Research into the socio-economic influences of democratic participation in Wales

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Alma Economics combines unparalleled analytical expertise with the ability to communicate complex ideas clearly.

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Introduction and background

There is widespread recognition that politicians from diverse and representative backgrounds are better positioned to make political decisions in a way that is more representative and equitably informed (Sillet, 2024). Reasons for this include:

- Decision-making processes without diversity are more prone to 'groupthink' among similarly-minded individuals with similar backgrounds, which leads to ideas facing insufficient scrutiny and challenge (Hallet, 2024).

- A political process which does not include the views of disadvantaged communities may make decisions which – deliberately or through ignorance – further disadvantage these communities (Cowper-Coles, 2020).

- Structural barriers preventing disadvantaged socio-economic groups from participating in the democratic process will prevent talented people from contributing to public life, lowering the aggregate talent of a council chamber or parliament (Sillet, 2024).

Moreover, lower democratic representation of disadvantaged socio-economic groups in elected office can have a cyclical effect. The under-representation of certain groups can erode trust in democratic institutions, leading to disillusionment and disengagement among marginalised communities. By contrast, more representative elected bodies can have a 'role model' effect, encouraging greater participation (Showunmi & Price, 2021).

Representation is also crucial because trust in democratic institutions has fallen in recent years across the UK (Curtice et al., 2024). Political disengagement (as measured by attitudes towards politics, registration and voting, candidacy, and elected representation) across the UK is higher in certain groups, including young people, people in minority ethnic groups, and people in long-term unemployment (Uberoi & Johnston, 2022). These issues have been identified in Wales also, with two recent studies outlining issues including low knowledge and engagement with the electoral system, lack of accessible information about political systems (Moore, 2023), and concerns around the "democratic health" of politics in Wales (Valgardsson et al., 2023).

Due to this, the Welsh Government has committed to increasing diversity in local democracy, and in 2021–22 launched the Access to Elected Office Fund pilot scheme to support disabled people in standing for elected office. A review of the Fund noted that a wider package of provision should be extended to individuals with other protected characteristics and other challenges (Davies et al., 2023). This led to a requirement in the [Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024](#) ('the Act') for Ministers to establish a financial assistance scheme to support disabled candidates, building on the previous Access to Elected Office Fund pilot. In addition, it includes provisions to develop similar financial support schemes for individuals with other protected or specified characteristics.

The Act contains other provisions relating to access to democracy. For example, it places a duty on Welsh Ministers to provide services, such as information, advice, coaching, and work experience, to promote diversity among individuals from protected characteristic

groups and varying socio-economic backgrounds who are seeking election to the Senedd or local government in Wales. The Act also requires Welsh Ministers to publish guidance for political parties around diversity and inclusion.

The Welsh Government commissioned Alma Economics to conduct a study into the influences of socio-economic disadvantage on democratic participation. This research focused on understanding the barriers affecting people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, which reduce their ability to participate fully in Welsh democracy – including standing for elected office in devolved elections in Wales. The research methods included focus groups and interviews with experts on democratic participation in Wales, a survey of elected members and candidates followed by interviews with interested participants, and a separate survey of Welsh citizens, also followed by interviews.

This research focuses primarily on the 'descriptive representation' of socio-economic groups in Welsh politics, which means that relevant demographics of elected representatives are proportional to those of the wider population (Pitkin, 1967). This has a strong link with 'substantive representation', which focuses on whether the policy priorities of disadvantaged groups are represented in the decisions made by authorities (Pitkin, 1967; Childs & Lovenduski, 2013). When politicians are not descriptively representative of the diverse communities they represent (i.e., when politicians' demographics do not reflect the population at large), there is evidence that poor and inequitable decisions are more likely to occur (e.g., Williams, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative that politicians at all levels are representative of the true socio-economic make-up of Wales.

1.1. Structure of this report

This report contains the following sections:

- Chapter 2 covers our methodological approach, highlighting the aim for each phase of the study and how it informed the next stage. This section will also outline sample sizes for each phase of stakeholder engagement as well as limitations of the study.

- Chapter 3 sets out our findings related to the key barriers to standing for elected office, as well as exploring ways to remove barriers to democratic participation in Wales.

- Chapter 4 summarises the key takeaways from this study by synthesising and comparing findings between the key groups engaged with during the research.

- Chapter 5 outlines a series of recommendations to address barriers to democratic participation for people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in Wales.

In addition, the report contains the following Annexes:

- Annex A contains details regarding the sampling and demographics of survey respondents.

- Annex B contains findings from a survey of Welsh citizens.

2. Methodology

2.1. Stage 1: Project scoping and evidence review

Stage 1 involved an exploratory review of academic and grey literature (e.g., Welsh Government reports), policy, and legislation, to enhance our understanding of the issues, ground development of research materials, and identify gaps to address through this research. This included Senedd committee reports, reviews and evaluations of initiatives, and other sources suggested by the Welsh Government at project inception. Some key sources within the Welsh context include the Senedd's Local Government and Housing Committee inquiry into diversity in local government (2023), the Wales Governance Centre's review of barriers to standing for the Welsh Assembly (Awan-Scully et al., 2018), and the Theory of Change to remove barriers to elected office for people with protected characteristics (Smith & Davies, 2022).

Additionally, two scoping interviews were conducted with policy officials in the Welsh Government, with one focusing on local government and one focusing on the Senedd. These helped refine the research aims and areas of focus, as well as supporting efforts to identify stakeholders for later engagement as part of an ongoing stakeholder mapping exercise. Individuals were identified through being authors of key reports and journal articles, having key roles in community organisations, as well as political party representatives.

To further contextualise the literature, relevant data sources were reviewed and exploratory quantitative analysis conducted to better understand socio-economic barriers to democratic participation nationally. This involved examining data from the 2021 Census (ONS, 2023) and correlating relevant socio-demographic indicators with indicators of democratic participation from the National Survey for Wales (Welsh Government, n.d.) at the Local Authority level and the turnout in the 2022 Welsh local elections at Ward level (House of Commons Library, n.d.).

2.2. Stages 2 & 3: Engagement with expert stakeholders in democratic engagement, and Engagement with practitioners

Following the completion of the scoping phase, three focus groups (90 minutes) and 10 one-to-one interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams with stakeholders who have expertise in democratic engagement in the Welsh context. In total, we engaged 19 key stakeholders. Participants included academic experts, political party representatives, and organisations that work directly to provide support and assistance to people across Wales who experience challenges due to socio-economic circumstances. This engagement provided information on the policy and legislative context, challenges and opportunities to implementing policy, perceived socio-economic barriers to democratic participation, and proposals to remove these barriers. Individuals were identified in the stakeholder mapping exercise that took place during the scoping phase of this research.

Focus groups were initially identified as an appropriate method of engagement for these groups, as they allow for discussion on similar expertise and experiences – e.g., groups

advocating for policy change may prompt each other to discuss shared implementation challenges. This often generates deeper insights and nuances than one-to-one interviews. However, one-to-one interviews were also offered for those who were unable to make the focus group dates/times or stated a preference to speak on a one-to-one basis. Discussion guides were semi-structured, allowing key questions to be covered with flexibility for participants to bring in unexpected topics. Privacy notices were provided in advance, and participants confirmed their willingness to participate either by completing a form in advance or verbally at the beginning of the focus group or interview.

Analysis was conducted iteratively across the research to allow us to embed findings into the next stage of the research. To analyse the data from the focus groups and interviews, four iterative steps of thematic analysis were conducted: familiarisation, coding, theme development, and reporting. The analysis then identified key areas of focus to be explored in further depth in the next stage of the research.

2.3.   Stage 4: Engagement with elected members, candidates, and citizens

The next stage of the research involved launching online surveys with elected members, candidates, and citizens. Surveys were developed to assess how specific socio-economic circumstances influence individuals' aspirations and decisions to run for elected office, and to identify the barriers or enablers these conditions may create. To encourage participation and ensure clarity, the survey for elected members and candidates was divided into three separate versions: (i) Members of the Senedd (MSs) and Senedd candidates, (ii) Local Authority councillors and candidates, and (iii) Town, Parish, and Community councillors and candidates. This approach aimed to reduce confusion about who the survey was intended for and allowed for minor wording adjustments (e.g., referring to 'Senedd Member' vs. 'Councillor'). Participants were asked to complete the survey corresponding to the highest level of office they had stood for. However, those who had contested elections for multiple bodies were welcome to complete additional surveys to share their experiences across different levels. The survey of citizens required less branching, but it did include separate questions for members of political parties and non-members, alongside collecting key demographic information.

Elected Senedd Members were contacted through their publicly available email addresses, while candidates and local councillors were contacted through political parties and bodies such as the Electoral Commission, and an online database of candidate information. Citizens were contacted through a network of voluntary organisations identified in the stakeholder mapping exercise – with social media also used to boost participation.

Microsoft Forms was used to host the surveys due to it being secure and UK GDPR compliant.

The target sample for the elected members and candidates surveys was Senedd Members (60), local councillors at Local Authority, community, and town levels (1,233); and those who have stood in Welsh elections (exact number unknown; approx. 326 candidates for regional lists and 308 for constituencies in the 2021 Senedd election (Electoral Commission, 2021).

The citizens' survey targeted all those eligible to stand for elected office (per Electoral Commission's (2021) Guidance for candidates and agents). We primarily sought to contact people engaged in voluntary activity to understand the barriers to democratic participation among people who are already engaged in community activity, as well as using social media to boost engagement.

All surveys had an approximate completion time of 15 minutes and were comprised mostly of close-ended items such as Likert scales, with some open-ended questions. Core questions across surveys included items on demographics, e.g., age, gender, disability, ethnicity, educational background, household income, parental education level, and self-reported levels of socio-economic disadvantage using the MacArthur Scale of Subjective Social Status (Stanford University, n.d.).

Questions directed at elected members and candidates included:

- Background of candidacy, e.g., political party membership, type of election stood for
- Barriers, e.g., What (if any) were the most significant social, economic, or cultural barriers you faced when seeking election?
- Costs, e.g., What was the direct and indirect financial cost you experienced as a result of your candidacy? Did you receive support to meet this cost?
- Perceptions [Likert scales], e.g., to what extent do you believe socio-economic factors impact individuals' ability to stand for election in Wales?
- Open-ended, e.g., how do you feel your socio-economic background impacted your experience as an elected member/candidate?
- Removing barriers, e.g., Are there changes you would recommend be made to remove these barriers to elected office?

Questions directed at citizens included:

- Engagement with democracy and community, e.g., political party membership, frequency of voting, extent they have considered / would ever consider standing for election, why yes/why not? Engagement in voluntary activity?
- Perceptions of barriers [multiple choice – categorised at the back-end by *Recruitment, Resource, Reaction*], e.g., what do you think are the main barriers to standing? To what extent are you familiar with the selection and election processes for community, county, or Senedd elections? Do you feel qualified to be elected?
- Perceived support [multiple choice], e.g., what kinds of support or measures might help promote standing?
- Open-ended, e.g., what, if anything, would encourage you (or people like you) to stand for election in the future?

When analysing survey data, descriptive statistics were generated, including means and frequencies. While the vast majority of questions were closed, qualitative thematic analysis was used to analyse open-text responses using a framework developed as a result of scoping interviews, the literature review, and focus groups and interviews with experts and practitioners. Where novel themes emerged, these were added to the thematic analysis template and marked as new – with these being explored in further detail in follow-up interviews.

Following the surveys, follow-up engagement was conducted with elected members, candidates, and Welsh citizens to gather deeper insights into these groups' experiences and perceptions. Participants were recruited through the surveys; however, due to a low number of sign-ups for citizens, supplementary recruitment was conducted through the Democratic Engagement Strategy network shared by a representative at the Welsh Government. To sign up for the follow-up engagement, participants were taken to a separate Expression of Interest form, which meant that the survey responses remained anonymous.

Participants were given the option between one-to-one interviews or small focus groups, with almost all sharing a preference for a one-to-one interview online via Microsoft Teams (or by telephone, if preferred). In this study, remote engagement reduced participant burden, improved accessibility, and was more efficient, enabling more individuals to contribute. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes, facilitated by one researcher. Discussion guides prompted reflections on personal experiences, wider perspectives on barriers, and constructive thinking on approaches to addressing barriers. Privacy notices were provided in advance, and participants confirmed their willingness to participate either by completing a form in advance or verbally at the beginning of the interview.

To analyse qualitative data, as in Stages 2 and 3, four iterative steps of thematic analysis were conducted: familiarisation, coding, theme development, and reporting. The analysis explored patterns of similarities and differences across groups and characteristics. It built upon the themes and analysis conducted in prior stages, allowing direct comparison between earlier fieldwork.

To incentivise public participation, citizen participants were provided with the opportunity to opt in to a lottery to win one of three £50 Love2Shop vouchers for completing the citizens' survey and a £15 voucher per interview.

Sample size

Our sample size for the surveys and follow-up engagement is as follows:

Table 1. Number of participants for surveys and follow-up engagement

Mode of Engagement	Elected members and candidates	Citizens
Survey	96	17
Interviews	12	7

Table 2. Further breakdown of elected members and candidate survey participants

	Members of the Senedd (MSs) and Senedd candidates	Local Authority councillors and candidates	Town, Parish, and Community councillors and candidates
Current elected member	6	32	14
Former elected member	1	8	4
Selected as a political party's nominee but was not elected	11	12	2
Independent candidate but was not elected	2	1	0
Sought a political party's nomination but was not selected by the party	1	0	2

For a demographic breakdown of all survey participants, including elected members, candidates and citizens, see Annex A at the end of this report.

Limitations

While we successfully met our target for engaging elected members and candidates, citizen participation in the survey remained low. Despite the use of incentives and a range of recruitment methods, take-up was limited. Students were also disproportionately represented amongst the citizen sample. Therefore, the findings indicate the views of a small sample of Welsh citizens.

Additionally, as with any project of this scale, the sample size was not large enough to be demographically representative. Participation was self-selecting and required individuals to have the time to take part. This was considered in the research design; for example, participants were offered flexible scheduling including evenings and weekends to accommodate caring responsibilities and work commitments. However, this may nonetheless have limited engagement from those who are most socio-economically disadvantaged.

Participants represented all major parties (Labour, Conservative, Plaid Cymru, Liberal Democrats), as well as some smaller parties and independents. A range of candidacy histories was also represented, including those who had stood both successfully and unsuccessfully at community, town, and county council level. However, no current MSs who

responded to the survey were able to take part in further engagement, so their perspectives were not represented in the follow-up interviews.

Despite these challenges, there was a diversity of perspectives within those interviewed, allowing for rich findings which are outlined below.

3.   Findings

This chapter includes findings from all phases of the research. It is divided into a series of key sub-chapters, which are as follows:

3.1.   Findings regarding definitions of socio-economic disadvantage and democratic participation.

3.2.   Findings regarding barriers to democratic participation, structured according to Recruitment, Resource, and Reaction barriers.

3.3.   Findings regarding proposals to remove barriers to democratic participation in Wales.

Each sub-chapter clearly indicates which phase research findings originate from by using headings. Overarching conclusions from the research can be found in Chapter 4.

3.1.   Defining socio-economic disadvantage and democratic participation

A fundamental part of understanding the impacts of socio-economic disadvantage upon democratic participation is to define socio-economic disadvantage and to define democratic participation. This section seeks to provide working definitions by combining findings from the literature, findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners, and implicit findings from fieldwork with candidates, elected officials, and Welsh citizens.

3.1.1.   Defining socio-economic disadvantage

3.1.1.1.   Findings from the literature

As part of a non-systematic literature review, the Socio-Economic Duty was identified as a key starting point to understanding socio-economic disadvantage in the Welsh context. The Socio-economic Duty came into effect in Wales on 31st March 2021. The Duty mandates that certain public bodies must take into account how their decisions could lessen inequalities linked to socio-economic disadvantage when making strategic decisions (such as establishing priorities and goals). This implies that public bodies in Wales will now be legally required to consider how their choices will improve the lives of those who are socio-economically disadvantaged when making decisions.

Socio-economic disadvantage is described in the guidance as 'living in less favourable social and economic circumstances than others in the same society' (Welsh Government, 2021a). Experiencing socio-economic disadvantage may include living in a deprived area, having little or no savings, having little or no income, experiencing material deprivation, and social and cultural norms associated with socio-economic backgrounds (Mills, 2021). Recognising the strong evidence that people with under-represented protected characteristics are more likely to experience socio-economic deprivation (Mills, 2021), socio-economic disadvantage should be considered within the broader context of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). In the context of democratic participation, this suggests that the reasons for underrepresentation are often complex and that multiple intersecting

characteristics can create additional layers of disadvantage, leading to further barriers being faced (Welsh Government, 2024a). For example, intersecting forms of discrimination are often experienced strongly by disabled people, women, and minoritised ethnic groups experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

3.1.1.2.   Findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners

Experts and practitioners were encouraged to explore how socio-economic barriers should be defined. When presented with the Socio-Economic Duty's definition, experts and practitioners widely agreed with its categorisation. Aligned with other research (Mills, 2021), experts and practitioners also emphasised the intersecting factors that might contribute to, compound, or change the nature of socio-economic disadvantage, including disability, gender, race or ethnicity, and caring responsibilities. In particular, the cost of being disabled (such as equipment, transport, home adaptations) was highlighted as a critical factor that may push people into socio-economic disadvantage. Additionally, some participants noted a need to consider more 'hidden' forms of socio-economic disadvantage, such as women in relationships that prevented them from having control over their finances, and people with no recourse to public funds.

Some participants emphasised the importance of focusing on class, as both an economic experience and as a social identity. They recognised that self-descriptions of class are often defined by people's early experiences, their parents' experiences, or the community in which they grew up, rather than material circumstances that currently affect them. These participants argued that members of the public would be more likely to understand and mobilise around programmes aimed at getting more working-class people into town halls, county halls, and the Senedd rather than programmes with the less tangible and easily understood aim of 'increasing socio-economic diversity.' Other participants warned that categories of social class are informed more by parents' experiences than material socio-economic reality – highlighting the risk that programmes open to anyone who self-describes as working class may be predominantly filled by people with middle-class professions and lifestyles and working-class parents or grandparents. Furthermore, some participants reflected that the term 'working-class' could be interpreted to exclude groups such as ethnic minorities or people experiencing additional costs which put them at socio-economic disadvantage, such as single parents or disabled people.

Ultimately, participants did not have a clear answer for which terminology would be most appropriate. Some noted that many who may be categorised as socio-economically disadvantaged would not see their communities as 'disadvantaged' and may resent being labelled or defined as such. Other practitioners and experts referred to more specific financial measures that could be used, such as whether someone is on a low income or no income, or the amount of savings they have; however, as noted in the first point, this could miss some of the nuances and intersections that change the experience of socio-economic status. The approach taken in this research was to primarily use the term 'socio-economic disadvantage' but also to use the language of class in recruitment and fieldwork alongside other elements of socio-economic disadvantage where appropriate – recognising that class can be an easily-understood concept and the term 'working class' can be an empowering self-descriptor for citizens, candidates, and politicians.

3.1.1.3. Findings from interviews with candidates and elected officials

Most elected officials and candidates who took part in interviews referred to their current socio-economic status as 'comfortable' or similar. Descriptions frequently related to stability, with many referring to their home ownership when asked about their socio-economic status. Several also referred to their parents' occupations as part of their understanding of their own socio-economic status, particularly when they referred to this status in terms of class. Many interviewees described themselves as self-employed or retired, indicating that the ability to control one's own time is a key advantage for prospective candidates.

Participants who perceived changes in their socio-economic status over time often attributed these shifts to fluctuations in income or periods of unemployment (downward mobility), or to milestones such as acquiring property (upward mobility). Some also referenced broader contextual factors, including the socio-economic conditions of their community or the standards of the era in which they were raised. Their accounts reflect an understanding of socio-economic status as a relative and dynamic concept shaped by both personal and familial experiences across time.

3.1.1.4. Findings from interviews with Welsh citizens

The self-described socio-economic status of Welsh citizens interviewed varied significantly. Several identified as working class, with a small number describing experience of homelessness and long periods receiving Universal Credit. Around half of interviewees were students, and these participants were highly likely to discuss their socio-economic status in reference to their age – arguing that they lacked a reliable income, received limited financial support for their studies, and were renters rather than property owners. Some female participants referred to their commitments as a parent, while one emphasised that they are a daughter of a single mother.

3.1.2. Defining democratic participation

The Specification for this research focused on researching how socio-economic factors impact 'on an individual's ability to get involved in local democracy and stand for elected office in devolved elections in Wales.' We encouraged some fieldwork participants, especially experts and practitioners, to reflect on this approach to understanding democratic participation. The broad consensus was that this clearer, narrower focus – which does not explicitly account for wider democratic participation (such as signing petitions, voting, campaigning) – was justified as all research must have boundaries. However, many also emphasised the importance of non-electoral democratic participation between elections. This includes political campaigning, membership of a political party, responding to consultations, and voluntary civic engagement. Participants viewed efforts to increase participation in these activities, as well as broaden the socio-economic diversity of those involved, not only as socially beneficial in themselves, promoting more informed citizens and decision-making, but also as essential for expanding the pool and diversity of individuals who might consider standing for elected office.

> "While this might not be the focus of your research, what happens between elections has the possibility to create the pipeline of who goes into elected politics." (Expert / Practitioner)

3.2.   Barriers to democratic participation

The literature suggests there are major barriers to democratic participation faced by individuals experiencing socio-economic disadvantages. Drawing on the work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission's (2019) report on barriers to participation in standing for local government in Scotland, we have structured this research into socio-economic barriers to democratic participation in Wales under the following themes: recruitment, resourcing, and reaction.[1] Within each of these themes, there is consideration given to whether specific barriers relate to 'supply-side' or 'demand-side' challenges, as per widespread practice in the literature on female participation in politics (Norris & Lovenduski, 1994; Lovenduski, 2005; Maguire, 2018). 'Supply' challenges refer to who decides to become a candidate for office, including factors such as the financial costs of campaigning, the aspiration to be elected, and time implications such as balancing campaigning and caring responsibilities. 'Demand-side' challenges include discrimination by party candidate selectors and voters (Kenny, 2015). These challenges interact with one another, particularly with 'demand' challenges affecting the 'supply' of candidates (Lovenduski, 2005; 2016). Nonetheless, they are a useful way to analyse barriers faced by those seeking to participate in democratic elections.

Therefore, the findings explore the 'journey' of a candidate experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Krook & Norris, 2014). It begins with the motivation, awareness, and encouragement to run for office (recruitment barriers), turning to the time and costs of running for election and representing constituents (resource barriers), before closing with a focus on the perceptions of voters and candidate selection panels towards these candidates (reaction barriers).

3.2.1.   Recruitment barriers to democratic participation

According to the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019), recruitment barriers are obstacles that prevent individuals – especially those from under-represented groups and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage – from being encouraged, supported, or selected to stand for elected office. These barriers may include both formal rules and informal practices, such as opaque selection procedures, internal party cliques, lack of inclusive outreach, or insufficient support for newer members.

3.2.1.1.   Recruitment barriers - findings from the literature

The academic literature suggests that socio-economic barriers to democratic participation begin from an early age and are affected by a variety of social, economic, and cultural factors. For example, Quintelier and Hooghe (2013) use panel data from Belgium to find that socio-economic status significantly influences political participation from the early ages of 16 and 18, and that this is exacerbated in more selective educational systems. In

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[1] The Equality and Human Rights Commission also focus on a fourth barrier ('Recognition'). This refers to political parties "failing to recognise that they may have a diversity problem at all". This focuses on parties lacking understanding of barriers and not collecting data. This is out-of-scope for this research, which focuses on the 'journey' of people with socio-economic disadvantage seeking election in general rather than auditing the performance of specific political parties. Issues of a lack of data are considered throughout this work, however, primarily as an explanatory factor for a lack of positive interventions to increase diversity at the 'recruitment' and 'reaction' phases of a candidate's journey.

addition, informal connections within political parties are said to favour candidates with high social capital and retrench inequality in candidate selection with gendered, racialised, and class-based implications – this is often referred to as the issue of 'favourite sons' (House of Commons, 2010).

Social networks within parties can also be used to inform well-connected political aspirants of the upcoming retirements of incumbents, allowing candidates with connections to prepare in advance for a selection or election battle, while those with fewer social connections may be at a disadvantage (House of Commons, 2010). With the decline in the power of trade unions in candidate selection, the Institute for Progressive Public Policy found that the effect of social networks within political parties has intensified socio-economic disadvantage in recent decades (Quilter-Pinner et al., 2022).

However, the literature also suggests that change can lead to further improvements. There is evidence that improvements in the socio-economic representativeness of legislatures may have a 'role model' effect by encouraging greater participation, confidence in one's own abilities, and the creation of support networks for socio-economically disadvantaged candidates (Showunmi & Price, 2021). Ultimately, the literature suggests that recruitment is primarily a 'supply-side' challenge (Lovenduski, 2016), as networks for the well-connected can reduce the number of socio-economically disadvantaged people who feel encouraged and able to successfully run for election.

3.2.1.2. Recruitment barriers – findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners

Across the focus groups and interviews with experts and practitioners, recruitment barriers were explored in greater depth than other types of barriers. Building on earlier discussions around the definition of socio-economic disadvantage, many participants expressed a desire to "take a step back" and examine the more fundamental obstacles that prevent individuals from engaging with politics in the first place. Given the breadth and depth of insights shared by experts and practitioners on recruitment-related challenges, these findings have been organised under a series of subheadings for clarity and structure.

Lack of prior knowledge, experience and confidence

Participants observed that political education and engagement are unevenly distributed across socio-economic groups. They noted that this disparity often begins early in life, as schools in disadvantaged areas may lack the resources to provide opportunities such as educational trips, guest speakers, or other activities that foster democratic awareness and participation. A lack of access to political education was perceived to be a significant issue, particularly for those whose families were not engaged in politics, and where politics would not be a topic of conversation at home. The sense that 'discussing politics at the dinner table' is a distinctly middle-class practice featured prominently in these discussions. At a broader socio-economic level, participants pointed to the decline in trade union membership across Wales and the UK as a key factor in growing political disengagement. Trade unions were seen as historically important providers of political education and training, offering an effective pathway into political life for working-class individuals.

Participants also argued that people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to be involved in various forms of civic participation (e.g., volunteering, charity work, community events, local campaigns) than those with greater socio-economic advantages. Lack of time and financial constraints were viewed as instrumental barriers to engagement. Additionally, some participants highlighted that lower levels of civic involvement may reflect broader patterns of political disengagement. This matters because civic participation was widely seen as a vital entry point into political life, offering opportunities to build networks, develop an understanding of electoral systems, and gain valuable experience that can strengthen a candidate's prospects in selection or election processes.

Related to this, some participants highlighted that a lack of experience – or, more pertinently, a sense of being under-qualified – can be a barrier to democratic participation. Participants felt that difficulty seeing themselves as the 'right sort of person' could be a major barrier to people considering standing. This was linked to an absence of role models in politics for underrepresented groups, and embedded ideas of how a politician should look, behave, or sound. Participants described working-class people feeling a need to change their accent in political circles to fit in more. It was noted that even for current politicians who are from an underrepresented background, they have often followed a particular professional pathway or archetype – such as being a lawyer, political adviser, or civil servant – meaning they are not necessarily relatable to others from that background.

Additionally, experts and practitioners raised concerns that potential candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are more likely to feel they would be unable to make a difference once elected, which was felt to be more prominent amongst certain groups, like women. Several noted that the biggest factor for people to become engaged in politics or run for elected office was often someone simply telling them they should, breaking the barrier of internalised prejudice or lack of confidence; however, this 'powerful whisper', as it was described, was recognised to be more likely to be given to those already engaging in political circles.

Complexity of democratic structures and processes

Building on the above, several participants highlighted the opaqueness of political procedures, which can appear impenetrable and alienating to those without prior experience or familiarity with bureaucratic systems. Specific examples included lengthy nomination forms that must be printed, an added challenge in disadvantaged areas where libraries and community spaces are increasingly closing, and unclear or inconsistent candidate selection processes. As a result, many potential candidates feel uncertain about how to even begin their journey toward elected office.

The significance of informal processes in securing selection as a political party's nominee was repeatedly emphasised. Experts and practitioners noted that being "in the know" about internal party dynamics, such as selection procedures or the anticipated retirement of incumbents, can be a considerable advantage, one that is often inaccessible to those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Several participants highlighted the difficulty new candidates face when trying to break into areas dominated by established groups, longstanding local families, or political "cliques" that have historically held candidacies or seats. A high level of incumbency was observed, particularly in Local

Authority elections, with some noting that even when an incumbent steps down, their successor is often informally predetermined, with party networks and support already in place.

Furthermore, some participants highlighted the lack of transparency regarding the costs associated with running for party selection, standing in elections, and serving as elected officials. It was often unclear in advance which expenses (both formal and informal) candidates would be expected to cover and which might be reimbursed or supported. This uncertainty could deter potential candidates who assume they must self-fund all costs, or lead to others feeling "caught out" by unexpected expenses that they had not anticipated.

Practical barriers

While these are often described as 'resource barriers,' participants emphasised how limited money and free time due to work and caregiving responsibilities pose significant obstacles to building the political networks necessary for elected office. Many people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage have less time to engage politically, often because of irregular working hours, low wages, and caring duties. Additionally, the rurality of Wales and inadequate public transport in some areas further restrict access, especially for disabled individuals without personal vehicles. Finally, the timing of party events and meetings presents a practical challenge, as evening schedules and a frequent lack of childcare make participation difficult for those with caregiving responsibilities.

These financial, time, and transport-related barriers were seen as limiting not only individuals' capacity to campaign effectively but also their opportunities to build political connections and deepen their knowledge. People experiencing socio-economic disadvantage often have less freedom to attend party meetings and events, canvass for other candidates, and engage in activities that help strengthen relationships and increase their visibility within local communities or political parties. While some interviewees noted that the shift to hybrid or remote meetings since the Covid-19 pandemic has the potential to widen access, some also acknowledged that those who can attend in-person events still enjoy significant advantages when it comes to building strong networks within the political sphere.

Fears about safety

Concerns about personal safety are examined in greater detail under the 'reaction barrier,' but some experts and practitioners also identified them as a significant recruitment barrier. Awareness of increasing threats to candidates and elected officials can deter individuals from pursuing political roles, as they are reluctant to expose themselves to such risks. Experts suggested that resilience may be particularly low among people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, who face the added mental burden of safety fears alongside financial pressures. This pre-emptive fear is often intensified for those facing multiple forms of marginalisation – such as ethnic minorities, women, and especially ethnic minority women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage – highlighting the need for an intersectional approach to understanding barriers to democratic participation.

Negative perceptions of politics and the democratic process

A final recruitment barrier identified was a general reluctance to engage with politics, stemming from disinterest or negative perceptions of the political system. This reluctance was linked not only to earlier points about limited knowledge and opaque processes but also to a growing distrust of politicians and political institutions. Some participants noted a common misconception that simply increasing support would automatically boost democratic participation, when in reality, many individuals have personal reasons for opting out. These reasons include believing they can effect greater change through non-electoral avenues like local activism, perceiving political spaces as "stuffy" or unappealing, having had negative past experiences with political engagement, or a general aversion to political parties.

3.2.1.3. Recruitment barriers - findings from surveys with elected members and candidates

These findings were then tested in the surveys with elected members and candidates. When examining the factors identified as significant barriers to seeking elected office across all elected members and candidates (including town, parish, or community councillors and candidates; Local Authority councillors and candidates; and Members of the Senedd (MSs) and Senedd candidates), the most commonly cited was uncertainty about having sufficient experience for the role and a lack of political connections (see Figures 1-3).

Figure 1. Most significant recruitment barrier faced when seeking election to the town, parish, or community council for the first time. Source: survey of town, parish or community councillors and candidates (n = 22)
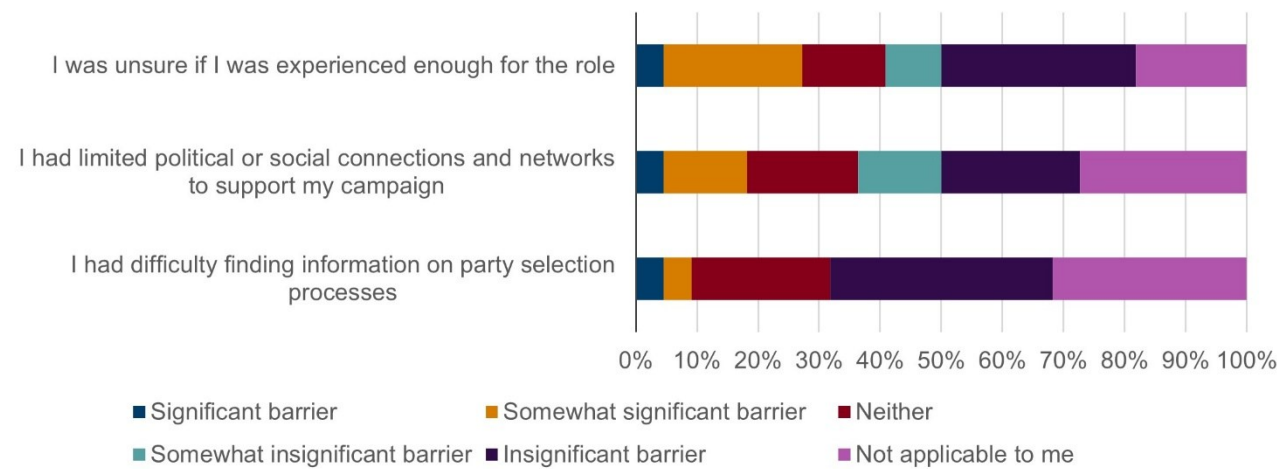
Figure 2. Most significant recruitment barrier faced when seeking election to the Local Authority for the first time. Source: survey of Local Authority councillors and candidates (n = 52)
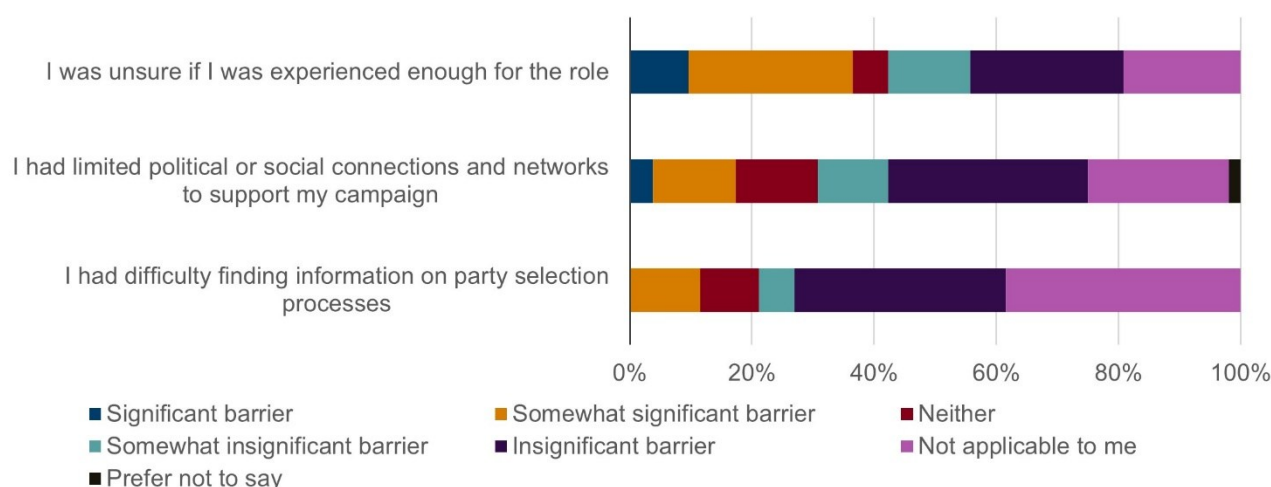
Note: One respondent who stood as an independent candidate in a Local Authority council election, but was not elected, has been excluded from this table.

Figure 3. Most significant recruitment barrier faced when seeking election to the Welsh Parliament or Assembly for the first time. Source: survey of MSs and Senedd candidates (n = 19)
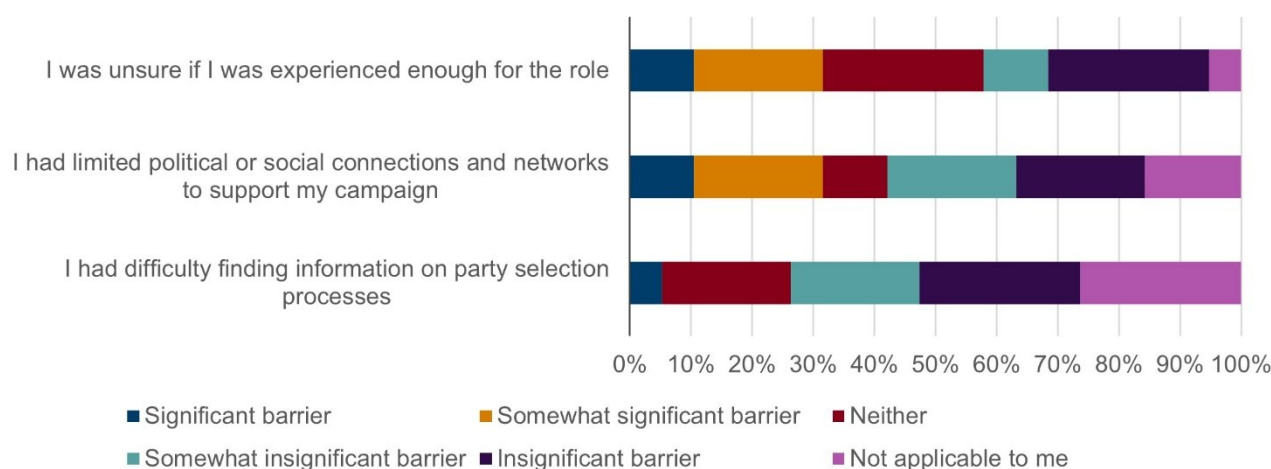
Note: Two responses from individuals who stood as independent candidates for the Welsh Parliament or Assembly, but were not elected, have been excluded from this table.

Overall, candidates expressed strong agreement with several statements about their political engagement and knowledge of political processes. Most reported feeling confident participating in national party meetings (e.g., party conferences), feeling encouraged to become more involved in their party, and feeling qualified to serve as a Member of the Welsh Parliament (or Local Authority council). They also showed a good understanding of their party's candidate selection processes, the process of becoming a Member of the Welsh Parliament (or Local Authority council), and the responsibilities involved in the role. Additionally, most candidates disagreed with statements suggesting they have been treated unfairly within their party due to their socio-economic status or protected characteristics (as

defined in the Equality Act, including ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, and disability). These patterns are consistent across all political levels surveyed (see Figures 4-6).

Figure 4. Thinking about your experiences within the political party of which you are currently a member, to what extent do you agree with the following statements? Source: survey of town, parish or community councillors and candidates (n = 22).
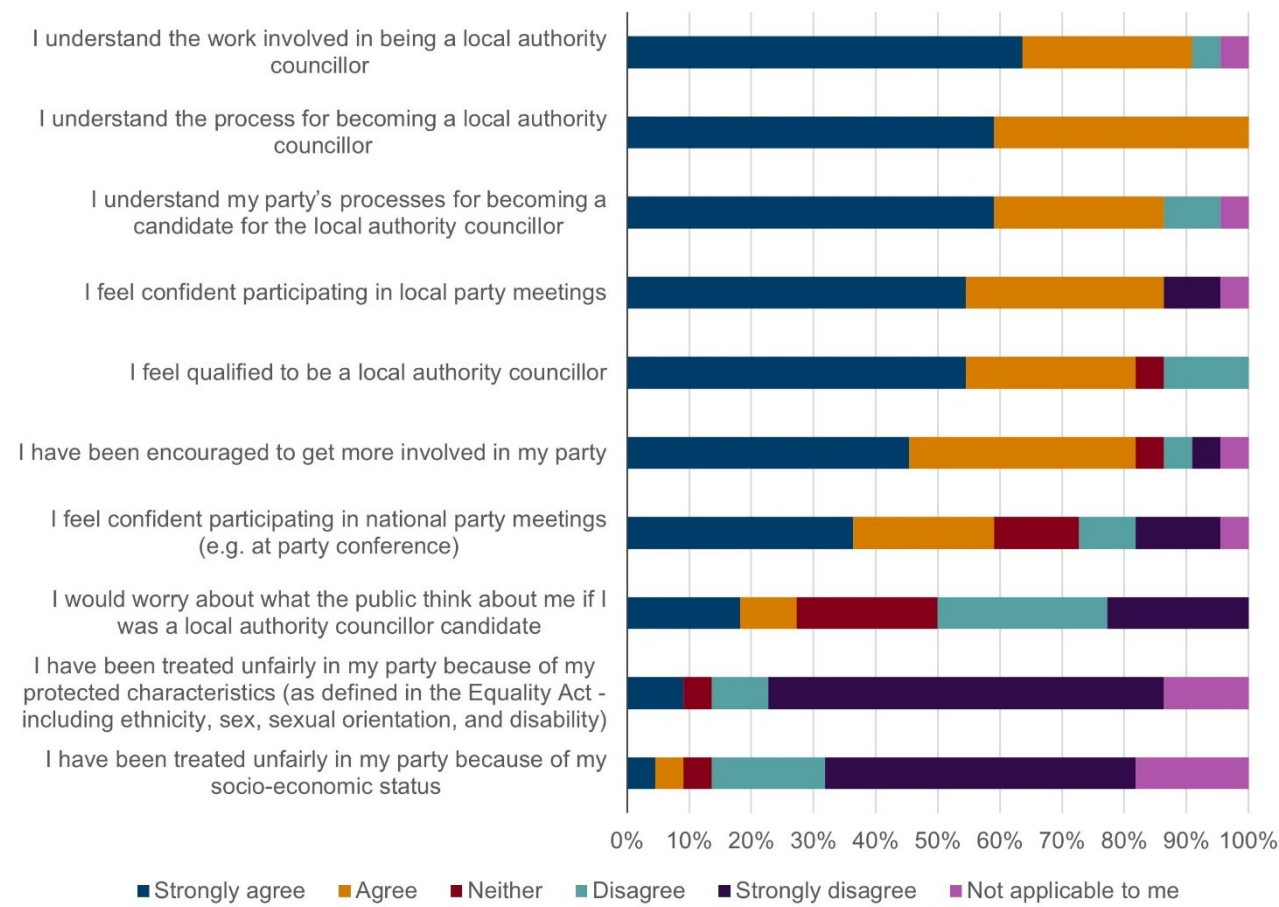
Figure 5. Thinking about your experiences within the political party of which you are currently a member, to what extent do you agree with the following statements? Source: survey of Local Authority councillors and candidates (n = 51)
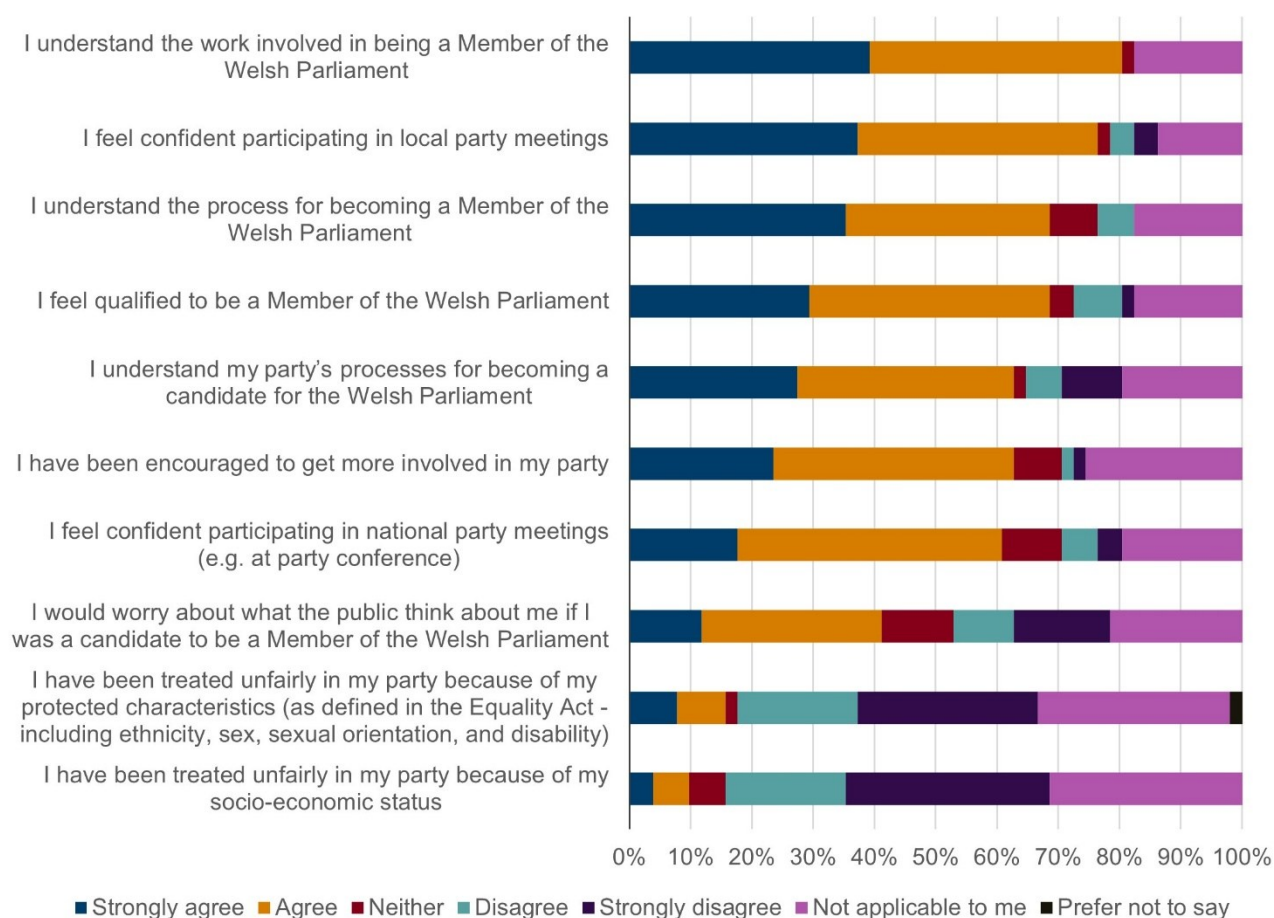
Note: One respondent who stood as an independent candidate in a Local Authority council election, but was not elected, has been excluded from this table.

Figure 6. Thinking about your experiences within the political party of which you are currently a member, to what extent do you agree with the following statements? Source: survey of Welsh Parliament or Assembly candidates (n = 12)
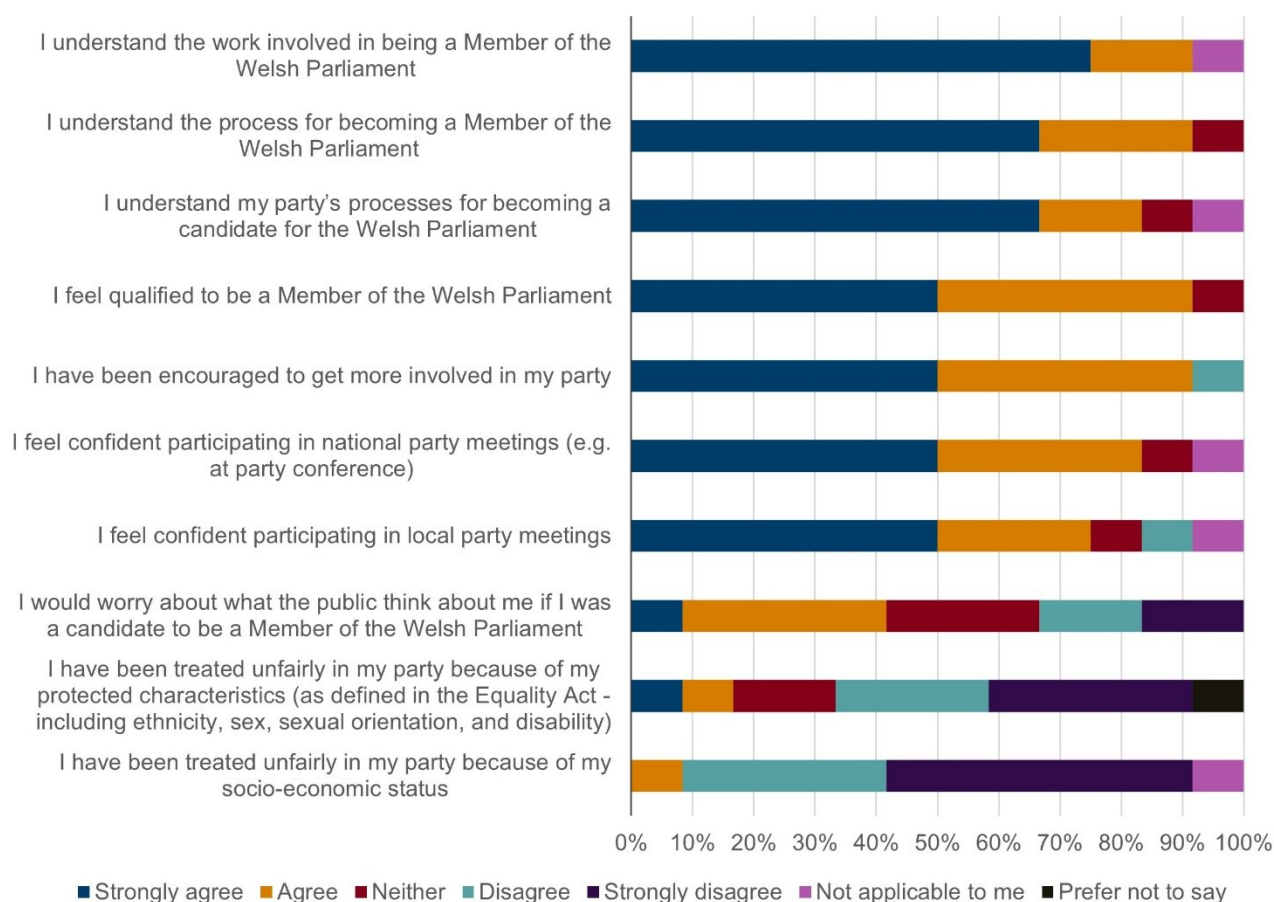
Note: Two responses from individuals who stood as independent candidates for the Welsh Parliament or Assembly, but were not elected, have been excluded from this table.

3.2.1.4. Recruitment barriers - findings from interviews with elected members and candidates

The follow-up interviews with elected members and candidates provided further nuance to the survey findings.[2] More specifically, the recruitment barrier that was most widely discussed in interviews with elected members and former candidates for elected office related to knowledge of and attitudes towards electoral politics. The perceived requirement to have strong networks to enable standing for election was noted as a barrier by many

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[2] For further context on recruitment barriers, which include a potential candidate's motivations, the reasons elected members and candidates shared for choosing to run for election are shared here. Many expressed a general interest in public service and representing people, sometimes instilled through histories of representative or public-facing jobs or voluntary work, or a desire to help their community. Some had become interested in politics through prominent issues or campaigns, such as climate change or the closure of local services. Others had become involved due to a specific interest in politics or democracy, sometimes running to prevent an incumbent or a major party from winning unopposed. A small number of interviewees had a family history of involvement in politics, and a few had taken opportunistic decisions to stand, as they happened to be available at a time when an opportunity arose. Participants generally did not have just one reason but were driven by a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, where personal interests and motivations aligned with opportunities to put these into action by standing for election.

participants, with several reflecting on their experiences of struggling to be selected or elected against better-networked candidates, regardless of their capabilities and experience. Some reflected on the value of party membership for building these connections, noting the benefits of having experienced colleagues and established networks; conversely, challenges for small parties and independents were noted.

Participants emphasised the importance of understanding political systems and processes. Many felt that the public often lacks even basic knowledge about the roles of elected bodies and their members, with even greater gaps in understanding what is involved in standing for election. These processes were seen as particularly opaque at higher levels of office, especially the Senedd. Some participants attributed this to a lack of transparency or ineffective communication by political institutions. While a few noted that party membership could help bridge this knowledge gap, others felt that political parties do too little to educate either their members or the broader public about the practical realities of electoral politics. Two outlined their concerns:

> "The political parties try and get you to stand, but they don't really tell you what is involved in that, and how much it's going to cost, and how many hours you need to put in and things like that. So, I think there needs to be more information on recruitment." (Community councillor)

> "I think the biggest one that I've sort of heard other people say is they don't have enough information to know what it actually takes to be a councillor. So a lot of people don't see themselves as 'councillor material', if that makes sense, right? At which point it's the job for us and others to obviously say, 'well, actually, yes, you can and actually you'd be good at it'. There are a lot of people who are communitarians at heart, right? They are there for everything in the community, they're actively involved in things. You see the work that they do, and you recognise that this person would be a fantastic councillor. But they themselves don't necessarily see themselves that way, right?" (Town councillor)

Participants also suggested that there is a strong sense of not being the 'right kind of person' to stand for election. One councillor described feeling intimidated about running for the Senedd, despite being active in their party, due to a sense that senior roles were more suited for certain "movers and shakers," and reflected on how challenging it was to try to break into that group. For people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, without existing networks or knowledge, this was felt to be more acute.

Several participants expressed concern about widespread apathy and disinterest in politics, often rooted in a belief that political engagement does not lead to meaningful change or a general fatigue with the 'status quo.' Some pointed to low voter turnout as evidence of this disengagement. It was noted that young people, in particular, can be difficult to engage, as well as those facing socio-economic hardship who may be focused on meeting their basic needs and have little time or energy for political involvement. One participant noted that people could often fail to make the connection between what they considered 'politics' and their day-to-day concerns, such as rubbish collection, despite political decision-making having important bearings on these issues.

Some elected officials and candidates highlighted the perceived lack of attractiveness of elected roles as a recruitment barrier, noting clear links with other categories of barriers. These roles were often viewed by the public as demanding, poorly paid, and thankless, with limited ability to effect real change. While fear of abuse was also mentioned, this concern was more frequently discussed in relation to reaction barriers.

3.2.1.5.   Recruitment barriers - findings from interviews with Welsh citizens

As with elected members and candidates, the barriers most frequently expressed by citizen interviewees were around knowledge of systems and processes, and networks. Most felt they did not have enough information to understand or engage with electoral politics, expressing that systems were too complicated and information not readily enough available. Some said it had never been made clear that it was an option that was open to them. One interviewee felt this lack of knowledge could be particularly acute for those from disadvantaged backgrounds:

> "If you are poor, you often don't have enough educational resources to get into these higher roles because they require more – and, in a lot of these deprived areas in the UK, they don't provide the education necessary for us to go for these roles, and they're not even teaching us that these roles are even available." (Welsh citizen)

Many expressed the view that someone would need to be very established in a community and have extensive contacts to be successful in an election. Some interviewees felt this could disadvantage younger people who had moved to an area for study or work. It was also suggested that political structures do not readily enable this kind of networking or confidence-building:

> "The reasons that socio-economic factors play a role in stopping people from considering this [running for election], having the information, or feeling networked is the lack of public meetings and democratic spaces that allow that to happen. […] So, I don't feel elected roles within a community feel aspirational to people because they have no experience of being in an assembly of sorts." (Welsh citizen)

While co-option mechanisms to town, parish and community councils do not rely on campaigning and voting, a few interviewees reflected that these processes still required approval from existing council members who may have prejudices. In one case, an interviewee felt they had been passed over for co-option in favour of another person who was aligned with the council's majority political party; another interviewee described how, despite being initially approached for co-option, they were then blocked as council members believed they would be unable to fulfil their duties due to their shift working pattern.

Several interviewees also highlighted a lack of confidence or a feeling that they were not the "right kind of person" to stand for election. This sense of 'imposter syndrome'[3] was seen as

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[3] Imposter syndrome is defined as a self-doubt about intellect or ability among high-achieving individuals (Huecker et al., 2013). For elected officials, it would be an unsubstantiated self-doubt about their ability to serve as an official.

particularly pronounced when considering more senior elected roles. It was closely linked to issues such as limited networks, with participants noting that a lack of exposure to elected politicians can reinforce the perception that those in office are fundamentally different from ordinary citizens, which further discourages political ambition.

> "I think there's just this perception of 'the council' as this quite scary thing – it just seems too formal if you get what I mean. It seems in that way it's intimidating. It feels like there's a lot of responsibility." (Welsh citizen)

Additionally, some interviewees simply felt that electoral politics was not for them, describing it as "old-fashioned" or expressing a sense of disempowerment about their ability to make a meaningful difference. A few also raised concerns about the potential loss of privacy that comes with putting oneself in the public eye by standing for election. This was linked to fears of receiving abuse or simply invasions of privacy:

> "Hypothetically, if I had enough money to do that for, like, do a campaign and go in for some sort of office [as a] candidate, would I still do it? No, […] I would be too scared because, like, what if I was seen drunk on a night out? Or what if I said something stupid to someone and they just happened to be recording it, or something I might have said on social media, like I might have completely forgotten about in the past, comes up? The anxiety behind that would be huge." (Welsh citizen)

Interviewees were also asked about a perception that politicians did not have the power to enact change, as this was a key finding from the survey of citizens (see Annex B). Some participants challenged this view, pointing out that, for example, Local Authority councillors oversee substantial budgets and MSs can influence significant policy decisions. Others did not see politicians as entirely powerless but believed they should be granted greater authority to effect meaningful change.

A few interviewees agreed with the view that politicians lack the power to enact meaningful change, often expressing frustration with the level of bureaucracy in local politics, which they felt could obstruct or delay the implementation of beneficial ideas. Several felt that more change was possible when driven by civic society and activism, rather than elected politics.

> "A lot of people my age, we are into politics but not in that way, if you get what I mean. I feel like there's a generational switch between activism these days – in the sense that people in my generation are more on social media in terms of activism, rather than getting down in the community." (Welsh citizen)

One interviewee suggested that while elected politicians may be able to create lasting impact, the process is often slow, whereas community work can provide more immediate support to those in need.

> "Some of the stuff they do is archaic. You know, it's rooted in decades and decades of history and very much one of those things that is done that way because it's always been done that way rather than what is the best way for this to work. The

fact that it's so difficult to do even basic good stuff for the people who have elected you – I think that's that makes my decision to stand or not to stand […] easier because that's what I would go in there for, and if I can't do that then I don't really see the value of it." (Welsh citizen)

3.2.2. Resource barriers to democratic participation

The next category of barriers is resource-related. These barriers refer to the time, money, and support needed to stand for election—factors that disproportionately affect individuals with under-represented protected characteristics and those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2019). According to the Commission, resource barriers include personal financial constraints (e.g., being unable to afford campaign expenses or take time off from paid work), as well as time pressures linked to caring responsibilities, limited access to transport or suitable venues, and scheduling conflicts.

3.2.2.1. Resource barriers – findings from the literature

It has been highlighted in the literature that resource-related barriers may prevent people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage from running for office. Most notably, this includes the financial cost of running a campaign, including the cost of travelling across a constituency and printing campaign materials. Financial costs are particularly challenging for independent candidates at local and Senedd elections. However, the literature suggests that campaigns for the nomination of a political party can also be prohibitively expensive within Westminster elections (Macleod et al., 2014). The cost of campaigning is often multiplied for disabled candidates, who may require more expensive transport and accommodation while campaigning (The Disability Policy Centre, 2022; Evans & Reher, 2020). As well as the direct costs of campaigning, there are also major time implications of campaigning. Campaigning in a competitive election is highly time-intensive, which can be a barrier for candidates in work or with caring responsibilities. This has been found to have particularly strong implications for working-class and female candidates (Smith & Davies, 2022; Quilter-Pinner et al., 2022).

Moreover, resource-related barriers are also faced by candidates who are successful in their election, especially those elected to local government. Being an elected representative requires a large amount of travel, especially in rural communities, which can be particularly costly and challenging for disabled representatives. Furthermore, Local Authority councillors in Wales are paid a basic salary of £17,600 a year[4] in 2024 and are expected to work for 21 hours per week (Welsh Government, 2024b). However, surveys of retiring candidates suggest that most councillors work more than the 21 hours a week denoted in the formal guidance (Hibbs, 2022; WLGA, 2017; WLGA, 2022). If councillors require an additional source of income but lack the time to pursue it, the salary for Local Authority councillors may act as a barrier, particularly for individuals experiencing socio-economic disadvantage (Owens, 2022). This could result in such roles being accessible only to those with

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[4] Local Authority councillors are entitled to claim for any travel, care, or subsistence costs they incur when on official business. However, a survey in 2022 finds a very large proportion of councillors eligible to claim for these costs do not do so – with lack of awareness, stigma, embarrassment, and negative electoral consequences identified as possible reasons for low take-up (Owens, 2022).

independent financial means. Relatedly, the role of town or community councillor is largely unpaid, aside from reimbursement for a limited number of expenses. These resourcing challenges are primarily 'supply-side' challenges, as they limit the pool of people able to financially afford to be a Local Authority or town and community councillor (Lovenduski, 2005).

3.2.2.2. Resource barriers – findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners

Experts and practitioners stated that resource barriers can have a major impact on the chance of victory for a candidate experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. One of the most significant barriers is that campaigning for selection or election, especially in competitive contests, requires a substantial time commitment that is difficult to manage alongside full-time work. Those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to have savings to afford to take time off work, and less likely to have flexibility over working hours – as self-employed or senior managerial candidates may be able to. Furthermore, experts and practitioners expressed uncertainty over whether running for elected office counts as meeting welfare criteria to be 'looking for work'. This means there is uncertainty about whether a candidate for elected office in-receipt of benefits could face sanctions for not campaigning for election, and therefore not seeking traditional forms of employment. Related to this, participants noted that individuals with childcare or other care responsibilities often need to pay for private services to free up time for campaigning – an expense that disproportionately impacts women experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

In addition to lost income, candidates may face direct campaigning costs, including: (i) printing leaflets; (ii) deposits required for Senedd elections; (iii) unspoken expenses, such as providing food and drinks for volunteers or feeling obliged to maintain a professional wardrobe; and (iv) costs related to IT equipment, transport, and broadband, all of which can be prohibitive for some candidates. It was highlighted that these barriers could be considerably more acute for independents and members of smaller parties, who could not rely on either the financial backing of a major party, or the inbuilt network of volunteers and supporters.

A key factor highlighted by some experts and practitioners is that people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage tend to be more risk-averse with money, as even a small financial loss can have severe consequences for themselves and their families. Given the relatively low pay of local councillors and the widespread perception that they often work many more hours than they are compensated for (Owens, 2022), some participants felt that candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage might face a pay cut if elected to a Local Authority council, and especially if serving on an unpaid town or community council. A related and important barrier is the current absence of financial support for those who lose their seat, unlike the 'Resettlement Grant' available to members losing Senedd or Westminster positions.[5] This has meant individuals have faced a sudden and significant loss

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[5] It should be noted that this matter is currently under consideration; the Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024 includes provision for the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru to determine the amount of

of income if not re-elected. Participants argued that this risk has particularly discouraged more risk-averse candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, especially those with additional expenses, such as disabled individuals or those with caregiving responsibilities, from standing for election.

3.2.2.3. Resource barriers - findings from survey of elected members and candidates

In the survey of elected members and candidates, a lack of time to campaign for the election was viewed as the most significant resourcing barrier for town, parish, community, and Local Authority councillors and candidates. Meanwhile, for Senedd candidates, a lack of money to campaign for the election was identified as the main barrier. The cause of this disparity is unclear, but may be linked with the larger constituencies in which Senedd candidates must campaign, especially the very large 'regional' or 'list' seats of the 1999-2021 Senedd electoral system.

Among Senedd Members who raised this concern, all reported receiving no financial support during their campaign. On average (among those who reported a figure above zero), the direct expense they, or their household, incurred as a result of their first successful Senedd candidacy was £780. These respondents rated their position on the social ladder at an average of 5, compared to an average rating of 5.9 among all survey respondents.

Figure 7. Most significant resourcing barrier faced when seeking election to the town, parish, or community council for the first time. Source: survey of town, parish or community councillors and candidates (n = 22)
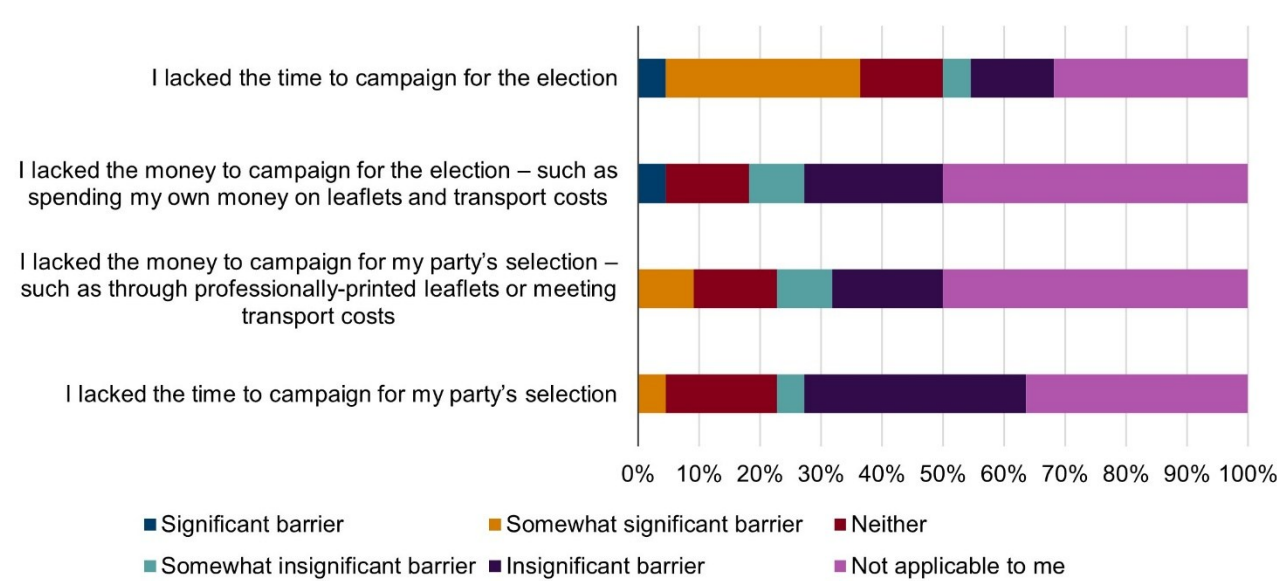
any resettlement payment payable by a local authority, as prescribed in regulations which Welsh Ministers may make.

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Figure 8. Most significant resourcing barrier faced when seeking election to the Local Authority for the first time. Source: survey of from Local Authority councillors and candidates (n = 52)
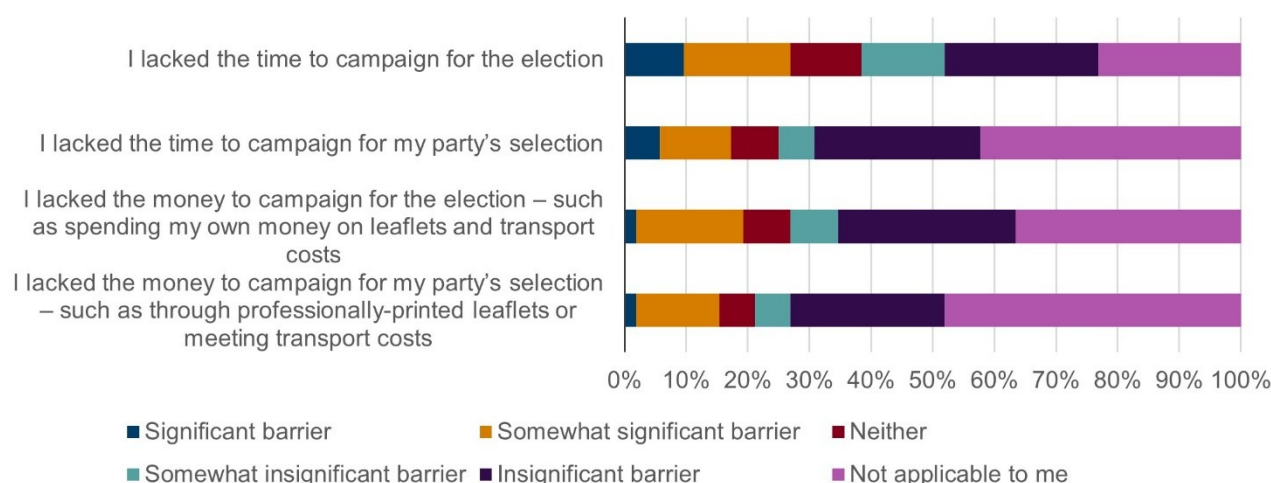
Note: One respondent who stood as an independent candidate in a Local Authority council election, but was not elected, has been excluded from this table.

Figure 9. Most significant resourcing barrier faced when seeking election to the Welsh Parliament or Assembly for the first time. Source: survey of MSs and Senedd candidates (n = 19)
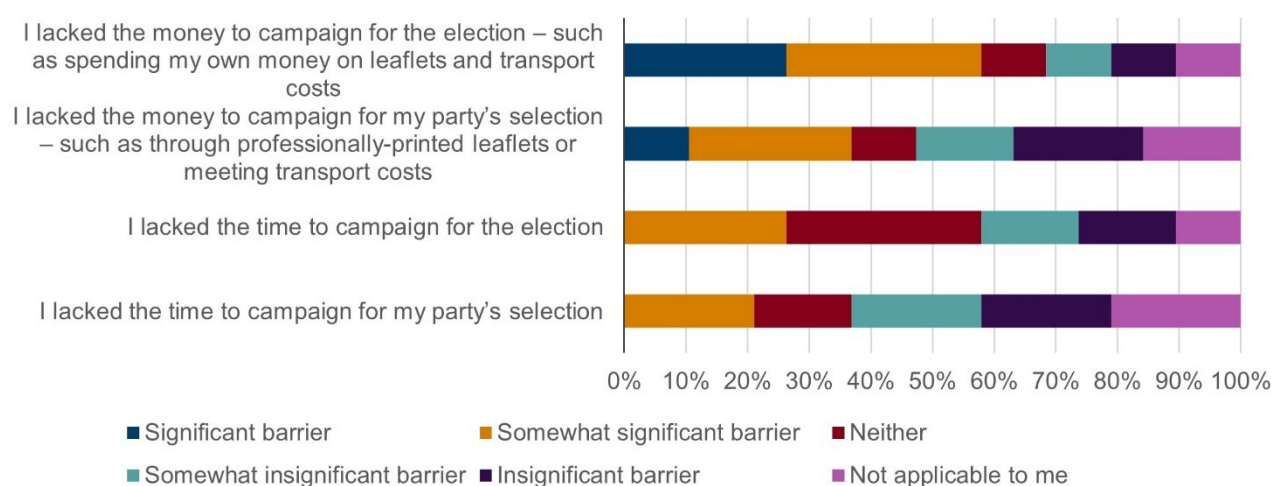
Note: Two responses from individuals who stood as independent candidates for the Welsh Parliament or Assembly, but were not elected, have been excluded from this table

3.2.2.4. Resource barriers - findings from interviews with elected members and candidates

Aligning with the survey findings, a crucial resource barrier highlighted during interviews with elected members and candidates was the substantial time commitment involved in elected politics and its potential impact on career prospects. Many interviewees emphasised the difficulty of balancing a full-time job with campaigning or, if elected to an unpaid or low-paid position, managing those responsibilities alongside work. For Senedd members and full-time Local Authority councillors, participants noted how taking time off could particularly affect younger people's careers, both financially and in terms of career progression. The

changing nature of work was also discussed, with the rise of zero-hours contracts and the decline of nationalised and unionised industries making it increasingly uncommon for employers to accommodate time off for election campaigns.

> "I was very fortunate that my selection and then going for election coincided with me becoming my own boss. I was lucky I could juggle work commitments with what was a really intensive [election campaign]. The selection, as I said, that was quite straightforward. But, I mean, the election was in May - we were out certainly at weekends, but not very long afterwards we were out in the middle of the week as well from about January. So, I think, the hours that we actually clocked up doing that was something that I had the luxury of being able to do. And, obviously, I was earning some money through my freelance stuff. So, yes, I survived. I can imagine if you're doing a full-time job, you know, you either give that up with obvious financial implications or you can't put the time into the campaign. So, I would say that time and money are quite key if you're going to do it properly." (County councillor)

Furthermore, several participants highlighted the high costs associated with standing for election, particularly expenses for designing and printing leaflets and posters, as well as transport for canvassing. Participants noted that those in rural areas faced greater challenges with accessibility, with cars being almost a necessity.

Interviewees observed that independents and candidates from smaller parties encountered further difficulties due to the lack of major party resources, such as funding and volunteer support, to help cover these campaign costs. One interviewee suggested that in order to successfully seek election, some aspiring candidates may feel obliged to "fly the party flag" even if this compromised some of their values, due to the resource implications of running independently.

For younger and less well-off individuals in particular, the risks of not being re-elected were seen to be heightened, as they could be left "high and dry", particularly for councillor roles where there historically has been no 'Resettlement Grant' to support stability. On a related note, some interviewees argued that the role of a local councillor can lack career progression and is not respected enough by employers to be a viable career option:

> "I know some younger county councillors in [Local Authority] and this is what they've been doing since they left school. […] And then, they've spent ten years as a local councillor with a not necessarily great salary – and, well, what do they do next? If people are thinking about that before getting elected … it's a very good argument not to stand, right? Because if you do want a career, there are things you need to do – like, get a university degree – and if being a councillor is basically a full-time job, then that's obviously not going to work." (Community councillor)

Closely related to this, some participants elected at town, community, parish, or county levels highlighted the resource costs associated with holding office. Several also noted a

reluctance among councillors to claim available expenses due to concerns about how the public might perceive such claims.

> "It costs me money to be a town councillor. I get £256 this year for expenses. I mean, I think I worked it out, I get paid less than 50p an hour. And then you've got to make your way to different community events which you know, you can't claim travel back for and all that sort of stuff […] people take days off work off or close their businesses for the afternoon. And, I mean, it is great to be at a school fête at 3 in the afternoon. But how many people can you know, afford to do that, or how many people's bosses are accommodating enough to say, 'yeah, don't worry, have the afternoon off to go to a school fête'? […] I'm sure there probably is some provision where you're allowed a certain number of hours to do things like this […] but the reality is that probably not the culture […] particularly unless you're, I guess quite well established." (Community councillor)

Several participants also highlighted the specific challenges faced by those with caring responsibilities, which were noted to disproportionately affect women. These challenges include the increased 'time poverty' experienced by carers, as well as the financial burden of paying for childcare or other care services needed to free up time for campaigning or fulfilling elected roles.

All of these resource barriers were linked to a disproportionate representation of older, retired, and relatively well-off elected officials. This issue was noted for councillors in local politics in particular, as these are not full-time paid positions. This was also reflected in our fieldwork, in which white, middle-class men over the age of 50 formed the majority of elected officials taking part in interviews.

A minority view among elected councillors was that financial and time-related barriers are not relevant, as the costs are minimal and the salary is generous for the work involved.

> "Nobody would be prevented from standing from a financial point of view because it doesn't cost them anything to stand. They only have to pay some small amount of money if they're successful, so there aren't any barriers as far as financial things. And, if they haven't got time to canvass or campaign, then they haven't got time to do their work as a councillor – so it [time as a barrier] is pretty irrelevant I think." (County councillor)

3.2.2.5.   Resource barriers - findings from interviews with Welsh citizens

Similarly in the interviews with Welsh citizens, participants highlighted time and money as the biggest resource barriers. Some expressed that they simply would not be able to take the time off work to campaign, either because their job would not facilitate this or because they could not afford to take a pay cut or extended leave.

> "The risk of spending volunteer time to [campaign], and then if you don't get in, then you've spent all that time, where I could have been working when I needed to work, because I need to work five days a week to keep paying the bills. So, it's that like I don't have that extra capacity within my bank account to allow me to do

a day a week or anything to promote myself as a potential candidate." (Welsh citizen)

Financial constraints were closely linked with time, as time was often understood in terms of lost earnings. Interviewees also highlighted concerns about the financial costs involved with standing, particularly for those not affiliated with major parties. Some described the general stress that could be associated with not having enough money, feeling that if money worries were part of someone's daily life, they would have very little space to think about standing for election.

These issues were noted to be exacerbated for those with caring responsibilities, particularly women with young children, who were already busy and often overstretched. One interviewee reflected on the need for parents to spend long periods away from their children while seeking election, and the sacrifice this involved:

> "You have to lose something in order to stand. You have to decide you're ready to lose something." (Welsh citizen)

3.2.3. Reaction barriers to democratic participation

The Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019) categorises reaction barriers to democratic participation as negative behaviours and responses individuals face – both from within political parties and the wider public – based on their protected characteristics, which can discourage or obstruct their political participation. These include experiences of harassment, discrimination, racism, sexism, and other forms of prejudice.

3.2.3.1. Reaction barriers – findings from the literature

Chronologically, the final barrier a candidate for elected office can face is the reaction of the selectorate and the electorate. In this context, the 'selectorate' refers to the people who decide a party's representatives in an election – for example, the local branch members of a party and the executive committee, which agrees on a short list in accordance with party rules (Rahat, 2007). For independent candidates, this stage is not relevant. There is evidence to suggest that selectorates have biases or prejudices which make them less likely to nominate candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, especially in campaigns which are considered "winnable" (House of Commons, 2010; Ashe, 2019; Waltz & Schippers, 2021). However, selection processes have been found to vary significantly when a 'snap' or early election is called, as candidates tend to be selected through expedited processes with greater control exercised by the central party – which can lead to more equitable representation of candidates experiencing forms of socio-economic disadvantage (Murray, 2021).

In the UK House of Commons, Members of Parliament (MPs) have over recent decades become far more likely to have worked in business, party politics, and professional occupations – with fewer MPs having backgrounds in manual work, teaching, or local government (Cracknell et al., 2022). Some papers suggest elected Senedd members are more likely to have a background in 'politics facilitating professions' such as law, public affairs, higher education, and political research (Awan-Scully et al., 2018). This is supported by Cairney and colleagues' (2016) coding of British legislatures by previous formative

occupation, which finds that, in 2011, the Assembly had the highest proportion of members with a professional and politics-facilitating[6] background compared to the House of Commons, Scottish Parliament, and British Members of the European Parliament. The Welsh Assembly had the lowest proportion of members from blue- or white-collar backgrounds, with only 1.7% of its members, compared to 9.7% in the Scottish Parliament at the same time. However, the Assembly was more representative of the population regarding private education and Oxbridge representation. These findings suggest that the UK – and perhaps Wales in particular – faces a particular challenge regarding low representation of individuals from non-politics-facilitating and non-professional backgrounds, with an especially low proportion of elected members coming from 'blue' or 'white' collar professions.[7]

However, there is also a risk of political parties selecting candidates experiencing socio-economic or related disadvantage as a way to complete a "tick-box" exercise, especially for candidates with intersectional experiences, including working-class women and ethnic minority women. This can undermine acceptance from other elected officials and the wider public and recognition of a socio-economically disadvantaged candidate's merit and achievements (Begum & Sobolewska, 2024; Murray, 2021).

There is limited research on how individuals experiencing socio-economic disadvantage perform after being selected by political parties – specifically, whether they encounter biased or prejudicial responses from voters. Some of the literature cited above suggests that the selection process is often far more prejudicial and biased than election campaigns. A study across the UK, United States of America, and Argentina finds no evidence that voters discriminate against working-class candidates – and in fact found British voters were more likely to vote for a working-class candidate over a middle-class candidate 53% of the time (Carnes & Lupu, 2016). Turning to protected characteristics, Evans and Reher (2020) note that "despite the ableism present within political party culture and within political recruitment and campaigning processes, very few of our interviewees reported negative reactions from voters to their disability." A contrasting study by Martin and Blinder (2021) finds evidence that ethnic minority candidates face prejudicial voting. For example, it finds that candidates from a black Caribbean background face prejudice only when voters are informed that they advocate 'pro-minority policies' or were selected through affirmative methods, while candidates from a Pakistani background face direct discrimination regardless of their described political stances or selection method (Martin & Blinder, 2021).

Furthermore, the reaction of a minority of the general public – often expressed through social media but also through physical violence – creates a further barrier which disincentivises standing for election or re-election (Local Government Association, 2022). This can be considered as a wider impact of a 'demand-side' prejudice which intimidates

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[6] Cairney and colleagues (2016) define 'professional' careers as those requiring formal qualifications (e.g. teachers, lawyers, accountants) and 'politics-facilitating' careers as roles that offer a more direct route into political work (e.g. party worker, trade unionists, journalists, think-tank researchers, local councillors).
[7] Keating and Cairney group 'blue' and 'white' collar professions together due to their low representation in parliament. The rationale for this is explained in a previous article: "We have grouped routine and junior white-collar workers with manual workers [i.e. 'blue collar'] and distinguished these from professionals on the one hand and private business managers on the other" (2005: 45).

socio-economically disadvantaged people from standing as candidates – thus having a wider 'supply-side' impact (Lovenduski, 2005). There is strong evidence that women councillors are significantly less likely to seek re-election to local government than male counterparts or continue in politics in other capacities after leaving local government (Allen, 2013). A study of local elected members in Wales (Farrell & Titcombe, 2016), using interviews with 18 councillors, finds evidence that – alongside resource constraints – a 'dominant male political culture' and 'sexist behaviour' are major factors which reduce women's desire to stand for election and re-election to Welsh local government.

3.2.3.2. Reaction barriers – findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners

Experts and practitioners highlighted the persistence of stereotypes and prejudice in both electorates and selectorates, often without making a clear distinction between the two. They described how certain groups, such as disabled people or individuals without high-status professional backgrounds, were viewed as lacking the necessary capabilities to hold office. These assumptions were not always explicit; instead, coded language – such as referring to someone as "not representative of the majority" – was described as being used to justify opposition to a candidate's selection or election. These views often operated at a subconscious level, reflecting deep-seated biases within the political environment.

Another major concern raised was the safety of candidates and elected members. Participants expressed that threats and harassment, both online and offline, appeared to be on the rise. This was seen as particularly acute in local government, where individuals are more publicly recognisable in their communities and may receive less institutional protection than higher-profile politicians like MSs or MPs. While socio-economic disadvantage alone was not widely viewed as a key factor in experiencing threats, participants noted that women, ethnic minorities, and individuals with other protected characteristics were more frequently targeted. One participant emphasised that people with greater financial resources might be better able to safeguard themselves through measures such as home security systems.

3.2.3.3. Reaction barriers – findings from survey of elected members and candidates

Within the survey of elected members and candidates, reaction-related barriers were reported at similar levels by both elected representatives and candidates who responded to the surveys. The most commonly cited concerns included hostility and toxicity during the campaign period, both in person and online, as well as conscious and unconscious bias from voters.

Among town, parish, or community councillors and candidates who agreed with at least one of these concerns, the proportion of men and women was the same (both 45%). The largest age group within this cohort was those aged 45 to 54 (27%). Among Local Authority councillors and candidates who expressed concern about such barriers, men and women were again represented in equal proportion (both 48%), with most falling within the 55 to 64 age group (30%). Among Members of the Senedd and Senedd candidates who identified

with at least one of these concerns, all were men (100%), and the largest age group was 45 to 54-year-olds (43%).

Figure 10. Most significant recruitment barrier faced when seeking election to the town, parish, or community council for the first time. Source: survey of town, parish or community councillors and candidates (n = 22)

Figure 11. Most significant recruitment barrier faced when seeking election to the Local Authority for the first time. Source: survey of Local Authority councillors and candidates (n = 52)

Note: One respondent who stood as an independent candidate in a Local Authority council election, but was not elected, has been excluded from this table.
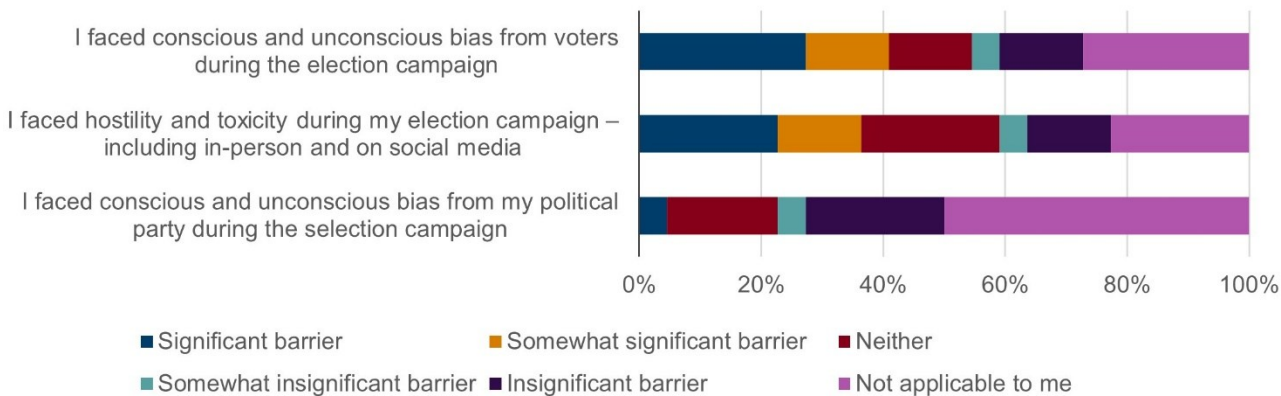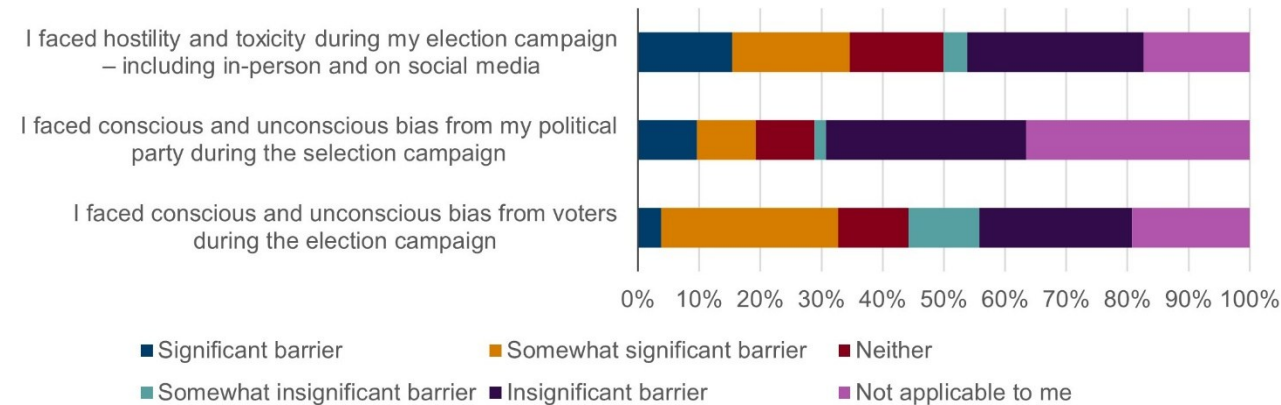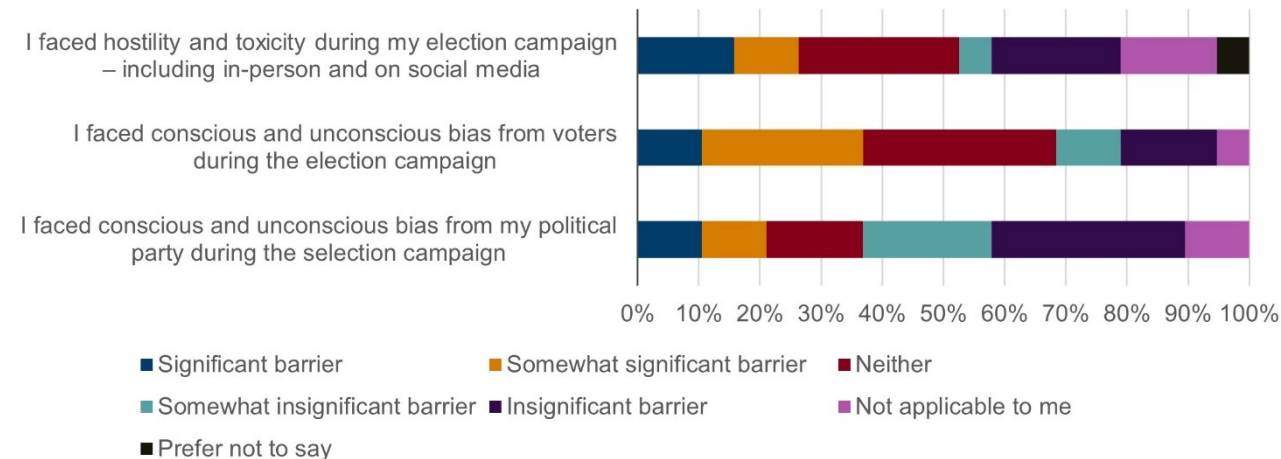
Figure 12. Most significant recruitment barrier faced when seeking election to the Welsh Parliament or Assembly for the first time. Source: survey of MSs and Senedd candidates (n = 19)

Note: Two responses from individuals who stood as independent candidates for the Welsh Parliament or Assembly, but were not elected, have been excluded from this table

3.2.3.4. Reaction barriers – findings from interviews with elected members and candidates

Many participants strongly highlighted issues of toxicity and hostility faced by those engaging in electoral politics, often sharing stories of incidents they, or their colleagues, had dealt with. In many cases, this abuse came from the public, often occurring online via social media, but sometimes involving threatening letters or even face-to-face confrontations.

Some participants related this to negative perceptions some of the public have of elected members, including that they are overpaid and in receipt of extensive benefits, or that they are incompetent because they are unable to solve all problems. A few felt that councils and parties had a responsibility to better inform the public to address some of these perceptions.

In some cases, abuse also came from fellow party or council members, due to negative cultures within elected bodies.

This abuse not only acted as a barrier to those in elected positions but also made them hesitate to recommend to others that they should consider standing for election.

> "I know people who have had very bad experiences running for elections – prejudice but also harassment, hate, threats, and all sorts of other stuff. It normally, from my point of view, tends to be female candidates that experience that. […] It's quite difficult to try to convince them – or, not necessarily convince but also ensure – that they will have support because they have seen what other people have gone through and don't want that on themselves. It's quite hard to say, 'it will be fine' because you know that it won't be fine, there is a likelihood that you will face that sort of harassment and threats." (Town councillor)

While some abuse was more generically targeted, a few participants had heard about, or experienced, abuse based on protected characteristics. One participant described receiving ongoing targeted and misogynistic abuse from council colleagues and receiving no support from the town clerk or others with positions of responsibility. Another participant felt afraid to come out to party colleagues as transgender due to societal transphobia, and explained how they had faced certain barriers in seeking to stand for the Senedd election under the gender quotas system used by some political parties.

3.2.3.5. Reaction barriers – findings from interviews with Welsh citizens

Similarly, in interviews with Welsh citizens, all participants expressed concerns about the abuse and hostility that elected members might face, with some citing this as their primary reason for not wanting to stand for election. Toxicity on social media was highlighted in particular, and some felt that politicians were not protected enough, which put them off seeking the "spotlight". Some stated that this toxicity could be intensified for minority groups, with one gay interviewee fearing their sexuality could put them at heightened risk if they were to stand for election. Negativity and abuse within political parties and elected bodies were also noted; one interviewee described an example of openly hostile language being used towards minorities within a political party.

"You are never going to take away people disagreeing with elected politicians. That is the nature of political debate. But some of the viciousness, some of the personal abuse and attacks. You know, no one in their right mind stays in a job where that is just part of it, you know. And I think that's something that could easily put off some really, really good potential elected members." (Welsh citizen)

"It is vile what some people think is acceptable to say to our elected representatives, particularly on social media. […] The sheer level of abuse they get just for doing their job means that I wouldn't consider it." (Welsh Citizen)

3.3. Addressing barriers to democratic participation

A key part of this research is to identify means by which these barriers to democratic participation could be addressed in future. To achieve this aim, this sub-chapter first provides an overview of previous efforts to increase the socio-economic diversity of Welsh politics before turning to findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners, elected members, and citizens.

3.3.1. Previous and ongoing efforts to address barriers – findings from the literature

Since the beginning of devolution in the late 1990s, there have been important efforts to remove barriers which affect those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage from participating in the democratic process in Wales. The key efforts have been identified below, being categorised using the 'recruitment, resourcing, reaction' model.

3.3.1.1. Previous and ongoing efforts to address recruitment barriers

Creating mentoring schemes and social networks for political aspirants has been one key approach used by organisations to increase diversity – particularly in efforts to increase the 'supply' of female candidates and therefore the representation of women in elected office (Lovenduski, 2005; Maguire, 2018). For example, the Conservative Party has a networking and mentorship organisation for women (Women2Win).

At a Wales-wide level, a mentoring scheme between elected Assembly and local government officials and people from groups under-represented in Welsh politics called 'Step Up Cymru' was established in 2009/2010. An evaluation found that the scheme cost £75,000 and had a positive impact upon the 34 mentees' democratic participation and political aspirations (Senedd Cymru, 2011). More recently, a mentoring and engagement scheme for potential candidates for local government, 'Diversity in Democracy', was implemented from 2014 to 2017 and supported 51 mentees, of whom 20 stated they wanted to stand after the programme (McConnel & Stevenson, 2019). Other elements of the scheme – including a communications campaign and employer engagement initiative – were deemed less successful by the evaluators.

More recently, a partnership between the Women's Equality Network Wales, Stonewall Cymru, Disability Wales, and Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team Wales has been formed to deliver the 'Equal Power Equal Voice' mentoring programme. In the 2022 local

elections, nine mentees stood for election and five were elected (Local Government and Housing Committee, 2023).

3.3.1.2. Previous and ongoing efforts to address resource barriers

In response to resource-related barriers, political parties provide resources to support the campaigns of nominated members. Furthermore, some organisations affiliated with parties have their own systems for tackling barriers during selection contests. For example, the Communication Workers Union (CWU) has a programme to support potential candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage to run and win Labour Party selection contests (CWU, n.d.).

In addition to this, at the national level, the Access to Elected Office Fund was piloted in 2021-22, aiming to improve the representation of disabled people in elected office. A review of the Fund highlighted the practical challenges faced by disabled candidates and stated that the fund provided crucial support, although it could be extended earlier into the campaign and selection process and support disabled people who win election to perform their duties (Davies et al., 2023). The Elections and Elected Bodies (Wales) Act 2024, recently passed by the Senedd, mandates Welsh Ministers to establish services and financial assistance schemes to promote diversity among candidates for the Senedd and local government elections. These services can include provisions of information, advice, coaching, training and work experience. The Act also includes a duty for Welsh Ministers to publish voluntary guidance for political parties to develop, publish, implement and review diversity and inclusion strategies for local and national Welsh elections and collect, collate and publish diversity information on Senedd candidates. The guidance was published in March 2025 (Welsh Government, 2025).

3.3.1.3. Previous and ongoing efforts to address reaction barriers

To encourage women and non-binary people to stand and to tackle demand-side prejudice from selectorates, some parties have introduced forms of gender quotas for internal party contests. The Labour Party has used all-women shortlists in some constituencies for Welsh and UK-wide elections for many years, while Plaid Cymru has long-held policies to guarantee women's representation at the top of regional Welsh Assembly lists (Electoral Reform Society, 2024). The Conservative Party have used an 'A-List' across the United Kingdom to encourage the selection of women and other underrepresented groups (Ashe et al., 2022). The specificities of this have changed following reform to the Senedd voting system prior to the 2026 Welsh Parliament elections. The Welsh Government guidance – discussed above – includes guidance to support political parties to consider implementing voluntary gender quotas for Senedd elections (Welsh Government, 2025). In addition to this, research by the Local Government Association (LGA) has been cited by Welsh Ministers, suggesting a way forward to tackle abuse and intimidation of local government candidates and representatives (Local Government Association, 2022; Welsh Government, 2022). Its recommendations include calling on: i) councils and partners to address the impacts of abuse on councillors' mental health and wellbeing, ii) police forces to take a risk-based approach that accounts for the specific risks that councillors face, as they do with other high-risk individuals, such as Members of Parliament, and iii) social media companies to provide better and faster routes for councillors reporting abuse and misinformation online.

3.3.2. Addressing barriers – findings from fieldwork with experts and practitioners

Experts and practitioners identified a wide range of measures to address socio-economic barriers to democratic participation. However, a key challenge they highlighted was ensuring that interventions do not only reach 'the usual suspects' – those already engaged in politics. For example, some participants felt that certain programmes, like mentoring, primarily benefit those who are already somewhat politically engaged. They argued that more effort is needed to reach beyond this group and broaden the pool of potential candidates. Proposed strategies to achieve this included earlier and more comprehensive democratic education, accessible materials provided by political parties, and targeted outreach by elected members, such as increased engagement with community and representative groups.

Interventions proposed included the following measures to tackle recruitment barriers:

- Mentoring and coaching programmes, which build people's confidence and self-efficacy. It was noted that this was particularly important for those who do not 'look like' the average politician, as mentors and networks of those with similar goals can help to address feelings of being out of place or inadequate.
- Clearer guidance on selection and election processes, emphasising that political parties, the Welsh Local Government Association, and the Welsh Government all have a role to play in increasing openness. It was widely felt that most ordinary people wouldn't know where to start if they wanted to stand for election, which prevents them from even considering it.
- Modernising politics and promoting these changes, which would then shift the public perception of these spaces, e.g., adopting more accessible ways of working such as hybrid working and job shares, changing the culture of political spaces, and focusing on respect both for and by elected officials.

Similarly, the following measures were proposed by experts and practitioners to tackle resource barriers:

- Financial support for campaigns was one of the most frequently suggested interventions. Providing practical financial support to candidates to cover campaigning costs was seen as crucial. In particular, covering childcare expenses was a popular idea among experts and practitioners. Many also emphasised the importance of adopting a holistic approach, considering less obvious costs such as clothing, makeup for women, taxis for safety, and similar expenses. There was broad support for expanding eligibility criteria for assistance through the Access to Elected Office Fund. Given the challenges of measuring socio-economic disadvantage, many recommended initially focusing on caring responsibilities as a starting point.
- Rules and guidelines, which allow people to run for election without losing their job, to reduce fears of the long-term financial and career consequences of standing for election. Furthermore, some advocated for a 'right to run' policy – with employers mandated to provide time off work for campaigning during the formal regulated campaign period for a Local Authority or Senedd election. The idea of a dedicated

fund to make up for forgone income for candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage was also proposed.

- Moving away from traditional working structures, for example, enabling hybrid meetings so people did not have to pay for transport to attend, job shares, creating and enforcing spending caps, and increasing the level of pay for local councillors.

Finally, participants proposed some measures to tackle reaction barriers, such as:

- Legally-mandated quotas to ensure candidates are more representative of a range of protected characteristics.
- More reassurance of safety, including being clearer about what will be done to protect candidates or elected officials, and what will be done if something happens.
- Changing the culture, as a threatening and abusive culture often comes from within parties themselves.

Proposals for more structural changes were also made, including introducing job-sharing for elected positions in Wales, term limits, increasing the salaries of Local Authority councillors, and moving to Single Transferable Vote[8] across Welsh Local Authorities.

More broadly, many participants emphasised that even the best-intentioned initiatives cannot succeed without sustained, long-term financial support. Some called on the Welsh Government and political parties to 'put their money where their mouth is' by funding more programmes. Numerous participants also argued for legislation to require political parties to meet their diversity commitments, backed by centrally provided financial resources. It was widely felt that, currently, efforts to increase socio-economic diversity rely too heavily on parties' discretion – some of which may not prioritise representation or lack the necessary resources to promote it effectively.

Several participants highlighted that, despite the extensive work done to promote diversity, there is limited evidence on what works to increase socio-economic diversity. It was felt that better data and evaluation are important to ensure initiatives have the intended impacts.

3.3.3. Addressing barriers – findings from survey of elected members and candidates

In the survey of elected members and candidates, most respondents were largely unfamiliar with the Access to Elected Office Fund. However, among the three types of elected members and candidates, those standing for the Senedd were the most familiar with the fund (37% reported being very or somewhat familiar), while Local Authority councillors and candidates were the least familiar (12% very or somewhat familiar).

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[8] Single Transferable Vote is a voting system where voters rank candidates in order of preference, and if a candidate receives a certain number of votes (quota), they are elected. Surplus votes are transferred to other candidates according to the voters' next preferences until all seats are filled. It is viewed by advocates as more proportional than existing voting systems in Wales (First Past the Post) and creating the opportunity for larger and more competitive ward-level elections, reducing the number of uncontested or vacant seats. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021 allows principal councils to decide whether to adopt Single Transferable Vote, but some interviewees suggested that this should be mandated.

Figure 13. Are you familiar with the Access to Elected Office Fund? Source: surveys of elected members of candidates

Legend: ■ Very familiar ■ Somewhat familiar ■ Neither ■ Somewhat unfamiliar ■ Very unfamiliar ■ Not sure
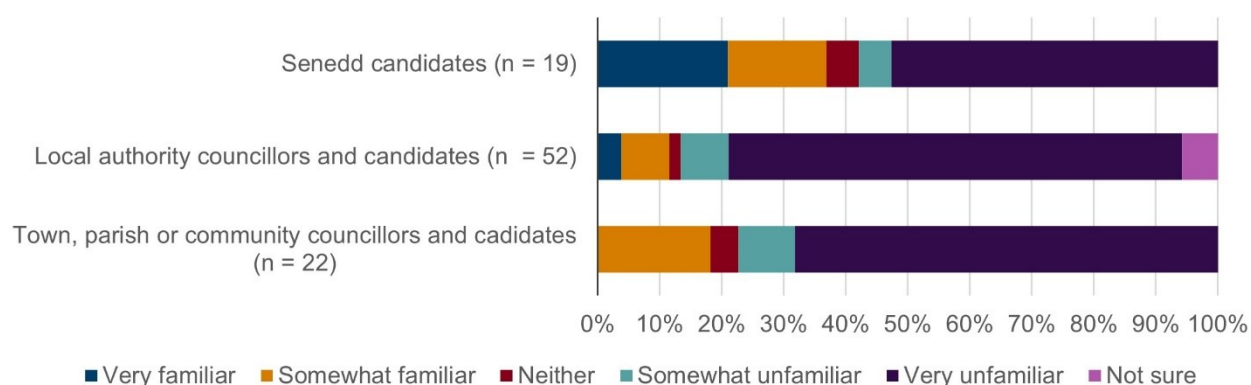
We also asked candidates how they would recommend adapting the Elected Office Fund to better support disabled candidates and those facing other forms of socio-economic disadvantage. As most respondents were unfamiliar with the fund, few provided a response to this open-ended question. Among the limited answers received, suggestions included improving the fund's design by increasing publicity and awareness, enabling direct applications rather than relying on party channels, and making the fund available at least six months before the formal campaign period.

The survey also asked candidates for their views on mentoring schemes like Equal Power Equal Voice. Overall, most respondents either did not answer or were unaware of these programmes. Among those who did respond, many people were unaware that such initiatives exist, highlighting the need for greater efforts to raise awareness and encourage participation. Another point raised was the value of mentoring, especially when it amplifies the voices of individuals with lived experience, and these schemes are seldom discussed in schools, workplaces, or community settings.

Finally, the survey included an open-ended question asking respondents to suggest changes to help remove barriers to elected office for people facing socio-economic disadvantage in Welsh politics. The main responses, grouped by type of respondent, are summarised below:

Town, parish, or community councillors and candidates: Respondents emphasised the need for financial assistance for candidates from disadvantaged backgrounds and mentioned that local, town and community councillors should receive better remuneration in recognition of their contributions. Some advocated for electoral reforms such as a "one vote only" system[9] in multi-member wards to promote fairness and equity in representation. Other suggestions included improving support for individuals with hidden disabilities or health conditions, scheduling meetings outside typical working hours to accommodate those

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[9] Currently, voters can vote for individuals from multiple parties. There is some evidence from English local elections in the 1990s that voters are more likely to vote for male candidates than female candidates (Rallings, et al., 1998). Removing the ability for voters to pick individual candidates may have controversies, but could also reduce this voter-level bias against female (and perhaps other socio-economically disadvantaged) candidates.

in employment, and launching public information campaigns on social media to raise awareness, and boost engagement in politics.

Local Authority councillors and candidates: Some respondents suggested the introduction of the Single Transferable Vote.[10] It was mentioned that it would be beneficial to reduce the number of councillors while increasing pay, making the role more viable for people in work or with caring responsibilities. Financial support was seen as critical, particularly for independent candidates, and some respondents proposed accessible routes to campaign funding. Improving the physical accessibility of meetings and campaign spaces, as well as making duties more manageable for individuals with disabilities or those with caring responsibilities, were also highlighted. Additional recommendations included better access to Welsh-specific information and training beyond English-only or UK-wide Local Government Association sessions, avoiding elections in winter months due to safety concerns, and offering mentorship from experienced councillors.

Senedd candidates: Respondents mentioned the need to elect more "ordinary" people as role models, encouraging people to participate in politics. Concerns were raised about bias in party candidate selection processes, with particular disadvantages faced by independent or underrepresented candidates. There was scepticism towards quota systems like "zipping", with some describing them as unfair and others as risking excluding transgender candidates from politics.[11] Other suggestions focused on levelling the playing field through public funding for core campaign materials, limits on campaign spending, and simplified election procedures. Further proposals included improving childcare provision at the Senedd, offering free and impartial mentoring and training, and stronger accountability mechanisms, such as the ability to dismiss elected members for misconduct.

3.3.4. Addressing barriers – findings from interviews with elected members and candidates

Following a series of questions on the barriers to democratic participation in Wales, elected members and candidates were invited to discuss ways of addressing and removing barriers to democratic participation in Wales.

3.3.4.1. Findings from elected members and candidates – addressing recruitment barriers

Outreach

The most frequently raised method for addressing recruitment barriers was outreach, sharing information, and taking a person-centred approach. Many felt that the best approach was simply talking to people about what different elected bodies do, demystifying processes, and encouraging them to get involved.

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[10] Single Transferable Vote is a voting system where voters rank candidates in order of preference, and if a candidate receives a certain number of votes (quota), they are elected. Surplus votes are transferred to other candidates according to the voters' next preferences until all seats are filled.

[11] 'Zipping' refers to the system by which some political parties have chosen to implement voluntary gender quotas for Welsh Parliament elections. It means that some positions within a political parties' list of candidates for a constituency must be held by women.

"Most people when you first talk to them say, 'oh, I don't know […] I'm not capable of doing that sort of thing, you know, I haven't got a clue. What's it all about?' And well, if you haven't got a clue, you're hardly going to want to go for something, are you? You know, you've got to be an odd sort of person actually, to go for something if you don't know anything about what it entails, really. So that is one message, it's personal contact and you know actual conversations with people, that gets them involved." (County councillor)

Engagement of young people was felt to be particularly important, including through schools-based outreach and Youth Councils. However, it was noted that politics needed to be made more relevant for young people, otherwise they risked disengagement.

Positive advocacy and transparency

A few suggested that elected members should be "advocates" for their roles, and some reflected that they had successfully engaged people this way in the past. One participant explained that it was important to explain to people how they could bring value and work on things they care about, to demonstrate how elected roles could align with their lives.

"When I got elected as a county councillor, because of my [professional] background, I was really interested in going on the subcommittees for social care and that type of thing. I think people need to be aware that, you know, if they have got a background they […] use that to their advantage when they get elected, you know, they can marry that connection up between what they're doing now or what they have done, and it will reflect and help them when they're on the on the Council as well." (County councillor)

Similarly, some participants commented on the importance of transparency in communication, and giving realistic and accurate information to the public.

"When I was first persuaded to stand, I was told you only had to attend one meeting a month, but in reality, there is a huge amount of work involved. There's a lot of training, there is constituency work, there are council meetings and committees. […] There is an expectation that, to ensure the electorate is content with you, you have to work hard. So, we don't say you just have to attend one meeting a month and that's it. No, we ensure that we are as realistic as possible, and people recognise that it does require a commitment." (County councillor)

Training and mentorship programmes

Training and mentorship programmes were mentioned by a few participants as possible routes to encouraging recruitment, including buddying programmes with more experienced councillors. Some also suggested that mandatory training for elected members should be implemented, both to improve the quality of councillors' work, and to possibly address concerns amongst those standing that they did not have adequate experience.

Quotas

Participants had differing views on more prescriptive initiatives such as quotas, referred to as 'positive discrimination' by some. A few felt that these had been successful and should be continued, whereas others felt that candidates should be selected "on merit" and were

uncomfortable with quotas. A significant unintended consequence of the 'zipping' policy that while not legal required, has been adopted by some political parties to ensure equal representation of women in party lists for the 2026 Senedd elections, was identified by one interviewee and former candidate, who stated that they cannot run for the next election as the 'zipping' system would either force them to come out as trans or risk being outed during the selection or election campaign. This risk of being outed was identified as the only significant barrier preventing this interviewee from participating in future elections. The interviewee stated that they held an interest in running for Local Authority elections should there be no 'zipping' at this level.

3.3.4.2. Findings from elected members and candidates – addressing resource barriers

Flexible working opportunities

For resource barriers, flexible arrangements such as hybrid meetings were noted as important to improve accessibility for those who are working or have caring responsibilities. Some cited meeting times as a major challenge, as these often occurred during working hours. There were suggestions that council structures were skewed to favour officers over elected members, such as holding meetings during normal working hours.

Participants had differing views on job sharing for elected officials. Some were in favour of this idea, feeling it could allow more people to stand for election, and argued that it worked well in other contexts. Most were concerned about voter confusion and a possible lack of accountability (particularly for more senior roles), and felt it was important for constituents to know and have a relationship with their local representative. Support was higher for job sharing to be available at the Local Authority level rather than for Members of the Senedd.

> "I can sort of understand the logic [of job-sharing], but I don't agree with it at all. I think it removes the individual candidates' accountability. Accountability is critical." (County councillor)

To address challenges in balancing work responsibilities with campaign demands, some agreed with the concept of a 'right to run', which would oblige employers to provide time off to allow workers to stand for election. A few noted that this would not be straightforward in careers with a workplace culture that does not encourage time off to run, which may act as a barrier even if the legal requirement is in place.

At the Senedd level, one participant suggested that splitting the centre of government between different parts of the country would improve accessibility for those living far away from Cardiff, who currently face numerous barriers compounded by the need to travel long distances for work or live in two areas simultaneously.

Financial support and remuneration

Practical and financial support for candidates was also proposed by several participants. Suggestions included grants, help with administrative work and filling in forms, covering costs of leaflets and transport, car loans, and claiming back time lost from work. Some noted that Local Authority or government-funded initiatives were preferable for this purpose, as smaller parties and independents are less well-resourced, so party-funded grants could

exacerbate existing inequalities. A couple of interviewees expressed concerns that this kind of grant could be exploited, noting that effective management and vetting structures would be needed.

Interviewees had differing views on remuneration for elected members. In relation to Local Authority councillors, some felt that the current salary was adequate, and that higher pay might attract people to the role for the wrong reasons. Some noted that many Local Authority councillors are retirees, and felt a high salary might contribute to generational wealth inequality. However, some suggested that if someone could 'make a living' from being a councillor, this may attract a wider range of people for whom taking months or years off work is too risky.

A few interviewees tentatively supported the idea of higher remuneration for Local Authority councillors or re-structuring the position to be a full-time role. However, they noted this would require greater expectations and requirements around the role, as there is currently wide variability in the level of work done by councillors.

> "I think it depends… to be brutally honest, if you look at my peers – not just in my party, across the chamber. We are paid on the basis of two-and-a-half days a week [of work], I think there are some people there that – to hazard a guess – probably don't do that [laughs]. I know for myself, evened out […], it's easily four days a week that I do. I'm fortunate because I've got another income. But, in terms of equity and actually reflecting what the role is about then it should be [paid more] and that might attract more people into the role too. […] I know I'd struggle with a family to survive just on that [current] salary." (County councillor)

There were some concerns about the optics of salary increases for councillors while Local Authorities struggle to provide services. To counter this, one participant suggested that salaries and allowances should come directly from the Welsh Government, to help with public perceptions that councillors were paying themselves disproportionately.

3.3.4.3. Findings from elected members and candidates – addressing reaction barriers

Challenges responding to toxicity and hostility

Participants offered fewer solutions for the barriers identified around toxicity, abuse and hostility. One provided examples of involving the police in cases of public abuse, while another suggested that negative cultures within councils would likely change naturally over time with younger councillors coming in. Generally, participants felt these were broader societal issues with no simple answer – and some felt that the issue was receiving greater scrutiny and attention than before.

> "I have been abused on the doorstep, but I won't tolerate that anymore. And the police were involved last time somebody decided that they were going to shout into my face. But, you know, I would encourage people to report it to the police. […] There's a far greater appreciation [of the seriousness of the issue by police and] attitudes, thankfully, have changed a lot over the last 15 years." (County councillor)

3.3.4.4. Findings from elected members and candidates – overarching themes

Across all interviews with elected members and candidates, two overarching themes emerged that spanned the three key barriers: Recruitment, Resources, and Reaction.

Responsibility

Firstly, most interviewees felt that the Welsh Government should be responsible for leading initiatives to remove barriers to democratic participation. The main reason given was that parties have different priorities and access to resources, meaning party-led initiatives could end up disproportionately benefiting those interested in running through major parties.

Some felt the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) and Local Authorities should also be involved, to ensure initiatives are effectively implemented at a local level. A few interviewees felt action should be solely led at a local level, suggesting that government-led programmes can be "heavy-handed and not too flexible." One participant argued that political parties should have at least some responsibility, since they are the base for most political activity.

Systematic changes

Interviewees also provided some examples of systemic changes that they felt needed to happen to enable greater access to democratic participation for those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

Several were opposed to the new Senedd constituency system[12] arguing that it disadvantaged smaller parties and independents and made the systems challenging for the public to understand. A few noted that Senedd candidates would be required to cover large and diverse geographical areas during their campaigns, demanding more time and incurring higher travel costs. Several interviewees felt that introducing an alternative system, such as the Single Transferable Vote, would have been more beneficial to disadvantaged candidates and expressed frustration that the Welsh Government had not introduced this voting system.

A perceived lack of power for elected members was mentioned by a few interviewees as a wider barrier for people to get engaged, and stay engaged, with politics. At a local level, some participants attributed this to the significant cost of statutory duties on councils and the need for councils to act within the limits of short-term funding settlements. There were suggestions that in some cases, too much power had passed from councillors to council officers, which was seen to be undemocratic and disadvantage underrepresented candidates and members. For example, this was cited as the reason why council meetings took place during working hours in some areas.

Regarding term limits, one interviewee felt strongly that "from a corruption and stagnation point of view" it was important to have some kind of limit on individual terms. However, they also expressed a concern, which was shared by the majority of elected members and candidates interviewed, that term limits could exacerbate the risk of uncontested and empty

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[12] The Senedd election in 2026 will be conducted using a 'closed proportional list system' across 16 constituencies. This means voters will vote for parties, rather than individual candidates. It also means that candidates will campaign across larger constituencies, both geographically and in terms of population.

seats in local community, town, and even county council chambers while also reducing the aggregate experience of council chambers.

3.3.5.   Addressing barriers – findings from fieldwork with Welsh citizens

Following a series of questions on the barriers to democratic participation in Wales, citizens interviewed for this research were also invited to discuss ways of addressing and removing barriers to democratic participation in Wales.

3.3.5.1.   Findings from Welsh citizens – addressing recruitment barriers

In line with interviewees' identification of lack of knowledge as one of the biggest recruitment barriers, many suggested that outreach and sharing of information was the most important way to bring more people into democratic participation. Interviewees felt that if people were more aware of the opportunities available and basics of getting involved, they would be much more likely to engage.

Some specifically mentioned the need to engage young people, and felt that outreach should meet young people where they are already engaged, such as on social media, rather than assuming they are not interested. Interviewees highlighted opportunities for schools and universities to engage in programmes to inform young people about democratic participation, such as academy programmes, and suggested politicians do outreach directly to young people in such settings.

3.3.5.2.   Findings from Welsh citizens – addressing resource barriers

Several interviewees expressed support for the idea that Local Authority councillors should be a full-time job with corresponding pay. They felt that this would make it easier for those who currently had to balance the role with other paid employment. It was also noted that for many councillors, the role involved more than a part-time job, creating more challenges for those with other work or caring responsibilities.

> "If you're a local councillor, it's a wage that covers two-and-a-half days and then your hours … you have to manage that. But, I don't know if you've ever tried to do two part-time jobs at once. It doesn't equal 'one job' but equals, you know, one-and-a-half or two jobs. And, then, if you have a family as well. So, I think that model of two-and-a-half days is really tricky. I think it'd be great if it was actually a full-time wage." (Welsh citizen)

Many interviewees felt that financial support to help with campaigning, such as grants or bursaries, would be an effective way to engage more people in democratic participation. Related initiatives such as free public transport were also suggested.

> "I think, to be honest, the cash [financial support for campaigning expenses] is a big thing, especially in this economy. We need as much support as we can and especially for people that come from my kind of background where we don't have the extra cash to be thrown around to do these sorts of things. I think that would really encourage people with, you know, lower economic backgrounds to even attempt to go for these sorts of roles." (Welsh citizen)

However, one participant felt that financial support to candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage was a "short-termist" solution and that this money might be better spent on improving democratic engagement at a community level, such as through investing in citizens' assemblies and other participatory and innovative democratic mechanisms. This change, the interviewee felt, could lead to a more fundamental shift in perceptions towards democratic participation, which lasts into the longer term.

Some also suggested more accessible structures, such as accessible meeting times and less formal meeting structures. One interviewee also proposed 'inclusion roles' within councils that would ensure individuals from minority backgrounds feel safe to run.

3.3.5.3. Findings from Welsh citizens – addressing reaction barriers

Among elected officials and candidates interviewed for this project, participants offered fewer solutions for the barriers identified around abuse and hostility. One citizen interviewee called for a mentorship programme for new councillors and prospective council candidates to be established and for this "be real with people" about the abuse they are likely to receive and strategies to mitigate its impacts, with the goal of "preparing people for the worst."

4.   Conclusion

This conclusion brings together the findings from Chapter 3, highlighting areas of agreement and difference between the groups involved in the fieldwork: experts and practitioners, elected members and candidates, and citizens. To make it easier for readers to revisit specific parts of Chapter 3 and gain deeper insights, this chapter follows the same structure.

4.1.   Defining socio-economic disadvantage and democratic participation

The previous chapter sought to define socio-economic disadvantage and democratic participation with insights from the literature review and fieldwork.

4.1.1.   Defining socio-economic disadvantage

Across all groups – experts and practitioners, elected members and candidates, and citizens – there was widespread agreement with the Socio-economic Duty's definition of 'living in less favourable social and economic circumstances than others in the same society' (Welsh Government, 2021a). For example, living in a deprived area, having little or no savings or income, as well as social and cultural norms associated with socio-economic background (Mills, 2021). Experts and practitioners, in particular, emphasised the importance of considering socio-economic disadvantage intersectionally. For instance, recognising that a disabled parent incurs extra costs for childcare and equipment. Elected members and candidates tended to reflect an understanding of socio-economic status as a relative and dynamic concept shaped by both personal and familial experiences that vary over time.

4.1.2.   Defining democratic participation

While understanding this research's focus on access to elected office, participants in all groups interviewed stressed the importance of non-electoral forms of democratic engagement, such as responding to consultations, community activism, and volunteering. Experts also argued that civic engagement can act as a "pipeline" into candidacy. Elected members also agreed that involvement in community groups or local forums can boost confidence and knowledge, thereby supporting future candidacies.

4.2.   Barriers to democratic participation

Drawing on the work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2019), this research categorises socio-economic barriers to democratic participation across three categories: recruitment barriers, resource barriers, and reaction barriers.

4.2.1.   Recruitment barriers to democratic participation

Recruitment barriers are obstacles that prevent individuals from being encouraged, supported, or selected to stand for elected office.

Knowledge, experience, and confidence

Experts and practitioners, elected officials, and citizens alike agreed that a lack of early political education and limited exposure to civic life are foundational obstacles. Experts suggested that, in many deprived schools, budgets for trips to the Senedd, mock debates or civic speakers have been cut, meaning pupils from disadvantaged areas receive a poorer political education than their more socio-economically advantaged peers. In line with this, elected members spoke of a "confidence gap" whereby those who have never seen politics modelled as "something people like me do" are unlikely to consider candidacy even if they are evidently "councillor material." Citizens, particularly younger adults, reported that they had no clear understanding of "how it works" – from writing a nomination paper to what constituents expect.

Survey data reflects this lack of confidence as across town, parish, community, Local Authority and Senedd levels, the most frequently cited barrier was "not feeling experienced or connected enough" to be a candidate. This quantitative finding aligns closely with the qualitative evidence from elected members/candidates and citizens that lacking political networks deters individuals from exploring running for elected office.

Complexity of democratic structures

Experts and practitioners stressed that the perceived lack of transparency surrounding party procedures and electoral regulations deters prospective candidates. Elected members and candidates agreed that parties do not clearly explain their selection processes to party members or the public. Furthermore, 'insider knowledge', such as being aware of upcoming retirements of incumbents, was identified as a significant privilege that is not always open to those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Relatedly, the barriers most frequently expressed by citizen interviewees were related to knowledge of systems and processes, as well as networks. Most felt they did not have enough information to understand or engage with electoral politics, stating that processes seemed too complicated and information was not readily available.

Practical and cultural barriers

Time, money and transport repeatedly emerged as practical hindrances to aspiring candidates. This was a theme more frequently raised by experts and practitioners, who argued that Local Authority meetings, political party meetings, and canvassing sessions require significant time and transport availability, which people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are less likely to have. Experts and practitioners also argued that the decline in trade-union membership has weakened a traditional route and support package into politics for socio-economically disadvantaged people. One councillor described feeling intimidated about running for the Senedd, despite being active in their party, due to a sense that senior roles were more suited for certain "movers and shakers" within their party. For people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, without existing networks or knowledge, this was felt to be more acute.

4.2.2.   Resource barriers to democratic participation

Resource barriers are limitations related to time, finances, or access to support that disproportionately hinder underrepresented individuals from successfully sustaining a candidacy.

Across all groups of research participants, it was widely agreed that a lack of time can be a significant barrier preventing those experiencing socio-economic disadvantage from running a successful election or selection campaign. This was the most significant barrier identified by both town, parish and community councillors and candidates (37% described a lack of time as a barrier) and by Local Authority councillors and candidates (27%). Lacking money to campaign for the election, such as through transport costs and leaflet printing, was identified as the most significant barrier for Senedd Members and candidates (58% described a lack of money to spend during the election campaign as a barrier). Elected members and candidates reiterated this in interviews, highlighting the additional challenge to socio-economically disadvantaged candidates in rural constituencies, who must fund travel costs by private car, and independent candidates, who likely have to self-fund campaign literature.

Another key factor which needs to be considered is that people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage are less inclined to take financial risks. The most obvious risk is that a candidate may lose their election campaign no matter how much time and money they put into the effort. However, the historic lack of financial support to Local Authority candidates who lose their seat (unlike the 'Resettlement Grant' for those losing Senedd or Westminster seats) was also identified by some experts and practitioners as having a significant impact on the likelihood of more risk-averse people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage from running, especially those with additional costs such as disabled people or people with caring responsibilities.

Resource barriers continue to be a challenge for local councillors due to limited remuneration. One community councillor stated that they are paid less than 50p an hour and are expected to self-fund travel and time off work for community events. Another Local Authority councillor stated that they work at least 4 days a week on council business – more than the recommended 2.5 to 3 days – and are only able to afford that because they have another income. All of these resource barriers were linked to a disproportionate representation of older, retired, self-employed, and relatively affluent elected officials, as these groups are more likely to be able to financially sustain being a local councillor.

4.2.3.   Reaction barriers to democratic participation

Reaction barriers are negative behaviours – such as discrimination, harassment, or exclusion – faced by individuals due to their protected characteristics or socio-economic status.

Experts and practitioners raised the persistence of stereotypes and prejudice in both electorates and selectorates. They described how certain groups, such as disabled people or individuals without high-status professional backgrounds, were viewed as lacking the necessary capabilities to hold office. These assumptions were not always explicit; instead,

coded language – such as referring to someone as "not representative of the majority" – was described as being used to justify opposition to a candidate's selection or election. This form of subtle discrimination in party selection or election campaigns was not echoed in fieldwork with elected representatives or candidates, suggesting either that elected officials did not wish to view their selection processes as inherently prejudicial or that selection processes are fair to candidates with underrepresented protected characteristics. The literature on this topic paints a mixed picture of both subtle discrimination, especially in competitive seats, but also 'tick-box' selections, which undermine recognition of a socio-economically disadvantaged candidate's merit and achievements (Ashe, 2019; Murray, 2021).

There was, however, universal agreement across all groups that hostility – both online and in person – deters many prospective candidates, especially women and those from minority backgrounds, to stand for election. Experts noted that financial means can mitigate these risks (for example, installing home security cameras), whereas those with limited resources feel particularly vulnerable. Citizens echoed that the anticipation of such hostility and toxicity was a significant barrier to them running for elected office.

4.3 Addressing barriers to democratic participation

A key part of this research is to identify means by which these barriers to democratic participation could be addressed in future.

4.3.1. Previous and ongoing efforts to address barriers – findings from the literature

Chapter 3 includes an overview of previous and ongoing efforts to address recruitment, resource, and reaction barriers, such as the Equal Power Equal Voice mentoring and engagement scheme, the candidates' programme of some trade unions (e.g., Communication Workers Union), the Access to Elected Office Fund, and voluntary gender quotas. The remainder of this chapter synthesises and compares views of the research participants – experts and practitioners, elected members and candidates, and citizens – on ways to tackle barriers to democratic participation for people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage.

4.3.2. Addressing barriers – findings from fieldwork

Elected officials, candidates, citizens, experts, and practitioners were encouraged to suggest means of addressing the barriers faced by candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage in Wales. These are by 'group' of fieldwork participants in Chapter 3, but are synthesised below.

Addressing recruitment barriers
The most frequently proposed approach to addressing recruitment barriers was outreach by elected officials, and sharing information on the roles of local councillors and selection and election processes. Many felt that the best approach was simply talking to people about what different elected bodies do, demystifying processes, and encouraging them to get involved. Formal training and mentorship programmes were mentioned by a few elected

officials and many experts and practitioners as possible routes to encouraging recruitment, including 'buddy programmes' with more experienced councillors.

In addition to this, many participants advocated for clearer guidance to respond to the lack of transparency surrounding selection and election processes, with the belief that political parties, the WLGA, and the Welsh Government had a role in increasing transparency. Some felt that awareness could be better raised around the relevance of 'politics' to people's everyday lives, as people's disengagement could be linked to not realising the ways in which they are impacted by democratic processes.

One citizen called for democratic participation outside of elections to become far more normalised, such as through citizens' assemblies, local meetings, participatory budgeting, and other mechanisms to involve members of the public in decision-making. Other modes of democratic participation, they argued, could change the culture of local politics in Wales, making Local Authorities a more attractive occupation for all people, including socio-economically disadvantaged people.

Addressing resource barriers

For resource barriers, a few elected officials and candidates tentatively supported the idea of higher remuneration for Local Authority councillors or re-structuring it be a full-time role. Additionally, they believed this would lead greater expectations and requirements around the role, as there is currently wide variability in the level of work done by councillors. Experts, practitioners, and citizens who took part in this research were more likely to unequivocally support increases to Local Authority councillor pay, although some suggested this should be done alongside a reduction in the number of councillors.

Participating elected officials and candidates had differing views on job sharing for elected officials. Some were in favour of this idea, stating it could allow more people to stand for election, and argued that it worked well in other contexts. Others were concerned about voter confusion and a possible lack of accountability (particularly for more senior roles), and felt it was important for constituents to know and have a relationship with their local representative.

To address challenges with balancing work responsibilities with campaign demands, some elected officials and candidates agreed with the concept of a 'right to run' policy, which would oblige employers to give time off work to allow workers to stand for election. A few noted that this may not be straightforward in careers where the culture may act as a barrier, even if the legal requirement is in place. On a related note, the idea of a dedicated fund to make up for forgone income for candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage was also proposed by experts and practitioners and citizens.

> "I think, to be honest, the cash [financial support for campaigning expenses] is a big thing, especially in this economy. We need as much support as we can and especially for people that come from my kind of background where we don't have the extra cash to be thrown around to do these sorts of things." *(Welsh citizen)*

Experts, practitioners, and citizens were most likely to endorse a financial support scheme for candidates experiencing socio-economic disadvantage. Specifically, the idea of covering

the cost of childcare was particularly popular. In addition, there were calls for support to cover the cost of transport, formal clothing for official events, and safety equipment.

Addressing reaction barriers

In relation to reaction barriers, participants had differing views on more prescriptive initiatives such as quotas, referred to as 'positive discrimination' by some. A few felt that these had been successful and should be continued; however, others felt that candidates should be selected "on merit" and were uncomfortable with quotas.

All groups engaged for this research offered fewer proposals for the barriers identified around abuse and hostility. Experts and practitioners felt that political parties needed to do more to reassure people of their safety, including being clearer about what will be done if something happens and the steps that are taken to mitigate harassment.

Systemic barriers and responsibility for change

Experts and practitioners called for some systemic changes, including introducing job-sharing for elected positions in Wales, term limits, and moving to Single Transferable Vote across Welsh Local Authorities. Moreover, elected officials and candidates also had strong views on systemic changes, including: i) several being opposed to the new Senedd constituency and voting system, ii) moving power from council officers to councillors, iii) broadly being opposed to term limits for Local Authority and community councillors, and iv) some advocating for Single Transferable Vote.

While many experts and practitioners argued strongly that political parties should be responsible for implementing reforms to address barriers to democratic participation for people experiencing socio-economic disadvantage, the reverse was true for elected members, candidates, and citizens. They tended to argue that the Welsh Government should take a leading role as it could be more impartial and provide equal opportunities to people of different political persuasions, rather than only to those aligned with larger, well-funded political parties. Further research, perhaps a consultation on a broader package of reforms to address barriers, could provide further insights on this topic.

5.   Recommendations

The aim of this research was to explore the socio-economic influences of democratic participation in Wales, with a focus on socio-economic barriers to elected office. Based on the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations have been proposed. The recommendations include several proposals for the Welsh Government to consider, with some requiring further collaboration from the WLGA, Local Authorities, and political parties.

Recommendations to address recruitment barriers:

- **Recommendation 1:** The Welsh Government should continue to invest in mentoring and training schemes such as [Equal Power Equal Voice](#), but should seek to ensure these are delivered in a way conducive to rigorous impact evaluation – for example, by introducing an element of randomisation and longitudinal data collection. Any future schemes should be established with detailed criteria to ensure they reach new, more diverse, and less politically engaged audiences.

- **Recommendation 2:** The Welsh Government should work in partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), councils, the Electoral Commission, political parties, and other partners as appropriate, to contribute to publicly available guidance which is kept relevant and up-to-date on the processes required to run for election to community councils, Local Authorities, and the Senedd.

- **Recommendation 3:** The Welsh Government and relevant partners should seek to foster different ways of engaging people in democracy in Wales with the clear goals of: i) increasing public involvement in decision-making in Wales, ii) increasing public awareness of how decisions are made in Wales, iii) empowering Welsh citizens to feel confident and qualified enough to run for election in Wales. This should be done in conjunction with Welsh Government consideration of a recent Institute of Welsh Affairs report on this topic (Elias et al., 2025). Initiatives should align with or build on existing public participation strategies which Local Authorities are required to have in place, and should be evaluated to identify areas where mechanisms could be strengthened.

Recommendations to address resource barriers:

- **Recommendation 4:** The Welsh Government, the WLGA, Local Authorities, the Senedd, and political parties should consider ways to reduce resource barriers to political activity. This could include introducing a creche at political party and Local Authority meetings, providing virtual access to all local political party meetings, and ensuring meetings can be accessed via public transport.

- **Recommendation 5:** The Welsh Government should scope the potential to develop a dedicated fund to support candidates with caring responsibilities and require paid-for care services for others as a result of their candidacy. A consultation should be launched to explore the specifics of this expansion, including whether vouchers for care are the correct delivery mechanism and whether unpaid care can be financially compensated. This should also consider targeted funding to offset costs incurred as a result of campaigning,

including transportation, additional food expenditure, and safety equipment for candidates who experience toxicity and harassment.

- **Recommendation 6:** The Welsh Government should seek to actively address stereotypes that may contribute to the cost of democratic participation, such as beliefs about the kind of clothing politicians should wear, or gendered expectations around makeup or hair for women. While this kind of mindset shift may be a longer-term strategic goal, in the short term this might include clarifying informal dress codes in council chambers, encouraging those conducting democratic outreach to not adhere to stereotypical expectations, and publishing guidance to challenge stereotypes and assumptions about appropriate dress or appearances.

- **Recommendation 7:** The Welsh Government should scope the potential to introduce an employee's "Right to Run", which requires an employer to allow time from work for candidates to run for Local Authority and Senedd elections during the formal campaign period. This should involve engagement with trade unions, political parties, business organisations, and more. The scope should include an assessment of feasibility and potential impacts across a broad range of employers including, but not limited to, small businesses and charities.

- **Recommendation 8:** The Welsh Government and the WLGA should engage with businesses, the higher education sector, and others to identify ways that service to a community as an elected official can be deemed a valuable skill by employers, and that councillors are supported with their longer-term career progression and training.

- **Recommendation 9:** The Welsh Government should consider introducing a dedicated scheme to compensate candidates for a portion of the income they lose while running for Local Authority or Senedd elections. To keep costs manageable, this could be tied to certain requirements; for example, in Westminster elections, deposits are linked to winning at least 5% of the vote.

- **Recommendation 10**: The Welsh Government should continue progressing the introduction of a 'Resettlement Grant'[13] for Local Authority councillors, along the lines of the model used for the Senedd.

- **Recommendation 11:** The Welsh Government and the Democracy and Boundary Commission Cymru should consider reviewing the roles, responsibilities, and salaries of Local Authority councillors. This could include making the Local Authority councillor a full-time role with full-time pay, and could be done alongside local government reform in Wales to reduce the overall number of councillors. Alternatively, this could include strengthening job-sharing options for Local Authority councillors and more clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of councillors to ensure they do not feel expected to work more than they are remunerated for.

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[13] The 'Resettlement Grant' refers to transitional payments to departing Members of the Senedd and Members of the House of Commons based on years of service and positions held. They bridge the financial gap between leaving office and starting new employment.

Recommendations to address reaction barriers:

- **Recommendation 12:** The Welsh Government should work with the WLGA, Senedd, and other partners to build on existing evidence, including the Local Government Association's (2022) recent call for evidence and report, by undertaking a targeted review what is already known on what works to tackle hostility, toxicity, intimidation, and abuse of elected officials and candidates. This review should seek to identify gaps and inform development of effective, evidence-informed interventions.

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Annex A: Sampling & demographic information from surveys

Survey of Welsh citizens

- A total of **17 responses** were received.

- Most respondents live in Pembrokeshire (29%), followed by Gwynedd (24%) and Bridgend (12%). Others live in Local Authorities such as Caerphilly, Cardiff, Ceredigion, Merthyr Tydfil, Rhondda Cynon Taf, and Swansea.

- In terms of age, 41% are aged 35–44, 29% are 25–34, 18% are 45–54, and 12% are 55–64.

- 53% of respondents identify as female and 47% as male.

- 76% identified as heterosexual.

- 94% are from a White ethnic background, while 6% chose not to disclose their ethnicity.

- 35% reported having a physical or mental health condition or illness lasting, or expected to last, 12 months or more.

- 76% indicated that they do not provide care or support to someone with long-term health conditions or age-related needs.

- 65% reported having no parental responsibilities.

- 76% hold an academic degree (e.g., BA, BSc, PhD, or postgraduate diploma/certificate), 12% hold qualifications such as HNC, HND, or BTEC Higher, 6% have A or AS levels, and another 6% reported having no formal qualifications.

- 41% selected the option describing a 'modern profession' (e.g., teacher, nurse, social worker, police sergeant, software designer, artist, etc.) — this was the most frequently selected occupational category.

- A large majority (89%) either own their home or live with someone who owns the property, whether it is fully paid off or mortgaged.

- On a 10-point social ladder scale (where 10 represents those best off in society and 1 the least), respondents rated their family's position at age 18 with a mean score of 6.3 (range: 2 to 9), and their current position at 6.9 (range: 3 to 9).

- 65% reported giving their time voluntarily to clubs or organisations in the past four weeks. Of those, 41% support charitable organisations, 18% are involved with youth or school-related groups, and 6% participate in arts-based groups. On average, they contributed 10 hours over that period.

- 59% stated they had responded to a Local Authority or Welsh Government consultation in the past year. Voter turnout among respondents was high:

  - 94% voted in the UK General Election (July 2024)

  - 88% in the Welsh local elections (May 2022)

  - 94% in the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) elections (May 2021)

- o   88% in the UK General Election (December 2019).

- o   18% of respondents are members of a political party.

Senedd candidates survey

- A total of **21 responses** were received.

- Most respondents live in Rhondda Cynon Taf (24%), followed by Swansea (14%) and Cardiff and Newport (10% each). Others live in Local Authorities such as Caerphilly, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Flintshire, Gwynedd, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Powys, and Vale of Glamorgan (each 5%).

- In terms of age, 29% are aged 45–54, 29% are 65–74, 19% are 35–44, 19% are 55–64, and 5% preferred not to say.

- 67% identify as male, 24% as female, and 10% preferred not to disclose their sex.

- 81% identified as heterosexual.

- 76% are from a White ethnic background. Other answers include: Asian, Asian Welsh or Asian British (10%), Not listed (5%) and Prefer not to say (10%).

- 29% selected the option describing a "modern profession" (e.g., teacher, nurse, social worker, police sergeant, software designer, artist, etc.) and 19% reported having a "technical and craft occupations" (e.g., motor mechanic, fitter, inspector, plumber, printer, tool maker, electrician, gardener, train driver). These were the most frequently selected occupational categories.

- 33% reported having a physical or mental health condition or illness lasting, or expected to last, 12 months or more.

- 67% indicated that they do not provide care or support to someone with long-term health conditions or age-related needs.

- 67% reported having no parental responsibilities.

- 86% hold an academic degree (e.g., BA, BSc, PhD, or postgraduate diploma/certificate), with the remainder reporting A/AS levels (5%), O levels or GCSEs (5%), or no formal qualifications (5%).

- 67% either own their home or live with someone who owns the property, whether it is fully paid off or mortgaged, 14% rent privately, 14% rent from a Local Authority or housing association, and 5% preferred not to answer.

- On a 10-point social ladder scale (where 10 represents those best off in society and 1 the least), respondents rated their position the year before they were first elected to the Welsh Parliament or Assembly with a mean score of 5.2 (range: 1 to 9).

- On political engagement:

- o   52% have been selected as a political party's nominee for a Welsh Parliament or Assembly election but were not elected,

- o   29% are current Members of the Senedd,

- o   10% have stood as independent candidates,

- o   5% are former Members of the Senedd,

- o   5% have sought but not secured party selection.

Local Authority Councillors and candidates survey

- A total of **53 responses** were received.

- Most respondents live in Cardiff (11%), followed by Newport, Gwynedd, and Rhondda Cynon Taf (9% each), and Swansea and Caerphilly (8% each). Others are spread across 13 other Local Authorities including Bridgend, Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion, Conwy, Flintshire, Isle of Anglesey, Monmouthshire, Neath Port Talbot, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Torfaen, Vale of Glamorgan, and Wrexham.

- In terms of age, the largest group of respondents are aged 55–64 (36%), followed by 45–54 (17%) and 65–74 (17%). Smaller groups include 35–44 (9%), 75 and over (11%), 25–34 (4%), and 16–24 (2%). 4% preferred not to say.

- 57% identify as male, 42% as female, and 2% preferred not to disclose their sex.

- 83% identified as heterosexual.

- 89% of respondents are from a White ethnic background. The rest include: Black, Black Welsh, Black British, or Caribbean (2%), not listed (8%), and prefer not to say (2%).

- 25% selected the option describing a "modern profession" (e.g., teacher, nurse, social worker, police sergeant, software designer, artist, etc.), 17% selected having a "Routine manual and service occupation" (e.g., HGV driver, van driver, cleaner, porter, packer, sewing machinist, messenger, labourer, waiter/waitress, bar staff) and 13% reported having a "technical and craft occupations" (e.g., motor mechanic, fitter, inspector, plumber, printer, tool maker, electrician, gardener, train driver). These were the most frequently selected occupational categories.

- 34% reported having a physical or mental health condition or illness lasting, or expected to last, 12 months or more.

- 62% indicated that they do not provide care or support to someone with long-term health conditions or age-related needs.

- 75% reported having no parental responsibilities.

- 72% hold an academic degree (e.g., BA, BSc, PhD, or postgraduate diploma/certificate), followed by HNC/HND/BTEC equivalents (11%), A/AS levels (6%), O levels or GCSEs (6%), and no formal qualifications (6%).

- 85% either own their home or live with someone who owns the property, whether it is fully paid off or mortgaged, 9% rent privately, 4% rent from a Local Authority or housing association, and 2% preferred not to answer.

- On a 10-point social ladder scale (where 10 represents those best off in society and 1 the least), respondents rated their position the year before they were first elected to their Local Authority with a mean score of 6.0 (range: 1 to 10).

- On political engagement:

- 60% are elected councillors at Local Authority level,

- 23% have been selected as a political party's nominee for a Local Authority council election but were not elected,

- 15% are former elected councillors at Local Authority level,

- 2% have stood as independent candidates in a Local Authority council election but were not elected.

Town, parish, or community councillors and candidates survey

- A total of **22 responses** were received.

- Most respondents live in Wrexham (14%), followed by Bridgend, Caerphilly, Conwy, Flintshire, Isle of Anglesey, and Swansea (9% each). The remaining respondents are spread across Blaenau Gwent, Carmarthenshire, Denbighshire, Gwynedd, Rhondda Cynon Taf, Torfaen, and Vale of Glamorgan (5% each).

- In terms of age, the largest group of respondents are aged 55–64 (36%), followed by 45–54 (17%) and 65–74 (17%). Smaller groups include 35–44 (9%), 75 and over (11%), 25–34 (4%), and 16–24 (2%). In terms of age, the largest groups of respondents are aged 45–54 (23%) and 65–74 (23%), followed by those aged 75 and over (18%). Smaller groups include 16–24 (9%), 35–44 (9%), 55–64 (9%), 25–34 (5%). 5% preferred not to say.

- 50% identify as male, 45% as female, and 5% preferred not to disclose their sex.

- 82% identified as heterosexual.

- 82% of respondents are from a White ethnic background. The rest include: Black, Black Welsh, Black British, or Caribbean (5%), not listed (9%), and prefer not to say (5%).

- 23% selected the option describing a "Senior managers and administrators" (usually responsible for planning, organising and coordinating work and for finance such as: finance manager, chief executive). This was followed by two categories, each selected by 18% of respondents: "Technical and craft occupations" (e.g., motor mechanic, fitter, inspector, plumber, printer, tool maker, electrician, gardener, train driver) and "Semi-routine manual and service occupations" (e.g., postal worker, machine operative, security guard, caretaker, farm worker, catering assistant, receptionist, sales assistant).

- 23% reported having a physical or mental health condition or illness lasting, or expected to last, 12 months or more.

- 55% indicated that they do not provide care or support to someone with long-term health conditions or age-related needs.

- 82% reported having no parental responsibilities.

- 77% hold an academic degree (e.g., BA, BSc, PhD, or postgraduate diploma/certificate), followed by HNC/HND/BTEC equivalents (14%), A/AS levels (5%), and O levels or GCSEs (5%).

- 77% either own their home or live with someone who owns the property (whether fully paid off or mortgaged), 18% rent privately, and 5% rent from a Local Authority or housing association.

- On a 10-point social ladder scale (where 10 represents those best off in society and 1 the least), respondents rated their position the year before they were first elected to the town, parish, or community council with a mean score of 6.2 (range: 3 to 9).

- On political engagement:

  - 64% are councillors at town, parish, or community level,

  - 18% are former councillors at this level,

  - 9% have been selected as a political party's nominee for a Local Authority election but were not elected,

  - 9% have sought a political party's nomination but were not selected.

Annex B: Findings from survey of Welsh citizens

Recruitment barriers – findings from survey of Welsh citizens

According to the survey of Welsh citizens, the main factor suggesting respondents would be more likely to stand for election was whether or not they are current members of a political party.

Among those who were not party members, the most common reasons were if politicians had more power to make a difference (43%), and if they had more information about what the process involves and the timelines associated with it (36%). When considering both reasons that would make them significantly or somewhat more likely to stand, other factors also emerged as important. For example, "if more people like me were already on the council" (86%) and "if the reputation of politicians was improved" (79%).

Among those who responded that either "if politicians had more power to make a difference" or "if they had more information about the process and timelines" would significantly increase their likelihood of standing, just 29% reported not volunteering their time to a club or organisation. However, 43% either had not, or were unsure whether they had, responded to a Welsh Government consultation in the past 12 months.

For those who were members of a political party, several reasons were equally cited as a factor that would significantly change their behaviour, each by 33% of respondents. These include: i) the availability of a fund to cover the costs of caring responsibilities once elected; ii) having more information about what the process involves and the relevant timelines; iii) access to a dedicated fund to support the costs of caring responsibilities during election campaigns; iv) if politicians had more power to make a difference; and v) if the reputation of politicians was improved. When considering reasons that would significantly or somewhat increase their likelihood of standing, two additional motivations stood out, each mentioned by 100% of respondents: "If a senior local party member (e.g., a councillor, local party chair, or MP) asked me to stand", and "If an ordinary party member asked me to stand".

Figure 14. What would make you more likely to stand for election? Source: citizen survey (non-members of political parties) (n = 14)
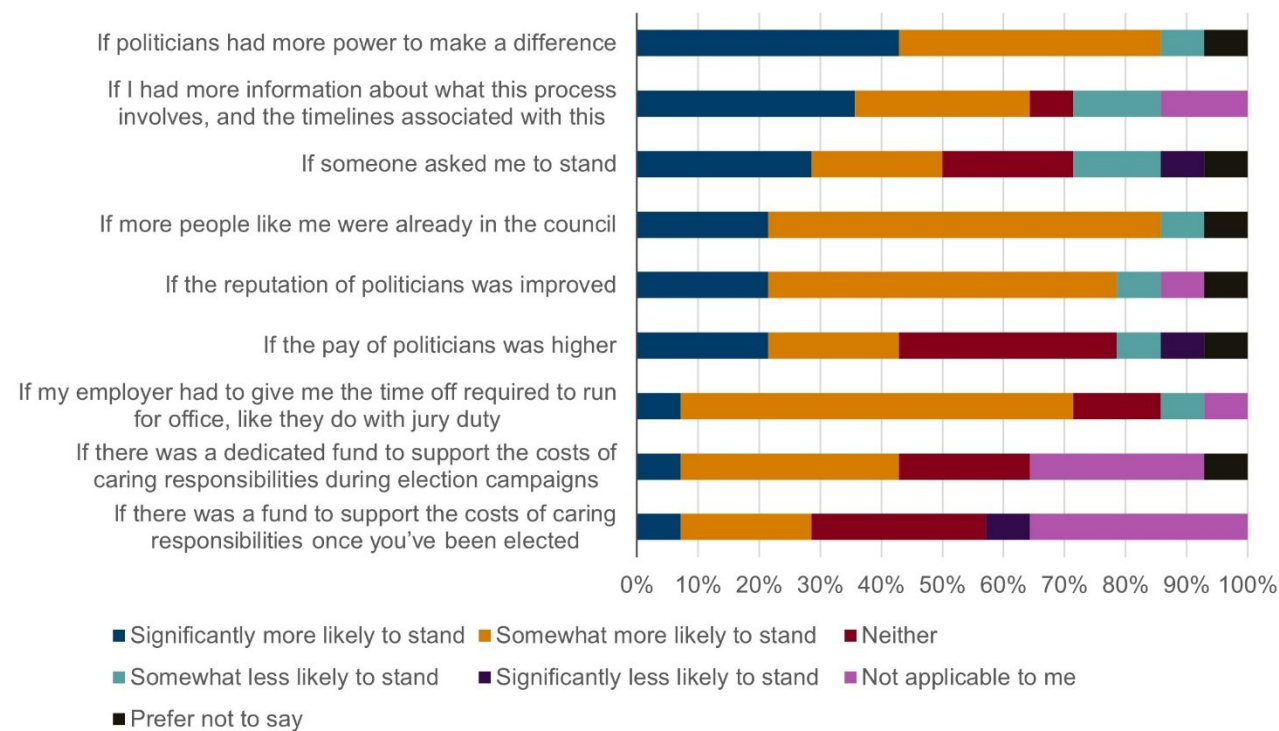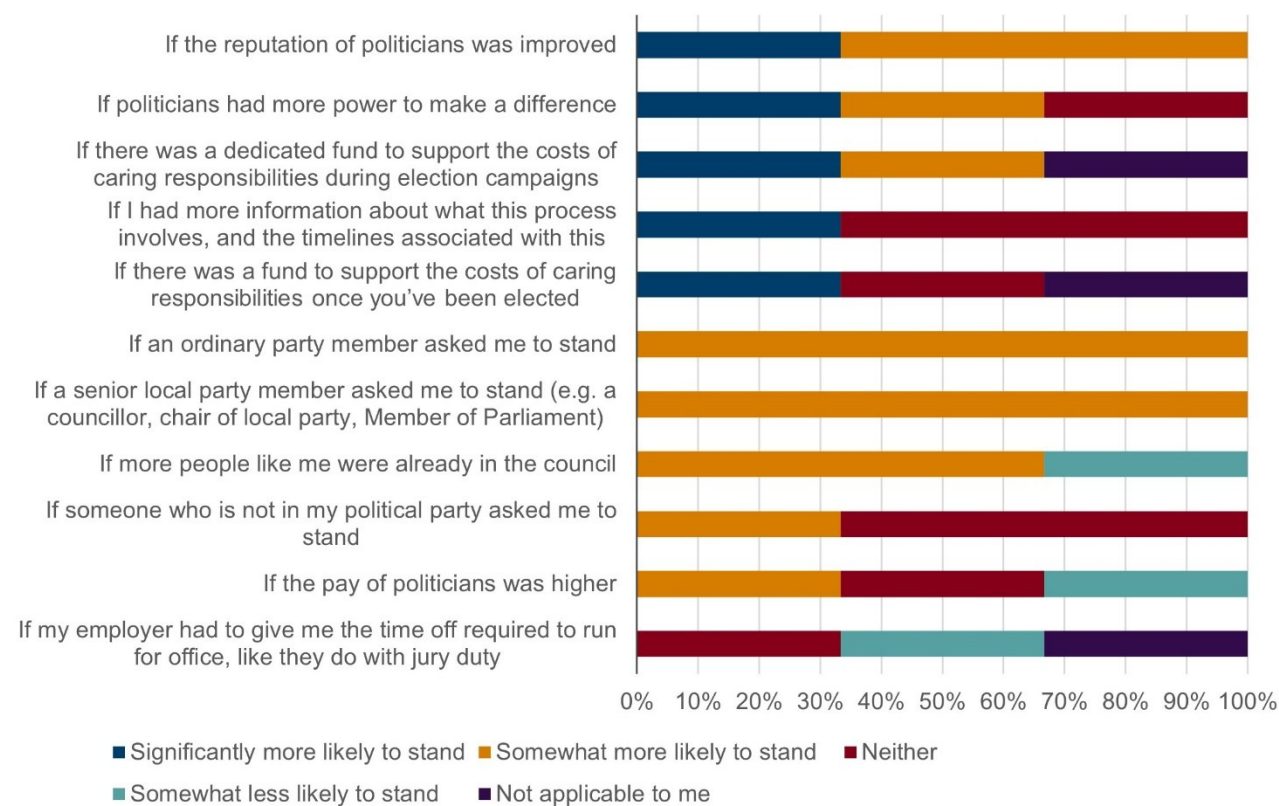

Legend:
- Significantly more likely to stand
- Somewhat more likely to stand
- Neither
- Somewhat less likely to stand
- Significantly less likely to stand
- Not applicable to me
- Prefer not to say

Figure 15. What would make you more likely to stand for election? Source: citizen survey (members of political parties) (n = 3)

Legend:
- Significantly more likely to stand
- Somewhat more likely to stand
- Neither
- Somewhat less likely to stand
- Not applicable to me

Resource barriers - findings from survey of Welsh citizens

The main resource-related barriers to standing for elected office are broadly similar for Welsh citizens who were both political party members and non-members.

For respondents who are non-party members, the most frequently cited barriers are the inability to afford time off work to run for office (79% agree or strongly agree) and the cost of campaigning, such as printing leaflets (64%). Among those who agreed with at least one of these statements, the most frequently reported occupations were: modern professional roles such as teachers, lecturers, nurses, physiotherapists, social workers, welfare officers, artists, musicians, police officers (sergeant or above), and software designers (29%); followed at 21% equally by clerical and intermediate occupations (e.g. secretaries, personal assistants, clerical workers, call centre agents, nursing auxiliaries, and nursery nurses); middle or junior managers (e.g. office, retail, bank, restaurant or warehouse managers, and publicans); and senior managers and administrators with responsibilities for planning, coordination, and finance (e.g. finance managers and chief executives). On average, these respondents placed themselves at 7.1 on the social ladder scale, compared to 6.8 among all non-party members and at 6.9 across all citizens surveyed (party and non-party members).

Party members report the same top barriers: 100% agree or strongly agree that campaign costs are a significant obstacle, and 67% agree or strongly agree that they could not afford time off work. All three respondents who agreed with at least one of these financial or time-related barriers work in modern professional occupations — such as teachers, lecturers, nurses, physiotherapists, social workers, welfare officers, artists, musicians, police officers (sergeant or above), and software designers. On average, these individuals rated themselves at 7.3 on the social ladder scale.

Figure 16. What do you think are the main resourcing (time and money) barriers that prevent you from standing for elected office? Source: citizen survey (non-members of political parties) (n = 14)
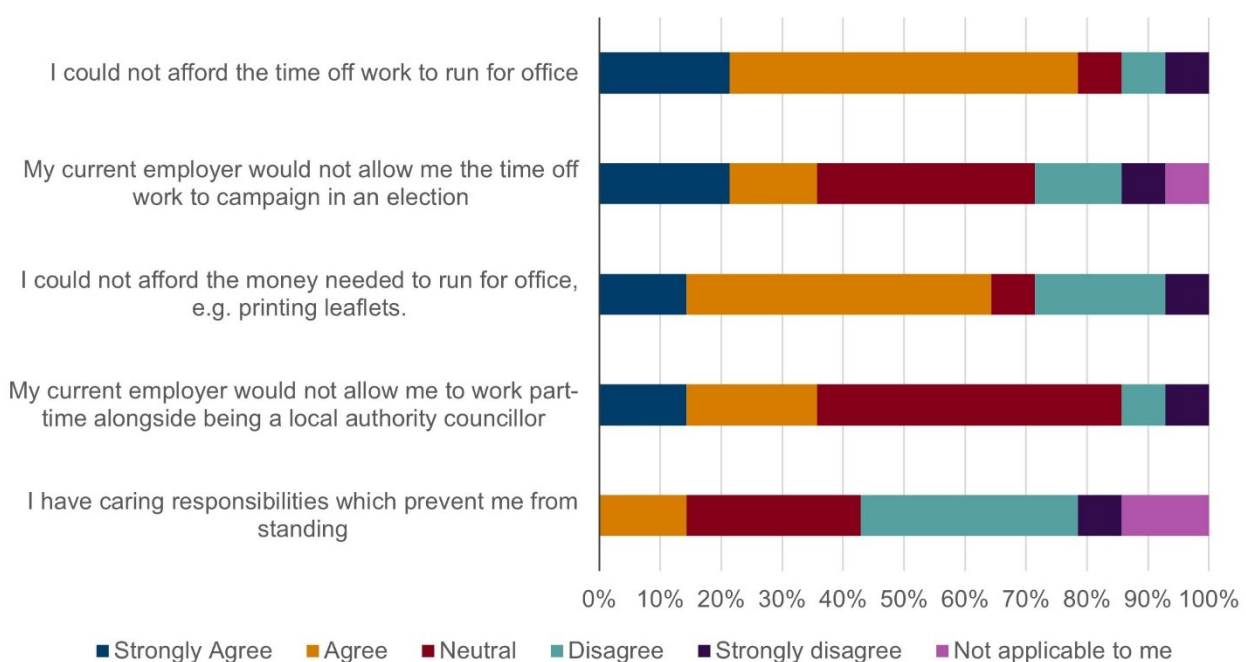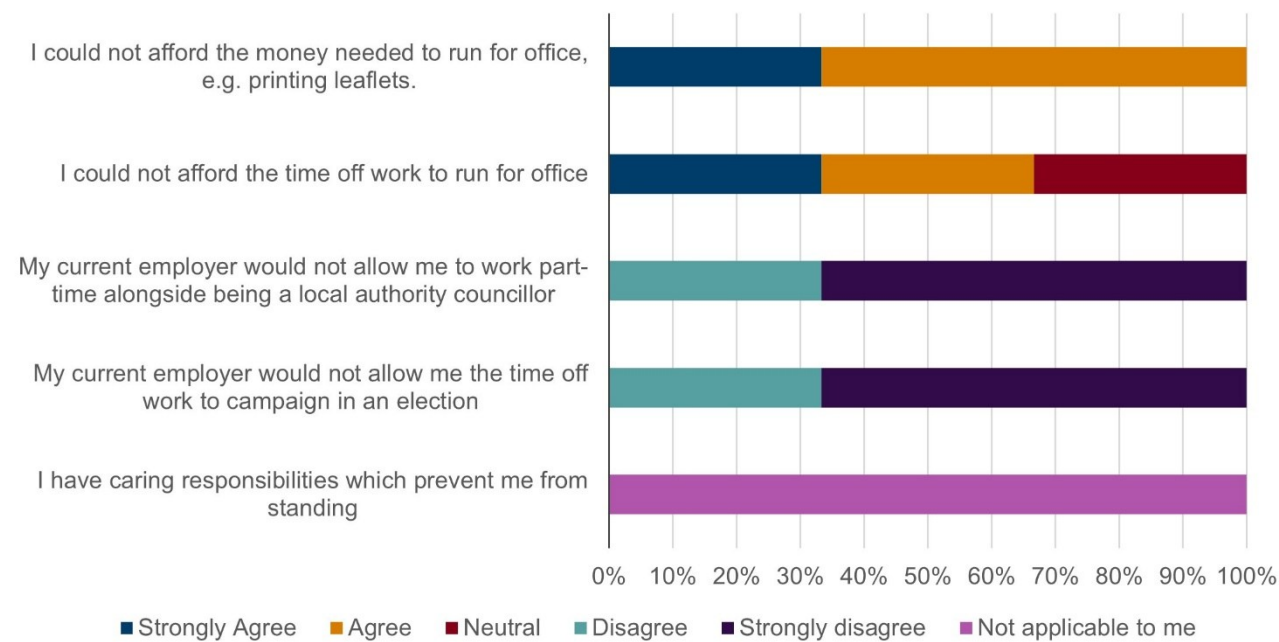
Figure 17. What do you think are the main resourcing (time and money) barriers that prevent you from standing for elected office? Source: citizen survey (members of political parties) (n = 3)

Reaction barriers – findings from survey of Welsh citizens

Reaction-related barriers to standing for elected office are broadly similar for citizens who were both political party members and non-members. Among non-party members, 64% agree or strongly agree with the statement "I am worried about the scrutiny I would face from other politicians and the media," and 57% express concern about "how people would react to me standing." Of those who agreed with at least one of these statements, the majority were women (56%) and most were aged between 35 and 54 (67%). Party members report the same top concerns, with 100% agreeing or strongly agreeing with both statements.

Figure 18. What do you think are the main reaction barriers that prevent you from standing for elected office? Source: citizen survey (non-members of political parties) (n = 14)
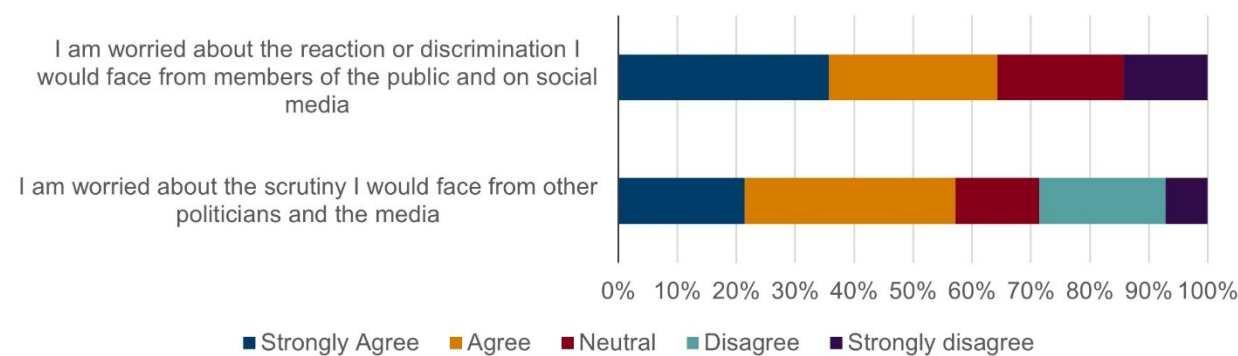
Figure 19. What do you think are the main reaction barriers that prevent you from standing for elected office?
Source: citizen survey (members of political parties) (n = 3)