

CTC 01

Ymgynghoriad ar rôl, llywodraethiant ac atebolrwydd y sector cynghorau tref a chymuned  
Consultation on the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council  
sector

Ymateb gan: Y Cynghorydd Gwenfair Jones, y Cynghorydd Phil Rees a'r Cynghorydd Arfon Jones

Response from: Councillor Gwenfair Jones, Councillor Phil Rees and Councillor Arfon Jones

Dear Members of the Committee,

This is a joint response to the Inquiry by the following members of Gwersyllt Community Council:

- Councillor Gwenfair Jones - Chair of Gwersyllt Community Council
- Councillor Phil Rees, Vice Chair of Gwersyllt Community Council
- Councillor Arfon Jones,

As well as being Community Councillors we are also former members of Wrexham County Borough Council.

This response is our joint views and does not purport to represent the views of Gwersyllt Community Council as a Corporate body

**The role and value of community and town councils in Wales;**

I believe that on the whole T&CC's in Wales do play an important role in their communities in that their members are known to the community. Many T&CC's have embraced new technology both as corporate entities and by individual members who are effective at imparting information. The effect of this is that members have more contact with the public both online and face to face with ours having more public attendance at meetings. Many T&CC's own assets which they manage for the benefit of the community, others provide a public good by financing many beneficial wellbeing and other projects by groups of interested community members. There is no doubt that T&CC's have £millions in assets as well as £millions in cash and reserves which on the whole the sector is managing well.

**Whether the sector is fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape;**

Welsh Government legislation changes to the sector has been both a blessing and a curse with the most efficient councils in the sector embracing the changes and making the most of new powers granted to them as well as accepting the responsibility and accountability that the government demands of them. The cursed are the few and far between that sadly come to the notice of the WAO and the Ombudsman's Office for a variety of transgressions and are struggling to turn things around because of the quality of their members and their ability to get to grips with the issues. There are however very few instances of downright criminality within the sector and we should rejoice in that. Another issue is the competence of the officers of the councils, are they trained to a suitable level, are they subject to scrutiny and overview or do they have the confidence of the members and are subject to very little scrutiny.

The National organisations like the Wales Audit Office and Public Services Ombudsman have a role to play in helping the sector be more fit for purpose but they can't because they themselves are not fit for purpose. First of all small community councils should not be subjected to the

detailed audit that the WAO put council's through but rather a simplified process that Parish Councils in England have to submit. The WAO cannot cope with 700 audit reports submitted to them every year and is nothing more than a cash cow exercise for their balance sheet. There is no need for the many petty pedantic reports that the sector get and the work they create to justify their existence. Secondly how long is the Public Services Ombudsman going to excuse bad behaviour by Councillors with their stock phrase, "Grow a thicker skin"? This is not an appropriate response to often misogynistic bullying that goes on in the sector.

If the T&CC sector is to become fit for purpose then they need support from UA Monitoring Officers, WAO and PSOW to become fit for purpose first and show a commitment to the T&CC sector

**Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency;**

This is an area of concern especially if councillors are not up to the task of scrutinising the council because of a lack of training or generally a lack of interest. There are some good examples of overview but in general I think the sector are behind the curve on this. Because of the localised nature of councils, councillors and officers are often on friendly personal terms and that does not help in holding officers to account and scrutinising the council effectively. There is scope for poor performance here and needs addressing.

**Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes;**

These new developments are often welcomed but not by everyone and some are reluctant to embrace hybrid meetings and social media but over time this will change as a new digitally aware generation takes over. This is a good development and raises the profile of the sector.

**How new powers and responsibilities for this tier of government are utilised to support communities.**

The new GPOC General Power of Competency is to be welcomed and undoubtedly the more innovative and enthusiastic in the sector will use to maximise the benefits to their communities. OVW has a whole host of great examples of councils innovating with the new powers. The question is what do with the councils who continue to plod along doing what they've always done. The Unitary Authorities have a role to play in empowering the sector but they don't as they see the sector as a relatively small part of the wheel. For example the UA may pass on responsibility for play areas to the sector and then turn round and say you can't make improvements without our consent and using our recommended companies...why bother if you can't deliver the service in a more cost effective way? Secondly any requests to the UA goes straight on the back burner i.e. an asset transfer request in Gwersyllt has still not been completed after 6 years!

Recommendations.

1. Mandatory core training for all Councillors within 3 months of election/co option (no exceptions)

2. Simplified audits for smaller Community Councils
3. WAO to be more proportionate in their audits
4. WAO to review fees and stop trying to justify their existence.
5. PSOW to take complaints more seriously and stop using "Grow a thicker skin"
6. Mandatory for councils to adopt and comply with the Finance Governance Toolkit.
7. All Council members to use a council email for council business.
8. Unitary Authorities to provide support and liaison for the sector.
9. Unitary Authorities to treat the sector with more respect and not the contempt in which they hold them currently.
10. Rationalise the sector i.e Would the city of Wrexham be better off with a City Council rather than 4 Community Councils?

Regards,

Gwenfair Jones

Phil Rees

Arfon Jones.