# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **Diversity in Democracy – Update** |
| **DATE**  | **08 July 2022** |
| **BY** | **Rebecca Evans, Minister for Finance and Local Government** |
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In September 2020 Phase Two of Diversity in Democracy was launched. Despite the challenges presented by prioritising work to combat the Covid-19 pandemic, significant progress has been made. This progress sits within the objectives of our Anti- racist Wales Action and Gender Equality Plans.

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 (the 2021 Act) included a number of provisions aimed at increasing diversity within councils and enabling greater participation in local democracy. They include:

* A duty on principal councils to encourage local people to participate in decision making, and a duty to prepare and publish a public participation strategy, developed in conjunction with communities.
* A duty on political group leaders to promote high standards of conduct and for standards committees to publish an annual report.
* Future proofed arrangements for remote attendance at meetings of principal and community and town councils, including the requirement to publish how the arrangements will operate and the requirement to consider the preference of members in respect of the timing of meetings and how they attend them.
* A requirement for principal councils to broadcast full council meetings live and make the recordings available on websites so that people can join the proceedings and see their councillors at work.
* Removal of the barriers for job sharing arrangements within the executive of principal councils. Cardiff, Swansea, Newport and Powys have already taken the opportunity to use these provisions to increase diversity in their Cabinets.

I look forward to working with local government to understand how these arrangements are making a difference and how we can build on them together to increase diversity and participation.

A key action was the delivery of our pilot Access to Elected Office Fund for Wales. It was made available to assist disabled people standing for election in both the May 2021 Senedd and May 2022 local government elections. For the local government elections, working with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), One Voice Wales (OVW) and councils we developed a series of short video clips. These provided the opportunity for people with disabilities to speak about the challenges they face standing for election and working as a councillor, how they can help their communities, and the benefits of the fund.

Managed by Disability Wales, the Fund received a total of 21 applications from candidates standing in Senedd, principal council and town and community council elections. I am delighted that six of the individuals in receipt of support were successfully elected, all to community councils. An evaluation of the Fund will take place later this year to inform future arrangements.

The 2021 Act enabled us to make changes to the family absence arrangements for principal councillors which have been in place since 2011. We have now extended the absence period for adopters leave from 2 to 26 weeks. The Act also removed the requirement for councils to publish the home addresses of councillors on their websites, instead enabling the use of an ‘office’ address.

I want to thank county and county borough councils and community and town councils for their hard work and commitment in delivering the above, in partnership with Welsh Government, it is only by working together we can achieve a broader representation in council chambers across Wales.

I also want to thank the WLGA for their continued work in this area, including around Be a Councillor, diverse council declarations and Civility in Public Life

During the remainder of this year, I hope we can continue to work together to build on what has been achieved by:

* exploring how we extend the provisions for job sharing to non-executive roles such as chairs of committees.
* considering what further measures can be put in place to support people from the range of protected groups to overcome barriers to participation, and importantly how intersectionality is recognised within any future arrangements
* exploring with voters and stakeholders additional approaches which could further improve diversity amongst our local elected members.

To inform the on-going work, I have commissioned a number of pieces of research into the role of councillors, their remuneration, training and development, workload, and public attitudes and behaviours. It will be important to triangulate the outcome of this research and my intention is to hold an event later this year to discuss the emerging themes and agree actions to be taken forward.

However, I would like to highlight one emerging finding which resonates with a recent report published by the Local Government Association ‘[Debate Not Hate: The impact of abuse on local democracy](https://eur01.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.local.gov.uk%2Fpublications%2Fdebate-not-hate-impact-abuse-local-democracy&data=05%7C01%7CLisa.James%40gov.wales%7Cdaf9493f8ac0499fead008da5a78a485%7Ca2cc36c592804ae78887d06dab89216b%7C0%7C0%7C637921771446264604%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C3000%7C%7C%7C&sdata=0WV1PC4xkhw9wa8ov%2B3Wl8dLKKEvJGTbHv1SwuQv%2BCI%3D&reserved=0)’. This sets out the terrible experiences of councillors, including on-line abuse and physical harm.

I could not make this statement without acknowledging the impact of this growing issue on our collective work to increase diversity in democracy. I am proud the Welsh Government has already taken action in some of the areas mentioned in the report, such as removing requirements for councillors’ addresses to be published, but there is more we can do and I look forward to working with our local government partners to ensure Wales is a place where abuse and intimidation of our councillors is not tolerated.