



**Independent working group
on sustainable local government
for the future**

Local government fit for the future

September 2026

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The independent working group on sustainable local government for the future

This is the final report of the independent working group on sustainable local government for the future, which was established by the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP), in collaboration with the Welsh Local Government Association.

The group considered challenges and opportunities for the Welsh local government sector in order to develop a clear vision and proposals for purpose-driven and sustainable local government.

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We acknowledge the contribution of the WCPP team to the work of the group, including their work in drafting and editing [the group's published outputs](#).

Scan here to
read the group's
outputs



Executive summary



- » **The current operating model for local government is unsustainable.** Councils in Wales face growing demand, financial pressures, workforce challenges and increasing complexity. A sustainable future model depends on foundational reforms to finance, governance, and workforce, paired with targeted investment in sector innovation capacity and a shared vision. At its heart, that future must strengthen local government's distinctive democratic connection to people and place.
- » **Councils in Wales must evolve from being primarily service providers to becoming democratic leaders of place:** continuing to deliver essential services while increasingly convening, enabling and working alongside communities and partners to improve outcomes.
- » **Our vision is that Welsh councils of the future will be collaborative, preventative, outcome-focused, adaptive, financially empowered and digitally-enabled.**
- » **Realising this vision for a future operating model requires three cultural shifts:**
 - **Relationship with residents:** Councils must work *with* communities rather than simply acting *for* them. Meaningful participation is essential to strengthen trust, improve decision making and build the public understanding needed to navigate difficult choices while maintaining democratic legitimacy.
 - **Relationship with the wider system:** Councils must champion purposeful collaboration, overcoming institutional silos and rationalising complex partnership arrangements to focus on delivering shared outcomes. Local government, Welsh Government and partner organisations must work together to create the conditions for more preventative, place-based and effective public services.
 - **Sector leadership:** Local government must take collective ownership of this transition. Building the council of the future is not a single reform event, but an ongoing process to develop, test, learn, and adapt.
- » **Cultural change cannot happen in isolation; it requires funding, performance, and accountability frameworks that actively incentivise the desired behaviours.** Neither structural reform nor cultural change alone will deliver a sustainable future for local government. Success depends on aligning funding, accountability, leadership, and behaviours around a shared vision.
- » **Sector-led change must be matched by Welsh Government leadership.** The reforms set out in our previous work on finance, accountability, workforce and innovation capacity remain essential foundations for success. Welsh Government, local government and partners share responsibility. The transition must be realistic and phased, but the need to begin it is immediate.

Introduction

In our work to date we have considered, commissioned and convened evidence around what local government is for; where certain functions should sit; how local government should be funded; and what steps we need to take to develop a new operating model.¹

In answering these questions we have made the case that local government as it is currently constituted is unsustainable, and outlined recommendations for how the local government sector in Wales, in partnership with Welsh Government, can create the conditions for a more sustainable operating model for councils in Wales.

We believe that the changes we have proposed in our paper [A firm foundation for change](#) are necessary to put councils on a more stable footing:



Addressing the systemic weaknesses of the current finance system



Streamlining and strengthening the approach to assessing the performance and financial health of councils



Investing in rebuilding the capacity for innovation in the sector



Developing a workforce strategy

However, more is needed to deliver the model of local government we are seeking to build. We need a shared vision around which we can coordinate our effort, rooted in the driving purpose of local government: the connection to our people and places, epitomised in the practice of local democracy. This paper, the final output from this group, sets out that vision and outlines some of the cultural shifts that we think are necessary to achieve this.

We are not starting from scratch. There is good practice across Wales, and many of the challenges we identify have been widely recognised. What is missing is a clear direction of travel and a coordinated effort to move towards it.

¹ Our previous reports and the evidence commissioned by us can be found in the [References](#) section, or scan this QR code.



This report seeks to provide that direction, setting out what local government should become and the changes needed to realise it. The rest of this paper does two things:

- First, we set out a clear articulation of our vision for the council of the future: the core characteristics of a new operating model for local government in Wales, rooted in people, place and democratic accountability, and designed to meet the challenges we face.
- Second, we discuss how the realisation of this vision requires a shift in culture both within the sector, but also more broadly. Without this, any vision, any action to create the conditions for change, risks falling short of the aspiration to develop a more sustainable model for local government.

It concludes by linking this back to the changes needed to enable the necessary cultural shifts, and to enable this vision to become a reality.

Building a new model of local government will require an inclusive, purpose-led approach, with action from Welsh Government and leadership from the sector itself. This programme will only succeed if it is owned and driven by local government.



The council of the future



The changes we have identified in our previous work create the conditions for a more sustainable system of local government. But they do not, on their own, define what that system should look like. To guide the transition ahead, we need a clear articulation of the model we are working towards.

This is not intended to be a single, fixed blueprint. Local government in Wales operates in diverse contexts, and the model which emerges will need to be responsive to local circumstances. However, there are a set of core characteristics which, taken together, describe a new way of operating; one that builds on the strengths of local government while enabling it to meet the challenges of the future.

Our vision is that Welsh councils of the future will be collaborative, preventative, outcome-focused, adaptive, financially empowered and digitally-enabled.

Taken together, these describe a significant shift in what has been the traditional role of local government. They imply a move away from a predominantly service provider model towards one in which councils act more directly as conveners, enablers and leaders of place; from operating within organisational silos towards working across systems; and from a focus on inputs and processes towards a focus on outcomes and impact.

They also reinforce the centrality of local democracy. The connection between councils, citizens and places as the defining feature of local government in Wales.² The challenge, and the opportunity, is to renew and strengthen that connection, embedding participation and accountability at the heart of how the system operates, while enabling councils to work in new and more effective ways.

² We outlined our position on the purpose and functions of local government in our earlier work. See: [The purpose and functions of local government in Wales](#) and [A firm foundation for change](#).

Our vision is that Welsh councils of the future will be collaborative, preventative, outcome-focused, adaptive, financially empowered and digitally-enabled:



Collaborative, place-based and citizen-centred

Working with communities, partners and other public services to shape places and improve outcomes, with citizens meaningfully involved in decisions that affect their lives. This requires a shift from seeing people as users of services towards recognising them as active participants in the governance and development of their communities.



Preventative, long-term and focused on future generations

Tackling the root causes of social, economic and environmental challenges, rather than responding only to their consequences. This requires a stronger focus on managing future demand, improving long-term wellbeing, and acting on major challenges such as inequality and climate change.



Outcome-focused and delivery-agnostic

Starting with the outcomes that matter for people and places, and being open about how those outcomes are achieved. This implies moving beyond traditional service silos and being prepared to redesign how services are organised and delivered in pursuit of better results.



Adaptive, innovative and continuously learning

Able to test, refine and scale new approaches in response to changing circumstances. This requires a culture that supports experimentation and learning, and an organisational approach that is responsive, flexible and open to change.



Financially sustainable, flexible and empowered

Equipped with the resources, autonomy and flexibility to make strategic decisions over the long term. This includes the ability to invest in prevention, respond to local need, and align spending with outcomes rather than being constrained by rigid funding structures.



Digitally enabled and evidence-driven

Making effective use of data, insight and technology to inform decisions, improve services and increase productivity. This includes the responsible use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence, to support better outcomes for people and communities.

The necessary cultural shifts

Realising our vision for sustainable councils of the future in Wales will require a change in how individuals and organisations think and behave. It implies changes in the relationship between councils and residents; and changes in the way councils work with the wider system. It also implies embracing uncertainty and risk. A sustainable model of local government does not yet exist. Building it will require courage, experimentation and a willingness to learn and adapt.

A shift in the relationship between councils and residents



Realising this vision will require a shift in the relationship between councils and the people they serve. This shift is not new in its intent, but it is more urgent than before.

The case for more joined-up, person-centred public services has long been made (see, for example, Wilson et al., 2015). Yet designing services around people requires more than better coordination within and between organisations. It also requires involving people themselves in shaping how services are designed and delivered. If services are to reflect the realities of people's lives, they cannot be developed solely within institutional boundaries. This implies a shift in how councils understand their role: from delivering services to communities towards working *with* them. In practice, this means recognising residents not simply as users or recipients of services, but as collaborators with knowledge, insight and agency. Without this, efforts to create more joined-up services risk remaining organisational rather than genuinely person-centred (Lent and Studdert, 2021).

This shift is particularly important in the context of the challenges facing local government and wider society. Many of the decisions required over the coming years, about prioritisation, resource allocation and long-term investment, will be difficult. They will involve trade-offs and reduced provision. While these decisions will need to be made, advocated for and owned by elected members, they will require a degree of public understanding and consent to be sustainable. That, in turn, depends on trust.

Evidence points to growing levels of disillusionment and disengagement from political processes (Gibbs and Mutbei, 2025; Welsh Government, 2025a). Only a minority of people feel able to influence decisions affecting their local area, and participation is often unevenly distributed across different groups. For some, disengagement reflects disempowerment, mistrust or dissatisfaction. For others, disengagement reflects the realities of modern life, where time, energy and attention are limited, and participation in civic life competes with many other demands (Brady et al., 1995; Masoud, 2025). In this context, attention has become a scarce and contested resource, shaping how and whether people engage.

This has implications for how councils approach engagement and decision making. Traditional models of consultation are not sufficient. If local government is to build and sustain legitimacy, participation must be more focused, meaningful and clearly connected to decision making.

People are more likely to engage where they can see that their involvement makes a difference, and where the opportunities to participate are proportionate, relevant and accessible (McAllister et al., 2020).

This also points to the need for a different kind of political leadership. Councillors will need to act not only as representatives, but as conveners of local dialogue, interpreters of local priorities and leaders of place. This involves working with communities to understand competing demands, to explore options and trade-offs, and to build a shared understanding of the choices that need to be made in view of the challenges local government faces.

Elected members will continue to be responsible for difficult decisions about priorities, service redesign and resource allocation. Building public understanding and legitimacy for these decisions will require honest conversations about what councils can realistically continue to provide in the future. In this way, participation should strengthen representative democracy rather than replace it.

Taken together, these changes imply a shift away from paternalistic ideas of the state, based primarily on councils delivering services, towards one grounded in democratic partnership. The relationship between councils and residents instead needs to become more active, more reciprocal and more integral to how decisions are made and services are shaped.

A shift in how councils operate within the wider system



Achieving the council of the future will require a different relationship between local government and the wider system within which it operates. This will involve changes to the frameworks of accountability, funding and regulation that shape behaviour, as well as a more deliberate approach to collaboration, both between councils and with partners across the public, voluntary and private sectors.

Current systems of governance have developed to support accountability, consistency in decision-making and professional specialisation.

These remain important, but they have also created incentives that can work against collaboration, prevention and place-based working (OECD, 2020). Funding tied to specific services, performance frameworks that reinforce silos, and regulatory expectations that discourage risk-taking can make it harder for councils and their partners to work in joined-up and adaptive ways (OECD, 2020).

A shift in governance is therefore needed, less as a technical redesign and more as a change in relationships and behaviours across the system. In particular, it requires a more enabling relationship between local government and Welsh Government. One that maintains accountability while supporting local leadership, aligning national intent with local priorities, and ensuring that funding, performance and regulatory frameworks support prevention, long-term planning, and place-based innovation.

At the same time, councils themselves need to become more collaborative by default. This means actively seeking opportunities to work across organisational boundaries, both with other councils and with partners. In some cases, this may involve sharing services, expertise or capacity; in others, it may involve joint planning, pooled resources or coordinated delivery.

The starting point should be a more open question: how can the outcomes we are seeking best be achieved, and what combination of organisations is best placed to deliver them?

This extends beyond collaboration within local government. Councils have a unique role as democratic institutions rooted in place, and are well positioned to act as leaders and conveners for their local areas. This includes working more closely with health boards and other public bodies, as well as with community and voluntary organisations and the private sector. Effective place-based working depends on aligning the efforts of these different actors around shared priorities, values, and outcomes.

The current partnership landscape in Wales is complex and fragmented (Crompton, 2026). Poorly designed partnership arrangements create additional governance burdens, slow decision making and blur accountability (Martin and Bristow, 2021). The new Welsh Government has a clear intention to simplify and rationalise partnership arrangements (Plaid Cymru, 2026). Any such reform will require difficult choices, including letting go of some existing structures and ways of working. Councils and the local government sector as a whole should play an active and constructive role in shaping this new partnership landscape. The aim should not be collaboration for its own sake, but collaboration that demonstrably improves outcomes, capacity or value.

Importantly, however, structural change alone will not be sufficient. At its heart, this shift is cultural. It requires a move towards a stronger sense of shared endeavour across the system, one in which organisations consciously and deliberately act to overcome the pressures to operate in isolation, to protect institutional boundaries, or to prioritise individual priorities over shared outcomes. This will not be easy. The incentives to act otherwise are often embedded in funding, performance and accountability systems, and there will be a need to build trust and a sense of stability in partnership arrangements. But without this shift, efforts to build a more collaborative, place-based and outcome-focused model of local government are at risk.

A shift in sector leadership



As our previous work emphasises, building the council of the future will require a shift in leadership across the sector.

The sector needs to work together, not only because of the scale of change required, but also because the end state is not yet fully defined. We have a clear sense of the direction of travel, but not a complete blueprint of what the future model will look like in practice. That uncertainty reflects the complexity of the challenges facing local government and the wider society it serves, and it will not disappear. Navigating this will require consistent leadership at a sectoral level in local government, from both officers and elected members.

The council of the future will not be created through a single reform programme or decision, or by councils 'going it alone'. It will emerge over time, through a sustained process of transition, with collaborative action required now, and over the medium to longer term. Local government itself must take ownership of this process. The sector will need to provide leadership, build consensus around the direction of travel, and continue to develop practical models that work in different local contexts. Leaders will need to empower staff at all levels in the organisation to propose and test different approaches and new ideas.

There is already strong evidence across Wales of innovation, good practice and leadership from both officers and elected members rising to meet these challenges. Many of the issues we identify, and some of the solutions we propose, have been recognised elsewhere. The challenge is not a lack of ideas or examples. It is the need for a more coordinated and sustained effort, grounded in a shared purpose, to develop and embed new ways of working across the system. This will require action from leaders in local government to develop, test, and learn from ideas and use this experience to support the development of the council of the future.

The role of Welsh Government is critical, but it should not seek to define the model in detail. Its role is to create an enabling environment: to reduce unnecessary constraints, align national policy intent with local priorities, and support the development of a sector-led approach to reform. The success of this transition will depend on local government having the confidence, autonomy and capacity to lead it in practice.

Progress will not be linear. It will involve testing new approaches, learning from experience and, where necessary, adapting or stopping what does not work. For these reasons, the goal should not be to produce a final and fixed model of local government. Instead, it should be to establish a shared direction of travel that enables coordinated action and continuous improvement over the years ahead. If this can be achieved, Wales will be well placed to develop a model of local government that is more collaborative, preventative, adaptive and capable of delivering better outcomes for people and places in the long term.



From vision to implementation

The vision set out in this report is ambitious, but the change needed will not be secured through aspiration alone. It must start with a clear sighted recognition of the context in which the process of transition must begin.

Councils are operating under considerable pressure, managing rising demand for services alongside financial constraints, workforce challenges and increasing complexity (Audit Wales, 2024). In many authorities, capacity has been absorbed by the need to respond to immediate operational pressures, leaving little time and resource for long-term planning, innovation and change management.³ This can make progress towards even existing policy ambitions, such as prevention or the future generations agenda, challenging. Progress towards the model described in this report will therefore need to be phased and realistic, recognising that capacity for change is uneven across the sector.

Crucially, acting on our previous recommendations on finance, accountability and workforce, set out in [A firm foundation for change](#), must go hand in hand with changes in mindset and culture we have described here. A more sustainable model of local government depends on stronger foundations.

This includes a more resilient financial framework, investment in workforce development and leadership capacity, greater support for innovation and improvement, and accountability arrangements that encourage collaboration, prevention and long-term thinking. It will also require investment in the skills needed to operate in more collaborative, preventative and digitally enabled ways, including community engagement, system leadership, digital transformation, the use of data and evidence, and organisational improvement.

Councils will find it difficult to become more outcome-focused if funding, performance and accountability arrangements continue to reward activity, process or organisational performance above long-term outcomes. Equally, councils cannot be expected to collaborate more effectively with other statutory bodies if those bodies either choose, or are incentivised, to not collaborate. Culture matters, but culture is shaped by the environment in which organisations operate. Lasting change will require both.

The future model of local government cannot be fully designed in advance. It will emerge over time through practical experience, disciplined learning and continuous improvement. Councils, Welsh Government and partners across the public sector therefore have a shared responsibility not only to articulate a vision for the future, but also to align governance, funding, regulation and performance frameworks with that vision. Only by combining changes in the operating environment with changes in behaviour will the ambitions set out in this report become achievable in practice. Together, they provide a route from vision to delivery.

³ We outlined this argument in our earlier position paper: [The purpose and functions of local government in Wales](#)

Continuing the conversation

As members of the independent working group on sustainable local government for the future, we commit to taking these ideas forward; continuing the conversation about how to develop a new operating model for local government and the vision which should underpin it; and to take action in our own authorities to develop and implement the changes we recommend. Working with the WLGA and the wider local government sector we will advocate for further change, including through the forthcoming renegotiation of the Strategic Partnership Agreement.

Others may disagree with aspects of our vision, and we welcome dialogue, careful exploration, and new proposals as we move forward. What we hope to have persuaded our colleagues of is the need for a bold vision, commensurate to the scale of the challenge we face.

Adopting a clear vision and implementing a programme of change to get us there, and to set local government on a truly sustainable footing, would give certainty to those who use our services. It would allow us the time and space to focus on people, places and outcomes. It would let us test and learn from new approaches, in a more certain financial environment. We could move towards holistic models of prevention and act for future generations. If we succeed, in short, Wales will have led the way in creating responsive, participatory and dynamic local government, fit for the future.



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