

Job-Sharing Cabinet Positions in Swansea: Report to the Equalities, Local Government & Communities Committee “Diversity in Local Government” Inquiry

The Equalities, Local Government and Communities Committee has published its report following their inquiry into Diversity in Local Government, which includes recommendations to follow Swansea’s example in bringing in job-sharing cabinet positions. This recommendation was made with very little input about how Swansea has done this, and what has been learned in the process.

This paper has two aims. Firstly we aim to support the committee’s recommendation by providing some insights from our early experience of job-sharing in Swansea. Secondly and perhaps more importantly, the paper explains some of the barriers to diversity which job sharing has shone a light on, and for which job-sharing, alone, cannot be a fix.

Although it carries a salary, the “job” of political office is not like other employment. Certain expectations made of politicians – by themselves, each other, the officers they work with and the public – make job-sharing a more complex undertaking, accompanied by more challenges, than a usual job-share. We hope that sharing our experience will be helpful on a practical level, and that the points raised here about cultural barriers to diversity, which job-sharing won’t necessarily put an end to, will be acknowledged as discussions continue about increasing diversity in democracy.

Legal Status and Culture Change

The Labour administration in Swansea has been determined to pioneer new modern ways of working for political roles, to encourage younger members especially young mothers to take on senior positions. Policies to become more family friendly have been under discussion and being introduced, influencing meeting times and durations, the active promotion of reimbursement of care costs, etc. This has included some cabinet portfolios being filled on job share basis (1 in 2017; 2 in 2018). Unfortunately the legislation and national local government processes have not helped; Swansea has persisted to successfully implement job-sharing despite rigid and out of date legislation and policy.

Currently, the legal reality is that a Cabinet Member salary, vote and title cannot be shared. Swansea sharers have alternated every three months, but continued to work *as a cabinet member* for the whole period: while the vote and the pay may alternate, job-sharers are still expected to fulfil their full cabinet role at all times. It has proved important to ensure all officers and members understand this.

Officers, particularly those who safeguard our legal compliance, have sometimes been very committed to clarity over who is or is not “the cabinet member” at any time. This can be confusing and undermining, not just for sharers but for colleagues (either members or officers) who are willing to be more flexible in order to embrace the new arrangements.

We welcome assurances that legislation and national policy will soon catch up and facilitate sharing without concern about it not being legally correct. Meanwhile, anyone pushing boundaries (real or perceived) to change cultures should be prepared for this tension.

Individual Responsibility in the concept of “Leadership”

A single portfolio-holder, overseeing their workload and remaining solely accountable for it, has many merits – essentially, this format gives clarity of accountability. The concept of individual responsibility is a fairly ingrained cultural expectation of political life. With all due respect for party cohesion, the fraternity of multi-member wards, principles of collective responsibility and

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the ultimate shared success or failure of a political administration, individual politicians are ultimately judged according to their own actions, by their colleagues, the media and crucially the electorate. This creates a philosophical dilemma as well as a practical challenge for job-sharing. Collaboration and integration also have many merits. The WCFG Act expects politicians to model these ways of working and we recognise the dangers of any silo mentality. But in the custom and practice of political life, even if collaborating with each other as competent individuals is expected, and works very well, going beyond that to working in a truly integrated way jars against concepts of individual leadership, and this is particularly notable with job-sharing. A nervous dance can emerge, with sharers anxious not to undermine each other and colleagues anxious about maintaining equal communication and collaboration with both partners.

It is worth considering how closely (or not) the qualities associated with “leaders” resemble those we’d look for in a working partner. Concepts of “leadership” shape working cultures and set our expectations of the people we support into leadership roles, who then perpetuate those cultures. The current, rather individualistic, culture of political work is one in which job-sharing can be an awkward fit. To put this another way: people who have enjoyed job-sharing in settings where individual leadership isn’t so paramount and where collaboration and integration occur more naturally may well find their natural working style an awkward fit with politics.

In discussions of diversity, may be recognized that diversity of *working styles* is as necessary as of race, age, sex, economic status etc, and we may know that working styles embedded long ago by white, wealthy men do not suit everyone, but they don’t seem to be being fundamentally challenged while discussions about diversity focus on practicalities. Getting more women into leadership won’t necessarily change these cultures, and nor will more job-sharing.

Workload

The workload of any cabinet member is unpredictable. For conscientious post-holders, seeking to drive improvement and change, there will always be more than can feasibly fit into a “normal” working week. For job-sharers, the boundary of what is achievable must be drawn in more tightly to fit their restricted availability. This is not as straightforward as a standard full-time job commitment where each sharer works their 18.5 hours.

Year 1 of Swansea cabinet job-sharing saw two names heading a list of shared responsibilities. The context of rapid change (see below) meant that both the highly experienced councillor and the new officer-turned-councillor were not familiar with the latest relevant operational structure: officers, plans, partnerships, meeting cycles etc. “Two-for-the-price-of-one” syndrome struck, with both doing everything. Other commitments, such as caring duties and other paid work had to give way in a manner that other sharers, with more fixed outside commitments, simply could not indulge. Inefficiency and duplication of effort, combined with cultural struggles (mainly with officers) over **individual responsibility** necessitated a change. Year 2 saw separate portfolios drawn up, with complete clarity over who would lead on what, but with the expectation that, in the spirit (and legal sense) of job-sharing, both would maintain an overview of the whole portfolio.

A job-sharer may commit to a role that seems feasible on a part-time basis, but with split responsibilities, keeping an eye on a partner’s areas requires additional time. All job-sharers may struggle with “hand-over time”, and political roles are no exception. If we could deploy part-time cabinet roles, with councils allowed to have up to 10 FTE cabinet members, this would eliminate “hand-over time” but other dilemmas related to workload would still be encountered.

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Employers generally recognize that they get more than 2 x half-time value out of one shared full-time post. In roles that can become truly immeasurable, with demand expanding unpredictably, job-sharing in a way that is fair and balanced, in respect of the sharers and of their other commitments, can be difficult. Devices commonly used to manage workload-creep in more conventional work settings (like blocking out certain days or switching off emails) don't lend themselves well to a political setting where being perceived as "unavailable" could be damaging.

Fundamentally: what is the Full Time Equivalency of a job that is potentially infinite? To entice someone with caring or other duties into a "part-time" political leadership role, how many hours must they prepare to commit? The usual formula of halving the full time commitment begs the question: how many hours is that? Perhaps if we'd like to see more job-sharing in politics, as a way of achieving more diversity in politics, then we must attempt to address work-life balance for all in politics.

Context of Rapid Change

Demand management, particularly during austerity, requires constant transformation. Getting abreast of an unfamiliar portfolio is a big task; newcomers or "returners" have a lot to learn in a short time to begin being effective. For job-sharers, with less time available, this contextual familiarisation can be a disproportionate burden, and both have to do it. Frequent changes in organizational structure, personnel and loss of resource in general make it more of a challenge; challenges take time to resolve, and job-sharers have less time. Incumbents – whether full-time or job-sharing - who retain a familiar portfolio may cope better with rapid change, once they're comfortable in their role. But incumbency is, research says, an enemy of diversity. If we seek more change in politics and a more open door to people in different situations, the context of rapid change in modern Welsh politics must be recognized as a difficulty to navigate.

Remuneration

We anticipate that it will soon be legally easier for some political roles in Wales to be shared. Until then, as explained above, sharers must "take turns" to comply with the law. In Swansea we have had three-month rotations between the full senior member salary and the basic ward member rate. This fluctuation of income can be problematic, and raise the age-old problem of the role only attracting someone with separate financial security to carry them through it.

A Cabinet role is a continuous 12-month commitment, whether job-shared or full-time, and the Independent Remuneration Panel for Wales needs to be able to recognize this and allow consistent, fair payments. Also, the fact that a pro-rata salary for a job-sharing politician becomes so low as to be an unattractive part-time employment prospect inevitably begs the question of whether the full-time rate is sufficient to be a viable job choice for someone who doesn't have a pension, an inheritance, or a well-paid partner to back them up.

Conclusion

Pioneering is never comfortable, and we are proud to have started this journey and gathered insights to share. The job-sharers of Swansea cabinet, together with a supportive and responsive Leader, continue to learn and adapt. While job-sharing may create more opportunities for some, the challenges involved reflect some of the deeply ingrained cultures of UK politics, which all of us keen to promote diversity in democracy must recognize, and these are not something which job-sharing, alone, can resolve. To encourage younger, or otherwise diverse candidates to step up for political roles, work is needed to challenge cultures, systems and expectations on a broader scale.