

Introduction

Despite some progress, women remain under-represented in public life, particularly in local government. While the proportion of AMs has climbed back to around 43%, the proportion of female local councillors has remained stubbornly low at 28% following the 2017 elections. The picture varies by local authority with Swansea and Rhondda Cynon Taf having just over 40% female councillors while Blaenau Gwent, Ceredigion and Ynys Môn all have fewer than 12% female councillors.

This imbalance is also seen in cabinet and leadership positions with just 18% of council leaders being women and there are examples of all-male cabinets in some areas. In non-political leadership roles women are also under-represented, making up 27% of local council chief executives despite accounting for 73% of the local government workforce.

This lack of women in local government is contributing to a “diversity crisis”. We can no longer afford to rest on our laurels and hope that more women will put themselves forward for election. We need radical and effective action by local authorities and political parties to ensure that in 2022 people in Wales can be served by diverse councillors, who are representative of the communities that they serve.

Actions

Actions for government:

1. Introduce statutory quotas

Different approaches have been adopted by political parties to improve the number of women candidates. Data suggests the most effective tool has been the application of All Women Shortlists (AWS) in the Labour Party.¹ Introducing statutory quotas, as proposed by the Expert Panel for Assembly Reform report, would ensure all parties make gender balance a priority and could support a more consistent approach across Wales. Options for such a quota, requiring political parties to field balanced candidate slates, should be explored for local government.

2. Remove sunset clause for AWS

The Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 allows parties to use AWS. At current rates, it is unlikely that we will achieve gender balance at all levels of government by 2030, which is the current sunset clause. The UK Government should either remove the sunset clause, or use a less arbitrary measure, such as a number of consecutive elections that result in at least 45% of elected members being women.

3. Implement section 106 of Equality Act

Currently, political parties are not required to publish candidate equality and diversity data. The UK Government should enact Section 106 of the Equality Act and require political parties to

publish candidate equality and diversity data for all elections. This will improve transparency and support targeted action.

Actions for political institutions:

4. Promote role models
Political institutions should continue to actively promote diverse role models and engage in schemes, events and initiatives that enable people to engage with elected representatives and learn more about the role.
5. Review structures and identify any barriers to women
Local councils should regularly carry out reviews of structures and processes to identify and resolve any issues. Exit interviews with councillors not seeking re-election should also continue to identify any common issues and potential good practice.

Actions for political parties:

6. Commit to 50% of candidates in winnable seats at the next local election being women
Each party should make a public statement outlining their commitment to fielding 50% women candidates in winnable seats at the next local election.
7. Publish action plans that set out what steps will be taken to achieve this commitment
To support a public commitment, political parties should set out clear actions that will be taken to achieve the goal of gender balance in winnable seats.
8. Review internal party structures and selection processes to identify and address barriers
Every political party should review party structures and processes to ensure there are no barriers, consider providing unconscious bias training for those involved in selection panels and pro-actively support local branches and parties to engage with potential candidates from under-represented groups.

Detailed Response

1. **The importance of diversity among local councillors**
 - 1.1. Diverse leadership teams improve performance. 85% of global CEOs state that diversity has enhanced business performance. In politics, diversity can be more effective for a number of reasons including “more informed decisions as different talents and skills and perspective and experiences provide new insights and question ‘group think’ and the dominant way of doing things.”¹
 - 1.2. Diversity ensures that different issues are discussed, as people draw on different perspectives and experiences. Research has shown that in the Assembly, women AMs account for between two-thirds and three-quarters of all interventions using terms such as

¹ S. Childs *The Good Parliament* 2016

childcare, domestic abuse and equal pay.² They are also more likely to initiate debate on gender equality than male AMs³.

- 1.3. Diverse role models are important to dispel myths about what a politician should look like. Girl Guiding found that role models were consistently cited as being important by young women. 43% said that having a female Prime Minister/ First Minister makes them feel more inspired that they can be leaders and 53% said that political parties should make sure half their politicians are women.⁴
- 1.4. A recent ERS Cymru report also pointed to a lack of diversity contributing to a dis-connect between politicians and voters.⁵ This is supported by findings from Girl Guiding who found that 57% of girls said they did not feel politicians understand the issues girls and young women face and 28% said that having a female Prime Minister/ First Minister makes them more interested in politics.⁶ Greater diversity among local councillors could help bridge the gap between politicians and voters, which will only contribute to better politics, a more engaged electorate and better public services.

2. Key barriers to attracting a more diverse pool of candidates for local government elections

2.1. Sexual harassment and abuse

- 2.1.1. ERS Cymru found abuse and harassment to be the biggest issue reported by elected politicians and those who had decided not to stand in their recent study into diversity in Welsh politics.⁷
- 2.1.2. There is a sense that this abuse has become more prevalent in recent years. While action is needed by social media platforms, political parties could also play a role by taking firmer action against party members who engage in online abuse and work must continue to bring about a cultural shift so such behaviour is reduced.

2.2. Family life, flexibility and work-life balance

- 2.2.1. Political roles, particularly that of councillor, can be even harder to access for those with family responsibilities, particularly women, who are more likely to be the primary carer in a household.
- 2.2.2. The majority of councillors surveyed by the WLGA in 2017 said they spent between 21 and 30 hours per week on council work.⁸ There remains an expectation that councillors will be accessible 24/7, and unlike AMs or MPs, councillors often need to maintain their main employment. In addition, meeting times that fall in the middle of the day or early evening could be particularly difficult for those with childcare responsibilities.
- 2.2.3. Improving the provision of childcare support, on-site crèches, support for pregnant mothers and families in terms of maternity and paternity leave could all support

² P. Chaney *Women and Policy-making: Devolution, Civil Society and Political Representation*, in [Our Changing Land: Revisiting Gender, Class and Identity in Contemporary Wales](#) (ed. Mannay D.). University of Wales Press: Cardiff. (p.220-238), 2016

³ Ibid

⁴ Girl Guiding *Girls Attitudes Survey 2017*

⁵ ERS Cymru *New Voices How Welsh politics can begin to reflect Wales 2018*

⁶ Girl Guiding *Girls Attitudes Survey 2017*

⁷ ERS Cymru *New Voices How Welsh politics can begin to reflect Wales 2018*

⁸ WLGA *Exit Survey of Members Standing Down in May 2017 2017*

greater diversity. A universal approach across local councils could also address any confusion for potential candidates around what support may be available.

- 2.2.4. ERS Cymru suggested in their latest report 'New Voices' the possibility of allowing some Councillors to take on the roll on a 'full-time' basis and allowing remuneration to reflect that.⁹ This might incentivise those who aren't able to balance the role alongside another job.

2.3. *Financial constraints*

- 2.3.1. It is inescapable that as long as the role of councillor is remunerated at current levels that few people would be able to perform the role on a full-time basis. This will affect diversity as it will be much easier for older, more well off individuals to take on the role, which will likely mean a continuation of councils being dominated by white, older men.
- 2.3.2. Women are more likely to work in lower paid, part-time work and earn less over their working lives. This could make it difficult for them to consider standing for election as a councillor, particularly for younger women who may have to try to balance the role with caring responsibilities and work commitments.
- 2.3.3. Consideration should be given to whether current remuneration rates reflect the demands and needs of a modern council.

2.4. *Political party processes*

- 2.4.1. Party selection rules and processes can act as a barrier to women, and other under-represented groups, and not all parties are using the tools available to them to ensure they put forward a gender-balanced slate of candidates.
- 2.4.2. Many of the barriers listed here affect candidates as well as elected councillors. Better support for candidates, particularly those from under-represented groups should be put in place.
- 2.4.3. Parties should also put in place rules and targets for local parties to follow in the selection of council candidates. Banning all-male candidate slates for multi-member council wards, committing to no all-male council cabinets and collecting and publishing candidate equality and diversity data could all ensure that party processes become more effective and do not replicate existing issues.

3. **Areas of innovation and good practice that may help diversity in local government**

- 3.1. Swansea appointed two members into the cabinet position for Future Generations on a job-share basis and in Bristol two working mothers took on the role of Assistant Mayor for Neighbourhoods.¹⁰ Commenting on the move, Bristol Councillor Daniella Radice said that "many people are often put off by the full-time nature of politics and this move demonstrates that you don't have to choose between a career and other commitments – it's possible to job share, even at a senior level."¹¹

⁹ ERS Cymru *New Voices How Welsh politics can begin to reflect Wales* 2018

¹⁰ <https://www.swansea.gov.uk/article/34477/New-cabinet-to-deliver-1-billion-City-Deal> / http://news.bristol.gov.uk/new_member_for_bristol_city_council_cabinet_in_job_share Accessed 3.9.18

¹¹ http://news.bristol.gov.uk/new_member_for_bristol_city_council_cabinet_in_job_share Accessed 3.9.18

- 3.2. Others, such as Monmouth Council, have explored how technology such as Skype could be used to support remote access to meetings.¹² However, concerns remain about delivering the required functionality to chair meetings, vote and access translation services in a cost effective way.
- 3.3. Changing the way in which cabinet positions are allocated can also make a difference. For example, following the 2012 election Swansea council allowed any member of the controlling political group to apply for cabinet posts and participate in an interview with the leader and deputy.¹³ Taking this approach, rather than traditional patronage led to a council leadership with four women and two younger men.¹⁴
- 4. The potential impact of proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, *Strengthening Local Government*, to increasing diversity in council chambers**
- 4.1. It's welcome to see the Green Paper recognise the need for Councillors who reflect the diversity of communities, and for cultural change in order to deliver this. However, we need to see more detailed, pro-active steps to actually deliver this change.
- 4.2. While there are no longer plans to merge councils, it's important to note the risk that a reduction in the number of councils could pose to diversity of representation. Women are often representing more marginal seats and are more at risk of losing their position come election time, and through the reduction of seats may lose out to an older incumbent who is more likely to be a white man. Reducing the number of councils could also disproportionately impact women's employment given they often dominate in the roles and services that would likely be reduced through mergers, such as back office administrative support and HR.
- 4.3. Plans around investing in people and organisational development could impact positively on women and offer an opportunity to address gender imbalance in leadership positions.
- 4.4. Improving diversity needs to be a more clearly identified aim of local government reform.
- 4.5. Diversity could be improved as a result of some of the proposals but unless it is expressed as an explicit aim there is a risk that improving diversity could become less of a priority. Making it a clear aim of reform would ensure it remains a priority, that the right interventions are developed and the right indicators are used to measure success.
- 4.6. The Green Paper is accompanied by an equality impact assessment (EqIA), which correctly highlights that more transparent and open local government would benefit equalities generally. However, as with many EqIAs, it lacks meaningful analysis through a gender lens and concludes that there would be no positive or negative impact on equalities. Given the scale of these reforms and the focus on improving the diversity of elected councillors this should not be the case. An initiative focused on 'strengthening local government' with a specific focus on 'diversity' and 'representation' should have a positive impact on equalities, and this need to be embedded in the process throughout or we will not see the change needed.

¹² "Councillors in Monmouthshire using Skype at meetings a 'long way off'" South Wales Argus 11.09.17
http://www.southwalesargus.co.uk/news/15528303.Councillors_using_Skype_at_meetings_a_long_way_off/
 Accessed 4.9.18

¹³ ERS Cymru *New Voices*

¹⁴ Ibid

Conclusion

Diversity in politics makes a difference. At the local government level, progress to improve the representation of women has been slow.

Action to improve diversity is inconsistent. While there are examples of good practice, there is a need for all actors – government, political institutions and political parties – to prioritise action and work towards a shared goal of equal representation.