

CTC 40

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

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

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Tref Pontarddulais

Response from: Pontarddulais Town Council

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Pontarddulais Town Council's response to the inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

18th October 2024

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

Providing the closest level of government to the community, best placed to engage with them and deliver for them. You only have to look backwards to the early days of the pandemic to see the incredible support provided to communities by the sector. Increasingly, this sector is taking on more and more responsibilities, providing new facilities and services to their communities on limited budgets and with few grant bodies who will fund us as we are considered “state provision” while also being told we are not entitled to state funding!

The sector is undervalued and historically underappreciated, working minor miracles for their communities on a shoe-string with small numbers of staff who often work hours unpaid for the benefit of their communities while members receive a tiny allowance, often working far longer hours than their local paid unitary authority counterparts. It could therefore be argued the value of the sector is immeasurable.

With funding restrictions being quoted by all sectors, Community and Town Councils are being asked to deliver more and more services and facilities for their communities with community asset transfers becoming the norm rather than the exception. All communities in Wales should have a council working for them, providing a bridge between the community and government, having powers to act in the best interests of the communities.

This sector is best placed to trial initiatives to improve sustainability and other areas which can then be shared and implemented widely across the whole of Wales. Projects which make a significant difference in one community have the potential to bring great benefit at all communities in Wales but without access to additional funding streams, this can be too much of a burden on the local purse, especially in smaller more rural communities, rather than addressing rural deprivation, the structure of the sector can widen the gap.

Further to these comments, Pontarddulais Town Council fully supports and endorses the response from One Voice Wales to this Inquiry.

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

There have been many changes to legislation over the past 10 years which have placed more regulations and legislation around the sector. This has happened without any support or resource from WG with an expectation these things will happen because they must. Most Councils are willing to adopt new ways of working but few have the resources to do so. The result is an increase in tax for communities while they see no benefit to their quality of life. This isn't to say Councils shouldn't be expected to comply but while there are communities without a Council, those paying a Precept will always see it as “double taxation”. This is also true for the trend of community asset transfer which is happening increasingly

as unitary authorities struggle financially. They will focus spending on communities not served by our sector while our communities pay for the same services via a precept. This inequality of structure is causing unrest in communities as they believe they will have all services provided for them by the unitary authorities and no precept should they seek to dissolve their local Council. We strongly believe there needs to be a change in legislation to ensure all communities across Wales are served by our sector for us to operate on a level playing field.

Further to this, having number of elected members as a requirement to retain Councillors means more and more Councils are losing this power through no fault of their own. If a casual vacancy arises, it is up to the community to call an election. The Council is not able to request an election if the community do not, even if they would prefer to. The Council is only left with co-option as a way forward, resulting in the loss of GPoC. If WG would like to see more elected members rather than co-opted, then the answer to this is simple, legislate that all vacancies MUST be filled by election. The competence of a Council is not dependent on whether members are co-opted or elected.

Technology can make provision of services much easier and more effective but without the knowledge or understanding within the Council to achieve this, there is a lack of consistency across the sector. Again, this is not the fault of the sector but a lack of understanding from those making the legislation. This sector does not have the resources to have specialists in all areas and so I would make sense for there to be a person in each relevant department at WG who is able to advise Council Clerks/RFOs on the best options for them. While this would come with a cost, across the entire sector it would be small.

Further to these comments, Pontarddulais Town Council fully supports and endorses the response from One Voice Wales to this Inquiry.

- Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency;

The sector is evolving and improving. There may be incidences where Councils have had poor Audit results or justified investigations by the PSOW but these are increasingly in the minority.

The introduction of the OVW toolkit for improved governance and financial management has meant many Council Clerks have improved working practices and governance in place.

There are many Councils in Wales which are very small and have little precept due to the financial constraints that brings. All Councils have a minimum number of duties and responsibilities to fulfil and without a calculated minimum amount of time required for one person to deliver that for a community, this leaves members with no understanding of the pressures Clerks are under. This is how mistakes are made, and deadlines are missed. Perhaps there could be a change to the annual audit arrangements so that Councils with a small precept only have an external audit every three years for example, with an internal audit annually, or similar? We believe compliance would be vastly improved if this kind of adjustment was made resulting in better transparency and accountability.

Further to these comments, Pontarddulais Town Council fully supports and endorses the response from One Voice Wales to this Inquiry.

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

The changes in legislation to multilocation meetings has been a blessing and a curse. The change has vastly improved meeting accessibility and diversity however, its introduction with no support or guidance on how to provide this was extremely short-sighted. It has resulted in many councils meeting unlawfully with no remote provision and others only able to meet online. A hybrid system which allows for seamless meetings with proper participation is very difficult to achieve without spending sums of money smaller councils do not have. Council Clerks are expected to be experts in all areas of Council administration and delivery but introduction of new legislation requiring a high level of technical acumen has left some Councils behind.

There is no one place to go to get advice on the best use of digital and new technology, we rely on OVW to guide us in areas they also haven't had sufficient time to research. There is a need for a digital tool to facilitate communication between the councils and their communities to inform community planning and budget setting. Some communities have used third party software to do this or platforms such as Facebook with varied results. Council websites should have a minimum amount of information to be provided in terms of policies, meeting and council information. This would ensure equality of service across the sector. Further to these comments, Pontarddulais Town Council fully supports and endorses the response from One Voice Wales to this Inquiry.

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

New powers and responsibilities have come frequently over the past decade with little in the way of support from WG to implement them. Councils have taken their responsibilities under section 6 of the Environment Act seriously and many are delivering biodiversity projects and working to improve their communities in this way. This has come with a cost implication and often an increase in the precept to fund them. Many residents, while struggling financially, are unhappy at the extra costs for what they perceive to be of little immediate benefit to them or their families, when they cannot feed their families or heat their homes, paying a precept towards wildflower meadows or community woodlands etc, creates negative feelings towards the local Council. Better communication from WG about the responsibilities of the sector would help a great deal to inform communities across Wales with a clear and consistent message about the reasons behind the changes is essential moving forward.

GPoC is a wonderful tool to give the sector the freedoms they need to provide the type of support they are best placed to. As we saw during the pandemic, it was this sector who was able to mobilise at speed to create community support initiatives, managing volunteers, tackling social isolation and loneliness. There is no end to the good this sector can do with the right support and understanding from WG and unitary authorities.

Further to these comments, Pontarddulais Town Council fully supports and endorses the response from One Voice Wales to this Inquiry.