

**P-04-666 Democracy in Local Government. Correspondence: Petitioner to the Clerking Team. 11.01.16**

Dear Ms England,

Petition P-04-666

This is my reply to your e-mail of January 6th, with the attachment being the response to my petition from Leighton Andrews AM, Minister for Public Services.

My petition was not really concerned with salaries, which is why I shall focus my response on the third paragraph of Mr Andrews' letter (in panel below). Mr Andrews writes, "The prime responsibility for ensuring that officers do not acquire an unreasonable level of influence in an authority lies firmly with the political leadership of the authority". A sentiment with which no one would disagree. But my simple question is, what happens when 'the political leadership' fails to exert that control?

The prime responsibility for ensuring that officers do not acquire an unreasonable level of influence in an authority lies firmly with the political leadership of the authority. That is why I have included provisions within the Draft Local Government (Wales) Bill, published for consultation on 24<sup>th</sup> November, which make clear that the chief executive of an authority is appointable by and accountable to the authority concerned. The Draft Bill goes on to provide that the leader of the authority must set objectives for the chief executive and monitor their achievements, reporting on this to the full council.

I can see nothing changing with the new legislation referred to in the extracted paragraph (above), Mr Andrews simply reaffirms the existing powers of elected representatives, and the relationship that should obtain between councillors and officers; but he fails to tell us what can be done when elected representatives fail to curb the interference and eventual take-over by a chief executive (invariably aided by some other senior officers and one or two leading councillors).

In the right circumstances, of a determined and dictatorial chief executive and a complaisant council, it is inevitable that we shall see further examples

of the problem my petition addressed, a problem to be seen in Wales today. This is why I wish to see some higher authority invested with the power to intervene when it becomes obvious that the chief executive is exercising undemocratic control over the running of the council.

Such a mechanism of intervention cannot be objected to by anyone wishing to defend the democratic process at local authority level. Failure to do so serves only to encourage those with dictatorial propensities while also alienating ordinary people, particularly young people, from the political process. The public losing interest in politics then makes it easier for the system I'm highlighting to flourish. This is a vicious circle.

It might be argued that such power already exists with the ability of the Welsh Government to place a council in 'special measures'. So if the power is already there why has it not been used in obvious cases of the chief executive subverting the democratic operation of the council?

Then again, taking a council into special measures because the chief executive has wrested control from the elected representatives might be regarded as using a scattergun approach when something more focused is needed. So if new legislation is needed to deal with this specific problem then introduce new legislation.

But passing the buck to those who've already exposed their inability to deal with the problem is nothing less than the Welsh Government washing its hands of that problem. We have every right to expect better.

I look forward to seeing this matter debated by the Petitions Committee on the 19th of January.

Yours

Royston Jones