

Institution: Aberystwyth University
Unit of Assessment: 17: Geography, Environmental Studies and Archaeology
Title of case study: Enhancing the capacity to act and democratic accountability of parish, town and community councils
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p> <p>Research undertaken in Geography and Earth Sciences at Aberystwyth University has directly led to changes in the powers and regulatory structures of parish, town and community councils in England and Wales, through legislation (Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011), and to new guidance and modifications to the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme in England. These changes have empowered parish, town and community councils to play a greater role in service delivery and community development; promoted wider citizen engagement in community governance; and increased the democratic accountability of local councils.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p> <p>Research on community governance by Woods and team has refocused attention on the neglected sector of town, parish and community councils and contributed to international literature on power, participation and partnership working in local governance. Initial research for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (1998-2000) identified the significant role of local councils in community development, but highlighted their uneven engagement in partnership-working [3.1]. Follow-up research in the ESRC Democracy and Participation Programme (2000-2), addressed the nature, type and pattern of participation in rural community governance, the motivations and experiences of participants, and the implications for issues of democracy and accountability [3.2]. The research included the first comprehensive survey of elections to parish, town and community councils in 30 years, and case studies examining the dynamics and processes of community governance.</p> <p>This research identified positive examples of community leadership by local councils, but also revealed that the majority of councils did not have contested elections and highlighted the under-representation of younger people on councils, and shortcomings in councils' engagement with local communities [3.3, 3.4, 3.5]. These findings hence pointed to limitations in the capacity of act of town, community and town councils as effective vehicles for community development and governance.</p> <p>On the basis of the research expertise acquired through the initial research, the team successfully bid for contracts for further research on town, parish and community councils from the Welsh Assembly Government (WAG) and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) in England. These were significant studies that had been commissioned in response to a lack of knowledge about the town, parish and community council sector, and consequently enjoyed a wide-ranging brief including substantial original empirical and theoretically-informed research.</p> <p>The WAG study (2002-3) (now known as the 'Aberystwyth Report') was tasked to investigate the role, function and future potential of community and town councils in Wales, considering issues including service provision, representation of community interests, public engagement, and council composition, structure, finances and working practices. Assembling evidence from questionnaire surveys, case studies, interviews and public seminars, the research found that the activities and aspirations of local councils varied considerably by size and context, that the capacity to act of more ambitious councils was restricted by lack of information and training, limited finance, and poor relations with principal authorities, and that many councils had limited visibility in their communities, with low participation in elections, restricted communication and opportunities for public input, and the under-representation of residents aged under 40 on councils, but also identified a number of examples of good practice [3.6].</p> <p>The Defra study (2006) was primarily focused on reviewing the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme, but through negotiation with the sponsors the scope of the research was expanded to collect wider data addressing academic as well as policy questions, for example on election participation and councillor profiles [3.7, 3.8]. Data collected through surveys and case studies found that the scheme helped to improve the professionalism of local councils, but that concerns persisted about relations with principal authorities, finance and accountability to local communities.</p>

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

- [3.1] Peer-reviewed output: Edwards, B., Goodwin, M., Pemberton, S. and Woods, M. (2001) 'Partnerships, power and scale in rural governance', *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*, 19, 289-310. doi: 10.1068/c12m
- [3.2] Peer-reviewed grant: 'Participation, power and rural community governance in England and Wales', ESRC Democracy and Participation Programme, £167,620, 2000-2002 (Woods [PI], Edwards).
- [3.3] Peer-reviewed output: Edwards, B. and Woods, M. (2004) 'Mobilising the local: community, participation and governance', in L. Holloway and M. Kneafsey (eds) *Geographies of Rural Cultures and Societies*, Ashgate, pp 173-196.
- [3.4] Peer-reviewed output: Woods, M. and Edwards, B. (2006) 'Voluntarism and new forms of governance in rural communities', in C. Milligan and D. Conradson (eds) *Landscapes of Voluntarism*, Policy Press, pp 53-72.
- [3.5] Peer-reviewed output: Woods, M., Edwards, B., Anderson, J. and Gardner, G. (2007) 'Leadership in place: elites, authority and agency in British rural community governance', in L. Cheshire, V. Higgins and G. Lawrence (eds) *Rural Governance: International Perspectives*, Routledge, pp 211-226.
- [3.6] Competitively tendered grant: 'The Role, Function and Future Potential of Community and Town Councils in Wales', Welsh Assembly Government, £100,700, 2002-2003 (Woods [PI], Edwards, Anderson, Gardner, Hughes). Published report: Woods, M., Edwards, B., Anderson, J., Gardner, G. and Hughes, R. (2003) 'The Role, Function and Future Potential of Community and Town Councils in Wales', Cardiff: Welsh Assembly Government, (informally referred to as the 'Aberystwyth Report'). http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/departmental/iges/pdf/39204_ENGLISH.pdf
- [3.7] Competitively tendered grant: 'Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme', Defra, £52,000, 2006, (Woods [PI], Gardner). Published report: Woods, M., Gardner, G., Gannon, K. (2006) *Research Study of the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme*, London: Defra. <http://www.aber.ac.uk/en/media/departmental/iges/pdf/gpsr-full-report.pdf>
- [3.8] Peer reviewed output: Woods, M. and Gardner, G. (2011) 'Applied policy research and critical human geography: some reflections on swimming in murky waters', *Dialogues in Human Geography*, 1, 198-214. doi: 10.1177/2043820611404488 [REF2 submitted]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research at AU described in section 2 has had a direct impact on public policy by informing Government guidance and legislation for local government in England and Wales, and an indirect impact on society by enhancing the capacity of town, parish and community councils to serve their communities. In particular, recommendations from research on town and community councils in Wales, presented to the Welsh Assembly Government in the 'Aberystwyth Report' [3.5] directly formed the basis for provisions in the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, as acknowledged in the Explanatory Memorandum for the legislation, and in the report of the National Assembly for Wales Legislation Committee examining the Measure:

"The need for new legislation was also informed by research commissioned by the Assembly Government into widening participation in local government (culminating in the publication of *Are we being served?*, the Report of the Councillor Commission Expert Panel Wales) and a study for the Assembly Government by Aberystwyth University into the role and functions of community and town councils in Wales (*Research Study into the Role, Functions and Future Potential of Community and Town Councils in Wales* [the "Aberystwyth Report"])" [5.1]

"The provisions in Part 7 of the proposed Measure flow from the study commissioned by the Assembly Government and undertaken in 2003 by the University of Wales, Aberystwyth: Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences into community councils in Wales, 'Research Study into the Role, Functions and Future Potential of Community and Town Councils in Wales' ("the Aberystwyth Report"). This was the first comprehensive review of the work of community and town councils in Wales." [5.2]

"The provisions in Part 7 of the proposed Measure are based on the *Aberystwyth Report*, which

was a review of the activities of community councils across Wales completed in 2003” [5.3]

The provisions introduced by the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 included changes to arrangements for establishing and dissolving town and community councils, holding community meetings and polls, reviewing community areas and electoral areas, co-opting council members and appointing youth representatives; new powers for the Welsh Government to award direct grants to town and community councils, to enforce ‘charter agreements’ between community councils and principal authorities, and to introduce an accreditation of quality scheme for community councils; and a power for town and community councils to promote well-being in their area. All these provisions follow from research by Aberystwyth University and have contributed to the capacity of town and community councils in Wales to serve their community by providing greater stability, enhancing accountability, strengthening relations with principal councils, and extending the remit of councils, as recognized in the Explanatory Memorandum for the National Assembly for Wales (Legislative Competence) (Local Government) Order 2010 [which enabled the National Assembly for Wales to introduce the legislation], and by the National Assembly for Wales Legislation Committee:

“[T]he study undertaken in 2003 by the University of Wales, Aberystwyth: Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences into community councils in Wales, “Research Study into the Role, Functions and Future Potential of Community and Town Councils in Wales” (the “Aberystwyth Report”) presented a comprehensive review of the activities undertaken by community councils across Wales ... In its formal response to the Aberystwyth Report (in 2004), the Welsh Assembly Government gave a commitment to seek legislation to address issues identified in the review, with a view to putting in place arrangements to develop and strengthen the role of community councils and enabling them to deliver a wider range of services and actions locally. This would also serve to increase the effectiveness of community councils’ representational role and their ability to work in partnership with other bodies.” [5.4]

“We welcome the provisions that relate to the promotion and improvement of well-being as a means of providing town and community councils with greater powers and responsibilities. This reflects the findings of the *Aberystwyth Report*, which recommended that community councils should be given broader powers.” [5.5]

Of particular note is has been the creation of a new statutory power enabling town and community councils in Wales to co-opt two ‘youth representatives’ (aged 16-25). This provision, unique in Europe, will strengthen the voice of an under-represented section of the community and promote engagement in public service by young people. It was proposed in recommendation 8.4 in the 2003 report to the Welsh Assembly Government, and introduced by Sections 121 – 124 of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011.

In addition, the research by Aberystwyth University has also directly informed a number of other developments that did not require legislation. These included new guidance on model charters between town and community councils and principal authorities, issued by the Welsh Government in March 2008 [5.6], which has led to the adoption of charter agreements in 12 of the 24 Welsh local government areas by October 2013; and the implementation of a National Training Strategy for town and community councils, initially published in 2006, but delivered over the period to 2012, with a new strategy agreed for 2012-15 [5.7]. As the Society of Local Council Clerks stated in their submission to the National Assembly for Wales Legislation Committee on the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, “The training of Town and Community Council staff has been a direct result of many of the recommendations of the Aberystwyth Report” [5.8]. In total, 53 of the 76 recommendations made by Aberystwyth University in the ‘Aberystwyth Report’ had been implemented in full or in part by July 2013, 29 through new legislation or action in the period since 2008.

Parallel developments in public policy relating to parish and town councils in England have also been informed by the research undertaken by Aberystwyth University. In particular, research on the Quality Parish and Town Council Scheme [3.5] directly informed the revision of the scheme in 2008, as noted in the foreword to the official guidance document:

“The Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs commissioned the University of Wales to review the Scheme in 2006 and their research report helped the National Stakeholders

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to agree amendments to the Scheme that, while not placing an undue burden on councils wishing to achieve Quality status, would ensure that the tests remained relevant to our tier, would help councils to achieve ever higher levels of professionalism and help councils to cement their position as community leaders.” [5.9]

The modifications made to the Quality scheme as a result of the Aberystwyth University research included requirements for councils applying for ‘quality’ status to demonstrate that they work proactively to support local democracy and citizen engagement, and to evaluate the training needs of members and staff. These provisions have contributed to greater democratic accountability and professionalism in parish and town councils in England.

Additionally, the research has informed policy and professional practice in the local council sector more broadly, through invited presentations at conferences of the National Association of Local Councils, the Society of Local Council Clerks, and One Voice Wales; articles in specialist media including *Local Council Review*, *Urban Clearway*, the *Municipal Journal* and the *Guardian* ‘Society’ section; and the appointment of Woods to the National Training Advisory Group for Community and Town Councils in Wales.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- [5.1] Explanatory Memorandum for the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, paragraph 3.2, p 10 (<http://www.assemblywales.org/ms-ld8140-em-e.pdf>)
- [5.2] Explanatory Memorandum for the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011, paragraph 4.17, p 24 (<http://www.assemblywales.org/ms-ld8140-em-e.pdf>)
- [5.3] Report of the National Assembly for Wales Legislation Committee 3 on the Proposed Local Government (Wales) Measure, December 2010, paragraph 270, p 84 (http://www.assemblywales.org/lq_final_english_report.pdf)
- [5.4] Explanatory Memorandum for the National Assembly for Wales (Legislative Competence) (Local Government) Order 2010, paragraph 7.3, p 3 (<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukSI/2010/1211/memorandum/contents>)
- [5.5] Report of the National Assembly for Wales Legislation Committee 3 on the Proposed Local Government (Wales) Measure, December 2010, paragraph 344, p 102 (http://www.assemblywales.org/lq_final_english_report.pdf)
- [5.6] Welsh Assembly Government (2008) *A Shared Community: Relationship building and charters for unitary authorities and community and town councils. Final guidance.* (<http://wales.gov.uk/ds/lq/publications/localgov/asharedcommunity/guidanceee.pdf?lang=en>)
- [5.7] Welsh Government (2012) Continued grant funding for the National Training Strategy for Community and Town Councils in Wales. Cabinet Decision, 14 June 2012. (<http://wales.gov.uk/about/cabinet/decisions/dr2012/aprjun/lclgov/cs1859/?lang=en>)
- [5.8] Legislation Committee No. 3, Proposed Local Government (Wales) Measure, Written Response from the Society of Local Council Clerks, (http://www.assemblywales.org/lq11_-_the_society_of_local_council_clerks_slcc_.pdf)
- [5.9] ‘*A Guide to Becoming a Quality Council*’, second edition, official guidance document from the Quality Town and Parish Council Scheme, 2008.