



Response to Local Government and Housing Committee consultation on diversity in local government

The Electoral Commission welcomes the Committee's decision to revisit this area, building on the work carried out by the Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee in the Fifth Senedd.

We have set out some information below, in line with the relevant headings from the 2019 report, which we hope will be helpful.

Bullying, discrimination and harassment

- As part of our post-poll reporting following the May 2022 local elections, we ran a candidate survey. The survey included questions relating to abuse and harassment experienced by candidates, and received 162 responses.
- 3 in 5 candidates who responded to our survey (60%) said that they did not have a problem with threats, abuse or intimidation, but 40% experienced some kind of problem and 8% experienced a serious problem.¹
 - Of those that said they experienced some kind of abuse, the most common sources were verbal (69%) and online (46%).
 - Over two thirds (69%) said the abuse they experienced came from members of the public. Almost 2 in 5 (39%) said they received abuse from other candidates, while 15% received threats or abuse from campaigners or volunteers
 - 16% witnessed threats or intimidation towards those campaigning on their behalf.
 - Of those who experienced or witnessed abuse, 15% said they reported it to the police, and almost a fifth who experienced threats or abuse said that their experience would discourage them from standing in the future.

¹ Over 3,000 candidates stood for election across Wales in 2022. Our survey received 162 responses from across all 22 local authorities, with 143 respondents answering the question on abuse. Candidates were asked: "On a scale of 1-5, with 1 being no problem at all and 5 being a serious problem, how much of a problem, if any, did you have with threats, abuse or intimidation in this election?" Respondents who rated their experience as a 2 or above were counted as having experienced threats, abuse, or intimidation. Respondents who rated their experience as a 4 or above were counted as having experienced a serious problem.

- We also received information from the four police Single Points of Contact (SPOCs) in Wales regarding issues experienced during the election period. It was reported that some candidate behaviour was poor, particularly on social media.
- The SPOCs have proposed that they, on behalf of the police forces in Wales, create some guidance for candidates and campaigners on expectations around behaviour during an election period, and that this should be provided to all candidates as part of the nomination process. This new guidance would sit alongside the resources already available on the College of Policing website relating to candidates, and the Code of Conduct for campaigners.
- We will work with the relevant police forces and SPOCs in the development and support of this material. We will also work with the Welsh Government and the wider electoral community to ensure we understand what is driving candidate abuse and intimidation, and to develop effective responses to protect candidates and campaigners at future elections.

Education system

- Following the extension of the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds in Wales, we have continued our work to help young people understand how to engage in the democratic process.
- Our reports on the 2021 Senedd and 2022 local government elections in Wales found that approximately 50% of young people were registered to vote. We recommended that further education and engagement is needed to support newly enfranchised voters to understand and participate in Welsh elections.
- We continue to develop our education materials and support for teachers to address this with support from key partners, the Welsh Government and the Senedd Commission. We have also been working with the Democracy Box, a youth-led organisation, to gain feedback from young people on our current resources and future plans.
- A sample of schools in Wales have also been taking part in a pilot project we developed to run a school referendum on a topic of interest to the pupils – this forms part of a new scheme of resources we’re working on to support the new curriculum.

Access to Elected Office Fund

- We welcomed the decision to pilot the Access to Elected Office Fund at the 2021 and 2022 elections, and we support the intention to establish the fund on a permanent basis.
- We are supportive, in principle, of plans to extend the remit of the fund to include wider underrepresented groups. However, it would be useful to hear further detail from the Welsh Government about what this might look like and how it would ensure the fund is resourced adequately to support a potentially larger number of applicants.
- Our survey of candidates following the 2022 local elections suggests that more can be done to raise awareness of the Access to Elected Office Fund, with less than a third of respondents (29%) suggesting they were aware of the fund. We recommend that the Welsh Government takes appropriate steps to increase public awareness of the fund ahead of the next scheduled elections in 2026 and 2027.