Welsh Local Leadership Academy

WLGA·CLlLC

The Effective 'Ward' Councillor
Councillor Workbook

Local Government
Improvement
and Development

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Foreword

Introduction

This workbook has been designed as a development aid for elected members regardless of their experience or responsibilities. Its content is aimed at supporting both existing and newly elected members in their role as council and community representatives.

The term 'Ward Councillor' is used to describe all aspects of the role of the councillor in the community, including that of community representative and community leader. Although the term 'Ward' is technically incorrect as these are now described as Electoral Divisions, we are using the term as it is still widely used and understood by members.

The workbook offers few firm rules for ward members as it recognises that each individual must decide how best to approach the role. This will be influenced by the ward you represent and the methods and approaches that suit you best. The workbook should serve as a direction marker rather than a road map.

As you work through the book you will find a number of features designed to help you think about community leadership and the councillor's role:

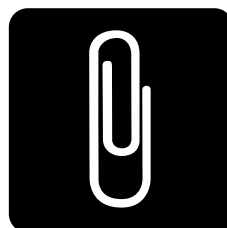These features are represented by the symbols shown below:
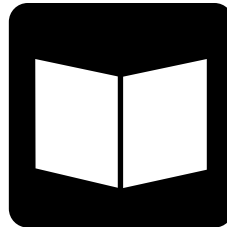
Guidance
This is used to indicate guidance, research, quotations, explanations and definitions that you may find helpful.

Challenges
These are questions or queries raised in the text which ask you to reflect on your role or approach – in essence, they are designed to be thought-provokers.

Case studies
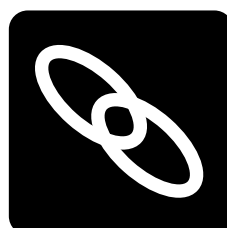These are 'pen pictures' of approaches used by councils elsewhere.

Hints and tips
These represent a selection of good practices which you may find useful.

Useful links
These are signposts to sources of further information, outside of the workbook, which may help with principles, processes, methods and approaches. A full list of useful additional information is set out in the Appendix of the workbook.

The role of the ward councillor >

The role of the Ward Councillor is twofold, firstly to represent your ward, acting as the voice for a diverse, complex community, to the council, partners and others and secondly helping local people understand and participate in local decision making and planning service delivery.

It involves building relationships with groups to inform, consult and empower people and facilitate effective community involvement in local government. It is about actively communicating the work of the council and partners and leading the community and others in developing a vision for the area and identifying the steps needed to achieve it.

"No one has a more important role than the ward councillor in ensuring that local democracy works and that residents believe in it."

IDeA Councillors Guide 2009

Understanding and dealing with the issues in your community and being equipped with the skills, confidence and ability to take action and make a difference is an important role for a member. You will be actively involved in local engagement structures and activities and facilitate dialogue between residents, the council and partners, This can be a real challenge, especially if you have just been elected!

Whilst council services have improved significantly in recent years, evidence suggests that improvements are not always keeping pace with new challenges and rising public expectations of services and service providers. In addition, our major public services – health, policing, and local government – still often operate in 'silos', working to directives from the centre, rather than rethinking how joint efforts at the local level could provide a better solution. The ward member's role is to act as the link between the community, the council and its partners.

The role of the ward councillor >
The Strategic Landscape

Local authorities need to cooperate and collaborate with other statutory and non-statutory organisations in order to ensure that:

- their communities, families and individuals receive the best services that can be provided;

- their services are integrated where possible and are 'citizen- centred' – not geared simply to make life easier for the organisation;

- local services achieve maximum efficiency and most effective use of resources.

Local Service Boards

Local Service Boards (LSBs) are Wales' model for engaging the whole of the Wales public service in a collaborative way of working by integrating services and responding more effectively to citizens' needs. Each of the 22 local authority areas in Wales has a Local Service Board, though some may merge over time. The aim is to improve local services for citizens by identifying key services which require collaborative action, and pooling resources and removing bureaucracy or other obstacles to improve these services. Membership includes key leaders from across public, third and private sectors working as equal partners, taking joint responsibility for connecting the whole network of public services within their area. The Boards agree, and ensure delivery of, a set of priority joint actions to achieve this and also agree the Community Strategy from April 2013.

WLGA Regional Boards

Regional boards consisting of local authority chief executives and leaders have been established in South East Wales, South West Wales, North Wales and Central Wales to encourage collaborative working.

Working with the Voluntary Sector

Voluntary organisations and social enterprises can be effective partners in delivering local services. They can help you to identify local needs and deliver local priorities by helping you link with your communities. They are likely to be involved in community partnerships and will contribute to community strategies. They also provide important local services which compliment that offered by the Council. These organisations are often funded by trusts or the lottery and also by grants from the Council. As a member you will be involved in making decisions regarding the funding of voluntary and community groups.

The role of the ward councillor >
Making a difference in communities

The role of the Councillor in the community can be defined as:

Community Advocate: Bringing neighbourhood/ward issues to Full Council, the Executive and Scrutiny.

Shaping and Improving Services: Improving services to individuals through surgeries, casework, walkabouts, trouble-shooting, community action and working with partners.

Local services, that impact on communities are frequent topics of conversation with constituents and typically include:

- Parks and open space
- Street services
- Community Safety
- Schools
- Housing
- Planning
- Community facilities
- Local Business
- Youth services
- Neighbourhood regeneration initiatives
- Healthy living

Community Engagement: This goes beyond consultation to include mobilising residents, mediation and brokering relationships, identifying communities of interest, identifying those vulnerable to exclusion, and engaging with transient populations.

Community Leadership: Developing with residents and partners a vision for the local area and taking steps to make it happen. Engaging the community in decision making, service planning and delivery and encouraging the community to be part of the solution.

The Political Dimension: Crucial for accountability as you are elected on a local manifesto and bound by party discipline (where applicable). Political group dynamics have a strong influence on how the ward role is conducted.

The task of representing a diverse and mobile mix of communities, groups and individuals is a complex one. Some groups are very hard to involve.

Generally speaking, the wider their range of approaches to community contact, the more people councillors will reach.

The role of the ward councillor >
Making a difference in communities

What do you think are the key characteristics of a good ward member?

Reflect for a moment on what you feel are the five most important characteristics needed as a ward member?

1 _____

2 _____

3 _____

4 _____

5 _____

A MORI survey in July 2001 identified the following characteristics:

Councillors should be:

• Visible, accessible and accountable.

• Someone who lives locally, understands the local community and stands up for it.

• Someone who is pro-active, listens and who is available to local people.
  'They should come out and talk to us, get to know us'

• Someone who acts on local views

Understanding your ward >

The role of representing a group of several thousand people is complex because of the patterns of change in social and political life in recent decades. Communities have now become increasingly diverse and the economic down turn has affected communities, businesses and families in different ways.

You may have lived in your ward for many years, but the chances are you will not know all of the communities that live there and all of their issues and problems.

The dynamics of wards change due to the movement of people in and out of the community.

Ward walks

A good way to familiarize yourself with your ward (electoral division) is to walk, cycle or drive around it – even if you have lived in the area for years – looking at roads, pavements, play areas, open spaces and other community facilities. This gives you an opportunity to note and report things like broken fences or equipment, potholes, graffiti and faulty streetlights to the appropriate council department and record action taken – useful as a demonstration of achievement. It can also be a good opportunity to meet informally with your constituents.

Some councillors carry out ward walks accompanied by fellow councillors or key council officers so they can make decisions on the spot. A few quick wins will make a good first impression. The ward walk could be a regular activity, accompanied on occasion by key local contacts like residents' association chairs, town or community councillors or community police. It's useful to build a shared knowledge of problems in an area and discuss possible solutions.

Understanding your ward >

Think about your ward

How would you describe the overall population in the ward you represent?
_____
_____
_____

What percentage of migrant workers live in the area?
_____

What percentage makes up the BME population?
_____

How is worklessness being tacked in your ward?
_____
_____
_____

How is my council addressing issues in housing/affordable housing?
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_____
_____

Do I fully understand what the Community Strategy is in this area?
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How do those priorities affect my ward?
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_____
_____

What were the most recent educational results for the schools in my ward?
_____
_____
_____

What mechanisms do I currently use to feedback this to my council?
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_____
_____

Understanding your ward >

Helpful information

You can also find information from InfoBase Cymru. Which gives you easy access to a wide range of statistics and indicators for different areas in Wales. The statistics cover a range of themes including people, the economy, education, health, housing and crime.
www.infobasecymru.net

And from the Welsh Assembly Government's statistical unit
www.new.wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/;jsessionid

The range of statistical information compiled by the Welsh Assembly Government arranged by theme. Area information is also available.

And from statistics provided from the office for National Statistics (ONS). This website provides useful data on the ward you represent and how it compares to other wards. This intelligence is gathered from data on family credit, income support, university admissions, attendance allowance, incapacity benefit, severe disablement allowance, and other useful data.
www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/

Representing local voices in communities >

The council is required to represent the interests of the whole community. Discovering the needs of different groups in the community is an important part of your role as a ward member.

Occasionally there will be conflicts of interest requiring sensitive judgement, e.g. dog owners, parents of young children and walkers might disagree about the use of a local leisure park. Representing these different views in an open and reasoned way is a crucial part of your role.

In carrying out the representation role you will often need to act as an advocate for individuals and the community. This will require skills in:

listening – actively finding out what people think and want. This can be done by knocking on doors or walking around estates, or by seeking out groups that you do not know well, e.g. mother and toddler groups, BME community groups or youth groups. You may prefer to use organised surgeries to meet people face to face and discuss the issues that keep them awake at night.

questioning – sympathetic questioning to get to the 'heart of an issue', to generate thoughts and ideas and to challenge extreme views, uninformed opinions and misleading information.

advocacy – ensuring that local voices are 'heard' when issues are debated and decisions are taken. This can often involve speaking up for those people whose views are under-represented, unspoken or frequently ignored, and for those people whose views you may not share.

facilitating – helping individuals and groups to come together to discuss issues affecting the ward, to debate different points of view and to reach consensus on solutions that may meet local needs.

giving information – talking to people and providing information in plain language to enable them to understand local government services and processes,
e.g. avoiding the use of council jargon and technical or legalistic language.

Possible tensions and challenges to this are:

- Ward interests versus wider council interests
- Getting things done versus consulting widely
- Strategic needs versus local objections
- Balanced views versus single interest politics
- Asking for views versus avoiding tokenism

Whose Voice is it Anyway? Community Consultation and Engagement

Imagine the council has asked you to represent the views of your constituents in the following situations. How would you seek views in these situations and who would you speak to?

a) Closing a local day centre which provides improved job and volunteering opportunities for people with a learning disability.

_____

_____

_____

b) Identifying how well local leisure services are meeting the needs of the community.

_____

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_____

c) Identifying what support there is for a local skateboard park for young people.

_____

_____

_____

Consider the answers you have given above. How many times have you actually consulted people in this way? How often do you give your thoughts on people's likely views without taking the trouble to canvas their opinions?

Shaping local priorities >

As a community leader you will need to be proactive in consulting local people and organisations on relevant council decisions prior to their being taken. To do this you need to scrutinise the council's agendas in order to spot issues likely to be of interest to your ward.

The focus of Councillors roles in relation to shaping local priorities is relevant to all councillors, tackling priorities such as childhood obesity, teenage pregnancy, affordable housing, street scene, and crime and disorder reduction.

Keeping in close contact with senior managers of the council should enable you to establish an 'early warning system' to find out about issues that concern the ward but do not make it onto committee agendas. Speaking to other local community leaders may help, e.g. other ward members, community volunteers, key staff in local voluntary and community organisations the local police and schools.

Once you know your ward and what your constituents expect of you, you can then set some priorities and make some judgment as to how far they are compatible or conflict with the council's overall priorities for the area as a whole.

👍

"You are always mindful of your community's views and the potential impact thereon before forming council policies. In the event that a council decision based on policy goes against the wishes of some of your electorate, you have to convey that to them and explain the reasoning for taking a decision."

Cllr Keith Evans Ceredigion County Council

Shaping local priorities >

Reflect on what you want to achieve for your ward in relation to the council's objectives

Ward Priorities

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Council Priorities

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

How do they compare?

_____
_____
_____

Where are there opportunities for synergy and where the risk of conflict?

_____
_____
_____

Shaping local priorities >

Imagine you are faced with the following emerging issues in your ward, In all these instances what could you do? Who could you contact?

You have received calls from residents complaining of on going problems with disorder around a suburban convenience store, resulting in vehicle theft and residents feeling disempowered to act for fear of reprisals.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

A community group asks for your support in seeking some funding as part of redevelopment and restoration in a multiple deprivation area in your ward.

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_____

You have been approached by the youth service to represent and support a project plan for local young people that is designed to promote green spaces, sports and encourage skills development. The plan is in its infancy, the youth service want you to help drive the plan.

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_____
_____
_____
_____

Look at the answers you have given and your approach. Do you have all of the contact details for these agencies and groups? If not how can you get hold of this information? Do any of your answers link into the Council's priorities and Community Strategy?

Shaping local priorities >

Councillor Call for Action

If Councillors have concerns about anti social behaviour or substance misuse in their area they have a right to bring this to the attention of their Council's Crime and Disorder Overview and Scrutiny Committee.

'The Councillor Call for Action (CCfA) for crime and disorder matters came into force in October 2009. CCfA gives councillors a new right to raise matters connected to anti-social behaviour and substance misuse which are of local concern with their Council's Overview and Scrutiny Committee. Overview and Scrutiny Committees can then decide whether to use their powers to investigate the issue. There are a range of options available to committees in considering how to respond. They could, for example, instigate a review of policy, call members and officers to attend a meeting and answer questions or make recommendations to the executive. They can also require the executive to review a decision that it has made. Any report produced by the committees as a result of a CCfA should be sent to the local authority, the community safety partners and the local councillor who raised the issue. CCfA is therefore a valuable tool in equipping councillors to act as powerful advocates for the communities they serve and to strengthen still further their role as community champions. Councillors will of course continue to resolve issues informally, as they do now. But where they are not satisfied that real action has been taken to resolve the issue they have raised, they have the ability to ask the overview and scrutiny committee to take the matter further.'

Guidance for the Scrutiny of Crime and Disorder Matters-Wales Welsh Assembly Government Guidance Circular No: 001/2010

Cohesive communities >

Local authorities' community leadership role, enshrined by the Local Government Act 2000, is fundamental to a councillor's role in building cohesive communities.

What is Community Cohesion?

"The term community cohesion is used to describe how everyone in a geographical area lives alongside each other with mutual understanding and respect"
Getting on together - A community cohesion strategy for Wales,
Welsh Assembly Government 2009

Like most aspects of community life, cohesion is something that people themselves generate but which local authorities and their partners can facilitate.

Councillors can contribute by involving all the different sections of the community and partners recognising valuing and using the diversity of knowledge and skills available in the voluntary and community sectors. You'll need to be prepared to be flexible in order to respond and adapt to circumstance and issues as they arise.

Councillors can also convene local forums that bring together different community interests as a mechanism not only to feed into the council's decision-making process, but also to address conflicts or misunderstandings between different groups within a local community.

Communities First

This programme was launched in 2001 and there are now over 150 Communities First partnerships across Wales.

Each one brings together members of the local community with representatives of the public, private and voluntary sectors to develop local Action Plans. Small staff teams support each partnership. They are normally based in the heart of the community, familiar and accessible to local people and helping to connect them to service providers and support agencies.

Communities First partnerships support a very wide range of work with people of all ages and tackle very many aspects of deprivation, improving health, creating jobs, and bringing additional funding into these communities.

Through Communities First, environmental and economic Regeneration go hand in hand with community engagement and action for social justice.

Communicating and influencing >

Understanding fully the nature and needs of your ward and making the effort to truly represent local people should provide you with a strong mandate for action, i.e.:

- you can speak with confidence on behalf of your community when issues affecting your ward are debated or decisions need to be taken;

- you can assess whether there is general satisfaction with council services (and those of other partner agencies) in your ward and whether local people believe they are getting best value from the money being spent;

- you can support community action and promote self-help among your constituents by understanding their aims, aspirations, views and tactics;

- you can promote partnership working between public, private and voluntary organisations in response to recognised community needs.

For many people, it is this satisfaction of acting on behalf of their local community that encourages them to become an elected member. But the biggest challenge for ward councillors is often in getting the council or an outside body to take local views into account when making decisions – a challenge that will require you to develop your communication and influencing skills.

In influencing the decision makers you will need to use your skills and judgment, but should always adhere to the following ground rules:

- prepare for meetings by studying the agenda and making sure you are properly informed and fully prepared about the issues to be discussed. Do not 'hijack' a meeting and raise issues that are pertinent to you but irrelevant to the debate;

- play an active part in the debate and form sound conclusions based on what is best for the community – and then abide by any majority decisions;

- ensure, with other members, that the council's deliberations and decision-making procedures are properly managed – be robust in your scrutiny;

- represent the whole electorate and not just those who voted for you; listen, and then represent the views of the community when discussing council business and working with outside bodies;

- maintain proper standards of behaviour as an elected representative of the people (e.g. adhere to your council's Code of Conduct).

Communicating and influencing >

Some ideas for consulting with people

Surveys and questionnaires can be paper based or sent by email.

- Focus groups get a selection of people together to debate a specific issue.

- Road shows can help you take your views out into the community and seek people's opinions.

- Consider using social media such as blogging and social networking. Used effectively these can engage those who would not normally have access to local councillors. Check current guidance to make sure that you comply with the Code of Conduct.

  Useful guidance: Connected Councillors, a guide to using social media to support local leadership **www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=17797214**

Raising your profile >

Think about all your council duties in a typical month, e.g. attending Council meetings, casework, attending ward based meetings, working with partners and getting involved in local action etc. The table reveals the public's expectations regarding the work of their councillors:

Which two or three things on this list would you most like your councillor to do?	What councillors are seen to do	What councillors should do
Dealing with the problems of people who live in their wards	43%	75%
Preparing for and attending committee meetings	35%	11%
Consulting with the public and representing their views	30%	68%
Representing the Council on various outside bodies	23%	7%
Setting the Council's priorities	22%	22%
Reviewing the Council's performance	22%	21%

Taken from the IDeA (now Local Government Improvement and Development) Website 2009-Raising the profile of elected members.

Working with the media >

Another key feature of your communicating and influencing role is the impact that you have in the local media. In a democracy the media is a vital mechanism for ensuring the transparency of local political decision-making and for holding councils and elected members to account.

There is a generally held assumption that local government gets a 'bad press', but evidence suggests that local media, in particular, are willing to present local government in a positive light, if handled in the right way.

Your Council will have protocols governing the issuing of press releases and speaking to the local media – if you are not sure whether your council has such procedures you should check before taking any action.

At the end of the day local press, television and radio journalists want a story to cover. These may often be the main source of information on local government for both interested and disinterested citizens and you will need to use your communication and influencing skills to ensure that a balanced and accurate account is given to the media in the first instance.

👍 **Some tips for handling the media**

- Don't respond to press calls out of the blue ask for background and the deadline – then respond;

- Identify key messages and good, punchy quotations that can be presented to the media;

- Don't point the finger, complain or consistently say 'no comment' you may get a bad reputation;

- Build a long term relationship with the media, e.g. write features and suggest news stories;

- Don't use jargon, council speak or inflammatory words – these might come back to haunt you;

Working with the media >

Have I got news for you?

Imagine you have been asked to give a press briefing in the situations below. In each case, identify what your key message (or headline grabber) might be and what you want to achieve from the press communication:

The Council has just received an "Excellence Wales" award for its waste recycling services and you are keen to communicate the significance of this to the wider community. The long term success of the recycling approach will depend on the willing commitment of local people.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Following a high profile campaign by a celebrity TV chef, the council is leading a local initiative to persuade parents to encourage their children to eat healthier meals at school – most schools in the area are now offering a choice of healthy meals, but a significant proportion of children are still opting for unhealthy alternatives.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Look again at your responses to the scenarios above. Have you approached a media campaign in this way before? Do you generally feel you have the knowledge and/or confidence to handle media relations? Do you need to brush up on your communication and influencing skills?

Handling casework >

Some members find casework the best part of being a councillor – the opportunity to sort out problems for people who find the council 'an impossible nightmare'. For other members casework is the impossible nightmare.

Your casework will come from:

letters, telephone calls and e-mails; surgeries, advice sessions and doorstep calls; campaigning and other political activity.

The general steps you will need to consider are:

Identifying what the problem is – establish the facts and find out how your constituent wants you to help. Identify whether there is a long history to the problem and who has been approached in the past. Avoid promising to sort out every problem, but do offer a sympathetic ear at all times.

Referring the problem to the appropriate council department – you may want to put your concern in writing to a council officer, although most members find that a quick face to face discussion, telephone call or e-mail is quicker and easier in sorting out casework problems. Get in the habit of taking copies of all correspondence.

Providing feedback – after you have made initial enquiries, let the constituent know what you are doing and keep them up to date with progress and eventual outcomes. They will not know what is going on unless you tell them.

Considering the wider issues – reflect on the issues raised by the casework and let your co-members know. A number of similar concerns raised with members may suggest that an issue needs to be dealt with by a new or revised policy or a scrutiny review. Where you have had a success, it is worth letting your fellow ward members know in case they face a similar situation. Always try and publicise your success to local residents through leaflets and newsletters – but if you are giving details of the case ask permission from your constituents first.

Handling casework >

Consider the following examples of casework. Write down the steps you would take to resolve the issues presented:

A council tenant complaining about the noise, bad language, music, banging and car repair 'business' being conducted by the new tenants next door.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

A neighbour of a wheelchair-using resident complaining that the recently introduced recycling service is not taking into account the needs of such residents who have to rely on neighbours to help them out.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Is this typical of the casework you face? How often do you review your casework performance? How are you balancing casework against the Council's wider priorities?

Next steps

Where do you go from here?

Look back over the material contained in earlier sections of this workbook and consider the following:

What key action points can you identify to improve your effectiveness as a ward member, i.e. what three or four things might you start doing, keep doing or stop doing?

_____
_____
_____

Have you identified any gaps in your knowledge or shortcomings in your personal skills? If so, please set these out below and identify how any further training or development might help you, e.g. further reading/ research, attending courses, coaching, mentoring, work shadowing etc.

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Appendix

Sources of further information

Printed publications

Community Leadership - What is it?, Local Government Association (LGA).

Community Engagement and Empowerment - A Guide for Councillors (IDeA, now called Local Government Improvement and Development) 2010

Useful websites

WLGA
www.wlga.gov.uk

The Welsh Assembly Government's Community Cohesion strategy for Wales
wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/communitycohesion/publications/strategy/?lang=en

Information on community Leadership
www.wlga.gov.uk/english/community-leadership/

Connected councillors - a guide to using social media to support local leadership
www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=17797214

One Voice Wales provide an advice and guidance service to member Community and Town Councils in Wales
www.onevoicewales.org.uk/

The website of Data Unit Wales – helps local authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government use data more effectively so that they understand and improve the services they provide to the people of Wales.
www.dataunitwales.gov.uk/Home.asp

Info Base Cymru
www.infobasecymru.net

information on health impact assessment (HIA) in Wales
www.wales.nhs.uk/sites3/home.cfm?OrgID=522

Appendix A
Sources of further information

The range of statistical information compiled by the Welsh Assembly Government arranged by theme. Area information is also available.
www.new.wales.gov.uk/topics/statistics/theme/;jsessionid

www.info4local.gov.uk
Provides an online, one-stop gateway for local authorities to get quick and easy access to local government-related information that is published on the web sites of central government departments and agencies. Generic information is relevant for both England and Wales but specific information on Wales is limited.

Website of the Office for National Statistics (ONS) which provides ward profiles.
www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk/dissemination/

www.upmystreet.com
Type in the relevant postcode for social and economic information by neighbourhood.

www.lacors.gov.uk
the local government central body responsible for overseeing local authority regulatory and related services in the UK

Ffynnon is an organisational performance management database. Thirty stakeholder organisations across Wales already have the system which allows users to collate and present information about risks, projects and performance indicators by using a range of visual representations.
www.wales.gov.uk/topics/localgovernment/ffynnon/?lang=en

The Wales Audit office
www.wao.gov.uk/