

Chief Executive OVW National Conference Presentation 2026

Good afternoon guests, conference delegates and sponsors/suppliers. As CEO I want to thank today's National Conference sponsors Unity Trust Bank and MVI Audi Visual for sponsoring the National Awards – your support is greatly appreciated. For your information my speech today will be sent to all delegates after the conference – in fact there will be a lot more in the document than I can possibly say today!

The sector is at a crossroads – we have a new government and an opportunity to influence the future direction of the community and town council sector. And yet it must be acknowledged there are issues within the sector that need to be addressed before it is ever given the chance to grow and develop. Conference - we need your help in determining how we move forward and consequently I want to spend the next 20-25 minutes setting out a suggested pathway for the sector for the next 4 years and as such the title of my presentation today is...

Developing a Capacity Capability and Cultural Change Programme for Community and Town Councils in Wales

For conference information this proposition has been developed over several months through discussions at OVW Training Associates Away Days back in March, discussions with Welsh Government officials, through discussions with the Chair and NEC members, internal team meetings and particularly sparked via the process of developing a new Cultural Change training module for the sector – more on this later.

So why the need for a Capacity Capability and Cultural Change programme? Here's some context.

What are the big challenges facing the community and town council sector?

Community and town councils face a cluster of **structural, financial, and capacity-related pressures** that make it increasingly difficult for them to deliver local services and represent their communities effectively. The biggest challenges fall into five broad areas.

The biggest challenges facing the sector 2026 include:

1. Severe financial pressure

Local government finances are under intense strain. Although community and town councils are not responsible for major statutory services, they are directly affected by the wider system's instability.

When principal authorities cut discretionary services (parks, libraries, street cleaning), community and town councils often feel pressure to take them on—without equivalent funding.

This creates a growing **expectation gap**: more responsibilities, but limited resources.

2. Rising demand for services

Even though community and town councils do not run social care, they feel the downstream effects of:

- Rising adult and children's social care costs consuming principal authority budgets
- Cuts to preventative and universal services (youth work, community centres, early help)
- Increased community need following the pandemic, cost-of-living crisis, and ageing populations

These pressures reduce the support available from higher-tier councils and increase local expectations on the most local tier.

3. Planning system pressures

Community and town councils are statutory consultees on planning, but the system is under strain:

- National housing targets and relaxed planning rules create tension between development and local infrastructure capacity.
- Environmental regulations (e.g., nutrient neutrality) stall developments and complicate local planning responses.
- Under-resourced planning authorities lead to slower responses and reduced local oversight.

This makes it harder for local councils to influence development in ways that reflect community priorities.

4. Digital transformation and the digital divide

Local government is expected to modernise rapidly, but:

- Many councils lack the skills, staff, or budget to implement digital tools effectively.
- Residents in rural or deprived areas may lack digital access or confidence, making digital-only engagement exclusionary.
- Councils must balance innovation with inclusivity.

Community and town councils often rely on volunteers or part-time staff, making digital transformation particularly challenging.

5. Climate change and sustainability duties

Local councils are expected to contribute to net-zero goals, but:

- Climate adaptation and mitigation require funding and expertise many councils lack.
- Environmental commitments can conflict with national planning reforms.
- Extreme weather increases pressure on local infrastructure and emergency response.

This creates a mismatch between **ambition** and **capacity**.

OTHER CHALLENGES: Cross-cutting structural challenges

Uncertain and short-term funding settlements

Even where funding increases are announced, they are often:

- Short-term
- Complex to bid for
- Insufficient to address long-term sustainability

The government acknowledges the need for greater certainty but has not yet delivered a long-term settlement.

Post-pandemic recovery pressures

Councils continue to deal with:

- Long-term health and social impacts
- Economic recovery needs
- Increased community vulnerability
- Higher expectations for local support and resilience planning

Capacity and skills shortages

Many community and town councils struggle with:

- Recruiting qualified clerks
- Retaining councillors
- Managing growing workloads with small teams
- Meeting rising governance and compliance requirements

This is often an unspoken but critical challenge.

Summary: the core challenge

So, community and town councils sit at the frontline of local democracy, but they are increasingly caught between **rising expectations** and **shrinking support**. The biggest threats to the sector are financial instability, planning pressures, digital and climate demands, and the erosion of preventative services at higher tiers of government.

What can be done about them? (SEE MANIFESTO – FIVE ASKS)

How to strengthen Community and Town Councils

Strengthening community and town councils means **building their capacity, confidence, and influence** so they can deliver more for local people. The most effective councils don't just run services—they shape the identity, wellbeing, and future of their place.

Below is a structured, practical roadmap for strengthening the sector, based on what works in high-performing councils across Wales.

The short answer

Community and Town councils become stronger when they invest in **professional capacity, good governance, community engagement, strategic planning, and partnership working**. The most successful councils behave less like small committees and more like **local civic institutions**.

1. Strengthen professional capacity

The clerk and officers are the engine of the council. Strong councils invest in:

- **Qualified clerks** (CiLCA or higher)
- Clear job descriptions and realistic workloads
- Access to training from One Voice Wales and SLCC, and partner organisations eg Planning Aid Wales
- Modern digital tools for finance, meetings, and communication

A well-supported clerk transforms the council from reactive to strategic.

2. Adopt a strategic mindset

Many C&TC's councils operate meeting-to-meeting. Strong councils think in **3–5 year horizons**:

- Create a **strategic plan** with measurable priorities
- Link the budget and precept to long-term goals
- Use data (surveys, footfall, demographics) to guide decisions
- Review progress annually

This shifts the council from “fixing problems” to **shaping the future**.

3. Improve governance and decision-making

Good governance builds trust and reduces conflict. Councils can strengthen themselves by:

- Regularly reviewing standing orders and policies
- Ensuring transparent agendas, minutes, and financial reporting
- Training councillors in roles, conduct, and decision-making
- Using committees and working groups effectively

High-performing councils run **professional, predictable, and well-chaired meetings**.

4. Build strong partnerships

Community and town Councils are most powerful when they collaborate. Effective partnerships include:

- Unitary Authorities
- Police and health services
- Local businesses and chambers of commerce
- Schools, churches, and voluntary groups
- Neighbouring councils

Partnerships unlock funding, influence, and shared expertise.

5. Deepen community engagement

Strong councils are rooted in their communities. They:

- Run regular surveys and consultations
- Hold drop-ins, listening events, and ward walks
- Use social media effectively
- Support community groups with grants and space
- Communicate clearly about what they do and why

Engagement builds legitimacy—and legitimacy builds power.

6. Use the precept confidently and responsibly

Many councils under-use their ability to raise funds. Strong councils:

- Link precept increases to clear, visible improvements
- Communicate openly about costs and benefits
- Use earmarked reserves strategically
- Pursue grants, sponsorship, and Section 106/CIL funding

Financial confidence enables ambition.

7. Lead on placemaking and wellbeing

Community and town councils are uniquely placed to shape local identity. They can:

- Develop neighbourhood plans
- Improve parks, play areas, and public spaces
- Support events, festivals, and cultural activities
- Lead environmental and climate initiatives
- Create community hubs and warm spaces

These projects build pride and cohesion.

8. Recruit and retain great councillors

A strong council needs strong people. Councils can:

- Run local recruitment campaigns
- Offer induction and ongoing training
- Encourage diversity of age, background, and skills
- Create a positive, respectful culture

Good councillors make better decisions—and attract more good councillors.

9. Embrace digital transformation

Digital tools make councils more efficient and accessible:

- Online meetings (where permitted)
- Digital finance and asset management
- Modern websites and accessibility compliance
- Online consultations and reporting tools

Digital maturity is now a core competency, not a luxury.

Summary: what makes a community or town council strong

The strongest councils are:

- **Professional**
- **Strategic**
- **Well-governed**
- **Community-led**
- **Financially confident**
- **Collaborative**
- **Ambitious for their place**

They act not as small committees but as **local civic leaders**.

What does the future hold for community and town councils in Wales?

The future of **community and town councils in Wales** is one of *growing responsibility, greater influence, and rising expectations* — but also increasing pressure to modernise, professionalise, and collaborate. Wales is ahead of England in recognising the value of the most local tier, and the Welsh Government has signalled repeatedly that it wants councils to play a **bigger, more strategic role and preventative role** in shaping local places.

Below is a clear, structured view of what the future likely holds, based on current policy direction, sector trends, and the trajectory of local government reform in Wales.

The headline

Community and town councils in Wales are moving toward becoming **stronger, more professional, more strategic local institutions**, with expanded roles in wellbeing, placemaking, climate action, and community resilience.

1. A bigger role in local governance

The Welsh Government has repeatedly indicated that it wants councils to:

- Take on **more local services**
- Play a stronger role in **local democracy and participation**
- Support the delivery of the **Well-being of Future Generations Act**
- Contribute to **local development plans** and placemaking

This means councils will increasingly be seen as **partners**, not peripheral bodies.

2. More responsibilities — especially for place and wellbeing

Future responsibilities are likely to expand in areas such as:

- Community wellbeing and social inclusion
- Local environmental management
- Climate adaptation and nature recovery
- Community transport
- Local economic development and town centre vitality

Councils that already run parks, halls, events, and local services will be well-placed to take on more.

3. Professionalisation and higher expectations

The sector is moving toward:

- More **qualified clerks** (CiLCA and beyond)
- Stronger governance and audit requirements

- Better financial management and transparency
- Clearer standards for councillor conduct and training

This shift is driven by the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021, which introduced:

- General power of competence
- Mandatory training plans
- Public participation duties
- Corporate planning requirements

Councils will increasingly operate like **small professional public bodies**, not volunteer committees.

4. Climate and nature responsibilities will grow

Wales has ambitious climate and biodiversity targets. Community and town councils will be expected to:

- Lead local nature recovery projects
- Improve green spaces and active travel routes
- Support community energy schemes
- Build climate resilience into local planning

This is an area where councils can become **local climate leaders**.

5. Closer collaboration with principal councils

As principal councils face financial pressure, they will increasingly:

- Transfer assets and services
- Seek local partners for community projects
- Rely on town and community councils for hyper-local delivery

This creates opportunity — but also risk — if responsibilities are transferred without funding.

6. More participatory and digital democracy

The future will involve:

- Hybrid or remote meetings
- Digital consultations and participatory budgeting
- Better online communication and transparency
- More accessible decision-making

Councils that embrace digital tools will be more resilient and more connected to residents.

7. A stronger role in community resilience

Recent crises — flooding, storms, cost-of-living pressures — have shown the importance of local resilience. Councils will increasingly:

- Coordinate volunteers
- Support emergency planning
- Provide warm spaces and community hubs
- Act as connectors between residents and services

This positions them as **anchors of local support**.

8. A shift toward strategic placemaking

Wales' national planning policy (Future Wales and Planning Policy Wales) emphasises:

- Placemaking
- Local identity
- Community-led development

Town and community councils will have a growing voice in:

- Local development plans
- Town centre regeneration
- Active travel and public realm improvements

They will be expected to help shape the *character* and *future* of their places.

Summary: the future in one sentence

Community and town councils in Wales are evolving into professional, strategic, community-anchored institutions with expanding roles in wellbeing, climate action, placemaking, and local democracy and hence why we feel it is critical that a Capacity Capability and Cultural Change programme is a necessity.

At our recent NEC meeting held in June Members agreed that the outcome of the recent Senedd elections provided One Voice Wales with a unique opportunity to take a lead on helping to define the purpose and future of Community and Town Councils. I referred to previous attempts to carry out this task by others - most notably the Independent Review Panel in 2017-18 - but, aside from initiatives such as the introduction of requirements to produce annual reports and training plans, few wholesale changes had arisen from these earlier reviews.

Members noted the success of One Voice Wales in relation to the provision of training opportunities, projects such as the Cost-for-Living Crisis team and

Local Places for Nature, improvements to communications, the development of digital solutions and dissemination of information and guidance across a range of areas. The One Voice Wales Awards also highlighted the achievement of Councils across Wales and demonstrated a transition towards new methods of innovative service delivery.

However, significant challenges remain in relation to the way in which Councils engage with One Voice Wales in terms of training, attendance at Area Committee's, with Welsh Government programmes of work and how the Community and Town Council sector is perceived by others ie poor compliance with statutory responsibilities eg Sec 6 Biodiversity reporting and reporting on Member Allowances.

Other challenges included addressing the number of Qualified Audit Opinions, which had led to reduced confidence in the efficiency of Community and Town Councils and their capacity to meet governance responsibilities.

Members considered that One Voice Wales should seize the opportunity to spearhead a dialogue on the purpose, capacity and capability of Councils, helping to establish a new cultural identity across the Community and Town Council sector.

Members noted that the Chief Executive had already reached out to the new Cabinet Secretary to commence this dialogue. Discussions had also been held with Welsh Government officials as part of the usual monitoring arrangements since the 2026 Senedd elections. A training module had also been commissioned to help Councils manage cultural change.

Other issues raised by Members included:

- acknowledgment of the different capacity of Councils of different sizes, which could lead to difficulties in judging Councils in a proportionate manner.
- the mix of skills available across Councils of different sizes and complexities.
- the impact of a new political landscape across Wales following the Senedd elections.
- changes in the culture and “architecture” of Community and Town Councils since COVID-19.
- the importance of taking a proactive approach in calling for change.
- the important representational role of Community and Town Councils.

- the importance of ensuring that Community Boundary Reviews reflected existing community ties. (The Chief Executive clarified the impact on the finances of One Voice Wales on any changes arising from the review process.)
- the need to safeguard the link between Councils and their communities. Devolution “within Wales” was as important as devolution “to Wales.”
- the need to embrace change and innovation.
- the challenge of continuing to provide meaningful opportunities for engagement with Community and Town Councils when so much information was already available via the new One Voice Wales website. The cultural change towards digital solutions was not without its challenges.
- the need to work in partnership with the new Welsh Government in developing a dialogue about the issues described above.

An interesting development...

I also reported that One Voice Wales had been invited to participate in an in-person workshop that would examine the current status and future direction for Community and Town Councils. The workshop was being organised by researchers at the University of Manchester along with the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru (DBCC) and would take place in Cardiff on 6 July 2026. The Chair of One Voice Wales and I will be attending on behalf of the sector.

Members noted that the workshop was designed to bring together scholars, policymakers, and practitioners to contribute to the development of a new, post-election blueprint for reforming and revitalising the Community and Town Council sector in Wales. Building on a growing body of research and policy analysis and highlighting weaknesses in local democratic governance, the event was designed to connect new academic insights with pressing real-world reform challenges.

A central part of the workshop would focus on discussion of a draft report prepared by the project team to be circulated prior to the event. The workshop would encourage presentation of participants’ ideas for the future development of the Community and Town Council sector and the maintenance of healthy local democracy in Wales more generally. These contributions would inform structured discussions with an invited group of academics as well as representatives from political parties, Welsh Government officials, regulatory bodies, and practitioners.

The ultimate objective of the workshop was to develop a coherent set of evidence-based recommendations for major reforms capable of enhancing

the legitimacy, effectiveness, and democratic vitality of local government in Wales.

Members expressed their surprise and concern that, as the national representational body for Community and Town Councils, One Voice Wales had had no prior involvement on the background to the above workshop, which appeared to provide an important opportunity to influence the future capacity, capability and culture of the Community and Town Council sector.

Finally, Members noted that the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru (DBCC) had been asked to explore attitudes and perceptions of Community and Town Councillors with particular consideration to their views on the size and structure of Councils and how they varied according to local circumstances. Feedback would help DBCC make recommendations on whether there was an appetite for a review of the size and structure of Councils across Wales. **It is critical that ALL Community and Town Councils fully engage with this process.**

It was Resolved that:

- (1) Members endorse the need for One Voice Wales to take a proactive approach in the development of a Capacity, Capability and Cultural programme.
- (2) One Voice Wales takes a lead in identifying the purpose of the Community and Town Council sector, taking advantage of the opportunity arising from the election of a new Welsh Government.
- (3) One Voice Wales acknowledges the opportunity arising from the election of the new Welsh Government to take the initiative in establishing a clear programme for developing the capacity, capability and cultural identity of the Community and Town Council sector, and developing an “offer” to put to Welsh Government to help deliver a clear policy for the future.

Launching our new Cultural Change training module!

Culture is one of the most significant factors influencing the effectiveness of Community and Town Councils in Wales. It shapes how Councillors behave, how decisions are made, how staff are treated, how communities are engaged and ultimately whether Councils succeed in delivering meaningful outcomes for their key stakeholders especially local residents.

Following discussions at our Training Associates Away Day in March 2026 it was agreed that we would commission a new training module on Cultural Change. We commissioned Tony Graham Town Clerk and CEO at

Pontypridd TC and OVW Training Associate – who's here today - to undertake this work given his past experience and recent Masters in Leadership and Management knowledge. This work has now been completed and shortly this course will be available as 'An introduction to Cultural Change' and includes some excellent tools and guides including:

- Cultural Self-Assessment Tool
- Cultural Improvement Plan Template
- Meeting behaviour checklist
- Annual Cultural Review Tool

This module will play a critical role in getting Councils to engage in a capability capacity and cultural change journey and I cannot recommend it more highly – Tony has delivered a superb training module for the sector.

I just want to touch on the themes emerging from the Tony's research in preparing the new module, from a synthesis of a series of structured interviews undertaken with experienced practitioners, Councillors and sector representatives across Wales and some key thoughts and ideas raised by me.

The interviews explored key research themes such as:

1. The current culture within the sector
2. What positive cultural change should look like
3. The triggers for change
4. Barriers to improvement
5. The role of Chairs/Councillors
6. The role of Clerks
7. Poor behaviour and conflict
8. Training and development needs
9. Indicators of improvement
10. Key recommendations for a future training approach

Several consistent themes emerged across all the interviews.

First, culture varies significantly between Councils and there is no single sector culture. Some Councils are collaborative, ambitious and community-focused whilst others remain reactive, inward-looking and conflict driven.

Second, many of the challenges experienced by Councils are not caused by ill intent. They are often the result of structural weakness, unclear purpose, poor understanding of roles and weak leadership.

Third, cultural change is possible and indeed has been undertaken successfully in a number of Councils in recent years. However, it requires deliberate effort, clear vision, sustained and determined leadership and practical support.

To address these themes we want to work with and receive support from the new government to develop a...

CAPABILITY, CAPACITY and CULTURAL CHANGE BUILDING FRAMEWORK 2026-2031

VISION FOR THE COMMUNITY AND TOWN COUNCIL SECTOR

It is envisaged that community and town councils will play an active role in meeting the needs of communities and providing vital public services as a result of local government reform. In particular, the aim is that councils will deliver services which meet the needs of vulnerable groups in communities, such as children, young people and the frail elderly. (White Paper: Reforming Local Government: Power to Local People 3 February 2015)

PURPOSE OF THE FRAMEWORK

The framework will enable a strategic approach to be taken to ensuring the community and town council sector has the necessary capability and capacity as well as the right culture to meet the challenges and take advantage of the opportunities the sector faces.

A multi-year capacity, capability and culture building framework will provide clarity and consensus on the additional capability, capacity and culture within the sector required over the short, medium and long term. This will inform decisions on the areas where Welsh Government should target support each year, and what activity will be

commissioned. It will also inform the investment the sector makes itself in training and development.

The purpose of the framework will be to:

- Identify what additional capability and capacity (skills, behaviours, knowledge and understanding) clerks and councillors will need
- Identify when this capability and capacity will need to be built
- Review the existing culture in the sector and set out a path for organisational and sector cultural growth.

The framework will sit alongside the National Training Strategy, which seeks to improve the core knowledge and skills of councillors and clerks and establish a training culture.

FRAMEWORK

The framework adopts a phased approach, mapping out the capability, capacity and cultural requirements over the short, medium and long term. Some of the capability, capacity and culture requirements will be specific to each phase whilst others will be cross cutting and require development throughout the period of the framework.

The skills, behaviours, knowledge and understanding can be broadly mapped under the following themes:

- Commercial and business management skills
- Financial management and governance
- Expertise in provision of services and management of assets
- Understanding customer service and care
- Expertise in needs and support for specific groups
- Skills in engendering community cohesion
- Regulatory and legal expertise
- Leadership
- Staff management skills
- Fulfil role as an elected representative of the community
- Ability to manage change
- Professionalism
- Working in partnership

Phase 1: 2026/27

General capacity, capability and cultural development activity

Within this phase the focus is on raising the capacity and basic skills of the whole sector as well as a cultural audit of the sector. The specific drivers are building the capacity, capability and culture to deal with the intermediate pressures and opportunity of transfer of services and assets; to engage with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015; and encouraging and supporting a diverse range of people to stand as councillors.

- Increasing competence in commercial skills – ability to scrutinise proposals, probe evidence, critically appraise advice, develop plans and make well informed decisions. [*Commercial and business management skills*] [*Expertise in provision of services and management of assets*]
- Building skills and expertise in commissioning services [*Expertise in needs and support for specific groups*] [*Expertise in provision of services and management of assets*]
- Developing an understanding of alternative delivery models [*Commercial and business management skills*]
- Developing the ability to set budgets, report on progress and produce annual reports [*Commercial and business management skills*]
- Encouraging people to stand for election in 2027 elections [*Community leadership*]
- Ensuring new councillors understand what is required of them [*Fulfil role as an elected representative of the community*]
- Enhancing leadership skills – learning to be proactive and setting direction. [*Personal leadership*]
- Awareness of social media [*Ability to manage change*]
- Independent cultural audit exercise of the community and town council sector
- Capability, Capacity and Culture Survey of community and town council sector
- Launch of Community and Town Council Cultural Change training module
- Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru Attitude Survey

Phase 2: 2027/28; 2028/29

Understanding of community and town council capability capacity and culture and intervention activity

This phase coincides with the progress of the Community Boundary's reviews; Community and Town Councils will be making plans for mergers following confirmed boundary changes as well as the findings from the audits and surveys in 2026/27. At this stage the proposed configuration of the community and town council sector will be starting to emerge. This will be an appropriate time to build specific capacity, capability

and culture to address issues identified in Phase 1 relating to financial and management governance as well as any cultural interventions needed to improve organisational effectiveness; councils wishing to make use of the general power of competence will be considering how to meet all three requirements; councils will also be considering how they will respond to the rights of the public when attending council meetings and participation at meetings. Capacity and capability as well as the right culture to engage in the community engagement arrangements of the county council will also need to be considered.

- Audit of all individual Councils against Finance and Governance Toolkit
- Implement individual work programmes for all councils based on results of above exercise including:
- Ability to manage staff effectively [*Staff management skills*]
- Increasing the number of qualified clerks [*Professionalism*]
- Continuing to strengthen financial management and governance procedures [*Financial management and governance*]
- Starting to up skill clerks and staff who could be part of a much larger community council under new arrangements [*Ability to manage change*]
- Awareness of risk management [*Regulatory and legal expertise*]
- Awareness of cultural change [*Organisational development*]
- Partnership working / negotiation skills [*Working in partnership*]

Phase 3: 2029/2030

Transition to new community council arrangements / purpose of sector

This phase follows the completion of the majority of the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru's reviews. There will be a need to map the capability, capacity and culture of existing councils against the recommended new arrangements and a move to a more targeted approach to address specific capability, capacity and cultural development gaps. Capacity and capability building and cultural developments to make the transition to the new community and town councils arrangements once the outcome of the majority of reviews are finalised.

- Ability to manage staff in larger organisations. [*Staff management skills*]
[*Leadership*]
- Development of legislative framework setting out the purpose of community and town councils
- Skills in handling staffing cuts and redundancies [*Staff management skills*]
- Encouraging people to stand in 2031 elections.[*Community leadership*]
- Up skilling clerks and councillors who are now part of a larger community council.[*Expertise in provision of services and management of assets*]
[*Understanding customer service and care*]

- Ensuring new councillors understand what is required of them [*Fulfilling role as representative elected to office*] [*Professionalism*]
- Ensuring new employees understand what is required of them [*Professionalism*]
- Embedding capability, capacity and cultural review processes into day-to-day activity

Now we want to spend the remaining time to take questions or comments from the conference audience in relation to our proposal.

Thankyou and back to the Chair.