



# **Evidence paper for Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government for General Scrutiny at Local Government and Housing Committee**

*22/10/25*

Information provided to aid the Committee in advance of the Cabinet Secretary's attendance for General Scrutiny on 5 November.

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# 1. Community Assets

1. In March 2024, the Welsh Government established a [Community Asset Commission](#) in partnership with Ystadau Cymru, following work undertaken by the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee.
2. On 24 September 2024, I issued a Written Statement outlining **progress** on key areas of work. This included details on the commission's structure, its main areas of focus, and the principal stakeholders involved.
3. The primary focus of the commission is buildings, land and natural assets. These include local facilities that bring people together and provide essential resources – assets such as libraries, museums, art centres, green spaces, and leisure centres. We are considering assets in the public, private, and voluntary sectors, as well as those under community ownership. The commission aims to understand the challenges that facilities may face, explore options for their ownership and management, and develop proposals to advance the community asset agenda.
4. While the workshops, interviews, and academic analyses have finished, the Commission's efforts are ongoing. The Task & Finish Group report and its recommendations will be presented to me in November which I will follow with a written statement before Christmas.

## 2. Corporate Joint Committees

### Amendment to Local Government Act 2003

5. Following a public consultation and consideration of the responses, I decided to proceed to amend section 33 of the Local Government Act 2003 Act to include CJs in the list of local authorities under section 31 of that Act. This will enable Welsh Ministers to pay grants directly to CJs. The draft regulations were laid on 16 September, the Senedd debate took place on 14 October, and the Regulations came into force 20 October 2025.

### 2025-26 Funding

6. I am providing £800k (£200,000 per CJC) in 2025-26 to develop CJC capacity and governance arrangements. This is in addition to funding provided by other Welsh Ministers in respect of the development of regional transport plans totalling £800k (£200,000 per CJC) and £400k available to incentivise and accelerate strategic development plans.

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## 3. Diversity in Local Government

### Extending Job-share arrangements

7. Since removing the barriers to job-share arrangements within council executives, several councils have put job-share arrangements in place. We committed to consult on extending these arrangements to non-executive roles. In June, following a consultation, I issued a [statement](#) confirming there was broad support for the extension of the provisions and that I would look to make the necessary regulations and guidance to take this work forward. This work is underway.

### Consultation on extending the duty on local authorities to broadcast meetings

8. Section 46(1) and (2)(a) of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (“the 2021 Act”) places a duty on principal councils (county councils and county borough councils) to put in place arrangements for the broadcasting of full council meetings so that members of the public who are unable to attend in person at the meeting can see and hear proceedings.
9. Alongside increasing public access to debate and decision making this broader access also holds the potential to encourage more people to be interested in the work of councillors and consider standing for office themselves. As currently only full council meetings are required to be broadcast, we are consulting on:
  - whether the duty on a principal council to broadcast meetings should be extended to include meetings other than that of the full council such as scrutiny committees;
  - whether there should be a duty imposed upon Fire and Rescue Authorities and/or National Park Authorities to broadcast their meetings and
  - whether there should be a retention period for recordings of broadcast meetings.
10. The consultation is due to close on 28 November and will inform future work.

### Research into the socio-economic influences on democratic participation

11. On 24 September I published a [statement](#) alongside research into the [socio-economic influences on democratic participation in Wales](#). The aim of the research was to better understand barriers to political engagement and to encourage broader participation in the democratic process. Key barriers identified include:
  - Lack of early education in politics and limited exposure to civic life.
  - Opaque party selection procedures and complex electoral regulations.
  - Limited access to political networks and time constraints for campaigning.
  - Financial insecurity, especially for candidates who lose their seats.
  - Discrimination and hostility particularly affect individuals from minority backgrounds or with protected characteristics.

12. I am now considering how the outcome of this report can inform future work.

### **Review of multi-location meeting guidance for principal councils in Wales**

13. The current guidance for principal councils was issued in the wake of the pandemic. Considering local authorities experience of implementing these arrangements, we are currently working with our partners in local government and the WLGA to revise the guidance to reflect lessons learnt.

14. It is important the guidance reflects the flexibility the arrangements provide for people to attend remotely, while ensuring the integrity of the process is preserved. While we recognise there have been several situations which have resulted in adverse news stories about councillors' behaviour, both inside and outside of council chambers, this remains an important tool to support of diversity. Remote and hybrid meetings provide opportunities for a broader range of people to become involved in democratic arrangements by allowing them to better balance their work and personal commitments. The way councillors conduct themselves at meetings, including the tone they adopt, can make a difference in terms of the wider interest in politics and attitudes to serving as councillors.

### **Abuse in Politics**

15. I know members share my concern about the abuse, intimidation and harassment of councillors. It is important we take steps to improve their safety. The rising abuse poses a real threat to our democratic processes.

16. In March, I hosted a Local Government Democracy event which provided a number of suggestions about ways in which we can improve arrangements. I am continuing to work with partners to explore these suggestions and there will be further online events later this year, to ensure the broadest range of individuals are able to contribute to these discussions. The outcome of this broader conversation will inform a set of key actions. It will also inform the ongoing work of the Jo Cox Foundation with which we continue to work.

17. Given members' continued interest in this matter, I would be happy to host a drop-in session for members once these discussions are concluded to explore the actions proposed.

18. However, the threat is not limited to elected members, it is also a real threat to candidates for election. I recently hosted an Inter-Ministerial Group on Elections which included a focus on security. The Group reflected on learning from recent elections, and what more could be done to ensure the security of democratic processes. We are engaging with the UK Government's Defending Democracy Taskforce and Joint Election Security and Preparedness Unit. Officials are taking part in exercises and planning resilience structures for the election in 2026.

19. The Electoral Management Board, which we recently established in law, has set up an Elections Planning Group, which includes a focus on security of elections. It has invited the Police to meetings to support this. We have legislated to exempt security-related costs from campaign spending limits for Senedd elections. We will introduce the same exemption for local elections from 2027. This is some of

the work being taken forward in this area and I would be happy to consider any suggestions members have to strengthen arrangements.

### **Resettlement payments**

20. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 includes a provision enabling resettlement payments to be made to councillors who choose to stand for re-election but lose their seat. The Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru (the Commission) recently considered this matter and my officials are in discussion with the Commission about framework that will be required to be put in place through regulations.

## 4. Implementation of the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act

21. The Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act has been almost wholly commenced, with the final provisions, relating to Automatic Voter Registration (discussed below) to be commenced in the coming months.

### Electoral Management Board (EMB)

22. The Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru established the EMB, under the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024, and it became operational in 2025.
23. Chaired by Karen Jones, former Chief Executive of Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, the EMB co-ordinates and support the administration of Senedd Cymru elections, local government elections in Wales and devolved referendums. It has established its workplan for the elections in 2026 and 2027 and is working well in providing support and coordination across Wales.

### Elections Information Platform

24. The Welsh Elections Information Platform regulations came into force in March 2025. The regulations set out the information that should be on the platform and confer responsibility on the newly established EMB to be the platform operator.
25. The work of the EMB on the platform is ongoing, and a working group comprising representatives from local authority electoral services teams, the Association of Electoral Administrators and Welsh Government meet regularly to discuss the development and delivery of the platform for May 2026.

### Welsh Government Diversity and Inclusion Guidance

26. The Welsh Government's Diversity and Inclusion Guidance for Registered Political Parties was published on 31 March 2025. The guidance encourages political parties to:
- Publish and review diversity and inclusion strategies for Welsh elections. This includes publishing their first strategy at least six months before the Senedd election in 2026 (Part 1)
  - Voluntarily collect and publish candidate diversity data for Senedd elections (Part 2)
  - Consider how they may increase women's representation in the Senedd (Part 3)
27. Parts 1 and 2 fulfil statutory duties under the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024, while Part 3 is issued under powers in the Government of Wales Act sections 60 and 62.

28. The guidance provides a number of suggested actions, across four broad areas, for parties to take to encourage people from underrepresented groups to put themselves forward for selection. The four areas are: strategic planning; organisational culture; candidate assessment and selection and candidate support.
29. The Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024 specifies the Welsh Ministers must review the guidance from time to time. The Act also allows the Welsh Ministers to revise the published guidance at any time.

### **Pilot Candidate Diversity Grant**

30. Under section 27 of the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024 (EEB Act), Welsh Ministers have a duty to make arrangements for the provision of services to promote diversity in the protected characteristics and socio-economic circumstances of persons seeking elected office in devolved elections. The EEB Act provides that such services may include the provision of information, advice, training, coaching/mentoring, work experience, equipment, and assistance with tasks. This could involve providing individuals with financial support directly, or by providing financial assistance to third parties who provide these services.
31. Welsh Government are piloting a Candidate Diversity Grant which provides funding to organisations who provide services which support candidates from underrepresented groups to stand in devolved elections.
32. The pilot scheme opened on 26 September 2025 and will remain open for applications until 24 October 2025. The scheme is open to third sector organisations working in Wales (or proposing to work in Wales using grant funding) and is aimed at both the 2026 Senedd election and the 2027 local government elections, providing services to current and potential candidates.

### **Financial Assistance Scheme**

33. The regulations introducing the Welsh Elections Financial Assistance Scheme Regulations came into force in July 2025. The scheme aims to remove barriers and promote equal opportunity for disabled people.
34. Key features of the scheme include:
- Independent Administration: The scheme will be operated by Disability Wales, ensuring impartiality and confidentiality.
  - Social Model of Disability: This approach will guide the type of support offered, focusing on removing barriers rather than defining limitations.
  - Comprehensive Support: From identifying needs to funding approved adjustments, the scheme will assist candidates throughout the election period—from nomination to the announcement of results.
35. The scheme, known as the Access to Elected Office Fund, opened for applications in September 2025 and includes:

- Help identifying necessary support.
- Assistance with completing applications.
- Fair assessment of requests to ensure equity.
- Provision of approved funding or services.

### **Reports by the Electoral Commission on Accessibility of Elections**

36. The Act requires the Electoral Commission to set out the steps returning officers have taken to assist disabled voters at both Senedd and Welsh local elections, which will run in parallel with requirements placed on Returning Officers to provide equipment at polling stations in secondary legislation.

### **Automatic Voter Registration**

37. Regulations to undertake pilots on Automatic Registration were passed by the Senedd in January 2025, and an Automatic Registration Pilots Working Group has been co-designing and overseeing the delivery of the pilots. The Working Group includes the four pilot authorities, Carmarthenshire, Gwynedd, Newport and Powys and the Welsh Government with support from the Association of Electoral Administrators and the Electoral Commission.

38. The four local authorities have concluded their pilot activity and the Electoral Commission will now prepare its evaluation for publication. The regulations passed by the Senedd give the Electoral Commission until 1 January 2026 complete its evaluation of the pilots and report to Welsh Ministers.

39. A further commencement order will be required to implement Automatic Voter Registration across Wales once the Welsh Government has considered the Electoral Commission's evaluation and any recommendations in full. It is intended for this Order to be introduced before the dissolution of the sixth Senedd to allow full roll out later in 2026.

### **Campaign Finance**

40. The Codes of Practice on election expenses have been prepared by the Electoral Commission and will shortly be laid in the Senedd. These Codes of Practice are:

- Non-Party Campaigner Campaign Expenditure (Senedd Elections) Code of Practice 2025
- Individual Candidate Election Expenses (Senedd Elections) Code of Practice 2025
- Political Parties Campaign Expenditure (Senedd Elections) Code of Practice 2025

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## 5. The role, governance and accountability of Town and Community Councils

41. In March 2025, the Local Government and Housing Committee submitted its report on its inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector. The report includes 11 recommendations and 1 conclusion. I responded on 16 May agreeing with the recommendations and conclusion.
42. On 1 October I published a [Written Statement](#) providing an update on key areas of work. This included plans on standards of behaviour to address Recommendations 2 and 4. In respect of Recommendation 1, the statement also noted our intention to engage with Audit Wales, One Voice Wales, and the sector to review the audit processes.
43. In respect of Recommendation 5, also related to standards of behaviour, this is being facilitated through the Memorandum of Understanding between One Voice Wales and the WLGA. I am discussing progress at my next bilateral meeting with One Voice Wales.
44. The Welsh Government continues to work closely with One Voice Wales as partners with a mutual interest in supporting a well-governed and effective sector. As I noted in my initial response to Recommendation 3, I have provided One Voice Wales with £400,000 of unhypothecated funding in 2025-26 to enable them to innovate and be responsive to provide increased support to the sector, including training on Code of Conduct.
45. In response to the Committee's conclusion, the Welsh Government also continues to work closely with the Society of Local Council Clerks. I have provided the Society with £40,000 of unhypothecated funding in 2025-26 enabling the Society to offer clerks in Wales wider and more flexible options for training, learning and development, to help them fulfil their roles effectively. I am also using opportunities, such as the One Voice Wales and Society for Local Council Clerks conference on 12 November, to promote the support available.
46. As part of its 2025-26 work programme, the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru, is considering the current approach to council size policies across Wales in respect of community reviews (Recommendations 6). This will include the potential for a national council size policy. It is in its early stages, and the Commission has confirmed it will work collaboratively with others, including One Voice Wales and other appropriate organisations to ensure a wide variety of views are considered. The Welsh Government looks forward to receiving the outcome of this work including any recommendations that may be proposed to improve current arrangements.

47. With respect to work to incentivise and foster collaboration through cluster working (Recommendation 7), I believe One Voice Wales are best placed to use their networks and grant funding to identify and promote clustering opportunities. I will, of course, support and promote such opportunities in my engagements with them at their annual conferences and innovative practice awards. This activity will take time.
48. I am fully supportive of a refresh to the model charter (Recommendation 8) and believe a sector-led approach is the right way to achieve this. It is therefore for One Voice Wales and the WLGA to own work to review the charter, as opposed to Welsh Ministers.
49. In respect of Recommendation 9, I published a Written Statement on 17 July, providing an update on the Digital Health Action Plan. The update also included the next steps related to Recommendation 10, sharing of resources, which is being led by One Voice Wales and the WLGA, through their Memorandum of Understanding.
50. Recommendation 11 is part of the Welsh Government's rolling programme to review the impact of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Any changes to legislation, however, will not be achievable in the current Senedd term due to the need to engage with and consult stakeholders to assess the potential impact of relaxing the requirements for annual reaffirmation. This will therefore be a matter for the next Senedd.