



The Effective 'Ward' Councillor

Councillor Workbook



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Welsh Local Government Association - The Voice of Welsh Councils

We are The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA); a politically led cross-party organisation that seeks to give local government a strong voice at a national level. We represent the interests of local government and promote local democracy in Wales.

The 22 councils in Wales are our members and the 3 fire and rescue authorities and 3 national park authorities are associate members.

We believe that the ideas that change people's lives, happen locally.

Communities are at their best when they feel connected to their council through local democracy. By championing, facilitating, and achieving these connections, we can build a vibrant local democracy that allows communities to thrive.

Our ultimate goal is to promote, protect, support and develop democratic local government and the interests of councils in Wales.

We'll achieve our vision by

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce

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Foreword

This workbook has been designed as a development aid for elected members regardless of their experience or responsibilities. Its content is aimed at supporting both existing and newly elected members in their role as council and community representatives.

The term 'Ward Councillor' is used to describe all aspects of the role of the councillor in the community, including that of community representative and community leader. Although the term 'Ward' is technically incorrect as these are now described as Electoral Divisions, we are using the term as it is still widely used and understood by members.

The workbook offers few firm rules for ward members as it recognises that each individual must decide how best to approach the role. This will be influenced by the ward you represent and the methods and approaches that suit you best. The workbook should serve as a direction marker rather than a road map.

Introduction

As you work through the book you will find a number of features designed to help you think about community leadership and the councillor's role. These features are represented by the symbols shown below:



Guidance

This is used to indicate guidance, research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.



Hints and tips

These represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.



Challenges

These are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.



Useful links

These are signposts to sources of further information, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information is set out in the Appendix of the workbook.



Case studies

These are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by councils elsewhere.

The role of the ward councillor

The role of the Ward Councillor is twofold, firstly to represent your ward, acting as the voice for a diverse, complex community, to the council, partners and others and secondly helping local people understand and participate in local decision making and planning service delivery.

It involves building relationships with groups to inform, consult and empower people and facilitate effective community involvement in local government.

It is about actively communicating the work of the council and partners and leading the community and others in developing a vision for the area and identifying the steps needed to achieve it.

“No one has a more important role than the ward councillor in ensuring that local democracy works and that residents believe in it.”

IDeA Councillors Guide 2009

Understanding and dealing with the issues in your community and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action and make a difference is an important role for a councillor. You will be actively involved in local engagement structures and activities and facilitate dialogue between residents, the council and partners, This can be a real challenge, especially if you have just been elected!

Whilst council services have improved significantly in recent years, evidence suggests that improvements are not always keeping pace with new challenges and rising public expectations of services and service providers. Through Public Services Boards, our major public services – health, policing, fire services and local government – are moving away from operating in ‘silos’ and are working together to explore joint efforts at a local level, providing better solutions and services for their area. The ward member’s role is to act as the link between the community, the council and its partners.

The role of the ward councillor

The Strategic Landscape

Local authorities need to cooperate and collaborate with other statutory and non-statutory organisations in order to ensure that:

- their communities, families and individuals receive the best services that can be provided;
- their services are integrated where possible and are 'citizen- centred' – not geared simply to make life easier for the organisation;
- local services achieve maximum efficiency and most effective use of resources.

Public Services Boards

Public Services Boards (PSBs) were established for each local authority area in Wales as part of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act. PSBs membership must include the local authority, local health board, fire and rescue authorities and Natural Resources Wales, and in addition include representatives of Welsh Government, police, Police and Crime Commissioner, probation services and the third sector.

PSBs must work in collaboration to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of its area by working to achieve the National well-being goals. A PSB must publish a Well-being Plan setting out it's objectives, areas of focus and how they will contribute within their local area to achieving the well-being goals.

It is important to note, that while local councils play a crucial role in shaping the well-being plans, the plans themselves are owned collectively by the PSBs membership.

Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs)

RPBs have been established as part of the Social Services and Well Being Act. RPBs bring together health boards, local authorities and the third sector to meet the care and support needs of people in their area, in particular to:

- improve the well-being of the population
- improve how health and care services are delivered.

WLGA Regional Boards

Regional boards consisting of local authority chief executives and leaders have been established in South East Wales, South West Wales, North Wales and Central Wales to encourage collaborative working.

Working with the Voluntary Sector

Voluntary organisations and social enterprises can be effective partners in delivering local services. They can help you to identify local needs and deliver local priorities by helping you link with your communities. They are likely to be involved in community partnerships and will contribute to community strategies. They also provide important local services which

compliment that offered by the Council. These organisations are often funded by trusts or the lottery and also by grants from the Council. As a member you will be involved in making decisions regarding the funding of voluntary and community groups.

The role of the ward councillor

Making a difference in communities

The role of the Councillor in the community can be defined as:

Community Advocate: Bringing neighbourhood/ward issues to Full Council, the Executive and Scrutiny.

Shaping and Improving Services: Improving services to individuals through surgeries, casework, walkabouts, trouble-shooting, community action and working with partners.

Local services that impact on communities are frequent topics of conversation with constituents and typically include:

- Parks and open space
- Street services
- Community Safety
- Schools
- Housing and Community facilities
- Planning
- Local Business
- Youth services
- Neighbourhood regeneration initiatives
- Healthy living

Community Engagement: This goes beyond consultation to include mobilising residents, mediation and brokering relationships, identifying communities of interest, identifying those vulnerable to exclusion, and engaging with transient populations. You can play a leading role (for example through social media) in helping your community engage with local democracy, keeping residents informed of plans and proposals for the area and what you are doing about it.

Community Leadership: Developing with residents and partners a vision for the local area and taking steps to make it happen. Engaging the community in decision making, service planning and delivery and encouraging the community to be part of the solution.

The Political Dimension: Crucial for accountability as you are elected on a local manifesto and bound by party discipline (where applicable). Political group dynamics have a strong influence on how the ward role is conducted.

The task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals is a complex one. Some groups are very hard to involve. Generally speaking, the wider their range of approaches to community contact, the more people councillors will reach.

The role of the ward councillor

Making a difference in communities



What do you think are the key characteristics of a good ward member?

Reflect for a moment on what you feel are the five most important characteristics needed as a ward member?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

An Ipsos MORI* survey in July 2001 identified the following characteristics required as a ward member.

Councillors should be:

- Visible, accessible and accountable.
- Someone who lives locally, understands the local community and stands up for it.
- Someone who is pro-active, listens and who is available to local people. 'They should come out and talk to us, get to know us'
- Someone who acts on local views

The IDeA commissioned research by the Work Psychology Partnership into what makes an effective member. It identified that members are most likely to gain the respect of their constituents if they are honest, accessible, trustworthy and competent.

How much of this is covered by your answers above?

Do you feel these are characteristics you can adopt as you look to become a good member for your local community?

* Ipsos MORI is one of the best known survey organisations in the UK. It carries out research studies in the areas of social and public policy, covering topics such as sport, culture, health, science, education, crime and employment. Ipsos MORI is a completely independent research agency and abides by the Market Research Society code of conduct in every respect.

Understanding your ward

The role of representing a group of several thousand people is complex because of the patterns of change in social and political life in recent decades. Communities have now become increasingly diverse and the economic down turn has affected communities, businesses and families in different ways.

You may have lived in your ward for many years, but the chances are you will not know all of the communities that live there and all of their issues and problems. Over time the dynamics of wards change due to the movement of people in and out of the community.

The Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales may also have reviewed electoral arrangements in your area and made changes to ward boundaries. It is important to familiarise yourself with all the roads and streets that make up your ward.

Summer 2022 will see the staggered release of data collected through the 2021 Census. This information will provide new population and demographic data to help better understand the local communities you represent.

Ward walks

A good way to familiarise yourself with your ward (electoral division) is to walk, cycle or drive around it – even if you have lived in the area for years – looking at roads, pavements, play areas, open spaces and other community facilities. This gives you an opportunity to note and report things like broken fences or equipment, potholes, graffiti and faulty streetlights to the appropriate council department and record action taken – useful as a demonstration of achievement. It can also be a good opportunity to meet informally with your constituents.

Some councillors carry out ward walks accompanied by fellow councillors or key council officers so they can make decisions on the spot. A few quick wins will make a good first impression.

The ward walk could be a regular activity, accompanied on occasion by key local contacts like residents' association chairs, town or community councillors or community police. It's useful to build a shared knowledge of problems in an area and discuss possible solutions.

Understanding your ward



Think about your ward

How would you describe the overall population in the ward you represent?

What percentage of migrant workers live in the area?

What percentage makes up the BME population?

How is worklessness being tackled in your ward?

How is my council addressing issues in housing/affordable housing?

Do I fully understand what the Community Strategy is in this area? How do those priorities affect my ward?

What were the most recent educational results for the schools in my ward?

What mechanisms do I currently use to feedback this to my council?

If you don't know the answers to these questions, do you know where you could find it out? Your Council should have this data available and should be able to provide you with up to date figures.

Understanding your ward



Helpful information

You can find information from the following sources:

InfoBase Cymru. Which gives you easy access to a wide range of statistics and indicators for different areas in Wales. The statistics cover a range of themes including people, the economy, education, health, housing and crime. www.infobasecymru.net

Welsh Government's statistical unit. The range of statistical information compiled by the Welsh Government arranged by theme. Area information is also available.
<https://gov.wales/statistics-and-research>

Office for National Statistics (ONS). This website provides useful data on the ward you represent and how it compares to other wards.
[Local statistics - Office for National Statistics \(ons.gov.uk\)](http://ons.gov.uk)

Representing local voices in communities

The council is required to represent the interests of the whole community. Discovering the needs of different groups in the community is an important part of your role as a ward member.

Occasionally there will be conflicts of interest requiring sensitive judgement, e.g. dog owners, parents of young children and walkers might disagree about the use of a local leisure park. Representing these different views in an open and reasoned way is a crucial part of your role.

In carrying out your representation role you will often need to act as an advocate for individuals and the community. This will require skills in:

listening – actively finding out what people think and want. This can be done by knocking on doors or walking around estates, or by seeking out groups that you do not know well, e.g. mother and toddler groups, BME community groups or youth groups. You may prefer to use organised surgeries to meet people face to face and discuss the issues that keep them awake at night.

questioning – sympathetic questioning to get to the ‘heart of an issue’, to generate thoughts and ideas and to challenge extreme views, uninformed opinions and misleading information.

advocacy – ensuring that local voices are ‘heard’ when issues are debated and decisions are taken. This can often involve speaking up for those people whose views are under- represented, unspoken or frequently ignored, and for those people whose views you may not share.

facilitating – helping individuals and groups to come together to discuss issues affecting the ward, to debate different points of view and to reach consensus on solutions that may meet local needs.

giving information – talking to people and providing information in plain language to enable them to understand local government services and processes, e.g. avoiding the use of council jargon and technical or legalistic language.

Possible tensions and challenges to this are:

- Ward interests versus wider council interests
- Getting things done versus consulting widely
- Strategic needs versus local objections
- Balanced views versus single interest politics
- Asking for views versus avoiding tokenism

Representing local voices in communities



Whose Voice is it Anyway? Community Consultation and Engagement

Imagine the council has asked you to represent the views of your constituents in the following situations. How would you seek views in these situations and who would you speak to?

a) Closing a local day centre which provides improved job and volunteering opportunities for people with a learning disability.

b) Identifying how well local leisure services are meeting the needs of the community.

c) Identifying what support there is for a local skateboard park for young people.

Consider the answers you have given above. How many times have you actually consulted people in this way? How often do you give your thoughts on people's likely views without taking the trouble to canvas their opinions? Are there any groups affected who may be harder to reach?

Shaping local priorities

As a community leader you will need to be proactive in consulting local people and organisations on relevant council decisions prior to their being taken. To do this you need to scrutinise the council's agendas in order to spot issues likely to be of interest to your ward.

The focus of Councils in relation to shaping local priorities and tackling priorities such as childhood obesity, teenage pregnancy, affordable housing, street scene, and crime and disorder reduction is relevant to all councillors.

Keeping in close contact with senior managers of the council should enable you to establish an 'early warning system' to find out about issues that concern the ward but do not make it onto committee agendas. Speaking to other local community leaders may help, e.g. other ward members, community volunteers, key staff in local voluntary and community organisations the local police and schools.

Once you know your ward and what your constituents expect of you, you can then set some priorities and make some judgment as to how far they are compatible or conflict with the council's overall priorities for the area as a whole.

"It's a huge honour to be elected to serve your community and - as schmaltzy and clichéd as it may sound – it's extremely rewarding being able to help people in difficulty. Being a councillor means you're not just helping people on an individual basis, you also have a say at what happens in the city more widely and the policy direction of the local authority, so you're able to have a say on what kind of city or town your residents would like to see in the future."

Cllr Dan De'Ath, Cardiff Council

Shaping local priorities



Objective comparison

Reflect on what you want to achieve for your ward in relation to the councils objectives for the area

Ward Priorities

Council Priorities

How do they compare?

Where are there opportunities for synergy and where the risk of conflict?

Shaping local priorities



**Imagine you are faced with the following emerging issues in your ward
In all these instances what could you do? Who could you contact?**

You have received calls from residents complaining of on going problems with disorder around a suburban convenience store, resulting in vehicle theft and residents feeling disempowered to act for fear of reprisals.

A community group asks for your support in seeking some funding as part of redevelopment and restoration in a multiple deprivation area in your ward.

You have been approached by the youth service to represent and support a project plan for local young people that is designed to promote green spaces, sports and encourage skills development. The plan is in its infancy, the youth service want you to help drive the plan.

Look at the answers you have given and your approach. Do you have all of the contact details for these agencies and groups? If not how can you get hold of this information? Do any of your answers link into the Council's priorities and Community Strategy?

Cohesive Communities

Local authorities' community leadership role, enshrined by the Local Government Act 2000, is fundamental to a councillor's role in building cohesive communities.

Within Wales the Well-being of Future Generations Act sets out seven well-being goals that show the kind of Wales the public sector is tasked to deliver. While all seven goals are inter-related and inter-dependent, two are particularly relevant to community cohesion:

A more equal Wales - A society that enables people to fulfil their potential no matter what their background or circumstances.

A Wales of cohesive communities - Attractive, viable, safe and well -connected communities.

What is Community Cohesion?

The term community cohesion is used to describe how everyone in a geographical area lives alongside each other with mutual understanding and respect. Like most aspects of community life, cohesion is something that people themselves generate but which local authorities and their partners can facilitate.

Councillors can contribute by involving all the different sections of the community and partners recognising valuing and using the diversity of knowledge and skills available in the voluntary and community sectors. You'll need to be prepared to be flexible in order to respond and adapt to circumstance and issues as they arise.

Councillors can also convene local forums that bring together different community interests as a mechanism not only to feed into the council's decision-making process, but also to address conflicts or misunderstandings between different groups within a local community.

The Welsh Government wants to make sure Wales is an inclusive country in which people from all backgrounds are welcomed and there is zero tolerance of xenophobia, racism or bigotry.

To facilitate the delivery of this vision, the Welsh Government has, since 2009, funded a Wales-wide regional Community Cohesion programme

Local authorities work with the police, Welsh Government and third sector equality and inclusion organisations to ensure that cohesion takes root in all communities.

Communicating and influencing

Understanding fully the nature and needs of your ward and making the effort to truly represent local people should provide you with a strong mandate for action, i.e.:

- you can speak with confidence on behalf of your community when issues affecting your ward are debated or decisions need to be taken;
- you can assess whether there is general satisfaction with council services (and those of other partner agencies) in your ward and whether local people believe they are getting best value from the money being spent;
- you can support community action and promote self-help among your constituents by understanding their aims, aspirations, views and tactics;
- you can promote partnership working between public, private and voluntary organisations in response to recognised community needs.

For many people, it is this satisfaction of acting on behalf of their local community that encourages them to become an elected member. But the biggest challenge for ward councillors is often in getting the council or an outside body to take local views into account when making decisions – a challenge that will require you to develop your communication and influencing skills.

In influencing the decision makers you will need to use your skills and judgment, but should always adhere to the following ground rules:

- prepare for meetings by studying the agenda and making sure you are properly informed and fully prepared about the issues to be discussed. Do not 'hijack' a meeting and raise issues that are pertinent to you but irrelevant to the debate;
- play an active part in the debate and form sound conclusions based on what is best for the community – and then abide by any majority decisions;
- ensure, with other members, that the council's deliberations and decision-making procedures are properly managed – be robust in your scrutiny;
- represent the whole electorate and not just those who voted for you; listen, and then represent the views of the community when discussing council business and working with outside bodies;
- maintain proper standards of behaviour as an elected representative of the people (e.g. adhere to your council's Code of Conduct).

Communicating and influencing



Some ideas for consulting with people

- Surveys and questionnaires can be paper based or sent by email.
- Focus groups get a selection of people together to debate a specific issue.
- Road shows can help you take your views out into the community and seek people's opinions.
- Consider using social media such as blogging and social networking. Used effectively these can engage those who would not normally have access to local councillors, and help you inform your community of decisions that affect your area. Guidance is available with regards to the use of social media and you will need to make sure that you comply with the Code of Conduct in your posts and online activity.

Useful guidance: [INSERT LINK TO SOCIAL MEDIA GUIDANCE or EMODULES](#)

Raising your profile

Think about all your council duties in a typical month, e.g. attending Council meetings, casework, attending ward based meetings, working with partners and getting involved in local action etc. The table reveals the public's expectations regarding the work of their councillors:

Which two or three things on this list would you most like your councillor to do?

	What councillors are seen to do	What councillors should do
Dealing with the problems of people who live in their wards	43%	75%
Preparing for and attending committee meetings	35%	11%
Consulting with the public and representing their views	30%	68%
Representing the Council on various outside bodies	23%	7%
Setting the Council's priorities	22%	22%
Reviewing the Council's performance	22%	21%

* Taken from the IDeA (now Local Government Improvement and Development) Website 2009-Raising the profile of elected members.

Working with the media

Another key feature of your communicating and influencing role is the impact that you have in the local media. In a democracy the media is a vital mechanism for ensuring the transparency of local political decision-making and for holding councils and elected members to account.

There is a generally held assumption that local government gets a 'bad press', but evidence suggests that local media, in particular, are willing to present local government in a positive light, if handled in the right way.

Your Council will have protocols governing the issuing of press releases and speaking to the local media – if you are not sure whether your council has such procedures you should check before taking any action.

At the end of the day local press, television and radio journalists want a story to cover. These may often be the main source of information on local government for both interested and disinterested citizens and you will need to use your communication and influencing skills to ensure that a balanced and accurate account is given to the media in the first instance.



Some tips for handling the media

- Don't respond to press calls out of the blue ask for background and the deadline – then respond;
- Identify key messages and good, punchy quotations that can be presented to the media;
- Don't point the finger, complain or consistently say 'no comment' you may get a bad reputation;
- Build a long term relationship with the media, e.g. write features and suggest news stories;
- Don't use jargon, council speak or inflammatory words – these might come back to haunt you;
- Be aware of the sources of local media, and local journalists. Make an effort to follow them on social media so that you are aware of what they are saying about your area and the issues that are being reported to you.

Working with the media



Have I got news for you?

Imagine you have been asked to give a press briefing in the situations below. In each case, identify what your key message (or headline grabber) might be and what you want to achieve from the press communication:

The Council has just received an “Excellence Wales” award for its waste recycling services and you are keen to communicate the significance of this to the wider community. The long term success of the recycling approach will depend on the willing commitment of local people.

Following a high profile campaign by a celebrity TV chef, the council is leading a local initiative to persuade parents to encourage their children to eat healthier meals at school – most schools in the area are now offering a choice of healthy meals, but a significant proportion of children are still opting for unhealthy alternatives.

Look again at your responses to the scenarios above. Have you approached a media campaign in this way before? Do you generally feel you have the knowledge and/or confidence to handle media relations? Do you need to brush up on your communication and influencing skills?

Handling casework

Some members find casework the best part of being a councillor – the opportunity to sort out problems for people who find the council ‘an impossible nightmare’. For other members casework is the impossible nightmare.

Your casework will come from:

letters, telephone calls and e-mails; surgeries, advice sessions and doorstep calls; campaigning and other political activity.

The general steps you will need to consider are:

Identifying what the problem is – establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. Identify whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past. Avoid promising to sort out every problem, but do offer a sympathetic ear at all times.

Referring the problem to the appropriate council department – you may want to put your concern in writing to a council officer, although most members find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or e-mail is quicker and easier in sorting out casework problems. Get in the habit of taking copies of all correspondence.

Providing feedback – after you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.

Considering the wider issues – reflect on the issues raised by the casework and let your co-members know. A number of similar concerns raised with members may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. Where you have had a success, it is worth letting your fellow ward members know in case they face a similar situation. Always try and publicise your success to local residents through leaflets and newsletters – but if you are giving details of the case ask permission from your constituents first.

Handling casework



All in the day job

Consider the following examples of casework.

Write down the steps you would take to resolve the issues presented:

A council tenant complaining about the noise, bad language, music, banging and car repair 'business' being conducted by the new tenants next door.

A neighbour of a wheelchair-using resident complaining that the recently introduced recycling service is not taking into account the needs of such residents who have to rely on neighbours to help them out.

Is this typical of the casework you face? How often do you review your casework performance? How are you balancing casework against the Council's wider priorities?

Next Steps



Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

What key action points can you identify to improve your effectiveness as a ward member, i.e. what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, e.g. further reading/ research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

Appendix - Sources of further information

Printed publications and further reading

LGA Guidance for new Councillors 2019/20

[Guidance for new councillors 2019-20 \(local.gov.uk\)](https://www.local.gov.uk/guidance-for-new-councillors-2019-20)

(Community Leadership – pages 26-62)

Joseph Rowntree Foundation – 2007 report

[Ward councillors and community leadership: a future perspective | JRF](#)

IdEA Skills framework for elected members

[member skills framework \(moderngov.co.uk\)](https://www.moderngov.co.uk/member-skills-framework)

Useful websites

WLGA

www.wlga.gov.uk

One Voice Wales provide an advice and guidance service to member Community and Town Councils in Wales

www.onevoicewales.org.uk/

The website of Data Cymru – helps local authorities and the Welsh Government use data more effectively so that they understand and improve the services they provide to the people of Wales.

[Home - Data Cymru](#)

Info Base Cymru

www.infobasecymru.net

Information on health impact assessment (HIA) in Wales

www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/home.cfm?OrgID=522

Welsh Government statistics

[Statistics and research | GOV.WALES](#)

Website of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which provides ward profiles.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/help/localstatistics>

Audit Wales
www.wao.gov.uk/

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