

Diversity in local government

June 2023

Introduction

Chwarae Teg is Wales' leading gender equality charity. We work to secure a fairer Wales where all women achieve and prosper, ensuring that women enjoy economic equality, are fairly represented in all walks of life and are no longer at risk of poverty, violence and exclusion.

We know that representation matters. Having diverse voices in the room means that different issues get discussed and that different perspectives are considered. Nowhere is this more important than in politics and public life, where decisions are taken that affect our day-to-day lives. Despite some improvement, women's representation in local government remains stubbornly low. There is a need to adopt a more well-rounded approach to supporting individuals from underrepresented groups to stand in local government elections.

Key messages

1. Improvements in diversity at the local government level remain stubbornly slow. Whilst the increase of women councillors at the most recent local government elections is welcome, this appears to have been more by accident than by design. The slow pace of improvement emphasises the need to re-examine all of the factors which influence an individual's decision to stand for election and what practical support is needed.
2. Data collection and reporting continues to be a major challenge in respect of diversity in local government. There are no robust data sets that provide an accurate picture of the diversity of those standing and those elected to local government in Wales. While there is a need for the UK Government to enact section 106 of the Equality Act 2010, the Welsh Government must look at what else it can do to ensure we have an accurate picture of the diversity of Wales' councillors.

Detailed Response

1. To assess progress made to improve diversity in local government since passing the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 and any tangible impact on candidates standing for election.

- 1.1. While the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 has brought in a number of changes to the way that local authorities are run and the administration of local

elections, it is still too early to see whether the Act has had a tangible impact on the diversity of candidates standing for local election.

- 1.2. Although the proportion of women elected to Wales' local authorities increased at elections in May 2022, it is not clear the extent to which this can be attributed to the 2021 Act.
 - 1.2.1. In May 2022, 36% of councillors elected were women compared to 28% in May 2018's local elections¹.
- 1.3. While the increase in women elected last year is welcome, we are still a long way from achieving gender parity in local government. Only two local authorities out have achieved gender parity – Monmouthshire and the Vale of Glamorgan. While both of these areas should be praised and examined for best practice, it's likely that the outcomes in these authorities can be attributed more to local factors and the actions of local political parties, than provisions of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021.
- 1.4. A lack of reliable data makes evaluation of the impact of the 2021 Act on the diversity of candidates incredibly challenging.
 - 1.4.1. While the Welsh Government published the Local Government Candidates Survey: 2022² in March of this year, the response rate for the survey was low and as such does not show a fully-rounded picture of diversity in local government.
 - 1.4.2. Furthermore, as the survey is voluntary, response rates across Wales vary widely, with 40% of candidates in Merthyr Tydfil completing the survey compared to just 1% of candidates in Anglesey.³ This inevitably makes it challenging to have an accurate picture of diversity in local government.
 - 1.4.3. Further to the Local Government Candidates Survey, organisations such as ourselves have sought to compile a list of successful candidates following the May 2022 elections to determine the proportion of women councillors in Wales. This in an imperfect exercise, however, as it has been necessary to assume individual's gender based on their name.
 - 1.4.4. In order to evaluate the success of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 in diversifying local government, there is a need for data to be collected regularly and held centrally in order to have an accurate picture of diversity.
- 1.5. Additionally, while we were aware that Powys had made use of the 2021 Act's provision for job sharing amongst cabinet members⁴, we are unaware of the provisions being used in other local authorities. It would be helpful to have a central database

¹ Chwarae Teg (2023) *State of the Nation: Five Year Review*

² Welsh Government (2023) Local Government Candidates Survey: 2022 Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/local-government-candidates-survey-2022> [Accessed 2 May 2023]

³ Welsh Government (2023) Local Government Candidates Survey: 2022 Available from: <https://www.gov.wales/local-government-candidates-survey-2022> [Accessed 2 May 2023]

⁴ Powys County Council (2022) *New Cabinet announced* Available from: <https://en.powys.gov.uk/article/12751/New-Cabinet-announced> [Accessed 25 May 2023]

where best practice can be shared to further encourage the use of job-share as a way of opening up leadership opportunities in local government, alongside wider work to encourage local government leaders to utilise provisions for job sharing to encourage greater diversity in cabinet.

2. To consider the progress in implementing the recommendations in the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee’s 2019 report on diversity in local government.

- 2.1. While it is clear that some of the Committee’s recommendations from 2019 have been implemented, it is hard to ascertain whether all have been implemented and how successful implementation has been.
- 2.2. For the purposes of evaluating the implementation of the Committee’s previous report, we have grouped relevant recommendations.

Remote attendance and use of technology

- 2.3. Most of the Committee’s recommendations in respect of attendance at formal council meetings and the use of technology were impacted by the Covid pandemic which required a fundamental shift in how local authorities conducted business.
- 2.4. We welcome provisions of the 2021 Act that require remote attendance at formal council meetings to be available to all elected representatives.
- 2.5. While these provisions are vital to ensuring that elected members can attend meetings remotely, there is also a need to address culture within local government to ensure that individuals who would prefer to attend remotely are empowered to make that choice and do not feel that they must attend in person.

Job-sharing

- 2.6. We welcome provisions within the 2021 Act to allow for job-sharing between executive members.
- 2.7. While we are aware of the initial example in Powys⁵, we are unclear the extent to which local authorities are making use of job-sharing as it is not readily listed by local authorities alongside their cabinet information. There is a need for Welsh Government and the WLGA to produce further guidance and support on the practicalities of job-sharing in local authorities to ensure that the provisions are utilised.
- 2.8. The Committee’s recommendations in respect of job-sharing between non-executive members has not been legislated for and we believe this to have been a missed opportunity to encourage more individuals to stand for elections to local government. We have previously called for job-sharing to be available for elected representatives to the Senedd⁶ and we would like to see this applied to Wales’ local authorities.

⁵ Powys County Council (2022) *New Cabinet announced* Available from: <https://en.powys.gov.uk/article/12751/New-Cabinet-announced> [Accessed 25 May 2023]

⁶ Chwarae Teg (2021) *Manifesto for an Equal Wales*

Diversity of candidates

- 2.9. Evaluating the diversity of candidates who stood for election in 2022 is extremely difficult due to the continued unavailability of robust data on who is standing. The lack of any requirement to collect and publish data on the diversity of candidates makes addressing the underrepresentation of many groups within local government a consistent challenge.
- 2.10. While we welcome the Welsh Government's work through the Diversity in Democracy workstream, and the Welsh Local Government Association's "Be a Councillor. Be the Change", campaign, it is difficult to determine the extent to which these initiatives have impacted on the diversity of those standing for election. It would be helpful to have access to a comprehensive evaluation of both the WLGA campaign and broader diversity in democracy workstream.
- 2.11. Whilst Chwarae Teg has not been actively involved in the Access to Elected Office Fund that has assisted disabled candidates to run for elected office, we understand that the scheme has been successful in increasing the number of disabled candidates at the 2022 local elections.
- 2.12. Furthermore, in respect of the establishment of mentoring and leadership programmes to support those from underrepresented group to stand in local government elections, while we are aware of some programmes around entering public life more broadly, we are unclear of specific programmes to support women into local government.
- 2.13. There remains a need to enact section 106 of the Equality Act 2010. While this has not been progressed by the UK Government, it is incumbent on the Welsh Government, especially in the context of upcoming Senedd reform, to explore more fully what options are available to Welsh Ministers to mandate the publishing of diversity data on those standing for election.

Social Media

- 2.14. Abuse directed towards women in public life continues to be a major issue that deters other women from standing for election. This is especially the case for disabled women and women from an ethnic minority background.
 - 2.15. While work has been undertaken in respect of social media by the WLGA and Electoral Commission, many of the issues faced by those standing for election in respect of social media are beyond their remit.
 - 2.16. Work should be undertaken to see if there are more innovative and active ways to shield candidates from the levels of abuse they receive through social media.
- 3. To explore research and analysis being undertaken by the Welsh Government, partner bodies and others on the diversity of candidates and outcomes following the 2022 local elections.**

3.1. Other than work undertaken shortly after the local elections to ascertain the proportion of women elected, we are unaware of any other research or data on the diversity of local councillors.

4. To examine schemes established to promote and enable greater diversity among those standing for election, including the Access to Elected Office Fund.

4.1. Multiple factors influence whether an individual stands for election. It is therefore essential that all schemes and strategies to encourage greater diversity amongst those standing for election address these often overlapping factors.

4.2. Providing mentoring opportunities and developing a greater awareness of the roles of elected representatives are important ways to ensure that women are empowered to make informed decisions about whether they would like to stand for election.

4.3. It is also vital that political parties take action themselves to ensure that they are doing all that they can in order to guarantee that politics is an inclusive place for women. This means adopting policies and procedures to ensure that unacceptable behaviour is called out and acted upon.

4.4. There is a need for political parties in Wales to examine more closely their selection processes and to ensure that they are not inadvertently discriminating against individuals from certain groups, either due to the design or application of selection processes.

4.5. Additionally, financial security continues to be a major factor that influences an individual's decision of whether to run for election or not. There continues to be a gap in provision to support individuals with the costs associated with standing for election.

4.6. The reported success of the Access to Elected Office Fund relates both to the financial support and mentoring. Subsequently, additional work should be completed to determine whether the same model should also be utilised for other underrepresented groups such as women and those from an ethnic minority.

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

5.1. Despite the increase of women elected at the last local elections, we are concerned that much of this was by accident rather than design. Improving representation of underrepresented groups at all levels of government is the responsibility of multiple actors and cannot be achieved by government alone.

5.2. In some areas, such as Monmouthshire, concerted efforts by local parties to encourage and support more women candidates across the county saw it become one of the first authorities in Wales to achieve gender parity.

5.3. Additionally, we are pleased to see the general improvement in the number of women either leading local authorities or holding cabinet positions.

5.4. While we welcome initiatives such as the WLGA's "Be a Councillor. Be the Change" campaign, which raise awareness of what being a councillor entails, we believe that

there is scope to examine whether the role of being a councillor is designed in way that supports greater diversity. Further work should be done to explore whether more fundamental change is needed to ensure that local government is as inclusive as it can be.

5.4.1. Evaluations should explore whether there is a need for term limits, what additional support carers and parents need in order to balance being a councillor alongside caring responsibilities, and whether current remuneration is sufficient.

5.4.2. Available international evidence⁷ also reveals that gender quotas have been a key tool in increasing the representation of women at the local government level and should be seriously explored by Welsh Government.

5.5. In the context of the slow improvement in diversity withing Welsh politics, it essential to explore what additional levers rest with the Welsh Government to support positive action to be used more widely by political parties and political institutions to quicken the pace of change.

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Who are we?

Our vision is for a fairer Wales where all women can achieve and prosper. Our mission is to inspire, lead and deliver gender equality in Wales.

Chwarae Teg is committed to a Wales where all women are represented, empowered and able to prosper at all levels in the economy and public life regardless of their background or social status.

Chwarae Teg is registered charity. Charity number: 1084466 – FAIRPLAY (Workforce) Ltd.



⁷ UN Women (2021) *Women's Representation in Local Government: A Global Analysis* Available from: <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-01/Womens-representation-in-local-government-en.pdf> [Accessed 31 May 2023]