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Review of the Access to Elected Office Fund Wales Pilot

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Review of the Access to Elected Office Fund Wales Pilot

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1. Introduction

Aims and objectives

- 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 in this area.
- 1.2 To achieve this aim, the following key research objectives were set:
- Consult with key stakeholders responsible for developing the Access to Elected Office Fund pilot scheme to understand the key aims of the pilot and establish the focus for the review;
 - Draw on existing work and literature on (and relevant to) access to elected office funds in order to understand the context for the pilot in Wales and, where appropriate, examples from further afield (UK and internationally) that can help further develop current thinking in this area;
 - Consult with key stakeholders involved in the design and delivery of the pilot scheme including staff from Disability Wales with responsibility for administering and delivering the pilot scheme, representatives from groups and organisations working across the public and third sectors, and panel members who took decisions on candidates' applications; and
 - Consult with candidates who engaged in the pilot scheme to understand their experiences, both before and after the election period.

Access to Elected Office Fund

- 1.3 Disabled people make up around a fifth of the UK population, as of 2019 (DWP, 2019) but are under-represented in politics at all levels of government. However, there are few governments to date which have taken steps to reduce the barriers and improve access to elected office for disabled people.
- 1.4 Disabled people in the UK who aspire to stand for election, have stood as candidates, or have been successful in being elected as candidates face a

range of barriers during the various stages of the recruitment and representation processes. These can be financial, cultural, political, social and/or physical in nature.

- 1.5 These obstacles can be categorised into three groups: accessibility; resources; and ableism¹ (Evans and Reher, 2020; University and College Union, 2023).
- 1.6 The definitions are influenced by [The Social Model of Disability](#), which has been established by disabled people, based on their experiences. The social model explains that the problems faced by disabled people are largely a result of the way that society is organised, including people's attitudes to disability, and physical and organisational barriers to disabled people.
- 1.7 Disabled candidates experience barriers of inaccessibility of the built environment and written material. In terms of resources and finances, parties can sometimes be reluctant to support personal costs (Murray, 2021) which leaves candidates reliant on their own personal funds (Mariani and Buckley, 2021), causing a disproportionate negative impact on disabled people who often incur more costs than others. This can then mean they lack support such as sign language interpreters, specialised equipment, and other assistive aids.
- 1.8 It is also recognised that stigmatisation and negative public perceptions of disabled people's capacities exist within parties and governments as well as from within constituencies and this ableism can also play a part in preventing disabled candidates' full participation in standing for election.
- 1.9 Research undertaken by Welsh Government in 2022 (Smith and Davies, 2022) on removing barriers to elected office for people with protected characteristics emphasises that local government should be representative of the communities it serves. People with protected characteristics want to be confident in the ability of their local representative to advocate for them and their interests and in order to improve this representation and equality,

¹ Ableism referring to failures to make workplace adjustments for disabled people, failure to employ or promote disabled people, and failure to make buildings, activities, and process accessible for everyone.

there needs to be increased levels of participation with a more diverse and informed candidate pool. Alongside effective ethical and accountability frameworks, this should in turn lead to fewer reports of discrimination and facilitate an accessible environment and process to elected office (Smith and Davies, 2022).

- 1.10 Following the 'On Balance' Report (Welsh Government, 2014) which recommended the Welsh Government deliver a similar scheme to one operated by the UK Government, Welsh Ministers made a commitment to establish the Access to Elected Office Fund Wales pilot scheme.
- 1.11 Work was initially undertaken as part of a 'Diversity in Democracy' Project in order to operate a similar scheme for the 2017 local government elections in Wales, but a number of issues meant that this was not possible at that time. The issues were subsequently resolved such that the Access to Elected Office Fund pilot scheme was established.
- 1.12 In 2021-2 the Welsh Government commissioned a pilot of the Fund which aimed to enable disabled people to stand for elected office by providing funding to meet the additional costs of impairment-related barriers that are not faced by non-disabled candidates. The pilot was administered by Disability Wales on behalf of Welsh Government as an impartial third-party organisation.
- 1.13 The pilot was implemented in Wales to fund reasonable adjustments and enable disabled candidates seeking election to the 2021 Senedd Cymru Election (Phase 1) and in the 2022 Local Government elections (Phase 2).
- 1.14 In the second phase of the pilot the fund was made available to disabled candidates standing for the 22 Principal and 735 Community Councils. This was the first time such provision was available to candidates standing at community level council in the United Kingdom.
- 1.15 Funding was made available to enable disabled candidates to access equipment (such as mobility equipment or equipment for communication) and training and to cover the costs of travel, and personal assistants.

- 1.16 In the first Phase there were three enquiries and two applications to the Senedd Cymru Elections in 2021 and an award from the fund was made to both applicants. Neither candidate was successful in gaining office.
- 1.17 During the second phase the pilot received 18 applications, of which 17 were approved. Of the successful applicants, 13 received provisions through the scheme, one person was unable to engage with the provision, another was elected uncontested and two people decided not to take up the award.
- 1.18 Of the applicants, 13 were candidates for Principal Councils and 8 stood for elections to Community Councils. In the Principal Council elections, no applicants won seats, however 6 were elected to Community Council seats.
- 1.19 Whilst this pilot concentrated on disabled candidates, there is a specific commitment in the Programme for Government to extend and improve access to the Elected Office Fund among people with all protected characteristics². This research also took this into account and considered different ways that the pilot could be adapted so that people with other protected characteristics can be supported in a similar manner.

The report

- 1.20 This report sets out the methodology used in the review. It then outlines its key findings, in line with the main objectives.

² Protected characteristics are those defined by the Equality Act (2010) as follows: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation.

2. Methodology

2.1 The review was conducted by Opinion Research Services (ORS), between November 2022 and March 2023.

2.2 This research was entirely qualitative in nature as it was felt that getting in-depth feedback from stakeholders, panel members and candidates was the best approach to provide insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the pilot, allowing for deeper understanding.

Initial data review and scoping: November – December 2022

2.3 This involved 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.

2.4 Most of the data reviewed was publicly available, and some was provided by Welsh Government.³

2.5 Along-side reviewing the documentation, exploratory scoping interviews were conducted virtually, with strategic personnel from Welsh Government and Disability Wales involved in the development and delivery of the pilot.

2.6 A purposive sample of interview participants who were felt to be ideally placed to inform the development of the Access to Elected Office Fund Pilot was identified by Welsh Government at this stage. Combined with the documentation review, the interviews gathered information for us to understand the context and inform the topic guides for the subsequent in-depth stakeholder and candidate interviews.

Stakeholder and candidate interviews: January – February 2023

2.7 11 in-depth stakeholder interviews were undertaken with 13 participants at the start of 2023. We also spoke to six members of the panel who reviewed

³ The research used evidence gathered as part of a Theory of Change on [Removing barriers to elected office for people with protected characteristics](#) which was published by Welsh Government in October 2022, a feedback report from Disability Wales, along with multiple other publicly available studies and reports concerned with barriers to access to elected office, not only with regard to disabled people but also other protected characteristics. The nature and extent of similar schemes and initiatives from other governments were also considered.

and assessed applications from candidates. Other stakeholders included representatives from the Welsh Local Government Association, the Electoral Commission⁴, Inclusion Scotland, and Policy Advisors.

2.8 Six candidates that applied for the fund took part in in-depth interviews; they were all successful in receiving provisions through the pilot scheme but were not elected to local government.

2.9 All participants received a range of provision from the fund, including but not limited to funding to cover the costs of travel, personal assistants or support workers, and mobility equipment or communication software such as dictation apps.

2.10 All interviews were recorded with the explicit consent of participants.

Analysis and reporting

2.11 Following the interviews, full transcripts were made using the recordings. ORS researchers also produced detailed notes which were used to create a qualitative analysis framework and extract the key findings from the data. Excel was used to organise the data into overarching and sub-themes (a manual approach was taken to ensure the data's full nuance and richness was captured), and once the final analysis was complete, an internal meeting was held to enable the whole review team to share and discuss the emerging findings from the analysis, including common themes and specific views.

2.12 The key findings from the interviews are summarised in the remainder of this report.

Data caution note

2.13 The interviews with stakeholders and candidates were intended to gather the experiences of as broad a range of people as possible within a relatively small sample size. As such, the qualitative feedback reported here, while comprehensive, should not be seen as statistically representative of the views of all stakeholders and candidates.

⁴ The Electoral Commission is the independent body which oversees elections and regulates political finance in the UK.

2.14 The views expressed by participants in the interviews may or may not be supported by available evidence; that is, they may or may not be fully accurate accounts of the facts. ORS cannot arbitrate on the correctness or otherwise of people's views in reporting them, and this should be borne in mind when considering the findings. We have, where possible, sought to triangulate the qualitative data with quantitative data and other published data/sources, but where this data does not exist or is inaccessible, the cautionary note above should be borne in mind.

3. Main Findings

Overall views on Access to Elected Office Fund Pilot

- 3.1 This research explores the strengths and weaknesses of the Access to Elected Office Pilot Fund as identified by key stakeholders, members of the panel tasked with assessing applicants to the fund, and disabled candidates who stood for election in either the 2021 Senedd elections or the 2022 local government elections and applied for the fund.
- 3.2 The fund was overall considered to be valuable in providing disabled candidates the reasonable adjustments they needed to compete on a more even playing field against other candidates running for election in the same constituency. However, it was recognised that there are wider factors influencing the levelling of the playing field, but the fund represented a stepping-stone towards more equal access for disabled people when campaigning.
- 3.3 Candidates and stakeholders also advocated for wider enabling provisions for disabled candidates in the form of a year-round version of the scheme that could educate potential candidates about the election process and the reasonable adjustments that they could expect to receive.
- 3.4 It is therefore our recommendation that a further scheme of this nature should be offered in future but rather than a standalone offer, it should form part of a package for disabled people with an interest in standing for office. Any future enabling provision should be offered in collaboration with partner organisations and should encourage political parties to play a bigger part in ensuring equal access.
- 3.5 Any future provision should have a clear communications strategy linked to it to encourage participation among disabled people with no previous background or experience in politics.
- 3.6 The following sections set out fund applicant and stakeholder views on various aspects of the pilot's delivery, and any future provision.

Panel members' views on the pilot's operational elements

Panel members generally learned about the opportunity through word-of-mouth and appreciated the accessibility of their application process.

- 3.7 Panel members mentioned that they had completed an application form to obtain the role. The form was praised for having been accessible to disabled people, since they were able to phone Disability Wales to request help and/or talk through anything that they felt they might not be able to complete physically.

'I was really lucky because Disability Wales said you don't have to fill in an application, you can ring them and they'd do it for you... Otherwise I don't think I would've been able to do it... Being able to call and say things to them... that made it possible for me to apply [to the panel]. That was job well done Disability Wales because they did make it very accessible.' – Panel Member

'I'd say they did well on their application form front because they themselves can be a massive barrier to disabled people. There were options in terms of methods of responding so you could ring them up or whatever, or submit a video or something, I think. There were a range of ways' – Panel Member

- 3.8 Some Panel Members said that they had seen the opportunity advertised by Disability Wales, although most remembered being told about the opportunity through word-of-mouth by members of Disability Wales.

- 3.9 Panel Members were supportive of the fact that the opportunity was aimed at people with lived experiences of disabilities and some form of existing relevant experience. However, it was suggested that the role could be publicly appointed in future.

'Disability Wales put out a notice saying they were looking for people who had lived experience of disability and some experience of political life or public engagement...' – Panel Member

'I was tapped on the shoulder by a member of Disability Wales. They asked if because I've got experience in the sector what I be interested. I

thought it was an interesting scheme to be in... and I was keen to help. In future it should be a publicly appointed role.’ – Panel Member

The role of panel members was largely positive and as expected.

3.10 Panel members said that their roles mostly comprised of reading and reviewing submissions for funding from candidates and deciding what would be an appropriate amount of funding and what equipment or other help should be provided to individuals.

3.11 This involvement was largely as panel members had expected, however, some said that there was a lack of significant experience with such funds within the panel. Therefore, it was felt that the panel could be improved in future by ensuring that the members have more collective experience of the pilot or similar schemes.

3.12 Overall, stakeholders spoke positively about the operational elements of the fund and agreed that it had been effective in maximising the voices of disabled people who wished to run for elected office.

‘It was a really good pilot in the sense that it was there for the people to use a scheme to maximise their voice and it really did maximise some people’s voices who got elected roles out of it.’ – Panel Member

3.13 Numerous members of the panel commented on the diversity of disabilities and lived experiences of panel members. It was felt that this diversity was key in ensuring that panel members could make well-informed decisions on applications from candidates with a wide range of disabilities.

‘The panel had quite a wide range of lived experience of different disabilities on it which I think was its strength. We challenged each other from time to time on the decisions we were making and perhaps the underlying judgements we were making. It was good, I thought it was a good, active, functioning, challenging panel.’ – Panel Member

Assisting candidates to complete their application forms was crucial to its success and made the process more efficient.

- 3.14 Stakeholders also commended Disability Wales for assisting candidates in completing their application forms. It was said that this made the process easier and clearer for candidates whilst improving /the quality of applications.
- 3.15 As a result, the panel rarely had to request additional information from candidates, making the process more efficient.

‘Disability Wales... helped people to fill in the forms and stuff. I think that was really important... people were able to supply us with enough information on most occasions and we rarely had to go back and ask for more detail.’ – Panel Member

The short timeframe of the pilot was the biggest barrier to its delivery.

- 3.16 Stakeholders felt that the timeframe was too short, since applications were only permitted six-weeks prior to the official canvassing period. This was said to have made it difficult to process all of the applications fully before the canvassing period began.

‘You get a big influx of applications all in one chunk really, and that’s difficult... to make those decisions in a timely manner... it was a little bit haphazard and could’ve done with being slightly more formalised...’ – Panel Member

- 3.17 It is important to note, however, that the six-week campaign period is linked to the legislative timeframe of the election period rather than a timeframe applied by WG or Disability Wales. As a result, the fund would not be able to provide support earlier or for longer than this period.
- 3.18 In response to this, panel members advocated for applications and enabling provisions to be available earlier. For example, if communication software and technology such as dictation apps could be granted to an applicant prior to the six-week campaign period, and training also provided in advance of the campaign period, it would allow for the following benefits:

- Allowing the panel more time to have additional / more formal meetings to consider applications;

- Allowing successful candidates more time to familiarise themselves with technology, equipment and software that they receive; and
- Allowing candidates more time to learn about the election process so that they can have more confidence in their decisions.

‘... it’s something that could keep running all year, so that disabled people are part of a network of skills development that actually prepares them for standing. Then once this fund is open, you’ve already got a network of people that have shown interest that you can then circulate it around. You’re not throwing it out in the dark.’ – Panel Member

‘Pulling that group of people together... It was a little bit haphazard and could’ve done with being slightly more formalised but it did work in so much as we had to do it.’ – Panel Member

The social model of disability should be considered when establishing inclusion and exclusion criteria.

3.19 It was also suggested that further inclusion and exclusion criteria for the fund should be developed to make it clearer to panel members and candidates what type of provisions can be allocated in future iterations of the fund. It was emphasised that the social model of disability should be considered in the design and application of these criteria.

3.20 It was also suggested that further inclusion and exclusion criteria for the fund should be developed to make it clearer to panel members and candidates what can be allocated in future iterations of the fund.

‘How much help we could give, how much extra stuff we could give, whether that would be prejudicing somebody who didn’t need that help and wasn’t disabled because the other person was getting what could be seen as an unfair advantage. We had some talk about the social model of disability vs the medical model. It’s always there in the background.’ – Panel Member

Motivation and expected barriers to participation

Motivation to stand for office

- 3.21 When asked what had prompted them to stand for public office, candidates' answers were generally routed in a desire to improve the representation of disabled people in local or national government.

'The lack of disabled representation, that's what it was... to show disabled people that just because you're disabled doesn't mean you can't do it.

You can.' – Candidate

- 3.22 In addition, all of the candidates interviewed had an existing interest or experience in local and national politics, ranging from campaigning for disabled people to involvement in local government and/or parties.

Expected barriers to standing for office

- 3.23 There were numerous barriers that candidates expected to face when standing for office, however the most common barriers were physical.

- 3.24 Candidates expected their biggest barrier to be their inability to canvas by themselves, due to the infrastructure of areas and people's houses preventing them from reaching front doors. These physical barriers to canvassing could be summarised as:

- Reliance on public transport due to an inability to drive;
- Inability to climb steps to people's houses;
- Inability to walk between houses for an extended period of time; and
- Inability to stand for prolonged periods to talk to people.

- 3.25 Candidates felt that these physical barriers to canvassing would give them a significant disadvantage compared to nondisabled people, and therefore disadvantage them in their campaigns to stand for office.

'I'd say 80 per cent of the houses you go to have got steps and awkward access to them. Without the funding to help, you'd never be on the same path [as a candidate without a disability], no matter how much money they throw at you.' – Candidate

- 3.26 Some candidates said that without the fund, those who faced physical barriers to canvassing could expect to incur financial barriers as they would have had to pay for assistance with their canvassing.

‘I would’ve had to have paid for someone to come in and help me... I wouldn’t be able to do it, it would be pointless.’ - Candidate

- 3.27 Finally, some candidates said that they expected to face a social barrier to standing for office, whereby a lack of public awareness or understanding of the nature of their disability could disadvantage them.

‘Most people are not aware of hidden disabilities, so it’s difficult sometimes when you’ve got to explain to someone ‘well, I might not be able to do that that day’, or just because there’s enough time it doesn’t mean I’ll have enough energy to go on and do a second thing. But there could be more awareness in the culture generally with disabilities...’ – Candidate

The application process

Candidates generally heard about the pilot through word of mouth.

- 3.28 All of the candidates that were interviewed said that they heard about the pilot through word of mouth. Most often this was due to the candidate’s involvement in campaigning, which led them to be informed about the pilot by a member of Disability Wales, a local/county councillor, or through a representative of their political party.

‘I guess by becoming a disability campaigner I got into awareness of this scheme. I guess it grew through word of mouth, through networks. If I hadn’t entered a network I don’t know if I would’ve found out about it, which is interesting’ – Candidate

‘I found out about it from my local... party disability officer. She gave me the right email address and I got in touch with them... and they quickly called me back and sent me the form.’ – Candidate

Information on the pilot was easy to find for candidates who were aware of it.

- 3.29 Candidates were overwhelmingly of the opinion that it was easy to access information on the fund once they were aware of it. Candidates had found it easy to find information about the fund online and were able to call Disability Wales to request further information over the phone.

‘It was easy. It was a doddle. Fair play, Disability Wales who ran it... was always available on the phone if I had any problems or questions. It was very easy.’ – Candidate

The support and advice available made the application process straightforward and more accessible

- 3.30 Candidates mostly applied for funding to cover the costs of personal assistants and physical technology and equipment to enable them to overcome barriers related to canvassing, and were overwhelmingly positive about the application process.

- 3.31 Being able to speak to Disability Wales staff to ask for help completing the application form and advice / guidance on what to apply for was greatly appreciated by candidates. For many applicants, this support – particularly the option to speak to a Disability Wales staff member over videoconference – meant that the application process was made much simpler and more accessible than it might have otherwise been.

‘I was given a lot of help in putting the application together which was really appreciated... I'd never done this before... I got a lot of help from Disability Wales in putting applications together and in, which was great. They were excellent.’ - Candidate

- 3.32 Disability Wales also advised candidates on what they would or would not be likely to require for their electoral campaign and what they could reasonably expect. Candidates felt that this made it easier to know what support to apply for.

‘... [I had a] videoconference with them where they said... they could look into the chances of a personal assistant. So, then we had a further

videoconference where I was then advised to send a different application in with the personal assistant support.’ – Candidate

What counts as reasonable adjustments was not made clear to all candidates.

- 3.33 Although the majority of candidates received support with their application, which included recommendations on what they could or could not expect to receive, this was not always the case. A few candidates felt that it was not clear what they could apply for because they did not know what would be deemed a reasonable adjustment. This led to some confusion about what would be considered a campaign cost and what would be a reasonable adjustment for their disability.

‘It wasn’t entirely clear actually from the information what counted as normal campaign costs and what counted as reasonable adjustments. At first, I thought: ‘Maybe I can use some of this money to send material out because it’s difficult for me to physically get to these areas’... But then Disability Wales said: ‘No, that counts as a campaign cost so you won’t be able to do that.’” – Candidate

- 3.34 This finding supports the view that panel members gave, that if the funding is made available again, the provider must ensure that they provide clear documentation and guidance on what costs are allowable and what costs are not allowable.

Support from the pilot for successful candidates & overall effectiveness

Candidates received most of the support that they applied for, but timescales were often an issue.

3.35 All of the candidates that took part in interviews said that they received either all or most of the enabling provisions that they applied for.

3.36 When asked why certain elements of what they had applied for were not granted, some candidates said that it was due to their application being too close to the election period since they had learned about the pilot later than they would have liked. As a result, they received their mobility equipment, communication software (e.g. dictation app) or personal assistants after the canvassing period had begun, leading some of the to feel that the overall impact that the support might have on their campaign was reduced.

‘I was told [about the fund] too late... I was offered... a personal assistant for the last 3 days of the campaign who would be with me for 2 hours every day.’

3.37 In some cases, candidates said that they did not receive certain aspects of the fund that they had asked for as it was not deemed to be a suitable adjustment for their disability. In these cases, candidates said that they were offered alternative adjustments instead, which was greatly appreciated.

3.38 In all of the cases where candidates did not receive all of the support that they applied for it was clearly explained to them why this was the case so that they understood.

The support candidates received was often the difference between whether or not they felt able to run for office.

3.39 As mentioned, candidates felt that they had been able to access all or the majority of the support that they applied for. Candidates therefore said that they felt they had received the majority of the help they felt they needed to run for office.

3.40 As a result, all of the candidates that were interviewed were grateful of the support they had received, with some saying that they would not have been able to run for office without it.

‘The most beneficial was my personal assistant... [and] some of the little gadgets I had were really helpful... the physical support I had was helpful. I couldn’t have done it without that.’ - Candidate

‘Well, it was essential. It meant I could physically get to the ward, and then I could run the campaign from there.’ - Candidate

3.41 Likewise, numerous stakeholders felt positive about the support that successful candidates received, crediting it as being the difference between whether or not candidates would be able to run for office

‘From the feedback we had and from the evaluation we did internally, candidates seemed to be pleased with the support they’d had [and] the process for getting that support. They felt it had made a difference to their campaign... to campaign on a similar footing to other candidates. I think it definitely was helpful to people.’ – Panel Member

‘I’d say with most of them who applied it was lifechanging. I think the majority of them simply wouldn’t have been able to run without that support.’ – Stakeholder

Stakeholders and candidates agreed that timescales were the most significant barrier to candidates accessing the support that they needed.

3.42 The main reasons noted by both stakeholders and candidates for the difficulties they had experienced with timescales were as follows:

- Candidates had to spend part of their campaign time familiarising themselves with new equipment that they had been given;
- Candidates representing political parties could not apply for funding until after their candidacy was confirmed; and
- Some candidates received their equipment / assistance after the canvassing period had already begun.

3.43 As a result, some suggested that potential candidates should be able to apply for provisions, in principle, at an earlier stage.

3.44 It was felt that this factoring in more time to the process would allow candidates more time to familiarise themselves with the equipment they

would receive and potentially make them more likely to win candidacy from their parties.

‘The scheme should allow you to apply before you are a candidate so that when your party affirms you are a candidate, you’re ready to go.’ –

Candidate

‘I didn’t know that I would be selected, so I couldn’t apply. If I was able to apply before knowing I was selected, then that would have helped speed the thing up. So, the scheme needs to acknowledge that political parties don’t necessarily operate as quick as they should.’ – Candidate

- 3.45 However, it was also questioned whether this would disadvantage independent candidates if they were not equally aware of their options as early as possible.

‘If they don’t know it’s there, I don’t know how you’d help them know it’s there. Probably party structures: political party structures are probably the best way. [However], that could then disadvantage independent candidates.’ - Candidate

- 3.46 Stakeholders also felt that more time would need to be given to learn about the equipment provided and to build partnerships with organisations that can provide personal assistants.

‘There needs to be more time in the run up to it, there needs to be more research done on where we can find personal assistants, where we can find the equipment people are asking for so that there are no delays actually accessing those.’ – Panel Member

- 3.47 Meanwhile, there were other candidates that received their equipment and/or personal assistants after the canvassing period had begun. This led some to question whether it could have negatively impacted their election result.

‘I do want to emphasise the timing of things. I didn’t get the support in time. The campaign had started when some of my physical things I applied for had arrived. I applied for a tablet to help me make notes on the doorstep and that didn’t arrive until week two of the campaign.’ -

Candidate

Candidates and stakeholders were cautious of the prospect of a ‘first-come first-served’ awarding system.

- 3.48 Both stakeholders and candidates pointed out that the nature of many disabilities could cause a candidate to take longer to complete their applications than other candidates. As a result, it was generally felt that to have a ‘first come first-served’ awarding system would not be ideal as it would disadvantage individuals based on their disabilities.

‘First come first served probably would’ve meant that I wouldn’t have got it, because I was so late in applying.’ Candidate

Stakeholders and candidates agreed that the fund levelled the playing field to some extent.

- 3.49 Stakeholders and candidates did not say that they felt the pilot had completely levelled the playing field as many felt that this would not be possible / reasonably possible. However, the majority of people interviewed tended to agree that the pilot had levelled the playing field to a reasonable extent.

‘I think it made disabled people realise there’s a chance, and that those opportunities are there because historically the percentage of disabled people standing for any type of election has been extremely low.’ – Panel Member

- 3.50 In addition, candidates that had made the applications late said that they might have felt that the pilot had levelled the playing field to a greater extent if they had been made aware of it earlier and therefore had more time to apply.

‘It could have been that I could have got my leaflets and campaign material out sooner to people so I could have focussed on other parts of actually speaking to people. It would have been less hectic I suppose with trying to get everything done in the short space we had left.’ – Candidate

Extending the fund to candidates with other protected characteristics and enabling those who are elected

Stakeholders and candidates felt that the barriers faced by people with disabilities are different to the barriers that people with other characteristics face.

- 3.51 Some candidates and many stakeholders were cautious of the notion of introducing other protected characteristics to the Access to Elected Office Fund if it was to remain in a similar format to that of the pilot. However, there was widespread support for levelling the playing field in politics using other initiatives.
- 3.52 Whilst participants acknowledge that people with other protected characteristics could likely face barriers to election, it was widely felt that the solutions to their barriers would be different to the barriers faced by disabled people.
- 3.53 Interestingly, these views were also given by participants identifying with other protected characteristics alongside their disabilities.

‘My [other protected characteristic] doesn’t stop me doing anything in terms of political life... I believe that disability by its definition... defines a physical and real barrier, as well as a psychological barrier to doing the job. The other characteristics, I don’t feel, suffer the same problems in engaging.’ – Candidate

- 3.54 Participants generally expressed their desire that the Access to Elected Office Fund remains a disability-focussed initiative, whilst other avenues could be pursued to better enable candidates with other protected characteristics overcome their respective barriers.

Stakeholders felt that more consideration could be given to candidate’s financial circumstances, pregnancy, and caring responsibilities.

- 3.55 Although stakeholders and candidates were cautious of introducing other protected characteristics to the fund specifically, they still considered how candidates with other barriers and challenges could be better enabled.
- 3.56 Candidates’ financial circumstances were considered to be significant by stakeholders, with panel members pointing out that whilst candidates’

disabilities often made it difficult for them to find work, the impact that this had on their income was not considered in the pilot. Therefore, it was felt that the negative impact that a lack of accessibility in places of employment has on disabled people – and therefore financial circumstances – should be considered in future.

‘... Some people would put in their applications that because they were disabled, they hadn’t been able to get a job, and had been living on universal credit so they didn’t have the clothing to be able to go out and canvas. We ruled that wasn’t a disability related item, but at the same time we all felt absolutely lousy because... that was a barrier.’ – Panel Member

‘I think having people who can advise [candidates] on poverty issues as well [would be useful] because all the minorities would tend to be disproportionately experiencing bias in the workplace, difficulties with employment and things like that.’ – Panel Member

- 3.57 There were also stakeholders and candidates who felt that financial support based on candidates’ employment status and financial circumstances could potentially be extended to candidates without disabilities.

‘Having it more joined up, more social models so it’s not just ‘we can only buy you something that’s related to your disability’. Expanding it further would’ve been really good.’ – Panel Member

‘If everyone had access to the money they were supposed to and didn’t have to spend their own money, you’d want unemployed people standing for election, people on benefits standing for election, and that is diversity. It means therefore funds like yours would only be needed for those who really need help.’ - Candidate

- 3.58 Pregnancy and caring responsibilities were other characteristics that stakeholders felt could be considered by future iterations of the fund, since these are barriers that could potentially be overcome with financial aid.

‘I think it would be a natural and straightforward next step to expand this to include caring responsibilities... for childcare and for people who support elderly relatives. Things like that.’ – Panel Member

Working with third-sector organisations could help support issues of intersectionality.

3.59 Participants struggled to give suggestions on how the fund could better enable candidates with more than one characteristic. However, it was suggested that future provision for those standing for election could link-in several organisations to better enable disabled people who also have other protected characteristics. The '[Equal Power Equal Voice](#)' partnership⁵ was mentioned as an example of good practice.

'I think combining with other organisations [would be beneficial]. I know with Equal Power Equal Voice you've got the women, LGBTQI+, BAME and disability. I think [the fund should be] getting people from all those organisations on board to be able to reach their base.' – Panel Member

Provision could be extended to better support elected candidates.

3.60 Stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that whilst the pilot was largely successful in providing disabled candidates the reasonable adjustments that they need to be able to stand for office, more needs to be done to enable candidates in their role after being elected.

3.61 Therefore, around half of all the stakeholders interviewed said that some kind of scheme would need to be extended to provide elected disabled candidates the same reasonable adjustments that are provided to disabled people in employment

'Access to Office helps with work related reasonable adjustments... but if you're appointed or elected, I don't honestly know. I doubt they would cover that because I don't think you're technically employed.' – Panel Member

Government buildings would need to have more accessibility built into them for elected officials at all levels.

3.62 As a wider point, several stakeholders expressed their dissatisfaction with local and national government buildings' accessibility for elected officials at

⁵ The 'Equal Power Equal Voice: Public Life Mentoring Programme' is a cross equalities partnership mentoring programme that aims to increase diversity of representation in public and political life in Wales.

every level. Accessibility was said to vary in local government buildings across Wales, whilst the Senedd was said to have poor accessibility to and from Ministerial seats that causes a great deal of attention to wheelchair users. It was emphasised that this was deeply discouraging for disabled people considering candidacy and that these matters would need to be addressed to better enable disabled people who are elected officials.

“If you want to go and sit in the ministerial seats and you’re a wheelchair user, they have this bizarre system where the floor goes up and... starts making beeping noises... And flashing lights! I’ve never seen anything like it... It’s absolutely ridiculous... That is built in discrimination within the fabric of the building’.” – Stakeholder

- 3.63 It was also suggested that community Council venues in general have few accessibility measures in place and any that do exist are particularly poor. Therefore, it was felt that many disabled people who have their first experience of elected office at this level might be discouraged from pursuing further involvement in politics in the future.

“I think where there’s a real need [for improvement] is with community councils, because they don’t necessarily have the same level of support and resource that principal councils do... I think that is an area where more training is needed, more access to support... I think if people have a bad experience there, then that is likely to put them off then going any further’.” - Stakeholder

Candidates stressed that future iterations of the pilot should continue in partnership with third sector organisations, whilst stakeholders advocated for political parties to be encouraged to play a bigger role.

- 3.64 When asked what should be done to help ensure that candidates receive the enabling provision that they need in any future iterations of the fund, candidates stressed the importance of third sector organisations. Disability Wales’s role in the execution of the pilot was felt to have been key, with candidates advocating for future versions of the pilot to continue building partnerships with such organisations across Wales.

‘Getting people to know about it of course is the first step... Every local authority area seems to have an access group. Disability Wales should know about that. Disability Wales is obviously the way to go...’ – Candidate

3.65 Stakeholders, on the other hand, stressed the importance of involving political parties in any future support offers so that members running for candidacy are not disadvantaged.

‘Political parties should be able to support them to some extent also. It’s not true inclusion if we just expect the government to do it. We all need to have the conversation.’ – Panel Member

Stakeholders advocated for a permanent version of the pilot that would year-round advice to potential candidates on what they could apply for.

3.66 Stakeholders agreed that whilst the pilot put measures in place to mitigate physical barriers faced by disabled people, more measures could be put in place to educate first-time candidates on the process of running for office.

‘If we put more of the wrap around services in place, so not just money but coaching and advice on looking at different avenues, then you’d truly level the playing field.’ – Panel Member

3.67 It was felt by numerous stakeholders that a version of the fund should be constructed whereby advisors could be permanently available to advise candidates not only on the election process but on what support could be available to them and what they could apply for.

3.68 Stakeholders believed that by doing this, potential candidates could have more confidence in what they could expect from running for office and therefore be more empowered to benefit from the support available.

‘[There should be] a fully paid officer [whereby] that’s all they do all year round, so they can have conversations with parties and get them on the right way to thinking about things. Even the Electoral Commission considering adaptations a candidate might need. And an assisted technology advisory on standby to assist the panel. And an agency on standby to help with social workers.’ – Panel Member

Candidates and stakeholders advocated for increasing the timeframe of future support.

- 3.69 Candidates and stakeholders again said that the timeframe of the pilot should be reconsidered in future iterations of the fund in order to improve candidates' likelihood of receiving the enabling provision required.

'I think it's just for future ones just looking at the timescales of when it's available and making sure it gets out to as many people as possible so that people who may not have thought they could stand maybe could stand in future if they knew that the support was there.' – Candidate

- 3.70 Whilst candidates advocated for a longer application window to reduce late awards encroaching on canvassing periods, panel members advocated for it so to allow for more time to acquire resources to carry out the fund and provide the support that candidates need.

'There's a lot going on behind the scenes before applications get to the panel and that needs to be adequately supported and resourced with people and time. I think looking at booking meetings in advance for those periods where you know it's going to be busy is important' – Panel Member

Information and guidance on future iterations of the fund should be made more visible.

- 3.71 Candidates and stakeholders also advocated for advertisement and communication of the fund to be increased in future. This was because it was believed that increasing visibility of the fund would allow for more potential candidates to seriously consider running for office.

'I think advertising is obviously really critical. I would probably go for a national campaign... I think I would just do it big really, otherwise you're going to get what they call the postcode lottery effect.' – Panel Member

- 3.72 Candidates also suggested that the Electoral Commission should encourage local councils to communicate the fund more widely in future, as some felt that their individual councils or political parties had not made the pilot as visible as they should have.

‘A lot of it will come down to local authority election officers, and I don’t think our election officer gave out information as widely as could’ve been done. Maybe the electoral commission ought to be encouraged to require deadlines for dissemination of this scheme to be broadcast widely.’ –

Candidate

- 3.73 Traditional media and social media were said to be the most effective ways that future iterations of the fund could be communicated. However, there were numerous candidates that advocated for local councils (especially in rural areas) to use noticeboards in future to make the fund more visible.

‘In this part of Wales, we have community notice boards run by community councils, perhaps a letter to them from the officer or from yourselves saying ‘there are local elections coming in 6 months’ time, we’d like to make you aware of us.’ – Candidate

4. Conclusions

- 4.1 Operationally, the Access to Elected Office Fund Pilot was successful. Disability Wales were able to mobilise the project in a shorter than planned timeframe, ready for the Senedd Elections in 2021.
- 4.2 The assessment panel brought together individuals with varying political backgrounds and experiences of disability, meaning each individual application received full and varied consideration, although the decision-making process was, at times considered rushed, and resulted in panel meetings being called on an ad-hoc basis, with varying levels of attendance.
- 4.3 Although application numbers were relatively low, the pilot provided enabling provision to those who applied, meaning that they were able to canvass more effectively than would have otherwise been possible, which was particularly valuable to those in more rural constituencies.
- 4.4 The application process was said to be straightforward and, when needed, the provision from Disability Wales was highly commended; assistance was sometimes provided to those who have difficulties filling out forms, and by explaining to applicants what provision would be the most enabling for them on an individual basis.
- 4.5 During the advice and guidance stage, efforts to clarify what could be counted as a reasonable adjustment in accordance with the social model of disability at this stage were commended.
- 4.6 Although our findings are based on a small number of candidates, the evidence provided suggests that the pilot worked well for those with physical barriers. There is less evidence on the success of the pilot for those with other barriers, or multifaceted ones, including cognitive issues. Careful consideration is needed on how future provision can cover the spectrum of disability as effectively as possible.
- 4.7 The biggest challenge to the success of the pilot was the short timeframe for application, linked to electoral law. For any future iteration of the fund to have a true impact on the diversity of elected members in Wales, these timeframes would need to be revisited and extended.

- 4.8 Stakeholders and candidates alike felt that the fund, or a version of it, should be extended to exist on a permanent basis, advising potential candidates on what they could apply for and encouraging political parties to seriously consider disabled members for candidacy. It was a commonly held view that an on-going programme of support offering a fund as part of it, would be beneficial to disabled people and would be positive for democracy in Wales more generally.
- 4.9 This programme or framework of provision would offer a more holistic package to disabled people but could also be an offer to individuals with other protected characteristics, and even those on a low income. It could include advice on the opportunities available for those with barriers in their life, networking opportunities, financial support akin to the pilot fund and ongoing support beyond election periods.
- 4.10 A brand and communications strategy built around this extended framework would raise the profile of the opportunities available to entering democracy in Wales and potentially give a more diverse range of people the confidence that these opportunities are open to everyone.
- 4.11 Reasonable adjustments for disabled candidates and elected members were also so said to be needed in Government buildings at all levels, including at local government level in Wales and in the Senedd.
- 4.12 The research participants noted that the accessibility equipment in the Senedd, for example, was particularly noisy and loud when in use and draws negative attention to the people using it. It was also noted that local government buildings across Wales often lack accessibility for disabled people.
- 4.13 The Access to Elected Office Fund Pilot demonstrated that targeted provision could make a marked difference in levelling the playing field for disabled individuals looking to run for elected office. However, for the provision to be scaled-up and accessible to people with a range of protected characteristics, it was felt that WG and its partners should reflect on the following recommendations and future considerations:

Key Recommendations

- 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; and
- The wider package should be extended to individuals with other protected characteristics / other challenges.

Future Considerations

- How can lessons be learned from the practical application of the Fund, and taken forward in future? These include the success of the advice and guidance elements, the make-up of the panel and the concerns around the timeframe for applying and awarding funding.
- How can panel members be supported to process applications thoroughly during the time between applications being opened and the election period beginning?
- How can we raise better awareness of the provision available within the political parties?
- How can we ensure independent candidates are aware of the provision and have equality of access to it?
- How can we ensure the provision is suitable across the spectrum of disability and is not biased towards physical disability, using the social model of disability as a framework?
- How can we ensure elected members are enabled once in office – at all levels of government, and across all regions?

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