

MINUTES OF THE BARRIERS TO POLITICS WORKING GROUP MEETING

Tuesday 18 April 2017

Present: Councillors Clarke (Chair), Paschoud (Vice-Chair), Hilton, Johnston-Franklin, McGeevor, Millbank

Also Present: Caroline Kalu (Catford South Vice-Chair), Anthony Kalu (Catford South Vice-Chair), Milton Keynes Fawcett Group (Gill Kirkup and Sheila Thornton) and Women's Equality Party (Rebecca Manson Jones and Madeline Petrillo), Paul Aladenika (Senior Officer), David Humphreys (Principal Officer), Sarah Assibey (Committee Support Officer).

1. Minutes

Members were recommended to agree the minutes from the previous meeting of the Barriers to Politics Working Group.

Chair, Councillor Clarke, asked for the following amendments to be made:

- The sixth bullet point on page 4 where it is stated that “there are 3 Councillors in each ward so there is a spread of talents and availability”: the Group discussed that in Lewisham, as most councillors are Labour, there was not always a spread of availability as most councillors had the same party commitments.
- In regards to Councillor income on page 5, where it says “[for] Many Cllrs...this would not be their primary source of income” the Chair wanted to clarify that this would be the primary source of income for Councillors many women with young children. The impact of allowance and benefits was a crucial part of the discussion in the last meeting
- The minutes imply Councillors have a choice of the amount of work they take on: “How councillors choose to execute their responsibilities...is largely a matter for individual councillors...”- The group felt that councillors were often compelled to work longer due to competition between parties or to improve chances of selection.

Vice Chair, Councillor Paschoud also observed the following amendments be made:

- On page 4, the minutes are corrected from “Committees do not meet more than twice a month” to “once a month”
- Paragraph numbering should be used throughout the Minutes

2. Declarations of Interest

No interests were declared.

3. Gender, Age and Caring Responsibilities Report

David Humphreys introduced this report. The recommendation is that members would note this report and also consider the evidence presented in this meeting.

Milton Keynes Fawcett Group

Gill Kirkup and Sheila Thornton from the Milton Keynes Fawcett Group, co-authors of 'Exploring Women's Participation in Local Politics', gave evidence and presented their report on "Women's participation in local politics in Milton Keynes". They made the following points, alongside their presentation:

- 3.1** The background of the Milton Keynes Fawcett Group (MKFG) is that it is within the National Fawcett Society and the Local Fawcett Society. This year's local members can form a group voluntarily and decide the aims and purpose of the group.
- 3.2** The Party are interested in the issues around local government and by looking at our own context. Women make up 33% of local councillors nationally- in Milton Keynes this is 37%
- 3.3** Fawcett's concerns lie within the fact that women's local authority representation is stagnating. While media and parties tend to concentrate on MPs and changes are happening there, they aren't happening at a local council level. All the parties, have organisations to support women within the parties to do things beneficial for the representation of women, but none are impacting as much as they should.
- 3.4** The Milton Keynes Fawcett Group said that there was a particular need to ensure women were adequately represented in local politics as cuts to council services were having a disproportionate impact on women
- 3.5** MKFG decided to look at this within their Council, through systematic participant observation of Council meetings between July and December 2015.
- 3.6** Previously the Group had tried to engage with female councillors, but without them feeling as though they were being criticised. So before publishing anything, the Group sat with members from the 3 main parties where they discussed what was observed.

- 3.7** In October after exploring with the members and incorporated some of their comments into the report, there was a public launch of this report- “Exploring Women’s Participation in Local Politics: Analysis of observations of Milton Keynes Council Meetings”
- 3.8** The Group then went on to attend public meetings to observe and report what they found and to see if (from what they observed) if anything can be done to increase the participation
- 3.9** MKFG analysed the gender composition of council meetings and attended 15 meetings in total, including full council meetings, Cabinet, Overview and Scrutiny, Corporate Parenting Panel, Development Control Committee, to get a vary of small and large meetings.
- 3.10** It was observed that women are not evenly distributed across all council committees and women councillors are over-represented in committees in traditionally ‘female’ areas; they are under-represented in traditionally ‘male’ areas, especially those to do with finance. The group discussed research which suggested that the lack of experience in finance and planning prevents women from rising to the most senior roles in local government.
- 3.11** An overview of what was observed within membership reflected this analysis, that the committees are gendered. However, it was argued that councillors follow their interests, so people join committees that they like and those interests are gendered. Regarding participation in meetings, the Group did not see any gender discrimination or disrespect. Women’s work, including that of councillors, activists and officers) was praised by make speakers and generally, the atmosphere was welcoming, inviting and acknowledging. Despite this there was a consistent under-participation of women councillors in regards to their speaking and the number of interventions. In a full council meeting, there were 16 women and 33 men of which 14 interventions were made by women and 88 interventions were made by the men.
- 3.12** Women were often late in joining the debate in a meeting, often they would speak for the first time after an hour from the start of the meeting. Male councillors often engage in friendly, cross-party ‘banter’ but this was not observed among the women. Women seemed more hesitant and diffident in their interventions.
- 3.13** With women spread thinly across committees, for reasons such as childcare, this often meant that there was no female voice at all. The representatives shared examples of these patterns in their full report.

3.14 They reported this back to women in the council and both male and female councillors were shocked by the results.

3.15 From the reports they drew the following recommendations (detailed in the presentation):

- Local political parties should examine who is given roles on council committees
- Local political parties should give more support to women who are new, to improve their confidence
- Male councillors should review their behaviour in public meetings in order to ensure that they are making space for the less experienced
- Female councillors should review their behaviour in public meetings
- Female councillors should make greater efforts to make intervention in discussion in public meetings; their constituents would not expect them to engage less than a male councillor
- Female councillors should take the training opportunities offered by their political parties
- Local political groups should consider strategies to encourage more women to stand as councillors.

3.16 The following responses and comments were given during discussion of this presentation:

3.17 Representatives from the Milton Keynes Fawcett Group explained their process for carrying out the research. The MKFG developed a tool for capturing qualitative interventions and used this to count interventions in the meetings which they observed.

3.18 Members were not aware that they were being observed at first, but after some time felt the group felt obligated to let members know they were being observed. MKFG did not feel there were changes in behaviour once members knew they were being observed.

3.19 When asked of their criticism of female councillors in regards to their contribution in meetings, the MKFG responded that the discussion that they had with women after the observations and report were very frank and honest discussions. They did not seem to want to take up the support and training that was offered to improve their confidence and how they participate in meetings. The MKFG observed accurately what they saw and aimed to have the women share the responsibility with the men.

3.20 There was no direct correlation between men and women who were absent from meetings. However, women, being unequally distributed, meant that the absence of one woman was more critical than the absence of one man. There perhaps should be more ratios and proportions on Committees to make this more even, as (as mentioned above) members select their committees out of personal interest.

3.21 Members praised the report given by MKFG, and said it would be very useful for newcomers or those wanting to join Council.

3.22 The Chair and some members felt that although there was no discrimination observed in the meetings described by MKFG, the question of whether women's voices hold appropriate weight and if there is a consequence or outcome of what they say should be considered

The Chair thanked MKFG for their presentation and welcomed the Women's Equality Party to introduce their report.

Women's Equality Party

Rebecca Manson Jones (Candidate in both the recent Brockley by-election and the GLA elections) and Madeline Petrillo (Lewisham Branch Leader) from the Women's Equality Party Lewisham and Greenwich Branch, gave a presentation on the Barriers to Women Entering Local Politics

3.23 The Women's Equality Party was formed 2 years ago, and there are 65,000 members and supporters, 73 branches nationwide and a vast majority of members, supporters and volunteers are women.

3.24 The main party had undertaken a study with Professor Sarah Childs who wrote a report last year, shedding light on the issues of barriers of women entering politics nationally. The Party have applied some outcomes of research that may be relevant to this issue, locally. Professor Childs' research highlighted 3 main areas of these barriers to politics for women; social, political and cultural barriers:

Social

Women are generally underpaid- as a councillor there is generally lack of access to flexible working such as job-sharing or maternity. Women need to be able to make their own arrangements in order to be involved financially. Women are also more time-poor, in regards to caring for children or elderly parents for example. Because of the array of council meeting, committee engagements and political campaigning, it is all extremely time-consuming. Professionally,

women are under-represented in senior roles e.g. accountancy, and these are the kind of jobs that would facilitate involvement in politics.

Political

Voters have to make choices based on parties rather than individuals: the research suggests that this impedes new people coming through and participating. Candidate selection committees tend to reflect the broader demographic of people involved in politics, e.g. white, middle class men. Being able to network and form those important relationships is more difficult for women. Historically, and in the present day, women's issues tend to be side-lined. Women believe that their time is better spent volunteering if they want to bring about social change, which is not the most efficient way to bring about change in politics.

Cultural

Politics is notoriously inhospitable to women and is still very masculine and male-dominated -women are allowed into, but still do not share equal power and responsibility within the industry. The Fawcett Society did some research in 2014 on explicit sexism in local councils and found that there was outright sexual derogatory and harassment within local Councils. This is likely to prevent women from entering politics.

The Party discussed the ways to attract women into politics.

3.25 The Party acknowledges that a gender equal society is better for everyone-this underpins all the work they are doing. Some of their core objectives to bring about women's equality include equal representatives in politics and business and equal opportunities. The party is actively working collaboratively across the party spectrum to achieve in these areas.

- The Party drew the following recommendations: Councils should consider how being a councillor can fit around family and work life e.g. role sharing and provision of creches
- Councils should make council work more accessible; flexibility around enabling people to contribute in meetings and decision making forums, technology such as skype, to hold meetings.
- There should be adequate and fair compensation, to support women in taking on the roles in the first place or at any time in their careers
- Supporting more proportional representation voting systems. PR voting systems and lists within Councils could be relevant here. Where there is PR, there is already more gender balance.

3.26 The following responses and comments were made in discussion after the presentation:

- Private donations are what contribute to the bursaries received within the Women's Equality Party. The Group commented that they thought it was fantastic that such support is given to women.
- Male councillors seem to have more status than a female councillor and the role of a female councillor does not seem as important. This should be an integral part of the conversation
- The Barriers to Politics Working Group should encourage women to identify their optimal entry points into politics, in terms of their age and level of responsibilities.
- The Group can consider voluntary work as a more important element in terms of selection

4. Age and Caring Responsibilities

As the Group were short on time and were yet to discuss Age and Caring Responsibilities, the Committee opted to present this item at the next meeting on May 17.

5. Future Meetings

- The Group noted that the focus in future meeting should be the recommendations of the contributors and speakers that attend the meetings
- The Group will consider having a separate meeting and the end (once all evidence sessions are complete) solely to focus on the recommendations to be taken to Council

The meeting finished at 9.43pm

