



Towards Greater Electoral Participation: Scaling Community-Based Voter Engagement in Wales

A report for the UK Democracy Fund

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Established in 1989, the Bangladeshi Women's Association of Wales (BWAU) is a community-led organisation dedicated to empowering women and supporting ethnic minority communities across Wales. Through education, advocacy, wellbeing initiatives, leadership development, and civic engagement, BWAU helps individuals and families overcome barriers, build confidence, access opportunities, and participate more fully in community and public life. BWAU works to strengthen social inclusion, amplify underrepresented voices, and create lasting positive change within communities.

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Introduction

By Ellen Berry, Head of UK Democracy Fund

Wales is becoming increasingly diverse, with [more than one in six](#) people now identifying with an ethnicity other than white. In Wales, qualifying foreign nationals with residency are able to vote in Senedd and local elections. Yet democratic participation remains unequal. The latest Electoral Commission data for Wales does not show comparative registration rates by ethnicity, but for [Great Britain as a whole](#), White people are 7% more likely to be registered than their Asian counterparts and 15% more likely than Black voters.

Approximately [400,000 eligible people](#) are estimated not to be registered to vote in Wales, and awareness of Senedd elections remains low. For some communities experiencing racial inequity, barriers relating to information, language, misinformation and trust can make participation more difficult. Understanding how these barriers can be overcome is essential to building a more inclusive and representative democracy in Wales.

In 2022, the Bangladeshi Women's Association of Wales (BWAU) were part of a pilot programme, where three South Asian-led organisations were funded by the UK Democracy Fund to work with their local communities to drive up voter participation. These pilots, and the UK Democracy Fund's further pilots with Black voters, were effective, proving that trusted relationships at the local level are crucial for supporting low-voting communities, and we shared our learning, which you can read [here](#). We wanted to test how this could be scaled, how limited charitable resources could support more voters to participate in our democracy.

In 2026, we funded BWAU to deliver this important work again, this time for the Senedd elections. But now they were testing a peer mobilising model for community leaders. Could they mobilise new partners in a new city, and manage a campaign effectively across two distinct geographies?

The answer is, "yes, it could". Through this campaign, BWAU and their partners supported more than 1,000 people to apply to register to vote. Although not an inexpensive form of voter registration (costing approximately £25 per registration application), it is able to engage voters which lower cost models such as online ad campaigns, likely could not.

Their findings suggest that successful scaling is dependent upon three factors:

- 1) investment in partnership development;
- 2) recruitment of locally connected Campaign Officers; and
- 3) strong central coordination to ensure consistency and quality.

The combination of local trust and centralised support proved highly effective and offers a practical framework that could be adapted by other community organisations seeking to increase democratic participation among underrepresented groups.

This model is an effective way for funders working regionally or locally to support the democratic engagement of their communities at some scale, particularly where there are few nationally networked umbrella organisations to work through.

However, we at the UK Democracy Fund, and anyone else seeking to improve equality in our democracy should pay attention to their recommendations – community democratic engagement should be supported and funded over the long term, and misinformation and knowledge gaps must be challenged.

Project partners

[Bangladeshi Women's Association of Wales](#)

[Bawso \(Cardiff & Newport\)](#)

[EYST \(Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales\)](#)

Newport Bangladeshi Women and Family Association

[Women Connect First](#)

[ACE Cardiff](#)

[Diaspora Voices Cymru](#)

[The Mentor Ring](#)

[Aurav Disha MW - A Direction of Peaceful Echo of Multicultural Wales](#)

Our project

Our project at Bangladeshi Women's Association of Wales (BWA) focused on hyper-local voter registration drives, multilingual resources, and culturally sensitive outreach, with a focus on ethnic minority communities, Commonwealth students, young voters (16+), and migrants.

Phase 1: Partnership development

We reached out to 16 community organisations, and five were successfully recruited (three in Cardiff, two in Newport) as delivery partners, bringing their deep relationships in their community to support the project. Expanding to Newport, provided a new challenge for us in supporting work across a different city. While we shared cultural connections and community networks with some partners, this was the first time we had collaborated with these organisations on voter engagement activities. The five Campaign Officers recruited through this process brought trusted community relationships, local knowledge and access to diverse networks that were critical to the project's reach. Partners were generally enthusiastic about the project and recognised the importance of improving democratic participation within underrepresented communities.

To strengthen outreach among Commonwealth students, particularly at the University of South Wales Newport Campus, seven Campaign Officers were recruited through the Students' Union. Their existing connections within student societies and peer networks helped extend the campaign's reach, increasing engagement with eligible Commonwealth students and other young voters who are often underrepresented in democratic participation activities.

Phase 2: Recruitment and training

We recruited 35 Campaign Officers in total across Cardiff and Newport for paid roles, including those from our partnership development activities, with opportunities advertised through social media channels and student unions. The selected Campaign Officers were already embedded within community networks, as community leaders, parents involved in local schools, university students active within student societies, and individuals connected to faith and cultural organisations.

Campaign Officers received initial training and regular development sessions, covering non-partisanship principles, voter eligibility checks, online and paper registration processes, use of multilingual Electoral Commission resources, and 'Get-Out-the-Vote' (GOTV) strategies. New Campaign Officers worked in small groups of around eight and

were supported by a central lead from the BWAU team. We also provided shared resources which could be used, including videos and suggested messaging. Conversations with experts at the Electoral Commission and others working in voter engagement, such as The Politics Project, helped us to shape the resources and training.

Phase 3: Community outreach and engagement

Campaign Officers ran workshops and voter registration drives, and shared election information resources in various languages. Activities took place via community stalls in mosques, universities and community centres, door-to-door outreach, and targeted engagement in key areas. They targeted outreach to areas with high concentration of low-voting groups in their target demographics.

Overall, they engaged with more than 3,000 participants and directly supported just over 1,000 voters to fill out a registration application, recording this each time on a Google form, allowing us to evaluate the shared impact of the project. Using the Fund's methodology, we would estimate that to be 648 final registrations (when accounting for standard rates of rejected or duplicate applications).

More than 50% of the people the Campaign Officers supported to register were under 34 years old. The vast majority were of South Asian heritage (89%). Most (67%) were British, 19% from Commonwealth countries.



A busy community outreach day

Image: BWAU

What we learned



The barriers to electoral participation are many and varied

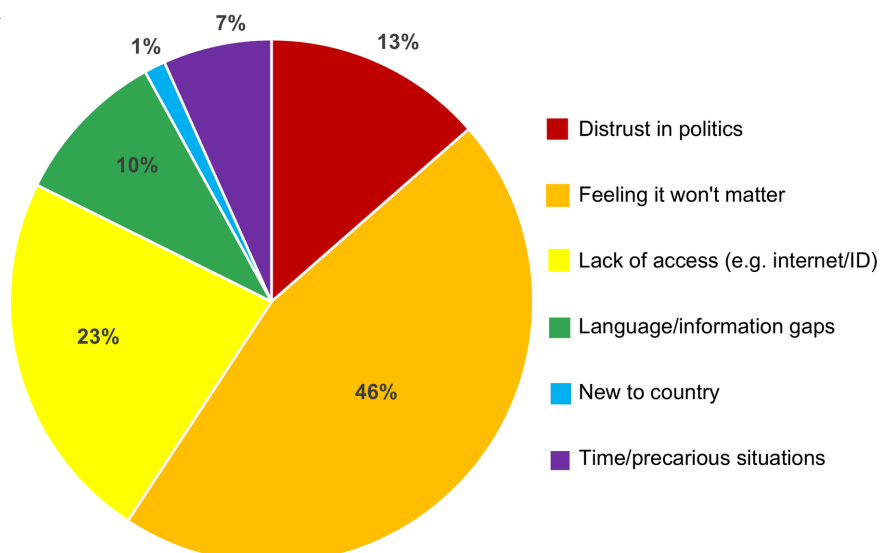
We asked voters *"What barriers have you faced in relation to voting or voter registration?"*.

The most frequently reported barriers included: distrust, lack of access, a feeling that it 'wouldn't matter', time/precarious situations, being new to the country, and language and information gaps (see pie chart, bottom of page). Specific comments included:

-  the timing of polling on working days
-  limited awareness of postal voting options
-  distrust in political institutions
-  perceptions that individual votes would have little impact
-  student mobility and transience
-  housing-related concerns
-  apprehensions regarding council tax implications

Campaign Officers frequently encountered misconceptions regarding voting eligibility, registration processes, and the potential consequences of being included on the electoral register. Some participants, particularly students, individuals living in shared accommodation, and migrants unfamiliar with UK electoral processes, expressed concerns that registering to vote might affect council tax arrangements, attract unwanted attention from public authorities, or create additional financial liabilities.

These findings highlight the complex interplay of structural, informational, and attitudinal factors that continue to inhibit electoral participation among underrepresented groups.





Partnership-based delivery requires substantial investment

Relationship-building, communication, and ongoing capacity development were all key. While partners were highly motivated by the project's aims, maintaining consistent engagement required regular meetings, ongoing support, clear expectations, and dedicated coordination. The appointment of a Project Coordinator, combined with structured training and fortnightly development sessions for Campaign Officers, proved critical in ensuring delivery remained consistent, non-partisan, and aligned across different organisations and locations.



Community organisations can overcome barriers that traditional voter awareness campaigns struggle to address – particularly when the activity is culturally relevant

Qualitative feedback from both participants and Campaign Officers found, in line with the UK Democracy Fund's previous learning, the importance of personalised support, culturally relevant information, and targeted reminders in fostering greater democratic engagement.

Trusted local relationships helped reduce scepticism, improve participation in voter information sessions, and encourage engagement among individuals who reported language barriers, political distrust, and limited awareness of electoral processes. The combination of multilingual resources, culturally sensitive communication, and familiar community settings was repeatedly identified by participants and Campaign Officers as a major factor contributing to successful engagement.

The background and local connections of Campaign Officers proved particularly important, and they were generally able to engage participants more quickly and effectively than would have been possible through conventional outreach approaches. Evaluation interviews suggested that participants were often willing to discuss their concerns about voting because the conversation was initiated by someone they recognised or who shared a similar background. Several Campaign Officers described acting as "bridges" between communities and democratic institutions, helping to translate not only language but also complex electoral processes into familiar and relevant terms.



"Bilingual approach... created a sense of trust – and they believe me because they understand me easily." Campaign Officer



Informative messaging is highly valuable to fill knowledge gaps

Information-focused messaging centred on 'how to register, who was eligible to vote, and why voting matters for local services and future generations' proved particularly effective. This was especially evident among young people aged 16–24. Campaign Officers reported that many younger participants were initially unaware of their eligibility to vote in Welsh elections or uncertain about the practical relevance of politics to their everyday lives. Discussions that connected voting to issues such as education, housing, employment opportunities, cost-of-living concerns, community services, and representation were significantly more engaging than generic civic participation messages. Campaign Officers frequently reported that once voting was framed as a mechanism through which communities could influence decisions affecting their future, interest and willingness to register increased substantially.



Voter engagement work is more effective when built into existing community activities

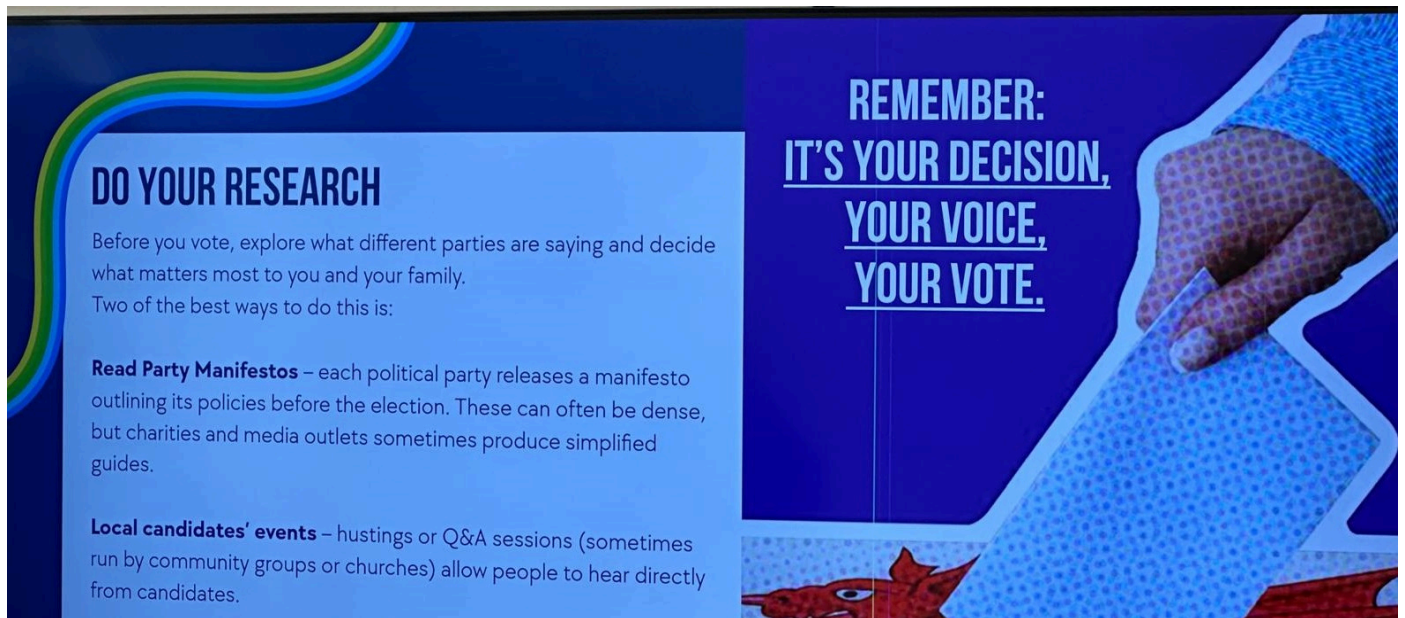
The type of venue and engagement setting also influenced outcomes. Campaign Officers reported that community events, faith-based venues, cultural celebrations, women's groups, and university-based activities were generally more productive than stand-alone voter registration stalls. Participants appeared more willing to engage when voter registration was incorporated into activities they were already attending and where trust had already been established. These settings created opportunities for informal conversations, questions, and follow-up support, which Campaign Officers regarded as critical for addressing concerns around eligibility, registration procedures, and perceptions that voting 'does not make a difference.'



Non-partisan guidance should be revisited through the project to help Campaign Officers' confidence

A particularly important achievement was maintaining a strictly non-partisan approach throughout the project. Several Campaign Officers initially expressed concerns about navigating political discussions while remaining impartial. However, regular training, fortnightly support sessions, and ongoing guidance from the Project Coordinator enabled Campaign Officers to focus conversations on democratic participation rather than party politics. As the project progressed, Campaign Officers reported increasing confidence

in encouraging participation without advocating for any political party or candidate. This represents an important learning point from the project: non-partisanship is not achieved through written guidance alone, but through continuous training, reinforcement, supervision, and opportunities to discuss real-life scenarios encountered during outreach.



Non-partisan training materials shared with Campaign Officers

Image: BWAU

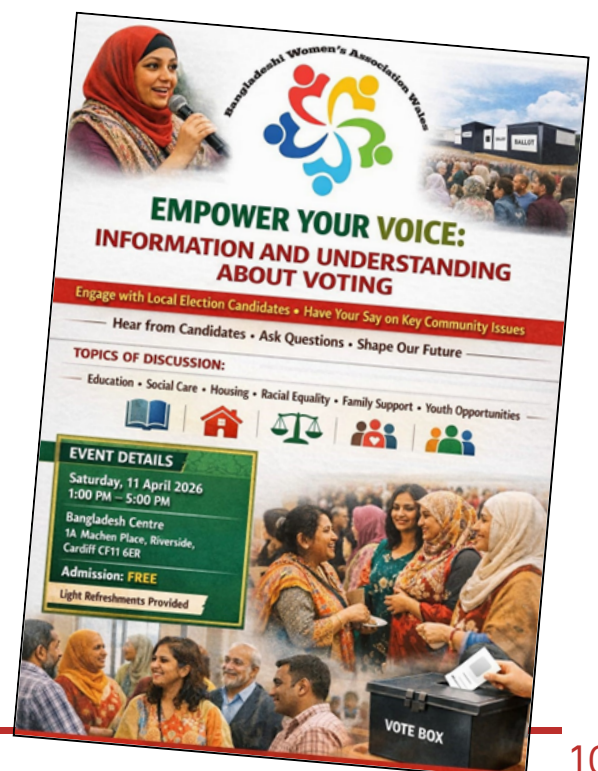


Impact on voter turnout is harder to achieve

Despite strong performance in voter registration and democratic awareness raising, converting registration into actual turnout remained one of the project's most significant challenges. While many participants expressed enthusiasm about voting and reported increased confidence in engaging with democratic processes, a range of structural, practical, and attitudinal barriers continued to prevent some individuals from casting their vote on election day.

Voter engagement event flyer

Image: BWAU



The challenge of voter turnout and the implications for policy makers

[Electoral Commission polling](#) in 2024 found the most common reasons for non-voting were being too busy or working (10%); being away from home (7%); medical reasons (10%); lack of interest (9%); and lack of trust in politicians/politics (11%).

One of the most significant findings concerned [the impact of working-day polling](#) on underrepresented communities. Many participants described practical constraints that limited their ability to vote in person. This issue appeared particularly acute among women with caring responsibilities, low-income workers, migrant workers employed in shift-based occupations, and individuals holding multiple jobs. Several Campaign Officers reported that participants frequently prioritised work, childcare, or family commitments over visiting polling stations, particularly when they were unaware of alternative voting options. A recurring finding from outreach activities was that [awareness of postal voting and proxy voting arrangements remained low among many participants](#), despite these mechanisms being specifically designed to address such barriers. The evidence suggests that voter registration campaigns alone are insufficient if they are not accompanied by sustained public education regarding the practical ways in which voting can fit around complex working and family lives.

Student mobility presented a particularly complex challenge. While many students successfully registered, [some later reported uncertainty about whether they would be residing in the same location at the time of the election](#). Examination periods, end-of-year accommodation moves, graduation plans, and travel arrangements created additional barriers. Campaign Officers reported that some students questioned the value of participating in local elections if they anticipated leaving the area shortly after completing their studies. These findings suggest that improving registration rates among student populations does not automatically result in equivalent increases in turnout, particularly where individuals have weaker long-term connections to the locality in which they are registered.

The evaluation also identified persistent attitudinal barriers, particularly political distrust and concerns regarding political efficacy. While many participants welcomed information about voting procedures, some [remained unconvinced that electoral participation would](#)

result in meaningful change. Rather than a lack of interest in politics, many Campaign Officers described this as a consequence of previous experiences where individuals felt that community concerns had not been adequately reflected in public policy or political decision making. One Campaign Officer noted:



“... they [participants] voted early however haven’t seen any reflective change, so not interested anymore.” Campaign Officer

This reflected discussions with Campaign Officers regarding turnout, which frequently centred on perceptions that political outcomes remained unchanged regardless of who was elected, reducing motivation to participate.

What is the future of this model?

Rather than replacing local organisations, BWAW's role (both in Cardiff and Newport) as a coordinating and capacity-building organisation enabled trusted community partners to deliver engagement in ways that were authentic, culturally relevant, and responsive to local needs. This offers a promising model for future democratic participation initiatives seeking to reach communities that have historically been underrepresented within Welsh electoral processes.

However, future scaling would require sufficient funding for dedicated coordination, longer lead-in periods to develop new partnerships, and sustained investment beyond a single election cycle. Community trust can be built quickly when working through established organisations, but maintaining momentum and translating registration into long-term electoral participation requires ongoing engagement and civic education. The findings suggest that future interventions should place greater emphasis on the period between registration and polling day, including voter reminders, postal voting awareness campaigns, community-led Get-Out-the-Vote activities, and initiatives designed to build longer-term confidence in democratic institutions. While the project successfully reduced immediate barriers relating to information, language, and accessibility, structural constraints and perceptions regarding political efficacy continued to limit conversion from registration to turnout among some participants.

A recurring theme throughout the evaluation was that community trust develops over time. Short-term election funding can increase registration, but sustained democratic participation is more likely to be achieved through multi-year investment that enables continuous engagement and relationship building.

Resource for community organisations

Bangladeshi Women's Association of Wales have produced a resource (linked below) to help other groups undertake non-partisan voter registration work:

[Training Materials for Campaign Officers \(step-by-step process\).pptx](#)

Additional quotes from Campaign Officers:

Many people were uninterested in voting, felt disconnected from politics, or believed politicians did not represent them

I enjoyed the outreach, speaking to friends and family and understanding voting. Some people surprised me because they did not vote. It is important to have these conversations in our community. Voting should be discussed more in our religious centres. The mosque never talks about voting

Root-level campaigning works

We tried our best to convey the message, but some people [...] said they voted before but had not seen any meaningful change, so they were not interested anymore

Giving information bit by bit helped people engage, rather than simply telling them to go and vote

There needs to be year-round civic engagement rather than activity concentrated around elections

The BAME community, including my African community, really valued the engagement. It helped build bridges between communities and raised awareness

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