

Electing a more diverse Senedd

Note of discussion event

July 2020

The Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform was established to examine the recommendations of the Expert Panel on Assembly Electoral Reform in respect of the size of the Senedd and how Members are elected.

To inform its work on the diversity of the Senedd, the Committee held a private discussion event on 10 February 2020 with representatives of organisations that advocate for under-represented groups.

The three questions considered were:

- 1.** Does the diversity or otherwise of Members of the Senedd affect the way the Senedd carries out its scrutiny and legislative work or its role as a representative body for the people of Wales?
- 2.** What are the main reasons that people from a diverse range of backgrounds may not choose to stand in Senedd elections?
- 3.** What specific legislative and voluntary measures should be considered to encourage diversity in the Senedd?

This note summarises the themes arising from the discussions.



Question 1: Does the diversity or otherwise of Members of the Senedd affect the way the Senedd carries out its scrutiny and legislative work or its role as a representative body for the people of Wales?

Representation and advocacy

1. It was argued by some participants that the membership of the Senedd does not fully represent the people of Wales. It was noted that there are no BAME women in the Senedd and people become disenfranchised if institutions do not reflect the people they serve. The challenge of representing different groups was highlighted and one participant observed that recent events connected to Brexit now meant that EU nationals in Wales do not feel well represented in the political process.
2. Participants in the discussion said that the breadth of topics considered and debated by the Senedd has grown and developed, but that a more diverse membership would help to ensure that the Senedd's business represents the interests of all people in Wales. Some participants felt that if the topics being addressed by the Senedd do not speak to certain sections of society then people disengage with the political process.
3. The Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015 was cited as example of a piece of legislation that would not have been made without a relatively gender-balanced Senedd. However, concern was expressed that diversity of representation can retreat as well as grow and diversity allies (i.e. advocates for under-represented groups) are not a substitute for a genuinely representative membership. Some participants observed a sharp contrast between what they regarded as relatively positive gender balance of the Senedd and the representation of people from BAME backgrounds.
4. Participants used the example of race to illustrate the consequences of lack of diversity as it was noted that the Senedd's first Plenary debate on race only took place in 2019. Participants said that lived experience is vital in shaping the focus of Senedd business. Without lived experience and a diversity of representation, it was argued, Members of the Senedd will find it difficult to properly understand the implications of the decisions that they make. It was noted that without experiencing particular societal barriers it is difficult for policy makers to understand what challenges people in under-represented groups face, and therefore the full range of potential policy or legislative solutions that may be effective. The risk is that policy making, despite good intentions, becomes paternalistic and fails to account for the needs of minority groups.

- 5.** It was agreed that electing a more diverse Senedd would help to improve policy making, legislating and scrutiny. Some participants, however, noted that in an Senedd of 60 Members it can be difficult for all minority groups to be represented. It was noted that this problem can become particularly acute in Senedd committees, especially those with small memberships. Other participants commented, however, that Senedd committees have a good track record in engaging with the public and seeking input from under-represented groups.
- 6.** The way in which political parties and the Welsh Government address equality issues was regarded by some people involved in the discussion as being illustrative of the problem. Some participants made the case that ‘equalities’ should not be regarded as a distinct portfolio but, instead, embedded in all aspects of the legislative and scrutiny process. Some participants said that some positive legislation had been put in place, but that implementation had not always been effective.
- 7.** Other participants felt that political apathy amongst young people was a consequence of politicians not speaking to their interests, although the discussion also noted that the Senedd had demonstrated a willingness to identify issues which may engage under-represented groups.
- 8.** Some participants noted that the challenge of achieving effective representation for under-represented groups within the Senedd was a reflection of wider society. It was observed that the Senedd will have to lead on explaining to the public why this agenda is important as it is taking place in the context of a backlash against moves to enhance the rights of minority groups. Some participants cautioned that the Senedd cannot be driven by public opinion as some sections of society in Wales may never support measures which aim to improve diversity and the representation of minority groups.

Engagement with under-represented groups

- 9.** Some participants argued that disability and disabled people have a particularly low profile in the context of the Senedd and Welsh politics. The importance of providing opportunities for people with disabilities to engage with politicians in ways such as shadowing was thought to be one way to highlight challenges that need to be addressed by public policy.
- 10.** One participant noted that electing a diverse range of Members of the Senedd will help to engage a broader range of people in its work, simply because people feel more comfortable approaching someone who is recognisable to themselves. The example was given of someone with a disability being more

confident of engaging with a Member of the Senedd who shares that disability because of the expectation that the Member is likely to have a natural understanding of their constituent's concerns.

Question 2: What are the main reasons that people from a diverse range of backgrounds may not choose to stand in Senedd elections?

Candidate selection

11. Participants felt that anyone seeking to enter party politics and hoping to stand as a candidate for election to the Senedd will face significant barriers, whether or not they are from an under-represented group. The challenge for under-represented groups is that they may face additional barriers which are even more difficult to overcome. One way to address this concern is in the selection of candidates; some participants said that the focus of selection should be on skills and not simply exploring somebody's interest in the role. However, participants felt that parties need to be persuaded that people have the right profile to be elected, and perception can be major barrier to selection as a candidate.

12. It was argued by many participants that the onus should be on political parties in Wales to approach under-represented groups rather than waiting for people to come to them. It was argued that parties must demonstrate that they want people from minority groups to become actively involved in the political process. Some participants commented that many people do not get to the stage of experiencing discrimination as a candidate because they are not sufficiently involved or engaged.

People with disabilities

13. Participants discussed the challenges that disabled people may face in standing for election and serving as a Member of the Senedd. One participant suggested it may be difficult for people with some disabilities to take part in traditional political party activities such as leafleting, door-to-door canvassing or phone canvassing. Furthermore, it was suggested that political parties are not generally supportive of people with disabilities seeking candidacy and that those selected and elected will often downplay their disability.

14. Introducing an access to elected office fund for Senedd elections was regarded by several participants as being vital to enabling people with disabilities to fully participate in campaigning and elections. An access to office fund would enable candidate with disabilities to access financial support to help with additional campaigning costs arising as a result of their disability. It was observed

that the establishment of a similar fund for local elections in Scotland had been of great benefit to disabled candidates.

15. Concerns were raised about the implications some disabled Members of the Senedd could experience if working full time. The interaction between levels of pay and the benefits and entitlements that some people with disabilities may receive was highlighted as the type of barrier that policy makers may not immediately identify when trying to encourage a more representative range of candidates.

16. Concerns were expressed that people with hidden disabilities may require time away from their role, which could be difficult to explain to constituents. Similarly, those with mental health problems may also face a perceived or actual lack of public empathy if they require time away from their public responsibilities or additional support. Participants were concerned that candidates and Members of the Senedd may feel compelled to disclose more information than they would like about disabilities or specific health conditions.

People from the LGBT community

17. Other participants discussed the barriers facing people from the LGBT community. It was observed that sexuality, gender and identity are not always visible, so a focus on making the Senedd inclusive is required within the institution. The point was made that, ultimately, how inclusive and welcoming an institution is is a product of its culture—the experience of a Member of the Senedd from the LGBT community would, therefore, would be shaped by the prevailing attitudes in the Senedd.

18. In the context of the working life of a Member of the Senedd it was observed that there could be a considerable mismatch between an individual's gender expression and the expectations or dress codes of the role, and that this type of cultural and institutional barrier might dissuade some members of the LGBT community from standing for election if they felt unable to be their authentic selves within the role.

BAME communities

19. Participants noted that one barrier that people from some BAME communities may experience is the sense that, if elected to the Senedd, they would have the responsibility of being *the* representative of their community. Concerns may include feeling the need to 'prove themselves' within their

community and ensuring that they have capacity to fully represent their community.

20. Other participants observed that the experience of candidates and elected Members will be different across the different communities in Wales. This is because there may be significant variation in the knowledge and understanding of politics and the Senedd in different communities.

Hate crime and online abuse

21. Concerns were expressed that people from under-represented groups, including particularly those from ethnic minority groups, people with disabilities and members of the LGBT community, are more likely to experience hate crime and this would be exacerbated by seeking public office. It was noted by some participants that people who disagree with a person's politics will target their personal identity and that policing is limited because of debate around freedom of speech vs hate speech. The intersectionality of identity can also affect the way in which individuals are targeted and the extent of the barrier—for example women from BAME communities are seen as being particularly subject to online abuse.

Role models

22. Many participants felt that encouraging people from all sections of society to participate could be driven by the presence of high-profile role models in the Senedd. Only when people see somebody like themselves winning election to the Senedd and working as a Member will some people feel it is a realistic option for them.

23. Participants said that the Chwarae Teg and the Women's Equality Network mentoring schemes had been successful in making a broader range of women feel able to stand for election. In particular, the importance of mentoring for women from BAME communities was emphasised. It was added that participation is not a question of confidence but of making sure that women have the tools to become involved.

24. Some participants noted that it will be important to challenge the stereotype and perceptions of a 'typical' Member of the Senedd if people from more diverse backgrounds are to feel encouraged to stand for election. The stereotype often includes educational background or norms of behaviour which some people may find alienating or difficult to live up to. Barriers may be created by people's perceptions of what a Member is if the Senedd does not take steps to demonstrate that it is inclusive and welcoming of diversity.

25. It was observed by some participants in the discussion that people from working class backgrounds may experience barriers based on a preconception of what a Member of the Senedd should be like. Similarly, some concern was expressed that there is a perceived expectation that Members should speak Welsh and that a lack of Welsh language skills would be a disadvantage. Levels of Welsh language skills may vary across different communities or under-represented groups, further exacerbating the barriers people with those identities might face.

Life as a Member of the Senedd

26. Several participants identified that Members of the Senedd are not in an environment that encourages a family friendly way of working. Late meetings, large amounts of travel, time spent away from home and a significant number of additional responsibilities such as participation in party events were thought to be barriers to people with families and caring responsibilities. The largely negative public and media response to the Independent Remuneration Board's proposal that additional support should be available to Members with caring responsibilities was regarded as illustrative of a wider political environment which does not understand the significance of providing support to enable people with such responsibilities to seek and hold elected office.

27. Similarly, the degree of abuse that politicians and their families can face both in public and, especially, online was highlighted as a potentially intolerable burden of becoming a Member of the Senedd.

Question 3: What specific legislative and voluntary measures should be considered to encourage diversity in the Senedd?

Electoral quotas

28. Some participants argued strongly in favour of quotas to encourage a more diverse Senedd. Although regarded as a blunt instrument it was commented that quotas could deliver change at pace. Some participants favoured gender quotas, while others argued that quotas should be designed to reflect the intersectionality of identity. It was also suggested that quotas could be introduced with the understanding that they may be a temporary measure designed to address historical imbalances. It was argued by some participants that both sanctions and incentives would be required to make quotas effective.

29. One participant commented that the most effective way to integrate quotas into the electoral system would be for Wales to adopt the Single Transferable Vote

form of proportional representation for Senedd elections. Another participant said that the existing system of electing additional regional Members could be repurposed to deliver equitable electoral outcomes—for example, the regional list could be used to redress any gender imbalance that emerges as a consequence of the election of constituency Members. Some participants argued that electoral systems in themselves will not deliver equality and that other specific measures, such as quotas, should remain the priority.

30. One concern regarding the use of quotas was the risk that applying a quota might bring a higher profile to an aspect of a candidate’s identity than they would be comfortable with thus creating a barrier to participation. The approach taken to electing the Welsh Youth Parliament, in which 40 members are elected to represent constituencies and 20 members are appointed by partner organisations who advocate for under-represented groups was highlighted, although some participants suggested that this could result in perceptions of tokenism.

31. Some concerns were expressed that there could be a public backlash against Members elected via quotas and that it could establish distinct types of quota and non-quota Members. However, other participants, said that the backlash may only be limited and would die down once the concept of quotas became established. Similarly, designing quotas could be challenging as, for example, disability can change or be acquired at different stages of life and it can also be difficult to assess.

32. The ethics of electing politicians from political parties on the basis of quotas was questioned by some participants who felt that problems related to inequality and discrimination were exacerbated by the actions and policies of those parties.

Publication of candidate diversity data

33. Some participants viewed the publication of candidate and Member diversity data as significant, on the basis that understanding the diversity of candidates and of Members of the Senedd at present relies on self-identification. There is a risk that inaccurate assumptions may be made about Members’ characteristics, and participants suggested that accurate recording of diversity data relating to Members could be a relatively ‘quick win’ in terms of establishing how diverse or otherwise the Senedd really is.

34. Participants were keen that the Committee emphasises the importance of establishing a data set to help understand how diverse candidates and Members of the Senedd are. The collection and publication of data was seen by some as a starting point rather than an end in itself, but it would serve as a useful measure of

progress. A number of participants agreed that an ‘embarrassment factor’ may drive parties to choose a more diverse mix of candidates.

35. The issue of whether the collection and publication of data should be voluntary or legislated for was discussed. Participants noted that political parties could collect and publish data voluntarily, and that the Senedd Commission could implement voluntary measures to understand the diversity of Members without having to rely on a legislative approach. However, participants acknowledged that any system of recording diversity data—legislative or voluntary, and for candidates or Members—should not compel people to provide information. Some participants observed that in small samples information provided could be used to identify an individual. If candidates or Members did not trust the way in which the data was collected, held and used then this could undermine its accuracy and efficacy.

Job sharing

36. Job sharing by Members of the Senedd was regarded by many participants as being an initiative which could make election to the Senedd a more viable option for a greater range of candidates. It was thought that people with disabilities and caring responsibilities were particularly likely to benefit from the option to job share. It was noted, however, that accountability to constituents cannot be regarded as a part-time obligation and the risk that a job share evolves into two partners both working 100 per cent of the time would have to be mitigated.

Cultural change

37. It was argued by some participants that introducing voluntary or legislative measures to improve diversity would not, necessarily, drive culture change within political parties. Other participants felt that measures to make representation more diverse might run contrary to the ethos of political parties, and that the presence of people from some minority groups may be regarded as tokenistic by people within their own parties.

38. Others regarded measures such as the requirement to publish diversity data as a mechanism which will allow people to ‘call out’ those parties not regarded as representative and would help reflect and highlight the values of political parties. One participant said that the approach taken to the diversity of their candidates by political parties was inherently political and that the implementation of quotas could obscure the extent to which parties genuinely believe in delivering diverse representation. Those parties committed to the agenda, it was argued, may not

enjoy any electoral or political dividend of their genuine commitment to making their parties more representative if all parties are compelled to field a diverse mix of candidates.

39. There was discussion of whether a statutory obligation should be placed on parties to require them to prepare and publish their own strategies to diversify their candidates. This was felt by some participants to be more a more flexible and proportionate approach which would enable parties to identify and put in place measures to address their particular circumstances and which would avoid some of the practical challenges associated with a blanket approach. However, there were concerns about whether it would be within the Senedd's legislative competence to place such a duty on political parties, about how parties would be held to account for the delivery of their strategies, and about how outcomes would be measured. One participant suggested that the Public Sector Equality Duty could serve as a model to be replicated by the political parties.

40. Some participants commented that political knowledge and education is required within minority communities to help people engage in the political process. It was noted that Operation Black Vote had been successful in helping people from some ethnic minority groups to navigate party politics and encouraging them to engage in the political process.