



Un Llais Cymru One Voice Wales

**Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into role, governance
and accountability of the community and town council sector**

**Observations of One Voice Wales
18 October 2024**

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Introduction

The Senedd [Local Government and Housing Committee](#) has agreed to undertake an inquiry into role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector.

The terms of reference for the inquiry are to examine:

- The role and value of community and town councils in Wales.
- Whether the sector is fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape.
- Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency.
- Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes.
- How new powers and responsibilities for this tier of government are utilised to support communities.

Consultation runs until 18 October 2024.

Following consideration by One Voice Wales Policy Committee and NEC, a working group was put in place to coordinate the contribution of One Voice Wales to the inquiry.

Membership of the Group were as follows:

Councillor Mike Theodoulou, Chair, One Voice Wales
Councillor Mike Cuddy, Chair Policy Committee
Lyn Cadwallader, Chief Executive
Paul Egan, Deputy Chief Executive and Resources Manager
Dr. Catrin Jones, Policy Officer
David Collins, Governance and Policy Practice Development Officer

The first meeting was held via Teams on Wednesday 18 September 2024 15.30 pm – 17.00 pm, following which a consultation event was arranged for all Councils in membership of One Voice Wales.

On 1st October 2024 One Voice Wales held a virtual consultation event with its members. The consultation event allowed member Councils to discuss the work of the inquiry. Councils considered information about matters which the Local Government and Housing Committee will investigate, in order to inform this submission to the Inquiry on behalf of One Voice Wales. Highlights from the discussions are submitted alongside this submission. The discussion reflects the five areas of the committee's terms of reference.

Larger Community and Town Councils across Wales also considered issues which the inquiry will examine, at a meeting held on 9 October 2024. An extract from the minutes of the meeting is attached as an appendix to this submission.

One Voice Wales also held its 2024 National Conference on 16 October 2024. This important event, attended by Councils from all over Wales included a host of guest speakers, including the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government, Auditor General for Wales, Public Services Ombudsman for Wales and representatives of the WLGA and Future Generations Commissioner. The inquiry formed a significant backdrop to the conference.

About One Voice Wales

One Voice Wales is the national representative organisation for Community and Town Councils throughout Wales. It currently has 660 Councils in membership representing some 90% of all Community and Town Councils in Wales.

Community and Town Councils can play a vital role in creating and sustaining a strong sense of community. One Voice Wales believes that Community and Town councils, as the first tier of government in Wales, are well-placed to ensure the sustainability of community development actions supported by other sectors.

This submission features strong links to our current corporate objectives, as identified in the One Voice Wales Corporate Strategy and Operational Delivery Plan 2024-25

The Plan includes the following Mission Statement:

One Voice Wales aims to support Community and Town Councils in achieving this vision and has adopted the following Mission Statement to guide its work:

“To represent the interests of Community and Town Councils; raise awareness and understanding of this first tier of government; and work collaboratively with our partners to ensure the sector contributes fully to the goal of developing dynamic and sustainable communities in Wales.”

The Plan identifies thematic areas, which provide the key strategic and organisational activities for 2024-25:

- Driving the use of the Finance and Governance toolkit by Community and Town Councils.
- Improving the digital capacity and capability of the sector.
- Responding to the outcome of the Ministerial Democratic Health Task and Finish Group.

- Continuing our work on the Local Places for Nature programme.
- Delivering the Cost-of-Living Crisis programme with Community and Town Councils.
- Driving greater support for Community and Town Councils regarding community asset transfer.
- Embedding new joint working arrangements with the WLGA and Unitary Authorities.
- Driving new organisational developments including improved communications channels and a revised and improved governance structure for One Voice Wales.

The Inquiry will thus examine many areas where the corporate values and priorities of One Voice Wales are clearly laid out, confirming the organisation's commitment to the key issues which face the sector.

About Community and Town Councils

There are 732 Community and Town Councils in Wales, representing this tier of government closest to the people. They cover approximately 94% of the land area and 70% of the population of Wales. Community and Town Councils are the most local part of our democracy and play an integral role in the functioning of communities in Wales. They provide our neighbourhoods, villages and towns with a democratic voice and a structure for taking action – real people power at grassroots level.

Community and Town Councils are local authorities constituted under the 1972 Local Government Act and range from those serving our smallest rural communities to larger urban councils with populations of tens of thousands. The services delivered by local councils are similarly varied but each seeks to serve its community within its own specific context. Currently this includes undertaking activities such as carrying out community appraisals, developing new or additional services, supporting local voluntary organisations, providing community facilities and influencing those decisions of other organisations that may affect the community.

They are the first step on the ladder of democratic engagement across Wales, providing services and representation to a diverse range of communities.

The communities they serve range from small rural settlements to large towns and their budgets vary accordingly. However, what they all have in common is serving their communities and acting to improve the quality of life in their locality. This is achieved through exercising a growing range of statutory powers and responsibilities.

Community and Town Councils are responsible to their local electorates for delivering a wide range of services and for the provision and upkeep of local amenities.

Each Council is made up of elected Members, or in some cases co-opted members. In Wales there are approximately 8,000 Community and Town Councillors, who represent the interests of the community they serve as a whole. They are recognised as having a role in providing the voice of the citizen in the development and delivery of public services in Wales.

The context of One Voice Wales response

Before responding to the inquiry's five specific questions areas of interest, we consider it appropriate to preface our comments through reflecting upon current issues and previous work that should be enacted and which we believe provide a context for our responses.

1. The Cost-of-Living Crisis, Culture in Wales and Place-Based Services

The draft priorities for culture in Wales 2024-2030 present a strong framework for promoting culture as a force for unity, identity, and resilience. It is important that these priorities remain inclusive and responsive to the needs of all communities, particularly in the face of ongoing economic challenges. The One Voice Wales Cost of Living Crisis Team is committed to supporting these efforts and ensuring that cultural initiatives are accessible and beneficial to all.

There are excellent examples of Community and Town Councils promoting culture.

- Blaenavon Town Council collaborated with a renowned South Wales photographer in 2023 to champion an initiative to honour and celebrate the intangible cultural heritage, spirit and resilience of the Blaenavon community, through an exhibition and book. The town, like many others in south Wales, was grappling with finding a renewed purpose following the decline of its industrial base. However, the townspeople, their institutions and cultural identity, forged in industry, showed resilience and determination amid socio-economic change. The project resulted in the "Family of Blaenavon" exhibition and an accompanying book.
- Criccieth Town Council recognises the importance of culture and heritage for community development – local culture provides a sense of identity for residents and improves local well-being. The challenges of the pandemic in recent years exacerbated isolation and communal stress. Criccieth Town Council responded to these challenges by building on its record of creative engagement and facilitating a number of imaginative heritage projects which have involved hundreds of volunteers in their design and delivery. The creative work has included digital aspects, a lot of paint, arts and crafts, performance and gardening to celebrate its history and

heritage, to increase the vibrancy of the community while also improving the quality of life by engaging residents and spreading messages of friendship, kindness and inclusivity. These projects have involved many voluntary associations, the local primary school, individual artists and other creative talents. The work has given hundreds of people the chance to contribute, even from the confines of their homes which helped residents to remain connected to others in a safe way during the pandemic, reducing feelings of isolation and supporting well-being. The Council developed a community and culture led tourism strategy, improving both the tourist offer and their experience of Criccieth and the quality of life of residents through celebrating the history and culture of the local area. A number of imaginative projects were devised with residents in support of a Community Plan developed with the community and the end results have become lasting legacies. Projects include a Town Map with historical points of interest, public art works including friendship benches with QR Codes to stories and legends collected and published on the People's Collection Wales website, post box toppers, tapestries of the town, gardening and the John Ystumllyn Rose, and celebrating the National Eisteddfod's visit to the area in 2023.

- Pontypool's Annual Report refers to "*A Pontypool of Vibrant and Thriving Welsh Language Supporting the Welsh language through Pontypool - Schools Eisteddfod. Value culture, creativity and diversity as core dimensions of well-being.*"

It is important to note the evolving role of Community and Town Councils. The Independent Review panel established by the Welsh Government prior to Covid, recommended that Place Based Services should be delivered by Community and Town Councils and that there should be a clear distinction between services delivered by Community and Town Councils and the Principal Council - "We have determined that 'place-based' should be any (mainly discretionary) services that helps the social, cultural, economic & environmental, and physical wellbeing of the community which can be linked to a place and can vary from place to place, rather than people based, statutory or regulatory services that are more likely to need equitable service across the country."

Examples of place-based services included: Burial Grounds, Community Assets including village halls / centres, toilets etc, culture, tourism and heritage including libraries, arts venues and museums. Whilst the recommendations are still being reviewed, the financial imperatives, highlighted by Principal Councils throughout Wales and the UK and underlined by Audit Wales, need immediate attention if the resilience of communities and their existing cultural infrastructure is to be maintained and to assist in supporting "discretionary services."

The present parlous funding position for "Culture" whilst acknowledged in the recent Welsh Government Consultation, does not offer any solutions. However, the Independent Review Panel noted that whilst the Community and Town Council Sector can raise a precept and that Councils have been

traditionally cautious, they need access to additional funding. This will incentivise Councils and assure them that additional support is available as they engage their communities. As the Independent Review Panel reported:

"We believe that Community and Town Councils should be made aware of, and have increased access to, these alternative sources of funding. In addition, we recommend the Welsh Government should explore how the transfer of funding and income related to place-based services taken on by Community and Town Councils can be achieved."

At present Welsh Government Funds often exclude Community and Town Councils – for example the Transforming Towns funding.

Community and Town Councils cover over 90% of Wales, are close to the community and could do far more than at present if the recommendations of the Review Panel were implemented.

Just as it is crucial to more properly recognise the role of Principal Councils, it is also important to recognise the services and ambition embodied in the breadth of the Community and Town Council sector. Alongside innovative and valuable project work highlighted by One Voice Wales, Community and Town Councils also provide venues, major events and cultural services. They are increasingly engaged in partnerships with principal authorities and with national bodies. In a time of declining non-statutory services, the sector is ever more important in realising the ambitions of this document and of the Future Generations and Well-being Act.

It is important to recognise that the ambitions of the sector go beyond plugging gaps in non-statutory services but in greatly contributing to the national culture. At Penarth Town Council, an example of this is The Turner House Gallery – www.turnerhouse.wales. The Council entered into a partnership with Amgueddfa Cymru to initiate a new, free, sustainable gallery, in a vacant historic building. Operated by PTC, since its opening 3 years ago, the gallery has provided an ambitious and ever-changing programme of exhibitions, events and partnerships. Projects include Crefftwr, initiated by the gallery in partnership with Heritage Crafts in Wales, and the National Lottery Heritage Fund to celebrate the makers keeping traditional heritage crafts alive in Wales.

Below the national organisations, it is vital that national policy recognises the makeup and interventions in the Community and Town Council sector, which make up the national cultural infrastructure, create a sense of place and respond to the cultural needs of their communities. With this in mind, we turn our attention to reviews of community governance. Community and Town Council boundaries need to support a sense of place for people and reflect the identities and interest of the community in that area and promote community cohesion, civic values, responsibility and pride. A review of community governance should seek to create cohesive, attractive and economically vibrant local communities and improve the capacity of local councils to deliver better services and represent the community's interests.

The area of a local council should reflect community identity and interest, thereby promoting effective and convenient local government. Size alone will not ensure this. The identification of a community is not a precise or rigid matter. It is important to encourage the involvement of local people in developing their community and to have a part to play in shaping the decisions that affect them. A local council can be a useful and democratic means of achieving this.

Community cohesion is central to the concept of a sustainable community which in turn requires effective and inclusive participation, representation and leadership and is an issue which needs to be considered when taking decisions about community governance arrangements. Community and Town Councils are the most local tier of government in Wales and their boundaries reflect community ties. Any community governance review needs to ensure that their boundaries continue to reflect local identities and facilitate effective and convenient local government. A community governance review ought to bring about improved community engagement, better local democracy and result in more effective and convenient delivery of local services. Local councils have two main roles: community representation and local administration. For both purposes it is desirable that a local council should reflect a distinctive and recognisable community of place, with its own sense of identity. Community Boundary Reviews need to home in on communities as offering a sense of place and of local identity for all residents. The views of local communities and inhabitants are of central importance when undertaking reviews of community governance.

2. Our democratic health

On 26 April 2023 the Minister for Finance and Local Government issued the following written statement:

“Community and town councils are democratically elected and operate at the most local level of democracy. I wish to provide an update on two key strands of work to support and develop the community and town council sector to play their role effectively.

The first key strand is about our shared interest in securing a healthy democracy at every level of government. My officials have completed their analysis of May’s community and town council elections, and the data raises serious concerns around the level of engagement between communities and their councils. At May’s elections, only 22% of the 7,883 seats were contested. 62% of seats were uncontested – meaning that no election was held – and 16% of seats were unfilled, to be filled through further election or by co-option.

In my Written Statement on this topic in July 2022, I referred to two key issues. The first was ensuring that people have a genuine choice as to who represents and serves them. The second was about ensuring that people feel being part of this level of democracy is a way of effecting change, and therefore want to put themselves forward for election. The

updated election results confirmed that these issues require urgent attention. I want to update members of progress.

My officials have been working with One Voice Wales to put in place a Democratic Health Task and Finish group to explore the causes of lower engagement and participation with some community and town councils, learn from the success in others, and suggest options for action to consistently improve engagement and participation.

I am pleased to announce that we have agreed the terms of reference and membership of the group. Their core aims will be to identify options for actions for community and town councils, sector representative bodies and government to:

- Improve awareness and engagement between communities and their community councils, and
- Increase the number, and diversity, of candidates standing for election to community and town councils.

This group will join up with related ongoing work on electoral reform and improving diversity in democracy. I would like them to work at pace and report within nine months of commencement.

I am pleased that Shereen Williams, Chief Executive of the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission for Wales has agreed to chair this important work. The other members will be:

- *Cllr Mike Theodoulou* – Chair of One Voice Wales
- *Dr Leah Hibbs* – Lecturer, School of Social Sciences, Cardiff University
- *Sue Leonard* - Chief Officer at the Pembrokeshire Association of Voluntary Services, the county voluntary council for Pembrokeshire.
- *Sue Husband* – Director, Business in the Community Cymru
- *Tilley Rees* – Student, University of Wales Trinity Saint David

They will bring a broad range of experience and expertise, and introduce new thinking, to the challenge of improving the democratic health of community councils.”

We are currently awaiting the outcome of this piece of work. Consequently, One Voice Wales would respectfully direct the Senedd Inquiry to this important workstream and any recommendations setting out the way forward for the community and town council’s sector.

3. Recent research

Over the course of the last 9 years there have been a number of activities that have highlighted the need for improvement and developments and consequently for increased levels of investment in the community and town council sector.

These will be examined in turn.

Welsh Government Review of Funding 2015

In August 2015 the Minister for Public Services, Leighton Andrews, agreed that a grant review of funding for One Voice Wales should be undertaken by officials to inform decisions on future funding of the organisation. The review commenced on Monday 12th October and completed on Friday 11th December.

The report found that there was a case for continued policy intervention in the sector and for continued investment in One Voice Wales. Some observations on how the sponsor team might take forward their working arrangements with One Voice Wales were offered.

Below are extracts from the main report. However, One Voice Wales considers that the issues presented within the report are as relevant in 2024 as in 2015 and in fact more so – the situation facing the One Voice Wales team has become even more demanding.

As of 31 March 2024, the organisation has 659 community and town councils in membership. An increase of over 18% or 99 new councils' members since 2015. Naturally this has had a significant impact on the number of advice and query requests, significant implications in terms of demand for training and development and the resources needed to service this as well as a significant increase in the representational role of One Voice Wales during the nine-year period with the associated resource pressures on the team. It has particularly meant that some of the activities carried out in 2015 have been squeezed with little or no resource within the team such as communications, website administration and resources to support evolving agendas such as community asset transfer, decarbonisation as well as the development of guides and practice manuals for community and town councils in relation to legislative changes.

The headline information from the 2015 review are set out below:

Main Findings: Introduction

The evidence and considerations underpinning the review findings are set out in the appendices to the report. The following paragraphs provide a short exposition of the key issues.

Main Findings: Summary

- 1) There is a rationale for continued investment in the sector
- 2) There is a rationale for continued investment in One Voice Wales.
- 3) Whilst there are potential alternatives to One Voice Wales as a delivery vehicle, there are drawbacks to each of them.
- 4) There is potential for tension between One Voice Wales's role as a representative of its sector and its role in contributing to the implementation of Welsh Government policy – this needs to be articulated, with clarification of how it will be handled.

5) One Voice Wales is struggling to deliver the full range of services that it and Welsh Government would wish, due to resource constraints. If additional resources cannot be found, a shared agreement must be reached on priorities.

6) The changing policy context offers the opportunity for Welsh Government and One Voice Wales to agree on a work programme that will help support the sector in adapting to the new expectations through to the 2017 and 2023 elections.

Main Findings: Discussion and Issues

There is a rationale for investment in the sector

- There are challenges associated with the sector in terms of the number, size, diversity, and varied (often limited) capacity of councils.
- Changes to the structure of local government in Wales, coupled with the austerity agenda, mean that an effectively functioning community and town council sector is more important than ever.
- Welsh Government has set out its policy aspirations to the sector and, given the nature of the sector, these will not be fulfilled without a pro-active approach by WG and an effective programme of interventions.
- There are policy changes (Appendix A2) which will come into effect following the 2017 and 2023 elections which must be prepared for now if they are to be implemented successfully.

There is a rationale for investment in One Voice Wales

- The advisory service and training programme offered by One Voice Wales is of value to a sector which is characterised by “committed amateurs” and a low resource base. These services are also of value to Welsh Government as they are in line with WG’s aspirations in relation to the capability and skills of the sector.
- One Voice Wales’s role as a channel for communications with the sector and for enabling the voice of the sector to be heard is of value to Welsh Government and also to other national bodies.
- The nature of the sector means that it is not a straightforward matter to deal with it effectively, and One Voice Wales has built up expertise in the field.
- The cost to Welsh Government of investing in One Voice Wales appears low relative to comparator bodies (A4).
- Whilst alternative delivery approaches could be found, there are drawbacks to each of them (A6).
- There are challenges facing the sector immediately and through to 2023. Loss of OVW at this stage, and the need to find an alternative arrangement, would be more likely to jeopardise progress towards these goals than to improve it.

Resource Constraints & Pressures on One Voice Wales

It was clear from discussions that OVW staff are feeling the pressure of providing a service to 560 member councils, and meeting WG’s expectations,

as well as being hampered by inadequate ICT. Some of the priorities which they would like to pursue (such as a drive to recruit members from North East Wales) are not achievable from within existing resources.

There would be value in considering whether some additional resources directed at priority activities would help to unlock some of the issues which are causing frustration currently. If additional resources (for example from the remainder of the budget ring fenced for training bids) are not available, then a shared agreement on priorities must be reached.

None of the above issues are insurmountable or mean that continued funding for One Voice Wales should be ruled out. There is clearly significant goodwill from staff on both sides (albeit tempered by frustration) as well as a shared commitment to the success of the community and town council sector, both of which provide a firm foundation for a successful future partnership approach to the addressing the challenges facing the sector.

Looking Ahead

As noted previously, Welsh Government and One Voice Wales ongoing work with the community and town council sector will need to include the following priorities:

- In collaboration with WLGA, WCVA, National Assets group, local authorities and other partners, supporting councils in responding to the delegation of services agenda
- In collaboration with the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner, supporting larger councils with the requirements of the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act
- Developing a policy position on the principles which should underpin the forthcoming LDBCW reviews of council areas
- In collaboration with the Auditor General for Wales, identifying councils which are likely to need targeted support to enable them to comply with audit requirements
- In collaboration with the SLCC developing an appropriate training / assessment programme for Clerks
- In collaboration with relevant experts eg Participation Cymru, eg WCVA eg Electoral Commission Wales develop an action plan for increasing local interest in forthcoming community and town council elections
- Continue to provide training, advice and support to councils to enable them to conduct business effectively
- In collaboration with Planning Aid Wales continue to improve councils' ability to engage effectively with the planning process

Given the scale of the challenge, and the constraints on One Voice Wales, it will be important to have clarity and a shared agreement on which priorities are being led by One Voice Wales, by Welsh Government or by other bodies.

Main Findings: Conclusion

Given the challenges facing the sector, the nature of the sector and the difficulties which this presents in dealing with it, the expertise which OVW has

developed in relation to the sector, the value for money which it represents, and the scope to build and improve on the existing strengths which exist, *continued funding for One Voice Wales is recommended.*

So, from a One Voice Wales perspective basically nothing has changed other than the issues highlighted in 2015 have become increasingly more acute as demands upon the organisation from all angles have become greater and the requirements for legislative compliance have grown considerably during the same period, the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, Environment Act and biodiversity action plan requirements, annual reporting and training plans and reporting to the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales on member allowances to name but a few.

Independent Review of Community and Town Councils

During 2017-18 - as part of the Independent Review Panel review of Community and Town Councils – One Voice Wales held a series of consultation workshops across Wales collecting the views of member councils. The final report and response to Welsh Government is available on the One Voice Wales website. It reflects:

- a) The views of member councils of One Voice Wales across Wales, individually and collectively recorded via:
 - Discussions in preparation for this response via eight consultation events held across Wales
 - An on-line survey of members of One Voice Wales (to ensure those that were unable to attend the consultation workshops held above had the opportunity to provide comments/ and to allow any further comments for those who attended the eight events to submit further thoughts)
- b) The expert comments are based on the experience of members of the One Voice Wales staffing team who were tasked with preparing the response.
- c) A literature review of documents relating to the community and town councils sector reflecting on what has been achieved, the challenges facing the sector in moving forward and the opportunities and actions that can help to mold a positive direction of travel for the sector for the future.

The document sets out One Voice Wales view of the local government landscape and the actions necessary to support community and town councils to improve and development to rightfully conduct a fuller role in the life of communities across Wales.

The final report of the Independent Review Panel 2018 – with its 46 recommendations largely remain areas for action for One Voice Wales and its members (accepting that some recommendations were taken

forward in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021) – clearly set out the challenges facing the sector and opportunities for change to enable improvement. One Voice Wales believes that the findings of this comprehensive undertaking still hold water and should be seriously considered by the Senedd Inquiry as the way forward for the community and town council sector.

One Voice Wales Members Survey 2020

This report was commissioned by One Voice Wales to obtain the views and opinions of Community and Town Councils throughout Wales to ensure that its work and priorities are in line with the views and expectations of its members and to provide a means for member Councils to suggest improvements in service delivery and ways of achieving its vision of :
“Working with local councils in Wales to shape places communities want to live in.”

The results are based on an analysis of a questionnaire sent by email to all member Councils. The report found a very positive response to the work undertaken by One Voice Wales and confirms that it is considered an excellent and necessary service for Community and Town Councils, providing vital support for Clerks. Respondents consistently praised One Voice Wales for:

- the approachability of staff, their availability and excellent professional advice given promptly
- its good practice guidance
- its information on new legislation
- its information on current developments in the sector
- the training opportunities provided which are open to Councillor’s and Clerks
- its role in representing Community and Town Councils in Wales

It also has a number of recommendations for further consideration by One Voice Wales:

- considering how it can lead to the delivery of the Future Generations Act and Environment Wales Act
- continuing to develop good practice guidance
- developing a suite of templates for policies
- considering suggestions for increased resource capacity
- continuing to promote partnership working

- reviewing and considering best working practices for Councils due to the impact of Covid-19
- considering ways of improving attendance at national meetings and conferences/events
- How to improve on attendance at already well-attended area meetings
- considering ways of promoting the importance of being a Councillor and developing a recruitment programme
- seeking feedback on the new webinar training available from September 2020
- reviewing the design and layout of the much valued and regularly read e-bulletin
- considering improvements to the website which is regularly consulted by members as a source of key information
- continuing its consultation process with Community and Town Councils across Wales

Support for different aspects of One Voice Wales's Working and Achievements

Respondents were given the chance to state whether they agreed with seven statements about One Voice Wales (OVW) (Q32 Appendix 1). Results indicate strong agreement with:

- OVW Staff are approachable – 91%
- OVW Staff are knowledgeable – 90%
- OVW is the representative body for Community and Town Councils in Wales – 89%
- OVW is dedicated to Community and Town Councils - 87%
- The Council Values its membership of OVW – 81%
- OVW can access a wide range of people and organisations – 70%
- OVW achieves a lot on behalf of its members – 61%

Prioritisation of One Voice Wales's Work to Achieve its Vision

- Respondents were asked to rank in importance which aspects of work from a list of ten help One Voice Wales in achieving its vision of working with local councils in Wales to shape places communities want to live in. (Q30 Appendix 1)

Five areas stood out as priorities for over two thirds of respondents:
Supporting the Council with advice – 92%

Providing information on latest developments/legislation – 81%
Representing Town and Community Councils in Wales – 79%
Providing examples of good practice – 77%
Providing training for Councillors – 70%

Around a third of respondents prioritised the following three areas:
Providing networking opportunities – 33%
Working with partner organisations – 30%
Providing opportunities for the Council's work to be recognised and rewarded – 28%

Less than 20% considered the following two areas to be a priority:
Promoting membership – 19%
Attracting commercial support – 17%

- Respondents were given the opportunity to suggest anything else they considered One Voice Wales should be doing to achieve its vision (Q31). 144 responses were received; many of the responses said that no change was necessary and that within the resources available One Voice Wales was working at full-capacity and achieving excellent results. Several respondents considered that One Voice Wales should be better funded and that this would help in achieving the vision. It was suggested that harnessing Clerks on an ad-hoc basis had benefits for both extending its resource and would assist in the development of Clerks. The availability of a central list of experienced former Clerks would help Councils in the absence of their Clerk, particularly with the pressures of audit. Another suggestion in relation to Clerks was to explore options with a view to ensuring equitable salaries and duties across Wales. Promoting the importance of being a Councillor was suggested with support and a recruitment programme to encourage young councillors to become involved. Promoting collaborative working, cooperation and networking at a local level between councils, (including partnership meetings with County Councils) and clerks was considered important and seeking ways of how to encourage more councillors to attend regional meetings. Having more regional events for information and support would also be welcomed. Some suggested that it would be beneficial for One Voice Wales staff to attend Council meetings across Wales to give a short presentation on the benefits of membership and how by working together Councils can be part of the vision. It was appreciated that this would have resource implications for the office, which could be addressed by holding virtual/online meetings. Continuing to communicate achievements would encourage a growth in membership. Some considered that One Voice Wales focussed on serving large councils and that different approaches should be used for

large and small councils, including helping smaller councils with no IT expertise and assisting them to balance an increased workload. A comprehensive 2–3-day induction course for clerks and councillors was suggested. Mention was made of the importance of volunteering and that training and policies do not currently cover this area. Smaller Councils would also value more locally based training venues and information on Place Planning for those with limited staff resources. Having suites of policy templates for all would save duplication of efforts across councils. It would also be beneficial to review and consider best working practices for councils in light of the impact of Covid-19, to seek information from both Community and Town and Councils and work with Welsh Government to agree on new guidance and recommendations on new working practices. It was further suggested that One Voice Wales should lead on the delivery of the Future Generations Act and Environment Wales Act. Other possibilities included working with organisations which are part of the Welsh Government Rural Development Programme to deliver projects and pursuing green economy to financially support the work of councils. Another suggestion was to have a “good Council” grading structure similar to England. Finally, to continue with the consultation process to seek the views of Community and Town Councils across Wales.

Discussions with Welsh Government Officials 2021/22

Over the course of the latter part of 2021 and first quarter of 2022 discussions were held between Welsh Government officials and the Chair and Chief Executive of One Voice Wales. Four broad areas for potential collaboration with Welsh Government including:

1. Green agenda – Decarbonisation, Climate Emergency, Local Places for Nature, Well Being of Future Generations
2. Community Governance – Digital working, Improving Financial and Management Governance, Diversity in Democracy Localism, implementing Local Government and Elections Act (Wales) 2021
3. Developing Place Based Services – Community Asset Transfer, Town Regeneration, Place planning/community planning
4. Community and Town Councils role in supporting ‘neighbourhood level support and supporting post Covid recovery.

In terms of the role and value of the community and town council sector these should form the cornerstones of the sector’s future work and existing activities in these areas have been proven to benefit the health and wellbeing of residents over the course of the last five years and examples are highlighted later in our response.

Audit Wales Research 2022

The Wales Audit report published on 1 November 2022 identified that 'Systemic change is needed if Welsh and local government are to meet the scale of the challenge to alleviate poverty. The report states that poverty has been a long-standing challenge in Wales, but the numbers affected are growing stating:

“Our report looks to help councils make better use of resources to support people in poverty. Poverty in Wales is not a new phenomenon and tackling poverty, particularly child poverty, has been a priority for both the Welsh Government and councils in Wales. The current cost-of-living crisis means that more people are being affected and families who have been living comfortably are moving into poverty for the first time. Our report looks at the challenges of poverty in Wales and how government is responding.

We found that many of the levers that could be used to alleviate poverty are outside of Wales's control. The Welsh Government adopted a Child Poverty Strategy in 2011, which was revised in 2015, but this is out of date and the target to eliminate child poverty by 2020 was dropped. We found that councils and partners are prioritising work on poverty, but the mix of approaches and a complicated partnership landscape mean that ambitions, focus, actions, and prioritisation vary widely.

The Welsh Government makes significant revenue funding available but, due to the complexity and nature of the issues, the total level of spend is unknown, and no council knows the full extent of its spending on alleviating and tackling poverty. The short-term nature of grant programmes, overly complex administration, weaknesses in guidance and grant restrictions, and difficulties spending monies means that funding is not making the impact it could. Councils find it hard to deliver preventative work because of the sheer scale of demand from people in crisis.

Despite this, there is a lot of good work happening on the ground to help lessen the impact of poverty. Our recommendations are designed to support decision making in councils and their partners and improve how they target their work.”

Community and town councils have been an important sector in the 'good work happening on the ground' and now need support to transition from the current position or level of activity to a future where they are enabling significantly more neighbourhood level support initiatives that addresses the core issues facing communities brought about by the cost-of-living crisis.

4. Relationships with others

During the Covid and Cost of Living Crisis period we have witnessed community and town councils embrace the environmental agenda via the Local Places for Nature scheme, declare Climate Emergencies in their towns, have a recognised role to play in the decarbonisation agenda and the 2030 targets agreed at Partnership Council with other public service providers; step up and provide a wide range of neighbourhood level support initiatives including vulnerable neighbour support, food banks, helping with fuel costs; see increasing number of community and town councils developing their own Place Plans and support regeneration initiatives in their localities. Much of this work has been undertaken against a backdrop of greater collaboration with local third sector organisations and local businesses.

Likewise, working in partnership has been critical to the growth and influence of One Voice Wales. We have developed strong working relationships with NALC, SLCC, Welsh Government, WLGA, Wales Audit, Public Services Ombudsman Service, IRPW, WCVA, Information Commissioners Office, Planning Aid Wales, Save A Life Cymru to name but a few organisations and commercial suppliers to the sector bringing benefits to member councils.

5. A post-Covid World and the pace of change

Community and Town Councils can and do play a vital role in creating and sustaining a strong sense of community – this has never been so clear as the last 5 years with the efforts of the community and town councils in responding to the Covid pandemic and cost of living crisis. They can make a significant contribution to the social and economic development of their communities. However, to do so effectively, they must have good financial management and governance arrangements in place. Across Wales, we know that local government has been working within a context of financial challenge. Service areas within councils are having to make annual cuts of up to 7% or more in some cases. This involves difficult decisions about staffing levels, investing in technology as well as presenting challenges in finding and retaining the right skill base to implement change.

One consequence of local authority cuts has been the transfer of assets and /or devolution of services to community and town councils – and this is only likely to continue as further cuts to local authority budgets occur. However, despite these very real challenges, innovation and creativity has played a role in the way that community and town councils in Wales delivers and designs its services now and will be increasingly important in future. During the Covid period we have witnessed community and town councils embrace the environmental agenda via the Local Places for Nature scheme, declare Climate Emergencies in their towns, have a recognised role to play in the decarbonisation agenda and the 2030 targets agreed at Partnership Council with other public service providers; step up and provide a wide range of neighbourhood level support initiatives including vulnerable neighbour support, food banks, helping with fuel costs; see increasing number of community and town councils developing their own Place Plans and support

regeneration initiatives in their localities. Furthermore, we know that digital technology presents the potential to save money and provide better services and this has been realised by some community and town councils in Wales who have innovated and used their current resource base creatively to deliver results within a climate of challenge.

There are some excellent projects currently being delivered across community and town councils in Wales, and reason to celebrate progress. One Voice Wales can point to community and town councils providing innovative responses to the agenda's set out above – for example Pembrey and Burry Port Town Council's work on neighbourhood level support, Pontypridd Town Councils work on environmental improvement, Newtown Town Councils work on place planning and town centre regeneration, Amroth Community Councils work on plastics removal and Blaenavon Town Council's work on the collaborative Healthy Blaenavon scheme.

However, the pace of change has been slower than Welsh Government, One Voice Wales and community and town councils would like, and work is ongoing to progress change around these agendas and for digital and technical approaches which are supported by all 732 community and town councils – Covid has seen the community and town council sector shift to digital remote working, and this provides a springboard for further developments within the sector. What is lacking is a dedicated resources to identify, share, promote and champion a more joined up approach to policy agendas and initiatives identified in 1.1 above and their delivery across all community and town councils.

Driving the message forward that change needs to happen in Wales therefore requires concerted action from community and town councils, One Voice Wales and Welsh Government. Working together to find those solutions by taking a more formal approach to building capacity and capability means that we can plan for the longer term ensuring one vision as well as reducing any duplication of effort.

Information, innovation and data sharing between organisations and focussing resource where it is needed most will sharpen focus and deliver better and more meaningful outcomes for Welsh Government, One Voice Wales and community and town councils as a whole. The aim will be to do things once rather than 732 times or at least to significantly increase the collaborating and sharing of resources, systems, innovations and workloads to allow community and town councils to deliver more with less and improve the pace of delivery of green infrastructure, community governance including digital services, place-based services and neighbourhood level support services.

The current climate

Whilst the announcement of the Senedd Inquiry may have taken some observers by surprise, it comes against a background of views expressed about the performance of Community and Town Councils from outside of the sector.

Concerns have been raised about the number of unqualified audit opinions issued by Audit Wales and the democratic deficit arising from the reducing number of vacancies filled by election.

Further, there is anecdotal evidence to suggest that some critics have wider concerns about the performance of Community and Town Councils. Whilst there may be a gap between such rhetoric and the reality, concerns exist within the sector for the future of communities, including the preservation of community identities, arising from review processes such as the Community Boundary Review. Issues around the question of size v density for the Community and Town Council landscape also arise.

The Inquiry therefore takes place against a background of debate, uncertainty and disquiet for the future of the sector.

Further, the 10-week consultation period over the summer recess has had implications for full and meaningful consultation with our membership. One Voice Wales considers that such root and branch reviews as this should feature a consultation period of a three months to facilitate meaningful engagement however as this is a review of the sector the consultation period should have been considerably longer to allow for meaningful engagement with the sector and with organisations with associations to the sector.

One Voice Wales would also recommend that a full and meaningful engagement with the sector is undertaken in 2025-26 to align with the proposed Cabinet Secretary agreed review of the sector planned for 2025-26.

Although the Inquiry is not a review of the performance of One Voice Wales, it presents a timely opportunity to highlight the successful contribution which the organisation has made to raising standards across Community and Town Councils.

One Voice Wales is well placed to highlight Best Practice across the sector. We are ahead of the curve and aware of the key challenges, constantly maximising opportunities to collaborate and highlight Best Practice.

Our communications offer has been enhanced and modernised, with a focus on digital communications and the promotion of One Voice Wales as a responsive, bilingual representational body.

One Voice Wales encourages opportunities to engage with young people both through promoting democratic involvement and direct service provision for young people. Other priorities include the development of age-friendly communities, supporting dementia sufferers, addressing social exclusion and rural isolation, collaboration across agencies and stakeholders, empowering local people and

the development, maintenance and enhancement of sustainable communities and effective units of local government.

Response to the terms of reference

In order to reflect these priorities, aspirations and achievements, One Voice Wales' response to the Inquiry is framed around the Inquiry's terms of reference.

Using the above terms of reference as a framework and the five lines of inquiry, the following is therefore presented to the Housing and Local Government Committee:

1 The role and value of community and town councils in Wales.

Community and Town Councils are the first tier of local government, providing a direct link between residents and decision-makers. Councillors represent the views and needs of their constituents, ensuring that local voices are heard in broader governmental discussions. They manage and deliver essential local services provision of a wide range of public services and amenities, as is detailed in the Good Councillors guide, append, which was revised in 2022 by the former Minister for Finance and Local Government, Rebecca Evans MS

Community and Town Councils are a fundamental part of the local government system in Wales and play an important role in the life of Welsh communities. They have considerable potential to develop their role, to play a larger part in the provision of services and amenities and more effectively to represent the interests of their communities. They foster community spirit by encouraging participation in local initiatives by facilitating dialogue between residents and local authorities, helping to build a sense of belonging and ownership within communities. Building on this interaction councils are able to drive economic development by supporting local businesses and initiatives and create opportunities for local entrepreneurs and stimulate economic growth.

In addition, Community and Town Councils are well-placed to lead sustainability initiatives. By promoting local environmental projects and encouraging responsible practices, the sector can contribute to the well-being of the sectors communities and the preservation of the sectors natural resources. Community and Town Councils enhance democratic participation by providing platforms for residents to engage with local governance. This encourages transparency and accountability, vital for a healthy democracy. They play a crucial role in preserving and promoting local culture and heritage.

The sector actively collaborates with other local organisations, charities, and government bodies, amplifying their impact on community well-being. These partnerships enhance the sectors capacity to address complex challenges and leverage additional resources. In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19

pandemic, the sector has demonstrated its ability to respond swiftly using adaptability and local knowledge allowing it to mobilise reserves and resources to support residents.

Interestingly, One Voice Wales consulted widely with its membership as part of the Independent Review Panel period 2017-18 and consider that the views and feedback received is still extremely valid today. In fact, in light of COVID pandemic and the Cost-of-Living Crisis and the response of the Community and Town Council sector to each they are ever more relevant. Details of the views of the sector are outlined below.

From the feedback One Voice Wales has received from its member councils it is a given that all the existing powers and duties should be retained – so we do not intend to cover this ground in any great detail but would make the point that we recognise as a sector that use of these powers and duties varies considerably across Wales and **there is a need to organise the sector to increase the uniformity and consistency of the sector offering to the local electorates.** We have detailed below in Table 2 comments received which show the level of ambition across the sector and identify new areas of responsibility for community and town councils. However, there is considerable desire within the sector to do more and sustain locally valued services within communities which may not have been within the remit of community and town councils historically and consequently to enable this to happen there is strong argument for additional powers to be made available to the community and town council sector. Some of these new powers are set out below:

- Through the Local Government Bill introduce measures to reform the laws governing the administration of Community and Town councils, which will include new powers to deliver local services
- Enable community and town councils to have the power to trade as their Unitary Authority counterparts have to ensure a level playing field and enable to sustaining of valued local services
- Amend the legislation to enable Community and Town Councils the ability to financially support the repair of church buildings
- Promote use of the Power of Well Being and remove barriers to the use (e.g. expenditure limit) of this ‘right to innovate’
- Strengthen the role of Community and Town Councils in the planning system by coordinating policy to focus on places and supporting communities to shape the place they live in by putting ‘Place Plans’ on a statutory footing
- Introduce a ‘right to engage’ which will help Community and Town Councils work more equitably and effectively with Unitary Authorities and other public services

Table: Future Area’s of Responsibility for Community and Town Councils based on One Voice Wales member councils feedback

- | |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Developing business plans to support community themed projects bespoke to |
|---|

the community/ Place plans/ Community Emergency Planning

- All councils should be aware of potential partnerships e.g. with charities which could draw down funding
- Liaising and communicating with adjoining Community Councils
- All aspects of community development and community support services including community advocacy and the management of community facilities.
- Community renewable energy schemes.
- Waste recycling initiatives including local waste recycling sites.
- Delegation of non-statutory functions and services provided by principal authorities: environmental health matters associated with pest and rodent control; environmental enforcement; local biodiversity programmes; libraries; markets; museums; toilets; community transport schemes; car parks; registration of births, deaths and marriages; town centre cleansing services; day care centres
- Community assets including public cemeteries; management of green and other open spaces; parks and play areas; playing fields; footpaths; public lighting; public seating; allotments; war memorials.
- Ancillary support to local health and education initiatives including an element of support to local religious groups.
- Developing supplementary planning guidance to support the local development plan...more Community Council involvement in the LDP and CIL (Community Infrastructure Levy) as well as being party to section 106 agreements
- Encouraging Youth Councils, community education including developing classes and support and being more involved with secondary schools/ supporting food banks
- Community grants: providing grants to local organisations including encouraging and developing grass roots sports and recreation
- Social isolation: greater work with Social Care as identified by the work of Solva CC. Identifying members of the community at risk and having clear framework to work with Unitary Authority for resolution.
- Local civic events – Remembrance Sunday parades; Christmas lights.
- Support tourism and local heritage
- One stop-shop and sign posting services to principal authority services including cashier facilities for accepting local payments for council tax and other fees.
- Arm's length companies to produce income

our local council sector in Wales is well placed to work up new ways of working and share improvement and developments to ensure sustainable local services for the future. Councils in Wales are not starting from scratch; they can build on a lot of good work that has been going on over the last five years. But the pressures they face are real and growing. Local community councils could provide the most solid bottom-up framework for community governance because they can be independently grounded through democratic legitimacy and statute.

Community and town councils in Wales have a number of basic responsibilities in making the lives of local communities more comfortable. Essentially these powers fall within three main categories:

- representing the whole electorate within the community or town
- delivering services to meet local needs
- and striving to improve quality of life in the community or town

One Voice Wales agrees with the Young Foundation who argue that for the sake of innovation, confidence and clarity, make it clear that community and town councils have a principal purpose, for example, “to improve local liveability” (i.e. community safety, environment, activities and infrastructure et as set out in Table 2 above).

Here’s some thought on the potential future roles and responsibilities for community councils which has resonance with the feedback from our member councils to the Review questions and provides a direction of travel for the potential future purpose of the sector:

- **Being asset based leaders** - Identifying, utilising and optimising assets. Local councils can lead the development of asset strategies for their communities to ensure local resources are used to the best effect.
- **Achieving fairness for everyone** – addressing the challenges of poverty. With increasing fuel prices local councils could co-ordinate schemes for such as oil purchasing consortiums.
- **Empowering local governance** – development of youth councils. By engaging young people and supporting their involvement in democracy local councils can enable innovative ideas and initiatives to meet the future needs of their communities.
- **Increasing resources for community benefit** – supporting the development of community renewables. One Voice Wales and Aberystwyth University research on this agenda identifies a ‘facilitator’ role for local councils in communities taking forward community renewable initiatives. This may include funding feasibility studies on energy options creating new local income streams for re-investment.
- **Enjoying locally relevant services** – services designed based on local needs using robust community engagement methods. Increasingly local councils are going to need to demonstrate effective use of precept to their communities – community plans or ‘place plans’ such as those developed by Borth Community Council will enhance local accountability and engagement.
- **Enriching social capital and well-being** – working with social entrepreneurs and social enterprises to jointly deliver services for communities, for example, youth drop-in centres.
- **Valuing local distinctiveness** – initiatives supporting local heritage and tourism. Kidwelly Town Council has designed a range of leaflets attracting visitors to local historic monuments.

- **Developing reliable infrastructure** – creating ‘One Stop Shop’ hubs such as the one being developed by the Penllyn Partnership by Bala Town Council and neighbouring community councils.
- **Enhancing environmental capacity** – embracing bio-diversity initiatives – Llandough Community Council has its own strategy - such as creating new allotments for community growing or community orchards that act not only as a food source but educational resource to local primary schools.
- **Supporting a dynamic local economy** – working with local businesses to support employment initiatives’ including apprenticeships and mentoring schemes

These thematic areas align with the work of the Carnegie Trust, who, over the last seven years who have identified key areas of activity to improve local resilience within communities and details of which are set out in their recent publication ‘Supporting Local Places and Local People: Opportunities and Challenges for Welsh Towns’ (Rebekah Menzies 2017). Given Welsh Governments recent support for the Understanding Welsh Places programme we would direct the Senedd Housing and Local Government Committee to this publication.

The drivers, synergies and justification for these thematic roles are set out below:

- The Welsh Government’s Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act – will force a re-think in public service delivery. In future, more collaboration and more innovation in the way services are delivered (as above for example)
- Financial Pressure – cuts force innovation. The Wales Wellbeing Bond and the Community Interest Fund in general provide an opportunity for co-production in designing and delivering services. New partnerships could emerge between Community and Town Councils, voluntary sector and unitary authorities
- Charters with unitary authorities (including a Local Councils/ County Councillor Member’s “Protocol” in Carmarthenshire). In best cases, these have resulted in a much healthier relationship between the two tiers – more respect and coherent partnership.
- A proportion of Community Infrastructure Levies (CIL) collected by principal authorities in Wales with up to 15% being devolved to local Councils. (One Voice Wales has published a guide for Councils in relation to the levy)

Although ‘Place Plans’ were not included in the Planning (Wales) Act there is still much interest in their development within the local council sector.

Planning Aid Wales have developed a toolkit on the delivery of Place Plans and One Voice Wales considers it critical that community and town councils

are given a central role in their delivery so as to enable the joining up of democratic accountability with local service planning and delivery.

Additionally, in considering responsibilities going forward, we would express our concern about the introduction, through the Wellbeing of Future Generations legislation, that the identification and prioritization of service needs and standards will move further away from the level of communities as identified in current and future structural groupings. The current information on Public Service Boards appears to reflect an expectation of a “macro” overview of requirements and priorities as the basis for service planning. This clearly needs addressing.

However, any consideration of future responsibilities must be reflective of assurances as to financial and budgetary viability and to the availability of sufficient resources, including staff, to discharge services and activities effectively. There are opportunities to develop new forms of community and town council organization, for example, joint delivery partnerships that could enable resources to be better utilized going forward. One Voice Wales members consider the rationalization of councils via mergers would not be a step in the right direction rather that the sovereignty of existing councils be maintained. The unintended consequences of such a move towards mergers would be the reduction in the numbers of community and town councillor’s and thereby creating a net reduction in numbers of those providing resource to civic society in Wales...not to mention the increased democratic deficit of community and town councilors taking responsibility for ever larger electorates quite possibly beyond existing community boundaries.

The feedback received from member councils is that roles and responsibilities will vary from council area to area, however this will be because of locally derived needs. Whilst the range of services may vary, what is clear is that the process of determination, that is, the engagement with the community should be consistent and transparent across all community and town council areas. In reality the range of activities currently will be driven by the drive, motivations and priorities of individual councils – further work will be required to determine what local residents can expect as a minimum from their local community or town council.

The current reality is that many community-based services will only be able to continue if Community and Town Councils are supported and encouraged to play a more active role in their local design and delivery. As a consequence, one area that will need further consideration is that of concurrent functions between Unitary Authorities and community and town councils. One Voice Wales considers that much could be learnt from Cornwall County Council’s ‘A Framework for Town and Parish Councils and Community Groups to have an Increased Role in Service Delivery’ model document.

This framework considers, “concurrent functions” which are functions that both Cornwall Council and Town and Parish Councils have the legal power to deliver. In implementing this framework, the shared aims are to:

- Continue to develop a ‘holistic’ long-term place-based approach (as opposed to a short-term single service-based approach) to local service delivery
- maintain community access to services that might otherwise be at risk, particularly “concurrent functions”
- increase satisfaction with services
- provide greater local influence over services
- where possible, maintain and enhance standards
- enhance the role of local councils in their communities
- generate greater community pride in local areas
- promote engagement of local communities in local government; and
- achieve ‘value for money’.

Specific feedback received through our recent consultations relating to the Senedd Inquiry and the role and value of community and town councils in Wales include:

- Councils were being asked to take on more services and responsibilities. Community and Town Councils were now more valid than ever. The timing of an inquiry into the role and purpose had therefore come as a surprise to some.
- There was widespread recognition that many services were best delivered closest to local communities.
- The direct level of democracy was an important feature of Community and Town Councils. Councils helped to intervene in resolving local issues and provided an important representational role at the grass roots of communities.
- There was a need to focus on service delivery.
- Councils discussed the rationale for a de minimis size for Community and Town Councils. Councils varied considerably in their size and shape. One size did not fit all.
- Larger, expanded Councils would lead to increased precepts with the cost per household being evenly applied. Larger Councils could become hubs if amalgamations took place.
- Banding together smaller councils might lead to friction occurring between the competing demands of long-established communities
- Some Councils considered that the requirements for exercising the General Power of Competence were too restrictive. This was a barrier to widespread adoption and use of the power.
- The delivery of place-based services by Councils could play an important part in any future model for Community and Town Councils.

- It was important that Welsh Government gave a clear message about how it saw the purpose and role of Community and Town Councils.

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

As frontline representatives of the sectors communities, Community and Town Councils are committed to ensuring the sector remains relevant, effective, and responsive to the needs of the residents. They provide a crucial link between residents and higher levels of government. The sector is accessible, enabling residents to voice concerns and influence decision-making in a direct and meaningful way and is adept in delivering diverse services that reflect the unique needs of their communities. From local events to maintenance of public spaces, the sector's focus is on enhancing community well-being and fostering civic engagement through various initiatives and events, strengthening communities and encouraging participation in local governance.

However, while Community and Town Councils strive to meet local needs, funding constraints can hinder the sector's ability to expand services or invest in long-term projects. Increased financial support is essential to enhance the sectors capacity. As communities evolve, so do their needs. Community and Town Councils have and must adapt to address issues such as housing and population growth, service delivery, and environmental sustainability. This requires continuous training and support for Councillors and staff. There has been some disconnect between Community and Town Councils and larger local government frameworks but through strengthened collaboration with county councils and other agencies the sector has ensured that community voices are integrated into broader planning and decision-making processes. The sector firmly believes that, with the right support and resources, community and town councils can continue to be fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape. Community and Town Councils are committed to adapting and enhancing the sectors' role to serve their residents effectively.

The current system provides both the legislative framework and a proven record of delivery. It allows the most pro-active councils to make a real difference to their communities through a wide range of imaginative initiatives. A number of councils have been willing to take on devolved services which have included asset transfers and are more than capable of undertaking major projects.

The key factors standing in the way of Community and Town Councils are twofold, the size of the council and the willingness of principle authorities to delegate functions or to work cooperatively. Principal councils and the Welsh Government should encourage and support all Community and Town Councils to take advantage of the opportunities open to them and should formalise relationships between Community and Town Councils and other bodies.

Many are party to charters with their respective principal councils but unfortunately whilst the aim of a charter is to define and enhance the existing relationship between the respective tiers of local government unfortunately, in practice much of the aspects of the charter are not adhered to. This is particularly relevant in that Community and Town Councils have a statutory ability to deliver concurrent functions held jointly with county and county borough councils.

The Independent review of the sector commissioned by the Welsh Government not so long ago clearly recognised that the sector is fit for purpose and would suggest that any major change is difficult to justify. The current community boundary reviews being undertaken fail to appreciate the importance of local engagement by councillors and the focus on reducing councillor numbers is likely to adversely impact on the effectiveness of councils and could have the perverse effect of undermining the fitness of purpose of community and town councils.

Additional specific feedback from our members councils over the last month include:

- It was important that Members had the ability and capacity to receive and understand new information about responsibilities, powers, and service delivery. Training for Members was key. Some mandatory training was considered necessary.
- There was a need for Councils to invest in staff development.
- There was a need for more praise and support from the WG and principal councils for the work of Community and Town Councils.
- The view was expressed that there should be limitations on the number of times Members could stand for re-election. A more regular turnover of Members could help to ensure that Councils remained vibrant.
- It was important that Councils received the recognition for their achievements and services. Credibility was critical to ensure that Councils were seen as relevant and meaningful.
- Many Councils made important contributions to wider community resilience and the development of effective partnerships with County Councils and others.
- Adverse publicity and dialogue across social media could act as a deterrent to encourage candidates to stand for election.
- Attendance and quoracy could be adversely impacted through some of the external pressures referenced above.
- There was limited evidence to support a reduction in numbers of councillors.

- Some 8,000 Members provide considerable local resources for community benefit and a greater workload level might discourage local people from standing for election.
- There would undoubtedly be mounting pressures for a considerable increase in remuneration for Members.

3. Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency.

Community and Town Councils operate under a clear governance framework defined by local and national legislation. This includes adherence to the Local Government Act 1972, which sets out the roles and responsibilities of councillors, ensuring that decision-making processes are transparent and accountable.

Strong and effective corporate governance is key to the future success of Community and Town Councils. They must always ensure that they have the mechanism in place to ensure efficient and effect operation. This should be supported by adequate financial and staff resources, supported by evidence of good practice, to ensure that all communities in Wales are able to benefit from strong local-level councils.

More robust Community and Town Councils would then be able to consider greater delegation of responsibilities for concurrent functions from principal authorities, which at present is currently limited. Community and Town Councils should also engage closely with their local communities and support the empowerment of citizens to become more involved with service delivery and to challenge poor practice.

Community and Town Councils' hold regular meetings, allowing residents to attend, engage in discussions, and raise concerns. This practice not only enhances transparency but also empowers citizens to participate actively in local governance. The sector also uses committee systems to focus on specific areas, such as finance, planning, and community services, which allows for more detailed scrutiny of decisions and policies. These committees are accountable for their recommendations, enhancing the overall governance framework.

All Community and Town Councils are now required to produce annual reports detailing the sectors activities an additional layer of scrutiny, ensuring financial accountability and transparency in the sectors operations.

This effective governance and scrutiny arrangements build public trust. When residents see transparent processes and understand how decisions are made, their confidence in local governance increases. Public participation in council meetings and decision-making processes empowers residents, making them feel more connected to local governance. This involvement encourages civic responsibility and engagement.

The scrutiny of decisions through committees and public feedback leads to better-informed decisions and greater responsiveness to community issues. Community and Town Councils can adapt policies based on community input, ensuring that the needs of residents are prioritised and that there is transparency in operations. When residents can access information about council activities, the public can hold their representatives accountable, fostering a culture of openness. By fostering this open and participatory environment, Community and Town Councils strengthen the sectors connection with the community and ensure that their voices are integral to local decision-making.

The Finance & Governance Self-Assessment Toolkit for Community & Town Councils published by the Welsh Government has helped a large number of member councils to review their financial management, governance and accountability procedures and introduce further improvements to improve their infrastructure. There is an ongoing push from One Voice Wales for all Councils to work through this important guidance document and in time will enable the improvement and development of the sector as a whole. Additionally, the publication of practice development notes by One Voice Wales as well as the excellent training provided by the organisation has further helped Member Councils internal arrangements and further enhance their ability to provide excellent services to the community.

These are some of the soundbite views expressed by our membership during consultations run by One Voice Wales in October 2024:

- Some Councils reiterated concerns that the requirements for exercising the General Power of Competence were too restrictive. This was a barrier to widespread adoption and use of the power. A rigid external audit regime meant that it was too easy to lose the ability to exercise the power.
- Councils who received a qualified audit opinion should be supported to help them introduce improvements and understand the audit requirements. There was a role for SLCC in working with Clerks to understand the reasons and causes of qualified audits.
- There was consensus amongst Larger Councils that many audits gave rise to qualified opinions as a result of administrative or clerical failings which could be dealt with more sympathetically by auditors. The time taken to complete audits was highlighted as a cause of concern. Delays could impact on Councils claiming eligibility to exercise the General Power of Competence and have implications for setting budgets.
- The increased governance and financial obligations on Community and Town Councils could lead to significant resource implications and higher precepts. Councils received limited support in resolving these challenges.

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

We know that digital technology presents the potential to save money and provide better services and this has been realised by some community and town councils in Wales who have innovated and used their current resource base creatively to deliver results within a climate of challenge.

The pace of change has been slower than we and community and town councils would like, and work is ongoing to progress change to digital and technical approaches which are supported by all 735 community and town councils.

Driving the message forward that change needs to happen in Wales within a digital context therefore requires concerted action from community and town councils, One Voice Wales and Welsh Government. Working together to find those solutions by taking a more formal approach to building capacity and capability means that we can plan for the longer term ensuring one vision as well as reducing any duplication of effort.

Information, innovation and data sharing between organisations and focussing resource where it is needed most will sharpen focus and deliver better and more meaningful outcomes for Welsh Government, One Voice Wales and community and town councils as a whole. The aim will be to significantly increase the collaborating and sharing of resources, knowledge, systems, innovations and workloads to allow community and town councils to deliver more with less and improve the pace of delivery of new digital services.

Community and Town Council Digital Health Programme 2023-2025

The former Local Government Minister has provided financial support to One Voice Wales over the last two years in the form of a Digital Health Programme for the community and town council sector which aims to build on and extend the good work that is already in existence and developed through the COVID period. This programme will provide the additional capacity and capability to share, promote and champion digital initiatives and their delivery across Community and Town Councils including the provision of guidance documents, training courses and information repository to improve knowledge and practice on digital matters..

A review undertaken by Welsh Government in 2022 on Digital Media in community and town councils indicates the level of capability across local government isn't consistent. Many community and town councils are finding that providing their services digitally is challenging. The review found that many community and town councils proactively engage with their communities' using newsletters, annual reports, social media and events.

However, among the public there is still a lack of understanding and awareness of the contribution town and community councils make to local communities. The Independent Review Panel 2018 recommended that ‘Community and Town Councils explore digital mechanisms to aid ways of meeting, engaging and sharing information’.

In response to this recommendation, Welsh Government carried out the above survey of Welsh community and town councils to find out more about how they are communicating with the communities they serve. Over 300 councils responded to the survey. The main findings included:

- Almost all councils which responded to the survey had their own website, or one hosted by an external organisation.
- Around three quarters of those councils responding have full control of their website, with most of the remaining passing content to a third party to update their website.
- Nearly half of councils which responded to the survey are using social media to communicate with their community, with most using Facebook.
- Around two thirds of respondents don’t use information from social media or other digital platforms to assist with decision-making.

The responses to the survey also highlighted a number of challenges community and town councils identified with using social media:

- Negative or disturbing comments being posted
- Connecting with members of the community who do not use social media
- Time needed to monitor and update social media; and
- Concerns over privacy, fake news, misinterpretation.

Capacity to provide their staff with the training and development they need to undertake their roles in technologically advanced times is patchy. Purchasing new technology as well as updating often more expensive licenses to provide better and more digital services is also a challenge. Doing these things as a single organisation is costly and, in a climate, where difficult decisions are being taken daily, deciding where to focus investment and scarce resources continues to be challenge.

COVID has seen the community and town council sector shift to digital remote working, and this provides a springboard for further developments within the sector. This has largely happened through individual council innovation and local networks. We now have a dedicated resource until March 2025 to identify, share, promote and champion a more joined-up approach to digital initiatives and their delivery across all community and town councils.

Over the last few years, we have seen a much more proactive approach taken by some community and town councils to embrace the use of technology to serve citizens more effectively, e.g. through bringing many transactions online and beginning to embed new applications to solve more complex challenges.

Examples of existing good practice within community and town councils in Wales include:

Cardigan Digital Developments

CARDIGAN'S town centre Wi-Fi scheme has given both locals and visitors free web connectivity across the town centre. The project – the first of its kind in Ceredigion – dovetails nicely with the recently-launched town app as Cardigan readily embraces digital technology.

Menter Aberteifi – established by the Town Council in 1996 - managed the project in association with the Town Centre Partnership, where various organisations in Cardigan come together to promote it.

It has cost around £30,000, with funding from both Welsh Government and Europe. The Town Council has put in £5,000 and 4CG £250.

The project benefits not only visitors but also people on low incomes who would otherwise not perhaps be able to access such systems. It is ideal for social media, browsing and emails and the systems complies with all new data protection regulations.

Wi-Fi units have been put up on buildings at strategic points throughout town by installers Telemat and with the combined data the app and Wi-Fi generate, the town is able gather useful information to help plan and measure cause and effect in the town for visitors.

For example, the new service can find out the increase in footfall during an event such as Barley Saturday, whether free parking makes difference in the number of people in town and how long they stay and where visitors come from.

As a sample, presently the majority of visitors who come to Cardigan are from South Wales and the Midlands – using the data generated the project was able to identify that there were 3,400 people in the town centre, of whom 688 stayed for up to an hour.

To use the free Wi-Fi, people have to simply search for Cardigan Town on their phone or tablet and sign in. People also have the option to be included

on a newsletter list which will look to provide quarterly information on events and special offers from Cardigan.

A similar scheme in Tenby attracted some 20,000 subscribers to the shops and businesses.

Similar Wifi schemes exist across Pembrokeshire, Carmarthenshire, Powys and Gwynedd as well as larger cities but this is the first and only scheme active in Ceredigion. Other towns are already looking to follow Cardigan's example.

Cllr Clive Davies, Cardigan Town Council, the originator of the idea, said: "Using these 21st century digital technologies shows how a small town like Cardigan can really get to know its customer, be educated and informed to develop their own business and the town further.

"The information could be used to attract new visitors and maybe new retailers who want to know this kind of information to benefit their business."

Cardigan Traders have welcomed the scheme as it is good for them as businesses and the town as a whole.

Carmarthen Town Council – developing digital skill

Carmarthen Town Council, in partnership with others (Carmarthenshire 50+ Forum, Dr Mz Carmarthen Youth Project and Digital Communities Wales) has successfully made a bid for a £19,000 'Carmarthenshire is Kind' grant. This partnership of organisations will during 2020 run a cross-generational community project across locations in Carmarthenshire to connect people who are 50+ with local young people to share learning and skills. The aim is to enrich lives through developing strong support networks, positively impact on health and wellbeing, and reduce social isolation and digital exclusion.

Carmarthenshire 50+ Forum has 2100+ members and is committed to supporting Carmarthenshire County Council's Well Being Strategy and the Older People's Commissioner's aim of 'Making Wales the Best Place in the World to Grow Old in'. They see this as a positive way of working with communities to make that a reality. They are well connected with a membership via web, social media, newsletters, email and print media. Surveys of their members have shown that many want help with digital media skills and what better way to do this than to connect them with young people who have the skills already. At the same time, we can invest in young people by training them to coach others and enable them to learn new skills from older people.

This project was piloted with all partners in Carmarthen – Dr Mz Youth Project, Digital Communities Wales, Carmarthenshire 50+ Forum and Carmarthen Town Council. The first ‘Bytes and Bites’ session was well attended, and 20 or so older people were coached by 10 Youth Project members on using their mobile devices and enjoyed afternoon tea prepared by the young people. The evaluations show that the pilot was a great success; there is now a waiting list and requests to hold similar events in other locations. During 2020 it is planned that there will be one hundred sessions running across Carmarthenshire at various rural and town locations. We also expect that the process of sitting and having a snack meal together will be beneficial in building mutual respect, forming cross generational relationships, sharing skills and enabling people to share their fears and challenges in a supportive setting.

Following the success of the pilot a part-time co-ordinator will be appointed (in March 2020) and they will be engaging with Youth Clubs and Town and Community Councils across Carmarthenshire to resource sessions in other locations. Digital Communities Wales trained the young people for the pilot project and are committed to continue working with the project across Carmarthenshire and build a network of Young and Older Digital Champions in those locations.

Clydach Community Council website developments

Clydach Community Council launched its new website to celebrate St. David’s Day in March 2019. The Council’s aim in creating this bilingual website was to provide not only a platform for sharing information about Council policies, activities and decisions, but also to provide a community information hub for Clydach and the locality.

The website provides this information in both English and Welsh and is divided into two sections. The first section covers the facts and figures of Clydach as a village. It provides information and links to the webpages of a variety of clubs, societies, schools and groups in Clydach enabling those groups to reach out to new members, and for residents in Clydach to see and recognise the range of activities and opportunities available to them in the village. The website works to promote the area as a place to live, grow, work and play; it celebrates community cohesion and aims to tackle social isolation.

In this section also sits a short film commissioned by the Community Council showcasing not only the beautiful local landscape but the variety of businesses, facilities and activities available in Clydach. The Council chose to avoid narration in the film to ensure its accessibility in both Welsh and

English and relies instead on the images themselves and bilingual captions to outline all the opportunities and services available and emphasise the natural beauty of the area. Feedback on the film, which was launched alongside the website, has been incredibly positive and has provided villagers with an aide memoir of how wonderful life can be in Clydach. It has certainly bolstered civic pride in the area.

A further page that strengthens village ties is the one sharing information on opportunities for residents to volunteer in the locality. Contact details are provided for each group and a short description of their aims.

In the website's second section, information is shared about the Council's own activities. All Council meeting agenda and minutes are posted on the site, along with many of our policies. The site is updated regularly to share information about the councillors serving their village and shares images of the councillors in order to increase their visibility and information about their declared interests and affiliations to promote transparency. Council vacancies are promoted via these pages when required. There are live online forms to enable villagers to submit applications to the council clerk for hall hire or grant applications to the community fund outside of office hours, allowing the public to access council services when it suits them.

The website also lists the facilities or projects under the management of Clydach Community Council and provides details of the annual community events organised by the Council. Links to the Council's active and lively Facebook and Twitter sites are also incorporated.

The website makes good use of images from the locality and therefore ensures that the activities showcased are rooted in the community. Alt text is provided for several of the images to assist with search engine optimisation (SEO) and screen readers. The font size is accessible to partially sighted people, and the website is compatible with mobile phones.

The Council's aim in creating the website in this manner is to ensure it is seen as a modern, approachable, transparent and outward-looking Community Council which strives to celebrate all that Clydach has to offer.

Pennard Community Council – digital engagement platform

A future goal is to produce a Community Plan using this engagement, along with other strategies; we hope to progress that in the next financial year.

Following this decision, the Council became aware of a web-platform "VocalEyes", initially available through the Swansea Rural Community Voice Project, which is the central aspect to our community engagement. Using this platform, we have developed a strategy for Participatory

Budgeting using £5000 raised from the precept. This budget and all transactions are publicly visible online here:

www.vocaleyeyes.org/vocaleyeyes/budgets/view/id/47

To raise awareness, we have held meetings with community groups such as Friends of Pennard Library, the WI, Youth Club, & have a regular stall at Pennard's monthly market. In addition, we have several local businesses who are actively engaged & the Primary school have developed Pupil Voice and Parent Voice groups which feed ideas into the Community group. For example, this video was created by a parent and the idea is available for rating in all three groups: https://youtu.be/bUcnjjN_mr8

We are aware that not all residents have access to the internet at home. In order to address this, we have access to a freephone number & hold face-to-face meetings at Pennard Library using their computers. All engagement online is anonymous which allows even the most timid of residents the opportunity to get involved.

Through rating & debating of ideas, a list of priorities is created, informing the Council budget. This financial year, we have identified three key priorities we are able to support using our participatory pot. We have purchased litter-pickers and hoops in response to an idea to increase the number of litter-picks in the ward. We have allocated £1240 as match-funding for a grant for a feasibility study into a Community Hub and aim to install a drinking fountain with the remaining funds in collaboration with a local business.

This new approach to community engagement has provided many exciting outcomes. Council have unanimously agreed to continue to develop participatory democracy into the next financial year with the commitment of a further £5000 for 2019/20. Perhaps even more exciting than the impact on Council is the increased collaboration between members of the community who are working together to bring about positive changes e.g. Plastic Free Pennard.

In order to ensure we are operating within the parameters of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act, topics on the web platform are broad and encompass issues like environmental projects and tackling social isolation. Individual ideas within these topics are wide and varied and provide innovative solutions to these difficult issues. You can view the Pennard group here: www.vocaleyeyes.org/vocaleyeyes/group/index/id/3502

Young people within the ward have previously been impossible to engage with but using this platform has empowered them and they have produced a video to demonstrate their need for a skatepark: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4QejJqe4ezw> . In addition, we aspire to

form a Youth Council in the coming year as the young people feel more involved in decision making and have communicated an interest in this.

Criccieth Town Tourism initiative

In 2019 Criccieth Town Council and Criccieth Business Forum were successful in securing £16,000 in a competitive process from Arloesi Gwynedd Wledig for a project to increase footfall on the high street and to extend the visitors season to the town: **The Unique Streets Project**. The Town Council contributed £4,500 making a total of £20,500 available to work on this exciting project. Since September 2017 Criccieth Town Council has worked with the community to develop a Community Plan. One important element is the town's economy.

Criccieth is a relatively small, historic and attractive town in a seaside location which has something to offer visitors and its residents all year round –however, it is a continuing challenge to ensure a thriving economy in the town in the face of changing shopping habits which is a common and universal trend. Following consultation with local stakeholders a project developed which was inspired by Robert Graves' poem the 'Welsh Incident' – 2019 marking the 90th year since its publication. The poem describes the emergence of “things” from the sea caves of Criccieth. They have no shape and are of colours that have no names! However, they are welcomed to the town by the Mayor and a Silver Band. It is a mysterious, enigmatic and humorous work which it was felt could inspire people to visit Criccieth.

Benefit to the local tourism economy

The project was launched on Good Friday, 19 April 2019 in the Lion Hotel Garden in the centre of Criccieth which has also provided the location for a new “sculpture garden” adjacent to the High Street with works already contributed by the sculptor Malcolm Roberts. Local poet and National Eisteddfod chaired bard Twm Morys and singer-songwriter Gwyneth Glyn contributed to this event by reading the Graves poem and also responding to it in a new Welsh version in his unique style. There were giant and colourful art pencils dotted throughout Criccieth High Street to mark the event.

Following this the town hosted an art festival day 'The Creative Incident - Y Digwyddiad Creadigol' held on 3 August 2019 when over 1,000 adults, young people and children enjoyed a fun afternoon of workshops and performances, face painting, storytelling and magic tricks to the sounds of a local silver band. The event provided ample opportunity for people to enjoy the town's shops, businesses, cafes, restaurants and bars, and the high street was brimming with people throughout the afternoon. A further 200 hundred people attended creative events in the nature garden including

junk modelling and group nature weaving to create some of the creatures coming out of the sea caves. A spokesperson for Arloesi Gwynedd Wledig confirmed that *“In a survey undertaken during the event 80% of people who had taken part agreed that the art event had resulted in them spending more money on the high street and 100% agreed that the event had created a positive impression on them”* (see also quotes below).

Attractive bilingual history boards on interesting stories about Criccieth were placed on the High Street and are now a permanent feature. Criccieth in Bloom contributed by financing a large bilingual information board featuring the “Welsh Incident” poem for Criccieth Railway Station.

In a further development artists were invited to tender for an art installation sculpture piece in the centre of the town to commemorate the poem 'Welsh Incident'. This was won by Howard Bowcott, a local sculptor of international status whose creation, in the view of the selection panel comprising members of the Town Council and local businesses, captured the essence of the poem. The unique and interactive sculpture has been designed as a family attraction. Its central location on the Maes leaves a lasting legacy for residents and visitors to enjoy and will play a part in increasing the footfall in town. Around 200 people attended the unveiling on 2 November 2019 on what promised to be a wet and stormy day. It was unveiled by Lord Dafydd Ellis-Thomas, A.M. Deputy Minister for Culture, Sport and Tourism in a fun event which included the silver band and performances of Robert Graves' poem in English and Welsh by Twm Morys and Gwyneth Glyn. Also launched on the day was a fascinating bilingual book by the chair of Criccieth Town Council, Robert Cadwalader, on Criccieth's Shops Through the Ages – which sold like hot cakes with proceeds going to support future creative events.

Criccieth's Christmas festival 'Croeso Dolig' 2019 was a very special event. Hundreds of people turned up at Criccieth Memorial Hall to see the stunning mural of Criccieth shops. It was designed and painted by local and visiting children during the Creative Incident event in August. The mural is being placed on the Blue China café on Criccieth seafront. The audience was enchanted by Lowri-Ann Richards' cabaret performance and by the moving rendition of two Christmas songs by the male voice choir Meibion Dwyfor. The lights were switched on at 6 pm by Lowri-Ann following a countdown by an enthusiastic crowd on the square. The shop owners stayed open until late welcoming everyone with seasonal refreshments. The High Street was buzzing with hundreds of people.

These events have been well covered in the press – including local newspapers and S4C's programme Heno, televised on 7 November 2019 which included interviews with shopkeepers and Criccieth Town Council. A short video has been created to appear on the Creative Incident Website:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bp_XPtSELZo&feature=youtu.be

However, whilst we have excellent examples of innovation as highlighted above this has not happened uniformly across the sector and currently largely each have their own systems and processes for managing and processing digital transactions and in some case if at all.

Due to the complexity and nature of all these different systems, there now exists a 'collaboration deficit' which manifests itself in two main ways:

An inconsistent baseline - Differences across public services challenge and impede the ability to respond to new developments. This can be for a variety of reasons including cultural, technological, linguistic, legacy and political. We know that our public services use, manage and share data in very different ways. In some cases, this is hampering innovation and more effective investment decisions at a time of limited budgets.

Leadership & capability - The breadth and scale of required innovation and change alongside running 'business as usual' means that the capacity across community and town councils to understand, develop and implement new developments is stretched or not in place at all. Increased demand from citizens for user focused delivery of services, at a time that best suits them requires increased leadership support across all public services.

There are therefore two main opportunities to improve:

- Technology preparedness - new business models need to be understood, explored and anticipated. Community and Councils will increasingly need to communicate with their electorates digitally through their websites and social media platforms. Building capability and capacity and the awareness of the solutions available will be key to achieving digital community engagement.
- The scope to 'build once and share' – improved data and digital technology now provides opportunities to minimise duplication, drive efficiencies and to provide a better, more sustainable service. The Digital Health Programme will no doubt help to begin the journey where community and town councils move towards a position where they make better use of the products available for community planning, for example, using the data available to them via the Understanding Welsh Places website effectively to inform members and partner organisations where the local needs are.

However, if the current Welsh Government funded Digital Health Programme is brought to an end at the end of March 2025 then this will fundamentally undermine One Voice Wales ability to drive digital improvements within the sector.

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

As the sector navigates the evolving landscape of local governance, Community and Town Council are committed to using these powers to enhance the well-being of the local resident population to foster sustainable community development. The devolution of powers enables the sector to engage residents more actively in decision-making processes. By involving community members in discussions around local priorities, Community and Town Council empower them to shape the future of their own neighbourhoods.

With enhanced powers Community and Town Council can influence local projects that align with the aspirations of the sectors community. This includes participating in consultations and advocating for developments that benefit the sectors residents, such as affordable housing and sustainable infrastructure. The duty under the Environment (Wales) Act 2016 has allowed the sector to promote environmentally friendly practices. Initiatives like community gardens, recycling programs, and energy efficiency projects contribute to a greener, healthier community.

New responsibilities have also empowered the sector to customise services that address the unique needs of local residents. The Community and Town Council have effectively managed local amenities, ensuring they are maintained and enhanced based on community feedback. They have, and continue to, acquire building and facilities via assets transfers from principal councils.

The empowerment of the sector has resulted in higher levels of resident engagement. Through initiatives such as public consultations and community workshops, the sector has fostered a greater sense of ownership among residents regarding local issues and projects. In addition, the ability to collaborate with other local authorities, organisations, and stakeholders has strengthened the sector's capacity to support community initiatives. By working together, 'councils can pool resources and expertise to address complex challenges that affect residents. This expansion of grassroots leadership has inspired more individuals to become Councillors.

Whilst the recent changes to legislation are welcomed by the sector, the underlying legislation the Local Government Act 1972, which at its time was

a major milestone in the history of local government in the UK by redefining the procedures, structures, duties and geographies of all English and Welsh councils, is however over 50 years old. The White Paper that preceded the enactment stated that “local authority areas should be related to areas within which people have a common interest – through living in a recognisable community, through the links of employment, shopping or social activities, or through history and tradition.” This ethos remains at the core of service delivery for Community and Town Councils, but the Act is outdated given the many changes in society and local government in Wales since 1972. New models more appropriate to Wales must be explored.

The sector is also unique in that unlike principal councils in Wales, such as County or County Borough Councils, Community and Town Councils operate under a different financial structure. Principal councils receive funding from a variety of sources, including the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) and re-distributed Business Rates. The RSG is provided by the Senedd to help principal councils cover the costs of local services, ensuring they have sufficient resources to meet the needs of their communities. Re-distributed Business Rates are also an important source of funding, with business rates collected across Wales being pooled and then redistributed to local authorities based on their needs and population.

However, Community and Town Councils do not have access to these funding streams. Instead, their sole source of funding is through the precept, a charge levied on residential properties within the council's area. This precept is a part of the overall council tax bill that residents pay, but it specifically funds the activities and services provided by the Town or Community Council. The amount of the precept is determined by the Community or Town Council based on their budgetary needs and is collected by the principal council on their behalf as part of the overall council tax. This funding model places Community and Town Councils in a unique position compared to principal councils. Since they rely entirely on the precept, their financial capacity is directly linked to the tax base of their community, primarily the number and value of residential properties. This can limit the scope of services or projects they can provide, especially in smaller or less affluent communities. Moreover, any increase in the precept is typically subject to local scrutiny, as it directly affects residents' council tax bills, which may constrain the council's ability to raise funds for additional services.

Therefore, traditionally community and town councils, while playing an important role in local governance, tend to focus on more localized services and projects like maintaining parks, community centres, and supporting local events. Their funding model reflects this narrower remit but also underscores their greater dependence on the support of the local community through the precept.

Specific comments raised during our consultations with members included:

- Initiatives such as the introduction of the General Power of Competence failed to address any shortcomings in Members' competence where training was so important.
- Candidates were dissuaded from standing for election to Councils for a wide range of reasons which needed to be addressed

Finally, One Voice Wales has highlighted overleaf the work of the national representative body for community and town councils against the 5 lines of the Senedd Inquiry. This illustrates the significant development and improvement work that is being undertaken with partner organisations including Welsh Government and with community and town councils themselves whereby we are capturing best practice and sharing with the sector. Furthermore, One Voice Wales is producing guides and toolkits enabling community and town councils to enhance their financial and management governance arrangements.

Inquiry line	One Voice Wales achievements	Best Practice examples across Community and Town Councils: Innovation and collaboration
<p>The role and value of community and town councils in Wales.</p>	<p>Independently assessed One Voice Wales Awards celebrate and disseminate Best Practice across thematic areas:</p> <p>Case Studies and webinars share the learning.</p> <p>Dialogue with IRP for Wales ensures that Payments to Members reflect levels of commitment and responsibility.</p>	<p>2024 Award Winners</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Best Annual Report Pontypool Community Council 2. Best Environmental Project Criccieth Town Council 3. Best Use of Digital Resources Abergavenny Town Council 4. Best Community Engagement Initiative Blaenavon Town Council and Newtown and Llanllwchaiarn Town Council (Joint Winners) 5. Best Tourism Initiative Criccieth Town Council 6. Best Sustainability Initiative Presteigne and Norton Town Council 7. Best Youth Engagement Llanelly Community Council 8. Best Heritage Initiative Blaenavon Town Council

		<p>9. Best Devolution of Service or Asset Project St Clears Town Council</p> <p>10. Best Community Initiative including Cost-of-Living Actions Cwmbran Community Council</p> <p>11. Best Democratic Health Initiative Llanelli Town Council</p> <p>12. The Caerwyn Roberts Best Local Council Service of the Year Criccieth Town Council</p> <p>One Voice Wales represents an agile membership, which has responded to national, regional and local challenges. The coronavirus crisis brought unprecedented pressures for the sector, who responded with vigour and imagination.</p>
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<p>Whether the sector is fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape.</p>	<p>Practice Development advice and Best Practice guidance promote and encourage good governance.</p> <p>A Memorandum of Understanding will be signed on 16 October 2024 to provide a framework for the relationship between One Voice Wales and the WLGA, supporting</p>	<p>2024 One Voice Wales National Conference will showcase current Best Practice across the Community and Town Council Sector:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criccieth Town Council will display its work on which led to their Awards Conference 2024 successes (including the Caerwyn Roberts Best Local Service etc), • Blaenavon will present to delegates across several different thematic areas and community
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	<p>collaboration and a joined-up approach to the 2024 local government landscape.</p> <p>New Governance Framework will improve how One Voice Wales itself supports and represents the sector.</p> <p>Contribution to debates and consultation around issues such as Community Boundary Reviews, <u>Draft Priorities for Culture in Wales 2024 to 2030</u>, <u>Senedd Cymru (Electoral Candidate Lists) Bill</u> and <u>Future spending purposes for dormant assets funding in Wales</u> ensure that the voice of the Community and Town Council sector is heard on key, current issues.</p> <p>Externally funded projects reach out to all Community and Town Councils in Wales (not just those in our membership.) to address digital health, the cost-of-living crisis and Local Places for Nature Business Plans are reviewed to ensure that they remain fit for purpose.</p>	<p>engagement/services.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bedlinog and Trelewis Community Council will highlight its contribution to tackling the cost-of-living crisis. • Pennard Community Council will showcase examples of digital good practice by a smaller council. (provisional) <p>Other recent case studies and Best Practice examples</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Blaenavon Town Council <p>Annual Community Wellbeing Days, attended by over 500 attendees each year, brought together community organisations offering support in health, finances, housing, education, and employment. Featuring family-friendly activities, it fostered intergenerational connections and community engagement. Feedback highlighted the event's free nature, opportunities to discuss personal concerns, and a strong sense of community. Attendees appreciated the focus on physical activity, cultural awareness, and reducing loneliness, with interest in shaping future events.</p> <p>“We feel very privileged to live in a town with a council who ensures there are activities and opportunities for everyone”</p> <p>Monthly Befriending Cinema Club (50 attendees per</p>
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		<p>session, 20 sessions to date.): Monthly screening in conjunction with Blaenavon Workingman’s Hall/Torfaen Community Connectors. Providing a free film, hot drinks & snacks. Offering opportunities to combat social isolation, loneliness and provide warm environment. “Since my wife died, these sessions have been a lifeline”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>Offa Community Council & Caia Park Community Council</p> <p>This small council has provided support for claiming benefits to their community. In 2024 these sessions resulted in residents accessing £137k in previously unclaimed benefits. Their neighbouring larger council, Caia Park offers similar services and in 2024 they supported residents to claim £1.4million in previously unclaimed benefits</p> <p>Bedlinog & Trelewis Community Council</p> <p>Warm Hub/Support For Older Residents: Bingo, refreshments and chat. Residents of Trelewis, or Bedlinog, are provided with free return transport to the hub should they need it.</p> <p>Youth Events/Activities provided: Soft play, Happy Hands Club, Rock Climbing. St John’s Ambulance Badgers Little Soldier’s Bootcamp, Magic show party</p> <p>Cwmbran Community Council</p>
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		<p>The Council's Task Force provides an affordable light decorating service in winter and light gardening service in summer, with a 50% discount for residents over 75 or registered as disabled. In 2023/24, this discount was extended to households with any disabled members. During the first year 71 decorating jobs were booked, with 67 receiving the discount, and 73 gardening jobs were completed, with 71 qualifying for the discount. The service supports those in need without competing with local tradespeople</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <p>Van Community Council</p> <p>Uniform Exchange, Grant for play days in summer holidays, Grant to Create for creative activities, Provision of free skateboarding lessons in school summer holiday, Free Tennis Lessons</p> <p>Food bank at Community Centre with deliveries last winter</p> <p>Community Event -local organisations in attendance , GAVO , Age Cymru , Alzheimer's Society etc . Connections made. Survey of what residents need want.</p> <p>Cwtch Café on Friday afternoon in Community Centre – Provision of 2 course meal , bingo. Age Cymru adviser in attendance</p> <p><u>Prestatyn Town Council</u></p>
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	<p>Our extensive and updated training and consultancy offer, helps to ensure that Councils keep pace with the ever-changing statutory framework within which they operate. 102 training courses delivered June – August 2024. 788 attendees.</p> <p>Membership of and secretarial support for the National Training</p>	<p>Warm Hub – between January-March 2024 Prestatyn supported 1341 residents with free meals in a warm space. They also provided ‘Singing Strummers’ music sessions in conjunction with Mind</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Darran Valley Community Council Free Christmas Activities <p>Panto, Selection Boxes, Disco & Buffer</p> <p>Free Bus Trips for Elderly Residents</p> <p>Free Summer Play Packs for primary school children</p> <p>(See also examples under new powers below)</p> <p>Testimonial from Tina Earley, Town Clerk Bay of Colwyn Town Council:</p> <p>“Bay of Colwyn Town Council commissioned One Voice Wales to undertake a review of Facilities Management at the Town Council Offices in May 2016. The detailed review was undertaken by Dr Ian Gardner who visited the Council’s building, interviewed the Town Clerk and looked through documents. Based on this a report was prepared and presented to the Council’s Buildings Sub Committee in July. Dr Gardner clearly explained the findings of the review and the recommendations relating to the</p>
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	<p>Advisory Group ensures that wider training and development issues affecting the sector are shared with stakeholders such as Welsh Government, NALC and the SLCC.</p>	<p>management of asbestos, legionella, fire safety and other statutory requirements and answered questions from Councillors.</p> <p>The Town Council subsequently commissioned Dr Gardner to prepare Memoranda of Understanding for the Town Council's lessees and tenants. Dr Gardner met with each occupier and discussed their responsibilities before drafting documents setting out how the Town Council and occupiers of the Town Council's offices would share responsibility for statutory compliance.</p> <p>The two commissions were undertaken professionally and delivered on time and within budget and the Town Council would recommend that other Councils with premises undertake similar reviews to help them manage their buildings and the responsibilities that arise from being a landlord."</p>
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<p>Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency.</p>	<p>Practice Development guidance raise awareness of good governance and highlight Best Practice across the sector.</p> <p>Model Financial Regulations will encourage a sound internal control environment.</p> <p>A Finance and Governance Toolkit has been introduced to</p>	<p>Developed jointly by One Voice Wales, the Society of Local Council Clerks (SLCC) and Welsh Government, with commentary from Audit Wales, a Finance & Governance Toolkit for Community & Town Councils aims to support community and town councils in Wales to review the financial management, governance and accountability arrangements they have in place; and consider how effective these arrangements are, and how they might be improved.</p>
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	help inform these important arrangements.	
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<p>Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes.</p>	<p>Creation of Digital Community of Practice.</p> <p>Distribution of advice on hybrid meetings, domain names and the adoption of digital solutions.</p> <p>New website commissioned for 2024.</p> <p>Enhanced social media presence to improve engagement with member councils.</p> <p>Option to enhance the digital agenda could include a shared approach between councils for design, build/procurement and operation of digital working could provide savings as well as improving capability and capacity. Packaged website design could save effort and spending on council websites</p> <p>A procurement service could</p>	<p>Around 30 people attended the first meeting of the community of practice, with 80 signed up as "members" of the community in total to date.</p> <p>Examples of Councils who are embracing digital solutions include</p> <p>Pennard Community Council for effective use of a communication and collaboration suite to operate internally - including meeting management and other core democratic procedures</p> <p>Gwernyfed Community Council for a smaller rural council effectively using multi-location meeting technology. All meetings are online during winter months to avoid difficult rural travel</p> <p>Aberteifi/Cardigan and Mold Town Councils for "smart towns" - use of data to drive service provision and support for local businesses</p> <p>Carmarthen Town Council for effective multi-location meetings held bilingually</p> <p>Abergavenny Town Council for good, clear engagement via social media and website</p>
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	<p>avoid duplication of resources, for example the number of Council Zoom accounts</p> <p>Models such as the "Hwb" service for education could be leveraged for the Community and Town Council sector for communication, collaboration and document management</p> <p>Extensive use of shared or refurbished equipment could provide environmental as well as financial benefits</p>	
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<p>How new powers and responsibilities for this tier of government are utilised to support communities.</p>	<p>Dissemination of guidance and provision across the sector helps Councils understand their rights and responsibilities in relation to the General Power of Competence, the promotion of biodiversity, delivering Age-friendly communities and responding to the Cost-of-Living crisis.</p> <p>The Chair of One Voice Wales sits on the Democratic Health</p>	<p>Councils such as Barry Town Council, Cwmbran Community Council and Pontypridd Town Council ensure that they deliver the aspirations of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 through an innovative programme of events and activities.</p> <p>Councils across Wales are meeting their obligations under the wide-ranging new requirements of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.</p> <p>As the level of governance closest to the community and embedded within those communities, delivering on the biodiversity agenda has been a priority for many</p>
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	<p>Task and Finish group, established by the Minister for Finance and Local Government, and charged with specifically looking at Community and Town Councils in Wales.</p> <p>Speakers at the 2024 One Voice Wales National Conference will include the Cabinet Secretary for Housing, Local Government, and Planning, Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, Auditor General for Wales and the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. Delegates can anticipate authoritative advice and comment from key decision makers and opinion formers across a range of current challenges and opportunities for the sector. Key issues of the day will therefore be at the forefront of the Conference.</p> <p>Networking through groups such as Local Democracy Classroom and Rural Futures to reach new audiences and raise awareness of the sector. We work with colleagues from Welsh</p>	<p>Community and Town Councils across Wales. Members and Officers know their community well and are well placed to understand the flow and rhythm of their local ecosystems. They have a better understanding of the need and capacity within their communities and can plan biodiversity improvements that engage with residents and secure successful buy in. Community growing initiatives, bioblitz activities, habitat creation and tree planting have all been successfully delivered by the sector. Councils have worked successfully with the Local Nature Partnerships to expand their reach and capacity. Councils are able to deliver fast paced change at a local level that has real impact on both communities and nature, helping to tackle the existential threat of the nature and climate emergencies.</p> <p>Best practice examples:</p> <p>Pontypridd Town Council Betws Community Council Llanelli Town Council Cricieth Town Council</p>
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	Government and Audit Wales to review issues relating to performance, legislation and service delivery.	
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One Voice Wales

Minutes of the Larger Council's Meeting held remotely on Wednesday 9 October 2024 at 10.30 am (Extract)

LLC 2024/51

[Local Government and Housing Committee](#)

Senedd Cymru's Local Government and Housing Committee was undertaking an inquiry into the [role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector](#). The terms of reference for the inquiry were reported.

The Chief Executive outlined the background to the inquiry and its timetable. He also described the steps which One Voice Wales had taken to consult Member Councils, which included an on-line consultation event held on 1 October 2024. Councils were encouraged to submit observations direct to the inquiry by Friday 18 October 2024. and to One Voice Wales to help shape a response.

The Chief Executive referred to discussions held with the Chair of One Voice Wales and Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government about the inquiry. He had sought to clarify certain aspects of the review with the Cabinet Secretary. She had indicated that the holding of a review into the Community and Town Council sector in 2025 would depend on the outcome of the current inquiry and the work of the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group.

The Chief Executive highlighted concerns about the timing of the inquiry and the short consultation period. He considered that this had hampered the ability of Councils and One Voice Wales to fully consider any response.

The Chair drew attention to the changing environment within which Community and Town Councils were performing and the need to put in place structures to respond to change. He highlighted some of the factors which he considered had informed the development of the terms of reference for the inquiry.

Councils considered each aspect of the work of the inquiry in turn. Observations are set out below. Comments made in the chat menu were also recorded. The Chief Executive updated Larger Councils on issues raised on 1 October 2024 as part of these discussions.

- (i) The role and value of community and town councils in Wales.
- Councils were being asked to take on more services and responsibilities. Community and Town Councils were now more valid than ever. The timing of an inquiry into the role and purpose had therefore come as a surprise to some.
 - There was widespread recognition that many services were best delivered closest to local communities.
 - The direct level of democracy was an important feature of Community and Town Councils. Councils helped to intervene in resolving local issues and provided an important representational role at the grass roots of communities.
 - There was a need to focus on service delivery.
 - Councils discussed the rationale for a de minimis size for Community and Town Councils. Councils varied considerably in their size and shape. One size did not fit all.
 - Larger, expanded Councils would lead to increased precepts with the cost per household being evenly applied. Larger Councils could become hubs if amalgamations took place.
 - Banding together smaller councils might lead to friction occurring between the competing demands of long-established communities
 - Some Councils considered that the requirements for exercising the General Power of Competence were too restrictive. This was a barrier to widespread adoption and use of the power.
 - The delivery of place-based services by Councils could play an important part in any future model for Community and Town Councils.
 - It was important that Welsh Government gave a clear message about how it saw the purpose and role of Community and Town Councils.
- (ii) Whether the sector is fit for purpose in an evolving local government landscape.

- It was important that Members had the ability and capacity to receive and understand new information about responsibilities, powers, and service delivery. Training for Members was key. Some mandatory training was considered necessary.
- There was a need for Councils to invest in staff development.
- There was a need for more praise and support from the WG and principal councils for the work of Community and Town Councils.
- The view was expressed that there should be limitations on the number of times Members could stand for re-election. A more regular turnover of Members could help to ensure that Councils remained vibrant.
- It was important that Councils received the recognition for their achievements and services. Credibility was critical to ensure that Councils were seen as relevant and meaningful.
- Many Councils made important contributions to wider community resilience and the development of effective partnerships with County Councils and others.
- Adverse publicity and dialogue across social media could act as a deterrent to encourage candidates to stand for election.
- Attendance and quoracy could be adversely impacted through some of the external pressures referenced above.
- There was limited evidence to support a reduction in numbers of councillors.
- Some 8,000 Members provide considerable local resources for community benefit and a greater workload level might discourage local people from standing for election.
- There would undoubtedly be mounting pressures for a considerable increase in remuneration for Members.

- (iii) Governance and scrutiny arrangements and its impact on accountability and transparency.
- The Chair echoed the observations expressed by Councils on 1 October 2024.
 - Some Councils reiterated concerns that the requirements for exercising the General Power of Competence were too restrictive. This was a barrier to widespread adoption and use of the power. A rigid external audit regime meant that it was too easy to lose the ability to exercise the power.
 - Councils who received a qualified audit opinion should be supported to help them introduce improvements and understand the audit requirements. There was a role for SLCC in working with Clerks to understand the reasons and causes of qualified audits.
 - There was consensus amongst Larger Councils that many audits gave rise to qualified opinions as a result of administrative or clerical failings which could be dealt with more sympathetically by auditors. The time taken to complete audits was highlighted as a cause of concern. Delays could impact on Councils claiming eligibility to exercise the General Power of Competence and also have implications for setting budgets.
 - The increased governance and financial obligations on Community and Town Councils could lead to significant resource implications and higher precepts. Councils received limited support in resolving these challenges.
- (iv) Scope of digital and new technology to improve decision-making, service provision and participation in local democratic processes.
- The benefits of digitalisation placed some Councils at a disadvantage if they lacked the capacity or skills to fully embrace digital solutions.
 - Some Councils suggested that there could be a role for One Voice Wales in providing IT support. There were calls for the development of a basic digital framework to include use of email. Support was also requested in relation to security and Cloud-based storage.

- Hybrid meetings brought particular challenges for simultaneous translation.
 - The role of One Voice Wales in providing practice development guidance and training was highly valued.
- (v) How new powers and responsibilities for this tier of government are utilised to support communities.
- Initiatives such as the introduction of the General Power of Competence failed to address any shortcomings in Members' competence where training was so important.
 - Candidates were dissuaded from standing for election to Councils for a wide range of reasons which needed to be addressed.

It was **Resolved** that:

- (1) The observations set out above in relation to the lines of inquiry to be followed by the Local Government and Housing Committee are used to inform a response to the inquiry by One Voice Wales.
- (2) One Voice Wales expresses the view that major, structural reviews such as the above inquiry should feature a consultation period of at least three months in order to allow meaningful consultation and preparation of responses.

LLC 2024/52

Keynote Speaker: Emma Goode, Cost-of-Living Crisis Project Manager, One Voice Wales

The Chair welcomed [Emma Goode](#) to the meeting. Emma presented to Larger Councils on the work of the Cost-of-Living Team. Her detailed presentation helped Councils understand the challenges facing communities and the ways in which One Voice Wales could help Councils address the cost-of-living crisis. Potential initiatives for Councils included food banks, Warm Spaces, Lunch Clubs, Hobby Groups, Coffee Mornings and other wellbeing activities, Webinars, social media activity and other networking opportunities helped to engage Councils and raise awareness of challenges, opportunities and case studies. The development of community transport facilities was highlighted as an important example of an area where Councils could help connect individuals to vital services.

Emma considered that the work of many Councils in tackling the cost-of-living crisis was an important factor to highlight to the Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into the role,

governance and accountability of the community and town council sector. It was an example of how Councils could make a real impact in their communities and take a lead in supporting and delivering community initiatives.

Copies of Emma's presentation were available from the Team.

It was **Resolved** that Councils are encouraged to seek guidance from the Cost-of-Living Crisis Team if they were considering ways of introducing anti-poverty measures in their communities

18 October 2024