

CTC 18

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: Dr Nathan Matthews

Response from: Dr Nathan Matthews

To whom it may concern:

Consultation Response: Inquiry into the Role, Governance, and Accountability of the Community and Town Council Sector

I am Cllr Dr Nathan Matthews. I have been a member of Blaenavon Town Council since 2022 and have served as Mayor of Blaenavon since 2023. The following consultation response is my personal view as a Town Councillor and does not necessarily reflect the opinion of my council.

Purpose and Role of Town and Community Councils

Town and Community Councils across Wales vary greatly in size and function, with each serving its community's unique needs. As the first and most local tier of government, these councils are deeply embedded in their communities, making them uniquely positioned to understand and respond to local issues. In towns like Blaenavon, where local identity is tightly connected to history and heritage, Town Councils play a crucial role in retaining a community's civic character and fostering a sense of place and belonging. This is particularly important in smaller communities within broader counties or county boroughs, where the needs may diverge significantly from those of larger urban areas.

Smaller councils, like Blaenavon, often act as advocates for their residents. This advocacy extends to bringing together public, private, and third-sector stakeholders to deliver services that are place-based and tailored to local needs. Even the smallest Town or Community Council holds an important place as a facilitator, drawing on intimate community knowledge to identify and address specific challenges that may be overlooked by larger governmental bodies.

Moreover, Town and Community Councils also uphold local governance traditions that can be traced back to institutions such as the Urban District Councils and the Local Boards of Health in the 19th century. This historical continuity reinforces civic pride and ensures that decision-making remains local, which is particularly valued in towns with deep historical roots like Blaenavon.

Fitness for Purpose in an Evolving Local Government Landscape

The effectiveness of a Town or Community Council is closely tied to its local purpose. While some councils are responsible for delivering essential services, others may focus more on cultural, environmental, or community wellbeing initiatives. 'Fitness for purpose' must be considered in this context, as the demands and expectations placed on councils differ based on the needs of their specific communities. However, one unifying requirement is the need for higher standards of governance, professionalism, and capacity across the sector as local government evolves.

The landscape of local government is changing. Town and Community Councils are increasingly expected to take on responsibilities that once fell to higher tiers of government, particularly as local authorities experience budgetary pressures. While this provides an opportunity for councils to become more involved in delivering services, it also means that they need to ensure

they have the governance structures and skills to manage these new responsibilities effectively. Unfortunately, many councils still face challenges in this regard, with a significant number receiving qualified audit opinions, indicating weaknesses in governance and financial management.

Governance and Scrutiny: Improving Accountability and Transparency

Governance and scrutiny mechanisms within Town and Community Councils vary widely across Wales, and while some councils operate to a high standard, there are many that do not. As councils take on greater responsibilities, there is a pressing need for stronger and more consistent governance arrangements, as well as a commitment to transparency and public accountability.

The audit process is one tool that can highlight where governance improvements are needed, but the issue runs deeper. Training for councillors is inconsistent, and while councils are required to have training plans, there is no mandatory requirement for councillors to complete the training. This often results in gaps in knowledge and competence, which can hinder effective decision-making and leadership. Introducing mandatory training and requiring councillors to demonstrate a minimum standard of competence would be an important step in addressing these gaps.

Democratic health within the sector is another area of concern. Uncontested elections and the frequent use of co-option to fill vacancies challenge the legitimacy of the democratic process. While this does not necessarily mean that councillors are unaccountable or do not represent their communities effectively, it does raise questions about community engagement and representation. Encouraging more people to stand for election is critical, but this is not without its challenges. Serving as a town or community councillor can be perceived as a thankless task, particularly given the rise in abuse and toxicity experienced by individuals in public life.

Scope of Digital and New Technology

Digital transformation presents an opportunity for Town and Community Councils to improve governance, service provision, and public engagement. In Blaenavon, as in many other areas, the adoption of digital platforms has the potential to transform how councils operate. For example, digital tools can enhance transparency by making council meetings, decisions, and financial records more accessible to the public. This fosters greater trust and accountability.

Moreover, embracing new technology can significantly enhance public participation. Digital consultations, online forums, and social media platforms can be used to engage a broader and more diverse range of residents, ensuring that the voices of those who may not traditionally attend council meetings are heard. In doing so, councils can ensure that their decisions better reflect the needs and aspirations of the whole community.

New Powers and Responsibilities: The General Power of Competence

The introduction of the General Power of Competence (GPOC) is a positive step forward for Town and Community Councils, providing them with the flexibility to act in the best interests of their communities without being constrained by the more prescriptive statutory powers. However, it is essential that councils who adopt GPOC maintain high standards of governance, financial management, and accountability. Recognising councils that consistently meet these standards with additional powers or access to central funding could provide an incentive for other councils to aspire to similar standards.

For councils that meet these criteria, mechanisms to better access funding and support from central government could allow them to further enhance the services they provide and their role in supporting community development. By enabling councils to draw on more resources, particularly those councils which demonstrate sound governance and financial responsibility, the sector can become more robust and capable of delivering meaningful outcomes for their communities.

Conclusion

In conclusion, as a Blaenavon Town Councillor, I see first-hand the critical role that Town and Community Councils play in responding to local needs and maintaining civic pride and identity. However, the inquiry offers a timely opportunity to address key issues relating to governance, training, democratic participation, and the adoption of new powers. Ensuring that councils are fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape is essential to maintaining their relevance and effectiveness as the most local form of government. By embracing higher standards of governance, fostering digital engagement, and encouraging democratic participation, Town and Community Councils can continue to play a vital role in shaping the future of their communities.

Yours faithfully

Cllr Dr Nathan Matthews