

# Consultation on Diversity in Local Government by the Local Government and Housing Committee

*June 2023*

WEN Wales campaigns for change in [six key areas](#) including diverse and equal representation. We strongly believe in democratic leadership that represents the full diversity of the electorate in terms of gender and other protected characteristics, including representation of women who experience intersecting discrimination, such as disabled women, Black, Asian and minority ethnic women and LGBTQ+ women.

At the local government level, we have seen some improvements since the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee's inquiry on diversity in local government 2019 and the passing of the Local Government and Election (Wales) Act 2021. But we are still a far cry from a local government that fully reflects the communities it serves.

Overall, [36% of councillors](#) returned by the 2022 elections were women, an increase of 8% from 2017. Results vary greatly across different local authorities. While Monmouthshire and the Vale of Glamorgan became the first councils to achieve gender balance, women are still seriously underrepresented in other local authorities, with women's representation being as low as 18% in Ceredigion. There is a scarcity of reliable data on other protected characteristics, including on women who experience intersecting discrimination.

Overall, there were some positive impacts of recent initiatives, including the Wales Local Government Association's (WLGA) [Diversity in Democracy](#) programme. The programme saw councils across Wales adopt diversity declarations and action plans ahead of the 2022 elections, with some like Monmouthshire committing to [a gender parity target](#). The permanent enshrinement of remote working in the [Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Act](#) is another positive step that provides better access for women with caring responsibilities and disabled people. Yet, there is still much work left to do to ensure local authorities are representative of the communities they serve, not only in terms of gender but also for racialised, LGBTQ+ and disabled communities.

In terms of women's representation, results at the last election varied greatly [between different parties](#). Labour was leading the way with 44% of elected councillors being women, followed by the Liberal Democrats (35%), Plaid Cymru (34%), Conservatives (29%), Independents (26%) and the Green Party (25%). This shows that women's representation is highly dependent on the voluntary initiative of individual parties, such as Labour's use of all-women-shortlists. Such initiatives are crucial, and it is concerning that some parties still decide not to use them despite the abysmal underrepresentation of women and overall lack of diversity in their candidates. It clearly demonstrates that voluntary measures alone have failed to deliver diverse and equal representation and will be unable to ensure progress in a robust and long-term manner.

## Exploring areas of innovation and good practice that may help increase diversity in local government

### Quotas

We welcome the announcement from Welsh Labour and Plaid Cymru on gender quotas as part of Senedd reform. Research shows that gender quotas are the [single most effective tool](#) for increasing women's representation, and we strongly encourage their consideration at the

local government level. Globally, [intersectionally embedded quotas](#) are emerging as best practice to ensure diverse representation across different protected characteristics and ultimately the Welsh Government should work towards these as the gold standard. Still, quotas alone are no silver bullet and need to be part of wider toolkit to address the different obstacles women and other underrepresented groups face in politics. Below, we outline several measures and supporting evidence on their impact on increasing diversity in political representation.

## **Job-sharing**

Wider encouragement for job-sharing is imperative for helping more women and other marginalised groups into local politics. [Research by the Women's Equality Network Wales and Electoral Reform Society Cymru](#) reveals that job sharing is a key tool for improving diversity as it can lower barriers for women, disabled candidates, and other underrepresented groups facing barriers to election.

Executive job-sharing has already been successfully used in some council cabinets and encouraging its wider use by a range of elected members, not only women would have a big impact. Politicians with experience in job-sharing or diversity and equality have echoed these points, also suggesting that job-sharing can provide mentoring opportunities that enable candidates from underrepresented groups to progress into senior roles. In addition to job-share arrangements for executive or other senior roles, legislative options for the election of job-sharing candidates should be explored.

For constituents, job-sharing could deliver “two for the price of one” in terms of skills and experience and could enable members to retain better connections to their life outside the Senedd which can be relevant to scrutiny and representative work.

It is important that expectations around job-share working arrangements are communicated clearly across the Council environment. We have encountered reports of both job-sharing parties being expected to regularly attend the same meetings. Without these measures being understood and positively supported in a local authority's culture, there is a risk that people will be discouraged from using what they are fairly entitled to, as has been [previously reported](#) for claiming caring expenses.

## **Mentoring, coaching and support networks**

Creating a pipeline of candidates from underrepresented groups is key to improving diversity in local government. Community and voluntary organisations are important pools of prospective talent.

There are several support and mentoring programmes. The flagship [Equal Power Equal Voice](#) (EPEV) is a 9-month mentoring programme to increase diversity of representation in public and political life in Wales. It is a partnership between the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales, Stonewall Cymru, Disability Wales, and Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team (EYST) Wales. The programme is delivered through three primary strands: personalised one-to-one mentoring, training sessions and workshops, and peer-to-peer support. It provides a safe and supportive environment that successfully supports people from underrepresented groups towards realising their aspirations in the public and political spheres, including in local government. In 2022, out of nine mentees that stood for election, five were elected to local government in Wales.

In addition, [Chwarae Teg's LeadHerShip](#) day gives women aged between 16-22 the opportunity to shadow senior leaders in Wales and learn what life is like as a decision maker within Welsh Politics and the world of business. Fabian Women's Network also offers support, including a [mentoring and political education scheme](#), as do some Welsh Labour fora. The Conservatives' [Women2Win](#) scheme also successfully supports women candidates in public office. To attract and support candidates from diverse backgrounds, it is essential to expand and adequately resource schemes for mentoring, coaching & shadowing, both in the third sector and within political parties.

### **Access to elected office fund**

During the 2021 Senedd elections and the 2022 local government elections, the [Access to Elected Office pilot scheme](#) provided support to disabled candidates with the additional impairment related costs that are a barrier to their participation in politics. Following the successful pilot, the Welsh Government is currently [exploring options](#) for expanding the scheme to other underrepresented groups who are facing barriers to elected office.

We know that people who experience intersecting discrimination tend to face more obstacles to elected office, including financial ones. We therefore strongly believe that the fund should be made permanent in legislation and that it should be expanded to other underrepresented groups, including through covering costs associated with a candidate's caring responsibilities for children and adults. Despite making up around 52% of the populations, women continue to be underrepresented at all levels of Welsh politics and we know that caring responsibilities and the associated costs are a major factor in this. Caring responsibilities are also a key-factor in women's socio-economic disadvantage and the resulting [financial barriers to elected office](#), as can be seen from the fact that, between 2017 and 2020, almost half (46%) of single parents (who are mainly women) lived in poverty – twice as high as the overall poverty rate in Wales.

The [Electoral Reform and Administration White Paper](#) proposed a parameter for the Fund to “provide support for candidates from underrepresented groups.” This, in our view, is too limited because it could suggest that there is only a problem as long as these groups are numerically underrepresented in Welsh politics. This is not the case. Caring responsibilities, for instance, may well continue to present a barrier to elected office even when women are no longer underrepresented in politics. Support should be available for the costs for caring responsibilities irrespectively of whether the main beneficiaries of it (women) are underrepresented or not. This is also the case for impairment-related expenses as these costs are needed to address barriers to equal access for disabled people, and many of these may continue to exist even when disabled people are no longer underrepresented.

As the Access to Elected Office Fund is expanded, the Welsh Government should clarify that underrepresentation is only a symptom of inequality and that the need for support candidates with overcoming barriers to elected office may remain even when these groups are numerically no longer underrepresented. To achieve this purpose, we believe that the design of the Fund and the overall Diversity in Democracy work should tie in with wider strategic equality plans, such as the [Gender Equality Action Plan](#), the [Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan](#), the draft [LGBTQ+ Action Plan](#), and the [Locked Out report](#).

## Online abuse

Abuse of women and candidates from other underrepresented groups is a key barrier to elected office and with the rising importance of social media, it is increasing. In line with the proposal in the Electoral Reform and Administration White Paper, we agree that robust evidence to understand the magnitude, form, severity and impact of abuse is a crucial step to effectively addressing it. To better understand the nature of abuse of candidates, the survey should also collect information on perpetrators, especially in terms of establishing whether perpetrators are mainly from the general public/electorate, or to what extent it may come from within political parties or competing candidates, as the means available to address these would be very different.

It is paramount that other measures to prevent and mitigate abuse are implemented immediately. Survey results should be seen as a resource to improve and tailor these measures, not as a precursor for introducing them as we need them urgently now.

Support and advice services need to be better signposted to candidates and women and other candidates with protected characteristics would benefit from free optional training on personal safety and online abuse. In addition, we believe that candidates who experience abuse would greatly benefit from access to an independent specialist advice service.

There is additional scope to address candidate abuse through strengthening complaint mechanisms and code of conduct procedures and through encouraging political parties to adopt zero-tolerance policies on harassment and abuse. Elected representatives should be held to the highest standards of behaviour in this regard and set a positive example for the electorate. Parties should also be encouraged to recognise their duty of care towards candidates through adopting measures to prevent abuse and to support candidates who experience abuse.

Overall, the approach to preventing and mitigating candidate abuse should tie in with the principles of the VAWDASV Act 2015 and the accompanying national strategy and should be informed by the experience of expert organisations such as Welsh Women's Aid, Bawso and Glitch UK.

## Training

The nature of a local government representative's role justifies the need for mandatory training in a several areas necessary to fulfilling their responsibilities to a high standard. This includes matters relating to standards of conduct and equality and diversity, to ensure that those elected are able to fairly represent their constituency in all its diversity. This is especially important as women and other groups continue to be underrepresented in politics – as long as these groups do not have an equal voice in political decision-making, we need to ensure

that those who have a voice are trained and informed on the realities and experiences of people with different protected characteristics.

We propose that mandatory training should be provided in areas including:

- Code of conduct training
- Equality and diversity training including gender equality, race equality, disability rights, LGBTQ+ training, socio-economic duty and how to be a good ally
- Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) training and active bystander training

All training must be meaningful and equip councillors with the tools they need to understand, call out and address discrimination, harassment and abuse, and to spot signs of VAWDASV, and not be piecemeal or tokenistic. To ensure training is accessible to all councillors, it should be provided at different times compatible with professional or caring responsibilities.

### **Diversity data**

Lack of reliable candidate diversity data is a barrier itself in challenging the lack of diversity within local government and makes it difficult to monitor progress. There is currently no requirement for parties to collect or publish information about the diversity of candidate, although they may do so on a voluntary basis. At the local government level, there is a requirement on local authorities in Wales to survey candidates within six months of local government elections, which currently includes questions about a candidate's sex, age, caring responsibilities, ethnic group, religion and sexual orientation. The Welsh Government must collate and publish the information within twelve months of a local government election.

In the most recent [Local Government Candidate Survey](#), response rates for different local authorities ranged between 1% and 40%, with an overall response rate of 12%. This makes it difficult to get an accurate picture of diverse representation across Wales. To improve data quality, the Welsh Government should work with local authorities to explore ways to improve response rates, including facilitating the sharing of best practice, and consider setting minimum targets.

### **Diversity and Inclusion Strategies**

The Special Purpose Committee on Senedd Reform recommended that parties should adopt diversity and inclusion strategies:

*“Recommendation 16: We recommend that Senedd reform legislation includes provisions that encourage each political party standing candidates in a Senedd election to prominently publish a diversity and inclusion strategy, setting out how it has sought to facilitate diversity within its candidates, at least six months prior to the scheduled Senedd election.”*

We would strongly welcome the publication of a best practice guidance or toolkit, co-produced with relevant equality organisations and experts by experience, to provide political parties with orientation and support on what measures would be most effective as part of their diversity and inclusion strategies. We would envisage this guidance or toolkit to include the following:

- Adopt a zero-tolerance approach to sexism, racism, ablism, and discrimination against people from the LGBTQ+ community;
- Introduce quotas and targets;

- Have due regard to the diversity of their candidates lists representing all protected characteristics, including race/ethnic minority status, disability, age, sexuality and gender identity;
- Make use of All Women shortlists and reserved seats on shortlists for people with other protected characteristics (note that this is compatible with Equality Act for protected characteristics other than sex, as long as not all seats on the shortlist are reserved for a particular protected characteristic);
- Recognise a duty of care towards candidates through adopting measures to prevent abuse and to support candidates who experience abuse;
- Expand and adequately resource schemes for mentoring, coaching & shadowing;
- Ensure information on becoming a candidate is easily accessible and proactively encourage people from a diverse range of backgrounds and communities to apply;
- Promote and adequately resource professional support networks for women and people with other protected characteristics;
- Use anonymised recruitment and diverse selection panels.

While we recognise the importance of robust diversity and inclusion measures at a party-level, we note that there are a substantial number of Independent councillors in Wales. This means that relying on party-level initiatives alone will not adequately increase diversity in all Welsh local authorities and needs to be combined with the other measures outlined above.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Introduce gender quotas for the 2027 local government elections in Wales and explore options for the introduction of intersectionally embedded quotas;
2. Introduce legislation that permits the election of job-sharing candidates in the next local government election;
3. Encourage executive job-sharing in local government to be used by a wide range of elected members, not only women, and ensure job-sharing arrangements are understood and supported within local authorities;
4. Support, expand and adequately resource schemes for mentoring, coaching and shadowing, including the Equal Power Equal Voice mentoring programme;
5. Enshrine the Access to Elected Office Fund in legislation with a commitment to appropriate long-term funding and expand the scheme to other underrepresented groups who are facing barriers to elected office, including through covering costs associated with caring responsibilities;
6. Improve the collection of data on magnitude, form, severity and impact of abuse of local government candidates;
7. Better signpost support and advice services, provide free optional training on personal safety and online abuse and an independent specialist advice service for candidates who experience abuse;
8. Strengthen complaint mechanisms and code of conduct procedures and adopt approaches to preventing and mitigating candidate abuse that align with the principles of the VAWDASV Act 2015 and are informed by specialist support organisations;
9. Introduce mandatory training for elected representatives on:
  - a. The code of conduct
  - b. Equality and diversity, including gender equality, race equality, disability rights, LGBTQ+ training, socio-economic duty and good allyship
  - c. Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) and active bystander training
10. Work with local authorities to improve the collection of candidate diversity data;

11. Publish a best practice guidance or toolkit to inform political parties' diversity and inclusion strategies, co-produced with relevant equality organisations and experts by experience;
12. Ensure that all work on diversity in local government recognises the root causes of underrepresentation by linking in with wider strategic equality plans, such as the Gender Equality Action Plan, the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, the draft LGBTQ+ Action Plan, and the *Locked Out* report.

**About the Women's Equality Network (WEN) Wales:** Our vision is of a Wales free from gender discrimination where all women and men have equal authority and opportunity to shape society and their own lives. We work with our vibrant coalition of organisational and individual members to transform society. Our work sits under three pillars. We will Connect, Campaign and Champion women so our vision is realised.

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*WEN Wales would like to thank the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee for the opportunity to contribute to their inquiry into diversity in local government.*

*If you have any further comments or queries, please get in touch.*

**Dr Jessica Laimann, Policy & Public Affairs Manager**

[jessica@wenwales.org.uk](mailto:jessica@wenwales.org.uk)