



Paper 10 gan: Youth Cymru

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### **Consultation on Diversity in Local Government**

The Welsh Assembly Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee enquiry into diversity in local government is in progress and we welcome this opportunity to respond to this consultation; and iterate that Youth Cymru fundamentally supports the importance and necessity to ensure diversity amongst local councillors

### **Youth Cymru - Introduction**

Youth Cymru is a national Welsh youth work charity with over 80 years experience of supporting youth work, young people and youth organisations in Wales. We seek to support and enable young people to become effective citizens through appropriate educational and developmental activities by providing them with access to innovative, creative and educative projects and programmes. We place youth participation at the heart of what we do and facilitate the involvement of young people in decisions making at all levels both within our organisation, other youth organisations and the communities in which they live. In all activities Youth Cymru promotes equality of opportunity and has due regard for the principles and purposes of youth work as enshrined in our history as a leading youth organisation in Wales and as set out in the Youth Work in Wales Principles and Purposes, the Youth Work Curriculum Strategy and in the National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014 -2018. We work with due regard to the UNCRC and align our strategic goals with The Well Being and Future Generations Act (Wales) 2015

We have extensive experience in the field of equalities in Wales with young people aged 11-25, working both directly in our projects and programmes and through our broad network of over 300 member organisations. Examples of our previous equalities field experience include an Erasmus+ funded project that



engaged with young people from across the UK and Ireland, bringing 30 of them together with parliamentarians from the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly. This is an example of good practice demonstrating the potential for decision makers to engage with young people at a high level of participation. By engaging in this structured dialogue project young people developed a series of policy calls including education, mental health, environment and Brexit, developed their understanding of political structures within their own nations and across UK and Ireland and were empowered to affect political change. The need for education in regard to policy and decision making at all levels led to our development of this project. They met with their respective parliamentarians face to face and we have continued to support these volunteers to remain engaged both in a second British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly project, being organised by our Partners UK Youth, and in a European Youth Forum Democracy Festival, YO! Fest. Additionally in 2017 we delivered work enabling young people to engage with a project that contributed to:

- Developing the capacity of civil society to influence reforms in pursuit of open government and sustainable development;
- Developing engagement between civil society and governments, in order to improve governance and sustainable development in Wales;
- Ensure wider participation in the open government civil society movement to progress the Well-being Goals in Wales.

This project consisted of a series of workshops delivered in diverse youth facing contexts across Wales enabling us to consult with young people and build our understanding of how to best support young people who face multiple barriers to enable them to begin to become more politically engaged, informed and active.

Additionally our Trans\*Form project was central to the Welsh Government Transgender Action Plan. Our training and free online Trans\*Form toolkit provides youth-facing organisations with best practice guidance on supporting trans young people and their duties under equality legislation. We were also the supporting organisation for the Campaign for a Welsh Youth Parliament and following the Welsh Government highly welcomed decisions to support a new Welsh Youth Parliament are a supporting organisation working with young people



who face barriers to engagement to participate in this new youth decision making structure.

This contextual practice experience and our linked established network of young people and youth work organisations has helped inform this response to this inquiry and we offer the following broad responses and thoughts in relation to these terms of reference.

**To understand the importance of diversity among local councillors, including the effect on public engagement, debate and decision making.**

Young participants who engaged with our Voices of the Future project included a cross section of young people who faced barriers to engagement and were marginalise in some way. Workshops were delivered to the following groups of young people:

- Swansea YMCA Hub group
- Swansea YMCA Good Vibes LGBT group
- Full Circle (young women and girls)
- Young police volunteers, Neath
- Gellideg Foundation, Merthyr Tydfil
- Swansea Young Adult Carers
- Young police volunteers, Swansea
- Young police volunteers, Port Talbot
- Children in Wales Young Wales event (attended by young people and youth forums from across Wales)
- Whizzkidz, Cardiff, Newport and Llanelli (x3)
- Cardiff Youth Service Early Intervention and Prevention (x3)

A young person who engaged with the project through Whizzkidz, highlighted how a lack of diversity in local councils and other decision making bodies can impact on aspirations, a sense of inclusion and feelings of acceptance. A lack of representation across all sectors of the community at council level led to one young person asking " Can

people in wheel chairs be politicians?" <http://youthcymru.org.uk/voices-of-the-future/>

This lack of representation and diversity was a theme throughout our work with young people highlighting the importance of diversity at all levels and how a lack of diverse representation can impact on engagement, debate and decision making. One young person voiced the disillusionment that many feel *"Sometimes it's pointless, they do consultations and nothing comes of it"* Some had previously taken part in consultations but there was a sense of frustration at the lack of transparency and the lack of clear and honest communication. This risks young people experiencing "consultation fatigue" and a feeling that they were not been listened to or taken seriously suggesting that much work to date to become more representative has been tokenistic and far from participatory.

Where youth representation is enabled through for example, youth forums located within statutory youth services, we see much good practice and examples of youth engagement with local councils; though arguable diversity remains an issue that youth services can only actively address with adequate resources. Young people with additional needs require specific support to enable them to engage with these structures. Ensuring the engagement of "harder to reach" young people requires youth work resources and any remaining existing "youth council/forum" structures face continual threats due to local authority budgetary cuts, leading to a decline in youth voices being heard, a reduction in diverse representation e.g. 18-25 year olds at councillor level and less young people engaging with local government.

As stated in the Estyn report to the Welsh Government young people have a right to high quality support through youth work. They need access to activities outside of formal education, in safe environments that open them up to new opportunities, help them make relationships, build friendships, and learn new skills. From time to time, they will also

need support that helps them to understand their life choices and make important decisions. Decision made at local council level impact hugely on the local services provided and have led to a patchwork, postcode lottery style of opportunity, which fundamentally prohibits diverse youth representation amongst local councillors. The structures that have been historically in place to enable youth representation and to "train and facilitate the skills to enable to engage in local government continue to be eroded due to local funding cuts to youth services and an absence of strategic direction from the Welsh Government that could "protect" the youth services needed to enable youth representation and increased diversity amongst local council.

Understand key barriers to attracting a more diverse pool of candidates for local government elections

As afore mentioned we carried out consultation with young people as part of our Voices of the Future project. Additionally our young leaders group Llais Ifanc consulted with their peers as part of our BIPA (British Irish Parliamentarian Assembly Project)

Key themes identified include:

- Trust

Across the consultation, there was a shared lack of trust in politics, at a local and national level with young people telling us - "We're talked at, not listened to." Some participants felt that engagement with young people was often tokenistic or superficial, or that young people were not taken seriously, perhaps due to a perceived lack of life experience. This lack of trust will prove a barrier to engagement and inhibit a more diverse pool of candidates in the future.

*"They don't care about young people, they think we don't have real life experience and only care about our phones, when I look after my mother and father and go to school! Tell me I don't have real life experience" - young carer*

- Education

*"Teach politics in schools. We want a say, but how can we if we're not even told?"*

A theme we often returned to was a lack education in schools. For many of the young people we spoke to, politics was equated with voting. Therefore, for many young people under 18, they felt politics was not relevant to them given they were not yet old enough to vote. With the changes in relation to votes for 16 year old in local elections the need for education increases to ensure barriers are reduced. Young people have to start somewhere and the opportunities they have access to early on will ensure that going forward local councillors include young people making for a more diverse, inclusive and representative local council.

It is important that any education does not only focus on voter registration and the electoral process, but develops an understanding of democracy as an ongoing process and the various ways for young people (including those under the age of 18) to become involved.

Echoing the findings of the Electoral Reform Society's recent 'Missing Voices' report, there was confusion about devolution, with many young people being surprised that they had five Assembly Members representing them in addition to their Member of Parliament. They lacked an understanding of how and where decisions are made not understanding the role of local councillors nor of Assembly Members. This lack of knowledge represents a key barrier across the age group we represent 11-25 year olds.

- Digital Communication

Young people also told us they wanted information on digital and media literacy including how to identify fake news. This lack of

acknowledgment of the needs of a digital generation proves to be a barrier to increased diversity.

- Representation

*"Young people's views need to be listened to. Speak to a wide range of young people."*

A number of young people spoke about challenges around representation and the need to ensure that any consultation or engagement activities proactively reach a wide range of young people.

Representation is also important in terms of perception and aspiration - can we expect young people to be (or to aspire to be) what they cannot see?

- Accessibility

For young people who had previously voted, some raised concerns about the accessibility of elections and spoke about the barriers they had experienced. Recent research found that only 25% of visually impaired voters said the current system allowed them to vote independently, compromising anonymity (Royal Society for Blind Children, 2016). Young people told us that election literature in the post should be available in large print and that accessible resources were not always properly advertised in polling stations. Young people who required mobility support told of their struggles they face when trying to engage e.g. lack of support using public transport or accessing events etc.

- Transparency

Young people told us that they face barriers due to the language used e.g. the use of jargon and exclusivity in mainstream / adult political media (e.g. language such as ("focus group" "neutrality" etc.) Public meetings are not understandable so how are they public?

What needs to change?

## Recommendations

One of the biggest recommendations was around visibility. Young people wanted decision makers to be more visible in the community, including coming into schools and youth clubs to speak to young people - "actually come to speak to young people". This could contribute to the needed culture change identified in the Welsh Government's Green Paper. There was overwhelming support for votes at 16 indicating that young people have an appetite to be involved in local government on many levels.

### **To explore areas of innovation and good practice that may help increase diversity in local government.**

Youth Cymru fully supports the importance of exploring areas of innovation and good practice and recognises that the learning from this practice should and could increase diversity in local government. As a national youth work organisation our work with over 300 member organisation has given an overview of the good practice that is taking place across Wales to support young people in developing the capacity and knowledge to enable them to engage in politics at different levels.

The collating and sharing of these good practice examples could contribute to an approach that would aid an increase diversity in local government. For example we know that training for young people to enable their understanding of local decision making processes structure and how they can get involved is vital to ensure diverse representation particularly in light of the move towards votes at 16.

### **To explore the potential impact of the proposals in the Welsh Government's Green Paper, Strengthening Local Government to increasing diversity in Council chambers.**

Youth Cymru is supportive of the Green Paper's acknowledgement of the need for Councillors to reflect the diversity of communities and support the proposal that cultural changes is necessary for this to happened. We would reiterate the importance of recognising and including young people meaningfully in this process of changes.



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<https://www.estyn.gov.wales/sites/default/files/documents/Youth%20Support%20Services%20in%20Wales.pdf>