

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Your local county voluntary council



VOLUNTARY ACTION
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11. Campaigning and influencing

11.10 Local government information

Voluntary organisations and the 22 unitary local authorities in Wales have a shared interest in the well being of the areas within which they work and in the empowerment of local people to make a positive difference in their communities – communities of place or of interest.

When people talk about local government, they are usually talking about the 22 unitary authorities, but there is also another layer of local politics in many areas of Wales, known as town or community councils. We have a separate information sheet on town and community councils.

Local authorities are expected to provide clear leadership for their communities, to deliver and secure high quality services, and to be open, accessible and accountable. They are expected to work in genuine partnership with the voluntary sector and others to agree common priorities and aims, and how to work together to achieve these.

Voluntary organisations involve people and communities in taking responsibility for finding solutions to their own problems, initiating and managing their own services and facilities, and pressing for better and more appropriate provision from our public bodies. Together, local authorities and voluntary organisations can make a major impact on the quality of life of people and communities in Wales.

What local authorities do

While the history of local government in Wales stretches back at least to the 16th Century, the existing [22 Welsh unitary authorities](#) date from 1996. These are not divided into county and district councils, but exist as one single 'unitary' tier, providing all local government services to local communities.

There are over 1,200 councillors in Wales and elections are held every four years. They spend around £4 billion per year on their services and employ 150,000 people. Approximately 80 per cent of the funding comes via the Welsh Assembly Government, with the remaining 20 per cent made up from the council tax.

Local authorities have two broad roles:

- Community leadership – to lead, influence and support partner organisations to work to common goals to meet the needs and aspirations of their communities
 - Delivering a wide range of personal, community and environmental services for individuals and whole communities
- Councils provide three types of services to their communities:

1. Statutory services (that they must provide), such as social care, housing, education, refuse collection, planning, transport and highways, community safety and fire and rescue services

2. Regulatory services (that they must provide) As the name suggests these are services relating to regulating aspects of the external environment such as environmental health, planning development control, trading standards and licensing

3. Discretionary services (that they may choose to provide), such as tourism, culture and leisure services

Councils provide some services directly, work in partnership with other organisations, and commission others to provide services on their behalf. Third sector organisations are crucial partners in local authority service provision, both in terms of providing access to citizens' voices to inform service design and delivery and as service providers in their own right.

How local authorities are structured

It is important to understand how local authorities are structured, in order to understand how decisions are made and therefore how you can begin to influence the decision making process.

In recent years Councils have modernised their management arrangements. The long-standing committee systems (remember the social services committee and the education committee?) have been replaced with executive governance models loosely based on the cabinet system of government. In the cabinet-style executive (a small group consisting of the council leader and councillors with specific portfolio responsibilities such as social services and education), decisions are made that get voted on by full council. Clearly the dominant political party are likely to get their direction and policy choices endorsed due to voting along party lines.

There are extensive staff structures in every authority headed by a chief executive, who works with other senior officers on day-to-day business and decision-making.

So, the cabinet or board is the power-base of any council and the councillors who are cabinet or board members are obviously high-profile and powerful in terms of local politics. However, backbench councillors are also important in terms of how councils operate. They may sit on the regulatory committees that councils must have, such as licensing and development control. Or they may be involved in the scrutiny function,

whereby cabinet or the board are held to account for their decisions and policies and services are examined with a view to improving them. Scrutiny is an extremely important function within local authorities and something that third sector organisations have an opportunity to engage with. We have a separate information sheet on the scrutiny function.

Engaging with and influencing local government

There are a number of ways to get involved in the work of your local authority and influence what they do:

Know your elected members and officers

Firstly it is well worth knowing who your ward councillors are. These are the democratically elected members who represent your area within the local authority. There will be at least one but some more densely populated wards will have more than one. The easiest ways to find out about your local councillors are to either contact your local council or go to www.writetothem.com.

It is also worth knowing which councillors are in the cabinet or executive. Cabinet members have a specific broad area of responsibility eg. social services, and it is useful to consider who holds which portfolio responsibility and whether their responsibilities impact on your work in any way. Ensure that the relevant elected members know about your organisation - invite them to come to your organisation; go and see them at their local surgery session; send them information or updates on what you are doing in their area (of geography or interest); invite them to your AGM.

Similarly, it is helpful to consider the role of officers. Whilst the elected members make decisions about the direction of travel in each local authority area, it is the officers who advise on and implement these decisions and make operational decisions about services. Be sure to make contact with key local government officers if their remit impacts on your work. The more they know about you, the more they are likely to contact you when matters of interest arise and possibly involve you in policy or service development discussions if they perceive you as experienced and helpful.

Find out what issues are being discussed

You can find out what issues are being discussed by your local councillors by attending meetings and/or looking at the paperwork for those meetings. You can attend most meetings of the council, although usually you will not be able to speak at them.

Every council must publish a 'forward work plan' listing the decisions that will be taken over the coming months. They also publish meeting papers at least five working days in advance, and afterwards they publish the minutes of the meeting, summarising the decisions made. Local authorities may exclude the public from meetings and withhold papers only in limited circumstances (for example where confidential issues are being discussed)

The forward work plan of meetings and published paperwork will be available on [your council's website](#) and you should also be able to go to your council offices to see the relevant paperwork. If you know what is being discussed, you will have the opportunity to influence the discussion through contact with councillors.

Freedom of Information (Fol) requests

Another way of finding out what's happening within your council is to use the Freedom of Information Act which came into force at the beginning of 2005. This provides individuals or organisations with the right to request information being held by a public authority (and this includes local authorities). It allows access to recorded information, such as e mails, meeting minutes, research or reports. You should be able to find something on your own council's website about how to make an Fol request, but in broad terms you have to make the request in writing (it can be an electronic written request) and you should then be told in writing whether the information is held and have the information communicated to you within 20 days of the request.

Sometimes your council will be able to withhold information, if for example the release of information would prejudice national security or commercial interests. Similarly, the Act does not give you a right of access to personal information about yourself (although this information can be requested under the Data Protection Act 1998). Nor does a council have to deal with vexatious or repeated requests for information.

There are also cost limitations to receiving information. A council can refuse a request if it estimates that it will cost more than £450 to fulfil your request. Where the limit is not exceeded, the only costs that can be passed to you are those associated with providing the information, for example photocopying and postage.

You can find more information about Fol requests from your own council's website or from the Information Commissioner's Office website at [www.ico.gov.uk/what we cover/freedom of information.aspx](http://www.ico.gov.uk/what_we_cover/freedom_of_information.aspx)

Compacts

Compacts are strategic statements setting out the relationship between individual local authorities and the voluntary sector. Compacts express their shared interests and recognise their respective roles and differences. There is recognition of the independence of the voluntary sector with a commitment to wide and structured consultation.

Usually, Compacts are drawn up and agreed by Joint Liaison Committees and should cover relationships between all parts of the local authority with all interest groups within the voluntary sector and should demonstrate political commitment at the most senior level in the local authority. Your [County Voluntary Council \(CVC\)](#) will know more about the compact in your area, what it says, and how to influence its implementation locally.

Joint Liaison Committee

The Voluntary Sector Joint Liaison Committee (JLC) or group is usually the prime interface between the voluntary sector and any individual local authority. It is normally made up of elected council members and voluntary sector representatives. It agrees the compact and it is also the key vehicle for ensuring the delivery of the compact and its associated plans. In all cases where a JLC exists, your county voluntary council facilitates the involvement of the voluntary sector. The local authority's involvement is facilitated by different parts of the authority in different work areas such as corporate services and social services. Make sure you contact your [CVC](#) to find out more about the JLC in your area.

Plans and strategies

It is important to know about and understand how to influence the different plans and strategies that your council produces. Plans and strategies should determine how services are provided and how money is allocated within a particular area. If you want to influence what happens in your area, you need to influence what goes into the plans and strategies for your area. The number of plans and strategies within any given area can be bewildering, so we have produced a separate information sheet on this in an attempt to explain the current framework.

Local Service Boards

Local Service Boards (LSBs), are Wales' new model for engaging the whole of the Welsh public service in a new way of working, by integrating services and responding more effectively to citizens' needs. The purpose of establishing Local Service Boards is to enable local public service leadership to be more effective in responding to citizens. Many LSBs operate as 'executives' of the Community Strategy Partnerships, which still remain as the key vision-setting forum for the community.

The aim is to improve local services for citizens by pooling resources and removing bureaucracy or other obstacles. A senior official from the Welsh Assembly Government will work with each local leadership team to help achieve this.

LSBs are not new organisations or institutions, they are the local leadership team. Membership will include key leaders from across public, third and private sectors working as equal partners, taking joint responsibility for connecting the whole network of public services within their area. They will include other key stakeholders in your area such as health, the police and third sector representatives so this is a good opportunity to influence the work of other stakeholders as well as the local authority. Your county voluntary council will know more about local arrangements.

The work of the LSB will be based on the area's community strategy. Each LSB will choose a number of priority projects to work on - usually issues that have proved to be difficult to achieve in the past - issues that require a pooled response and a new way of working. This is where the role of the senior WAG official comes in as this person will help to identify and unlock central barriers to local delivery. Each LSB will produce a

Local Delivery Agreement which is an agreement with WAG on what projects are being worked on and what actions will be taken to progress issues.

Overview and scrutiny function

This is an extremely important function within local government whereby decisions can be challenged and policies and services can be reviewed and improved. We have a separate information sheet on the scrutiny function.

Conclusion

All local authorities are different and will have different ways of doing things locally. The best way for you to find out how to engage with your particular council is to contact your County Voluntary Council. They will have existing links with the local authority and know about local structures and implementation.

Further information

You can find other useful information about local government on the following websites:

- www.walescandidateguide.co.uk This is a basic guide for newly elected councillors or people who are thinking of standing for election. It contains lots of accessible information about how local government works and what local councillors do.
- www.wlga.gov.uk This is the website of the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) which represents the interest of local government and promotes local democracy in Wales.

It contains lots of topic based information on issues that affect local government. It is worth noting that WCVA works closely with WLGA to represent the interest of the third sector to local government.

- www.idea.gov.uk This is the website of the Improvement and Development Agency (IDeA) for local government. IDeA is owned by the Local Government Association, of which WLGA is a constituent part, and their website contains plenty of topic based information and good practice examples.
- www.urbanforum.org.uk In the publications section of this website you will be able to download a copy of a useful booklet called *How your Council Works - a handy guide for community groups*. Some of the information is only relevant for England, but it is still worth having because much of the information is applicable to Wales.

- Wales Council for Voluntary Action
Tel: 0800 2888 329
www.wcva.org.uk

Disclaimer

The information provided in this sheet is intended for guidance only. It is not a substitute for professional advice and we cannot accept any responsibility for loss occasioned as a result of any person acting or refraining from acting upon it.

For further information contact

Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil

Voluntary Action Centre, 89/90 High Street, Merthyr Tydfil, CF47 8UH

Registered Charity: 1060242

Tel: 01685 353900

enquiries@vamt.net

Fax: 01685 353909

www.vamt.net

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Tel: 0800 2888 329
www.wcva.org.uk