
**Local Government
and Housing Committee**

Eleri Williams,
Policy and Research Adviser
Building Communities Trust

18 November 2024

Dear Eleri,

Inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town sector

Thank you for agreeing to give evidence to the Committee on this inquiry, I hope that you are recovering well following your illness. As you were unable to attend the evidence session, Members agreed that it would be useful to receive a written response from you on the matters we had intended to discuss. We would therefore be grateful if you could outline your views on the following.

Relationship with community councils

Community interaction. Views on why some community groups, in Building Communities Trust's words, choose to "focus their attention on what can be done without input from any tier of government".

Role and value: Views on whether larger and better resourced town and community councils provide greater support for community groups, and what sort of influence do communities and community groups have over local decision making.

Financial support for community action

Variability of support. To outline experiences of the variability in financial support from community councils in support of community action, and whether it is a matter of resource rather than desire to assist community groups.

Support for community led schemes and seed funding. Views on whether community councils are sufficiently supporting communities at the early stages of planning, such as schemes to develop community-led housing, and whether such schemes are easier to develop with larger community councils.

Community council clerks

The role of clerks as facilitators. Views on how significant the role of a community council clerk is in facilitating and supporting relationships between community groups and community councils, and whether clerks have the required support and capacity to undertake the role effectively.

Recognition for clerks. Views on the level of recognition and remuneration of town and community council clerks, and whether they have the required qualifications to effectively undertake all their duties.

Democracy

Democratic deficit. Views on the extent low engagement in the electoral process and the number of uncontested seats “undermine the legitimacy” of this tier of government, and whether this creates issues of trust between some community groups and community councils.

A rethink on community council structure. Views on the [Independent Review Panel’s conclusion in its 2018 report](#) that the “case has been made to retain Community and Town Councils” and that all areas should be served by one. Whether electoral data paints a different picture, and views on whether there should be a wholesale rethink about the future structure of this tier of government.

Scrutiny arrangements. To expand on concerns about scrutiny arrangements at some town and community councils, and what should be done to improve accountability and transparency.

Training for councillors. Views on current training requirements for community and town councillors, and whether there should be mandatory training, particularly in relation to code of conduct matters.

Digital

Use of digital to improve decision-making: Views on developing both IT and digital capacity within the town and community council sector, and how it could be used to increase participation and engagement in local democratic processes.

Support for councils: Whether there is sufficient support and resource for community councils to improve their digital and IT capacity, and whether it should be a priority for this tier of government.

New powers and responsibilities

General Power of Competence: Awareness of whether local councils are seeking to become eligible community councils for the purpose of exercising the general power of competence, and views on the potential benefits for communities and third sector organisations.

Annual reports and training plans: Views on whether the additional requirements in the 2021 Act to publish an annual report and prepare training plans improved transparency and accountability, and what would help to improve accountability in future.

If possible, it would be helpful to receive your response by Thursday 28 November to enable the Committee to consider it ahead of our final evidence session on this inquiry.

Yours sincerely



John Griffiths MS

Chair

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg.

We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.



By email only: Inquiry into the role, governance and accountability of the community and town sector

November 21st 2024.

Dear John Griffiths MS, Local Government and Housing Committee Chair,

Many thanks for your letter dated November 18th. I was disappointed not to be able to attend the evidence session virtually due to illness and I thank you and the Committee Members for your understanding, as well as the opportunity for Building Communities Trust to contribute additional information to help this inquiry in writing. For ease of use I have included all the points in your letter, with our responses coloured blue.

Relationship with community councils

Community interaction. Views on why some community groups, in Building Communities Trust's words, choose to "focus their attention on what can be done without input from any tier of government".

Motivations for getting involved in community action undoubtedly vary. However, in the types of communities where BCT works (with the majority experiencing the double disadvantage of significant socio-economic disadvantage and limited social infrastructure) many individuals have been involved in community action for a long period of time. Individuals and community groups may have participated in a range of previous poverty alleviation and / or community development programmes with varying degrees of success. For many of the communities where we work, the historical experience of Communities First is still felt, leading to apathy on one side, and distrust of government programmes (and sometimes funding) on the other.

In our experience most community action comes from local initiative and reflects local networks, (social) enterprise and opportunities. Much of the action revolves around activities people *want* to do together and some around the help for themselves and their neighbours that people feel *needs* to be provided locally. The geographical make up of local areas also makes a difference with both transport within communities and the nature of opportunity to run community activity being important factors. Community action is almost always led by some kind of group or organisation, especially if it has been going for a long time. Most community organisations involve a committee with a small amount of money to run simple activities, but a considerable minority ¹ are incorporated organisations, owning or managing property and employing staff.

Role and value: Views on whether larger and better resourced town and community councils provide greater support for community groups, and what sort of influence do communities and community groups have over local decision making.

At a national level, recent statistics show that a minority of individuals (30%) feel able to influence local decision making, although this figure has increased since before the pandemic.²

¹ [2020-12-08-14-1-mapping-community-assets-in-wa.pdf \(squarespace.com\)](https://www.squarespace.com/2020-12-08-14-1-mapping-community-assets-in-wa.pdf)

² <https://www.gov.wales/wellbeing-wales-2024-wales-cohesive-communities-html#153135>

Carnegie Trust data shows that most people in Wales feel that they cannot influence decisions affecting the UK, Wales, or their local area (74%, 66% and 55% respectively) and 31% of people have low levels of trust in local councils.³

Beyond these statistics, our experience suggests that giving long-term funding directly to community groups, can equip them with better leveraging power with local authorities and town and community councils. Overall, communities and community groups influence over local decision making is limited overall with some notable exceptions, for larger well-resourced and connected community groups.

In general, we would consider that larger, better resourced (and organised) town and community councils have a greater ability to provide support for community groups and community action in principle. However, the practice is also dependent on the culture and ambition of the town and/or community council. Simply having access to more resources does not necessarily guarantee that a town or community council will be supportive of community groups and community action.

Financial support for community action

Variability of support. To outline experiences of the variability in financial support from community councils in support of community action, and whether it is a matter of resource rather than desire to assist community groups.

As suggested above, there are several interrelated factors affecting the relationship between community groups and town/community councils, particularly when it comes to financial support. Resources and culture are two major factors. For larger, better resourced town and community councils, it is obviously easier to offer financial support to community action and groups. However, culture and ambition on the part of the council is also key. We must also remember that in some areas of Wales, community actions is more prevalent than others, so the viability of a grants scheme (or the like) will also depend on the existence of a range of community organisations, which could satisfy any financial procedures stipulated by the town or community council.

Support for community led schemes and seed funding. Views on whether community councils are sufficiently supporting communities at the early stages of planning, such as schemes to develop community-led housing, and whether such schemes are easier to develop with larger community councils.

Community-led housing and planning are not areas of expertise for BCT, so we are not well-placed to respond to this line of questioning.

Community council clerks

The role of clerks as facilitators. Views on how significant the role of a community council clerk is in facilitating and supporting relationships between community groups and community councils, and whether clerks have the required support and capacity to undertake the role effectively.

³ https://d1ssu070pg2v9i.cloudfront.net/pex/carnegie_uk_trust/2024/11/11151431/LiUK-Wales-2024-FINAL.pdf

The role of clerk is essential to the smooth and effective running of any town/ community council. They can and often act as a bridge between the institution and external stakeholders, such as community groups. However, there is not always capacity for clerks do focus on this aspect. Many groups in our network spoke highly of their relationship with council clerks, recognising the competing pressures they face, suggesting that potentially more support could be provided to clerks. It may be worth looking into the development of a Welsh-specific peer network for clerks, given the differing reporting requirements.

Sometimes, councils employ a dedicated community connector, to undertake much of this engagement work, and where these roles exist, it is clearly the connector not the clerk undertaking the facilitation and development of relationships with community groups (and others).

Recognition for clerks. Views on the level of recognition and remuneration of town and community council clerks, and whether they have the required qualifications to effectively undertake all their duties.

Clerks were widely regarded as central to the overall success of town and community councils. At least one member of our networks expressed concern about the low levels of remuneration for clerks. It is our understanding that whilst qualifications for clerks are encouraged, they are on essential for clerks of councils looking to exercise the General Power of Competence. From the experiences shared by our networks, the challenges facing clerks relate to capacity levels, rather than appropriate qualifications. We heard from one individual who undertakes clerking for two councils, that the 2021Act had led to a dramatic increase in their workload. The individual explained that they could “understand why so many clerks were giving up the role.”

Democracy

Democratic deficit. Views on the extent low engagement in the electoral process and the number of uncontested seats “undermine the legitimacy” of this tier of government, and whether this creates issues of trust between some community groups and community councils.

It is our view that the statistics we quoted in our previous response regarding May 2022’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.”⁴ Around 30 councils were inquorate following these elections. Turnout was also down around 5% from 2017 to 38%.⁵) should be a significant concern which undermines the legitimacy of this tier of government. However, the democratic deficit affecting this tier of government does not appear to be a major cause of distrust between community groups and town / community councils. As highlighted above, there are a range of factors causing issues of trust between community groups and any tier of government. The level of disinterest in this tier of government is our view, more concerning.

A rethink on community council structure. Views on the Independent Review Panel’s conclusion in its 2018 report that the “case has been made to retain Community and Town Councils” and

⁴ Rebecca Evans MS, Minister for Finance and Local Government, [Written Statement: Democratic Health of Community and Town Councils](#), April 2023

⁵ Terms of Reference for the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group, <https://www.gov.wales/democratic-health-task-and-finish-group/terms-reference>

that all areas should be served by one. Whether electoral data paints a different picture, and views on whether there should be a wholesale rethink about the future structure of this tier of government.

BCT does not have a view on the Independent Review Panel's conclusions but we have significant concerns about the status quo, in light of the low voter turnout and level of contestation of seats. We would support further analysis of the future structure of this tier of government, which we recognise may have already been undertaken by the Democratic Health Task and Finish Group.

Scrutiny arrangements. To expand on concerns about scrutiny arrangements at some town and community councils, and what should be done to improve accountability and transparency. We are concerned about the current scrutiny arrangements for this tier of government. Former town and community councillors shared their experiences of ineffective challenge to and by Council Chairs, stating that many councillors and Chairs do not adequately understand their roles, nor the protocols that exist. We also heard about the difficulties of individual councillors having their views heard, especially as young women. This is despite longstanding interest in and efforts to increase the diversity of individuals involved in local government, suggesting a need for culture change within some town and community councils. We would support calls for further mandatory training for councillors as a starting point and would like to see additional open access support provided by One Voice Wales, to town and community councils which are not part of their membership.

Training for councillors. Views on current training requirements for community and town councillors, and whether there should be mandatory training, particularly in relation to code of conduct matters.

As we understand it, there are training requirements for those councils wanting to exercise the General Power of Competence, but not for other town and community councils. We believe there should be a mandatory training programme for all councillors, with regular refresher courses available. This is especially important to code of conduct matters, and if implemented effectively could aid in reducing apathy towards this tier of government.

Digital

Use of digital to improve decision-making: Views on developing both IT and digital capacity within the town and community council sector, and how it could be used to increase participation and engagement in local democratic processes.

We consider there to be limited potential from developing IT and digital to increase participation and engagement in local democratic processes. The evidence is that there is little interest in the work of town and community councils rather than unmet demand for information. With 7% of the Welsh population not online, and many more not proficient online, it is vitally important that if this is pursued, it must be done so alongside other non-digital engagement and participation methods. We are clear that developing IT and digital capacity is not a universal solution and will not meet everyone's needs.

Support for councils: Whether there is sufficient support and resource for community councils to improve their digital and IT capacity, and whether it should be a priority for this tier of government.

We anticipate that there will be sufficient support and resource for larger town and community councils to improve their digital and IT capacity. Maintaining a digital presence takes resources and expertise, which may or may not be present. From a limited examination of the websites of a small sample of town and community councils, it is not clear that this is a priority for many councils currently. We remain unconvinced that expanding the use of digital and IT capacity should be prioritised above and beyond other forms of engagement and participation methods. In our own programme work, there is a wide variety of expertise and willingness to engage virtually, and we anticipate this reflects the wider population.

New powers and responsibilities

General Power of Competence: Awareness of whether local councils are seeking to become eligible community councils for the purpose of exercising the general power of competence, and views on the potential benefits for communities and third sector organisations.

It's beyond our expertise to have detailed knowledge of whether councils are seeking to become eligible community councils in order to exercise the general power of competence. However, it appears that the general power of competence creates additional responsibilities. These additional responsibilities appear to be onerous for councils and clerks which already lack capacity. The act includes the requirement to make and publish a training plan for staff and councillors, the duty to publish an annual report and provision to ensure that for any members of the public attending meetings have a reasonable opportunity to make representations about council business. From these responsibilities, it is not obvious how the general power of competence results in direct benefits to communities and third sector organisations.

Annual reports and training plans: Views on whether the additional requirements in the 2021 Act to publish an annual report and prepare training plans improved transparency and accountability, and what would help to improve accountability in future.

The additional requirements of the 2021 Act in terms of publishing an annual report and preparing a training plan have, in our view, limited potential to improve transparency and accountability. Whilst these provisions add some level of additional scrutiny to eligible councils, there is a mismatch between the requirements of professionalisation and capacity. We also anticipate that the readership of a training plan and annual report will be small.

Many thanks once again for your understanding and the opportunity to provide further written evidence. Should you wish to have any further clarity on any of the points raised, please do not hesitate to contact me. I hope the rest of the evidence sessions for this inquiry go well.

Yours sincerely,

Eleri

Eleri Williams, Policy and Research Advisor at Building Communities Trust.