

A RESEARCH STUDY INTO THE ROLE, FUNCTIONS AND FUTURE POTENTIAL OF TOWN AND COMMUNITY COUNCILS IN WALES

SPECIFICATION FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT

The purpose of this study is to examine the role and functions of town and community councils and the factors relevant to their future development, highlighting , where appropriate, current good practices. It will also consider the relevance to Welsh local councils of developments and good practices from elsewhere in the UK and Europe.

The study will:

- (1) Review the literature and research documentation relating to local councils and relate this to Welsh town and community councils' current activities.
- (2) Examine the availability of information on town and community councils, such as their budgets, the number of elected members, their backgrounds(such as age, sex, occupation, party affiliation), the number of uncontested seats during elections, and the number of type of staff employed. Where such information is unavailable, consideration should be given to how the information could be collected and updated and who should have this responsibility.
- (3) Establish the geographical extent of town and community councils in Wales and assess the adequacy of the existing legislation for creating, merging and dissolving town and community councils.
- (4) Examine how town and community councils engage with the public and how they could stimulate greater democratic involvement.
- (5) Identify the range of services town and community councils provide, individually and in partnership with others; establish their potential for taking on additional service responsibilities, especially for threatened services provided by other bodies or providing services jointly with county councils and other agencies; their potential role in representing the views of their areas

by, for example, providing feedback on service quality to county councils.

(6) Establish the extent to which town and community councils should be involved in assessing best value for the services which they provide, in particular, how town and community councils should apply best value principles, and whether the proposed threshold of £1m of gross revenue expenditure should be reduced to enable a wider range of town and community councils to be subject to the best value regime.

(7) Identify how town and community councils' performance could be measured and whether different approaches are required for small and large town and community councils.

(8) Assess how the performance of town and community councils could be improved. This would entail considering:

- Whether incentives for enhanced performance should be introduced, such as England's proposed quality designation;
- Whether training should be provided for elected members and staff of town and community councils and how such training could be provided and funded;
- How information and good practice could be identified and shared;
- How town and community councils could be encouraged to jointly provide services.

(9) Establish how town and community councils are funded and the components of their expenditures. This would involve examining their:

- Sources of income, including precepts, the use of Section 137 of the Local Government Act 1972, and other income sources such as rental income, charges, etc;
- Borrowing powers;
- Expenditures, including spending on capital projects.

The research should:

- identify changes to these components over the last five years and the extent of town and community councils' access to financial expertise; and

-consider whether town and community councils should have access to further sources of funding such as access to income from central government.

(10) Review the involvement of town and community councils in the town and country planning process. This would involve examining community councils' contribution to development control, unitary development plan preparation, and the development of other strategies,

including community strategies, and how community councils could better influence the future development of their communities.

(11) Assess the extent to which town and community councils work in partnership with others – neighbouring community councils, principal councils, the private and voluntary sectors, and other bodies such as the Assembly's sponsored bodies and the NHS – the way such partnership arrangements operate, the mechanisms used, highlight examples of good practice and how they can be disseminated and whether there are barriers to partnership working. The study would establish what more could be done to encourage partnership working between town and community councils and other bodies.

(12) Review the relationship between town and community councils and principal councils and identify models of good practice . This would entail examining communications between community and principal councils, the operation of existing consultation arrangements and procedures, and the relationship between town and community councils and area forums, links between community councils and county councils' new decision-making and scrutiny arrangements, and the effectiveness of the arrangements for the joint enforcement of standards of conduct.

(13) Review the role of the associations representing town and community councils, the regional and county bodies and their potential for improving community councils' performance. This would include the Welsh Local Councils Forum, the national town and community councils' associations, the county associations and local consortiums.

(14) Establish whether allowances, including special responsibility allowances, should be paid to elected and coopted members of town and community councils. If the review results in a recommendation that members should receive allowances, to recommend how such allowances should be determined and updated and the levels of allowances.

(15) Establish the extent to which town and community councils are represented on external bodies, on which other bodies they should have representation, and how representatives should be selected.