



ERS Cymru submission to Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee inquiry into diversity in local government

Introduction

Earlier this year ERS Cymru published 'New Voices' a report looking at the barriers to diversity across Welsh politics. The report examined UK Parliament, the Welsh Assembly and Welsh local government in turn, assessing the unique circumstances in each which halt gender equality and greater diversity generally being reached.

As part of this work on local government we have assessed the current makeup of Welsh local authorities, following last year's local elections, surveyed elected representatives in Wales with 224 councillors responding and undertook in depth interviews with key figures in local authorities in Wales, including Debbie Wilcox, Leader of Newport Council and the WLGA, Rodney Berman, Councillor and former Leader of Cardiff Council and Yvonne Jardine of Swansea Council.

The full report can be found here: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/new-voices-how-welsh-politics-can-begin-to-reflect-wales/>

1. Understanding the importance of diversity among local councillors, including the effect on public engagement, debate and decision making.

- 1.1. At present just 28% of Wales' councillors are women. In two local authorities in Wales there are no women at all in the cabinet. Only 30% of candidates in last year's election were women, with a third of wards having no women standing at all.¹
- 1.2. In our survey, which 224 councillors undertook we asked for a range of information including age, sexual orientation and ethnicity in addition to gender. 76.3% of those that took the survey were over the age of 45. 91% characterised themselves as white. 88.4% defined themselves as heterosexual or straight². While this is a relatively small sample of Wales' 1264 total councillors, it does paint a picture of a political culture in local government that is pale, male and stale.

¹ ERS Cymru. 2018. New Voices. Available at: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/new-voices-how-welsh-politics-can-begin-to-reflect-wales/#sub-section-8>

² *ibid.*

- 1.3. This creates a situation where local authorities are attempting to represent the people they serve while completely failing to reflect them. With all of the councils in Wales having a majority of men, with high rates of those white and middle aged or older there is a lack of diversity of experience and opinion. In the Vale of Glamorgan, for example, we must consider how a cabinet entirely made up of white, middle aged men can effectively make decisions which consider the perspective of, for example, women, people from ethnic minorities or young people. A multiplicity of voices and perspectives can only serve to improve the decision making processes of such a leadership team.
- 1.4. Furthermore, voters are offered a complete lack of choice. Given this it is unsurprising that at the 2017 election turnout was just 41% of registered voters.

2. **Understanding key barriers to attracting a more diverse pool of candidates for local government elections.**

- 2.1. The 'New Voices' report considered a number of barriers to better diversity in local government, including those that are specific to local government and those that are societal issues that put people of political office on a wider basis.
- 2.2. In terms of issues specific to local government, we have identified the following as key barriers to diversity:
 - **A lack of positive action-** Across politics and specifically in local government it is clear that a lack of parties working to specific targets and quotas is a fundamental barrier to greater diversity. In the Welsh Assembly in particular methods such as all women shortlists and twinning have been used to great effect, with the Assembly becoming the first legislature in the world to reach gender parity in 2003. While this is now at around 43% the fact that this is largely due to the electoral fortunes of those parties that do use positive action highlights the impact that this does have. Unless these methods are adopted in local government on a cross party basis, there will be little change to the current stasis.
 - **A lack of data-** To be able to effectively correct the issues we see around a lack of diversity we need to be able to better understand the scale of the problem. While the survey we conducted with councillors for the 'New Voices' report spoke to 224 councillors to understand the lack of diversity in Welsh politics, we must now look to ensure we receive a much fuller picture of exactly how diverse our local authorities are. For other elections could be done by the UK Government implementing Section 106 of the Equality Act, however political will to do this is, at this point in time, lacking. It is also worth noting that the legislation doesn't include local government.
 - **The voting system-** Using the first past the post system in any election creates a situation where safe seats are created that councillors can essentially hold onto until they wish to stand down. Our research in Parliament has shown the vast impact of this, with 80% of the Welsh MPs elected in 2010 or before that still hold their

seats being male³. The same principle applies in local government. While parties may put an emphasis on selecting more diverse candidates to stand in vacant seats, it is those that have been held by the same person for years where a lack of diversity will persist.

- **The role of a councillor-** A fundamental reason for the lack of diversity in local government is the role of the job. The role of a councillor as essentially a part time job, with many meetings in evenings is a specific barrier to diverse candidates, in particular women, standing for election. Debbie Wilcox, Leader of Newport Council, spoke to us extensively on this issue for our 'New Voices' report stating:

"When I started on the council and I was working full time as a teacher it was really impossible to try and get to some of these meetings that were held at 10 o'clock in the day [AM]. I've helped to change that over the years. For example, main council now begins at 5 o'clock [PM]... my own cabinet meeting, it used to be that you would have a pre-cabinet at 9 o'clock on a Monday morning and the public meeting at eleven. Well, I have switched that so now on a Monday we have pre-cabinet at half past four so I can have cabinet members who work. And then we have public cabinet then on Wednesday at 4 o'clock. So its about moving meetings. Again there is ups and downs with that. Some women tell me that's when the kids get home from school, that's when we have got to get tea sorted and get them onto their clubs and whatever so there is no perfect solution but moving meetings around, and we will develop more Skype and technology in the future. It's still rudimentary at the moment but that would be a way forward so you can actually attend a meeting without actually physically being in a place"

The Welsh Government have promoted greater flexibility for local authorities, with each council now having to survey their members for the best meeting times for them. However, with such a dominance of men in local authorities, the voices of women with childcare obligations are often minimised.

2.3. In terms of the wider societal barriers to greater diversity in local government our 'New Voices' report identified a number of barriers:

- **Abuse and harassment-** The levels of abuse and harassment we uncovered in the process of pulling together our report were shocking and disturbing. Across the political spectrum we heard stories of sexual and racist abuse, online threats and in person harassment. Of the 266 politicians that responded to our survey 45% overall had experienced abuse or harassment. In women this was 54%. These levels of abuse raise the question of why someone, especially someone from a diverse background, would want to put themselves forward for election given the kinds of abuse they are likely to face.
- **Financial barriers-** There are financial implications of standing for election, even at a council level. While we tend to talk about the cost

³ *Ibid*, subsection 9: <https://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/latest-news-and-research/publications/new-voices-how-welsh-politics-can-begin-to-reflect-wales/#sub-section-9>

of standing for Parliament or the Assembly many councillors will see implications on other jobs or the ability to do other jobs restricted upon election. For people with childcare commitments having an existing full time or part time job, then adding the role of a councillor on top of that and childrearing adds fundamental strain to an individual.

3. To explore areas of innovation and good practice that may help increase diversity in local government.

3.1. We have a number of recommendations, which we believe would increase diversity in local government and tackle some of the barriers we have identified in section 2. These are outlined below:

- Welsh Government should introduce a 45% quota for women for each party at local government elections, meaning that at least 45% of their candidates should be female. While the issue of how to enforce a quota for independent candidates remains a problem, this would at the very least fundamentally increase the levels of women standing for, and getting elected to councils in Wales.
- Measures should be put in place to encourage a broader range of candidates from ethnic minorities, age spread and those with disabilities alongside ways to monitor the development of this. While the implementation of Section 106 remains the best way to ensure data on this is collected for other elections we believe this should also be rolled out in time to local government. In the absence of this being enacted and extending to local government, each party should ask candidates to fill out an equalities monitoring form upon selection and every party should make the headline figures of their candidates public in a standardised format to allow the progress of parties to be compared fairly. Each local authority should then publish a complete report of their makeup after each election.
- Council leaders should be held to account by Welsh Government if they fail to select councillors who are diverse for their leadership teams.
- Welsh Government should commission a review into councillor remuneration, which should include an analysis of the potential for fewer councillors at a higher salary. The two barriers of the part time nature of a councillor and the financial implications could possibly be overcome by the remodelling of the role of a councillor. We would urge this to be looked into by Welsh Government.
- A proportional electoral system should be introduced for local elections in Wales, to ensure greater representation of people's views at the ballot box but also to reduce the levels of 'seatblocking' where men have held council seats for generations acting as a barrier to diversity.
- The Welsh political parties should develop a joint code of conduct on intimidatory behaviour in attempt to tackle the abuse and harassment councillors are seeing. Better training and guidance to candidates on

social media abuse should also be offered, as was also recommended by the CSPL last year.

- Job sharing, while being trialed currently in some local authorities in Wales, should be rolled out on a wider basis. In Swansea there are currently two shared Cabinet roles⁴. More options like this would make the role of a councillor easy to juggle for those with other commitments, while not holding them back from reaching leadership roles.

4. Exploring the potential impact of the proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, Strengthening Local Government to increasing diversity in Council chambers.

- 4.1. ERS Cymru welcomed many of the proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, Strengthening Local Government, however as reform in local government currently stands there are gaps where measures to increase diversity could be included.
- 4.2. We would urge the Welsh Government to consider legislating on some of the recommendations outlined in section 3 when it presents the Local Government Bill, due for publication in early 2019. The specific recommendations we believe would be suitable for inclusion include; quotas ensuring political parties take measures to boost gender diversity, and action around completely undiverse council cabinets. We also believe that there is a need to look at the legislative arrangements of job sharing. Furthermore, the Welsh Government should review remuneration and the role of councillors.

For further inquiries please contact:
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⁴ Swansea Cabinet. 2018. Available at: <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/Cabinet>