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John Griffiths MS

Chair of the Local Government and Housing Committee

The Welsh Parliament

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Dear Mr Griffiths

Thank you for the opportunity for the WLGA to give evidence to the Committee's Inquiry into the role governance and accountability of community and town councils in Wales. I am pleased to provide you with the following response to the questions you sent to me on 18<sup>th</sup> November 2024.

**How does the Chief Digital Officer for local government work with community and town councils, and what resource and capacity needs have been identified?**

The role of the Chief Digital Officer (CDO) for local government in Wales is to provide strategic leadership on the digital agenda for local government. This role involves representing local government and championing its digital ambition. Due to the breadth of this focus, the CDO has not had the opportunity to work with community and town councils in Wales to any great extent to date.

The Welsh Government (WG) funded a research project in Autumn 2022 that analysed the digital capacity and capability of the community and town council sector in Wales. The CDO was asked by WG to oversee delivery of the project via a private sector research organisation. This project led to the creation of [the community and town council digital health action plan](#), which aims to maintain and improve sector progress.

To support delivery of the plan, the CDO has provided a senior member from their office to work with the project board. The project board, which meets on a quarterly basis, is chaired by the One Voice Wales (OVW) Chief Executive. Ovw is the principal organisation for supporting community and town councils in Wales. Other than this support, there is currently no direct involvement in the sector from the CDO or their office.

Organisations like One Voice Wales (OVW) and the Society for Local Council Clerks (SLCC) play a crucial role in supporting community and town councils. These organisations provide essential resources and guidance to enhance digital capacity and capability.

**Is there sufficient support and resource for community councils to improve their digital and IT capacity, and whether it should be a priority for this tier of Government?**

Most community councils have low to very low levels of digital maturity, particularly in use of cloud-based ICT services to support the democratic process. Based on the experience of the action plan project board, it appears there is insufficient support and resources available to community councils to materially improve.

In addressing the digital challenges faced by the community sector, it is essential to recognise that local government alone cannot provide the solution and the sector has numerous pressures to face in terms of implementing digital transformation. Instead, a collaborative approach involving various organisations and stakeholders, led by a suitably financed and digitally upskilled Ovw, is necessary to drive meaningful progress. A well procured and managed private sector will need to play a significant part in delivering the required improvement.

**Whether there is sufficient data collated on diversity within the community council sector, and on how local authorities are working with community councils to improve availability and quality of such data.**

The Welsh Government, with the support of Data Cymru, carried out of a survey of candidates for the local government elections in [2017](#) and [2022](#). Data Cymru manages the survey which holds information at a national level.

The main aim of the survey is to provide timely information on the demographic profile of councillors and candidates for both levels of local government. The intention is that the survey will be repeated during each ordinary election to track changes in councillors' and candidates' characteristics over time. The survey included a number of unique identifiers which enabled Data Cymru to track the candidates that were elected as councillors.

The survey was aimed at both County and Town and Community councillors and candidates and asked a prescribed set of questions that included (but was not limited to) questions about sex and gender identity; sexual orientation; language; ethnicity; age; disability; religion or belief; health; education and qualifications; employment; and the role of a councillor.

The response rate for the survey in 2017 was 18 per cent (1,701 responses) compared with 12 per cent (1,077 responses) in 2022. The 2022 report accounts for this drop in response as:

*Firstly, a potential reason for this drop in response rate is that this year's survey was "digital first", whereas the candidate registration is not in most local authorities, and therefore not all candidates provided an email address when registering. Secondly, after the COVID-19 pandemic, candidates may be experiencing "survey fatigue" associated with an increased number of surveys examining equality and well-being issues. Thirdly, UK General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR) requirements (not yet in force in 2017) meant that it was not possible to follow up and remind specific candidates who had not responded; instead, only general reminders to all candidates could be sent.*

We recently contacted local authority equality officers to find out if they were engaged in any work on the collection of diversity data of councillors at a local level. We didn't receive a response from all 22 authorities but, from the responses received, it appears that local authorities rely on the national data set.

Any collection, storage and analysis of diversity data at a more granular level would need to be considered carefully to GDPR compliance.

**Yours sincerely**



**Paula Walters**

Interim Head of Corporate Policy and Services