# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE** | **Community and Town Council Sector – Update July 2022** |
| **DATE** | **13 July 2022** |
| **BY** | **Rebecca Evans MS, Minister for Finance and Local Government** |

Community and town councils are democratically elected and operate at the most local level of democracy.

The start of a new local government term is, therefore, a good time to reflect on the Welsh Government’s work with, and support for, the community and town council sector. It is also a useful point to reflect on our future shared priorities and ambitions.

Firstly, I would like to recognise the key role community and town councils played in their communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Many councils went above and beyond working actively in their neighbourhoods to support the most vulnerable, particularly during the initial lockdowns. I know that many councils are helping their communities in the current cost of living crisis, through services such as supporting fuel costs and pre-paid meter tokens, subsidised food shops and meals on wheels for the elderly. This is neighbourhood-level support in action. I would like to take this opportunity to record my thanks to all community councils for their work during this challenging time.

Since the last update in March 2021, the Welsh Government has worked closely with sector partners to build the capacity and capability of councils to deliver for their communities. Some highlights include:

* *The Finance & Governance Toolkit for Community and Town Councils*, which was co-developed with One Voice Wales, the Society of Local Council Clerks and with supporting commentary from Audit Wales. This toolkit will support councils to meet their statutory responsibilities, have strong financial management and governance and deliver the best outcomes for their communities.
* Support for council clerks to undertake the sector-specific CiLCA (Certificate in Local Council Administration) qualification, with funding provided to cover the full cost.
* Funding to incentivise and enable councillors to undertake training, with a particular emphasis on financial management and governance, and code of conduct.
* A refresh of the Good Councillor’s Guide following the elections in May 2022, to equip councillors with the information they need to fulfil their duties.
* Work with the Local Government Chief Digital Officer to prepare an assessment of the digital capacity and capability in community and town councils.

We have included a general power of competence for eligible community councils through the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (“the Act”), which provides councils with the flexibility to be innovative in supporting their communities.

The Act also creates new duties to increase the visibility of councils’ work with their communities, such as the duty to publish annual reports and the right for members of the public to participate in council meetings. The new requirements to report on their work will make it easier for communities to understand the role and contribution of their council in their communities. We published statutory guidance on 10 June to support community and town councils to discharge their new powers and duties under the Act. We need to allow time for the steps we have already taken to make a difference.

However, early data from the May 2022 elections suggest there is more work to do to ensure active participation in community and town councils. Turnout at the most recent community council elections was just under 40 per cent – around 5 per cent lower than in 2017. Around 60 per cent of council seats were uncontested and around 15 per cent of seats were left vacant, to be filled through co-option. This is far from satisfactory. Community councils are an opportunity to effect positive community change through our most local level of democracy. For this democracy to be effective, there are two key issues we must work on together. The first is ensuring people have a genuine choice as to who represents and serves them. This is critical to people feeling connected to and wanting to engage with democracy. Secondly, ensuring people feel being part of this level of democracy is a way of effecting change and therefore want to put themselves forward for election.

These are not changes Welsh Government can deliver in isolation. For example, I recently issued a statement on next steps in promoting diversity in local government and see community councils as a key aspect of this work going forward. I intend to work with the sector in the coming months to respond to these challenges. I also welcome thoughts from Members as part of this process.