

DLG 14

Ymchwiliad i amrywiaeth ym maes llywodraeth leol

Inquiry into diversity in local government

Ymateb gan: Ffederasiwn Cenedlaethol Sefydliadau'r Merched–Cymru

Response from: National Federation of Women's Institutes–Wales

## **1. Background**

1.1 The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is the largest voluntary women's membership organisation in the UK with over 220,000 members across England, Wales and the Islands. In Wales we have about 16,000 members belonging to 600 WIs. The NFWI is an educational, social, non-party political organisation, established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, make new friends, widen their horizons and together influence local, national and international affairs on issues that matter to them.

1.2 Since its inception, the NFWI has campaigned to get more women involved in public life at all levels of decision-making. The WI was founded in 1915 at a time when few women participated in public life. It offered women training in democratic systems and in getting their voices heard. It, for example, educated women on how to chair meetings and work on committees, and built their confidence in public speaking. Today, education and training to equip women with the skills to get involved in public life continue to be a key element of the work of the WI led by our NFWI Unit and at our own adult residential college, Denman, based in Oxfordshire.

1.3 Between 2005 and 2014, NFWI-Wales managed the former Women Making a Difference project which was established to provide women with the confidence, knowledge and skills to get involved in public life. The project provided the motivation and encouragement for women across Wales – particularly those who are under represented in the decision making process because of language, race, disability or social status - to take up public appointments by recognising and understanding the factors that prevent women from considering such appointments, and taking positive action. It delivered a three-stage progressive, outreach programme of training, personal development, mentoring and role-shadowing that educated and empowered women to become more self aware and to take responsibility for their own lives and for the communities in which they lived.

## **2. Importance of diversity among local councillors including the effect on public engagement, debate and decision making**

2.1 Women make up 52% of the population of Wales yet continue to be under-represented at all levels of public life, for example only 28% of councillors in Wales are women. To ensure that policies and decisions reflect the views and needs of women and their communities, it is vital that women are represented in local government at all levels.

2.2 Women can bring a wealth of expertise and knowledge to councils ensuring that the needs and views of women are equally reflected in discussions and policy-making. For example, more women than men are employed in part-time positions and women's transport needs differ from those of men. Women continue to be the main carers of children and other family members. It is estimated that, every year, around three million women across the UK experience Violence Against Women

(VAW), which includes domestic violence, rape, forced marriage, sexual exploitation and other forms of abuse and harassment. It is therefore vital that women's views and experiences are represented in the development and delivery of specialist support services for women who experience VAW, in order to ensure that the services meet women's needs.

2.3 Research undertaken by the NFWI to mark the centenary of the WI in 2015 demonstrates that members feel that much more progress is needed to ensure that women are represented in public life, and that their views are heard by decision-makers. Eighty-three per cent of WI members believe that more women are needed in leadership positions and only 32% of WI members feel that they have a good deal or some influence over decision-making in their local area.

2.4 If we truly value women and the contribution they can bring to the decision-making process in terms of what services are needed in a community, and how they should be delivered, then it is essential that women are encouraged and supported to stand for local elections.

2.5 Women have a huge contribution to make to local government. Women very often get involved in many areas of community life and, through their interest in local issues, have much knowledge and experiences to share. Research undertaken with participants of the former Women Making a Difference Project found that women appeared to be less attracted by the desire to acquire power and influence and more by the desire to make a tangible difference.

2.6 In addition to gender, it should be ensured that councils are diverse in terms of age, race, disability, sexual orientation, faith and language, as well as social status, in order to ensure that they truly reflect the communities that they serve. Although it is acknowledged that some people may not wish to declare their personal characteristics (e.g. sexual orientation) and that should be respected.

### **3. Key barriers to attracting a more diverse pool of candidates**

3.1 One of the key barriers to increasing the participation of women standing for election to local councils is getting women to apply in the first instance.

3.2 The stark inequalities that persist in our society are deterring women from getting their voices heard and from standing for election. Some additional findings from The WI at 100 Report highlight barriers that WI members believe that women continue to face today:-

- 70% disagree that women are equal to men
- 59% agree that women are penalised in the workplace for having children
- 84% say it is difficult to balance family responsibilities with work

3.3 The WI at 100 Report found that most WI members believe that despite family-friendly legislation such as child-benefit and maternity leave, it still remains difficult for women to balance family responsibilities and work. This is especially apparent as the burden of caring, both for children and elderly parents, falls disproportionately on women. Members noted that the family unit is changing and the law has to change with it.

3.4 Affordable and accessible childcare is a key barrier for women and women must be better supported to balance work and family commitments.

3.5. Research undertaken by NFWI-Wales in 2010 with participants of the former Women Making a Difference project identified a number of barriers to women putting themselves forward for positions in public life as highlighted below:-

- **Fear of failure and lack of confidence in putting themselves forward.**  
Participants expressed lack of confidence in standing up and speaking in front of a large group and speaking in meetings, particularly in front of men. Other confidence barriers included being outside the workforce, for example taking a career break to bring up children, or if they worked in a part time low skilled/paid capacity.
- **Concerns about balancing work commitments and family responsibilities.**  
Women often play a major role in providing care to children and family, as well as balancing work. Many of the women involved in the research were already combining their career with child and/or elder care. This was thought to be a barrier both in terms of time away conflicting with caring responsibilities and also the costs and/or availability of child or elder care during these absences. It is acknowledged that the work of the Independent Remuneration Panel (IRP) for Wales has recommended 'All authorities must provide for the reimbursement of necessary costs for the care of dependent children and adults (provided by informal and formal carers) and for personal assistance needs up to a maximum of £403 per month. Reimbursement must be for additional costs incurred by members in order for them to carry out their approved duties. Reimbursement shall only be made on production of receipts from the carer'. This decision should be advertised better, particularly in pre-nomination papers.
- **Women were not always clear about what positions in public life would entail.** For many of the women who would want to take up a public appointment, they felt that the role must be attractive to them and worthwhile.
- **Lack of knowledge and experience in politics.** Barriers to getting involved in a political party such as the application process, funding challenges and access needs. Many of the women were simply unaware of the opportunities to serve on public bodies – or that there are targets to fill them. They perceived Boards, Trusts etc., as closed (recruited on the golf course) or politically biased. Even if the women were aware of public appointments and realised that they may be eligible, they did not generally know where they were advertised or how to apply for them.
- **Perceptions about politics being an old boys club.** The perceived culture of public bodies as being 'old boys networks' were identified by almost all of the groups of women as being a barrier which was preventing many of them from wanting to become involved in public life.

One participant noted that to motivate and support her to consider serving as a councillor she would expect the following:- *“The ability for meetings to be more accessible as a mother, the provision of childcare and a support network that would enable me to be able to conduct myself properly and to the best of my ability”.*

3.6 The comments below from WI members who took part in focus groups as part of The WI at 100 Report, also characterise some of the barriers faced by women and the perceptions that exist:-

*“If you speak out you tend to get branded as feisty... or a ball-breaker, or hard, or bossy. Bossy, there’s a word. I hate it!”*

*“Even now with the current legislation, men are still given the benefit of the doubt more; promoted more, rise to the top in female dominated industries like teaching. When you get past middle-age they put women in a box. We need to get out of these boxes.”*

*“The media discriminates against women.”*

*“Women in leadership inspires you to do something.”*

WI focus group participants (The WI at 100)

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

4.1 Local government is disadvantaged from not being able to benefit from the talents of women in Wales. Investment must be made in ensuring that the support networks are in place to enable women to stand for nomination.

4.2 We believe that positive role models and case studies of women who are involved in public life can make an important contribution in inspiring more women to consider getting involved in local government. This should not be in the period immediately before an election but as a continuous process if we are truly committed to increase the numbers of women in local government at all levels.

4.3 78% of WI members believe that there are not enough positive role models for girls (The WI at 100 Report). Role models were recognised as important influencers in a changing world, people today’s girls could learn from, look up to, and be inspired to reach their full potential by.

4.4 NFWI-Wales has a number of case studies of women who took part in the former Women Making a Difference project which gives their first-hand accounts of the barriers that they had to overcome to get involved in public life. We would suggest that positive case studies of female councillors, who have stood for or are elected councillors, could be used as part of a high profile campaign to engage more women to consider standing for local government. NFWI-Wales would suggest that a range of media is used such as promotional videos and posters. NFWI-Wales would further suggest that any campaign focuses on what the role of a councillor entails. Very often there is misconception amongst the public that councillors need to possess particular qualifications or experience. We would suggest that public appointments advertisements use less formal language.

4.5 One issue that has been raised as a means of supporting women to stand for election is the introduction of job sharing among councillors. This would address a

key barrier currently faced by women in balancing family responsibilities, work commitments and being a councillor.

4.6 The Assembly's Expert Panel for Electoral Reform made a number of recommendations around gender equality including the introduction of quotas and job sharing. Schemes such as job-sharing at local government level would remove some of the barriers for those with caring responsibilities, disabilities and financial constraints. It would also provide greater flexibility to balance other work commitments.

4.7 We need local authorities to invest in putting support structures in place and introduce policies that will support women to stand for election. For example, women with young children may not be able to commit to attending evening meetings and the cost of childcare will be a barrier. Opportunities to contribute through video conferencing and other means should be offered. This would also help alleviate access issues in rural areas where transport is often non-existent. This issue highlights the importance of ensuring that rural communities across Wales can access broadband.

4.8 Training, development and appraisal systems for elected members and adequate support services for council members are crucial. It is important that the continuous training provided to councillors as well as the extensive induction programme for new councillors is advertised sufficiently pre-election. Training should be offered at flexible times.

4.9 Data gathered by the Electoral Reform Society Cymru has found that the make up of councillors in Wales is 'predominantly male, straight, middle-aged and white picture for councillors in Wales' - Councillors are expected to be 'on call' during the day, evening and weekends hence the reluctance by people to stand for election. This also explains why retired people, with few other commitments, are attracted to standing for local government.

4.10 There is a need to review the remuneration framework for councillors. Financial barriers should not stand in the way of attracting more people to considering serving as a councillor especially those from under-represented groups. Being a councillor brings many responsibilities such as engaging with, and representing constituents, and scrutinising policies. The establishment of a remuneration system which adequately rewards all councillors for the responsibilities they undertake in serving their communities would be key in broadening the diversity of candidates that serve in local government. This would particularly be necessary in attracting candidates on low incomes and those who would face financial costs from serving as a councillor such as child and elder care costs. While the IRP have made recommendations they do not take into effect the transient nature of councillors. They are only guaranteed that they will receive any remuneration for 5 years or whenever an election occurs. It is important that adequate notice is taken for this whatever people's personal circumstances. If people take a 'career break', or even are in work, they may have to take a reduction in hours and that can affect mortgages etc.

4.11 We need to see greater gender balance in council cabinets. Councils should have a duty to ensure that there is diversity in their cabinets

4.12 Monitoring the equality and diversity profile of candidates who stand for local government and are elected is needed.

4.13 Feedback from some of the participants of the former Women Making a Difference Project regarding the support they would expect if standing for election included the following:-

*Guidance and support from fellow councillors. Ideally a type of 'mentor' relationship would be a benefit.*

*Guidance from an established 'public role holder' would help each individual to pursue their journey and achieve their role regardless of level of public role.*

*For women already on a council they need support from party members both practically and in political discussion. This is particularly important if women are a minority on the council.*

*When a woman does stand for council the local party should look out for when the candidate needs encouragement and practical help. The party also needs to discuss the need for more women on council at regular intervals at a local level*

*The support I would expect complements the above – provision of childcare and suitable meeting times to enable an individual to do the best job that they could.*

4.14 The important role of mentoring and role shadowing should be taken forward by councils. We note that mentoring schemes are available but perhaps happen too late in the electoral cycle. Participants of the former Women Making a Difference project highlighted the importance of mentoring and role shadowing opportunities and called for more champions and role models.

*"I think much more needs to be done in terms of mentoring and role-shadowing. These help in getting people known to the system and make those necessary connections."*

*"Having a mentor restores and rebuilds confidence when feelings of inadequacy kick in. I think a brief supportive word can often prevent someone 'giving up'. Simply saying 'well done, you did that well' empowers women and builds confidence. Take time to encourage others!"*

*"Role-shadowing is an opportunity to learn 'first hand' and to experience all the good sides and how to cope with the negatives of a public role."*

Women Making Difference participants

4.15 The option of not being affiliated to a party by standing as an Independent Councillor needs to be publicised more widely as it leads to a more focussed decision making process which relate more closely to local issues and circumstances without being perceived as following 'national party policy'. However there needs to be a flexibility in allowing independent candidates access to electoral roles early – something that is not allowed at present.

4.16 Election to Community and Town Councils can be an ideal way of getting people interested in local government. However there is very often little knowledge and promotion of this very local level of local government.

## **5. To explore the potential impact of the proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, Strengthening Local Government to increasing diversity in Council chambers**

5.1 In his Foreword to the Welsh Government's Green Paper, Alun Davies, Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services, states that "We need councils whose membership is fully representative of the local community and which are relevant to everyone." This presents an opportunity to introduce strong measures to address the current lack of diversity in local government by engaging more women and others that are under-represented, for example, disabled people and those from the BME community, in order to achieve the "best outcomes for the people they serve" (Statement by the Cabinet Secretary on 17 July).

5.2 It must be ensured that any changes in the structuring of local authorities does not create a disconnect with local citizens by distancing the democratic process from local communities and consequently disengage people from decisions which impact on themselves, their families and communities. This, we feel, will further disempower women and other under-represented groups from getting involved in local government.