

Diversity in local government

Summary of engagement

15 June 2023

1. As part of the Local Government and Housing Committee's inquiry into diversity in local government, two online focus groups were held on Thursday, 11 May 2023.
2. Contributors were recruited via the Head of Democratic Services at each of the 22 local authorities across Wales, with support from the Welsh Local Government Association.
3. Contributor composition varied with contributions received from eleven councillors across four Senedd regions – Mid and West Wales, North Wales, South Wales Central and South Wales East.
4. The political affiliation of contributors also varied, with contributions received from Conservative, Green Party, Independent, Labour, Liberal Democrat and Plaid Cymru councillors.
5. Five contributors were first elected in 2017, with a further five elected for the first time in 2022. One contributor was first elected during a by-election in 2021.
6. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the programme of engagement.
7. The following matters were explored with contributors.

Diversity and progress over the past five years

8. Initial discussion during both focus groups concentrated on what diversity meant to contributors, both in the context of local government and in broader terms.

“... for me diversity is also not just about being able to represent a community but it's also about not having any barriers for anyone that



may be fairly unique in their community from being able to step forward and being part of their administration.”

Focus group 2, Monmouthshire.

“I think a really important part around the diversity and democracy agenda is saying, yes, we have to represent or reflect our communities on the whole, but we have to be very open to thinking about those people who have those less common characteristics and traits and keeping an open mind and ensuring that they’re not forgotten about. I think that’s tremendously important – it’s about having an open mind and being tolerant and promoting that respect for diversity.”

Focus group 2, Conwy.

- 9.** Whilst most contributors acknowledged that some progress had been made to improve diversity in local government over the past few years, several contributors did not feel that the make-up of councillors in their local authority reflected the diversity of the communities they serve.

“Just having a gender balance is not enough . . . we need a diversity of lived experiences. We don’t have any Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic people on our county council. We have very few openly disabled councillors and only one openly LGBT councillor. I think that’s really poor and I want to see us do an awful lot better. . . We need to do much more work to show that all these different people from different protected characteristics belong in the chamber.”

Focus group 1, Monmouthshire.

“. . . it’s really important that we as a council, as Carmarthenshire Council, or every council we have in Wales reflects the people we have in the community and I do feel that in the county, we do not, as a council, reflect our community properly . . . We don’t have one person of colour on the council . . . before the last election, we had two women from Llanelli from BAME backgrounds. We don’t have anyone now. We only have a small number of young people and that is something I think we need to discuss because we’re not pulling our young people into politics. Definitely not to the county council and we don’t have anyone on the county council that’s disabled either.

Focus group 2, Carmarthenshire.

10. Contributors reflected upon the composition of councillors within their local authority area, with some explaining that initiatives to increase diversity had been effective to a degree, but believed there to be scope for developing further.

"It really has improved in terms of gender equality in Monmouthshire, no doubt about it. A significant reason for that was because the leader of the Tories and the leader of the Labour group agreed they would set a target of 50% women for the next council, and they achieved it. . . The fact that we have an 'Access to Elected Office' Fund which has supported disabled people to office - I'm really supportive of this fund. It was only for disabled people, but I would like to see that expanded to other protected characteristics potentially, because women face more barriers to standing and if you're a disabled woman as well and a woman of colour, that's even worse."

Focus group 1, Monmouthshire.

Barriers to standing as a councillor

11. Contributors shared both personal and anecdotal accounts of the barriers experienced when standing for election. These barriers can be summarised as follows.

Lived experience

12. Some contributors were keen to emphasise that whilst ensuring individuals with protected characteristics are encouraged to stand for election, those with lived experience had invaluable insight to share, but are often overlooked.

13. Discussion on the need to harness the contributions of those with lived experience was often interlaced with a recognition that certain social classes and those in certain circumstances (for example, individuals with inflexible employment and/or caring responsibilities) face a unique set of barriers to standing for elected office.

"... the one thing we haven't talked about is class and it is poverty, and it is the ability to afford to be a councillor. One of the things that has absolutely shocked me in my first year is the hostility of certain groups within the public who think that county councillors should not

be paid, that we're all useless and if we're going to do it, we should do it for love . . . This is a really important issue for us as another member of our Labour group was a frontline carer doing shift work. She absolutely could not put that with her council work, so because of the small amount that we get she was able to cut down her shifts and just work in the day, so she wasn't constantly exhausted. She is an incredible asset to our Labour group and to the council because of her lived experience that she brings to the role, so I think class and pay are really important for us to investigate."

Focus group 1, Conwy.

"I think the political system entertains a certain class certainly, and makes it easier, whereas much more of the population who probably can't afford to do the number of voluntary hours that you need to get elected due to caring responsibilities and things, they don't put themselves forward. . . We talked about ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and migrant populations; they simply won't be able to afford the time a campaign would require. It's a choice between giving that voluntary time and putting that food on a plate for the family."

Focus group 1, Cardiff.

"With work commitments there is a diversity issue here. . . if you're from a more privileged position or occupation where you've got the flexibility to work part-time or to be flexible in your working, it's good. It's not just part-time because you've actually got to be flexible in your hours because meetings happen all over the week. . . but if you're in a less professional role and whether your family is more in need of your income, then actually your availability to stand and to be a councillor is reduced and I think that's a real issue."

Focus group 2, Monmouthshire.

Social media abuse

14. The impact of social media abuse on councillors and those considering standing for election was discussed at length during focus group 2. Due to time constraints, this was not explored to the same degree during focus group 1, although one written contribution was received by a contributor via e-mail.

"One of the things I think is a particular barrier for women is online abuse and you know if you put yourself up for this role or any role, you are opening yourself up to at best, some very negative tweets and at worst, death threats. I think until that issue is grasped and dealt with, you're still going to get people questioning, really thinking hard, women especially, and worse for disabled women and women of colour. And you're going to get your family questioning you - are you sure you want to do this? That's a significant barrier that I don't think anyone has managed to grasp yet."

Focus group 1, Monmouthshire.

"The risk of having social media trolling is probably quite off putting but I'm afraid I think it is something that's always going to happen and will happen as long as you have social media that people can access."

Focus group 2, Conwy

Attracting young councillors

15. A number of contributors during both focus groups discussed the need for attracting a younger demographic of councillor, but explained that issues concerning remuneration and employment were often challenging for younger people considering standing for election.

"I don't think there's any specific barriers that I've experienced. Anecdotally, but this is happening less and less as time goes by, I feel I might make contributions that are overlooked or not taken seriously because I'm young."

Focus group 2, Conwy.

"I do think with regards to young people, the remuneration - you have to work. You're never going to earn enough money as a county councillor to give up your job and I think that's the problem with young people which is why I didn't do it until my girls had gone through university. . . I wasn't in a position to stand for council before that . . . so I think that is something we need to address at some point. If you want young people, and have a younger demographic within the council then we have to somehow - I don't know . . . people don't

want to pay councillors and that's fine but then you're only going to get people of a certain age that are able to do it."

Focus group 2, Carmarthenshire.

"It would help but I think it's very politically difficult so I don't think I'd advocate for more money but there is an issue about how we could make it work for young people because obviously they may not be getting the salary and they may have to have other jobs, but they're also getting potentially career development through this so it's about looking at what the other non-financial benefits they might be getting."

Focus group 2, Monmouthshire.

Support for independent councillors

16. The role of independent councillors was also discussed, with one independent councillor explaining that the level of support, particularly upon being elected, was often lacking.

"Not knowing enough about what the role was because I'm independent and I don't have a party standing behind me to help. Advertising, walking around and delivering leaflets, having them printed and done by me and paid for by me. I was just lucky that the ex-councillor helped me a little bit as he was retiring. I am dyslexic and I didn't feel I got a great amount of help from the council itself. . . A better packet of what the role involves would be a good idea because if you're coming in blind, it's difficult."

Focus group 1, Powys.

"I have really wondered in my first year here, how independents manage because my support network is my family but also my party. I would find it really hard to have gone through this steep learning curve without their support and a bit of a fast track from people with experience."

Focus group 1, Conwy.

Awareness

17. Some contributors explained that a lack of awareness amongst the general public regarding the responsibilities of councillors often contributed to misconceptions about the role, which were largely negative.

"I think for me, the biggest barriers are about perceptions, and I think for me, what would really help is probably two areas. One is actually if the public had a greater understanding of what councillors do and what the roles and responsibilities of councillors are, because the level of civic education in this country is appalling and people have very little idea. So, I think if there was more profile, more understanding, more visibility of what councillors do, that would be really helpful.

And then if we're looking at the diversity issue, more visibility of councillors who are under-represented . . . so that people can see themselves in a council chamber somewhere and think, 'yeah ok, that person's like me.' Whether it's because of their ethnicity, their gender or their gender identity, or their physical ability or characteristics, then that might also encourage them to think 'yes, I see myself doing that role.'"

Focus group 2, Monmouthshire.

Solutions

18. Contributors discussed possible solutions to some of the barriers raised. The level of support for each of these solutions varied amongst contributors.

Mentoring programmes and the Access to Elected Office Fund

19. Contributors shared largely positive views of initiatives already established to promote and enable greater diversity among those standing for elections. However, some were keen to emphasise that these schemes can only be effective as part of a suite of initiatives to mitigate barriers, and should not be considered the panacea for resolving all issues associated with diversity in local government.

"I've personally found mentoring programmes incredibly helpful. . . But mentoring programmes can only do so much. They can create the pipeline, but a woman might go on a mentoring programme then 5 or 6 years later be convinced to stand. It's not like a magic bullet. It's

not going to make everyone stand straight away. Their circumstances might stop it."

Focus group 1, Monmouthshire.

20. When discussing the Access to Elected Office Fund, some contributors revealed they were unaware of the Fund and called for greater promotion.

"There is a piece of work to do in the county council so that people know that these programmes are available for people to use, because I didn't know about them."

Focus group 2, Carmarthenshire.

"I'm not actually aware of anyone that's applied to it. I don't know if it's ignorance on my part, but I'm not aware of anyone who accessed it."

Focus group 2, Conwy.

Gender quotas

21. Gender quotas was proposed as a solution by some contributors, although support was not universal, with one contributor sharing a contrary view.

"I think that one of the most important ways we can help get more diverse councils and Senedd is gender quotas. A hundred countries around the world use gender quotas and I'm a firm believer in them. All those countries are at the top level in terms of representation of women . . . I think all political parties should have really strong diversity strategies and those should be required to be laid down before an election. The reason I say this, and the reason I say about quotas is because some political parties are much better than others at promoting women and selecting women. . ."

Focus group 1, Monmouthshire.

"I personally don't think quotas is the way . . . I didn't want to be a tick box, I wanted to be there on my own merit and I didn't want anyone to say that I only got there because of women on these shortlists. That wasn't what I wanted to promote. It has to be the right people. You can't be there just because you're a woman or you're of colour. . ."

Getting the wrong people holding positions doesn't do anyone any favours. They don't portray those positive images of those communities. So it's important that we get the right people in but the main thing is encouraging people to stand."

Focus group 1, Cardiff.

Job sharing

22. Job sharing was discussed in positive terms, subject to some modification, during both focus groups.

"The final thing I'd like to mention as I'm part of the job share in my cabinet role is that job shares are a really good thing at local government level and it's enabled me to be a cabinet member and get some experience, and I'm a brand new councillor so it's really good as a job share. We learn off each other and it makes the role more manageable if you're working as well. So I'm a firm believer in job share. But the one issue with job share is I think sometimes your cabinet colleagues don't realise you are a job share and that should mean I don't have to turn up to every single meeting because we're supposed to be able to divvy up those responsibilities and communicate with each other."

Focus group 1, Monmouthshire

Hybrid meetings

23. Contributors were predominantly positive about the advantages associated with hybrid meetings, explaining that it often allowed those with accessibility requirements and caring responsibilities to contribute. However, some contributors emphasised the need for caution, particularly with regard to levels of conduct during hybrid meetings.

"I do not deny the fact that hybrid is sometimes not as productive as in the room, however it still allows people who have a caring responsibility, whose got young children, if they really, really want to be part of the meeting so they can join as well."

Focus group 2, Cardiff.

"I'm quite conflicted on hybrid meetings but if I were forced to say whether I support them, I probably do having benefitted from the ability to join meetings first hand. I think the concerns I would have are around conduct in hybrid meetings and this is talking from my personal experience – when you're expected to attend a chamber people tend to adhere to certain levels of conduct. What I find is that whenever we get people dialling in to meetings the levels of conduct seem to be below what should be expected and I think that's a real disappointment. . ."

Focus group 2, Conwy.

Barriers to political career progression

24. Several contributors discussed barriers they have faced thus far during their political careers, with some contributors explaining that challenging certain norms is important if we are to encourage greater diversity.

"Being a woman of colour, there are stereotypical views that are often held, and you're kind of battling those things and you can feel certain vibes and low expectations of you. It gives me great pleasure to prove them wrong. . . There are certain systems in place that have been there for centuries and changing those to shape it, to be representative of the community we represent now, it takes some persuading."

Focus group 1, Cardiff.

"We still have prayers before full council meetings. We still have throughout politics, we have a role called whip. For somebody with a colonial past and a member of politically black groups; are we really going to be whipped? This is a very political point I guess. It brings back connotations of slavery for some of us. The language, prayers, culture, the chairman – I've even been called madam chairman. I challenge and call out at every opportunity."

Focus group 1, Conwy.