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NATIONAL STRATEGY AND PLACE

A VIEW FROM INDUSTRIAL TRANSFORMATION
IN PORT TALBOT

JULY 2025

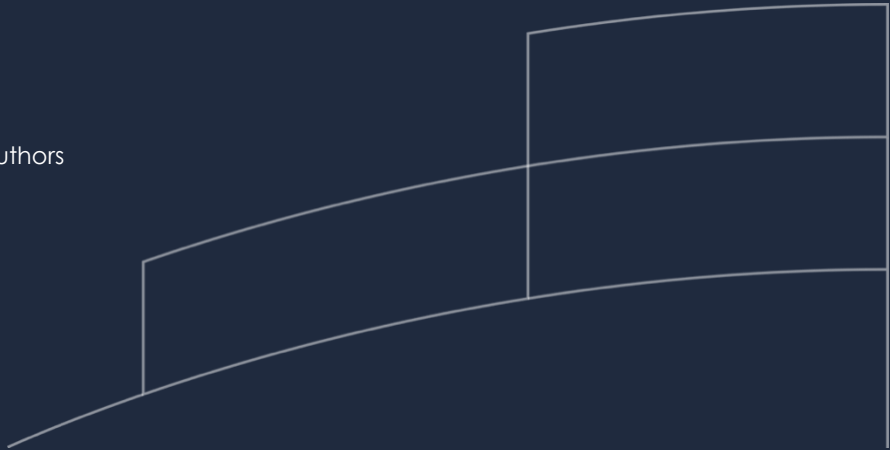
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The Heywood Fellowship was created by the Heywood Foundation in memory of Jeremy Heywood, Cabinet Secretary 2012–18. This visiting fellowship gives a senior UK civil servant the opportunity to explore public service and policy issues outside their immediate government duties. The Fellowship is based at the Blavatnik School of Government, University of Oxford, with support from the Cabinet Office. The fellow is associated with Hertford College, Lord Heywood's former college.



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NATIONAL STRATEGY AND PLACE

A VIEW FROM INDUSTRIAL TRANSFORMATION IN PORT TALBOT

In a nutshell

- This case study is part of our work looking at how an aligned, adaptive, capable national strategic practice can meaningfully account for place. It looks at this from the lens of industrial transformation in Port Talbot.
- Interviewees thought that the Port Talbot case study stands as an example of how current approaches to strategy are failing to deliver long-term, meaningful outcomes for communities. While some expressed opinions on historical national decisions regarding the steel industry, their strongest frustration centred on the lack of foresight and planning once the consequences of those national decisions began to emerge.
- Despite significant government action targeted at the area, interviewees observed challenges with current approaches to delivering long-term transformation. They pointed to the proliferation of multiple, parallel “micro strategies” that create fragmentation; a “top-down bias” that places the burden on local tiers to reconcile often competing approaches; and the complex interdependence across levels of government, which makes it difficult for any single tier to drive long-term strategy effectively on its own.
- Interviewees felt there had been more success in aligning action during a crisis. The Transition Board was seen as a good step towards a “shared endeavour” of managing immediate fall-out. Interviewees felt optimistic about what could be achieved for the area if all “jigsaw pieces” were put together into a coherent strategy.
- We derived several insights from our case study on how a national strategy practice should meaningfully account for place. Place-based views to national strategy can:
 - Reveal how national strengths, opportunities and challenges can play out and be **amplified locally**.
 - **Offer** insights into how international and **national policies** — industry, trade — **affect local** economies.
 - Support **timely action to reduce the impact of trade-offs**. Without this, as in Port Talbot, responses can be intermittent, reactive and focus on cost rather than opportunity.
 - Help identify and connect strategic opportunities, focusing on the right **geographic footprint**.
 - Root national choices in **local culture and identity**, making long-term change more locally resonant and easier to sustain.

Introduction

This project starts from the belief that the UK, and countries like it, are at a generational moment where the assumptions we have held previously won't hold in the future. We believe this moment calls for a more outward-looking, future-focused, and nationally-grounded approach to setting ambition and direction. It also requires a more strategic practice, one that is agile, aligned, and capable of responding to fast-moving pressures while staying focused on long-term national goals. Our aim is to explore, describe, and define that practice, and to develop frameworks that help governments think strategically and make coordinated, collective pivots when needed.

To be effective, this national strategy practice must be open and make sense not just in Whitehall but have meaning in towns, cities, regions, and nations across the UK. It must be able to set an overarching sense of long-term direction and mobilise governments and partners operating at different spatial levels. It must draw on place-specific opportunities and strengths to understand the UK's overall comparative advantage, to assess trade-offs and make bold future-oriented decisions. Achieving this is not easy given that such a national strategy practice will need to operate across overlapping electoral cycles, political leaderships, and mandates and priorities. To understand how a national strategy practice can meaningfully account for place we reversed the lens and examined long-term strategy through the experiences of specific places and sectors in the UK.

Partnering with PolicyWISE and the Future Governance Forum, we engaged experts from inside and outside government to explore how a national strategy practice can harness place-specific strengths to address national challenges and shape strategic priorities, including identifying the big bets most likely to deliver long-term impact. We also examined how such outcomes can be designed and delivered effectively within the UK's devolution landscape, where policy levers are distributed unevenly across different levels of government. This case study shares what we have learnt from the industrial transformation experience in Port Talbot.

Rationale and approach to the case study

Our case studies have followed a purposive sampling approach. Our criteria is based on how relevant the case is to our questions of interest and availability of expert interviews within our research timelines. We have also considered variation of the case studies overall in terms of sector and geographical selection, so each case study offers insights into our research questions from a different perspective.

Port Talbot has undergone significant industrial transformation over the past few decades, emblematic of the UK's transition away from manufacturing. The decision by Tata Steel in 2024, a major employer in Port Talbot, to restructure has placed the area at a critical crossroads regarding its economic future. Port Talbot offers a compelling case study of how decisions usually taken at national level — on energy, defence, industrial policy, trade — can profoundly shape specific localities. And looking to the future, how national, devolved, and local strategies can interact to

steer a place through economic transition toward a more sustainable long-term future.

This case study has been based on three stages:

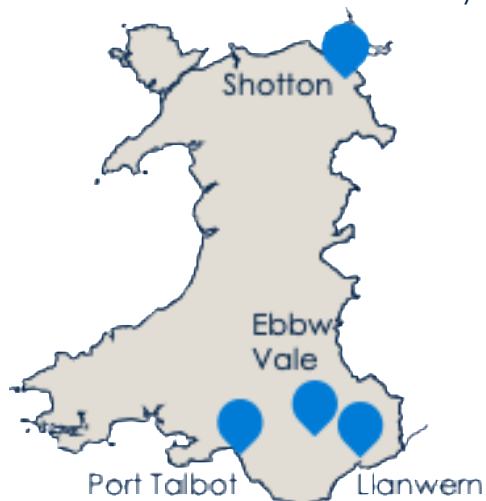
- **Stage 1:** desk research
- **Stage 2:** semi-structured qualitative interviews between March and April 2025 with experts representing actors with different roles in the context of Port Talbot including central and local government representatives, academics and businesses. The interviews were based on a set of open-ended questions to allow consistency across interviews balanced against flexibility to explore unexpected insights and follow-ups on interesting points raised by participants. Interviews lasted for an average of 45 minutes and were conducted virtually
- **Stage 3:** a roundtable of experts bringing together significant experience of devolution in the UK including case study interviewees to test our conclusions and findings.

The sections below outline reflections from the case study in Port Talbot. Our aim has not been to evaluate the specific interventions mentioned by interviewees, but to understand what their reflections reveal about how place perspectives can shape an effective national strategy practice. We selected the case study and carried out interviews in March and April this year before the recent developments in Scunthorpe and the UK Government's decision to save the plant with the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act.¹ We are grateful to the individuals and teams we spoke to for their honesty and knowledge. To preserve the anonymity of colleagues we spoke to, these findings are generalised. Any interpretations of our findings included within this paper are representative of PolicyWISE and the Heywood Fellowship team alone.

Context

Port Talbot is a town and community in the county borough of Neath Port Talbot, bordered by Swansea Bay to the west and the hills and the Afan and Neath valleys to the north. Since the mid-twentieth century, steel has been at the very heart of Port Talbot's identity.

In the 1950s, when the UK ranked among the world's top five steel producers,² the Steel Company of Wales launched a national advertising campaign proudly showcasing its flagship steelworks in Port Talbot. The town was dubbed 'The City of Steel'. The campaign's powerful message "Day and night, this city is at work. It's one concern is simple: to make steel."³



Port Talbot was one of Wales's four major steelworks alongside: Ebbw Vale (once the world's largest steelworks), Llanwern, and Shotton. Known affectionately as 'Treasure Island', the steelworks became a symbol of industrial strength drawing workers from across Wales and the UK to fuel growing national demand. Responding to this industrial boom, the local council embarked on an ambitious housebuilding programme to accommodate the expanding workforce.

By 2023, the UK had fallen to 26th place in global steel production rankings.⁴ Port Talbot now faces significant socio-economic challenges, with local indicators for economy, education, and health all lagging behind national averages: gross disposable household income is £17,181, compared to a national average of £20,425; 10.8% of the working population have no qualifications, nearly double the national rate of 6.6%, and male healthy life expectancy in the area is 59.2 years, compared to 60.6 across Great Britain.⁵

In 2024, Tata Steel announced a restructuring of its Port Talbot operations, including the closure of its blast furnace, a critical moment marking the continued decline of the UK's steel industry. For Port Talbot, where steel is woven into the fabric of the local economy and identity, this national shift has had profound and lasting consequences.

Table 1 — Timeline of selected events in history of the steel industry in the UK and Port Talbot²

Period	UK Steel Industry (National)	Port Talbot Steelworks (South Wales)
1923	Industry rebounded after dip in 1921	Completion of Margam Iron and Steel Works
1951	Nationalised via Iron and Steel Act 1949 ⁶ . UK in top five of steel production globally in the 50s ²	Steel company of Wales formed in 1947 is nationalised and becomes state-owned <i>Iron and Steel Corporation</i>
1953	Denationalised	Becomes part of private sector, but still state-influenced
1967	Re-nationalised; British Steel Corporation (BSC) formed	Absorbed into British Steel. Port Talbot becomes a key site for hot and cold rolled coil production
1970s	Heavy investment in restructuring and modernisation. UK is 5 th in global rankings ²	Major investment: installation of Blast Furnace No. 4 and upgrades to hot strip mill. Production capacity peaks
1980–81	Job losses and closures across UK. UK falls to 10 th in global rankings: a position it maintains for the next two decades ²	Workforce reduced but Port Talbot remains operational
1988	British Steel privatised as British Steel PLC	Port Talbot included in privatisation. Remains a flagship site
1999	British Steel merges with Hoogovens to become Corus	Port Talbot now part of Corus UK. Some investment in efficiency, but cost pressures continue
2001–03	Corus begins downsizing UK operations	Blast Furnace No. 5 rebuilt (2003) — however, job cuts still occur
2007	Tata Steel acquires Corus	Port Talbot becomes Tata Steel Port Talbot — largest steelworks in the UK
2010s	Tata seeks to divest UK assets (2016). UK falls to 18 th in steel production in 2015 ²	Interventions targeted at Port Talbot include Swansea City Deal
2016–19	UK steel in crisis; British Steel rebrands collapses in 2019 and then taken over by Jingye Group	Port Talbot not part of British Steel brand — remains under Tata. Tata commits to operations, but uncertainty continues
2020–21	Focus on green transition. UK leaves EU; UK steel exports to EU drop	Tata explores electric arc furnace technology but says blast furnaces are still vital
2023–24	In 2023 the UK was 26 th in global steel production rankings ⁷	Tata announces plan to shut both blast furnaces. Direct job losses of up to 2,800 expected
2025	Steel Industry (Special Measures Act) ¹ gives UK Government power to direct the operation of steel manufacturers when in public interest	Choices for Port Talbot include transitioning to green steel

Strategic outlook

Past

Table 1 traces the history of the steel industry in the UK and Port Talbot in parallel. A key question of interest for us in this case study is tracing the impact of those high-level national policies and decisions which shaped the steel industry in the UK on specific places like Port Talbot. We are particularly interested in whether decisions taken at the national level were shaped by an understanding of place and the impact of options on economies dominated by steel production; local identities rooted in pride about their manufacturing past; and the actions that would need to be taken to transition these places from old to new sustainable futures.

This focus of this case study is not to examine the validity of the decisions or to enter into the well-trodden debates on whether governments should or should not intervene in strategic industries. Our interviewees did however give various observations for the reason of the decline of the overall UK steel industry which we think are worth sharing as context. Some attributed it to underinvestment in the steel industry from the late 1980s and early 1990s, contrasting it with other international economies such as Belgium which, in their view, had been investing significant amounts of funding into the industry over the same time period. Some interviewees felt there had been a deliberate decision to turn away from the steel industry, shaped by views on globalisation held at that time that production could be carried out more cost-effectively elsewhere in the world.

Others framed it as a conscious act of neglect, driven by similar economic reasoning. Steel, they said, was often perceived as a “dirty,” “old,” and “outdated” industry, particularly when compared to sectors like financial services and banking, which were seen as engines of “modern” economic growth. This perception has been further reinforced by the rising emphasis on climate change and the drive toward net-zero emissions, which placed increasing pressure on traditional, carbon-intensive industries such as steel.

On our main question of interest, interviewees couldn't locate any sign that national policymakers in the past had taken account of place in their decision-making processes, especially the concentrated effects of high-level trade and steel industry decisions on particular places. What interviewees expressed most strongly was their frustration, not at the decisions themselves, but that no coherent strategic action was taken once decisions had been made. They felt no forward-thinking action was taken, with and for Port Talbot, even as the consequences of the steel industry's decline became increasingly apparent in the 2000s. Many felt that the risks associated with the area's heavy reliance on a single employer — Tata Steel — were well understood, and that the company's decision to close its blast furnace in 2024 should not have been a surprise for decisionmakers.

Despite this, there was no overarching strategy in place to respond to the situation, one that acknowledged both the immense challenges and the potential opportunities in a place with a long legacy of industrial transformation. This is not to

suggest that all levels of government failed to act; rather, the actions that were taken were widely viewed as reactive, rather than forward-looking, with action often prompted by pressure from trade unions, the media, and workers themselves rather than emerging from a long-term plan. There were a multiplicity of micro strategies operating on and in the area, but these were not knitted together into a comprehensive and realistic plan for the area.

On the response to the most recent developments, interviewees expressed support for the UK government's decision to invest £500 million in Tata Steel's electric arc furnace (EAF) and the ongoing efforts made by all levels of government through the Port Talbot Transition Board, established in 2024. They noted the Board as an example of a positive 'shared endeavour' across governments and actors, and commended its efforts in securing and allocating funding within the expected timelines. Yet interviewees did not view these actions as a bold, forward-looking investment in the town's future. Instead, they were largely seen as short-term measures intended to stem further decline.

Future

When discussing the future of Port Talbot, interviewees identified a range of potential big bets which had the power to transform the local economy. Many described a vision of interconnected "jigsaw pieces" that, if brought together through a coherent, place-based regeneration strategy, could redefine the town's economic purpose and identity. Some contributors cautioned that the intense focus on Port Talbot during the Tata crisis risked reducing its identity to one of decline. Instead, they argued, the town's future must be grounded in a positive and forward-looking vision, one that reflects its potential, not just its challenges.

A significant number of respondents focused on offshore wind as the cornerstone of this transformation. Port Talbot was seen as a key player within the Celtic offshore wind supply chain, generating green power for the planned electric arc furnace and supporting thousands of jobs, both directly and indirectly. Interviewees positioned this within the context of a broader industrial green cluster, comprising green hydrogen production and modular nuclear energy. Several also emphasised the strategic partnership between Port Talbot and Milford Haven (Pembrokeshire) — both integral to the Celtic Freeport — as complementary energy producers and importers harnessing the resources of the Celtic Sea.

An alternative vision centred on Port Talbot's potential as a high wellbeing town, capitalising on its natural assets, including one of the largest and most scenic beaches in Wales, proximity to a rich hinterland with tourism potential, a high-quality public realm, and strong transport links such as the mainline railway to Cardiff and on to London.

In all of these propositions, interviewees felt that the cultural identity of Port Talbot and the sense of local pride were essential ingredients in shaping any long-term strategy, ensuring that transformation was rooted in community identity and values.

There was a clear consensus that the full transformation of Port Talbot would require a long-term, integrated strategy and this must involve all levels of government — UK, Welsh, and local — each with genuine “skin in the game”, aligned to a shared 15–20-year vision. The next section explores how different layers of government strategy — national, devolved, and local — interact and align to shape Port Talbot's future trajectory.

Interplay of national, devolved and local strategies

Our briefing paper, [*Place: Thinking of National Strategy from the Ground Up*](#) discusses the overall governance framework of the UK and the levers that sit with different levels of government. This framework is asymmetric and changes over time and can look different for different areas across the UK. In Port Talbot, since 1999, the Welsh Government has held responsibility for a range of devolved powers, including economic development and skills. Other key levers — such as industrial strategy and trade — are reserved to the UK Government. At the local government level, Neath Port Talbot Council has statutory responsibilities for services such as planning and education. Since 2022, the Council has also been part of the Southwest Wales Corporate Joint Committee, a regional body tasked with improving strategic coordination across transport, land use, economic development, and energy planning.

Despite this layered structure, interviewees described a sense of “fluidity” in how devolution operates in practice, with blurred boundaries and unclear responsibilities across different tiers of government. This high level of interdependence between these different layers further obscures accountability. Interviewees pointed to several examples of public confusion about who is responsible for what at official and political levels.

Economic development was frequently cited as a domain where responsibilities have shifted both upwards and downwards over time. Table 2 underlines this point. It gives a snapshot of selected economic development strategies introduced by different levels of government that have applied to Port Talbot. Interviewees reflected more broadly on the underlying philosophies shaping these efforts, namely, the tension between a place-first approach, which empowers local areas to design tailored strategies; and a sectoral approach, where government supports priority industries or clusters. Interviewees felt that these economic growth models often coexist, but inconsistently, undermining coherence in long-term planning. The ideal, interviewees suggested, would be a model where place-based strategies are reinforced by sectoral strengths, enabling areas like Port Talbot to build a distinct and resilient economic identity.

This fragmentation across levels of government was seen by interviewees to be compounded by siloed working within government itself. Interviewees cited several instances where different teams were responsible for overlapping agendas, such as energy and climate change, within both the Welsh and UK Governments. This lack

of internal coordination was viewed as a barrier to forming a unified strategic perspective, with concerns that significant opportunities were being missed.

The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015,⁸ passed by the Senedd and internationally recognised as pioneering legislation, was widely acknowledged by interviewees as a potentially transformative framework offering a statutory foundation for long-term, sustainable policymaking.^{9, 10, 11 & 12} While many respected the Act's moral authority, when asked specifically about the Act's role in shaping long-term strategy in Port Talbot, most interviewees did not see it as having been a source of influence on decisions related to industrial transformation over the past decade. Interviewees argued that meaningful implementation of the Act would have involved greater foresight: identifying risks such as contaminated land and air pollution and integrating these issues into forward-looking strategies for employment and sustainability. One explanation offered for the Act's limited traction was its perception as primarily a Welsh Government initiative, with little awareness or buy-in from other levels of government. Our [case study on Spain](#) also recognises the time it takes for long-term strategies to bed in.

Interviewees emphasised that transforming Port Talbot's economy would require close alignment between strategies across all levels of government. For instance, securing a viable future in floating offshore wind hinges on major investments in energy grid infrastructure, port upgrades, and transport connectivity, many of which fall under the jurisdiction of the UK Government. At the same time, the Welsh Government holds critical responsibilities for land remediation, planning, and local infrastructure. Interviewees cautioned that, when assessed in isolation, individual projects may struggle to meet narrow value-for-money criteria. However, when coordinated within a shared long-term strategy, such investments have the potential to unlock wider economic benefits, building investor confidence, attracting private capital, and ensuring that opportunities are not lost to global competitors.

Table 2 — Selected economic development strategies: Port Talbot

Period	UK Government	Welsh Government	Port Talbot Council / local strategies
1999 – 2005	Regional development through Regional Development Agencies	A Winning Wales ¹³ (2002): aimed to build a more competitive Welsh economy focused on diversification while committing to working with the steel industry	Emphasis on local job creation and resilience
2005 – 2010	Continued support for RDAs and infrastructure Early push for digital economy and innovation	Wales: A Vibrant Economy ¹⁴ (2005) focused on business growth and skills Welsh Development Agency abolished and brought into Government	Support for brownfield regeneration and employment programmes
2010 – 2015	RDAs replaced with Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) in England	Economic Renewal Programme ¹⁵ (2010): Low-carbon growth, digital, and infrastructure	Integration into Swansea Bay City Region partnerships
2015 – 2017	UK Industrial Strategy ¹⁶ (2017): Clean growth, infrastructure, skills	Strengthening Foundation Economy ¹⁷ Expansion of city and growth deals	Swansea Bay City Deal ¹⁸ (2017): energy infrastructure and transport priorities
2018 – 2019	Sector Deals: focus on AI, manufacturing, and construction.	Prosperity for All ¹⁹ (2017): Inclusive growth, well-being, regional equity	Local SME support and enterprise regeneration
2020 – 2021	COVID-19 response: furlough, business grants	Economic Resilience Fund Recovery support for businesses and workers	Recovery and resilience planning Early response to steel sector uncertainties
2022 – 2023	Levelling Up White Paper ²⁰ (2022) Green funding for energy and net zero Planning for electric arc furnace transition	Net Zero Wales: emphasis on just transition and regional fairness	Participation in green transition dialogues Local pressure for long-term strategic planning
2024 – 2025	Invest 2035 — Industrial Strategy Green Paper ²¹ UK Modern Industrial Strategy ²² Launch of National Wealth Fund (£5.8bn) UK Steel Strategy TBC	Continue investment in innovation, skills, and place-based development	Port Talbot Transition Project (2024)

Conditions for successful long-term strategy: a Port Talbot view

Much has already been written about Port Talbot and the steel sector; our goal is not to evaluate any policies or strategies directly, but rather to draw on the lessons that speak to our core questions:

- How can countries harness place-specific opportunities and strengths to better understand their comparative advantage?
- In what ways can a place-based perspective help national leaders assess trade-offs and make bold, future-oriented decisions?
- How can national strategy processes effectively mobilise governments and partners operating at different spatial levels?
- And whether some of the outcomes that matter most to the nation can be led by places themselves?

What came through clearly in this case study were answers to the first two questions and the importance of any national strategy practice drawing on place specific knowledge to reveal how national strengths, opportunities and challenges can play out and be amplified locally, and how international and national policies - industry, trade - affect local economies. Place-based inputs can also support timely action. Without this, as in Port Talbot, responses can be intermittent, reactive and focus on cost rather than opportunity.

Creating a national strategy practice that builds on place knowledge but is still able to make proper choices and not be everything to everyone is not easy.

Interviewees raised three key tensions:

- **Risk and resilience:** drawing from the town's industrial history, interviewees were mindful of the risks associated with placing too much emphasis on a single transformative strategy. There was strong support for ensuring that any big bets were sustainable, diversified, and embedded within a broader regional framework to protect the community from future economic shocks.
- **Identifying place-based opportunities vs following private investment:** a recurring theme was the debate around whether governments are equipped to create conditions in specific places to attract private investment, or whether their role is better understood as one of facilitating private sector confidence and capital. Both meant different things for how a national strategy practice reflects place, including on how strategic priorities were made and big bets taken.
- **Scale and geography:** respondents stressed the importance of matching the scale of investment to the appropriate geography. Most argued that meaningful transformation in Port Talbot, for example, would require investment beyond the town's boundaries, across the wider Southwest Wales region (and towards the east). For instance, one interviewee noted that a robust skills pipeline for the Port Talbot workforce would necessitate coordination and planning across a regional labour market, rather than

focusing solely on a town of approximately 30,000 residents. This necessitates a more flexible interpretation of place within national strategy, making the policy design and delivery process more complex

Our interviewees offered important insights on how these tensions could be addressed, identifying conditions that would be important to successfully integrate a place view into a national strategy practice. These conditions resonated with what we have heard from other parts of the UK including in our case study of Cambridge.

The importance of a shared evidence base

A critical enabler identified by interviewees was the need for all levels of government — UK, Welsh, and local — as well as other stakeholders to work from a shared and robust evidence base. Participants stressed the vital role of data and evidence in fostering a unified understanding of the challenges at hand and informing the range of response options. Several interviewees pointed to a history of underinvestment in foundational structures such as data systems, which has hampered coordinated action today. Without a common evidence base, strategies risk becoming fragmented and disconnected from the lived realities of communities like Port Talbot.

Equally important, interviewees emphasised the necessity of a shared understanding of the benefits that any strategic action would deliver, and how these benefits are distributed. They called for a clearer recognition that place-based investments create value not only locally but also regionally and nationally. A common evidence base, they argued, could serve as a tool to systematically capture and attribute the benefits of public investment across different tiers of government. Without this collective understanding, the risk of underinvestment in places like Port Talbot persists, as the broader, multi-level benefits of such investments are often overlooked or undervalued in siloed decision-making processes.

Bold convening leadership

Despite ongoing ambiguity around the responsibilities of different tiers of government, and what several interviewees described as “blurred accountability”, there was a shared belief that a cohesive strategy could be both designed and delivered. Interviewees understood there is little appetite for constitutional reform or significant changes to the devolution framework in the short-term. As a result, they focused on the critical importance of leadership in convening all stakeholders around a unified strategic vision. This leadership they felt could come from any level of government, but it was important to cut through the fragmentation and align actors around a shared purpose.

Effective distribution of risk and reward

Interviewees noted that while strong convening leadership was important to galvanise stakeholders around a common purpose — in the context of multiple election cycles across UK, Welsh and local governments — this kind of leadership alone was not sufficient to maintain long-term focus. However, they felt that if the initial support could be “locked in” and buy-in secured, then political change was less likely to create wholesale disruptions in strategic direction.

Interviewees felt governance frameworks could be used to formalise the “terms and conditions” of collaboration. These mechanisms would help cut through institutional ambiguity, offering a practical way to align strategies and drive outcomes, even within a fragmented governance landscape. An example of such a mechanism in action was the Transition Board in Port Talbot. Interviewees pointed to its monthly meetings, which brought together stakeholders from all levels of government, as a key factor in enabling investment. Similar examples were cited beyond Port Talbot, such as the Bradford Opportunity Area, which, for them, demonstrated how devolved, place-based decision-making can unlock tailored, responsive interventions.

It was important this was done in a way that meant all interested parties — government, the private sector, and communities — had a clear stake in the process. This shared investment in both the success and failure of a strategy was viewed as essential to maintaining commitment and driving collective action. While some acknowledged the potential for friction and complexity in shared accountability structures, there was consensus that well-designed mechanisms for distributing both risk and reward can be powerful tools for sustaining long-term collaboration.

Effective public engagement

The Port Talbot experience highlights the importance for any national strategy to resonate with local stories and a place’s sense of identity. Interviewees consistently stressed that achieving community buy-in was an essential condition for success. However, doing so in the context of Port Talbot was not straightforward. Mistrust among communities was seen as a major barrier to deep engagement. Residents routinely express scepticism about whether promised investments would ever materialise, with a prevailing “believe it when we see it” sentiment that makes long-term engagement particularly challenging.

Interviewees suggested several ways for overcoming these barriers in an effective practice:

- **Narrative alignment:** national strategies need to be framed in ways that connect with local identities and a community’s sense of place.
- **Empowering local actors:** genuine empowerment goes beyond consultation; it should involve giving local actors the tools, information, and autonomy to match problems to solutions.

- **Early wins:** delivering visible, early successes was seen as critical to building trust and creating momentum for longer-term engagement.
- **Ongoing dialogue:** sustained, two-way communication is needed as strategy progresses to adapt to local needs and maintain community trust.

Lessons for the practice of National Strategy

We take the following lessons away from this case study for how the practice of national strategy can reflect place:

Use place-based perspectives to inform prioritisation

- A place-based view is important to a country's understanding of its strengths, opportunities, and challenges. Failing to do so prevents a comprehensive understanding of opportunities and challenges and how they may amplify in local geographies.
- National big bets are a matter of prioritisation and trade-offs. A place 'view' can help inform those (effective) trade-offs and better analyse the potential impact. This view is not only limited to domestic priorities and impact but should inform geo-political trade-offs on issues such as trade, security, technology and international relations.
- Strategy must reflect the scale of the economic and social opportunity, not just administrative borders.

Incentivise aligned action

- The UK's multi-level governance can be a real strength for national strategy if it can create the conditions for local, devolved and reserved powers to act in sync. Interviewees in the Port Talbot case study emphasised the importance of unifying leadership that can align stakeholders around a shared purpose, and governance mechanisms that can clarify roles and responsibilities and create structures for collaboration where shared priorities and trade-offs can be addressed.
- A joined-up, stable policy environment will help marshal the activity and actions of other actors, like businesses, towards a shared goal.

Create a shared evidence base

- To unlock the full contribution of place to national strategy, the UK needs investment in a common, robust evidence and data infrastructure that spans all levels of governance. This should support collective diagnosis, enable coordinated action, and ground national strategies in the lived realities of people and places.
- Crucially, the evidence must illuminate not only the value created within a specific place, but also how that value contributes to wider regional and national outcomes. Building this shared foundation will strengthen strategic

alignment across the public and private sectors and make national strategy more responsive, targeted, and effective.

Root national strategy dialogue in local narratives

- For national strategies to be effective and sustainable, engagement must genuinely connect with communities and be framed in ways that resonate with their unique identities and values. Without this cultural grounding, it becomes difficult to build lasting support and momentum at the local level.

We will be reflecting these lessons as we design and develop a contemporary practice of national strategy.

Other publications

These findings have fed into our overall paper:

- [Place: Thinking of National Strategy from the Ground Up](#)

As well as the industrial transformation in Port Talbot, we have also conducted the following case studies:

- [The semiconductor sector in Cambridge](#)

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