

## Consultation on Diversity in Local Government

Written Response provided by Penarth Town Council

### Terms of Reference

- To understand the importance of diversity among local councillors, including the effect on public engagement, debate and decision making.
  - To understand key barriers to attracting a more diverse pool of candidates for local government elections.
  - To explore areas of innovation and good practice that may help increase diversity in local government.
  - To explore the potential impact of the proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, 'Strengthening Local Government to increasing diversity in Council chambers.'
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Penarth Town Council recognises that there is an issue with regards to diversity within local government, and as such have prepared a response accordingly.

However, it must be noted that by designing a consultation which focuses on individual rather than group responses, our own answers will be somewhat limited. This is compounded by the lack of statistical information provided to the Council for use as a baseline comparison.

Despite this, we have encouraged all our councillors to complete the online survey noted in the consultation letter, and have drafted this response after a task-and-finish group met to discuss the terms of reference noted above.

Penarth Town Council believes that whilst a lack of diversity within local government *can* significantly impact on public engagement, debate and decision making, the key driver for public participation at a community level is how engaging the subject matter is to the electorate.

Historically, Penarth Town Council has often found that candidates for local elections emerge when they are personally affected by or invested in the issues being discussed.

A similar effect has also been observed with regards to local residency groups; however, their level of engagement is often more long term and more cyclical in nature as their issue of interest moves in and out of the forefront of current affairs.

Interest in participation also seems to naturally pique during times of elections. However, many town councils cannot run elections, due to the number of people involved at that level, or simply because the cost is too high.

A lack of elections in a given local area, therefore, will likely lead to less public engagement, and lead to a narrower range of people becoming involved in their community.

Penarth Town Council feels that one of the steps which could be undertaken would be to focus on raising awareness of locally important issues in conjunction with highlighting local community groups which are passionate about those issues.

This would enable people with vested community interests to link up with others who share these interests/values. If this were to be followed up with greater education concerning what becoming a local councillor entails, and how to approach this, the Council feels that the diversity of Local Government would increase.

Penarth Town Council has done much recently to ensure that there is scope for as many people as possible to get involved with their community as possible.

In recent times, Penarth Town Council has encouraged participation through inviting community groups to present at our various Committee and Council meetings. At our most recent meeting, 3 presentations were made by groups covering issues such as reducing single use plastic to raising awareness surrounding dementia.

The involvement of 'Penarth Youth Action' (PYA) has also grown over time, whereby members now present report to Council and are able to represent their concerns and needs. They are keen to be heard, and Penarth Town Council is now looking to continue evolving their role within the community, encouraging them to continue with recruitment of members from a wide area of the town.

To make meetings more accessible to both councillors and the public, Penarth Town Council ensures that their meetings are held in the late afternoon/evening, allowing the greatest number of interested people to attend wherever possible.

The Council feels that if other areas hold meetings during inaccessible hours, then attendees should be suitably recompensed for their time, rather than leave out of pocket for engaging with the community.

The Council also feels that particular pressure should be put on non-public sector organisations to facilitate this, and to lead on the relaxation of rules to enable people to take time off work to attend meetings without fear of repercussion.

In Penarth Town Council, we have taken on board recommendations regarding the remuneration of councillors. For instance, the Council has promoted the availability of Childcare allowance for our councillors with young children, which has been taken up. Crucially, we have also made it easy for them to claim this.

The Council feels this is important as it provides choice, removes barriers and widens the scope of people who would potentially look to step into Local Government.

Councillors have also been provided with several training opportunities - no matter what their experience level - through One Voice Wales and other relevant organisations. This has helped with upskilling members and enabling the Council to develop a greater holistic knowledge of issues pertinent to the community.

Penarth Town Council has also been involved in several events and activities aimed at all aspects of the community, and by having a public facing mayoral figure, the Council is able to promote these events and lend credence where necessary with regards to particularly important issues.

One such issue facing Local Government in the region is the proposal to reduce the number of town and community councils.

Penarth Town Council believes that, with fewer seats available for people to contest, there will be an overall reduction in the level of diversity at a local level. This means that there will be less diverse people engaged with debates and decision making.

Reducing numbers also means that elected councillors will have to work harder, longer hours and/or unsociable hours to compensate. This will naturally restrict opportunities for participation amongst those who have other commitments during these periods of time.

It could also lead to those being elected actively seeking remuneration for this increased commitment or even salaries, which could have severe financial implications for all levels of government and taxpayers, especially if it leads to further cuts of services.

Instead of cutting services and numbers, the Council believes that there should be a committed focus on working in partnership, with work being done to foster curiosity in the community to ensure that the local community are aware of the issues that relate to them, are aware of how to be involved at a public engagement level, and are aware of the processes, commitments and benefits available to them if they wanted to move into Local Government themselves.