MINUTES OF THE BARRIERS TO POLITICS MEETING

Monday 24 July 2017 at 7.35pm

PRESENT: Councillors Suzannah Clarke (Chair), Jacq Paschoud (Vice-Chair), Joyce Jacca, Paul Bell, Bill Brown and Luke Sorba

Also Present: Ashok Viswanathan (Operations Manager, Operation Black Vote), Will Davis (Advocacy Service Manager, Lewisham Speaking Up), Colin Smith (Lewisham Speaking Up), Peter Crane (Lewisham Speaking Up), Salena Mulhere (Officer), Sarah Assibey (Clerk)

Apologies: Councillors Hilary Moore, Joan Millbank, Maja Hilton, Colin Elliot and David Humphreys (Officer)

1. **Minutes**

   The Chair asked that the following amendments be made to the Minutes of the last meeting:

   Under paragraph 3.6, "women elected" be changed to "female candidates"
   Under paragraph 3.15, "other organisations" be changed to "other local organisations"
   Under paragraph 4.4, "Several years" be changed to make clear that caring responsibilities, particularly those of children with disabilities, can span over the course of a lifetime.
   Under paragraphs 4.6 and 4.7, this a repetition of 4.4 and 4.5 and should be removed.

   RESOLVED subject to the amendments noted, the minutes were agreed as a true record.

2. **Declarations of Interest**

   No interests were declared.

3. **Ethnicity**

   3.1. Salena Mulhere summarised a report on ethnicity barriers in politics, produced by officer, David Humphreys. The report provided context for the Group to consider as part of the evidence session.

   3.2. The most recent Census of Local Authority Councillors (2013) was used to draw data from the report. The following points from the report were highlighted:

   3.3. The vast majority of councillors were white. A greater percentage of councillors from London boroughs were from non-white backgrounds at 15.7%. However compared to the rest of England this figure is still not representative.

3.4. Many disparities in leadership within a local authority were highlighted in the 2013 census. 5.8% of respondents from a BAME background were a directly appointed mayor or deputy mayor; 1.6% of respondents who were non-white were a local authority leader compared to 2.8% of white respondents.

3.5. Comparable time was spent on council business: 20.9 hours was spent by non-white councillors where as white councillors spent 20.7 hours. However, councillors from a non-white background were spending 5.8 hours on party business and an average of 4.2 hours was spent on party business by white councillors.

3.6. The BAME Women Councillors' Taskforce was convened by the Government Equalities Office in May 2008. The Taskforce highlighted the importance of supporting the individual journey to become a councillor. They recommended that a single clear summary of the steps to become a councillor is developed and also that care is taken when matching mentors.

3.7. Ashok Viswanathan, co-founder and deputy director of Operation Black Vote (OBV) gave a presentation, highlighting the focal points of Operation Black Vote, its background and work as follows:

3.8. He gave context of the organisation highlighting that its goal is to encourage and inspire people from BAME communities to take part in the democratic and decision-making process of government.

3.9. This is done primarily through 3 strands of work within the organisation: political education, political participation and political representation.

3.10. OBV has just celebrated its 21st birthday- the organisation launched in the House of Commons in July 1996. The work done founded the nucleus of the operation and found that there were only 4 BAME MPs in the House of Commons- all elected in 1987, after what was effectively a 100 year gap from when the previous BAME MP had been in parliament.

3.11. OBV aims to change the picture of politics by firstly lobbying institutions and secondly encouraging communities, particularly African-Caribbean and Asian communities, which were traditionally less likely register to vote. In these communities, 25% of people are not registered to vote and over 50% would not go out to a polling station (of those registered). This compares to 1 in 16 who are not registered to vote in the wider community.

3.12. A democratic deficit was observed from the representation levels and low levels of participation

3.13. Since 1997, OBV worked with polling companies that have done research on the vote campaign and run campaigns for the organisations and also try to get an idea of the electorate feel about the political process post-election campaign.

3.14. In 2005, within these campaigns, the question "Do you believe there will ever be a Black PM?" was asked: in the 18-25 age bracket, a huge apathy, distrust and alienation was found. This poll has not been undertaken subsequent to the election of Barack Obama but speaking to young people and children showed that they were very pleased to see a black President in the U.S.

3.15. There is still a high level of distrust which manifests itself in the political arena. This distrust stems from and lies within particular encounters with police, local authorities, health bodies, etc.

3.16. Outside of electoral politics, there is still a vast amount of work to be done to engage young people primarily, but also BAME communities. Some work has been done by local authorities, Lewisham being one of them. Lewisham ran its first Councillor Shadowing scheme in 2009, the most recent has been run in 2015 and Ashok commended Lewisham on continuing to strive to improve participation by undertaking this review.

3.17. OBV has recently selected 50 candidates for a parliamentary shadowing scheme, which was being supported by the DCLG as well as other speakers and bodies, including the Parliamentary Speakers Committee, the Z Foundation and other key grant-holders. There has not been a national campaign which runs over a longer period.

3.18. The organisation also plans to campaign further around education; citizenship education has slipped and fallen under the radar, leaving many young people unknowledgeable about politics.

3.19. OBV also works around the election cycles to try to increase the voter registration rates. There has not been a register-to-vote national campaign nor a 'get-out-and-vote' campaign that has run over a long period.

3.20. Ashok Viswanathan concluded his presentation by listing the barriers the Group may want to consider for evidence: the barriers to entering politics in BAME communities include social capital (the networks that are more readily available to, for example, a white middle class middle-aged person, are not as available to people from BAME communities and other communities); educational capital (therefore there is not as much knowledge of the systemic process of politics); and financial capital (which would provide support with an employer, household etc.).

3.21. Councillor Paschoud asked whether it was made clear to those wanting to join the schemes that joining a party would be helpful to them and increase their chances of entering this side of politics. Ashok highlighted that when people come for an interview for any of the schemes they are asked if they are a member to any of the parties that they wish to shadow. When candidates are scored this is taken into consideration. It is not used against them but it is beneficial to those that are willing to join a party. It is hoped that the individual will go back into the community and act as an ambassador and demystify the process for others. The membership fee is a barrier for some, especially with some parties charging more than others, causing some to reconsider wanting to join some parties.

3.22. Councillor Clarke pointed out that trade unions base charges on an individual's income and that political parties could consider this in relation to their membership charges.

3.23. Several of the candidates selected for the schemes were already active in their CLPs or their conservative associations, and even though they were active, they were not progressing. Being on a programme like OBV, facilitated by the organisation with its national profile, would help propel them forward.

3.24. Councillor Bell made a point that social background is a very significant barrier in politics as well as class. The cost to run, join as a member and/or networking required for particular positions is difficult for those from working class backgrounds. In addition to this, the social capital of networks is tightly managed by the middle class and by the people that have the power. The class dynamic and financial aspect feeds into the points raised by OBV.

3.25. Ashok stated that none of the issues raised are solely to do with being BAME-social class is also a large component. In terms of the scheme, it provides subsistence and travel costs to all participants. As well as the 12 days of shadowing, which are split between the constituency and Westminster, training is provided in 6 areas, which includes running for election in local/national government, media training/public speaking and other areas that they may find useful in the political arena but are also transferable skills should they use them in another area.

3.26. Councillors highlighted that there is potentially a barrier in relation to geographical locations. Ashok confirmed that although the majority of candidates applying to take part in the scheme were from London, approximately one third are from other parts of the country; OBV offers travel and subsistence support to increase participation from candidates in other parts of the country.

3.27. Councillor Sorba told the group that he thought that as councillors they were already on the 'inside', and should hence go out and engage the community more rather than leaving in to organisations like Operation Black Vote.

3.28. The Chair raised the argument that studies show there are high numbers of BAME in certain high level industries such as Law and Medicine but in Civil Service and Politics, there are not as many. The Chair told the group that this is often because people in those positions are seen as elevated and this creates an 'us and them' attitude.

3.29. Participants of the meeting also discussed the fact that people vote according to what is a reflection of themselves. It is imperative for them to see themselves represented in their communities and nationally.

The Chair thanked Ashok for his participation.

RESOLVED that this report and evidence given was noted.

4. Disability

The Chair welcomed representatives from Lewisham speaking up, who raised the following points regarding the barriers to politics and generally for those with learning disabilities.

4.1. The representatives from Lewisham Speaking Up first noted that they would be specifically discussing those with learning disabilities. Two of the attendees at the meeting were parliamentary representatives of the Speaking Up People's Parliament. Will Davies, Advocacy Service Manager at Lewisham Speaking Up, said that his colleague had carried out some research in preparation for the Barriers to Politics Working Group meeting and that he could only find information on two councillors with learning disabilities nationwide.

4.2. The representatives made a point that if help was available to all those with disabilities, including those disabilities that are not visible, that this would truly provide equal opportunities.

4.3. The representatives from Speaking Up said that a barrier to getting into politics for those who have learning disabilities is reading or writing difficulties, however this shouldn't be an issue providing they have the right people supporting and also encouraging them.

4.4. The Chair said that those with learning difficulties and disabilities, technology is of great use. There is some technology out there which can provide round the clock support for those who need it, which would be beneficial for those in or trying to enter politics.

4.5. Councillors said reading and writing skills are essential for most jobs including those in politics. However, learning disabilities like dyslexia can effect ones confidence in these positions and make it very difficult to progress.

4.6. Time is also a factor when considering the barriers to politics as it takes those with learning disabilities longer to complete tasks.

4.7. Representatives from Speaking Up said that some of the main things that would stop them from being councillors was the forms and also people asking them lots of questions about their disabilities.

4.8. Councillors said that it would be beneficial for all if people were less judgemental and over-expectant of politicians and if a greater effort was made to communicate clearly, for example not using abbreviations, to ensure that everyone understands what is being discussed and no one is being excluded.

4.9. Councillors agreed that it would also be beneficial to have digests of reports, for example with long reports or agendas; this would make things simpler without losing the quality of work.

4.10. Councillors also queried if there were legal barriers regarding participation. Statistics show that many of those with disabilities do not vote, however, people are concerned about supporting those with learning disabilities being perceived as manipulation.

4.11. Councillors notes that here was a perception that there was a lack of support at polling stations for those with learning disabilities- however, it was noted that support is available for anyone with any disability in polling stations but it is important that people are made aware of the support.

4.12. Will Davies told the group that it was more difficult to prepare and dissipate information to support those with learning disabilities to vote in advance of the previous general election because it was a snap general election.

4.13. Councillors noted the fact that they are not asked of any learning disabilities they have upon appointment of their position, and said that it may be a good idea to change this in time for the appointment of new councillors.

4.14. Councillors also felt that Council documents should also be made dyslexia friendly, such as the options to change font or the colour of paper should be available. The council should take notice of the resources and technology that is available to help people with similar learning disabilities, and also ask councillors about the support they might need.

4.15. The Group stated that it would be more useful for select committee meetings to have people with disabilities, as opposed to those who support them or speak on behalf of them, to attend meetings and speak on how particular issues affect them directly. It was also suggested that ordinary service users speaking at select committees, as the norm, would be better and that agendas and meeting times could be adjusted to better suit people. Salena Mulhere suggested that councillors speak to scrutiny managers to arrange participation/evidence-giving in the future, noting that the committees cannot deal with individual cases. The group noted that there were other ways of engaging service users directly, for example, Healthier Communities Select Committee had run a 'tea party' event previously.

4.16. The Chair requested that the Group considered the recommendations set out in the report "Smoothing the Pathway to Politics for Disabled People", appended in the agenda.

RESOLVED that the report and evidence given is noted.

The Chair thanked Lewisham Speaking Up's representatives for their time.

5. Future Meetings

The Group felt that there would perhaps need to be more time spent collating evidence for a wider range of disabilities (including physical and mental health), religion, sexuality and gender reassignment.

As there are 2 meetings left, one being an evidence sessions, there is limited time to get the final report to Council before the end of the year, feedback from the survey should be done via email before the October meeting; any extra meetings could be facilitated if necessary, providing there is an available date. The final draft report will

be circulated in advance of the meeting to ensure that members are prepared to discuss finalising their draft recommendations at the October meeting.

From the evidence taken to date, and suggestions made by members, it seems that there will likely be two "sets" of recommendations: one for those things within the remit of the Council (support, meetings, inductions, allowances etc.) and another set of recommendations for political parties in Lewisham regarding selection, canvassing, mentoring and setting clear expectations.

The meeting finished at 9.25pm