

Town and Community Councils in Wales

**Topic Paper for the Local Government and Housing Committee
of the
National Assembly for Wales**

prepared by

Councillor Richard Edwards and Councillor Mair Stephens

6th November 2001

Mair Stephens, is immediate past Chair of the Wales Association of Community and Town Councils, a longstanding member of Llandyfaelog Community Council, and has served on the Wales Consumer Council for 2 terms, she is Co-ordinator of the Wales Assembly of Women. A senior regional official with the WI in West Wales, Mair serves on the National Assembly Partnership Council and until recently on the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council of the Assembly. Married with one son Rhys, Mair is an occasional broadcaster and Chair of her local school Governors. Keenly interested in rural issues, she has served on several Royal Welsh Show Panels and is a current Board Member of the WCVA.

Richard Edwards, is Leader of Prestatyn Town Council, and served on Clwyd County Council for 16 years and Rhuddlan Borough for 25 years; Chairing major committees on both. A former member of the WJEC, Clwyd Health and North Wales Police Authorities, he also Chaired the Public Sector Panel of the Welsh Language Board for 3 years. Recently an Advisor to the Welsh Affairs Select Committee and Committee of the Regions on Children's Policy Issues, he currently advises the West Midlands LGA on developing Child Friendly policies. Married with teenage sons Sion and Rhys, he sits on the new Postwatch Wales Committee and is a DTI nominated member on the Wales Advisory Committee on Telecommunications, having previously been on the ITC Wales Viewers Council. He has studied local Government structures in Ireland, Belgium, Denmark and Austria, and prepared ministerial advisory papers for Government.

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Background

Town and Community Councils number some 736 and cover most of Wales. Areas within Cardiff, Newport, the Rhondda, Merthyr, Port Talbot for example, do not have full coverage at present. Some urban areas such as Wrexham do have new town centre Community Councils that have functioned for a number of recent years. Some Unitary Councils would welcome full coverage, while others are far less supportive.

Action:

- ***The Scoping study needs to identify all areas across Wales that are without Community Councils.***

- ***Special attention is needed to learn from areas that have introduced community governance in recent years.***
- ***Viable size, geographic and area considerations need to reflect local loyalties.***

Since 1975 Town and Community Councils in Wales have developed in a number of ways - reflecting local priorities and circumstances. There are wide differences both between and within the Town and Community Council sectors. There are many examples of Best Practice, innovative local projects, exciting Community developments and partnership working.

Action:

- ***The Scoping Study need to draw out the very best examples from across Town and Community Councils to highlight patterns of best practice.***
- ***Local Councils should be involved in a Wales wide Desktop review - allowing them to feed into the Scoping Study on a uniform, auditable and equal basis.***
- ***The Assembly should consider the establishment of a specific liaison post within its structures to work with Town and Community Councils, and help them understand and interact with its new structures.***

Fact – 1

Powys has 110 Councils for 126,000 people.

Fact – 2

Flintshire has 32 Councils for 149,000 people.

Fact – 3

Carmarthenshire has 73 Councils for 170,000 people.

Since Local Government Reorganisation in 1995, Town and Community Councils have found themselves responding to differing adjustments of service level from their County and County Borough Councils. This has caused wide and increasing differences in community service planning and rate income. Council income has risen to almost £22 million across Wales, but patterns differ widely.

Action

- ***The Scoping Study needs to examine these large differences across Wales and even between neighbouring Unitary areas that would seem to be the same.***
- ***The Study also should address the differing ways Unitary Councils support, grant aid, liaise with their Town and Community Councils - highlighting good working and best practice.***

The Assembly has no Community Governance database, knowledge of rate/other income or any idea of functions being undertaken. The Assembly has no formal established officer linkage, joint officer working party or liaison protocols with individual Councils or Associations. It does however, with the WLGA, Welsh Fire Authorities, Welsh National Parks and Welsh Police Authorities as well as the WCVA etc.

Action

- ***A formal working protocol with the Wales Local Councils Forum should be established and mechanisms developed to engage Community Governance.***
- ***Professional officers, advisors and others thought appropriate should be brought into existing liaison structures.***
- ***A target of 2004 should be set to put all Town and Community Councils on a National link e-mail network.***
- ***Community Council consortia, joint arrangements, Best Value liaison, skill sharing resource links etc should be part of an Assembly short paper to encourage greater local co-operation.***
- ***The needs of Community and Town Councils of all sizes should be recognised via advance training, links to Syniad etc. New Audit and Best Value requirements could well be addressed through regional partnership Seminars involving the Assembly and WLCF.***

Allowances and expenses are an issue that divides opinion across Wales Local Councils. There is no doubt this issue will not go away, but there should be investigation of how other EU countries deal with these concerns.

Action

- ***The Assembly should study the Town Commissioner system in Ireland on how small councils in Austria, France and Denmark reimburse town members.***

Fact – 5

New Urban Community Councils in Wrexham have become Key Partners in Community health, advice and support in less prosperous areas.

Fact – 6

Many Town & Community Councils raise between 10 - 20% of their income from other sources.

Outside Bodies and Representation issues cause some concern across Wales for Town and Community Councils. Town and Community Councillors have an excellent record of attendance and representation on Outside Bodies that they sit.

Action

- ***The Assembly should consider Town and Community Councils for appropriate representation through the WLCF.***

The Wales Local Councils Forum was established some 18 months ago. It meets once a quarter and involves all Associations. Through its single secretariat it should be seen as an embryo single association. Assembly Officials and relevant Ministers have been very supportive and helpful to encourage a single voice. The Forum represents almost 700 of Wales Local Councils.

Action

- ***To encourage full membership of the emerging new body the Assembly might consider channelling major Policy Communications, representation issues and consultation items via the Forum to reinforce its view of having one Association - in a similar way it does with the WLGA.***
- ***The WLCF should also be recognised rather than individual Associations on all Assembly liaison bodies.***

The Wales Local Council Forum has recognised increasing training needs and the development of a skilled, professional workforce within its member Councils. Excellent

development work has been started by NALC and the WACATC in seminars, handbook production and e-governance. Assembly Officials have also been helpful in supporting such moves and recognising changing needs.

Action

- ***A number of pilot schemes for Town and Community Councils should be supported by the Assembly to recognise the differing skills and information for officers and members.***
- ***Assembly Officials should be involved in informing Clerks of Assembly structures, access points, divisional responsibilities and liaison links.***

The Way Ahead in Partnership

The National Assembly is moving ahead to encourage development of Community Strategies throughout Wales across a range of headings – from Health to economic development through to Crime Prevention and Community Safety. Bottom up, needs led community initiatives involving genuine partnerships targeting resources to the least prosperous Communities is welcomed by Wales Local Councils.

Action

- ***Town and Community Councils who between them have a turnover of almost £24 million can be Key partners in identifying local community partnerships. They should not be excluded or marginalised in this process – as seems the case in some areas. Their staff resources especially in the larger Councils should be fully integrated into the emerging partnerships – especially in Objective One areas.***
- ***The smaller Local Councils should be involved more – especially in Rural Areas – perhaps through clusters of Community Councils as happens in Cornwall. Their local leadership in these areas is Key to engage others within the process.***

A Developing Scrutiny Role

In Ireland, Town Commissioners work with the County Councils in area partnerships,

which include shared staff giving added experience. They also act to scrutinise performance and effectiveness on Principal Councils by measuring delivery against strategy.

Action

- ***Town and Community Councils should be encouraged to develop, such roles in Wales, but the Assembly should consider guidance and advice as to how to proceed in a standard and measurable way, such procedures should be seen by Unitary Councils as constructive.***

Conclusion

Town and Community Councils in Wales work well together. The myths that concern members are:

1. ***Most Town and Community Council elections are uncontested.***
2. ***Many Community Councils are inactive, do not welcome new functions and are a talking shop for a male dominated, rather elderly group of middle class people.***
3. ***Many Town Councils are either inactive, Mayoral/Civic dominated and full of former principal Councillors who bemoan their loss of power.***
4. ***Town and Community Councils tend to sit on large reserves for doubtful large prestige projects that do not get built.***
5. ***Rural Community Councils in West and Mid Wales are full of people who are related to each other and who are keen to keep newcomers off.***

In fact:

The several thousand Community and Town Councillors in Wales are:

- ***Active in their communities reflecting local views.***
- ***Linked into other community groups, school governors etc.***
- ***Well informed on local planning concerns and community issues.***
- ***Keen to be trained, informed and helped in their Voluntary Work.***

- ***Careful with monies – not spendthrift.***
- ***Far more inclusive, less male dominated and interested in youth issues than larger Councils.***
- ***Town Council Elections across large parts of Wales are hotly contested with its strong independent tradition.***
- ***Town Councils tend to be full of younger members, with no time to stand for Unitary Councils – reflecting a wider age range than Unitary Councils.***
- ***Town Council members are keen to see their Councils fill the gaps, not duplicate services and records show specialisation in playgrounds, community centres, environmental and community initiatives linking into local partnerships.***
- ***Town and Community Councils in a recent Survey of North Wales Councils showed an average of 29% female membership compared to the Municipal Journals Survey of 20% for Unitary Councils in Wales.***

Number of Town & Community Councils in Unitary Areas

Blaenau Gwent	4	Merthyr	1
Bridgend	19	Monmouth	30 (33 in WYB)
Caerffili	15 (16 in WYB)	Neath/Port Talbot	20 (19 in WYB)
Carmarthenshire	73	Torfaen	6 (WYB) 0-MYB
Cardiff	6	Newport	14
Ceredigion	51	Pembrokeshire	80 (79 WYB)
Conway	33	Powys	110(WYB – 111)
Denbighshire	37	Rhondda Cynon Taf	12

Flintshire	32Ü (34 in WYB)	Swansea	23 (24 in WYB) Ü
Gwynedd	64Ü	Vale of Glamorgan	19 (26 in WYB)
Ynys Môn	40Ü	Wrexham	33 (34 in WYB)
TOTAL: 736			