

CTC 17

Ymgynghoriad ar rôl, llywodraethiant ac atebolrwydd y sector cyngorau tref a chymuned

Consultation on the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Cymuned Kerry

Response from: Kerry Community Council

INTRODUCTION

A recent independent review into how Town and Community Councils work and their value to wider Governmental bodies as well as society in general was conducted in 2018. Town and Community Councils were consulted at this time. Many positive recommendations arose from this consultation which, if implemented, would surely help and enable Town and Community Councils to manage their remit more effectively. (1)

The merging of smaller Community councils to create larger fewer local units would most certainly be detrimental to their ability to utilise their local knowledge and ability to liaise with residents at a grass roots level.

KCC would like to emphasise that local residents may become disengaged and less likely to approach or respond to larger town or county councils. This is because they might feel that their voices will be unheard or overlooked, getting lost in the overall noise of larger organisations. Conversely, when a community council exists, it significantly increases the likelihood that feedback will be acknowledged and formally represented through meetings and meeting minutes. When residents believe their opinions are being heard, they are more inclined to voice their concerns.

A large council cannot effectively serve the small communities in Wales in place of the 730+ community and town councils currently in existence. This approach undermines the local democracy that the Welsh government aims to promote.

As highlighted in SENEDD 2021 – 26 - A Manifesto for Localism (2)

"Councils have shown that they are uniquely placed at the heart of their communities and public service delivery and are the first port of call for the most vulnerable or those in need of support or assurance." (pg 3)

INQUIRY CONSULTATION TIMESCALES

KCC would like to highlight the lack of notification that this current inquiry is taking place, Councils, who usually meet on a monthly basis, will not have had adequate time to debate or engage with their residents about the topics under review.

In addition, there appears to be very little information as to why and how this review has arisen.

GENERAL BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY COUNCILS

Before reviewing the specific questions raised in the review KCC would like to highlight the general benefits that Community Councils bring to Wales and its residents.

1. Local Representation

Community Councils provide a platform for local residents to have a say in decisions that affect their area

They ensure that the unique needs and interests of the community are considered in local planning and development

2. Community Services

They have the power to provide and maintain various local services, such as:

- Community transport schemes for those who need it
- Traffic calming measures to improve road safety
- Local youth projects to engage young people in positive activities
- Tourism activities to promote local attractions
- Leisure facilities like parks and recreational areas
- Car parks and public conveniences
- Street lighting and street cleaning to maintain cleanliness and safety
- Burial grounds and allotments for community use
- Bus shelters and commons for public use

3. Crime Reduction

Community Councils work on initiatives to reduce crime and improve community safety.

This can include measures like improved street lighting, community watch programs, and youth engagement projects.

Example: KCC Cllrs meet regularly with PCSOs to walk around the villages highlighting any issues of concern.

4. Environmental Improvements

They are involved in maintaining and improving local green spaces, such as village greens, parks, and footpaths

This helps to enhance the local environment and provide residents with pleasant outdoor spaces.

5. Economic Development

By promoting local tourism Community Councils can help boost the local economy. They can also work on projects to attract new businesses and investment to the area.

6. Community Engagement

Community Councils encourage residents to get involved in local decision-making and community activities. This fosters a sense of community spirit and encourages residents to take an active role in shaping their local area.

7. Advocacy and Support

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They act as advocates for the community, representing local interests to higher levels of government and other organisations. They can also provide support and advice to residents on various issues.

8. Partnership Working

Community Councils collaborate with other local organisations, such as county councils, voluntary groups, and businesses, to achieve common goals and improve services for the community.

These benefits highlight the important role that Welsh Community Councils play in enhancing the quality of life for local residents and fostering a strong sense of community

CONSULTATION QUESTIONS

The Role and Value of Town and Community Councils in Wales.

Community and Town Councils have specific local knowledge, are democratically accountable and able to raise resources from grant making bodies to benefit their residents.

Town and Community Councils are responsible for most place-based services. They also work in partnership with local authorities to effectively disseminate relevant information to all of their residents.

T & CC's also maintain and develop community assets. Despite a variation in precepts and size, their governance responsibilities remain equal.

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

There are many examples of T&CC's taking responsibility for valuable services that would otherwise be lost to Wales when County Councils look to save money. For example: Kerry Community Council (KCC) took over the ownership of the public conveniences which were threatened with immediate closure by Powys County Council.

Kerry Community Council were then able to secure third-party funding in order to extend the outdated and neglected building, which lacked even basic accessibility facilities, to accommodate a new disabled unit and to modernise the aged interior amenities for all users. The upgrade includes the recent installation of PV Panels to reduce the Council's carbon footprint and saving utility costs.

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

T&CC's are under constant scrutiny and submit regular audits to the Welsh Government.

To ensure compliance KCC has implemented the Finance and Governance Toolkit as provided by One Voice Wales. Members of KCC regularly attend training sessions to maintain core standards and improve decision making.

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Although T&CC councillors are elected members with statutory responsibilities, they receive little financial recompense for this role i.e. £156.00 per annum and expenses to £52.00 nor for the training required.

The majority of Community Councillors opt out of the remuneration and complete many hours of voluntary work within the community on behalf of the council.

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

Many rural areas in Wales still lack reliable internet access and most Community Councils do not operate from office buildings equipped with the latest technology. However, councillors have made every effort to abide by the obligation to offer remote access to their council meetings despite the cost implications and security concerns.

In addition, KCC has updated its website to ensure WCAG 2.2 compliance.

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

The introduction of GPoC gives T&CC's the power and opportunities to do more. It is, however, difficult for most community councils to achieve GPoC status with Clerks employed on part-time contracts and many councillors being co-opted. Having to re-declare eligibility every year is onerous. As the legislation stands this benefit is only sustainable with the long-term retention of a qualified clerk.

It may be beneficial to extend the criteria of the GPoC to include more councils that are excluded currently potentially utilising One Voice Wales to assess powers to spend related to projects/ contracts i.e.

- Lending or investing money e.g. to support village or town activities, or to support and generate local businesses; (3)
- Providing discretionary support and activities e.g. taking over youth facilities or offering organised support (such as reading/numeracy assistants to schools);
- Generating and selling green energy.
- Building and providing a range of community facilities.

Councils that are not currently eligible but have unqualified audits could submit business cases to One Voice Wales for review and approval.

SUMMARY

Community Councils are vital in offering local services, reducing crime, improving the environment, boosting economic development, engaging the community, and representing local interests. They work in partnership with other organisations to improve services and support residents. Specific examples include initiatives to maintain public conveniences, crime reduction efforts, and environmental enhancements.

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It is perceived that Community councils are currently burdened with increasing bureaucracy, significantly driving up our operating costs. Unfortunately, this additional financial strain can only be alleviated through higher levies on our taxpayers. As a mainly voluntary council, our primary objective is to enhance the services and assets we oversee and to make a meaningful impact without excessive administrative expenditure. This issue is particularly pressing given the current budget constraints, where councils are expected to deliver the same level of services with reduced funding.

(1) Source - independent-review-panel-on-community-and-town-councils-in-wales-final-report.pdf

(2). Source <https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=2860>

(3). Source - <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-08/statutory-guidance-for-community-and-town-councils.pdf>