

# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Phase two – Diversity in Democracy** |
| **DATE**  | **19 July 2019** |
| **BY** | **Julie James, AM, Minister for Housing and Local Government**  |

The Welsh Government is committed to increasing diversity within elected office, working to enable and empower people who want to put themselves forward for election to serve their communities. In a country with a diverse population it is important individuals have faith in the democratic arrangements that deliver the services they rely upon. It is therefore essential to ensure the views of all parts of society are represented in the discussion and debate which takes place in communities. In the absence of the full range of views, individuals from under represented communities can feel left out and that their needs are not being catered for.

Our Diversity in Democracy (DiD) Programme focussed on a range of activities aimed at addressing the barriers people from under-represented groups face when considering putting themselves forward to stand for election. The main element within the programme was the mentoring project, which paired existing councillors as mentors with members from under-represented groups. Of the 51 mentees who participated. 16 stood for election and 4 were elected.

On 26 June an evaluation of the programme was published. It concluded the programme, while successful in addressing some of the barriers people face, would benefit from a more targeted approach to better identify more tailored solutions for individuals. It also focusses on the lack of awareness of the role councillors play and the contribution they make to individuals lives within the community. The report is also clear about the need for a funding scheme to support disabled people when standing for election and during their tenure as councillors.

Many of the areas highlighted in the evaluation reflect similar issues to those identified by the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee through its work on Diversity in Local Government. The Welsh Government has welcomed the Committee’s report and has accepted the majority of the 22 recommendations.

In addition to supporting individuals to stand for election, it is also important to continue that support for those individuals throughout their career as elected members. The Committee’s report focuses on a number of important issues, including remote attendance, job-share arrangements and support to assist disabled people to run for elected office. These are all areas where work is already under way.

For example, in the forthcoming Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill, we intend to amend the remote attendance sections of the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2011 to make it easier for councils to facilitate remote attendance at meetings. We will also include provisions to facilitate job-sharing arrangements for members of council executives and leaders. The Bill will also include a duty on political group leaders to promote appropriate standards of behaviour, and require local authorities to publish the official address of its elected members, rather than their home address. So, local authorities would need to provide an official office address for members to use on publicity

There is already a wealth of research and practical approaches that identify the barriers to full participation in local democracy. What is required now is to draw from all of this work and put in place arrangements which will assist individuals to overcome these hurdles.

Phase two of the Diversity in Democracy programme will draw on this and include:

* A Communication campaign – this campaign will have two main aims. The first to awareness of the role of the councillor and how they make a real difference to the lives of local people. The second aim will be to encourage people from diverse backgrounds to stand as councillors.
* Support for disabled individuals– establishment of a scheme to support disabled people to seek elected office by addressing some of the financial and operational barriers for participation. This will be put in place in time for the next Local Government elections.
* Family absence arrangements - we intend to increase the period of absence available to elected members who adopt children through the Local Government and Elections Bill.

In addition, there are a number of areas where further work is required to identify key actions to take forward in support of wider diversity.

I will be chairing a roundtable discussion with key stakeholders in September to discuss a number of these areas and agree a range of specific actions to be taken forward. These will include:

* Training and development
* Flexible working arrangements
* Safeguarding councillors’ physical and mental / emotional wellbeing
Support for individuals across the range of protected characteristics
* Data collection and analysis to inform future initiatives

During the coming months, we will work together with partners by means of a range of workshops to identify a series of actions and a timetable which will see this work taken forward at pace. I will chair a further roundtable discussion in December to consider the outcome of these workshops and agree the programme for delivery.

It will be important that this work is taken forward in line with the wider work on equalities issues across the public sector and beyond, including the Gender Equality Review and our work on advancing and strengthening equality and human rights in Wales, which is being led by the Deputy Minister and Chief Whip. I will shortly be writing to a number of key stakeholders to invite them to participate in this next phase of our programme.