



CYNGOR
monmouthshire
COUNTY COUNCIL
sir fynwy

John Griffiths MS
Chair
Local Government and Housing Committee
Senedd Cymru
Cardiff
CF99 1SN

Monday 21st August 2023

Dear John,

Re: Diversity In Local Government

I have followed your committee's enquiry into diversity in local government with interest and I'm grateful for the opportunity to provide written evidence on our experiences in Monmouthshire.

It is a source of pride that Monmouthshire was the first council in Wales to have a 50:50 gender balance following the 2022 elections and, following a by-election in October 2022, is Wales' first ever female majority council. The two main groups both have 55% female councillors – 12 out of 22 in the Welsh Labour group and 10 out of 18 in my Welsh Conservative group.

I have always had an interest in the politics of representation. In 2008, for my master's dissertation I wrote a critical analysis of the position of women in the Welsh Conservative Party. I believe there's a copy of it somewhere in the depths of the National Library. At that time, the Conservatives had 17 female MPs in the UK and the Welsh Conservatives had never elected a female MP. At the then most recent Assembly election the party had been 98 votes away from being an all-male group for the second term and only 26% of Welsh Conservative councillors were women. It was an interesting time to write about diversity in the party as David Cameron was introducing a number of reforms to broaden the party's appeal. In the years that followed the little progress that was made in Wales was sadly not sustained. 14 years on, just 28% of Welsh Conservative councillors are women.

In May 2021, having served as a county councillor and cabinet member for four years, I was elected Leader of Monmouthshire County Council. At the time, many Welsh councils were still dominated by older white men, with several councils having as few as three women on the entire authority – that's three more than they would've had nearly 2,000 years ago when the Romans introduced the first form of local government in Wales.

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I appointed Monmouthshire's first female Deputy Leader, Sara Jones, herself a champion and role model for women in public life, as part of Monmouthshire's first gender balanced cabinet. Having been a critic of the lack of progress on diversity in my own party and finding myself in a leadership position, I felt determined to try to make progress. At the first full council meeting after my election, I brought forward the following motion and asked opposition leaders for their support:

This Council:

- *Recognises that a more representative council is better equipped to reflect the views and experiences of the residents of our county.*
- *Regrets that in Wales only 28% of councillors are women and no local authority has ever achieved a 50:50 gender balance.*
- *Welcomes the improvement in female representation amongst Monmouthshire councillors to 35% in 2017.*
- *Resolves that all four political groups will take steps to help Monmouthshire County Council become the first local authority in Wales to achieve gender parity in 2022.*

I had discussed with the WLGA their template motion for councils to self-define as 'diverse councils' but I wanted to make a clearer commitment that we were going to aim for gender parity. It could be said that 'take steps' was a weak wording, but I had no authority to dictate to political parties what those steps should be and I knew they would vary. Gender quotas or any form of positive discrimination were never a realistic option for my party, but my understanding of the steps taken by Welsh Labour is that they were more prescriptive and ruled that all retirement seats had to be reserved for female candidates. I am not aware of any steps taken by either the Liberal Democrat or Independent groups.

Sara Jones and I had already been headhunting potential candidates for the forthcoming election and while we adopted an informal target of 50% female candidates, we did not know if or how it would be met. This target focussed the minds on a shared goal, although it's fair to say that beyond my group, reaction to our target was more mixed. Some in my own party felt our target was unmeritocratic, that it risked prioritising gender over talent and that we should simply allow 'the cream to float to the top'. I think that had we sacrificed calibre it would have completely undermined the argument for diversity. Each of my colleagues was selected on merit and I now have a very high calibre team, which is better equipped to undertake our roles because of the diversity of gender, age and background.

As Conservative group leader, I had a seat on my local party's candidate approval committee but in a non-voting capacity. Selections were undertaken by local branches in online meetings (as we were still mid-pandemic) or by a county-wide electoral college. Therefore, I and those who supported the goal of 50% female candidates had limited influence over the selection process. So our roles were focussed on headhunting, mentoring, supporting and advising female candidates to give them the best chance of being selected for a winnable seat.

The process brought home to me the additional barriers that women face in seeking elected office. In the early stages, we spent a lot of time meeting potential candidates and explaining what was involved in being a county

councillor. A number of potential candidates withdrew due to pregnancy, while others had greater considerations to weigh up before committing.

For some of our female candidates the election was a particularly challenging period, as some tended to juggle more family and caring responsibilities. This was particularly difficult in single parent households and we tried to be as supportive as possible.

In the 2022 election, Monmouthshire had more female candidates than anywhere else in Wales as the Conservatives, Labour and the Greens all had 52% female candidates.

For me, the experience has proven that quotas, all-women shortlists and other forms of positive discrimination are not the only way to create greater diversity in local democracy. I believe the steps that we took in Monmouthshire to ensure we better reflect the electorate should be adopted in my own party in other areas and at other tiers of government.

However, the pace of change in Wales over the past 25 years has been far too slow. The longer we take to affect change, the longer council chambers will be doing a disservice to a large proportion of their local populations. While I still believe that positive discrimination can be patronising and can undermine politicians' credibility, I would urge those in positions of influence to act with greater urgency.

I think those in leadership positions in elected groups on councils and elsewhere as well as in political parties need to show greater leadership and get their whole teams focussed on a target or goal. Due to incumbency, for some councils it may take a few election cycles to get close to parity, but even small steps can help create a critical mass that could accelerate progress.

Thank you once again for the opportunity to share some experiences from Monmouthshire and I wish you and your committee members well with your deliberations.

If there's anything I can do to assist the committee, please do not hesitate to contact me. I will continue to follow your discussions with interest.

*Yours sincerely,
Richard.*

Richard John
Leader of the Welsh Conservative Group
Monmouthshire County Council