

Report of the Working Group on Diversity and Inclusion Survey

This follows the Report of the Working Group on Inclusion and Diversity delivered to Scrutiny in February 2024, and completes the reporting to Scrutiny Committee on this phase of the Group's work. A survey of MDDC Councillors was undertaken to gain more complete information on issues which had arisen in earlier investigations, including obstacles to recruiting a diversity of candidates and facing Councillors in their work, timing of meetings and travel time. The survey was carried out online over a three week period. 30 Councillors responded, 11 women and 19 men.

Overall we consider that a response rate of around 75% (we have 40 functioning councillors at present) is good. There was a higher response rate among women (who fill 13 of the 42 member positions) than among men.

Findings in brief

1. Early evening meetings have the least number of Councillors who find it challenging to attend, even though some can only attend with difficulty. Morning and late evening meetings presented the most challenges for some people to attend.
2. The option of online attendance makes evening meetings possible for some who would otherwise be unable to attend. Therefore, we suggest that MDDC promote the case to central government that, as during Covid, online attendance should have parity in voting rights with in-person attendance.
3. Councillors generally found their work interesting, at times rewarding and at times frustrating. Training by officers had been much appreciated and there were some requests for further training, though 43% felt that no further training was required. Topics mentioned in the survey included: finance matters; how to present a motion, how to propose an amendment and how to manage the motion; a 'one year in' Councillor workshop, run similarly to the icebreaker; experiential training generally was also mentioned. There were a number of comments of appreciation for the help given by Democratic Services. It was observed that the Chairing of some meetings could be tightened up with recommendations for experiential training, specifically in regard to time management and adherence to the agenda as well as the chairing for inclusion of all Members as mentioned in our earlier report.

Obstacles to becoming a Councillor

Time balance with family and employment (or both) was often mentioned, and by as many men as women. Time requirements were mentioned 11 times as deterring potential candidates.

Lack of confidence and perceived powerlessness in relation to red tape and central government were also mentioned. Perhaps testimony from current members about what they have been able to achieve since becoming councillors (e.g. matters raised, resident's problems resolved, changes in policy) could help to put this view

into perspective and counter the view that local government cannot help communities.

Perceived unpopularity for a particular party allegiance, and the anticipation of receiving abusive comments from members of the public, were cited as reasons why some might not stand for office, and had to be overcome by some who did in fact stand.

Meeting times

Attending morning and early afternoon meetings was challenging for a number of Councillors in full time employment whose work pattern was not flexible. None of the respondents said that early evening meetings were impossible, even though for some they are still problematic; and later evenings were difficult or impossible for 40% of respondents to attend in person. Mention was made of having to leave 5 or 6 pm meetings early to put children to bed, or to attend Parish Councils. Skilful chairing might be helpful in reducing the length of meetings.

The results showed fewer problems with attending meetings remotely, evening meetings beginning at e.g. 7.30 p.m. becoming possible for some who would find in-person attendance impossible, and would make it easier for some who found in-person attendance difficult.

Travel

Distance does make a difference to the ease with which Councillors can attend meetings in person. 40% of respondents live over 10 miles from Phoenix House and 20% have a travel time over 30 minutes each way.

Most Members attend meeting by car (88%). This contributes to the carbon footprint of MDDC and adds to financial expenditure, not to mention the wear and tear on Councillors. The journey can potentially double the time required for a meeting, and time for some Councillors is very much an issue.

Therefore, we recommend that MDDC should support the ability to vote while attending meetings remotely on MS Teams, or other suitable technology. This decision rests with Central Government but we should consider MDDC's position and lobby for change if agreed by Council. We suggest that the Standards Committee should consider this recommendation for progression.

Workload

Comments were made about the number of parish meetings, and there were issues with conflicts between Parish or Town Council and MDDC meetings. We considered whether Parish and Town council meetings could be put into a shared calendar for reference in relation to meeting times, although we accept that clashes cannot always be avoided altogether. We concluded that with the numerous factors influencing the preparation of the annual schedule of meetings including strict timing

between meetings that this would not be practicable. For those Members who wanted the Town or Parish Council meetings to appear in their diary, there was nothing stopping them putting that information into their calendar themselves. The demands for email correspondence and casework appear to vary greatly between parishes. We recommend that those considering standing for elections be warned about the unpredictable time demands for working with residents' issues and Town & Parish councils.

Experiences of being a Councillor

There were many comments from respondents about positive relationships and helpfulness of colleagues and party groups. The picture is, on the whole, encouraging. Most Councillors felt confident enough to add their views in discussions and thought they were listened to. Of those who did not feel that they were always listened to, or were not attended to as well as other Councillors, three were female and four were male, and were from across age groups. Although the numbers are small, it appears that women Councillors are slightly less likely to feel listened to with equal respect.

Many Councillors recorded that they found their roles interesting, rewarding and encouraging, and some said that they appreciated being able to take on casework and speaking up for residents. The need for more officer help with casework was mentioned in one response. The length and complexity of reports was another problem mentioned. Some commented that the learning needed was a work in progress and they hoped to achieve more as time went on.

Training

The training which had been given so far was much appreciated.

Some further requests were made for training and there was one response expressing interest in being mentored on Council procedures and administrative methods, managing motions etc,

Other specific needs mentioned were

- Experiential (on the job, hands on) training desired
- Finance - government finance terms and jargon needed to be better understood
- Charing - for efficient use of time as well as inclusion of all voices
- Corporate Parenting (This could fit within the already requested training on protected characteristics?)

Conclusions and Recommendations

1. Conclusion: The move to more early evening meetings, as has already happened in this administration, is an appropriate way to maximise attendance. We need to review the spread of meetings over the working day and evenings after a period, and also consider the impact on officers with respect to the move to more early evening meetings.

2. Recommendation: The findings strengthen the case for further experiential training for Chairs and Vice Chairs.

3. Recommendation: A change in rules to allow voting by online participants in a meeting improves access for some Councillors. This may be particularly relevant to improve the potential for parents or carers to attend, as well as those with mobility problems and those at the greatest distances, particularly in the evening. It would also reduce costs and carbon emissions. We note that the LGA has campaigned for this change. We recommend that MDDC advocate for this change and lobbies the government to introduce it.

4. Recommendation: We believe that the work of this Working Group has concluded and recommend that the subject of Inclusion and Diversity with regard to removing obstacles to becoming a Councillor be added to the Policy Framework or the Scrutiny Work Plan to be considered annually.

5. Recommendation: We recommend that those considering standing for elections be warned about the unpredictable time demands for working with residents' issues and Town & Parish Councils. This may be something for the Political Groups to consider.