

Community councils should play an important role in local governance, offering potential benefits that could enhance community life. Acting as a first tier of local government, it should provide a platform for local residents to voice concerns and influence local decisions, making sure their voices are heard. Through management of local services such as parks or community centres and events, it should lead to a more tailored and responsive service compared to larger government bodies.

Where they work well they should deliver a sense of empowerment, civic engagement and fostering a sense of ownership and community spirit. They should be more accessible and less bureaucratic than the larger governmental bodies and be able to have improved flexibility and responsiveness. They should also be cost-effective, operating on smaller budgets and making efficient use of limited resources.

Unfortunately, many Community Councils are not reaching their full potential. The reasons for this vary from council to council, but they often include financial constraints that hinder effective service delivery and the advancement of important projects. Bureaucratic obstacles may also impede decision-making and responsiveness. Additionally, some councils could be affected by political dynamics, particularly if the dominant party refuses to support proposals from opposing parties

From my personal perspective and experience, the efficient operation of some councils can be greatly affected by a lack of awareness and training among both councillors and key personnel, alongside inadequate management of employed staff. When these issues persist over time, the council may lack essential structures, such as Finance and HR Committees, and experience high turnover rates among council members, resulting in a significant proportion of new councillors.

In these situations if one of the key issues is the performance of the Clerk with complicit support of the Chair:

- not undertaking the duties set out in terms of employment, such as around requirements of Financial Regulations and setting budgets and annual report
- providing incorrect and contradictory legal advice, and using online “ask.com” answers to support their position
- failing to respond to Freedom of Information Requests
- failing to circulate to Councillors relevant important information such as availability of training modules, schedule of Council Liaison meetings, issue of Audit Wales qualified reports etc
- not including items and councillor motions on agenda where provided in line with Standing Order 9a and b, and not keeping a register to document any reasons for rejecting as per Standing Order 9h.
- issuing basic agenda with lack of clarity on any specific discussion items or motions for decision making it particularly difficult for the public to frame any questions in the short public interaction section.
- Long delays in production of minutes, and often needing corrections or refusing to accurately account for discussion or decisions at the meeting
- Refusing to provide un-redacted payee information to Financial Committee/all councillors
- Claiming meetings without his presence cannot make any decisions
- Excluding full council from participating in responses to qualified Audit Reports (as well as not informing them of the qualified report ahead of Fol request from the public)
- Exhibiting this same behaviour at other councils.

Particularly with “new councillors” they can be in the position of “you can’t know, what you don’t know” so maybe unable to challenge the Clerks behaviour or even understand that it is not correct or appropriate. Unfortunately, all the guidance “out there” tends to suggest that when you have any problem your first port of call is to speak to your clerk. All the bodies that you might have thought you could go to seem to be advisory only (“no teeth”), or are not even able to discuss with councillors but only the Chair and/or Clerk e.g. One Voice Wales. This effectively removes OVW as a source of support if the issue is the Chair and Clerk combined.

Of course, the answer may very well be “you just need to follow the personnel procedures”, however as noted above, where you are reliant on the Clerk to ensure the “setting up of committees” is allowed and recorded properly in the meeting minutes, it is not as easy as it might first seem. Clearly, where the clerk is employed at more than one council and the same issues are seen it must show that there is a wider system issue.

I understand that there may be councils out there where professional and hard-working clerks may face difficult employment conditions, perhaps pestered by individual councillors, bullied at meetings and not given the level of respect they should have. However, there are controls and protections in place through employment law and support of SLCC and reports to the Ombudsman.

Unfortunately there seems to be a weakness in the whole system that where multiple councils using the same clerk are having the same issues, the same failures (i.e. multiple years un-submitted accounts for audit/qualified audit reports) they are seemingly left to their own devices to “sort it out themselves”.

While focusing specifically on financial accounts rather than other procedural responsibilities like agendas and minutes, it is important to recognize the need for a more flexible approach with smaller councils. However, Audit Wales should be empowered with stronger sanctions to ensure that appropriate action plans are developed and implemented promptly, especially in cases of repeated violations. Additionally, Audit Wales should require that the entire council participate in reviewing shortcomings and formulating improvement strategies, rather than leaving this task solely to the Chair and the Clerk/RFO.

When several councils face a recurring pattern of financial account audit failures tied to the same clerk, it should raise a serious warning, necessitating a coordinated and enhanced response. These issues not only compromise a council's credibility but also weaken its relationship with the community, diminishing trust and obstructing opportunities for community engagement and support for initiatives.

All new Cllrs should receive a “pack” when taking up their position (potentially triggered by/from the Election Office) with copies of (or links to) the most appropriate guidance and rule-set not just the Code of Conduct. They should receive the schedule of training modules so they can review and then revert to Chair or HR Committee and Training Plan to arrange appropriate modules. They should be aware of wider useful information such as the schedule of liaison meetings. Clearly having a “cheat-sheet” that made it clear in summary duties and powers of clerk and councillors and chair would be great and would allow a basic starting point to then go on and follow through on the detailed guidance available.

Moving onto the discussion point “Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes”. This probably has greater scope for the larger town councils but also many opportunities for community and parish councils.

- Data-driven decision making:
 - Advanced data analytics tools can help local councils analyse large datasets to identify trends, assess community needs, and evaluate the effectiveness of policies and services.
 - This informed approach can lead to better decision-making by analysis of demographic information, service usage patterns and public feedback.
 - The use of predictive analytics tools could help forecast trends and potential issues allowing proactive/preventative approach.
 - Real-time information such as traffic patterns, public health data could be very useful in crisis or emergency situations.
- Enhancing service provision:
 - The use of online portals can streamline access to local services, allowing residents to report issues, request services, and access information easily.
 - Development of mobile Apps that can be used for a variety of things, reporting defects in the community roadways, street lighting failures quickly to officials as well as accessing council updates and news feeds.
 - The use of AI and automation could be used for chatbots or automated systems that could support a council on routine inquiries or basic service requests. This may reduce the workload on council staff for more complex tasks.
- Public engagement and participation
 - Digital platforms covering tools like online surveys, forms and interactive maps to allow the public to better share their opinions and ideas on community projects. Improves transparency and helps empower residents to contribute to decision making.
 - Social media engagement can greatly assist councils to reach a much broader audience, engaging with a younger demographic and encourage active dialogue on local issues.
 - Virtual meetings are already being used to a much greater extent on the back of the Covid impacts on society. It does provide a much greater degree of flexibility for public participation as helps remove some potential barriers due to mobility or time constraints issues.
 - More use perhaps could be made of “live polling” and Q&A sessions during a “virtual town hall” can foster a more interactive experience.
- Increasing Transparency and Accountability
 - Open Data Initiatives: By making data publicly available, councils can enhance transparency and allow residents to engage with the decision-making process more effectively. Open data can also encourage civic innovation and community-led initiatives.
 - E-Governance: Implementing e-governance platforms can streamline processes such as voting, petitioning, and reporting issues, making it easier for residents to participate in local governance.

Challenges to be born in mid:

- The Digital Divide: Ensuring equitable access to technology is crucial. Not all residents may have the same level of access to digital tools, which could exacerbate inequalities in participation.
- Privacy and Security: Implementing digital solutions raises concerns about data privacy and security. Councils must ensure that resident data is protected and used responsibly.
- Capacity and Training: Local councils may need training and resources to effectively utilise new technologies. Building digital capacity among staff and councillors is essential for successful implementation.
- Cultural Shift: Embracing technology requires a cultural shift within councils, moving towards more open and participatory approaches to governance.

The scope of digital and new technologies in local governance is vast, offering opportunities to improve decision-making, enhance service provision, and foster greater participation in democratic processes. However, councils must address challenges related to access, security, and capacity to fully realise these benefits. By doing so, they can create more responsive, inclusive, and effective local governance.

1.

Impact on Accountability and Transparency

1. **Trust Issues:** Weak governance and scrutiny arrangements can lead to distrust among residents. If community members feel decisions are made without adequate oversight, their confidence in local governance may erode.
2. **Ineffective Decision-Making:** Poor scrutiny can result in decisions that do not reflect community needs or priorities, undermining the council's legitimacy and effectiveness.
3. **Lack of Clarity:** Insufficient transparency in decision-making processes can create confusion among residents regarding how and why certain decisions are made.
4. **Resistance to Change:** Without strong scrutiny mechanisms, councils may be resistant to adapting practices or improving transparency, perpetuating ineffective governance.

Recommendations for Improvement

1. **Enhancing Training and Capacity:** Providing training for councillors on governance best practices, accountability, and transparency can improve oversight effectiveness.
2. **Strengthening Public Engagement:** Encouraging greater public participation through outreach and engagement initiatives can help foster a culture of accountability.
3. **Formalizing Processes:** Developing and adhering to formal governance and scrutiny frameworks can enhance transparency and consistency across councils.
4. **Leveraging Technology:** Utilizing digital platforms for meetings, reporting, and community engagement can help increase transparency and accessibility for residents.

Conclusion

While community councils have mechanisms in place for governance and scrutiny, significant challenges remain that impact accountability and transparency. By addressing these weaknesses and enhancing existing strengths, community councils can improve their effectiveness and foster greater trust and engagement within their communities.

New powers and responsibilities granted to community councils are increasingly being utilized to support local communities in various meaningful ways. Here are some key areas where these powers are effectively leveraged:

1. Community Development and Planning

- **Local Development Plans:** Community councils can engage in the development of local planning policies that reflect the needs and aspirations of their communities. This includes influencing land use and community design to enhance local infrastructure and amenities.
- **Support for Local Projects:** Councils often have the authority to initiate or support community projects, such as creating parks, improving public spaces, and enhancing community facilities. This fosters local pride and improves quality of life.

2. Service Provision

- **Local Services Management:** Many councils have taken on responsibilities for managing local services such as libraries, community centers, and parks. This allows for tailored service delivery that meets specific community needs.
- **Youth and Social Services:** Community councils can develop programs aimed at supporting youth engagement, social inclusion, and community cohesion, helping to address local social issues directly.

3. Environmental Initiatives

- **Sustainability Projects:** With new powers, councils can initiate environmental projects such as community gardens, tree planting, and sustainability education programs, promoting a greener community and encouraging residents' involvement.
- **Local Climate Action:** Councils can implement local climate action plans that align with national goals, allowing communities to participate actively in addressing climate change at a local level.

4. Public Health and Wellbeing

- **Health Initiatives:** Councils can promote public health initiatives, such as fitness programs, mental health awareness campaigns, and health screenings, enhancing the overall wellbeing of community members.
- **Crisis Response:** New responsibilities may include coordinating responses to local emergencies (like public health crises), allowing councils to mobilize resources and support quickly and effectively.

5. Enhancing Civic Participation

- **Engagement Platforms:** Councils are empowered to create platforms for civic engagement, such as public consultations and forums, enabling residents to express their views and influence decision-making.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** New responsibilities allow councils to implement systems for gathering community feedback on services and initiatives, fostering a culture of transparency and accountability.

6. Partnerships and Collaboration

- **Collaboration with Local Organizations:** Community councils can forge partnerships with local businesses, NGOs, and community groups to enhance service provision and support local initiatives, leveraging additional resources and expertise.
- **Joint Initiatives:** Councils can collaborate with larger local authorities and stakeholders to address broader issues, such as housing, transport, and economic development, ensuring that community voices are represented.

7. Funding and Financial Management

- **Access to Grants and Funding:** New powers often include the ability to apply for grants and funding from various sources, enabling councils to finance community projects and initiatives that address local needs.
- **Community Investment:** Councils can allocate budgets to specific community projects, ensuring that funding is directed toward initiatives that resonate with residents.

Conclusion

The new powers and responsibilities of community councils offer significant potential to support and empower local communities. By effectively utilizing these powers, councils can foster community development, enhance service provision, and increase civic participation, ultimately leading to stronger, more resilient communities. Successful implementation requires ongoing engagement with residents, effective collaboration, and a commitment to transparency and accountability.

While community councils can play a valuable role in local governance, there are several arguments for why some may advocate for their abolition:

1. Redundancy in Governance

- **Overlapping Responsibilities:** Community councils often have roles and responsibilities that overlap with those of larger local authorities, leading to confusion and redundancy. This can create inefficiencies in governance.
- **Streamlined Decision-Making:** Abolishing community councils could lead to a more streamlined decision-making process by consolidating governance at a higher level, potentially making local governance more efficient.

2. Limited Impact and Influence

- **Insufficient Powers:** Community councils often lack significant decision-making powers, which can limit their effectiveness in addressing community needs. Their influence on key local issues can be minimal, rendering them less relevant.
- **Dependency on Larger Authorities:** Many community councils rely heavily on larger local authorities for support and funding, which can undermine their autonomy and ability to effect change.

3. Inequality in Representation

- **Variability in Effectiveness:** The effectiveness of community councils can vary widely based on the commitment and capabilities of council members. This inconsistency can lead to disparities in representation and service provision across different communities.
- **Low Engagement and Participation:** Community councils may struggle with low levels of public awareness and engagement, leading to decisions that do not reflect the views of the broader community.

4. Administrative Burden

- **Resource Allocation:** Maintaining community councils can require significant administrative resources, including staffing, funding, and operational costs. Abolishing them could free up these resources for more effective governance.
- **Bureaucratic Complexity:** The existence of multiple layers of local governance can complicate bureaucratic processes, making it difficult for residents to navigate local services and decision-making channels.

5. Potential for Ineffective Governance

- **Lack of Accountability:** Some community councils may lack sufficient oversight and accountability mechanisms, leading to concerns about transparency and decision-making processes.
- **Limited Training and Capacity:** Councillors may not receive adequate training, resulting in poorly informed decisions that do not serve community interests effectively.

6. Modern Governance Alternatives

- **Emergence of New Models:** With the rise of digital technology and community engagement platforms, alternative models of local governance are emerging that may be more effective in engaging residents and addressing community needs.
- **Direct Engagement with Residents:** Larger local authorities can adopt direct engagement strategies that facilitate community input without the need for an intermediary body, making governance more accessible.

7. Focus on Larger Issues

- **Addressing Broader Concerns:** Abolishing community councils could allow local authorities to focus more on larger systemic issues, such as housing, transportation, and economic development, which require coordinated efforts beyond the scope of community councils.

Conclusion

Arguments for the abolition of community councils center on issues of redundancy, limited impact, and inefficiencies in governance. While these councils may serve specific functions, critics contend that their existence can complicate local governance rather than enhance it. The decision to abolish or reform community councils should be considered carefully, weighing their benefits against these challenges in the context of modern governance needs.

How should you put your written evidence together?

There is usually no prescribed style, or set requirements, for setting out written evidence. However, the evidence received by committees is usually published on the internet, and the Senedd seeks to ensure all its webpages are accessible to:

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You can help the Senedd to meet web content accessibility guide lines (and enable more people to access your evidence) by following the guidance below.

Please:

- keep the document brief – as a guideline, 3,000 words maximum;
- avoid acronyms and abbreviations. Where they are used please ensure they are spelled out in full the first time they are used;
- submit a single document (preferably as a Word document) as your paper, with any tables, spreadsheets and annexes incorporated into the paper;
- use headings for structure (we recommend using the standard word formatting of Heading 1, Heading 2, etc.);
- if you are including links in your paper, these should be written as descriptions of where a reader will go, should they follow that link (i.e. not 'click here');
- include tables only when they are necessary for the purpose of presenting structured content. If you are using tables, please ensure they are a table in the paper itself (i.e. please don't include an image of a table). Please ensure a table is made up of labelled rows and columns. Any notes to the table should be as separate text (i.e. not be presented by the creation of additional rows unrelated to the column headings). If Excel SpreadSheets are provided, please ensure they are 'print ready,' so that the information contained within can easily be produced to a printable output on A4 paper, without any need to adjust the data contained within;
- include 'alt-text' for any images used in your document. Alt-text is a piece of 'hidden' text that describes an image used on a webpage or other electronic media, if for any reason a viewer cannot see the image itself. To add Alt Text you will typically (depending on your software)



need to right click on the picture, select 'Format Picture,' and then the 'Layout and Properties' icon (Layout and Properties). You will then be able to select 'Alt Text.' If in doubt about what alt-text to write, we recommend trying to imagine describing the image to someone over the phone.

- align text to the left hand margin;
- use font in at least size 12 (black colour);
- keep use of bold, underlining and italics to a minimum;
- use numbered paragraphs;
- use paper size A4 in portrait format;
- maintain a 1.5cm page margin (footnotes are fine, but headers/footers can be problematic);
- if you wish to include page numbers, site them on the left or right hand side of the page (to avoid clashing with the Assembly's own numbering of large packs of papers);
- email a copy of your written evidence to the clerking team by the agreed deadline;
- submit papers in a way that complies with any public information policies your organisation has (e.g. a bilingual information policy).

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- refer to the committee as the Welsh Government, the Welsh Assembly Government or WAG. Welsh Parliament committees are not part of the Welsh Government, and Welsh Parliament committees include Members of the Senedd from all political parties;
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- send your written evidence directly to the committee members;
- submit a security marked PDF document;
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