



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

RESEARCH

Councillor remuneration and citizen engagement with councillors: survey of public attitudes (summary)

The report explores public perceptions of the role of councillors and the work they do and general support for the principle of providing payments for their work.

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Contents

Background

Councillors' allowances and remuneration

The contribution of councillors within local communities

Behaviour and attitudes towards councillors

Contact details

Background

The Welsh Government is undertaking a programme of research to find out more about the role of councillors in Wales and their remuneration. This programme of work builds on an evaluation of the first phase of the Welsh Government's Diversity in Democracy programme carried out in 2019 which identified the need for a more targeted and tailored approach to supporting under-represented groups to help them actively participate in local democracy. The evaluation also highlighted a lack of awareness among the general public of the role of the councillor and the important contribution they make on behalf of communities.

One element of this research has involved examining general public perceptions of the role of councillors and the work they do and exploring the extent to which those perceptions influence the respect shown to councillors and general support for the principle of providing payments for their work. The Welsh Government commissioned additional questions about the role of councillors in the March 2021 wave of the Wales Omnibus Survey (conducted by Beaufort

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Research Ltd), with analysis conducted in-house by Knowledge and Analytical Services.

Additional research is being undertaken alongside this work, including an evidence review of councillor remuneration in Wales and a small range of case study countries, and a survey of councillors at principal and community and town council levels about their workloads and remuneration.

The Wales Omnibus Survey involves interviews with a representative sample of a minimum of 1,000 adults aged 16 years and over who are resident in Wales. Fieldwork for the March 2021 wave of the Wales Omnibus Survey took place between 2 and 9 March 2021. A total of 1,000 interviews were completed.

Levels of public interest in councillors and in the work that they do

Respondents to the Wales Omnibus Survey appeared to have a good understanding of the role of local government councillors in Wales and offered a range of views on their day-to-day work.

Around a fifth (21%) thought that councillors represented their local areas and acted on behalf of local residents. A further 16 per cent stated that they had responsibility for managing local services, while 14% thought they had responsibility for 'making decisions about local services'.

The majority of respondents had heard of town councillors and county councillors, but there appeared to be lower awareness of community councillors.

Around three quarters of respondents had heard of town councillors (78%), and a similar proportion had heard of county councillors (73%), while half of all respondents had heard of community councillors. Less than a tenth (7%) had not heard of any of the councillors mentioned.

There were significant differences in the proportion of respondents who had heard of the different types of councillors by age. A higher proportion of

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respondents aged 16 to 34 years (12%) had not heard of any of the councillors listed, compared with 4% of respondents aged 35 to 44 years and 4% of respondents over the age of 55 years.

Most respondents (66%) agreed that they would like to hear more about the work of their local councillors and nearly three out of five respondents (57%) agreed that they would like to have more say in what local councillors do as part of their role.

Almost two-thirds of respondents (63%) agreed that councillors 'should be available to the community at any time', while only around one in ten respondents (13%) disagreed with this statement. The proportion agreeing with the statement tended to be higher among respondents:

- aged over 55 years
- from C2DE socio-economic groups

Nearly three-fifths of respondents (57%) agreed that they would like to have more say in what local councillors do in their area and around half of all respondents (52%) agreed with the statement 'I feel comfortable putting my views to local councillors'.

A clear majority of respondents (70%) said they had no desire to become a councillor and around a quarter of respondents (24%) said that whilst they had not considered becoming a councillor, they were open to the idea.

Only 2% of respondents were either working as councillors at the time the survey was carried out, or had been councillors in the past.

Of the 52 respondents who said they had considered becoming a councillor, 21 respondents said that their interest stemmed from a desire to help others and to give back to the community, and 12 respondents thought that it offered an opportunity to make a contribution to the local area. Among the other answers given were: respondents felt motivated to become a councillor as a result of their dissatisfaction with existing councillors in their areas and believed that they could do a better job; respondents had been encouraged by others to become a councillor; or had developed an interest in becoming a councillor following their

involvement in local politics.

When asked why they had decided not to become a councillor, a small number of respondents (11 respondents) stated that they did not feel confident enough or suitably qualified to undertake the role and a further 9 respondents felt they could not commit the time required to undertake the role.

Councillors' allowances and remuneration

Respondents were supportive of providing councillors with an entitlement to a basic salary, travel expenses and equipment to support their role, but appeared to be divided on the issue of offering councillors a dependent carers allowance to cover childcare costs, care of elderly residents and/or other dependents.

Most respondents agreed that councillors should be entitled to a basic salary (72%), ICT and other office equipment (70%) and travel expenses (65%). In comparison, only around two out of five respondents (43%) agreed that councillors should be entitled to a dependent carers allowance, with more than a quarter (27%) disagreeing, and around a quarter (24%) remaining neutral on the issue.

There were significant differences in responses to councillors' allowances and remuneration by age, with support for providing a basic salary and travel expenses highest among respondents aged 35 to 54 years (72%) and over 55 years (75%) respectively, while the proportion agreeing that councillors should be entitled to a dependent carers allowance was higher among those aged 16 to 34 years (54%).

The contribution of councillors within local communities

Over half of all respondents thought that local councillors had made very little or no contribution at all in their local area.

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When asked to explain their answers, respondents provided a range of negative comments, which included that there was no evidence in their area of what councillors had done, local councillors were 'useless', or that respondents had never heard from their local councillors or did not know who they were.

Those responded that were more positive thought that their councillors had helped to bring about positive changes to their local areas, through: improvements to local services such as parks, recreational facilities and community buildings; placing litter bins in public areas and keeping communities clean and tidy; and addressing issues relating to local traffic problems and road conditions.

Behaviour and attitudes towards councillors

The survey showed that respondents had mixed attitudes towards councillors within their area, with around a quarter saying that they were generally viewed positively and a similar proportion saying that they were viewed negatively.

Around a quarter of respondents (26%) said that councillors were generally viewed positively and around one in five respondents (21%) saying that councillors were generally viewed negatively by residents within their area. Around a third of respondents (31%) said that they were not viewed positively nor negatively in their area.

Respondents aged 16 to 34 years were more likely than other respondents to think that councillors were generally viewed positively by residents within their area.

When asked to explain their answers, respondents provide a range of positive and negative comments. Common positive responses included 'they do a good job' and 'they do a lot for the area'; 'nice people', 'friendly', 'very popular and well-respected'; 'approachable', 'communicate well' and 'transparent'; and 'work hard for community', 'ensure local issues are addressed' and 'helpful' (6%).

Negative comments tended to focus on the lack of contact and limited interaction

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between councillors and local residents; the limited evidence showing that councillors had done anything in the area; and the use of negative terms, such as 'useless', 'in it for themselves' and 'don't listen to residents'.

The majority of respondents had not witnessed any anti-social behaviour or hostility towards councillors in their area and said there had been no change in the standard of behaviour towards councillors during the last few years.

Respondents who had witnessed anti-social behaviour or hostility against councillors in their area reported that they had come across negative comments or abuse towards councillors online and had witnessed councillors being verbally abused or subjected to name calling and insults.

Almost two out of three respondents (64%) thought that the standard of behaviour towards councillors had stayed the same during the last few years. The small proportion of respondents who thought it had improved (5%) attributed this to councillors being more visible in the local community and more respect being shown towards councillors in their areas. Respondents who thought it had got worse (5%) felt that their local councillors were not sufficiently involved in local matters and had become less visible locally and observed that the increased use of social media made it much easier to verbally abuse councillors.

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government.

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