

Empowering Underrepresented Ethnic Minority Voters in Wales Dr Sharmin A Julie

Purpose of the Grant

The UK Democracy Fund grant was awarded to the BAWW to increase democratic participation among underrepresented ethnic minority communities in Cardiff and Newport ahead of the May 2026 Welsh Senedd election. The project focused particularly on ethnic minority communities, Commonwealth students, migrants with voting rights, women, and young people aged 16 and over. The grant aimed to:

- (1) Increase voter registration and participation among groups with historically lower levels of electoral engagement
- (2) Strengthen community partnerships to improve democratic outreach
- (3) Generate practical evidence on effective community-led approaches to increasing democratic participation.

The project built upon BAWW's previous voter engagement work in Cardiff and tested whether this community-based model could be successfully replicated in Newport through local partner organisations.

Work Delivered

The grant enabled BAWW to implement a comprehensive programme of multilingual voter engagement and registration support across Cardiff and Newport. Key activities included:

- (1) Establishing partnerships with community organisations, schools, universities, faith groups, and local networks;
- (2) Recruiting and training 35 Campaign Officers from diverse backgrounds to deliver non-partisan voter engagement.
- (3) Delivering voter registration drives, information sessions, community events, and Get Out The Vote activities.
- (4) Producing and distributing multilingual voter education resources, including six awareness videos.
- (5) Organising a community hustings event to raise awareness of party manifestos, with particular focus on women's representation; five out of 12 active parties participated in the event.
- (6) Providing accessible voter registration support through trusted community settings and one-to-one engagement.
- (7) Undertaking monitoring, evaluation, and post-election learning activities to understand what worked and what barriers remained.

How the Grant Helped BAWW

The funding was transformational for BAWW. It enabled the organisation to expand a successful local initiative into a structured regional programme operating across two local authority areas. The grant supported recruitment, training, coordination, multilingual resource development, and direct community outreach. Beyond immediate project delivery, the funding strengthened BAWW's organisational capacity, developed new partnerships, generated a valuable evidence base, and demonstrated BAWW's ability to coordinate large-scale democratic participation initiatives across diverse communities.

Key Results Against Agreed Outcomes

Outcome 1: Increased Voter Participation

The project exceeded its voter registration target. A total of 1,004 new/updated voter registrations were directly supported through the project. More than 3,000 individuals were engaged through outreach activities. The project successfully reached its intended target groups, including ethnic minority communities, young people, Commonwealth citizens, migrants with voting rights, and students. Participants also reported increased confidence in democratic participation. Particularly, 807 participants stated that the project significantly increased their confidence in engaging with democratic processes, and the average self-reported likelihood of voting among participants was high (4.38 out of 5).

Outcome 2: Practical Evidence and Learning

The project generated valuable evidence about barriers to democratic participation and effective responses. The most commonly reported barriers included: (1) limited awareness of voting processes and postal voting; (2) political distrust and perceptions that voting does not make a difference; (3) work

commitments and caring responsibilities; (4) student mobility and housing instability; and (5) misinformation surrounding voter registration and council tax implications.

Evidence collected throughout the project demonstrated that multilingual information, culturally appropriate engagement, trusted local messengers, and personalised support were highly effective in helping participants overcome these barriers.

Outcome 3: Stronger Community Partnerships

The project successfully demonstrated that BWAU's Cardiff-based model can be scaled through trusted partner organisations. Most notably, BWAU built and strengthened partnerships with community organisations, schools, faith groups, universities, and local networks across Cardiff and Newport. These partnerships significantly increased the project's reach and enabled engagement with communities that are often overlooked by traditional voter registration campaigns. Significantly, the project exceeded its original partnership targets and generated evidence that community-led democratic engagement can be replicated successfully when supported through training, coordination, and investment in local relationships.

What Worked Well

The strongest lesson from the project was the importance of trust. The evaluation consistently found that individuals were far more willing to engage when approached by someone they already knew, recognised, or identified with through shared language, culture, faith, neighbourhood connections, or lived experience. Campaign Officers acted not only as sources of information but also as trusted intermediaries between communities and democratic institutions. The project further demonstrated that democratic engagement is most effective when embedded within existing community life. Outreach delivered through community centres, women's groups, faith settings, schools, universities, and cultural events generated stronger engagement than stand-alone voter registration activities. These settings created opportunities for dialogue, relationship-building, and personalised support that would have been difficult to achieve through traditional campaign approaches alone.

Another important success was maintaining a consistently non-partisan approach. Through ongoing training and support, Campaign Officers were able to focus conversations on democratic participation and voter rights rather than party politics. This strengthened community confidence in the project and ensured that engagement remained inclusive and accessible to all participants.

What Did Not Work as Well

While the project achieved significant success in increasing voter registration and democratic awareness, the evaluation highlights the continuing challenge of converting registration into electoral turnout. Many participants continued to face barriers that could not be resolved through voter registration support alone. These included demanding work patterns, caring responsibilities, student mobility, low awareness of postal voting options, political distrust, and concerns about whether participation would lead to meaningful change. The findings reinforce that registration is only one stage in the democratic participation journey.

The evaluation also highlighted the ongoing influence of misinformation and misunderstanding surrounding voter registration, eligibility, council tax implications, and electoral processes. Although campaign officers were frequently successful in addressing these concerns, doing so often required repeated engagement and personalised support. A key lesson therefore is that increasing participation among underrepresented groups requires more than election-period activity. Sustainable democratic engagement requires long-term investment in civic education, trust-building, community capacity, and ongoing dialogue between communities and democratic institutions.

Key Learning and Future Implications

This project provides compelling evidence that community-led democratic engagement works. It demonstrates that trusted community organisations can effectively reach individuals who are often overlooked by mainstream democratic participation initiatives and can play a crucial role in reducing barriers relating to confidence, information, awareness, and trust. The project also offers important strategic lessons for future investment. First, trust-based community engagement should be viewed as core democratic infrastructure rather than a short-term campaign activity. Second, successful scaling depends on investing in local partnerships, capacity-building, and coordination, rather than simply replicating resources or messages. Finally, achieving lasting changes in democratic participation requires sustained engagement beyond voter registration and beyond individual election cycles.

To conclude, for BWAU, the grant has strengthened our organisational capacity, expanded our partnerships, generated a valuable evidence base, and provided a tested model for future democratic participation work. For the wider sector, the project offers practical evidence that community organisations can make a meaningful contribution to building a more inclusive and representative democracy in Wales.