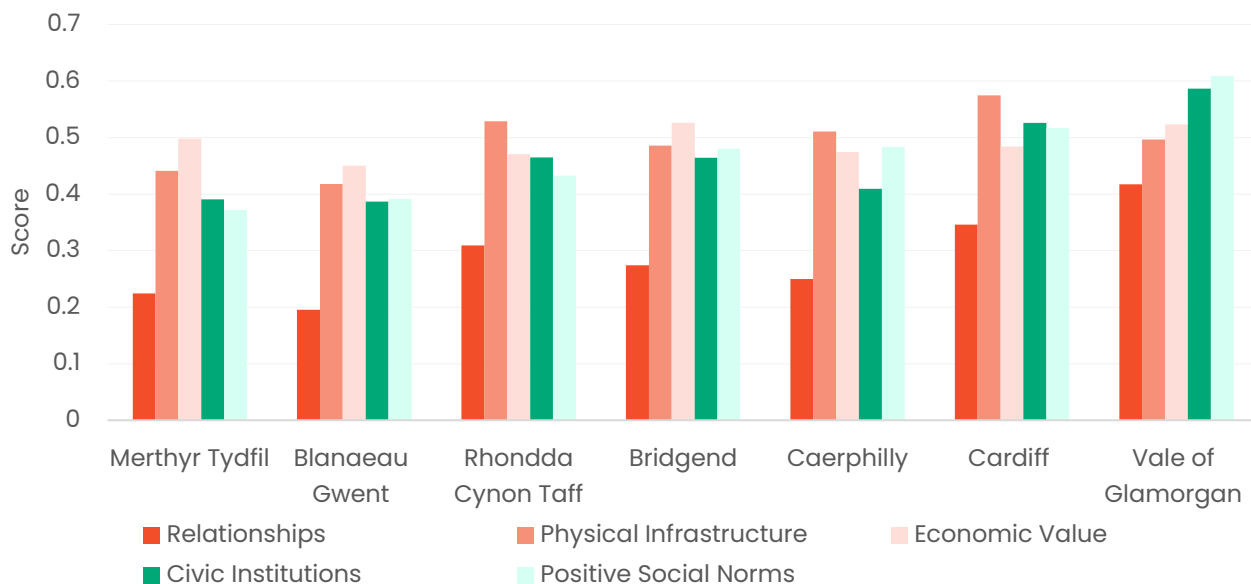
Second, on community strength, most residents we spoke to said that Barry benefited from strong community ties, although locals from lower income backgrounds were less likely to report this. Participants in our focus groups cited a variety of shared community experiences in the area as strengthening community ties and belonging. These included the local music festival "GlastonBarry", held annually since 2013, and the Barry Festival of Light, a fireworks display organised annually by the Vale county council and the local Barry Town Council which attracted almost 12,000 visitors in

2021.³⁶ Other residents raised the local Sea Cadets for young people, the male voice choir, and the war museum as other important community institutions. However, a few residents from less affluent backgrounds said that while there had been a strong sense of community in the past when everyone knew one another, an influx of new residents over recent years had diluted this.

This strength of community in Barry is highlighted by data from Onward’s Social Fabric Index. Data from the index shows a Vale of Glamorgan score of 5.3 compared to a 4.6 average for Wales and well above the 4.4 figure for the neighbouring local authority of Rhondda Cynon Taf. This high score is primarily driven by the strength of relationships, positive social norms, and civic institutions in the Vale, all of which are higher than those in neighbouring local authorities.

Figure 10: Social Fabric Index scored for local authorities across Southern Wales

Source: Onward Social Fabric Index, 2020



That said, Barry residents did report concerns about one of the most regular sources of community strength and pride that a place can have: the local high street. Barry is home to two different high streets in the town, one in the more affluent western part of Barry and another, Holton Road, in the more deprived eastern area. The former remains fairly vibrant, with relatively few vacant stores and high levels of independent businesses. But the latter, Holton Road, is struggling with high vacancy rates and participants in our focus group described the high street as a “disgrace” and said that it was “dying”. Data from the Vale of Glamorgan shows that vacancy rates on Holton Road are around twice that of the main high street. That said, the vacancy rate for Holton Road (18%) is only marginally more than the average for Great Britain (14%).³⁷

Table 1: Commercial vacancy rates in Vale of Glamorgan high streets.

Source: Vale of Glamorgan Council

Year	2021	2022
Barry (High Street/ Broad Street)	4%	8.9%
Barry (Holton Road)	14%	17.7%
Cowbridge	11.6%	9.7%
Llantwit Major	3%	6.9%
Penarth	2.3%	3.9%

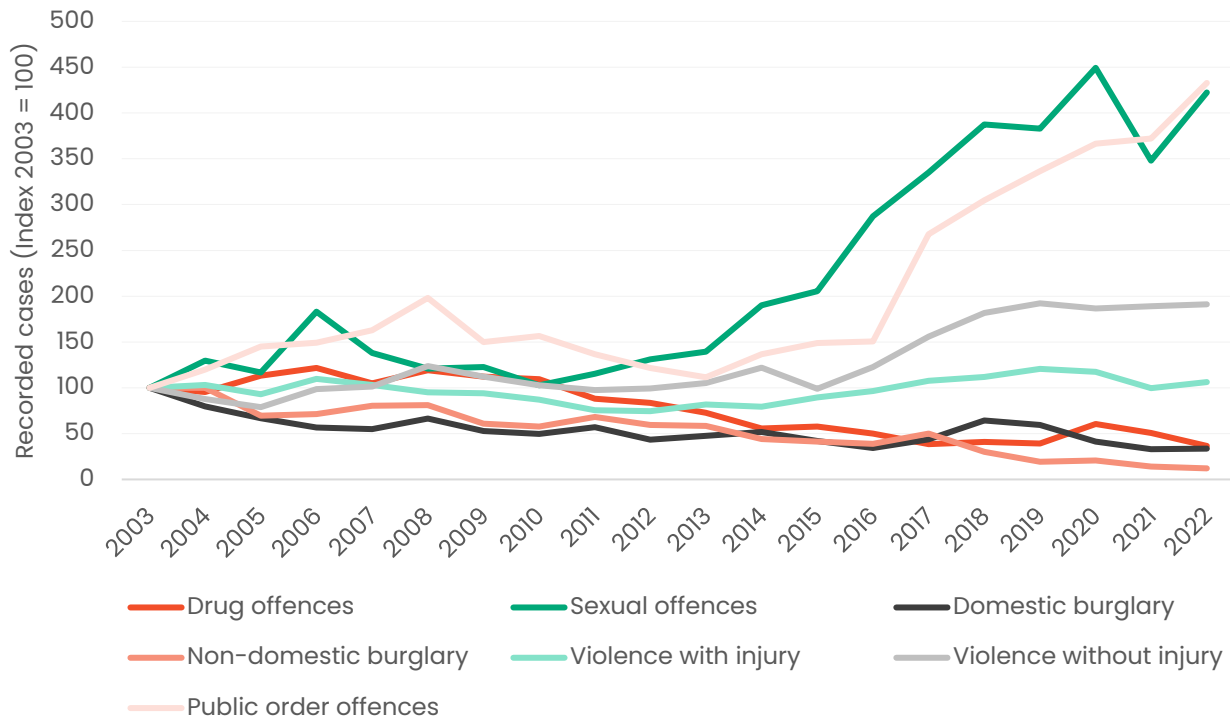
Finally, on crime, there is relatively little concern about criminal activity and anti-social behaviour in the area. A few locals did complain about the prevalence of drug use in “rough pockets” of Barry. Others noted the importance of their kids living in a safe area and expressed a desire for more police officers in the town. However, these concerns were far less prevalent than those expressed in other areas of the country as part of Onward’s “Levelling Up in Practice” programme.

There were a few different explanations put forward by locals to explain the relative lack of crime and anti-social behaviour within the community. One resident pointed towards the role of Superintendent Colin Jones of the Vale of Glamorgan police division in helping reduce crime in the area during the 1990s, who was honoured with a Queen’s Policing Medal in 2003 for his services.³⁸ Other locals argued that there had been a strong and anti-social drinking culture in the town in the 1980s which had contributed to Barry’s decline as a tourism destination, but that this had been curbed by Public Space Protection Orders preventing drinking in public spaces on the island that were introduced in the last decade.³⁹

That said, official data from across the Vale of Glamorgan suggests that there has been a fairly large increase in some kinds of crime over the last decade. Violence without injury doubled between 2008 and 2018, with similar increases in public order offences. The number of shoplifting offences also increased by almost 50%. By contrast though, drug offences, cited as a particular problem in Barry, more than halved. These results suggest that the Vale-wide data may not be representative of what is happening in Barry.

Figure 11: Reported cases of crime in the Vale of Glamorgan (Index 2003 = 100)

Source: Home Office police recorded crime, 2003-22



Overall, there is a strong sense of comfort with the direction of travel for Barry. Locals tended to be fairly confident about the future of the town. For example, one local community leader told us “we’ve become a commuter town for Cardiff” but that it was “an advantage to be in the shadow of Cardiff”. Another local community leader told us that being so close to Cardiff used to be seen as a negative but not anymore, due to the pandemic allowing people to work remotely. However, some of those from lower socio-economic backgrounds in our focus groups were more concerned that the town’s identity would suffer from further influxes of people. One local told us that “When I grew up in Barry, I knew everyone and everyone knew me. Now the influx from the Valleys means you can walk up the high street and nobody knows you”.

What might this mean for the local playbook?

There are three problems in Barry’s sense of community that could be addressed. First, while most Barry residents report a strong sense of community, not all do so and greater action could be taken to find ways to bring locals together. Second, while the high street in the more affluent western part of town is a source of local pride, the Holton Road high street in East Barry is still struggling. Third, there is growing concern about crime within Barry, despite crime rates remaining low. There are a number of actions that could be taken to address these challenges.

First, the local councils and the local community could deliver more regular community events. Barry residents frequently mentioned the role of events such as the Barry Festival of Light in

bringing the community together. However, most of these annual events, with the notable exception of GlastonBarry, tend to occur in the autumn months of the year. For example, the majority of big community events, as shown on the local Barry Town Council website, occur in November and December.⁴⁰ More signature community events in the winter and spring months could help more people feel connected to the community all year round. Barry Town Council could organise Nature Days during the Spring months, like Matlock Town Council and Eynsham Parish Council have done.⁴¹ They could also take part in the Great Get Together initiative, which helps communities across the UK put on events to tackle loneliness at the end of June each year, bringing millions of people together.⁴²

Second, further action can be taken to support the high street. While the high street in the more affluent West of Barry is thriving, the large number of empty stores on Holton Road is damaging local pride in the East of Barry. The Vale council has already taken action to support the high street, including spending £600,000 in upgrading the shopfronts of commercial properties on Holton Road, as well as nearly £1 million on residential property refurbishment to improve the look of the area.⁴³ Perhaps the most successful and imaginative intervention taken to support Barry's high street stores in recent years has been the Vale Council's "Meanwhile Uses" pilot. This project supported 23 micro-businesses to temporarily occupy a vacant store, giving them the opportunity to test the market and gain experience, while adding to the vibrancy of the high street.

But the local council could go further by working with businesses in the area to create a High Street Buyout Scheme, a shared pot of funding that community groups could borrow from to take ownership of empty stores. Such a scheme could work in a similar fashion to proposals from Power to Change for a nationwide High Street Buyout Scheme, and build on the investment the council has already made in the area.⁴⁴ It could be funded through a combination of council revenue, contributions from local businesses, perhaps through a new local Business Improvement District, and charitable donations from local philanthropists. Funding raised in these ways could also be used to invest in an expanded and longer-term version of the "Meanwhile Uses" programme.

Third, the Vale council could support a community-led focus on crime and anti-social behaviour in Barry. Barry residents are keen to see a greater police presence in Barry, to deliver a stronger sense of security from crime. To deliver greater security, the Vale council could seek to boost community-led crime prevention. This could be achieved by encouraging more households to join the Vale of Glamorgan Neighbourhood Watch, which is active in Barry.⁴⁵ The council could also work with the local police force to initiate a recruitment drive of Special Constables in Barry, helping to reverse the 30% decline in the number of Special Constables across South Wales in the last decade.⁴⁶ There is clear evidence that community action to reduce crime works, with a College of Policing study finding that for every 100 crimes committed in the UK, a further 15 are prevented by Neighbourhood Watch schemes.⁴⁷

4) Empower local leaders and communities

“The council say they will do this, this and this, and then they don’t do it because they realise they don’t have the funding”
Alice, public sector official

That there is such comfort locally with the direction of travel for Barry is a testament to how far the progress made within the town over the last two decades has been driven by the community. Above all, there have been two crucial forums through which the local community has played a role in setting the agenda for the regeneration of the town.

First is the local “Pride in Barry” group. Set up in 1994 as a group of around 30 locals passionate about their place, Pride in Barry would regularly meet with local councillors to pass on their views on priorities for regenerating the town, with the group given seats on the independent portion of the council’s regeneration board. This link between local government and the local community was an important aspect in driving the regeneration of Barry forward. As part of their role scrutinising the regeneration of the town, Pride in Barry also kept a “Barry Balance Sheet” comparing what developers have delivered for Barry. At one point the group succeeded in getting all the local parties to sign up to their plans for the regeneration project, to ensure it did not become a political football.

Second, is Focus Barry. This group also offered a platform for local community groups to come together between 2009 and 2020. An example of its role in harnessing community power was the group’s involvement in local protests against the unpopular biomass plant, discussed above. Focus Barry also used to run local hustings for elections in the area, providing a platform for Barry residents to scrutinise the candidates.

Even looking beyond these two community groups, the extent to which local residents in Barry felt a strong sense of responsibility for their place is striking. In our focus groups, a number of participants raised the role of local people in improving Barry. One argued against Barry becoming a “dependent society” and argued that “if you want to live in a nice place, you need to do your bit”. Another participant stated that levelling up was “our responsibility” but that the local council was still accountable.

But despite the role that community groups have played in working with the Vale of Glamorgan County Council to help make the regeneration of Barry a success, local people had mixed views about the Vale Council. A number of participants in our focus group reported a degree of scepticism about the council’s ability to level up Barry, with one going so far as to say “the biggest problem in Barry is the council”. This scepticism appears to have been driven by a handful of unpopular decisions taken by the council, such as filling in the local swimming pool and reducing road capacity by adding bike lanes. Some locals also complained that public consultations by the council were not genuine and were a tick box exercise. Finally, a few local residents said that the decision by a

number of councillors elected as Conservatives to switch to independent in 2019 and allow in a Labour administration, had damaged trust, and that frequent changes in the council's political complexion had led to frequent shifts in the council's approach.

Alongside the Vale of Glamorgan County Council, a small number of powers rest with the local community council, Barry Town Council, who manage two community centres, green spaces and a number of events within the town.⁴⁸ Despite this, the town's residents appear to underestimate the responsibilities which Barry Town Council has, with many locals telling us that the council only provides cemetery services. This suggests that the town council could do more to raise awareness of its role within Barry.

Finally, it is worth noting that the efforts of both local community groups and the Vale Council to improve Barry have been supported by the Welsh Government. Locals told us that the devolution of powers to the Welsh Government in 1998 had made it far easier for Barry to secure financial and institutional support by bringing locals closer to policy makers. Examples cited included Welsh Government funding for Vale Council initiatives like the "Meanwhile Uses" pilot and the Pride in Barry group successfully using the Senedd's Petitions system to secure £9 million for the regeneration of Barry Island in 2009.⁴⁹

What might this mean for the local playbook?

Barry is already fortunate to have an empowered community and local council, which have been instrumental in driving the regeneration of the town. But there are two main challenges on empowerment facing Barry. First, there is a lack of local champions for the deprived eastern parts of the town, particularly for the local residents and businesses around Holton Road. Second, there is a perception that local people do not have a say over what the Vale council does in Barry, because of a lack of trust. There are two actions which could be taken to address these issues.

First, more can be done to channel community engagement into more formal institutions, to give local community leaders more influence. For example, the role of local business owners in improving Barry could be strengthened if they were to create a new Business Improvement District across Barry. This kind of body, which raises money via a levy on local businesses, would raise funding to invest in further improving Barry. Locals told us that there had been some past interest in creating a BID in the town centre, but that this had failed to get off the ground.

One of the main issues that a local BID could seek to address would be the deprivation of the Holton Road high street. Some of the funding raised through the organisation could be used to invest in bringing empty stores on the high street back into profitable use. This would follow the example of other pioneering BIDs, such as one in Sunderland, which is involved in a high street regeneration programme which seeks to cut empty retail unit numbers by 20%.⁵⁰

Second, the Vale of Glamorgan council could seek to improve its links with the local community in Barry. Given the perception that the council changing hands has led to changing approaches to

Barry, the council could try to build a cross-party consensus around regeneration projects in Barry, in order to restore community trust. In practice this could mean the council leaders working with their opposition counterparts to identify areas of disagreement over their recently published Barry Growth Plan, being willing to tweak parts of the plan to get opposition support, and councillors from both parties then releasing a joint statement endorsing the Plan and committing to retain it after the next set of elections (2027), no matter who wins control of the council. The council has already made a strong start on this via the Barry Place Board.

Conclusion

“Barry will be a better place in five years”
Andy, franchise consultant

Barry is an example of how a local community can level itself up, with only limited intervention from Westminster. From the Vale of Glamorgan Council and the local community’s lead in regenerating the town’s Waterfront, to the role of local entrepreneurs in investing in the local area, Barry is showing the way when it comes to levelling up. Of course, the town has been incredibly lucky to benefit from the “Gavin and Stacey Effect”. But the role of local businesses in capitalising on this, like Marco’s cafe on Barry Island, is just as important.

That this process began with the local council and community groups like Pride in Barry working together over the last 30 years has embedded a collaborative approach within the social fabric of the town. So too have the local council and the community shown a maturity about the future direction of their town and the inevitability that it will increasingly become economically linked to Cardiff. This collaborative and mature approach to the future of Barry has made it much more likely that the town’s regeneration will continue in the long-term.

But there is still a lot of work to be done in Barry. More can be done to improve the local economy, by capitalising on the benefits of tourism at the same time as diversifying by bringing more skilled jobs to the area. Health services and education within the town can still be improved. Action is still needed to support the local Holton Road high street and to give the people of Barry a greater sense of security from crime. And local community groups and the local councils can still work together better.

The progress being made in Barry is a testament to what local people can achieve when the community’s social fabric is strong, and local people care about their place. Other towns and communities across the UK who are keen to get on with improving their place but don’t know how effective they can be without central government support should look no further than Barry.

Acknowledgements

This research note is funded by the National Lottery Community Fund.

Appendix 1 – Focus Groups

This is a short overview of two focus groups that Onward moderated in Barry on the evening on 25 August 2022. Participants were from the socioeconomic group BC1 in the first group and C2DE in the second, with all of them living within Barry.

1. How do people define levelling up?

- Participants in both groups had awareness of what levelling up meant. People spoke about levelling up in the political sense, describing it as what “Boris has been saying” and the “Tory slogan in the last election”. But they were also aware of the economics of the phrase, with participants noting it referred to “making the North as equal as the South” and “trying to make everyone as affluent as the South East”. A couple of participants in the C2DE group said they did not recognise the phrase until others started talking about it, but then it jogged their memory.
- In both groups there was a good deal of scepticism about the Government’s aims and their ability to deliver. This was strongest among C2DEs participants, with one participant, Lorraine, talking about levelling up being a “tickbox exercise” designed to get votes in the North of England while Mark, a contractor, argued “they are not levelling us up, they are doing the opposite”. Among BC1s, the scepticism was more moderate, with one participant noting that “If they did it, it would be great! But you have to out some action to it”
- When it came to what levelling up meant for Barry, both groups discussed the need for greater support for the local high street, with participants describing the high street as a “disgrace” and arguing that the local Holton Road high street was “dying”. People in the B1C group also noted the need for greater road capacity and local infrastructure, while those in the C2DE group discussed the prevalence of drug use. While C2DEs argued there was a lack of jobs in the area, this was not raised in the BC1 group, with many of these participants working in Cardiff or from home.
- Many of the participants in the BC1 group were more positive generally about the future of Barry. One person noted the local waterfront regeneration project as an example of levelling up in action. Another participant, a contractor called Mike, said “I don’t think it’s as bad as people think by any stretch” and that there were “lots of positives for Barry” but “like any area, there are always things that can be improved”.

2. How do people feel about how their place could be improved?

- When asked what makes a good place, participants cited a number of characteristics, focused around four aspects:
 - *Natural resources.* Participants raised the importance of green spaces like parks and local woodlands. With Barry in mind, both the BC1 and C2DE groups raised the natural beauty of Barry’s beaches, with Connor, a warehouse worker in the latter group, noting the town’s “cracking coastline”.

- *Community facilities and experiences.* The important role of community facilities was noted by both groups, with a particular premium placed on amenities like cafes and a vibrant high street. Participants also noted the importance of activities “to keep the youth off the street”, such as bowling and the cinema. Both groups cited shared community experiences that bring people together, with one participant referencing the local music festival, “GlastonBarry”, as an example.
- *Strong infrastructure.* Both groups raised the importance of local infrastructure, including reliable public transport, well-maintained roads, and affordable, high quality housing. Participants in the C2DE group also raised the availability of public toilets and free parking.
- *Job opportunities.* While both groups raised the issue of work, this featured more heavily in the discussions of the C2DE group. Ben, a process engineer in the latter group argued that “if you want a half decent salary in Barry you’ve got no chance”, while another participant suggested that Barry was “basically a suburb of Cardiff”.
- When pressed on what mattered most for a good place, participants noted the importance of a good sense of community and a sense of local pride. Local pride seemed to be strong among the participants, with Leanne, a social worker, stating that “if anyone outside of Barry criticises Barry, I get quite defensive”. There was a more mixed response as to the depth of community feeling in the area. The contractor Mark stated that in the past everyone knew each other but now the influx of new residents had removed this sense of community, while Lynn, a retired NHS admin, countered that recent Jubilee street parties were a signal of community strength. Participants also noted the importance of living in a safe area, with a couple of participants noting that they wanted their “kids to feel safe” and that more police officers and PCSOs would help achieve this in Barry.
- Participants were then asked what sort of areas in particular had these aspects that made a good place. The BC1s group tended to note areas nearby to Barry, such as Cardiff, Penarth, as well as rural areas in the South West, including the Cotswolds. However, this was not universal, with the social worker Leanne stating she “would personally rather put needles in my eyes than go to Cardiff”. The C2DEs group also mentioned the South West, including Bournemouth and Ilfracombe, alongside areas further afield, such as London and the South of France.
- Asked to describe Barry, both groups were largely enthusiastic. Participants in the BC1 group stated they had “nothing but positive” things to say, while those in the C2DE group said the town had “potential”, was “vibrant”, and had started “going in the right direction”. Among the latter group, though, a few participants stated that Barry was overpopulated.
 - *What Barry does well.* Many participants raised the natural beauty of Barry, from the beach to local parks. On economic opportunity, the BC1 participants raised good transport links into Cardiff, allowing them to access job opportunities, while both groups noted the strength of local schools in Barry. Both groups also mentioned firework displays as an example of the kind of community activities that brought Barry together, while BC1s cited the local Barry football team, which had played in Europe.

- *What Barry does poorly.* Both groups pointed towards the decline of the high street, with the BC1s noting that many of the independent stores did not last long, as well as a lack of health facilities, following the recent closure of the local A&E. BC1s and C2DEs alike raised the issue of a lack of job opportunities in the local area, but differed on the extent to which Barry was a place in which you could succeed. Alice, a civil servant in the BC1 group suggested that “You can succeed here, but you’d need to commute if you wanted an office based job”. By contrast, those in the C2DE group agreed that if you wanted to get ahead in the private sector you would have to move away, although there were some good public sector jobs in the area, such as teaching. Other negatives raised by the BC1 group included the West / East poverty divide in the town, a lack of activities to bring families and communities together, and declining water quality in the sea.

3. Who is responsible for Barry’s fortunes?

- Participants were then asked what sort of areas in particular had these aspects that made a good place. The BC1s group tended to note areas nearby to Barry, such as Cardiff, Penarth, as well as rural areas in the South West, including the Cotswolds. However, this was not universal, with the social worker Leanne stating she “would personally rather put needles in my eyes than go to Cardiff”. The C2DEs group also mentioned the South West, including Bournemouth and Ilfracombe, alongside areas further afield, such as London and the South of France.
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4. What would people do to level up Barry?

- Participants were then asked about what they would do to level up Barry if they had the power to do so. Responses centred on four aspects:
 - *Lived environment.* Both focus groups stated that they would prioritise improvements to the appearance of the town by investing in the high street and seeking to attract new businesses and stalls. The BC1s group also suggested money be spent on improving the appearance of the deprived parts of Barry, by planting trees, flowers and hanging baskets, so as to attract more visitors to that area of the town.
 - *Crime and anti-social behaviour.* Again, both focus groups called for a greater focus on community policing in Barry. Participants in the BC1 group suggested that a greater community police presence could reduce anti-social behaviour and improve local businesses. Those in the C2DE group argued that community policing would better safeguard children and deter crime, and complained that the police presence in Barry had decreased in recent years.

- *Activities.* The BC1 group were keen to see Barry provide more family-oriented activities such as paddle-boarding, cinemas, and bowling. While participants acknowledged there were often these kinds of activities available in nearby Cardiff, there was a reluctance to visit the city among commuters: one said that “after I’ve been working in Cardiff all week, the last thing I want to do on weekend is to go back into Cardiff”. Others noted they wanted to “spend our money in our town” rather than in Cardiff.
- *Jobs.* The C2DE focus group called for a greater focus on job opportunities, suggesting a focus on opening up new working spaces and trying to attract a new manufacturing company to provide jobs.
- Finally, participants were asked how optimistic they were about Barry’s future. Participants in the BC1s group tended to be fairly confident about the future, with the franchise consultant Andy saying that “based on the last ten years, yeah I think the next ten years will be better”. Although another, the database administrator Mark, said they thought that in 15 to 20 years Barry would just be a suburb of Cardiff. By comparison, the C2DE group was much more negative, with participants stating that Barry would get worse as the density of people in the area continued to grow.

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