

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: Dave Sheridan

Response from: Dave Sheridan

Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

This is a response to the Inquiry by the Clerk/RFO to Gwersyllt Community Council.

This response is my view and does not represent the views of Gwersyllt Community Council as a Corporate body.

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

Community and Town Councils (T&CC's) in Wales do play an important role in their communities in that their members are known to the community.

T&CC are the first tier of local government, providing a direct link between residents and decision-makers. Councillors represent the views and needs of their constituents, ensuring that local voices are heard in broader governmental discussions.

There are a number of T&CC's across Wales that own assets which they manage for the benefit of the community that they represent, others finance beneficial well-being and support other projects being undertaken by groups from within and by community members.

T&CC's are well-placed to lead sustainability initiatives; by promoting local environmental projects and encouraging responsible practices, T&CC's can contribute to the sectors natural resources. T&CC's enhance democratic participation for residents to engage with local governance. This allows for and encourages transparency along with accountability, this is vital for healthy democracy and can be apply to all leaves of government. It is important to note that T&CC's can and do play a crucial role in promoting local culture and heritage in the areas that the cover.

My CC actively collaborates with other local organisations, charities, and local government bodies, helping to amplifying our small but important impact on community well-being and biodiversity.

While still being new to this role of Clerk/RFO my understanding is that there was an Independent Review Panel (2017-18) and from that review I would consider that the views and feedback are still valid to this day and should be considered under this inquiry.

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

T&CC's is a fractured sector, may T&CC's are able to remain relevant, effective, and responsive to the needs of the local residents, while many others cannot.

The local Members are accessible, and so are enabling residents to voice concerns and influence decision-making that reflect the needs of the communities that they live in. Our CC focus is on enhancing community well-being and engagement through initiatives and events, strengthening communities and encouraging participation in local governance.

the competence and training of Clerks/RFO's to get them to a suitable level which will enable them to work within their role is not universally adopted, many older Clerks feel that having done the job for many years they do not need to undertake training. There was a need for Councils to invest in staff development and for Clerks to be paid accordingly for the role that they undertake.

This attitude that having done the role of Councillor for many years, they do not need to undertake training is also held by many Members of T&CC's, T&CC's have to have a training plan in place by legislation but Members of T&CC's do not have to undertake any training.

It is important that Members have the ability to understand new information regarding their responsibilities, powers, and role. Training for Members is key, and I would argue mandatory, ongoing training is necessary linked to the need to the training plan.

There was an independent review of the sector commissioned by the Welsh Government which as I understand it clearly recognised that the sector is fit for purpose.

It could be argued that any reducing of councillor numbers is likely to impact on the effectiveness of T&CC's and may be undermining the fitness of purpose of T&CC's and have an impact on the workload of the Clerks/RFO's driving more out of the role and leaving T&CC's unable to function.

If the Government in Cardiff needs more Members due to workload, then so would principle and T&CC's but at a time of the cost-of-living crisis and the backdrop of the setting of the Westminster budget by the newly installed Government this would not sit well the electorate.

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

T&CC's clear governance framework to operate under which is defined by local and national legislation. The Local Government Act 1972 is the major Act to which allows Clerks/RFO's to understand the roles and responsibilities of councillors, ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent and accountable.

This area can become a concern especially if some or all of the councillors are not up to the task of scrutinising the council due to the lack of training, understanding, or interest, only wanting to attend meetings and nothing else in between.

Public participation in council meetings and the decision-making processes needs to be encouraged, this will then allow the empowerment of residents, making them more connected to local governance. Getting residents more involved encourages civic responsibility and engagement along with pride in their community.

Trust in government needs to come from the top down, local residents need to trust the politicians and Government at all levels, Cardiff, Guildhalls, Townhalls and CC's.

There is a need for T&CC's who have received a qualified audit opinion to be supported to help them introduce improvements and to understand the reasons and causes.

It would seem that many audits gave rise to qualified opinions as a result of administrative or clerical failings, they need to be looked at more sympathetically by auditors, T&CC's are not health board with a budget in the 10's of millions. The time taken to complete audits as a new Clerk still undertaking training is a cause of concern.

The increased governance and financial obligations on T&CC's would lead to significant resource implications within my role and so to higher precepts.

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

New development of technology is welcomed but not by everyone, older residents see this as a barrier, older Members of T&CC's are reluctant to embrace social media and often push back on ideas of change, often quoting their own demographic. Over time this will change but with help and support for the likes of Digital Communities Wales, or Welsh Government to fund the Members to have and use iPad/Tablet's along with good IT infrastructures and quality Broadband in all areas of Wales would speed this matter along.

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

Being a new to the role Clerk/RFO undertaking training in the powers and responsibilities of this sector the devolution of powers to this sector allows T&CC's to engage with residents more actively. By involving community members in discussions around local priorities, T&CC's empower them to shape the future of their own neighbourhoods, however when planning is overruled or LDP's are forced onto local residents then trust is lost in the government process to which you are trying to engage.

The Environment (Wales) Act 2016 has allowed the T&CC's to promote environmentally friendly practices. Projects that help to contribute to a greener, healthier community. However not being supported by the local County Council is the Community Council aims is very poor, it has taken 6 years to try and complete an asset transfer from the Unitary Authority to the Community Council and this matter is still ongoing with no end date.

Recommendations.

Mandatory training for all Councillors within a set time following election/co-option.

Maximum number to terms a Chair can sit on a T&CC's and a number of set years that they can be a Community Councillor to allow younger residents to get involved with local government.

Simplified audits for Community Councils with fixed costs.

All Council members to use IT along with a council email purely for council business funded direct from Welsh Government and supported by IT helpdesks for those that need it. County Councils made to help, support and liaison for T&CC's while treating the sector as part of the government structure highlighting good practise by those that do and shaming those that don't.