

CTC 41

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 Cymuned Pennard

Response from: Pennard Community Council

Pennard Community Council's response to the Senedd inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

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

Town and Community Councils provide a valuable service, being at ground level it knows what the community needs and wants, as it is continually hearing from and consulting with them. In a time where Unitary Councils are struggling for funding, many assets and roles are passed down to them and being members of their Communities they serve, the Councillors have the best interest of their residents to the fore in all the decisions they make, rather than just looking to raise money.

Not only delivering much needed services to the area, they empower communities through collaboration and consultation and provide both a communication channel and a representative voice.

Many Town and Community councils collaborate with each other sharing best practice and ideas this was particularly relevant during the pandemic where other services were stretched.

We would suggest a change in the legislation to enable more Town and Community Councils be formed, especially over our County, as many parts of Swansea are missing out on the representation that having their own Town or Community Council can provide.

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

We would say yes, Town and Community Councils have evolved a great deal over the past few years, One Voice Wales can give many examples of the contribution and new services being provided over the sector. This is especially evident at the innovation awards conference which is run every year. Due to the changes brought in by the Local Government and Elections Wales Act 2021 and the changes everyone had to make during the pandemic most Town and Community Councils have risen to the challenges their communities faced and found ways to make things happen.

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

The Finance and Governance Tool kit is an essential tool for all. Especially the health check, if you don't know where you are how can you improve. Training for members and staff alike is also essential to improve the decision making and service delivery and should be actively encouraged and, in some cases, made mandatory.

The Audit system is currently too slow but this will improve. Audits are often feared but should really be viewed as a learning opportunity, the governance is there for a reason but sometimes mistakes are made and lessons need to be learnt.

The GPOC criteria is too rigid and many Town and Community Councillors have good members put there by co-option and some have ineffective members who have been elected. Why should this be a barrier? This needs to be addressed.

Pennard Community Council's response to the Senedd inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes;
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The sector as a whole has been encouraged to use digital solutions where it can. The ability to hold meetings remotely as well as hybridly has given the opportunity to some people to become members, who may not have been able to, due to family or work commitments in the past. Regarding the resources needed to run meetings in this way, it would be beneficial if there was some sort of consistency over the sector, some small council struggle to find the funds for the necessary conference equipment, so perhaps some support from Welsh Government would help with this

At Pennard we have seen an increase in public participation due to the ability for them to join online which has been very enlightening. We have embraced collaborative working in our document production, especially our newsletters which Councillors can contribute to by using online tools. Online surveys and the use of QR codes have also increased our community contribution and collaboration during recent consultations.

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How new powers and responsibilities for this tier of government are utilised to support communities;
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General Powers Of Competence gives us the opportunity to do more, but is difficult to achieve given the criteria needed to obtain it and to enable annual re declaration. Having the ability to use GPOC is a fantastic asset for a Town or Community Council to have, enabling it to support their community and should be nurtured and encouraged.

Welsh Government investment in architecture is needed so even the smallest Community Council can implement many of the new powers. Perhaps a sliding scale needs to be applied, all Councils have the same obligations with no consideration of their community size, facilities, budget or staffing level.

Pennar Community Councils response to the Senedd inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

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

We fully support and endorse the OVW response to this inquiry. Town and Community Councils 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.

Town and Community Councils are a fundamental part of the local government system in Wales and play an important role in the life of Welsh communities, because their members are part of the community, they serve they have an in-depth knowledge of the needs and aspirations of their residents.

They foster community spirit by encouraging participation in local initiatives by through consultation and facilitating dialogue between residents and local authorities, thus helping to build a sense of belonging and ownership of their community

With Unitary authorities currently facing funding issues more and more tasks will come under Town and Community Councils. They often work in partnership with their neighbouring councils in times of crisis this was especially evident during the pandemic where best practice and ideas were readily shared.

With the General Powers of Competency Town and Community Council can expand their support further, but only if they fit the criteria and this is difficult to do without enough elected members. There needs to be a change in the way elections are called to fill vacancies at the moment the onus is on 10 community members but if this were in the hands of the Town or Community Council then the process would be much simpler and GPOC one step easier to gain.

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

We fully support and endorse the OVW response to this inquiry. As frontline representatives of the sectors communities, Town and Community Councils provide a crucial link between residents and higher levels of government. The sector give residents a means to voice concerns and influence decision-making in a direct and meaningful way, as well as

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being adaptable enough to deliver diverse services in line with the unique qualities of their communities.

From organising local events to maintenance of public spaces and burial grounds, the sector's focus is on enhancing community well-being, Strengthening the community's sense of belonging through consultation and participation in local governance.

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

We fully support and endorse the OVW response to this inquiry. Town and Community Councils' hold regular meetings, allowing residents to take part 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 community facilities, which allows for more detailed scrutiny of decisions and policies. These committees are accountable for their recommendations, enhancing the overall governance framework.

All Community and Town Councils are now required to produce annual reports detailing the sectors activities an additional layer of scrutiny, ensuring financial accountability and transparency in the sectors operations. We also produce a Budget report detailing the budget figures and an explanation of how we arrived at the precept figure we have.

Each year the Audit programme not only looks at the financial governance but also other statutory requirement be it how employees are contracted to the reporting of remunerations made to serving Councillors. These audits are often feared but should be looked upon as learning process, if the questions asked are answered and procedures followed then everything should be fine, but mistakes can happen and we should learn from them.

The introduction of the Finance & Governance Self-Assessment Toolkit for Community & Town Councils published by the Welsh Government has helped a great deal in allowing councils to review their financial management, governance and accountability procedures and introduce improvements where necessary. The initial health check is invaluable after all if you don't know where you are how can you improve.

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

We fully support and endorse the OVW response to this inquiry. The pandemic acted as a springboard for many councils who were now meeting remotely, banking was being done online, facility payment received electronically, some embraced it and the rest were pulled along. Our Council was one who further embraced what we had started. Finances payroll and pensions are handled

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by online providers, Our Council and Committee meetings are held online, which has seen an increase in public participation. Our documentation is produced using a digital tool allowing collaborations between members. The use of social media and website use has also opened up the Sectors work to the community as a whole and can only improve in transparency element discussed previously. The use of some digital resources can be onerous to some of the smaller Community Councils and investment is needed from Welsh Government to help them with this.

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

We fully support and endorse the OVV response to this inquiry. 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 giving 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.