

DLG 25

Ymchwiliad i amrywiaeth ym maes llywodraeth leol

Inquiry into diversity in local government

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Cymreig y Gwasanaethau Ieuenctid Gwirfoddol

Response from: Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services

1. Introduction

The Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's Inquiry on Diversity in Local Government.

CWVYS is the independent representative body for the voluntary youth work sector in Wales and delivers against four main functions:

- National representation and strategic leadership for the voluntary youth sector (including brokerage, policy development, advocacy, shaping and influencing, strategic communications, raising the profile of voluntary youth services within Wales and internationally)
- Networking and regional partnership working (including brokering partnerships, regional representation, promoting the languages and cultures of Wales)
- Information sharing (including providing funding information and support, policy information, events)
- Promoting learning and good practice and facilitating research and evaluation (including good youth work practice and quality assurance, workforce development/training/accreditation, data collection and measuring social/economic impact)

We have entered into exciting times in terms of youth democracy, establishing firm foundations for future generations to be informed, educated and inspired by democratic participation.

The newly established Welsh Youth Parliament brings together 60 diverse young people aged 11 – 18 years of age, to democratically vote on issues that will be presented for national debate. Young people can already participate in local democracy through youth forums and school councils, which feed into the Youth Parliament.

The introduction of votes for 16 year olds in local council elections, and their imminent inclusion into national politics, creates exciting opportunities to further develop young peoples formal education.

Through a number of CWVYS member organisations including EYST, Boys' and Girls' Clubs of Wales, Youth Cymru and UpRising Cymru, young people are being engaged in a variety of projects and initiatives to help them understand political processes, to receive mentorship and develop as leaders, and to be able to exercise their right to vote effectively.

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

- 2.1. The commitment to increase diversity within leadership and government generates enthusiasm for fairer representation. We might argue that our elected members and democratic institutions in Wales are not presently reflective of the constituents or communities they represent with regards to gender, age, race, disability, sexual orientation, faith and language.
- 2.2. The Electoral Reform Society (2018) report: 'New Voices: How Welsh politics can begin to reflect Wales', is positive in relation to gender i.e. that in both Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea, 42% of elected representatives are female. There are 1254 councillors in Wales, and just 349 female (28%). A number of local authorities remain 90% male, with two local authorities not having any female representation in their cabinet. So, although progress is being made, increasing the diversity of councillors appears to be a slow-moving process.
- 2.3. Councillors are elected to represent their local community, as a privileged form of public service, seeking to make a difference to the quality of peoples' lives. When positive role models from diverse cultural and social circumstances step into leadership roles, they can inspire and empower others, generating interest and participation in democracy. They can facilitate a better understanding between constituents and members, be better able to evidence and champion the needs of communities and increase cohesion.
- 2.4. A diverse mix of councillors can provide more grounded perspectives in debate, present more compelling arguments, and offer more precise scrutiny based upon authentic experiences. The dynamics of group decisions are greatly enhanced through alternative perspectives, experiences and skills, producing greater insight into community issues that lead to better solutions.
- 2.5. It is equally, if not more important, for councillors to actively seek the views of a diverse range of constituents to inform their decision-making. Councillors are advocates and champions of local people. Those marginalised or isolated by their circumstances have a right to be heard, understood, and have their views taken forward with fairness and understanding, irrespective of whether elected members share similar characteristics.

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

- 3.1. The demands of the role are considerable, balancing the needs and interests of local residents, the council and their respective political parties. The rigid, formal council structures make it difficult to manage education or work commitments, with little flexibility for family, childcare or caring responsibilities. Local councillors need to be a representative of a range of socio-economic backgrounds, yet the commitments, financial risks and constraints would exclude many with low incomes from considering the role.
- 3.2. The Electoral Reform Society (2018) recognised the institutional barriers to increasing diversity and reported that councillors in Wales are 'predominantly male, straight, middle-aged and white'. By increasing the diversity of councillors, the assertion of white, male privilege will decrease, and reduce the number of positions in local government available to men. If increasing diversity is perceived as ostracizing or threatening, then some local councils may not provide an environment where newly elected representatives feel accepted, respected or are retained. An organisational culture of an established 'old boys club', may be pervasively resistant to change.
- 3.3. A tension exists where initiatives to increase diversity appear reactive or tokenistic, as opposed to a component of systemic change. As a recent example, we are aware of the experience of a highly accomplished, young female of colour who withdrew her attendance as a speaker at a 'diversity in politics' event, as she considered as demeaning to merit an opportunity based upon deficits in representative characteristics. A number of initiatives in the lead up to elections have been experienced as tokenistic, seemingly used as a means of achieving positive publicity.
- 3.4. Knowledge of local government is limited, although young people in Wales have a better understanding through school councils and youth forums. Local government websites provide a range of information about the council, but not how to become a councillor. It is not clear where appointments are advertised, what the application process is, remuneration, access and support available. Whilst it is the responsibility of the political parties to implement good practice in recruitment, it is also the responsibility of local authorities to inform communities effectively, and equitable to those who may wish to stand independently.
- 3.5. Councillors are facing increasing challenges, expected to manage the impact of our changing society, with concerns and uncertainty about the Welsh/UK economy after Brexit. With the reduction or loss of services that people valued, and roll out of welfare reform there is incredible strain on vulnerable groups and deprived communities, generating new social issues and mental health concerns affecting every generation. There are widespread expressions of hopelessness, frustration and anger at the perceived, and real injustices being experienced.
- 3.6. There are expectations for councillors with digital literacy skills to have an active

presence on social media, which creates personal and professional anxieties. Social media has become a widely accepted tool to connect and engage with the public. However, meaningful online engagement takes consideration and time, and needs hyper vigilance to every comment or opinion expressed. Bullying can be as prominent a concern for adults as it is for children and young people, and can be particularly aggressive targeting public figures and officials, with public abuse described as a growing concern in the WLGA's 'Exit Survey' for councillors. The visibility of the role may deter people, not wishing to become a target for abuse, or subject their family and friends to negative attention.

3.7. Political figures throughout the UK are experiencing a particularly difficult relationship through the press and online information sharing, making the role unappealing. Negative media attention can tarnish reputations, creating public reactions, and changing perceptions of political institutions by association. Whilst the conduct of some national media outlets should be brought into question, the conduct of political figures and institutions, are under constant scrutiny. There is a growing mistrust around the integrity of political institutions, codes of conduct and political representatives being found guilty of criminal activities. A number of high profile cases have revealed how official roles have been exploited to gain access to children and young people. Whilst these represent a small number of isolated occurrences in Wales, there are public expectations that issues of integrity will be addressed with transparency, accountability, and reform where necessary.

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

4.1. Make the role of councillor visible and accessible as part of a long-term communication strategy to increase participation and diversity in democracy. Develop co-ordinated and consistent campaigns that can be communicated across sectors and networks, to ensure that potential community leaders are made aware of opportunities, and provided with adequate information. Local authorities already provide online information and could include resources such as the WLGA's 'Councillor Guides' that provide an understanding of the role, responsibilities and processes, presented in simple and concise terms. There are also resources provided through the Electoral Commission and One Voice Wales that could be utilised or adapted for universal audience. Identifying and celebrating positive role models whilst highlighting the impact they have made would be a worthwhile exercise.

4.2. Some local authorities are working successfully with political parties to increase representation whilst providing examples of good practice that can be shared

throughout Wales. Training and development may be needed for local councils to support them with organisational and cultural change. With future plans to reduce local authorities, and the number of councillors, there will be opportunities to review roles and implement measures that ensure our elected representatives are representative of our diverse communities.

- 4.3. There is considerable cross sector learning to draw upon. There are a number of ways that youth forums, school councils and youth organisations could link with local councils, through role shadowing, mentoring and skill exchanges, providing with opportunities to learn from each other. Elected councillors could act as political mentors and young people could share their skills as digital natives. 1.1 million 11-18 year olds took part in the UK Youth Parliament 'Make your Mark' ballot to decide on the issues for debate: 54,000 from Wales and over 13,400 young people from Cardiff, making it one of the largest youth consultations of its kind in UK history. Youth Cymru have also recently developed resources to increase participation in civic life as part of 'We are 100' focussing on the suffragette movement.
- 4.4. Learn from previous mentoring schemes such as Operation Black Vote, Diversity in Democracy, Chwarae Teg's 'LeadHerShip' programme, and new schemes such as EYST Wales 'Routes to Public Life' (supported by AMs, MPs and Chief Executives in the Third Sector) to establish an annual mentoring programme with local councils that includes placements for people from under-represented groups. Mentoring programmes can support people with advice and training to develop political skills. Role shadowing and council open days could be offered as introductory activities for people to consider the role before committing to the mentoring scheme or signing up as a candidate.
- 4.5. Develop engagement strategies to involve constituents in earlier stages of the decision making process, with a variety of ways to participate. Local councils are increasingly providing information online, yet there remain to be many individuals who feel digitally excluded, experiencing barriers related to poverty, capability or ability. Digital technology is a tool, but it is not inclusive, so in addition to online information and campaigns, engagement strategies could include: developing community ambassadors; developing a network of forums to consult with the community; as well as developing an online space for community debate linked to community events.
- 4.6. Westminster Government recently consulted on proposals to update the disqualification criteria for councillors and Mayors in line with modern sentencing practice and behaviours the public have a right to expect of the elected members that

represent them. Where behaviour has led to a conviction or enforcement action resulting in: the notification requirements in the Sexual Offences Act 2003; a Sexual Risk Order; a Civil Injunction; a Criminal Behaviour Order they will seek to legislate to ensure that they are disqualified from standing for office. Councillors and mayors in Wales are not required to undertake enhanced DBS checks unless they have contact mainly with vulnerable groups, or frequently visit settings where they have the opportunity for contact with vulnerable groups. A Welsh Government commitment to safeguarding measures for children, young people and vulnerable adults through enhanced DBS checks, would greatly engender levels of public confidence and trust.

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

- 5.1.** The intentions set out in the Welsh Government Green Paper 'Strengthening Local Government' provide an opportunity to reinvigorate local government. While it does not address diversity within local government directly, throughout the document there are solid statements surrounding the increase in support for councillors to undertake their role effectively and statements that councils will become more open, transparent and engage more citizens in their work.
- 5.2.** There is recognition of the commitment required to be a councillor, with aims to ensure they are properly remunerated, respected and recognised for the work they do in their communities. Any review of should include whether flexibility could be extended to formal meeting structures, to make them more accessible.
- 5.3.** The suggestion to increase the freedoms and powers of local government are mentioned a number of times throughout the green paper, and if this is achieved, it must not be at the expense of underrepresented groups or moves towards more diverse representation. However, with the potential creation of new merged authorities there are possibilities of establishing new practices: "Creating the new authorities provides an opportunity to reconfigure, redesign and transform service delivery across the range of local authority service areas".

Kathryn Allen
Vice-President
CWVYS