

WLGS AGM report on Councillors Commission

The Councillors Commission reported in December and a government response is expected in the spring. The Local Government Association, IDeA and Leadership Centre for Local Government are also working on a response and action plan for those recommendations where local government can act without waiting for government to do so. The LGA, IDeA and LCLG are also seeking 9 pilot authorities to work with to trial the recommendations in the run-up to the 2010 elections in particular.

The Commission came up with five principles from which the recommendations flow:

1. Local authorities are key to promoting local democratic engagement
2. Promoting a sense of efficacy is key for better engagement
3. Councillors are most effective when they share similar life experiences with their constituents
4. Relationship and connections between councillors and their constituents is key to representation
5. The role should be less daunting to become, to do and to leave

The first recommendation is the most important and flows directly from principle 1: a new statutory duty for local government to promote democratic engagement and the role of local councillors. This is intended to make it clear that local government is responsible for the health of local democracy and backs up a range of other recommendations:

- support for councillors in their community role, for casework, for communications and other roles - executive, scrutiny and regulatory.

Principle 3 also leads to a series of recommendations:

- the role being compatible with full-time or part-time employment - we firmly believed that full-time professional councillors are not the right way forward. This also led on to recommendations to ensure councillors could combine their role with being in employment:
 - a national allowances framework
 - pensions for councillors and 'parachute payments' for those who lose their seats
 - meeting times and business processes
- recommendations that more should be done to improve the representative profile of councillors:
 - women are stuck at around 29% of councillors
 - BME councillors are only 4% of all councillors
 - there are only 128 BME woman councillors in the whole of England.
 - Our research found that women were more likely to stand if there had been asked, and also that BME people were less likely to be asked to stand - which perhaps explains the number of BME women councillors
- These included recommendations that political parties should act as if bound by the equalities duties on race, gender and disability - as non-public bodies they cannot be statutorily required to follow them - but they clearly have a key role to play and should take their responsibilities seriously to provide a greater range of candidates for the electorate
- Also a recommendation that an assessment of the representative nature of councillors should be included in the performance framework that covers local authorities. We accepted that the choice over who becomes a councillor is not under the control of local authorities themselves, but over the political parties and, of course, the electorate. However, we wanted

to provide an incentive and a sense of shared responsibility for local authorities to collaborate with local political parties and to do what they are able to do to encourage a broader range of candidates to come forward eg:

- pre-selection training and open days
- shadowing and mentoring schemes
- better citizenship education in the national curriculum and improved connections between councils, councillors and young people in schools

Principle 4 led to recommendations around the voting and electoral system:

- votes at 16 for young people who want to go on the electoral register
- the ability for local authorities to pilot STV - while there wasn't a consensus in the Commission for STV overall, the evidence was clear that first past the post was the least favourable system for under-represented groups to get elected, while generally STV had been favourable for getting women elected (most of the research has been around women)
- incentives that local authorities could use to encourage people to vote
- reform to the code on publicity to provide local authorities with clarity about when it is acceptable to provide information about their councillors

What could WLGS do?

The statistic that women are more likely to come forward if asked suggests that we might run a campaign to get all women councillors to ask another woman to put herself forward to be a candidate.

Perhaps we can learn more from the research done by Mary Shears at Plymouth University about candidates and the reasons why some groups do better than others.

Is there something we can do to promote a voluntary agreement by the political parties to be bound by the Equality Duties?

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