

CTC 25

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: Cyngor Tref Aberystwyth

Response from: Aberystwyth Town Council



Maer Aberystwyth Mayor: Y Cyng. / Cllr. Maldwyn Pryse

Local Government and Housing Committee
Welsh Parliament
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Aberystwyth Town Council
The Presbytery
Queen's Road
Aberystwyth
SY23 2HS

18.10.2024

Dear Local Government and Housing Committee,

We write to provide you with our response to your current inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector. Our response will primarily be applicable to larger town/community councils, however it is important that the Committee notes the differences within the sector. The largest council in Wales is Barry Town Council, with a precept of over £1.2 million; in comparison, there are over 600 councils with a precept of less than £100,000¹. It is important that the Committee takes into account the view of councils all across this sector's wide ranging spectrum; different councils of different sizes often perform different roles and it is imperative that the Committee considers the differences present within the sector.

The role of the Town Council:

Aberystwyth Town Council, like many others, are taking up more and more non-statutory services. This is often being done in response to the financial situation of County Councils, which are decimated thanks to decades of austerity. This has seen many Town Councils "stepping up" to take over non-statutory services to maintain provision for residents while easing financial strain on County Councils. To use Aberystwyth as an example, thanks to the way the settlement shaped out after the reorganisation of local government in the 1970s, we were left with no assets or property that otherwise could have provided a foundation. All developments of service provision therefore are new, and we have needed to direct significant resources to build our capacity and expand our skill-sets and knowledge in order to deliver these. This has slowed our ability to provide services, and created its own challenges, and despite this we have been successful in providing efficient and effective services to our residents. In many cases where services have been transferred from County Councils to Town Councils, these services have actually be run more effectively and a less cost by the Town Council; Town and Community Councils are a cost effective form of local government.

¹ Based on 2022-23 precept information: [Community council precepts by community council \(gov.wales\)](https://www.gov.wales/government/community-council-precepts)

Whether or not austerity-like policies are set to continue, we should be building resilience in the sector while also developing new talent and pools of knowledge. The Welsh Government should play a role in facilitating this, helping to create a hub through which to share best practice and support Town Councils in developing.

Subsidiarity, decentralisation, and localism should be fundamental principles in future discussion on devolution of powers to Town Councils, which this Council supports. The devolution of powers will only be effective with adequate devolution of the means to enact those powers. That is, that devolution of powers must also include devolution of the financial mechanisms to enact them. One example of an area that could be devolved further to Town Councils is planning. All community and town councils are currently statutory consultees to planning authorities, however our input is often disregarded. Strengthening the ability of Town Councils to raise their voices would be welcome. Town Councils already play a massive role in 'placemaking' in their communities, and could play an even bigger role if given the space to do so. Decentralisation should be pursued, with greater powers and financial capability devolved to Town and Community Councils.

Governance and Accountability of Town Councils

A root and branch review of Town Councils' role in local government is needed. With an ever growing focus by county councils on providing only statutory services, combined with often unaccountable democratic structures, many residents have called for more local services by more local government. Current power distributions should be reviewed and tested for resilience and accountability. There is a democratic deficit in democracies across the world, but in any review of the sector, accountability and governance are inextricably linked and would benefit from increasing the awareness of electors in the changing role of governments at all levels; a piece of work that needs to happen at all layers of government.

Accountability can take many forms; formal ombudsman complaints, public participation at meetings, and of course the ballot box. Fundamentally any deficit in accountability in the sector must be linked to the lack of knowledge of electors, but also an under-resourced sector whose accountability is reliant on actions largely by councillors who are volunteers, and for the most part not specialists in politics, public services, or governance. Training on standing orders and other matters should be a legal requirement for all councillors in order to help address this, but without a recognition of the growing role of Town and Community Councils, any new mechanisms of accountability should develop alongside new mechanisms enabling councils to build capacity and resilience in their service provision.

Communication between layers of government are ad-hoc arrangements, which means while there are many great relationships, there are also many negative ones. The Welsh Government should work with other organisations to develop a 'Code of Standards' to enable a minimum level of mutual respect and understanding between local authorities. This code should empower Town and Community Councils, the level of representation closest to the public, such that the public may be better represented in decision making. It should also set minimum requirements of communication between levels of government on decisions and proposals.

Support should be provided, both by the Welsh Government and representative bodies such as One Voice Wales, to enable larger councils to develop policies, processes, and their standing orders and other documentation. This would facilitate a greater increase in capacity and enable Town and Community Councils to provide the best provision possible.

Digitisation

Evolving technological landscapes are enabling online participation more than ever. Support for Town and Community Councils to provide hybrid facilities and simultaneous translation is essential to enable full participation of members and residents.

Sincerely,

Cyng/Cllr Dylan Lewis-Rowlands

Chair of Standing Orders and Policy Committee

Chair of General Management Committee

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Dylan Lewis-Rowlands", is displayed on a light beige rectangular background.

On behalf of Aberystwyth Town Council