

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: Paul Evans

Response from: Paul Evans

Town and Community Councils: Submission to the Local Government and Housing Committee

Introduction

I have served as a Councillor on Crickhowell Town Council since 2020, and for the last two-and-a-half years as its Chair (Mayor). This submission is entirely personal, however, and does not make any claim to represent the official or collective view of the Council.

Crickhowell is a small rural town in Powys, with a population of around 2,800, an electorate of around 2,100 and a council tax base of around 1,300. The Council's precept income in 2024-25 is £65,000. Income from other sources (burial fees and ad hoc grants etc) brings its overall budget to around £80,000 to (in an exceptional year for grant income) £100,000. The Band D Council Tax is £2,026.63, of which £56 is for the Town Council precept.

The Council's principal assets are a recreation ground/small park which includes the ruins of Crickhowell Castle, and the (quite large) town cemetery; we have a few small assets in the form of miscellaneous things like the war memorial, a memorial fountain, an historic travellers' shelter, an historic horse trough, a clock and various bits of street furniture and so forth. Several of these we have adopted as they had become orphaned over the years.

There are twelve seats on the Council including the Chair. No Councillors declare a political affiliation on election, though recently one sitting Councillor has also been elected (in a by-election) as a County Councillor on a party ticket. I am told that since the creation of the Council in 1975 there has not been contested election. This has been consistent with experience in the last two elections at which there were insufficient candidates to fill all the vacancies, and co-option was required to complete the numbers. My impression is that this phenomenon is quite widespread amongst the smaller community councils.

The role and value of community and town councils in Wales

The greatest benefit of community councils is of course that they are close to their communities, and are perhaps better able to represent a collective view of their communities. This role comes to the fore principally in dealing with other authorities – the County Council, the planning authority (in our case the Bannau Brycheiniog National Park Authority), the highways agencies, the environmental agencies, the fire and rescue and police services and sometimes the Welsh Government.

The downside is that it is hard to make ourselves heard by these authorities, and community expectations of what we can do can be unrealistic. There is a lack of public education about who does what, and understandably the average citizen does not hold these things in their head when they are worrying about schools, roads, parking, crime and security, flooding, street lighting, planning, housing and a myriad of other things.

My sense at least around here is that many smaller community councils are reluctant to use their precept-raising powers, and do less than they could. The Band D community council tax precept across Powys (110 community councils) ranges from £10 to £400. Some community councils are clearly raising only enough to pay the costs of maintaining a legal existence and doing little or nothing for their communities.

But increasingly, a decade of austerity has left gaps which we are urged to help fill – indeed this seems to be the declared policy of Powys CC. The biggest single call on the Town's budget in Crickhowell is the more than £20,000 a year (nearly a third of our precept) which goes on keeping the public toilets open. We do this because our surveys of local opinion indicate that it is a priority, and because the town is heavily dependent on tourism for its prosperity and to leave visitors with no public conveniences would be bad for our image. However, although this is a benefit to the wider community around Crickhowell we bear the full cost. Since Powys CC essentially withdrew all support for local public conveniences a decade or so ago the costs have spiralled because doing it as a single contract is highly uneconomic. We are trying to reduce costs, but we have little negotiating clout. This may seem a trivial example from the perspective of Cardiff Bay, but it illustrates in a small way the conflict between providing at a community level and cost-sharing across a wider population.

Generally, there is a conflict between being in touch with the community and being able to reap the benefits of scale. If community councils are to fulfil a genuine role in shaping and supporting their communities they need more scope and probably more powers to do something for example about libraries, leisure centres and sports grounds, community transport and support for volunteering.

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

Town and Community Councils vary very greatly in size – you might compare Crickhowell with Brecon some 15 miles to the West. Brecon's council tax base at around 3,500 is about three-times that of Crickhowell. Its precept income is around £600,000 or nearly ten-times that of Crickhowell, with a Band D charge of £168 (about three times Crickhowell's). It manages to generate income from its assets of around £25,000 (Crickhowell has hived off almost all its community assets with income generation potential to self-standing trusts).

It also (and I am sorry to bang on about this but it is a big issue for Crickhowell Town Council) manages to run two public toilet provisions for about 120% of what it costs us to run one – a small illustration of the benefits of scale.

But for me, the key difference is that Brecon Town Council is able to employ five staff (probably not all full-time) at a cost of around £200,000.

I may appear to be slightly labouring this comparison, but I am doing so because it seems to me to support my basic contention that there are too many community councils, and this proliferation ultimately undermines their ability to serve their communities effectively. I will develop this argument below.

Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency

Part of the problem with existing governance and scrutiny arrangements is that the accountability burden for small councils is disproportionate to their scope for action. The budgeting, monitoring and audit requirements take a significant amount of time. This burden is magnified when a council is too small to afford full-time staff, as it then falls disproportionately on the volunteer councillors. Transparency is of course necessary, but it drains quite a lot of the scant resources of a community council which could be directed to more creative purposes.

The demands of being a community councillor are quite hard to reconcile with a full-time job and family responsibilities. Amongst the twelve Crickhowell Town Councillors, five are in full-time employment, five are retired (but often with a variety of caring responsibilities) and two are somewhere in-between. But it has taken considerable effort to significantly lower the average age of the Council over the last three or four years. The amount of time these volunteers can devote to council work is necessarily limited, and I am astonished how much they all do. But with only 15 hours a week of staff support, it is inevitably a significant limiting factor, and the last thing most of them wish to spend their freely-given time on is the bureaucracy of accountability. I believe much more could be done to reduce and delegate this burden – not least by having the capacity to employ more staff.

But, to repeat myself, my broader contention is that there are too many councils, and we need to pool resources. Crickhowell Town Council is part of an informal network of community councils which we call the “Five Councils” (Crickhowell, Cwmdu & District, Llangattock, Llangynidr and the Vale of Grwyney – this constitutes a significant proportion of the old Crickhowell Rural District Council area dissolved in 1974). Taken together, these communities have a council tax base of around 3,350, broadly comparable to that of Brecon Town Council. This seems to me to be about the right size to carry the administrative burden of running even this level of local government.

Although the “Five Councils” co-operate, this is a very loose network. The area they cover broadly corresponds to the natural catchment area of the highly reputed Crickhowell High School. Crickhowell is also the retail and commercial hub of these communities and the place where many residents work and shop, and to a greater or lesser extent go for leisure and entertainment. But our ability to collectively support and enhance these assets is severely limited.

Crickhowell Town Council has recently published an ambitious Place Plan, after extensive local consultation. This covers many issues which can only really be tackled across a wider area – active travel routes between and beyond these communities, community transport, environmental enhancements, affordable housing and better energy use to name but a few. But delivering on these (most of which depend on other agencies) is made more complex by the fragmented nature of the lowest level of local democracy.

Although provisions exist to allow voluntary mergers of community councils they are cumbersome, and the time and energy to invest in them is not readily available even if the will were there. The Senedd should consider how to either merge the smaller councils or enable a statutory framework within which they could develop common services, shared budgets and a degree of equalised precept. They might then provide community transport, volunteer co-ordination and other common endeavours.

The Committee should consider ways of balancing local representativeness with creating bodies with a sufficiently large tax base and talent pool to deliver an appropriate degree of professionalism, especially in the more rural areas.

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

There is undoubtedly potential for digital technology to promote greater engagement between community councils and their communities, perhaps especially in the fields of online meetings and consultations. But much of this technology is expensive, and its operation requires a degree of specialist expertise. Even building and running a website is quite challenging within the resources we have available.

I believe much more could be done to support community councils in the use of digital technology by building shared platforms which can be used to support different functions. Each Council has to buy its own accounting software, build its own website, develop a way of running hybrid meetings, subscribe to various online platforms and so forth, and to do all this with exiguous part-time professional support.

Essentially, small councils are left to find their own way through the digital jungle with neither financial or know-how support from any other level of government. If they are to remain so small and fragmented as they presently are, then someone at the centre of things needs to think a lot harder about how to support them, or build structures which can.

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

I have little experience to report under this heading either, because the scarcity of professional support, the lack of available councillor-bandwidth and the difficulty of securing the legal and financial expertise needed to access these powers is simply not available at the scale of Crickhowell Town Council. By the time we have undertaken our fiduciary obligations, endeavoured to undertake the recommended training programmes and attended meetings and consultations there is not a lot of fuel left in the tank.

Despite this, my fellow councillors not only attend community events but are often to be found getting their hands quite literally dirty weeding flowerbeds, helping with litter-picking, running stalls and planning events and ceremonies.

Bodies such as One Voice Wales help with the provision of centralised training and advice, but even finding the capacity to access their assistance is challenging.

I am aware that there are provisions for the delegation of functions from a principal council to a community council and for the acquisition of new functions under the power of general competence. But, as presently configured, it is unlikely that many of not most community councils will have the capacity to benefit from these provisions.

But I would give one example. Like many towns, Crickhowell has a parking problem. Parking is provided at County level and we have so far failed to persuade Powys CC to take up any of our suggestions for expansion. Under the power of general competence I believe we could (if we qualified, which we currently do not) borrow to build our own car park and hope to pay off the debt through charges. But we don't have the capacity to do this because of our lack of human and financial resources.

This leads on to a wider point which I believe is a problem at all levels of government but may be more acute at the bottom rung. Money for capital projects usually comes in the form of grants. We are frequently told that the Welsh or UK government has distributed a fund (which will be for more or less specific purposes) and that we must apply within a few weeks. The application forms are lengthy and detailed – sometimes we don't have the resources to apply within the deadline. If we do and are successful, we are often then told that the money must be spent by 31 March next, which may be no more than two or three months hence. The whole thing has to be done helter-skelter, and this frequently (in my view) leads to extravagance, waste and poor prioritisation. It would be enormously helpful if a rolling programme (say three years) of capital investment could be set up with sensible lead times, to enable community councils to access funds to realise some larger ambitions in a measured and considered way.

Conclusion

There is almost certainly no “one-size-fits-all” solution to local government. Powys County Council is geographically too big – we definitely need a level nearer to the local communities. Life here is also made more complicated by the overlapping responsibilities of the County Council and the National Park Authority – we need a way to negotiate between them.

But many community councils seem to me too small. They lack confidence and ambition, and are unwilling to seize the opportunity to develop the resources which would enable them to make a difference, and to fill gaps left by the withdrawal of principal councils from areas of discretionary provision. Many community assets which could be supported by a local council and stand as a visible symbol of local democracy are now run by trusts which rely on an uncertain stream of grant funding – because community councils dare not or cannot take responsibility for them. (For example, in Crickhowell, its Clarence Hall, Information and Resource Centre and Market Hall.)

As a result of their timidity and reluctance to exercise power, reinforced by their lack of resources and capacity, I suspect many community councils are nigh to invisible within their communities.

Arguably, something closer to the old system of urban and rural district councils would pave the way to a more community-sensitive distribution of powers and resources. Some things – education, social services and refuse collection for example – are almost certainly best done at a fairly aggregated level. But even a county council can feel remote from the communities it serves.

I would reckon that a “council tax base” of between 3000 and 5000 is probably the minimum viable size for community councils to be able to make a tangible difference in their communities, so long as they were configured with a sensitivity to “natural” and historic communities. The Local Government and Housing Committee could help in achieving this by persuading the Welsh Government to reconfigure the structure of community councils around some minimum viable size or creating a statutory framework enabling or mandating community councils to work as consortia.

I hope my thoughts are helpful to the Committee in its inquiry – I must stress once again that they are mine alone and do not purport to represent a collective view. If I can be of further help to the Committee I am happy to be asked.

Paul Evans CBE

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