



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru  
Welsh Assembly Government

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## **WRITTEN STATEMENT BY THE WELSH ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT**

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**Title: Update on Community and Town Councils**

**Date: 23 November 2009**

**By: Brian Gibbons, Minister for Social Justice and Local Government**

I recently introduced the proposed legislative competence order for local government before the National Assembly. One of the key purposes is to enable the National Assembly for Wales to legislate to strengthen the role of community and town councils.

This is a notable milestone in Assembly Government policy for the development of community and town councils. Depending on the successful progress of the LCO, the role, functions and scope of activity of community councils could potentially be enhanced and so I feel that this is an opportune time to provide an update to Members on our grassroots tier of local government.

For the sake of brevity, references in this statement to community councils should be taken to mean both community and town councils.

### Aberystwyth study

When the Aberystwyth research study was published in August 2003, the preface to the publication mentioned that community councils have for too long been the silent partners of local government. The study, funded by the Assembly Government was the first comprehensive review of the work of community councils in Wales. The Assembly Government's response in

August 2004, to the recommendations made in the study has since informed our policy approach to the sector.

Aberystwyth University wrote “the most fundamental requirement for any future development of the role of community and town councils, is for more comprehensive training of both clerks and council members.” The Assembly Government recognised the urgency of this recommendation and responded very promptly to prepare a National Training Strategy which continues to be implemented in collaboration with members of the National Training Advisory Group, comprising One Voice Wales, Society of Local Council Clerks, Welsh Local Government Association, National Association of Local Councils and the Universities of Aberystwyth and Gloucester. To date, 94 packs of Working with your Council have been purchased by clerks and some 199 councillors have attended the modular training programme for community councillors.

This year I have agreed to fund bursaries to be administered by One Voice Wales and the Society for Local Council Clerks. These bursaries are designed to encourage smaller councils to participate in training.

### Representational role

The focus and commitment that the Assembly Government and One Voice Wales have given to the sector over the past six years has increased its capability and confidence. Community councils are no longer the “little known about” tier of local government mentioned in the research study. Many of them are now keen to get engaged and represent their communities on Local Service Boards and other partnerships.

The representational role of community councils has recently been strengthened through another piece of legislation. The Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 now places a duty on community councils to participate and assist in the community planning process for their areas. Our commitment to extend the Power of Wellbeing to community councils, which we are pursuing through the local government legislative competence order, will enhance their ability to collaborate with their unitary authorities to promote quality of life in their communities.

### Relationship with unitary authorities

The most important external relationship for most community councils is that with their local county or county borough council. In July 2008, we issued guidance - “A Shared Community” – on relationship building and charters, to all our partners in local government. I am pleased to note that there has been a positive response to the guidance from both unitary authorities and community councils. In September this year I attended a very successful event for the re-launch of the Torfaen charter, one of the first based on the new guidance, and I know that progress is being made throughout Wales. I

believe that the current economic downturn will necessitate high levels of co-operation and pragmatism.

### Community development

A few weeks ago I delivered the keynote address on “Developing your Community” at the One Voice Wales annual conference at Pontrhydfendigaid. It is less than six years since this organisation was formed, so I was very pleased to witness such a professional and well attended conference with over two hundred delegates present.

Many community councils are playing an active role in community development. The Penllyn project in Gwynedd which was presented at the conference is a good example of community engagement in the shaping of local government service delivery.

There is also scope for community councils to be represented on Communities First Partnerships. Due to factors such as the challenging economic climate and increased social migration, we are developing a community cohesion strategy. Community councils are ideally placed to be aware of local issues and help with tension monitoring.

### One Voice Wales

One Voice Wales is now well-established as the national representative body for community and town councils and has been instrumental in re-vitalising the sector. It has raised the profile of community councils as a result of being acknowledged as a valuable partner organisation for government as well as for the voluntary and community sector. The association is regularly invited to represent the interests of community councils by the Assembly Government and local government and a variety of other bodies. As a membership organisation, it offers a wide range of services tailored to the different needs of a very diverse sector. In these difficult economic times, One Voice Wales has an invaluable part to play in supporting community councils to be innovative and resourceful for the benefit of their communities.

I look forward to the continued success of One Voice Wales and to the further development of community councils in their efforts to raise the quality of life for their communities.