

# WHAT MATTERS:

a north Wales community  
in the early months of the  
COVID-19 lockdown

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# WHAT MATTERS: A NORTH WALES COMMUNITY IN THE EARLY MONTHS OF THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN

**This is a report from one small town of Blaenau Ffestiniog and the nearby villages, hamlets, farms and houses in the valley of Bro Ffestiniog. The district has a long history of de-industrialisation with the local slate industry in decline from the 1890s so that the history is of urban depopulation; upland agriculture has never generated high incomes; by accident it has significant plastics manufacturing. The leading sectors of the larger Gwynedd economy are publicly funded education, health, care and public administration, plus tourism which generates export earnings and poorly paid (seasonal) employment.**

Much of what many know about Blaenau could be described as knowledge at a distance through the often one-dimensional categories of official statistics. Through this lens, Blaenau and the Bro look to be the kind of place which could be condescendingly described as “left behind” in economic terms: it is part of an area like many others in the UK of low wages and precarious self-employment, though partly buffered by modest house prices so that two median wage earners can afford to rent or buy a terrace house.

But here we report on a different kind of close-up knowledge obtained from a community online questionnaire<sup>1</sup> about the impact of Covid-19 on the people of the town and locality. 244 adults answered the questionnaire in May and early June 2020, in the early stages of the lockdown. The respondents are not a representative sample but they do give an overview which includes the linguistic minority of non-Welsh speakers: for example, 73% of questionnaire respondents were fluent Welsh speakers (and a further 16% described themselves as either speaking Welsh ‘quite well’ or ‘learning’) vs 79% Welsh speakers in Blaenau in the 2011 census.

The questionnaire gives a very different picture of Blaenau and the Bro from the official statistics. In the questionnaire, family and community matter to most of our respondents (both native born and immigrants) who feel grounded in a place whose compelling attractions are social and natural, not economic. Strikingly, one of the strongest responses to the survey was the agreement by many of the positive effects on ‘the environment’ of the lockdown. And many are proud of their communities and how they have risen to the challenge of Covid-19 by helping neighbors.

It should be remembered that the questionnaire was taken in May and June 2020 when business failure and high unemployment were apprehensions about the future; not the present realities they will be in autumn and winter 2020. And, there was also surprisingly little mentioned about the problems of working parents juggling child-care responsibilities. The average household in our questionnaire

<sup>1</sup> This total includes incomplete questionnaires where questions were not fully answered. The total population of the area is around 6,500.

consists of 2 adults and 1 child but only 22% of respondents were “very concerned” about child-care responsibilities (Q 19) during this period.

Going forward, much is uncertain especially about upcoming local outbreaks of covid and a second spike, as well as the impact on incomes and well-being. We have identified three elements to our continuing research work:

1. a follow-up community questionnaire in mid-winter 2020-21 to explore the extent of similar and different results in the later stages of the pandemic’s impact on households and the community;
2. meanwhile, it would be worth looking at the impact on small and micro-enterprises (private and social) located in and/or serving the Bro;
3. and worth digging deeper into the responses of youth and young adults who were significantly underrepresented in this survey, with just 4% of respondents aged 16-25 against 80% 26-65 and 16% 65 plus (Q 3). The issue of how youth relate to community is obviously critical to the future.

However, the responses from what might be called the responsible adult population (i.e. aged 26 and upwards) in Blaenau reinforce the case for switching local public policy for renewal away from economic development objectives and towards foundational policies of community support which are social and economic in nature.

From the record of the past twenty years, the objective of creating large numbers of high paid jobs in the Bro (or Gwynedd more widely) looked to be unattainable before covid. Instead, we should be thinking about how public policy can support the foundational basics of access to housing, eliminating fuel poverty, providing quality health, care and education services and leisure facilities (which might also support local, grounded enterprises). The challenge is how to renew this infrastructure which allows families and communities to get on with what matters for them.

And, as a matter of urgency, community has been demonstrated through the pandemic by more helping of others and the valuing of these acts; there is a question about what structures and models can be put in place to encourage individuals to carry on doing more to support well-being. Here is one big idea from a small place.

The DWP has just reinstated sanctions for those on universal credit. Effectively, financial support will be reduced if the claimant does not look for jobs. Practically, after Covid-19 this is cruel and pointless as claimants will be punished for not looking for jobs which do not exist. Why not allow claimants to provide evidence of social volunteering as an acceptable substitute for evidence of job search? In this way social security could start to become a constructive way of respecting what matters to citizens not a mindless way of enforcing labour market discipline.

*“And many are proud of their communities and how they have risen to the challenge of Covid-19 by helping neighbors.”*

# THEMES FROM THE QUESTIONNAIRE

## THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNITY AND FAMILY

Summed up in many responses to the question about 'why the community is important to you' (Q7), people and place were mentioned multiple times in different variants. For some it is specific people – family and friends – while for others it is the sense of strong connections between people and the positive actions and outcomes that result from that. Others highlighted the enabling nature of the place which affects quality of life. For example, reasons why the Bro is important included (a) “*cymdeithas glos*” “*cymdeithas cryf*” “*cymuned*” and “*close community*” (b) “*teulu yn byw yno*” “*teulu*” and many variations on a “*good place to bring up children*” “*living close to family*” etc. (c) for one respondent after family and community the third consideration was “*pawb yn adnabod iw gilydd*” and some simply said “*pobol*”. In Q7 respondents were asked to give three reasons why the community is important to them and 96% of respondents completed the question.

This collection of personal explanations of 'the community' is reinforced by responses to other questions. When asked about the benefits of lockdown, the first most popular benefit, named by 38%, is “*spending more time with the family*” (Q14). When asked a more open question about the effects of the coronavirus, 63% worry about missing family and friends and having to be socially distanced from them (Q8); when only 28% worry about “*loss of income*” and 23% worry about being “*unable to work*”.

## GROUNDING THROUGH ATTACHMENT TO PLACE

71% of the respondents do not want to move away from what they see as their place in Blaenau or the Bro (Q8). This is a high percentage and fits with the responses to the “*where do you feel like you belong,*” question, in which the majority said Blaenau (often just 'here') or Wales.

It's not then surprising that at least one respondent argued that here status and recognition are not tied to economic role: *I am on disability benefits and unable to work, and everywhere else I have been, small-talk begins “What do you do?”. I have NEVER heard that question in Blaenau. People here are not obsessed with money and status; they take others as they find them. I feel safe and free and accepted here.*

## WHAT DOES BLAENAU MEAN BY “COMMUNITY”?

Intellectually, community is a very blurred notion, but practically in Blaenau and the Bro it means mutual aid: “*We look out for each other*”; “*mae'r gymuned yn edrych ol ei gilydd*”; “*people are there for each other*”

Unsurprisingly some bracketed “*cymuned*” and the “*iaith*” because they value a majority Welsh speaking community. But, interestingly the mutuality definition of community runs through the English as well as the Welsh respondents. This is one social value which unites individuals with very different backgrounds and cultural identities.

## BUT THIS IS NOT EDEN, COMMUNITY COMES WITH FRICTION

Closeness can also mean dissatisfaction with neighbors. One respondent was “*disgusted at the parents sending children out alone*”. Another complained about “*others*

ignoring social distancing, driving and seeing families and it made a mockery of what we were doing". A third perceptively coupled "coming together" with "some friction" and a fourth talked knowingly about "the few who should know better".

For a few self-conscious outsiders, lock down had meant intensification of exclusion eg an English holiday home owner complained "Non Welsh living here are treated as tourists" another expressed the "wish the community was more welcoming and accepted 'blow ins'" (NB This was very clearly not the general view of non-Welsh speakers though several recognized the language could be barrier to their own social participation).

## RESILIENCE IN ECONOMIC ADVERSITY, WITH APPREHENSIONS ABOUT THE FUTURE

Respondents do not attach value to individual economic success but to community resilience in economic adversity: "The community is unique and holds its own despite the neglect and poverty." There were surprisingly few complaints about economic facilities with only one complaint about the nearest petrol station being 15 miles away and one other respondent describing Blaenau as a "dying town".

Most respondents were not thinking of Blaenau in transactional terms. Instead an incoming English business owner praised "passionate people doing amazing work in town". The schools especially the secondary school, are the public institutions which get repeatedly mentioned positively, praise is for a family/ community institution.

But there are widespread worries about the economic future, especially for small business "It is likely that many small businesses have been badly affected by the forced closure during the pandemic" "My concern is for businesses will they be able to survive" "bryderus o ran yr economi yma wrth symud ymlaen". In open questions respondents expressed fears for others in their community.

## COMMUNITY PERFORMED IN COVID 19

The covid 19 lock down gave the community a chance to perform "little things such as helping with shopping. Looking out for neighbours". Shopping for others "siopa I eraill" was mentioned very often. Much of this was clearly informal. Only a few mentioned structured support eg phone calls to Age Well group members + helping with gofal cymunedol stiniog group. There were frequent mentions of the 'foodbank' suggesting problems of food poverty which are not new, but have possibly become more extensive during lockdown.

Despite concerns expressed about health worries and access to health services (Q13) the lockdown was also seen as positive in answers to the open question about the effect of the coronavirus on your community (Q14): "mae'r cymuned wedi agosi" or "dangos faint mae pobl eisiau bod yn darn o cymuned lleol". Or at length, "I feel that the atmosphere of the people of Blaenau has helped a lot for us as a family, neighbors chatting from a distance and looking after each other, everyone worried about each other and caring for each other. The closeness of this community has helped during this difficult and anxious time."

## THE CLAIM TO BE DOING MORE

The collective belief is that others are helping more and many individuals claim to be doing more themselves. 85 % believe that "people in the community" are doing more to help others (Q 21); 71% report they as individuals have been doing more (Q22).

71 % report that they as individuals have not received more support during the corona virus outbreak (Q25) But that is entirely consistent with an able bodied majority of respondents concentrating assistance on older people, those shielding because of health conditions and the socially isolated.

# AND WHAT ABOUT BEING MORE INVOLVED IN THE COMMUNITY AFTER THE PANDEMIC?

A significant minority give “not sure” or “don’t know” answers (Q29). But there are a large number of positives about “*gwneud fwy o waith yn y gymuned*” and “*spend more time in the community!*” (Q30)

From the responses to this last open question of the questionnaire, there is a clear will to continue helping in the community when the pandemic is over. How can this be supported eg by some kind of new or developed structure/model which involves both design at the community level but also supportive externally-driven conditions.

Thank you to the people of Bro Ffestiniog.

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