

Episode 201 – One Voice Wales – The Strategic View on Community and Town Councils

Beth Smith (Good Practice Exchange Programme Manager, Audit Wales)

Hello and welcome The Exchange, podcast produced by Audit Wales. My name is Beth Smith and I work for the Good Practice Exchange team. Audit Wales is the audit body responsible for the financial and performance audit of the devolved Welsh public sector.

This ranges from the Welsh Government your community council and everything in between. Today's episode is about community and town councils in Wales. Community and town councils are the most local part of our democracy and play an integral role in the function of our communities in Wales. They provide our villages and towns with a democratic voice and a structure for taking action.

There are 731 community and town councils in Wales, with around 8,000 councillors serving their communities. Community and town councils vary a lot in terms of size and budgets, from the rural areas to compact towns, but they all work to serve their communities and improve quality of life.

They are mainly funded by the precept that appears in your council tax bill. The most common community assets that are provided by community and town councils are village and civic halls, playing fields and open spaces, shelters, street lighting and footpaths.

They also have the power to do anything that they consider will be likely to improve the economic, social or environmental wellbeing of an area. In this episode we'll be sharing examples of projects where the community or town councils work to make a positive difference to the well-being of their area, as well as celebrating some of the good things that they're doing for their communities.

We'll also discuss some of the challenges that they face too. Today's podcast is part of a series of podcasts on community and town councils. In the episodes that follow you'll hear directly from councils themselves about the work they're doing within their communities. So let's introduce you to today's panel.

Lyn Cadwallader (Chief Executive, One Voice Wales)

Good morning. I'm Lyn Cadwallader, Chief Executive of One Voice Wales.

Paul Egan (Deputy Chief Executive and Resources Manager, One Voice Wales)

Hello, I'm Paul Egan, Deputy Chief Executive and Resources Manager for One Voice Wales.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

Thanks both and thanks for your time with us today. So we'll kick things off straight away and with a very sort of broad question, but what is the role of community and town councils?

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Okay, so I think you've alluded to it in the introduction, Bethan, but as far as we're concerned, the main roles are around local service delivery. They provide and maintain a wide range of local amenities, which may include allotments, parks and open spaces, community centres and halls, bus shelters, public toilets, street lighting, litter bins, festival events and community buses.

And these services vary depending on the size and resources of the council, but increasingly the role of the community and town council sector has broadened and we're involved increasingly in environmental matters and things like the cost of living crisis agenda.

The second sort of area that um we see as a main role is actually representing the community. And they act as a voice of the local community representing residents views to the unitary authorities, developers, local police and health services and indeed national government.

They are also statutory consultees on planning matters, meaning their views must be considered. And the third sort of main role as we see it is around improving quality of life and councils across Wales, the 731 community and town councils initiate or support projects such as place plans, community hubs, youth projects, dementia friendly groups, environmental initiatives and grants to local organisations. Their goal clearly is to enhance well-being and strengthen community cohesion.

And I would like to sort just touch on how councillors contribute. They, as elected councillors, represent residents and handle casework, build relationships with local groups and businesses, help shape local council policies and strategies, sit on committees, provide community leadership and as such they act as a bridge between residents and the council. And indeed where they fit in with the wider system within Wales, and they sit below unitary authorities. They don't handle major services such as education, social care or highways. Those remain with the higher tier authorities.

So in summary, community and town councils deliver local services, represent local people, shape and support community projects and strengthen local democracy.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

Thanks, Lyn. I think, just from hearing that, you really get to understand the huge role that they play within our communities. So what are the biggest challenges that face the sector currently, would you say?

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Well, I think there's a range of structural financial and capacity related pressures that make it increasingly difficult for community and town councils to deliver local services and represent their communities effectively.

Our opinion, as One Voice Wales, is that the biggest challenges fall into sort of five broad areas. The first of these being relating to severe financial pressure. As I think everyone is aware, local government finances are under intense strain. And although

community and town councils are not responsible for the majority of statutory services, they are directly affected by the wider systems instability.

For example, when principal councils cut discretionary services such as parks, libraries or street cleaning, community and town councils often feel the pressure to take them on without equivalent funding.

So this creates a growing expectation gap, more responsibilities but limited resources. The second area where there are challenges is certainly around the rising demand for services.

Even though community and town councils do not run social care, they feel the downstream effects of, for example, rising adult and social care costs consuming principal authority budgets. Cuts to preventative and universal services, for example youth work, community centres, early help and also increased community need following the pandemic, cost living crisis and ageing populations and I'm sure during the course of the podcast we'll come back to the cost of living crisis but these pressures reduced the support available from higher tier councils and increased local expectations on the most local tier.

The third challenge, as we see it, is around the planning system pressures. Community and town councils are statutory consultees on planning, but the system is under strain.

National housing targets and relaxed planning rules create tension between development and local infrastructure capacity. environmental regulations, stall developments and complicate local planning responses and under-resourced planning authorities lead to slower responses and reduce local oversight. This makes it hard of for community and town councils to influence development in the way that reflects community priorities.

The fourth area or challenge for the sector at the moment is certainly around the digital transformation and the increasing digital divide. Community and town councils are expected to modernise rapidly, but many lack this either the skills, the staff or the budget to implement digital tools effectively.

Residents in rural or deprived areas may lack digital access or confidence, making digital-only engagement exclusionary, and councils must balance innovation with inclusivity. So community and town councils rely on volunteer or part-time staff, making digital transformation particularly challenging.

Fifth area for the for the sector at this present time relates to climate change and sustainability duties. Local councils are expected to contribute to net zero goals, but climate adaptation and mitigation requires funding and expertise many councils lack.

Environmental commitments can conflict with national planning reforms and we've got extreme weather increases, pressure on local infrastructure and emergency responses. So this creates a mismatch between ambition and capacity.

Furthermore, there are another wider cross, what would we describe as cross-cutting structural challenges in terms of uncertain and short-term funding settlements. Even where funding increases are announced, they're often short-term, complex to bid for, insufficient to address local issues and long-term sustainability.

And it's, I think, well recognized that government acknowledged the need for great certainty, but has not yet delivered a long-term settlement. The second sort of cross-cutting structural challenges that relates to the post-pandemic recovery pressures.

Councils have to deal with long-term health and social impacts, economic recovery needs, increased community vulnerability and higher expectations for local support and resilience planning.

And finally, on sort of structural challenges, there is definitely a capacity and skills shortage within the sector. Many community and town council struggle with certainly recruiting qualified clerks, retaining councillors and managing growing workloads with small teams. And finally meeting in rising governance and compliance requirements.

This is often an unspoken but critical challenge. So they're the sort of core areas of challenge facing that face in the sector at the present time.

Paul Egan (One Voice Wales)

Well, I think if I talk about some of the day-to-day challenges faced by the sector.

My job in One Voice Wales is to provide advice and support and coordinate training for um all the councils in Wales. And we have a team of development officers who deal with inquiries every day, give good advice every day, um and we're dealing at the moment with over 200 inquiries for advice every single month. That's quite a lot.

So what are we doing to help them? Well, first of all, what does that suggest if you're getting that many inquiries? It means, first of all, that those working for community councils and town councils may not have the basic knowledge of what they need to have in support of their councils. One Voice Wales has a critical role there.

We provide training courses, we've got about 27 modules currently growing, where we're getting high demand from councillors and some officers attending those training webinars. So we're building up the knowledge through that route. Very grateful for the support we have from the Welsh Government, from the from the funding they provide to enable us to offer some free training webinars.

We produce practice development notes, of a fairly new website, almost brand new, and they're displayed on there. They've got a nice written style about them as well. And we're encouraging clerks throughout Wales to access those so they can help develop the and build up the knowledge within their councils and share that with the councillors as well.

So I think um that is one of the first issues is about some of the gaps in knowledge. The other big issue is about recruit recruitment and retention of clerks and responsible financial officers. It's not proving easy, particularly in the smaller councils

and actually in the larger councils. I think it's probably partly to do with the growing intensity of the role, um but also because some small councils may not be able to attract the people with the prior knowledge and experience to come into those roles. One Voice Wales has helped those councils by producing a recruitment and retention guide for them to use.

We also give an offer of consultancy services to help them recruit and we occasionally engage with councils to support them in that respect. But we've also given out guidance about how you retain the people that you've recruited, because that's vital.

Once you take them in, if you start training them, developing them, the last thing you want is for them to leave very soon afterwards. So we're doing that. We're doing our best in that respect. And I've also, from a personal perspective, I'm also ah a CiLCA trainer in Wales. Most clerks know that. That's the minimum professional qualification for a clerk to be for a council to be able to claim eligibility for the general power of competence. I see a lot more clerks throughout Wales putting themselves forward for that for that training and to get the qualification. So there's obviously a desire within councils from those clerks in the main, sometimes deputy clerks, to get themselves developed in terms of formal qualification. So I think One Voice Wales is doing quite a lot to help the councils with these issues. And that's just some of those that I've identified, which council clerks and councillors will be well aware of.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

So clearly a lot of pressure there on the sector. Is there anything that can be done about those pressures?

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Absolutely. We've recently launched a new manifesto for the sector. It came out on the 5th March earlier this year, available on the One Voice Wales website. And we've made five asks of the incoming government.

And if I may, I'll just briefly just touch on these five asks. So the ask one is about a commitment to taking forward the recommendations to send an inquiry report. I'm sure community and town council colleagues, partners will be aware of the 11 recommendations and One Voice Wales fully supported that.

Our second ask is around empowering communities. We feel to address the issues, the next government, the incoming government now should strengthen community and town council's right to produce place plans, enable greater influence on local council's decisions such as highways, housing, licensing and planning.

We would love to see the establishment of an arts and cultural programme for community and town council in Wales. Furthermore, we support partnership working between um both tiers of local government. Indeed, we have signed in the last 18 months a new memorandum of understanding with the Welsh Local Government Association. So we are already working on that, but we would want sort of further support around that agenda.

We would like to see further support to build the capacity and skills of community groups to work in partnership with the community and town councils and around the sort of empowering communities that the final sort of ask is around explicitly taking account of the role of the community and town councils in any place based approach by Welsh Government.

Now, I mentioned earlier in terms of the challenges facing the sector. Some of those are around ah financial funding issues matters. And so our third ask is around in improving the sort of diverse funding available to the sector.

So to make this a reality, we'd love to see the government introducing a community and town council development fund. This could help to fund development officers to enable the creation of new community and town councils in areas where they don't exist. Some of the areas such as in inner city, Cardiff, Swansea, Newport, they would be welcome developments.

We'd love to see the introduction of a future of Welsh Towns fund that would enable every town in Wales to create a strategy for future collaboration with neighbouring community councils.

We'd welcome the creation of a grant to support community and town councils to introduce deliberative democracy tools such as participatory budgeting.

A further ask is around direct access to government funding and enabling powers for ministers to fund community and town councils directly, which is not, but historically hasn't always been the case.

We'd also like to see a share of the business rates. And last but not least, we'd like to see increased developer levy contributions where developments occur within communities. Ask four about strengthening local leadership around this agenda, we'd love to see a new partnership agreement between Welsh Government and One Voice Wales, replacing the existing memorandum and understanding, and the priorities there would be about shared issues such as tackling the cost of living crisis, transforming the local environment, developing and delivering sustainable person-centred public services and place-based provision and establishing a new principle of funding for the sector when implementing new initiatives.

Now, historically, there has been funding for local government, but extensively that funding has been for the unitary authorities. We would like to establish a sort of precedent where if funding is made available to the unitary authorities, a small amount of funding is also made to the to the community and town council sector where appropriate.

A further ask is around a new local government in brackets, Community and Town Councils Bill, which would introduce new powers setting out a clear purpose for the sector and deliver place-based local services.

We'd also like the government to increasingly promote the use of the general power of competence. We'd like the government to strengthen the role of Community and

Town Councils in the planning system, as we say, put plan ah place plans on a statutory footing.

And we would certainly like the government to actually promote and encourage. We've undertaken ourselves as a national representative body, which is promote civility and respect in public life.

And then the final ask for the new government is around helping us to build capacity and capability within the community and town council sector. It's about really working with the sector to encourage more people to become councillors and establishing a national democracy fund to support individuals in beginning a political journey, encouraging more people from more backgrounds and experiences to get involved with community and town councils.

One we would love to see is it would make it far easier for people to stand and serve as councillors. We experienced in recent elections that the process of being elected seemed to be quite complex. We'd love to see a simplification of that going forward.

We would certainly ah love to see ah the development of support and investment in a national improvement strategy for the sector. We do have funding off Welsh Government which is you know highly valued, but if we want to see financial and management governance further improved, we would love to see further support around this agenda.

And finally, in terms of our ask of government under the building capacity and capability agenda, is to establish Smart Towns initiative for town councils and larger community councils to ensure every larger council in Wales enjoys improved access to digital infrastructure.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

Thank you for sharing that. Just to say that we'll make sure that a link to the full manifesto is shared in the show notes for this podcast. So anyone that's interested can go and away, have ah have a read of that in more detail. So, Paul, I'll come to you now just as a serving clerk. What more support do you feel could be given to comm community and town councils in the future?

Paul Egan (One Voice Wales)

Well, I've been a clerk to ah a council for 44 years this year. And next year, my council's been abolished under a community boundary review. So by the time that happens, I will have done 45 years.

So I think I can talk with some experience. I think that when I leave um and somebody comes in to take over my place, they're going to have to learn an awful lot.

They can rely on the Society of Local Council clerks, they provide a great service and lots of training, but they're going to have to work with councillors in the new council and elsewhere, and they need a level of support from One Voice Wales as well.

One Voice Wales offers great support in terms of reacting to your questions, your queries. You get a decent answer coming back. I answer some of those myself, so I know they are. We also provide a legal support service and we have an arrangement with the National Association of Local Councils. So that's very handy. But what we would probably be, what councils would probably be looking for in the future, when there's more challenges and more demands on what we're expected to do within our localities, is we would like to think that One Voice Wales would have more resources, and I'd call those core resources, not project resources, which are time-limited for a specific project, but more core resources where there can be ready supply of professional support.

For example, in relation to new buildings, asset transfers. I think it'd handy to have somebody who can approach that's a professional within that field. I think it'd be handy to have more support on the HR side, human resources, because that is a big issue in small councils.

They're not like County Borough Councils where you have an HR department you can go to. The clerk essentially takes everything on their shoulders usually and looks outside for the support. We do offer level of support from One Voice Wales, but I suspect clerks in Wales would really appreciate more resources but in that field and more resources in relation to support for financial accounting, and auditing processes. That's vital because we know there's an issue over the number of qualified audits in Wales. Well, I think One Voice Wales could provide more direct support, but you can only do that if you have enough of our core resources where we can go out there and actually support clerks. So that would be a proactive way of dealing with the issues. So I think One Voice Wales lacks resources in terms of its core responsibilities, and I think putting that right, if it could be, probably by the Welsh Government, would actually be a one big step in the right direction to support the effective work that community and town councils are delivering every day of the week.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

We've talked a lot about, you know, the challenges facing the sector. So moving on from that, what are community and town councils really good at doing for communities?

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Great question. In our opinion, community and town councils are genuinely excellent at the things that require deep local knowledge, close relationships and quick practical action.

In our experience, they succeed where larger authorities struggle. They understand people, places and the small details that make communities work. We would sort of identify probably some of the core sort of strengths for community and town councils being around the provision of hyper-local service delivery.

Community and town councils, they definitely excel at delivering small-scale visible services that directly shape daily life. We've certainly seen that in the COVID period

and more recently through the cost of living crisis period, an ongoing cost of living crisis period.

And they run services such as allotments, parks, festivals, community buses, leisure centres, public toilets and street lighting. But we've also experienced, as I say, in the last five or six years, them expanding into areas which perhaps would have probably been in the domain of the unitary authorities historically. So they're developing in sort of wellbeing hubs.

They've done a lot of work around the environmental agenda, developing wellbeing gardens, encourage encouraging volunteering within their local communities. So their strengths really, they rely in the speed, they can act faster than principal authorities, flexibility, they can customise services very, very quickly for specific issues. Certainly in COVID, we saw lots of community and town councillors doing low-level community support initiatives.

You know helping their neighbours. And then finally, of in terms of their responsiveness, they adapt quickly when residents raise issues. So this makes them highly effective at the everyday essentials level that people notice.

I suppose the second core strength is about giving communities a strong voice. Councils provide certainly a democratic voice and a structure for community action, particularly strong at representing residents in planning consultations, influencing developers and principal authorities, and acting as the first point of contact for local concerns.

And this is primarily because councillors live in the area they represent, and they have a nuanced understanding of local priorities that larger authorities often lack. I'd sort of highlight a third core strength is about a deep connection with the community and they are trusted. Community and town councils are embedded within the communities they serve, giving them insight into local like local needs and aspirations.

This proximity enables them to, one, build strong relationships with residents, business and voluntary groups, spot emergency issues early, mobilise community action quickly.

The grassroots presence is a major asset in an era of centralized decision making. A fourth strength would be around improving the quality of life and well-being of local residents. They're highly effective in initiating supporting projects that enhance well-being. And over the last four or five years, One Voice Wales has been heavily involved in Welsh Government's Local Places for Nature initiative. So community and town councils are doing a range of activities around environmental initiatives from developing orchards, community gardens, well-being gardens, bee highways, you name it, community and town councils who are involved in it.

And we've also undertaken more recently some research independent research undertaken on behalf of One Voice Wales by Wavehill Research on the work of the

cost of living crisis team within One Voice Wales and the work of the cost of the work of and the work of community and town councils in relation to the cost of living crisis.

And that's shown some absolutely incredible statistics. So for every pound that a community or town council spends on the cost of living crisis, it's been found that they generate about five pounds worth of social value. And this has basically meant that over the last three years, the community and town council sector has generated around about £25.97 million pounds worth of value across Wales.

An incredible return on investment for government. The fifth area of strength, we would say, it would be around acting as conveners of place, Councils are powerful place shapers and conveners bringing together residents, business and partners to support local growth.

Whilst, you know, a lot of the work of Community and Town Councils focuses broadly on ah some of the strengths I've mentioned already, already they also help to connect communities: People who wouldn't otherwise collaborate. They championed identity and they coordinate local initiatives and partnerships. Indeed, I was only speaking with a consultant colleague yesterday and there's some fantastic work being done between Ceredigion Unitary Authority and the community and town councils of Ceredigion where 13 place plans have been developed over the last 18 months in key rural service areas and that's a fantastic development and that's certainly something that we would envisage happening more going into the future.

So the things that they're good at, to surmise, they're very much, and they succeed because of their local legitimacy, their local knowledge, their local autonomy, and their local scale.

This makes them unique in delivering for their local communities.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

Thanks, then. I think and what comes across really strongly is the relationships with people and the connections that are made and understanding those local priorities. I think you mentioned over £25 million pounds in social value, which is just, yeah, it's incredible, isn't it? So what could be done to support them so that they can continue to do all of these good things?

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Well, a strengthening community and town councils means building their capacity, confidence and influence so that they can deliver more for local people. The most effective councils don't just run services, they shape their identity, wellbeing and the future of their place.

So a short answer to the question would be community and town councils become stronger when they invest in professional capacity, good governance, community engagement, strategic planning and partnership working.

And the most successful councils behave less like small committees and more like local civic institutions. And just to sort of elaborate on those areas where the stronger

councils invest. So in terms of strengthening professional capacity, the clerk and officers are 100% the engine of any council.

Strong councils invest in qualified clerks, including the CiLCA qualification, clear job descriptions and realistic workloads. Access to training from One Voice Wales and the Society of Local Council Clerks or the SLCC as most people know it as, and partner organisations including Planning Aid Wales who deliver planning related training to the community and town council sector.

And they also invest in modern digital tools for finance, meetings and communications. So a well supported clerk transforms the council from reactive to strategic.

They also, I say, adopt a strategic mindset and in this regard many com community and town councils operate sort of meeting to meeting. But strong councils think on a three to five year horizon. They create strategic plans with measurable priorities. They link their budget and precept to long-term goals. They use data. There's products out there like Understanding Welsh Places. They've got a vast amount of really useful information that community and town councils can use for community planning.

And they also review progress sort of annually. So it shifts from a fixing um reactive to a shaping the future proactive council.

And in terms of improving governance and decision making, good governance, we certainly advocate this at One Voice Wales, builds greater trust and reduces conflict within community councils. So councils can strengthen themselves by certainly regularly reviewing standing orders and policies, ensuring transparent agendas, minutes and financial reporting, making sure councillors attend training courses, especially things around their role, conduct and decision making, and using committees and working groups effectively to make sure that decisions are taken as effectively and as transparent and accountable as possible.

So high performing councils run what we've regarded as professional, predictable and well-chaired meetings.

In terms of building strong partnerships, community and town councils are most powerful when they and they collaborate.

There's been a history of community and town councils acting in glorious isolation. We're seeing less of that. We are seeing councils reaching out to work with their neighbouring town council or their neighbouring rural community council. But effective partnerships that have certainly been developed and are growing ah between the sector include with unitary authorities, charter arrangements are increasingly being put in place between the unitary authorities and community and town councils on ah on a on a unitary authority geographic basis. There's much more collaborative work in between police and health services and some community in town councils.

We have seen certainly in the last 5 or 6 years um community and town councils engaging with local business much more effectively. hey've done this through the development of place plans in their localities. I can i can reference places like a Bay of Colwyn, Newtown that have implemented really robust place plans that have been effective for their local areas. And these partnerships help to unlock funding, influence and shared expertise.

In terms of you know the stronger community councils, town councils, they've really taken advantage of deepening their community engagement with their local residents.

Historically, community and town councils probably didn't do much around consultation with their local communities. But now we're seeing towns using social media, all sorts of... the techniques, participatory budgeting, um to really understand the needs and wants of their local communities. And these sorts of councils run regular surveys and consultations.

They hold drop-in events, listening events, they do ward walks. They support community groups with grants and spaces. Indeed, I've been really fortunate as Chief Executive to go to a number of Town Council community awards evenings and to see the benefits that accrue from small amounts of grant funding from a town council to ah of a volunteer or community group is quite startling. you know Hundreds of people benefiting from a £500 or £1000 grant initiatives being developed within their local community.

And that the better community in town councils communicate clearly about what they do and why. And that's usually through their website. But they also use old techniques by putting information up on notice boards. It's still a good method of engaging local people.

Finally for me, in terms of... What good councils, you know, with strong governance um ah have, they use their precept confidently and responsibly. They link the precept to increase clear and visible improvements, and that's helpful because if there is an increase in precept in the following year, as long as local residents are seeing that value is being gained from that, but that then that there is generally no issue.

They communicate openly about the costs and the benefits with the local residents. They used earmarked reserves strategically and that that these stronger councils certainly pursue grants, sponsorship and look to the Unitary Authority to draw down Section 106 funding.

So for us really, as One Voice Wales, these sorts of councils enable financial confidence to drive further ambition within their local communities.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

So just on that point there of you know working collaboratively, I guess a sort of supplementary question there is how does the size of the council affect their ability to be able to do that?

Paul Egan (One Voice Wales)

My own personal view is I know lots of small councils. I'm a clerk myself of relatively small council. I don't think size got much to do with it. The extent to which you can work on a strategic basis and on a planned basis will be affected by the amount of resources available to you.

But I think with proper guidance and support and probably encouragement from the clerk as well, I think any council could move along this direction, but it would be small scale. But would be all the things Lyn said. but probably more in a nutshell rather than a larger perspective of it. Medium to large councils are perfectly well resourced, I suspect, to do this, but they don't all do it. So if it's so good to do this, and it is, it's much far better to work on this basis, why don't they all do it?

And I think the reason why they all don't do it is because they haven't been allowed themselves to be sold on the benefits of working on that basis. Secondly, there are issues within some councils of civility and respect, which is a known issue, not just in Wales, but in England as well.

I think that so there are some issues that councils don't really get to grips with, which is about the way they interact themselves, what their cultural approach is to different things. So I don't think size is a great issue. The scale of how you do it might be a lot smaller for a small council, but we can all work on this basis, all of us.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

Okay, so just moving in then to the sort of final question for today. and What is your vision then for the future of community and town councils?

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Well, as I've alluded to earlier in the podcast, ah we've launched our manifesto that clearly sets out our vision. But for the benefits of the podcast, I'll just rattle through probably about eight areas where we see the community and town council sector developing in in the coming in years.

So in terms of the future of community and town councils, we certainly see it being one of the growing responsibility, greater influence and rising expectations, but also increasing pressure to modernise, professionalise and to collaborate.

We certainly feel Wales are ahead of England in recognising the value of the of its most local tier and indeed we have a very strong working relationship with Welsh Government and they've signalled repeatedly that it wants councils to play a bigger role, a more strategic role in shaping local places.

Indeed, One Voice Wales agrees with the findings of the Future Generations Report 2025, and that identified the preventative agenda needs to be prioritised and protected.

Partnership arrangements are not being used as effective as they could be: Implementation is best achieved through meaningful involvement with communities and there are entrenched inequalities in Wales which are getting worse. So we think the community and town councils in Wales are moving towards becoming stronger,

more professional, more strategic local institutions with expanded roles in well-being, placemaking, climate action and community resilience.

In terms of a bigger role in local governance, the Welsh Government has repeatedly indicated it wants community councils, town councils to take on more local services, play a stronger role in local democracy and participation, support the delivery of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and contribute to local development plans and placemaking.

And this means that councils will increasingly be seen as partners, not peripheral bodies. Secondly, we envisage that there'll be more responsibilities, especially ratings of place and wellbeing.

Future responsibilities are likely to expand in areas such as community well-being and social inclusion, local environmental management, climate adaptation and nature recovery, community transport and local economic development and town centre vitality.

We feel that councils ah that already run ah park halls, ah events, local services will be well placed to take on more. The third sort of area that we envisage envisage and we think that there's going to be growth is around ah the professionalisation of the sector and the highest expectations being placed on it.

So the sector moving forward, we are working very closely with our colleagues in the SLCC to ensure that there are more qualified clerks, that there's stronger governance and audit requirements, that there's better financial management and transparency and clear standards for council conduct and training.

And this shift has certainly been driven by the Local Government and Elections Act, Wales 2021, which introduced the general power of competence, mandatory training plans, public participation duties and corporate planning requirements.

Councils will increasingly operate like small professional public bodies, not as some people perceive as volunteer committees. Of course, we know that community and town councils are indeed not volunteers, but they are indeed public servants.

The fourth area and we envisage there to be sort of growth for the sector is around the climate and nature responsibilities will grow. Wales has got a very ambitious climate and biodiversity targets and community and town councils will certainly be expected to play a much greater role in this agenda.

They'll help to lead local nature recovery projects, improve green spaces and active travel routes, support community energy schemes and build climate resilience into local planning.

And this is an area where councils can become local climate leaders. And indeed, we've seen places like Machynlleth Town Council declare climate emergency. I think they were the first town in Wales to do that.

A further sort of area where we envisage growth of the sector is around closer collaboration with principal councils. So as principal councils face increased financial pressure, we are anticipating that there will be a greater degree of transfer of assets between the Unitary Authority sector and the community and town council sector.

That Unitary authorities will seek local partners, i.e. community and town councils for community-based projects and certainly rely on community and town councils for hyper-local delivery. We've seen over the last 20 years and the funding for non-statutory services decrease and there is definitely opportunities but there are indeed some risks of some of those non-statutory services being taken on by the community and town council sector.

The sixth area in terms of visioning for the future, we think we'll be around more participatory and digital democracy. So the future will involve more hybrid meetings or remote meetings, digital consultations, participatory budgeting, better online communication and transparency and more accessible decision making for local residents and the public.

Councils that embrace digital tools will certainly become more resilient and more connected to residents.

The seventh area is around a stronger role in community resilience. Increasingly over the last 10, 20 years, we've seen crises around flooding, storms, cost of living pressures, and they've very much shown the importance of local resilience. So we envisage that local councils will increasingly coordinate volunteers, provide some support to emergency planning. In the last few years we've seen some fantastic work done by Pontypridd Town Council working with Rhondda Cynon Tâf dealing with the issues that have come out from the flooding of the River Tâf for example.

Councils will increasingly provide warm spaces and community hubs. We've seen some fantastic examples in the last few years in places like Haverford West a town introducing a warm hub, Blaenafon town, you know, really, really impressive initiatives that have galvanised the local community.

And finally, that acting as connectors between residents and services. And I think, you know, we will we feel that that community and town councils will be increasingly positioned as, I suppose, anchors of local support.

And then finally, ah the sort of eighth sort of vision in area for our sector relates to a shift towards strategic placemaking. I've alluded earlier that there's fantastic work being done between Ceredigion and 13 rural service areas in that locality.

And in terms of the impact on community and town councils going forward, Wales' national planning policy, the Future Wales and Planning Policy Wales document emphasizes placemaking, local identity and community-led development. And community and town councils will certainly have a growing voice in the local development plan process, town centre regeneration, active travel and public realm improvements.

So to surmise, community and town councils in Wales are evolving into professional, strategic, community-anchored organisations with expanding roles in well-being, climate action, place-making and local democracy.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

So thank you both for your time today. It's been a fascinating conversation. I know I've certainly learned a lot. Hopefully those listening in have as well. I think it's been really good to hear not only, you know, all the positive things and all the ways that community and town councils impact our communities, and but also that vision for the future and where, you know, hopefully we can continue making that impact. So thank you, Lyn. Thank you, Paul, for your time today.

Diolch yn fawr, thank you for listening.

Lyn Cadwallader (One Voice Wales)

Thank you, Bethan, for those kind words. On behalf of One Voice Wales, it'd be remiss of me if I didn't say a thank you to Audit Wales for helping to put on the podcast today. And a big thank you to our colleagues in the SLCC who enabled this to happen. And a huge thank you to the community and town councils who are providing the case studies to support this podcast. So big thank you to everyone.

Beth Smith (Audit Wales)

Much appreciated. Thank you once again to Paul and Lyn for their contributions today. I'm sure you'll agree it's been a really interesting conversation. As I mentioned at the start of the episode, this is the first in the series of episodes exploring the work of community and town councils in Wales. Please keep a look out for the next episode where you'll hear directly from councils themselves about the work they're doing in their communities.

Rhian Jones (Audit Wales)

Thanks for tuning in to this episode of the Exchange Podcast. If you enjoyed it, then hit subscribe via your podcast provider to catch future episodes. A quick review and share with your friends or colleagues would mean a lot to us.

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