

Strong Welsh Communities

A manifesto for healthier, happier,
more resilient communities in Wales



Our vision for Welsh communities:

Every community in Wales has the resources and influence it needs to build community capacity, and develop and run its own social infrastructure.

Our manifesto is about a brighter future for communities in Wales. We want Welsh Government to focus its energies on supporting people in their own communities to do the things that matter to them. We want to build stronger communities because we know that they improve the wellbeing, resilience and opportunities of local people¹.

The floods and Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, have highlighted the value, strength and resourcefulness of community groups. They've provided food, friendship and support with a knowledge and care that only local people can.

Even before these crises, working at local community level has already paid dividends in Wales, with community groups running projects and initiatives that:

- Tackle poverty
- Develop local skills and create jobs
- Promote health and wellbeing
- Protect the local environment and help tackle the climate crisis



“Poorer areas with greater community capacity and social infrastructure have better health and wellbeing outcomes, higher rates of employment and lower levels of child poverty.”²

Research from the Local Trust shows that poorer areas with greater community capacity and social infrastructure have better health and wellbeing outcomes, higher rates of employment and lower levels of child poverty compared to poorer areas without².

But the value of this community support remains overlooked, under-resourced and too often taken for granted by national and local government. If Welsh Government makes it a priority to listen to, trust and support communities, it would do much to secure a healthier, happier and more sustainable future for the people of Wales.

¹Institute of Health Equity, 2020, [The Marmot Review 10 Years On, Community Actions](#), p.10
BCT, 2018, [Our Local Economies: Communities Building Prosperity](#), p.9

²Local Trust/OCSI, 2019, [Left behind? Understanding communities on the edge](#), p. 4

More Rights and Recognition

We want Welsh Government and public bodies to recognise the work that communities do, and develop a national vision designed by and for communities.

Wales is home to a diverse and growing range of community-run social infrastructure, from libraries and leisure facilities, to community centres and cultural venues. They show how local people are working together to build strong, independent organisations that improve wellbeing and opportunities in their local areas³.

Yet Welsh Government currently have no overarching strategy for communities in Wales, and they're not included in any ministerial portfolio. Instead Government's approach has been framed by their wider policy ambitions for greater citizen involvement and improved wellbeing.

But this broad framing isn't changing long-established ways of working and cultural practices in the public sector, which leave many communities feeling marginalised and untrusted. Too often communities lack the rights and recognition they need to develop the community capacity and social infrastructure they want and need in their area.

After many years of neglect, it is time for a new deal for our communities; one which is designed by them and for them, and understands and builds upon their strengths.



“It feels like government are not listening – there’s a lack of awareness of what community organisations can offer and achieve.”

“There are no solid mechanisms for understanding, let alone sharing good practice.”

What we want:

- A Minister-led strategy for building stronger communities, which draws on the expertise of existing community organisations.
- Give communities stronger rights to own and control buildings and local land, with new legislation based on the 2015 Scottish Community Empowerment Act.
- Make sure public bodies recognise the key role communities play locally, with an additional duty in the Future Generations Act to promote the role of community organisations.

³BCT in partnership with the WCVA, Wales Co-operative Centre, Development Trust Association and Coalfields Regeneration Trust, May 2020 (yet to be published), *Mapping Community Assets in Wales*, p. 11-14

CASE STUDY

Hubberston and Hakin Community Centre: A Wellbeing Hub

Since local people took ownership of Hubberston and Hakin Community Centre in 2016, it has become a focal point for the wellbeing of its local community.

After Pembrokeshire County Council (PCC) announced its closure in 2016 – members of the community formed a charitable incorporated organisation (CIO), and leased the centre from PCC for a trial period. Two years later, a community asset transfer from PCC to the CIO was agreed.

Since then, the trustees have focused on partnership working to create a thriving facility that 300 people of all ages use each week.

Activities include sessions for adults with learning disabilities, exercise classes for those with long-term health conditions, a young carers support group, a luncheon club for older people, and a youth club for 14-18-year-olds. It's also home to Little Acorns, a pre-school playgroup that includes Flying Start provision for 58 children. The local health board runs mental health support sessions in the centre, and the local authority runs tuition sessions for children.

The long-term aim of the CIO is to be financially self-supporting by providing community activities in a suitably located, familiar and reasonably-priced venue, while fostering community cohesion and reducing social isolation in an area of deprivation.



More Investment

Communities should be given the opportunities and resources to get things done for themselves, to build on their strengths, and improve their local area.

We know that improving support for local people to do the things that matter to them can help tackle the impacts of poverty, promote wellbeing, create opportunities and protect the local environment.

But community capacity and social infrastructure are not evenly spread across Wales, with poorer urban areas least likely to benefit. Communities have told us about barriers like limited community development support and lack of secure funding.

Austerity, cuts to public services and facilities – and now coronavirus – have put huge pressure on community organisations, who have had to step into the gaps left by the public sector, often with little or no recognition⁴.

It is time to give our communities the support and resources that they need to continue helping people respond to the current crisis and build a brighter, more sustainable local future.



“There is a lack of long-term commitment and our projects often feel temporary. We want to plan for the future, to build capacity and sustainability.”

“It’s not ok for communities to fill in the gaps and provide services left by public bodies without the resources, support, and skills to be able to do it.”

What we want:

- The next round of money from UK dormant stocks, shares, insurance and pension funds should be used to give communities in Wales the long-term, flexible funding they need to plan and deliver projects in their local areas.
- Enhance the Communities Facilities Fund and dedicate future Regional Investment Funding to support activities and development work that builds community capacity as well as facilities.



⁴New Local Government Network, 2019, [The Community Paradigm: why public services need radical change and how it can be achieved](#), p. 22

Plas Madoc Leisure Centre: A Successful Social Enterprise

Under community ownership, Plas Madoc Leisure Centre (PMLC) has become a self-sustaining, award-winning Social Enterprise embedded within its community – a large housing estate on the outskirts of Wrexham.

Previously seen as an unsustainable drain on public resources, it's been transformed into a financially viable community asset, providing essential health and fitness facilities for local people – and is now one of the largest employers within the area.

Following the local authority's decision to close it in April 2014, the centre is leased and operated by 'Splash Community Trust'. Under community management, the leisure centre is reactive to community needs. As well as a busy leisure centre with a swimming pool, it also runs community events to bring people together, support wellbeing and tackle isolation – from free yoga classes to family wellbeing days – and one of the squash courts has been converted into a community room where groups can meet.

PMLC also runs community health and sports initiatives, like a cancer pre-op group and cardiac rehabilitation group – activities that people would not engage with or access if they had to travel 6-8 miles by bus to a facility in Wrexham. When the leisure centre closed for 8 months, GPs saw a sharp decline in the take-up of GP referrals to alternative leisure centres.



More Respect

There needs to be mutual respect and understanding between public bodies and local communities, so people's lives change for the better.

Communities across Wales told us that public sector ways of working are a key barrier to greater collaboration and mutual understanding. Their experiences of working with public bodies are often characterised by poor communication, lack of trust, risk aversion and silo working. A series of recent reviews by Audit Wales found that public bodies often lack involvement and collaboration with communities and their organisations⁵.

The knowledge, experiences and strengths of local communities are rarely recognised and understood, and in some cases consciously ignored and undervalued by public bodies.



But in many parts of Wales the response to coronavirus is changing this picture before our eyes, leading to improved understanding, decision-making and collaboration⁶.

And as we face a deep recession and further austerity it is more important than ever to build upon this innovative joint working and not blindly return to 'business as usual'.

“There is substantial mistrust from our local authority. They work in silos and are very risk averse. We need a cultural shift.”

“Public bodies are big ‘top-down’ institutions – they don’t have a culture or practice of co-operative and co-productive working.”

What we want:

- Public Services Boards should map local community capacity and social infrastructure as part of their assessment of local wellbeing.
- Welsh Government should help communities and public bodies test ways of building mutual understanding, collaboration and respect by creating a £4.5m Communities Challenge Fund (like the Foundational Economy model).
- Develop good practice guidance for public bodies on collaborative working and building stronger communities in partnership with the WLGA and Audit Wales.

⁵Audit Wales, May 2020, [So, what's different? Findings from the Auditor General's Sustainable Development Principle Examinations](#), p.42

⁶People & Work and BCT, July 2020, [Community Responses to COVID; what's been going on?](#), p. 4

CASE STUDY

Canolfan Pentre: Tackling Loneliness and Isolation

The village of Pentre in the Rhondda Valley was once a thriving community, but gradually lost many of its services and facilities: shops, bank, post office, library, day centre and school.

The founders of Canolfan Pentre originally came together as a campaigning group to protest the closure of the local school. Although they didn't save the school, they did see potential in turning the former day centre in the village into a community hub – bridging the gap that was left by the loss of so many local facilities.

Today, Canolfan Pentre is a thriving hub of activities and support for the community, including after school clubs, a community cafe, job club, mental health support and a parent & toddler group. The centre is also used by many other charities including a local bereavement group, MIND, and many more. Over 1,600 people a year benefit from their services and facilities.

During the floods in 2020, the centre co-ordinated donations and provided food, cleaning supplies and clothing. It also acted as a vital hub for residents too, helping them to access ICT and apply for emergency and recovery grants. During the Covid-19 lockdown, they continued to be a lifeline for the community, distributing activity packs for children, afternoon tea and care packages to older residents, collecting prescriptions and food shopping. The local knowledge and connections meant they could respond to the crises quickly, efficiently and appropriately.



About Us

Building Communities Trust (BCT) supports community development work across Wales.

We manage the Invest Local programme, Wales' largest asset-based community development initiative, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund and working in 13 different communities. We also run a network of support, learning and advocacy for over 120 community-based organisations.

About This Manifesto

Early in 2020 we ran a series of 20 events across Wales, involving over 250 people from community groups.

We asked them what would help them to build stronger communities – and what the barriers were. For many, it was the first time they'd discussed policy, and their experiences and ideas have fundamentally shaped this manifesto for change.

It is also informed by BCT's own recent research into mapping Wales' large number of community-run assets, showing the existing strength of Welsh community organisations.