CTC 05
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: Cyngor Tref Y Fenni
Response from: Abergavenny Town Council

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

Abergavenny Town Council (ATC) has a defined role and value, in working for the benefit of the town, using a strategy and action plan against which ATC can be judged. ATC pride themselves on their annual report which is delivered to each household in the 6 wards. ATC have expanded their digital communication but there is still a lot to do in communicating with all residents.

ATC have a good relationship with Monmouthshire County Council (MCC). With members on both the TC and the CC, we are in a fortunate position. ATC has a good relationship with MCC so there is no need for a dedicated officer to liaise between the two bodies. As representatives are based on size of population and wards, ATC increased from 5 to 6 wards after a recent boundary review. ATC feel this review could have better reflected how the settlements across the whole conurbation are represented. ATC try to encourage participation with committee meetings by advertising these online as well as the obligatory notice that is publicly displayed.

Town and Community Councils might be encouraged to have an annual open session for all members of the public to attend to voice opinions, views and ideas. Several councils do this with good effect. It may stimulate the public to attend Council meetings more often.

We are aware that by supporting events and activities in the centre of the town we are also benefitting the wider community who do not pay the precept which is directly controlled by ATC.

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

ATC can take a specific role in improving our town, using the strategy and action plan and can provide specific events that benefit the town as a whole and bring in tourists who improve our economy by using our facilities. ATC can be judged against their strategy and action plan.

The audit process is bureaucratic, rigid, being a one size fits all and could be more flexible. Better training and understanding would be beneficial. ATC recognise the excellent training modules provided by One Voice Wales. However, in practice, this does not cover what is needed in order to submit full audit reports to Audit Wales. Enabling some sort of mentoring system, or point of contact, to allow RFO's the opportunity to ask specific questions in order to fulfil the requirements of the basic and full audit submissions would be more beneficial.

Town and Community Councils are being more and more left to provide the Non-statutory services as these are being decimated in many parts due to County Council budget squeezes. Our examples of this are street cleaning, care of environmental spaces and even toilets!! Welsh Government should recognise this trend and make sure Town and Community Councils have the authority, skills, staff and resources to be able to at least provide the basic Non statutory services communities require for wellbeing.

There is a critical shortage of trained individuals to fill the vacancies either as clerks or RFO's. There is an increase in need of support staff to enable clerks to fulfil their roles as demands on their time increase, and expectations of the community alter and grow. One Voice Wales and SLCC provide a wealth of training opportunities, but ultimately finding the time to release staff to undertake this (CiLCA takes 200 hours) puts a huge pressure on all the other duties that are expected to be undertaken at the same time as these obligatory and compulsory studies.

Average age in most councils does not reflect the demographic of the communities we serve. There is a real need to explore how to encourage a broad cross section of the community to take part in council activities.

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

Currently at ATC every councillor is elected but we have a policy for co-option. ATC Councillors do the recommended training facilitated by One Voice Wales and ATC publish the training undertaken. ATC produce an annual report and cannot see how these could be standardised as each council is different. Councillors feel there is too much bureaucracy on the clerk especially when there is a small staff.

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It's important to develop types of consultation that will give a voice to all demographics across our communities, especially those who don't usually have a voice or traditionally engage with these processes. This includes being mindful of timescales and the facilities available to enable them to be carried out in a meaningful and productive way.

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

ATC use technology to enable hybrid meetings. This helps those whose work takes them away from home, or those with childcare duties to attend, thus adding to the diversity of councillors. ATC pay for technical support from a local tech company, as staffing being so small there is not scope to have a dedicated IT expert employed directly by the Council. Social media has enabled residents to see what we are doing and to attend events. ATC have outsourced the design and management of their website and social media channels to a local media company. This enables it all to be accessible and up to date, producing relevant content which

is then programmed and approved by the Council. This would not be possible if ATC had to rely solely on its own staff to do this.

ATC cannot rely only on digital means of communication with the residents. There are still groups more easily reached by traditional print and press.

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ATC already utilises Smart Technology for delivery of town services and is always seeking ways to expand this area of activity.

It should be recognised that not all Councillors are familiar with the technology that town and community councils are now expected to utilise to engage with day to day council business. It should be possible for them to have immediate access to training in this area once elected, including the necessary equipment that may be required.

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

ATC do not have GPOC. We have managed well without it so far, but there is a real need for someone to come to grips with the shortage of qualified clerks and RFOs, and this cannot be solved by individual councils unless the training can be made more accessible and achievable in more flexible ways.

ATC are grateful to One Voice Wales for the sharing of good practice and innovation across the sector at their conferences and online updates. This role could be expanded more in future.