

DLG 08

Ymchwiliad i amrywiaeth ym maes llywodraeth leol

Inquiry into diversity in local government

Ymateb gan: Cyngor Sir Fynwy

Response from: Monmouthshire County Council

## **Response to Assembly Inquiry on Diversity in Local Government**

1. This response comes from the perspective of councillors currently performing the role. It is not offered as a fully representative submission and does not purport to represent the views of the many people in our communities who could potentially perform the role but who have either been deterred by barriers in the system or perhaps have not even considered engaging in local politics because of perceptions of the role, the work attached to it and its potential impact upon their career or family.

### The importance of diversity

2. We agree with the sentiment of the Green Paper '*Strengthening Local Government*' which said that we need councillors who reflect the diversity of our communities and are value driven, energetic and work hard to improve people's lives.

3. Councillors need to be able to speak directly to the community about issues that affect them and relate to the people in their ward and understand their lives and needs. A diversity of councillors can act as role models to encourage others to become more involved in public life and local decision-making while there is support for the notion that good debate and decisions come from having discussion amongst people from a diversity of backgrounds and experiences.

4. We need diversity throughout local government including more women in senior positions and more young people as well as those from BME backgrounds. Having role models who are already within the sector is one important step that can be taken towards achieving this. Councils should be fully representative of their local community, there are however there are some challenges which make this aspiration hard to achieve.

5. Research has shown that local councillors are presently not representative of the communities they serve. The average councillor is white, male and on average older than the residents they serve with less than one in ten councillors under the age of 40.

### Barriers to attracting a diverse pool of candidates

6. It is very hard for people to balance a career, childcare or caring role and being a councillor. It's difficult to combine two of these, doing three is virtually impossible. This is particularly acute if the elected role also encompasses responsibilities such as a position on Cabinet or chairing a committee. It was also recognised that in many (but not all cases) child care responsibilities can fall disproportionately on women impacting on their ability to engage in politics further impacting on diversity and gender balance on councils.

7. We have explored different meeting times. 10am and 1pm starts can work for people with school age children. Evening meetings can be effective for some with careers but can also result in very long working days with people unable to give their as they are tired which can impact on the quality of debate and decisions. Evening meetings can also create additional childcare problems for those with young families.

8. Several councillors have left their paid employment during their first term to dedicate more time to their role but then found it hard to re-enter the labour market. This can be for a range of reasons:

- Firms don't always understand the role of the councillor and it can often come with negative perceptions such as being opinionated.
- It can be misinterpreted as a career gap and it is not always easy to articulate the transferable skills gained during time served in a political role in a way that makes them appealing to future employers.
- There is a genuine concern from some employers about the time commitment required to be a local politician.

9. National research carried out by the Welsh Local Government Association found that the most common reasons given by councillors aged 18 – 54 for standing down voluntarily was changes to employment. At least one councillor has reported that they now regret standing for election because of the difficulties combining it with work.

10. A further barrier is the image and the distrust of politicians in general and the perceived futility of working with them that some have experienced. This also permeates into the views of some employers and as a result the effect on gaining employment is real. One councillor reported that:

*“People have stopped talking to me in the playground since they have found out that I am a councillor...they say ‘he’s one of them, watch what you say’ or simply don’t talk to me anymore”.*

11. Different pressures are brought by ward work and the more formalised environment of meetings and committees that happen in town halls. Social media has created an assumption that councillors are always available which creates pressures in both work and family life.

12. Remuneration is also an issue raised by many councillors. The present basic allowance is not sufficient to encourage people to leave their job or make sacrifices in their career. As a result the role can tend to favour retired or wealthier individuals. There is a need to ensure that money is not a disincentive to becoming a councillor.

13. A concern was also raised by independent councillors that while association with a political party can have negative perceptions in some quarters it also carries advantages in the form of networks and support that are not available to independent candidates providing a further barrier

#### Good practice that may help increase diversity

14. Increased use of remote attendance and voting is one potential change that could make it easier for people to combine the role of local elected official with a career and family life. In Monmouthshire we recently changed our constitution to allow this to happen and have piloted remote attendance and voting at a Cabinet meeting.

15. An increased focus on member support and development would help councillors get the most from their time in office and ensure that they are exposed to opportunities and training and development that can be more easily applied to other settings when they leave politics.

16. Development of automated channels such as apps and chatbots can make it easier for some ward issues to be handled directly by residents without the need for councillor involvement. Exploring more inclusive or participative forms of decision-making may also

give more people a taste of local politics and help them to understand that by getting involved they can make a real difference to what happens locally.

17. This authority has held a number of events promoting democracy and encouraging people from different backgrounds to speak and share their experiences of local government and politics. This has included holding events during International Women's Week and for young people during Democracy Week. During November 2017 an informal event was planned and delivered by young people to celebrate and raise awareness of Local Democracy Week. It provided an opportunity for them to find out more about local democracy and quiz elected members on issues that are important to them. Young people from secondary schools in the county listened to an informative presentation about the history of democracy and politics. It reinforced to them the importance of having a voice at both a local and national level and is one way in which younger people can be encouraged to get involved in local decision-making.

18. We were encouraged by the commitment shown by the Diversity in Government Programme which ran for three years until March 2017 but do not feel that this has delivered any longer term impact.

19. One option put forward in the discussions for this was a members' allowance that was based on your financial circumstances rather than a flat rate. It was also noted that membership of some committees such as planning can require a large time commitment with no additional remuneration. If we want to encourage more people with children to take up the role, they need to be incentivised. A part-time job is out of the question as these are often hard to come by and may still not result in a high enough income to run a household.

20. In reality it is only by fundamental reform of the entire system that we will get a sea-change in diversity. This includes at Welsh Government itself and within the structure and selection processes of the political parties themselves where the risk remains that candidates are not representative of the wider community. A significant financial investment offering competitive salaries could encourage more young people to enter politics as a career but is probably unaffordable within the current financial climate and would not overcome some of the barriers experienced by potential candidates from BME backgrounds.

#### Proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper

21. We support the intent of the Green Paper that Welsh Government should recognise the commitment involved in being a councillor and ensure that the role are properly remunerated, respected and recognised for the work and contribution it makes to the strategic functioning of the local authority and within communities.

22. We agree that councillors should have access to information, kept abreast of decisions being taken on behalf of the council and have support to fulfil their scrutiny role effectively.

23. We welcome the commitment made to work with local government to champion the role of elected members and help communities understand, and value, the important part councils play in their lives and look forward to hearing more about how this could be delivered.

#### Further questions the committee may wish to debate to inform the response

If you do not intend to stand for re-election, what are your reasons for this decision?

How could the candidate selection processes be improved to encourage a greater diversity of candidates to stand at local council elections?

Outside of the candidate selection process, are there any other steps that should be taken to encourage a greater diversity of candidates standing for local council elections?

Councillors may also choose to submit an individual response to the inquiry which will allow for more personalised experiences and perspectives to be shared. An online survey can be accessed at [www.assembly.wales](http://www.assembly.wales)