

11. Campaigning and influencing

11.10 Local government information



Third sector 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.

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 third sector and others to agree on common priorities and aims, and how to work together to achieve these.

Third sector 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 third sector organisations can make a major impact on the quality of life of people and communities in Wales. They have much in common, although they may have different roles to play. A strong relationship between local government and the voluntary sector is the basis for a vibrant local democracy and active,

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

Ways to engage

There are plenty of different ways for third sector groups to engage with their local authority, such as:

- Know your elected members and officers
- Find out what issues are being discussed
- Compacts
- Joint Liaison Committee
- Plans and Strategies
- Community Strategies
- Local Service Boards
- Overview and scrutiny function

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.

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 (also known as the executive board). Cabinet members have a specific broad area of responsibility e.g. 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 make contact with key local government officers if their remit impacts on your work. Whilst the elected members make decisions about the direction of travel in each local authority area, it is the officers who implement these decisions. The more they know about you, the more they are likely to contact you when matters of interest arise.

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.

The forward work plan of meetings and published paperwork will be available on your council’s website. If you know what is being discussed, you will have the opportunity to influence the discussion through contact with councillors.

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 (CVC) 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

Local authorities have plenty of plans and strategies for work in their areas. These have been streamlined through a process called "plan rationalisation" to create a framework of four high level plans that must exist in each area. They are:

- Community Strategies - being the local authority overarching document with 3 prescribed strategies below;

- Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Strategy
- Children and Young People's Plan
- Local Development Plan

There should be opportunities to influence these plans through various partnership mechanisms - your County Voluntary Council (CVC) will know more about this.

Community Strategies

Every local authority must prepare a Community Strategy, for promoting or improving the economic, social and environmental well-being of their area, and contributing to the achievement of sustainable development. Community Strategies must belong to all partners, not just to the local authority. They need to be prepared in partnership with the voluntary sector, other public sector partners, the business sector and fundamentally the public. They must be "owned" by the communities to which they apply.

Some years ago, a Community Strategy Partnership or equivalent strategic partnership was set up in each local authority area to oversee the development and delivery of the Community Strategy. Some of these continue. Where this is the case, it is vital to ensure that the voluntary sector is involved at the earliest stage and that there is adequate representation from the different aspects of the sector. The sector itself should decide which bodies should be on the Community Strategy Partnership, particularly taking account of under represented groups.

In the future it is likely that there will be a legal duty on certain bodies from the public sector to participate in community planning and the community strategy.

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 the private sector, so this is a good opportunity to influence the work of other stakeholders as well as the local authority. Your County Voluntary Council (CVC) will know more about local arrangements.

The work of the LSB will be based on issues within the local community and, from this the Boards will agree, and ensure delivery of, a set of priority joint actions to achieve this. These actions will be expressed as Local Delivery Agreements.

Their role is to ensure concerted and collective leadership across public services, in areas of critical importance for the locality. Their role is not to oversee any individual service, but to ensure an effective whole-system response to the needs of citizens. The work of the Board should be based on the Community Strategy for the area.

For example, where a service is delivered by a range of different organisations, the Board may develop changed patterns of working in their constituent organisations, to ensure the delivery of seamless, citizen-centred services which address the root causes of persistent and fundamental problems.

The Board will ensure that there is effective citizen engagement across sectors, for example by working to develop a consistent strategy for engagement and dialogue with all citizens including children and young people, older people, people with disabilities, people of different cultures and orientations, people who speak Welsh and people who are vulnerable. Third sector organisations are crucial partners to this process.

Overview and scrutiny committees

The Local Government Act 2000 requires authorities to set up at least 1 overview and scrutiny committee. Their purpose is to hold the executive to account and to also support the council in terms of policy development and contribute to the council's community leadership role through scrutiny of local services – both council and non-council services. Overview and scrutiny committees do not have any decision-making powers, but they can make recommendations to full council or the executive.

Most local authorities now have a cabinet-style structure, and the executive in these instances will be the cabinet members.

Members of the executive (cabinet) will not be able to sit on an overview and scrutiny committee. The idea is that decision making can be examined objectively, by elected members not involved in the process.

It is important that the sector has its voice heard in the debates about public service provision and this can be achieved, in part, by engagement with the overview and scrutiny functions of local authorities. However, voluntary sector involvement with local government overview and scrutiny committees varies very much between one area and another. This is not helped by the different interpretation of the overview and scrutiny role and the different structures and processes from one local authority area to another. However, it is clear that robust engagement of the sector will help local

government to harvest the views of service users and local residents on their experiences of public services, what needs to change and how improvement might be achieved.

In some areas, County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) play an important representative role for the sector, sitting on committees and feeding in the sector's voice. In other areas the CVCs take on a co-ordinating role for the sector, supporting individual sector members to sit on committees and represent the voice of the third sector in their area. Third sector representatives can also play a key role as expert witnesses, providing the scrutiny committee with a different, often expert perspective of council policies or services.

What is apparent though, is that the approach to engaging the third sector in overview and scrutiny is enormously variable across Wales. The Voices for Change Cymru project has undertaken a piece of research into how CVCs and the third sector are engaging with overview and scrutiny functions and this has formed the basis of a WCVA evidence response to the Assembly's Health, Wellbeing and Local Government Committee inquiry into overview and scrutiny.

Further information

Voices for Change Cymru is a WCVA project supported by the Big Lottery Fund. There are now more opportunities than ever to make your voice heard and this project provides services to help third sector organisations influence policy and legislation at local and national levels.

Tel: 0800 2888 329

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www.voicesforchangecymru.org.uk

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.

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

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