

CTC 03

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: Bryony Nicholson

Response from: Bryony Nicholson

To whom it may concern,

I am writing in an individual capacity to provide a response to the Inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector which is currently being hosted by the Senedd. The Town Council to which I am elected, Abergavenny Town Council, will be submitting a separate response. I have cc'ed my personal email so that I have a personal record of this account.

### **Concerns about the timescale of this inquiry**

Firstly, I want to express my concerns about the timescale of this inquiry. I see that it was launched at the end of July, just in time for the August recess. That has left six weeks (from 1<sup>st</sup> September to the inquiry deadline of 18<sup>th</sup> October) for councils to be aware of the inquiry, meet to discuss a response, compose a response and submit it. Within the timescales of local government, which at the Town and Community level does not meet on a weekly basis, this is not a long time. I am concerned that this will have impacted the number and quality of responses.

#### **1. Fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape**

Any organisation which seeks to serve its community should seek to reflect its community, and this conversation has become louder over the last ten years as all sectors have had to take a long, hard look at their approaches to Equity, Diversity and Inclusion. Yet, this is not a conversation I see happening in the Town and Community Council sector.

Wales has an ageing population; currently just under 30% of the population are [over 60 and above](#). Yet, a 2018 [report](#) found that "over half (55 per cent) of community councillors are aged 60 or above" and "65% are male" whilst 98.8% identified as white. A quick glance at the Town Councils in Monmouthshire shows that not much has changed.

I see barriers to entry for younger people, especially women, to engage in these roles. This lack of diversity, equity and inclusion impacts on Town and Community Councils being fit for purpose for an evolving landscape. Current barriers to access:

- **Lack of clear, accessible and digestible information** about what is expected when you stand as a Town or Community Councillor. Millennials crave information before they make decisions ([this](#) shows a link between research and purchasing, but can be extrapolated to go beyond just purchase decisions). There is no clear, consistent information about the expectations of Councillors once elected in terms of time commitment and amount of work.
- **No monetary compensation.** It's no secret that the cost of housing, food and childcare are going up year on year. Meanwhile, wages in Wales are not matching inflation, meaning that families are struggling to make ends meet, even across two salaries. To commit an unknown number of hours of work to receive £150 for the time and effort,

against a backdrop of increasingly high demands on the family unit, can feel like an unmanageable commitment.

- **Archaic cultures.** If the findings of the 2018 survey are still true, that means men over the age of 60 are over represented at Town and Community Council level. This could mean that the cultures of councils are being built on the foundations of the way the workforce operated ten or twenty years ago. We know that women and people of colour have been consistently discriminated against in the workforce, and whilst I hope this is now changing, councils need to evolve too and move their culture beyond the past. I was shocked at some of the behaviour of older men when I joined Abergavenny Town Council, and found it completely out of step with current professional standards in the workplace.

There is need to seriously look at whether the statutory duties demanded by Town and Community Councils across Wales can be effectively met by an unrepresentative workforce. If the majority of Town and Community Councillors are aged over 60, we can assume that many of them no longer engage in the paid workforce, meaning that there is a skills and information gap between the needs of communities (which represent all ages), and the abilities of local Councils (which over-represent one age group). Without any monetary compensation, how can we attract people who are already over worked and underpaid?

## **2. Scope of digital/new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation**

The relationship between new technology and Town and Community Councils seems to be several years, if not a decade, out of date. Whilst provision was brought in during Covid for online meetings, I have been using online tools to have virtual meetings in work since I started my career, in 2014. There has been an explosion in Artificial Intelligence recently and yet there appears to be no moves to explore how this can be used to support the local governance sector. In my workplace, AI is taking notes and summarising them for us and then being checked by a colleague. There is a need for more training to support more agile working and use new technologies to make the work more effective and efficient.

## **3. How new powers and responsibilities are utilised to support communities**

There is a lack of understanding within the general public about which level of government does what for whom. This leads to Town and Community Councils being held to unrealistic expectations as constituents expect councils to look after services which are the remit of the County Council. Yet whilst County Councils have large workforces with varied experiences and skills, Town and Community Councils are often staffed by one part time, or full time, member of staff, with a limited range of hours in the day and range of skills. This means that local councils struggle to engage communities effectively as there is little to no resource for community engagement. As above, due to under-representation of groups aged 60 and under, there is also a risk that there is a lack of understanding in councils about how to engage effectively with other age groups. For example, social media is often overlooked and I am proud of the work we have done in Abergavenny to engage a local agency to manage our communications, allowing us to engage dynamically with a range of audiences online.

I hope the above will be taken into consideration and I am happy to be contacted if useful to share further thoughts and experiences.

Best wishes,

Bryony Nicholson