

Member Development Working Group: Promoting Local Democracy Phase One report, March 2019

This is the phase one report of the working group set up by the Member Development Group to promote local democracy. Phase one has focused on increasing the diversity of people standing for election to the Council. Member Development Group agreed the findings and recommendations set out in this report in March 2019.

Members of the working group: Mrs Janet Duncton (Chairman), Dr Kate O’Kelly, Mrs Sue Mullins, Mr Viral Parikh, Mrs Elizabeth Sparkes

1. Background

In June 2018, the County Council discussed a notice of motion regarding increasing female representation in local government. The County Council agreed to ask the Member Development Group (MDG) to actively look at ways to encourage women, together with other under-represented groups wanting to become councillors in West Sussex and make recommendation on how to increase the number who stand in the 2021 elections. Following this, MDG agreed to develop a three-year programme to promote local democracy, leading up to the 2021 County Council elections, incorporating:

- The provision of information to people thinking of standing for election, building on learning from 2017.
- An exploration of the barriers to people standing for election and ways to address these and improve the diversity of county councillors.
- A review of member roles.
- Promotion of the role of members and the Council to the wider general public, including through opportunities such as Local Democracy Week.

MDG established a cross-party working group to lead this programme and this is carrying out its work in three phases:

- Sept 2018 – Feb 2019: The barriers to standing for election
- June 2019 – Feb 2020: Reviewing member roles
- April 2020 – March 2021: Planning for the next County Council elections and member induction

2. Phase 1 overview

The working group has met four times, using videoconferencing for two of its meetings. It has reviewed a wide range of information and heard evidence from members, officers, the Council’s staff groups and from other councils and representatives from the Local Government Association (LGA) – as summarised below. One member of the working group used a wheelchair to attend County Council in December 2018, in order to gain an insight into access issues at County Hall. Two members of the working group attended the women in Local Government Conference in January 2019.

a) Information reviewed:

- Demographic data.
- The support available to elected members.

- The Council's '[Be a Councillor West Sussex](#)' website.
- The Member IT offer.
- The LGA '[Be a Councillor](#)' campaign.
- Specific national reports that have particularly informed the working group's deliberations include:
 - [Stand for what you believe in, improving access to local government elected office for people with disabilities](#) (LGA, 2018)
 - [Does local Government work for women?](#) (The Fawcett Society, 2017)
 - [The Speakers Conference report 2010](#) (which considered the disparity between the representation of women, ethnic minorities and disabled people in the House of Commons and their representation in the UK population at large)
 - [Democratic engagement: Respecting, protecting and promoting our democracy](#) (HM Government, 2019)

b) Evidence heard:

- LGA national Be a Councillor campaign.
- Briefing on an access audit of County Council buildings, provided by the Head of Facilities Management.
- Feedback from other county councils in the region.
- The working group met with the five staff groups, to explore their perspective on what discourages (and might encourage) people to stand for election. These groups are: Women in the Workplace, the Carers Staff Group, the Disability Staff Group, the LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender) Group and the BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) Group.
- The working group also heard evidence from individual members about their personal experience of standing for election and their perspective on the barriers that exist for certain groups, reflecting the following aspects of diversity: support for members with disabilities; for women with childcare responsibilities; for members of the LGBT+ community; for those with caring responsibilities.

3. Working group findings

- a) The Group identified the affected groups of people who they considered had to overcome additional barriers to enable them to stand for election as: young people; those working and in education; those with disabilities (both visible and hidden); women (including those with dependent children); those in a minority due to their race, religion or beliefs, those in a minority due to sexual orientation or who have undergone gender reassignment and those with caring responsibilities.
- b) It recognised that there are limitations to what the Council can do to address and influence all barriers to greater diversity in its membership, but identified a number of actions and areas for development (set out in para 4). An overriding concern for the working group was **to enable people to participate equally and to ensure there is equality of opportunity for all**. Whilst it may be difficult to encourage people to stand for election (feedback from the LGA suggest candidates have to be asked six times before they even consider standing), the working group recognised that there are other ways for people to get involved which should be promoted. It is always going to be hard for young people, those in full-time education and in employment to take on the role of a county councillor. But the working group felt that ensuring all groups and

communities have the opportunity to influence and engage through different mechanisms is as important as encouraging them to become councillors.

Raising the profile of councillors and promoting local democracy is a long-term investment, which may ultimately lead to a broader diversity in terms of people standing for election – but which brings other gains, such as a more engaged community, residents who understand the decisions being made that affect them – and how to influence these, and perhaps higher levels of voting in local elections.

- c) There are many different barriers affecting different people in different ways, but also that there is a lot of positive work already going on in West Sussex. We need to promote this better, and to **highlight the existing diversity within the Council membership – to present a positive image to the community that celebrates difference.** The Council's commitment to equality of opportunity and addressing stigma and prejudice in all its forms should be clearly communicated.
- d) However, there are some areas that do present real difficulties, and the experience of one member of the working group who spent the morning of a full Council meeting in a wheelchair was salutary. He felt isolated and dependant on others for support, and the working group recognises that there would be significant access challenges at County Hall for any members with disabilities, be they temporary or permanent. Whilst feedback from staff and members does not suggest people have directly experienced prejudice themselves, the working group feels that all members should have training in equalities and unconscious bias. This will help ensure everyone understands the issues and to enable all members to help to address them. Members are also well-placed to lead by example as ambassadors for the County Council.
- e) It is inevitable that there is a reactive approach in terms of providing support for members and making adaptations to meet different needs. However the working group felt that there is potential to be more proactive, through better information, IT and training, and by showing that it is possible to be a councillor even where there are constraints. Initiatives such as the Be a Councillor website and the programme of engagement with the West Sussex Youth Cabinet were highlighted as good practice. The potential to do more including through events such as Local Democracy Week, by engaging with sixth form students, with staff and through County Local Committees were identified.
- f) Feedback from the staff groups was very helpful and the working group wishes to thank them for giving members the opportunity to meet with them. Their perspective on the different barriers people face was very insightful. Staff do not always understand the role of councillors themselves, so there is potential to explore opportunities to address this, and to encourage staff to become advocates for promoting local democracy.
- g) The working group was passionate about the difference local councillors can make to their community, and the fact that all councillors – whether cabinet members or backbenchers, majority or minority party - can have a real influence on policy and decisions through their different roles at the Council. It sees members as the ambassadors for the whole County and as such they have a key role to play in encouraging residents to get involved – whether that means

through standing for election, volunteering, attending engagement events or voting in local elections.

4. Recommendations and action plan

The working group has developed an action plan, summarised in the table below. This will be monitored by the working group as it progresses into phase two of its work. Governance Committee is asked to consider and endorse the actions and recommendations set out below.

Issue/barrier	Actions/Recommendations
4.1 Lack of data – so unclear on the full extent to which members may require support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question to be asked in the 2019 Member Survey on whether members would be happy to provide more personal data, to provide benchmarking information and help ensure members’ needs are met.
4.2 Perception that there is a lack of diversity of local councillors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight the existing diversity of Council members and present a positive image of the Council as a good place to work and which sees equalities and diversity as important issues. • Consider making more member films (including BAME and working age members) and promote the other member films. • Promote the ‘Treating People as Individuals’ policy/approach.
4.3 Improve information on the support available to those thinking of standing for election	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Update the WSCC ‘Be a Councillor’ website to ensure information on the range of support available (including training) is provided. • District/borough council elections teams to be asked to promote the ‘Be a Councillor’ website. • Develop a lone worker policy for members and ensure members are aware of how to report online and offline abuse and harassment. • Identify members who would be willing to become mentors for people thinking of standing for election and new members once elected.
4.4 Lack of awareness of the role of members/local government – public	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a ‘Be a Councillor’ event at County Hall North in October 2019, supported by the LGA. If successful, two further events to be held during 2020 at other locations (Worthing, Crawley). • The Working group is developing an outline idea to take a session on local democracy to 6th form colleges (see para 4.8 for more detail) • ‘Be a Councillor’ sessions to be held at all County Local Committees in spring/summer 2020 (pre-events) – publicising the role of members as well as the role of the Council in the community. • Promote the role of councillors, and local democracy in general, including through events during Local Democracy Week.
4.5 Lack of awareness of the role of members	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staff themselves can play a role in being ambassadors for the Council and in promoting local democracy/the role of members. It is therefore important to promote

Issue/barrier	Actions/Recommendations
- staff	<p>existing information ('Be a Councillor', member films, online political management training) with staff.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve staff groups in the member induction programme 2021. • Recommend piloting a member panel/Q&A drop-in session with staff at County Hall, Chichester. If successful this could be rolled out across the five main hubs (County Hall Chichester, County Hall North, Durban House, Centenary House, Crawley Library).
4.6 Selection process and role of political associations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide role profiles to political associations, including expectations/time commitments, support available and link to 'Be a Councillor' website.
4.7 Political affiliation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is difficult to stand for election/be elected unless you are affiliated to a political party, but this is a reality that is difficult for the working group to influence. However, the working group felt that it is important to ensure there is support for people thinking of standing as independents, including through the 'Be a Councillor' website and events.
4.8 Young people	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people may consider themselves inexperienced and may in reality not be able to make the time commitment due to education/work commitments. • Continue to work with the Youth Cabinet on a programme of youth engagement with WSCC members, to encourage older school children to further their interest in politics, including opportunities for young people to shadow their local county councillor. • Recommend developing a pilot session on local government (approx. 45 minutes to 1 hour long) for members to visit 6th forms/colleges to highlight the role of members and importance of democracy (with a panel of local members). Aim to hold in autumn 2019 (September/October). If successful, to be rolled out across the county. • If successful, to be rolled out across the county. • Encourage members to make more use of social media to engage a younger audience in democracy/community issues.
4.9 Older people – retired and approaching retirement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The working group agreed not to prioritise this group: older age groups are well represented and therefore the barriers that may exist for them are not seen as a priority.
4.10 Working age	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is difficult to manage work commitments whilst also fulfilling the role of a councillor. It is important to ensure that the likely time commitment for the role is made clear and there is potential to publicise/highlight existing members who are employed and how they manage the roles. • The working group will review this as part of Phase 2, to include expectations around different member roles and what further engagement might be useful with

Issue/barrier	Actions/Recommendations
	<p>local businesses/partner organisations/colleges, district/borough councils etc.</p>
4.11 Disability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a reactive approach to supporting the needs of members with disabilities and with limited mobility – making adaptations where required. As members aren't asked to provide this type of information, it is possible that some needs are not recognised or addressed. The working group therefore considered that more detailed data should be requested from newly elected members. • Information on the facilities and assistance available for disabled members should be provided. • There are considerable barriers in terms of accessibility at County Hall. An Access Audit is currently underway into all Council buildings, which is due to be reported back to the working group in summer 2019. • Better use of technology needs to be prioritised to enable people with disabilities to participate in meetings virtually. Members recognised that videoconferencing cannot be used for formal meetings but recommend that it should always be offered for all informal member meetings (following the IT upgrade).
4.12 Hidden disabilities (e.g. mental health, autistic spectrum disorder, learning difficulty)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The support available to members needs to be clear in all documentation, so people thinking of standing are aware of this (e.g. access to counselling). • There may be potential to encourage members with such conditions to talk about how they manage their disability within their role. • The whole organisation needs to be open about the support for mental health and other hidden conditions – and to highlight that the emphasis is on treating people as individuals. It is important for the Council to be supportive of equalities and to address stigma associated with mental health. • Recommend that the Cabinet Member for Adults and Health/Chairman of Health and Wellbeing Board be asked to champion addressing such stigma.
4.13 Women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Address the perception, where it exists, that councils are predominantly an 'old boys club' (which the working group members confirmed is not the experience of female councillors at WSCC). Show people what the reality is: promote the role to women – show what female councillors do (role models) and provide mentors. Promote film of female councillors. • Ensure women candidates and members understand the legal protection available against online and offline abuse and harassment and be confident these methods will address the problem (N.B. this applies to all candidates/members, not just women).
4.14 People with dependent children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It can be difficult to travel and attend meetings during the day and in school holidays; difficult to arrange childcare when meetings are held on different days;

Issue/barrier	Actions/Recommendations
	<p>childcare costs can be prohibitive; difficult to arrange childcare when meetings re-arranged at short notice.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommend that meetings should be avoided in school holidays as far as possible and meetings for different committees/panels should be on the same day of the week. Changes to dates of meetings already advertised/set out in the calendar of meetings should not be made without consultation with the affected members. • Recently agreed changes to the member allowance scheme which enable members to claim for childcare costs to be promoted.
4.15 Race, religion, belief	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The working group considered that there could be targeted promotion of the role of councillors through attendance at community events in areas with higher proportion of BAME residents. In addition, the guidance for members (including through the 'Be a Councillor' website) should make clear that all dietary requirements can be catered for. • Work with existing members who have links to different faith/BAME groups to promote the role of councillors/local government, including through a new member film highlighting their work. • Consider shadowing/mentoring initiatives for people thinking of standing for election.
4.16 Sexual orientation /gender re-assignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue to attend community events such as Pride to promote volunteering and highlight the Council's positive approach to diversity. The working group felt that more members should be encouraged to be involved in such events. • The working group felt that consideration should be given to the Council's listing in the Stonewall workplace equality index (i.e. to achieve a place in the top 100 organisations) and to whether WSCC should sign up to the Stonewall diversity champion programme. It plans to discuss that at its next meeting and may wish to make recommendations to the Cabinet Member for Corporate Relations on this.
4.17 Caring responsibilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whilst recognising that caring responsibilities can make it very difficult to make the commitment to being a councillor, the working group considered it important to promote the carers' support allowance available as well as the experience of current members who are/have been carers (and show what they have brought to the role/how they have managed).
4.18 Ex-military personnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The working group did not consider this to be a particular barrier (and noted that several current members are ex-military). However, it agreed that it is important to continue to promote the Council's support for ex-military, and that there may be opportunity to include something within the 'Be a Councillor' website to reference this.

Issue/barrier	Actions/Recommendations
4.19 Equalities awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommend that equalities/unconscious bias training be provided to all members.

5. Suggestions for Phases 2 and 3

During the course of Phase 1, the working group identified a number of issues to include in phases 2 and 3, as set out below.

a) Phase 2: reviewing the member role:

- Review the Member Development Charter programme and consider its appropriateness for the County Council.
- Review the information provided on member allowances
- Provide details of any revised member role profiles to political associations (and make available online).
- Consider any outcomes from the County Local Committee review, particularly relating to the local member/community leader role.

b) Phase 3: planning for 2021 Council elections

- Ensure candidates have a clear understanding of the day-to-day reality of the role of being a councillor (including time commitments and preparation time); candidates should be shown some 'real' members' calendars (backbencher/cabinet member).
- Equalities/unconscious bias training to be part of induction.
- Gather better/more data on members to be able to provide appropriate support.
- Staff groups to be involved in member induction programme (e.g. Disability Staff Group has offered to run an awareness session).
- Take part in any media campaigns around voter registration – and liaise with district/borough council elections officers on student registration programmes.

6. Next steps

The working group plans to continue into Phase 2 of its work, focusing on the member role, although elements of Phase 1 are ongoing. It is proposed that Phase 2 will be between June 2019 and February 2020, and the working group will provide further updates on this during 2019/20. The working group agreed that the membership could be reviewed as necessary by MDG through the course of its work, but that it would be helpful to keep the same 'core' of members involved.