Scrutiny at Eden Increasing Candidate Participation in Local Elections

December 2018

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Chairman's Foreword

As part of this year's Eden District Council scrutiny topics I put forward a suggestion to explore the reasons why 19 out of the 38 seats in the four yearly District elections went uncontested in 2015. I was very keen to look at how representative our council is. It is so important that local government truly reflects the communities that we have been elected to represent. It; it needs to be inclusive so that we are able to make the best possible decisions for everyone.

The definition of Local government according to the on-line Collins Dictionary is "the system of electing representatives to be responsible for the administration of public services and facilities in a particular area".

Local government bodies are the decision makers for their communities. They are hugely involved in the local economy, planning and service delivery. They influence the lives of everyone living and working in that area. The way that a Council works is determined by the political leadership, the style of governance, knowledge and commitment of Councillors.

If Councillors are going be effective in their contribution to the work of Councils, we need to be openly debating the issues and barriers surrounding the number of seats that are uncontested in Eden and how we increase democratic viability. By using a combination of desk top research, focus groups and public engagement, this paper sets out to explore the reasons behind the low participation. This paper sets out the recommendations on how to encourage involvement, increase the number of candidates and inspire more people, especially from under-represented groups, to stand for election.

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Eden District Councillor for Alston Moor Chairman of the Increasing Candidate Participation in Local Elections Task and Finish Group

1. Executive Summary

In the last two local elections Eden District Council has had the highest number of uncontested seats in England. This prompted the Scrutiny Co-Ordinating Board to establish a Task and Finish Group to take a non-partisan approach to considering ways in which the Council could encourage an increase in participation to reduce the democratic deficit.

Having undertaken some initial desk research, the Task and Finish Group (hereafter referred to as Members) considered Eden District Council's current activities and reviewed them against those of comparable Councils. They held witness sessions with Party Group Representatives, which included Agents, serving Councillors and Parish Councillors. Members of the public were invited to complete a survey, which was available on line and in a paper format.

Members identified three main areas of concern which discourage people from standing as candidates at elections. There are perception of the Council, perception of Councillors and access to information in relation to standing for election.

Perception of the Council

The lack of clarity around services falling under the auspices of the District Council appears to be problematic, as does a lack of understanding of how Council meetings function and how decisions are made.

Members felt that increasing awareness of which services are provided by the County, District and Parish Councils and how the Council makes formal decisions, in a simple, clear, way would help to increase participation.

Perception of Councillors

The lack of diversity in respect of age, disability, ethnicity and gender was considered. Members felt that the gender balance within the Council membership has improved but other groups are under-represented. To address this the Council needs to engage more with Schools, the Youth Parliament in Cumbria and outside organisations to reach under-represented groups.

Members felt that it was important to note that the most vital characteristic for a Councillor was a genuine interest in and willingness to serve the people and the community which they represent.

There is a perception that standing against a well-known/long standing candidate is a 'waste of time'. Concerns over party politics were also raised. Findings show that, from the perspective of the electorate, party politics do not have a huge role in District Council elections. Improving access to information regarding standing for election may help facilitate the number of independent candidates and stand against existing Councillors. Individuals who are concerned about a single issue may be encouraged to stand.

The work and time commitments of Councillors are not clear to members of the public. Concerns over the work/life/Councillor balance, appears to deter people from standing for election. Members felt that steps should be taken to demonstrate that it is possible to balance such commitments successfully.

There is a misconception that Councillors have little impact on their communities, the work of the Council and/or the lives of their constituents. Members felt that it is important to dispel this by showcasing the positive changes that Councillors can make.

Members acknowledged that an increase in candidates standing for election is dependent on the willingness of people to stand. The recommendations in this report are intended to ensure individuals are better informed.

Members noted a number of comments regarding public perceptions of Councillors which were beyond the remit of this group.

Access to information for potential candidates

Information and support is available for potential candidates, however, this information is difficult to find and improved signposting is required.

Members felt that the induction process for new Councillors should be made known in advance of the elections, so that potential candidates could be reassured that they would receive appropriate support when taking up the role.

2. Introduction

This review has been undertaken to explore why a substantial number of seats in the four yearly District Council elections were uncontested in 2015 and to make recommendations on increasing the number of candidates and therefore increasing the number of wards with more than one candidate.

3. Scope

3.1 Purpose of the Review:

To allow the Scrutiny Co-ordinating Board to assess the Council's existing strategy for increasing participation in local government in order to make recommendations in advance of the 2019 election and beyond.

3.2 Aims:

To consider the current practices in the District Council.

To compare current practices with comparable Councils.

To make recommendations to increase the number of candidates standing for election.

3.3 Methodology

All non-executive Members were invited to join the Task and Finish Group. Initially seven Councillors volunteered, however one subsequently withdrew due to other commitments clashing with meeting dates. The group comprised Members from all parties and agreed to take a non-partisan approach to the task. The Members on the Task and Finish Group (hereafter referred to as Members) were:

- Councillor L Sharp –Alston Moor (Chairman)
- Councillor D Holden – Penrith North
- Councillor V Kendall – Kirkby Stephen
- Councillor G Nicolson – Lazonby
- Councillor R Orchard - Hartside
- Councillor J Raine – Crosby Ravensworth

Members agreed to the following approach:

- Desk based research comprising a review of previous elections, a survey of similar Councils and a review of similar work undertaken by other Public bodies.
- Witness sessions with the Group Leaders, serving Councillors, Parish Councillors and former candidates.
- Public engagement via on-line and paper questionnaires.

As this was not an academic study the Literature Review was limited to publicly accessible reports and papers readily available, free of charge via the internet.

An initial search identified 24 local authorities where at least one in 10 Councillors were elected unopposed[1] in the May 2011 elections. From this 13 Councils were identified as being similar to Eden District Council based on the classification of

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[1] Electoral Reform Society (2011), English Local Elections

Mainly Rural[2]. These were collated with the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy 'nearest neighbours' group of similar authorities and as a result 23 Councils were contacted to establish the number of uncontested seats in the 2011 and 2015 elections and the initiative in place for encouraging candidates to stand. Responses were received from 13 Councils.

Having reviewed three publications[3] Members agreed to hold four witness sessions in order to gain an understanding of different views in relations to;

- the role of the District Councillor;

- the time spent by District Councillors;

- the skills required;

- representation of the local community;

- clarity of the process for standing for election;

- age;

- why so many seats were uncontested in Eden in 2015;

- what difference canvassing makes;

- what would encourage people to stand for election; and

- the support available for candidates before and after elections.

Witness sessions were held for:

- Party Group Representatives attended by representatives of the Conservative Party, the Green Party, the Labour Party; the Liberal Democrat Party and the Independent Group.

- Serving Councillors from all Political Groups and covering a range of length of service as a Councillor and rural/urban wards.

- Parish Councillors; with attendece by representatives from three Parishes together with a candidate who had previously stood for election as a County Councillor.

Members were keen to understand the views of candidates who had previously stood for election but were unable to arrange for a specific witness session due to difficulties in reaching previous candidates. One candidate attended the session arranged for Parish Councils to facilitate a group discussion. Participants at each session were advised of the rationale for the study and informed that a non-partisan approach was being taken to the study. Witness sessions took the form of semi-structured focus groups. The questions asked at each witness session to initiate discussion are included as Appendix 1 to this report.

Members also agreed to undertake wider public engagement. During discussions and arising from comments made at witness sessions Members felt that increased efforts should be made to engage with young people. Due to the timescales involved and resources available witness sessions involving schools were not undertaken. Public engagement was undertaken through an anonymous on-line

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[2] Local Authority Districts ranked by rural and hub-town (rural-related) populations 2011, with the Rural Urban Classification
[3] Electoral Reform Society (2011), English Local Elections; Democracy Commission (2017),Growing a Stronger Local Democracy from the Ground Up

survey, which was promoted through a press release and social media. The Facebook reach was 1,633 with 135 post engagements and 16 link clicks. The Chairman of the Task and Finish Group was also interviewed by local press.

Paper copies of the survey were available at Council offices and Libraries/Local Links at Alston, Appleby, Kirkby Stephen, Lazonby, Penrith and Shap.

An email was sent to all Secondary schools in Eden requesting that the link to the survey be sent to year 11, 12 and 13 students.

In total 50 responses were received. Members were disappointed to note that no responses were received from members of the public aged below 25. The questions asked in the survey are included as Appendix 2 to this report.

4.   Findings

4.1   Background

The Kirklees Democracy Commission report[4] suggests that "Voters are motivated by having a competitive choice of candidates and by having a sense that your vote counts for something."

Eden District is one of the areas in England with the highest number of uncontested seats at local elections. Eden operates on a four year cycle of all-out elections. In Eden District, at the 2011 and 2015 local elections only 19 seats out of 38 were contested and at parish council level in 2015 only 11 elections took place within the 53 parish councils. Therefore, at the Scrutiny Co-Ordinating Board meeting held on 24 Many 2018, the Committee agreed that a Task and Finish Group should be established to undertake a Scrutiny Review to consider ways in which the Council could help to reduce the democratic deficit.

A report from Plymouth University[5] indicated that in 2015 Local Elections were held in 279 authorities in England, with the whole Council being elected in 130 District Councils, 30 Unitary Authorities and one Metropolitan Borough. In 35 Metropolitan Boroughs, 19 Unitary Authorities and 64 Districts one third of the Council was elected.

An Electoral Reform report[6] placed Eden at the top of a league table of Uncontested Seats. Members noted that out of the 24 local authorities listed 21 were either classified as Mainly Rural or Largely Rural. Of the 13 Councils who responded, only one had similar levels of uncontested seats in 2015 i.e. Hambleton District Council who, following a boundary review have 28 seats over 17 wards. In 2015, 14 of those wards were contested.

Having contacted and received responses from 13 District Councils with similar profiles to Eden, Members noted 10 Councils engaged in promotional activities for prospective candidates such as delivering workshops, Agent sessions, producing posters/publications outlining the role of a District Councillor and issuing press releases. Three Councils took no action. One commented that the political parties were active in recruiting candidates which meant the Council could increase the support available to new Councillors following the elections. Two Councils commented that they actively engaged with schools during Democracy week. Only one Council held three out of four yearly elections.

[4] Kirklees Democracy Commission (2017)Growing a Stronger Local Democracy from the Ground Up
[5] C Rallings and M Thrasher (2015) Local Elections in England May 2015
[6] Electoral Reform Society (2011), English Local Elections

In previous elections Eden District Council has supported candidates by:

- Providing advice and guidance via the Elections team;

- Providing information sessions for prospective candidates; and

- Providing induction/training sessions after elections

A communications campaign from January onwards, is been planned by the Communication Officer to promote the elections and the role of the Councillor. This will include press releases, video soundbites and an increased social media presence.

4.2 Barriers to Participation

Members considered the report of the Lancaster City Council Overview and Scrutiny Committee[7] together with comments from the witness Sessions to better understand the issues which deterred people from standing for election. The areas which promoted most discussion are discussed in sections 4.3 to 4.8. These have been identified as themes from analysis of the witness Sessions and the Survey results.

4.2.1 Election Cycles

Members noted the content of the Kirklees Council report[8] which considered local democracy in a wider context to that of this study. In particular the arguments for and against a four year electoral cycle compared to three out of four year cycle. Members felt there would be little benefit to recommending any changes to the current system as there was no evidence to suggest that this would influence the number of contested seats.

4.2.2 Age, Disability, Ethnicity and Gender

Members noted references to the gender balance within the current administration which has 24 male Councillors to 14 female Councillors (63% male, 37% female), within the Executive the balance is 4 male to 3 female (57% male, 43% female). In the 2015 General Elections only 26% of candidates were women, 29.4% of those elected were women[9]. This indicates that Eden District Council is above the national benchmark.

Currently there are no non-white or young people (people aged below 25) serving as Councillors. However, from August 2016 to May 2017 Eden District Council did have a 22 year old Councillor serve.

When asked all respondents were quite clear regarding the age restrictions for Councillors ie that the minimum age is 18. Gender, age and ethnicity were all raised in witness sessions and through the survey. Work/life balance is covered below which is particularly relevant to gender and age.

A sample of comments from the survey in response to 'How representative of your community are District Council Candidates?' are detailed below:

"Very little, generally retired and not representative of working people and youngsters".

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[7] Overview and Scrutiny Committee Lancaster City Council (2010) Barriers to Being a Councillor Task Group
[8] Kirklees Democracy Commission (2017)Growing a Stronger Local Democracy from the Ground Up
[9] House of Commons Library (2015) Briefing Paper, General Election 2015

"I understand that retired people probably have more time on their hands, and older people have more life experience, so they may not look like me, but they can still represent me if they engage with their constituents, and read reports around local and national issues."

"I suspect they are not representative, given the shortfall in candidates then statistically it would be unlikely if they were. Having said that I feel most try to represent their constituents, which is a different question."

"All Councillors should be independent and not push their views on the public".

Members noted the following areas discussed at witness sessions:

- There are not enough young people involved.

- All communities are different.

- The gender balance has improved; however, this does not mean that parity has been achieved.

- Access to the Council Chamber is particularly difficult for anyone who is a wheelchair user.

- Support available for people with disabilities is not apparent.

- Candidates tend to be more affluent.

Members acknowledged that serving Councillors tend to be older and that younger people and women face additional barriers to standing for election such as managing work and family commitments (either caring for children or elderly relatives). Members also acknowledged that engaging with people with disabilities and people from ethnic minorities is particularly difficult and that more needs to be done to facilitate their involvement in local government.

While Members welcome increased representation from these groups they noted that there is a limit to what steps the Council can take to widen participation, in that people must want to stand for election and that this cannot be forced on any individual or section of the community.

When asked 'What skills should a District Councillor have' survey respondents commented on communication skills most frequently. Members felt that the most important characteristics required were an interest in and concern for the local community. These characteristics are often overlooked and should be emphasised.

4.4 Understanding the Role and Responsibilities of Eden District Council

The different roles and responsibilities in relation to County, District and Parish/Town Councils were raised during each Witness session. Consensus was that people do not have a clear understanding of which Council has responsibility for the different services or the difference between their statutory duties. There is also confusion as to which are statutory and which are discretionary services.

Members felt that potential candidates would be deterred from standing if they did not have a clear understanding of the functions of the Council.

Responses to the Survey question 'Please identify which Council has responsibility for the following services' are detailed below and confirm this.

Only 56 % of the questions asked in relation to the provision of services were answered correctly. This indicates that more needs to be done to raise awareness in respect of the Council's area of responsibility.

	PARISH COUNCILS	EDEN DISTRICT COUNCIL	CUMBRIA COUNTY COUNCIL	ALL COUNCILS HAVE SOME RESPONSIBILITY	DON'T KNOW	TOTAL
Refuse Collection	0.00% 0	86.00% 43	6.00% 3	2.00% 1	6.00% 3	50
Adult Social Services	0.00% 0	8.00% 4	74.00% 37	6.00% 3	12.00% 6	50
Street Lighting	12.00% 6	30.00% 15	38.00% 19	10.00% 5	10.00% 5	50
Footway Lighting	22.00% 11	40.00% 20	10.00% 5	8.00% 4	20.00% 10	50
Grass Cutting	24.00% 12	42.00% 21	8.00% 4	10.00% 5	16.00% 8	50
Planning Application	2.00% 1	76.00% 38	0.00% 0	18.00% 9	4.00% 2	50
Public Transport	0.00% 0	4.08% 2	73.47% 36	6.12% 3	16.33% 8	49
Homelessness	0.00% 0	30.00% 15	32.00% 16	20.00% 10	18.00% 9	50
Education	2.04% 1	0.00% 0	83.67% 41	6.12% 3	8.16% 4	49

4.4 Understanding the Roles and Responsibilities of the District Councillor and Party Politics

Public understanding of the roles and responsibilities of District Councillors was also raised at witness sessions as a possible barrier to standing as a Councillor.

When asked 'Do you know what a District Councillor does?' 47% of respondents answered 'No'.

Comments from the survey suggested that respondents answering 'yes' believed Councillors:

• represent local views;

• can be contacted regarding local issues;

• provide representation at a regional level;

• liaise with Parish Councils; and

• represent communities on Eden District Council Committees.

The issues of Party Politics was discussed in witness sessions in relation to support offered when standing for election (see section 4.5). It was noted that Eden District Council has a tradition of having a large proportion of 'Independent' Councillors.

To better understand the influence of party politics the survey included two questions relating to voting in elections.

90% of respondents advised that they vote in local election. 9 of the 15 people who commented as to why they do/don't vote indicated that they felt this was their civic

duty/right. Four felt that it was a waste of time and two felt that it was due to 'poor calibre of Councillors and dislike for party politics at a local level'.

The responses to 'How likely are you to vote for the same political party at each elections?' were as follows:

ANSWER CHOICES	RESPONSES	
Extremely likely	12.00%	6
Very likely	24.00%	12
Somewhat likely	30.00%	15
Not likely	34.00%	17
TOTAL		50

Comments also suggested that the candidate standing was more important than party views:

"I vote on the policies I like, not tied to particular party."

"Depends on what they do for the local community and if they represent the interests of the community."

"I will usually vote for the person who I think will best serve the interests of my community."

"I would vote for a local Councillor based on the work they do and not their "party"."

Only 24% of respondents agreed with the statement 'You have to be a member of a political party to stand as a candidate for District Council Elections'.

Serving Councillors in particular, felt that their roles were not understood by the general public (see section 4.7).

Concerns over post-election support were also raised with the following being cited as potential barriers:

- Lack of clarity regarding Council structures;

- Lack of clarity regarding individual responsibilities, what a Councillor Must, Should, Can/Can't do;

- Not knowing who to contact; and

- Not knowing what post-election support would be available.

As only 24% of respondents agreed with the statement "You have to be a member of a political party to stand as a candidate for District Council Elections" and only 36% are extremely likely or very likely to have their vote influenced by an allegiance to a political party, Members felt that the characteristics of the candidate are more important that party views. It was felt that steps should be taken to dispel the commonly held myth that there is no point in standing for election as party politics are dominant.

4.5   Understanding the Election Process

Unsurprisingly, the Party Group Representatives felt the election process was clear, as they arrange Agents to act for Candidates. However they, along with serving Councillors and Parish Councillors, felt that the process was not very clear for new candidates. It was agreed that many rely on Party support. All agreed that the support provided by the Elections team was good, however, more information was needed to encourage individuals to stand.

It was noted that Eden District Councils website includes information on becoming a Councillor, together with links to the websites for: the Local Government Association; GOV.UK; The Electoral Commission; Cumbria Association of Local Councils and The National Association of Local Councils. While these sites provide clear information on what Councillors do and how to stand for election, Eden District Council's website is difficult to navigate and finding this page is, in itself difficult for those not familiar with the site.

69% of respondents to the Survey disagreed with the statement 'The process for standing for election is clearly specified and readily available.' Given that there is a strong tradition of Independent Councillors in Eden and that respondents to the survey tend not to follow party politics, Members felt that improving access to clear, concise information is an important factor in increasing participation.

4.6 Practicalities for Councillors

A number of practicalities were raised including, time commitments, workload, work/life balance, travel, scheduling of meetings, coping with negative publicity/social media and remuneration affecting benefits.

There was little consensus in relation to the question around how much time a District Councillor should spend on Council business. Survey responses to 'How much time do you think a District Councillor typically spends on Council business each week?' varied considerably:

Hours per week/comment	Number of responses
Varies depending on Councillor	3
No idea	7
10 hours or less	18
Between 11 hours and 20 hours	10
Over 20 hours	5

Feedback from witness sessions indicated that a minimum of one day per week would be spent on Council business. It was noted that this could vary considerably depending on the number of Committees a Councillor sits, for example Members sitting on the Executive and Planning Committee would have a significantly increased workload and would spend more time at meetings/engaged in Council business than those who sit on Committees which sit less frequently. The number of formal committee meetings scheduled for 2018 -2019 is detailed below to indicate that commitments involved:

Committee	Number of meetings scheduled in 2018-2019	Typical duration of meeting
Accounts and Governance Committee	6	1.5 – 2 hrs
Council	8	2 – 3 hrs
Executive	11	1.5 – 2.5hrs

Environment and Economy Scrutiny Committee	5	1.5 – 2.5 hrs
Housing and Communities Scrutiny Committee	5	1.5 – 2.5 hrs
Planning Committee	12	2.5 – 8 hrs
Planning Committee (Site Visits)	12	Dependent on location
Scrutiny Co-ordinating Board	6	1.5 – 2.5 hrs
Portfolio Holder Meetings (7 Portfolio Holders)	11 per Portfolio Holder	1.5 – 2.5 hrs

It should be noted that these meetings may be cancelled if there are no items for debate eg. Licensing Committee, Planning Committee site visits. Additional meetings may be scheduled during the year if any decisions of the Executive are called-in eg. Scrutiny Co-ordinating Board. Similarly Councillors are involved in the Human Resources and Appeals Committee and Budget Scrutiny groups as well as other ad hoc committees such as this Task and Finish Group. Members also attend training and briefing sessions.

Workloads also vary according to the number of Outside Bodies on which a Councillor sits. Where a Councillor's Ward covers more than one Parish, more time may be spent attending Parish Council meetings as a District Councillor.

Members acknowledged that the rurality of Eden means that additional time is required to travel to meetings or to meet with constituents. As Council meetings take place at the Town Hall in Penrith, Councillors representing some areas may spend almost as much time travelling to and from meetings as they do at the meeting. Lack of public transport may also be a barrier to potential candidates as attending evening meetings is a requirement. Councillors are required to attend in person at formal meetings, therefore web based communication is not possible. The possibility of attending web based training was discussed as a way of reducing travel time and facilitating attendance.

The scheduling of meetings was discussed during witness sessions in relation to work/life balance. Council, Executive, Scrutiny Co-ordinating Board, Housing and Communities Scrutiny, Environment and Economy Scrutiny and Accounts and Governance Committee all take place during the evening. Formal Portfolio Holder meetings, Planning, Licensing, HR and Appeals, and Joint Consultative Committees meet during the day.

Both the Lewisham[10] report and the Local Governance Research Unit[11] reports discuss issues which echo witness session discussions in that varying the times of the meetings may not encourage candidates to stand for election as "day time meetings could negatively impact those in employment and evening meetings could negatively impact those with children."[11]

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[10] Lewisham City Council (2017) Draft report of the Lewisham Barriers to Politics Working Group
[11] De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission (2017) The Voice of the Councillor

These same reports, together with the Lancaster City Council report[12] discuss the challenges of balancing the work of a Councillor with full time work. This appears to be a significant challenge for younger Councillors/potential candidates. The Local Governance Research Unit report[11] quotes a Councillor "You have to make a choice – council or career…"

Comments from the survey include:

"Don't have the time [to stand for election] due to work and finance requirements towards my young family. Unless you are wealthy or "a sponsored chosen one from an urban inner city poverty" then what's the point."

"I would rather focus on my career."

It was noted that potential candidates may not be aware of the allowances available to Councillors. It was also noted that anyone in receipt of benefits would have to declare the allowance as income, which may result in them being worse off.

When Members discussed the time commitment they acknowledge that it can be difficult to quantify the commitment involved as this varies greatly. It was noted that 21 of the 38 serving Councillors successfully manage the demands of being a Councillor with self-employment, employment and/or caring for family members. Members felt that examples of the ways in which Councillors balance their work/life/Council commitments could help encourage more candidates to stand.

4.7   Perception

Witness session also identified challenges in respect of public perceptions of both the Council and Councillors. Perceptions of the roles and responsibilities is included above, in addition issues around negative publicity and the impact of social media were raised as potential barriers.

Witness sessions provided feedback that Councillors are under ever increasing scrutiny from the public. Whilst this is welcome in terms of transparency, it can become a barrier if potential candidates feel that they will come under personal attack either physically as with Jo Cox or via social media. It was noted that it is particularly difficult for Councillors to defend themselves where the public do not have a full understanding of the statutory duties which limit the powers of the Council and individuals ability to influence policies. There is general apathy and an unwillingness to 'put your head above the parapet'.

The De Montfort University and Municipal Journal Councillor Commission report[11] suggests that while criticism is often seen a part and parcel of being a Councillor many Councillors felt that local media oppose the party in control of the Council and the 'nature and tone' could be problematic.

Witness sessions highlighted the fact that while negative opinions of Councillors and the Council are often reported, the unseen good works by Councillors often go unnoticed. This provides little incentive or encouragement for potential candidates.

There was also a clear indication that perceptions of the current Councillor within a Ward has a significant impact on potential candidates. There is a reluctance to stand against 'popular' or 'influential' Councillors as it is seen as a 'waste of time'. As there is also a financial cost, there appears to be little incentive to stand where the perception is that the candidate has no chance of success.

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[12] Overview and Scrutiny Committee Lancaster City Council (2010) Barriers to Being a Councillor Task Group

Members felt that communicating the positive differences Councillors make might encourage others to stand for election.

Comments from the survey include:

"People like to whinge but aren't prepared to get involved. And everyone involved in politics is on the take and only in it for themselves."

"There isn't a culture of participation. I don't think many people are aware of just how much the local Council is responsible for and how well its officers usually deliver services."

"In rural areas politics do not seem to have much effect on the District Council."

"People feel they have no influence, it's too political and not truly local, no-one feels empowered, people can't be [*bothered*] to engage (but they love to moan, councillors won't come and deal with every local issue (too busy, too far removed). And would people want to put themselves forward? No. No time, have full time jobs or are retired, have other things to do in life, do not want to travel distance to where county hall is, and don't want the hassle and aggro. In social media days, even better to avoid!"

"No one wants to put their head above the parapet, it comes across as a thankless task. Few people know how to become a Councillor. Few people know what they would have to do. People think you have to have special knowledge, they don't realise 'politicians' are just normal people trying to represent the area."

"Perception of having little power to effect change."

"Time commitments. And my feeling is in the area people don't like change so generally the same Councillors get elected by reputation."

"Too much party politics and lack of respect between Councillors in the Council Chamber. People have busy lives and younger people often have busy jobs and families. People don't realise they can be independent and often don't want to put themselves up for election against and existing Councillor."

"Lack of trust in Councils."

"Is it really worth it!!!! [standing as a candidate] The selection process is predetermined and institutional discrimination and public discrimination. So unlikely to be selected and if elected the discrimination that I am likely to face both from Councillors and the Council. As equality is only paid a lip service."

"Councils come across as corrupt, decisions already made before being made public. I do not know anyone who trusts what EDC say."

Members felt that a lack of understanding of the Council's rules and procedures acted as a barrier to participation, as members of the public may be disheartened and feel that Councillors cannot effect change if they don't understand the formal process of debate that Councillors must abide by.

When asked what could be done to encourage candidates to stand responses included the following negative comments:

"Less "cronies in the pockets of big business" already within the Council. You won't stand a chance against these "sponsored" individuals with links to big parties, trade unions or big business."

"I have thought of standing, indeed I have been asked by two existing District Councillors. I won't because of the criticism and lack of thanks for doing the role."

"Close to nothing unfortunately. I am not willing to take the same abuse my District Councillor has been taking recently on social media."

"Get rid of the politics and centralise all meeting and administrative functions to minimise travel."

"Change the way Councils work and more openness and transparency."

"Payment of the National Minimum wage or enhanced allowance. The present rate hardly equates with singing on street corners."

"My District Councillor has taken a lot of abuse because of a Cumbria County Council decision….If she was not told then it is not her fault and should not take this abuse, If this is how the system works – secrecy and lack of communication at higher levels causing others to be in the line of fire from constituents – then I am out."

"Although you don't have to be wealthy, retired or a member of a political party to be a candidate it is a massive advantage in many instances, If the Councillor role was less bureaucratic and the renumerative allowances were higher it might encourage people to stand."

"If there weren't as many elderly Councillors."

Positive comments included:

"Some information about what the job is and what the Council does."

"More information, is there a wage? How do you go about standing? What do they do?"

"Fewer evening meetings? Streaming [sic] of Council meetings."

"It would help if the local news media would provide info."

"If I understood in what way it would make a difference to others."

"If I knew what skills were looked for and had more information about what the job involves."

"Institutional change and more diverse."

"If a real difference could be made."

"Support in the opportunity."

Members expressed concerns regarding some of the comments that were received as it was evident that a number of respondents held negative views of the Council. While a number of the more troubling comments in respect of allegations of corruption and uninterested Councillors are beyond the scope of this group, Members agreed that there were a number of misconceptions, which were not borne out by the evidence, that could be addressed. Members felt that communicating the positive difference Councillors make through working with their communities and Officers to find solutions to day to day issues affecting residents may help to dispel the belief that being a Councillor is a 'waste of time'.

Similarly it was felt that providing clarity on how the Council debates issues and makes decisions may encourage people to become more involved.

4.8   Parish and Town Councils and Parish Meetings

While the Terms of Reference for this study relate to increasing candidate numbers in elections for District Councillors, Members noted that Parish Councils also have high levels of uncontested seats, and Members believe that some of the issues also relate to Parish and Town Councils and Parish Meetings.

It was noted that involvement with the Parish or Town Council or Parish Meeting is often a spring board to District Council. Almost 66% of serving Councillors are/or have been involved in their Parish or Town Councils.

Members noted that some of the costs involved in holding District Council elections are borne by the Parish Council. This may act as a deterrent to contested elections.

Members felt that sharing the finding of this study with Parish Councillors would raise awareness of the barriers to participation in elections.

5.   Conclusion

In conclusion findings from witness sessions, existing studies and the survey suggest that the main barriers to standing for election can be summarised in three main categories: perception of the Council; perception of Councillors and access to information regarding standing for election.

5.1   Perception of the Council

Members felt that the lack of clarity around the services falling under the auspices of the District Council deters individuals from standing as candidates for election. If people do not understand the role of the Council they will not feel empowered to represent their communities. Similarly, if they do not understand how Council meetings function and how decisions are made they will not feel confident in taking part.

Members felt that increasing awareness of which services are provided by the County, District and Parish Councils in a simple, clear way would therefore help to increase participation.

5.2   Perception of Councillors

The lack of diversity in respect of age, disability, ethnicity and gender was of concern. While the gender balance has improved other groups remain under-represented. Members felt that it was particularly important to address the lack of young people engaging with the Council. To do this they felt that involvement with schools and the Youth Parliament should increase. They also felt that communication with outside organisations eg. Awaz (who provide support for under-represented groups) could help engagement with other under-represented groups.

Members felt that it was important to note that the most vital characteristic for a Councillor was a genuine interest in and willingness to serve the people and the community which they represent.

The Task and Finish group has taken a non-partisan approach to this subject and noted that Eden District has a strong tradition of Independent Councillors. Feedback indicated that there is a perception that standing against a well-known/long standing candidate is 'waste of time'. Concerns over party politics were also raised; however, findings show that, from the perspective of the electorate, party politics do not have a huge role in District Council elections. Increasing the ease of access to

information regarding standing for election may help facilitate the number of Independent candidates. Individuals who are concerned about a single is issue may be encouraged to stand.

There appears to be little understanding in respect of the work and time commitments of Councillors. While it is acknowledged that it can be difficult to juggle the work/life/Councillor balance, Members felt that steps should be taken to demonstrate that it is possible to manage this successfully.

There is a misconception that Councillors have little impact on their communities, the work of the Council and/or the lives of their constituents. Members felt that it is important to dispel this by showcasing the positive changes that Councillors can make. Members acknowledged that this should be on a non-party basis and should not be used to promote any individual in advance of any forthcoming elections.

Members acknowledged that an increase in candidates standing for election is dependent on the willingness of people to stand, the recommendations in this report are intended to ensure individuals are better informed.

5.3   Access to information for potential candidates

Members acknowledged that there is information and support available for potential candidates. However, this information is difficult to find and improved signposting is required. While there is a reluctance to 're-invent the wheel', Members felt that additional clear, concise material may be required.

Difficulties in understanding the working practices of the Council following election were also felt to be a potential barrier. Members felt that the induction process for new Councillors should be made known in advance of the elections, so that potential candidates could be reassured that they would receive appropriate support when taking up the role.

As Members have spent a considerable amount of time considering the issues involved they felt that they would like to continue to work with Officers to develop an improved induction programme and supporting information for new Councillors.

6.   Recommendations

To address the barriers to participation identified by the findings detailed in this report Members wish to make the following recommendations. Recommendations 1, 7 and 9 are ultimately matters for the Executive to consider. The remaining matters are for the Deputy Chief Executive as District Returning Officer to implement.

1) That there be an increase in ongoing publicity on the role/work of the Council including:

- regular press releases/social media presence;

- improvements to information on Eden District Council's website; and

- the production of an easy guide to which Council has responsibility for which service.

2) That there be an increase in ongoing publicity on the role/work of Councillors to encourage new candidates including:

- Posters;

- Press/social media releases;

- Improvements to information on Eden District Council's website

- A day in the life of a Councillor to illustrate how a good work/life balance can be achieved.

3) That a booklet be developed for prospective candidates to include:

- Election process – signposting to the Electoral Commission Information rather than re-inventing wheel;

- Support available before/after elections;

- Councillor role descriptors – what Councillors must/should/can do;

- Members Code of conduct;

- Typical meeting calendar to provide information regarding time commitments; and

- Organisational structure chart.

4) That briefing sessions/open evenings be provided for potential candidates.

5) That there be an increase in engagement regarding forthcoming elections with under-represented groups through organisations such as Awaz (who provide support to under-represented groups).

6) That there be an increase in contact with Secondary Schools and the Youth Parliament.

7) That Group Leaders be recommended to take a non-partisan approach and nominate experienced Councillors to act as mentors for new Councillors.

8) That this report be forwarded to Eden Association of Local Councils.

9) Members of the Task and Finish Group work with the Assistant Director Legal Services to develop an induction programme for new Councillors to include:

- training sessions;

- support material such as; an induction booklet containing

  - Council structure

  - who's who/leads for all areas,

  - Councillor role descriptions

  - how Council makes decisions

  - what Members must/should/can/can't do

  - role of scrutiny;

  - how to approach casework;

  - Mentoring/support networks;

  - procedures;

  - statutory declarations.

Appendix 1 - Witness Session Question

Party Group Representatives

1. How do you think District Councillors can make a difference?

2. How much time should a District Councillor give/how much time do you think you need to be a Councillor?

3. What skills should a District Councillor have?

4. How representative of the local community are candidates?

5. How clear is the process for standing for election?

6. What should be the age range for District Councillors?

7. In the 2015 local elections 19 of the 38 seats were uncontested. Why do you think there are so many uncontested seats/low turnout in local elections?

8. How much difference does canvassing make?

9. How does canvassing affect turnout?

10. What would encourage people to stand in a local election?

Candidates who sought election but were not elected

1. How do you think Councillors can make a difference?

2. How much time should a District Councillor give/how much time do you think you need to be a District Councillor?

3. What skills should a District Councillor have?

4. How representative of the local community are candidates?

5. How clear is the process for standing for election?

6. In the 2015 local elections 19 of the 38 seats were uncontested. Why do you think there are so many uncontested seats/low turnout in local elections?

7. How much difference does canvassing make?

8. How does canvassing affect turnout?

9. What would encourage people to stand in a local election?

10. What would your feelings be about standing again?

Serving Councillors

1. How do you in your role as a District Councillors make a difference?

2. How much time should do you give in your role as a local Councillor?

3. How representative of the local community are candidates?

4. How clear is the process for standing for election?

5. In the 2015 local elections 19 of the 38 seats were uncontested. Why do you think there are so many uncontested seats/low turnout in local elections?

6.   How much difference does canvassing make?

7.   How does canvassing affect turnout?

8.   What would encourage people to stand in a local election?

9.   What support have you had before & after elections?

10.   How helpful was this?

Parish Council representatives

1.   How do you think District Councillors can make a difference?

2.   How much time should a District Councillor give/how much time do you think you need to be a District Councillor?

3.   How important is voting according to Party Views?

4.   How representative of the local community are District Council candidates?

5.   How clear is the process for standing for election as a District Councillor?

6.   What should be the age range for Councillors?

7.   In the 2015 local elections 19 of the 38 seats were uncontested. Why do you think there are so many uncontested seats/low turnout in local elections?

8.   How much difference does canvassing make?

9.   How does canvassing affect turnout?

10.   What would encourage people to stand in a local election?

Appendix 2 – Public Engagement

Eden District is one of the areas of the UK with the highest number of uncontested seats at local elections. A Scrutiny Group of District Councillors is now investigating what perceived barriers there may be that are preventing people who are passionate about their local communities from standing for election.

We would be obliged if you could complete the following survey.

1. Please identify which Council has responsibility for the following services?

	Parish Councils	Eden District Council	Cumbria County Council	All Councils have some responsibility	Don't know
Refuse Collection	○	○	○	○	○
Adult Social Services	○	○	○	○	○
Street Lighting	○	○	○	○	○
Footway Lighting	○	○	○	○	○
Grass Cutting	○	○	○	○	○
Planning Application	○	○	○	○	○
Public Transport	○	○	○	○	○
Homelessness	○	○	○	○	○
Education	○	○	○	○	○

Other (please specify)

2. Do you know what a District Councillor does?

○ Yes

○ No

Please provide a summary of what you think a District Councillor does

3. How much time do you think a District Councillor typically spends on Council business each week?

4. What skills should a District Councillor have?

5. To help us understand voting patterns, please could you tell us if you vote in local elections?

◯ Yes

◯ No

◯ Please provide details as to why you do/don't vote

6. How likely are you to vote for the same political party at each election?

◯ Extremely likely

◯ Very likely

◯ Somewhat likely

◯ Not likely

Comments

7. How representative of your community are District Council candidates?

8. In the 2015 Eden local elections 19 of the 38 seats were uncontested. Why do you think there are so many uncontested seats/low turnout in local elections?

9. Have you ever thought about standing as a district councillor – if not why not?

◯ Yes

◯ No

◯ If you have answered no, please tell us why not.

10. What would encourage you to stand as a District Councillor in a local election?

11. To what extent do you agree with the following statements:

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
You have to be a member of a political party to stand as a candidate for District Council Elections	◯	◯	◯	◯
Being a District Councillor is a full time commitment	◯	◯	◯	◯
You have to have a large disposable income	◯	◯	◯	◯
District Councillors don't have any real power to change things	◯	◯	◯	◯
You have to understand how a Council works before you can stand for election	◯	◯	◯	◯
There is no support for new Councillors	◯	◯	◯	◯
The process for standing for election is clearly specified and readily available	◯	◯	◯	◯
You have to be retired to stand as a District Councillor	◯	◯	◯	◯

Is there anything else that would encourage you to stand as a District Councillor?

12. Do you have any other comments?

13. To help inform this survey please provide your age group

◯ Under 18   ◯ 45-54

◯ 18-24   ◯ 55-64

◯ 25-34   ◯ 65+

◯ 35-44

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