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## Welsh Places Charter





## About the author

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This Charter has been created by the **Welsh Places Influencing Group**, convened by the IWA. We are a coalition of organisations, practitioners, and academics passionate about creating a Wales in which people's social, economic and environmental and cultural wellbeing is at the centre of our communities.

The following are members:

Michael Woods - Aberystwyth University  
Pippa Coutts - Carnegie UK Trust  
Chris Jones - Chris Jones Studio  
John Heneghan - CLES  
Llŷr ap Gareth - FSB Wales  
Vivienne Sugar - Independent  
Ellen Jones - Institute of Welsh Affairs  
Auriol Miller - Institute of Welsh Affairs  
Andy Regan - Institute of Welsh Affairs  
Peter Williams - The Means  
Lyn Cadwallader - One Voice Wales  
Roisin Willmott - RTPi Cymru  
Scott Orford - WISERD

## About us

We are The Institute of Welsh Affairs, Wales' leading think tank.

We challenge, inspire and drive change, making Wales a better place to live and work for everyone.

We are independent of government and political parties.

By bringing together experts from all backgrounds, we conceive ambitious and informed ideas which secure political commitments to improve our democracy, public services and economy.

We provide platforms for debate, opportunities for people to make their voices heard and agenda-setting research. We are funded by our members, income from our events and training sessions, and are supported by trusts, foundations and other funding bodies.

Our vision is to create a Wales where everyone can thrive.

For more information about the IWA, our policy work, and how to join, as either an individual or organisational supporter, contact:

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## Vision for the Future of Welsh Places

The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and accelerated problems that have long been embedded in our communities. Our places are struggling in the wake of declining retail sales and lockdown restrictions, and this has a knock-on effect on the environmental, economic, social and cultural well-being of Wales.

It is clear that the way in which we live and work will not be the same as we move towards recovery, and big questions need to be asked about what we need to do to ensure that our places can not only recover but are thriving and resilient.

We believe that the answers to these questions lie within our communities, and throughout this Charter we set out a vision for a Wales where more economic power is returned to local citizens, and it is the norm for people to have a greater say in how they shape their communities.

When we talk about community we mean a community of place and the people who live and work in that place. It is important that all communities of place are welcoming for those from diverse backgrounds and with protected characteristics, and that planners and place-based community leaders focus on creating inclusive environments for all.

In order for Wales' places to build back better from the effects of the pandemic and economic shutdown we need to see power redistributed back to our communities.

All communities should have

- the **tools** to better understand their area
- the **voice** to represent their needs to decision makers
- the **means** to make a change in the places where they live and work.

The pandemic recovery presents an opportunity for us to design communities that work for people and foster health and wellbeing.

All Welsh places should

- be **co-designed** with and for all people living and working there
- be **well connected** and promote opportunities for social interaction
- aim to become **Real Living Wage Places**, and support the creation and retention of good quality jobs
- provide high performing and responsive services and facilities for people
- celebrate their **culture and identity**.

We believe that this can create a lasting impact by improving the physical environment and creating sustainable and vibrant places that are focused on supporting people's wellbeing. This document sets out our recommendations, firstly for all places in Wales (urban, suburban, towns and villages) and then specifically for smaller places, often left behind in the policy process.

## Strong Local Democracy

The pandemic has shown us that crisis response is often best managed at a local level, yet the infrastructure is not currently in place to empower people to play an active role in shaping where they live and work during normal times.

## Recommendations

To make this a reality, the next Welsh Government should

1. Introduce a Town and Community Council Development Fund. This would fund development officers to enable the creation of new town and community councils, and support existing councils to improve how they contribute to their own local priorities.
2. Create a grant to support local authorities to introduce deliberative democracy tools such as participatory budgeting and citizens' assemblies, in order to give communities a stronger voice in local democracy.
3. Introduce a Community Enabling Fund for communities to scope and design project proposals which will help them build back better after the pandemic. This fund would support communities who often don't have the capacity to focus on bid writing and development.
4. Provide multi-annual funding frameworks for communities that are not tied to electoral cycles, and that commit to both capital and revenue funding. This would alleviate the risk of a 'cliff-edge' for projects when governments change.
5. Treat data as an essential service. Improving the collection and presentation of data at a community level would in turn strengthen the evidence-base for informed local decision making. (see page 4)





6. Commit to decisive measures to promote diversity. Collect and publish diversity data, and establish a far-reaching Access to Elected Office Fund to include support for people from diverse backgrounds or with protected characteristics. This should include local government and town and community councils, as called for in [Electoral Reform Society Cymru's - A Manifesto for Democracy](#).
7. Introduce mechanisms for communities to have a greater say in decisions about land use, for example enabling Community Asset Transfers, learning from The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015. (see below)

## Midsteeples Quarter, Dumfries

Midsteeples Quarter is a Community Benefit Society set up and run by the people of Dumfries. Their aim is to help shape a new future for the town centre; one that responds to the needs of the community and is run for local people's benefit.

The core principle is that it is local people who have the innovative solutions for their towns. Through community ownership and control, a significant local stake in the future of the town is the best route towards sustainable prosperity that is shared fairly between everyone.

Midsteeples Quarter are bringing eight underused High Street properties under community control and refurbishing these as a contemporary living, working, socialising, learning and enterprising quarter.



8. Establish a national programme for plural ownership. The next Welsh Government should commit existing and new business development resources to develop and grow cooperatives, community businesses, small and medium-sized enterprises, and social enterprises.
9. Support improved community engagement in the planning process by
  - creating a participation framework as a baseline for planners to engage with communities
  - increasing capacity in local authority planning teams
  - supporting the wider skillset and capacity of place focussed officers
  - ensuring effective mechanisms for digital engagement
  - improving accessibility and availability of information about planning for groups who typically do not engage in the process.

## Understanding Welsh Places

Understanding Welsh Places is a bilingual website that presents information on the economy, demographic make-up and local services of more than 300 places in Wales in a quick and easy format.

Currently, a lot of statistics collected about Wales are only available on a local authority level and too often, town communities are overlooked by public policy, because of the difficulty accessing data at that level.

Understanding Welsh Places allows people to explore and compare statistics on towns; including information on

- population, age distribution, ethnicity and national identity
- number of primary and secondary school places per person
- the industry of employment, commuting distances and qualifications
- number of hospitals, GPs and dentists per person.

Funded by the Carnegie UK Trust and the Welsh Government, the website is a vital tool for community groups, planners and policy makers to understand towns in greater detail and enables communities to identify opportunities in their areas.



## Prosperous Places Enabling Wellbeing

The pandemic has highlighted the challenges for towns and town centres across Wales. Many of our places are struggling in the wake of declining retail sales, lockdown restrictions, and changes in consumer behaviour. The recovery presents us with an opportunity to evolve our high streets and to support them to become places where people live, work and spend leisure time, as well as shop.

## Recommendation

### The next Welsh Government should

1. Stop urban sprawl by maintaining a town centre first approach as called for in the [Royal Town Planning Institute Cymru's - Plan the Wales we Need](#). The planning system should
  - Ensure all town centres have a vibrant mix of retail, work, and leisure spaces.
  - Continue to move homes into town centres, in a way that doesn't compromise their commercial development and viability. These homes should be high-quality, affordable, and built to the highest zero carbon standards.
  - Include a focus on repurposing vacant properties in town centres in order to support community resilience and environmental sustainability.
  - Consider the impact of Covid on business premises valuation in light of decreased footfall, and potential long term changes to in-person high street shopping.
  - As the [Federation of Small Businesses \(FSB\) Wales' manifesto](#) notes, business rates and tax policy should reflect the strategic aims of developing Welsh places.



## 2. Continue to support the placemaking principles outlined in the [Placemaking Wales Charter](#) by

- creating towns that put people first by making 20-minute neighbourhoods a central principle in local planning, transport, health and economic policy
- supporting initiatives that improve access to green space, and bring green infrastructure and nature into town centres
- encouraging the re-establishment of community facilities into town centres such as libraries, information points and health centres
- supporting the Welsh language and our heritage by integrating policy areas and encouraging better collaboration between linguistic and spatial planners. This would enable local planning authorities to take account of the Welsh language in land use decisions
- strengthening local supply chains and their alignment to high streets and places through procurement reform, and supporting local aggregation, distribution and shared retail space to nurture and encourage local enterprise and employment
- prioritising and investing in sustainable transport to high streets by integrating walking and cycling with the wider public transport network, and ensuring it serves all users equitably
- establishing an arts and culture programme for towns in Wales which supports local creative practitioners, organisations and communities to work together to develop local cultural strategies. (see below)
- creating town centre incubators and encouraging affordable flexible spaces for pop-up uses on a temporary or seasonal basis, or for local seed ideas to be tested.



## Future Paisley

**Future Paisley** is a radical and wide-ranging programme of events, activities and investments in Paisley. It harnesses the town's unique and internationally-significant cultural stories as a means to transform its future.

Future Paisley aims to create a vibrant cultural town centre, to develop cultural excellence, lift communities out of poverty, and add new dimensions to the local economy.

The programme is unique in its scale and scope in Scotland and aims to change Paisley's image by establishing it as a centre of excellence for cultural regeneration and showing it can be a leader for towns everywhere.



3. Introduce a Future of Welsh Towns Fund. We support the Federation of Small Business Wales' recommendation to create a Future of Welsh Towns Fund that would help every town in Wales create a strategy for its future. These strategies must be co-designed and have data and evidence at their heart.
4. Support The Rural Vision's call for a 'Smart Towns Initiative' to establish a fund to ensure every town in Wales enjoys improved access to digital infrastructure. This initiative should support towns and local businesses to use digital technologies to deliver services and support local businesses.



## Cardigan Town App

In 2016, after securing grant funding, the Cardigan Town Partnership developed a bilingual town app available on all Android and Apple devices.

The purpose of the app is to provide information and act as a guide to the town's heritage and history. By utilising a clever mixture of images, text and a town trail, the app helps people discover important areas and facilities.

It hosts profiles on a number of independent shops and hospitality venues in the town centre and their location in relation to the app user. It also includes information on annual events and festivals held in the town.

The app is promoted through a mix of online marketing, leaflet distribution and a QR code located on all town maps in car parks and within the town centre.

The app employs iBeacon technology and links to a Google Analytics account which allows insights into where users travel from and how often they visit. All information is sent to town centre businesses each month, which in turn, allows them to adjust their marketing and sales plans to ensure they're operating as efficiently as possible.



