



Be a Local Councillor in 2017
A Guide to Community and Town
Councils and the Role of Community
and Town Councillors

A booklet for anyone wanting to know more about community and town councils and the role of community and town councillors

Published by One Voice Wales



ABOUT ONE VOICE WALES

One Voice Wales is the national representative organisation for Community and Town Councils throughout Wales. The vision subscribed to by One Voice Wales is:

“Working with community and town councils in Wales to shape places communities want to live in”

One Voice Wales aims to support Community and Town Councils in achieving this vision and has adopted the following Mission Statement to guide its work:

“To represent the interests of Community and Town Councils; raise awareness and understanding of this primary tier of government; and work collaboratively with our partners to ensure the sector contributes fully to the goal of developing dynamic and sustainable communities in Wales.”

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Be a Local Councillor 2017



- **Do you care passionately about your local community or town?**
- **Is there something you want to change or improve for residents?**
- **Are you ready to take challenging decisions?**
- **Why not stand for what you care about and become a community or town councillor in your local area?**

This guide is intended to be used as a quick introduction to the basic information that you need to consider when planning to stand for office as a community or town councillor.

Introduction

What are community and town councils?

There are 735 community and town councils in Wales; this number has remained relatively stable since the 1980s. The Local Government Act 1972 reformed and rationalised the



structures of local government in Wales and set in motion the special community reviews which led to the whole of Wales being divided into communities. Community and town councils form the most local level of government: they are corporate bodies and local authorities and cover many rural and urban areas throughout Wales. They cover approximately 94% of the land area and 70% of the population of Wales. They have a powerful voice to represent local people.

Community and town councils are an elected tier of local government. The other tier in Wales consists of Unitary Authorities. Unitary authorities have a legal duty to deliver services such as education, town and country planning, environmental health and social services. Community and town councils have the legal power to take action, but they have fewer duties and freedom to choose what

action to take. They can play a vital part in representing the interests of their communities and influencing other decision makers. Furthermore they can take action to improve the quality of life for local people and their local environment and, in some cases, they can deliver services to meet local needs.

Each council is made up of elected members, or in some cases co-opted members. A typical community council represents around 1500 people but the largest population served by a town council is Barry with over 50,000. The diversity of community and town councils is a strength. Each can make a unique response to the needs of their community with a sensitivity that is more difficult for county and county borough councils to achieve. In Wales there are approximately 8000 community and town councillors, who represent the interests of the communities they serve as a whole. They are recognised as having a role in providing the voice of the citizen in the development and delivery of public services in Wales.

In Wales they are known as community councils or town councils - in England they are called parish or town councils. In both England and Wales they are elected units of local government whose activities are controlled by Acts of UK Parliament or legislation introduced by the National Assembly for Wales.

To find out if there is a community or town council in your area contact **One Voice Wales** – contact details are shown on the inside cover of this guidance booklet.

What do these councils do?

Community and town councils are the part of local government closest to the people. They serve the smallest area 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 facilities and services for local people.



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 three main categories: representing the whole electorate within the community; delivering services to meet local needs; and striving to improve quality of life in the community.

Community or town councils have a range of 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 conveniences,, litter bins, street lighting, street cleaning, burial grounds, allotments, bus shelters, commons, opens spaces, footpaths, bridleways, and crime reduction measures. The Welsh Government encourages community and town councils to deliver more services and play a greater part in their communities.

As examples a community or town council could organise or give financial support for:

- an evening bus taking young people to the nearest town;
- affordable housing to rent;
- pond clearing events;
- redecorating the community centre;
- a teenagers' drop-in club;
- restoring a bandstand;
- equipment for the playgroup;
- transport to hospital.



Projects like these would be a challenge and are not for the fainthearted. Of course, your council could always decide to do very little; but you and your electors might then wonder why the community or town council should exist at all.

Community and town councils can also comment on planning applications - they are statutory consultees (they have to be consulted if they so wish) and can be represented at public inquiries.

The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 introduced the new power of 'well being' reflecting the Welsh government's initiative to revitalise local democracy enabling the sector to do more to improve the local social, economic and environmental situation of an area.

Additionally, the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 introduced new legislation allowing the appointment of up to two individuals to act at any one time as community youth representatives. Several community and town council have established youth councils and youth representatives in their areas.

Benefits of a Community or Town Council

Independent research study carried out by Aberystwyth University in 2003 identified 8 key benefits of community councils:

- **Local Responsiveness:** On average there is one community or town councillor for every 250 residents in those parts of Wales with local-level councils, compared with one county or county borough councillor for every 2,320 residents across Wales. Most members of community and town councils live in the communities they serve and many councillors also engage with local residents through surveys, newsletters and public meetings. As such community and town councils can be more responsive than higher tier authorities to community needs and interests, and to the diversity of interests and needs within a community.
- **Representation of Local Interests:** Community and town councils can act as a vehicle for the representation of local interests to external bodies. Whereas Unitary Authorities have to balance the competing needs and interests of the many communities across their territory, community and town councils have a responsibility for a single community and are able to be uninhibited in advocating the interests of that community.
- **Mobilisation of Community Activity:** Community and town councils exist at a scale that reflects people's patterns of social interaction and their identification with place. They can therefore act to facilitate community activities, organise and sponsor community events and promote community spirit and inclusiveness. Community and town councils play a vital role in supporting local clubs and organisations. Collectively they donate over £1 million in grants to community groups, sports clubs, charities and other voluntary sector organisations each year – funds that are not available in communities without councils.
- **Additionality:** Community and town councils can provide additionality to the services and facilities operated by county and county borough councils. They have the flexibility to enhance service provision in the community, or to provide additional services, facilities or even simple features such as floral displays, that may lie outside the principal councils' budgetary priorities.
- **Accountability:** The authority of community and town councils comes from their electoral mandate. Unlike the officers of non-statutory community associations, community and town councillors are accountable to the local electorate and may be removed at election time. Furthermore, they are accountable to the whole community, not to a paid-up membership, and therefore have an incentive to engage with and represent all sectors of the community, not just those most predisposed to join local societies.
- **Stability and Continuity:** The statutory constitution of community and town councils gives them a relative security of existence. Unlike non-statutory community associations, they are not dependent on recruiting members or securing a continuity of funding from grant-making bodies. This means that community and town councils can plan on a longer-term basis and have more capacity to take on larger-scale projects.
- **Tax-raising Powers:** The ability of community and town councils to precept the council tax is one of their most significant powers. Whilst they may be restricted in accessing funds in other contexts, the ability to precept provides a relative stability of income (again supporting long-term planning) and a means of raising funds from the community for reinvestment in the community for communal benefit.
- **Promotion of Public Service:** Participation as a community or town councillor more substantially engages an individual in public service in local government than participation in a non-statutory community association. Community and town councils can provide a 'training ground' for individuals who may subsequently progress to serve as county or county borough councillors, or to stand for higher political office

So what must a community or town council do?

The law gives community and town councils lots of choice in activities to undertake; but there are very few duties, activities that they must carry out in delivering services to local people. Some examples of duties are that a council must:

- participate in the development and implementation of community plans led by the county or county borough council for the area;
- provide allotments if the council considers that there is demand for them from local residents and it is reasonable to do so;
- comply with its obligations under the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the Data Protection Act 1998;
- comply with general law, for example relating to employment;
- consider the impact of their decisions on reducing crime and disorder in their area;
- have regard to the purpose of conserving biodiversity in carrying out their functions;
- decide whether to adopt a churchyard when it is closed, if asked to do so by the Parochial Church Council (note: this does not apply to a Church In Wales churchyard).

Community and town councils have an obligation to demonstrate that they have identified and managed the risks to public money arising from their work.

The Welsh Language (Wales) Measure 2011 enshrines in law the official status of the Welsh language in Wales. The Welsh Government has yet to make regulations setting out the Welsh language standards which will apply to community and town councils but it is the intention to do so in due course, following further consultation. Existing Welsh Language Schemes remain in force until the regulations are made.

The community council also has a duty to ensure that all the rules for the administration of the council are followed. The council must:

- appoint a chair of the council;
- appoint officers as appropriate for carrying out its functions;
- appoint a responsible financial officer (RFO) to manage the council's financial affairs; the RFO is often the clerk, especially in smaller councils;
- appoint an independent and competent internal auditor (see below);
- keep records of all decisions related to council business (the minutes);
- hold an Annual Meeting of the Council in May or shortly after the community and town elections.

Who else do councils work with?

They will often work with bigger public services in their area such as Unitary Authorities, Health Boards and the Police and co-operate with them to ensure the effective delivery of services to the local community.

Increasingly community and towns are working with third sector organisations to ensure valued local services are sustained such as public conveniences,



local museums and libraries, cycle and footpaths, green open spaces to name but a few. Community and towns are increasingly getting involved in the maintenance and upkeep of their local areas with support from their local community organisations and local residents. Working in collaboration will be a key feature of community and towns work in the years ahead.

Being a councillor

What is a councillor?



Councillors are elected to represent an individual geographical unit on the council, known as a ward or - mainly in smaller communities - the entire community or town council area. They are generally elected by the public every five years.

What do councillors do?

They have a duty to act properly as a councillor. In particular they have a responsibility to:

- attend community or town council meetings when summoned to do so; the notice to attend a council meeting is, in law, a summons, because you have a duty to attend;
- prepare for meetings by studying the agenda and making sure you are properly informed about issues to be discussed, taking advice where appropriate;
- take part in meetings and form objective judgements based on what is best for the community - and then to abide by majority decisions;
- ensure, with other councillors, that the council is properly managed;
- act on behalf of the whole electorate equally, and not just those who supported your election campaign; similarly take an interest in all issues equally and not just those local issues for which you campaigned; listen, and then represent the views of the community when discussing council business and working with outside bodies;
- maintain proper standards of behaviour as an elected representative of the people.

Councillors have three main components to their work.

1. *Decision making* - Through meetings and attending committees with other elected members, councillors decide which activities to support, where money should be spent, what services should be delivered and what policies should be implemented. In undertaking their role they are bound to observe the provisions of the Councillor's Code of Conduct.

2. *Monitoring* - Councillors make sure that their decisions lead to efficient and effective services by keeping an eye on how well things are working.



3. *Getting involved locally* - As local representatives, councillors have responsibilities towards their constituents and local organisations. These responsibilities and duties often depend on what the councillor wants to achieve and how much time is available, and may include:

- Going to meetings of local organisations such as tenants' associations.
- Going to meetings of bodies affecting the wider community.
- Taking up issues on behalf of members of the public.
- Running a surgery for residents to raise issues.
- Meeting with individual residents in their own homes.

Visiting your council is the best way to find out what happens there. Give the council a call and find out when its next public meeting happens. By law, members of the public are allowed to be present during most council business.

The Welsh Government have published a set of public sector values to guide how public services work. These are:

- working for the long term
- always growing and improving
- working together
- treating everyone with respect
- putting citizens first

Rules and regulations for councillors

All councillors are expected to uphold the highest standards of behaviour. The public needs to feel confident that you are living up to the high standards that they have a right to expect from you.

Councillors are bound by a statutory Code of Conduct which outlines what is expected of them in terms of behaviour and conduct; this code applies to councillors whenever they are acting or appear to be acting as a councillor - in short pretty much all of the time. According to the Code, councillors need to act very clearly in the ways outlined below:

- Act only in the public interest - not in favour of yourself or anyone else
- Be honest and declare any interests you have
- Act with integrity - not be influenced by any people or organisations for their benefit
- Act within the law
- Use the authority's resources lawfully and prudently
- Always take decisions on merit, using all the information and evidence available
- Always show respect to other people no matter who they are and what they believe
- Be as open as possible about your actions and the actions of the council
- Be prepared to be open to the scrutiny of the public for what you do
- Lead others by example and be a positive role model for the council to the public and officers

Breaches of the Code can be referred to the *Public Services Ombudsman for Wales* and sanctions can include formal apologies, training or even suspension or disqualification from office. Councillors are expected to formally agree to the Code when signing their acceptance of office following election. (Source: Code of Conduct, NAFW, 2001)

How much time does it take up?

Quite often councillors say that their duties occupy them for about three to seven hours a week. Obviously there are some councillors who spend more time than this - and some less, but in the main, being a community or town councillor is an enjoyable way of contributing to your community, and helping to make it a better place to live and work.

Many community and town councils provide grant schemes for local organisations which enable valued local services to be delivered in their communities.

Additionally community and towns run local achievement awards schemes recognising the work and actions of local people and clubs and societies.



Am I Qualified?

Yes - most people are. However there are a few rules.

You have to be:

- a British subject, or a citizen of the Commonwealth or the European Union; and
- on the “relevant date” (i.e. the day on which you are nominated or if there is a poll the day of the election) 18 years of age or over;

And additionally:

- on the “relevant day” a local government elector for the council area for which you want to stand; or
- have during the whole of the 12 months preceding that day occupied as owner or tenant any land or other premises in the council area; or
- have during that same period had your principal or only place of work in the council area; or
- during that 12 month period resided in the council area (or within three miles of it)

You cannot stand for election if you

- are subject of a bankruptcy restriction order or interim order.
- have, within five years before the day of the election, been convicted in the United Kingdom of any offence and have had a sentence of imprisonment (whether suspended or not) for a period of over three months without the option of a fine.
- you work for the council you want to become a councillor for (but you can work for other local authorities, including the principal authorities that represent the same area).

But I'm too young...

Some community councils also run youth councils, which are comprised of a number of young people representing their local area. They are granted their own political forum by having a space and a time to meet and discuss matters that affect them. These youth councils are in direct communication with their



community councils so they can also be involved in decision-making. Contact your community council or speak to your school to find out if either is involved in such a scheme and you are interested in getting involved. If there is not a scheme, or a community youth forum, get together with friends and put a proposal to your local community or town council.

I am not a member of a political party and do not want to be

Most community and town councillors are not party political - and many who are tied to one party as a councillor for another sector, do not necessarily stand as a political candidate for their community council

If you wish to stand as a party political candidate, you are also welcome to do so. Contact your party's local office for more information.

Conservative Party	www.welshconservatives.com
Green Party	www.walesgreenparty.org.uk
Labour Party	www.welshlabour.wales
Liberal Democrats	www.welshlibdems.wales
Plaid Cymru	www.plaidcymru.org
UKIP	www.ukipwales.org.uk

How to become a councillor

Community councillors are elected by the public and normally serve five year terms. Following elections, councils appoint a chair, or town mayor in town councils.

The Election Procedure

Ordinary elections of community and town councillors take place on the first Thursday in May normally every five years. Reorganisation of local government may cause alteration of the Election Day and election year in some cases.

The election timetable (see www.electoralcommission.org.uk) **is as follows:**

- Publication of notice of election: Not later than the twenty-fifth day before the day of election.
- Delivery of Nomination papers: Not later than 4.00pm on the nineteenth day before the day of election.
- Publication of list of candidates: Not later than 4.00pm on the eighteenth day before the day of election.
- Delivery of notices of withdrawals of candidature: Not later than 4.00pm on the nineteenth day before the day of election.
- Notice of Poll: Not later than the sixth day before the day of election.
- Polling: Between 07:00 and 22:00 on the day of election.

In calculating the timetable the Bank holidays and weekends are disregarded.

Nomination process

A prospective candidate must arrange delivery by hand to the Returning Officer a valid nomination paper. This form is obtained from the Elections Office. The candidate's surname, forenames, home address and description (if desired) must be entered and his or her number and prefix letter from the current register of electors (depending on the eligibility criteria claimed). The Returning Officer has a copy of this register, and the clerk of the community and town council normally has one.



The nomination paper must also contain similar particulars of a proposer and a seconder. They must be electors for the area for which the candidate seeks election (i.e. the community or town or the ward if it is divided into wards): they must sign it.

What Next?

The returning officer appointed by a unitary authority is the person responsible for the conduct and arrangement for community and town council elections. If you are considering becoming a candidate for election it could be wise to contact the Elections Office to obtain any more detailed information. Also for more information about what life is like as a councillor contact One Voice Wales or alternatively your local community or town council.

There is an election in May 2017

After the May, 2017 Election, if a seat becomes vacant mid-term (or if there are not enough candidates to fill all council seats at election time) the council may be required to hold a by-election. In certain circumstances the council may then co-opt members to the council.

Further Information

If you need any further information please contact your local community or town council. Alternatively you can contact One Voice Wales, the representative body for community and town councils in Wales, on 01269 595400 or email admin@onevoicewales.org.uk

Other sources of information

Welsh Government

www.gov.wales

Welsh Local Government Association

www.wlga.gov.uk

Society of Local Council Clerks

www.slcc.co.uk

Electoral Commission

www.electoralcommission.org.uk

Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

www.ombudsman-wales.org.uk

Elections 2012 Candidates Survey: Summary of Key Findings (Source: Welsh Government Social Research, 2013)

The Welsh Government, with the support of Data Unit Wales, has carried out a survey of local government councillors (Unitary Authority and community and town councillors) and candidates following the May 2012 elections. In relation to local government candidates, the survey is the first of its kind in Wales. The full report is available at:

<http://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/130503-local-government-candidates-survey-en.pdf>

Summary findings are set out below:

Responses

- A total of 3,201 responses were collected from 21 local authorities.
- The response rate of county councillors varied across local authorities from 66 per cent in Flintshire to 12 per cent in Cardiff.

Gender

- 32 per cent of elected councillors were female in comparison to 31 per cent of unelected candidates.
- Among county councillors, 28 per cent were female.

Age

- The majority of elected councillors were over the age of 60 – 57 per cent of county councillors and 61 per cent of community councillors.
- 46 per cent of unelected candidates were of the same age.

Ethnicity

- The majority of elected councillors were White – 99.4 per cent.
- 2.8 per cent of unelected candidates were from an ethnic minority background (Mixed/multiple ethnic groups, Asian/Asian British, Black/African, Other).

Religion

- 83 per cent of the sample of elected councillors said they were Christian in comparison to 70 per cent of unelected candidates.

Sexual Orientation

- 2 per cent of elected councillors identified as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB) in comparison to 5 per cent of unelected candidates.

Disability

- 14 per cent of elected councillors considered themselves to be disabled compared to 15 per cent of unelected candidates.

Prior Experience

- 83 per cent of elected councillors said they had served as a councillor in the past, suggesting that re-election is very common.

Employment Status

- 44 per cent of elected councillors were retired in comparison to 35 per cent of unelected candidates.
- 3 per cent of elected councillors were not in the labour market in comparison to 6 per cent of unelected candidates.
- 43 per cent of elected councillors described their current or most recent employment sector as public, 43 per cent as the private sector, and 5 per cent as the voluntary sector. The remaining 9 per cent described their current or most recent employment sector as 'other'. There was little variation across the sample of unelected candidates.
- A lower proportion of unelected candidates were manual or craft workers.

Education Level

- 52 per cent of the sample of elected councillors held a qualification equivalent to NVQ level 4 and above (i.e. degree or professional qualification) in comparison to 59 per cent of unelected candidates.

Welsh Language

- 25 per cent of elected councillors said their first language was Welsh in comparison to 13 per cent of unelected candidates.
- 16 per cent of county councillors said their first language was Welsh in comparison to 26 per cent of community councillors and 15 per cent of unelected county council candidates.

Note: The results do not include data from Anglesey, whose elections were delayed for a year until May 2013, at which time there will be a separate survey for the county.

Un Llais Cymru



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