

MINUTES OF THE BARRIERS TO POLITICS WORKING GROUP

Tuesday 14 March 2017 at 7.30pm

PRESENT: Councillors Suzannah Clarke (Chair), Jacq Paschoud (Vice Chair), Joyce Jacca, Luke Sorba, Sophie McGeevor, Jim Mallory, Liz Johnston-Franklin and Colin Elliot

Also Present: Paul Aladenika (Officer), Salena Mulhere (Officer), David Humphreys (Principal Officer), Sarah Assibey (Support Officer)

Apologies: Councillor Joan Millbank

1. Election of Chair and Vice-Chair

RESOLVED Councillor Clarke was appointed Chair and Councillor Paschoud as Vice Chair of this Committee for the existence of the Group.

2. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared

3. Terms of Reference

The terms of reference were presented and agreed by Members.

4. The Role of a Councillor

David Humphreys gave a presentation on this item to give context on the role and expectations of a councillor, as well as an overview of councillor demographics, campaigns, research and suggest an approach to the areas of focus for the Group. The key points to note were:

- The Equality Act 2010 explains the protected characteristics which might be of use to the Group to discuss and consider when looking into the future discussions and recommendations. These characteristics are age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy, race, religion, gender and sexual orientation
- Lewisham's Comprehensive Equality Scheme (CES) objectives may fall in line with some aspects of what the Group is trying to achieve.
- The description of the role of a Councillor can be found in both the Local Government Association (LGA) Councillors Guide- which explains that a councillor balances the roles of community leadership, developing council policy and planning and regulation
- The LBL Constitution, elaborates further that councillors represent both the people of their ward and that they also act in the interest of the whole area when involved in making decisions.
- The Council's Handbook for Council Members defines the 5 main areas of responsibility for councillors: deciding on overall council policy and giving the

authority for political leadership; making decisions within Council policy; monitoring and reviewing performance in implementing policy; representing the area and the Council externally and; acting as advocates on behalf of constituents.

- The Constitution does not prescribe how many meetings each Cllr must attend or their specific day-to day responsibilities, other than to state that Cllrs who do not attend a meeting in 6 months may cease to be a member. Councillors are not employed in the same way officers are, however, the role can be seen as similar to that of office holders, e.g. in terms of remuneration. Councillors receive an allowance designed to recompense them for the work they undertake, which was displayed in the form of a table in the report, and compared the allowance paid to councillors in other London boroughs.
- Remuneration for councillors is a decision made by councillors at Full Council, after consideration of advice from an independent expert. Lewisham Councils allowances were set by councillors in 2014.
- Lewisham's allowance is currently second to lowest of its 6 other neighbouring boroughs at £9812 as the Basic Allowance for last year. Some Cllrs may receive a special allowance for additional duties e.g. Chairing Scrutiny or Planning meetings, or Cabinet Member
- Cllrs may also request travel, overnight and carer's allowances as well as subsistence allowances, as set out in the constitution. Councillors are supported with appropriate learning and development to undertake their role, as set out in the Member Development Strategy. A programme of learning and development is provided for councillors, the development of which is underpinned by personal development plans for all councillors who choose to have one. The Local Authority Councillors Census 2013 is the most recent and up to date census which provides detail about the demographic of Cllrs and how their time is spent. Lewisham data is not publically available and has not been analysed because of the small sample size.
- The group could perhaps conduct a survey to gather more up to date and detailed information about councillors' experiences and perceptions. .
- The census shows that Cllrs were spending 22.5 hours per week on Council business (in London). Councillors spent an additional 5.4 hours per week on party/group business; compared with 4.3 hours nationally.
- It was noted that although group/party expectations is not the focus of this working group, party/group expectations of councillors also impacted on the time councillors spent dealing with things that they might perceive as being part of their "role" as a councillor.
- 24% of Councillors had less influence than expected; 6.5% Cllrs in London boroughs would not recommend being a councillor. The Group may want to consider this in the context of demographic information and in relation to the barriers to progression.
- In terms of the demographic profile, the average age of a Cllr in London was 56.5 years old; 10% being under 35 and nearly 50% over 60. 83% of Cllrs across London were white ethnic origin, compared to the 60% of the London population being white; 11.8% Asian/Asian British (2.8% nationally represented) and 2.1% being Black or Black British (0.6% nationally). 8.9% of Cllrs described themselves as having a disability. Over a third of Councillors in London were female at the time of the Census (cf. 13% nationally) and over a quarter of Cllrs in London had caring responsibilities.

- There are various organisations, campaigns, research that can be drawn on as part of the work of this group to understand the barriers to becoming a councillor, such as Amplify, a campaign to encourage women in the Labour Party to take on leadership roles, Operation Black Vote and Stonewall 'Gay in Britain'. Once the focus of the upcoming meetings has been agreed, officers will contact the relevant organisations and groups, to invite them to make written submissions or give evidence to the working group.

The group then discussed the approach to gathering the necessary evidence at the upcoming meetings. The following key points were noted:

- The Chair suggested a thematic focus to the evidence session for future meetings with the themes of **1) Gender, Age and Caring Issues; 2) Disability and Mental Health; 3) BAME and LGBT; 4) Survey Results-including recommendations.**
- Relevant organisations/individuals would be invited to each session to give evidence, as well as conducting a Councillor (to gather evidence about their experience in entering politics and also whilst in politics) and Resident (to gather information about perceptions) survey. It was thought a public survey could help the Group identify the perceptions of residents and to establish what the barriers are to entering politics are. The Chair suggested the following areas of focus for the Councillor Survey and to perhaps be explored in more detail with a handful of councillors as case studies: a) emails and communication b) council and external bodies c) ward and community d) political. The Councillor survey should seek to find out how much time councillors put into their Council work and also how many councillors are in full/part-time work.
- There were concerns that the grouping of BAME and LGBT together in one meeting could prevent sufficient time being given to all of the relevant issues.
- Officers suggested giving a 4 week time frame to prepare the final report for September's Council meeting whereby all evidence gathered by the last meeting will be used in this report.
- Councillors agreed that the group may also consider economic strains under each of the themes.
- In relation to the two surveys, it was agreed that sufficient time was needed to draft them and then allow people time to respond and then to collate and analyse responses.
- The public survey will be a more general survey about what people think about politics and why they would not enter politics, their perceptions, and what would the barriers be if they wanted to enter politics.
- The specific wordings of the questions and how best to phrase it would be undertaken by the officers with extensive consultation experience within, the policy team.
- Getting a precise sample from the specific levels the Group would want will be challenging, there will work to do by the Cllrs themselves in order to get the public to give their responses. Councillors can use this as an opportunity to communicate with the public in their field/area e.g. local assemblies to maximise the response.
- It was recommended that the surveys are electronic, to reach a wider audience and the survey should be as brief as possible. The surveys should close in advance of the July meeting to allow time for analysis in advance of final considerations in September.

- The Councillor survey will be distributed to all council members. It will be looking at the role of a Cllr and looking at the casework and workload of the Cllr. It could also compare the work of councillors in other boroughs if this could be organised within the time available. The Group may have to look at external funding for this task. The Group should also survey the difficulties that some Cllrs may have faced getting into the role. The officers recommended that this survey is given to all Cllrs within Lewisham and then perhaps support this evidence with case studies.

The Working group then had a broader discussion about some of their experiences as councillors and some of the areas of concern that they wished the working group to consider: The following points were noted in the discussion:

- The 22.5 hours of work per week highlighted in the census, were not expectations of Cllrs, but rather what the collated results of the (self-selecting) survey of councillors found as the average of time councillors said they spent on their role as councillors at that time.
- The Group is under no obligation at this inaugural meeting to come up with recommendations, but to rather gain insights and plan how evidence will be gathered to enable the group to write a comprehensive report and make evidence-based recommendations in due course.
- Working full time and being a councillor was felt to be challenging. Flexibility was said to be a barrier because of the constant changes in day-to-day council work and some councillors felt that they would not be able to take up full-time employment alongside being a councillor. This is very dependent on life circumstances as many Cllrs are in the role because they have the time.
- It was felt that there should be more clarity given prior to the selection as a candidate of the expected hours being a councillor should take.
- Cllr Paschoud pointed out that Committees do not meet more than twice a month and most Cllrs are on a maximum of 2 select committees and a licensing or planning committee, then full Council- this is a basic structure. Cllrs have a responsibility to themselves to manage any work on top of this. All community work outside of Council, can actually inform the role of a Cllr. It is imperative that Cllrs are realistic with time management-their obligations and capacity. It is also important that Cllrs note that there are 3 Cllrs in each ward so there is a spread of talents and availability.
- It was suggested that a prescribed figure of “expected hours” could relieve the guilt and pressure that comes with balancing work in and outside of the Council. Although the likelihood of councillors voting to increase their allowances in this climate is very slight, clarity about expected hours might be beneficial to Cllrs.
- Increasing councillors’ allowances in line with any annual staff pay increases was discussed, however it was noted, that the decision to not link allowances to annual increases was made by Cllrs at full Council 2014. Reviewing the decision made in 2014 and suggesting raising allowances in line with neighbouring boroughs was discussed.

- Cllrs questioned whether a barrier is being created to where people may feel they cannot afford to enter the role of a Cllr due to the current rate of allowance and the current lack of potential annual increase, and whether councillors should be paid a salary in the same manner as employees of the Council.. Opposing this argument, other councillors reminded colleagues that they were not employees and the role of councillor was akin to that of a governor, not a member of staff: meaning councillors were paid an allowance to prevent Cllrs from being out-of-pocket by undertaking the role.
- Many Cllrs, are either in full-time employment or they are on a pension or retired from employment, so this allowance would not be their primary source of income. However, it was noted that the Cllr allowance may have a significant impact on other allowances or benefits a Cllr may be in receipt of. The impact of a councillor allowance on state benefits was noted as needing to be further considered when remuneration was next considered by the Council, after the next Council election.
- The expectancy that some Cllrs should be retiring from the role, can also create a barrier due to the perception that the role is for younger people. Chair agreed that ageism should be looked further into in coming meetings
- Regarding the hours of work, the Group discussed evening, daytime and weekend work (weekend “work” being a largely political element). Cllrs mentioned that hours are an issue when it effects peoples’ personal time. With several expectations of councillors outside of formal meetings, both in terms of constituent and ward expectations, and expectations of political groups, this can cause some Cllrs to feel overwhelmed.
- It was noted that the only formal expectation is that Cllrs attend a meeting at least once every 6 months to remain in the role and eligible for an allowance, and that outside of that, working hours are not specified. The expectation and framework for the responsibilities of the role are based on the Constitution. How councillors choose to execute their responsibilities and what specifically they feel is expected of them is largely a matter for individual councillors, their ward colleagues and, what their political parties expect from Cllrs. There is a clear border between political activity and work within the Council.
- There is an expectation from residents and public that Cllrs are available all day every day, so clarification and knowledge of what a Cllr is and does will ease the pressure that some Cllrs may receive from the public and better manage expectations. Highlighting, on the website for example, that councillors are not full time employees of the Council so will not always be able to respond immediately may help.
- Working collaboratively with ward colleagues, and beyond if necessary, may assist with the pressure councillors feel. There is a role for parties in supporting collaborative working between ward and party colleagues. Political Groups may like to consider formal procedures for councillors to follow if they were unhappy within their ward.

RESOLVED: The Group agreed the themes for each of the coming meetings until September as suggested, with some flexibility should there need to be if, after the first evidence session, members should feel differently about these themes.

The Group also reiterated that this Committee has been set up as a way of discussing barriers to becoming a local councillor, including but not limited to the barriers of entering, progressing in and staying in politics.

5 . Future meetings

RESOLVED: The proposed scheduled of meetings was agreed.

The meeting finished at 9.34pm