

Planning training for community and town councils



What did we set out to do ?

Town and Community Councils play a vital role in the Welsh planning system. They comment on planning applications on behalf of local communities and they work with planning authorities to help prepare Local Development Plans.

Community councillors bring valuable local knowledge and community connections to the planning table.

However, community councillors are usually lay people with limited planning knowledge. There can also be some tension in the relationship with planning authorities, which is often based on simple misunderstandings. Town and community councils have been a key training target for Planning Aid Wales since 2005.



We have worked in innovative ways to trial a range of approaches for improving local community engagement with planning.

But with almost eight hundred community or town councils in Wales averaging ten councillors each, and with new councillors joining and older ones leaving, this is challenging territory.



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Helping communities engage with planning

How did we do it ?

In partnership with One Voice Wales, the umbrella organisation for community councils, and with funding support from the Welsh Government, we published in 2005 an accessible guidance handbook specifically aimed at community and town councillors.

Also with funding from the Welsh Government, we have been developing since 2008 a comprehensive training programme for community and town councillors. The first stage of the work involved a series of regional planning training events. Rather than simply delivering the planning information we thought was needed, we developed an innovative series of 'pilot' workshops that gave an overview of the planning system whilst also:

- ▶ finding out much more about how councillors view their role in planning.
- ▶ identifying specific training needs and learning preferences.
- ▶ trialling a variety of training approaches and materials, and evaluating them to find out which worked best.



The second stage of the programme, now almost complete, has been to develop a comprehensive suite of distance learning materials and activities. These build on the training materials developed for the pilot workshops and the valuable information we gained about training needs and information requirements. They include:

- ▶ a Community Engagement Toolkit to support community and town council involvement in Local Development Plan preparation.
- ▶ five Action Packs which allow councillors to train themselves using a series of innovative discussion-based exercises. Topics include 'Understanding Local Development Plans' and 'Improving communication with your local planning authority'.
- ▶ a series of Fact Sheets on a variety of relevant planning topics.

What difference has it made ?

This project has:

- ▶ given hundreds of participating councillors a basic working knowledge of the Welsh planning system and their role in it
- ▶ built the skills and confidence necessary for councillors to participate effectively in Local Development Plan preparation
- ▶ developed collaborative working between Planning Aid Wales, One Voice Wales, the Society of Local Council Clerks and local planning authorities.
- ▶ led to the delivery of numerous discrete training events for community and town councils and twelve events as part of the One Voice Wales national training programme
- ▶ established Planning Aid Wales as a reputable provider of independent planning advice and training
- ▶ up-skilled our volunteers by building their capacity to deliver training