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18th October 2024

Local Government and Housing Committee
Welsh Government
Cathays Park
Cardiff

Dear Sir

Re Community and Town Councils

The above Association represents approx. 30 of the larger town and community councils in north and mid Wales including Holyhead, Rhyl, Prestatyn, Holywell, Abergele, Shotton, Llandudno, Conwy, Buckley, St Asaph, Connah's Quay, Hawarden, Caerwys, Ruthin, Llanfair Caereinion, Mostyn, Flint Beaumaris and others.

I write with regard the consultation into Community and Town Councils. The Association met earlier today to discuss the consultation and wishes me to provide their views – please see attached report.

We look forward to attending your committee on 27th November in Cardiff. Attending will be Cllr Ian Hodge and myself. I have been asked if we can bring our Vice Chair as well (making 3). No doubt you will let me know.

Thank you for your time.

Yours faithfully

Robert A Robinson

Robert A Robinson MBE FRICS FSLCC
Secretary

NORTH & MID WALES ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL COUNCILS

REPORT ON TOWN AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS for the Local Government and Housing Committee Inquiry

1. Introduction

The Association presents this report in response to the request for information from the Local Government and Housing Committee of the Welsh Government.

The Association has not recorded here a wealth of information which is out there on the subject as the committee will be aware of it.

2. Representation

The North & Mid Wales Association of Local Council has been in place for over 40 years representing approx. 30 of the larger Town and Community Councils mainly along the North Wales Coastal area.

3. How information was gathered

The Association hosted a meeting (face to face and by zoom) with its members at Towyn & Kimmell Bay with a considerable time of the meeting spent considering the consultation and putting together a presentation of the members views.

This report sets out their views evidence by their own council experience both with their town council and with the county councils.

4. Overview viewpoint

The views of our members vary from council to council – depending upon their size. The larger councils have a different approach to those with much smaller budgets. However, there are many subjects upon which the viewpoint is common.

It should be noted that council's which have engaged with us (and indeed One Voice Wales) generally are those who are getting more right than wrong. Those council's which do not respond tend to be those who are not doing so well or have any real interest in the subject.

5. The role of town & community Councils in Wales

The role of town and community councils was identified as:

- i) Primary – representing the local community.
- ii) Consultations including planning matters.
- iii) Delivering some local services.
- iv) Working with the local community to create a community feel.

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Members are aware of the duties and powers of local councils, particularly regarding budgets, meetings and governance.

The members believed if councils were to be enlarged with more responsibility that consideration should be given to councillors 'being paid' for what will be a position with more responsibility and more time needed.

There was also a feeling that those seeking to be nominated for election should attend a pre-election meeting so that they understand how the council works and what is involved.

6. Local service delivery

Members are concerned about the reductions in local services by principal councils (indication is that from April 2026 the county councils will only carry out such activities as it has a duty to do). The feeling was that county councils were 'dumping' services on town councils without financial support causing larger than justified council tax rises. This leaves a lot of small local services in danger unless someone else steps up to take them over.

Numerous examples of working with county councils were given, some good but mainly poor. Relationships with the county council (in general) were cited as generally poor.

The key issues raised were:

- i) Funding via the precept – possible large rising.
- ii) Double taxation (the county councils have been given the money but are not delivering the local services in some areas).
- iii) The capacity of smaller councils to carry out such functions.

Unless councils are enlarged service delivery locally will prove exceedingly difficult. It has been suggesting in the past that smaller councils 'cluster' and this might be worthy of discussion.

7. The value of town & Community Councils in Wales

The members felt that the town and community were typically fair value for money, delivered local services well and add value by knowing their local area and resident's needs.

A local council can deliver services at much less cost than the principal authorities.

The need for training was sited. Members present nearly all had a training plan which was being implemented directly though external sources.

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The need for a good town clerk (qualified) was highlighted.

8. Is the sector fit for purpose in an evolving local government

Generally the viewpoint is:

- i) 1/3rd yes they are fit for purpose.
- ii) 1/3rd are OK.
- iii) 1/3rd are not fit for purpose.

The areas of concern are generally around the smaller councils.

The viewpoint is evidenced by the Audit Wales reports on governance issued by them at presentations and in their annual report.

One major issue for councils is finding a good and qualified clerk, essential to the good administration of any council. Many members have experience this over the past years at various times.

It was also noted that a sizeable number of councils either have no clerk or have issues between the clerk and councillors (both ways).

9. Governance and scrutiny

Members were in support of the need for good governance and scrutiny and felt that the sector is doing better in recent years.

Audit Wales has reported on the defects found when completing annual returns with papers. The number of qualified annual returns is of some concern.

There have been complaints on occasions that the audit office is 'difficult' and only reports on papers given (without seeking more information from the authority concerned).

Training was still considered an issue even with the offer of online courses.

It was also noted that 'more rules' comes with a 'price tag' and that this must be recognised and must not progress to a level where it starts to impact on delivery of services.

10. Accountability and transparency

The accountability and transparency of local councils is improving but still a long way to go.

Hybrid meetings have helped in many cases and being able to video council meetings also can help.

The information published by councils on websites is still patchy.

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The election of councillors is another issue of which social media criticism was highlighted as one of the things which put people off standing.

11. Scope of digital technology

The use of digital technology was discussed with the following items of note:

- i) All member councils have a website.
- ii) Many member councils have a social media presence.
- iii) Many member councils use email to issue agenda and papers (some give the option of email and or paper based)
continued
- iv) All member councils host hybrid meetings or offer them on advance notice.
- v) The main issue for provision is for the smaller councils who do not have their own premises but meet in church halls etc. Some have no internet in rural areas (or not strong enough signal). Others have to bring their own screens/computers etc to each meeting.
- vi) Help with financing these facilities would be welcomed.
- vii) In person still is considered the best option for meetings although the benefits of hybrid and video link meetings were recognised.

There are issues around those with illnesses (particularly those who cannot hear or see) when using digital technology.

The issue of the Welsh language was also pointed out. Most local councils have their material printed in English with Welsh available upon request. The main reason for this was the cost of translation. Funding to help this would be good but it would need to be ongoing and not time limited.

There was a feeling that digital on its own is not enough and that there is still a need in many communities for paper based material as well.

12. New powers and responsibilities to support local communities

Members welcomed the new powers and responsibilities but were concerned that they needed proper funding to ensure activities could be sustainable.

13. The future of town and community councils

Members are aware of the need for local councils to 'step up to the plate' to help retain some services locally. However, many smaller councils will find this difficult.

Enlarging local councils may help with this but has two dangers:

- i) The loss of local contact if such councils become too large.
- ii) The cultures of local councils can be vastly different.

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14. Funding

The main concern for members is the level of funding required to administer a council in today's world. More legislation and governance requirements requiring more time by the Clerk which in turn has a cost implication.

Members would welcome some direct Welsh Government funding – not via the county councils.

There is an issue around partial exemption VAT for small and medium councils. The limit of £7,500 has been the same for over 20 years and will not be enough if local councils take on many more services. In many cases registering fully for VAT can be a disadvantage.

15. Elections

The members agree with accountability and transparency and this applies to election of members.

The guidance is that co-option should be the 'last resort.' However, for many councils an election costs around £3,000 a time. This can influence the budget. Members would like to ask the Welsh Government to fund local elections to encourage more to take place.

16. Other comments

Other subjects raised by the members at the consultation meeting included the feeling that 'North Wales' and 'Mid Wales' are often forgotten in favour of South Wales. The appointment of a North Wales Minister may help but to date it does not appear to be the case.

17. Further information

The details of the members response can be expanded upon at the meeting scheduled to take place in the Senedd on 27th November 2024.

The above information is based upon our member's views expressed to us. Member councils were also encouraged to respond direct to the survey.

Robert A Robinson MBE FRICS FSLCC
Secretary to the Association