



**Rhwydwaith
Cydgynhyrchu
Cymru**

**Co-production
Network
for Wales**

Pawb gyda'i gilydd
All in this together

Consultation on the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill

1. We are submitting a response to the Consultation on the Local Government and Election (Wales) Bill on behalf of the team and the members of the Co-production Network for Wales.
2. The [Co-production Network for Wales](#) is an independent not-for-profit organisation working to transform public services through co-production and citizen involvement. When citizens and professionals work in partnership, services are improved and better meet people's needs. In the current landscape of dwindling public resources and increasing demand, co-production and citizen involvement offer a compelling approach to bringing positive, sustainable change to public services and communities. The Network's remit is to grow good practice across sectors and across Wales; and to support policy and decision makers to shape a positive context for this work.
3. **Our response is specifically relating to Part 3 of the proposed bill: Promoting Access to Local Government.**
4. We applaud the intention of the Bill to change the governance framework for local government in order to better enable transparency, local ownership and innovation, which we see as essential to ensure the sustainability of services into the future.
5. The Bill makes a strong start on increasing transparency, with information about how the council works, how to become a councillor, and what's on the council agenda (Chapter 2); the guide to the council constitution in ordinary language (Chapter 3); and streaming public meetings to make them more accessible (Chapter 4).
6. The Bill also makes a positive statement on public participation in local democracy in Section 46, which asserts that councils must **encourage** [emphasis our own] local people to participate in the making of decisions. We warmly welcome this.

7. Simply putting the councils' internal processes on display for those who might be interested will not result in widespread active engagement. It would be problematic to make the assumption that citizens are ready and waiting to become involved through the existing channels. Politicians complain about people being apathetic and disengaged, and little wonder when the processes are abstruse, people are consulted tokenistically on issues determined by the public bodies, and they don't perceive that their voice is having a meaningful influence on matters that are relevant to them.
8. Beyond just making information available, councils need to actively seek to involve people and encourage participation. It would be a waste of resources, for example, to invest in the videoconferencing and streaming technology alluded to in Section 53(1), and not work towards people making full use of it. The process does begin with effective transparency, i.e. that which is guided by the end users, not dictated by the organisation. (By taking a co-productive approach, councils can engage with local people in order to find out what else they would like to know or need to understand.) However, transparency on its own will remain insufficient unless systems are put in place to make interactions relevant, interesting, accessible and comfortable. Councils need to understand their people just as much as people need to understand their councils. It is the responsibility of the council to find the right channels and processes to actively and deliberately encourage people to contribute their voice to local decision-making.
9. It is therefore disappointing that the Bill falls short in Section 47, where it sets out how to encourage people to participate, making mention of:
 - (1) preparing and publishing a public participation strategy
 - (2a) making people more aware of how the council works
 - (2b) making people more aware of how to become a councillor
 - (2c) informing people about what decisions are currently on the council's agenda
 - (2d) having a process so people can weigh in on the decisions that are already on the council's agenda
10. The focus is on clarifying how councils already operate, with the agenda-setting firmly held by the council. The result will not be vastly different from what already exists: a formalised system, accessible to the few, and still difficult for the layperson to navigate. The Bill doesn't make provision for people to raise issues that matter to them, or allow the possibility of other ways for people to engage apart from becoming a councillor or signing a petition. Adding a layer of strategies will not grow participation unless they contribute to improving the relationship and interactions between the council and its people. It is a strong citizen voice, supported by a co-production and involvement approach, which will enable people to engage in local democracy and decision-making.
11. Section 48 states that the public participation strategy must be published "as soon as reasonably practicable", and this time pressure puts at risk a genuine co-production approach. It would be powerful for this Bill to support councils to take the time that it takes to do involvement properly; as opposed to going through the motions tokenistically just to get it done quickly, which will fail to generate impact and change. Section 48(2), (4) and (6) make mention of consulting local people to prepare, review and revise or replace the strategy. Taking this route is likely to generate responses from the "usual suspects", and widespread disinterest, running counter to the stated aim of the Bill to actively engage people in local democracy. It would seem logical to co-produce the strategy and work with people to shape how they can and will contribute.

12. Likewise for the petition scheme detailed in Section 49(3) and (4): we note that reviewing and revising or replacing the strategy is very much council-driven and -focused. If you really want people to participate in their local democracy, ask what would enable them to, listen, understand, and shape the processes together - so that they are effective and resource-efficient.
13. The Bill sets inspirational aims but shies away from enabling them to be met. Its stated desire for greater innovation is limited to the use of video conferencing and social media. Councils need to be able to invite more (and more diverse) people into a constructive conversation, to solve problems and make decisions collectively that will contribute to the sustainability of our services and the resilience of our communities. Those are the benefits of people being actively engaged in local democracy. They won't be reached without innovation, but innovation doesn't just happen; you need to create the conditions.
14. We thank you for considering our response to the consultation. We remain available to support innovation and improvement through co-production and citizen involvement in a local democracy context, and will be pleased to discuss this consultation response with officials, committees or Ministers if requested.

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January 2019