

CTC 16

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: Roger Evans

Response from: Roger Evans

Inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

Written evidence submitted by Mr. Roger Evans, Oakdale

Introduction

As a firm supporter of local government, I value the **essential** services it provides. However, the bottom tier of local government in Wales - Community & Town Councils (CTCs) - does not provide any such services and I very much hope that this Inquiry will recognise that as a first principle.

I believe it is important to take into account the 30% of Welsh electors who do not have a Community or Town Council - mainly Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, Merthyr Tydfil and many parts of the South Wales Valleys - and are managing perfectly well without one.

As a founder-member of Gwent County Council in 1973, I worked with my colleagues on the then Islwyn Borough Council to serve the people of Ynysddu community. We did not have a Community Council, we did not need one, we did not miss one, and we didn't want one.

I now live in Oakdale, which again does not have a Community Council and, having followed the activities of nearby Community Councils over many years, have been reinforced in my previous opinions of them.

My twelve years' experience as a County Councillor and subsequent research has led me to conclude that Community and Town Councils are:

- Unwanted
- Undemocratic
- Unfair
- An extra financial burden
- Financially uncontrolled
- Unnecessary
- Exporters of local resources
- Obscure and opaque.

Each of these objections is explained in more detail below, together with my conclusions and recommendations.

I fear that this Inquiry is being carried out without the knowledge of the vast majority of Welsh voters and council taxpayers; most of the submissions the Committee receives will be from Community and Town Councils whose primary objective is self-preservation and which have the time and resources to tell you how wonderful and vital they are.

It is imperative that the Committee also considers the view from the other side and takes full account of that before reaching any conclusions. I therefore implore the Committee, on behalf of the above-mentioned 30%, not to impose another layer of government or taxation

on us.

Unwanted

According to Welsh Government statistics, at the Community Council elections held in 2012, 67% of seats across Wales were not contested; in Gwent the figures for uncontested seats were: Blaenau Gwent 86%, Caerphilly 59%, Monmouthshire 62%, Newport 69% and Torfaen 26%, an average of just over 60%.

Subsequent elections demonstrated a similar pattern. The 2017 figures were: Wales 62%; and in Gwent: Blaenau Gwent 59%, Caerphilly 65%, Monmouthshire 61%, Newport 64% and Torfaen 63%. In 2022 the Wales-wide figure was still 62% uncontested, hardly a ringing endorsement of democratic interest or support.

Those same 2012 statistics also showed 12% of seats were vacant after the election, a pattern repeated in subsequent election years:-

2017: Wales 17%; Blaenau Gwent 32%, Caerphilly 7%, Monmouthshire 20%, Newport 24% and Torfaen 3%.

2022: Wales 16%; Blaenau Gwent 37%, Caerphilly 14%, Monmouthshire 30%, Newport 35% and Torfaen 3%, representing an even greater lack of interest.

In many places seats have been vacant for the entire life of the council, as a scrutiny of local CTC websites demonstrates (assuming those websites are kept up to date). In order to fill empty seats, very often a member of the relevant principal council will also 'double up' as a Community or Town councillor. Casual vacancies are rarely filled by public election; in most cases the CTC will co-opt someone, and anecdotal evidence suggests it is usually 'someone just like them', thus negating any moves towards diversity or balance in the make-up of the CTC.

Again, it is often the case that a seat on a CTC is offered as a 'consolation prize' to those candidates who were not elected to the relevant principal council.

Undemocratic

You don't have to live in the area of the CTC in order to stand for, or sit on, that council. This can give rise to situations where over 50% of the members of a CTC may not live within its area and pay no council tax towards it. Ironically, many such councillors even live in communities not served by a CTC so don't pay council tax towards any CTC.

Unfair

Because of the way CTCs are funded (a precept on the principal council), they are guaranteed their income, even if taxpayers within their area default on payment to the tax-collecting authority. This shortfall is 'made good' by all taxpayers within the principal council's area, including those who live in areas without CTCs. This means that taxpayers in areas without a CTC are effectively subsidising those CTCs; the amounts may be small, but a principle is at stake and is clearly being breached.

An extra financial burden

Gwent taxpayers will pay over £7.7 million in CTC taxes in 2024-25 on top of their main Council Tax bill, with the average (Band D) ranging from £5 (Coedkernew, Newport) to £121 (Usk, Monmouthshire) per household, with a maximum (Band I) of £283 (Usk); many households are in the valleys areas of Gwent which are some of the poorest (Communities First) in Wales and can ill-afford such an extra burden.

Financially uncontrolled

Unlike principal councils, CTCs are not subject to external control (ie, by Welsh Government) over annual tax increases. During 2024-25 Gwent CTC taxpayers saw rises of 82% in Penhow, 67% in Llangybi, and 54% in both Trellech and Whitecastle; with a further eighteen councils levying rises of at least 10%.

CTCS are able to hide these figures 'behind the skirts' of the principal councils and thus disguise the reality from their taxpayers. Also the limited amount of financial information that CTCs provide on their websites (where available) is virtually useless and makes it difficult for any detailed analysis, let alone easy understanding, by the average taxpayer.

Unnecessary

CTCs have a duty (ie, something that they **must** do) to provide **only two** services and the power (ie, something that they **may** do) to perform over 40 other functions according to the 'List of legal powers and duties' published by the NTS in 'The good councillors' guide'. Most CTCs would be hard-pressed to supply detail of which services they actually do provide under these headings, leaving most of their expenditure as discretionary or non-statutory, ie, they don't **have** to do any of them. Many of these services are probably already being provided by the principal councils anyway; if they were to be totally devolved to the CTCs, I doubt if many CTCs could afford to fund them in their entirety.

Travelling around Gwent, it's challenging to see any visible or tangible benefits in areas that have CTCs compared with those that do not, for example, Rogerstone versus Caerleon in Newport, Ebbw Vale versus the rest of Blaenau Gwent, and Blackwood versus Newbridge, Pontllanfraith or Crosskeys in Caerphilly.

Exporters of local resources

Amongst those benefiting financially from the existence of a CTC and not necessarily living or located within its area are:-

Clerks – often part-time employment for an existing or retired local government officer; some councils also have additional staff. In some cases the same Clerk may service more than one CTC.

Big business – benefits from essential insurance and financial services that every CTC needs, and very little of that goes into local coffers.

National and regional organisations – CTCs invariably affiliate to other bodies for mutual support and the meetings and conferences that these bodies organise.

Premises – many CTCs find they can't manage without their own building(s) and the running costs these entail, especially rentals, utilities and maintenance, all paid to outside bodies.

Members – although councillors don't receive a salary, they can claim reasonable expenses, which can add up if they attend various external conferences, plus the Mayor or Chairman gets an extra allowance, and many members have been provided with mobile phones and home computers.

Obscure and opaque

Finding information about the activities and operations of Gwent's CTCs is not easy. Basic precept information is usually provided by the principal councils on their websites, but not

in an easy or standardised way; for example, details for Torfaen could only be obtained from an FoI request.

CTCs own websites are invariably not presented in any consistent manner, they are not kept up to date (some sadly listing deceased members months after their demise!), are not comprehensive, and financial information is invariably brief.

What should be done?

The role and value of community and town councils

I see no purpose in retaining any CTCs in a modern Wales. They represent an archaic hangover from medieval or Victorian times when communities were built around local parishes; that is no longer the case. CTCs provide no value to an area and are a financial extravagance, costing Wales an estimated £63 million in 2024-25.

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

The sector is not fit for purpose as any routine inspection of CTC websites will demonstrate; they invariably are not kept up to date with changes of council membership or the addition of the latest statutory annual reports on their activities. Nor is the sector needed in a rapidly-evolving demographic landscape in which actual community boundaries bear no relation to those covered by out of date council areas.

Conclusions and recommendations

I believe all CTCs should be abolished. However, if this is not done:-

- There should be an immediate Local Government Boundary Review, in order to reduce the number of CTCs in Wales by recommending a minimum size of population to be served and an optimal number of councillors that should sit on any council, with the aim of standardising the number of electors served by each councillor;
- Voters should have the opportunity to vote for or against having a council established in their area under such provisions. CTCs should not be extended into areas currently without one unless there is a clear mandate in favour from the voters of such areas;
- The future creation/abolition of CTCs should be permitted by local referendum following the submission of a public petition to the appropriate principal council, rather than the holding of a public 'community meeting' which is unrealistic in today's society;
- Membership of CTCs should be restricted to residents of the area served;
- Members of principal councils should be debarred from also being elected to a CTC;
- There should be an upper age limit of 70 years for candidates for election to CTCs, to encourage younger people to come forward for election;
- There needs to be a consolidation and clarification of the laws prescribing what CTCs are permitted to spend money on;
- To improve the transparency of financial information, it should be a legal requirement that CTCs must publish how much they spend on administration, staffing costs, members, statutory services and discretionary services, with an analysis of how much of that expenditure is spent locally.

Roger Evans
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