

CTC 24

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 Acton

Response from: Acton Community Council

MRS CAROLE ROBERTS
Clerc/Clerk

c/o Little Acton Community Centre
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18 October 2024

Via email to Chair of the Senedd Inquiry

Dear Sir,

Written Evidence to the Senedd Inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the Community and Town council sector.

Acton Community Council wishes its response to the Consultation the role, Governance and Accountability of the Community and Town Council sector as detailed below to be considered and looks forward to inclusion in any further discussions on this important initiative to ensure any future changes deliver benefits to the whole of the sector.

The role and value of Town and Community Councils in Wales.

It is well established that Town and Community Councils are the first tier of local government, providing direct links between their residents and decision-makers. Acton Community Councillors represent the views and needs of their constituents; ensuring local voices can be heard in broader governmental discussions. Acton Community Council manages and delivers essential local services provision of a wide range of services and amenities, as is detailed in the Good Councillors guide. This document was revised in 2022 by the former Minister for Finance and Local Government, Rebecca Evans MS

Town and Community Councils play an important role in the life of Welsh communities. They could have considerable potential to develop their role; play a larger part in the provision of services and amenities and more effectively to represent the interests of their communities. They foster community spirit by encouraging participation in local initiatives by facilitating dialogue between residents and helping to build a sense of belonging and ownership within respective communities.

In addition, Town and Community Councils are well-placed to lead sustainability initiatives. Acton Community Council promotes local environmental projects. The whole sector can contribute to the well-being of the sectors communities and the preservation of the sector's natural resources. Town and Community Councils enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for residents to engage with local governance. This encourages transparency and accountability, vital for a healthy democracy. They play a crucial role in preserving and promoting local culture and heritage.

The Sector actively collaborates with other local organisations, charities, and government bodies, amplifying their impact on community well-being. These partnerships enhance the sector's capacity to address complex challenges and leverage additional resources. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the sector demonstrated its ability to respond swiftly. Its adaptability and local knowledge allowed it to mobilise reserves and resources and support residents effectively

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

Town and Community Councils provide a crucial link between residents and the higher levels of government. The Sector is accessible, enables residents to voice concerns and influence decision-making in a direct and meaningful way and is adept in delivering diverse services that reflect the unique needs of their own communities. From local events to maintenance of public spaces and community buildings, the Sector is focussed on enhancing community well-being and fostering civic engagement

through various initiatives and events, strengthening communities and encouraging participation in local governance.

Capacity Issues

Whilst Town and Community Councils strive to meet local needs, a deficit of time, capacity and funding constraints can hinder the Sector's ability to expand services or invest in long-term projects. Increased financial support is essential if the Sector's capacity is to be enhanced through additional officer time to deliver these initiatives. The burden of any new initiatives or legislation has fallen to the sector to absorb. This absorption cannot continue on an indefinite basis nor can the goodwill of residents be relied upon. New initiatives do impact considerably on the Sector's capacity particularly for the smaller Community Councils. As communities evolve, so do their needs.

Town and Community Councils have and must adapt. For Acton Community Council in particular it should be enabled to have sufficient capacity to address emerging issues within the local infrastructure as a result of housing and population growth, to ensure service delivery, and environmental sustainability. This requires recognition at National level of the current limitations on resource capacity particularly in terms of staff resources, capacity and funding limitations due to the cost of living crisis and ability of residents to meet increased precept levels. Any increase in resources should be accompanied by continuous training and support for Councillors and staff. The current Training Plan documents are mandatory but the training itself is not. This should be addressed.

There has been some disconnect between Town and Community Councils and larger local government frameworks but through strengthened collaboration with county councils and other agencies and One Voice Wales, the Sector has ensured that Community voices are integrated into broader planning and decision-making processes. The Town and Community Councils Sector with the right support and resources can continue to be fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape. Town and Community Councils have demonstrated commitment to adapting and enhancing the sectors' role to serve their residents effectively.

The current system provides both the legislative framework and a proven track record of delivery. It enables the most pro-active councils to make a real difference to their communities through a wide range of imaginative initiatives. A number of councils have been willing to take on devolved services which have included asset transfers and are more than capable of undertaking major projects.

The key factors standing in the way of Town and Community Councils are twofold, the size of the Council and the willingness of the 22 Unitary Authorities to delegate functions with associated assets and funding or to work cooperatively. Unitary Councils and the Welsh Government should encourage and support all Town and Community Councils to take advantage of the opportunities open to them and should formalise relationships between Town and Community Councils and other bodies. The current Charter arrangements with Wrexham County Borough Council are fairly limited and unsatisfactory and have seen dis-engagement with many to its Town and Community Councils.

Many other Town and Community Councils in Wales are also a party to Charters with their respective Unitary Councils but unfortunately whilst the aim of a Charter is to define and enhance the existing relationship between the respective tiers of local government unfortunately, in practice much of the aspects of the Charter are not adhered to. This is particularly relevant given that Town and Community Councils have a statutory ability to deliver concurrent functions held jointly with County and County Borough Councils.

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

Town and Community Councils operate under a clear governance framework defined by local and national legislation. This includes adherence to the Local Government Act 1972 (as amended), which sets out the roles and responsibilities of Councillors, ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent and accountable.

Strong and effective Corporate Governance is key to the future success of Town and Community Councils. They must always ensure that they have the mechanisms in place to ensure efficient and effect operation. This should be supported by adequate financial and staff resources, supported by evidence of good practice, to ensure that all Communities in Wales are able to benefit from strong local-level councils.

More robust Town and Community Councils would be able to consider greater delegation of responsibilities for concurrent functions from Unitary Authorities, which at present is currently limited. Town and Community Councils should also engage closely with their local communities and support the empowerment of citizens to become more involved with service delivery and to challenge poor practice.

Town and Community Councils hold regular hybrid meetings, which allow residents to attend, engage in discussions, and raise concerns. This practice not only enhances transparency but also empowers citizens to participate actively in local governance. The Sector also uses committee systems to focus on specific areas, such as finance, planning, and youth or community services, which allows for more detailed scrutiny of decisions and policies. These Committees are accountable for their recommendations, enhancing the overall governance framework.

All Town and Community Councils are statutorily required to produce Annual Reports. This document details the Sector's activities providing an additional layer of scrutiny, ensuring financial accountability and transparency in the Sector's operations.

Arrangements for effective governance and scrutiny build public trust. When residents see transparent processes and understand how decisions are made, their confidence in local governance increases. Public participation in council meetings and decision-making processes empowers residents, making them feel more connected to local governance. This involvement encourages civic responsibility and engagement. However public engagement at Town and Community Council meetings is not as great as it should be despite best efforts to involve them.

Public feedback leads to better-informed decisions and greater responsiveness to community issues. Town and Community Councils can adapt based on community input, ensuring that the needs of residents are prioritised and that there is transparency in operations. When residents can access information about council activities, the public can hold their representatives accountable, fostering a culture of openness. By fostering this open and participatory environment, Town and Community Councils strengthen the sector's connection with their communities ensuring that their voices are integral to local decision-making.

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

The sector has embraced the potential of digital and new technology to enhance the sectors decision-making, improve service provision, and increase participation in local democratic processes. By embracing these advancements, Town and Community Councils have more engaged and empowered communities, which has resulted in better governance.

Technology has, and will continue, to improve the management of Town and Community Councils resources. Such technology can be used to schedule maintenance for public spaces or tracking service requests. This leads to more efficient use of funds and improved service delivery. Digital technology can enable the provision of services online, enhancing accessibility for residents; such as reporting issues, requesting services, and access information, reducing the need for in-person visits.

The Sector uses digital platforms for community engagement. Channels, such as newsletters, social media, and mobile apps, keep residents informed about council activities, decisions, and provide opportunities for involvement, fostering more engagement with the electorate.

In turn this provides for more inclusive involvement with the public and has facilitated quicker and more inclusive feedback on Council Initiatives and proposals. Town and Community Councils must continue to embrace a range of media and consultation techniques to break down traditional barriers to participation. Additionally, the use of video conferencing tools allows residents to participate in council meetings remotely, increasing attendance and engagement. This is particularly important for those who may face barriers to attending in person.

However, whilst digital technology offers many benefits, it is crucial to recognise and address the digital divide that exists in some communities within Wales be it rural or urban. It is imperative to ensure that all residents have equal access to technology, which is not always the case, and digital literacy programs are essential to avoid excluding vulnerable populations.

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

The Sector faces an evolving landscape of local governance which must be navigated. Town and Community Councils are committed to using these powers to enhance the well-being of the local resident population to foster sustainable community development. The devolution of powers can enable the Sector to engage residents more actively in decision-making processes. The involvement of community members in discussions around local priorities can empower Town and Community Councils to shape the future of their own neighbourhoods.

With enhanced powers Community and Town Council can influence local projects that align with the aspirations of the Sector's community. This includes participating in consultations and advocating for developments that benefit the sectors residents, such as inclusion of affordable housing and sustainable infrastructure. The duty under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 has allowed the sector to promote environmentally friendly practices. Sector led Initiatives like community gardens, recycling programs, and energy efficiency projects contribute to a greener, healthier community.

New responsibilities have also empowered the Sector to customise services that address the unique needs of local residents. Town and Community Councils have effectively managed local amenities, ensuring they are maintained and enhanced based on community feedback. They have, and continue to, acquire building and facilities via assets transfers from principal councils.

The ability to collaborate with other local authorities, organisations, and stakeholders has strengthened the Sector's capacity to support community initiatives. By working together, partners can pool resources and expertise to address complex challenges that affect residents. This expansion of grassroots leadership can inspire more individuals to become Councillors.

The recent changes to Welsh legislation are welcomed by the Sector. The underlying legislation is the Local Government Act 1972, which redefined the procedures, structures, duties and geographies of all English and Welsh councils, is however over 50 years old. The White Paper that preceded the enactment stated that "local authority areas should be related to areas within which people have a common interest – through living in a recognisable community, through the links of employment, shopping or social activities, or through history and tradition." This ethos remains at the core of service delivery for Town and Community Councils, but the Act is not now reflective due of many of the changes that have taken place in society and local government.

Yours sincerely,

Carole Roberts

Clerk to Acton Community Council