

Written evidence: Welsh Parliament inquiry into diversity in local government

Professor Elizabeth Evans,
Goldsmiths, University of London
Elizabeth.evans@gold.ac.uk

The below submission is based upon qualitative and quantitative analysis undertaken with Dr Stefanie Reher in relation to disability and political representation in the UK (2018-). We undertook an evaluation of the EnAble Fund on behalf of the UK Government Equalities Office (published in 2021) and have since continued to conduct research in this area.

1) Barriers to elected office for disabled people¹

Our research has identified several barriers faced by disabled people seeking to put themselves forward for elected office, these can broadly be categorised as (1) accessibility; (2) financial resourcing; and (3) ableist culture. We also note that these barriers are further exacerbated when disability intersects with gender, race and class.²

Accessibility: this can be divided into inaccessible buildings and inaccessible materials; many interviewees spoke to us about their experiences of local parties holding meetings in inaccessible venues (e.g. upstairs at a pub), in locations which were not accessible by public transport, or in buildings with no accessible toilets. Moreover, some disabled politicians reported that some local council meetings were held in rooms that were inaccessible for some disabled local councillors. Our interviewees also reported that materials were often not produced in accessible formats or were distributed at the last minute which meant that some people were not able to go through all the paperwork.

Financial resourcing: the sheer financial cost of standing for office was a deterrent for some interviewees. This is unsurprising given the relatively high number of disabled people in the UK who are economically disadvantaged. It also means that being disabled can aggravate inequality in access to politics due socio-economic background, and vice versa. Disabled candidates reported having to pay for the reasonable adjustments (RA) which the local parties stated they could not afford to cover, such as BSL interpreters or transport. The lack of predictability concerning the temporary nature of government funding schemes (e.g. the Access to Elected Office and the EnAble fund) made it difficult to plan ahead. Relatedly, partly due to parties' reliance on volunteers, the availability of RA or assistants at events was also often perceived as unreliable. Some interviewees opted out of meetings and events because they were embarrassed to ask local parties to provide funding for RA. Disabled candidates often had to rely on informal networks, which made them feel disempowered because they were reliant on other people's good will.

¹ Evans, E and Reher, S. 2022. 'Disability and Political Representation: Analysing the Obstacles to Elected Office' *International Political Science Review* 43(5): 698-712;

² Evans, Elizabeth and Stefanie Reher. 2023. 'Gender, Disability and Political Representation: Understanding the Experiences of Disabled Women', *European Journal of Politics and Gender*

Ableist culture: disabled people reported having to adapt themselves to a standard and idealised model of a politician. This was particularly relevant in relation to political campaigning where there is a high degree of pressure regarding 'presenteeism' (i.e. the idea that 'real' political campaigning is done through door to door canvassing rather over the phone), which excluded those with energy limiting conditions or particular mobility impairments. Interviewees also discussed how political parties were resistant to adapting their 'one size fits all' approach to political organising and campaigning. Survey experiments we have conducted to examine public attitudes to disabled candidates have revealed that people are not biased against disabled politicians, and yet disabled politicians report that they have been seen as 'risky' candidates or viewed as not being up to the job by parties. Some interviewees were deterred by the ableist culture at Westminster (e.g. the formal and aggressive style of debating).

2) Solutions to addressing the barriers

There are a number of strategies that can be used to help increase the number of elected disabled politicians, including: 1) funding; 2) job-share; 3) remote working; and 4) political parties doing more to be accessible and inclusive.

Putting yourself forward for elected office can be very expensive. It is also the case that disabled people are likely to incur additional costs because of their impairment. As such, additional **funding** should be introduced on a permanent basis to help support disabled people meet these additional costs.

For some disabled people who may have energy limiting conditions or for people who have periods during which they are sick or require rest, the idea of becoming a politician may be an impossible dream. The introduction of **job sharing**, where two people share a position, would make the idea of putting themselves forward for election a more realistic option. Any such arrangement would require a pair of individuals to come to a shared agreement so that they spoke as one, rather than two individuals with differing views; it is also true that anyone who sought out a job-share candidate would likely select to stand with someone with a similar ideological and political leaning. Our interviews with disabled candidates and politicians revealed overwhelming support for the idea of job-sharing.

In light of the changes in working as a result of COVID we have all become more used to **remote working**. Going forward, maintaining some sort of hybrid working practice would make politics more accessible for disabled people, for example through the use of remote voting, and virtual participation in some debates and committee hearings. The changes that were made as a result of COVID offer an opportunity to properly evaluate which aspects of hybrid working actually make for an enhanced deliberative process.

Finally, it is necessary that **political parties** take disabled people seriously and commit to ensuring that they are organising in an accessible and inclusive manner. This includes ensuring that the disabled members groups within each party is given a meaningful role in, for example, helping design inclusivity training sessions for local parties. It also includes that local parties actively anticipate any reasonable adjustments (in line with equalities legislation) so that disabled members aren't expected to e.g. request accessible venues, which places an additional on disabled people and delays their participation and work.

3) Access to Elected Office Funds

Given the range of financial barriers facing disabled people who might wish to put themselves forward for elected office, establishing funding schemes to provide funding for the additional costs associated with being a disabled candidate is one important way in which to ensure disabled people can participate. Our evaluation of the UK Government's temporary EnAble Fund for elected office³, found that the additional funding was judged to be very important to disabled candidates.

While the survey data gathered from those who had been awarded funding did not allow us to draw a direct causal link between the allocation of funding and the number of disabled people elected, the research revealed:

- 92% felt that the EnAble Fund helped decrease the barriers they faced in the election process.
- 92% believed that the fund was 'extremely important' for increasing the number of disabled people in politics.
- Only 21% of respondents said that they could have "definitely" stood for election without the funding

In 2016, the Access to Elected Office Fund Scotland (AEOFS) launched a pilot project, supporting disabled people standing for selection and as nominated candidates in the 2017 local government elections. The AEOFS, which shared its aims with the Access Fund launched in England and Wales, was administered by Inclusion Scotland. The evaluation of the fund reported that two thirds of those who used it indicated that it "completely" or "mostly" removed the barriers they faced, with one third saying it removed some of them. The Scottish Government have extended the AEOFS and it continues to be in place.

Our forthcoming book⁴ draws on interviews with just over 80 disabled politicians and party activists, nearly all of whom mentioned the importance of having centrally allocated funding schemes to enable disabled people to put themselves forward for elected office. In order for funding schemes to be effective they should be established on a permanent basis and advertised well in advance of elections. It is also important that political parties understand how the funding works and to promote it to their members in order to reach as many people as possible. Similarly, it is important to ensure that disabled people who wish to be elected as Independents are also made aware of the funding schemes.

Funding schemes could also be particularly useful for those from low income backgrounds or those with caring responsibilities, given the gendered and racialised nature of income inequality it is also likely that women in particular would benefit from additional funding schemes.

4) Systemic approaches

There is little evidence from around the world that any countries, regions, or parties are using electoral systems to increase the number of disabled candidates. However, there are a few

³ Evans and Reher. 2021. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/barriers-to-elected-office-for-disabled-people/barriers-to-political-representation-disability-and-the-enable-fund#conclusions>

⁴ Evans and Reher. *Disability and Political Representation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

examples where systems have been used specifically for this purpose. For example, in Scotland the SNP recently adopted a rule whereby the two top places on the eight regional lists should be reserved for a Black and ethnic minority candidate or disabled candidate. Meanwhile, and further afield, several countries, predominantly in post-conflict societies, have reserved seats or quotas for disabled people in parliament, including Uganda, Rwanda, Liberia and Kenya.

Our research with disabled people has revealed that while there are some enthusiastic proponents of 'all-disabled shortlists' most people we have interviewed (N=83) expressed reservations about disabled quotas. Principally this objection was driven by concerns about how this would work in practice and in particular the wide range of different impairment types amongst disabled people – notably the distinction between visible and invisible impairments.