Diverse voices? Are local councils in England attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?

Daphne Dunning

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Abstract

This piece of research tries to ascertain the level of disabled representation in local English councils – both parish and town. It also aims to discover how these councils alter their practices in meetings to be more inclusive to those with disabilities, especially non-visible disabilities. It looks at both declared and non-declared disabilities and the attitudes and actions of both officers and councillors to question whether ableist behaviours prevail within the sector and the effect these have in determining the measures taken to reduce barriers for disabled councillors.

Local government is the first tier of representative democracy and anecdotally sees itself as both welcoming and inclusive. This research aimed to ascertain whether these beliefs are accurate and to what extent the sector makes small adjustments to reduce barriers for disabled councillors.

The literature review clarified the prevalent attitudes to disability within local government including the domination of politics by white able-bodied middle class/aged men and the levels of inclusivity for disabled persons. An England-wide questionnaire based on qualitative and quantitative research methods established the extent to which local councils reflect prevailing societal attitudes. With 220 responses testing the premise that with little or no-cost actions, councils could minimise the barriers to inclusivity experienced by disabled councillors, it helped to determine whether officers used best practice to encourage inclusivity and whether councillors saw themselves as either disabled or encouraging of disabled colleagues.

The results provided some tantalising evidence. The suggestive levels of representation on English local councils by disabled councillors was 55%. Yet the findings indicated inconsistent understanding of disabilities and barriers and reflected ableist attitudes where minimising barriers for disabled councillors is not seen as a priority. Further research into these preliminary results is needed to test these indicative findings.

Key words: representative democracy, local councils, disability, non-visible disabilities, ableism, barriers, social model of disability, officers, councillors.
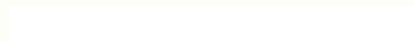
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Daphne Dunning
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Glossary and list of abbreviations and acronyms

Ableism	Discrimination unfairly favouring non-disabled people
Access to Work	A publicly funded employment grant scheme to support disabled people to start or stay in work
Community Life survey	A survey which generates statistics on attitudes and social behaviours
Disablism	Discrimination or prejudice against disabled people
DNS	Disability News Service
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
Equality and Human Rights Commission	Promotes and upholds equality and human rights across England, Scotland, and Wales
Family Resource survey	A study of living standards and circumstances of UK and Northern Ireland citizens
First past the post	A "plurality" voting system where the candidate with the most votes in each constituency is elected
LGA	Local Government Association
NALC	National Association of Local Councils

National Association of Local Councils Diversity Commission	With representative from Fawcett Society, Local Government Association, De Montfort University, Wilshire Local Councils Association, and local councils
Non-visible disabilities	Disabilities that are not necessarily 'visible' to other people or immediately obvious
ONS	Office for National Statistics
Political representation	Broadly where political representatives speak, advocate or act on the behalf of others in the political arena
Representative democracy	A form of governance whereby citizens delegate the right to make political decisions to their elected representatives whom they choose in regular and fair elections
SLCC	Society of Local Council Clerks
Social model of disability	A model created by disabled people which says people are disabled by barriers erected by society not by their impairments. It was endorsed by the Government Equalities Office in 2014
United Nations (UN)	An international organization founded in 1945 with193 member states, who purpose is maintaining world peace and security
WHO	World Health Organisation

Chapter 1:

1.1 Introduction

English local councils (both town and parish) are the first and most accessible tier of government closest to citizens, providing initial access for people becoming councillors (Willett & Cruxon 2019). With 10,000 local councils[1] (Sandford 2021) of between 5 to 31 councillors (Giovannini et al 2023), there are some 100,000 councillors (NALC 2023) helping reinvigorate representative democracy through local place shaping (Willet 2018).

Local democracy benefits from its diversity where varied voices are heard and considered in local decision-making (LGA 2021). Work by the National Association of Local Councils (NALC) Diversity Commission raised awareness of sector gender and age imbalances[2] (NALC 2018). Yet one significant social group - disabled persons[3], who account for some 9.8M people in England (ONS 2023) appear under-represented in public and political life (Evans & Reher 2022).

1.2 Background

To put this into context, around 1 in 5 people in the UK are affected by *physical or mental impairment, that has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out day-to-day activities* (Equality Act 2010 Pt 2 Ch 1 S6 (1)) and during a lifetime, most people will experience some temporary or permanent disability (WHO 2023). Disabilities are diverse and cover a range of conditions and

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[1] Serving around 40% of the English population
[2] Average age of councillors is 61
[3] Although terminology around disability can vary, this study uses the preferred UK term of 'disabled person' rather than 'person with a disability' to emphasise that it is the existence of societal barriers and not the disability which disables an individual

needs. As shown below around 80% are non-visible[4] (DWP 2022) and may not be obvious.

Picture 1: Which disabilities are non-visible
Daily life can look different for people with non-visible disabilities. Non-visible disabilities include a wide range of disabilities. These are not limited to, but may include:

- mental health conditions, including anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, personality disorders, obsessive compulsive disorder
- autism and Asperger's syndrome
- visual impairments or restricted vision
- hearing loss
- sensory and processing difficulties
- cognitive impairment, including dementia, traumatic brain injury, or learning disabilities
- non-visible health conditions, including diabetes, chronic pain or fatigue, respiratory conditions, incontinence

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With disabilities come barriers; "physical and social environments that can also be determinants of disability" (Rochette et al 2022:416) described by United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) as:

'… an evolving concept that results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others' (Rohwerder 2015:2).

This means disabled councillors may face additional barriers around accessibility (buildings and materials); institutional - stigma and negative attitudes leading to a disability perception gap - *the difference between the attitudes of non-disabled people and the reality of disabled people's experiences (*Dixon, Smith & Touchet 2018:3) and resourcing issues (Rohwerder 2015).

This raises the complicated issue of ableism (Mellifont 2023; Scuro 2017). Research suggests ableism – the dominant attitudes and ideological biases that tend to favour and prioritises the needs of non-disabled people (Sense 2023) – is everywhere, is

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[4] Wide ranging disabilities that are not necessarily 'visible' to other people. The term covers other terminology such as invisible, less-visible, or hidden disabilities which are deemed less acceptable descriptions.

experienced by many persons with disabilities and causes barriers (Scope[5] 2022). Ableist language is an inescapable part of our lexicon (Nović 2021). Euphemisms like "fall on deaf ears" or turning a "blind eye" may not be intended to hurt but nevertheless are forms of linguistic micro-aggression which differentiates and marginalises (Csillag et al 2022). This matters as internalised ableism - where those with disabilities acquiesce to the viewpoint that sees disability as a problem to be hidden – can cause significant psychological distress (Csillag et al 2022).

The diversity of local councils is their strength (NALC 2018) but do their perceptions and understanding of disabilities have an impact (Brown 2012)? Are councils attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities and is there awareness of the barriers these councillors may face? As the UK does not systematically collect data on the disability status of elected representatives, it is hard to gauge actual representation. Government suggests only 5 MPs (under 1%) publicly identified as disabled (DNS 2019) and a census of local authority councillors suggested a rate of 15.5%[6] (LGA 2022). There appears no data on local councils. What is known is that many elected representatives choose not to disclose any disabilities due to stigma, harassment, or discrimination (Evans & Reher 2021).

1.3 Aims and objectives of this research

The overarching aim is to investigate indicative numbers of disabled local councillors in England and secondly how mindful local councils are to the barriers disabled councillors could face and if there is evidence that they actively try to reduce any barriers. As Evans (2022) notes, barriers broadly involve:

- accessibility - physical/buildings/infrastructure and materials/resources
- negative attitudes/stigma - seen as dependent, incompetent, and weak
- lack of resourcing to participate.

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[5] A disability equality charity in England and Wales
[6] Based on response rate of 30%

Barriers are too numerous to fully cover within the constraints of this dissertation so there will be no consideration of the statutory obligations under The Public Sector Equality Duty[7] including assessable buildings, reasonable adjustments, Access to Work and alike. Instead, the research focuses on accessible paperwork and meeting structures as potential causes of barriers as these are council-wide activities regardless of council size[8].

Using a sample survey, the objectives are:

- investigating the indicative numbers of disabled councillors especially those with non-visible disabilities in local councils
- investigating whether these councils structure meetings to aid councillors who may be restricted in the length of time they can sit or concentrate
- investigating whether these councils ensure meeting papers are accessible to aid those with non-visible disabilities including dyslexia and colour blindness.

1.4 Structure

The structure of the research is as follows:

Chapter 2 Literature review. A thorough examination, analysis, and review of secondary research literature from academics, sector professionals, practitioners, and key players in central and local government.

Chapter 3 Methodology. The examination and analysis, including the limitations and consideration of ethical issues, of the chosen research methods and the challenges of using questionnaires and interviews to collect and evaluate primary quantitative and qualitative data.

Chapter 4 Results and analysis. An examination of the responses and results from the primary data and an analysis of the findings.

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[7] Section 149 of the Equality Act 2010
[8] Local Government Act 1972 Schedule 12 8(1)

Chapter 5 Conclusions and recommendations. An assessment of the effectiveness of the chosen research methodologies and summary of the analysis of the findings, the implications and conclusions and recommendations for future research and investigations.

Author's interest in the subject

With a background in health, education and HR, the author has worked for local councils since 2016 and is currently clerk to Pucklechurch parish council[9]. Having a non-visible disability, the author can capitalise on the insights this has given but is aware of the need to guard against bias based on experiences of discrimination and negative attitudes. Through evidence-led research the author hopes to contribute to activities that improve understanding of the barriers faced by disabled people so that the local council sector offers a positive approach to widening participation and inclusivity.

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[9] Based in South Gloucestershire

Chapter 2 Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature review is a "systematic examination of the scholarly literature about one's topic" (Efron & Ravid 2018:2). It will outline the context, then analyse and evaluate existing research, literature, theories, and practices on disabled representation in local politics. This will provide insights into the current state of knowledge and identify areas for further exploration to extend the knowledge base.

Childs & Cowley (2011) argue that political institutions unrepresentative of society are democratically deficient and lack legitimacy, emphasising the argument that "equality for anyone requires equality for everyone" (Wood & Scott 2014:9). As Reher[10] (2020) notes under-represented social groups are disempowered, which reinforces inequalities in political engagement. While research and political interest have focused on gender and ethnicity under-representation, little attention has been directed at disability (Evans[11] & Reher 2022). As Clare Pelham CEO of the Epilepsy Society notes, "when we look around, too often disabled people are missing" (Wood & Scott 2014:10).

2.2 Statistics

Representation by disabled politicians and councillors needs to be analysed against the wider context of disability within UK society. This requires statistical data as according to the United Nations (UN):

"Official statistics on disability play an essential role in the monitoring of equality of opportunity and achievements at the economic, social, political and cultural levels." (UN 2004:5)

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[10] Associate Professor in Government and Public Policy, University of Strathclyde
[11] Professor in Politics Goldsmiths University of London

Research shows statistical disability data is an extremely complex topic to pin down due to differences in the ways disability is defined; the quality and methods of data collection; reliability of sources; and disclosure rates (Al Ju'beh 2017). Despite having a clear definition of disability, the number of disabled persons in the UK remains contested - ranging from around 1 in 4 (24% or 16 million) in the 2021/22 Family Resources survey[12] (DWP 2022); nearer 1 in 5 (22% or 14.6 million) in Parliamentary briefing papers (Kirk-Wade 2022) to 1 in 6 (17.8% or 10.4 million) in the 2021 Census of England and Wales (ONS 2023).

These discrepancies are likely attributable to the known failures to systematically collect specific data, instead the outcome data used is harvested from multiple data-sources including the Family Resource and Community Life surveys (ONS 2022) which collect data across all aspects of society. Data also depends on self-reporting. Yet there appears no mechanism to address the resultant inconsistencies caused by people either not considering themselves disabled despite meeting the legal definition or choosing not to disclose disabilities due to stigma, harassment, or discrimination (Evans & Reher 2021). It should be noted that disabled politicians may also be subjected to other intersectional discrimination[13].

2.3 Representation

Despite this lack of consensus, disabled people clearly make up a substantial social group, and in a healthy participatory democracy, such diversity would be reflected across all our elected representatives. The Equality and Human Rights Commission stresses the importance of monitoring the diversity of political representation through quality data (Lamprinakou et al 2019). Yet as will be shown there is a paucity of systematically collected evidence. Where research is undertaken, it highlights under-representation of disabled persons which in turn undermines the notions of legitimate representation - crucial for democracy (Sillett 2023).

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[12] A continuous UK household survey collecting information on a representative sample of private households.
[13] Including but not limited to age, gender, ethnicity

Nationally, the Inter-Parliamentary Union[14] note the importance of having a democratic parliament – characterised by representing, involving, and serving the needs of its diverse population (Beetham 2006). This matters when the working practices of the House of Commons reflect the traditions and preferences of the Members who historically populate it (Childs 2016). Chaney's study of the UK Parliaments[15] (2015), suggests there is engrained institutional ablism - negative discriminatory and/or prejudicial attitudes to and behaviours towards disabled persons. Parliamentary culture - the learned societal customs and behaviours – informs 'ability' expectations (Wolbring 2012) which disadvantages disabled representatives and impacts policy and law making. Tradition is hard to break when ableism remains so ingrained.

Political representation according to Pitkin[16], can be viewed as i) substantive - where elected representatives act in the interest of the represented or ii) descriptive - where they share similar characteristics with the represented (Kurebwa 2015). Effective policy making needs the perspectives of all citizens' "present" (SEP 2018) and legislative bodies that resemble societal demographics (Hayes & Hibbing 2017). Having elected disabled politicians with shared characteristics to represent this marginalised group reinforces 'nothing about us without us'[17] a term firmly rooted in disability activism (Pfeifer 2022) and 'the politics of presence' (Chaney 2015:183). However, it is important to note that the UK electoral system of first-past-the-post favours those achieving spatially concentrated share of votes whilst discriminating against those with more evenly spread support across the country (Dunleavy 2019) - a potential barrier for disabled candidates.

It remains unclear whether disabled politicians automatically represent the diverse views of disabled citizens (Reher 2022). While some politicians act as the voice of their disability community, others may fear tokenism or 'role entrapment.' Equally, rising abuse, harassment and hate-crimes against disabled people may contribute to

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[14] Global organisation of national parliaments with 179 members and 14 Associate members including UK.
[15] Covering the period 1940-2012
[16] American political theorist (1931 – 2023) best known for 1967 seminal study *The Concept of Representation*
[17] Accredited to South African disability rights movement in the 1990s,

elected representatives hiding or minimising their disability. Whilst the barriers disabled people face vary, many will have a commonality of experiences[18] not shared by non-disabled people. Reher (2022) shows this tends to lead to distinct priorities and a propensity to be more supportive of public and healthcare spending and income redistribution. This trend is more prevalent in disabled politicians regardless of party suggesting disabled representation will benefit both the interests of disabled voters (Reher 2022) and help inform more inclusive public decision-making (Chaney 2015). As Marsha de Cordova[19] MP notes, having disabled people at the heart of legislation helps prevent the isolation of 20% of the population (APPG et al 2022).

2.4 Participation

Gauging the prevalence of disabled representation is problematic. Despite legislation, section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 has not been enacted and the protected characteristics of elected politicians are not tracked nor is data on disabled people standing/being elected as local candidates (Sillett 2023). Estimates exist but the numbers vary. Disability Policy Centre founders Hensman & Schendel-Wilson (2022) suggest 8 parliamentarians out of 650 (1.23%) declare as disabled while Pring (2019) notes only 5 openly disabled MPs after the 2019 General Election. True representation would need 136 disabled MPs in the House (Shepherd et al 2023).

An important caveat is that numbers are likely to be higher as some MPs will have un-declared disabilities and others will choose not to declare for fear of the electorate, their party or reduced opportunities (Hensman & Schendel-Wilson 2022). An example is Daisy Cooper[20] (MP) who did not declare her non-visible disability during campaigning to prevent it being 'weaponised' by rival candidates. She now campaigns to highlight the raft of parliamentary processes that disadvantage her as

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[18] Including but not limited to physical, social, economic, and legal barriers
[19] Labour party MP representing Battersea since 2017
[20] Liberal Democrat MP for St Albans since 2019. She has Crohn's disease.

a disabled politician[21] (ElectHer 2022). Clearly Parliamentary disabled representation does not reflect society (Evans & Reher 2022).

Higher-tier disabled councillors (district/county/unitary) remain under-represented despite the recommendations of the Councillors Commission that disabled people "should not encounter additional barriers" (2007:90). A census by Local Government Association found 16% of higher-tier councillors who have an average age of 59-60 claim "long-term physical or mental health problems"[22] (LGA 2022:14). In local councils, the Intergenerational Foundation found an average age of 60 (Leach and Kingman 2012) with 40% of all local councillors aged 65+. With many disabilities acquired later in life, higher disability rates are statistically more likely as almost everyone may be impaired at some stage (Al Ju'beh 2017) and by State Pension age and over, 45% are covered by disability provisions in the Equality Act 2010 (DWP 2013).

2.5 Barriers

Research provides additional anecdotal evidence on why disabled people are not represented in politics:

- Austerity, Covid (disproportionally affecting disabled people) (DWP 2022), welfare reforms and policy suggest the Conservatives have an ableist mindset (Redpath[23] 2021). Likewise, Disability Labour[24] suggests Labour is institutionally ableist (Farr 2022). This matters as Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats dominate the English political system and play a key role in selection and manifesto priorities (Evans 2022). Around 90% of all councillors now represent these parties (Copus and Wall 2017).

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[21] Includes getting permission to take water into the Chamber, problems caused by lock-ins and speaking in debates
[22] 2022 survey removed the word 'disability' from its narrative and replaced it with mental health.
[23] Student disability columnist on Oxford University's independent newspaper
[24] A Socialist Society affiliated to the Labour Party campaigning on inclusion and ableism

- Growing party-political influence in local councils means local councillor voices will likely echo those at other levels of local government (Copus and Wall 2017) raising concerns of ableist attitudes (Evans and Reher 2022).

- Across selection, the election process and post-election, local selectors may under-value diversity or lack knowledge of the impacts of disability and barriers to participation (Evans 2021). No data is collected to know how many disabled candidates stand but are not elected or how many disabled councillors are co-opted to unfilled vacancies. Neither is data collected on whether councillor resignations or failures to seek re-election are connected to their disabilities (Copus and Wall 2017).

- Lack of role models. Politics remains dominated by middle aged, white, middle-class, able-bodied men (Burton & Tunnicliffe 2022). 57% of higher tier councillors are male (LGA 2022) and 67% are male in local councils (Leach and Kingman 2012). While Labour's membership nears gender parity, men make up two-thirds of Liberal Democrats and three-quarters of Conservative members. 44% Conservatives are aged over 65 while Labour/Liberal Democrats have 30%. This matters as barriers to selection are known to be influenced by attitudes, perceptions and institutional culture and norms (Evans 2022).

- Studies show disabled people remain less engaged with politics, with scepticism of the political institutions who ignore their concerns and needs (Hansard Society 2019). A prime example is *R(Binder & Others) v Secretary of State for Work and Pensions* (25/01/22) where the High Court declared the Government's National Disability strategy to be unlawful.

2.6 Summary

The aim of this literature review was to investigate whether the levels of disabled representation in politics mirror societal levels. Clearly collating data on this under-represented group is not a priority but where data exists, it indicates political

representation across all levels of Government is unrepresentative of society. This is bad for democracy and as Nandy[25] suggests "*everyone has something to offer and something to learn.*" (Nandy 2022).

[25] Labour Shadow Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

According to Bell (2005) research is conducted to seek to solve problems through a methodical process aimed at expanding knowledge (Lukenchuk 2013). What is clear from the literature review is the dearth of data on disabled people in political life. Where available, secondary research is suggestive of a general trend of under-representation in all levels of local government. This scarcity reinforces the need for primary data from English local councils to test whether they reflect this trend of under-representation of disabled councillors especially those with non-visible disabilities.

This chapter outlines the rationale for the research strategy – the specific and planned actions required to achieve the goals (Denscombe 2017); the design and methodology employed and the associated ethical considerations. It will further consider any problems and limitations arising from the chosen methods.

3.2 Research strategy

The purpose of undertaking primary research - defined by Gratton & Jones as "the collation and analysis of original data that has not been gathered before" (2010:8) - is to expand the 'who, what, why' questions (Matthews and Ross 2010). It helps begin to understand, explain, and evaluate the extent of any under-representation of disabled councillors in English local councils. The research objectives are to:

    i.   identify and provide illustrative evidence to demonstrate if under-representation of disabled councillors is reflected in local councils.

    ii.   increase knowledge of how aware local councils are of both non-visible disabilities and some of the difficulties disabled councillors may face.

iii. show, by focusing on the structure of council meetings, if there is evidence to indicate that local councils actively try to reduce barriers for councillors with non-visible disabilities.

3.3 Research design

Research involves a series of steps where different means and methods are employed to effectively collect and analyse new primary data (Habib, Maryam, & Pathik 2014).

Picture 2: Research steps

STEP 1: Formulating the Problem

STEP 2: Research Design

STEP 3: Data Collection

STEP 4: Data Processing

STEP 5: Finalizing Research Draft

Research Steps - Habib, Maryam and Pathik (2014:15)
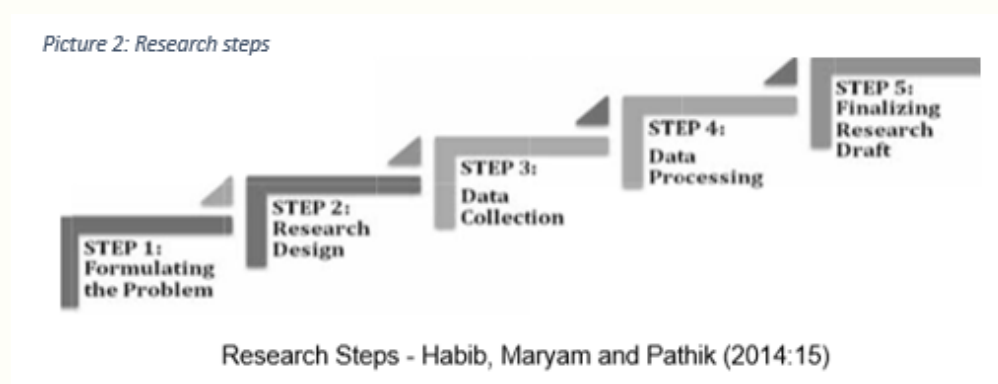
Research methods must be appropriate, reliable, and valid. Whilst there may be no right or wrong methodology, the adopted techniques should be capable of meeting the research objectives to provide the information needed to accomplish the overall goals (Ahmed, Opoku and Aziz 2016). Reliability relates to confidence in the trustworthiness, dependability, and accuracy of the research data (Patil 2020). Validity is concerned with the relevance and appropriateness of the process - is it "measuring what is supposed to be measured?" (Patil 2020:51).

For this study the research tools must be capable of capturing responses from officers and councillors from across all sized English councils in a timely and non-burdensome manner. Despite the legislation recognising the social model of disability - where it is barriers in society that disable people rather than their impairment, - the design needs to incorporate measure to address likely uneasiness contributors might feel in participating due to fear of stigma and negative attitudes attached to disability. Here, Bryman suggests a web-based questionnaire may

"afford a greater propensity to report sensitive information" (2016:176). However, as Denscombe (2017) suggests, the success of any questionnaires depends on response and completion rates and the validity of the responses.

3.4 Methods of data collection

The primary method of data collection is a self-administered web-based questionnaire with an embedded information statement (Appendix 1) outlining the importance of participation to improve understanding (Denscombe 2017). The questionnaire used Google Forms - a free web-based survey tool with a downloadable spreadsheet for detailed response analysis. Local council officers and councillors were provided with a web link to the questionnaire[26] and invited to participate to provide a broad spectrum of awareness of non-visible disabilities.

Disability is a sensitive subject where confidentiality is key, so using a questionnaire allowed responses to be submitted anonymously or anonymised once collected. The intention was to probe more deeply themes arising from the questionnaire, by undertaking some follow-up semi-structured, one-to-one interviews (Appendix 2). Anonymity meant participation would be via a self-selecting 'convenience sample' despite the potential that this could skew the results (Turner, Cardinal, and Burton 2017).

The research used mixed methods, viewing quantitative and qualitative research as mutually compatible, feasible and desirable (Bryman 2016). Quantitative research measures hard data often presenting findings in statistical form to provide credible and objective foundations for the research (Denscombe 2017). Qualitative research offers a more subjective analysis of words and how people understand and interpret real world experiences through beliefs, values, and feelings. The questionnaire included quantitative and qualitative sequential questioning covering three areas: background information on councils; information on disabled councillors and finally barriers councillors with non-visible disabilities may encounter at meetings.

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[26] Cloud-based

To minimise the potential for hypothetical answers, careful consideration was given to ensure questions have relevance to all councils regardless of size. Using a mix of closed, multi-choice and questions requiring commentary was deemed an effective way to undertake probability sampling to gain a broad swathe of views. Sufficient flexibility was built into the questionnaire to acknowledge that non-visible disabilities are not homogenous and there are no right answers (Habib, Maryam, & Pathik 2014). Pre-testing by fellow community governance students and a few councillors provided helpful feedback on the appropriateness of the questionnaire to serve the research objectives (Appendix 3).

3.5 Research limitations

All research tools have limitations which need careful consideration when analysing response and completion rates and response validity. Quantitative research methods can mean the quality of data collected may be highly variable raising the risk of data manipulation which then influences the findings. Likewise qualitative data is subjective and open to interpretation while its credibility remains highly influenced by both the views and skills of the researcher. The author has sought to follow the findings, and to be aware of her own positionality linked to the topic.

The limitations of web-based questionnaires no matter how well designed include:

- reliance on connectivity and digitally aware participants
- respondent fatigue
- potential for multiple replies (Andrade 2020).

The lack of ability to question or check validity of responses could be partially addressed through testing in the follow-up interviews.

It is known that on-line questionnaires often have low response rates but capacity, time and geographic considerations made this the only practical option. However, as Rindfuss et al (2015) suggest, low response rates need not lead to biased results but

as noted by Sauermanna & Roach (2013) issues around representation and sample selection bias must be considered in any analysis.

Further limitations specific to this research include a lack of understanding of disability within society that Scope notes (Dixon, Smith and Touchet 2018) and misinformation from the internet (McDowall, Almuth and Doyle 2023). Either may influence the number of individuals who choose to participate in this research. The very nature of non-visible disabilities may mean the topic is not seen as having relevance and as Rindfuss et al (2015) note those with no interest in the research topic are unlikely to participate.

3.6 Ethical considerations

Denscombe (2017) notes the importance of ethical scrutiny to protect participants interests when collecting data from individuals. Ethics are based on:

- respect for persons (informed consent)
- beneficence (risks and benefits assessment)
- justice (fairness, no deception, conducted with integrity and legally compliant) (WHO 2023).

This research was undertaken in line with De Montfort University's (DMU) ethical standards and code of practice (DMU 2021). The view that growing competition in the 'research market' has led to risk-aversion in University Ethical Review Boards (ERBs) to protect their reputations was noted. Bushera and Fox (2021) argue this means more hypothetico-deductive[27] approaches are applied to social scientific research rather than more appropriate methods such as:

- inductive (drawing general conclusion from significant themes in raw data or observations)

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[27] Scientific approach to research which tests the consequences of a hypothesis from which deductions and comparisons are made

- ethnographic (observations of the behaviours, culture and experiences of a community or organisation) or
- documentary (using outside sources and documents to support arguments).

Reiterating dignity and respect, the embedded research participant information sheet accompanying the on-line questionnaire consent form confirmed:

- the voluntary nature of participation and the ability to withdraw at any point
- privacy protection – fully anonymised data
- the purpose and use of date collected
- legitimate access to data (Taquette & da Matta Souza 2022).

Although this research covers non-visible disabilities, participants do not need additional interventions to prevent harm from participation. Any individual with such disabilities contributing to this research is not less-capable; they may simply think and process information differently (Turner and Andrew 2018). This research was approved as a low-risk study.

3.7 Distribution

To publicise the research, approaches were made to both National Association of Local Councils[28] (NALC) and Society of Local Council Clerks[29] (SLCC). With synergy to NALC's 'Make a Change' campaign - encouraging people from all backgrounds and experiences to stand as local councillors - NALC kindly promoted the questionnaire through its county association networks (CALCs) and will include findings in their 2023 Election Report. SLCC kindly included details in their newsletter and on their 'CG Dissertations & Other Coursework' web page. 351 personalised emails were sent to clerks around the Bath, South Gloucestershire, and Gloucestershire areas, all CALCs and Community Governance colleagues (see below and Appendix 4). The questionnaire was also promoted on the SLCC online 'Forum.'

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[28] National body representing the interests of 10,000 local (parish and town) councils
[29] Professional body for local council clerks and senior council employees

Table 1 Personalised emails

Direct emails using publicly available contact details	
Regional/area	No. of emails
Bath and North East Somerset (ALCA)	34
South Gloucestershire (ALCA)	41
Gloucestershire (GAPTC)	220
CALCs	41
Level 6 Community Governance students	15
	351

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The questionnaire was live between 3rd – 28th April 2023.

3.8 Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the rationale and methodology used to collect primary data from the local sector. It also highlighted some of the challenges and difficulties of obtaining valid and representative data when those with no interest in the research topic were unlikely to participate. It anticipated a low response rate. The next chapter will detail the analysis and provide an indicative narrative on the findings around under-representation of disabled councillors on local councils.

Chapter 4 Results and analysis

4.1 Introduction

This chapter examines the responses and results from the primary data collected. It will present a detailed analysis of the findings and link these to the emergent assumptions and themes arising from the literature review.

4.2 Response rate

A total of 220 responses were received from local council officers and councillors[30] in England which exceeded expectations. There were no incomplete questionnaires.

- 114 from officers (49.6%)
- 116 from councillors (50.4%).

A low response rate was anticipated as despite the publicity, it was impossible to know if the information reached the intended recipients. With a potential pool of 10,000 councils and 100,000 councillors in England, distribution relied on third parties or as noted in chapter 3, individuals choosing to respond. Those with no interest in the research topic were always unlikely to participate. Overall, the response rate suggests this is not a priority topic for either officers or councillors.

Although the number of responses may be viewed as low and the response rate remains uncalculatable, this need not lead to biased results (Rindfuss et al 2015). However, it must be noted from the responses that those participating appear to have an interest in and/or personal or professional experience of disability. Equally, it is not known if respondents gained their 'knowledge' from the internet which according to McDowall, Almuth and Doyle (2023) is a somewhat 'wild west' where unregulated information can result in knowledge and attitude gaps. With potential

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[30] Unless otherwise stated any reference to officer or councillor will relate to officers and councillors in town and parish councils (local councils).

representational or sample selection bias due to the likelihood of respondents with a personal interest self-selected to complete the questionnaire, all findings can only be illustrative and indicative.

4.3 Responder profiles

Q2–4 of questionnaire.

Responses were received from officers/councillors across England covering 90% of County Associations of Local Councils (CALC) areas[31].

Figure 1 Responses from CALC areas
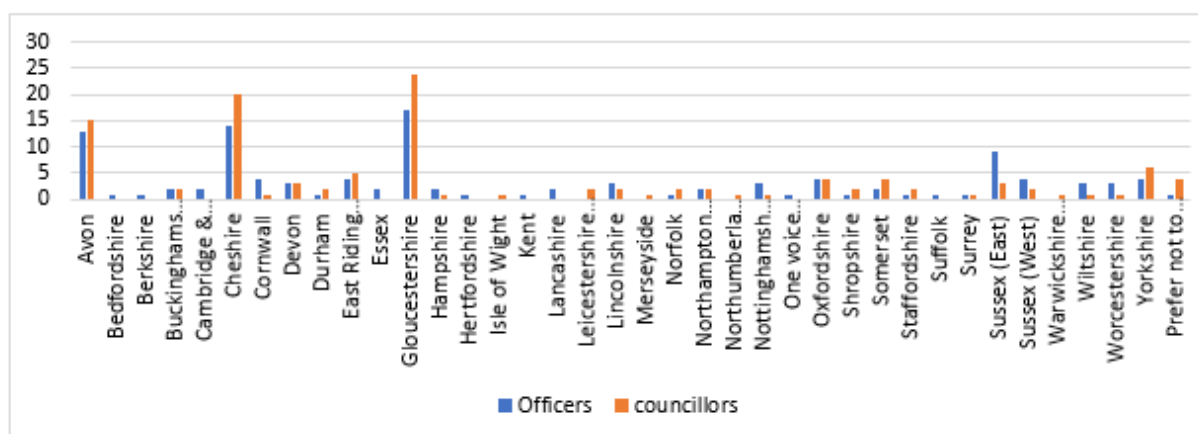
Every sized council is reflected in the responses although there is greater representation from small to medium sized councils.

Figure 2 Response rates from English local councils

Precept	Officers	Councillors
>£25K	25%	27%
£25K-£100K	32%	35%
<£100K - £500K	26%	26%
<£500K - £1M	10%	6%
<£1M	7%	2%
Prefer not to say	0%	4%

No. of councillors	Officers	Councillors
<5	5%	7%
6-13	61%	74%
13-22	31%	19%
23+	4%	0%

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[31] A single Welsh clerk submitted a valid questionnaire and whilst included in the overall findings, these comments cannot be viewed as illustrative and attributed to Wales

4.4 Research findings

The questionnaire focussed on two discrete areas; the first to gauge levels of disabled councillors while the other explored measures taken to reduce barriers to their engagement in meetings. A full analysis of the questionnaire can be found in Appendix 5. The near 50/50 split of responses from officers and councillors enabled comparisons of their respective views and experiences to produce more nuanced findings from this initial snap-shot of views vis-a-vis attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities.

4.4.1 Gauging the levels of disabled councillors

Questions 5 - 13 investigated potential levels of councillors with publicly declared or undeclared disabilities or suspected disabilities. The findings were analysed against existing baseline data. As 2.2 of the literature review identified, there is not a definitive rate for those defined as disabled within the UK population. What is generally accepted is that existing research indicates around 80% of all disabilities are likely to be non-visible. With a lack of specific local council sector data, the closest comparable data that exists relates to higher tier councils which have a similar age profile to local councils and indicate rates of disabled councillors at around 16% (LGA 2022).

4.4.1(i) Data on declared disabilities

36% of officer respondents (41 of 114) said they had councillors with publicly declared disabilities, while 53% (61 officers) said they had none who had chosen to publicly declare their disabilities.

Figure 3 Q5
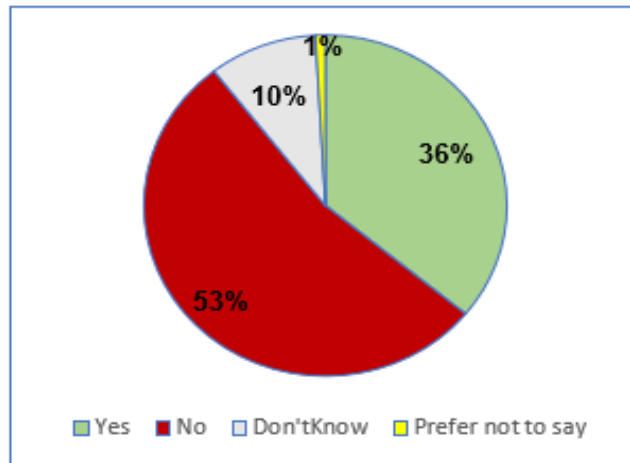
Within this cohort of 41 officers, 20 reported having one councillor, 13 had 2 and 6 had 3. A further breakdown showed 14 officers had councillors with visible disabilities, 19 had non-visible disabilities and 8 had both.

Figure 4 Officers Q6 How many councillors?
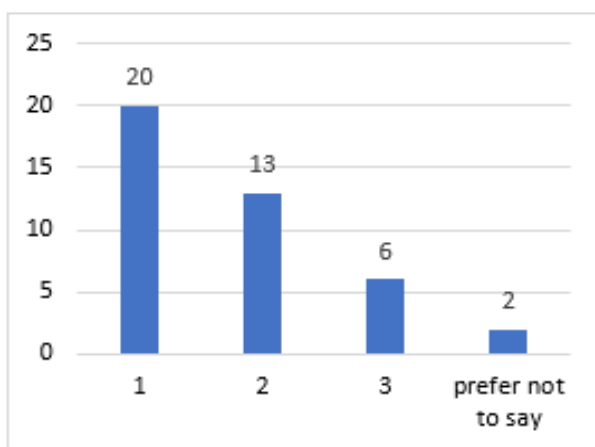
Figure 5 Officers Q7 Type of disabilities
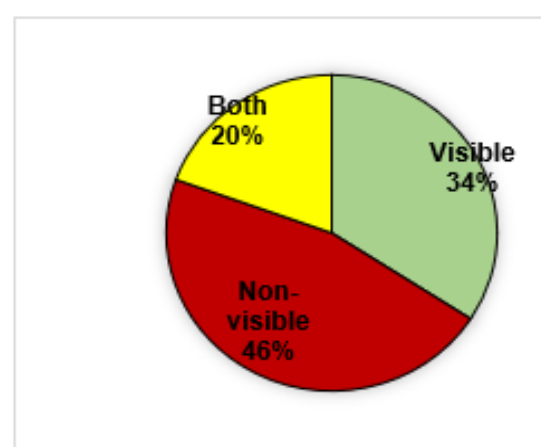
The overall aggregated figures from officer respondent data indicates:

- 12% have councillors with declared visible disabilities
- 17% have councillors with declared non-visible disabilities
- 7% have councillors with both.

This suggests an overall level of 24% of officers having councillors with declared non-visible disabilities and that non-visible disabilities account for 67% of all the declared disabilities.

In contrast when councillors were asked if they consider themselves to have a disability, 55% (64 of 116) said 'yes' while 45% (52 of 116) said 'no'. However, within the cohort of 64 councillors declaring a disability, only 34 or just over half (53%) had publicly declared their disability of which 27 councillors declared non-visible disabilities and 7 declared they had both.

Figure 6 Q5 Councillors Do you consider yourself to have a disability?
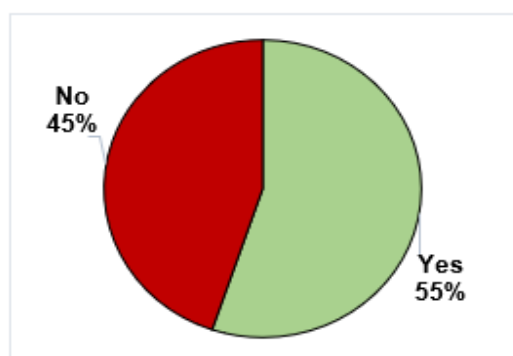
Figure 7 Q6 Councillors If you have a disability, have you publicly declared the disability?
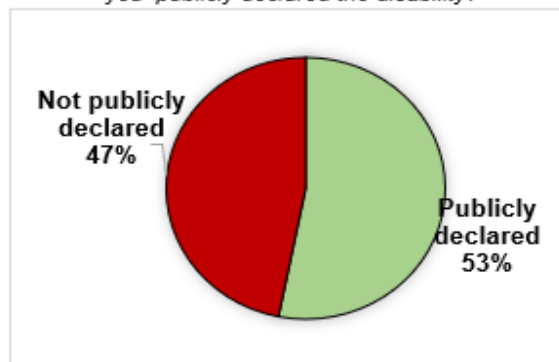
The breakdown of councillor respondent data indicates 23% of councillors have declared non-visible disabilities and 6% have declared both. This is suggestive of an overall level of 29% of councillors with declared non-visible disabilities.

However, there remains a further 30 councillors, or around half, who have not publicly declared their disability which equates to 26% of councillors with undeclared disabilities. Again, 2.3 of the literature review suggests this is not unexpected (Reher 2022), as elected representatives may choose or to hide or minimise their disability due to increasing abuse, harassment, and fears around discrimination. It is not known if these councillors are included in 4.4.1ii and 4.4.1iii.

Officer comment from questionnaire "is there a requirement to declare visible disabilities? if not how would staff know that adjustments would be required?"

4.4.1(ii) Data on disabilities not publicly declared.

37 of 114 officers (32%) had been told by councillors about disabilities they had chosen not to publicly declare. Within this cohort of 37 officers, 22 reported they were told by one councillor, 11 by 2 and 4 by 3. A further breakdown showed:

- 3 officers reported councillors had undeclared visible disabilities
- 31 had non-visible disabilities
- 2 had both
- 1 did not say.

The overall aggregated figures from officer respondent data indicate 27% of officers have councillors with undeclared non-visible disabilities and 2% have both visible and non-visible. This suggests an overall level of 29% of officers having councillors with undeclared non-visible disabilities (with non-visible disabilities accounting for 91% of all the undeclared disabilities).

37 of 116 councillors (32%) had been told by other councillors about disabilities they had chosen not to publicly declare. Within this cohort of 37 councillors, 21 reported they were told by one councillor and 16 by 2. A further breakdown showed:

- 3 councillors were told that councillors had undeclared visible disabilities
- 24 were told about undeclared non-visible disabilities
- 9 were told of both
- 1 did not say.

The overall aggregated figures from councillor respondent data indicates 21% of councillors have been told by other councillors of their undeclared non-visible disabilities and 8% have been told of both visible and non-visible. This suggests an overall level of 29% of councillors being told by other councillors about their undeclared non-visible disabilities (with non-visible disabilities accounting for 89% of all the undeclared disabilities).

Figure 8 Q9 Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to how many councillors had told them about disabilities they have chosen not to publicly declare?
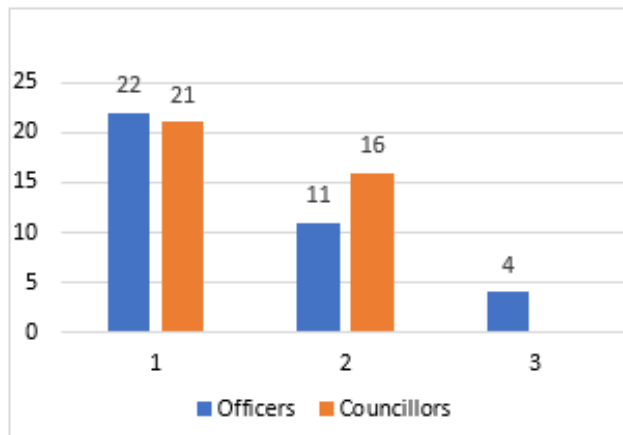
Figure 9 Q10 comparison of Officer and Councillor responses on types of undeclared disabilities
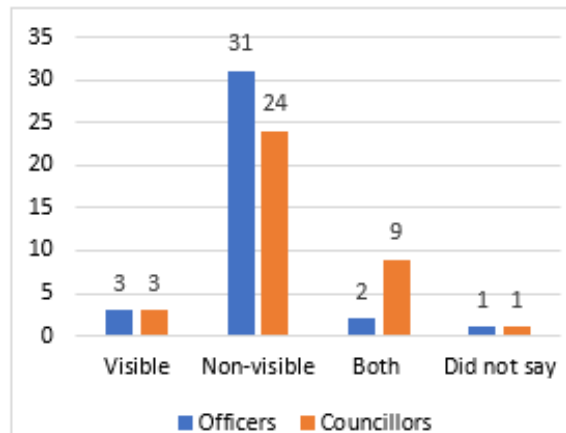
4.4.1(iii) Data on suspected disabilities

40 of 114 officers (35%) suspected they had councillors with undisclosed disabilities. Within this cohort of 40 officers, 11 officers believed they had one councillor, 19 believed 2, 5 believed 3, 4 believed 4+ and 1 did not say. A further breakdown showed:

- 2 officers suspected councillors had undisclosed visible disabilities
- 29 suspected non-visible disabilities
- 9 suspected both.

The overall aggregated figures from officer respondent data indicates 2% of officers suspect they have councillors with undisclosed visible disabilities, 25% suspect undisclosed non-visible disabilities and 8% suspect both. This suggests an overall level of 33% of officers suspecting they have councillors with undisclosed non-visible disabilities (accounting for 95% of all the suspected undisclosed disabilities).

49 of 116 councillors (42%) suspected there were other councillors with undisclosed disabilities. Within this cohort of 49 councillors, 20 councillors believed there was one councillor, 19 believed 2, 5 believed 3, 3 believed 4 and 2 did not say. A further breakdown showed:

- 34 councillors suspected there were councillors with non-visible disabilities

- 14 suspected there were councillors with both
- 1 did not say.

The overall aggregated figures from councillor respondent data indicates 29% suspect undisclosed non-visible disabilities and 12% suspect both. This suggests an overall level of 41% of councillors suspecting there were councillors with undisclosed non-visible disabilities (accounting for 98% of all the suspected undisclosed disabilities).

Figure 10 Q13 Types of suspected undisclosed disabilities
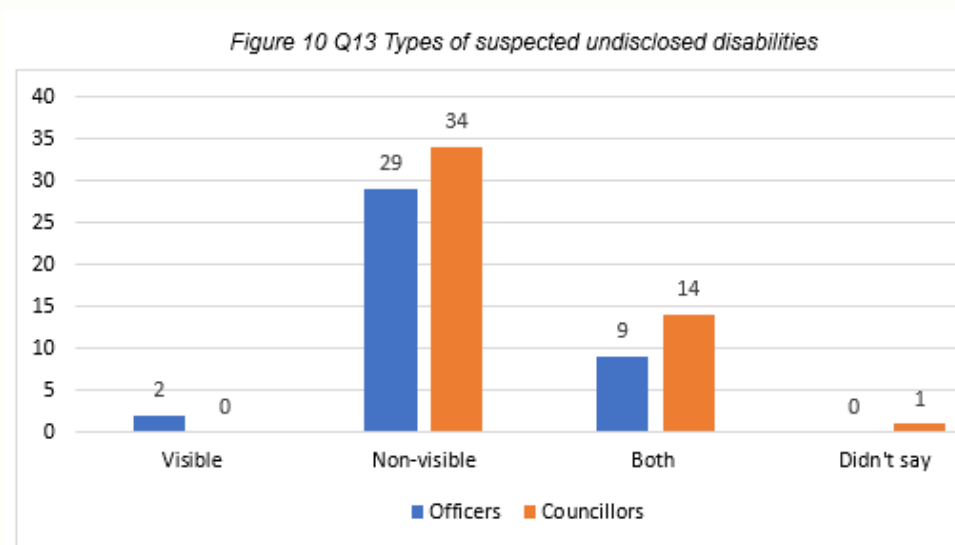
4.4.1(iv) What the findings reveal about levels of disabled councillors in English local councils

The findings reflected some of the indicators from the existing research in that:
- disability is a complex topic
- disabilities are not homogenous and cover multiple conditions
- knowledge of and the lived experiences of those with disabilities will differ while opinions vary
- not everyone will choose to disclose their disabilities
- some will not consider themselves disabled despite meeting the legal definition.

It is also not known if the officers who responded had personal experience of or prior knowledge of disabilities. All these factors have the potential to influence responses

and may in part account for some of the variances between the views of officers and councillors.

Data from councillors indicated that 55% have disabilities. This appears much higher than the 36% of officers reporting they have disabled councillors but the 36% only relates to councillors with publicly declared disabilities. Given a further 11% of officers reported that they did not know if some councillors have a disability, the overall figure could be nearer 47% of officers with disabled councillors. Clearly both these headline figures far exceed the UK average noted in the literature review of between 17% - 25% and could be a result of representational bias due to respondents self-selecting.

The literature review findings imply that this figure is not unexpected (Leach and Kingman 2012; Al Ju'beh 2017). While the age of local councillor respondents is unknown, research has shown the average age of councillors is 60+ so statistically higher rates of disability are far more likely (LGA 2022). Section 2.4 showed many disabilities are acquired later in life while Government data shows 45% of the general population over State Pension age will be covered by disability provisions in the Equality Act (DWP 2013). Further investigations including age profiling is needed.

Breaking down the reported 55% disabled councillors revealed that only half had publicly declared their disability. This reduces the figure to 23% of councillors declaring non-visible disabilities and 6% both visible and non-visible disabilities (total 29%). In comparison, while officers reported similar rates of 24% of disabled councillors with non-visible disabilities, they reported higher rates for councillors with visible disabilities at 12%. Although any differences are not immediately obvious, one explanation could be that where a disability is 'visible' the officer has automatically assumed the disability is publicly declared. It remains the prerogative of any councillor not to declare a disability regardless of whether others are aware of it. There could be over/underreporting but further studies would need to clarify these discrepancies.

There are some signs that disabled councillors with non-declared disabilities do share this information be it through councillor-to-officer and councillor-to-councillor interactions. 32% of officers have been made aware of disabilities of which 29% relate to undeclared non-visible disabilities. Likewise, 32% of councillors have been told by other councillors about undeclared disabilities of which 29% relate to undeclared non-visible disabilities. What is not known is if the data from officers and councillors involves the same councillors. In addition, when compared to the data collected on actions to reduce barriers, the findings suggest an imbalance between discussing disabilities and initiating actions versus the ableist approach of expecting disabled councillors to ask for help.

The findings further suggest quite high levels of disability awareness and insightfulness. 35% of officers suspect they have councillors with undisclosed disabilities of which 33% relate to undisclosed non-visible disabilities. Councillors report even higher rates of 42% of which 41% relate to undisclosed non-visible disabilities. The higher levels of disability among councillors may make them more attuned to recognising disabilities in others.

Finally, the findings suggest two key areas of concern. One is the mismatch in the findings around non-disabled councillors where 53% of officers said they had no councillors with disabilities compared to 45% of councillors declaring they are not disabled.

Referring to the complexity of disabilities, there are indications in this evidence to imply a lack of discussion, probably out of fear of offending, suggesting a training need. Disability awareness does not form part of formal professional development programmes for local councils such as CiLCA nor is there mandatory guidance. This could place officers in a difficult position if they have never encountered disabilities and could therefore perpetuate inaccurate perceptions of disability or stifle inclusivity.

The second concern is around disclosure of disabilities. Why have 26% of councillors chosen not to publicly declared their disabilities? When around one third of officer and councillors are aware of non-disclosed disabilities and even higher levels suspect councillors have disabilities, what is being done vis-à-vis inclusivity to

help these councillors with disclosure and/or support? Research has already identified possible reasons; choice or stigma/harassment associated with increased party politics or even this sector's reported civility and respect issues, but this is only speculation. Yet if the findings on disabled councillor figures are in any way indicative of the wider local council sector, then scaled up there could be as many as 55,000 disabled councillors serving on councils with 26,000 unwilling to declare their disability for unresearched reasons. This should be of concern and requires further detailed research which is suggested in the next chapter in recommendations.

4.4.2 Data on barriers

Councillor comment from questionnaire "I don't think they're really interested in breaking down barriers."

Officer comment from questionnaire "... the council has not been made aware of any difficulties individual councillors are facing which we are not addressing"
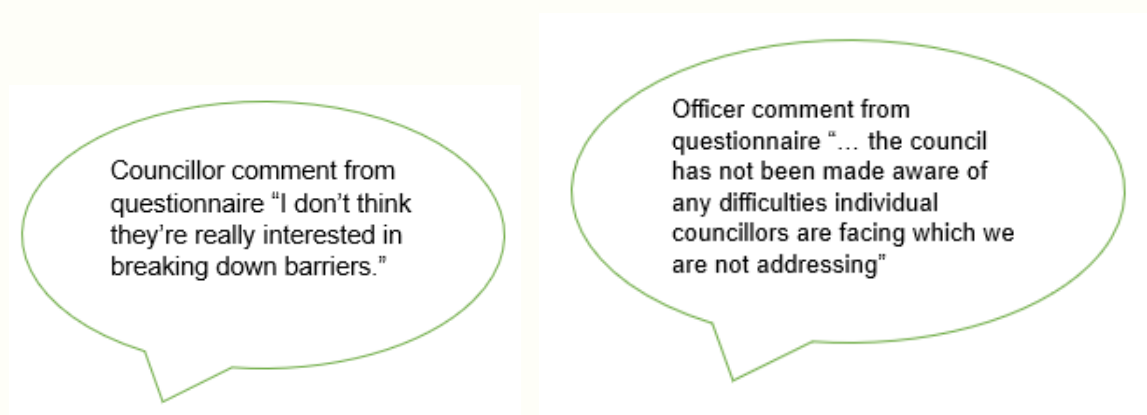
Questions 14 - 29 investigated potential barriers councillors with non-visible disabilities may face in meetings and the measures, if any, taken to address them. The findings suggest that knowledge of potential barriers may be reasonably commonplace, but is not uniform across different disabilities and does not always translate into actions.

Awareness of measures to make communications more helpful to those with dyslexia is low with under a quarter of officers (24%) and only 14% of councillors reporting they always produce dyslexic-friendly correspondence. The findings suggest a need for improvements and awareness training, with implications especially for publicly available reports.

Figure 11 Q14 Do you create more dyslexia friendly content in your written communications?
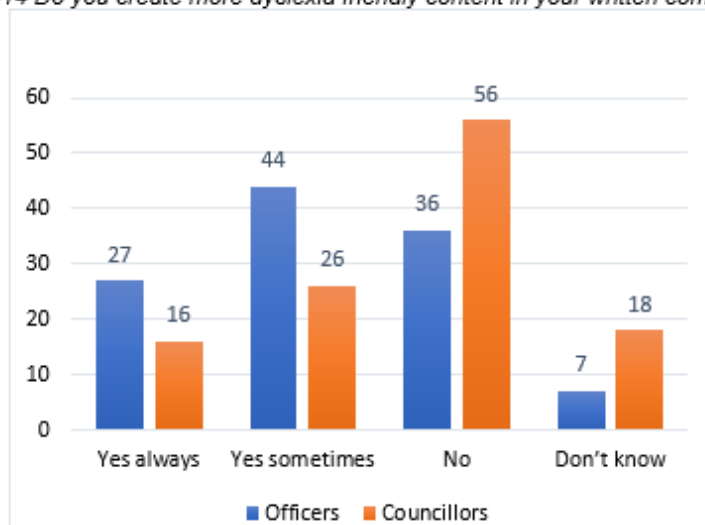
61% of councillors compared to 49% of officers reported they were aware that black text on a white background can be dazzling and affect neurodivergent people which might infer councillors are putting knowledge into practice. Yet in comparison when asked about implementing adjustments such as contrast in any projected documents or using coloured papers, 88% of officers and 76% councillors reported they took no actions

Figure 12 Q15 Colour awareness of text and papers
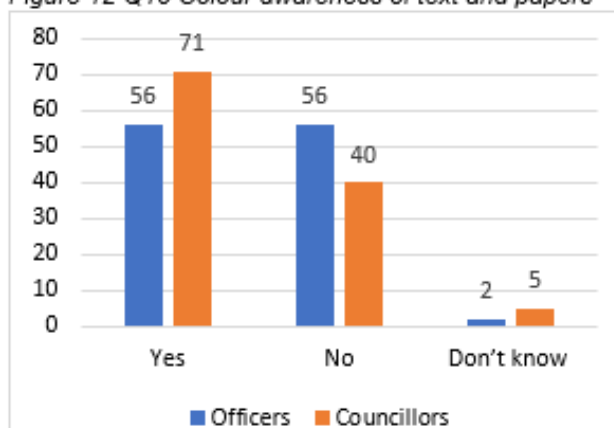
Figure 13 Q16 Adjustments
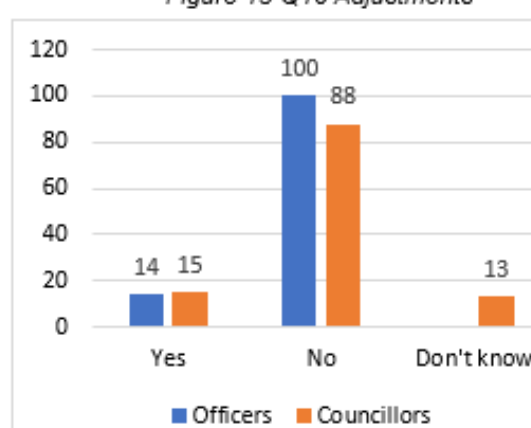
Half the respondents had knowledge of overlays with 50% of officers and 53% of councillors aware they can be helpful. Yet again when it came to taking actions, no officer reported providing overlays and only 3 councillors had been given them. Likewise, while officers appeared more aware of the impact of colour vision

deficiencies (58% to 23%) a third of respondents (32% of officers and 33% councillor) had no awareness.

The area with the most divergent views was around whether agenda and meeting papers included clear and explicit instructions on tasks and expectations for items requiring actions. While two thirds of officers (67%) said papers were clear and explicit, only one third (33%) of councillors agreed. Does this imply officers over-estimate the quality of their agendas, or do councillors not register what are good/bad papers – another possible area for further research. Everyone benefits from 'clear and unambiguous instructions' so there should be urgent further research as to the root cause of this disparity in opinions.

Figure 14 Q19 Unambiguous instructions in papers
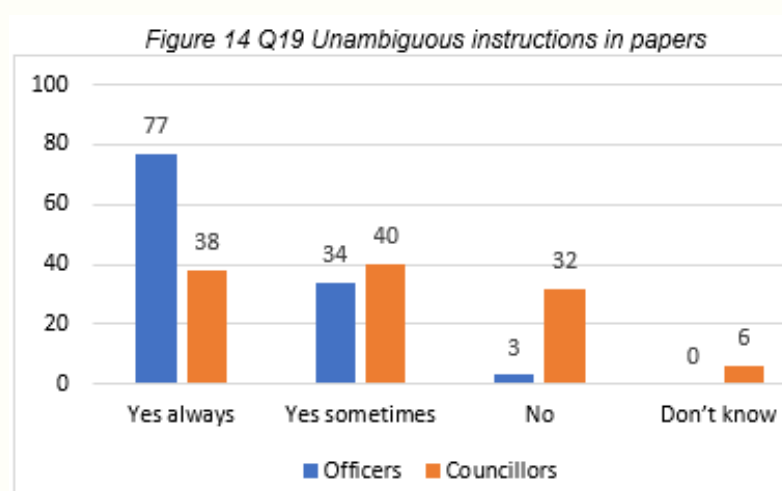
Councillor comment from questionnaire "More structured agendas; papers for items (I have tried this but struggled to get other Cllrs to adopt it)."

Officer comment from questionnaire "Agendas, Papers and Minutes prepared using Microsoft Word Styles so that people using read-aloud technology can skip more easily to relevant sections."

Awareness around difficulties to concentrate or sit for extended periods of time was impressive at 88% of officers and 92% of councillors. Yet when it came to taking actions such as routinely structuring agendas to allow important decision making to

be considered near the start of the meeting, 50% of officers and 70% of councillors reported no actions.

This lack of correlation between knowledge and actions was particularly evident when 77% of officers and 78% of councillors reported meetings had no periods of adjournment for comfort breaks, to move around or recharge after periods of focussed concentration.

Figure 15 Q21 Important decisions near start of meeting?
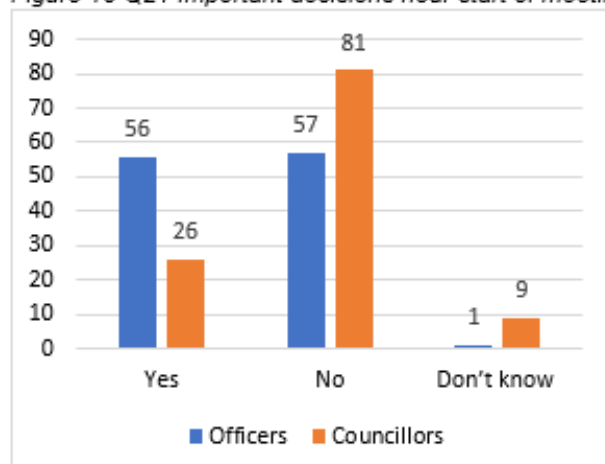
Figure 16 Q22 Comfort breaks?
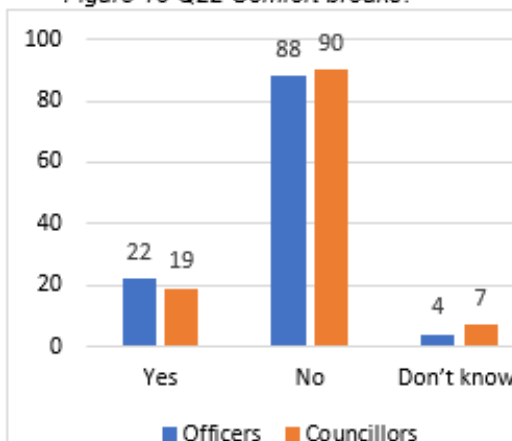
Knowledge of the range of difficulties the hearing impaired may face was impressive with 92% of officers and 96% of councillors aware. Yet, when it came to implementing measures[32] in meetings to aid those with hearing impairments, 79% of officer and 81% of councillors said no actions were taken.

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[32] Excluding access to loop or infrared systems or acoustic clouds

Figure 17 Q24 Any measures aiding the hearing impaired
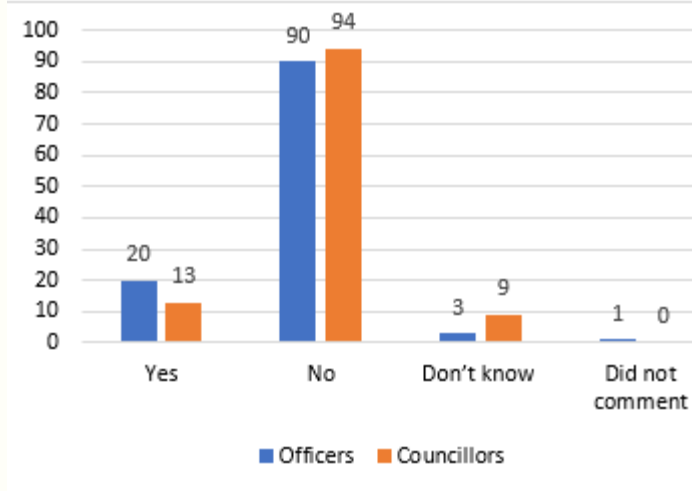
Officer comment from questionnaire "We always make sure Cllrs are facing one another so that hard of hearing Cllrs can lip-read."

Councillor comment from questionnaire "Requesting those hard of hearing to sit close, and indicate if they can't hear."

Respondent findings suggest some councils use third party premises for meetings which they feel restricts their options for improvements as this typical quote shows.

Officer comment from questionnaire "It is quite difficult to put in place practices to make it easier because we rent the building and they are quite strict on what we can and cannot use."

Question 25 showed that while there is awareness of what actions can make a difference, there appears an underlying unwillingness to act despite many of the actions being easy to implement and not dependent on the ownership of the premises. This may be suggestive of the ableist default position of waiting to act until asked.

Officer comment from questionnaire "I have a councillor who is very hard of hearing and sadly nothing is done to help the situation."

Councillor comment from questionnaire "No, at least not until requested, as it would be a complete waste of resources."
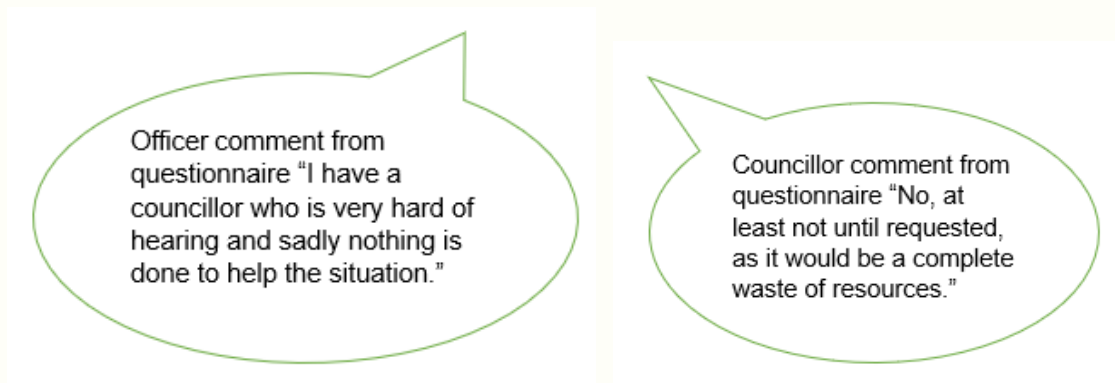
Question 26 offered telling insights into current good practice versus question 27 wish-list of measures officers/councillors would like to take. The data clearly showed just how many of the good-practice measures already employed by some councils in meetings are mirrored in the list of measures officers/councillors would like to see introduced.

Table 2 Examples of similarities between Q26 & Q27

Q26 Practices employed to break down barriers	Q27 Practices like to see introduced to break down barriers.
Venue selection and layout including acoustics and lighting Councillors can choose where to sit Position council and public in reasonably close-proximity to one another	Adjust room layout
Restricting length of meeting Consistent meeting structure Prioritising important decisions to earlier in the meeting	Restricting length of meeting Improved meeting management
Agendas, papers and minutes prepared using Microsoft Word Styles – aid those using read-aloud technology	Accessible documents/ Financial graphics as well as text Résumé reports to support agenda items
Use of microphones	Use of microphones/improved amplification
Point clarified before decisions made Clarify understanding of discussions and decisions	Summarising key points
Use of large screens to project information and highlight text etc Use of projector	Projecting materials
Regular breaks in meetings	Comfort breaks
Awareness raising and verbal briefings to councillors on non-visible disabilities.	Training/awareness raising/sharing good practice

Dunning 2023

Question 28 revealed 1 neurodiversity policy whilst question 29 suggested 83% of officers and 75% of councillors indicated support for embedding awareness raising in their training.

> Officer comment from questionnaire "I'd like to learn more about things myself so I could put some steps in place to help support those with non-visible disabilities)."

> Councillor comment from questionnaire "Training to make fellow councillors aware of various disabilities)."

In a sector where the dissemination of good practice and professional development is encouraged by both SLCC and NALC, these easy to implement, low/cost-neutral measures to reduce barriers in meetings are not being implemented as a matter of course which could benefit everyone not just those with non-visible disabilities.

> Officer comment from questionnaire "We could do more - no doubts."
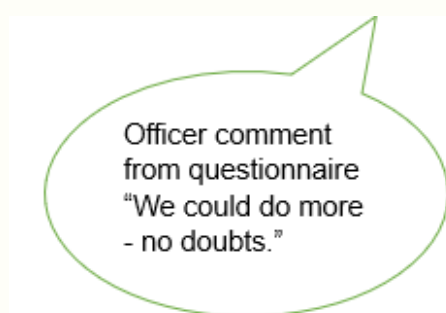
4.4.3 Summary

The picture emerging from these initial findings indicates that English local councils may attract higher-than-expected number of disabled councillors especially those with non-visible disabilities. However, it also suggests that nearly half of these councillors do not publicly declare their disabilities. While both officers and councillors may have some knowledge of the barriers disabled councillors could face in meetings, evidence suggest there is often a disability perception gap and a

prevailing ableist attitude of 'wait to be asked' rather than proactively taking measures to reduce barriers.

Councillor comment from questionnaire "We don't have barriers."

Councillor comment from questionnaire "had councillors with … 'non-visible' disabilities. Their effectiveness can be less as a result, but as volunteers … the other councillors often don't have time or resources to assist."

Chapter 5 Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter reviews the effectiveness of the research methodology and sets out the conclusions drawn from this sampling of local council officers and councillors. The research examined if the apparent under-representation of disabled persons in public life was reflected across the local council sector (LGA 2021; Evans & Reher 2022) and investigated the barriers disabled councillors may face in meetings. As previously noted, while the findings provide a fascinating snap-shot, at this stage they can only be viewed as illustrative and indicative. The chapter will conclude by proposing recommendations arising from the research for NALC and the SLCC to consider taking forward.

5.2 Analysis of the methodology

As previously detailed, both quantitative and qualitative research methods were employed to collect data on this sensitive subject. However, it is important to be able to show that the methodology was appropriate and succeeded in achieving the research aims. The questionnaire elicited responses from across England and these were evenly balanced between officers and councillors. This allowed comparisons across and between data-sets. Whether emboldened by anonymity or just interested in the subject, the degree of honesty in the responses was far greater than expected with spontaneous responses detailing 'respondent's truths' thereby overcoming possible 'social desirability bias.'

There was consistency in the findings within each data-set and when compared, that consistency showed across both data-sets suggesting the research methods were reliable and valid. Correlating answers across both data-sets revealed some remarkable similarities - be it councillors with suspected disabilities or awareness of potential barriers; and provided further credibility to the veracity of the findings. However, what became immediately clear during the research phase was that the original intention to undertake on-line interviews to corroborate or challenge the

evidence collected was inappropriate. It was unlikely that the high degree of honesty and spontaneity found in the anonymous questionnaire responses could be replicated in a face-to-face situation when interview dynamics might influence or stymie openness. This in turn risked yielding suspect data that could undermine the integrity of the overall research.

While mixed methods may be currently in vogue, they are not according to Bryman (2016) intrinsically superior to mono-methods and poor research will always be poor no matter how many methods are employed. With hindsight and reflecting the veracity of responses to the initial anonymous questionnaire, research was restricted to this mono-method (Vizcarguenaga-Aguirre and López-Robles 2020). This topic is very important to the author and this change in methodology was essential to protect the integrity of this original research and enable her to pass on a quality product for others to take up the challenge of further research.

5.3 Analysis of the findings

5.3.1 Investigation into indicative numbers of disabled local councillors

One objective was to examine the apparent under-representation of disabled persons in public life by investigating the indicative numbers of disabled councillors, especially those with non-visible disabilities, in local councils in England.

While figures from the literature review indicated between 17% - 25% of the UK population are classified as disabled (DWP 2022: ONS 2023) and higher tier council data suggested 16% of councillors have disabilities (LGA 2022), the findings indicated higher-than-expected representation of disabled councillors on local councils. The headline figure indicates as many as 55% of local councillors may consider themselves to have a disability. While self-selection bias may have played a part, 55% may not be unexpected as although respondent councillors did not declare their ages, the literature review showed local councillors had an average age of 60+ (Leach and Kingman 2012). Statistically disabilities are more likely with age,

with official figures showing at State Pension age, 45% are covered by disability provisions (DWP 2013).

Whilst 55% of councillors identified as disabled, only 29% had publicly declared their disability, while 26% chose not to. While some may not feel the need for disclosure, these findings do appear to reflect national trends identified in the literature review (Evans and Reher 2021), which suggested many elected representatives hide or minimise their disability due to abuse, harassment and discrimination. Furthermore, as has been shown, ableism remains ingrained in society and political institutions (Mellifont 2023; Chaney 2015) and is likely to have been a contributary factor. Evidence that ableist views appear prevalent across officers and councillors alike will be offered later in this chapter. Further research is needed to gauge how much the local council sector reflects societal norms. Is ableism endemic in councils or as Dunleavy (2019) suggested, is the way councillors elected intrinsically disablist, perpetuating an environment perceived as hostile which prevents disclosure of disabilities or propagates secrecy?

The comparison between the data-sets suggests similarity in the levels of disclosure of non-declared disabilities between officer-to-councillor and councillor-to-councillor and that awareness of suspected disabilities in councillors is comparable. The area where there is some divergence is between officers' perceptions of the numbers of councillors with declared disabilities and councillors' perceptions. More research is needed to ascertain whether the levels of knowledge, personal experience and/or understanding of terminology by officers were contributory factors or indicate a training need.

5.3.2 Investigation into awareness of barriers disabled councillors could face and measures to reduce barriers

The other objectives of this study centred on barriers disabled councillors may face in meetings and specifically the levels of awareness and whether no/low-cost measures are taken to reduce such barriers.

The findings gave a degree of synchronicity between the two groups allowing comparisons and preliminary conclusions. While the analysis across the data-sets showed some divergence in the levels of knowledge between officers and councillors of potential barriers facing disabled councillors, it also showed a discernible pattern of similarities emerging when it came to taking actions to address the barriers. The findings suggest that awareness of the barriers facing disabled councillors is linked to familiarity with the non-visible disabilities under discussion, reflecting the views of disability equality charity Scope about the general lack of understanding of disability. For example, across both data-sets there was similar limited knowledge of dyslexia with only a quarter of officers and one seventh of councillors regularly producing dyslexic-friendly correspondence, while a third of both groups had no knowledge of colour vision deficiencies. Yet awareness of the difficulties with concentration or being able to sit for extended periods of time averaged 90% across both data-sets and there were even higher levels of awareness around hearing impairments.

Across both data-sets and almost regardless of the levels of familiarity of potential barriers, knowledge often did not translate into actions suggestive of a disability perception gap. Even when actions had been taken or were perceived to have been taken, the data suggested officers and councillors had different views on implementation. For example, when asked if agendas and meeting papers contained clear and unambiguous instructions, two third of respondent officers believed their documents were explicit but only around one third of councillors agreed. Equally when asked if agendas routinely allowed important decision making near the start of the meeting, half the officers and nearly three-quarters of councillors reported no. Furthermore, despite high awareness, over three-quarters of both officers and councillors reported meetings had no periods of adjournment for comfort/recharge breaks. Finally, four fifths of officers and councillors reported no actions were taken to address barriers for the hearing impaired

When asked what measures might or could be introduced or what respondents would like to see implemented, as has been shown, where opinions were expressed, these revealed some attitudes which were not always well-informed by facts (McDowall, Almuth and Doyle 2023). In the main, responses were suggestive of ableist mindsets, reiterating the findings in chapter 1 (Mellifont 2023; Sense 2023).

Many seemed to equate the council's informality and friendliness with breaking down barriers while others made assumptions that individuals are comfortable explaining the challenges they face. Time and again the views expressed indicated that assistance could of course be offered/considered but that councillors needed to ask. This reinforces the need for awareness training across the sector. Overall, despite varying degrees of knowledge, the lack of action is suggestive of councils not viewing minimising barriers for disabled councillors as a priority.

5.4 Recommendations

Based on these indicative findings, if scaled up as many as 55,000 serving councillors could have a disability, many of which will be non-visible. Of these a potential of 26,000 councillors could be unwilling to declare their disability for reasons which are currently unresearched. If corroborated this research suggests far more attention needs to be directed towards investigating disabled representation. Both NALC and SLCC should give serious consideration of the consequences of a sector where understanding of disability is often limited and the impact of ableist perceptions is rife.

The recommendations are that NALC:
- undertakes large-scale research to test the validity of these figures across the 10,000 local councils in England
- researches the reasons behind the apparent trend for many disabled councillors not declaring their disabilities
- involves disabled councillors to ensure the sector is addressing their needs to be more inviting and inclusive
- integrates disability awareness training into councillor training.

The recommendations are that SLCC:
- introduces disability awareness training for officers and incorporates it into all professional development routes
- Undertakes research to develop a suite of low/no-cost best practice measures which all councils can implement.

5.5 Summary of conclusions

This initial original research into disabled councillor representation has identified tantalising evidence that indicates the need for further research. Overall, the analysis raised more questions than answers which is exciting. Further research could help the local council sector reverse the perceptions that all political institutions are the same by demonstrating it is a more welcoming and inclusive sector than others and has strong representation from disabled councillors.

The sector should want to strive to counter the words of the disability rights activist Lydia X. Z. Brown *"… we are largely complacent in allowing ourselves and society to perpetuate a world where disabled people are marginalized and oppressed by attitudinal and systemic barriers to access."* (12 Aug 2012 blog 'Disability in an Ableist World').

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Participant research information sheet

Appendix 2: Participant verbal consent form ('brief' interview version)

Appendix 3: Changes during development of the questionnaire

Appendix 4: Personalised emails

Appendix 5: Analysis of findings

Appendix 1 Participant research information sheet

DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER **Participant Research Information Sheet**

Title of Project: Diverse voices? Are local councils in England and Wales attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?
Name of Researcher: Daphne Dunning
Email: p17034685@my365.dmu.ac.uk

I am a student at De Montfort University undertaking a BA (Hons) in Community Governance.   Officers and councillors are invited to take part in this research study which comprises a questionnaire and opportunity to participate in a follow-up interview. The questionnaire should take approximately 10-15 minutes and can be completed until 28th April 2023. All responses are confidential and will be anonymised.   Interviews via Zoom will last no more than 30 minutes and will reflect on responses to the questionnaire.   Again, all responses are confidential and will be anonymised.   Before you decide whether to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully before deciding whether you wish to take part or not.
Thank you.

What is the research about?
English and Welsh town, parish, or community councils (local councils) as the 'first' tier of government, provide accessible points for citizens to become local councillors. This local democracy benefits from representation that reflects society to ensure that diverse voices are heard and considered in local decision-making.

Within the UK, Government statistics show 1 in 5 people have disabilities of which 80% will be non-visible disabilities. The legal definition of disability in the Equality Act 2010 is 'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'. Yet evidence suggest this large social group which accounts for some 10.47M people in England and Wales remains under-represented in public and political life. What is not clear is if this trend is reflected in the local council sector or if it successfully attracts disabled councillors, in particular those with non-visible disabilities.

Disability is a hugely complex and varied topic and the constraints of the dissertation limit the scope of any research.   It is also important to recognise that some people will not consider themselves to be disabled even though they meet the legal definition of disability above. Although this research will consider barriers to participation, it will not consider the statutory obligations under The Public Sector Equality Duty (**PSED**) under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010 including assessable buildings, reasonable adjustments, Access to Work and alike.

This research will focus on two areas.
The first is an exploratory study to provide illustrative data on representation and how effective the local council sector is at attracting disabled councillors, particularly those with non-visible disabilities.

The second theme uses the social model of disability which says people are disabled by societal barriers rather than their impairment or difference. By focussing on council meetings, the research aims to illustrate if councils are proactive in putting measures in place to reduce barriers to make meetings more accessible for disabled councillors particularly those with non-visible disabilities.

What does the research involve?
You are invited to participate in a short questionnaire which should take no longer than ten minutes. There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions but by contributing, officers and councillors will be helping to provide actual data on how well the disabled are represented in councils and how inclusive the local council sector is. By participating you are consenting to having your data anonymised, used and stored.

The voluntary basis of participation means you can withdraw from the study at any time, without giving a reason but please be aware that as questionnaires are anonymous, once a questionnaire is submitted it will not be possible to remove the submitted responses. The questionnaire is structured so the data requested is anonymous and collects no personal data. This means any references to data or use of any quotations is totally anonymous and at all times any data will be securely stored on a password protected database.

There will be an opportunity for participants completing the questionnaire to volunteer to be part of a small number of follow-up interview via Zoom which will investigate in more depth the themes from the questionnaire and last no more than 30 minutes. The information collected on anyone participating in interviews will be kept on a password protected database and is strictly confidential. You will be allocated an ID code which will be used instead of your name and any identifiable information you provide will be removed and anonymised. The voluntary basis of participating in interviews means you may withdraw from the study or the interview at any point and any data provided during the interview may be withdraw within 24 hours of your interview.

Please be aware that as the data collected forms part of my dissertation, it may be reviewed by my supervisor at DMU Dr James Derounian. If you have any concerns about this research or any other reasons or complaints, you may contact him - email James.Derounian@slcc.co.uk

The results of the research will form part of my dissertation submission but I will happily share interim finding with anyone who requests the information. If you would like a copy of the summary, please request it in the questionnaire and provide an email address.

Thank you for taking part in this study as your data will contribute to providing answers the research question: Diverse voices? Are local councils in England and Wales attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?

Appendix 2 Participant verbal consent form ('brief' interview version)

DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER   **PARTICIPANT VERBAL CONSENT FORM ('BRIEF' INTERVIEW VERSION)**

Title of Research Project: Diverse voices? Are local councils in England and Wales attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?
Name of Researcher: Daphne Dunning
Email: p17034685@my365.dmu.ac.uk

Process of obtaining verbal consent from research participants:
Participation in this interview is voluntary. This follow-up Interviews via Zoom should last no more than 30 minutes and will reflect on the responses to the questionnaire. All responses are confidential and will be anonymised.

Clear explanation of this project.
In exploring the theme of under-representation of disabled people in public and political life, the overall research aim is to investigate and gather illustrative data to indicate if town, parish and community councils in England and Wales reflect this trend and by probing the structure of meetings, provide evidence to suggest if councils are proactive in putting measures in place to reduce barriers to make meetings more accessible for disabled councillors.

Aim 1
To explore the indicative levels of disabled councillors especially those with non-visible disabilities on town, parish and community councils in England and Wales.

Aim 2 To investigate indicative levels of proactive actions by local council in reducing barriers to participation by disabled councillors through a focussed examination of the structure of council meetings:

Interview.
You have self-identified as willing to participate in the interviews and have provided contact details to facilitate a Zoom meeting. The data gathered during the interview will be allocated an ID number so data is recorded anonymously as the processing of personal data brings no additional benefits to this research. Data will be held securely on the council's password protected web-based system. The anonymised data may be referenced as evidence of quantitative and qualitative research in both the presentation and dissertation as part of the Community Governance qualification.

Participation in this interview is voluntary and they can **withdraw** from the research at any time without giving a reason, and without there being any negative consequences. Participants can decline to answer any particular question, or questions.

Confidentiality - individuals who participate in the questionnaire only, provide data in an anonymous format so are protected from being identified. Only participants

offering to take part in a follow-up questionnaire provide an identifiable email address. At all times data and any identifiable information are stored on a password protected database and are treated as strictly confidential with only the researcher accessing the database. The interview itself is between the participant and the interviewer only and will not be recorded or films. No-one else will be involved in the interviews. I understand that the data collected during the study may be inspected by a supervisor from De Montfort University. I give permission for the supervisor to have access to my data.

Anonymity - Individuals who participate in the questionnaire only, provide data that is in an anonymous format so they cannot be identified. Only participants offering to take part in a follow-up questionnaire provide an identifiable email address. These participants will be allocated an ID code. All data will be recorded under this ID code and any identifiable information provided will be removed or anonymised.

The purpose of the interview is to collect opinions, comments or views from willing participants which will be recorded and stored under an anonymous ID. All responses to questions posed by me during the interview will be fed back to the participant to ensure the accuracy of my record. Any identifiable information provided will be removed and anonymised. Any information shared with DMU through presentation or dissertation to describe the experience of research, the effectiveness of methods used and outcomes will only contain anonymous data.

Before starting the interview
I will give the research participants further opportunity to ask any questions about any of the above or any other concerns they may have. I will then verbally check with the research participants that (tick, as applicable):

☐   They have read and understand the above.

☐   They agree to take part in and are happy to be interviewed by me.

☐   They give verbal consent to their data being anonymised and stored and understand that the data including any non-identifiable quotes may be used in both the presentation and dissertation as part of the Community Governance qualification.

Researcher Signature:
Date: 24 March 2023 version 1

Appendix 3 Changes during development of the questionnaire

<mark>   </mark> Changes and additions | ~~Text~~ | Text removed from questionnaire

<mark>Diverse voices? Are local councils in England and Wales attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities</mark>?

I am a student at De Montfort University undertaking a BA (Hons) in Community Governance. ~~The research study for my dissertation is:~~
You are invited to participate in this research study by completing a short questionnaire which <mark>should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.</mark>   It also provides an opportunity for participants to volunteer to take part in short follow-up on-line interviews to discuss the questionnaire themes in more detail. <mark>The questionnaire closes on 28th April 2023.</mark> Having read the <mark>Participant Research Information Sheet</mark> for this research project, you understand that participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. However please be aware that where a fully anonymised questionnaire is submitted, it will not be possible to trace and remove it.

In contributing to this questionnaire, you agree and give consent to having your data anonymised, stored, and used for this research. You further understand that the collected data may be reviewed by a supervisor at DMU and grant access to the data by the supervisor.

Q1 Are you?*
A clerk or other officer
Councillor

Clerk/officer responses

What size is your council precept?*
Under £25K
£25K - £100K
£101K - £500K
£501K - £1M
Over £1M

How many councillors make up the council?*
5
6-13
14-22
23+
Prefer not to say

Please select your ~~c~~ <mark>County ~~a~~ Association:</mark>*
Avon

Bedfordshire
Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
Cambridge and Peterborough
Cheshire
Cleveland
Cornwall
Cumbria
Derbyshire
Deven
Dorset
Durham
East Riding and Lincolnshire
Essex
Gloucestershire
Hampshire
Hertfordshire
Isle of Wight
Kent
Lancashire
Leicestershire and Rutland
Lincolnshire
Merseyside
Norfolk
Northamptonshire
Northumberland
Nottinghamshire
Oxfordshire
Shropshire
Somerset
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Surrey
Sussex (East)
Sussex (West)
Warwickshire and West Midlands
Wiltshire
Worcestershire
Yorkshire
One Voice Wales
Prefer not to say

The following section considers disabilities

Although 1 in 5 people in the UK have disabilities of which 80% will be non-visible, statistics suggest this large social group is under- represented in public and political

==life. The purpose of the following questions is to reveal if local councils reflect that trend.==

==Many people will not consider themselves to be disabled even though they meet the legal definition, but for the purpose of this research, please include information on anyone who meets the legal definition.==

The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as 'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'.

~~Government statistic show 1 in 5 people in the UK have disabilities of which 80% will be non-visible disabilities, yet evidence suggest this large social group remains under-represented in public and political life. The purpose of the following questions is to reveal if local councils reflect this trend and to see how well disabled councillors are represented on local councils.~~

~~Although it is known that many people will not consider themselves to be disabled even though they meet the legal definition of disability, for the purpose of this research, please include information on anyone who meets the legal definition of disability as detailed in the Equality Act 2010 which is *'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'.*~~

==The Government's Disability Unit defines non-visible disabilities as 'disabilities or health conditions that are not immediately obvious' and may include:==

~~For clarity non-visible disabilities are as defined by the Government's Disability Unit as *disabilities or health conditions that are not immediately obvious* and may include:~~

Neurodiversity - natural variations in the way that people think and process information including autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia or a range of other neurodivergent experiences
mental health conditions
visual impairments or restricted vision
hearing loss
sensory and processing difficulties
cognitive impairment
non-visible health conditions.

==Q5== Does the council have any councillors who have declared disabilities?*
Yes ==– go to Q6==
No ==– go to Q8==
Don't know ==– go to Q8==

==Prefer not to say – go to Q8==

==Q6== If yes, how many ==councillors==?

1
2
3
4
5
6
7
8
9
10
Prefer not to say

Q7 Are these declared disabilities:
Visible
Non-visible
Both visible and non-visible
Don't know

Prefer not to say

Q8 Have any councillors ~~with disabilities made you aware of~~ told you about their disability although they have chosen not to publicly declare them to others?*
Yes – go to Q8
No – go to Q11
Don't know – go to Q11
Prefer not to say – go to Q11

Q9 If yes how many councillors?
~~Enter number~~
~~1~~
~~2~~
~~3~~
~~4~~
~~5~~
~~6~~
~~7~~
~~8~~
~~9~~
~~10~~
~~Prefer not to say~~

Q10 Are these undeclared disabilities:
Visible
Non-visible
Both visible and non-visible
Don't know

==Prefer not to say==

==Q11== Do you suspect that the council has councillors with disabilities which they have neither spoken to you about nor have chosen to ==publicly== declare ==them?*==
Yes – ==go to Q12==
No – ==go to next section==
Don't know – ==go to next section==
~~N/A~~ ==Prefer not to say – go to next section==

==Q 12== If yes how many ==councillors?==
~~Enter number~~
==1==
==2==
==3==
==4==
==5==
==6==
==7==
==8==
==9==
==10==
==Prefer not to say==

==Q13== Do you suspect these disabilities are:
Visible
Non-visible
==Both visible and non-visible==
Don't know
==Prefer not to say==

==This final section focuses on potential barriers councillors with non-visible disabilities may face in meetings.==

This research is constrained by the limits of the dissertation. Whilst the author acknowledges the statutory obligations local councils have under The Public Sector Equality Duty (**PSED**) under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, when exercising any functions and decision-making, this research is not considering building accessibility and any associated legal requirements such as hearing loops.

This research uses the social model of disability, which as a core part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states

'Disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.'

The remaining questions focus on a process undertaken by all councils – that of meetings. The aim is to investigate levels of awareness and adjustments employed to reduce potential barriers for disabled councillors. There are no right or wrong answers and it is important to understand that there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

~~Are you aware of the Dyslexia Style Guide 2018: Creating Dyslexia Friendly Content?~~
~~Yes, and we use it~~
~~Yes, but the council does not use it~~
~~No~~
~~Do not know~~

Q14 Some dyslexic people experience difficulties with written materials. In your written communications do you consider layouts, fonts, and writing styles to create more dyslexia friendly content?*
Yes always
Yes sometimes
No
Don't know

Q15 Are you aware that some neurodivergent people (which may include but not limited to autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia) find it hard to read black text on a white background as this can appear too dazzling?*
Yes
No
Don't know

~~Q16 Does your council use coloured paper such as cream or yellow instead of white for printed papers?~~
~~Yes~~
~~No~~
~~Don't know~~

Q16 To make reading easier are coloured paper such as cream or yellow used instead of white for printed meeting papers or if meeting papers are projected, are adjustments made to backgrounds, text colour and/or brightness?*
Yes - meeting papers are coloured
Yes - projections are adjusted to make reading easier
Yes - to both papers and projections
No
Don't know

Q17 Are you aware that for some people, transparent, plastic, coloured overlays may help make text easier to read?*
~~Yes, and the council provides overlays~~ Yes, I am aware and councillors are provided with overlays

~~Yes, but the council does not provide overlays~~ Yes, I am aware but the council does not provide overlays

No

Don't know

Q18 Is your council aware that green and red/pink inks can be difficult for those who have colour vision deficiencies (colour blindness)?*

Yes

No

Don't know

~~Are you aware that some people with non-visible disabilities benefit from clear and unambiguous instructions? Does the agenda and meeting papers include clear, explicit instructions on tasks and expectations for items requiring decision or actions?~~

~~Yes~~

~~No~~

~~Don't know~~

Q19 Some people with non-visible disabilities benefit from clear and unambiguous instructions. Does the agenda and meeting papers include clear, explicit instructions on tasks and expectations for items requiring decision or actions?*

Yes always

Yes sometimes

No

Don't know

Q20 Are you aware that some non-visible disabilities make it difficult to concentrate or sit for extended periods of time?*

Yes

No

Don't know

Q21 Does the council routinely structure agendas so the business involving decision making is considered near the start of the meeting?*

Yes

No

Don't know

Q22 Where decision making is complex or requires focussed concentration, does the council include periods of adjournment to allow short comfort breaks for councillors to recharge, move around or 'clear the head'?*

Yes

No

Don't know

Q23 Are you aware that for some people with hearing impairments or who are hard of hearing, room acoustics, external noise and/or layout of meeting rooms may cause them problems in following meeting proceedings?
Yes
No
Don't Know

Q24 Excluding access to loop or infrared systems (where applicable), does the council employ any measures in its meetings to aid those with hearing impairments?
Yes – go to Q25
No – go to Q26
Don't Know – go to Q26

Q25 If measures are taken, please provide brief details – these might include amplification, summarising salient points of discussions before decisions are taken, good lighting to aid lip reading and the like.
Enter text

~~Please describe briefly any other practices the council employs to break down barriers~~
Q26 Please describe briefly any other practices the council employs in meetings to break down barriers for those with non-visible disabilities.
Enter text

~~Please describe briefly if there are any other practices not currently employed that you would like to see introduced to help break down barriers.~~
Q27 Please describe briefly if there are any other practices not currently employed in meetings that you would like to see introduced to help break down barriers for those with non-visible disabilities
Enter text

Q28 Does your council have a neurodiversity policy?
Yes
No
Don't know

Q29 Do you think disability awareness raising training/workshops should be embedded in officer training?
Yes
No
Don't know

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. ~~your input is greatly appreciated.~~ If you want to volunteer for follow-up interviews or receive a summary of my research findings please ensure you provide an email address below.

If you would like to volunteer to be involved in any follow-up interviews, please provide your email address. There will only be a small number of interviews and I will only contact you if you are selected.
Enter text

If you would like to receive a summary of my research findings, please supply an email address
Enter text

Diverse voices? Are local councils in England and Wales attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?

I am a student at De Montfort University undertaking a BA (Hons) in Community Governance.
You are invited to participate in this research study by completing a short questionnaire which should take no more than 10 minutes to complete.   It also provides an opportunity for participants to volunteer to take part in short follow-up on-line interviews to discuss the questionnaire themes in more detail. The questionnaire closes on 28th April 2023.

Having read the Participant Research Information Sheet for this research project, you understand that participation is voluntary and you are free to withdraw from the research at any time. However please be aware that where a fully anonymised questionnaire is submitted, it will not be possible to trace and remove it.

In contributing to this questionnaire, you agree and give consent to having your data anonymised, stored and used for this research. You further understand that the collected data may be reviewed by a supervisor at DMU and grant access to the data by the supervisor.

Q1 Are you?*
A clerk or other officer
Councillor

Councillor responses

Q2 What size is your council precept?*
Under £25K
£25K - £100K
£101K - £500K
£501K - £1M
Over £1M

Prefer not to say

Q3 How many councillors make up the council?*
5
6-13
14-22
23+
Prefer not to say

Q4 Please select your County Association:*
Avon
Bedfordshire
Berkshire
Buckinghamshire
Cambridge and Peterborough
Cheshire
Cleveland
Cornwall
Cumbria
Derbyshire
Deven
Dorset
Durham
East Riding and Lincolnshire
Essex
Gloucestershire
Hampshire
Hertfordshire
Isle of Wight
Kent
Lancashire
Leicestershire and Rutland
Lincolnshire
Merseyside
Norfolk
Northamptonshire
Northumberland
Nottinghamshire
Oxfordshire
Shropshire
Somerset
Staffordshire
Suffolk
Surrey
Sussex (East)
Sussex (West)

Warwickshire and West Midlands
Wiltshire
==Worcestershire==
Yorkshire
One Voice Wales
Prefer not to say
==The following section considers disabilities==

~~Government statistic show 1 in 5 people in the UK have disabilities of which 80% will be non-visible disabilities, yet evidence suggest this large social group remains under-represented in public and political life. The purpose of the following questions is to reveal if local councils reflect this trend and to see how well disabled councillors are represented on local councils.~~

~~Although it is known that many people will not consider themselves to be disabled even though they meet the legal definition of disability, for the purpose of this research, please include information on anyone who meets the legal definition of disability as detailed in the Equality Act 2010 which is *'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'.*~~

==Although 1 in 5 people in the UK have disabilities of which 80% will be non-visible, statistics suggest this large social group is under- represented in public and political life. The purpose of the following questions is to reveal if local councils reflect that trend.==

==Many people will not consider themselves to be disabled even though they meet the legal definition, but for the purpose of this research, please include information on anyone who meets the legal definition.==

==The Equality Act 2010 defines disability as 'a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities'.==

~~For clarity non-visible disabilities are as defined by the Government's Disability Unit as *disabilities or health conditions that are not immediately obvious* and may include~~ ==The Government's Disability Unit defines 'non-visible disabilities as 'disabilities or health conditions that are not immediately obvious' and may include:==

Neurodiversity - ~~natural variations in the way that people think and process information including~~ autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia or a range of other neurodivergent experiences
mental health conditions
visual impairments or restricted vision
hearing loss
sensory and processing difficulties

cognitive impairment

non-visible health conditions.

Q5 Do you consider yourself to have a disability?*

Yes – go to Q6

No – go to Q8

Don't know – go to Q8

Prefer not to say – go to Q8

Q6 If you have a disability, have you publicly declared the disability?

Yes

No

Don't know

Prefer not to say

Q7 Is the declared disability:

Visible

Non-visible

Don't know

Prefer not to say

~~Q8 Are you aware of other councillors with disabilities which they have chosen not to publicly declare?~~

Q8 Have any councillors told you about their disability although they have chosen not to publicly declare them to others?*

Yes- go to Q9

No – go to Q11

Don't know – go to Q11

Prefer not to say – go to Q11

Q9 If yes how many councillors?

~~Enter number~~

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

10

Prefer not to say

Q10 Are these undeclared disabilities:

Visible

Non-visible
Don't know
Prefer not to say

Q11 Do you suspect there are councillors with disabilities which they have neither spoken to you about nor chosen to declare?*
Yes – <mark>go to Q 12</mark>
No <mark>– go to next section</mark>
Don't know – <mark>go to next section</mark>
Prefer not to say – <mark>go to next section</mark>

Q12 If yes how many
~~Enter number~~
<mark>1</mark>
<mark>2</mark>
<mark>3</mark>
<mark>4</mark>
<mark>5</mark>
<mark>6</mark>
<mark>7</mark>
<mark>8</mark>
<mark>9</mark>
<mark>10</mark>
<mark>Prefer not to say</mark>

Q13 Do you suspect these disabilities are:
Visible
Non-visible
Don't know
Prefer not to say

<mark>This final section focuses on potential barriers councillors with non-visible disabilities may face in meetings.</mark>

This research is constrained by the limits of the dissertation. Whilst the author acknowledges the statutory obligations local councils have under The Public Sector Equality Duty (**PSED**) under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, when exercising any functions and decision-making, this research is not considering building accessibility and any associated legal requirements such as hearing loops.

This research uses the social model of disability, which as a core part of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities states

'Disability results from the interaction between persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.'

The remaining questions focus on a process undertaken by all councils – that of meetings. The aim is to investigate levels of awareness and adjustments employed to reduce potential barriers for disabled councillors. There are no right or wrong answers and it is important to understand that there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

Q14 Are you aware of the Dyslexia Style Guide 2018: Creating Dyslexia Friendly Content?
Yes, and the council uses it
Yes, but the council does not use it
No
Don't know

Q14 Some dyslexic people experience difficulties with written materials. In your written communications do you consider layouts, fonts, and writing styles to create more dyslexia friendly content?*
Yes always
Yes sometimes
No
Don't know

Q15 Are you aware that some neurodivergent people (which may include but not limited to autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia) find it hard to read black text on a white background as this can appear too dazzling?
Yes
No
Don't know

Q16 To make reading easier are coloured paper such as cream or yellow used instead of white for printed meeting papers or if meeting papers are projected, are adjustments made to backgrounds, text colour and/or brightness?
Yes
No
Don't know

Q17 Are you aware that for some people, transparent, plastic, coloured overlays may help make text easier to read?
Yes, and the council provides overlays
Yes, but the council does not provide overlays
No
Don't know

Q18 Is your council aware that green and red/pink inks can be difficult for those who have colour vision deficiencies (colour blindness)?
Yes

No
Don't know

Q19 some people with non-visible disabilities benefit from clear and unambiguous instructions.   Do the agenda and meeting papers include clear, explicit instructions on tasks and expectations for items requiring decision or actions?
Yes always
Yes sometimes
No
Don't know

Q20 Are you aware that some non-visible disabilities make it difficult to concentrate or sit for extended periods of time?
Yes
No
Don't know

Q21 Does the council routinely structure agendas so the business involving decision making is considered near the start of the meeting?
Yes
No
Don't know

Q22 Where decision making is complex or requires focussed concentration, does the council include periods of adjournment to allow you short comfort breaks to recharge, move around or 'clear the head'?
Yes
No
Don't know

Q23 Are you aware that for some people with hearing impairments or who are hard of hearing, room acoustics, external noise and/or layout of meeting rooms may cause them problems in following meeting proceedings?
Yes
No
Don't Know

Q24 Excluding access to loop or infrared systems (where applicable), does the council employ any measures in its meetings to aid those with hearing impairments?
Yes – go to Q25
No – go to Q26
Don't Know – go to Q26

Q25 If measures are taken, please provide brief details – these might include amplification, summarising salient points of discussions before decisions are taken, good lighting to aid lip reading and the like.

==Enter text==

~~Q23~~==Q26== Please describe briefly any other practices the council employs to break down barriers
Enter text

~~Q24~~ ==Q27== Please describe briefly if there are any other practices you would like to see enacted to help break down barriers
Enter text

~~Q25~~ Q28 Does your council have a neurodiversity policy?
Yes
No
Don't know

~~Q26~~ ==Q29== Do you think disability awareness raising training/workshops should be embedded in councillor training?
Yes
No
Don't know

Thank you for completing this questionnaire. ~~your input is greatly appreciated~~. ==If you would like to volunteer to be involved in any follow-up interviews, please provide your email address. There will only be a small number of interviews and I will only contact you if you are selected.==
~~If you would like to volunteer to be involved in any follow-up interviews, please provide your email address. There will only be a small number of interviews and I will only contact you if you are selected.~~
==If you would like to volunteer to be involved in any follow-up interviews, please provide your email address. There will only be a small number of interviews and I will only contact you if you are selected.==

==If you would like to receive a summary of my research findings, please supply an email address==

Appendix 4 Personalised emails

Dear colleagues

I am a parish clerk in South Gloucestershire who is in the final year of the Community Governance degree. My dissertation is titled **"Diverse voices? Are local councils in England and Wales attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?"** This research aims to investigate whether the trend of under representation of disabled people in public and political life is reflected in the local council sector (town, parish and community councils in England and Wales) by:

- providing illustrative data on representation and how effective the local council sector is at attracting disabled councillors, particularly those with non-visible disabilities.
- using the social model of disability which states people are disabled by societal barriers rather than their impairment or difference, illustrate if councils are proactive in putting measures in place to reduce barriers to make council meetings more accessible for disabled councillors particularly those with non-visible disabilities.

This is where I need your help as I need to collect primary data to provide illustrative evidence to support or disprove this hypothesis. I have produced a short 10 minutes questionnaire for both officers and councillors to complete.

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSei0sEAr-NljiVHxtLvKluzu2uPY8jgwXNVkfZ5t2YEPJntyw/viewform

All councillors whether they are standing for re-election or not are welcome to contribute to the questionnaire as are any officers. There are no right, wrong or 'one size fits all' answers but I would love to hear both officer and councillor perspectives, including those who do not consider themselves to be disabled even though they meet the legal definition of disability. Participation is completely voluntary, and all data will be anonymised, treated as confidential and securely stored.

I appreciate this is a busy time with elections looming in many areas so thank you for any assistance you can give with helping make this research meaningful.

Best regards
Daphne

Appendix 5 Analysis of the findings

Title of Project: Diverse voices? Are local councils in England attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?
Name of Researcher: Daphne Dunning
Email: p17034685@my365.dmu.ac.uk

Thank you for taking an interest in this research which forms part of my BA (Hons) in Community Governance with De Montfort University.   The following is a summary of the research questionnaire which focused on two areas.

The first was an exploratory study to provide illustrative data on representation and how effective the local council sector is at attracting disabled councillors with non-visible disabilities.

The second theme focussed on council meetings to illustrate if councils are proactive in putting measures in place to reduce barriers to make meetings more accessible for disabled councillors with non-visible disabilities.

You are welcome to quote from the following research summary; but do acknowledge my authorship as follows:

Dunning, D (2023) *Diverse voices? Are local councils in England attracting councillors with non-visible disabilities?* Unpublished Dissertation, Society of Local Council Clerks/ De Montfort University.

Daphne Dunning
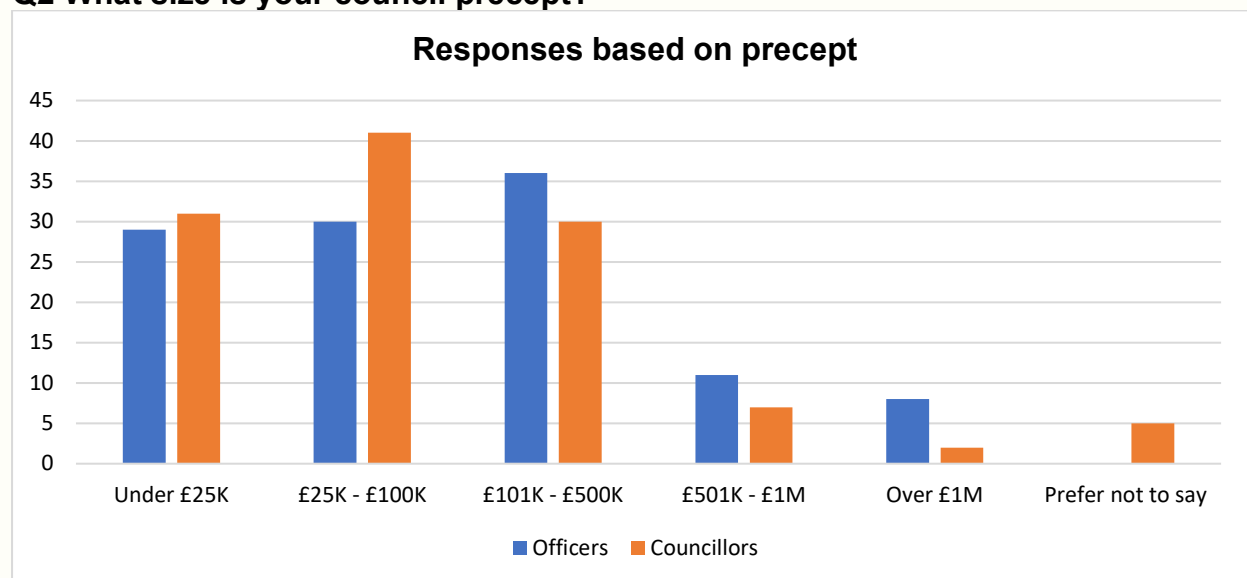August 2023

Q1 Are you an Officer or Councillor?

230 questionnaires were completed:

Officers 114 (49.6%)

Councillors 116 (50.4%).

Section 1: Please provide some general background information about your council - precept, number of councillors and county association.
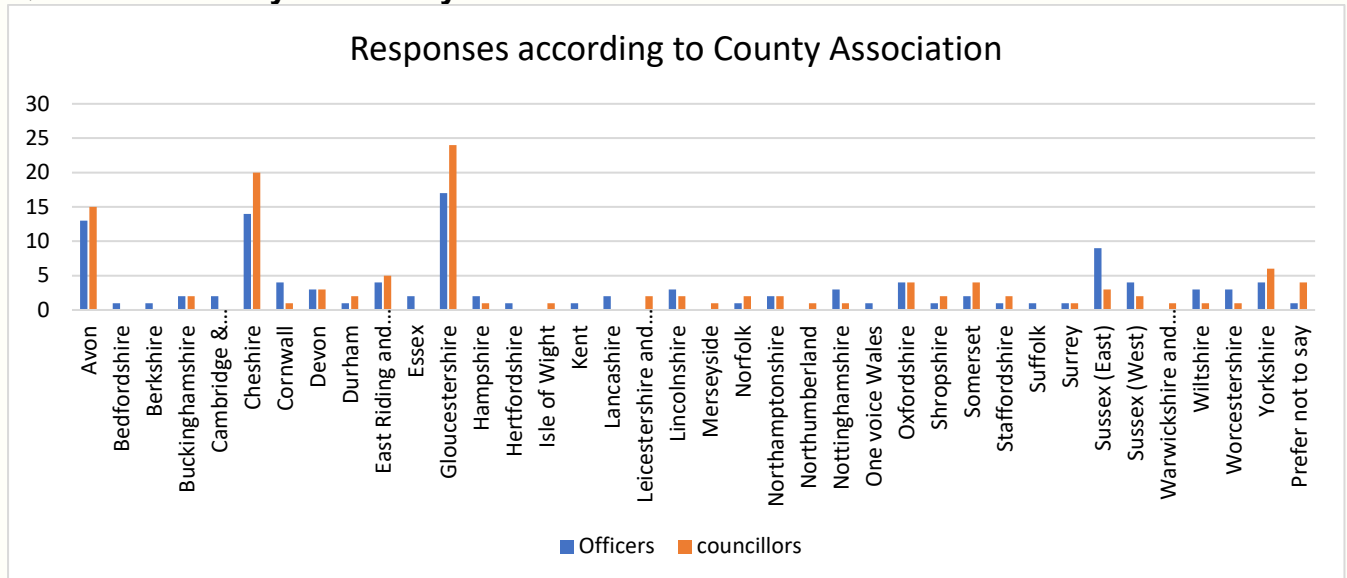
Q2 What size is your council precept?

Q3 How many councillors make up the council?

Q4 Please select your County Association:

Responses according to County Association

Legend: ■ Officers ■ councillors
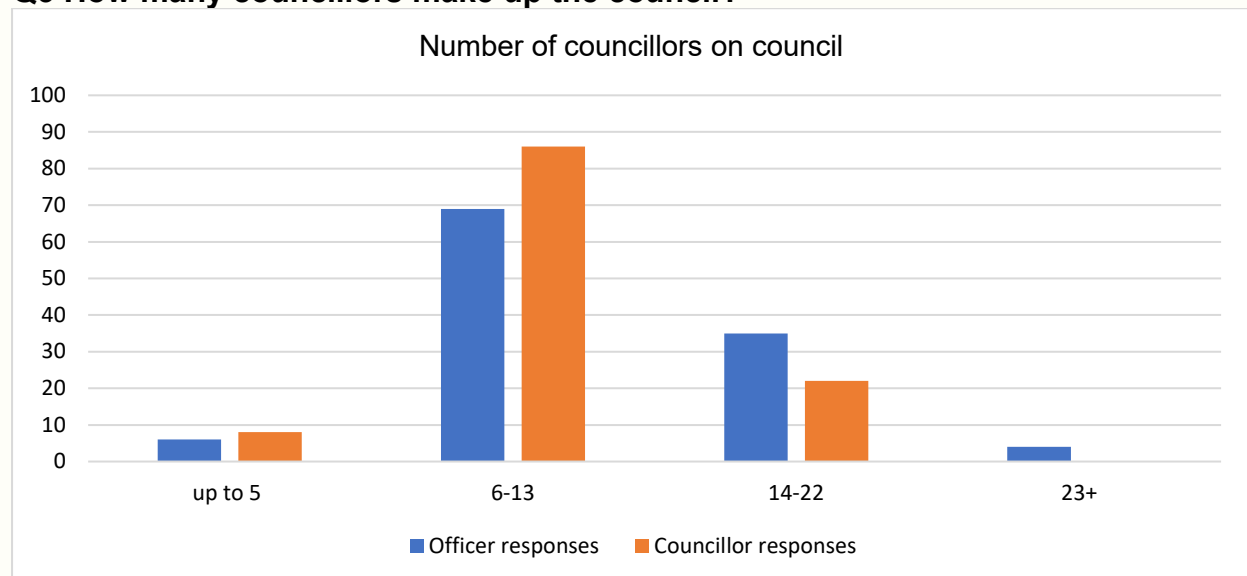
General observations:

At least one response was received from every CALC area except Cumbria, Derbyshire, Dorset, and Herefordshire (4 responses did not identify an area)

At least one response was received from councils with precepts ranging from under £25K to over £1M

At least one response was received from councils of all sizes with between 5 to 23+ councillors.

Section 2: The following section considers disabilities.

Q5 Officers - Does the council have any councillors who have publicly declared their disabilities?

41 of 114 Officers reported yes (36%)
61 of 114 Officers said they have no councillors with disabilities (53%)
11 of the 114 Officers did not know (10%)
1 of the 114 Officers preferred not to say (1%).

Q5 Officers - Does the council have any councillors with publicly declared disabilities?
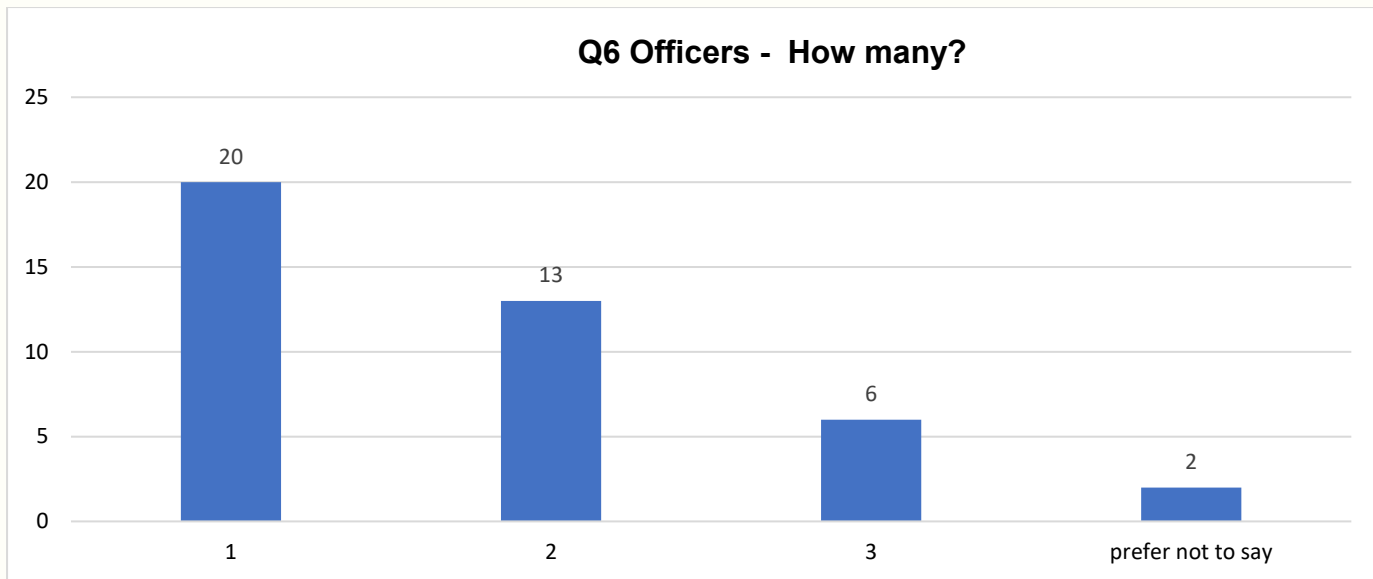
Yes ■ No □ Don'tKnow □ Prefer not to say
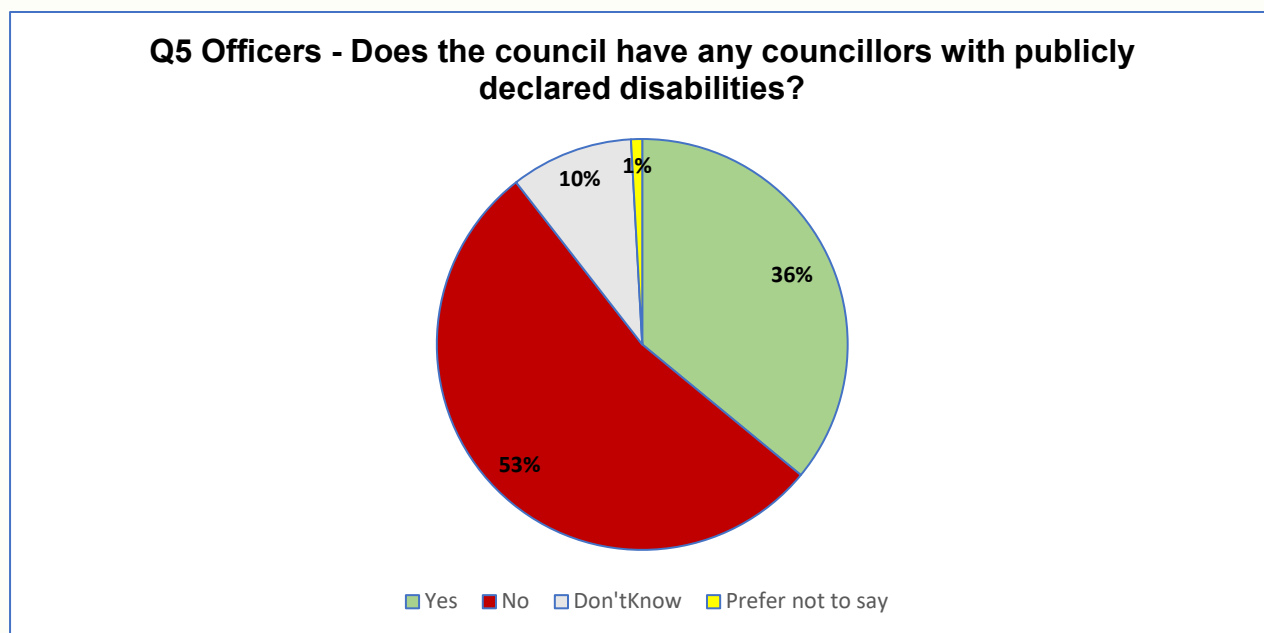
Q6 Officers - If yes, how many councillors?

20 of 41 Officers had one councillor (49%)
13 of 41 Officers had two (32%)
6 of 41 Officers had three (14%)
2 of 41 Officers preferred not to say (5%).

Q6 Officers - How many?

	Value
1	20
2	13
3	6
prefer not to say	2

**Q7 Officers - Are these declared disabilities?**

14 of 41 Officers have councillors with visible disabilities (34%)
19 of 41 Officers have councillors with non-visible disabilities (46%)
8 of 41 Officers have councillors with both visible and non-visible disabilities (20%).

Q7 Officers - Are these declared disabilities?

Category	Percentage
Both	20%
Visible	34%
Non-visible	46%
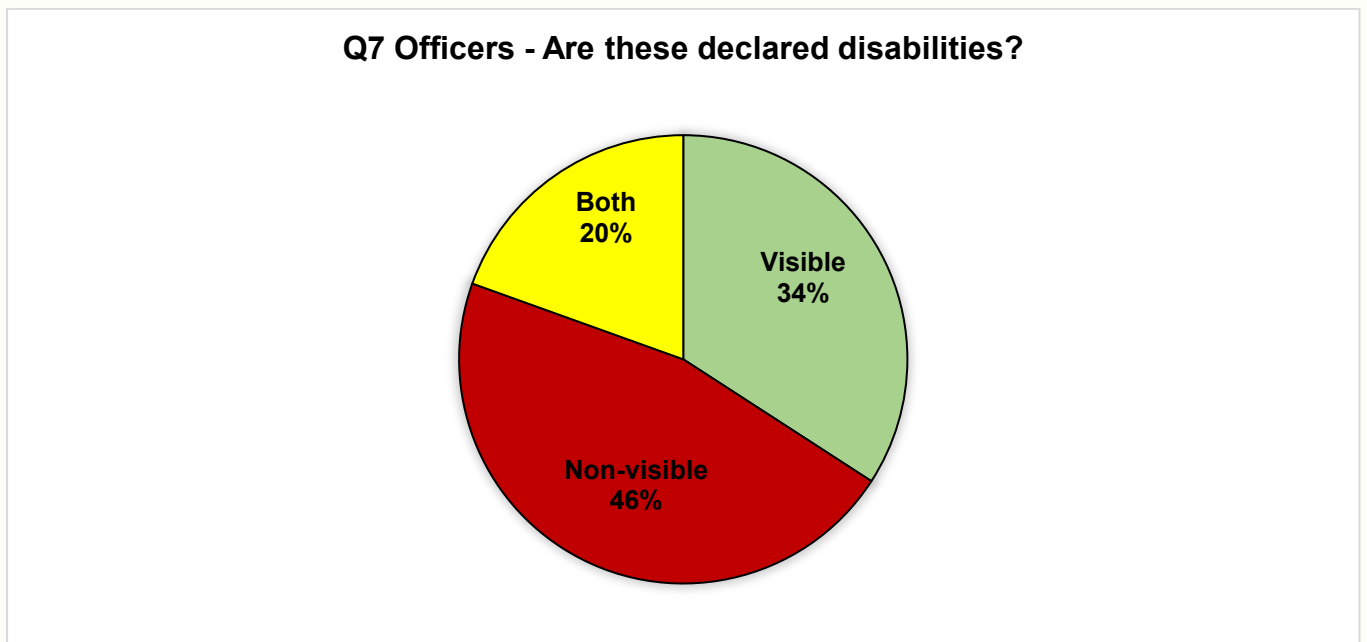
Q5 Councillors - Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

64 of 116 councillors reported having disabilities (55%)
52 of 116 councillors said they had no disabilities (45%).

Q5 Councillors - Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

No
45%

Yes
55%
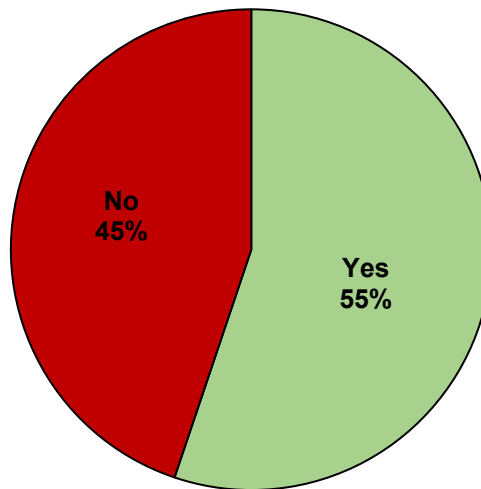
Q6 Councillors - If you have a disability, have you publicly declared the disability?

34 of the 64 councillors have publicly declared the disability (53%)
30 of the 64 councillors have a disability but have not publicly declared it (47%).

Q6 Councillors - have you publicly declared your disability?

Not publicly
declared
47%

Publicly
declared
53%
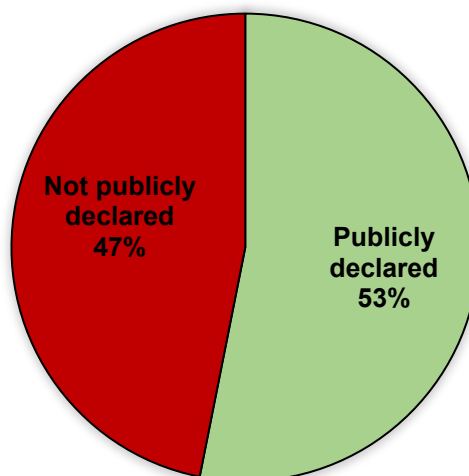
Q7 Councillors – Type of declared disability?

27 of the 34 councillors have non-visible disabilities (79%)
7 of the 34 councillors have both visible and non-visible disabilities (21%).

Q7 Councillors -Type of publicly declared disabilities?

Both visible and non-visible
21%

Non-visible
79%
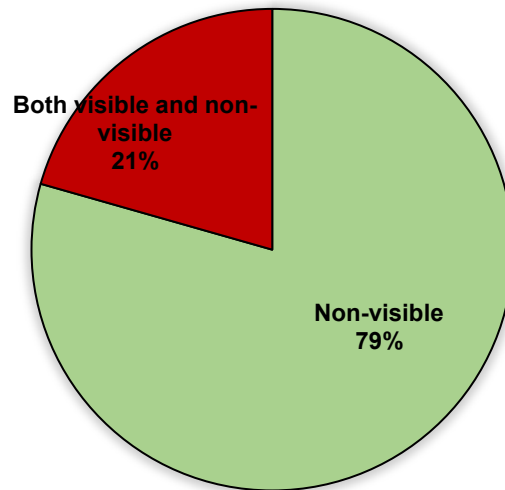
Comparison of Officer and Councillor data to Q7 on declared disabilities
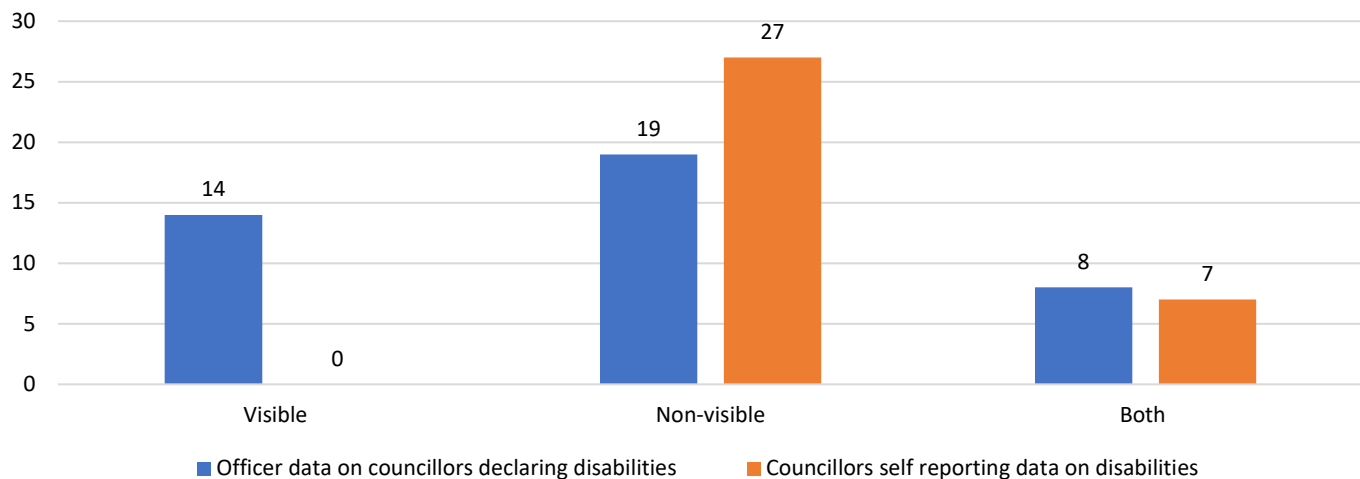
	Visible	Non-visible	Both
Officer data on councillors declaring disabilities	14	19	8
Councillors self reporting data on disabilities	0	27	7

Q8 Have any councillors told you about their disability although they have chosen not to publicly declare them to others?

Officers
37 of 114 Officers have been told by councillors of disabilities which the councillor has chosen not to publicly declare (32%).

Councillors
37 of 116 Councillors reported they have been made aware of disabilities other councillors have chosen not to publicly declare (32%).

Q9 If yes, how many councillors?

Officers
22 of 37 Officers have been told by 1 councillor (60%)
11 of 37 Officers have been told by 2 councillors (30%)
4 of 37 Officers have been told by 3 councillors (10%)

Councillors
21 of 37 Councillors know of 1 councillor (57%)
16 of 37 Councillors know of 2 councillors (43%)

Q9 Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to how many councillors

Q10 Type of undeclared disabilities:

Officers
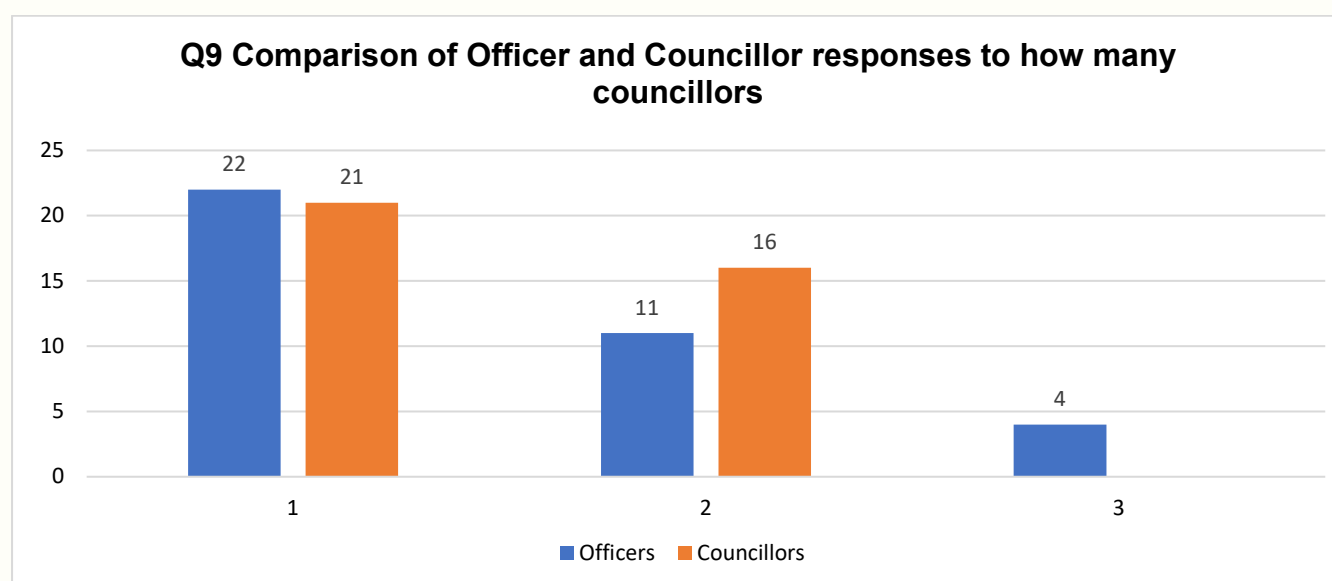3 of 37 Officers reported councillors with visible disabilities (8%)
31 of 37 Officers reported councillors with non-visible disabilities (84%)
2 of 37 Officers reported councillors with both visible and non-visible disabilities (5%)
I of 37 Officers did not say (3%)

Councillors
3 of 37 Councillors reported councillors with visible disabilities (8%)
24 of 37 Councillors reported councillors with non-visible disabilities (68%)
9 of 37 Councillors reported councillors with both visible and non-visible disabilities (24%)
I of 37 Councillors did not say (3%)
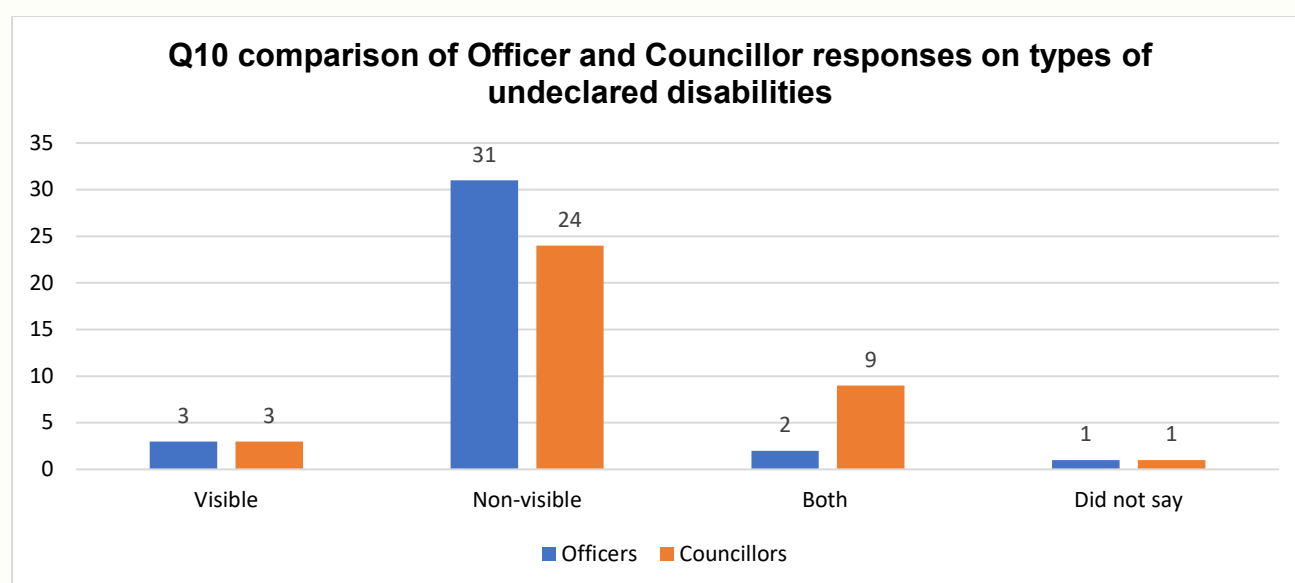
Q11 Do you suspect there are councillors with disabilities which they have neither spoken to you about nor chosen to publicly declare them?

Officers
40 of 114 Officers suspect they have councillors who have disabilities which the councillors have neither spoken about nor publicly declared (35%)

Councillors
49 of 116 Councillors suspect there are councillors who have disabilities which the councillors have neither spoken about nor publicly declared (42%)

Q12 If yes how many councillors?

Officers
11 Officers believe they have 1 councillor
19 Officers believe they have 2
5 Officers believe they have 3
2 Officers believe they have 4
2 Officers believe they have 5
1 Officer did not say.

Councillors
20 Councillors believe they have 1 councillor
19 Councillors believe they have 2
5 Councillors believe they have 3
3 Councillors believe they have 4
2 Councillors did not say.

Comparison of Officer and Councillor repsonses to Q12 number of councillors suspected of having disabilities

	1	2	3	4	5	Didn't say
Officers	11	19	5	2	2	1
Councillors	20	19	5	3	0	2
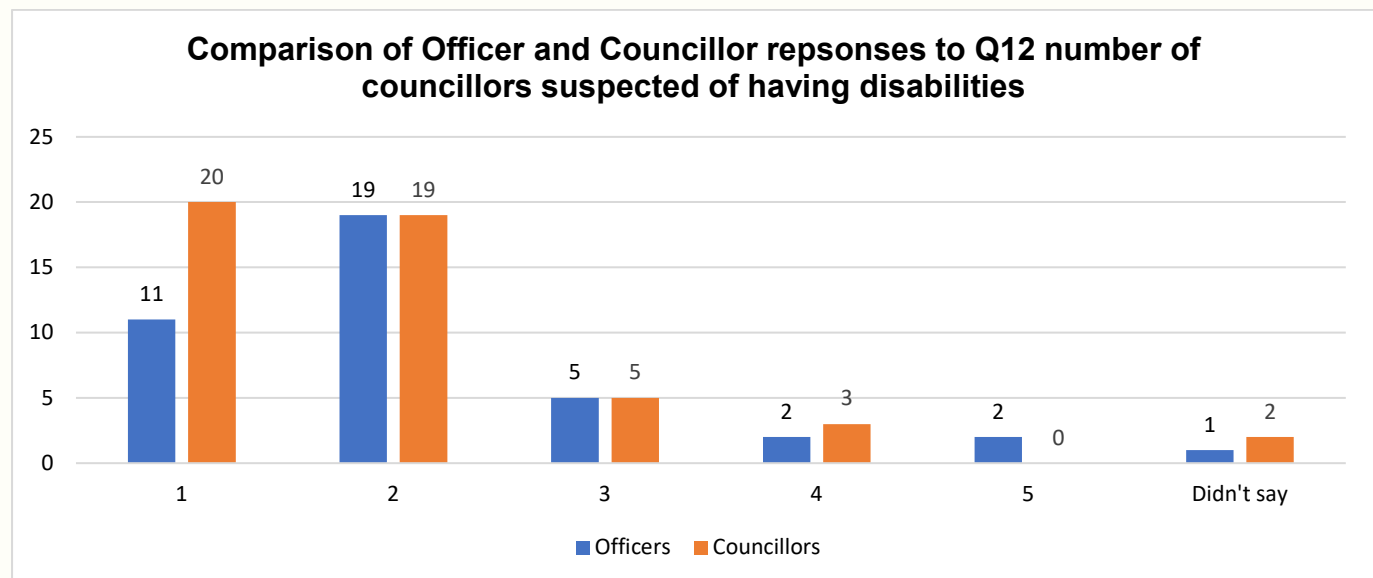
Q13 What do you suspect these disabilities are:

Officers
29 Officers felt the disabilities were non-visible (73%)
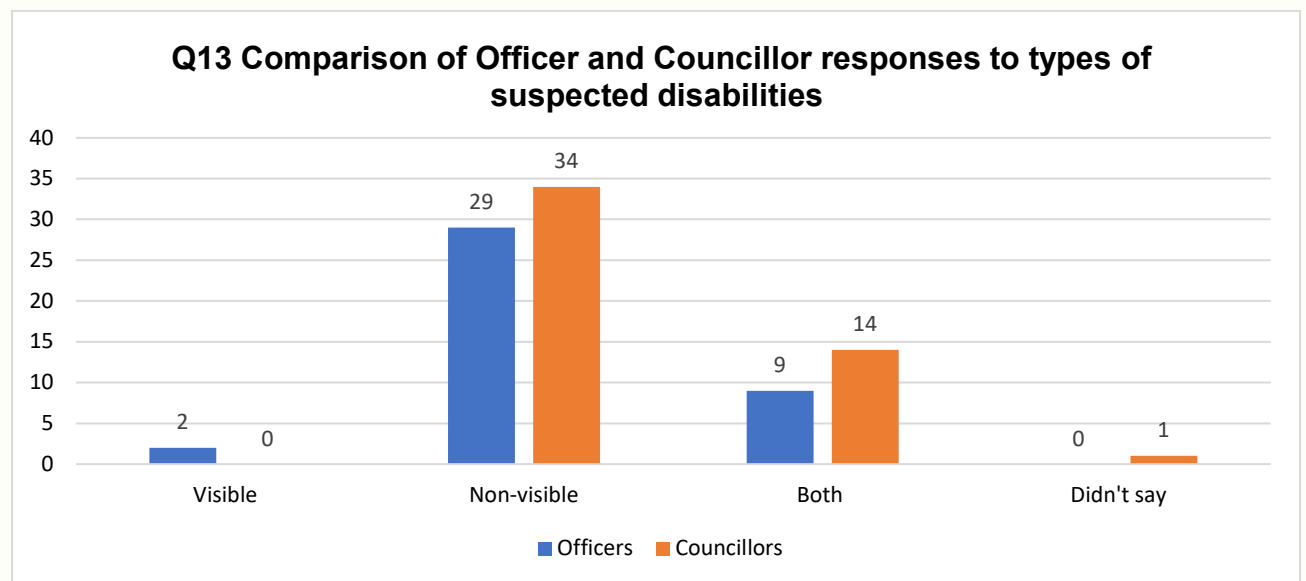9 Officers felt the disabilities were both visible and non-visible (22%)
2 Officers felt the disabilities were visible (5%)

Councillors
34 Councillors felt the disabilities were non-visible (69%)
14 Councillors felt the disabilities were both visible and non-visible (29%)
1 Councillor did not say (2%).

Q13 Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to types of suspected disabilities

This final section focuses on potential barriers councillors with non-visible disabilities may face in meetings.

Q14 Some dyslexic people experience difficulties with written materials. In your written communications do you consider layouts, fonts, and writing styles to create more dyslexia friendly content?

Officers
27 of 114 Officers reported 'yes always' (24%)
44 of 114 Officers reported 'yes sometimes' (39%)
36 of 114 Officers reported no (31%)
7 of 114 Officers stated they did not know (6%)

Councillors
16 of 116 Councillors reported 'yes always' (14%)
26 of 116 Councillors reported 'yes sometimes' (22%)
56 of 116 Councillors reported no (48%)
18 of 116 Councillors stated they did not know (16%)
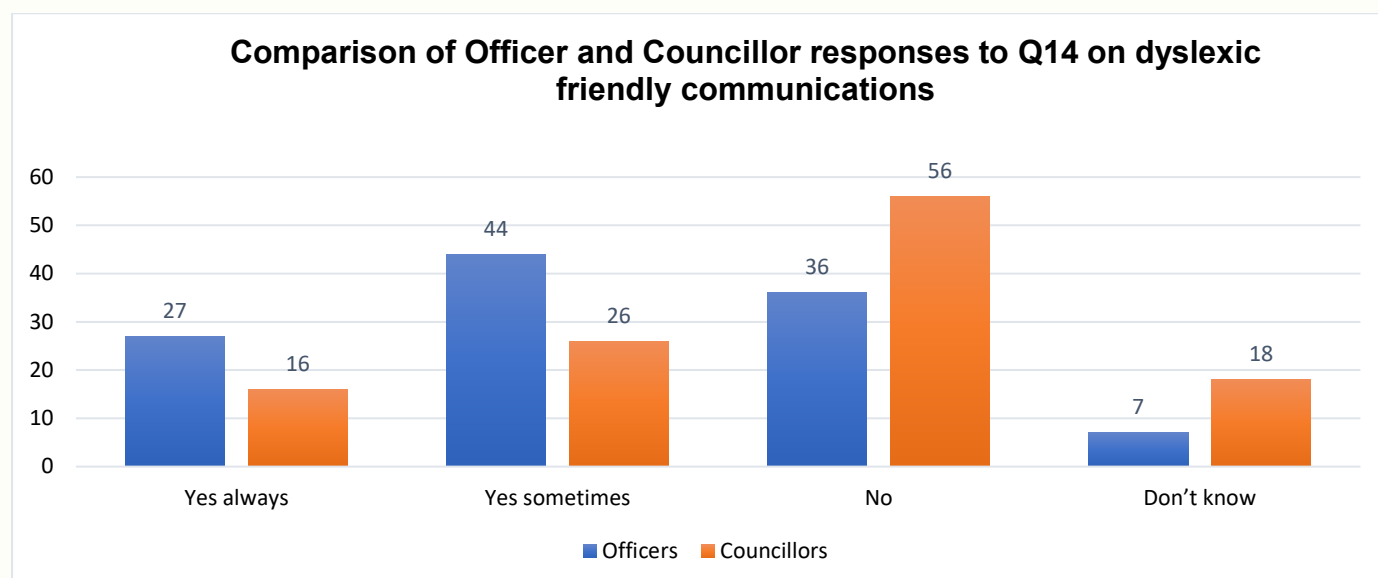
Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q14 on dyslexic friendly communications

Q15 Are you aware that some neurodivergent people (which may include but not limited to autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia) find it hard to read black text on a white background as this can appear too dazzling?

Officers
56 of 114 Officers responded yes (49%)
56 of 114 Officers responded no (49%)
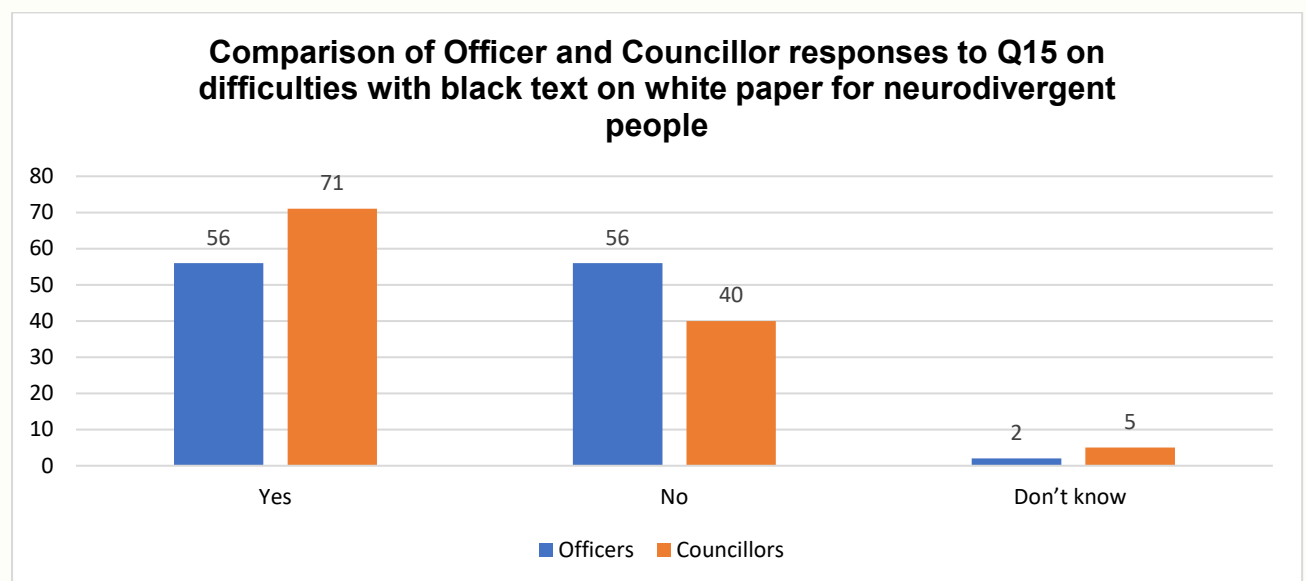2 of 114 Officers did not know (2%)

Councillors
71 of 116 Councillors responded yes (61%)
40 of 116 Councillors responded no (35%)
5 of 116 Councillors did not know (4%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q15 on difficulties with black text on white paper for neurodivergent people

	Yes	No	Don't know
Officers	56	56	2
Councillors	71	40	5

Q16 To make reading easier are coloured paper such as cream or yellow used instead of white for printed meeting papers or if meeting papers are projected, are adjustments made to backgrounds, text colour and/or brightness?

Officers
14 of 114 Officers reported yes (12%) – 8 Officers reported adjusting projections, 3 Officers reported using coloured meeting papers and 3 Officers reported doing both 100 of 114 Officers reported No (88%).

Councillors
15 of 116 Councillors reported yes (13%)
88 of 116 Councillors reported no (76%)
13 of 116 Councillors did not know (11%)
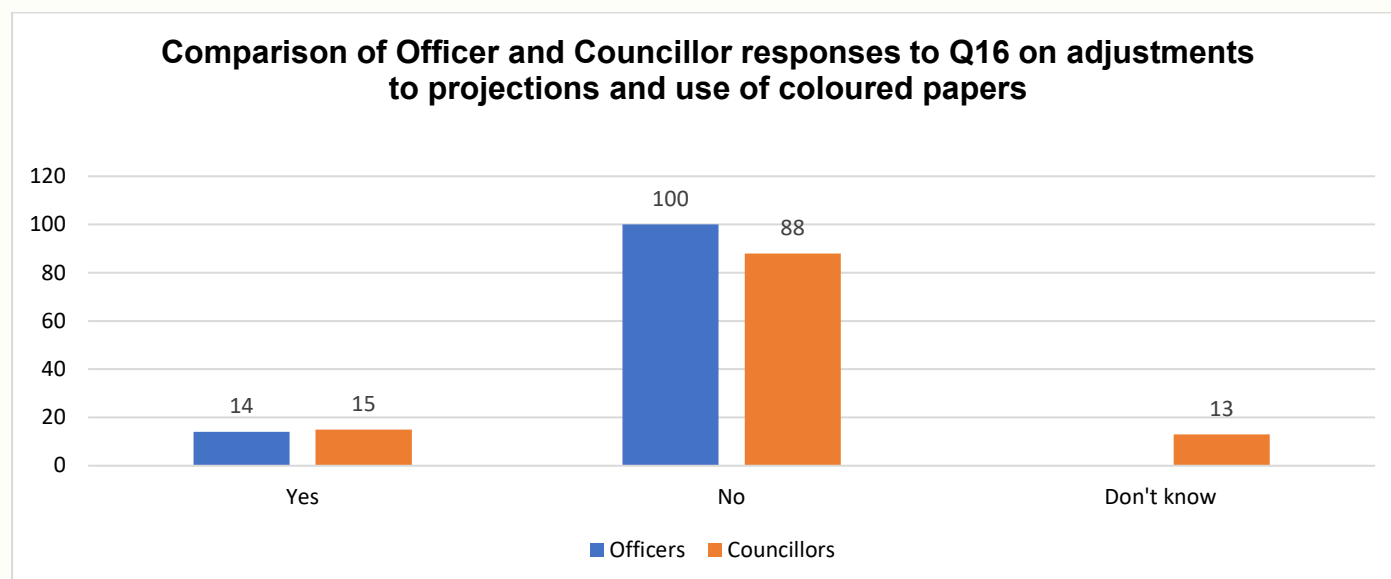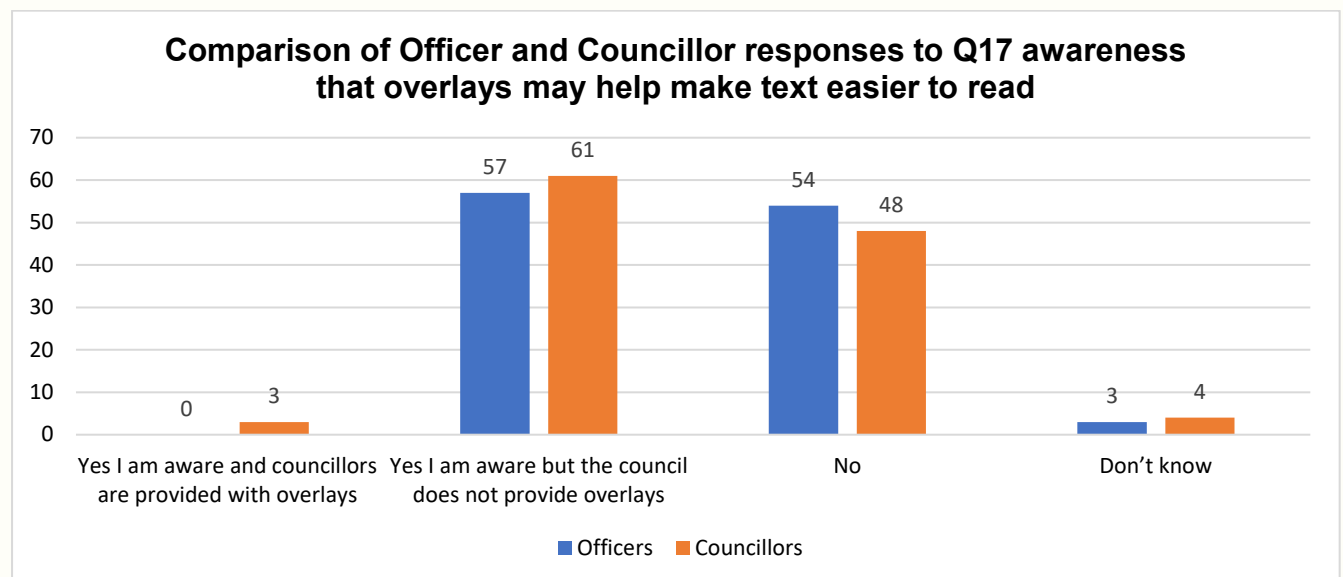
Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q16 on adjustments to projections and use of coloured papers

	Yes	No	Don't know
Officers	14	100	
Councillors	15	88	13

■ Officers ■ Councillors

Q17 Are you aware that for some people, transparent, plastic, coloured overlays may help make text easier to read?

Officers
No Officer reported they were aware and councillors are provided with overlays (0%)
57 of 114 Officers reported they were aware but the council does not provide overlays (50%)
54 of 114 Officers reported No (47%)
3 of 114 Officers did not know (3%)

Councillors
3 of 116 Councillors reported they were aware and the council provided overlays (3%)
61 of 116 Councillors reported they were aware but the council does not provide overlays (53%)
48 of 116 Councillors reported No (41%)
4 of 116 Councillors did not know (3%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q17 awareness that overlays may help make text easier to read

Q18 Is your council aware that green and red/pink inks can be difficult for those who have colour vision deficiencies (colour blindness)?

Officers
66 of 114 Officers reported they were aware but the council does not provide overlays (58%)
36 of 114 Officers reported No (32%)
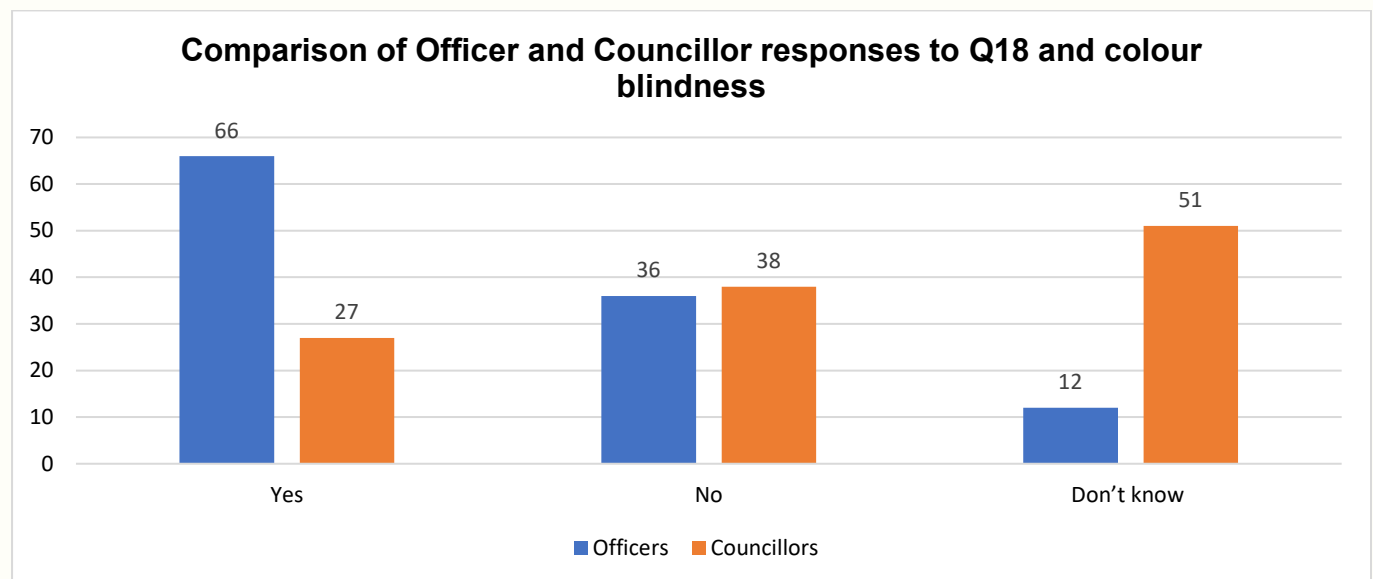12 of 114 Officers did not know (10%)

Councillors
27 of 116 Councillors reported yes (23%)
38 of 116 Councillors reported No (33%)
51 of 116 Councillors did not know (44%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q18 and colour blindness

Response	Officers	Councillors
Yes	66	27
No	36	38
Don't know	12	51

Q19 Some people with non-visible disabilities benefit from clear and unambiguous instructions. Does the agenda and meeting papers include clear, explicit instructions on tasks and expectations for items requiring decision or actions?

Officers
77 of 114 Officers reported yes always (67%)
34 of 114 Officers reported yes sometimes (30%)
3 of 114 Officers reported no (3%)

Councillors
38 of 116 Councillors reported yes always (33%)
40 of 116 Councillors reported yes sometimes (34%)
32 of 116 Councillors reported no (28%)
6 of 116 Councillors did not know (5%)

Q20 Are you aware that some non-visible disabilities make it difficult to concentrate or sit for extended periods of time?

Officers
100 of 114 Officers reported yes (88%)
11 of 114 Officers reported no (9%)
3 of 114 Officers did not know (3%)

Councillors
107 of 116 Councillors reported yes (92%)
6 of 116 Councillors reported no (5%)
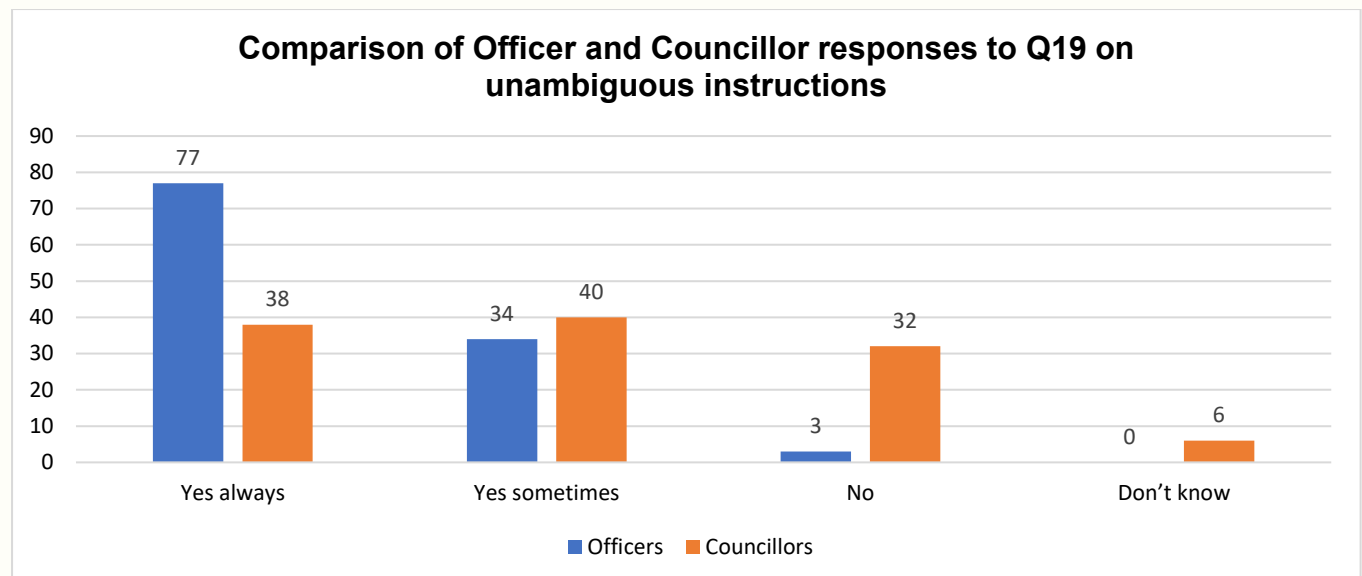3 of 116 Councillors did not know (3%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q20 on awareness of difficulties with concentration over long periods

Q21 Does the council routinely structure agendas so the business involving decision making is considered near the start of the meeting?

Officers
56 of 114 Officers reported yes (49%)
57 of 114 Officers reported no (50%)
1 of 114 Officers did not know (1%)

Councillors
26 of 116 Councillors reported yes (22%)
81 of 116 Councillors reported no (70%)
9 of 116 Councillors did not know (8%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q21 having important decision making near start of meeting

Q22 Where decision making is complex or requires focussed concentration, does the council include periods of adjournment to allow you short comfort breaks to recharge, move around or 'clear the head'?

Officers
22 of 114 Officers reported yes (19%)
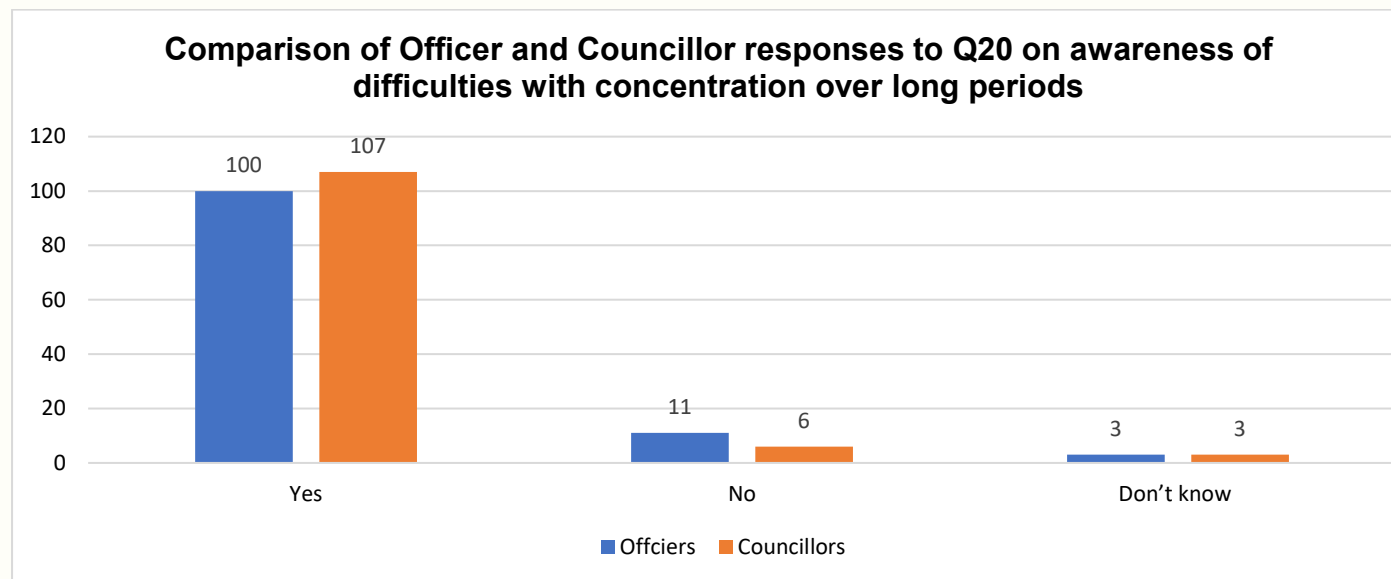88 of 114 Officers reported no (77%)
4 of 114 Officers did not know (4%)

Councillors
19 of 116 Councillors reported yes (16%)
90 of 116 Councillors reported no (78%)
7 of 116 Councillors did not know (6%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q22 on whether comfort breaks are included during meeting

Q23 Are you aware that for some people with hearing impairments or who are hard of hearing, room acoustics, external noise and/or layout of meeting rooms may cause them problems in following meeting proceedings?

Officers
105 of 114 Officers reported yes (92%)
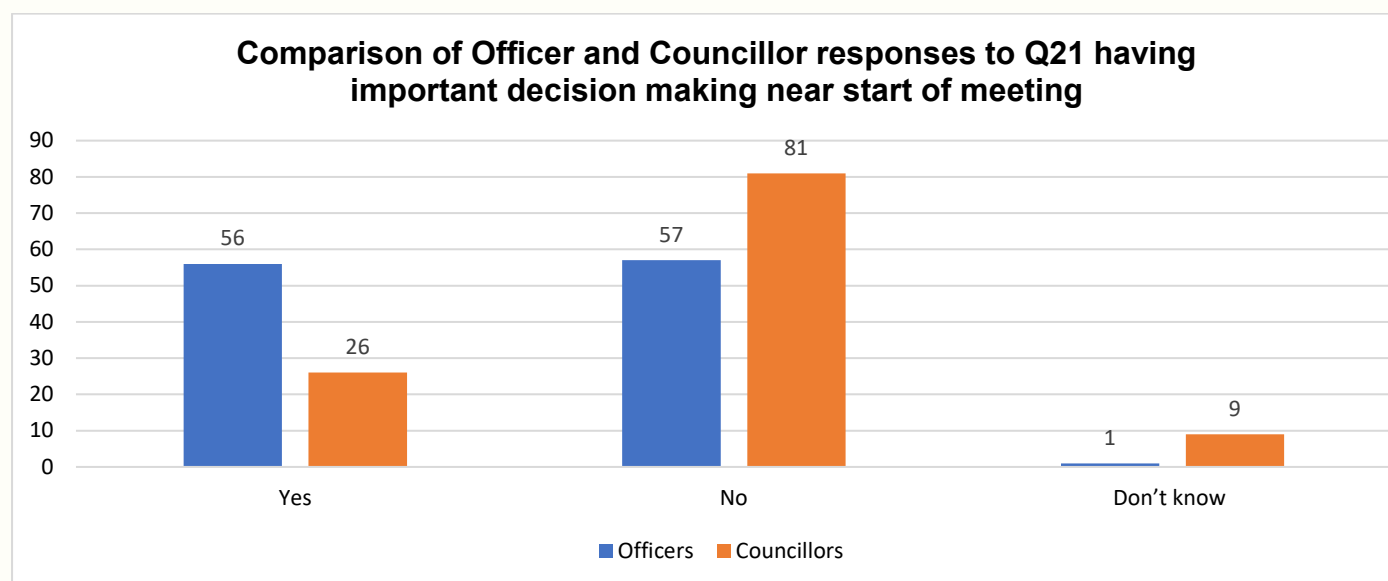8 of 114 Officers reported no (7%)
1 of 114 Officers did not answer (1%)

Councillors
112 of 116 Councillors reported yes (96%)
3 of 116 Councillors reported no (3%)
1 of 116 Councillors did not know (1%)

Comparision of Officer and Councillor responses to Q23 on awareness of hearing impairments

Q24 Excluding access to loop or infrared systems (where applicable), does the council employ any measures in its meetings to aid those with hearing impairments?

Officers
20 of 114 Officers reported yes (17%)
90 of 114 Officers reported no (79%)
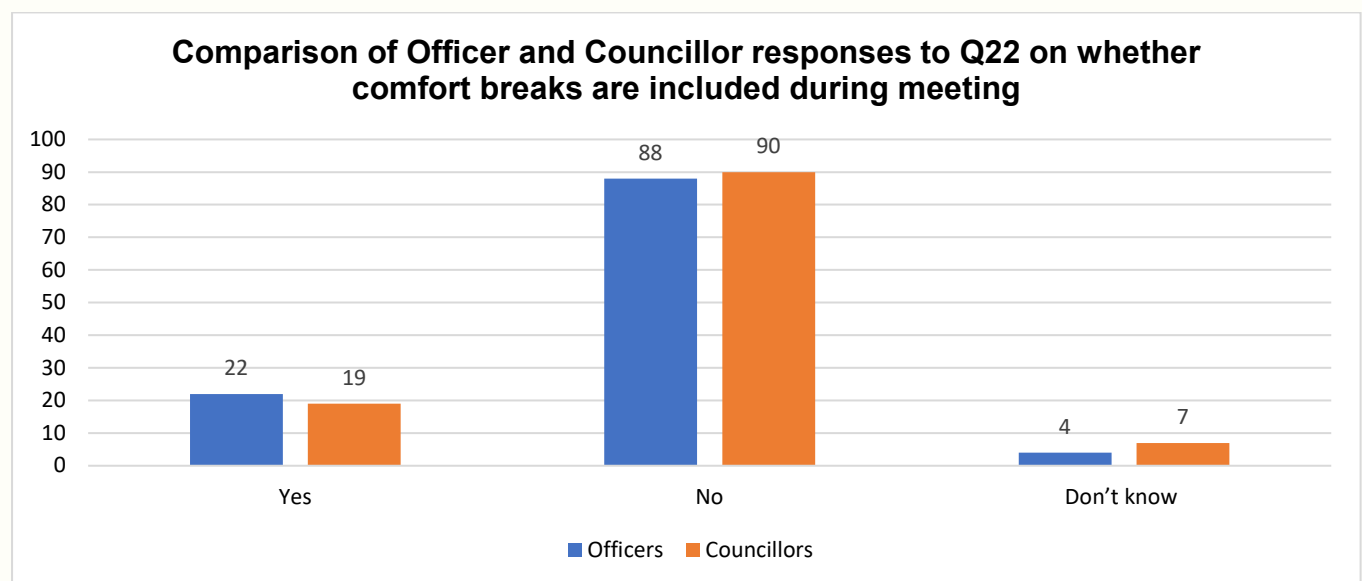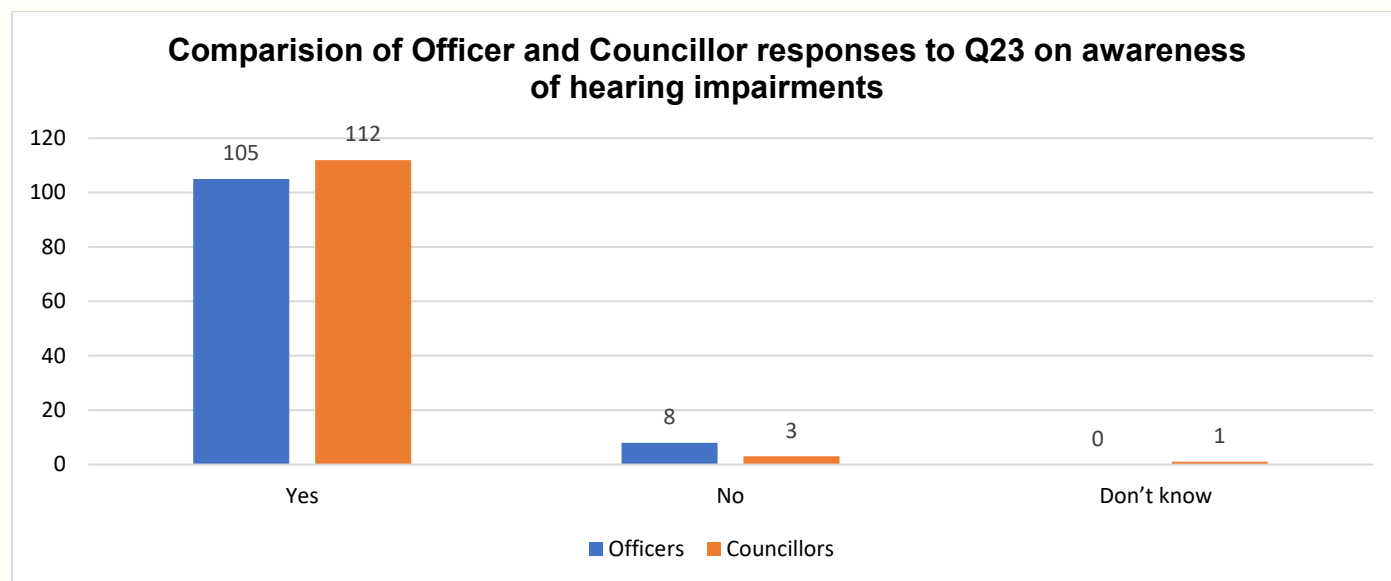3 of 114 Officers did not know (3%)
1 of 114 Officers did not comment (1%)

Councillors
13 of 116 Councillors reported yes (1%)
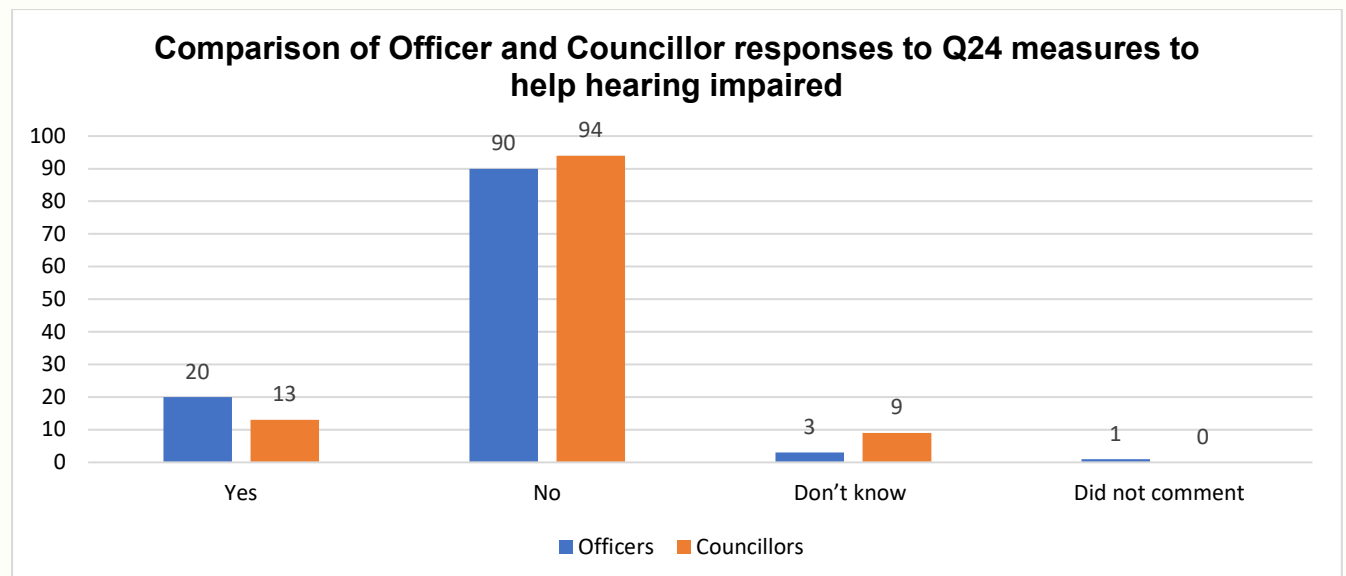94 of 116 Councillors reported no (81%)
9 of 116 Councillors did not know (8%)

Comparison of Officer and Councillor responses to Q24 measures to help hearing impaired

Q25 If measures are taken, please provide brief details – these might include amplification, summarising salient points of discussions before decisions are taken, good lighting to aid lip reading and the like.

22 of 114 Officers provided comments (19%). 92 of 114 Officers did not respond (81%).

16 of 116 Councillors provided comments (14%). 100 of 116 Councillors did not respond (86%).

Summary and comparison of measures identified by officers and councillors

Officers		Councillors	
Good lighting	4	Good lighting	1
Ensure room layout allows councillors to face each other or sit where they can best hear/ help aid lip reading	7	Experiment with room layout/ adjust layout to aid councillors and aid lip reading	4
Only allowing one person to speak at a time	1		
Encourage people to speak clearly	1	Speak clearly	1
Use of microphones / amplification /audio systems including Roger system	4	Use of microphones/amplification/audio systems	4
Project documents on screen which can be annotated online in real time with highlights	1	Project documents on screen	1
Acoustics improvements such as woollen clouds or baffles	2	Acoustics improvements such as woollen clouds	3
Clearly summarising salient points before decision are taken	3	Clearly summarising salient points clearly	1
Remind members before meetings that there may be those with hearing issues	1		
Chair ensures questions, discussions and responses are heard and understood	2		
Request public stand when speaking	1		
Police background "chatting"	2		
Encourage councillors with hearing difficulties to sit closer to the Chairman / Clerk to help them follow proceedings.	2	Seating councillors with hearing difficulties appropriately or closer together to be better able to hear discussions	3
		Encourage people to indicate if they cannot hear	2
		Minimising any background noise	1
Flexibility with room layout	2		
	33		21

Q26 Please describe briefly any other practices the council employs in meetings to break down barriers

53 of 114 Offices provided comments (46%). 61 of 114 Officers did not respond (54%)

65 of 116 Councillors provided comments (56%). 51 of 116 Councillors did not respond (44%).

Summary and comparison of practices the council employs in meetings to break down barriers identified by officers and councillors

Officer responses		Councillor responses	
Venue selection and layout including acoustics and lighting	2	Venue selection and layout including acoustics and lighting	3
Accessible or barrier free meeting rooms	6	Accessible or barrier free meeting rooms	4
Councillors can choose where to sit	2	Councillors can choose where to sit	2
Position council and public in reasonably close-proximity to one another	1	Position council and public in reasonably close-proximity to one another	1
Proximity to toilets	1		
All Council meetings are held in hybrid format to increase public accessibility	1	Virtual committee meetings to increase public accessibility	1
Pre-meeting public surgery	1		
Name cards	1		
Use of microphones	2	Investigating use of microphones	1
Speak clearly and slowly	2		
Only one speaker at a time	2		
Point clarified before decisions made	1	Point clarified before decisions made	2
Attendees asked to say their names before speaking	1		
Hands up to speak	1		
Clarify understanding of discussions and decisions	2		
Advise speakers that there may be people present who rely on lip reading and therefore to address councillors face on	1		
Circulate agenda and papers sooner than the statutory three clear days' notice	1		
Papers provided 10 days before meetings	1		
Officers offer to go through meeting papers and reports prior to meeting - offered to all members	1		

Staff check documents for accessibility	1		
Agendas, papers and minutes prepared using Microsoft Word Styles – aid those using read-aloud technology	3		
Electronic meeting papers	1	Electronic meeting papers	1
		Use dyslexia acceptable fonts	1
Closed captions (form of sub titles),	1		
Use of large screens to project information and highlight text etc	1	Use of large screens to project information and highlight text etc	2
		Use of projector	1
Clear information on agenda papers about what decisions are required	1		
Prioritising important decisions to earlier in the meeting	2		
Minimise extraneous fuss and fancy language and use of colloquial name, as well as for formal names on documents.	2		
Use of clear unambiguous language to reiterate rules or confidentially compliance	1		
Consistent meeting structure	1	Consistent meeting structure	1
Restricting length of meeting	2	Restricting length of meeting	2
Regular breaks in meetings	2	Regular breaks in meetings	4
		Informal approach - encourage discussion and member involvement	5
		Allowing participants sufficient time to consider/respond to issues	3
		Tolerance	2
Awareness raising and verbal briefings to councillors on non-visible disabilities.	1		
Inclusive policies, attitudes, and practices	1		
Councillors issued with/use tablets which they adjust to meet their needs	2	Councillors issued with/use tablets which they adjust to meet their needs	2
Reduce full council meetings to quarterly and greater use of committees	1		
Councillor uses mind map software to help with note keeping	1		
Better awareness of impact and triggers for councillors with non-visible disabilities	1		

New form at induction which asks about any health conditions/emergency no etc	1		
Where a hidden disability is suspected Officers draw councillors' attention to urgent matters by phone	1		
		Focusing on meeting accessibility regulations for website content	1
		Large print for visual disabilities	1
		Would respond to any requests for additional assistance	6
Take no actions (22%)	16	Take no actions (39%)	30
	72		76

Although submitted under Q27 one councillor noted the council's openness to disclose and talk about councillor disabilities.

Q27 Please describe briefly if there are any other practices not currently employed in meetings that you would like to see introduced to help break down barriers.

35 of 114 Officers provided comments (31%). 79 of 114 Officers did not respond (69%)

60 of 116 Councillors provided comments (52%). 56 of 116 Councillors did not respond (48%)

Summary and comparison by officers and councillors of practices not employed by the council that responders would like to see introduced.

Officers		Councillors	
Better lighting	1	Better lighting	1
Restricting length of meeting	2	Restricting length of meeting	3
Ask/self-reporting system to request additional assistance	1	Ask/self-reporting system to request additional assistance	1
Only allowing one person to speak at a time	1		
Use of coloured papers	3		
Summarising key points	1		
Projecting material	2	Projecting materials	2
Accessible documents/ Financial graphics as well as text	2		
Training/awareness raising/sharing good practice	5	Training/awareness raising/sharing good practice	6
Need to understand legislation around disability	1		
		Issue laptops/tablets	1
		Casual/informal meetings	1
		Adjust room layout	5
		Vary times of meetings	1
		Comfort breaks	5
		Use of microphones/improved amplification	3
		Improved meeting management	3
		Increased time for public participation	2
		Improved system for exclusion of public during parts of a meeting	1
		Braille agenda	1
		Pre-meeting briefings	1
		Résumé reports to support agenda items	2
		Improved/ focused agendas allowing time for considered decision making	2
		Decision boxes on papers	1
		Earlier distribution of agenda and meeting papers	1

		Neurodiverse policy	1
		Improve councillor IT skills	1
		Ground rules for respect	1
		Openness	1
		Volunteer role - lack of time and resources to aid disabled councillors	1
No actions/unsure of actions	8	No actions/unsure of actions	19
Hearing loop/audio system	5	Hearing loop/audio system	6
		Sound proofing	1
Legislative changes for remote meetings	5	Legislative changes for remote meetings	2
		Better interaction for public attending meetings remotely	1
		Do not have barriers	1
	37		78

Q28 Does your council have a neurodiversity policy?

Officers
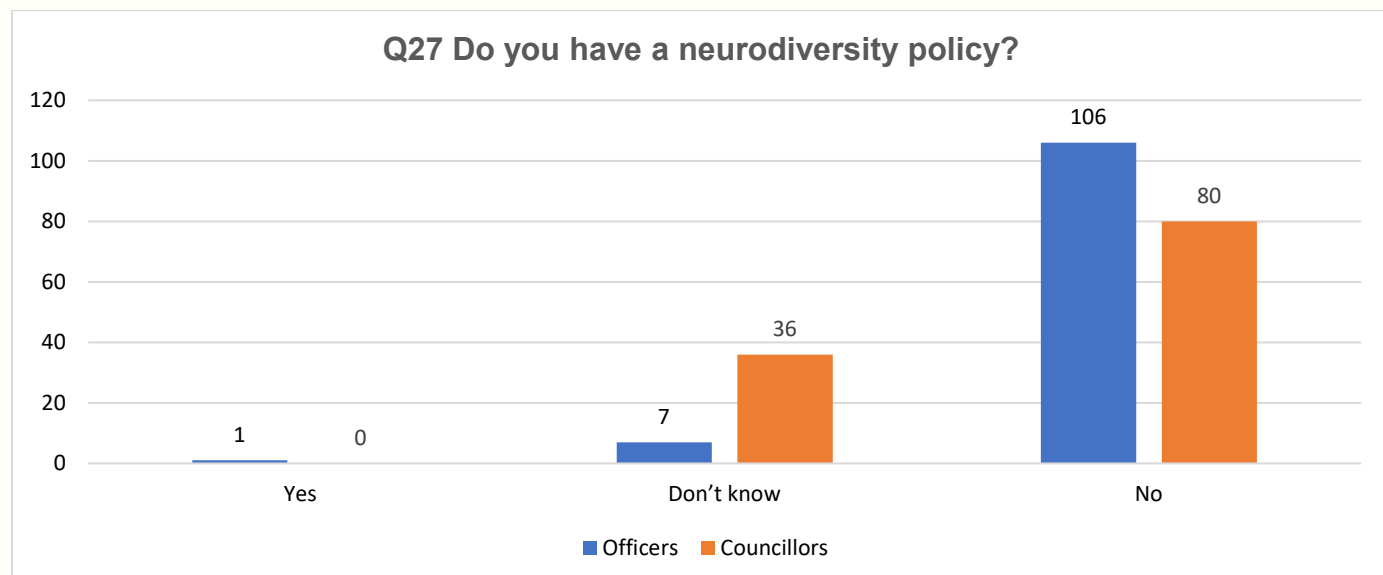1 of 114 Officers stated they had a neurodiversity policy (1%)
7 of 114 Officers stated they did not know (6%)
106 of 114 Officers stated no (93%)

Councillors
36 of 116 Councillors stated they did not know (31%)
80 of 116 Councillors stated no (69%)

Q27 Do you have a neurodiversity policy?
(Officers, Councillors)
Yes: 1, 0
Don't know: 7, 36
No: 106, 80

Q29 Do you think disability awareness raising training/workshops should be embedded in councillor training?

Officers
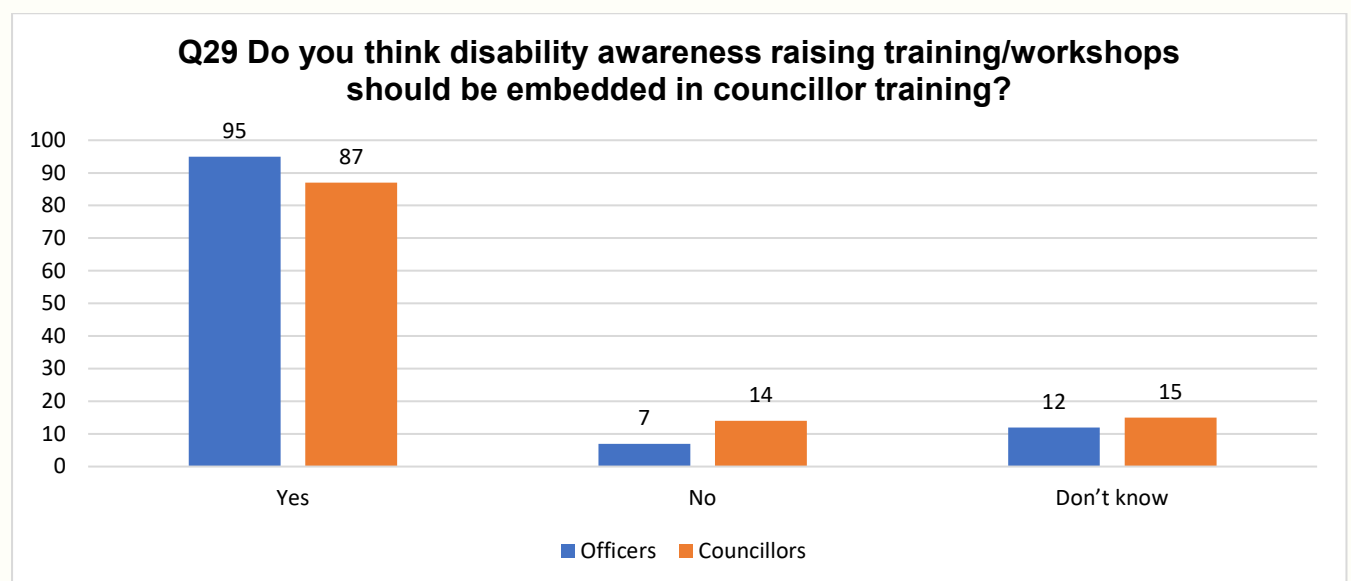95 of 114 Officers stated yes (83%)
7 of 114 Officers stated no (6%)
12 of 14 Officers stated they did not know (11%)

Councillors
87 of 116 Councillors stated yes (75%)
14 of 116 Councillors stated no (12%)
15 of 116 Councillors stated they did not know (13%)

All comments referring to areas outside the scope of this research have not been considered or included.