

<b>Barriers to Politics Working Group</b>			
<b>REPORT</b>	Barriers to entering and progressing in politics faced by people with disabilities		
<b>KEY DECISION</b>	No	<b>Item No:</b>	4
<b>WARD</b>	N/A		
<b>CONTRIBUTORS</b>	Executive Director for Resources & Regeneration		
<b>CLASS</b>	Part 1	<b>Date:</b>	24 July 2017

## **1. SUMMARY**

- 1.1. This report provides context for the Barriers to Politics Working Group to consider as part of the evidence session on barriers related to disability which people face when running for and progressing as a local councillor.
- 1.2. This report draws on data from the most recent Census of Local Authority Councillors (2013) and provides information on research in to the barriers people with disabilities face whilst running for and progressing in elected office. The report highlights campaigns and initiatives which have attempted to support people with disabilities to enter and progress in politics.

## **2. RECOMMENDATION**

- 2.1. The Barriers to Politics Working Group is recommended to:
  - Note the report.
  - Consider the evidence provided at the meeting.

## **3. CONTEXT**

- 3.1. The Equality Act 2010 defines the following characteristics as protected characteristics:
  - age
  - disability
  - gender reassignment
  - marriage and civil partnership
  - pregnancy and maternity
  - race
  - religion or belief
  - sex
  - sexual orientation
- 3.2. Lewisham's Comprehensive Equality Scheme (CES) 2016-20 sets out how the Council will meet its duties to improve the quality of life and life chances of all Lewisham's residents as well as the various equality groups afforded specific protection under the Equality Act of 2010. The scheme contains the following five overarching objectives:

- tackle victimisation, discrimination and harassment
- improve access to services
- close the gap in outcomes for our citizens
- increase mutual understanding and respect within and between communities
- increase participation and engagement.

3.3. The London Borough of Lewisham has a population of 301,000 (the 13th largest in London and the 5th largest in Inner London). The population of the borough has increased by 25,000 since the 2011 Census (this represents a 9% increase since 2011). By the time of the next national Census in 2021, the population of the borough is forecast to reach 321,000 (a 16% increase on 2011). Children and young people make up 25 per cent of Lewisham's population, whilst those aged over 65 comprise of 10 per cent of the population.

#### **4. DISABILITY CONTEXT**

4.1. In the 2013 Census of Local Authority Councillors, respondents were asked whether or not they had a long-term illness, a proxy for disability, which limits their daily activities or the work they can do and that has lasted or is expected to last at least 12 months. Just over one in eight (13.2 per cent) of councillors confirmed that they had a disability or long-term illness which fitted the definition. This proportion has fallen slightly from 2010 (14.1 per cent), however it should be noted that the question in 2010 did not include the timescale.

4.2. The proportion of councillors who had a long-term illness or disability was highest in the North East (16.8 per cent), the West Midlands (16.1 per cent), and the East Midlands (15.3 per cent) and lowest in London (8.9 per cent), the South East (11.4 per cent) and the East of England (11.6 per cent). The position in London remained fixed between the 2010 and 2013 Census of Local Authority councillors with 8.9 per cent identifying themselves as having a long-term health illness.

4.3. At the time of the 2011 National Census, 14.4 per cent of Lewisham residents had a long-term health problem or disability which either limited their daily activities a little or a lot (7.1 per cent of residents said their daily activities were limited a lot and 7.3 per cent said their daily activities were limited a little). The Lewisham position is similar to that of the rest of London, with 14.2 per cent of London residents having a long-term health problem or disability which either limited their daily activities a little or a lot (6.8 per cent of residents said their daily activities were limited a lot and 7.4 per cent said their daily activities were limited a little). Across the whole of England, 17.6 per cent of residents had a disability (8.3 per cent of residents said their daily activities were limited a lot and 9.3 per cent said their daily activities were limited a little).

4.4. No differences were observed between male and female councillors in relation to whether or not the respondent identified as having a disability.

4.5. The proportions of councillors with a long-term illness or disability varied across political parties. Labour Party representatives (16.5 per cent) were the most likely of all of the main parties to state that they had a disability, followed by Liberal Democrat (12.0 per cent) and Conservative Party members (11.6 per cent).

- 4.6. In terms of ethnicity, 13.3 per cent of respondents who were white identified that they had a disability, compared with 9.3 per cent of respondents from other ethnicities.
- 4.7. Of the 106 councillors aged under 25 who responded to the Census, declared that they had a disability, and few councillors aged under 40 had a long term illness (3.5 per cent).

## **5. DISABILITY RESEARCH AND CAMPAIGNS**

- 5.1. In 2010, the House of Commons, Speaker's Conference on Parliamentary Representation found that "many disabled people are deterred from any sort of involvement in politics or public life by problems at a local level, with their councils. Local authorities play an important role along the pathway to politics, but they do not always make it easy for disabled people to get involved." The Councillors Commission, reported in 2007 that some local authorities were failing to ensure practical help for councillors with disabilities and gave the examples of sign language interpretation at official meetings, induction loop systems and accessible meeting rooms. The Commission found that often support was not available or not publicised.
- 5.2. Research and campaigns into representation of people with disabilities has been conducted in other areas of public life. In 2010, the Advisory Panel on Judicial Diversity recommended a fundamental shift in approach from a focus on selection processes towards a judicial career that addresses diversity at every stage. In the same year, Disability Rights: UK conducted a survey of disabled people who are board level directors, departmental directors, or non-executive directors. The findings of the research identified 'high fliers' with disabilities, who agreed overwhelmingly that mentoring and support from senior staff were key to their success. However, the research also found that disabled people were significantly less likely to get that kind of mentoring and senior support.
- 5.3. The Equality and Human Rights Commission response to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities call for evidence on the right of persons with disabilities to participate in decision-making, 'Smoothing the Pathway to Politics for Disabled People', was published in 2016. One of the Commission's recommendations was directed at representation in local government: the Commission found that steps taken by local authorities to allow elected members and the public to fully participate in public life should be exemplary practice. The full report is attached at Appendix A.
- 5.4. The Government Equalities Office has published 'Political Life: Disabled People's Stories' which sets out experiences disabled people have had in getting experience, standing for elected office and working in political life. The case studies give examples of barriers people with disabilities have faced and how they have overcome them. One of the case studies by a former Parliamentary intern recognised that some people expect there to be people who have negative attitudes towards their involvement in politics because of their disability, but his experience was that people's attitudes are very positive towards disabled people being involved in politics. However, one current councillor had experienced a lack of understanding from others within all sectors. Other case studies identified the cost of funding a British Sign Language translator or support worker as a barrier for candidates with disabilities. One candidate identified logistics for attending meetings as a potential barrier which he would overcome by thoroughly researching locations ahead of time.

- 5.5. Councillor David Beaman (Farnham Town Council) in 'Political Life: Disabled People's Stories' recommended training schemes to support councillors and potential candidates with disabilities. Apart from allowing information to be more widely disseminated, Councillor Beaman states that such training sessions would also provide the opportunity for people with disabilities to network to share and learn from the experiences of others. Additionally, Councillor Beaman recommends that consideration should be given to short and longer-term placements with Leaders of local authorities to provide mentoring and shadowing opportunities for candidates with disabilities.
- 5.6. The Local Government Association has published 'Make a Difference. Be a Councillor. A Guide for Disabled People' and introduced a mentoring scheme to support and encourage disabled people in politics as part of the 'Be a Councillor' Campaign. The guide is attached to this report as Appendix B. As part of the previous government's Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Strategy, the Access to Elected Office for Disabled People Fund was established; a cross-party group of MPs has recently called on the Government to reopen the fund.

## **6. EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS**

- 6.1. The equality implications are set out in the body of this report.

## **7. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 7.1. There are no specific financial implications arising from this report at this time.

## **8. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

- 8.1. The legal implications are set in the body of the Report.
- 8.2. Additionally, Article 29(b)(ii) of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities requires the UK Government to enable people with disabilities to participate in non-governmental organisations and associations concerned with the public and political life of the country. Community participation and 'civil society' have been encouraged by the UK Government in England and Wales through Department for Communities and Local Government funded projects and the Localism Act 2011 which introduced new rights for communities to take greater control in their local areas.

## **9. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS**

- 9.1. Appendix A: 'Smoothing the Pathway to Politics for Disabled People: Equality and Human Rights Commission response to the UN Special Rapporteur on the rights of persons with disabilities call for evidence on the right of persons with disabilities to participate in decision-making.'
- 9.2. Appendix B: 'Make a Difference. Be a Councillor. A Guide for Disabled People.'