



SOCIAL RESEARCH NUMBER: 13/2020

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Renewing democratic engagement: Exploratory research

Executive Summary

1. Background

- 1.1 In July 2018, the then First Minister announced the Welsh Government's legislative programme for the next 12 months. It included provisions for extending the voting franchise for local government elections to 16 and 17 year olds and citizens of all countries living in Wales lawfully¹. The proposal overlapped with plans to extend the voting franchise to 16 and 17 year olds in elections for the National Assembly for Wales².
- 1.2 The Welsh Government is interested in how to engage with the proposed newly enfranchised groups of voters and also those who are already enfranchised but politically disengaged.
- 1.3 Beaufort Research was commissioned to carry out qualitative research with members of the public to:
 - Explore attitudes towards voting in elections;
 - Explore knowledge and understanding of politics in Wales and how represented people feel;
 - Collect views and experiences of wider civic engagement;
 - Identify suitable / effective methods of communication and engagement with different groups of voters.
- 1.4 The sample consisted of 148 participants in total, covering 14-17 year olds, disengaged adults, foreign nationals and stakeholders. The research used a mix of focus groups, mini-groups, paired depth interviews, face-to-face depth interviews and phone depth interviews. A proportion of fieldwork was carried out in Welsh. Fieldwork took place late July to early November 2019.

¹ See [Local Government and Elections \(Wales\) Bill](#).

² See [Senedd and Elections \(Wales\) Act 2020](#).

2. Key findings

Participants were more familiar with local councils than the National Assembly for Wales – but some didn't know what councillors do

- 2.1 Participants were reasonably familiar with their local council. It was known to them through interactions, visible logos and staff and word of mouth. However, some were unfamiliar with the role of councillors and did not know that they were elected. There was sometimes uncertainty about whether the council was responsible for health services and social care.
- 2.2 Overall, participants either did not feel represented by their local councillors (for example because they rarely or never saw a councillor) or did not feel able to answer this question. Some younger participants felt that councillors would be older people and probably not very easy to relate to. Reflecting an attitude of general cynicism, some older participants assumed that councillors were untrustworthy.
- 2.3 Participants were less familiar with the Welsh Government and awareness of the National Assembly for Wales was very limited. The two entities were generally considered to be one and the same thing, where participants were aware of both names. Perceptions of their role and responsibilities, where volunteered, tended to be vague. The Senedd building was quite well known as having something to do with the Welsh Government or the National Assembly.
- 2.4 Politics in Wales was thought to have a low profile, with some participants remarking how they did not encounter the subject in the media. Participants tended to be relatively more aware of UK politics and political figures given their media profile.

Younger people and foreign nationals were more likely than disengaged adults to show an interest in voting in local elections

- 2.5 The levels of interest in voting among these two groups tended to have increased slightly by the end of the research discussions. This was not the case for disengaged participants.

A lack of knowledge, finding politics confusing and unappealing and general disillusionment were key engagement barriers

- 2.6 The barriers to voting were broadly consistent across participant types, regardless of eligibility, but with varying levels of emphasis. They applied to voting in elections in general rather than there being specific barriers arising for different kinds of election in the UK (local, Assembly and UK).
- 2.7 A lack of knowledge and finding politics confusing were key stated barriers to voting, especially among younger participants and foreign nationals. Finding politics unappealing and boring and a general disillusionment with politicians were prominent barriers as well. 'Politics' was often interpreted through a lens of negativity which had formed over time for older disengaged participants. Not feeling represented or connected to politics was present as a barrier across participant type.
- 2.8 A small number of disengaged participants had voted in the EU referendum because it had felt like such a significant moment. Foreign nationals were more likely to emphasise the importance of voting as a means of making their voice heard. For some, this was still important even if they doubted the integrity of the process in their country of origin.
- 2.9 The voting process itself did not emerge as a barrier to voting overall although it was clear that participants were often not very familiar with how the system worked, including registration.
- 2.10 There was little to suggest that any constructive political discussions took place at home, with the exception among some young people's families and some foreign nationals.

Foreign nationals were sometimes uncertain about voting rights for different elections in the UK

- 2.11 Foreign nationals tended to be aware of their eligibility for voting in elections in the UK, or to guess correctly, although limited awareness of local elections meant that some had not previously given it much thought. They were therefore sometimes uncertain about their voting rights. Some non-EU/non-Commonwealth participants were frustrated that they could not vote in any elections in Wales given how much tax they paid and how they were part of the local community.
- 2.12 Non-EU and non-Commonwealth participants were in the main very receptive to the Welsh Government's plan to give non-Commonwealth and non-EU citizens living in Wales the right to vote in local council elections³.

Participants cared about the communities in which they lived but it tended to be unclear how to raise an issue

- 2.13 Participants identified several positive aspects about their communities (e.g. the people and access to green space). They also identified a range of community related issues with varying levels of importance to them. Issues related to antisocial behaviour were most prevalent (e.g. litter, drug use and low level crime).
- 2.14 However, acting on an issue or getting involved in the community was not often considered unless participants were immediately affected. They tended to be unclear on how to raise an issue, give an opinion or change anything. Some issues seemed too big for them to be able to have any influence. Some anticipated they would not be listened to if they did try to raise an issue or that they were too young to do so.
- 2.15 Even so, online petition-signing was fairly common and some had experience of volunteering, suggesting the potential exists for greater engagement.

Stakeholders faced similar challenges engaging with the groups they worked with

- 2.16 Citizenship and civic engagement played an important role in some stakeholders' work when supporting specific groups of people. In some instances, these topics were not quite so integral to their work; and some found it difficult to engage with client groups on such subjects because of other more pressing areas.
- 2.17 Stakeholders also contended with low levels of democratic and civic engagement for the types of reason summarised above. Reaching and engaging with certain groups was sometimes a struggle (e.g. economically inactive people, young people with a disability and people in private residential care).

Knowing more, feeling listened to, and knowing participation can make a difference were key themes from participants' suggestions for improving engagement

- 2.18 The key themes to emerge were:
- Knowing more about the subject and how to raise an issue;
 - Feeling listened to and being taken seriously;
 - Feeling that voting or community involvement could make a difference.

³ The Senedd and Elections (Wales) Bill originally made changes to electoral law to enable 16 and 17 year olds to vote in Assembly elections. Amendments tabled by the Welsh Government after this research began were agreed to also enable qualifying foreign citizens to vote in Assembly elections. Giving qualifying foreign citizens the right to vote in Assembly elections is consistent with the Welsh Government's proposals for extending the franchise for local government elections to qualifying foreign citizens. The timing of this research meant that this option of voting in Assembly elections was not covered.

2.19 From a voting perspective, some participants wanted to know:

- what the relationship was between the local council, the Welsh Government and the National Assembly for Wales;
- why politics in Wales is important;
- the identity of the political parties and what they stand for; and
- how to decide who to vote for in an election.

More visible politicians / candidates and using school, social media and existing community networks were considered key ways to reach people more effectively

2.20 Participants often suggested that more visible and accessible local politicians, candidates or local decision-makers – and having the opportunity to meet them on a face-to-face basis – would encourage them to engage more and consider voting.

2.21 Message themes that participants thought could motivate them to engage more centred on evidence of change, action, honesty and sometimes messages about the future, for example where participants were thinking about their children. Some young people were motivated by messages about the environment. Among foreign nationals and some 14-17 year olds, there was a desire for messages of inclusivity and diversity that made them feel valued.

2.22 The main suggested engagement routes for reaching people were through school and the education sector, via face-to-face routes in the community and via social media.

2.23 Stakeholders identified existing local face-to-face channels as well as themselves as an effective way of reaching and engaging with the people they supported. Despite acknowledging the importance of social media, some pointed to the success they had with face-to-face interactions.

2.24 Training or funding those who had already developed trusting relationships with harder to reach groups like the economically inactive was suggested by some, rather than attempting to engage from scratch. 'Youth workers', 'support workers', 'social workers', charities and community activists were sometimes identified as being well placed to help. Some stakeholders also highlighted the importance of peer-to-peer strategies for improving engagement.

2.25 Some 14-15 year old boys thought that high profile individuals talking about these subjects, for example in Welsh sport and music, might help them to engage.

3. Recommendations

Lack of knowledge and associated confusion need to be addressed as a key barrier to engagement

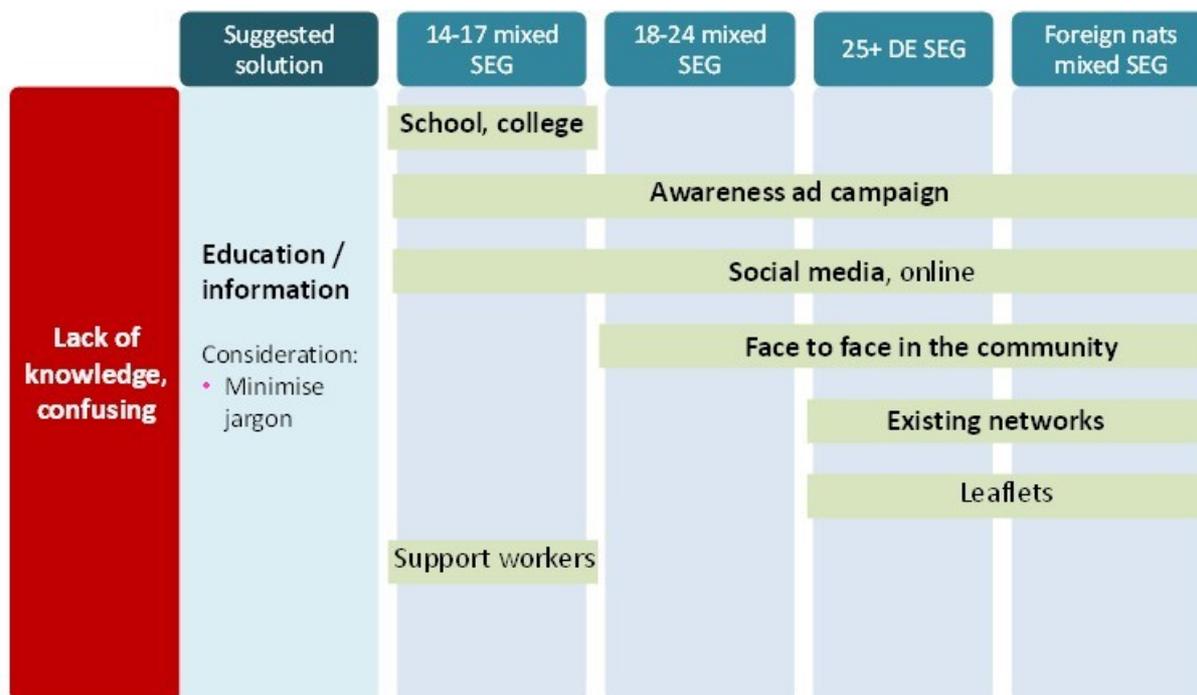
3.1 The research identifies a disconnection between a reasonable awareness of local council services and caring about the community but still not voting. Work is needed on helping people make that connection and improving knowledge of how local government functions.

3.2 Schools and the education sector have a significant role to play in tackling issues with knowledge and confusion through embedding citizenship and political education in Wales's new curriculum.

3.3 A high profile awareness advertising campaign is needed for the widespread reach required to improve levels of understanding and support engagement. Continued work is also needed to raise the profile of Welsh politics in the media.

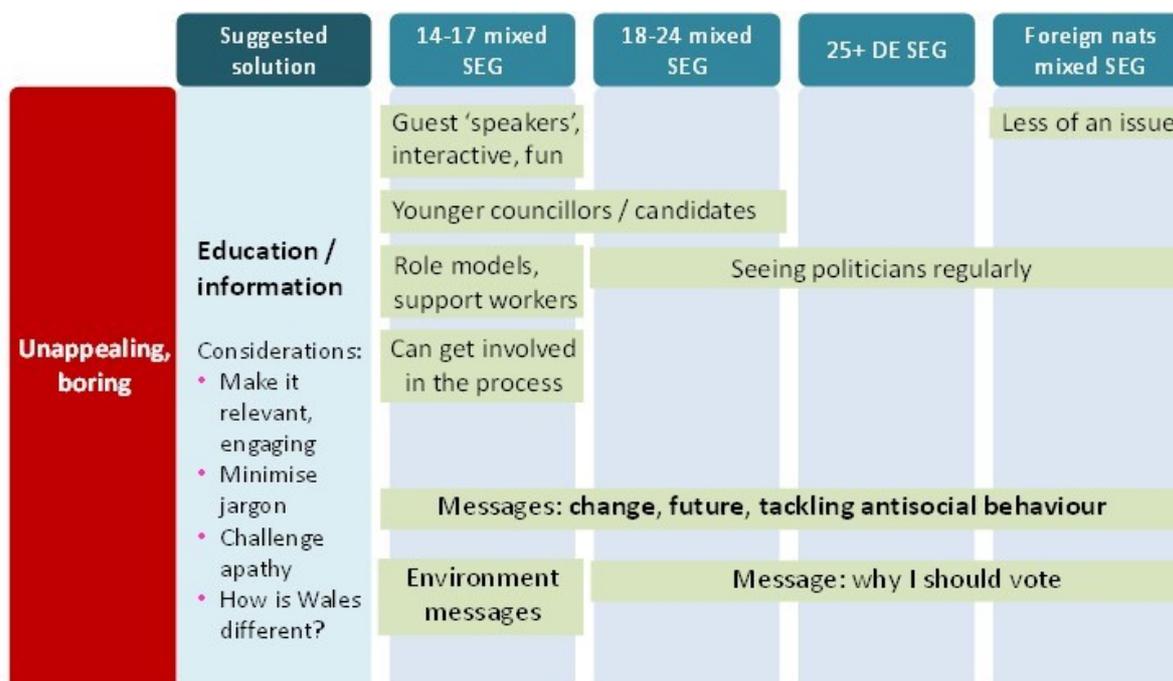
3.4 Young people, younger disengaged adults and foreign nationals showed more potential to changing their perceptions and behaviour and may benefit from being targeted with appropriate communications and education.

3.5 The diagram summarises suggested recommendations for tackling the barrier of a lack of knowledge and associated confusion⁴.



Tackling the barrier of elections and politics being unappealing and boring

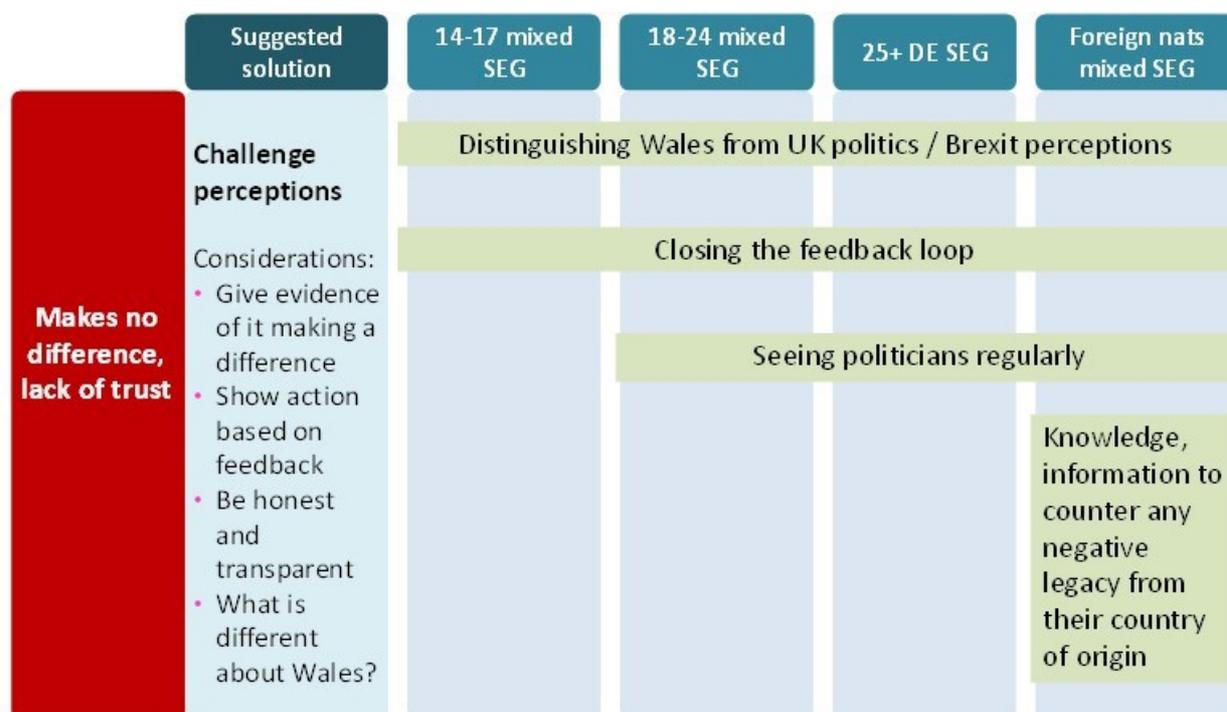
3.6 Education can help to challenge perceptions that elections and politics are unappealing and boring. Messages of change, the future and tackling antisocial behaviour would feel relevant and may catch attention. Ensuring politics feels relevant is key, together with making the engagement process enjoyable and fun for young people. The diagram below summarises how this barrier can be tackled.



⁴ Socio-economic grouping (SEG) given for the disengaged adults sample summary overleaf is based on the occupation of the head of the household, with the 'DE' group defined as follows: semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, state pensioners, casual and lowest grade workers, unemployed with state benefits only.

Tackling the barriers of voting or getting involved making no difference, and trust issues

- 3.7 The perceptions that voting and getting involved do not make any difference need to be proactively challenged.
- 3.8 Whenever the general public's views are sought, guarantees are required that meaningful feedback will be provided.
- 3.9 More work is needed to dilute the confirmation bias which is driving some of the cynicism shown towards politicians generally. An initial step could be to raise the profile of and learn from the petitions process of the National Assembly for Wales which closes the feedback loop between petitioners and policy action⁵. The diagram below summarises how this barrier can be tackled.

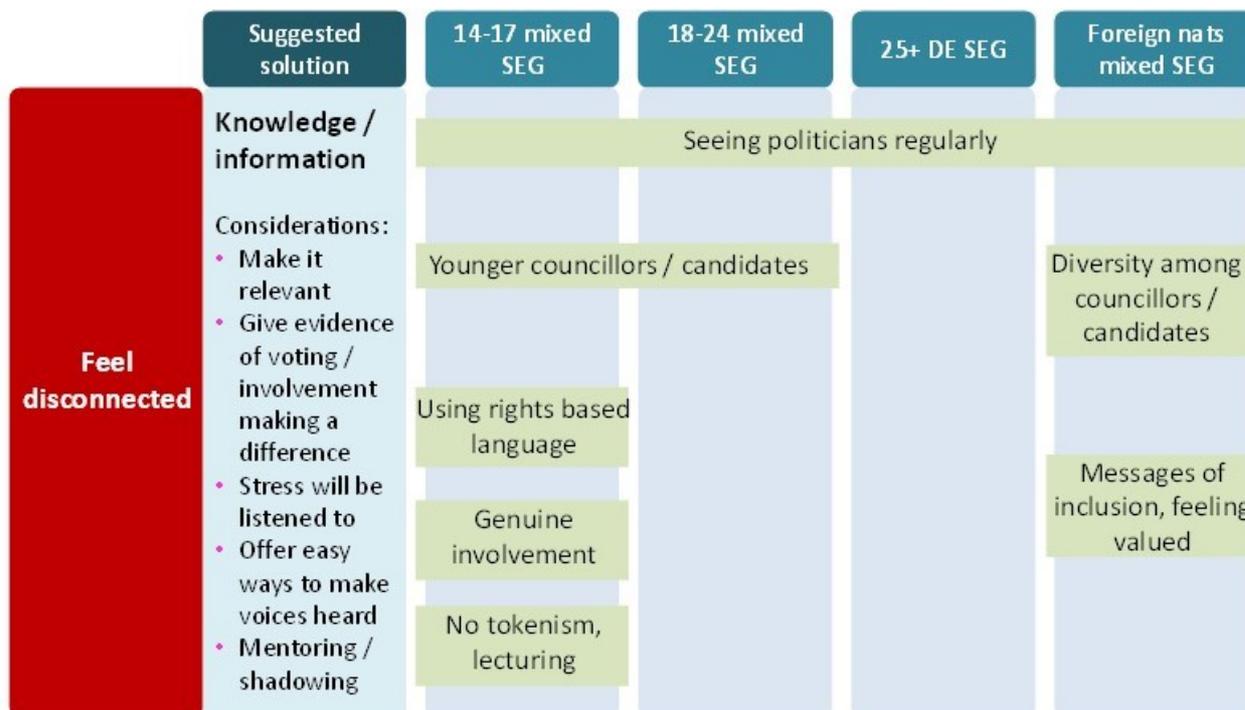


Tackling the barrier of people feeling disconnected

- 3.10 The final main obstacle to voting and getting involved is feeling disconnected from it all. Improving knowledge and information provision is integral, together with:
- Getting to know local politicians;
 - Greater politician / candidate diversity;
 - Providing easy ways for people to be heard;
 - Seeing evidence of how engagement makes a difference at a local level;
 - Messages of inclusivity.
- 3.11 Using the behavioural nudge of social proof may have a part to play: people can engage with an initiative or change behaviour because they find out that others are already involved.
- 3.12 The petitions process of the National Assembly for Wales may provide useful case study content and good practice principles to support greater efforts to reconnect with people.
- 3.13 However, the levels of disengagement displayed among older participants suggest that it could take an inordinate effort to address such disillusionment at scale.

⁵ See [Petition timeline](#). For an example of policy action based on a petition, see [P-05-817 Specialist prosthetics for child amputees](#)

3.14 The diagram below highlights suggestions for how this barrier can be addressed.



Support is needed to help activate the potential for wider civic engagement

3.15 The research shows that some potential exists for greater civic engagement: participants care about their communities, sign petitions and sometimes volunteer. However, support is needed to help activate this potential. There need to be clear, accessible and actively promoted channels for raising an issue and getting involved. There also need to be reassurances that everyone’s view is welcome and will be genuinely listened to. Greater civic engagement at a very local level would help to form the basis for broader civic engagement at a Wales level which was not a consideration for these participants overall. Citizens’ juries and assemblies, for example, could be used more widely to help in this respect⁶.

⁶ See [Wales’ first Citizens’ Assembly reports back](#)

Authors: Beaufort Research

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Available at: <https://gov.wales/renewing-democratic-engagement-exploratory-research>

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

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Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.

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