

CTC 23

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: Justin Horrell

Response from: Justin Horrell

This document provides a translation of correspondence received from Justin Horrell

I am a town councilor for the Aber-craf ward on Ystradgynlais Town Council, representing Plaid Cymru, but I submit this response as a councillor and an individual: it is not a response on behalf of the Council or Plaid Cymru.

- **The role and value of community and town councils in Wales:**

Community and town councils have significant value as "grassroots" representation for their communities. Most councillors are committed to their communities and want to protect their interests. However, because of the age profile and background of councillors, there is a risk that this desire to protect may be conservative in nature.

Councils also have a role in providing local services for their communities. But community and town councils are currently funded by a Council Tax precept. Given the extremely "non-progressive" nature of Council Tax, there is a risk that the financing and provision of services by community and town councils can be a burden on communities - compared to the financing of those services by other layers of government or by the third sector.

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

Councils need to see considerable improvement in their communication and engagement with their communities. I can say from personal experience that most local residents have no understanding of their local town council and do not know the names and responsibilities of their local councillors. For example, a simple online system to search for councillors' names by postcode or residential address would help people to understand how to contact their local councils.

- **Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency:**

A strong scrutiny system is needed. The current system seems complex and expensive for councils – slow and ineffective. A national online system for councils to manage their financial and operational affairs could be a fairly easy but effective solution. There are private companies that offer such systems, but these are expensive and complex for smaller councils to use as individual bodies.

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

Councils already have statutory requirements to carry out parts of their activities digitally, for example by having a website and by offering online access to meetings. However, there are no requirements for such things as the use of email systems for communication, cloud storage or other activities. This poses a risk that councils will miss opportunities for greater effectiveness

through the use of technology or that online systems and platforms will be misused and expose them to possible fraud, data loss and other security issues.

In addition to being a town councillor, I am also a governor at a local primary school. It is interesting to compare the central provision available to school governors with provision for community and town councils and their councillors. School governors have an account on the Hwb platform, which offers email, file sharing, online meetings and other features. School staff also get Hwb accounts, as well as access to other systems for financial planning and other activities.

As things stand, each community and town council has to procure website systems, online meeting services such as Zoom, email and so on individually. Their staff have to integrate the systems they use and also try to manage and maintain digital equipment such as personal computers, printers and communication equipment. Having each council act individually therefore leads to higher costs and inefficiency in the use of the technology. Council clerks and staff waste time on internal matters instead of working on behalf of their communities. There is likely a business case for central procurement for e.g. Zoom or Microsoft 365 licenses and for having a digital standard offer for councils. The savings could then be invested in a platform or support service to help council staff to solve technical problems and be more effective. Data from the support service would show where council processes could be improved over time.

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

Before powers and responsibilities can be exercised effectively, a transformation is needed to ensure that community and town councils:

- are funded through a system that is progressive and fair to communities and individuals
- are properly scrutinised by modern methods that are appropriate for councils of all sizes
- have practical and direct support to operate as twenty-first century organisations in terms of systems and processes

Yours sincerely,

Justin Horrell