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Democratic renewal: Evidence synthesis to support local government electoral reform

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Democratic renewal:

Evidence synthesis to support local government electoral reform

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Glossary

<i>Acronym or Key Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
BME	Black and Minority Ethnic
DiD	Diversity in Democracy
ERO	Electoral Registration Officers
EU	European Union
FPTP	First Past the Post
KAS	Knowledge and Analytical Services (Welsh Government)
LA	Local Authority
MP	Member of (UK) Parliament
PB	Participatory Budgeting
STV	Single Transferable Vote

1. Introduction

- 1.1 In 2015, the Welsh Government published a White Paper outlining the strategic reform agenda for local government in Wales (Welsh Government, 2015) proposing a number of measures, including enhancing democratic delivery.
- 1.2 Democratic delivery, as defined in the White Paper, is about ensuring that members of the public use their voice, and therefore their vote, to improve the public services they receive. This aligns closely with the concept of democratic renewal, which is the practice of 'adjusting the institutions of local government to make them more democratic' (Pratchett, 1999, p. 1).
- 1.3 Since the 2015 White Paper, further consultations have been held with the public, which has led to a proposal for local government reform and a programme of democratic renewal regarding:
 - a. citizen engagement in the democratic process;
 - b. voter engagement, including the widening of the franchise (Petitions Committee, 2018).
- 1.4 To help inform the development and implementation of local government electoral reform in Wales, Knowledge and Analytical Services (KAS, Welsh Government) has been asked to provide a synthesis and appraisal of the relevant evidence, with a specific focus on the methods for promoting citizen engagement in democratic processes.
- 1.5 This aim will be achieved by providing a synthesis of the evidence for the following:
 - definitions and motivators for democratic renewal;
 - research into civic and democratic engagement;
 - research into engagement (and voting) with local government; and
 - research into extending the voting franchise to those population groups proposed in the Welsh Government consultation on the matter.
- 1.6 The methodology for this evidence synthesis can be found in annex A.

2. Defining democratic renewal

- 2.1 This section of the review looks to summarise what democratic renewal is, and why it is a valuable practice.

What is democratic renewal?

- 2.2 According to Pratchett (1999), democracy as a theory is often vague, defined through a broad set of principles as opposed to a succinct description. Democratic renewal, therefore, is seen as inherently ambiguous (*ibid*). Because of the variability in how democratic renewal might be conceived, it is important to set out how this document will define and consider it.
- 2.3 One way we can investigate democratic renewal is through what it implicitly suggests. The phrase implies that democracy at present is failing or has shortcomings, and that there is a need to investigate and remedy this (Pratchett, 1999).
- 2.4 Given that democratic delivery is about ensuring the public are represented (Welsh Government, 2015), democratic renewal could also be viewed as a method of improving representation¹. One way of doing this is through ensuring that elected representatives closely resemble the electorate but certain groups, such as women, young people, BME individuals and people with lower education levels, remain underrepresented amongst elected community and county councillors (Broomfield, 2013; Murphy & Jones, 2018; Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2017). A lack of representativeness in local government could result in policies that do not reflect issues faced by under-represented groups and it has also been argued that this may lead to alienation of voters from under-represented groups (Scully, et al., 2004). Representativeness in local government is being considered as part of another research project commissioned by the Welsh Government, evaluating the Diversity in Democracy programme.
- 2.5 As well as ensuring elected representatives resemble the populace in terms of their demography, it is also important that the public is heard by them. In this manner, democratic renewal can be seen to involve voting behaviours, such as increasing voter turnout, and widening the franchise of those eligible to vote.

¹ The issue of representativeness in local government is being considered in more detail as part of the Welsh Government commissioned research to evaluate [the Diversity in Democracy programme](#).

2.6 Democratic renewal could also involve delegation in governance (Monkerud, 2007). This relates to two opposing views of democracy: the competitive democracy which centres on the idea of elected politicians holding control, or the participatory democracy where citizens are involved alongside representatives (*ibid*). In a participatory democracy, it is important to look beyond government – the formal institutions of the state, to governance – the government processes of influencing and negotiating with the private, public and third sectors (Hambleton, 2004). By taking a governance perspective, there is the recognition that a government service cannot succeed in isolation, and that public participation as consumers, customers and citizens is necessary for success (*ibid*). This view allows for governments to delegate some responsibilities to their electorate.

2.7 In summary, democratic renewal can be viewed as:

- a concept highlighting the need to improve current democratic practices;
- a method of enhancing representativeness through voting behaviours, the chosen representatives and extending the franchise; and
- a way to delegate power from governments to their communities.

Why is democratic renewal important?

2.8 Governments around the globe have recorded different reasons for turning to democratic renewal policies, for example Norway began a democratic renewal programme as a result of widespread concern regarding falling voter turnout (Monkerud, 2007). The evidence does not suggest falling voter turnout to be an issue in Welsh local elections, with proportional turnout in the 2017 Welsh local government elections equalling that in 2004 at 42 per cent (Electoral Commission, 2017b). Although turnout is not falling in Wales, no Welsh local government election has turnout reached 45 per cent² in the last ten years (Blair & Mathias, 2017), suggesting voter apathy in Wales may be a cause for concern particularly for local elections. As democratic renewal is thought to counter voter apathy (Monkerud, 2007), the Norwegian justifications for pursuing it may also be relevant to Wales.

² Note that this turnout is across Wales as a whole and that there is a high variability in turnout between local authorities. For example, in the 2017 local elections, turnout ranged from 36 per cent in Newport to 53 per cent in Ceredigion (Electoral Commission, 2017b).

- 2.9 Research from the United States also looks at reasons for pursuing democratic renewal (Hambleton, 2004), some of which is driven by the public expectation for local authorities to become more efficient and effective. These researchers also described a growing desire for power to be conceived as the ability to get results via cooperation with other groups as opposed to controlling the groups.
- 2.10 Within the UK, Cox et al (2014) noted disquiet with the status quo and a desire for change in public service delivery among the public in England. Evidence supporting a need for democratic renewal in Wales can be found in the Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement, which noted concerns regarding perceptions of low influence, with nearly half of respondents in Wales³ believing that they have no influence at all on national decision making (Hansard Society, 2018). In addition to this, and a finding which is particularly relevant given the current focus on local government, only around one out of ten individuals surveyed in Wales felt that they had an influence locally (*ibid*). Given that researchers have suggested that perceptions of political powerlessness can decrease the likelihood of a person voting (British Psychological Society, 2016), these perceptions of low influence may be a further reason to pursue democratic renewal.

³ The sub-sample size for Wales was relatively small (108 interviews), therefore caution should be exercised against generalising these reported figures to the wider population.

3. Civic and democratic engagement

3.1 This section of the review looks to bring together evidence regarding civic engagement, which is the way in which citizens participate in their community for the purposes of improving it (Adler & Goggin, 2005), and democratic engagement, which relates to democratic, political and social practices as opposed to community practices alone (Delli Carpini, 2004).

Motivations for civic engagement

3.2 Batson et al (2002) identify four classifications of the motivations for civic engagement:

- egoism: increasing personal welfare;
- altruism: increasing the welfare of others;
- collectivism: increasing the welfare of a group; and
- principalism: upholding moral principles.

3.3 Of these motivations, altruism and collectivism are considered to be the more powerful although both have flaws in that they can result in the exclusion individuals who are not considered as part of an ingroup (*ibid*).

3.4 Research into engaging those who may not regularly participate, but can be encouraged to do so, has examined five key drivers of civic behaviour:

- trust in government institutions;
- moral motivations;
- norms of good behaviour;
- feelings about their neighbourhood; and
- socioeconomic status and other demographic factors (John, et al., 2010).

3.5 These drivers were investigated in terms of what civic behaviour they were associated with, and found that positive feelings about the neighbourhood were correlated with many diverse forms of civic behaviour. This was a powerful predictor of civic behaviour, and also a stronger motivator than social norms or moral motivations.

- 3.6 Factors associated with the aforementioned positive feelings about the neighbourhood included group loyalty and identification with those in the neighbourhood, with other important factors including attachment to the neighbourhood, community spirit and social peer pressure (John, et al., 2010).
- 3.7 If community spirit is an important factor then it stands to reason that investigation of the drivers behind it may be useful in understanding how to encourage civic behaviour. The major theoretical perspective on this proposes four factors which strengthen community spirit: membership; influence; integration and fulfilment of needs; and sharing of emotional connections (McMillan & Chaivs, 1986).
- 3.8 Even when citizens care about what happens in their community, they can be apathetic about their own personal involvement in services (Rai, 2008). Some do not want to become involved in local democracy regardless of the factors which might be expected to promote engagement (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2011).
- 3.9 For those who do want to get involved, high levels of enthusiasm can be depleted over time for a number of reasons. In some situations, other commitments take precedence (Bovillard & Loeffler, 2012), however for others it can be public institutions frustrating citizen's ability to participate (John, et al., 2010). This relates to the largest barrier noted in one study – citizens' perception or experience of a lack of council response to consultation (*ibid*). Because of this, civic activity ought to be seen as a two-way process where institutions enable participation, building on the idea of a civic contract where reciprocity and mutuality influence pro-social behaviour.
- 3.10 Given that citizen enthusiasm may diminish if they do not feel valued (John, et al., 2010), it is important to ensure that the citizens feel appreciated (Haq, 2008). This can be achieved through giving citizens status in service design or delivery, thereby highlighting a commitment to citizen involvement, increasing trust, and sustaining involvement (*ibid*).

Motivations and disincentives of governments and citizens

- 3.11 Evidence suggests there may also be a disconnect between the motivations of the public sector for engaging communities and citizens, and the motivations of the communities and citizens themselves. Differing motivations can be problematic in

this respect, for example by leading to a conflict between government and citizens, as citizens may find their involvement may not to be to the degree they expected (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2011).

- 3.12 From the perspective of government, one motivation may be improving citizens' wellbeing (Burton, et al., 2004), while a second motivation is that it is viewed as an inherently good thing to do (Burton, et al., 2004; Holmes, 2011). Where government motivation is weak, there is support for the idea that citizen engagement can be passive or tokenistic (Yang, 2005). To avoid tokenism, it is important for governments to be clear about their motivations for involving citizens, and their expectations of the extent of involvement (Holmes, 2011).
- 3.13 Citizens and communities, on the other hand, tend to hold a different motivation: improving services or their experience of services (Holmes, 2011). Distrust in public institutions is a second motivator for citizens, with less trusting individuals appearing more inclined to want to act and the more trusting feeling they can leave things as they are (John, et al., 2010).
- 3.14 Community involvement is considered by some authors to be inevitably uneven (Burton, et al., 2004) – with certain citizens or population groups more likely to get involved than others given its voluntary nature – which may lead to flawed decision making. To overcome this, service providers must put in significant effort to motivate many different groups to engage (Holmes, 2011). Although improving the wellbeing of citizens may be a motivator for public services, the effort required to gain representative engagement may act as a disincentive. Another disincentive to engaging citizens or communities may be that it creates the perception that it is more difficult for government to achieve the outcomes it desires (John, et al., 2010).

Who engages?

The citizen

- 3.15 Research suggests that older people are more likely to take part in all kinds of civic behaviour than other age groups (John, et al., 2010), whereas those on lower incomes, black and minority ethnic (BME) groups, women, young people and people who are homeless are less likely to engage (Burton, et al., 2004; Loeffler & Boviard, 2017). Those who engage have been described as 'the curious, the fearful and the available' [McComas et al, 2006, pp691-692, as cited in (Loeffler & Boviard,

2017)], which, unlike many other assessments, looks at the characteristics of the individuals, rather than demographic groups.

- 3.16 It is often supposed that the types of people who display civic engagement (such as community volunteering) are the same as those who turn out for elections. Research examining the link between civic responsibility and volunteering has found that volunteering can help to develop ties to the local community, impacting awareness of local issues. This in turn has the potential to improve a sense of social responsibility, however, the evidence is limited and the direction of this effect is unclear, i.e. whether volunteering improves a sense of social responsibility or whether those with greater social responsibility are more likely to volunteer (WISERD, 2018a)⁴.
- 3.17 A final factor which appears to govern whether people engage with civic and democratic activities is wellbeing. From analysing longitudinal survey data, it has been proposed that the optimum level of happiness for political participation is slightly lower than that of the highest happiness group (Oishi, et al., 2009), showing that the relationship between political participation and wellbeing is not linear. This finding implies that policies to improve wellbeing may not necessarily facilitate civic or democratic engagement beyond a certain point and supports the finding that dissatisfaction can be a motivation for engagement (Haro-de-Rosario, et al., 2018).
- 3.18 There is a general perception that active involvement is easier for those in the middle class (Rai, 2008). This perception appears to direct public sector interventions, as they focus on engaging disadvantaged groups (Blakeley, 2010), although it is not a well evidenced point of view (Rai, 2008). The choice of public sector to focus on disadvantaged groups can lead to unintended negative consequences, such as overburdening disadvantaged groups with a multiplicity of activities that they are encouraged to undertake (Blakeley, 2010).

The public sector

- 3.19 As noted above, the decision to participate in community activities does not rest solely on the citizen: the public sector also has an important role in determining who can take shared responsibilities for service design, delivery and governance (Geddes, 2006). By focussing interventions on specific groups, building systems

⁴ The '[Social Action as a Route to the Ballot Box](#)' project will test this limitation by examining young volunteers' view on civic duty over the course of their volunteering experiences (*ibid*).

which require specific skills, and choosing who should be represented, the public sector is determining the parameters within which people can choose to participate (Blakeley, 2010; Burton, et al., 2004; Geddes, 2006; Oostveen & van de Besselaar, 2004).

Factors influencing the success of engagement

- 3.20 Levels of civic engagement can range from passive involvement (such as absorbing government information) to active involvement (for example, running a community budgeting scheme). Despite variance, five themes are apparent when assessing factors that influence successful engagement:
- local context;
 - leadership;
 - public administrators' attitudes;
 - ownership; and
 - scale of change.

Local context

- 3.21 Burall and Carr-West (2009) state that local context influences not only the knowledge which citizens possess, but also their perceptions of the importance of particular issues and their relationship with public service providers.
- 3.22 It appears that is not just the present local context which influences success of engagement. The history of the locality is also impactful, for example in Manchester areas with concentrated citizen participation were historically industrialised areas characterised by trade unions and collective action (Blakeley, 2010).

Leadership

- 3.23 Research highlights different parts of leadership as important, for example some found that strong leadership is what is required for the cultural change which allows citizen engagement and involvement in service design and delivery (Rai, 2008). Others argued that this strong leadership needed to be charismatic, or that continuity of leadership is equally important to this charisma (Blakeley, 2010).

3.24 As noted above with the inclusion of continuity of leadership as a key factor, successful leadership need not be due to innate characteristics of the leader. Civic leadership training has also been found to increase political participation and engagement, for example leading to higher attendance rates at local town hall meetings, and greater participation with local officials (Tsai, et al., 2018). This research implies that leadership as an influential factor can be improved, thereby suggesting a potential intervention for improving citizen engagement.

Attitudes of public administrators

3.25 Attitudes of public administrators impacts engagement because to achieve success researchers argue that there needs to be trust between the government and citizens (The Hague Academy for Local Government, 2018). For public administrators, there needs to be trust in citizens so that they can use local knowledge and activism in order to share power (Yang, 2005).

3.26 Trust may also reduce the perceived worries of central government, where there is a cultural fear of citizen involvement in service delivery (House of Commons Public Administration Select Committee, 2011). It is understandable that with negative attitudes towards citizen engagement from public administrators there would be little opportunity to pursue democratic renewal, and from there a reduction in the chance of engagement.

Citizen ownership

3.27 A case study of a city's strategic action plan by Blakeley (2010) concluded that citizen participation was seen to have been aided because the plan was perceived as 'an action plan for the city' rather than a plan of the city council or for the city council' (Blakeley, 2010). In this way, the plan was seen to have held more value to citizens (*ibid*).

3.28 Citizen ownership of plans may have downsides as well, for example it may move decisions and accountability away from those with the electoral mandate to make them (Griffiths, et al., 2009). This may also cause friction between government and citizens, due to the differences in their perceptions of what is important (Bovard & Loeffler, 2012). It is thought that citizens place greater importance on the *process* of receiving the service, whereas governments put greater weight on the *outcome* of citizens using services (*ibid*). Ownership could also be *shared* between citizens and

the authorities, as opposed to being held by either in full (Goedkoop & Devine-Wright, 2016). This can return to the issue highlighted under the ‘attitudes of public administrators’ section of this document, whereby trust between actors becomes a key facilitator or barrier.

Scale of change

- 3.29 Smaller scale change appears to be the most successful way to approach citizen involvement in service delivery, for example through involving citizens in some aspects but not all of them (Holmes, 2011), or by building on existing structures as opposed to implementing whole-system change (Griffiths, et al., 2009). One reason for this might be that engagement depends on specific relationships between communities, citizens and the public sector which results in different needs (and therefore different approaches) for different neighbourhoods (Loeffler & Boviard, 2017). Because of this, it is not always appropriate to roll out a model which is successful in a small area to a larger area (*ibid*).

Mechanisms for stimulating engagement

Nudge Theory

- 3.30 Behavioural science – or ‘nudge theory’ as it is commonly called – provides insights into how people can be encouraged to make better choices that will benefit themselves and society (Behavioural Insights Team, 2014).
- 3.31 One example of using nudges in the domain of democratic engagement looked at providing participants information about citizens who have signed online petitions (John, et al., 2010). By providing information about the number of signatories, the researchers were able to influence the likelihood of participants joining the petition through generating social pressure (*ibid*). This was seen as a cost-effective way to influence larger groups in order to increase democratic engagement.
- 3.32 Nudges have also been explored in an experiment relevant to civic engagement: investigating citizens’ likelihood to give money to charity (Ariely, et al., 2009). For some, motivations were purely intrinsic, underpinned by factors such as altruism or moral preferences. For others they were extrinsic, therefore driven by the proposal of material rewards or the chance to signal to others that they are a ‘good person’ (*ibid*). In order to play on both of these types of motivations, researchers found that pledging to make a donation in advance combined with later public recognition led

to statistically significant increases in donations (*ibid*). Even pledging alone improved donations (*ibid*), which fits with research suggesting that making a commitment in public increases the likelihood that it will be seen through (John, et al., 2010).

- 3.33 A criticism that has been levelled at nudge theory in terms of democratic participation is that it works under the assumption that citizens are already willing and able to participate, and lack only motivation, which is not always the case (*ibid*).

Inclusive design

- 3.34 Inclusive design can help to mitigate the marginalisation of excluded groups with institutional links between citizens and the government providing a framework for the desired civic participation. Despite this, the lack of acknowledgement from the institutions can reduce motivations for participation (*ibid*). Citizens' motivation to participate is more likely to be maintained when institutions:

- listen to what citizens have to say;
- Feed back on the outcomes of decisions;
- Make decisions that are in line with what the majority of citizens agree with (*ibid*).

- 3.35 If these criteria are met, then the design of the discussion is inclusive in that it is more likely to produce satisfied and empowered citizens who are engaged with civic activity. Mutual trust is also a crucial factor in inclusive design, because trust between administrators and citizens can increase citizen willingness to participate (Yang, 2005). Similarly important is the provision of information to citizens, in order to connect them to new systems of governance (Griffiths, et al., 2009; van Rijn & Tissen, 2013).

- 3.36 Participatory budgeting involves engaging members of the community to participate in discussions regarding spending priorities of for a public budget. Evidence suggests that the process increases participation and engagement with local government (Wampler, et al., 2018), improves communication between councillors and citizens, raises the councils' awareness of their community and even has the potential to increase turnout at local elections (Sgueo, 2016). A review of existing evidence in a Welsh context made recommendations for implementing participatory

budgeting in the future including starting at a local level by allowing communities to vote on local projects (Williams, et al., 2017).

Technology

- 3.37 Technology is often viewed through the domain of e-voting, however this limits its potential scope for democratic engagement (Oostveen & van de Besselaar, 2004). It could also be considered for the provision of information, political deliberation and decision making (*ibid*). Decision making could consist of deliberative polls, where an issue is introduced to the public sphere, discussion within the public is promoted, before people are asked to vote on a choice of clear but limited options (*ibid*). People can also use technology to put forward their points of view through forums, Electronic petitions (ePetitions) or opinion polls, or to simply learn more about politics, political parties, and their local area (John, et al., 2010; Oostveen & van de Besselaar, 2004; Panagiotopoulos & Al-Debei, 2010).
- 3.38 Petitions are useful in that they can provide an overview of accumulated beliefs of citizens (Panagiotopoulos & Al-Debei, 2010). ePetitions in particular are simple, easy to disseminate, and are not limited by geographical scope. They enable voices to be heard and increase responsiveness, allowing authorities to use citizen's ideas to inform agendas and policies specific to the needs of their public (Panagiotopoulos & Al-Debei, 2010; Bochel & Bochel, 2017). Strong petition systems can even provide an educative function to improve awareness of the political system (Bochel & Bochel, 2017). Several case studies support the role of ePetitions as a means of facilitating citizen input in to decision making and therefore enhancing local government democratic processes (Panagiotopoulos & Al-Debei, 2010; Macintosh, et al., 2002).
- 3.39 Whilst there is an ePetition system for the National Assembly for Wales⁵, there are few systems in place at a local government level in Wales. A number of characteristics have been outlined which contribute to a strong ePetitions system at the local level with the potential for significant benefits, such as transparency, direct access and a mechanism for citizens to engage with conversations with officials (*ibid*).

⁵ [ePetition system for the National Assembly for Wales](#)

- 3.40 Research suggests that political deliberation is beneficial to democratic engagement, and new technologies present further opportunities for this, for example through online deliberative forums (Oostveen & van de Besselaar, 2004). However, emerging evidence has found that while online forums attract a high volume of contributions (especially on contentious topics), changes in policy preferences and knowledge are only moderate (*ibid*). This suggests that although online technologies can provide a space for deliberation, they have an impact on the quality of engagement. Research attributes this in parts to lacking opportunities for reciprocity and reason-giving – in other words, the opportunity to recognise what has been contributed before and the opportunity to offer a rationale for their contribution (*ibid*).
- 3.41 This reciprocity may be achievable through new technologies. Social media can provide local government with the opportunity to engage in two-way, interactive communication with citizens to improve engagement and transparency (Mergel, 2013). Social media, along with other advances in technology such as the internet and e-mail, have also resulted in more options for citizen-led journalism, allowing governing institutions to communicate more directly and locally, as opposed to going through larger professional outlets. These methods could be particularly effective in helping to engage hard to reach groups, including young people (Firmstone & Coleman, 2015).
- 3.42 This section has considered the evidence around civic and democratic engagement, identifying motivations for engagement among citizens and government; which types of people tend to be more engaged; and mechanisms that can be used to deepen and widen engagement. The next section turns its attention specifically to the evidence around voter engagement.

4. Voter engagement

The electoral system

- 4.1 The electoral system has been argued to play a more important role in explaining voter turnout in local elections than national elections (Cancela & Geys, 2016). Currently, local government elections use the First Past the Post System (FPTP) which has been criticised for potentially discouraging voters (Sunderland, 2002).

Proportional representation

- 4.2 Supporters of a Single Transferable Vote (STV) system believe that it is better at enabling diverse opinions to be represented and reducing the number of uncontested seats, as demonstrated in Scotland and Northern Ireland (Welsh Government, 2018; Curtice, 2012; Sunderland, 2002; Electoral Reform Society, n.d). The Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales consultations regarding electoral reform in Wales revealed support for a system based on proportional representation (Welsh Government, 2018; National Assembly for Wales, 2018).
- 4.3 It is also argued that it would result in a fairer voting system for local government, enabling citizens to rank candidates by preference and increase voter turnout. However, there is limited evidence to back this up with data from Scotland revealing that, following the introduction of STV, gender balance of elected representatives only slightly improved and there was no improvement in voter turnout (Curtice, 2012).

Voter turnout in local elections

- 4.4 Turnout for General Elections in Wales is considerably higher than it is for Assembly and local council elections (Blair & Mathias, 2017). As Table 1 (below) shows, roughly two thirds of the electorate in Wales vote in General Elections compared with less than half voting in Assembly and local elections.

Table 1 – Electoral turnout in Wales

	General Elections			National Assembly for Wales Elections			Local Council Elections		
Year	2010	2015	2017	2007	2011	2016	2008	2012	2017
Turnout (%)	65	66	69	43	41	45	45	39	42

Source: Electoral Commission (2017b)

4.5 Research conducted by the Electoral Commission following the 2017 Local Government elections revealed overall high levels of satisfaction with the voting procedures (Electoral Commission, 2017b). Therefore, the issue with voter turnout does not appear to be with the procedure itself. The following section will examine potential demographic factors impacting turnout in local elections in Wales.

Age

4.6 Since 1997, there has been growing concern that the British public, and in particular young people, are becoming increasingly disengaged with politics and democracy (Ministry of Justice, 2007). This view has been challenged by evidence showing that young people are engaged with other forms of civic and democratic activity, such as engaging with volunteering, informal political action (Roker & Eden, 2002) and involvement with youth councils (Matthews, 2001). Others therefore have argued that this engagement in less formal politics shows that it is instead the expression that has shifted from traditional channels to new channels such as television, blogs, social media and websites (Loader, 2007). Despite this, young people's election turnout rates continue to fall and therefore, the issue appears to be with voter engagement as opposed to political apathy in general (Henn & Foard, 2011). Furthermore, this effect is not limited to the UK and evidence gathered from official surveys conducted just after polls take place reveal patterns of declining voter turnout since the 1980s can be seen across Europe (Oxenham, 2017).

Level of education

4.7 Having a degree has been found to have a significant effect on increasing the likelihood of voting (Birch, et al., 2014; Hansard Society, 2018). This may be due in part to graduates having greater exposure to political processes and activism that accompany university life (WISERD, 2018b). Graduates are also more likely than non-graduates to earn higher wages and therefore, the income effect may also be apparent (Birch, et al., 2014). There is also an interaction with level of education

and age, with the declining youth turnout in Britain being more pronounced amongst those who did not attend university. Since 2001, the turnout rates in the General Election for non-graduates under 30 has been, on average, 14 percentage points lower than graduates. In the 2017 General Election, turnout rates for graduates under 30 was 62 per cent compared with 38 per cent for those who did not engage with post-16 education (WISERD, 2018b). These findings highlight the importance of education and voter turnout, however, they do not address why the differences are apparent. Possible explanations are explored below.

Ethnicity

- 4.8 In the UK, BME citizens are less likely to be registered to vote than the national average. For instance, in the 2010 General Election, 18 per cent of BME citizens were not registered to vote compared to 7 per cent of white citizens (Holloway, 2013). The effect is more pronounced amongst certain groups, most notably Africans with non-registration rates as high as 28 per cent (*ibid*). However, whilst turnout rates overall are less than the average population, turnout rates amongst some BME groups are actually quite favourable with self-reported turnout rates higher than the national average amongst Bangladeshi, Pakistani and Indian groups (*ibid*). Other groups such as African and Caribbean continue to have low turnout rates, as do young BME citizens with the Electoral Commission finding that the decline in youth turnout is more pronounced amongst this group than young white people (Electoral Commission, 2017c; MORI, 2005).

Explanations of turnout in local elections

- 4.9 In addition to examining intrinsic factors such as gender, age, level of education and ethnicity, it is important to consider other, more dynamic factors that could have an influence in likelihood to vote. It is worth noting that research on voting behaviour in local elections specifically is very limited and research tends to focus on motivations and barriers around voting in general. Where possible, research in Wales has been highlighted. A review of survey data reveals several key themes explored below that could be affecting voter turnout (Blair & Mathias, 2017; Sunderland, 2002).

Sense of importance and understanding of local elections

- 4.10 With regard to perceived importance, as noted in Table 1, turnout at National Assembly and local council elections is lower than that of General Election turnout

in Wales. International evidence about second order effects, whereby there is a perception that less is at stake in regional and local elections, may partially explain differences in voter turnout. However, these differences do not seem to be apparent where regional elections are held simultaneously with national elections (Scully, et al., 2004; BBC, 2003; Schakel & Jeffrey, 2013).

- 4.11 Evidence from political science suggests that a sense of civic duty to vote is perhaps the most important predictor of voter turnout (Blais, 2000; Weinschenck & Dawes, 2018). However, little research to date has attempted to explain why certain people have a strong sense of civic duty and others do not. Recent evidence shows that genetic factors account for between 70 per cent and 87 per cent of the correlation between civic duty and the Big Five personality traits (Weinschenck & Dawes, 2018). While there are limitations with regard to the role of personality as a mediating factor the emerging evidence suggests that people are not born with political ‘blank slates’ that are shaped purely by their life experiences, but rather people are born with predispositions that shape their engagement with politics (*ibid*).
- 4.12 A lack of understanding could also be playing a role in voter turnout. In a survey conducted by the Electoral Reform Society Cymru, it was noted that respondents could be confused about what they were voting for and often lacked political knowledge (Blair & Mathias, 2017) – for example, recognition rate for local politicians was particularly low. In addition, 30 per cent of respondents did not know that health policy and the NHS in Wales was devolved (Blair & Mathias, 2017), further highlighting a lack of understanding. If people are not aware of devolved responsibilities, perceived importance of local and Welsh Assembly elections may be reduced in that people do not feel that issues in that area can be addressed at a local or national level. Respondents recognised that the political education provision was not sufficient and this lack of knowledge is playing a detrimental role in Welsh democracy.
- 4.13 Furthermore, it is important to note that the information deficit is not limited to young people. In order to address this, researchers recommended that there needs to be an improvement of political education and better communication from government to the public (Blair & Mathias, 2017). Improving political education and awareness could help to improve the sense of importance of local elections. This effect is even more prominent at the local level with a third of all respondents in England reporting

that they did not feel they had enough information to make an informed choice at local elections (Electoral Commission, 2017d). This is much lower than figures seen in the General Election (*ibid*). A better understanding of the powers of local government is required along with the need to raise awareness of what local councillors are doing to improve the lives of their citizens.

- 4.14 The method in which information is presented to citizens may also have an impact on their willingness to vote. Research conducted in the US explored ‘soft’ versus ‘hard’ news. They found that, whilst traditional ‘hard’ news is higher in quality, it is unappealing to inattentive individuals and therefore, its ability to influence voting behaviour in these individuals is minimal (Baum & Jamison, 2006). On the other hand, soft news such as day-time talk shows is more efficient in that it can facilitate voting competence amongst inattentive, politically unengaged citizens (*ibid*). To date, there have been no similar studies conducted in the UK and it is not possible to predict whether the same effect would be apparent in citizens in Wales.
- 4.15 The Welsh Government consultation regarding electoral reform in local government asked open questions to determine support for any initiatives not otherwise raised during the consultation. There was support for improving voter awareness and education (Welsh Government, 2018). Whilst education can occur in any context, the ‘Democratic Schools Initiative’ suggests that schools are the best place for this (Electoral Reform Society Scotland, 2018). Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) (2004) states that aspects of citizenship, including teaching children about democracy and voting, should not be taught as a standalone subject, but rather, it should be applied throughout the curriculum. The Welsh curriculum may incorporate a similar system following the recommendations outlined by Professor G. Donaldson (Donaldson, 2015).
- 4.16 Others argue that civics education in school is not sufficient as it does little to develop practical democratic skills. Instead, initiatives such as those seen in some Australian schools employing democratic processes to students’ experience in schools by allowing them to make decisions about their classes, curriculum and running of school buildings allows young people to “prepare to function as citizens in a democratic society” (Varnham, et al., 2014).

4.17 There is also evidence to suggest that education has an important role in determining the engagement of young people in political issues. For instance, young people were asked to express their opinions in relation to the European Union (EU) Referendum. It was found that children, who had learnt about the EU in school, or via their own means, were able to provide more structured arguments in relation to their opinions on whether the UK should remain or leave the EU (WISERD, 2016). This supports the idea that where children are taught relevant issues, they are able to make better informed decisions. Whilst the evidence does not relate directly to their ability to engage in civic duties including voting, it does suggest that education is important in generating interest and improving understanding.

Intrinsic Influences

- 4.18 There are factors governed by individuals' perceptions that may affect their motivation to vote. In a survey by the Electoral Reform Society, average agreement with the statement "when people like me get involved in politics, they can really change the way things were run" was low amongst all respondents but was particularly low amongst non-voters (Blair & Mathias, 2017, pp7).
- 4.19 The lack of diversity amongst elected representatives may also affect perceptions of influence amongst voters. For instance, in relation to under-representation at UK Government level, the Tune In, Turn Out project found that young people surveyed said they were turned off voting because politicians are not addressing the issues that they are most concerned about such as rising living costs, unemployment and housing (Birdwell, et al., 2014). Furthermore, Demos investigated the opinions of young people with regards to the profiles of Members of Parliament (MPs). The research, consisting of surveys and focus groups, suggested the social class, age and gender of MPs is important when considering voting motivations. Specifically, young people stated that they would be more likely to vote if there were more local working-class MPs, more MPs under age of 35, more MPs from the local area and more female MPs (Birdwell, et al., 2014).
- 4.20 This doesn't appear to explain the low levels of registration and turnout seen amongst BME citizens with findings that BME groups are more positive about the efficacy of voting than the national average, particularly amongst those born outside of the UK (MORI, 2005). Furthermore, popular reasons cited for not voting amongst

BME individuals included a lack of trust in politicians to keep their promises and seeing no point in voting as it was obvious who would win the election (MORI, 2005).

Extrinsic influences

- 4.21 Political behaviour such as voting can also be influenced by extrinsic factors such as household and local contexts, with voting habit formation correlating with an individual's parental political involvement (Pultzer, 2002). This is particularly apparent with regards to the formation of voting habit through socialisation with family and peers. It has been argued that aspects of political participation is learned at an early age via experiences in schools, neighbourhoods and the home. For instance, evidence has shown that the predicted probability of voting strongly increases when there is another voter in the household. This effect has also been shown to be more effective when the other voter in the household is family as opposed to spouses or roommates (Fieldhouse & Cutts, 2012). This has implications for lowering the voting age as, the younger a first time voter is, the more likely they are to still be living with their family and thus be exposed to this effect. The authors reiterate the importance of this in the context of habit formation, noting that once an elector has voted once, they are more likely to vote in the future (Green & Shachar, 2000; Fujiwara, et al., 2016), further emphasising the importance of early habit formation. This effect has also been found amongst under-represented groups, for instance, in a study examining the voting behaviours of individuals with intellectual disabilities, the most significant predictor of voting behaviour was living in a household with an active voter (Keeley, et al., 2008).
- 4.22 Nudge techniques have been trialled in voting experiments, where interventions reminding citizens of their civic duty were effective in encouraging participation and had an enduring effect (Behavioural Insights Team, 2014). Other light-touch interventions such as personalised canvassing (either face to face or via the telephone) have also been shown to increase voter registration and turnout, in this case by between three and seven per cent (*ibid*). Due to the effects of habit formation, where people are more likely to continue with an activity once it has been initiated, the impact of this intervention was found to be enduring, with the likelihood of voting in an election the following year increasing by over 50 per cent compared to a control (*ibid*).

Removing barriers and improving voter turnout

4.23 Removing barriers with regards to voting and registration to encourage greater participation not only includes addressing the issues raised above, in relation to understanding and perceived influence, but also with the voting process itself.

Registration

4.24 Voter registration is significantly higher amongst older people, aged 55-64 (90 per cent), than younger people, aged 18-24 (55 per cent) (Electoral Commission, 2014b). In addition to this, BME communities, recent home movers, people in rented accommodation are also less likely to register to vote (Birch, et al., 2014). This means that the registered electorate is not fully representative of the population. Several suggestions to improve voter registration are explored below.

4.25 One issue is that, in order to vote, citizens are required to register in advance. Same day registration may help to reduce this and has been shown to be effective in the previous US presidential election whereby states that allowed same day registration had higher turnout than other states (Birdwell, et al., 2014).

4.26 There has been support for the use of Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) with access to data about voters including National Insurance, driving licence details and passport details. As EROs already have access to council tax and housing benefit information, these additional sources could help to boost registration and reduce the cost. However, there was some dissent from individuals who feared infringements on their right to privacy (Welsh Government, 2018).

4.27 The Electoral Commission ran a public awareness campaign leading up to the 2017 local government elections in Wales, encouraging people to register to vote. They utilised various methods of advertising including television, social media, radio and online search engines, with an aim of reaching both a general audience and under-registered groups. Between the date the campaign started and the registration deadline, there were 25,000 people added to the electoral registers in Wales. Whilst this does not evidence a causal relationship, their follow up survey work demonstrates that awareness of the campaign was high. In addition to this, they targeted under-represented groups via support agencies such as RNIB Cymru, Mencap Cymru and The Wallich to improve awareness of how they can participate in the election (Electoral Commission, 2017b).

- 4.28 Automatic registration has been successfully used in some countries such as Australia, Canada and some US states. Automatic registration has benefits particular for home-movers whereby there is no need to re-register at the new address (Electoral Commission, 2016). As part of the Welsh Government consultation on electoral reform, 77 per cent of respondents were in favour of automatic registration (Welsh Government, 2018).
- 4.29 Relaxed registration to allow for block registration could also be used to target specific, underrepresented groups such as BME communities, students, and people living in care homes and tower blocks (Electoral Reform Society, 2017).

Accessibility

- 4.30 Equal access to elections is an important step to ensuring higher turnout levels. However, research has shown that people with disabilities do not have equal opportunities to vote compared to those without disabilities (Electoral Commission, 2003; Electoral Commission, 2017b) and issues such as unfamiliar words, unhelpful maps and lack of easy read forms are still apparent.
- 4.31 Individuals with intellectual disabilities are under-represented at UK general elections both in terms of being registered to vote and actually voting (Keeley, et al., 2008). This suggests that there may be an issue with the registration process and also, potentially, the accessibility of polls. There are still other external factors evident also, as noted above earlier, such as living with an active voter being a more powerful predictor of voter turnout amongst those with intellectual disabilities than being in supported accommodation.
- 4.32 Australia has considered innovative solutions to assist under-represented groups to vote. In addition to extending voting locations to hospitals and nursing homes (Electoral Commission, 2017a), they have implemented a free app for phones and tablets to provide guidance and text-to-voice software to assist individuals with communication difficulties to vote in person at polling stations Whilst there is no evidence examining the direct impact on voter turnout, the software app received positive feedback from disability agencies and was downloaded 1,615 times in a five-week period leading up to the elections (Victorian Electoral Commission, 2016). It is worth exploring further innovative solutions employed by other countries to assist under-represented groups.

Voting methods

- 4.33 At present, postal votes and votes by proxy are the main alternatives to attending a polling station. Turnout rates from the 2017 local government elections in Wales were higher for ballots cast via post than polling station turnout, with rates of 69.7 per cent and 36.3 per cent respectively (Electoral Commission, 2017b). The convenience of voting appears to be a factor with research indicating that a popular reason for people not voting at polling stations was that circumstances on the day prevented them from doing so (MORI, 2005). The Welsh Government consultation on electoral reform found support for more flexible voting methods which may improve convenience such as electronic voting more flexible voting hours and the use of multiple polling stations (Welsh Government, 2018). Given the indication that convenience is a factor, it is important to assess the suitability of these methods as a means of improving voter turnout.
- 4.34 There is limited evidence to suggest that implementing electronic voting at polling stations will have a positive effect. Electronic voting systems are expensive and are prone to issues with systems crashing and security (Electoral Reform Society, 2017). Evidence from Belgium found that implementing electronic voting resulted in a drop in voter turnout, despite voting being compulsory (Regis Dandoy, in (Electoral Reform Society, 2017). The introduction of electronic systems would require exploratory research, testing and trials to determine the effectiveness of such systems prior to any implementation.
- 4.35 Remote internet voting has also been discussed as a way of reducing the physical costs of elections and as a method improving electoral turnout in declining Western democracies (Norris 2001). Whilst survey data in the UK has suggested that young people felt online voting would increase the likelihood of them voting (Birdwell, et al., 2014), countries such as Canada, Switzerland and Estonia that have introduced internet based voting have experienced negligible impact on turnout (Oostveen & van de Besselaar, 2004; Solvak & Vassil, 2018). Despite this, recent evidence has highlighted that e-voting can have a greater impact on habit formation than typical paper voting and whilst it may not increase turnout, it may help to prevent further decline (Solvak & Vassil, 2018).

- 4.36 Compulsory voting is a controversial method of improving voter turnout. Before compulsory voting was implemented in Australia, less than 70 per cent of citizens voted in elections. Working-class citizens were also less likely to vote than wealthy citizens, resulting in public policy not reflecting the preferences of the population as a whole (Fowler, 2013). Following the implementation of compulsory voting, there was a 24 percentage point increase in voter turnout and a shift towards policy preferred by working-class citizens (*ibid*). There has been limited support for a compulsory voting system in Wales with the consultation on Electoral Reform revealing the majority were opposed to it (Welsh Government, 2018). Furthermore, studies have shown that whilst compulsory voting is effective in improving voter turnout (Hoffman, et al., 2017; Bechtel, et al., 2017), it does very little to address underlying motivations and habit formation, with the effect vanishing once the compulsory element is removed (Bechtel, et al., 2017). This further emphasises the importance of contextual and motivational factors involved in habit formation as opposed to the act of voting itself.
- 4.37 This section has considered the evidence around factors that influence voter engagement and turnout (in local elections and in elections more generally) and how barriers to engagement can be overcome. The next section turns its attention to relevant evidence around the possibility of extending the voting franchise in Welsh local council elections to 16 and 17 year olds and foreign nationals.

5. Extending the franchise

- 5.1 If, as noted earlier, democratic renewal is in part about enhancing representativeness, extending the franchise could be seen as a method of democratic renewal in that it affords representation for more of the population. In 2018, Welsh Government consulted with the public on extending the franchise for local council elections to 16 and 17 year olds and all legal residents in Wales irrespective of their citizenry or nationality (Welsh Government, 2018)⁶. Pertinent evidence around extending the voting franchise to these population groups are now considered in turn.

Young people

- 5.2 Around seven out of ten respondents (68 per cent) to the Welsh Government consultation were in favour of lowering the voting age to 16 years. (Welsh Government, 2018). The National Assembly for Wales also found support for lowering the voting age to 16 in their consultation, whereby the majority of respondents (81 per cent) identified as being under the age of 18 (National Assembly for Wales, 2018). In the literature, it is suggested that those in favour of lowering the voting age see it as a way of supporting young people as societal assets and encouraging them to develop their civic and democratic potential (Eichorn, 2018). Those who oppose enfranchising 16-17 year olds tend to reason it will have negative effects, or at the very least no positive effects (*ibid*). In order to understand these views, evidence on young people's voting habits and behaviours will be presented under the themes which emerge from the consultation and wider literature. It should be noted that these themes draw mostly on opinion-based arguments of principle, but empirical analysis is incorporated where relevant.

Theme 1: 'It makes sense'

- 5.3 In investigating the drivers behind views on enfranchising young people, one theme to emerge from the Welsh Government consultation was that it 'made sense' given other duties associated with being 16 years old (Welsh Government, 2018), an argument which is reiterated throughout literature on the subject. An example of this view being demonstrated elsewhere comes from the Electoral Reform Society, who

⁶ This consultation also investigated views on enfranchising Welsh prisoners. The evidence around this is being considered in a separate report.

argue that anyone who contributes financially to the state, and who even may risk their life for it through joining the army, ought to have a say in how the country is run (Electoral Reform Society, 2018).

Theme 2: 'They aren't ready'

- 5.4 A second theme noted in the consultation response summary was that those aged 16-17 'aren't ready' to vote (Welsh Government, 2018). This included the views that they were not sufficiently mature, did not have enough relevant experience, or were not educated enough on the subjects of politics and democracy (*ibid*).
- 5.5 This viewpoint can be tested against relevant evidence regarding awareness of which competencies are devolved to Welsh Government, and which are reserved by the UK government. For example, (Evans, 2017) investigated knowledge of who runs the NHS, education and policing in Wales. In terms of the NHS, those aged 16-17 years demonstrated poorer knowledge than the general population (28 per cent were aware that NHS Wales is devolved, compared to 43 per cent of the general population), which might support the supposition that 16 and 17 year olds lack knowledge in areas relevant to democracy in Wales. Despite this, for both education and policing those aged 16-17 years answered the questions on devolution correctly more often than the general population (75 per cent vs 61 per cent and 53 per cent vs 50 per cent respectively). This suggests that in terms of devolved competencies, for certain areas – potentially those most relevant to those of the age group in question such as education – there is no compelling evidence of a comparative lack of knowledge.
- 5.6 Looking beyond the issue of devolved competencies, research that investigates awareness of political leaders among the 16-17 year old age group (Evans, 2017) shows around three in four recognise key political figures in the National Assembly for Wales, although there is a lack of comparative data for awareness of the same politicians among the general Welsh population. There is an argument that low levels of knowledge about actors in the political system are due to a lack of identification with these actors as opposed to a lack of interest in politics as a whole (Eichorn, 2018).
- 5.7 The experience of other countries that have introduced voting for 16 and 17 year olds suggests that low knowledge or awareness of politics is a barrier that can be overcome. In Austria, enfranchisement coincided with the enhancement of civic and

citizenship education in schools and this population displayed higher turnout rates than those aged 18-24 years (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014). In Scotland too, emerging evidence suggests that civic education has been beneficial, with a consistent association found between discussion of politics in the classroom and high levels of political engagement and positive civic attitudes (Eichorn, 2015).

- 5.8 These findings imply that improving education on civic responsibilities may be useful. However, survey data of young people in Wales suggests that many those aged between 12 and 15 do not feel that school helped to increase their interest in politics (Evans, 2017).

Theme 3: ‘They aren’t interested’

- 5.9 While the Welsh Government consultation response summary did not highlight a view that young people are not interested in voting (Welsh Government, 2018), it is a perspective that appears in the literature on the subject. The evidence for this point of view is mixed, although many studies find that 18-24 year olds are somewhat less informed and enthusiastic about democracy than older age groups, which might in part explain perceptions of 16-17 year olds (Wagner, et al., 2012; Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014; Electoral Commission, 2017d). This assumption that 16-17 year olds can be accurately represented by their older counterparts is proposed by some to be flawed, at least in part because 16-17 year olds are largely in traditional full time education or vocational arrangements, which is thought to impact their experience of political discussion and engagement (Eichorn, 2018).
- 5.10 In Norway, a trial was run where some of their municipalities lowered the voting age to 16 in the 2011 election. Through survey methodology, researchers found greater interest in politics for those who were 18 than those in the 16-17 age bracket (Bergh, 2013), thereby supporting the suggestion that those aged 16-17 are not as interested as their older counterparts. This conclusion must be caveated, however, as the municipalities which ran the trial were self selecting and particularly engaged with youth politics.
- 5.11 The findings of Bergh (2013) directly contradict those of a similar study in Austria (Wagner, et al., 2012). Wagner et al (2012) also used survey methodology, but found political interest in the 16-17 year old age group to be second only to those aged 31 years and above, and willingness to participate at the same level as the general population. Bergh (2013) suggests the disparity between findings may be

because in Austria the lowered voting age was a reality as opposed to being part of a trial, meaning those involved had greater chance to develop political maturity..

- 5.12 In terms of the relevance of these findings to Wales, it should be noted that Austria has traditionally high turnout rates for elections (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014), which cannot be said for elections in Wales where turnout across the country as a whole for National Assembly and local council elections are typically below 50 per cent (Jones & Holzinger, 2016). This suggests that the findings from Austria may not be wholly applicable to the Welsh context.
- 5.13 Evidence from Scotland shows that in the 2014 independence referendum where 16-17 year olds were enfranchised to vote, 75 per cent of this group reported to have voted (Electoral Reform Society, 2018), (Electoral Commission, 2014a). although objective data records show that only 66 per cent of 16-17 year olds were registered at the time of the referendum, thereby suggesting turnout in this age group to be lower than self-reported (*ibid*)⁷ and substantially lower than the overall turnout of 85 per cent.
- 5.14 While this may suggest low interest in politics among 16 and 17 year olds, it has also been argued that young people are not disengaged with democracy but rather engage with it in a different manner (Evans, 2017). For example, young people demonstrate higher engagement with alternative democratic practices through online petitions, blogs, websites and digital media productions (Henn & Foard, 2011). Therefore, a preoccupation with electoral turnout rates may be too narrow a measure for young people's interest in politics (*ibid*). This pattern of engagement can also be seen with 18-24 year olds, as noted in the voter engagement section of this report.

⁷ (Ruedin, 2018) notes that social desirability and self-selection bias may have skewed the survey results.

Theme 4: 'This will improve long-term voter turnout'

- 5.15 Early voting experiences are thought to be habit forming [Dinas, 2012, as cited in (Eichorn, 2018)], and the period between 18 and the early twenties involves important decisions pertaining to careers and relationships [Strate et al, 1989, as cited in (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014)]. It has therefore been argued that as many people have to wait until their early 20s to vote at an election after turning 18, this might coincide with other life preoccupations and foster a low interest in democracy, thereby paving the way for life-long low interest or engagement (*ibid*). Voting at an earlier age (when voting is proposed to be easier due to fewer life stressors) has therefore been suggested in theory to increase the probability of maintaining long term higher electoral turnout in that cohort (*ibid*).
- 5.16 Although there is little data on the long-term impact of lowering the voting age, a study in Austria (Zeglovits & Aichholzer, 2014) found turnout to be higher among 16-17 year olds than 18-21 year olds. This finding however should be caveated by the lack of longitudinal data so it cannot answer whether this higher turnout among 16-17 year olds can be maintained as they get older, and by the unknown impacts of awareness raising campaigns for the newly enfranchised group (*ibid*), and changes in the school curricula aimed at enhancing learning about the political process (Eichorn, 2018).
- 5.17 Evidence from Scotland shows that, when asked after the 2014 independence referendum, 97 per cent of those aged 16-17 who voted said that they would do so again in the future (Petitions Committee, 2018). If this predicted behaviour was shown to be true, it may lend further support to the argument that long term voter turnout could be boosted by a lower minimum voting age. Overall however, the current evidence base appears limited on the longer term habit forming impact of lowering the voting age.

Foreign nationals

- 5.18 At present, in order to vote in a Welsh local election, in terms of nationality one must be either:
- a British citizen living in the UK;
 - a commonwealth citizen living in the UK;

- a citizen of the Republic of Ireland living in the UK;
- or an EU citizen living in the UK (Electoral Commission, 2018).

5.19 The Welsh Government has consulted on enfranchising citizens of all countries who are legally resident in Wales to vote in local council elections (Welsh Government, 2018). This would also overcome any uncertainty with regard to voting rights of EU citizens living in Wales at the point of UK withdrawal.

Consultation findings

5.20 There was extensive support for this proposal in all of its variations in both the Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales consultations. For example, 75 per cent of respondents agreed that EU citizens who move to Wales after the EU exit should acquire the right to vote; 73 per cent agreed that anyone legally resident in Wales ought to be enfranchised regardless of their nationality; and 70 per cent agreed that EU and Commonwealth citizens living in Wales should be eligible to stand for election. One view set out on both sides of the debate was that paying taxes and having the right to vote should be intrinsically linked.

Evidence of foreign nationals voting

5.21 There is some tentative evidence from Switzerland suggesting that enfranchisement of foreign nationals increases civic participation [Giugni, 2007, as cited in (Groenendijk, 2008)],

5.22 There is also evidence which shows that foreign national voters participate at lower levels in local elections than the general population (Groenendijk, 2008). This is not homogenous, however, with certain groups displaying higher proportional turnout than the general population (for example, Turkish people living in Scandinavia (*ibid*)).

5.23 In part, lower turnout rates of foreign nationals may be explained in part by immigrants tending to be younger and having lower educational attainment than the population as a whole, according to (Ruedin, 2018). This may explain some of the variance, however it would appear that there are other factors at play too which are specific to foreign nationals. An example of this is that although older age usually correlates with higher turnout (Electoral Commission, 2017d), for foreign nationals this appears only to hold true if they were born in a democratic country (Wass, et al., 2015).

5.24 Controlling for a range of variables that may otherwise influence foreign nationals' propensity to vote in Switzerland, Ruedin (2018) concluded that a perceived stake in the community increases the probability of voting. For people who planned to return to their country of origin, the researchers suggested that they have may perceive a lower stake in the community, and therefore be less interested in the local politics, and subsequently be less likely to vote. It is not just time spent in the community which influences the perceived stake, for example it was found that those who had frequent contact with Swiss nationals turned out at a higher rate than their counterparts, which the authors took to mean that having 'roots' in society improved participation. Further evidence supporting the 'stake in the community' argument is that foreign nationals with a local spouse or young children displayed higher turnout. These findings appear to be reliable, given that other research displays similar outcomes in a different context (Wass, et al., 2015).

Evidence of foreign national voter registration

5.25 Different countries have taken different approaches to registering foreign nationals to vote, for example in Belgium they must actively register to vote, a process which includes taking an oath to respect the Belgian constitution, the country's laws and that the European Convention on Human Rights (Seidle, 2015). In the Netherlands and Sweden, however, the relevant public authority enters foreign nationals who are eligible to vote on the electoral list automatically (*ibid*). Because of the situation in the Netherlands and Sweden, there is no way to investigate the level voter registration of foreign nationals in those countries, however for Belgium we know that in 2012 levels of registration varied between 16-18 per cent dependent on whether citizens were from the EU or not (*ibid*). One member of Brussels Regional Parliament who was born in Algeria noted that she believed the requirement for foreign nationals to register themselves for voting to be an obstacle to vote, which, despite being a rational argument, has a lack of evidence available in order to verify this belief (*ibid*). This section has considered evidence pertaining to widening the voting franchise to 16 and 17 year olds and foreign nationals. The next section provides concluding remarks on the key insights identified in the literature and makes recommendations for further research.

6. Concluding remarks

6.1 This report has aimed to summarise evidence in relation to democratic renewal in order to inform the development and implementation of local government electoral reform in Wales and shape subsequent primary research. It has explored citizen and voter engagement as a goal of democratic renewal, with evidence pertaining to methods of promoting voting at local elections, overcoming barriers to engagement, and evidence pertinent to extending the franchise to 16 and 17 year olds and foreign nationals.

Key insights

6.2 From the evidence reviewed three key factors recur throughout the literature on democratic renewal:

- Engagement is uneven and tailored methods are required to successfully involve politically disengaged groups;
- Education has the potential to improve understanding of local democracy and impact on levels of engagement;
- Perceptions of influence are a key predictor of the likelihood of democratic engagement.

Uneven engagement

6.3 The first key insight is that engagement is not equal for all groups. This is important because representativeness is incompatible with uneven engagement, especially when there are systematic biases in who engages. Demographic and socioeconomic factors are predictors of civic and democratic engagement, and the method by which government chooses to engage with citizens can further exacerbate disparities.

6.4 To overcome this, governments could consider tailoring methods of engagement with the more disengaged groups. The evidence reviewed in this report suggests that different groups may have different preferences as to how they wish to engage in democratic behaviour. Local government's use of a variety of methods may help to target these hard to reach groups.

Education

- 6.5 The second key insight is that education plays a great role in engagement. It appears to facilitate democratic renewal in many areas, for example civic education may lead to increased voter turnout. This is important because it has been suggested that second-order effects may be a factor in relation to lower turnout at local council (and National Assembly) elections compared to UK General Elections. Greater education regarding the role of local government and greater awareness of what local councillors are doing may also facilitate increased motivation to engage with local democracy.
- 6.6 Furthermore, educating people on political issues has been shown to generate interest and understanding whilst also increasing political awareness and the ability to make informed decisions, thereby strengthening democracy
- 6.7 Local government could also benefit from awareness campaigns that seek to improve a greater understanding of the role of local government and how citizens can seek to address the issues they face.

Perceived influence

- 6.8 Perceptions of citizen influence is seen throughout as the third factor which influences participation with democracy. This can be seen in the civic sphere, whereby projects, such as those involving participatory budgeting, facilitate engagement by creating a sense of ownership. This can further be seen in the electoral sphere where voting systems such as first past the post can lead to disillusionment and a lack of interest in voting due to perceived lack of impact.
- 6.9 Creating a greater sense of influence could be initiated through activities such as participatory budgeting, the use of e-petitions and deliberative polls, thereby leading to greater democratic engagement. The language used in communicating with citizens can also be powerful in conveying the influence that citizens can have when they participate.

Future research

- 6.10 Despite there being a number of areas where the evidence base is strong, there are also areas of literature where gaps or conflicting evidence make recommendations difficult. The most pervasive evidence need relates to replications of findings in the relevant context. For example we know that research with 18-24 year olds is not generalisable to 16-18 year olds, therefore it would be useful to investigate drivers

specific to the age group of interest. Similarly there is a lot of research into national government engagement, however given that we know there are disparities in voter turnout and knowledge of local elections it would be useful to investigate engagement specifically at a local government level. Another area where evidence could be improved would be for more research on proposed electoral or democratic reforms to be conducted with representative samples as opposed to self-selecting samples. Consultation documents are useful in understanding views of interested groups and individuals, however their value is limited in that these views (and statistics which derive from the consultation) are not representative of the wider population, and may miss out harder to reach groups.

- 6.11 Understanding the interplay between the high interest of young people but relatively low electoral turnout would also be helpful. In a broader sense, this could extend to understanding how civic engagement can be successfully harnessed into democratic engagement.

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Annex A: Methodology

Sections one and two of this report are based on a literature search completed in August 2018, limited in scope by neither geography nor publication date. The key search term for this was 'democratic renewal', with other search terms included such as 'civic engagement', 'democratic delivery' and 'democratic engagement'. Literature was assessed based on whether it was accessible to Welsh Government, the relevance of the subject matter and whether the methodology was judged to be robust.

Section three of this report is based on a literature search completed between April and August 2015, temporally limited to research published no earlier than 2004. Given the historic nature of this literature search, it was replicated in August 2018 to ensure more recent evidence is included in this report. The geographical scope of this search was the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand and Norway. Key search terms included:

- Mechanisms/ tool/ instrument/ system/ structure for OR impact of OR characteristics of those involved in;
- AND Democratic engagement OR civic engagement OR civic participation OR democratic renewal OR civic interest OR civic involvement/ active civic involvement OR democratic involvement OR civic empowerment OR civic activism OR Local Government participatory democracy.

Following this, literature was assessed and either included or rejected on the basis of:

- The relevance to the subject matter;
- Clear and robust methodology;
- Clear aims which acted as guiding principles for the paper.

Sections four and five of this report are based on a sequence of brief literature searches carried out in August and September 2018, with key words and papers acquired through snowballing methods.