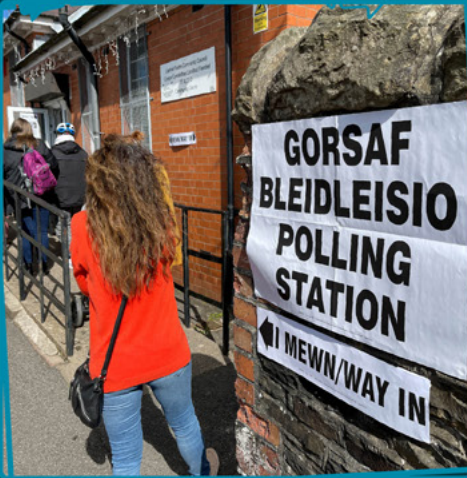


Talking about Community and Town Councils

Report 2024



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



Hello

There are **732** community and town councils in Wales. They are responsible for lots of different local services:



 Community and town councils are all different sizes — from representing small communities up to the largest town council of over 50,000 people.



Each community and town council has elected councillors.

There's an election every 5 years where people vote for the candidate they want to represent them. The last election was in May 2022.

The issues

Only **40%** of people across Wales voted.

Not enough people stood as candidates. Of the **7,883** community and town council seats:



62% were uncontested because there was only one candidate standing.

16% were unfilled because nobody stood for election.

22% were contested (election) because more than one candidate stood for election.

i Candidate — someone who stands for an election.

Talking to people

Voting and having a choice in who represents you is really important. It means your voice can be heard in decisions about your community and life.

The Welsh Government wanted to explore why people aren't getting involved. So they set up a **Democratic Health Task and Finish Group** to talk to people across Wales.



This report tells you what happened and what people said.



About this report

The Democratic Health Task and Finish Group has professionals from different backgrounds, ages, and opinions.

Our aim was to explore:

- why so many people don't get involved or take part
- find ways to improve awareness so people do get involved
- how to increase the diversity of candidates.

i Diversity – having people from a range of different backgrounds and beliefs.

What happened



In Dec 2022 the Welsh Government ran a YouGov survey. This reached **over 1000** people aged 16+ and asked what they know about community and town councils.



Then we:

- studied research
- ran surveys
- held workshops
- met with focus groups and talked to experts
- ran a follow-up YouGov survey in 2024.



We involved and listened to:

- people from all over Wales
- young people
- community organisations
- community and town councils and local authorities.



This report includes:

- ➔ a summary of all the findings
- ➔ the results from the 2022 and 2024 YouGov surveys
- ➔ feedback from people across Wales
- ➔ feedback from young people
- ➔ feedback from organisations
- ➔ feedback from community and town councils
- ➔ feedback from county/county borough councils (often referred to as local authorities)
- ➔ paths to improve involvement in the future.



Summary of findings

The main findings from the research were the same as what people told us across Wales.

Perception – what people think

- People don't know enough about what councils do.
- Others don't have a positive opinion of councils or councillors.
- Community and town councils need to be open to change and have a more positive culture.

Conflict – the culture

- New councillors feel like new ideas aren't welcome and they're not getting the support they need from older councillors.
- There are issues with how complaints are dealt with.
- Community and town councils across Wales aren't run the same way. Some are more open to new ideas and ambitious than others. Some deliver more projects and services.

Structures – how things work

- Systems are confusing and stop people getting involved.
- Systems makes democracy difficult.
- Everything needs to be clear, easy-to-use and open to everyone.
- There are concerns that costs impact elections.
- Community and town councils need to be clear about how they manage their budgets and deal with any serious money issues or fraud.

Communication – raising awareness

- There needs to be more awareness of what community and town councils are and what they do.
- Communicating through community notice boards and local press doesn't raise awareness or reach enough people.
- People don't feel included or able to give feedback.

Engagement – involving people

- Community and town councils need to include everyone and reflect the diversity of their communities.
 - People are more likely to take part if they feel they can make a difference.
 - Young people don't feel welcome or listened to by their community and town councils.
- i Democracy** – people choose their government by voting for it.



The YouGov Surveys

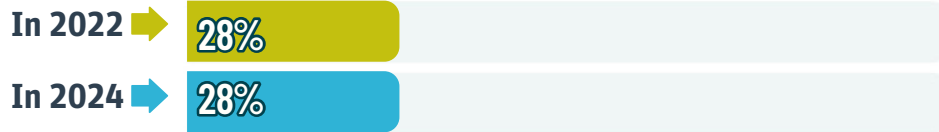
In **Dec 2022** the Welsh Government ran a YouGov survey. This reached **over 1000** people aged 16+ and asked what they know about community and town councils.

In 2024 we ran a follow-up YouGov Survey.

People who did not know very much if anything about community and town councils.



People who knew a great deal or fair amount about town and community councils.



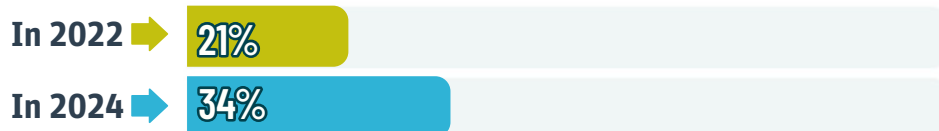
People who had no contact with their community or town council in the last 12 months.



People who were either not very, or not at all interested in becoming involved.



People who 'probably would/definitely would consider' becoming a councillor.



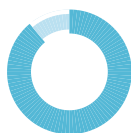
Reasons for not becoming a community council councillor:

- lack of interest
- lack of time
- dissatisfaction with the system
- people felt they are too old
- lack of awareness of what they do.



Feedback from the public

753 responses to the surveys.



79% were aware of community and town councils.

Their relationship with community and town councils.

- Some people didn't know what community and town councils did.
- People mixed up community and town councils with local authorities.
- People preferred volunteering for organisations because it was more flexible and fitted in better with their interests.
- Lots of people said they didn't get responses from their community or town council. Emails or queries weren't answered. If they did answer, it took months.

About becoming a candidate

People said they wouldn't become a candidate because:

- it wasn't easy to be part of
- councils didn't feel welcoming to new people
- they preferred to volunteer in community organisations
- the financial cost
- they didn't have enough time
- they were not part of a political party so would have to stand as an independent which is harder.

What people said:

💬 Councillors have been in office for too long and too set in their ways.

💬 Many councillors don't seem to understand their roles. They prefer to attend meetings but not engage with residents.

💬 There's a democratic deficit because local people do not see the benefits or evidence of community councils' work.

💬 I have considered contacting them about my interest in a local building that I've heard they have a role in but am wary, having heard that they operate as a 'closed shop' that isn't interested in openness or public engagement.

💬 They have no power to help.

💬 The meetings don't seem to achieve anything. The subject working parties do seem to and they are the work of just 1 or 2 councillors. If every community council in Wales had to set up working groups on each of the key topics for which they are responsible or asked for advice, then it would be worthwhile getting involved.

💬 I am the wrong demographic i.e. retired male who moved from England. The community council needs younger representatives from a diverse background.

💬 Lack of disabled access to Council Chamber.

💬 The Town Council appears a clique of individuals with a high turnover of councillors all co-opted. I cannot recall an election in recent years.



Feedback from young people

Their relationship with community and town councils.

- **25%** said they didn't know what community councils did. They confused community and town councils with local authorities.
- **46%** don't know what democracy is.
- **81%** engage with a community and town council for events like fun days, bonfire night and Christmas.
- **41%** said they don't know how to contact their local council or councillors.

Young people said community and town councils need to:

- listen to young people more, and work with them
- be more visible, show what they do and promote themselves
- be more open and welcoming
- make things more fun
- work with youth representatives, youth councils, youth groups and schools
- improve communication and use the systems young people use
- have better websites, that are easy to use
- pay young people if they get involved.

Things that mattered to young people:

- improving the quality of life in their communities
- having more opportunities and activities
- involving them in decisions
- their health and wellbeing.

Young people said:

- 🗨️ Just don't know about them or what they do – can't contact someone you don't know exists.
- 🗨️ Don't feel they do much/be interested in us.
- 🗨️ Locally there's lots of bad press about some of the town councillors re: arguments and people resigning all the time. They don't seem like a positive place to be.
- 🗨️ I feel it's a level of democracy that isn't needed and think it would be better to encourage people to set up local action groups to achieve change.



About being a youth representative or a candidate

57% said they wouldn't want to be a youth representative.

74% said they wouldn't want to be a councillor.

62% said they'd be interested in getting involved in community activities.

They wouldn't be a candidate because:

- they weren't interested
- they didn't have enough time
- they didn't know enough about it
- councils didn't represent them— age and ethnicity.

Young people said:

I was one (a youth representative on the council) – it was good for me but maybe didn't help other young people much, raised eyebrows and awareness amongst other councillors.

Lots of the council members are just old white men.

Councillors don't understand issues affecting young people.

I'd like to have a say in what goes on near me.

I'm interested... but I'm not sure if where I live has a community council and previous engagement in similar activities has been a negative experience where we felt unwelcome.

I'd be trying to deal with people who aren't willing to listen to other options, 'this is how we normally do it, so we won't change it.

We aren't allowed to be in them.



Feedback from the voluntary sector (Charities and organisations)

Their relationship with community and town councils.

75% were aware of community councils.

The voluntary sector had different views on what councils should be doing. They work in partnership with them for funding bids and other applications. Sometimes there were misunderstandings about roles and responsibilities. The voluntary sector would like open communication.


Barriers to future working, include:

- poor communication
- lack of understanding of roles or responsibilities
- lack of resources
- lack of skills and knowledge
- fear of abuse.

About becoming a candidate

People said they wouldn't be a candidate because of:

- their workload
- caring responsibilities
- lack covering costs.

 Experience has shown that I am seen as a troublemaker as I speak up for things which I feel are fair and I'm usually palmed off by the town clerk, so I never get to actually engage with an elected representative.

Feedback from community and town councils, and local authorities

Their relationship with community and town councils.

What stopped involvement included:

- the culture in the council
- workload and working hours
- negative views
- lack of time
- fear of abuse.

About becoming a candidate

30% of councillors said workload would stop them standing at the next local election.


People said they wouldn't be a candidate because of:

- workload
- fear of abuse
- they had 'no interest'
- lack covering costs
- caring responsibilities.



Things that might encourage people to get involved:

- positive media campaigns
- support to stand as an independent candidate
- support for new councillors
- paid leave to be a councillor.

 It's not worth standing, it's a men's club. It's all party politics... party first, people, community, town last. You're not listened to as female and independent.

Paths for the future

We've developed possible paths that could improve things for the future.

Path 1 Rebuilding community councils

This is about increasing engagement and participation with communities. It has 5 themes.

- 1 Improving knowledge and awareness of community councils.**
- 2 Making community councils more inclusive and increasing diversity.**
- 3 Improving skills.**
- 4 Making it easier for people to become future councillors.**
- 5 Changing the culture of councils and improving how they work.**

Further research

Further research is needed to help the future of community councils, whichever of the 2 paths is chosen.

Change would take time, resources and money, but it could:

- improve awareness
- make sure more people take part and improve democracy
- increase the diversity of candidates standing for election.

Thanks for reading this

You can read more here:



gov.wales/democratic-health-community-and-town-councils

Path 2 Modernise

It might be time to change the system and do things differently.

A ministerial group could come up with different models. They would have help from organisations like:

- One Voice Wales
- The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA)
- Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA).

They could:

- look at other countries to see what might work in Wales
- explore functions, powers and duties of different councils
- look at the relationship with local authorities and community and town councils
- look at the resources and budgets available
- look at different election processes.

