

WLGA RESPONSE

Inquiry into diversity in local government Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee National Assembly for Wales



September 2018

Introduction

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry on Diversity in Local Government and was pleased to advise and provide support in promoting the Inquiry throughout local government.
2. One of the WLGA's core roles is to promote local democracy and, along with local authorities, it has promoted and supported a range of initiatives through the years to encourage greater understanding, engagement and participation in the local democratic process.
3. 'Diversity in Democracy' was the main national coordinated campaign ahead of the 2017 elections, led by the Welsh Government and supported by the WLGA and a range of partner bodies, including the main political parties in Wales. It was also supported by local activities within authorities. Diversity in Democracy was the most well-resourced programme of its kind in Wales and is currently being evaluated (which is due to report towards the end of 2018). Although there have been some local successes, progress overall in terms of greater diversity has unfortunately been minimal.
4. The 2017 local elections saw small improvements in gender balance: 29% of all candidates were women (up by 1% from 2012); 28% of councillors elected were women (up 2% from 2012) and 32% of all newly elected members were women. The gender balance of cabinet members also remains low and lower than the proportion of women councillors at 27.5%. The age profile of councillors did not change significantly remaining proportionately older than the general adult population (47% of councillors were aged 60 years or older) and a higher proportion of councillors were retired (31%). Only 1.8% of councillors were black or ethnic minorities compared to 4.7% for the Welsh population. 16% of candidates and 11% of councillors stated that they had a disability, and there remain a range of challenges for disabled people participating in the democratic process. The report on the Local Government Candidates Survey 2017 provides further information about both candidates and elected councillors.¹

¹ <https://gov.wales/docs/caecd/research/2018/180502-local-government-candidates-survey-2017-en.pdf>

Although Welsh local government faces particular challenges in terms of diversity of elected representatives, the challenges are not unique to Wales or local government, for example gender imbalance is also evidenced in England where 33% of councillors and 17% of leaders are women; 28% of Wales' MPs are women and only 31% of candidates at the 2017 elections were women; and 42% of AMs are women and only 32% of candidates at the 2016 elections were women. Progress is however being made in terms of the proportion of Non-Executive Directors and public appointments made by the Welsh Government. More widely, women make up only 29% on FTSE 100 company boards, although it is anticipated that by 2020 all FTSE 100 companies will have reached a target of 33% women on their boards, a target set by the UK Government-backed Alexander-Hampton Review. Gender balance on FTSE 250 boards is however in decline.

5. There is cause for optimism within Welsh local government. The leadership of Welsh local government is more diverse than ever before, though we recognise it is not fully reflective of wider society; there are 4 women leaders (up from 2), including the Leader of the WLGA, 5 women Deputy Leaders, a quarter of leaders are below the age of 45 and 2 leaders recently featured in the Pride Cymru's 'Pinc List 2018'.
6. Championing and improving democracy and gender equality is one of the WLGA's core priorities for this municipal term and we are currently developing proposals for delivery ahead of the 2022 local elections.
7. The commitment and prominence of diverse role models in leadership positions as well as a commitment to bring forward some challenging policy discussions, following on from the Welsh Government's Rapid Review of Gender Equality, will ensure that diversity in democracy remains a political priority within Welsh local government. However, progress requires continued impetus from all partners and stakeholders, including the Welsh Government, National Assembly for Wales and the political parties in order to make significant change where historically only incremental change has been achieved.
8. Although it is important that councillors are as diverse as possible and there remains under-participation and representation across many characteristics, this response will focus mainly on age and gender balance given these are the most significant areas of imbalance.

What is the importance of diversity among local councillors, including the effect on public engagement, debate and decision making?

9. There are several reasons why diversity is an important and much debated feature of representative democracy.

10. First and foremost, there is a moral imperative based on principles of equality and fairness that our democratic institutions and elected representatives should be as diverse as and reflect the populations they represent and serve.
11. It is widely agreed that a democratic deficit is becoming more problematic as councils make significant decisions about service provision in austerity. A more diverse democracy and elected representatives who are more reflective and understanding of their communities leads to better engagement with individuals and communities, in turn leading to greater levels of confidence and trust. Prominent decision-makers from under-represented groups can be influential role models, empowering and encouraging others to aspire to follow in their footsteps and to contribute to public life. Similarly, more diverse senior political leaders who are more representative of an organisation's workforce can lead to improved workforce engagement, trust in leadership and a more confident organisational culture.
12. As noted above, all forms and tiers of representative democracy have historically not been as diverse or demographically reflective of the constituents or communities they represent. Elected representatives, whoever they are, are elected to represent all constituents and constituencies and must do so to the best of their abilities. The WLGA's Councillor Guide provides the following summary:

“As a councillor, you represent several different communities and individual citizens with diverse identities. You will want to treat everyone with respect...equality is about ensuring that all people are treated equally. This does not mean treating everyone the same, but recognising the differences in their situations and experience and ensuring that there is equality of opportunity for all. For you to represent the diverse people in your electoral division, you need to know who they are.”

13. Greater diversity ensures more diverse life-experiences shape our decision-making. Candidates and all elected representatives are deemed to have particular 'qualifications' relevant to their roles, whether it is local ties, professional or voluntary experiences or a track-record of community activism. Diverse-life experience should also be regarded as part of the 'essential criteria' or a qualification for the role of elected office given the added value that a diverse range of perspectives and life-experiences can contribute to decision-making.
14. Evidence shows that diverse decision-makers lead to better and more diverse decisions. Decision-makers with diverse life experiences, from different backgrounds, with different skills and different aspirations can lead to wider perspectives, greater challenge and scrutiny which in turn can lead to more rounded policy decisions. Diverse decision-makers encourage public bodies to understand how different people will be affected by their activities so that policies and services are appropriate and accessible to all.
15. Although process and procedure, such as engagement strategies and Equality Impact Assessments for example, can help contribute to and improve the quality of decision-

making, they cannot be a substitute for a diversity of experiences, perspectives and policy debates from the outset. For example, studies of National Assembly for Wales debates by Chaney et al demonstrate a greater likelihood of gender related issues or topics (such as childcare, domestic violence and equal pay) being raised by women Assembly Members (see Fawcett Society's Does Local Government Work for Women Report 2017)²

What are the key barriers to attracting a more diverse pool of candidates for local government elections?

16. Councillors, and those people who put themselves forward as candidates, should be commended and their commitment to public service should be recognised and respected.
17. The role of a councillor is stimulating, rewarding and regarded as a privilege by many. The role however is a challenging and demanding one and is not one that should be considered lightly; it is a complex role, which requires a significant time commitment and can therefore have implications on people's family lives and work-life balance. It can impact on a professional career and on an individual's income and future financial security. It is also a role that can expose individuals (and their families) to regular personal criticism, insults and even threats, particularly through social media.
18. The number of candidates who stood for election in 2017 however increased by 5.6% (3,463 candidates compared to 3,279 in 2012 (including Anglesey candidates in 2013). There however remain too many uncontested seats in Wales, 92 or 7% of seats were uncontested in 2017 (though this is fewer than compared to 99 (8%) in 2012).
19. Despite these widespread challenges, there are specific barriers that potentially have a greater impact on attracting more diverse candidates to stand for local elections. There have been several studies in recent years including:
 - 'On Balance: Diversifying Democracy in Local Government in Wales' Report of the Expert Group on Diversity in Local Government (2014)³
 - 'Does Local Government Work for Women?' Final Report of the Local Government Commission (2017)⁴

² <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=0de4f7f0-d1a0-4e63-94c7-5e69081caa5f>

³ <https://gov.wales/docs/dsijlg/publications/localgov/140305-expert-group-report-en.pdf>

⁴ <https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/does-local-government-work-for-women-final-report-of-the-local-government-commission>

- ‘New Voices: How Welsh politics can begin to reflect Wales’ Electoral Reform Society (2018)⁵

20. The reported barriers in these studies include:

Time-commitment and meeting times

21. Being a councillor requires a significant and flexible time commitment to the role. The Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales bases its remuneration framework on a councillor spending an average of three days per week on council business, with executive members working full-time. These three days include day-time, evening and weekend commitments. Evidence suggests that most members actually commit more time than this, for example, the WLGA survey of those councillors who stood down at the 2017 elections showed that 63% of respondents spent more than 3 days a week (21 plus hours) on council business⁶.
22. Meeting times are often identified as a challenge if not a barrier, particularly to attracting younger people, people with young children or people in employment. Councils survey their members to determine preferred meeting times, however, as many councillors also manage part-time or full-time employment as well as family or other caring responsibilities, achieving a consensus on what times are most convenient to all is impossible. Those councillors in employment may prefer evening meetings however this may impact on those with young family commitments. The irregular and significant time commitments required inevitably influences who is able or prepared to stand as a councillor and is perhaps one of the reasons why a high proportion of councillors are retired and aged 60 years or older.
23. Remote attendance at meetings could resolve some of these issues. Video-calling or video-meeting technology is widely available and can be accessed via smart-phone devices, however, the remote attendance provisions as outlined in the Local Government Measure (Wales) 2011 are too restrictive and inflexible and have curtailed authorities’ ability to roll this out widely. It is anticipated that these issues can be addressed via the forthcoming Local Government Bill.

Political and organisational culture

24. Although councils are increasingly accessible, open, transparent, seek to engage with communities and councillors are the most accessible and visible elected representatives, evidence suggests that the public’s understanding of local government and the role and responsibilities of councillors is limited. Councils can also be seen to be traditional organisations with complex and intimidating governance arrangements, rules and standards.

⁵ <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/new-voices-how-welsh-politics-can-begin-to-reflect-wales/>

⁶ <https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=1256>

25. Previous research has suggested that the nature of ‘male-dominated’ politics can be perceived as being combative, confrontational and is increasingly regarded as toxic which may disproportionately dissuade women, in particular, from engaging and participating⁷.
26. However, only two respondents to the WLGA’s Exit Survey referred to ‘bullying’ or political dynamics as contributing to their desire to stand down, although more referred to criticism and abuse received from the media or the public as being a concern. Furthermore, the WLGA’s survey suggests that women were proportionately not more likely to stand down than men.
27. Political parties’ approaches or rules with regards recruitment and/or selection of candidates can also be complex or reliant on particular networks for potential candidates. Party activism, membership and organisational capacity varies and is in a period of flux⁸, however, and parties’ capacity to deliver significant change to the diversity of candidates and councillors may be limited given their capacity to recruit and support sufficient numbers of candidates as well as the level of influence of any national diversity commitments or programmes over local branches or groups. The Diversity in Democracy evaluation is examining the experiences, challenges and successes of political parties during the 2017 local elections.

Child care and other caring responsibilities

28. Child care and other caring responsibilities are a particular issue for councillors, given the extent and irregularity of time commitment to the role as outlined above. Although reimbursement of care costs is available to members, most members who are eligible do not draw such allowances due to concerns about political, press or public perception.
29. The Independent Remuneration Panel has recently changed its reimbursement of care costs criteria to encourage wider take up, including changing the name from ‘allowance’ to ‘reimbursement of cost’ and allowing councils to publish a non-attributed, total sum of costs claimed, rather than identifying individual recipients. It is too early to assess the impact of this, but it is hoped that it will create an environment where more eligible individuals will feel able to claim such allowances.

Public criticism and online abuse

30. Councillors live and work in the council area and in the communities they represent, they are accessible and visible. Austerity has meant that councillors are also responsible for or are perceived to be responsible for taking some of the toughest and most unpalatable and unpopular service delivery decisions in decades.

⁷ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-45396521/politics-live-panel-discusses-toxic-culture-of-social-media>

⁸ <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/SN05125>

31. Councillors expect and accept challenge and scrutiny as a core part of the role. However, the level and nature of public criticism and abuse of councillors is growing, and is delivered face-to-face, through correspondence, and increasingly via social media and commentary on online news platforms. Some senior councillors have had their cars or houses damaged and a number have had to install additional personal safety and security measures. Public abuse was described as a growing concern in the WLGA's Exit Survey of councillors who stood down.
32. The use of social media has grown significantly in recent years. Unfortunately, alongside the growth in usage has been a growth in online abuse, particularly of public servants and elected representatives. Several studies, including a review by the Committee on Standards in Public Life⁹, have described the nature of social media abuse as well as its impact on elected representatives. Evidence shows that women and representatives from black and minority ethnic groups are much more likely to be subject to abuse and, on occasions, threats.¹⁰

Remuneration and Employment

33. As noted earlier, the time commitment required to be a councillor can have a significant impact on individuals' employment prospects or their ability to continue to work part or full-time, which may have a longer-term impact on career progression.
34. Councillors in Wales receive a basic salary of £13,600 which is not an insignificant salary but is significantly below the average Welsh salary and therefore does not adequately compensate people for any potential loss of income in their careers. Most significantly, the Independent Remuneration Panel itself recognises that its own framework undervalues councillors by around £1,400 per year: 'the financial constraints on the public sector and particularly local authorities has meant that the link with average Welsh earnings has not been maintained. The Panel considers that this has undervalued the worth of elected members...If this alignment had continued the basic salary would currently be significantly higher than the current prescribed amount, (close to £15,000 pa).'¹¹
35. Furthermore, councillors do not receive a 'resettlement grant' or severance package should they lose their seat at an election, unlike Assembly Members of Members of Parliament or like other fields of employment where redundancy is typically provided. This is therefore a financial and personal risk for those people who might consider standing particularly those who choose or are chosen to be a cabinet member or leader, which are generally regarded as full-time (and more) roles and often require individuals to either take a sabbatical or give up a secure job; such individuals are provided with no

⁹https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/666927/6.3637_CO_v6_061217_Web3.1_2_.pdf

¹⁰ <https://www.wlga.wales/social-media-and-online-abuse>

¹¹ <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/localgov/180226-annual-report-2018-en.pdf>

financial security and could feasibly be unemployed without any notice or 'redundancy pay' following an unsuccessful election. The WLGA understands that the current powers of the Independent Remuneration Panel may prevent such a scheme being considered in Welsh local government.

Role models and incumbency

36. Councils are seen to be dominated by white, middle-aged men and there are therefore few role models for people from wider more diverse backgrounds.
37. Some mentoring programmes have been developed to 'pair' people from diverse backgrounds with elected representatives and role models, these have included activity by Operation Black Vote, the recent Diversity in Democracy mentoring scheme, Chwarae Teg's LeadHerShip programme and the current Women's Equality Network programme.
38. The Local Government Commission interim concluded that "Incumbency in local councils disproportionately benefits men...[and]...the slow pace of change is significantly driven by incumbency." According to the Elections Centre, in Wales' local elections in 2017, 895 incumbents stood for election (across 71% of seats) with 693 or 77% being successfully re-elected. In summary, incumbents are more likely to be re-elected than other candidates due to their profile, reputation or track-record and, as most councillors are older, white men, most successful incumbents are therefore older white men. The impact of incumbency has therefore led some campaigners to call for term-limits, quotas or all-women shortlists.

What areas of innovation and good practice may help increase diversity in local government?

39. The 2017 local elections in Wales were supported by local activities linked into the national Diversity in Democracy programme. The Diversity in Democracy programme was the biggest and most well-resourced programme of its type and was supported by a range of national partners including the main political parties. The programme included an awareness and promotional campaign, production of literature and online videos for candidates, businesses and mentees, working with employers to encourage them to encourage and support staff to be councillors and the roll-out of a mentoring scheme for people from under-represented groups. Although such nationally coordinated campaigns are vital and provide resources and profile ahead of the elections, the impact of such awareness raising and development programmes can be limited as the slow rate of improvement at the 2017 elections demonstrates.

40. A range of online materials have been produced to provide information to candidates and councillors, including the WLGA's Be a Councillor guide¹² and Councillor's Guide¹³ and the Welsh Government's Diversity in Democracy materials¹⁴ which included specific leaflets to encourage businesses to support staff in becoming councillors¹⁵.
41. The Welsh Government produced a series of online videos with councillors as part of the Diversity in Democracy programme¹⁶ and several councils, including Gwynedd, Monmouthshire and Powys have also produced excellent videos to explain the role of councillors and to encourage candidates to stand¹⁷.
42. Councils have good links with school councils and youth forums and many actively seek to engage young people in council business and the democratic process through various initiatives such as mock elections, meetings with councillors and Local Democracy Week activities. These activities are important with regards wider interest and understanding of democracy generally and particularly so given the planned electoral reforms which include votes for 16 and 17 year olds; it is therefore vital that these activities continue and are linked to reforms to the Curriculum as well as the Welsh Youth Parliament.
43. A number of councils ran 'open days' ahead of the elections and mentoring and shadowing programmes are widely regarded as being beneficial, particularly in supporting people from under-represented groups to come forward to stand. A mentoring campaign was the central project within the Diversity in Democracy programme and participants received extensive support, advice, training and access to serving councillors who acted as mentors. Of the 51 mentees who participated, only 16 stood for election and only 4 were elected. The evaluation will be seeking views from mentees to explore the reasons why there was such a significant drop-out rate, which will provide invaluable perspective regarding the challenges and barriers faced. However, such a 'conversion rate' suggests that, in future, mentoring and support programmes may be more effective use of resources if they are provided to people who had already committed to standing as a candidate.
44. There are other arrangements that councils could introduce to make the role of councillor more accessible and support the work of a councillor, including facilitating 'remote attendance'. As noted above however, although video-calling or video-meeting technology is widely available, the remote attendance provisions in the Local Government Measure (Wales) 2011 are too restrictive and inflexible.

¹² <https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=352>

¹³ <https://www.wlga.wales/SharedFiles/Download.aspx?pageid=62&mid=665&fileid=976>

¹⁴ <https://gov.wales/topics/localgovernment/diversity-in-democracy/?lang=en>

¹⁵ <https://gov.wales/docs/dsjlg/publications/localgov/150605-did-businesses-supporting-communities-en.pdf>

¹⁶ <https://gov.wales/topics/localgovernment/diversity-in-democracy/?lang=en>

¹⁷ <https://en-gb.facebook.com/MonmouthshireCC/videos/1311280965573005/>

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/MonmouthshireCC/videos/1311192478915187/>

<https://en-gb.facebook.com/MonmouthshireCC/videos/1311171622250606/>

<https://www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/en/Council/Councillors-and-committees/Being-a-Councillor.aspx>

<https://www.wlga.gov.uk/be-a-councillor-2018>

45. As part of the Diversity in Democracy programme, the Welsh Government explored the potential of a 'Door to Democracy' fund, similar to the successful Access to Elected Office schemes in Scotland and England, which provides financial support for disabled people standing in elections. Despite interest, legal advice suggested that the Welsh Government did not have powers to deliver the programme in Wales and disabled people were supported through the wider mentoring programme. Powers over elections have since been devolved to the Assembly and therefore it is anticipated a future programme will be rolled out in Wales.
46. One of the issues affecting councillors, particularly those who also have full or part-time employment is the encouragement and support of their employer. Although the majority of respondents to the WLGA's Exit Survey noted that their employers were supportive, some councillors suggest that being a councillor can affect their careers or make it difficult to re-enter the labour market. The WLGA provides a highly regarded Leadership Academy, with Academi Wales and the LGA, which is an ILM accredited programme designed to equip leading councillors with a range of skills for the role. The WLGA previously explored wider accreditation of other training programmes, but there was limited interest at the time, however, we are reviewing whether an accredited programme of training and development could be developed which would be relevant and tailored to appeal to future employers, for example, leadership development and financial management.
47. Most research suggests that political parties have the major role to play in terms of affecting change with regards diversity in democracy. Although independents are a valued and significant proportion of councillors and candidates, the majority of candidates and councillors represent political parties and therefore the parties can have a significant influence over who they recruit and select to stand for them in elections.
48. Many of the recent reports on diversity in democracy recommend significant political (if not legislative) commitment to either ensure more representative candidates lists (for example the previous commitment by some political parties to field women in 40% of winnable seats), to fielding all-women shortlists through to quotas.
49. Whilst such approaches have in the past been controversial within parties nationally and locally, they have been introduced as parties have recognised the value of ensuring a more diverse and representative democratic institution with wider life-experiences. Evidence also suggests that such initiatives are effective at engendering change.
50. There are a range of approaches that might be considered from statutory or national party quotas, to commitments to field diverse candidate lists, to more local or targeted interventions.
51. Minor parties and independents continue to play a valued and key role and will continue to compete electorally, but for example, if all by-elections that occurred during a municipal term were targeted through a voluntary agreement between the main political parties to field only all women candidate lists, gender balance could improve by up to 5% during a municipal term.

52. A wider approach, which might require some changes to electoral law regarding the nomination process, could see a similar approach adopted for 'vacant' seats, where councillors had decided to stand down or retire at the election. If such councillors were able to commit to standing-down by an early-enough deadline, political parties could agree to voluntarily field all-women candidate lists, which could see as much as a 10-15% swing in terms of gender balance at an election and gender balance could potentially be achieved in local government over a 5-year period over the course of 2 elections.
53. The practicalities and implications of such proposals would need to be explored further and are a matter for political parties to consider. The WLGA does not currently have a policy position on quotas or other proactive political interventions, however, the WLGA may consider the merits of these as part of a wider review on Gender Equality in local government which will be commencing this autumn.
54. Even without such legislative or policy commitments, local authorities and political parties can and have made significant local progress in improving diversity of candidates and councillors, for example, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council's gender balance is 43% women (up from 37% at the 2012 elections) and 42% of councillors in Swansea Council are women (up from 39%). Both councils not only have a higher proportion of women councillors than elsewhere but are increasing the proportion at above the average rate. These experiences and successes and those from elsewhere could provide invaluable learning for others.

What are the potential impact of the proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, Strengthening Local Government to increasing diversity in Council chambers?

55. The Welsh Government's Green Paper outlined a positive and supportive narrative around the role and contribution of Wales' councillors. The Green Paper explicitly included a section on 'Valuing Councillors' and noted that councillors' remuneration and support arrangements needed to be addressed, as well as the scope of the role, alluding to new powers and flexibilities for councils in future.
56. It should be noted that previous Welsh Government reforms have also provided flexibilities and support for councillors, including the establishment of an Independent Remuneration Panel, care allowances regime, parental leave, sickness absence, remote attendance and support for development and training.
57. There are some possible changes in the forthcoming Local Government Bill that would be further welcomed, for example, flexibility around allowing councillors to job share (particularly for senior office holders), remote attendance reforms as well as options for the Independent Remuneration Panel to make changes to the remuneration framework.
58. The Green Paper observed:

“Elected members are under increasing pressures...their representational role is under pressure from increased workloads, the demands of social media and the press and the impact on their personal lives...The pressures on elected members, combined with the level of remuneration, makes the role unattractive to many people who would make excellent councillors. They cannot afford either in financial or personal terms to make the commitment needed...The Welsh Government believes we should recognise the commitment involved in being a councillor and ensure they are properly remunerated, respected and recognised for the work they do in their communities.”

59. However, the Welsh Government’s proposed improvements to councillor remuneration and support were linked to the proposal for fewer local authorities which, in turn, intimated a need for fewer councillors and that existing sums of remuneration and support resources could be shared between fewer councillors.

60. At this stage, it remains unclear what reforms to the roles, remuneration or support for councillors the Welsh Government is committed to bring forward in the anticipated Local Government Bill.