

STEELTOWN STORYBOOK



CHILDREN'S CHAPTER

FUNDED BY AHRC IMPACT
ACCELERATION AWARD

SWANSEA UNIVERSITY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Steeltown Storybook: Children's Chapter was established to ensure that the young people of Port Talbot are not merely spectators to the town's industrial transition, but active co-authors of its future narrative. By engaging 300 children aged 7–11 from local primary schools, the project sought to bridge the gap between the town's historical identity and the lived experiences of its young people. This Arts and Humanities Research Council Impact Accelerator Account (AHRC IAA) funded project provided a platform for children to articulate how they navigate their communities, perceive their past, and envision a healthier future.

This report shows that children have a profound sense of belonging rooted in intergenerational social ties. Yet, this is often at odds with a perceived lack of safety and a shortage of spaces designed specifically for children. Furthermore, while the steelworks remain a central landmark, today's young people are focused on a transition toward cleaner town. They acknowledge their steel heritage but call for more diverse and equal opportunities for all genders.

This work is critical because it provides the evidence base needed for heritage, education, and placemaking to progress and suit the needs of the next generation. For schools, these insights help align the curriculum with a child's local "cynefin" (belonging), while for local authorities, it offers a child-first blueprint for regeneration. It ensures that monumental shifts, such as the decommissioning of traditional steel making or the creation of new public art like the M4 underpass mural, are not simply done to the community, but are shaped by the imagination and needs of those who learn, play, live and work in the town.

300

young people took part across Port Talbot.

5

local primary schools were directly involved.

3

murals were produced that currently sit under the M4.

The key recommendations for schools and public services requires a commitment to co-production and listening to young people, ensuring that the children of Port Talbot are treated as key stakeholders in all decisions, allowing them to lead the town's journey from its industrial past toward a vibrant, green, and inclusive future.

The findings suggest that schools in Port Talbot are more than just places of learning; they are vital anchors for identity and safety. For educators, the project highlights four key areas for action: There is an important opportunity for learning that happens outside the classroom. Schools can use the town's resources (the beach, the mountain, and even the M4 underpass) as a way of teaching heritage, environmental lessons, and history.



INTRODUCTION

Between 2023 and 2025, Swansea University's Local Challenge Research Office (LCRO) completed a listening exercise across south and west Wales. The purpose of this exercise was to understand challenges and opportunities local communities were facing. During this time, TATA announced the decommissioning of their Port Talbot site's traditional steelmaking processes in favour of greener technologies - leading to deindustrialisation and skills leading 'local challenges' discourse. For a town where "everyone worked in the steelworks in some capacity" during the postwar period, this wasn't just an economic shift; it was a potential erosion of the community's identity.

It was evident that the voices of children and young people were missing from this discourse, despite decisions being made directly impacting their future.



This brought the project team together. Emily Adams' (LRCO) oral history research with people who left school in Neath Port Talbot between 1945 and 1979 highlighted how aspirations were historically limited when children's dreams were not listened to. To break this cycle of history being "done to" the town rather than "with" it, we combined local heritage research with Dr Michaela James' (Swansea University's Medical School) expertise in child health and co-production to platform over 300 local children's ideas about Port Talbot's past, present and future.

Children's voices are extremely rare across historical records.

This project not only gave children an opportunity to comment on their local heritage, but also to create sources for those researching Port Talbot's heritage in the future – contributing to the reversal of traditional adults-only narratives. This project empowered them to create their own archive for the future, providing another narrative aside from traditional, adults-only narratives and reclaiming the spaces beneath the M4 that have long divided their community.

The Steeltown Storybook: Children's Chapter aimed to:

- Empower children in Port Talbot as active co-designers by providing platforms to share their experiences, identity, and aspirations during Port Talbot's transition.
- Capture youth insight on the town's past, present, and future, creating a new digital archive to challenge traditional, adult-only historical narratives.
- Inform the co-design of a major public mural and revitalise underutilised spaces beneath the M4, turning a symbol of community division into a space of connection.
- Embed children's voices into formal community decision-making processes, ensuring they are heard and valued by local authorities and heritage networks.
- Fostering a sense of ownership and pride in Port Talbot's evolving cultural identity.

We've written this report to share the impact for anyone who cares about Port Talbot and wants to see it thrive. If you're involved in making decisions about our town's future, this is a chance to see those plans through the eyes of the children who will live them. We also want to create a toolkit to be used widely to help replicate the project across different areas in Wales and beyond.

If you're looking for creative ways to bring local history to life in the classroom, whether you're working on transport, new buildings, or fixing up the areas under the M4, these insights show you what the future owners of the town actually need. We've gathered the big ideas and the worries of 7–11-year-olds. Use this report to help back up your own funding bids or to shape your activities around what local children are actually asking for.



METHODS

The Steeltown Storybook: Children's Chapter used a creative, participatory framework to ensure that young people are active co-researchers in documenting Port Talbot's industrial transition. The project engaged with 300 children (aged 7-11) from five local primary schools in Port Talbot. To ensure a broad range of perspectives, the team worked split across Years 4, 5, and 6.

The research team (including a dedicated Research Assistant) collated and analysed data from focus groups, reviews, and creative outputs. This involved identifying recurring themes in how children perceive the Steel Town identity and the M4 underpass.

The project was underpinned by INVOLVE principles of co-production, focusing on shared power and reciprocity. Rather than adults interpreting the data in isolation, the children's co-created mural concept and digital portfolio serve as the primary evidence for future regeneration recommendations.

The project was delivered through a series of creative and data-driven workshops:

- **Workshops & Creative Sessions:** The team hosts introductory brainstorming sessions to identify children's initial ideas and priorities for their community.
- **PhotoVoice:** Participants use photography to capture images and stories of their local area. This method helps them communicate complex lived experiences in an accessible way.
- **Storytelling & Discussion Groups:** Focus groups are used to gather contemporary perspectives on the town's industrial heritage and social history, building on existing oral history themes.
- **Podcasting & Digital Storytelling:** Guided by a local digital storyteller, children are trained to create podcasts and digital content that document their vision for the town.



FINDINGS



The findings presented in this section are a direct reflection of the ideas, concerns, and dreams shared by over 300 children across Port Talbot. By combining creative expression with data-driven insights from the HAPPEN and RPlace platforms, we have moved beyond traditional statistics to uncover the lived reality of growing up in a town undergoing massive industrial change. What follows is more than just research data; it is a collective narrative of how the next generation perceives their heritage, navigates their current environment—specifically the divided spaces like the M4 underpass and envisions a greener, more connected future for their community.

THE PAST: HOW CHILDREN IMAGINE WHAT PORT TALBOT WAS LIKE AND THEIR COMPARISONS WITH TODAY

Steel

Port Talbot has historically been defined as a steel town. The growth of the town and the steel industry during the postwar period were inseparable, closely linking it to identity and income for the older generation. In the children's responses, their relationship to the steelworks is more diverse. It is either seen rather neutrally as part of the town's landscape and identity, or as a polluting and unhealthy influence. Some see the steelworks as a restricting, insecure and dirty workplace with long shifts, where you could get **"hurt/burnt"** or lose your job. Others noted that their older relatives worked in the steelworks and that there was good pay and secure jobs for male workers - echoing the sense that everybody was involved in one way or another with the steel industry.

For the children, the steelworks is an important landmark that signifies they are **"home"**. Steel is undeniably part of the town's identity as they see it: they are conscious of industry's presence and have questions and ideas about its future. However, overall, they don't see steelworks as a positive influence on their lives and seem eager for change in the town's economic future. Just a handful of the young people said they would consider a career in steel; their aspirations are bigger and more creative than before.

Play

Children feel that in the past there was more freedom to enjoy outdoor play in nature, particularly on the street, beach and mountain. They felt that in the postwar period there were less opportunities to go and **“explore”** or visit places further afield; one noting that the lack of chances to travel make people **“sad”**. Here, we get a glimpse of the children’s interest in being outdoors, seeing different parts of the world, and absorbing the cultures they have learned about in school.

Gender

For the children, Port Talbot in the past was a place marked by inequality in gender roles. There is a sense that in the past girls’ options were limited:

“Girls was always left out to do everything around the house”

“Girls had less respect [than] Boy’s’.”

However, many now see the present as more **“ecwul”** for **“any gender”**.

The children of Port Talbot recognise the steel town legacy, but they are no longer bound by its traditional constraints. While the older generation remembers a time of industrial stability, today’s youth see a more complex picture; one where environmental health, gender equality, and the freedom to explore are just as important as economic security.

They are asking for a town that respects its heritage without being restricted by it.

Let’s not just rebuild Port Talbot; let’s build the version of Port Talbot our children believe is possible.



THE PRESENT: WHAT CHILDREN DO & ENJOY

Exploration

Children in Port Talbot love exploring with their friends and family, going to the parks and beach to ride bikes and playing together. They particularly love playing football and rugby, swimming, playing games with friends both in person and online, going to fun places such as trampolining centres, looking after and being with animals, being in nature and discovering new places. But we must note too that there is very diverse range of interests and activities they enjoy which range across creative, sporting, social and outdoor play: from kickboxing to pottery, from horse jumping to traveling abroad or even to the moon.

Much of these activities are creative and outdoors. Kids seek out fun and sociable activities both indoors, online and outside activities. Fun means being able to be active, creative, sociable, exploratory, close to nature and expressive across a range of activities:

“In my free time I go to the beach & park and I play Dress to Impress with my baddies”

“I go in the park river, down to the water. We made a trampoline out of a blue plank of wood.”

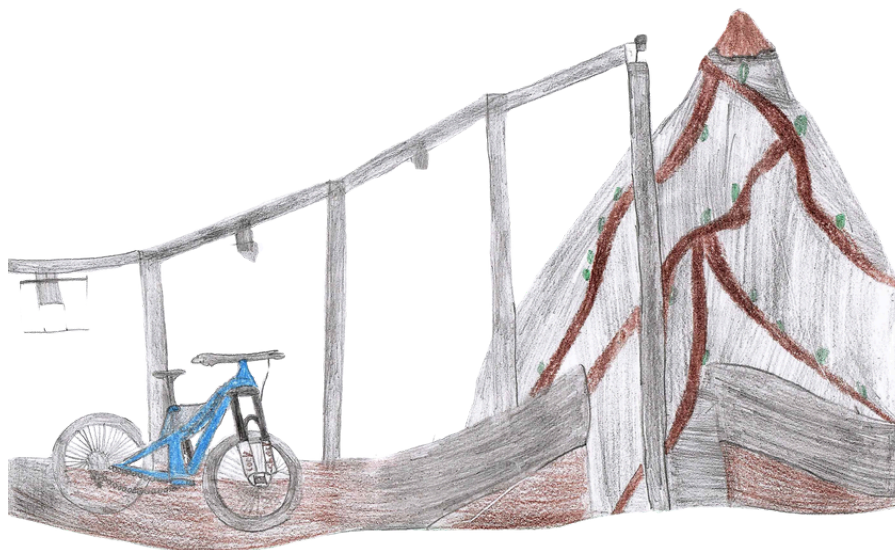
The key places mentioned are the parks, the beach but also the river, town centre and its eateries, activity centres, the mountain, and cities further away, like Swansea and Cardiff. Leisure centres and play centres such as arcades, water parks and trampolining centres are popular, but so too are fun community events and entertainment. Some children are excited about going away on holiday and travelling. In particular, and especially in winter months, trampolining centres are often seen as great all-rounders, **“all type of our favourite places”**.

Exploring is important, some even said it is a **“right”** for children. They love **“trips to some places they haven’t been before, going to a concert, favourite restaurant, hang out together, go to library”**. Children suggest that they should be trusted to explore safely and independently, seek out their own fun and be part of a safe, creative and supportive community. One child expressed the connections between kids’ imagination, access to fun, safe places to hang out together and community. Fun safe places to explore and be creative bring people together and this underpins and nurtures a happy community:

“...if kids have these really good imaginations, they can start going out with friends more oftenly and that will make our community more better, ...[we can] hang out more and then if we have more people hanging out with each other we can see that our town is more now happy and we all see these sad faces happy faces...”

The message from the children is clear, community is built on safe, accessible, and imaginative spaces where they can connect with nature and each other. We must protect their right to explore by designing a town that trusts its young people. When we invest in children's imaginations, we aren't just funding play; we are building a more connected and less isolated community.

Port Talbot’s natural features like the beach, the mountains, and local parks, are parts that the children identify as key parts of their community. To support this generation, we must move toward trusting independence by creating safe-passage spaces that allow children to explore their local community on their own terms. Rather than installing standard playgrounds, we should prioritise co-designed play spaces.



What Children Value

Children love Port Talbot as their 'home'; it's where their friends and family are and where they can hang out and explore the beach and the parks, be close to nature or doing meaningful fun things together with their loved ones e.g. **"I like watching the sunset with mam"**.

Many see the friendliness of people here as a crucial part of what makes Port Talbot special, communities are seen by the children as closely connected and this shapes everything:

"I think won't leave because all my family are here and my friends are here but if they ever leave I would leave to go with them."

Children see Port Talbot as having a strong a strong sense of community, pointing out the ties between families and friends which continue into today:

"My mam and my friend['s] mam was friends before we were friends... we have been friends for 10 years."

Green space is incredibly important. Parks and green space are places to play, be sociable, explore and also supports wildlife, animals and the wider community. The children care about local nature, especially animals, both wildlife and pets. They also enjoy a value a town centre with eateries, sweet shops and a large range of different food options where they can have fun with friends and family. They also love fun places further afield such as wildlife centres and trampoline centres. They are proud of both the town's environment and its community. Some kids want Port Talbot to be seen beyond the stereotypes, and they don't like it when people **"moan about PT!"** and others think **"Port Talbot should be the capital of Wales."**

Concerns and Challenges

Children are concerned about the state of their environment, they often mention pollution, littering and the harms these cause to people and animals. They are concerned about their own safety, the safety of their friends and the wellbeing of animals both pets and wildlife from pollution, environmental damage and adult behaviour.

These environmental harms also send children a deeper message. It isn't just damage done by careless abuse of the environment but also that littering and pollution also speak to a lack of pride and care taken by adults for children's lives.

For example, some children spoke about alcoholics starting fights and leaving broken glass on the ground harming children and animals. There are some concerns around safety and the behaviour of adults such as abuse, fighting, and even kidnapping – although this is often something that is perceived as happening in places other than where they are.

It's not just the local environment and adult behaviours that children are concerned about, they also see Port Talbot as subject to global technological and environmental challenges:

“People will die, wildlife will die.”

They are also concerned that healthcare for people and pets are overloaded:

“They could get rushed in and no one's there coz it's so busy, we need to get more people in.”

Children want safe and fun places to play and more to do in town or close by Port Talbot – they wish some of the fun places such as trampolining centres were closer by and easier to get to. They love the beach, especially the whale, but feel that there could be more pleasant, modern and exciting places to play elsewhere. Even though many of the children have access to the park and beach they want bigger parks and play areas for older kids especially, and places to go like youth clubs, faith and community centres.

In discussing school, some children speak of subjects they don't enjoy, that school is boring and **“long”**. On the other hand, children report enjoying school because they see their friends there and others eagerly discuss the activities and learning they are doing at school. Two schools that took part, also took part in the HAPPEN Survey. It provided a mixed picture with one school reporting higher than the national average on school community (88% feel part of their school community), competence (84% report feeling like they are doing well) and enjoyment of school (70%), with the other reporting low (68%, 73% and 45% respectively). This further evidences different experiences of school and the importance of involving children in matters affecting their lives and community.

There is some concern about the economy: that things should cost less, that there are many closed shops and abandoned buildings. Some note that there might be less jobs in the future either that robots and AI will take jobs or that they will have to or want to move away to find **“progress”**. There is a hope for **“more fairness”**, that Port Talbot **“doesn't go wrong anymore”**. They feel that if there are more places to play and hang out with friends the community will be happier and more connected.

Their concerns, ranging from the immediate dangers of litter and broken glass to global anxieties about AI and climate change, highlight a generation that feels vulnerable but remains hopeful. They are not asking for grand promises, but for safe, clean, and modern spaces where they can simply be children and continue to enjoy into adulthood.

THE FUTURE: CHILDREN'S IDEAS FOR IMPROVING PORT TALBOT

Children feel that rivers, the beach, parks and town should be cleaned and cared for the benefit of people and planet. Although some of what they'd like to change may be out of our control – such as changing tides, weather, and instances of roadkill – on the whole they want sites for children, nature, and community to be cared for:

“Don't drop litter, make Port Talbot glitter.”

Many of the children want to be active agents in supporting their own community and helping others. They talk about cleaning up areas such as the beach, town, the river and streams and making it better for wildlife to live and for their friends to explore and play.

They have ideas about the future of the steelworks being somewhere healthier and cleaner:

“I wish the steelworks could be better, more tidy and clean.”



This might be something that organisations, like TATA Steel and related contractors who operate Port Talbot steelworks, should address to attract future employees. Indeed, more publicity on green initiatives targeted at children would assuage the current concerns about their environment and the town's future within the climate crisis.

They have creative ideas for events and parties, making the town beautiful with art, fun places for kids both younger and older, and what to do with empty buildings and neglected green spaces. They want town to be full of lively activity, places to eat, shop and have fun.

They also want to be able to go to activity centres, such as trampolining and soft play, in their own local area closer to home. While grateful for new local parks, they felt parks should be expanded and there should be more to do for older children, such as skating and biking facilities – spaces they can make their own together.

The future in Port Talbot is often imagined by children as involving futuristic ideas such as robots, flying cars and aliens. They are intrigued by the possibility of new inventions they might enjoy such as a new sport, time travel to the future and to the moon. There will be fun and parties (in the steelworks with DJ Alien!) in a future Port Talbot.

They are aware of environmental and geopolitical threats, the threat of pollution killing and harming wildlife and humans, fear of **“world war three”** and economic collapse, **“world explodes”**. AI and robots might do the jobs for them in the future whilst they are **“chilling”** but others are cognizant that AI may mean **“more automatic things”**. There is a sense that there will be different houses, shops, eateries and buildings and the steelworks will be closed and cleaned up.

They are interested in a future economy where things are cheaper, and they can prioritise what to do with their money. In one group, all the children except one would give money to friends, family, charity, homeless people and sick animals. One child opted for money over family, and this caused a playful witty discussion. As it turned out, the child who opted for money said they would use the money to treat their family and have adventures with friends.

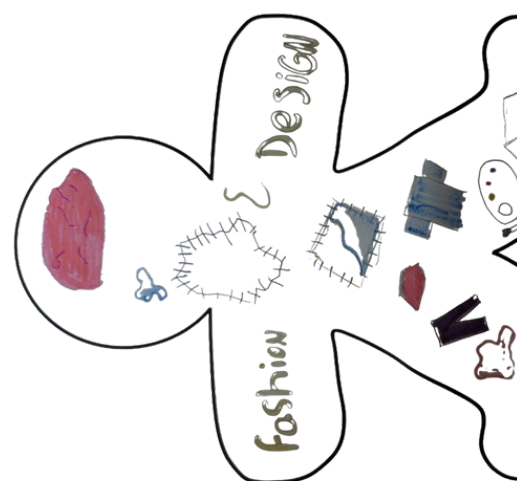
Children's Aspirations

Children here have a whole range of different ideas about what they want to do in the future. They wish for a future where they can be creative, social, caring, active and successful.

There are some contemporary roles of interest here from emerging parts of the economy like **“Youtuber”**, digital artists or content creators. However, there isn’t one distinctive idea of what constitutes a creator. Mostly the ideas of future roles for children seem linked to their contemporary life, what people do around them and what is presented to them at home and in school.

On the one hand this shows how deeply they are connected to Port Talbot as a community and how much they care about each other, the environment and nature of the town and locale. On the other hand, these aspirations might indicate areas that are lacking or how horizons are currently limited by local opportunity structures: **“Morrisons, steel worker”** etc. It is important that we nurture the aspirations of children and young people within the town to support their wellbeing and contributions to diverse economies.

Given the importance of the green transition to Port Talbot, there is a need to think imaginatively about how the future is both imagined and prepared for in education and training. It is interesting to note that there is little interest here in engineering in a place known for past and possible future in industry. For the role of game designer, it was seen that you need to study computer science, rather than a creative or humanities subject or take a path through the creative industries. Alongside these examples, the job roles discussed above indicate a need to think more broadly about aspirations for the future presented at school and at home, we encourage those speaking to children to expand the range of what is possible and contemporary.



WHAT DOES THIS MEAN?

For Schools...

Schools also play a critical role in showing children that their dreams are valid. It might be possible to introduce a more up-to-date range of aspirations and link these creatively to possible modern career pathways in a strong exciting way. One example might be connecting pupils with local industry and creative partners to show that progress and success can happen right here in Port Talbot. The children's goals suggest that there may be some mismatch between what they believe they can do and what is offered to them as pathways. Updated guidance could demystify possibly exciting futures in a changing economy and give young people more control over their futures.

Schools can act as advocates for safe active travel and community play. By supporting children's desire for exploration, schools help build the confidence and autonomy that pupils need to thrive outside the classroom too. Using tools like the HAPPEN survey allows schools to move beyond academic metrics and address the specific lived experiences of their pupils ensuring that mental health support is tailored to the wants and needs of their pupils.

For The Local Authority...

Children spoke at length about local parks and facilities. Pride in place was evident, but so was room for improvement. For example, heritage sites – like the Taibach Memorial Park Band Stand – were deemed incredibly important to the community but thought to be wasted by being fenced off. One school had visions of the bandstand being used for picnics, music, and playing with friends. Children also noted that they would regularly build bike ramps with their friends that are destroyed during park maintenance. There are implications here of the necessity of an integrated approach to the future of places. Everything that makes somewhere worth hanging out in: heritage, biodiversity, safety, beauty, learning, community, and fun are all possible through the care of place and the active involvement of children and young people in co-creating these spaces.

For local authorities, children's voices serve as a direct call to action for child-friendly planning and policy. Environmental cleanliness must be reframed as a safety priority, where tackling litter and public intoxication becomes a tool for restoring children's independent mobility and safe passage through the town. This means treating children as key stakeholders in regeneration projects (such as the green transition, the redevelopment of the M4 underpass, or uses for empty buildings in the town centre) ensuring their voices are embedded in formal planning processes. By moving from one-off consultations to true co-production, local authorities can turn these insights into a standard for future placemaking that values the safety, imagination, and civic pride of its youngest residents. Drawing on the skills and creativity that young people have demonstrated throughout this project will ensure that the ability of future generations to meet their own needs is not compromised.

For Public Services Boards...

The 300 children who took part in our project offered crucial insights for the upcoming Wellbeing Assessments. They covered topics that directly speak to the social, economic, environmental, and cultural wellbeing of their town. In doing so, they have demonstrated the importance of listening to their voices when writing the next chapter of Port Talbot's story. Below we've highlighted some crucial points to consider:

Social: The children spoke highly of the local parks, beaches, and green spaces. However, they also revealed a lack of indoor activities for children of all ages. The loss of Bizzi Bees, a soft play centre that used to be on Station Road, was heartfelt and children called for more places in our local area for children and young people to enjoy safe play with their friends – with many noting that this now requires travelling out of Neath Port Talbot. The children also expressed a desire to be included in the planning of areas for children and young people – they enjoy building bike and scooter ramps with their friends, but these are routinely destroyed in park clean-ups. Creating the spaces that children want to see would undoubtedly enhance social wellbeing.

Economic: The children have expressed a vast array of aspirations. We urge the public services board to take note of everything from palaeontologist and fashion designer through to established local opportunities, like steelworker and Morrisons' employee. There is a need to diversify the advice and support offered to young people from Port Talbot; there is also a need to increase awareness and pathways to green skills.

Environmental: The children have expressed deep concern about experiencing environmental challenges locally. Putting a stop to littering and pollution entering the sea are two of their key concerns. One suggestion, endorsed by all the schools, was more posters and more bins available throughout the town. They felt that both options would act as a deterrent and improve the local environment.

Cultural: The children felt deep ties to local heritage structures – including Taibach Band Stand and the Aberavon Beach Whale. While the whale is regularly used for play, the band stand is identified as a location that needs to be rejuvenated to allow them to use the space in the same way that older generations have. Furthermore, while appreciating our cultural heritage through stars, like Richard Burton, a lot of the children spoke of the importance of creative pursuits to their current wellbeing – examples include, playing design games with their friends, going to drama club, and crafting – any support for these activities would undoubtedly enrich the cultural wellbeing of the young generation.

For Heritage and Placemaking...

Ultimately, successful placemaking in Port Talbot requires a commitment to intergenerational memory. Our findings denote the importance of using shared landmarks as a bridge to ensure that the Port Talbot's evolving story speaks to everyone who lives in the town – including those who will be here the longest. By documenting children's perspectives alongside the oral histories of adults, we create a more inclusive approach that honours the town's roots while embracing modern values like environmental health and gender equality.

This shift is most tangibly represented in the children's M4 murals; rather than a simple historical timeline, the findings demanded a vibrant, imaginative design that reflects the children's active relationship with their town. Identity in Port Talbot is not static, but a living narrative that children are eager to co-author. Traditionally, heritage has been framed through an adult-centric lens, yet this project proves that children act as vital co-creators who see their town's history as part of a wider identity, connected through the mountains, rivers, beaches, and community spaces. It is these historic landscapes that create an intergenerational call to action – to respect and protect local heritage.

CONCLUSION

The Steeltown Storybook: Children's Chapter demonstrates that the future of Port Talbot cannot be successfully built without the active participation of its young people. By listening to children, we have uncovered a vision of the town that values health, inclusivity, equality, and the fundamental right to explore.

These findings reveal that the connection between place and community is forged in the imaginative worlds of children; when we provide safe, creative, and tidy spaces. We are not just improving infrastructure; we are nurturing a sense of belonging and pride that will last a lifetime.

Ultimately, this work contributes to wider regeneration and heritage efforts by bridging gaps. By documenting the aspirations of today's youth alongside memories of the past, we ensure that Port Talbot's transition to a greener future is not something that is simply done to the community, but a collaborative journey that honours its historic past while empowering the next generation to lead the way.

Our final call to action to every policymaker, educator, and community leader is this:

Don't just read this report and file it away as a collection of projects. Use it as a catalyst for change. When you plan a new development, ask how it serves a child's right to explore. When you discuss the future of the steelworks and the local economy, include the children who will live with the environmental and economic outcomes. When you design our public spaces, give the final say to the children who have already shown they have the imagination to come up with solutions.

LET'S MAKE DECISIONS WITH CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE, NOT JUST FOR THEM.



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