

Cwmpas is a development agency working for positive change in Wales. We are a co-operative, and our focus is on building a fairer, greener economy and a more equal society, where people and planet come first.

We are the lead partner in delivering Social Business Wales, the Welsh Government's specialist support service for social enterprises, co-operatives, and employee-owned businesses. We also deliver the Welsh Government's flagship digital inclusion project, Digital Communities Wales, and community-led housing project, Communities Creating Homes.

Our consultancy team works with the Welsh Government, communities, local authorities, housing associations, universities, charities, social enterprises, and businesses in the private sector, among others, helping them to think creatively and act smartly so they can embed the kind of positive values within their operations that bring sound and lasting social and economic benefits to the communities they serve.



The role and value of community and town councils in Wales

At the core of our work is the mission to empower communities to re-balance local economies and build sustainable prosperity that meets the needs of our communities and improves well-being. This requires building community wealth, ensuring power, assets and decision-making are in the hands of local people through locally-owned and anchored businesses, groups and institutions. At their best, community and town councils fit this description and provide a means of governing at a local level.

In practice, the outcomes in Wales are mixed. There are examples of town and community councils as key local institutions engaging local communities at the grassroots level and adding clear value. However, there are also examples of this layer of government with poor democratic engagement and scrutiny, and councils with assets or capacity that are not having their social value impacts maximised.

By their nature, an inconsistency is to be expected. Not every area in Wales has a community or town council, and areas with different political cultures and local institutions, as well as different levels of skills, challenges and assets, will have different capacity. In some contexts, towns and community councils are useful assets and there are several examples of positive steps these institutions can make to add value to their communities, some of which we will outline in this response. In other areas, different institutions may be more appropriate or necessary. It is clear that more could be done to improve the social value that is created by towns and communities councils in Wales and this should form part of an overall mission to empower communities and re-balance local economies.

How community and town councils can use their land/assets/capacity to pro-actively support community wealth building.

Towns and community councils are well-placed to be strategic anchors for a community wealth building approach to local development. In their response to the 2022 Senedd Local Government and

Housing Committee Inquiry into Community Assets, that One Voice Wales noted that the community and town council sector manages approximately £200 million of assets. For example, this could be in relation to supporting community-led housing. Community-led housing (CLH) involves local people coming together, alongside key stakeholders, to develop their own solution to the affordable housing crisis. CLH is an umbrella term which covers approaches such as community land trusts, housing co-operatives, co-housing developments and collective self-build schemes, but no two projects are the same. People with a shared vision come together to decide what kind of homes and communities they want to live in and have an influential voice in the delivery of affordable homes that meets the need of individual communities. CLH can play an essential role alongside councils, developers, and investors to create affordable homes and thriving communities.

Town and community councils can play a vital role in the delivery and growth of community-led housing in Wales. Involvement could range from simply raising awareness of CLH amongst the general public to supporting communities groups at the early stages with consultations, meetings or even seed funding. Town and community councils could provide the land or buildings for CLH projects and support developments during the planning process which helps to grow the supply of affordable homes. Town and community councils could champion and lobby for CLH and encourage local authorities to develop supportive policy environments. Town and community councils can even take a more active role in promoting and developing CLH by establishing their own CLH vehicle to deliver affordable homes, in partnership with local community groups.

Town and community councils across Wales and England are already taking action to deliver affordable CLH. Formed in 2020, Nolton and Roch Community Land Trust (CLT) was borne from the Nolton and Roch Community Council that were concerned about the lack affordable housing for local people in the area. Following a housing needs survey to understand the local need, the council formed a separate Community Benefit Society (Nolton and Roch CLT) to drive a project forward. The CLT has secured a piece of land in the village, and is working with a housing association to deliver nineteen affordable homes for local people.

This example is also relevant across many other sectors that could benefit from greater levels of democratic ownership or community-owned models and solutions. The key question is how social value can be maximised across the level of government. Due to the inconsistency across the sector in terms of skills and capacity, some communities are more likely to see innovation and performance improvements than others. Ensuring that there is high level of engagement and quality of outputs consistently across Wales will require high-quality, pro-active support to be available to all councils. However, this would not serve all communities equally, as not every part of Wales has this level of government. It may be that investment in other community wealth building initiatives are more appropriate.

Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes

There is clear scope for digital technology to improve performance at this level of governance. However, if new technologies and a digital-first approach are adopted, it is essential that it does not exacerbate existing inequalities and ensures that those who are digitally-excluded are not forgotten or isolated. The latest data suggests that 7% of people in Wales are digitally-excluded, but this is significantly higher among certain parts of the population, including older people, people in rural areas, or people with lower educational attainment. If digital tools are adopted, it must not be done in a way that disengages those who cannot get online.

There are several examples of places where digital democracy has been adopted and led to higher levels of engagement. The One Voice Wales Annual Awards includes a “Best use of digital resources” category, demonstrating that there is awareness of the potential of these tools for town and community councils within Wales. Similarly to the response in the previous section, ensuring that town and community councils are adopting best practice consistently across Wales will require high-quality support to be made available to be made available.