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Review of the Access to Elected Office Fund Wales Pilot

Executive Summary

1. Background

- 1.1 The aim of this research was to review the Welsh Government's Access to Elected Office Fund Wales pilot scheme ('the fund' / 'the pilot') to provide evidence to influence future arrangements of this area.
- 1.2 In 2021-2 the Welsh Government commissioned the Access to Elected Office Fund Wales pilot scheme with the aim of enabling disabled people to stand for elected office. The pilot was implemented in Wales to fund reasonable adjustments and support for disabled candidates seeking election to the 2021 Senedd Cymru Election (Phase 1) and standing for the 22 Principal and 735 Community Councils in the 2022 Local Government elections (Phase 2). This was the first time such provision was available to candidates standing at community level council in the United Kingdom.

2. Methodology

- 2.1 The review was conducted by Opinion Research Services (ORS), between November 2022 and March 2023. The research was entirely qualitative in nature, aiming to get in-depth feedback from stakeholders, panel members and candidates to provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the pilot.
- 2.2 Between November-December 2022, ORS completed a light-touch review of key documentation to understand the context for the pilot in Wales and inform the development of the project design and the questions to be included in the data collection stages of the review.
- 2.3 Exploratory scoping interviews were also conducted virtually, with the strategic personnel from Welsh Government and Disability Wales involved in the development and delivery of the pilot.
- 2.4 A series of in-depth stakeholder interviews were undertaken with 13 participants between January and February 2023. Six panel members who reviewed and assessed applications from candidates

took part in these in-depth interviews. Other stakeholders included representatives from the Welsh Local Government Association, the Electoral Commission, Inclusion Scotland, and Policy Advisors. In addition, six in-depth interviews were held with candidates that applied for the fund.

- 2.5 All participants received a range of support from the fund to better enable them to participate, including but not limited to funding to cover travel costs, personal assistants or support workers, and mobility equipment.

3. Key findings

Panel Members were generally supportive of the operational process, but identified some areas where improvements could be made.

- 3.1 Panel members felt positively about the application process that they had to complete to apply for the role, praising it for its accessibility and the fact that applicants could phone Disability Wales to request help or talk through any issues that they might have with the form.
- 3.2 Some panel members said that they had seen the opportunity advertised by Disability Wales; however, most learned about it through word-of-mouth from members of Disability Wales.
- 3.3 The panel's diversity of experience of disabling barriers was felt to be a major benefit to the fund, allowing for decisions on a range of applications to be well informed.
- 3.4 Panel members agreed that the role of reviewing applications was largely as expected, and mostly involved reading and reviewing submissions for funding from candidates and deciding whether applicants were eligible for support and what that support should be.
- 3.5 Some panel members felt that the process could be improved in future by ensuring that the members have more collective experience of the fund or similar schemes.
- 3.6 Stakeholders and candidates advocated for a permanent version of the scheme whereby candidates could have certain support made available earlier, so that they could be trained to use software and technology (such as dictation apps) that had been granted to them in advance of the campaign period.
- 3.7 It was also suggested that a permanent version of the fund could be used to educate potential candidates with disabilities of the processes of standing for elected office and what support they could reasonably expect.

Candidates were overwhelmingly positive about the application process and the support they received but struggled with timescales.

- 3.8 Candidates felt overwhelmingly that it was easy to access information on the fund once they were made aware of it. Information online was said to be easy to find, and many said that they were able to call Disability Wales to request further information over the phone.

- 3.9 Candidates were able to access help with their applications from Disability Wales, either by asking for advice and guidance over the phone or through completing the form with a member of Disability Wales over videoconference. This was felt to be crucial to many candidates' applications.
- 3.10 Most candidates received all or most of the support that they applied for and felt that the support was the difference between whether or not they could run for office. However, numerous candidates felt that they did not receive the full support that they applied for due to the lack of time between their application and the start of the campaign period.
- 3.11 In addition, some felt that it was not entirely clear what could be deemed a reasonable adjustment. As a result, some candidates were unsure as to what they could apply for.
- 3.12 Stakeholders and candidates generally felt that it would not be possible to fully level the playing field between disabled candidates and non-disabled candidates. However, most agreed that the pilot had levelled the playing field to a reasonable extent.

Stakeholders and candidates tended to feel that separate efforts to the fund would be required to support people with other protected characteristics in standing for elected office.

- 3.13 Stakeholders and candidates generally felt that the nature of the fund was not strictly applicable to other protected characteristics since the barriers that they face are largely different to disabled people.
- 3.14 Participants therefore expressed their desire that the fund remains a disability-focussed initiative, whilst other avenues could be pursued to help candidates with other protected characteristics to overcome their respective barriers.

Key recommendations and future priorities:

- 3.15 Based on the findings of the research, it was felt that WG and its partners should reflect on the following recommendations and future priorities:
- Provision for disabled candidates seeking election in Wales should be made available in future;
 - Within the limitations of the legislation, efforts should be made to provide preliminary enabling equipment or training before the funds are drawn down;
 - The fund should not be standalone. It should form part of a wider, more holistic, package of provision and guidance with a clear brand attached to it;
 - The wider package should be extended to individuals with other protected characteristics / other challenges.

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Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/review-access-elected-office-fund-wales-pilot>

Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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