

# Written Response by the Welsh Government to the report of the Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform

## Background

The Senedd is barely recognisable from the National Assembly for Wales as established in 1999, such has been the political evolution over 21 years.

The Welsh Government would like to thank the Committee on Senedd Electoral Reform for their comprehensive report completed in these unprecedented circumstances. As the Committee is now dissolved, the Welsh Government's response is being laid in the Senedd rather than being submitted to the Committee.

## The Report and recommendations

The Committee published its report "*Senedd Reform: The next steps*" on 10<sup>th</sup> September 2020. The report made a total of 32 recommendations. Given the point within the electoral cycle which we are at, there are a limited number of recommendations that it is appropriate for the Welsh Government to consider at this stage. The following four recommendations are accepted by the Welsh Government.

*Recommendation 9. We endorse the recommendation of the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee that the Welsh Government should make representations to the UK Government for the commencement of section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 in respect of elections in Wales.*

ACCEPT

This has already been actioned. I have written to the UK Government asking for section 106 of the Equality Act to be commenced. In the same correspondence I also asked that consideration be given to widening the scope of section 106 to include local government elections. I am disappointed to report that the UK Government's recent response was that they would keep section 106 under review, and continue to encourage political parties to report on a voluntary basis.

While the publication of data, of itself, will not result in increased diversity, it will provide valuable information about the characteristics of individuals who put themselves forward to stand for election. This in turn will help identify where further action could be taken to target and subsequently address barriers which may be resulting in proportional under-representation of certain groups.

Financial implications: None.

*Recommendation 13. We endorse the recommendation of the Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee that the Welsh Government should establish, as a matter of priority, an access to elected office fund to support people with disabilities to stand for election, and that consideration should also be given to extending eligibility for funding to other underrepresented groups.*

ACCEPT

This is already in progress. A pilot Access to Elected Office Fund to support disabled candidates who wish to put themselves forward for elected office, to the 2021 Senedd elections and the 2022 Local Government elections will be available from early 2021. The fund will support candidates with the additional costs they incur, as a result of their access or communication requirements that could otherwise prevent them from seeking elected office. Candidates will be able to apply for a range of support from the fund including for example, transport support for mobility impaired candidates, specialist equipment such as a screen reader software, British Sign Language interpretation for hearing impaired candidates during election campaigns. There will also be an advisory service available to candidates to explore options for assistance.

We will be exploring extending eligibility to other underrepresented groups as part of Phase 2 of our Diversity in Democracy programme, both for local Government and Senedd elections.

Financial implications: Staff, Fund and administrative costs are being met from existing budgets. The costs of any extension to eligibility will be considered as part of the Diversity in Democracy programme.

*Recommendation 14. The Welsh Government and the Electoral Commission should consider whether disability-related expenditure arising in respect of engaging with people with disabilities during election campaigns should be exempt from election campaign spending limits.*

ACCEPT

Again, as with recommendation 13, this is something the Welsh Government is already delivering. An Order was laid in the Senedd on 8<sup>th</sup> October 2020 that if agreed will exclude disability related expenses and English/Welsh translation expenses from the spending limits for candidates seeking election. This will apply to both candidate expenses and political parties' campaign expenditure for both Senedd and local government elections. This Order is to be debated in November.

Financial implications: Staff costs associated with developing and promulgating the legislation are being met from existing budgets.

*Recommendation 15. The Welsh Government should bring forward subordinate legislation to exempt expenses relating to the costs of a candidate's childcare or other caring responsibilities from election campaign spending limits.*

ACCEPT

The Welsh Government is determined to see a Senedd that is representative of the people it serves. As stated above, we will be exploring this matter further as part of Phase 2 of our Diversity in Democracy programme, both for local government and Senedd elections.

Financial implications: The costs of future legislation will be considered as part of the Diversity in Democracy programme.

**Julie James MS**

Minister for Housing and Local Government

October 2020