

# **After the Furnace:** Stories from Welsh Steel Communities: Engagement Findings

January 2026



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# 1. Engagement Summary

The following engagement summary offers an overview of the engagement programme design, delivery, and key findings.

## Background

1. The Economy, Trade, and Rural Affairs Committee is conducting an inquiry into the provision of, and access to, support for individuals affected by the Tata Steel redundancy waves that began in September 2024.
2. The Committee wished to hear directly from those made redundant by Tata Steel. The Citizen Engagement Team facilitated interviews, both individual and group, with people with this lived experience.
3. This report summarises the perspectives shared by this target audience.

## Objectives

4. The objective of the engagement sessions was to deepen the Committee's understanding of the benefits and potential barriers faced by this demographic when accessing support.

## Methodology

5. This study constitutes a bounded qualitative case study focused on individuals made redundant during the Tata Steel redundancy waves beginning in September 2024. The case is focused on the post-redundancy period with workers with lived experience of redundancy, within a targeted geographical area. It explores their experiences of accessing employment and welfare support.
6. Data were generated through a small number of semi-structured individual and group interviews, producing in-depth, context-specific insights intended to inform parliamentary scrutiny rather than generate generalisable findings.
7. To enable participants, engagement was conducted on individual requests, mindful of those preferring face-to-face, phone or online sessions.



- 8.** The engagement comprised of the following:
  - 1 face-to-face group interview
  - 4 telephone interviews
  - 2 online interviews
- 9.** Notes of each session are available to Members upon request.
- 10.** At engagement sessions, a semi-structured interview approach was used. Questions used to structure the sessions were shared with participants before the sessions. These can be found in Annex 2.
- 11.** Interviews were conducted to ensure people could talk openly about their experiences in private, creating a safe space for individuals to share often distressing accounts..
- 12.** Suggested solutions from participants can be found within the body of the report and in Annex 1.

## Participants

- 13.** Participants were recruited through gatekeeper organisations and local representatives, using a snowball sampling approach. This method involves initial participants referring others within their networks, enabling the inclusion of individuals who might otherwise be difficult to reach. A list of supporting organisations is provided in Annex 3.
- 14.** A short “expression of interest” survey was set up for anyone wishing to take part; this was available online or over the phone. The survey identified eligibility and requirements for those interested in taking part.
- 15.** Of the 11 participants, the sample included a range of characteristics, though not all participants chose to share these details:
  - **Location:** 6 are from **South Wales West** (including Aberavon, Neath and Ogmore constituencies), 1 is from **Mid and West Wales** (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr), and 1 is from **South Wales East** (Blaenau Gwent).
  - **Age profile of participants:** one was aged 25–34, one was 35–44, two were 45–54, and five were 55–64.

- **Gender:** 8 identified as male, 1 identified as female.
- **Work profile at Tata:** 1 Technical, 1 Supervisory and Mid-level Management, 1 Contractor, 2 Specialist, 3 Operational roles.
- **Access to support:** 4 had not accessed support, 4 had accessed support 1 wasn't sure.

## Ethical considerations

**16.** This engagement programme adhered to the standards set out in the Market Research Society Code of Conduct and complied with relevant data protection and safeguarding legislation to ensure the ethical treatment and privacy of all participants. To ensure a participant-led approach, we offered face to face sessions (where possible), telephone and digital interviews, as well as offering engagement sessions at short notice and at the convenience of the participants.

## Summary of the Engagement Findings

*“The steelworks is not 'in' the community, it “is” the community.”*

**17.** The engagement revealed seven key themes and cross-cutting themes affecting individuals impacted by Tata Steel redundancies:

### **Theme 1: Emotional impact, identity and community cohesion**

**18.** Redundancy was described as a profound loss of identity and purpose, particularly for older workers. Participants expressed grief, anger, and mistrust toward Tata, unions, and governments (UK and Wales). Community pride and resilience were evident, but feelings of abandonment were strong.

### **Theme 2: Access to support from local providers**

**19.** Experiences with the Community Support Centre in Aberafan shopping centre were mixed – participants were positive when staff were proactive, but barriers included visibility, travel costs, and perceived eligibility issues for those outside Port Talbot.

### **Theme 3: Funding to set up a business - benefits and barriers**

**20.** While the UK Shared Prosperity Fund enabled business creation, participants faced complex forms, digital access challenges, and slow reimbursements, creating cashflow pressure.

### **Theme 4: Funding to retrain or increase skills**

**21.** PLA was praised for enabling career progression, but ReAct+ was seen as stressful and poorly timed. Early access to training and clearer pathways for older workers were highlighted as critical.

### **Theme 5: Support that led to employment**

**22.** Volunteering often led to paid roles, and personal networks were more effective than formal channels. Some reported being prevented from job searching while still employed at Tata, but while at risk of redundancy.

### **Theme 6: Mental health support - gaps, delays and trust**

**23.** This support was perceived as insufficient, with unclear referral routes and long waits. Loss of workplace counselling compounded the issue. There was a feeling that mental health and well-being must be prioritised alongside practical support.

### **Theme 7: Financial strain, contractors and cash flow**

**24.** Business founders faced cash flow issues due to reimbursement delays. Debt advice was needed but rarely mentioned, and contractors - working externally - may be unaware of available support despite likely being affected.

### **Cross-Cutting Themes**

**25.** Poor communication during the wind-down and perceived favouritism by Tata Steel for certain employees at risk of redundancy undermined this group's trust in the redundancy process and the institutions running it.

**26.** Participants called for clearer, proactive contact systems and visible local champions for Mental Health. They felt this would build trust with a strong local presence.

**27.** Further transparency of spending of the funding was called for by participants.

## Participant Sentiment

**28.** The depth of emotion expressed during engagement sessions, particularly anger and grief, was unusually pronounced for a policy engagement context, underscoring the profound personal and cultural significance of steelworking within affected communities. The strength of feeling observed was evident through tone of voice, language, and the overall atmosphere during sessions, and is reflected in the sentiments outlined below.

- **Anger:** Voices were raised; this stemmed from a disbelief at the closures or the way redundancies were handled.

*"Steel workers don't want charity, they just want an opportunity to work...Never in my lifetime did I think I'd see our furnaces die."*

- **Guilt:** Felt by those involved in negotiations that failed to deliver.

*"They promised us the world and delivered nothing...I carry that guilt."*

- **Sadness & Grief:** Redundancy equated to bereavement; some participants cried in sessions.

*"I've felt hopelessness, I've felt useless...It's hard to talk about it even now."*

- **Frustration & Confusion:** Linked to complex funding processes and delays.

*"My SPF claim took me 8 months...why can't they pay those guys direct?"*

- **Abandonment:** Concerns about fairness and lack of local input amplified mistrust.

*"This government promised millions...they don't listen to the people who know."*

**29.** Despite hardship, a strong community ethos persisted:

*"Being part of the steelworks is being part of a family."*

**30.** Participants prioritised younger generations' futures over their own.

Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement, particularly the participants who made time to be involved.

## 2. Engagement Findings

**31.** At the end of the themes below, we present solutions suggested by participants during the engagement sessions. All solutions can be found in Annex 1.

### **Theme 1: Emotional impact, identity and community cohesion**

**32.** Participants described feelings of grief, anger, hopelessness and abandonment, alongside pride in their community and signs of emerging resilience.

*"It broke my heart leaving my job."*

*"Our community was let down, our workforce was let down. Our way of life has gone."*

**33.** Many equated redundancy with grief and loss of purpose, particularly for older workers or those with long service. Several also expressed mistrust of Tata, unions, and both the UK and the Welsh Government, as well as frustration about a lack of transparency with regard to decision making and funding allocation.

*"I don't feel Tata has supported anyone as much as they should have."*

*"They [the government] promised us the world and delivered nothing."*

*"Nobody seems to know where this money has gone." (in terms of the mental health allocation)*

## Solutions

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- Build trusted local presence (community ambassadors; consistent, human contact).
- Proactive well-being check-ins at 12–18 months post-closure when pinch points arise.

## Theme 2: Access to support from local providers, i.e. Community Support Centre in Aberafan shopping centre, The Opportunity Hub, NPT Employability or the Job Centre

**34.** Experiences of the Community Support Centre were mixed but often positive when staff were persistent and practical.

*“It’s been a godsend to me, being able to access this training and the support from the Hub.”*

*“They phoned me back, got in contact, text me...they didn’t leave it go, they were a driver.”*

**35.** Barriers included visibility and location (a public shopfront felt too exposed); a limited face-to-face option elsewhere, and experiences of feeling deflated or unseen by the staff at the Community Support Centre.

*“I don’t think it’s in the right location...It’s too visible.”*

*“I didn’t get much out of the Community Hub...they gave me a number to ring...got a bit deflated.”*

## Issues for those outside Port Talbot

**36.** Travel distance and parking costs were significant barriers, with some reporting confusion about eligibility linked to residency in Port Talbot.

*“For me, it’s a 66-mile round trip to get to the Community Hub...travel and parking will impact others.”*

*“Some of the boys even said that they were told that they weren’t eligible for support because they didn’t live in Port Talbot. This did affect my motivation to reach out to the Community Hub.”*

## **Solutions**

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- Satellite hubs and popup days in trusted local community venues (sports clubs, local projects), including shift-friendly hours. And a similar offer of a part-time hub in other central points along the M4 for affected groups beyond Port Talbot.
- Travelling case workers, plus parking concessions or travel vouchers for those coming from outside Port Talbot.
- Employer/union-led letters/flyers distributed to every affected worker, acknowledging this audience may be in shock initially, but signposting clearly what they can access next.

## **Theme 3: Funding to set up a business - benefits and barriers**

**37.** When accessed via Neath Port Talbot Council, the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (referred to as SPF by participants) enabled business creation and skills acquisition, with strong praise for the NPT Economic Support Team – a council-based team.

*“I’ve had a lot of support to set the business up...fantastic, conscientious and really supportive.”*

*“The Economic Support Team...all they want to do is help.”*

**38.** However, participants consistently flagged overly complex forms, assisted digital needs, upfront payment requirements, and slow reimbursements, contributing to cashflow issues.

*“There were spreadsheets and things like that...well, no, it’s paper and pen for me.”*

## Solutions

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- Simplify the application and provide in-person assisted digital help. Or where this is already provided, promote it more clearly to eligible participants.
- Allow direct supplier payment or staged claims by default: *“Why can’t they pay those guys direct?”*
- Determined and well communicated targets for reimbursement times (e.g., 10–15 working days).

## Theme 4: Funding to retrain or increase skills (PLA, ReAct+, employability support)

**39.** The Personal Learning Account (PLA) system linked to Tata Steel offers free courses to those working in Tata Steel to help recipients take advantage of skills shortages and invest in their careers. PLA was widely praised and led to meaningful career progression for some.

*“PLA was the best. It was really good. I did about 20 courses.”*

**40.** ReAct+, a Welsh Government funded initiative for people currently under formal notice of redundancy, or who have been made redundant within the last 6 months, offers funding to retrain or update skills to get back into employment quickly. ReAct+ was described as stressful to navigate, and some reported barriers to training access before redundancy.

*“I wasted days tracking things down; it was a constant stress.”*  
(ReAct+)

*“They [Tata Steel] didn’t want people to do the courses because of the cost...not encouraging people at all.”*

## Solutions

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- Ensure early access to training during initial redundancy stages when it's most important for a person at risk of redundancy to consider their options.
- Provide on-site pop-ups, while being mindful of a shift worker environment, so staff do not have to leave work to access support.
- Tailor pathways for older/long-serving production workers, providing hands-on, upskilling routes.

## Theme 5: Support that led to employment

**41.** Some participants progressed from volunteering to paid roles, crediting the Community Support Centre with giving them confidence, equipment loans and bridging opportunities.

*"I've gained a sense of purpose...[opportunities from the Community Support Centre] helped with my mental health."*

**42.** Word-of-mouth and personal networks were often more effective than formal channels.

*"I feel like I was quite lucky to find the other job. I found it through someone I knew."*

**43.** There were reports of being prevented from attending interviews or job searching while still on site

*"We weren't allowed out of work to look for jobs."*

## Solutions

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- On-site job fairs, guaranteed paid time for interviews, and 1:1 exit conversations with HR/union reps.

## Theme 6: Mental health support - gaps, delays and trust

**44.** Participants perceived mental health support as insufficient, with no clear route on how to access this support, long waits and a loss of trusted workplace counselling.

*"We haven't had no support [for mental health] from health boards. We had a counsellor at work, and they laid her off."*

*"[It takes] Three weeks to answer your referral, 6 to 8 weeks for an assessment...crazy time scales when you are at crisis point."*

*"I couldn't tell you what that support is...Nobody seems to know where this money has gone." (allocated mental health funding)*

### Solutions

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- Commission trusted local mental health ambassadors embedded in community venues to provide rapid triage and continuity.

- Publish clear referral pathways and transparent reporting of mental health allocations and outputs.

## Theme 7: Financial strain, contractors and cash-flow

**45.** Although dedicated debt advice was rarely mentioned, financial strain was a common theme (especially among contractors) and business founders experiencing reimbursement lags.

*"I'm on my arse now." - contractor with bills and a mortgage to pay*

### Solutions

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- Proactive debt advice referrals at exit, and more efficient processes within the funding systems for businesses receiving SPF.

## Cross-cutting themes: Poor communication, lack of fairness and transparency.

**46.** Participants repeatedly cited poor communication during wind-down, learning of relevant sessions after the fact, and feeling blocked from seeking new roles.

*"You'd find out a day later that something had happened...The communication was lacking."*

*"People were stopped taking leave for job interviews."*

**47.** There were concerns about eligibility fairness and perceived favouritism, which undermined their confidence in the redundancy process.

*"Lots of people put their name down to stay and then went for interview. But the point scales wasn't used, it was more about favouritism."*

*"They didn't want people to do the courses because of the cost."*

## Solutions

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- Create and allocate a responsible body to proactively and personally contact those affected (letters/calls/emails).
- Establish a clearer route to accessing mental health support, possibly through a trusted party that understands the local community.
- Set up a system of visible and confidential points of contact, i.e. local champions that can be approached over a phone line. To support the community and channel and signpost people to support networks. This could be based on the already established NPT Council Local Area Coordinators, but focused primarily on supporting those affected by the steelworks closure.

Local Area Coordinators help people to avoid reaching a crisis in their lives or to help people recover if a crisis has already happened.

## Themes linked to demographics

**48.** While these insights highlight potential differences by age, location, and role type, they are drawn from a limited number of participants and cannot be generalised to the wider population without further research. The findings are valuable for illustrating lived experiences and identifying areas for deeper inquiry, but they should be interpreted as emerging signals rather than statistically representative trends.

**49. Those aged (55–64):** This audience described how they felt they had encountered a more difficult transition than others because of their age and proximity to a retirement age; they demonstrated a reluctance to compete for jobs seen as needed by younger families. Some chose retirement but emphasised the need to focus support on upskilling 40–50 year old production workers.

*“It’s very difficult for people like me, at my age.”*

*“If I was a younger bloke, I might have found it easier...didn’t want to take the job of someone who had a family.”*

*“Production boys will really be struggling now...There should have been more chances...to be upskilled.”*

**50. Location (outside Port Talbot):** As outlined in Theme 2, travel time, distance and parking costs were physical and financial barriers to accessing the Community Support Centre. This audience demonstrated feelings of being forgotten; they reported a perceived ineligibility linked to residence.

*“You do feel when you live away from the M4 corridor that you don’t seem to get the same support.”*

*“We are the forgotten children again.”*

**51. Role type (production vs. specialist):** Production workers described institutionalisation and shock; specialists sometimes leveraged networks to access support more quickly.

*“A lot of the workforce have been there since school...it’s a massive shock when you step out.”*

*“I’m able to pick the phone up to somebody...brilliant, but I don’t know whether everybody else has got that access too.”*

## Participant sentiment

**52.** During every session, the moderator gauged participants’ sentiments through their body language, tone of voice, use of language and the atmosphere in the room.

**53.** Recording these observations was important to ensure the strength of feeling from participants was documented.

**54.** The following emotions were observed:

- **Anger** – Voices were often raised, and a tone of anger was used to get a point across. This stemmed from a level of disbelief at the situation:

*“Steel workers don’t want charity, they just want an opportunity to work and provide a decent living to provide for their family. To work in the industry, once it’s in your blood, it’s in your blood. In this town, you [the government] have taken the “port” out of Port Talbot. Never in my lifetime did I think I’d see our furnaces die. There was no need for this.”*

- **Guilt** - One participant who was at one point heavily involved in talks with political figures and governments (both UK and Welsh) as a union representative, said they felt they were *“led down the garden path”* when discussing how they felt about the outcome of the redundancies. They said *“they [the government] promised us the world and delivered nothing, and I was the man there who was doing it [fronting it]...I carry that guilt.”*

- **Sadness / Grief** –One participant cried in the session. Several others appeared emotional and close to tears.

*“For me, I have felt hopelessness, I’ve felt useless...It’s hard to talk about it even now.”*

- **Frustration and confusion** – mainly with a lack of efficiency when applying for funding.

*“My SPF claim took me 8 months...why can’t they pay those guys direct?”*

- **Abandonment** – some worried that the support hasn’t been locally led or allocated with input from the community, adding to mistrust and confidence in the approach:

*“This government promised millions...they don’t listen to the people who know.”*

*“I am struggling for a sense of purpose and a sense of meaning to be perfectly honest with you...I don’t know what day it is; it doesn’t matter what day it is when you are retired.”*

*“It’s very difficult for people like me, at my age. The transition hasn’t been easy. It’s been difficult for me, but for the younger people, well, I shudder to think.”*

**55.** There was a strong “we are a community” ethos, where participants talked about the importance of putting young people first, focusing on young people and helping with their futures before their own. *“Being part of the steelworks is being part of a family.”*

**56.** Alongside a sense that the closures had had a monumental impact on the community and the way of life for many in the area: *“Our Community was let down, our workforce was let down. Our way of life has gone.”*

## Annex 1: Solutions from participants

The following solutions were proposed by participants during discussions as potential pathways for positive change and are shared here to inspire further dialogue and consideration.

### **Theme 1: Emotional impact, identity and community cohesion**

#### **Solutions**

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- Build trusted local presence (community ambassadors; consistent, human contact).
- Proactive well-being check-ins at 12–18 months post-closure, when pinch points arise.

### **Theme 2: Access to support from local providers, i.e. Community Support Centre in Aberafan shopping centre, The Opportunity Hub, NPT Employability or the Job Centre**

#### **Solutions**

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- Satellite hubs and pop-up days in trusted local community venues (sports clubs, local projects), including shift-friendly hours. And a similar offer of a part-time hub in other central points along the M4 for affected groups beyond Port Talbot.
- Travelling case workers, plus parking concessions or travel vouchers for those coming from outside Port Talbot.
- Employer/union-led letters/flyers distributed to affected workers, acknowledging this audience may be in shock initially, but signposting clearly what they can access next.

## Theme 3: Funding to set up a business - benefits and barriers

### Solutions

---

- Simplify the application and provide in-person assisted digital help. Or where this is already provided, promote it more clearly to eligible participants.
- Allow direct supplier payment or staged claims by default: *“Why can’t they pay those guys direct?”*
- Determined and well communicated targets for reimbursement times (e.g., 10–15 working days).

## Theme 4: Funding to retrain or increase skills (PLA, ReAct+, employability support)

- Ensure early access to training during initial redundancy stages when it’s most important for a person at risk of redundancy to consider their options.
- Provide on-site pop-ups, while being mindful of a shift worker environment, so staff do not have to leave work to access support.
- Tailor pathways for older/long-serving production workers, providing hands-on upskilling routes.

## Theme 5: Support that led to employment

### Solutions

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- On-site job fairs, guaranteed paid time for interviews, and 1:1 exit conversations with HR/union reps.

## Theme 6: Mental health support - gaps, delays and trust

### Solutions

---

- Commission trusted local mental health ambassadors embedded in community venues to provide rapid triage and continuity.

- Publish clear referral pathways and transparent reporting of mental health allocations and outputs.

## **Theme 7: Financial strain, contractors and cash-flow**

### **Solutions**

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- Proactive debt advice referrals at exit, and more efficient processes within the funding systems for businesses receiving SPF.

## **Cross-cutting themes: Poor communication, lack of fairness and transparency.**

### **Solutions**

---

- Create and allocate a responsible body to proactively and personally contact those affected (letters/calls/emails).
- Establish a clearer route to accessing mental health support, possibly through a trusted party that understands the local community.
- Set up a system of visible and confidential points of contact, i.e. local champions that can be approached over a phone line. To support the community and channel and signpost people to support networks. This could be based on the already established NPT Council Local Area Coordinators, but focused primarily on supporting those affected by the steelworks closure. Local Area Coordinators help people to avoid reaching a crisis in their lives or to help people recover if a crisis has already happened.

## Annex 2: Individual and group interview questions

The following questions served as a flexible guide for the facilitator.

**57.** The engagement sessions were participant-led, allowing for an organic conversation flow; questions were not presented in a specific order or exact wording but were used to facilitate discussion based on the participants' responses and needs.

### Questions:

1. What support has been available, and how did you find out about it?
2. What are the positives and/or negatives you've experienced when trying to access support since your redundancy?
3. What have been the main barriers you've faced in accessing the support you need?
4. Have you faced any specific challenges in accessing support? (For example, related to your age, ethnicity or where you live)
5. How can people who were made redundant from Tata Steel since 2024 be better supported?
6. Can you give examples of ways to improve access to the support?
7. If you could ask the Committee to focus on one specific thing that would make the biggest difference/improvement to you, what would it be?

## Annex 3: Partner Organisations

**58.** Thank you to the following for their support in sourcing participants for the engagement and assisting in hosting a group interview:

- Aberavon Quinns RFC
- Bethel Community Church – Sandfields
- Bridgend Association of Voluntary Organisations (BAVO)
- Community Support Centre Aberafan Shopping Centre, Port Talbot
- Community Trade Union
- Local GP cluster groups
- Multi-Union Committee, Tata Steel UK
- Neath Port Talbot Council
- Springfield Advisory