

One Voice Wales: Benefits of a Community or Town Council

The independent research study carried out by Aberystwyth University in 2003 concluded that “the benefits of community and town councils outweigh the associated costs and that there is a strong argument for the establishment of community councils in all parts of Wales.” The study 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 councils 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 principal councils 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.