

Update on Motion 564 Inclusion and Diversity

Report to the Scrutiny Committee of the Inclusion and Diversity Working Group, February 2024

1. Background

On 24 February 2021 Motion 564 was passed by Full Council (see Appendix 1) calling upon Council to take action to secure greater participation by under-represented groups including women.

The motion includes a resolution *'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?'*¹ *The report ... found that structural and cultural barriers hold back women's participation in local government. The practices and protocols of local government create unnecessary barriers to participation particularly for women with caring responsibilities.'*

In March 2022 the LGA-supported Spotlight Review into "How Local Government Works for Women" was produced for Mid Devon District Council's Scrutiny Committee (see Recommendations in Appendix 2. The full report is on the Members Teams website). The review describes Mid Devon District Council as being the "worst for women's representation in the South West". This reflected the District Council results in May 2019, which resulted in only 9 elected members out of 42 being women.² This represented 21.4% of the Council and remained unchanged after the by-elections of May 2021. The national average was 35%.

Since the elections in May 4 2023, much has changed and we are now in a different situation, with 15 of the elected members being women, representing 36% of the Council. However, in more senior roles the proportion of women remains considerably lower, with only two women in the Cabinet.

A review of the situation of women in local government internationally reveals that in many countries (some poorer than the UK) women are incorporated in more equal numbers into local government. The research studies reported show that women's participation and prominence is affected by political systems such as voting methods (proportional systems encouraging greater gender balance), and in some countries, it makes a difference when quotas are used.³

Following Motion 564 and the subsequent LGA-supported Spotlight Review, this motion was added to the new Scrutiny Committee Work Programme. It was unanimously agreed that an updated report should be commissioned from The Scrutiny Committee Inclusion and Diversity Working Group, comprising councillors from across the political spectrum, both male and female.

At its meeting on July 24th 2023 Scrutiny set up the working group, to create a report on Inclusivity and Community Engagement within Mid Devon that would feedback to the Scrutiny Committee in early 2024. Members were Cllr Gill Westcott (Convenor, Green Party), Cllr Polly Colthorpe (Conservative) and Cllr Lance Kennedy (Liberal Democrat). Cllr Kennedy was later substituted by Cllr Gordon Czapiewski. The group has attended to inclusion not only in relation to women but to other potentially disadvantaged groups, reflecting the wording of the original motion, in which the Council affirms 'its role in helping to create an equal and inclusive society for all, and recognises that sexism, racism, bigotry, discrimination, intolerance and bad behaviours in any form play no part in this'. It intends that this wider concern will inform its continued work.

¹ [Does Local Government Work for Women? - Final Report of the Local Government Commission | The Fawcett Society](#)

² 'Does Local Government Work for Women' – A Spotlight Review by Members of the MDDC Scrutiny Committee, March 2022. To be circulated.

³ 'Women in Local Government: International research and analysis', Sophia Gilmour. The review can be read on the Members' Teams site in a folder named Scrutiny Committee Inclusion and Diversity Report.

The working group has conferred with the Equalities Champion, Councillor Jane Lock, who has attended some of our meetings and with the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Group (formerly the Equalities Forum) convened by Stephen Carr.

It should be noted that before District Council Elections, Mid Devon District Council already provided both in person and online sessions describing the role of councillors to encourage new candidates to stand for Councillor roles. This practice should be continued and built upon.

It should also be noted that at the start of each municipal year, every Committee, Policy Development Group and Cabinet agree the timing of their meetings. These have been revised to meet the requirements of the current Councillors. This process should be reviewed at each scheduling opportunity.

2. Role of the Equalities Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Group

We have held discussions with the EDI group and the Equalities Champion (who has attended one of our meetings) about our respective roles. Both have a wide brief. The EDI group, convened by Stephen Carr, is concerned with EDI matters for MDDC as a whole and the Mid Devon Community, particularly in regard to their access to council services and processes. The EDI group acts under the Equalities Act 2010 fulfilling the requirement on councils to prevent discrimination in relation to protected characteristics, set appropriate objectives and to produce an Equality Action Plan which is reviewed at least every four years. The current objectives are:

1. Meeting the needs of an aging population.
2. Overcoming the problems faced by vulnerable individuals caused by rural isolation.
3. Overcoming the effects of multiple disadvantage in families with complex needs.
4. To continue to concentrate on mental health issues within MDDC and the wider community.
5. Secure decent digital connectivity for all of Mid Devon (Corporate Plan aim)

Recent work has included publishing accessibility information, drafting the Single Equality Scheme, work with Devon County Council's Equality team, producing an Equalities Impact Assessment tool for projects and changes in procedures and policies, and conducting Equalities monitoring. Our own Inclusion and Diversity Working Group is in a position to facilitate some of the necessary investigation and facilitation in relation to councillors, and the group felt this was our best contribution to the ongoing work.

3. Training needs

Our discussions suggest that councillors could benefit from further training for Inclusion and Diversity. We suggest:

4.1 Training for all councillors in Protected Characteristics, what they are and our obligations in relation to them. This could be provided in house or as web based training. Democratic Services could suggest how this is sourced and provided.

4.2 We recommend that all Chairs and Vice Chairs receive training in Inclusive Practices, enabling all voices to be heard. The term Inclusive would include women as well as any other individuals or groups who may not currently be well represented or their needs voiced. Preferably this should be

delivered by external trainers, such as those who provided the Ice Breakers at the start of the present administration. It should include participative exercises and scenarios. Pre-course reading/online training could be used to reduce the face to face time involved but for best use of time this would need to be confirmed as having been completed prior to the face to face training commencing. We would suggest that this training could be delivered to Elected Members and Officers in the same sessions, though this decision would lie with Democratic Services. Following the assessment of training completed by Members, which is currently under way, we hope that a suitable external agency can be commissioned to offer this training.

4. Encouraging diverse council candidates

In advance of the last local government elections, in May 2022 MDDC laid on a public session on the role of Councillors, in accordance with point 2 of the Motion and Recommendation 1 of the Spotlight Review. This session was reported to be helpful and welcome by current members some of whom had attended. We understand that an online session was also provided, but that some, inevitably were unaware of this opportunity. Councillors could help to advertise such a session before the next local elections, which might encourage those at greater distances from Tiverton or with home-based responsibilities to attend.

There is obviously a tension between encouraging diversity of candidates, and the recognition that by virtue of those very circumstances which cause some groups to be under-represented, they will also experience difficulties in fulfilling their role if they are elected. There is a balance to be struck. Nevertheless this council has moved in a positive direction to shift the balance towards greater inclusivity. We have chosen timings for meetings to allow those with regular employment commitments to attend, and the care allowances available help those with caring responsibilities to attend council business. We are glad that people of working age and with caring responsibilities are represented on our authority and hope that further measures can help to increase the diversity of participation in our democratic life.

5. Consulting all members

The working group came to the conclusion that there is no one-size-fits-all to maximise inclusion. For example while evening meetings allow those with 9 – 5 employment commitments to attend, they may be more difficult for parents than meetings during school hours or require a sacrifice of family time. Retired members also sometimes find daytime meetings suit them better. There is also a disruptive effect on officers from the increase in evening meetings.

We would like to provide an opportunity for all members to contribute their views on this and other ways in which we can reduce obstacles to inclusion, and therefore propose that the Working Group, with help from officers, conduct a survey of members on these issues, the results to be collated anonymously and brought back to Scrutiny Committee for discussion.

6. Conversations with women and carers

The Spotlight Review highlighted the value of peer mentoring, 'networking sessions or a women's forum to support female members'. Recommendation 5 is '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'. The working group aims to provide an opportunity, initially for informal conversation, with both these groups to allow for sharing of views and to see whether further initiatives are suggested. Initial suggestions for a conversation with women councillors has proved controversial but a number of women members have confirmed their interest. As with survey results, any suggestions would be brought back to Scrutiny Committee for discussion.

7. Conclusion

We are encouraged by the steps which have already been taken within MDDC to maximise inclusion, encourage diversity, and to ensure that members with differing situations can participate in council business. We acknowledge that this is work in progress, but that members have told us that they appreciate the respectful and co-operative working relationships with each other and officers. To continue this work should not be taken as a criticism of Mid Devon District Council but a reflection of a worthwhile commitment to ensure that all voices are heard and that, as far as possible, obstacles to members making their full contribution are removed or mitigated. We are grateful for the work of the Equality Diversity and Inclusion Group (formerly the Equality Forum), particularly on accessibility and Equalities Assessment. We know that the Communities PDG is also advancing equality in our communities. The potential is for Mid Devon to exemplify good practice on all these fronts. We depend both on our members' commitment and our communities' willingness to interact with us to help us to achieve the best we can for them.

8. Recommendations

We recommend that

- Democratic Services arrange in house training for all Councillors in protected characteristics
- In addition to the existing training for chairs and vice chairs, they should receive interactive training in inclusive practices. Following the assessment of current training completed by Members currently under way, Democratic Services are requested to source and commission a suitable external agency to offer this training to councillors and officers.
- The working group should work with Democratic Services to conduct a survey of all councillors on their views on increasing inclusion and diversity, and any preferences about timing of meetings.
- Further conversation should take place on how best to mitigate obstacles for women, people with caring responsibilities and other defined groups in becoming Councillors and in fulfilment of their role.

Appendix 1

Motion 564, passed February 2021

This Council affirms its role in helping to create an equal and inclusive society for all, and recognises that sexism, racism, bigotry, discrimination, intolerance and bad behaviours in any form play no part in this. This Council also acknowledges that language is a powerful tool for change, inclusion and inspiration, as well as a cause of ignorance and damaged relationships -- it should be used thoughtfully and respectfully, and language and behaviour should be challenged where it is not respectful or conducive to good outcomes for the Council and its residents. In order that the Council can play its part locally in building a more understanding and inclusive society, it resolves:

1. To review all our relevant policies and conventions, and identify any additional Member and Officer training needs, so as to actively promote diversity, engagement and inclusivity.

2. That the Equality Forum and Community Policy Development Group be tasked with exploring opportunities to increase inclusivity, engagement and representation at Mid Devon District Council, including by identifying hard to reach or underrepresented communities, and considering how best to engage with them.

3. To review and update the MDDC equalities policy and create a diversity and inclusion strategy, seeking input from residents and local organisations that have expertise where necessary, so as to ensure the council is more socially inclusive in its recruitment, member representation and service provision.

4. 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?' (see footnote 1).

(1) The Fawcett Society and Local Government Information Unit report, 'Does Local Government Work for Women?' found that structural and cultural barriers hold back women's participation in local government. The practices and protocols of local government create unnecessary barriers to participation particularly for women with caring responsibilities.

<https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/does-local-governmentwork-for-women-final-report-of-the-local-government-commission> Council⁴

Appendix 2 Recommendations from Spotlight Review

'Does Local Government Work for Women'

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

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.

⁴ The original reference is ineffective. The report can be found here [Does Local Government Work for Women? - Final Report of the Local Government Commission | The Fawcett Society](https://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/does-local-governmentwork-for-women-final-report-of-the-local-government-commission)

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 and accessibility champion would be useful to look into these kinds of issues within the Council. This role could cover all aspects of equalities and accessibility, including supporting the needs of groups that are defined by the nine "Protected Characteristics" in the Equality Act 2010 (age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation). 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 which does not favour inclusion 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.