

# **Does Local Government Work for Women**

**March 2022**

A Spotlight Review by Members of the Mid Devon District  
Council Scrutiny Committee

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## Introduction

In July 2017 the results of a year-long study led by the Fawcett Society, in partnership with the Local Government Information Unit, was published which asked 'Does Local Government Work for Women?'. The report found widespread sexist practices, sexual harassment both unchecked and unchallenged and a lack of inclusive practices which, it argued, show that local government is still a male-dominated world.

Additionally, research published in September 2021 by the Fawcett Society showed that just 34% of the 4,980 councillors elected in May 2021 were women. In total, across England women now make up just 35% of the total number of councillors – less than a 1% increase since the 2019 elections. Detail within that report showed that Mid Devon District Council (MDDC) is the 'worst Council in the South West in terms of women's representation following the May 2021 elections'. The elections brought the total number of female members in MDDC to 24%, a decrease on the May 2019 elections after which 26% of members elected were women, and compared to an English average of 35%.

Members of the MDDC Scrutiny Committee established a review group to address the findings and recommendations in the 2017 Fawcett Society report. Ensuring that councils are truly representative of our communities is a key challenge for local government. The aim of this review is to enable the right conditions to be in place to allow a diverse range of candidates to be empowered and supported to stand for election in the District, and to ensure those candidates are supported once elected. Through this review, members have considered the Council's existing policies and practices, good practice elsewhere and made recommendations to support potential and existing councillors who are women, parents and carers.

## Rationale

In February 2021, Cllr Elizabeth Lloyd and Cllr Jo Norton brought [Motion 564](#) to Full Council to encourage a discussion on equality and diversity, and to bring forward ideas on how to ensure the Council represents the residents of Mid Devon.

Part of that Motion included a request for the Scrutiny Committee:

*"That the Scrutiny Committee be tasked to consider and make any recommendations to the council regarding the findings of the Fawcett Society/LGiU report: 'Does Local Government Work for Women?'"*

As such, the Scrutiny Committee established a Spotlight Review to look in depth at the issues and recommendations in the Fawcett Society report. Cllr Elizabeth Lloyd chaired the review, and the other members of the group were Cllr Jo Norton and Cllr Chris Daw. An email was also sent to invite all members of the Council to take part in the review and to share their experiences with the group.

The review aimed to:

- review the recommendations in the 2017 Fawcett Society report and consider recommending, or calling for, actions within MDDC;

- assess the experiences of current Members;
- consider the culture within the Council and whether there is more the authority can do;
- consider how to encourage more women to stand for Local Government;
- review whether there is any further support that can be provided to members;
- review whether there is any further support required for officers within the Council; and
- make recommendations, or to call for action, that will encourage women to stand for Local Government, or will support women within the Council.

## **Methodology and approach**

It was agreed that the Scrutiny Committee would hold a Spotlight Review to take a time limited, in depth look at the recommendations in the 2017 Fawcett Society report.

The Members of the spotlight review met on Thursday 28 October 2021 and at that meeting the group heard input from:

- Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation;
- Corporate Manager for People Governance and Waste;
- Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security;
- Member Services Manager;
- District Solicitor and Monitoring Officer;
- Cllr Clive Eginton, Chair of Standards Committee;
- Cllr Bob Deed, Leader of the Council; and
- Cllr Bob Evans, Leader of Conservative Group.

The Group had a final meeting on Monday 22 November 2021 at which they met with Virginia Ponton, Adviser - Leadership and Localism from the Local Government Association (LGA) to hear how the LGA support councils to increase female candidates in local elections.

In advance of the Spotlight Review session, the group asked all members to send anonymous input on their experience as members of the Council. Statements received were shared anonymously with the members of the review group.

In order to understand how other Local Authorities have approached these issues, the group engaged with Brighton City Council and received a written representation which they reviewed as part of the Spotlight Review.

In addition, the group reviewed a large number of relevant documents including: the LGA toolkit 'Supporting Women to Stand in Local Government'; Fawcett Society research and data on gender equality in Local Government; the IPR report 'Barriers to Women entering Parliament and Local Government'; as well as a number of internal documents and council policies and procedures.

The Group also held a meeting with female members to discuss the proposed recommendations on 22 February 2022. All female members were invited to attend the meeting.

Members are grateful to the officers and members that took time to speak to the group, or to provide anonymous statements and for their honest and informative answers.

## **National context**

Data from the Fawcett Society following the 2019 local government elections found that women make up just 35% of councillors across England. In addition, only 17% of council leaders are women – a figure that has hardly shifted in ten years. Despite women making up 78% of council employees, only 33% of Chief Executives are women – which could be due to the lack of flexibility in senior roles. At the current rate of progress, gender parity will not be reached in local councils until 2077 – over 50 years away. In addition, BAME women, disabled women, and younger women are still underrepresented.

The 2017 Fawcett Society report ‘Does Local Government Work for Women?’ found that sexism is commonplace in local government with almost four in ten female councillors having experienced sexist comments from within their own party. The survey of over 2,300 councillors also found that a third of female councillors have experienced sexist comments in the council chamber and 43% say they are held back by assumptions about what they can do just because they are women. In addition, one in 10 have been sexually harassed and 46% of women, compared to 35% of men, have experienced harassment or abuse from the electorate.

Having women in decision-making positions makes a difference to whether issues that have a disproportionate impact on women get discussed or not. The 2017 Fawcett Society report says, "the services [councils] provide determine the support we receive from our first years to our dying days; and women are more dependent on those services". When women breakthrough in local government, they make a difference and have a big impact in their local community. The LGA toolkit ‘Enabling and Supporting Women, Parents and Carers to Stand and Serve in Local Government’ stresses that the equal participation of women and men in local politics, as our elected councillors and as our leaders, is an important condition for effective democracy and good governance. Representative councils are best able to speak to, and for, their communities and to support the effective business of local government. Once elected, councillors need to be able to fulfil their duties, and be supported, regardless of gender or circumstances.

In the LGA toolkit, the then Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Jake Berry MP, argues that some councils have taken steps to address this issue, but to see a step change in the numbers of women, parents and carers standing for elected office there needs to be a much wider sector response. He stressed that councils have the tools to remove some of the barriers which prevent people from standing and local parties and politicians have an obligation to seek out talent and incentivise a broader range of people to stand for local office. The LGA toolkit has been developed to help councils create the underlying policies, procedures, ethos and environment that encourages and empowers women, parents and carers to become local councillors and take on leadership positions.

More widely, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced some behaviours (for example the need to adapt to remote and hybrid meetings), and got in the way of others (the ability for Councillors to build in-person relationships). This review is a chance to incorporate learning from this period, and to find new ways forward.

### **Current position within Mid Devon District Council**

The 2017 Fawcett Society report makes a number recommendations that are specifically aimed at councils. During this review, members of the group were pleased to see that many of those recommendations have already been actioned, or are being actioned, since the introduction of Motion 564 within MDDC including:

1. In December 2021, Full Council adopted a new Members Allowances Scheme which included the introduction of a parental leave policy for members.
2. The Council has an established formal Standards Committee.
3. The Council has finalised a reasonable adjustments policy, the policy will apply to both members and employees.
4. The Council has invested in technology that enables committee meetings to be held as hybrid meetings. Members who do not need to vote, officers and members of the public can attend by zoom if required.
5. As agreed at Full Council, the Leader has written to the Secretary of State on the legislative inability to hold hybrid meetings which means members have to vote in person.
6. The Council's Code of Conduct has recently been discussed at the Standards Committee and adopted by Full Council, after minor amendments made.
7. All Committees and Policy Development Groups vote to agree meeting times at the start of each municipal year.
8. Members are consulted on the Member Development Programme and can make requests for specific sessions or training.

### **Recommendations**

1. That the Council considers ways to better promote the role of a Councillor.

Rationale: Reflecting the local population is vital in helping councils run efficiently and for communities to thrive. It brings in the knowledge and lived experience of the needs and aspirations of everyone in the local community. Many residents and members of the public, however, often do not clearly understand the role of a Councillor and the impact that role can have in the community. There is also often a lack of knowledge about the expenses available and the time needed to give to the role. A better understanding of the role and its benefits may help encourage more people to stand for election.

The Council should give thought as to how to clearly communicate to a wide range of people in the District. This could be through events or workshops to help demystify the process and the role, and in doing so encourage more women to stand. Outreach is about looking in different places and in all communities for untapped talent and proactively reaching out – going to where people are and building a meaningful and holistic relationship across the Council with groups, networks and communities. For example, the Council could: work with schools to increase the

pipeline and interest locally; engage with local stakeholders and organisations that may not necessarily work closely with the Council; work with other Local Authorities to create shared materials and knowledge (for example Devon County Council has materials aimed at encouraging a diverse range of people to stand); pull together profiles on members from under-represented groups or from different backgrounds; and work with the LGA on sourcing peer members to speak at events.

2. That all Chairs of Committees and PDGs are required to attend formal training.

Rationale: The group has had first-hand experience, and have heard from colleagues, about issues to do with behaviour and conduct in meetings. One way to tackle these issues is for the Chair of that meeting to address it immediately. Good Chairs of meetings should create a collaborative and respectful space that supports good discussion and decision-making. Chairs should encourage other members to do the same. All Chairs of Committees and PDGs should therefore clearly understand, and receive training on, how to deal with unacceptable behaviour/conduct in a meeting. Political Group Leaders should require members that hold Chair positions to attend, and consideration should be given to whether to enforce this as a requirement through the constitution.

3. That a councillor is identified to be the equalities and accessibility champion.

Rationale: A recommendation in the 2017 Fawcett Society report is that a member should be identified to promote equality within each council. The Fawcett Society report details evidence of a macho, combative culture in council chambers which can silence or appropriate women's voices. The review group has also had similar experiences and therefore felt that identifying an equalities champion would be useful to look into these kinds of issues within the Council. The champion could also take forward and drive the work of the Equality Forum (including promoting its presence and role within the Council and externally), have a role in organising the gender equality networks as detailed in recommendation 5 and carry out the research as detailed in recommendation 8.

4. That the Council develops a mentoring scheme for (new) members of the Council.

Rationale: Both the Fawcett Society report, and the LGA toolkit 'Enabling and Supporting Women, Parents and Carers to Stand and Serve in Local Government', encourages councils to review their current induction programme to ensure effective support is in place for new members. They recommend including an active sponsorship scheme or mentoring programme for all new councillors, as well as ensuring parents/carers and female councillors in particular feel supported. The Council should introduce a mentoring scheme, and draw up a list of members willing to be mentors and a list of members with necessary skills that new members could use as a knowledge source. There could also be monthly group coaching for members, networking sessions or a women's forum to support female members.

5. That the Council supports and facilitates the building of councillor networks, in particular between women councillors and councillors with families or caring responsibilities to grow peer to peer support.

Rationale: Both the 2017 Fawcett Society report and the LGA toolkit recommend introducing gender equality networks and evidence shows they can enable increased solidarity between women, which can in turn lead to increased confidence and progression. Feedback from the meeting with female members was that, given the impact of covid, members would also welcome the opportunity to engage with other members outside of Committee meetings. Within MDDC, these networks could extend across the whole organisation, offering shared leadership and development opportunities by bringing councillors and officers together, or by focussing networks for parents/carers. These confidential sessions could be organised and driven by the member identified as the equalities champion.

6. That the Council develops a (password protected) private members area on the Council website, in order to create a bank of shared training materials and documents for reference and ongoing learning.

Rationale: The group recognise that members often differ in the amount of time they are able to give to the role, particularly if members have full time employment. As such, some members find it hard to attend informal meetings, briefings and training opportunities. The group wanted to ensure that these members are supported in other ways to access the information given at these meetings. The group therefore recommends that a password protected, private member area be developed on the Council website. This area could be a depository for presentations and material given at briefings; guidance; training materials; and other useful documents. This could also potentially be a place to log attendance at training to encourage members to attend.

7. That the Council ensures all officer roles are offered flexibly (unless there is a business need) and give consideration to the option and promotion of job shares for officers.

Rationale: The 2017 Fawcett Society report recommends that local authorities offer all officer roles, including senior roles, as flexible working and part-time by default, unless there is a clear business case otherwise. This must be backed up by a genuine commitment to viewing flexible working for officers on equal terms with traditional working patterns. Whilst most officer roles within MDDC are now offered on a flexible basis, the Council should also give consideration to the option and promotion of job shares for officers (as long as achievable in line with the needs of the business). Job shares can assist recruitment by attracting qualified employees who do not want to work full-time, and can help improve retention given the flexibility they offer.

8. That further research is carried out into member experience of equality in the Council.

Rationale: The group heard that there is potential for the Equalities Forum to be more ambitious and do more, if members were more engaged. The Equalities Forum

should consider how to proactively engage members on their experiences and gather feedback, perhaps working with the LGA on this. Research could also consider the impact that covid has had on member experiences within the Council. The member identified as champion for equalities could lead and drive this research.

### **Actions we call for**

1. Leadership from the top of the political group is important. Group Leaders should be clear on their role regarding member development and conduct and actively encourage members to attend training and briefings.

Rationale: There is a role for Political Group Leaders with regards to member conduct, and the group heard how some Leaders deal with conduct issues. The group would like to see Political Group Leaders actively encouraging members to attend training and briefings, and also requiring their members that are Chairs to attend training on how to chair and deal with conduct in meetings.

2. Political parties should work with the LGA political officers to understand best practice and what actions can be taken to encourage a diverse range of candidates to stand.

Rationale: The LGA have political group officers who can provide various support to Political Group Leaders, including working with political parties to help think through how to encourage a broad range of candidates to stand.

### **Discussions and evidence given to the Spotlight Review**

#### **Meeting with Virginia Ponton, Adviser – Leadership, Local Government Association (LGA)**

The group heard from the LGA about how important it is for councils to have meaningful conversations about how to encourage a diverse range of candidates to stand for election. The LGA commended MDDC for carrying out this review and for making it a strategic priority, and stressed that it is the type of discussion all councils should be having.

The group heard about the work that the LGA is doing to raise awareness nationally to broaden the appeal of Local Government, including the 'Be A Councillor' campaign and outreach work with underrepresented groups. The LGA talked about the importance of equality and diversity being seen as business as usual and ensuring that it is included in the induction programme.

Virginia Ponton gave examples of some 'quick' wins (reviewing current policies and processes; gathering information on experiences; mapping out stakeholders) and some longer term investments (thinking through strategic vision; how to reach untapped talent; outreach with all areas of the community). She recommended that MDDC use the LGA regional representatives to link up with other councils who want to use the Be A Councillor campaign, and this could also have the benefit of sharing resources and knowledge. The group talked about some specific recommendations that could come out of the review, and the themes that had been raised so far,

including: communications and engagement; outreach; member development; support for women who have been elected; and internal process reviews.

The LGA offered to provide assistance where possible with these issues, and have subsequently provided the group with a range of resources and research to help progress this work.

### **Meeting with Director of Corporate Affairs and Business Transformation and Corporate Manager for People, Governance and Waste**

The group heard from the officers how the main challenges with this review will be how to ensure the most impact and to get buy in. Officers suggested that the things to keep in mind are:

- data – ensure you understand the demographics, for example the Council's recent staff survey will help the organisation understand how women are currently feeling in the workplace;
- policy – what the organisation is required to do by law and guidelines on how people should be treated in the work place;
- practical actions – like reasonable adjustments or how the organisation tackles issues like the menopause – and educates the workforce; and
- the importance of learning, development and training – having relevant training and support for different groups, and opportunity for mentoring and coaching is vital.

When asked what helps to get people to buy into this work, officers stressed that being very clear about what you are trying to achieve, and the desired outcome, is important. The importance of articulating the why, as well as the what. Action plans are also important, for example the organisation will be looking at how to tackle the issues coming out of the staff survey. The group discussed the ripple effect of having more women standing and in leadership roles, and how that might reinforce what the organisation is doing in terms of equality and diversity.

Officers informed the group about the sessions for potential candidates that the Council run before elections to help encourage people to stand. It was acknowledged, however, that these are often poorly attended. The group had a conversation on how to break down some of the attitudes that people may have about standing for Local Government, and that there is a connection between the 'brand' of Local Government and whether it's an attractive proposition to stand. The group discussed behaviour and attitude, and the importance of role modelling the changes you want to see.

The issue of job sharing was raised, and officers suggested it was an area that could be explored further within the Council.

### **Meeting with Group Manager for Performance, Governance and Data Security**

The officer presented the MDDC equality policy, and talked about how the policy translates into action in the Council, and gave some examples of equality impact assessments in various areas of work. The officer updated members on the work of

the Equality Forum, and talked about some ways to improve the Forum and the need to increase awareness of issues like protected characteristics.

The group talked about how to use the communications team to encourage people to stand, and the possibility of engaging with other council's to share experience and resources in this area. They talked about the importance of retaining members, and how there is a need to start at the ground up to encourage members to stand. Members can help with this work, and the group agreed it would be beneficial to see more members going into schools to talk to students about the work they do.

### **Meeting with Member Services Manager**

The officer talked about how the Council has implemented remote meetings, and that members had approved the recent motion to ask Government for legislation to enable members to vote remotely. The group heard how remote meetings have enabled increased public involvement and flexibility for attendees.

The group talked about the importance of member development, and officers encouraged members to put forward requests and ideas for member training. The ability for development sessions to be held by zoom has increased numbers, but some sessions are still poorly attended. It was acknowledged that political group leaders could do more to push training to members, and perhaps a member survey would help to understand what training members would like. There was also a discussion about the member allowance scheme being extended to include parental leave, which was due to come to Full Council.

The group asked about the training and guidance that chairs of committees and policy development group's receive. Officers confirmed that all chairs are offered training, alongside spending time with officers on procedural rules. Chairs do not always take up the offer of formal training, however.

The group discussed potentially recording zoom training sessions, and putting them somewhere for members to access at a different time. It was suggested that a depository somewhere on the intranet be introduced that could include training sessions and useful presentations and documents. There was also a discussion about whether it would be possible to log which members attend training.

The officer explained the buddy system for new members, which sees officers support members with regards to process issues, and members heard how political groups are encouraged to have a new member shadow one of their long standing members.

### **Meeting with the Leader of the Council**

Members discussed ways in which representation could be increased and how to increase the number of women that stand for Local Government. The time and commitment needed to be a member of council was also raised, which can sometimes put people off who may bring more diversity into the authority. The group considered how to make the system, structure and procedures work for the full range

of people who want to consider standing for election – many of who may also have full time employment. The range of skills needed to be a Councillor is wide, and the need for Local Authorities to tap into those skills is important.

Using Town and Parish Councils was discussed, as well as how to appeal to younger residents to stand, and how to encourage retention of members. Culture was also discussed, and the importance of the Council looking at the challenge of representing the District in the membership so that the public see themselves in the elected representatives.

### **Meeting with Chair of Standards Committee**

The Chair gave an overview of the Standards Committee and stated that there has not been any complaints brought before the Committee in the last two and a half years that have been taken to subcommittee. Any complaint that does come before the Committee has to be of a relatively serious nature for the Committee to look at it.

Members discussed the changes made to the Code of Conduct, and how it is often behaviour that is the issue, and that the language used is important. Group Leaders have a part to play in role-modelling, but so do sanctions when behaviour is unacceptable. The Chair and Monitoring Officer gave information on future training for members on standards, to look at specific examples concerning respect.

Events for potential councillors were discussed, and it was agreed that very often these are attended by people who already want to stand. It is also down to political parties to increase the representation and encourage young people to stand. Using the media may also help to reach those people that otherwise may not stand.

### **Meeting with the District Solicitor and Monitoring Officer**

The group discussed how representation at political level is often not the same as at officer level, and that this may be because there is not enough public understanding about the role of members. Promoting the role with schools is useful, and other community based work can help in the longer term. A Councillor is often seen to be a vocational role, rather than a professional role and that is reflected in the pay/allowances, and it therefore attracts people who can carry out this type of vocational role.

The group heard how, on a practical level, accessibility of meetings is important to enable people to fit the role around their life. As is the timing of meetings, and at MDDC members are asked to agree meeting times at the start of each year, the group heard from the officer how this does not always happen in Local Authorities. Length of meetings is also important, and this can be controlled constitutionally by having time limits to meetings – some councils stop meetings after three or four hours. Allowances for parents was discussed, and it was acknowledged that the Independent Remuneration Panel was working on recommending that the Council adopt a parental leave policy. This would help give the role the sense that it is a professional role with rights and responsibilities.

With regards to the Code of Conduct, the officer said that the general trend across councils is that complaints regarding respect have generally increased over the last ten years. There was a conversation about the importance of reporting issues, and the importance of dealing with issues as they arise. It was acknowledged that everyone has a role in promoting culture, and there was an understanding that some people may find it difficult to report issues.

The officer confirmed that she hoped that forthcoming member training workshops will help set examples of conduct and help people understand what is appropriate and respectful behaviour. In addition to these sessions, promoting Local Government and the brand, alongside reassuring members that they will be listened to through a robust complaints system that deals with issues promptly, would be useful.

### **Meeting with the Conservative Group Leader**

The group discussed how the different aspects of this work can be categorised as aimed at: the authority; the political groups; and members. The group heard how the Conservative party seeks to encourage anybody to consider standing and aims to be inclusive of all. It also looks to make all reasonable adjustments that any individual may feel they require in-order to be fully included both within the group and the Council as a whole.

The group discussed behaviour, including a specific example of poor behaviour in a public meeting and the Group Leader's process for challenging that behaviour. The need for a parental leave policy was also discussed, and the Group Leader talked about the issues that members will raise with him regarding childcare and attending meetings. There was also a discussion on whether it should be made clear to the public why people are not attending meetings (for example, if currently on parental leave). The group discussed how to attract more people to local politics, and recognised the complexity of this. Ensuring people understand the kind of difference they can make is useful and the influence you can have, and that this does not necessarily have to be political.

### **Statement from Brighton and Hove City Council**

Cllr Norton had received a statement from Cllr Hannah Clare, Deputy Leader of Brighton and Hove City Council, outlining actions the Council had taken to increase representation after bringing the 2017 Fawcett Society report as a Motion to Council.

Agreed actions within Brighton and Hove City Council have included: allowing job shares; adding a reference into the Constitution that 50% of members should be women; working on introducing parental leave; and using gender neutral terms for chairs and for members (the constitution now has no pronouns in it). Brighton and Hove City Council recognise that there are still some areas to work on, like ensuring women contribute in debates and that men do not always dominate. There has also been a lot of proactive hard work by the Council in reaching out to women to encourage them to stand for election.

## **Input and experiences from members**

As part of the enquiry into the culture of the Council, a call was put out to all members for anonymous information on their experiences as members of the Council. The group received four written responses to their request.

Given the lack of response, the group wanted to stress that personally, they had had in depth conversations about (and personally experienced) issues within the Council, many of which did not seem to be represented in the formal responses. The group also acknowledged the recent Fawcett Society report that MDDC was the 'worst in the South West' in terms of female member representation, at 24% compared to an English average of 35%.

The group considered how to engage the membership on the issues discussed, and agreed it might be useful to come up with some recommendations that could then be taken to members to stimulate discussion.

When reviewing the anonymous responses, key points raised were:

- A number of these issues are not confined to women.
- Complaints must be quickly and firmly followed up on.
- The Council has no influence on who stands for local election, it can be hard to encourage people to stand and then it is down to the electorate to vote for them.
- Councillors can sometimes become confrontational in their arguments.
- A number of recommendations in the Fawcett Society report are outside of the Councils' control.
- Remote meetings had made life easier.
- Members had experienced or witnessed harassment from members of the public.
- Members had experienced or witnessed sexist comments from colleagues.

## **Meeting with female members**

The Group met with female members on 22 February to discuss the findings and proposed recommendations. At this meeting, members discussed their experiences within the Council, and in particular the impact that covid has had on member's confidence and the loss of personal relationships with other members. The female members welcomed the proposed recommendations, and particularly welcomed the proposal and opportunity to engage with other members through networks and peer support. Members raised that they also welcome further opportunities to engage outside of meetings, perhaps in an away day or similar setting, as it this would help break down some of the political and cultural barriers and promote effective collaboration. There was also a discussion around the importance of training for chairs, and the need for both a member, and officer, equalities and diversity representative.

### **Input from the Liberal Democrats**

The Group Leader for the Liberal Democrats was unable to attend the Spotlight Review, and therefore provided some written input to the group. That statement detailed how the Group are taking actions to try and help with promoting more women into politics and they hope to have more women standing at the next elections than they have before.

The statement also acknowledged that the current attitude to people with families, or to those that are working, may not help in attracting some women to want to stand. There have been examples of members having their commitment questioned by other members when family has been put before council business.