

Role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector

Summary of roundtable discussions

1. Introduction

As part of the Local Government and Housing Committee's inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector, roundtable discussions were undertaken with relevant stakeholders. This summary paper highlights key points raised during these discussions.

1.1. Contributors

Clerks and members of town and community councils were invited to attend informal, private discussions with Committee members.

1.2. Format

The contributions in this paper are drawn from three focus groups which were held simultaneously on 23 October 2024.

Thanks are extended to all who participated in these roundtable discussions.

2. Key points

Key discussion points from the focus groups will be highlighted within this section. These qualitative findings have been arranged thematically as follows:



2.1. Standards of behaviour

Across all sessions, standards of behaviour were highlighted as a significant concern. Contributors within the clerking groups referred to negative and threatening behaviour, including bullying. One participant described “bullying in the sector” as “absolutely atrocious” and said that they were unable to sleep at night. Participants described being belittled and shouted at.

Participants said that the culture in the sector in turn leads to loss of expertise and a shortage of young clerks. We heard that there is a lack of authority and respect for the role of clerk in some councils.

One participant said that they had “never experienced anything like it”. Another said that clerks live in fear of losing their jobs if they don’t do what councils want, and another participant said that they have witnessed people having breakdowns and deciding to leave their roles.

Another participant commented that it is “astonishing that some councillors get away with some of the things that wouldn’t be tolerated in other sectors.”

Among members, some referred to internal problems within councils, with issues such as imbalance of power between members and clerks, lack of communication and co-operation between members cited as challenges. The inconsistency in size of individual councils added to this problem according to some. One participant referred to their council as being run by a small number of members, and another to being excluded from decisions being made through a ‘WhatsApp’ group.

2.2. Clerks to community and town councils

One participant described the relationship between the council and the clerk as “strange”, in that the clerk is there to advise and guide but also to take instructions from the council. One participant said that “many councillors think they know everything and won’t listen to advice.” Another participant said that some members view the clerk as their secretary. It was argued that being a clerk is a complex role that isn’t always appreciated by members of the council.

Among members, some participants expressed concern that they are unable to complain about a clerk should they behave inappropriately in the same way a complaint could be made about a member. It was suggested that a professional HR company should be employed to undertake clerk appraisals. It was felt that

clerks should be independent and should therefore be unable to stand as members of other councils.

2.2.1. Support

There were calls for more resources, protection and support for clerks. Some participants said they would like to see clerks being employed by the local authority in order to have the local authority's protection. Participants said that they did not feel qualified to deal with HR issues, and that they often found themselves "firefighting" instead of doing their clerking roles. However, another participant said that doing this would "strip the sector of their independent corporate status".

Participants raised concern that clerks are often "on their own" i.e. the only person employed by the council, with one clerk describing the feeling as being "isolated".

It was suggested that "communication could solve some problems" and that an impartial mentoring system along with more "check-ins" would be helpful.

One participant referred to a Facebook group for clerks and said that people posted in it every day about bullying. The participant described a close-knit community of clerks but felt concerned for those without that network. There were calls for One Voice Wales to implement an online forum based advice area with financial support.

One participant said that they did not receive any "handover" when they started the role, while others felt frustrated that help and information is currently not easily accessible.

2.2.2. Training

It was noted that many clerks are trained to CiLCA level. Participants said that the bursary has been helpful.

Some participants in the clerking groups said that they had asked for training but these requests were not taken seriously and/or viewed as costly. One participant said that many members do not acknowledge that clerks require time off to complete training and think it can be done alongside their regular responsibilities. This can be a particular struggle for clerks who work part-time or work more than one job.

Some clerks said that some of the audit requirements can be quite challenging and noted a need for recognition and awareness of the burden placed on clerks.

2.3. Clustering of community councils

Participants across the groups expressed mixed views on clustering community councils. There was acknowledgement that the variability between sizes and coverage of councils was problematic, with some councils being too small. Some parts of Wales do not have community councils, and it was suggested that every area should have one. One suggestion was to “cluster” smaller councils rather than to disband. Clustering would provide a framework for collaborative working. It was noted that some councils have difficulty in attracting candidates so mergers could be an option.

Some participants raised concern that the legal requirements are the same whatever the size of the council, and that some very small councils struggle to implement the new requirements e.g. remote participation in meetings. Some participants suggested merging smaller councils, in order to pay the clerk a proper wage and to be able to ask for a professional qualification.

However, some participants felt strongly that small councils should remain so not to lose “the voice nearest to the people”. Pooling resources was described by one participant as being “unacceptable in terms of democratic rights”, adding “it would give those in smaller areas even less ability to act in their best interests and less voice in any debate”.

2.4. Relationship between Principal and Community Councils

There was a strong feeling, particularly among members of councils that the relationship between the sector and principal authorities could be “frustrating”. Participants expressed concern, with *planning* cited as a particular concern, and a feeling that their views are often overlooked or ignored by principal authorities. It was noted that being overlooked may be a barrier to recruiting new people to become members.

2.5. Technology

Participants across the groups expressed general support for the use of technology, but this was accompanied by a warning that technology should not be the only option. It was noted that many areas of Wales still have poor connectivity and that some older people are not confident in using technology.

Participants conveyed differing experiences around being able to work in a hybrid manner. Most participants welcomed remote participation in meetings as it has increased opportunities for people with other responsibilities to join meetings but

said that more funding is needed to enable the implementation of the legislation and the proper set up of hybrid meetings.

Experience of provision of equipment also varied with some members and clerks having been provided with ipads while others called for this to be available universally. The cost of universal provision was considered prohibitive by some.

A number of participants raised issues with multi location meetings and the lack of resource for it. They described struggling with ICT, especially in listed buildings, and not knowing what to do if the technology breaks. One participant described the legislation as “woolly” or “grey” when it comes to what to do if the technology doesn’t work.

According to one participant: “we are trying our best to implement the necessary equipment needed for Hybrid meetings, however we are in a Grade II listed building and the local authority Conservation Officer will NOT allow us to install anything into our Council Chamber. We have to jump through hoops to get anything done. There are no experts who can advise us and companies are scared of installing items that the conservation officer deems not in keeping with the building.”

Concern was expressed that, as some councils are unable to conduct meetings in a hybrid format, all participants needed to join meetings remotely.

2.6. General Power of Competence / New responsibilities

Contributors felt the General Power of Competence (GPC) was welcome, but it was noted that the eligibility criteria could be a barrier, in particular the requirement that clerks need to be qualified. Observations included the turnover of clerking staff and that individuals at the end of their career may be reluctant to take on board the qualification. It was suggested that a broader assessment of measuring clerks’ ability to support GPC is needed. Another suggestion was that the expertise and skills of members combined with those of the clerk should be a measure of competence.

Participants called for the GPC to be looked at again, with one suggesting that affirming eligibility for the duration of a council term would be preferable to re-affirming annually.

Several participants spoke of the additional responsibilities being taken on board by their councils, in particular operating services such as public toilets or car parks. Most felt that the sector was well placed to run these community services, but not

all have the resources, skills or ability to effectively manage these services. It was noted that there should be proper consultation by the local authority and resources to support the transfer of responsibility - including support from officers.