



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

REPORT, DOCUMENT

Democratic health of community and town councils

Report about getting people more involved with community councils and improving participation and diversity among candidates.

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Foreword by the Chair

It is with a sense of urgency that I present this report on the democratic health of community and town councils. It is the closest tier of government to the people and is at a critical juncture. Our findings highlight significant challenges that, if left unaddressed, threaten the very foundation of local democracy.

Over the past 50 years, Wales has undergone profound social, political and technological changes. Yet, our community and town councils have remained culturally and procedurally largely static. This disconnect has led to a crisis in democratic health, characterised by low engagement, poor electoral participation, and a lack of diversity among councillors. These issues undermine the legitimacy, effectiveness and relevance of our councils in the daily lives of people across Wales.

The group has been mindful of previous independent work, such as the 2018 independent review panel which explored models of community governance in countries such as Denmark, the Netherlands, New Zealand and Germany. These models showed that the most local tier of governance is effective when it has a clear purpose and is integrated into the community. Nearly 40 recommendations were made which included increasing the diversity and skills of councillors, enhancing the training and support for councils, strengthening the accountability and transparency of the sector, clarifying the roles and responsibilities of councils, promoting collaboration and partnership with other tiers of government and civil society, and encouraging innovation and digital transformation.

However, despite the comprehensiveness and relevance of the recommendations, they do not appear to be having the desired impact. The implementation of the recommendations by partners has been patchy.

There are many potential reasons for this patchiness, but it led us to ask

fundamental questions. For instance, is the current model of community governance in Wales outmoded? Is the existing model of community and town councils, based on territorial boundaries and electoral representation still fit for purpose for the 21st century? The answer to these questions were out of scope for this review, but we have proposed options to explore this more deeply with communities.

Our evidence suggests that, whilst there are some exceptions, overall, the community and town council sector cannot be viewed as thriving. To summarise:

- Democratic health is very poor, with only 22 % of councillors standing in contested seats.
- Governance is not good enough according to Audit Wales. The sector takes over £50 million in precept, but the evidence of its impact and value for money is not clear. Overall, around 50% of councils received qualified audit opinions in 2022 to 2023.
- Purpose is unclear and inconsistent. There is no clear vision or strategy for what the sector is for, and how it inter-relates with other partners such as principal councils or the third sector.
- Unsurprisingly then, the sector does not enjoy a healthy relationship with its communities and partners. Most members of the public do not know what community councils do, or who their councillors are. We struggled to get a response from the general public, third sector organisations, principal councils and community councils themselves, on these issues. We believe the apathy is a finding in itself, and a deeply concerning one.
- Generally, integration or working with partners is poor, including between councils. Instances of working with other councils or the significant volume of community volunteers are too rare. Opportunities are missed to harness the energy, skills, and resources of the people who care about their communities and want to make a difference.

This is unsustainable and should not be overlooked any longer. This is not merely about councils failing to meet expectations; it is about the risk of losing a

crucial layer of democratic representation if we fail to act now. It is not delivering the best outcomes for local communities, nor the best value for the public money. It is not engaging local people, nor reflecting their diversity and aspirations. It is not adapting to the changing needs and challenges of the 21st century, nor taking advantage of the opportunities and innovations that it offers.

It is the view of the group that there are 2 clear paths for the future of the sector.

The first is to heavily invest in rebuilding, improving governance, transparency and representation. This path will require significant financial and political commitment, but it is a necessary step if we are to restore trust and legitimacy. Democracy costs money, which means paying for elections and compensating councillors for their time and effort. The presumption is that with increased awareness comes increased engagement and thus democratic health. In the backdrop of broader democratic and financial challenges, this will be costly and take time. Evaluation will need to be robust to test whether the interventions are having the intended impact.

The second path is more radical. It calls for us to reimagine what community governance should look like in the 21st century, unshackling ourselves from structures designed in the 1970s. It should be something based around purpose first, and form following function. It should not lose the best of the current model, in fact it should learn from it, but it would shake off those aspects that are seen as weaker. If agreed, this should be done following the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and involve the people it seeks to help. Whilst this path is perhaps the most uncertain, it might also prove to be the optimal one.

As a group, we did not reach a consensus. This reflects our attachment to the current model and the recognition that starting from scratch is risky and complex, particularly in relation to the broader local government landscape. Both paths come with risks, but inaction is not an option. Change is urgent and undeniable. Our community councils must become more inclusive, better

governed, and more reflective of the diversity and dynamism of Welsh communities.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed their time, expertise, and passion to this important work, especially the group members and the secretariat.

Wales is ambitious for its future. We need bold action to reinvigorate local democracy and ensure its foundations are fit for purpose and the 21st century. I hope the options we have put forward guide the next steps of reform and inspire a renewed commitment to local governance.

Executive summary

This report presents the findings, conclusions and proposed options of the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group, established in April 2023 by the then Minister for Finance and Local Government.

The Group's remit was to explore the causes of low engagement and participation in community and town councils, and to identify options for actions for community councils, sector representative bodies and government to:

- improve awareness and engagement between communities and their community councils
- increase the number and diversity of candidates standing for election to community councils

The report is based on a range of evidence sources including literature review, surveys, expert contributors and stakeholder focus groups. The group acknowledged that the numbers of relevant stakeholders who were willing to engage on this topic were limited, which suggested a degree of apathy. Different

stakeholder groups were involved including young people, the general public, community and town councillors and clerks and third sector organisations.

There were a number of key findings from each of these stakeholder groups.

For young people, they:

- had limited awareness of community and town councils and often conflated their functions with those of principal councils
- were less likely to contact their community council councillors or attend meetings. They preferred engaging in community events rather than formal council roles
- wanted to be part of decision-making in their communities
- raised several reasons why they did not want to become councillors. This included a lack of interest, not enough time, and lack of knowledge about the role. They also cited a lack of diversity and concerns about the limited impact of councillors

For the general public, they:

- also had limited awareness of community councils and often conflated their functions with those of principal councils. Involvement with community councils was also limited
- talked about barriers to engagement, such as queries going unanswered or receiving long-delayed responses. There was a perception that councils operated as closed shops
- said that accessibility issues, co-option practices, and the perception of councils as cliques that did not welcome outsiders, put them off wanting to stand as councillors

For the third sector, they:

- talked about awareness and workload. 75% of third sector groups were

aware of community councils. However, workload and bureaucracy were seen as a significant barrier to standing as a councillor, followed by caring responsibilities and lack of remuneration

- discussed some of the challenges of working with community councils, such as poor quality of community councils' applications for project funding, a lack of community engagement, and differing perceptions of roles and responsibilities between community councils and community groups
- considered the potential for future collaboration which included improving working relationships, greater transparency, and more joined-up support and training. However, they noted barriers which included poor communication, lack of understanding, and perceived lack of resources

For community and town councillors and clerks, they:

- discussed the barriers to elections. The low numbers standing for election was impacted by the lack of understanding of community councils, their visibility, and their perceived lack of impact. Young people needed to be incentivised to participate. Community councils were not good at reaching out to diverse groups in their communities
- talked about the abuse from other council members or the public that was common, especially through social media. They described their workloads as meetings, events, implementing projects and report writing
- also discussed the challenges and rewards of their roles. Challenges included limited remuneration, bureaucratic culture and lack of efficiency. However, delivering community projects and events was seen as very rewarding

The Report reached the following conclusions:

- Low awareness and engagement: there is a significant lack of awareness about the purpose and activities of community councils, especially among young people who are confused about the roles of local and central government.

- Public perception and diversity: community councils are often perceived as irrelevant, not dynamic, and not reflective of the diversity within their communities. Young people do not feel they have a voice in community councils.
- Culture and structure: the culture within community councils needs to change as councils often operate as cliques, making it difficult for newcomers to get involved. There are also issues with financial management, governance, and outdated infrastructure.
- Varied council ambitions: there is a variation in the ambitions of different councils, with some being reactive and others proactive in delivering services and managing projects.
- Bureaucracy: the bureaucratic nature of community councils, including meeting formats and discussions, is off-putting to individuals who prefer more flexible volunteering opportunities.
- Reputational damage: reports of instances when councillor behaviour fell below the standards expected, abuse of councillors and staff, and poor financial management have damaged the reputation of the sector.

Proposed options for action(s)

Many of these conclusions are not new. As such, the Report's options contain 2 paths for improvement.

Some further research into specialist topics is likely to be required, that overlaps both paths. We believe this foundational research will prove relevant whichever of the 2 paths are chosen.

The first path looks at a set of options to rebuilding the community and town council sector.

The second path contains 1 overarching option, to modernise the model for this tier of local government, acknowledging that the current model may be

outmoded and that a new version of community governance is needed.

The task and finish group are of the view that Welsh Ministers should choose 1 of these 2 paths and proceed on that basis.

Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector

This path focuses on increasing engagement and participation between communities and their councils to improve democratic health. It includes enhancing public perception, promoting inclusion and diversity, improving skills, and creating pathways for future councillors.

- Enhancing public perception: options include providing training and resources for councillors to engage with schools, youth groups and communities. Co-developing curriculum resources with teachers and engaging with colleges and universities. Sharing good practices to raise awareness of community councils.
- Promoting inclusion and diversity: steps to increase diversity include creating processes for collecting demographic data, developing guidance for reserved seats for under-represented groups, and compensating non-councillor representatives from under-represented groups, including young people.
- Improving skills: supporting councillors aspirations through training and mentoring, exploring models for providing clerking services, and addressing repeated governance failures to enhance the skills and governance of councils.
- Creating pathways for future councillors: options include the development of a framework for clarity, transparency and standardisation of community council election costs. Proposing that community councils establish ringfenced reserves through a small increase in precepts, to enable elections to be held. Promotion of non-councillor representation and restricting long-term co-option by limiting this to one term only. The Welsh Government's

Communities Policy should also explicitly address how community organisations can work with community councils. The new Electoral Management Board should be encouraged to support information and advice for candidates through its new voter information platform.

- Cultural change: options include a review, conducted by Chairs of Standards Committees and the Standards Committees Network to look at how well the ethical framework and code of conduct process has been implemented. Exploring with Audit Wales whether it can play a more substantial role and contribute to the development of criteria, aimed at tackling diversity issues and perceived underperformance. A review of evidence to inform sizing policies should be carried out by a body such as the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru.

Path 2: modernisation

This path involves exploring new models for community governance, including redefining the purpose, relationships, functions, and different models for election or selection to these bodies, with a clear process for reflecting the diversity of communities. There should also be a clear understanding of both success and failure criteria, and a process for intervention.

The Task and Finish Group were not specifically tasked with identifying other models, nor are they the experts for that exercise. However, it was proposed that a specific Ministerial group is tasked with exploring this option.

Chapter 1: introduction

The community and town council sector is the level of local government closest to communities. There are 875 communities in Wales, and 732 of those have a community or town council. Community and town councils are served by just

under 8,000 councillors.

The size of community councils varies across Wales. A typical community council represents around 1,500 residents. There are smaller community councils that represent less than 500 residents. The largest population served by a town council is Barry, with over 50,000 residents.

At the last local government elections in May 2022, election results for community councils showed that competition for seats was limited. Almost two-thirds of seats were uncontested, meaning no election was held, and 1 in 6 seats were left vacant, to be filled through further election or co-option.

In April 2023, the then-Minister for Finance and Local Government, Rebecca Evans MS, established the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group. The members were appointed to bring a diverse range of perspectives from inside and outside the sector.

Membership

- Shereen Williams (Chair), Chief Executive, Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru
- Cllr Mike Theodoulou, Chair, One Voice Wales and Chair, Shelter Cymru
- Dr Leah Hibbs, Lecturer, in Social Policy, Cardiff University
- Sue Leonard, Chief Officer, Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services (County Voluntary Council for Pembrokeshire) (*until 31st August 2024)
- Sue Husband, Director BITC Cymru (*until February 2024)
- Tilley Rees, Student, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Chapter 2: context

Background for review

The ordinary local government elections to all seats in all principal councils and community and town councils takes place at the same time, every 5 years. These elections were last held in May 2022. The results for community councils showed a low turnout of around 40%. Moreover, of 7,883 community and town council seats, only 22% were contested. 62% of seats were uncontested, meaning that no election was held, and 16% of seats were unfilled and therefore vacant. Vacant seats would be filled through either further election or co-option.

A comparison of the May 2022 elections with that of the previous local government elections in May 2017 found that the number of contested community councils seats on election day had dropped from 19% in 2017 to 15% by 2022. The number of vacant seats on election day had risen from 17% in 2017 to 22% by 2022 (see annex 2).

The then-Minister for Finance and Local Government issued a **written statement in July 2022** responding to early data from the election results. The Minister highlighted the importance of people having a genuine choice of who represents and serves them and feeling that being part of this most local level of democracy can make a difference in their communities.

In **April 2023**, the Minister issued a further Written Statement about the establishment of the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group, formed to explore the causes of low engagement and participation in community and town councils. The group's core aims were to identify options for actions for community and town councils, sector representative bodies and government to:

- improve awareness and engagement between communities and their community councils

- increase the number, and diversity, of candidates standing for election to community and town councils

The group members were appointed to bring a range of perspectives, including stakeholders, communities and independent, evidence-led viewpoints.

Collectively, we covered several key perspectives, e.g.:

- community and town councils
- principal councils
- community organisations
- business sector
- academic insight and challenge
- young people
- inclusion/diversity
- behavioural/system change

In addition to the Task and Finish Group, an Officer Support Group was established made up of representatives from One Voice Wales, the WLGA and Welsh Government officials. This group's purpose was to provide additional support to us in respect of secretariat support, gathering evidence, offering expert advice and helping the drafting of the report.

The changing shape of Wales and local government

A timeline of key legislative changes and reviews is in annex 3. Some of the key changes are noted below.

Further background information on the community and town council sector can be found in annex 4.

Local government pre-1972

Before the Local Government Act 1972 (“The 1972 Act”), Wales was divided into 13 administrative counties and 23 county boroughs. The counties were further subdivided into smaller urban and rural districts, each with their own elected parish councils. There were approximately 850 parish councils in Wales.

The 1972 Act replaced this system with 8 counties and 37 districts, which came into effect in 1974. Parish councils in Wales were abolished and replaced by community councils with different boundaries and functions. The 1972 Act intended that the new areas would be more efficient, rational, and representative of the people in Wales.

Changes to local authority structures 1996

In April 1996, the local government structure of 8 counties and 37 districts was replaced with 22 local authority areas (Local Government (Wales) Act 1994).

Reviews of community and town councils

There have been several reviews into community and town councils. In 2003 Aberystwyth University conducted research into the **role, functions and future potential of community councils in Wales**. This was followed by a further **study in 2014** to update these findings and provide analysis of the structure, operation and changes in community councils since then.

In 2006, the Beecham Review of Local Service Delivery was conducted. Its aim was to assess and improve the delivery of public services in Wales. Whilst not directly referring to community councils, the review emphasised the need for local government bodies to work more closely, adopt best practices for better

service delivery and be citizen-centric.

In July 2017, the then-Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government established the Independent Review Panel to explore the potential role of local government more local than principal councils, define the most appropriate model(s)/structure(s) to deliver this role and to consider how these models and structures should be applied across Wales. This review built on the previous research. The independent **review reported in 2018** and made a series of recommendations which were to be taken forward by all partners.

Many of the recommendations were resolved, for example:

- support to councils on the use of social media
- access to the general power of competence
- identification of core training
- provision of training bursaries
- supporting smaller councils to help them fulfil audit requirements

There are several issues that have not been addressed. Such as whether:

- there is benefit in defining services which would be delivered by community and town councils
- Councillors should be able to sit on both community and principal councils
- Councillors should only be able to be co-opted for a maximum of one term
- all clerks should be required to be qualified
- Welsh Government Ministers should have proportionate intervention powers

We have not replicated the work of the Independent Review Panel, and we sought to further engage groups outside the immediate work of community and town councils.

Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021

The introduction of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 provided for the establishment of a new and reformed legislative framework for local government elections, democracy, performance and governance, including a new general power of competence for eligible community councils. This power allows eligible councils to do “anything that individuals generally may do” as long as other laws aren’t broken. This removed previous constraints on spending powers for eligible community councils.

Independent Commission on constitutional future of Wales 2024

In 2024, the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales published its report.

The report included recommendations to strengthen Welsh democracy. Its first recommendation proposed that the Welsh Government should strengthen the capacity for democratic innovation and inclusive community engagement in Wales. This should draw on an expert advisory panel, and designed in partnership with the Senedd, local government and other partners. New strategies for education in local democracy should be a priority for this work, and subject to regular review by the Senedd.

The Welsh Government responded to the report in March 2024. At the time of writing our report on the democratic health of community and town councils, the Welsh Government has begun its work on taking forward the recommendations. We will share our findings to contribute to this work.

Financial management and governance

Between 2017 and 2020, the Public Accounts Committee considered a number of **reports** published by Audit Wales on the financial management and governance of community and town councils.

Audit Wales follows a programme of auditing community and town councils to give reasonable, but not absolute, assurance that the accounts have been properly prepared, and arrangements are in place to secure value for money. The programme follows a 3 year cycle: each community council will receive a limited defined procedures audit in two of the three years and a more in-depth examination in the third year.

Insight from Audit Wales was that the number of qualified audits received by community councils in 2022 to 2023 was 49% (out of 681 completed audits). Where they undertook a more in-depth audit, they found that 58% of those 'full' audits (of which there were 216) received qualified audit opinions. The next report into the financial management and governance of the sector is expected later in 2024.

Since 2018, there have been 30 public interest reports issued to community councils.

Code of conduct

In 2021, **an independent review** was conducted by Richard Penn on the ethical standards framework for local government in Wales. The review concluded that the framework continued to be fit for purpose and suggested some amendments to help with the prevention of complaints and improve handling and further enhancement of ethical standards.

All community councillors must agree to observe the statutory councillors' code of conduct when they accept office. Except for minor complaints, that can be addressed through local resolution procedures, where both parties agree, alleged breaches of the code should be made to the Public Service Ombudsman for Wales.

Alleged breaches of the Code are considered by the Ombudsman who refers the complaint to the local standards committee or the Adjudication Panel for Wales if they determine, based on their public interest test, there is a potential case to answer. Over the last 5 years, the Ombudsman has dealt with between 100 and 200 complaints per year regarding the ethical conduct of community councillors. The most recent Annual Report from the Ombudsman showed that it had received 176 new Code of Conduct complaints about community council councillors, an 11% increase on the previous year.

Digital health of the sector

In 2022, the Local Government's Chief Digital Officer (LGCEO) carried out a **Digital Discovery Project** for community and town councils to assess the sector's digital readiness. The report noted a significant variation across the sector and made it clear that action was needed to enable community councils to work confidently through digital means.

As a result, the then-Minister for Finance and Local Government asked One Voice Wales to lead on delivering an action plan to improve the digital readiness of the sector, supported by up to £150,000 per year in 2023 to 2024 and 2024 to 2025.

Welsh Government support for the sector

Community councils are corporate bodies, responsible for meeting the duties

and functions conferred on them by legislation and accountable directly to their electorate. They are not accountable to principal authorities or Welsh Ministers. However, over the last few years, the Welsh Government has provided a range of support, funding and guidance to help the sector build its capacity and capability, and to be able to deliver for their communities.

A particular focus has been helping the sector to improve its financial management and governance.

Over the last 5 years, Welsh Government has worked with sector partners to develop a range of support, including:

- Welsh Government funding made available through One Voice Wales, to incentivise and enable councillors to undertake training, with a particular emphasis on financial management, governance and code of conduct
- Welsh Government funding to support general training for smaller councils, providing a 50% contribution towards the cost of other training needs
- Welsh Government funding through the Society for Local Council Clerks, to provide council clerks to undertake the sector specific CiLCA (Certificate in Local Council Administration) qualification
- a national training survey led by One Voice Wales, to determine the sector's training and development needs
- the Finance and Governance Toolkit for Community and Town Councils. The toolkit supports councils to meet their statutory responsibilities and have strong financial management and governance
- core funding for One Voice Wales to help its role as a member-led organisation
- the Access to Elected Office Fund pilot, through the Diversity in Democracy programme

Chapter 3: methodology

The group adopted different approaches to help understand the views of a broad range of stakeholders. As part of the work, both quantitative and qualitative information was gathered on what the general public, young people, third sector, community and town councils, and principal councils thought about engagement and representation with local community and town councils.

Evidence was gathered from different sources:

- literature search and review of relevant academic papers (November to May 2023)
- a survey conducted by YouGov on behalf of Welsh Government (December 2022)
- expert contributors (External and Welsh Government) (July 2023 to May 2024)
- call for evidence surveys (October to November 2023)
- focus groups (November 2023; April to May 2024)
- a follow-up survey conducted by YouGov (May 2024)

Literature search

The officers group carried out a desktop review of relevant literature to support us in identifying initial themes for exploration. These themes were:

- Theme 1 perception: how community and town councils were perceived by their local communities
- Theme 2 conflict: polarised views by council members that in some cases led to animosity and hostility, and concerns about local relationships impacted by acting as council members (particularly a concern for women)
- Theme 3 structures: local governance structures and whether these effected

- representation and involvement in decision making for local communities
- Theme 4 communication: ineffective communication between community councils and their communities
 - Theme 5 engagement and participation: how communities were involved in the work of community and town councils and their decisions

Survey

The Welsh Government commissioned surveys conducted through YouGov. These surveys reached 1,000+ people aged 16 years and over and asked questions regarding public knowledge of community and town councils.

Expert contributors

The group invited several expert contributors to expand on key topics such as academic research into improving engagement in parish councils, the new Curriculum for Wales, young people in politics, electoral reforms and community council governance. This helped to determine the areas that needed further exploration (annex 5).

Call for evidence

The group launched a **call for evidence** through general press and surveys. Contributions were invited from political parties to understand their approach to supporting the pipeline of candidates to community councils. Views of people not currently engaged in community councils were also sought by seeking contributions through local community newspapers. (annex 6).

In October 2023, a number of surveys were launched, aimed at specific stakeholder groups, to understand the awareness, perception and attitudes

towards community councils.

Stakeholder focus groups

Key themes were identified through the call for evidence surveys, which led to a series of updated areas to explore during in-person and online stakeholder events.

These key themes were awareness and engagement, specifically:

- poor experience / response rate when raising queries with community or town councillors (general public/third sector respondents)
- confusion surrounding awareness of democracy, not understanding government structures and the tiers of local government, including community councils (young people)

And future participation:

- workload of councillors (community council councillors; principal councils; general public; third sector respondents)
- fear of abuse (community council councillors; principal councils; general public respondents)
- lack of interest (community council councillors; principal councils; general public respondents; young people)
- perceived complexity of the elections process (general public)
- conversely, there was interest in voluntary work that community councils may conduct (general public); and interest in community voluntary work (young people)

From March to June 2024, 15 focus groups and one-to-ones were held. Annex 7 contains further information on the approach to these sessions.

Follow-up survey

A follow-up survey was repeated through YouGov, which built on the themes that came out of our call for evidence survey. The second YouGov survey was carried out in May 2024.

Limitations of engagement

It is important to note that the remit of the Task and Finish Group was not to replicate the Independent Review Panel's work on community and town councils which reported in 2018. The Panel's remit was broad and explored the potential role of local government below principal councils, drawing on best practice, defining the most appropriate models and structures to deliver this, and to consider how these models and structures should be applied across Wales.

Chapter 4: findings

A summary of the findings from different aspects of our evidence gathering is shared below.

Literature search

A broad range of literature was reviewed from the last 10 years, based on national and international studies of the most local tier of government, i.e. structures closer to community councils than principal councils. Five key themes were identified:

Theme 1: perception

Several papers highlighted people mistrusted their councils after having, or hearing of, negative experiences, often leading to the belief that councillors were mostly self-serving.

Research based on English parish councils noted that although there was some local awareness of the councils' existence, awareness of what they do was low, particularly for young people.

The demography of councillors was generally noted as older people, 'retired old men' and councils were 'too old' and didn't reflect community diversity. Younger people needed to be involved and make councils more representative and accessible.

Research by the Welsh Government on community councils (Welsh Government Social Research, December 2014), concluded similar findings. Most people knew of the existence of community councils but not their roles or how they differed from principal councils.

Theme 2: conflict

New councillors often felt their values and interests clashed with the older, male and more middle-class councillors. This caused conflict over competing and opposing priorities that challenged the existing hierarchies.

When councils had polarised views, councillors with alternative perspectives were unlikely to find support, creating animosity and hostility.

Research based on English parish councils found that conflict within councils was often linked to the council's own resistance to change. New ideas were felt

to be unwelcome.

Theme 3: structures

An international review compared different local governance systems and their impact on citizens' participation. It found that hyperlocal councils were generally unrepresentative of their local populations, had little authority and no real influence on local governance.

Attention should not just be paid to size and design of structures, but to relationships and how citizens and communities were supported to participate in the system. Decentralising decision-making locally, did not inevitably lead to greater participation.

How central government controlled, empowered or guided local governance (e.g. by policy; regulation) affected how local decisions were made. Formal structures of representative democracy were needed for open, inclusive and transparent processes, but they affected people differently. Some people found the local government rules and regulations a hindrance. They often liked to join community action groups which generally had lower levels of bureaucracy. They also liked to work with other participatory projects or organisations that enabled them to be more flexible with their time.

Council processes used languages and structures that made participation hard for newcomers. Meetings, minutes and notes were often unfamiliar to the wider community.

Theme 4: communication

Issues with communication were a common theme and ran through most of the other themes. Traditional methods of communication, e.g. community

noticeboards and local press notices which are often used by parish councils, were considered inadequate and often not seen by many members of local communities. Communication often felt one-way, with little engagement or feedback sought on any proposals from communities.

Local councils were often viewed as slow, ineffective or obstructive, rather than being open to suggestions for positive change. Councils' responses impacted how they were viewed.

Age and voting restrictions often meant that young people were excluded from decision-making processes, but young people often felt that they were the ones who spent most of the time within the local community. For example, being outside with friends, using facilities like play parks and green spaces.

Elections were viewed as important for enhanced democracy and crucial for (potentially) new councillors and communities to have a conversation. Whilst councils preferred co-opting councillors to avoid the cost of elections (particularly by-elections) and the associated cost, this was not experienced positively by others and seen as undemocratic and an inhibitor to diversity.

The feedback that councils preferred to co-opt rather than cover the cost of holding by-elections was a particular concern for the group. Cost was given as a primary reason, but this will impact on diversity and representativeness. We noted the 2018 Independent Review Panel into community and town councils recommendation that "...elections should be called regardless of whether seats are contested".

Theme 5: engagement and participation

One particularly relevant study looked at English parish councils. **The study** had designed and tested interventions (e.g. letters, briefing paper and training event) to help councils address barriers to participation and engage with the public.

However, the intervention did not significantly impact candidate recruitment or election outcomes, beyond an increase in the use of social media for recruitment. The study suggested that persuasion and information, i.e. facilitative interventions, did not work. Instead, more radical strategies may be necessary.

International reviews showed that when innovative methods were used for citizens to have more say, this did not affect the decision-makers leading to citizens feeling powerless. The result was citizens increasingly lost interest.

In an international review undertaken by the Scottish Government in 2021 (**Systems of local governance and how citizens participate: an international review**) it was proposed that mandatory participation, with binding results, was more likely to advance levels of engagement. The findings, through case studies, illustrated that most participation was discretionary, and that local governance could decide whether to act on the results from its citizens engagement. This was often disempowering, and the review suggested this could lead to citizen disengagement. Engagement was more likely to be advanced if citizens felt that their input had a direct impact on decision-making, with decision makers having to act upon the outcomes of participation. It was also thought that mandatory participation would ensure that citizens systematically influence decisions, and that this may address long-standing inequalities.

Issues were identified between local government participation efforts and actual participation. This included a lack of awareness of the opportunity; perceptions that participation was symbolic; a lack of response from councils; people feeling socially excluded and poor use of participation mechanisms. Proposals included more electronic opportunities; need for 'bottom up' participation and citizen panels.

Different types of civic participation were considered e.g. informal (community groups) and formal (voting, standing for election). Informal participation could help solve a local problem, but there were concerns about accountability and

representation to the whole community.

From consideration of the literature search findings, we invited a wide range of contributors to share their knowledge and experiences around the themes identified.

YouGov Surveys

In December 2022, YouGov ran a survey on behalf of the Welsh Government. This survey was repeated in May 2024 and found similar results where the same questions were repeated.

The surveys asked about public awareness regarding their local community councils; whether respondents had contacted their local community councils in the 12 months prior. The survey also asked whether people were interested in taking part in the work of community councils, including seeking to stand as a councillor. Finally, it sought views on whether people believed they were represented on their council.

The survey found that:

- in 2022, 72% of respondents did not know very much if anything about community and town councils. In 2024, this was 68%
- in 2022, 83% of respondents had not had any contact with their community or town council in the last 12 months. In 2024, this was 84%
- in 2022, 45% of people felt that people like them were not represented on the community and town council. In 2024, this was 54%
- in 2022, of those who said they had a community/town council, 16% of respondents were interested in becoming involved in the work of community or town councils. This question was not repeated in 2024

The most common reasons given for not considering becoming a community

council councillor were lack of interest, lack of time, dissatisfaction with the community council system, feeling they are too old, or lack of awareness of what the sector does.

28% of those surveyed in 2022 (32% in 2024) said they knew a great deal or fair amount about town and community councils. In the 2024 survey this was broken down further.

- More males than females were aware (37% compared to 27%)
- The age group most aware of community councils was the over 65-year-olds (38%). This is compared to 29% of those aged 16 to 24 years old
- Those in the ABC1 social demographic were more aware than those in the C2DE social demographic (38% compared with 26%)
- Those who spoke Welsh were more aware of community councils than those who weren't (40% of those who spoke Welsh were aware, compared with 27% of those who spoke no Welsh).

All figures, unless otherwise stated, are from YouGov Plc. Total sample size was 1,041 adults in 2022 and 1,113 adults in 2024. Fieldwork was undertaken between 1-6 December 2022 and 30 April - 7 May 2024. The survey was carried out online. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all adults in Wales (aged 16+).

Call for evidence

The previous evidence informed the call for evidence surveys, which were segmented by stakeholder, i.e. general public, young people, third sector organisations, community and principal councils.

753 responses were received to the call for evidence surveys from both individuals and groups. In summary, we found:

General public

A common theme throughout the early evidence from members of the public was a low awareness of the existence and role of community councils. They often conflated community councils with the services more commonly provided by principal councils. Involvement with community councils was also limited, and volunteering was more appealing. They noted that volunteering was seen as more flexible in respect of time commitments, often involved more direct action, and is more specific to their interests.

18% of responses to the call for evidence were received from members of the public.

Public engagement with councils was often limited because of negative previous experiences, e.g., emails and queries going unanswered by councillors, or responses taking too long. Residents do not feel they hear from their community or town council.

“ I have considered contacting them about my interest in a local building that I’ve heard they have a role in but am wary having heard that they operate as a ‘closed shop’ that isn’t interested in openness or public engagement. Member of the public ”

“ They have no power to help Member of the public ”

On the question of why members of the public would not want to stand as councillors, there were consistent themes of lack of accessibility, councils often using co-option of preferred candidates, and seeming to have cliques that did not welcome others.

“ The meetings don’t seem to achieve anything. The subject working parties do seem to and they are the work of just 1 or 2 councillors. If every community council in Wales had to set up working groups on each of the key topics for which they are responsible or asked for advice, then it would be worthwhile getting involved. Member of the public ”

“ I am the wrong demographic i.e. retired male who moved from England. The community council needs younger representatives from a diverse background. Member of the public ”

“ Lack of disabled access to council chamber. Member of the public ”

“ The town council appears a clique of individuals with a high turnover of councillors all co-opted. I cannot recall an election in recent years. Member of the public ”

Young people (aged up to 25 years old)

There was a consistent theme throughout the evidence that young people’s awareness of community councils was limited. They often conflated the functions carried out by community councils and principal councils i.e. that community councils delivered services such as education and social services, which are delivered by principal councils.

The key findings were that:

- over 46% of respondents did not understand the purpose and roles of national government, local authorities and community councils
- of those young people that *had* engaged with community councils, this

engagement was mainly focussed on community events, for example, park fun days; bonfire night displays; Christmas lights switch on (81%)

- young people were less likely than other age groups, to contact their community council councillors or attend community council meetings
- 41% of young people said they did not know how to contact their local council or councillors, a few made the comment that 'this is not advertised in the media'
- 57% answered that they would not want to be a youth representative on their local community councils
- 74% answered that they would not want to be a councillor on their community councils
- 62% said that they would be very or fairly interested in becoming involved in their local community council activities, e.g., allotments, playing areas, and working with community councils and local companies on local projects. However, this was mainly as a volunteer, not as a councillor
- the main reasons why young people did not want to become a councillor were no interest, not enough time and they do not know enough about it
- other reasons included the lack of diversity, including age and ethnicity of councillors, and concern with a perceived limited impact that councillors had on key issues

Youth groups, who had taken part in the call for evidence had the same lack of awareness. Comments included that they 'don't feel they'd [community councils] do much/would be interested in us' and that they 'just don't know about them or what they do can't contact someone you don't know exists'. When the groups were asked whether they would be interested in being a youth representative on a council, one respondent commented, 'I was one it was good for me but maybe didn't help other young people much, raised eyebrows and awareness amongst other councillors.'

Other comments included:

“ locally there is lots of bad press about some of the town councillors re: arguments and people resigning all of the time. They don't seem like a positive place to be ”

“ I feel it's a level of democracy that is not needed and think it would be better to encourage people to set up local action groups to achieve change ”

The issue of a lack of demographic diversity also featured, with one respondent saying:

“ Lots of the council members are just old white men ”

Third Sector

A common theme throughout the evidence was the relationship between volunteers and community councils.

- 75% of third sector groups that responded to the survey were aware of community councils.
- Workload was the most important reason given for not wishing to stand as a councillor. Followed jointly by caring responsibilities and lack of remuneration.

“ Experience has shown that I am seen as a troublemaker as I speak up for things which I feel are fair and so usually palmed off by the town clerk so never get to actually engage with an elected representative. Third sector ”

Community and town councils and principal councils

For principal councils, we wanted to understand how much they understood and engaged with community councils, as well as the barriers preventing engagement. A common theme throughout the early evidence was the perception of principal councils that community councils 'do nothing'. The key issues were of barriers that deterred people from standing as councillors and the culture within community councils. Another recurring theme was the working relationship between community councils and principal councils.

In respect of community councillors:

- 30% cited workload as the most significant barrier to standing for election as a community councillor at the next local government elections. This was followed by fear of abuse (20%) and lack of interest (16%)
- lack of remuneration (13%) and caring responsibilities (10%) were also evident as important factors in the decision making of community council councillors on standing for election again
- the main issues for community councils when engaging with principal councils in their area were lack of timely response to enquiries, and principal councils not taking the views of community councils on board

“ It's not worth standing it's a men's club. It's all party politics....party first, people, community, town last. Not listened to as female and independent. Community council ”

For principal councils, the main reasons they weren't interested in standing as a community councillor were workload (40%), fear of abuse (11%), no interest (11%) and incompatible working patterns.

Stakeholder focus groups

The call for evidence survey provided us with insights which formed the basis for deeper discussion with stakeholders through in-person and online focus groups. A summary of the feedback from the stakeholder focus groups for each group follows.

General public

Although aimed at the general public, who are the principal beneficiaries of community councils, most attendees were previously involved in community councils as either a councillor or clerk. Despite several initial responses expressing an interest in being involved in this work, the group found that there was a general low level of engagement from the general public.

In respect of those who weren't previously involved with councils, the key findings mirrored earlier evidence in respect of the conflation of principal and community and town councils, and issues about the contact with community councils. Participants expressed dissatisfaction with responses from, or engagement with, community councils.

“ Councillors had been in office for too long and too set in their ways;
Member of the public ”

“ Many councillors don't seem to understand their roles. They prefer to attend meetings but not engage with residents. Member of the public ”

Most participants were not interested in being more involved with community councils, either as volunteers or as councillors. They cited reasons such as:

council ineffectiveness, hostility, cliques and ‘smugness’ of councillors. Several participants preferred volunteering through other groups that were more proactive, and issues orientated.

There was a mixed response on whether the process of standing as a candidate was complex. It wasn’t clear whether this was perceived or based on actual experience.

Some attendees raised a concern of community councils using co-option to block outsiders from joining the council. Others were put off by the personal costs and time commitment of standing for election. Most believed it was harder to stand for an election as an independent candidate without support from political party officers.

“ there’s a democratic deficit because local people do not see the benefits or evidence of community councils’ work. Member of the public ”

Young people

In these sessions we explored in more detail young peoples’ views on community councils and how community councils could improve the involvement of young people.

In addition to confirming previous findings, we heard there was a general feeling that community councils did not impact the lives of young people in their communities, because the issues that community councils focussed on were neither relevant to them nor involved them.

“ Councillors don’t understand issues that are affecting young people. Young person ”

The things that mattered to young people that they wanted community councils to engage with were:

- improving the quality of life and environment for young people (e.g. reducing anti-social behaviour; improving local high streets; providing cleaner and safer community spaces; better transport links/free transport for under 16s)
- creating more opportunities and activities for young people (e.g. social events; providing spaces and places for teenagers, that don't cost money; biodiversity projects; keeping libraries, hubs and leisure centres open)
- enhancing the engagement and representation of young people in community decision-making (e.g. projects that young people could get involved with)
- promoting the health, wellbeing and inclusion of young people

Young people wanted community councils to listen to, and work with them. They said that community councils needed to be more visible and to promote themselves, to show and explain what they do. They also wanted them to be more accessible, open and welcoming and to make things more engaging.

Young people made the following suggestions:

- have youth representatives or a youth council/youth groups/schools that community councils liaise with to represent young people
- improve communication with residents and use systems to reach young people, that they use (e.g. TikTok; BeReal; Instagram). A lot of young people don't want to use social media for contact
- provide clearer websites, with well signposted projects and easy ways to get in touch (e.g. web chat)
- support youth provision and initiatives and involve young people e.g., help improve transport issues, safety and the environment
- remunerate young people for their involvement

There was a mixed response when young people were asked about their

interest in being part of community council meetings. Those that were interested didn't know how to get involved, who to contact or what the community councils did. For those who were interested, they wanted to help improve their local community and have their voices heard.

“ I would like to have a say in what goes on near me. Young person ”

“ I am interested but I am not sure if where I live has a community council and previous engagement in similar activities has been a negative experience where we felt unwelcome. Young person ”

“ It would be trying to deal with people who aren't willing to listen to other options. They say, “This is how we normally do it, so we won't change it”
Young person ”

“ We aren't allowed to be in them. Young person ”

Third Sector

In these sessions we explored in more detail the third sector's views on community councils and the nature of their involvement with them. It was a surprise to the group that the third sector did not, generally, view community councils as valuable partners in supporting local people.

The key findings from the focus group attendees were that:

- much of their involvement with community councils was based around funding bids, applications and some partnership working
- their experience of working with community councils presented challenges

and frustrations e.g. the poor quality of community councils' applications for funding, lack of evidence of community engagement and collaboration by community councils. There was no clarity over the areas of difference or mutual interest between community councils and third sector organisations. There was certainly no consistency between areas or organisations of these. This meant it was unlikely to lead to successful collaboration

- attendees felt that improving the working relationships between the 2 sectors was the main opportunity that would lead to:
 - better and more collaborative working
 - greater transparency
 - more joined-up support and training
 - improved involvement of the wider community
 - learning from good practices and other models of community-led planning
- attendees highlighted barriers to future working, which included:
 - poor communication and engagement
 - a lack of understanding and awareness of the community councils' roles and benefits of them
 - perceived lack of resources and capacity, not all community councils collaborate to maximise resources
 - resistance to working differently by some community councils in respect of how they engage people, flexibility of meeting and bureaucracy. These differences cause frustrations when exploring how to work together
 - fear of losing control or power. This applied to both community councils and third sector bodies
 - lack of skills and knowledge, by community councils to complete applications for funding bids
 - elections process and the electoral system were off-putting in terms of standing as councillors
 - fear of abuse through social media
 - workload and collaboration issues
 - competition for the same funding

- differences and perceptions that may create divisions or mistrust. This included how community councils and voluntary organisations each saw their roles in the community, with different views on the purpose of each
- Third sector bodies were of the view that for there to be a more productive relationship with the community council sector, there would need to be:
 - a clear statement from One Voice Wales about the purpose of community councils and expectations of working with the third sector
 - more interesting and engaging projects and communications
 - more case studies and examples of joint working (community councils; third sector; unitary authorities)
 - more diversity and representation in community councils and more participatory and deliberative democracy methods (e.g. community forums)
 - involvement and joint development of wellbeing plans
 - greater collaborative working with local communities to create communal spaces that improve individual and community well-being
 - participatory budgeting that involves the local community, when making funding decisions

Community and town councils

These sessions explored views of community council councillors and officers across 4 themes:

- elections and promotion of the sector
- their experiences of abuse
- workloads and time
- whether they felt the role was worthwhile

The contributors told us that the decision on whether to standing for election was influenced by:

- people's lack of understanding and awareness of community councils and of the differences between community and principal councils
- community councils not being visible to their communities and perceived as doing very little for them
- community councils not reaching out to a diverse range of residents in their communities
- young people needed to be incentivised or rewarded to take part
- culture of community councils, which was felt to be outdated and in need of change. How councils traditionally operated led to dull debate and little achievement, and the bureaucratic structures from old legislation. Members questioned whether the legislation was fit for purpose
- remuneration didn't compare to principal councillors
- lack of skills and confidence to become a councillor
- perceived lack of powers
- negativity and toxicity about councils and councillors
- difficulty for independent candidates without party support

Attendees felt the resources that would have the biggest impact were:

- a national media campaign, for example, good news stories from One Voice Wales Awards, promotion of elections and explanations of the Senedd, principal councils and community councils and how they work
- support for independent people with no party affiliation, to engage in democracy
- support and encouragement for ambitious councillors and support for new councillors who wanted to drive forward new initiatives for their communities
- special leave arrangements for employees to help them act as councillors and managing their time
- community councils being valued by local authorities to enable them to represent their communities over concerns/issues

On the issue of abuse, most of the focus group participants had seen abuse of councillors by other council members or the public but had not been targeted

themselves. They noted how the negativity affected councillors and staff, sometimes leading to resignations.

Social media was often the main source of abuse and councils did not have the resources to help councillors manage such abuse. In terms of abuse from other councillors, local resolutions were generally perceived by the focus groups as not being effective. They also felt that abuse between councillors was more likely as many councillors chose not to attend code of conduct training. There were different opinions within the groups on what constituted appropriate debate versus disrespectful language. On occasion, this led to complaints being made to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales (PSOW) instead of seeking to resolve what some viewed as local disagreements. It was also felt by the focus groups that the PSOW did not always have the capacity or powers to intervene in these cases.

However, it should be noted that the role of the PSOW is to investigate potential breaches of the code, and if there is a case to answer, based on the public interest, then it will refer the complaint to the Standards Committee or the Adjudication Panel for Wales.

Representatives shared with us examples of their workloads and how their time was spent. They felt that there had been an increase in the number of meetings, committees and working parties with councils taking on more responsibilities. Much time was spent in council meetings, organising and attending events, implementing projects and writing reports. However, workloads were generally considered by participants as manageable and much depended upon what councillors took on.

We also noted the following comments:

- Not all councillors worked to drive forward projects for communities, and some participants felt those councillors just wanted the status.
- For many councillors, satisfaction in the role came from actively delivering

projects and events for the community rather than council business.

- The areas that put councillors off standing in the future were: limited remuneration; council's lack of efficiency and collaboration; the culture (e.g. bureaucracy); a lack of serious consequence when complaints were made about a believed breach of the code of conduct this leading to a continuation of poor councillor behaviour.
- There were mixed responses to whether the role was worthwhile, some felt they made a positive difference, others were frustrated by the lack of ambition of the council, abuse, bureaucracy and slow progress.

The response rate to focus groups was relatively small. This was despite initial requests from nearly 200 respondents to the call for evidence survey to be involved in the follow-up discussions, only around 30 responded to further invitations.

Throughout the research and evidence sessions, the group noted there was a significant body of people engaging in issues-based activities rather than place-based. Community organisations were seen to be more flexible, more active, and less bureaucratic than community councils. This presents missed opportunities, not just in terms of joint working, but also a pipeline of future community and town councillors with experience in delivering for local people.

The group noted the research into parish councils conducted by Southampton University. In particular, the group noted prior experience of efforts relating to persuasion and information, which had not been successful. They invited Professor Ryan to speak about this research and methods which may prove more effective. He suggested more forcible approaches, for example, compensation, introduction of quotas and enhanced powers, may be necessary to see significant improvements.

Chapter 5: conclusions

The group set out to develop options that would help to improve the awareness and engagement between communities and their community councils, and increase the number, and diversity, of candidates standing for election to community councils.

It is clear that historic issues are continuing. For instance:

- poor awareness across sectors and the public of the purpose of community councils' and what they do for their communities. Particularly so for young people, who were also confused about local and central government
- community councils often seen as irrelevant and not dynamic
- community councils often seen as not reflecting the diversity of their communities
- young people do not feel they have a voice in their community councils, either as youth representatives or as participants in projects and activities happening in their communities
- the views and experiences of the culture within the sector suggest that many councils do not welcome change. We've heard of councils operating as cliques of individuals, making it difficult for newcomers to get involved. This, along with councils' concerns about the costs of elections, leads to a co-option sometimes being seen as a way of saving money and by-elections are discouraged. Moreover, co-option tends to favour people within existing networks which results in a lack of diversity
- councils' ambitions vary across the sector. Some councils were reactive, acting to represent their communities but without taking on other projects. Other councils, that were more proactive, delivered assets and services, and managed projects through different working groups and sub-committees. The projects ranged from organising and attending events to maintaining and renovating buildings
- the way community councils work, meeting formats, minutes and 'boring'

discussions is off-putting, and individuals often preferred to volunteer, without the level of bureaucracy, increased flexibility and with a focus on their areas of interest

- issues around councillor and clerk behaviour within councils. This includes a lack of clarity about when it would be appropriate to use local resolution procedures, perceived delays with the Ombudsman handling complaints and perceived lack of sanctions and abuse of councillors and staff which affected attracting and retaining councillors and council staff. These issues were reputationally damaging
- the number of qualified audits and reports in the public interest issued around poor financial management and governance, which in some cases relate to the skills and capabilities of councillors and staff, and in other cases, more serious issues, such as fraud, are reputationally damaging to the sector

During the evidence gathering process, financial management and governance was seen as variable throughout the sector. The number of qualified audits is stubbornly high. This has an impact on the workload of Audit Wales, who require more time pursuing and investigating audited accounts. Moreover, behavioural and code of conduct issues are also impacting regulators of the ethical framework. Monitoring officers spend significant time addressing issues from community councils. Each of these regulators also act as the regulators for the rest of the local government sector and so these issues place additional pressures on the current system.

There is a disconnect between communities and their councils. The bureaucratic nature of council meetings, with formal and rigid procedures can be intimidating and off-putting to its local community. It can also mean community councils are sometimes slow to react to issues that citizens may have raised, leading to frustration and disengagement.

There have been several many societal changes since the Local Government Act 1972 was introduced, across all spectrums of life, changes to culture,

technology and democracy, including local government reorganisation. Community councils don't consistently use modern digital tools to share documents, hold multi-location meetings or encourage participation. Council meetings themselves can often be held at times that limit the participation of those with family commitments or caring responsibilities.

Chapter 6: options for action

The task and finish group were remitted to provide options for short and long-term actions to improve the democratic health of the sector. The group considered a wide range of potential options. In developing the options that follow, the aim was to ultimately secure confidence in community and town councils across Wales. The group, and communities, want to see effective, skilled, welcoming, open, vibrant and diverse councils delivering for their communities.

Further research

There were specific issues requiring further research which the group felt needed to be explored by those with the relevant expertise. Irrespective of the broader approach for community councils going forward, the group is of the view that the research below will better inform how community governance will be supported in future.

- The community council sector and the WLGA should set up a time-limited project to explore models for providing clerking to provide resilience of governance and assurance. This could be through clerking provided by principal councils and/or internal audits provided through principal councils.
- For existing communities, a review of evidence to inform sizing policies should be carried out by the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru.

This would inform a nationally consistent approach to principal council-led community reviews.

- A review, led by the chairs of standards committees and the Standards Committees Network, working with One Voice Wales, should look at how well the ethical framework and code of conduct process has been implemented.
- Explore with Audit Wales whether it can play a more substantial role and contribute to the development of criteria, aimed at tackling diversity issues and perceived underperformance as a part of strengthening the audit process. If not viable as part of the regular audit, explore as a national study.

The long-term future of the community council sector

There are, realistically, 2 paths to secure healthy, representative community governance in Wales. The first is to restore the democratic health of the community and town council sector as it is currently constituted. The second is to modernise community governance more radically.

We have broken these down further and provide indicative costs and impact appraisals. Further detail is provided in Annex 1.

Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector

This path presumes that if effort is placed into increasing engagement and participation between communities and their councils, then representation will increase, and democratic health will improve. There are also options within this path to improve the governance of councils, thus improving the confidence that communities and towns have in their councils, improving engagement and leading to healthier democracies.

We have categorised these options as they cover a broad range of themes.

Theme 1: enhancing the public perception of community councils

As noted in our conclusions, awareness of the work of community councils is clearly low. Options to raise awareness across communities, with and without councils, are summarised below:

- training and resources to support community councillors to reach out to schools, youth groups and communities to build links and find opportunities to deliver together
- co-develop (with teachers) curriculum resources to support learners to understand the local government structure and purposes e.g. The Democracy Box. Engage with colleges and universities to engage and involve students in local democracy
- provide resources to support communities without councils to understand the benefits of councils and encourage the creation of new councils
- share good practice across community councils and communities to raise a positive profile of community councils and inspire positive local activities

Overall, we assess these activities to cost of the order of up to £75,000 and be of low/medium impact over the long term.

Theme 2: inclusion and diversity

We do not have accurate demographic information of community councillors in Wales. This is a weakness. However, the perception from evidence is that councils are not engaged with, or appealing to, people from diverse backgrounds. Steps are needed to provide active pathways and support for people with different experiences, for instance people with protected characteristics or from a range of socio-economic groups.

Options to increase the potential diversity of future engagements and councillors include:

- create a reliable process for collecting and sharing data on the demography of communities and community councils, including breakdowns by under-represented groups
- develop non-statutory guidance to encourage and incentivise community councils to reserve additional seats for representative groups and co-opt appropriately
- balance representation through co-option, reporting through annual reports every 2 years
- explore having additional reserved seats for young people and other under-represented groups on community councils. The impact of this would be reported in community council annual reports
- explore the remuneration of community councillors and non-councillor attendance allowances for under-represented groups, through a review conducted by the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru
- supporting different ways of encouraging under-represented groups, such as engaging with ElectHer, WEN Wales and similar organisations, through other work strands in Welsh Government that are focused on democratic engagement. This includes Diversity in Democracy and Access to the Elected Office fund
- explore special leave arrangements for employees to help them act as councillors and managing their time

Overall, we assess these activities to cost of the order of £30,000 and be of low/medium impact. These costs do not include any future outcomes from exploring remuneration, reserved seats and non-councillor attendance allowances.

Theme 3: skills

We concluded that councillors should be continued to be supported to increase

their skills to expand the potential of individual councils. Moreover, as governance of councils is variable, the group proposes options to provide more consistent support for good governance and that steps are taken in the event of repeated failure.

Options include:

- supporting the aspirations of councillors through training and mentoring/shadowing opportunities, e.g. learning from other impactful councils and other tiers of government
- community councils become more attractive propositions when they are seen to be well-run. The sector and the WLGA should explore models for providing clerking which provide resilience of governance and assurance. This could be through clerking provided by principal councils and/or internal audits provided through principal councils
- the Welsh Government may wish to consider a proportionate approach to address concerns of repeated governance failure within community councils. This would need to be developed with the involvement of communities, community councils and principal councils as the people primarily affected by such change

Overall, we assess these activities to cost of the order of £35,000 and be of low/medium impact. These costs do not include any future outcomes from exploring different clerking models and Welsh Government intervention processes.

Theme 4: pathways for future councillors

Community councils, like other tiers of government are, generally, expected to cover the cost of their own elections. This is the price that society pays to ensure the views of its people are represented in government. The group felt this was a reasonable price for securing democracy.

The group debated whether principal councils or the Welsh Government should cover the cost of elections but, on balance, felt it unfair to expect other governments to cover costs for the community council sector. However, it agreed that there was a need for greater clarity, transparency and standardisation on the cost of elections.

Options to increase the potential pool of future councillors include:

- The Electoral Management Board should work with principal councils and other stakeholders to develop a framework for clarity, transparency and standardisation of community council election costs, with a view to securing consistency.
- Community councils should consider establishing a ringfenced reserve, through a small increase in precepts, to enable elections to be held. Cost should not be a disincentive to holding elections and community councils, as local community leaders, should be encouraging their communities to exercise their democratic voice.
- Community councils often have sub-committees and working groups to deliver specific activities, and these would benefit from non-councillor representatives. National promotion of these opportunities (for councils and communities) should be increased - particularly in the year prior to elections.
- Co-option should be disincentivised as a long-term option. Councillors should not be able to be co-opted across 2 electoral terms i.e. If a councillor is co-opted for a full or part term, they may not be co-opted at all in the next ordinary electoral term (in any community council, even where a casual vacancy occurs), but may stand for election.
- As part of the remuneration review under Theme 2, the group suggests it considers the contribution of community councillors to their community.
- The development of the Welsh Government's Communities Policy should explicitly address how community organisations can work with community and town councils. Joint working provides an obvious synergy and the body of capable, skilled leaders and doers in community organisations provides an obvious pipeline for future community councillors.

- The new Electoral Management Board should be encouraged to support information and advice for candidates through its new voter information platform for 2026 elections. With a requirement for community councils and principal councils to help promote the platform, and for OVW to be included in the development of a future democracy portal.

Overall, we assess these activities to cost approximately of £500,000 to £1 million shared across all communities with a community council in Wales. We believe these options, delivered successfully, would be of medium impact.

Theme 5: cultural change

We were concerned at the number of stories of poor behaviour within councils, of which, only a fraction made it as far as formal complaints to the principal council standards committees or Ombudsman. We noted that the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 introduced additional requirements in this space but did not receive evidence of systemic activity or impact.

On a broader point, the purpose of community and town councils was raised regularly. Some of the group felt that community councils were effectively 2 sectors:

- The first were community councils that acted as the community voice and delivered a small number of activities but represented and supported people at the hyperlocal level. These were generally small councils with small precept income.
- The second were councils with the capacity and income to deliver more for their communities.

The group noted the work of Professor Matt Ryan of the University of Southampton which noted the apparent optimal range of size of parish councils (as well as his [own Working Paper into improving democratic health of](#)

parish councils).

The group, therefore, suggests these options to address the core cultural challenges for existing community and town councils:

- Explore with Audit Wales whether it can play a more substantial role and contribute to the development of criteria, aimed at tackling diversity issues and perceived underperformance as a part of strengthening the audit process, whether as part of regular audits or a national study.
- As part of this review, the WLGA and One Voice Wales should agree a consistent definition of the purpose(s) of community councils and their relationship with principal councils. This provides clarity for all partners, including communities and community organisations.

Overall, we assess the cost of these activities to be staff time and be of medium impact.

Path 2: modernise

We initially approached this review with the presumption that democratic health was best served by the existing local government model. Over the course of this exercise, some members challenged that presumption.

Noting the constitutional changes in Wales since 1972, and the **broader challenges to election turnout and democratic engagement and literacy**, questions were asked of whether we were able to do things differently. This might include exploring different structures as well as different types of democracy. It would also be a more fundamental review of purpose, starting from first principles, rather than seeking to clarify existing purposes.

This group was not specifically tasked with identifying other models, and did not feel they were qualified to do so. Nonetheless, the majority of members felt such

a fundamental question needed to be asked. There was a significant body of evidence that the current system is not incentivised to change and that the current powers and duties are not having the desired effect. Indeed, it could be said that the current model was not designed to meet the current demands on the most local tier of government.

There is only 1 option suggested for this path. This path presumes that the current model of community governance might be outmoded. A specific Ministerial group should be tasked with exploring this. The remit should be tested and refined with One Voice Wales, the WLGA, WCVA, the Chair of this group should be independent.

The group concluded the remit should include:

- purpose of community governance structures, drawing on international practice and application to Welsh context
- relationship of these to the broader discussions with ongoing work following the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales
- the functions, powers and duties of such structures
- relationship to principal councils and third sector (including voluntary and community groups) e.g. clear understanding of who does what
- relationship between the residents and community governance structures
- resourcing (finance and staff) of these structures
- different models that enable residents to be involved in community decisions, with a clear process for reflecting the diversity of their communities
- clear understanding of success criteria and failure criteria (as well as a process for intervening upon meeting those criteria)
- securing consistency with the Well-being of Future Generations Act and the development of an updated Communities Policy

Overall, we assess these activities to cost the order of £90,000 to support the work of a new Ministerial group to undertake the review and be of medium impact. If managed in an engaged and cross-party way, we believe, it would

take of the order of 10 years to secure change.

Annex 1: summary of options estimated impact and costs

Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector (Theme 1)

Theme 1: enhancing public perception of community councils	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
Training and resources to support community councillors to reach out to schools, youth groups and communities to build links and find opportunities to deliver together.	High	£15,000
Co-develop (with teachers) curriculum resources to support learners to understand the local government structure and purposes. Engage with colleges and universities to engage and involve students in local democracy	Low	£20,000 to £55,000
Provide resources to support communities without councils to understand the benefits of councils and encourage the creation of new councils	Low	Ad hoc. Negotiated within OVW grant award as required
Share good practice across community councils and communities to raise a positive profile of community councils and inspire positive local activities	Low	Less than £5,000

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Theme 1: enhancing public perception of community councils	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
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Total cost for Theme 1		£40,000 to £75,000
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Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector (Theme 2)

Theme 2: inclusion and diversity	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
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Create a reliable process for collecting and sharing data on the demography of communities and community councils, including breakdowns by under-represented groups	Medium	Less than £5,000
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Develop non-statutory guidance to encourage and incentivise community councils to reserve additional seats for representative groups and co-opt appropriately	Medium	Less than £5,000
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Balance representation through co-option, reporting through annual reports every 2 years	Low	not available
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Explore having additional reserved seats for young people and other under-represented groups on community councils. The impact of this would be reported in community council annual reports	Medium/High	Less than £5,000
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Explore the remuneration of community councillors and non-councillor attendance allowances for under-represented groups, through a review conducted by the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru	High	£15,000
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Theme 2: inclusion and diversity**Estimated impact** **Estimated cost**

Supporting different ways of encouraging under-represented groups, such as engaging with ElectHer, WEN Wales and similar organisations, through other work strands in Welsh Government that are focused on democratic engagement. This includes Diversity in Democracy and Access to the Elected Office fund

Medium

not available

Explore special leave arrangements for employees to help them act as councillors and managing their time

Low

not available

Total cost for Theme 2

£30,000
(excluding
outcomes
from
review)

Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector (Theme 3)

Theme 3: skills**Estimated impact** **Estimated cost**

Supporting the aspirations of councillors through training and mentoring/shadowing opportunities, e.g. learning from other impactful councils and other tiers of government

Medium

Less than
£5,000

The sector and the WLGA should explore models for providing clerking which provide resilience of governance and assurance. This could be through clerking provided by principal councils and/or internal audits provided through principal councils

High

cost of
research
£15,000
Future cost

Theme 3: skills	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
		dependent upon research outcomes
The Welsh Government may wish to consider a proportionate approach to address concerns of repeated governance failure within community councils	High	Research/consultation £15,000. Future cost dependent upon research outcomes
Total cost for Theme 3		£35,000

Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector (Theme 4)

Theme 4: pathways for future councillors	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
The Electoral Management Board should work with principal councils and other stakeholders to develop a framework for clarity, transparency and standardisation of community council election costs, with a view to securing consistency	Medium	not available
Community councils should consider establishing a ringfenced reserve through a small increase in precepts, to	High	£500,000 to £1 million

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Theme 4: pathways for future councillors	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
enable elections to be held. Cost should not be a disincentive to holding elections and community councils, as local community leaders, should be encouraging their communities to exercise their democratic voice		across sector
Community councils often have sub-committees and working groups to deliver specific activities, and these would benefit from non-councillor representatives. National promotion of these opportunities (for councils and communities) should be increased, particularly in the year prior to elections	High	Less than £5,000
Co-option should be disincentivised as a long-term option. Councillors should not be able to be co-opted across 2 electoral terms i.e. If a councillor is co-opted for a full or part term, they may not be co-opted at all in the next ordinary electoral term (in any community council, even where a casual vacancy occurs), but may stand for election	High	Reflected in cost of by-elections
As part of the remuneration review under Theme 2, the group suggests it considers the contribution of community councillors to their community	Medium	not available
The development of the Welsh Government's Communities Policy should explicitly address how community organisations can work with community and town councils. Joint working provides an obvious synergy and the body of capable, skilled leaders and doers in community organisations provides an obvious pipeline for future community councillors	Medium	not available
The new Electoral Management Board should be encouraged to support information and advice for candidates through its	Medium/ High	not available

Theme 4: pathways for future councillors**Estimated
impact****Estimated
cost**

new voter information platform for 2026 elections. With a requirement for community councils and principal councils to help promote the platform, and for OVW to be included in the development of a future democracy portal

Address how community organisations can work with community and town councils (part of community policy)

High

not available, assume included as part of ongoing work to explore community policy

Total cost for Theme 4

approximately £500 thousand to £1 million

Path 1: rebuilding the community council sector (Theme 5)

Theme 5: cultural change**Estimated
impact****Estimated
cost**

Explore with Audit Wales whether it can play a more substantial role and contribute to the development of criteria, aimed at tackling diversity issues and perceived underperformance as a part of strengthening the audit process

High

to be confirmed

Theme 5: cultural change**Estimated impact** **Estimated cost**

As part of this review, the WLGA and One Voice Wales should agree a consistent definition of the purpose(s) of community councils and their relationship with principal councils. This provides clarity for all partners, including communities and community organisations

Medium

not available

Total cost for Theme 5

£25,000

Path 2: modernise

Path 2**Estimated impact****Estimated cost**

The establishment of a Ministerial group specifically tasked with a review of community governance

High

£50,000 to support review. Future cost dependent upon research outcomes

Further research to better inform future community governance

Medium/
High

£40,000

Total cost for Path 2

£90,000 (review costs)

Further research

Research	Estimated impact	Estimated cost
For existing communities a review of evidence to inform sizing policies should be carried out. This would inform a nationally consistent approach to principal council-led community reviews. A body such as the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru would be well placed to conduct such a review	Medium/ High	£20,000
The sector and the WLGA should explore models for providing clerking which provide resilience of governance and assurance. This could be through clerking provided by principal councils and/or internal audits provided through principal councils	High	cost of research £15,000. Future cost dependent upon research outcomes
A review, led by the Chairs of Standards committees and the Standards Committees Network, working with One Voice Wales, should look at how well the ethical framework and code of conduct process has been implemented	Medium	£5,000
Explore with Audit Wales whether it can play a more substantial role and contribute to the development of criteria, aimed at tackling diversity issues and perceived underperformance as a part of strengthening the audit process	High	to be confirmed

Annex 2: elections data

Change in contested community council wards between the 2017 and 2022 ordinary local government elections

Contested wards (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
323	281	-13%

Uncontested wards (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
1,232	1,275	3%

Total wards (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
1,555	1,556	0%

Change in contested community council seats between the 2017 and 2022 ordinary local government elections

Contested seats (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
1,498	1,256	-16%

Uncontested, filled seats (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
5,109	4,857	-5%

Empty seats (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
1,347	1,770	31%

Total seats (Wales)

2017	2022	Change from 2017
7,954	7,883	-1%

Annex 3: timeline

- 1972: Local Government Act enacted, establishing, among other things, community and town councils, replacing the previous system of parish councils
- 1973: the UK joined the European Union
- 1992: the Local Government Finance Act 1992 enabled community councils to raise funds through a precept, a charge made to council tax under section 41 of the Act
- 1994: the Local Government (Wales) Act 1994 amended the provisions in the Local Government Act 1972. This saw changes to the establishment or dissolution of community councils and among other things, the constitution and powers of community councils. This Act also reduced the number of local authorities to 22
- 1997: a devolution referendum was held in Wales and certain functions of the UK Government were transferred to the National Assembly for Wales. The Government of Wales Act 1998 established the National Assembly
- 1999: the National Assembly for Wales is established
- 2000: the Local Government Act 2000 introduced a new standards regime for community councils. Welsh Minister may by order, specify principles that are to govern the conduct of members of community councils and may issue a model code of conduct that members must observe
- 2006: the Government of Wales Act 2006 established a newly constituted National Assembly, with a fully-fledged legislature, and a separate executive initially named the 'Welsh Assembly Government' (which later changed to the 'Welsh Government')
- 2008: the Local Authorities (Model Code of Conduct) (Wales) Order 2008 provides a model code as regards the conduct expected of member of community councils
- 2011: the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 (which amended the Local Government Act 2000) gave community councils the power to do

anything they consider is likely to achieve the promotion or improvement of the economic well-being, social well-being or environmental well-being of their area

- 2014: the Wales Act 2014 extended the Assembly's legislative competence on certain tax matters, and this included local government
- 2015: the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 introduced a duty of sustainability for larger community or town councils in Wales
- 2016: on 23 June 2016 the UK voted to leave the European Union
- 2017: the Wales Act 2017 changed the system for determining the powers of Senedd Cymru from a conferred powers model to a reserved powers model, consistent with the models adopted for Scotland and Northern Ireland
- 2017: in July 2017, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government established the Independent Review Panel
- 2018: in October 2018 the Independent Review Panel on community and town councils in Wales, published its report
- 2020: 31 January 2020 the UK leaves the European Union
- 2021: the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 brought in a new and reformed legislative framework for local government elections, democracy, performance and governance
- 2022: in May 2022 local government elections were held in Wales
- 2024: in January 2024 the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future of Wales published its report

Annex 4: about the sector background on community and town councils

Town councils are created by community councils who resolve to become a town council. The main distinction between a community or town council is its name and the appointment of a mayor or deputy mayor instead of a chair and deputy chair.

Community councillors are elected by people in the local community, and they hold office for a term of 5 years. The chair is elected annually by the council from among the councillors.

Community councils do not deliver statutory services like principal councils (i.e. County or County Borough Councils) but they commonly provide discretionary services and amenities like village halls, playing fields, streeting lighting and footpaths.

Community councils are corporate bodies in their own right and are accountable to local people, with a duty to represent the interests of the different parts of the community equally.

What do community and town councils do?

Community and town councils are elected bodies forming part of local government closest to the people. They were established by the Local Government Act 1972 and serve the smallest areas and are responsible for the most local of matters. Very importantly, these councils can “precept”, raising a sum collected with the council tax each year to improve services and facilities for local people. The precept is funded directly by Council taxpayers living in the community or town.

In Wales they are known as community councils or town councils and are elected local government bodies whose activities are controlled by Acts of the Welsh and UK Parliaments. They each work closely with the principal council for their respective areas as aspects of their work are interlinked.

The sector has a membership body called ‘One Voice Wales’ which acts to lobby Welsh Government and to support its members with training, advice and guidance. It acts to share good practice across the sector and seeks to bring the sector together at a number of conferences held throughout the year.

Main responsibilities of community and town councils

Community and town councils have a number of basic responsibilities in making the lives of local communities more comfortable, many of which are often taken for granted. Essentially these powers fall within the 3 main categories:

- representing the whole electorate within the community
- delivering services to meet local needs
- striving to improve quality of life in the community

Certain larger councils in Wales have a duty of sustainability contained within the Well Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Many Councils have also taken responsibility for a range of devolved services including asset transfers from principal councils.

Individual powers include the provision and maintenance of community transport schemes, traffic calming measures, local youth projects, tourism activities, leisure facilities, car parks, village greens, public lavatories, litter bins, street lighting, street cleaning, burial grounds, allotments, bus shelters, commons, open spaces, footpaths, bridleways and crime reduction measures.

The major package of reforms included electoral reform, a general power of competence for eligible community councils; more consistent and coherent collaboration and joint working; voluntary mergers and increasing public participation in local government.

Councillor demographics

There are just under 8,000 community and town councillors in Wales. The Group did not have demographic information about the sector as a whole. However, from the [Councillor remuneration and citizen engagement: survey of](#)

councillors, conducted in 2022, we know that of 1,100 people that responded:

- 61 per cent were male
- 76 per cent were over 55 years old, and 49 per cent of those, were 65 and older
- 97 per cent were white

This data reflects much of the anecdotal evidence that the Group received from different stakeholders during discussions.

How the sector is funded

The Local Government Finance Act 1992 enables community councils to raise funds through a precept, a charge made to council tax under section 41 of the Act. The current precept raised by the sector as a whole is approximately £50 million. In addition, community councils can also receive funding from other grants and income streams, and also have the power to borrow. These other sources of funding amounted to approximately £17 million for the financial year 2021 to 2022.

Of the 732* community and town councils in Wales:

- 485 are councils that typically have communities of 999 dwellings or less (this includes 322 councils that have less than 500 dwelling)
- 200 are councils that typically have communities of between 1,000 to 4,999 dwellings
- 37 are councils that typically have communities with dwellings of between 5,000 to 9,999
- 10 are councils that typically have communities with dwellings of 10,000 and above

(*Information provided from the One Voice Wales database, based upon the

number of households, as notified by principal councils).

Large councils are typically considered to be those with an income of over £200,000, collected through its precept. Data available for 2022 to 2023 shows that 71 community and town councils raise more than £200,000 in precepts ([community council precepts by community council](#)).

Annex 5: expert contributors

Contributor/Topic

- Local Government Policy Division, Welsh Government/Diversity in democracy
- Cohesive Communities Division, Welsh Government/Communities Policy development
- Jessica Blair, Director & Matthew Mathias and Electoral Reform Society Cymru/‘Our Voices Heard’ young people’s ideas for political education in Wales
- Clerks from the community councils sector/Experiences of clerks from small, medium and larger community and town councils
- Dr Matt Ryan, University of Southampton/Lessons shared from experimenting to encourage contested elections and greater representativeness in English local councils
- Chris Llewellyn, Chief Executive of Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)/WLGA’s contribution to the work of the Task and Finish Group
- Education Directorate, Welsh Government/New curriculum: expectations and limitations
- Frances Duffy, Chair of the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales/ Overview of the panel's role and approach to setting remuneration levels for elected members
- Elections Division, Welsh Government/Overview of the Elections and elected

Bodies (Wales) Bill and the Senedd Reform (Wales) Bill

- Tom Moses, PLANED and Community Wellbeing and Resilience (CWBR) Youth Project/Sharing the experiences from the CWBR Youth Project and community development as a town councillor
- Sheree Ellingworth, Third sector and community wellbeing officer (CVC for Anglesey and Alwyn Rowlands/Reflections on the role of town and community councils in place-shaping work
- Neil Prior, member of Pembrokeshire County Council Cabinet, Chair of Public Services Board and member of community council/Community-led action and citizen involvement in local decision making and the role that community and town councils can play
- Deryck Evans, Technical Manager, Audit Wales/Overview of the financial management and governance of the sector
- Constitution and Justice, Welsh Government/Constitutional Future of Wales Report

Annex 6: articles used in community press, Hwb, stakeholder bulletins and letters to political parties

Community Press

Have you ever thought of becoming a community or town councillor?

Perhaps, you were a councillor, but stood down?

The Welsh Government has created a Democratic Health Task and Finish Group to review the health of community and town councils in Wales.

The group is exploring ways to:

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- improve engagement between communities and their community councils, and
- increase the number and diversity of candidates standing for election to community councils.

Your views and experiences will help the group understand the real issues and propose positive actions. To be involved, please send us your responses to the following 3 questions, by 27 November 2023:

1. Do you want to stand, or have you ever stood, as a community councillor?
2. If you want to stand, do you know how to go about it?
3. If you do not want to stand, your reasons why (telling us which is the most important)

Your responses can be emailed to: DemoHealthGroup@gov.wales or posted to:

Democratic Health Task and Finish Group
Local Government Policy Division
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

Text of letters to political parties

I am writing as the Secretariat, on behalf of the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group for community and town councils.

The Task and Finish Group, established by the Minister for Finance and Local Government, has the key aims of:

- improving awareness and engagement between communities and their

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community councils

- increasing the number, and diversity, of candidates standing for election to community and town councils

The Group recently met and are reviewing evidence as well as beginning to establish how to engage key stakeholders. A particular theme they would like to explore with you relates to pathways into becoming councillors.

To help inform their work, they are interested in understanding your Party's approach to how you attract members. Also, how you promote and support members along a pathway towards becoming local government councillors, particularly at the community and town council level.

I would be grateful if you could please provide a written response on your Party's approach, by 18 August 2023, in advance of the group's next meeting on 22 August 2023.

Hwb and Stakeholder bulletins

Awareness, engagement and representation on community and town councils:
call for evidence

Time to have your say!

Community and town councils are democratically elected and operate at the most local level of democracy. There are over 730 community and town councils in Wales and just under 8,000 councillors. They deliver a range of services on behalf of communities.

In the May 2022 local elections, only 38% of people voted. 85% of community and town council seats were uncontested or unfilled.

In response, the Welsh Government has created a Democratic Health Task and

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Finish Group to review the health of community and town councils in Wales.

The group is exploring ways to:

- improve engagement between communities and their community councils
- increase the number and diversity of candidates standing for election to community councils

Your views and experiences will help the group understand the real issues and propose positive actions. A **survey** has been launched, and we encourage you to take part, to help build stronger and more inclusive communities across Wales.

Please respond.

The survey closes on 27 November 2023.

Annex 7: methodology

Surveys

Themes of the findings became clearer to us from discussions with expert contributors and written evidence (e.g. academic papers through literature search; an initial survey conducted by YouGov). This resulted in online **Calls for Evidence** surveys being issued in collaboration with the Task and Finish Group members, Welsh Government officials and social researchers. The questions were disaggregated for different stakeholders based upon the themes of our earlier evidence gathering.

A **young persons' survey** was developed in collaboration with the Group's young persons' representative. Eighty-seven young people responded.

The surveys ran from 16 October 2023 until 27 November 2023.

Respondents wishing to be involved in follow-up conversations about the survey findings had the option to provide contact details in anticipation of future stakeholder events.

Links were also made with young people on the CWBR (Community Well-being and Resilience) Youth Project, following contact by the project coordinator. Several in-person young people's focus groups were held between November to December 2023. A template was developed to aid group responses, enabling questions to follow the survey format and provide consistency, when the feedback was analysed and considered against individual survey responses.

Distribution methods

Social media content and articles were developed to promote the call for evidence survey. The survey was broadly distributed electronically through networks available via Group members, including One Voice Wales; WCVA and CVCs Cymru Network.

The Society for Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and the WLGA disseminated information via their channels, using a package of social media content and articles.

Articles were also placed in community newspapers to help reach people who may not engage with digital communications and social media services, but who had either an interest in becoming community or town councillors or had previously been councillors but had stood down. There were options to reply via email or through the post.

The following Welsh Government networks, aimed at reaching a broad range of stakeholders were also used:

- education sector channels
- articles on Hwb and in newsletters
- communication to parents through X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook via Education channels
- communication channels into Further and Higher Education to reach colleges and universities
- promotion through the Education consortia network
- Children's Commissioner for Wales
- LGBTQ+, disability rights networks and anti-racist Wales Action Plan networks through the Equalities team. This included social media and articles for bulletins.
- local authority media leads
- community channels

Focus groups

A series of online and face to face focus groups were developed to respond to the themes from the call for evidence survey.

Invitations were issued via One Voice Wales, aimed at reaching youth representatives across community and town councils in Wales. Invitations were also sent directly to respondents to the survey who wished to be engaged in further conversations. Members also used their networks to reach out resulting in focus groups with third sector participants and young people.

The group template initially used to engage with the CWBR Youth Project groups as part of the call for evidence, were tailored for each of the stakeholder focus groups, to ensure consistency when gathering information from each of the focus groups.

Summary of events

Young people

- 5 focus groups at Pembrokeshire College, including during Politics and Activism Week. Members from the CWBR Youth Project were also invited to contribute.
- 1 focus group with Conwy Youth Council
- 1 focus group with National Youth Stakeholder Group and post-16 Education group (delivered through Children in Wales)

Community and town council representatives

- 3 online focus groups

General public

- 3 online focus groups/1-to-1s

Third sector representatives

- 2 online focus groups

Limitations with engagement

The participants that came forward for follow-up conversations as part of online focus groups were those with some interest and awareness in community and

town councils.

The participation from young people was generally limited to groups that self-selected to respond to the call for evidence and subsequent focus groups. Although we were also able to hold a focus group with Conwy Youth Council, several focus groups at Pembrokeshire College and Children in Wales also ran an online survey and focus group. Three focus groups for young people were cancelled due to lack of response. This included a focus group with community councils youth representatives.

We wrote to Wales Youth Parliament to ask representatives to meet us to share their experiences of community and town councils. Unfortunately, no representatives were able to meet with the Group.

No responses were received from any of the political parties. The articles issued in local community newspapers only received 1 reply. Two focus groups for community and town council representatives were cancelled, along with 1 Third Sector group, due to a lack of response. We did not receive any engagement from local businesses.

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