

# MINUTES OF THE BARRIERS TO POLITICS WORKING GROUP

27 June 2017

PRESENT: Councillors Suzannah Clarke (Chair), Jacq Paschoud, John Paschoud, Joan Millbank, Joyce Jacca, Hilary Moore

Also Present: Lauren Lucas (LGiU, Commission for Women in Local Government), Salena Mulhere (Officer), David Humphreys (Officer), Sarah Assibey (Clerk), Ching Yu (Representative of Parent and Carers Forum)

Apologies: Councillor Colin Elliot

## 1. Minutes

Cllr Hilary Moore advised she sent apologies for the last meeting but they were not reflected in the minutes of the last meeting.

The Chair also wanted the following added to the amended minutes of the April 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. *This was due to the expectations of the electorate and the formal requirements of the job.*”

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

## 2. Declarations of Interest

No interest were declared

## 3. Commission on Women in Local Government

**3.1** Lauren Lucas from the LGiU presented a report providing background to the work of the Commission on Women in Local Government. She raised the following key issues in the presentation

**3.2** The Commission was set up a year ago led by the Fawcett Society, a women’s campaigning charity. The LGiU has partnered with the Fawcett Society on the report, both to deliver part of the research and also to advise

over the course of the Commission and support them in their understanding of local government and how it works.

- 3.3** It is a cross-party Commission, co-chaired by Dame Margaret Hodge and Julienne Keegan, who is a Conservative councillor in Chester.
- 3.4** The purpose of the Commission is to gather evidence, provide recommendations and to encourage more women to stand and participate and to also look at the make up of women in Councils (i.e. women from BAME backgrounds, women with a disability and what the interaction are within these groups). This was in response to some shocking statistics: women make up more than 75% of the local authority workforce, but representation on a political level remains stubbornly low- only 17% of leaders in England and Wales are women.
- 3.5** The lack of progress of women in local government has remained almost unchanged in the last 10 years- at this rate it would take 48 years to achieve equal representation between women and male representatives in local government.
- 3.6** Looking at candidates by party, Labour has seen an increase in candidates consistently between 2008 and 2016. This represents their deliberate policy on fielding 50% female candidates and seats. It has fallen from a high base for both Liberal Democrats and remained relatively stable for Conservatives. Labour women elected has increased from 33% to 42%.
- 3.7** The research also demonstrated that men tend to stay in their political positions longer than women do. This incumbency holds a big advantage for men in terms of electoral success. In 2016 men were 1.6 times more likely to be long term incumbent than women were. As the cohort of councillors gets older, the ratio of men to women increases.
- 3.8** The greatest equality of representation of women and men in Council is 35-44 year olds. There is a large disparity in the 18-24 age group however this is a very small representation of councillors overall.
- 3.9** The research also found that a high number, 55%, of women with disabilities felt that they had been discriminated against compared with a lower number, 26%, of men with disabilities. The survey also showed that there was an underrepresentation of BAME women who represent 14% nationally but only 5.5% in local government.
- 3.10** Three main types of barrier were identified from this research:

### ***Sexism and hostility***

37% report sexist comments within their Party. 33% report sexist comments from other councillors. Sexual harassment was also reported, 10% from both the Party and from other councillors.

***Exclusion from discussion/confidence and ability to be heard***

Women were much more likely to report a lack of confidence in making their voice heard and that their opinions are valued. This is considerably more of a barrier for women in this area. A lack of training and support was also raised by the women who took part in this survey.

***Institutional barriers***

This included childcare, maternity/paternity provisions, clashes with other caring responsibilities and also distance from meetings.

- 3.11** The respondents outlined some suggested solutions to these barriers::
- mentoring
  - flexibility of time of meetings
  - provision of childcare
  - better use of technology (there is suggestion that meetings could be more accessible via Skype for example).
- 3.12** A common issue raised between men and women was that there were not enough women councillors to choose from to take positions in Council. Another popular response was that women do not put themselves forward for senior roles. Sexism on the part of other councillors was an issue raised by 26% of women as opposed to 20% of men.
- 3.13** When the Commission produces its final report, it will be looking at some of the solutions mentioned in this interim report, as well as the Code of Conduct, targets, the role of Standards Boards, which can discipline councillors where necessary, and it will also further explore the use and availability of women's networks and other forms of support.
- 3.14** Discussing the flexibility of the time of meetings the Group raised the point that changing and varying the times of meeting may not make a great difference as day time meetings would negatively impact those in employment, as those with children may be negatively impacted by evening meetings.
- 3.15** For example, women hold more positions in other organisations, such as school governors, voluntary committees and local charities. However, identifying why many women fill local positions but only a few are willing or able to stand for councillor positions.

**3.16** The group discussed utilising technology to tackle some of the practical barriers councillors with caring responsibilities may face, for example to take part in meetings, with the options of skype/conference calling a possible way forward. However, caution was urged as it was felt this wouldn't necessarily be beneficial on a regular basis, but would have a place in certain circumstances, such as maternity leave.

**3.17** The group discussed the possible benefits of having an informal women's councillor network. It was felt that this could be a highly beneficial way of experienced women councillors supporting and engaging with other women councillors. ,

Members noted the report and thanked the representative from LGiU

#### **4. Age and Caring Responsibilities**

**4.1** David Humphreys presented a report giving some context of age and caring responsibilities when becoming or in the position of a local councillor. The following key issues were raised in addition to the report.

**4.2** 28.8% of councillors in London had caring responsibilities at the time of the last Census of Local Authority Councillors in 2013. 25% of men had a caring responsibility for one or more person whereas 35% of women had such responsibilities.

**4.3** Carers Lewisham and the Positive Ageing Council provided written submissions to the Barriers to Politics Group in advance of the meeting and a representative from the Lewisham Parent and Carers Forum was in attendance at the meeting. Carers Lewisham produced points for consideration in their report on how caring may impact on a persons ability to carry out the role of a councillor.

**4.4** Looking at caring responsibilities, members raised the point that when looking after a child their increasing independence and progression is different to those looking after a child with a disability which could take place over the course of several years sometimes. This is a point for consideration- it is difficult for councillors to therefore take on any voluntary or extra work. It is difficult to do justice to the role. Many may have to stand down from positions because of the caring obligations they hold.

**4.5** The group also endorsed the idea of members being more vocal of their personal caring circumstances which prohibit them from functioning in and around their role as expected, to give other members more understanding

and illuminate judgement. An anonymous case study was suggested to aid this idea.

- 4.6** Looking at caring responsibilities, members raised the point that when looking after a child their increasing independence and progression is different to those looking after a child with a disability which could take place over the course of several years sometimes. Caring responsibilities can make it difficult for councillors to take on any additional responsibilities either as a councillor, or wider voluntary/paid work.
- 4.7** The group also endorsed the idea of members sharing their personal caring circumstances with their party colleagues, to help raise awareness, normalise discussions and manage expectations around caring responsibilities in relation to colleague/party expectations. The anonymous case studies proposed might also help highlight the challenges councillors with caring responsibilities face.
- 4.8** Members raised concern over the pressures councillors might face in terms of progress. Members felt that people should be able to fulfil their role as best as they can, without the perception that they are not progressing. Progression is something that is appropriate at certain points of each individuals' life. It is fair for a councillor to step into the role when they believe they are in a good position to fulfil all their obligations as best as possible, without the scrutiny of not being ambitious.
- 4.9** The Group also clarified that progression in the microcosm of local politics is different to that of general employment, notwithstanding to many, their role of a councillor is perceived as a form of employment. Progression is not decided by any rational organised or documented mechanism as it would be for someone who worked in a larger organisation or public sector company. It is fundamentally at the whim of the majority party or the Chair of a committee. There is not a requirement for qualification, expertise or experience to hold the position of Cabinet Member, for example. Progression in Council happens on an irrational basis. The Group stated that perhaps a fairer system of selection should be considered for the recommendations.
- 4.10** The Group went on to discuss the issues and barriers of age in Council. It was stated that older councillors may feel pressure to retire from Council sooner than they would prefer to make room for younger councillors. Incumbency was also discussed in relation to the findings that it can prove to be a barrier for women. The group concluded that it should be made clear that anybody is welcome to be a councillor.

## **5. Future meetings**

The following dates were agreed by members:

- 27th June (evidence session)
- July (to be confirmed as there is a clash) (evidence session)
- 6th September (evidence session)
- 3rd October (draft report considered and recommendations agreed)

The Group will report to the Council meeting in November.

It was agreed that the councillor questionnaire would be shared with councillors as soon as possible, as would a template for capturing case studies.

The meeting finished at 9.28pm