

# **BARRIERS TO POLITICS WORKING GROUP MEETING**

Wednesday 6 September 2017

Present: Councillors Suzannah Clarke, Jacq Paschoud, Maja Hilton, Joyce Jacca, Hilary Moore, Joan Millbank, Colin Elliott, James-J Walsh

Also Present: Rev. Carol Bostridge, Anthony Kalu (Secretary for the BAME Forum), Salena Mulhere (Senior Officer), David Humphreys (Officer), Sarah Assibey (Committee Support Officer)

## **1. Minutes**

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

Under paragraph 3.28, "The Chair told the group that this is often because people in those positions are seen as elevated..." should be corrected and clarified that research suggests this point and that they are not the actual words of the Chair.

## **2. Declarations of Interest**

Councillor Moore and Councillor Paschoud declared interests as members of the SACRE (Standing Advisory Council for Religious Education) for the Local Education Authority.

Councillor Elliot declared an interest as a former member of Christians on the Left, who still receives correspondence from them.

## **3. Barriers to Politics - Religion or Belief**

David Humphreys provided a brief overview of the item stating the following:

- 3.1. Whereas the group had been reliant on the Census of Local Authority Councillors for information, no information was collected as part of the Census on Religion and Belief or sexual orientation. The GLA, however, are planning to collect such data in the future.
- 3.2. There is, however, information from the National Census which indicates that Christianity is still the most populous religion but there has been a decline. The NatCen's British Social Attitudes Survey 2017 was published after the dispatch of the officer report; this provided more up to date information on the increase of people who classed themselves as having no religion. According to the Survey, 53% of the British public state they have no religion; it was noted that the figures are not directly comparable to the increase of those having no religion in the 2011 census.

- 3.3. No specific religion is classed as a religion or belief under the Equality Act protected characteristics.
- 3.4. Councillors further discussed the importance of faith and religion in politics, suggesting that it may be challenging to work or vote politically, when separating one's personal beliefs and values.
- 3.5. A 2015 YouGov poll asked the public if they were more likely to view party leaders more positively or negatively based on their religion or belief- the vast majority of people (between 71-75% depending on the religion) stating it would make no difference.
- 3.6. Research on the likelihood of people representing their beliefs in the political sphere (in relation to MPs) suggested that those of an religious minority background are more likely to raise 'minority issues' more broadly rather than solely for their particular minority group. Figures released by the DCLG suggested that there was not a lot of difference in terms of community engagement between people that are of no religion and people who identify as Christian. The DCLG did find, however, that engagement among some religious groups was significantly lower e.g. they found that 44% of Muslims and Hindus participated in civic engagement or volunteering.
- 3.7. There are some networks that provide support for people of different religions e.g. Christians in Politics offers cross-party guidance for Christians and Christian MPs.
- 3.8. The officer stated that it is difficult to comment on how representative local politics is in relation to religion or belief due to lack of research in this area. It is possible to use central government as a proxy but there is very little information in relation to local politics which the GLA are looking to address in their census for local authority councils.

The officer then introduced Rev. Carol Bostridge to discuss potential barriers into politics or whilst in politics, for those of faith. She discussed the following issues:

- 3.9. As a member of both inter-church and inter-faith groups within Lewisham, Rev. Bostridge noted that the dialogue between the inter-faith groups and the Council is excellent. The Mayor and the Council have been welcoming in terms of communication and working together
- 3.10. There is a strong base of faith groups in Lewisham who do a lot of work on the relief of poverty, youth, elderly care etc. and the Council have made the groups feel they have equal authority, which is something very positive to note.
- 3.11. The step to encourage those members to become members of the Council, is quite complex as those from, for example, church volunteer groups, are probably already very busy running youth groups, food banks etc. these are

already busy people who may feel they do not have the time to also be involved in politics.

- 3.12. Some people who identify as having a religion may see more value in doing work within the church than they would in working within the Council. However, this perspective is changing- there have been many political groups who come in to speak to the church leaders during the last election. During these visits, there was a lot of encouragement towards Christians, asking them to vote and the same progress was being made within the Muslim community too.
- 3.13. There is the dilemma, that to significantly increase a candidate's chances of being elected, they would have to stand as a representative for a political party- this can create conflict if personal beliefs differ from political party values. Many may find challenges in what is expected of them when there is a clash between the two. There is also a fear that they may be pushed into supporting a policy that they do not agree with.
- 3.14. The truth of this notion is debatable, so education on the subject is imperative. It would be helpful to have members of Council who are of faith, discuss with church groups their personal experiences within politics and what they do when such incidents occur.
- 3.15. The Church also has a responsible to do more to dispel this "sacred, secular divide".
- 3.16. Many people of faith, wanting to get involved in politics, may also be unaware of how much they are required to do and what does it involve- they are often involved in other community-based work so this could be a determining factor for them.
- 3.17. Media perception of religion, particularly where people of religion are scrutinised for their beliefs, can put people off getting into politics. Additionally, where there is a clash in the personal views and Party views, there is a large barrier between the person and politics.
- 3.18. Cllr Hilton mentioned that the concern of having to partake in something such as a policy that you do not believe in resonates even with those who are not of any particular faith or religion. As Councillors, representatives of the community, it should be demonstrated that there is not an obligation to cross any "red lines" that do not align with your beliefs. She also mentioned that such conflicts are more likely to pertain to national policies rather than local policies. It is important for people of faith to know that they are not alone
- 3.19. Cllr Paschoud stated that it is important to know that there are different strata in politics. For example, MPs are involved in law-making, whereas Councillors are not- although they are involved in policy which is different to being an MP. Explaining the difference between the two, and also Parties clearly outlining their individual expectations is important going forward, so that those willing to join politics are aware of what is expected of them.

- 3.20. Cllr Paschoud also mentioned that nowadays, it seems to be acceptable to knock or critique aspects of religion, although it would not have been acceptable in the past. Social media appears to be a hub for the public to say negative things about religion. It would be difficult for people to voice their beliefs in politics with the knowledge that they could be criticised or attacked for it, in a public way.
- 3.21. Rev Bostridge added that, fundamentally, acceptance of peoples' beliefs is key as well as educating people on religion within politics, making this information more public.
- 3.22. Cllr Walsh mentioned that the Local Government Association does produce a non-party/political leaflet which explains how to become a councillor and they also have a website. He went on to say that politics is often tied to the history of Christianity- and Crown and faith have always been inter-connected. He considered what this observation would be like for those of other religious beliefs and stated that politics would have to be more mindful and considerate about how things are done. As a Council, corporately, LBL is very good at announcing Christian holidays and celebrating those and are getting better at doing this with non-Christian holidays. But the Council ought to consider, is Eid, for example, celebrated on the same scale as Christianity, especially when the Muslim community in Lewisham is fairly large. This would show the Council is more inclusive.
- 3.23. Cllr Elliott stated that as a Christian, he can relate to the difficulties faced in politics and at work. As a former governor, he stated that he witnessed first-hand the mistreatment of church schools, simply because of their ethos. It does appear to be fair to attack church schools and their ethos- he would often sit on committees and argue against it, because the schools were performing very well, but the ethos was challenged. Tim Farron, who was recently quizzed over his faith, is an example of Christians who are in politics and judged not only because of what they say but also over what their leader is saying and may find themselves having to defend the words and actions of others.
- 3.24. He continued that such issues could lead to many people not disclosing their faith for fear of being scrutinised for it- he stated that it is easier to go into politics and not disclose your faith.
- 3.25. Councillors agreed that fundamentally, dialogue is important. Cllr Millbank stated that it is crucial to recognise and accommodate respect and difference. Open conversion is necessary because everyone has different beliefs, religious or not. This also means that councillors need to be more aware of how they conduct themselves- they should not stay silent on important matters as then there is no exchange of different perspectives. It is only with dialogue that opinions shift and/or there is mutual understanding and respect.
- 3.26. The Chair asked members about their thoughts on what the Council could do more of, in regards to religious practices. The group discussed the matter of a

“prayer/quiet space” for a moment of religious reflection- not just for staff and councillors but also for members of the public.

- 3.27. The Chair thanked Rev. Bostridge for her attendance and contribution. Rev Bostridge offered her contact links to the Group if they would like to be in touch with other leaders and members of faith groups.

#### **4. Barriers to Politics- Sexual Orientation**

David Humphreys provided a brief overview of the item stating the following:

- 4.1. Contact was made to Stonewall, Metro and the Lewisham LGBT Forum over the last few weeks and months, but unfortunately, they were not able to send a representative for the meeting. The organisations had been invited to make written submissions or engage with the Barriers to Politics Working Group after the meeting.
- 4.2. As with the previous item, there is very little information about sexual orientation and gender identity in politics, particularly in relation to councillors. The Census of Local Authority Councillors does not ask any questions on this topic but they are planning to for the next census.
- 4.3. In terms of the population figures, nationally based on the last annual population survey, approximately 1.7% identified themselves as lesbian, gay or bisexual.
- 4.4. The important thing to note with all of these figures in the report is that they do not provide a true and accurate reflection- many choose the “don’t know” option or refuse to respond to the question.
- 4.5. In many parties, namely, Labour; Conservative, Liberal Democrats, Green and UKIP- all have MPs who have publicly identified themselves as part of the LGBT community, representing 7% of all MPs.
- 4.6. According to the Stonewall report, Gay in Britain (a report that looked at perceptions in terms of local and national politics), they surveyed a number of people - 52%, 23% and 20% of people who identified as LGB thought they would face prejudice regarding their sexuality if they were to stand in the general elections for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties respectively.
- 4.7. In the same the report, the local figures were much higher- 74%, 39% and 33% felt that they face barriers at a local level for the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties respectively. At the time of the 2013 survey by Stonewall, 76% of gay people believed that LGBT politicians would face greater scrutiny from both the public and media.
- 4.8. The Chair turned the group’s attention to a quote in the Stonewall report, “I don’t want to hold anything back, I want to bring my whole self to work”- she

stated that the fact that a person would have to hide their identity in order to be in politics is something to consider as a barrier.

The Chair asked that the Group discuss and share their perceptions on this topic. Cllr Walsh spoke on his experiences being a gay councillor, making the following points:

- 4.9. When standing for electorate office, a person is exposing themselves which can be daunting- adding homosexuality to that and fear of being scrutinised can be quite difficult. Knowing that people have different views on sexual orientation, although Lewisham is very tolerant, one could be exposed to a minority who can be very vicious. That is a barrier for those in Council.
- 4.10. "Family values" is a term which often gets used when talking about an LGBT candidate standing against a non LGBT candidate, which is interesting to view especially in a national election. Language and acceptability seems to be the "go-to" when such competition occurs.
- 4.11. In Council, there is a misunderstanding of LGBT people- firstly there are 4 strands to this community. It is interesting to view which of the four is more accepted, although there is currently no representation of Transgender within Council. Some are very vocal about their sexuality in Council and some are under-represented. It is sad that many councillors who fall under one of these categories would rather keep that private
- 4.12. There is also the concern of safety for the LGBT community, which could be a barrier for a councillor in certain areas where they live and work. There is a generation factor within the discussion of sexual orientation to consider.
- 4.13. There are some issues around the fact that there is very little LGBT infrastructure within the borough- there is a fantastic Young Mayors Programme that is doing great things around LGBT matters. The younger generation seem to be very engaged in this topic. The Lewisham LGBT Forum is still running, but LBL do not seem to have the same engagement and outreach that other boroughs do. It is therefore important to note that infrastructure and support is needed in the borough for the people who feel the need to keep their sexual orientation a secret.
- 4.14. The Chair suggested that the group may look at recommendations from the review of the Safer Stronger Committee, and Cllr Walsh and Cllr Jacca's recent trip to Manchester to discuss the topic of LGBT.
- 4.15. Cllr Millbank expressed the importance of allowing people to identify who they are, and championed the idea of a councillor survey, stating that it is good place to start and that it is important to create the culture of openness, particularly within gender politics and sexually orientation. She went on to say that things are gradually changing, using the Young Mayor's programme as an example- young people are having the conversation which makes a refreshing change from what the conversation would have been years back, if it would have been a conversation at all, she explained.

- 4.16. Cllr Paschoud, on the topic of openness, asked how much of a person's life needs to be public knowledge, open for potential scrutiny, by their involvement in politics- a person's personal life and political stance will sometimes coincide. She continued that not everybody wants to share the more sensitive parts of their lives, and not everybody who does not share is hiding their identity. There should not be a feeling of obligation. To overcome prejudices and barriers at large, everybody would need to be honest and open about their own personal views, but at the same time, if people felt that coming into Council people would know too many intimate details of their lives, this could be a barrier. She expressed that there needs to be balance between the two.
- 4.17. The Chair added that with openness, there also needs to be support available. Individuals should also consider that there is a right and wrong time to share, and some may feel the need to be open at a time where they feel more comfortable.
- 4.18. Cllr Walsh agreed with the comments but also offered an alternative view: Being LGBT has a lot more conflict than other strands and other groups, for instance faith and BAME. Sometimes religion and BAME culture clashes with LGBT, and LGBT is outnumbered by the two. This is relevant because, in a church for example, a sermon on LGBT does not line up with the values of Lewisham- and faith groups are significantly larger than the LGBT community. Although it is a challenge to expose oneself in that way, openness is important to speak up on the behalf of the LGBT.
- 4.19. Cllr Elliot stated that it is important to manage expectations; that people cannot expect to change a church's attitude overnight. It is about being realistic, accepting and having realistic expectations from those who have different beliefs. There needs to be more openness and discussion, but even to overcome barriers, there are going to be people in the faith communities who will feel at risk of being a target if they were to speak up on their beliefs. He stated that overcoming this conflict is very tricky, but expectations are key.
- 4.20. The Chair asked Cllr Walsh if he had any recommendations for the group to consider. He gave the following:
  - 4.20.1. Visibility is crucial. As a Council we should consider how to create visibility is a greater way to be more inclusive of LGBT people and same sex couples. There should be an equivalent amount of visibility across LGBT as there is in BAME.
  - 4.20.2. Community infrastructure- as a Council, supporting the organisations that support LGBT people within the borough
  - 4.20.3. Role models- there are positive influences within the Council but more involvement would be great from the Council, to champion the community. We should have more LGBT networks in borough
  - 4.20.4. Ask the Young Mayors group about guaranteed representation for all liberation groups, because that would be useful in ensuring that there are pathways from the very youngest ways.

## 5. Future Meetings

David Humphreys introduced the last item; the following was discussed:

- 5.1. The Group are due to report back to full council on 22 November 2017. The next meeting is scheduled for 3 October- however due to the tight schedule of meetings, summer break and the Councillor survey produced by the group yet to go live and results be analysed, the Group should consider a more suitable date, later than 3 October.
- 5.2. The group agreed that the next and final meeting before Council will take place on 6 November. At this meeting, there will be a draft report for Council and the sets of recommendations will be tabled, also to go to Council.
- 5.3. The surveys are now ready to go live: the surveys will be distributed at the beginning of Labour Group meetings and will be cascaded to all Councillors. The Chair encouraged members to ask local groups, assemblies and councillors from other boroughs to fill out the survey. They will include an option for councillors to discuss how they have overcome barriers, as well as the barriers they currently face.
- 5.4. It will be an online survey and will go live week beginning 11 September. Hard copies have already been cascaded to the Chair and Vice-Chair. Hard copies will be sent in the car-run for members and available at the reception of the Civic Suite after the next Labour Group meeting to better publicise.
- 5.5. The case studies discussed at prior meetings, to gain more perceptions of life as a councillor and the barriers they face, will also be available for councillors to anonymously complete.

The meeting finished at 9.28 p.m.