

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

March 2025



## Chair's foreword

There are over 700 community and town councils serving their local areas across Wales. The size of the councils and the resources available to them will vary significantly, but all share the objectives of wanting to deliver and achieve the best outcomes for their communities.

There have been other reports looking at the community council sector in recent years and all have made their own recommendations. Some of the main areas our report focuses on are the audit arrangements, standards of behaviour and support for council clerks.

Increasing diversity across the local government sectors has been an important theme throughout our work, and we know that poor behaviour is one of the key factors in deterring people from standing or continuing in an elected role. We were therefore very interested in the Code of Conduct for Members and have made some recommendations relating to training, which we believe could lead to fewer equality and respect complaints.

All councils need competent clerking support to function effectively. We have therefore also focused on clerking arrangements and the adequacy of support available to clerks.

We have made a series of recommendations to the Welsh Government and the sector which I believe can make a positive difference and also work in conjunction with issues raised in other recent reports.

I would like to thank everyone who has contributed to this inquiry.

**John Griffiths MS**

Chair

## Recommendations and conclusion

- Recommendation 1.** The Welsh Government should work with the sector and the Auditor General for Wales to co-produce a new bespoke audit system for town and community councils in Wales..... Page 18
- Recommendation 2.** The Welsh Government should explore the option of using statutory guidance via the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 as a vehicle for introducing mandatory code of conduct training for town and community councillors, and formally consult with the sector on the proposal.  
..... Page 25
- Recommendation 3.** The Welsh Government should continue to offer a bursary to One Voice Wales for delivery of its code of conduct training, maintained at existing levels. .... Page 26
- Recommendation 4.** The Welsh Government should work with relevant stakeholders to explore options to facilitate greater use of local resolutions to disputes..... Page 29
- Recommendation 5.** The Welsh Government should work with local government to explore mechanisms to enable the town and community council sector to access support from local authority monitoring officers and HR services. .... Page 29
- Recommendation 6.** The Welsh Government should work with a relevant body, such as the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru, to undertake a review of evidence to inform sizing policies to ensure a nationally consistent approach to principal council-led community reviews..... Page 40
- Recommendation 7.** The Welsh Government should engage with the town and community council sector to explore greater opportunities for clustering and to encourage the sharing of good practice..... Page 40
- Recommendation 8.** The Welsh Government should support both tiers of local government to ensure a review of the model charter between principal and community councils can be undertaken..... Page 44
- Recommendation 9.** The Welsh Government should provide an update on the implementation of the digital health of community and town councils action plan published in May 2023. .... Page 48

**Recommendation 10.** The Welsh Government should work with the WLGA and One Voice Wales to encourage local authorities to:

- provide IT support to town and community councils through service level agreements, and
- share facilities for use by town and community councils to hold hybrid meetings. .... Page 49

**Recommendation 11.** The Welsh Government should make the necessary legislative changes so that community councils eligible to exercise the General Power of Competence are only required to affirm their eligibility once during an electoral term. .... Page 53

**Conclusion 1.** We would like the Welsh Government to do more, in conjunction with the sector, to raise awareness of the bursary and encourage more clerks to study for it. The possibility of clerks being remunerated for the additional training time may be an option to explore. .... Page 33

## Introduction

- 1.** Community and town councils are responsible to their local electorates for delivering a wide range of services and for the upkeep of their local amenities. According to the latest StatsWales data, there are currently 729 community and town councils in Wales. Local councils vary significantly in size and responsibilities, with communities ranging from small rural settlements, some with fewer than 200 residents, to large towns serving thousands of residents. Their budgets, as a result, vary accordingly, with some holding a few thousand pounds in their accounts, while others have budgets of several hundred thousand pounds.
- 2.** The sustainability of local government in Wales is one of the Committee's overarching priorities for the Sixth Senedd. As part of this, we agreed to undertake an inquiry to examine the role, governance and accountability of the community and town council sector. The terms of reference for our work 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.

## Evidence gathering

- 3.** We gathered written evidence and held oral evidence sessions with stakeholders. A public consultation was launched on 31 July and closed on 18 October 2024. We received 52 responses to the consultation.
- 4.** We heard oral evidence from stakeholders on 14 and 27 November and from Jayne Bryant MS, the Cabinet Secretary for Housing and Local Government ("the Cabinet Secretary"), on 5 December 2024.

**5.** We held three roundtable discussion groups with clerks and members of town and community councils on 23 October 2024 to hear about their lived experiences. A summary of our engagement work can be found on our website.<sup>1</sup>

**6.** We are grateful to everyone who took part in the inquiry. Details of all evidence gathered can be found in the Annexes to this report.

## Context

**7.** In 2018, the Independent Review Panel on community and town councils in Wales published its Final Report and recommendations.

**8.** Evidence gathered by the Panel signalled strong support for the sector, but it also heard calls for this tier of government to be abolished entirely. The report highlighted comments it had received, which outlined “flaws in the current system” and that community councils “are not fit for purpose”. However, the Panel also stated that the “overwhelming majority of responses were concerned with how the sector could be improved”.

**9.** The Panel came to the conclusion that it believed that “the case has been made to retain Community and Town Councils”, and that all communities “should be supported by a Community and Town Council”. However, it also noted that some community and town councils aren’t “sustainable” or “able to fulfil the role” envisaged if they remain as they are. The Panel also reflected on the significant variation in “capacity and capability” in the sector, and the role the sector plays as “part of the wider Local Government landscape”.

**10.** In April 2023 the then Minister for Finance and Local Government established a democratic health task and finish group to explore the causes of low engagement and participation in community and town councils. The Group’s remit was to consider ways to improve awareness and engagement between communities and their community councils and to increase the number and diversity of candidates standing for election to community councils. The task and finish group reported in November 2024.

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<sup>1</sup> Local Government and Housing Committee, Summary of engagement activity, 23 October 2024