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# **Government Response to the Speaker's Conference Report**

March 2010



# **Government Response to the Speaker's Conference Report**

Presented to Parliament  
by the Deputy Minister for Women and Equality  
by Command of Her Majesty

March 2010

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## Introduction

1. The Government is grateful for the comprehensive and detailed examination the Conference has made of the political and Parliamentary landscape and welcomes its landmark report.
2. The Speaker's Conference gathered evidence from representatives across the UK. The Government's response covers both UK policy and policy which applies in England only.
3. We are delighted that all three main political parties gave evidence to the Speaker's Conference and clearly showed a shared understanding and commitment for the need for change. We are also grateful that so many stakeholders provided evidence and insights to inform the report.
4. The Government agrees that fairer representation is fundamental to a democratic society, and accepts the three tenets of the Speaker's Conference case for widening representation: justice, effectiveness, enhanced legitimacy.
5. We believe that we should take all the steps we can to increase diversity in Parliament and that there is a real need to make political parties reflective of the communities they serve. Democracy will be better delivered when people feel that there is a voice representing them within the political process.
6. The Government submitted evidence and recommendations to the Speaker's Conference taking into account the views of stakeholders<sup>1</sup>. We are pleased the Speaker's Conference has acted upon some of the recommendations submitted, such as that political parties should be required to collect diversity data on electoral candidates and that Parliament should look at increasing access for disabled members and making some of its processes such as sitting hours more family-friendly.
7. Despite some progress we still have a long way to go. Women still only make up less than 20% of the House of Commons compared to 9% before 1997. The increase in the number of women MPs is largely because of legislation that Government has introduced to allow political parties to use positive measures towards increased participation. But we need to increase that to 50%, and improve representation of other under-represented groups so that the House of Commons better reflects society.
8. The Government recognises that the UK Parliament is a long way behind other countries. For example, we are still ranked 62nd out of 187 countries

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<sup>1</sup> Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation); Session 2008-9 published 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009, SC69, Ev221

and 16th in the European Union in terms of women's representation by the Inter-Parliamentary Union<sup>2</sup>.

9. Equally we need to look at why comparatively so few disabled people, individuals from a minority ethnic background or lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender people are putting themselves forward for Parliamentary seats and there is only one 'out' lesbian. Out of 645 MPs only 15 are Black or Asian; in order to be representative of the population we should have more than four times that number. In their evidence to the Speaker's Conference<sup>3</sup>, RADAR highlighted the fact that the numbers of disabled MPs are unknown and that the numbers of openly disabled MPs are very low compared to the proportion of disabled people in the population. Again to be representative of the population we might expect a minimum of 65 disabled MPs.
10. In our written Government Memorandum to the Speaker's Conference<sup>4</sup>, we flagged examples of how some countries are tackling under-representation of not only women but also of other under-represented groups. These include main parties allowing the participation of resident non-citizens in the candidate selection process in Canada and the introduction of zipping systems in Sweden. We will continue to monitor how different countries tackle the problem of under-representation together with the effectiveness or otherwise of different electoral models.
11. We need to consider tackling the barriers, as well as looking at what Government, Parliament and political parties can do both individually and in partnership. We need to ensure that existing procedures and systems are not inadvertently limiting the opportunities for some people to be selected, elected and to work effectively as MPs both at Westminster and in their constituencies.
12. We support the Speaker's Conference in its assertion that it is for political parties and Parliament itself to take action to have a lasting impact. Too often the voter has not even been given an opportunity to consider diverse candidates who they may wish to elect. However, where it can this Government has taken action to improve diversity at both local and national level. The Equality Bill, currently before Parliament, contains a number of specific measures to tackle under-representation, for example by extending the time available to political parties to use women-only shortlists to 2030, and increasing the options open to political parties and public bodies to tackle under-representation such as enabling parties to reserve a specific number of places on their electoral shortlists for candidates with a protected characteristic such as people from an ethnic minority background or with a disability. We have also taken action as

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<sup>2</sup> www.ipu.org; data as at 31 January 2010

<sup>3</sup> Speaker's Conference (on Parliamentary Representation); Session 2008-9 published 27<sup>th</sup> May 2009, SC3 Ev7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, SC61 Ev61

outlined below to improve the supply chain that can create a greater pool of talented people becoming candidates.



## Key Government Action

13. We have achieved a lot since submitting Government's Memorandum to the Speaker's Conference last year. For example to encourage greater diversity in political participation we have:

- Introduced new provisions in the Equality Bill, which if enacted will enable political parties to reserve places on electoral shortlists for those with a targeted protected characteristic, such as disabled candidates or those from an ethnic minority background.
- The Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Women Councillors' taskforce completed its work programme and reported formally in October 2009 with a series of recommendations to Government, political parties and other key strategic partners such as the EHRC<sup>5</sup>.
- In partnership with Operation Black Vote the Government Equalities Office also set up the first national BAME women councillors mentoring/shadowing scheme and offered women the opportunity to gain a Certificate in Community Leadership. So far, 8 women out of the 60 women who started on the mentoring scheme in October 2009 are standing as councillor candidates and 1 is standing as a Prospective Parliamentary Candidate. The scheme will end in March 2010.

14. In addressing under-representation in Parliament and political life Government is conscious of the equal need to examine and address the causes of under-representation in broader society. Some of the ways we are taking this work forward include:

- Launching new cross-Government targets for public appointments to improve representation of our public bodies. This is critical to ensure our public bodies, which make important decisions that shape the quality of our lives and public services, reflect the face of modern Britain.
- Publishing "Working towards equality: a framework for action", outlining steps to increase fairness in the workplace and the participation of women in paid employment. This report contains the Government's response to the 2009 Women and Work Commission report, including practical measures such as ensuring Jobcentre Plus is better able to identify part-time and flexible job opportunities and a commitment to continue to support the Woman and Work Sector Pathways initiative which supports 5,000 women each year in sectors where they are under-represented.
- Responding to the National Equality Panel report, welcoming the central finding that the big rise in economic inequality witnessed in the 1980s has

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/Task%20Force%20Report%20Oct%202009.pdf>

been halted and committing to further action, including: further improvements to childcare and early learning provision; helping families through funding for more Sure Start children's centres; funding more mentoring opportunities to raise aspirations for young people; plans to increase flexibility of parental leave; and, through the Equality Bill, the proposal for all public bodies to publish details of their pay for men and women, and according to different ethnic groups and disabled employees.

- Accepting key recommendations from the Milburn Review "Fair Access to Professions" announcing: a new Social Mobility Commission to review trends and provide ongoing advice; a relaunched Gateways to the Professions Forum; and financial support for 10,000 undergraduate interns from low -income backgrounds
- Launching a further ten Take Part local pathfinders in May 2009, to make a total number of 18 pathfinders, each funded until 2011. These programmes are designed to build skills and confidence, and include community leadership programmes that offer tailored support into civic activism and/or lay governance roles. The pathfinders are run as partnerships between local authorities and other key organisations, such as third sector bodies and educational institutions. We have also begun to develop and implement a programme of national support to help pathfinders and others to learn from each other and share best practice.
- Launching "Tackling Race Inequality: A Statement on Race" in January 2010. This statement sets out how we will ensure that the Government is fulfilling its duties and commitment to tackling race equality and promoting equality of opportunity for Britain's minority ethnic communities. It provides a clear narrative that expresses the challenges we face today in tackling the inequalities that people from minority ethnic groups face, how these have become more complex and our approach to meeting those challenges. It demonstrates a clear and comprehensive approach, recognising the current legal framework and policy approaches and building on the progress that has been made since the original race equality and community cohesion strategy "Improving Opportunity, Strengthening Society" was launched in 2005.
- Taking forward commitments that flow from the cross-Government Independent Living Strategy to build leadership capacity among disabled people and their organisations. For example the Office for Disability Issues (ODI) will shortly be publishing material aimed at increasing disabled people's capacity for involvement in Local Strategic Partnership Boards. The ODI is also working with RADAR on their leadership empowerment programme.
- Conducting research to further understand the barriers faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people who want to participate in public and political life.

## Recommendations for Government

15. Of the Speaker's Conference's 71 recommendations and position statements in their final report, we have identified 17 as requiring a direct response from Government in the first instance. For each of these we have given a clear indication of the Government's position.
16. We have identified a further 3 recommendations (3, 42 and 43) not targeted for a Government lead but for which we feel Government can lend vital support and expertise through existing legislation or through our current and ongoing work. For example, recommendation 3 is aimed at public sector organisations but the cross-Government action plan to increase diversity in public appointments is relevant. We have indicated our support for these recommendations.
17. Our response seeks to address all the relevant recommendations in numerical order.

## Recommendation 1

1. In England, the Department for Children Schools and Families should work with headteachers and with Ofsted to ensure that the importance of citizenship is better understood and the subject is taught with quality and appropriate breadth. In the devolved administrations, the equivalent authorities should consider a similar approach in the relevant curriculum areas.

### Response

The Government accepts this recommendation. The Government is grateful to the Speaker's Conference for highlighting the importance of citizenship in the curriculum and the need to ensure more comprehensive buy-in across the education landscape.

We welcome Ofsted's latest report (published in January 2010) on the teaching of citizenship in schools which acknowledges the real progress which has been made over the last three years.

While we are pleased with the progress which has been made in getting citizenship increasingly embedded in secondary schools, we do nevertheless take very seriously that some schools have more to do.

With this in mind we are accepting the report's recommendations and will maintain the number of initial teacher training places in citizenship; and continue the professional development provision for teachers so that the good progress in the majority of schools is extended to all schools.

In recognition that citizenship is the newest subject in the curriculum, the Government has funded a national Continuing Professional Development CPD programme since 2006 to increase the number of teachers with expertise in citizenship.

We have made available support for all secondary schools to implement the new secondary curriculum in 2008. This includes support for citizenship teaching as well as overall curriculum design. We have developed and promulgated materials for the new identity and diversity strand within the citizenship curriculum, introduced in 2008, which enables pupils to explore and build a sense of shared identity and values, as British citizens. A "Who Do We Think We Are?" project has been funded by DCSF since 2008 to produce materials for teachers and to engage local authorities in supporting their schools in personalising delivery to match the interests of pupils and the needs of their community.

## Recommendation 2

2. The Government should ensure greater and more consistent access to youth and community citizenship engagement programmes. The Government should also consider what more it can do to support organisations which are, directly or indirectly, promoting active citizenship and political literacy

### Response

The Government accepts this recommendation. The Youth Citizenship Commission was set up by Government in 2008 following a proposal in the 2007 *Governance of Britain* Green Paper to define what citizenship means to young people. Its aims were to increase young people's participation in politics and promote active citizenship, reflecting the communication preferences of young people. The Commission which reported in June 2009, focused on young people aged 11-19, but its work included young people up to 25.

The Government's ambition is to ensure that young people have more opportunities to engage with the issues they are passionate about, because we firmly believe they should be empowered as citizens, connected to the political process and offered a meaningful say in the decisions that affect them.

The Government's response to the Youth Citizenship Commission Published February 2010 – *An Agenda for youth engagement*<sup>6</sup> outlines how we have been helping young people become more actively involved with their communities, and with politics and institutions. We want to enable young people to engage with public bodies and decision-making processes in the ways that are relevant to them.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/333826/youthengagement.pdf>

### Recommendation 3

3. Public sector organisations should encourage the development of the next generation of leaders by appointing members of under-represented groups to supernumerary positions on boards and other bodies. This should be aimed at enabling people to gain the skills and experience they need to equip them to take up positions of influence.

#### Response

The Government supports this recommendation and encourages public sector organisations to consider ways this could be achieved. The Government is committed to fair and equal representation on the boards of our public bodies. This is about good service delivery as much as fairness. Public bodies need board members to advise on important decisions that shape the quality of our lives and public services. Boards that reflect the face of modern Britain can make a real difference to both people and communities and to the future of public services, and as such, the people appointed to these boards already hold significant positions of influence.

Women, disabled people and ethnic minorities are currently not adequately represented in public life. This is why, for example, the Government set challenging targets in June 2009 to improve diversity of public appointments. By 2011, for all new UK public appointments regulated by the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments (OCPA), the Government's has set a target of 50% of new public appointments to be women, 14% to be disabled people and 11% people from an ethnic minority background.

These targets are underpinned by a cross-Government action plan designed to raise awareness of the public appointments system, provide support to potential applicants and tackle the barriers that people face when applying for these roles.

The Government recognises that skills and experience gained through a position on a public sector board may be invaluable to another sector, profession or organisation. Indeed in some cases the skills gained through a public appointment may act as a stepping stone to other opportunities in public life. However, the goal of encouraging greater diversity on the boards of public sector organisations is critical in its own right too, since this is about fairness and ensuring our public bodies deliver services in the interests of all.

## Recommendation 6

6. We believe that all publicly-funded organisations, especially local bodies, should create opportunities for people who are interested to learn how to become more active citizens

### Response

The Government accepts this recommendation in principle and is already developing opportunities through the Take Part Programme<sup>7</sup>. Take Part is a national programme, run at a local level, which aims to give people the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to have more of a say about what happens in their areas, and to help shape the decisions that affect their daily lives.

For a full and just society to function effectively it is important that people feel able to play a part in their communities and to have a say in how things are done - to be active citizens. In order for more people to be able to participate in local decision-making, they need to have a better understanding of how local services are managed and local democracy operates. Some people also need support and encouragement to have the confidence to speak up and get involved, or to overcome barriers that they face. This is why, through the Take Part local pathfinder programme, the Government is supporting 18 Take Part pathfinder areas and implementing a national support programme which builds on the work of the Take Part National Network.

18 Take Part local pathfinders are running learning programmes that build skills and confidence across the nine regions; each pathfinder programme will run until 2011. In order to ensure the practices developed by the Take Part pathfinders are effectively shared and adopted in other areas of the country, we are developing and implementing a national support programme.

The Active Learning for Active Citizenship evaluation, run by Goldsmith's College, University of London<sup>8</sup>, found that the Take Part approach encouraged and equipped citizens to develop political literacy skills and become involved in governance structures, such as voluntary and community organisations, boards of school governors and local cross-sector partnerships. It found that these learning opportunities should be accessible to all, but that there is a particular need to support those who face educational, social and other barriers to their participation. It also found that active citizenship learning can make important contributions to community cohesion, strengthening social

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<sup>8</sup> Mayo, M. and Rooke, A., (2006), *Active Learning for Active Citizenship*, <http://www.takepart.org/assets/documents/alacevaluation-report/>. Page 8..

solidarity in the context of diversity and multiculturalism, and promoting democratic approaches to conflict resolution.

In addition, Government is working to develop and implement strategies for increasing and improving the opportunities for people to take up volunteering.

Baroness Neuburger, the Government's volunteering champion, has undertaken a number of reviews on volunteering within public services. She found that volunteering can create a virtuous circle, improving levels of well being for volunteers, professional colleagues and most importantly the people that use services.



## Recommendation 11

11. The Government should consult on the introduction of a scheme enabling local political parties to apply for funding linked to their receipts from member subscriptions. The scheme should be administered by a suitable independent body and the details of all funding allocations made should be published. Local political parties should also expect to make some account of the way in which they use the funding to support the development of social capital. This consultation should take place in the first session of the 2010 Parliament.

### Response

The Government is grateful to the Speaker's Conference for identifying the important issue of party membership and local activism and the importance of vibrant local political parties to delivering diversity of representation. The Conference report recommends consultation on a scheme to allow local political parties to apply for funding linked to member subscriptions.

Political parties have a vital role to play in our democracy and it is important that they have the resources to enable them to do so effectively. The Conference recommended that consultation on this proposal should take place in the next Parliament. The Government will consider this proposal further in due course, in line with the Conference's recommendation.

## Recommendation 23

23. We fully support the proposed extension of the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 to enable the use of all-women shortlists until 2030. Equivalent enabling legislation should now be enacted to allow political parties, if they so choose, to use all-BME shortlists. Like the Sex Discrimination (Election Candidates) Act 2002 such provision should be time limited and should be subject to review prior to 2030

### Response

We recognise there is a huge shortfall in numbers of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) MPs. Out of 645 MPs only 15 are Black or Asian, only two of whom are women. To be representative of the population we should have more than four times that number. That is why the Government commissioned a report from Operation Black Vote<sup>9</sup>.

After consideration of the issues raised in this report the Government concluded that there were alternative options that should be pursued to increase the participation of those from a BAME background in the electoral process, such as the broadening of the positive action provisions within the Equality Bill.

The new provisions in the Bill mean that, for the first time, political parties will be able to reserve places on electoral shortlists for those with a protected characteristic, such as race, that is under-represented in politics.

The Operation Black Vote report was also extremely valuable in:

- Analysing a number of the underlying causes why some people from a BAME background disassociate themselves from political engagement
- Identifying the areas where further work needs to be done, both by Government and by the individual political parties themselves
- Offering some potential solutions to the problems of how to encourage more people from a BAME background to become involved in politics at either local or national level

As outlined earlier in our response to the Speaker's Conference<sup>10</sup>, the BAME Women Councillors' taskforce made a number of practical recommendations to increase the numbers of BAME women local councillors. Likewise the Government's work with Operation Black Vote in setting up the first national BAME women councillors mentoring/ shadowing scheme is proving very

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.equalities.gov.uk/pdf/obv%20report%20-%2014-05-08.pdf>, May 2008

<sup>10</sup> See "Key Government Action", para 13

successful in encouraging more BAME women to become involved in both local and national politics<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*; also see response to recommendation 43

## Recommendation 24

24. Candidate selections for the following general election will begin, for some parties, within the first twelve to eighteen months of the 2010 Parliament<sup>12</sup>. These selections will be equally important for securing cultural change within parties and within the House of Commons. In this context we particularly welcome the indications from the opposition party leaders that they are open-minded on the matter of equality guarantees. If the political parties fail to make significant progress on women's representation at the 2010 general election, Parliament should give serious consideration to the introduction of prescriptive quotas, ensuring that all political parties adopt some form of equality guarantee in time for the following general election.

### Response

The Government accepts this recommendation in principle and believes the Speaker's Conference is right to highlight the need to examine progress on women's representation following the 2010 general election and consider further options if sufficient progress is not made.

Government recognises that increasing women's representation is a priority and is already taking a range of action to encourage women from a diverse range of backgrounds to become involved in political life. These include initiatives like the BAME Women Councillors mentoring scheme<sup>13</sup>. Through the Equality Bill, we will extend the use of women-only electoral shortlists to 2030, with a power to extend their use even beyond that date.

The Bill also allows for other action to be taken to reduce inequality in parties' representation, where proportionate, when selecting candidates for Parliamentary elections, elections to the European Parliament, elections to the devolved Parliaments and local government elections. The Bill will also allow political parties to take a wider range of actions including:

- carrying out an audit of political party membership to identify the proportion of members from under-represented groups and identify where gaps are present;
- setting targets for recruitment drives;
- carrying out general and specific or targeted recruitment drives;
- running mentoring and leadership programmes;
- setting targets for increasing the proportion of politicians and staff from under-represented groups;
- establishing and supporting in-house forums for under-represented groups.

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<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

We hope that the success of these and similar measures will be reflected in the composition of Parliament following the 2010 General Election and beyond, but we are committed to consideration of all the options to deliver equality of representation for men and women if sufficient progress is not made.

A range of issues would have to be considered before introducing further change. The Government believes that these discussions need to take place in the context of wider constitutional reform.

## Recommendation 25

(25) We welcome the openness of all three main party leaders—Rt. Hon. Gordon Brown MP, Rt. Hon. David Cameron MP and Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP—to the principle of publishing monitoring data in relation to candidate selections. This is an important indication of the commitment of all three main parties to the promotion of fairer representation in Parliament. We recommend that all political parties registered under part 2 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 should be required to publish details of their candidate selections online every six months, on 31 March and 31 October, setting out, for each potential candidate at each stage of the selection process, the following information:

- (a) the administrative region in which the selection took place;
- (b) the method by which the candidate was selected;
- (c) whether the party:
  - (i) currently holds the seat for which the candidate was selected; or
  - (ii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of less than 5% of the votes cast; or
  - (iii) came second or third in the seat at the last general election within a margin of more than five per cent but less than ten per cent of the votes cast;
- (d) the sex of the candidate;
- (e) the ethnicity of the candidate; and
- (f) whether the candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person.

The reports might also include the following information:

- (a) where a candidate is willing to identify as a disabled person, the nature of the impairment;
- (b) where a candidate is willing to state his or her sexual orientation, the sexual orientation of the candidate;
- (c) the age of the candidate;
- (d) the occupation of the candidate at the time of selection; and
- (e) the highest level of the candidate's educational attainment.

## Response

The Government welcomes and accepts the recommendation that political parties should be required to publish diversity data in their candidate selections, which is why we tabled an amendment to the Equality Bill to give it legal effect. We agree with the Speaker's Conference that regular monitoring of diversity data will enable parties to compare themselves both in the UK and internationally.

However, before any final decisions are made on how this requirement will work in practice we are committed to seeking and considering the views of political parties, the Electoral Commission and the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The wording of the Government amendment tabled to the Equality Bill reflects that commitment.

The issues that need to be considered include the precise nature of diversity data to be published, the selection stages for which data will be published (e.g. whether for individuals selected as candidates or more widely from people who have sought nomination), which parties are required to publish diversity data, the form of publication, and how regularly data should be collected and published.

We note that the Speaker's Conference original recommendation recommended that political parties make diversity data available every six months. However, we are mindful that the new requirement should not prove overly burdensome particularly to smaller political parties which may have limited resources at local level. Our view is therefore that any final decision about how frequently data should be published should be made after consultation with political parties and the other key stakeholders outlined above.

This amendment in response to the Speaker's Conference recommendation will place a responsibility on parties to collect a wide range of diversity data from candidates and will enable diversity data to be collected in a systematic way at a national level for the first time.

It should help us to better understand the route that under-represented groups take to election, and may help to identify issues such as people from under-represented groups either not being selected at all, or only being selected for marginal seats.

The new requirement is intended to help improve the transparency of the election process and to focus attention on the diversity of our political parties and elected representatives. The Government hopes that requiring political parties to provide data on their candidates standing for election will help generate more diverse candidate selection and will ultimately result in a more representative Parliament.

In addition to tabling an amendment to the Bill, we have written to the Party Chairs of the three main political parties, Plaid Cymru, the SNP and to Sinn Féin, the Ulster Unionist Party, the Social Democratic and Labour Party and

the Democratic Unionist Party requesting that they voluntarily agree to collect diversity data on candidates.



## Recommendation 27

27. We recommend that the Government should find time for a debate on the implementation of the Speaker's Conference's recommendations and progress towards just representation in the House of Commons in 2010, 2012, and every two years thereafter to 2022. We also recommend that the House of Commons should provide access from a dedicated page on the Parliament website to all published statements and reports by each party represented at Westminster on their Parliamentary party representation and candidate selections, alongside links to the reports from the Speaker's Conference.

### Response

The Government agrees that there should be a debate in Government time on the implementation of the Speaker's Conference's recommendations every two years, as we recognise the importance of continual monitoring and debate about this critical issue.

We look forward to engaging with the Speaker's Conference and key stakeholders on how best to ensure the issue of representation in Parliament remains high on the agenda.

## Recommendation 28

28. We believe scarce cash-limited Access to Work funds—intended for use by individuals—should not be used by councils to fund core legal requirements—such as action to make reasonable adjustments to buildings. Making such adjustments is a key part of being a good employer and complying with the law

### Response

The Government accepts this recommendation. We fully support the Speaker's Conference's recommendation that all council employees (including councillors) who are eligible for assistance through the Access to Work Fund should be able to access it and we would therefore urge all councils to ensure that their councillors as well as their employees are made aware of the Fund and how and where to access it.

We are grateful also to the Speaker's Conference for highlighting the important legal requirements of all employers (councils included) to make reasonable adjustments for their employees and the fact that it is not appropriate to use the Access to Work Programme to do so. As the Conference points out, the Access to Work Programme is in place to support those costs / barriers that are **over and above** these reasonable adjustments and are by definition 'not reasonable' for the employer to meet. Where an adjustment is seen as reasonable, the employer is encouraged to make it by Jobcentre Plus as part of the assessment process.

## Recommendations 33, 34 and 35

33. We support the suggestion of a Democracy Diversity Fund which could be drawn upon by local political parties to support the work of developing talented individuals from under-represented groups and also to provide bursaries to individuals who would otherwise be unable to sustain the costs of candidacy. There must be strong controls in place to make sure the money is not abused and therefore the scheme's effectiveness and propriety should be regularly evaluated by the Electoral Commission, in reports which should be laid before the House at least once every Parliament. The Electoral Commission should consult the Equality and Human Rights Commission when evaluating the scheme.

34 There is overwhelming evidence that shortage of money and the necessity of additional expenditure to support disabled people through candidacy, make finance a particularly significant barrier to elected office for disabled people. Disabled people should be able to fight for parliamentary seats without having to face the complicated financial barriers that confront them at present. This is not a question of political advantage, but a simple matter of achieving just representation

35. We therefore believe that the Government should urgently consider, as part of the Democracy Diversity Fund, a ring-fenced scheme to support disabled parliamentary candidates. This scheme for disabled candidates should use as its model the Access to Public Life Fund which has been proposed by Scope. The scheme should be devised and operated by the Department for Work and Pensions, and should be administered in the same way as the Access to Work scheme

### Response

The Government accepts these recommendations in principle to establish a Democracy Diversity Fund but further work is required to identify where and how this should be administered. Government is grateful for this proposal from the Speaker's Conference and notes that the views of key stakeholders will be critical to developing a workable proposal. We will therefore explore with the Electoral Commission, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, parties themselves and across Government how such a fund might operate in practice. We will also consult with the voluntary sector and other organisations with an understanding of barriers facing different groups.

In doing so we will draw upon our experience and lessons learnt from existing schemes to engage underrepresented groups in political and public life, for example, the work of the BAME Women Councillors' Taskforce, which we will evaluate in full by summer 2010. We will also look at the work of organisations such as Operation Black Vote and the Leadership Centre for Local Government, which coordinates the national "Be a Councillor" programme.

The Access to Work programme is a well received and successful programme supporting disabled people in employment and we will ensure that the operation of this fund takes account of the positive lessons learned and good practice of this programme.

As the Conference notes, it will be crucial that the establishment of any fund along the lines proposed is accompanied with robust financial management controls with proper safeguards for the use of public money, and an effective monitoring and evaluation strategy. Discussions and decisions on this issue will also need to take into account the current restraints on central Government funding.

## Recommendations 36, 37 and 38

36. A measure which could help to reduce the burden on candidates would be for the Government to legislate to give approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees the right to request a reasonable amount of unpaid leave during working hours and/or a right to work flexibly for the purposes of campaigning. This would also, symbolically, recognise that the action of standing for election, whether or not the candidate is successful, is an essential part of our democratic process and of public benefit.

37. The Government should legislate to enable approved prospective parliamentary candidates who are employees to take unpaid leave, rather than resigning their employment, for the period from the dissolution of Parliament to election day.

38. We recognise that, in the first instance, making such leave unpaid protects employers from any suggestion that they may be improperly financing a political campaign. In the long term we would like the Government to move to a position where candidates are entitled to receive a grant from the state equivalent to the minimum wage for the period sometimes known as the short campaign.

### Response

The Government would like to consider further the options for taking this recommendation forward. Government notes the Conference's finding that certain employers support prospective candidates by allowing them leave (paid or unpaid) during the election campaign. It would not be practicable to legislate before the next Parliamentary general election to give effect to the Conference's recommendation that prospective Parliamentary candidates should be granted unpaid leave for the campaign period; however, following the election, the Government will give further consideration to the options for taking this proposal forward. Any change in this area would need to take account of the interests of employers, prospective candidates and other interested parties. Careful consideration would also need to be given to any proposals to increase the level of state support given to parties and candidates through a form of grant.

## Recommendation 42

42. We believe it should be possible for each Parliamentary party to maintain a list of individuals from under-represented groups, perhaps nominated by stakeholder organisations, who might by this means be notified of internships and temporary vacancies arising in Members' offices. All reasonable adjustment costs for the successful applicant should be funded for the duration of the appointment. We invite the political parties to work with stakeholder organisations to establish how this can best be done.

### Response

The Government supports this recommendation. It is for political parties and individual Members to consider and implement, within the framework for Members' staffing devised by the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA) and the House of Commons Authorities.

As the Conference recommends, all reasonable adjustment costs for interns and temporary job holders in MPs' offices should be funded. The reasonable adjustment duty in the Disability Discrimination Act would apply to both internships and temporary work and there are codes and guidance which set out and exemplify the statutory requirement. The duty carries forward into the Equality Bill.

## Recommendation 43

43. We believe that there is scope for the development of a UK – wide scheme similar to the Step Up Cymru mentoring scheme, but with a strong Westminster element. This could bring together elected members at all levels of government to provide opportunities for people from under-represented groups to find out about their work. The initial aim might be to encourage involvement in community groups, but it should also give encouragement to those who might wish to become candidates for elected office at local and national level or be appointed to a public body.

### Response

The Government supports this recommendation. Government is grateful to the Speaker's Conference for highlighting the importance of mentoring schemes in raising levels of representation and engagement of under-represented groups in appointments to public bodies and in local and national politics.

We agree that mentoring schemes provide under-represented groups with an opportunity to experience first hand what is involved in these specific public and political roles. This helps to demystify the roles and open up processes thereby allowing greater diversity to help tackle under-representation. Government has recently launched two mentoring schemes to encourage greater diversity in political and public life which are outlined below; we hope that lessons learned in setting up and running these schemes could be built upon in establishing any UK-wide scheme.

For example, early feedback from the Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Women Councillor's Taskforce regional events suggested that development and training would be critical to ensure BAME women felt supported in taking their first steps into political life. The two most popular forms of support highlighted by people who attended these events and completed feedback were mentoring and support from political parties (72%) and having the opportunity to shadow a councillor (66%). This led the Government Equalities Office in conjunction with Operation Black Vote (OBV), to develop a councillor mentoring / shadowing scheme<sup>14</sup>.

Government launched the national BAME Women's Councillor Shadowing Scheme across 51 local authority areas in October 2009 to run for 6 months to end March 2010. The scheme seeks to raise levels of BAME women's representation and engagement in local politics. Following an extremely successful recruitment campaign which attracted over 400 enquiries, 60 dynamic participants were selected. Already we are seeing early successes<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> See also "Key Government Action", para 13 and responses to recommendations 23 and 24

<sup>15</sup> *ibid*

A full evaluation report on the (BAME) Women Councillors Taskforce programme will be published in spring 2010.

As part of our broad programme of work to increase diversity on public appointments, Government is also running two mentoring schemes for groups currently under-represented on our public boards. One scheme targets individuals who may have had some experience on local boards or in their industry or sector, but who have not previously considered a public appointment. A second more intensive scheme will run over four months and target highly qualified individuals who may have unsuccessfully applied for a public appointment or who may already hold an appointment and are now looking for a more senior role. A full evaluation of the programme will take place by the end of 2010.



## Recommendations 63 and 64

63 The law on disqualification from Membership is not consistent or logical in its treatment of various types of illness or disorder. If a Member suffers from serious physical illness—say a stroke—that can leave constituents effectively un-represented in much the same way as if a Member has a serious mental disorder. Yet there is no parallel provision to s141 of the Mental Health Act 1983 for cases of physical illness. We have received substantial evidence from a number of sources, both expert and lay, to suggest that s141 wrongly implies that mental illness is in some way fundamentally different in its effects from physical illness. Yet the House, through its medical services, can provide care and assistance for those with mental illness, just as it can for those with physical illness

64. We believe that s141 of the 1983 Mental Health Act is unnecessary and damaging. It embodies attitudes which stigmatise and sap the confidence of people with mental illness. Section 141 should be repealed as soon as practicable.

### Response

The Government fully appreciates the understandable strength of feeling that exists on this issue, and agrees that the distinction drawn by the current legislative framework between mental and physical incapacity of MPs is not sustainable. However, the Government considers that we need to be sure that the right measures are in place for protecting the interests of constituents in the event of their MP, for whatever reason, becoming incapacitated.

The Speaker's Conference has taken the view that this issue should be discussed by a Select Committee [Recommendation 65]. The Government shares the view that consideration of this matter is better led by the House itself, and we hope that this will happen without delay. The Government is committed to reacting promptly to any recommendations that might emerge from a Select Committee.

## Conclusion

Government looks forward to considering the responses from political parties and from Parliament, and to sharing our experience and expertise on tackling inequality and discrimination and promoting diversity with both political parties and Parliament. The Government Equalities Office will continue to champion diversity within Government and will continue to work with other departments and partners to improve diversity of representation in public and political life and to tackle barriers facing particular groups.



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