

Investing in Underrepresented Candidates: Tracking the Impact of Fund Her Small Grants

A report written for Elect Her¹

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March 2026

1. Introduction

This report draws on in-depth interviews with women candidates who received Fund Her grants during the May 2024 Local Election and July 2024 Parliamentary Election, to better understand both the practical and personal impact of this financial support. We examine how recipients allocated their grant money across campaign activities, how actual spending aligned with, or diverged, from initial plans, and whether common spending patterns emerged across the cohort. We also explore how the grants helped to offset the financial barriers women candidates routinely face, and to what degree this assistance eased the burden of fundraising. Beyond financial relief, the interviews shed light on how the grants shaped candidates' broader campaign experiences – including their confidence, sense of viability, and ability to engage voters. At the same time, we address the barriers that persisted despite the grant, ranging from systemic funding inequities to the hidden costs of campaigning such as lost income and caregiving responsibilities. Together, these perspectives reveal the multifaceted role of Fund Her support in women's campaigns.

2. About Fund Her

Fund Her is a micro-grants programme, run by Elect Her, designed to support women from underrepresented groups and backgrounds, who are facing financial challenges with the personal costs associated with standing for election in Britain. The programme has been

¹ This research has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 101019284).

running since 2020 and has evolved through learning from women and development with other experts in the field. The grants are entirely dependent upon donations by individuals who donate to Fund Her, which determines the size and number of grants available. The grant round referred to in this report opened in December 2023 for applications from women standing in either the local or general election in 2024. From 40 applicants, 23 grantees were awarded grants of £500 each, which they received in March 2024, ahead of the local elections in England in May 2024 and the Westminster Parliamentary snap election held in July 2024. In addition to Fund Her, Elect Her runs Equip Her, providing support open to all women candidates, such as cross-party training, coaching and community building, for which there is no selection process to participate. Most of the grantees engaged with this support, although it was optional.

3. Methodology

Researchers from the TWICEASGOOD project invited all 23 Fund Her grantees to participate in a post-election interview to reflect on their experiences of campaigning, the financial barriers they faced, and how the grant supported their candidacy. Invitations were sent by email, including a link to schedule a 30-minute online interview with researchers from the University of Birmingham. Interviews were conducted via video call by members of the research team.

In total, ten interviews were conducted. Six of the interviewees received funding for the May 2024 Local Election, and four had received funding for the July 2024 Parliamentary Election. However, due to the proximity of the dates of the local and general elections, and the fact that two recipients were both local and parliamentary candidates, the fund supported activities across these elections. Seven candidates were standing in ‘target’ seats, identified by their respective parties as winnable (or vulnerable to losing). Target seats generally receive increased campaign resources, alongside expectations of candidate time from their political parties. Three candidates were standing in seats which were not target seats.

Interviews followed a semi-structured schedule designed to capture candidates’ experiences of the Fund Her programme. At the outset, TWICEASGOOD researchers provided candidates with an information sheet, and informed consent procedures were explained, including the use of anonymised quotations in reports. The main section of the interview focused on campaign activities during the 2024 England local elections and the 2024 UK Parliamentary snap election, respectively. Interviewers discussed both their intended and actual spending, as well as the perceived impact of the grants on reducing financial barriers, campaign capacity, and candidate wellbeing and confidence. The interview closed with an open-ended question, inviting participants to share additional reflections on challenges they faced and lessons for supporting women in future campaigns. With participants’ consent, interviews were recorded for internal use only to ensure accurate notetaking and analysis.

4. Evaluating candidate use of the grant

The interviews provided rich insights into how recipients used their awards and the impact this support had on the campaign experiences.

The Fund Her grant provided funds towards personal costs and household expenses. Candidates highlighted that reducing the financial strain of these costs enabled them to focus more fully on pursuing candidacy and their campaign activities. The funding was particularly valuable in easing pressures that might otherwise have excluded them from standing, from practical campaign essentials to vital personal needs that supported their wellbeing and resilience during the pre-election period. While individual circumstances among the cohort varied (such as employment status and caring responsibilities) common patterns emerged in terms of the spending choices and the impact of the funding:

Clothing:

Several candidates purchased ‘presentable’ clothes including a smart coat and boots to wear in campaign photos and at the vote count. Candidates also purchased more practical clothing to wear when canvassing outdoors, which often required covering extensive distances on foot to deliver leaflets. Practical items included layered coats, sturdy shoes, and other weather-appropriate gear. Comfortable trainers were particularly helpful for a candidate with a health condition, making campaigning physically more manageable.

Technological Equipment:

Many of the candidates purchased technological equipment and highlighted how this had positively impacted their campaigns. For example, one candidate updated their mobile phone so that it was compatible with their party’s canvassing app. Two candidates either fully or partially purchased laptops as they did not own their own, one of whom shared a laptop with her children which created difficulties when attending long online campaign meetings.

Household expenses and food:

Household expenses were another common spending category. These included utility bills, rent, food shopping, and general household items. For some candidates, this eased the financial strain of lost earnings from freelance employment or unpaid leave while campaigning. Others purchased meals and takeaways, which relieved some of the pressure on their time during campaigns. One candidate purchased takeaways for their disabled children when they were out campaigning and unable to cook meals at home. Another candidate highlighted the health benefits of purchasing balanced, cooked meals, as it allowed them to avoid unhealthy eating habits and maintain their well-being during the campaign.

Childcare and caring responsibilities

Some candidates spent their grants directly on childcare related costs such as activities and play sessions, or to reimburse friends who were caring for their children. This was in the context in which, as candidates themselves highlighted, childcare and other caring responsibilities tended to fall on women. As such, they were aware this was a particularly gendered barrier to both standing for election and for volunteering on campaigns. This was evident not least in one candidate's account that most of their team and volunteers were men, which they described as a 'boys' club.' Significantly for others, the positive impact of the funding in relation to their children was less direct: One candidate shared they would normally prioritise buying new clothing for their children, rather than clothes for themselves. The grant enabled them to purchase new clothing, and eased feelings of guilt that they were taking money away from the household finances or their children.

Travel costs:

Several candidates reported spending grant money on travel and transportation while campaigning. This included petrol to travel to and around their ward/constituency. One candidate with a health condition upgraded their bicycle to a better, safer, model, with a boost pack and a robust helmet easing the physical demands of canvassing. Others spent some of their grant on lunches and hot drinks for themselves and volunteers.

Medication:

One candidate disclosed that they had spent their fund on an item which did not fit the common spending patterns: HRT medication. Having experienced low energy levels and brain fog because of perimenopause, they were struggling to campaign at a competitive intensity. As they were unable to access testosterone HRT through the NHS, they used the fund to secure this medication privately. The candidate reported it had made a significant difference to their ability to campaign as they had improved energy, drive and focus and reduced anxiety.

Unanticipated costs:

In the above spending categories, candidates used their funds on items which they had anticipated and outlined in their applications. However, it is significant that in some instances, candidates reported using their fund for unexpected or unanticipated costs. These often related to how much of their time and their own financial resources were required to campaign competitively. For example, one candidate had not anticipated how expensive the cumulative costs of travel would be, especially because they were standing in constituency where they were not normally resident. Another candidate had planned to purchase a new laptop; however, campaigning had significantly reduced the time available to earn an income from freelance employment. Much to her disappointment, she instead spent the fund on housing rent. Others had not anticipated the additional costs of continuously maintaining their

appearance to be ‘presentable’ for campaign photographs and had used funds for the hairdressers and new clothes.

Whilst unanticipated costs are not uncommon for candidates, the impact of these additional outgoings was exacerbated by existing income and wealth disparities. Candidates with higher levels of disposable income were able to cushion themselves from the unexpected financial outgoings of a campaign. For women with lower financial security, unanticipated costs engendered difficult trade-offs between basic living costs and campaign costs, which were uniquely challenging.

5. Impact of Funding on Practical Campaigning Capacity

For many candidates, various uses of the fund enabled them to campaign more – and more effectively – than they would have otherwise through spending on practical, time-saving measures, including transport, food, and digital devices.

Candidates frequently mentioned enhanced canvassing ability as a direct outcome of the grant, enabled through the acquisition of necessary equipment and resources that would otherwise have been inaccessible. For example, one candidate used the grant to upgrade their phone. They had not been able to access canvassing software on their old phone, which had limited the amount of canvassing they could do without their team, ‘I was struggling last year [before receiving the grant], and [following the grant] I was more powerful with my phone loading the app and able to do a lot more canvassing for myself,’ suggesting that accessing technology has the potential to significantly improve their autonomy and time management. Another candidate captured this dynamic, noting: ‘Having the laptop meant that I was able to do things from home... if I didn’t have that, the alternatives would be that I probably wouldn’t be out campaigning as much because I would have to find the time to go somewhere else or borrow somebody else’s equipment.’ Here, the emphasis is on the pragmatic efficiencies introduced by owning essential tools which reduced travel time, enabling flexible scheduling, and supporting a more dynamic approach to campaigning that was better suited to their personal circumstances.

In addition to digital devices, participants also mentioned enhanced physical mobility and well-being via using the grant, both of which were critical to the increased scale and endurance of their canvassing efforts. As one candidate explained: ‘It just meant I could get places quicker and do more... in particular, I could just get round somewhere quick and then jump on my bike and go to the next bit,’ highlighting how investment in transport infrastructure allowed for more effective constituency coverage. Another candidate, who has sciatica, used the grant to invest in supportive footwear to support persistent muscular issues, illustrating how even modest purchases improved candidate’s mobility and reduce health-related constraints during the campaign period.

6. Impact on campaign participation in relation to candidates' financial and employment status

As discussed above, most candidates, various uses of the fund (as outlined above) enabled them to campaign more – and more effectively – than they would have otherwise through spending on practical, time-saving measures. Nevertheless, it is important to understand the impact of these practical measures in the context of candidates' employment status and financial resources.

Several candidates shared that the fund alleviated concerns about purchasing food and petrol while campaigning, because they felt guilty for spending household funds on campaigning activities. One candidate shared that they wanted to “walk away” from campaigning, because she was financially dependent on her husband to support both their household and campaign costs. She often felt 'guilty' as if she were 'robbing' their family. Rather than withdraw or scale back her campaign to mitigate this, the fund enabled her to continue campaigning and alleviated some of the practical and emotional burden. Significantly, one candidate who stood in the local elections and who was also a parliamentary candidate, additional financial support could not alleviate pressures on their childcare responsibilities. As the snap general election was called shortly after the local election, she withdrew her general election candidacy, unwilling to spend more time away from her children.

The impact of the funding in alleviating tensions with competing demands of paid work and campaigning were in relation to, and at times limited by, candidate's employment type. In general, all candidates found the demands of campaigning alongside employment challenging. They felt under pressure to reduce their time at work during the campaign. In some instances, candidates took unpaid leave or were already in a period of unemployment. The fund helped bridge the financial gap by covering, for example, utilities and food shopping. One candidate had started a new job during a short campaign period, so could not take unpaid leave, or reduce their working hours. However, as their new employer offered flexible hours, they were able to fit their work around campaigning. This flexibility enabled her to campaign more safely, because her party expected to campaign alone. She chose times of the day when she felt safer and less vulnerable, rather than campaigning in the evening at the end of the standard workday.

Balancing campaign and work commitments was complicated by inconsistent guidance from some political parties. One candidate disclosed their party had not forewarned candidates that campaigning competitively would require taking time off work. It was only during the campaign that experienced campaigners and volunteers explained that maintaining full-time employment would be incredibly hard. The candidate expressed that she thought this was unreasonable and, further, she experienced a lack of empathy from other party members and volunteers about the financial pressures of taking unpaid leave during the campaign.

Balancing work and campaign commitments was further impacted by whether candidates were standing in a target seat. Even though several candidates were standing in constituencies where they were unlikely to be elected, they were aware of expectations that they should, nevertheless, invest time and money campaigning. In such instances, a candidate described campaigning as a ‘thankless task.’ Another candidate in a non-target seat was told by her party not to campaign in her own seat and instead was expected to canvas for target seat candidates. In practice, this would have required spending her own limited personal resources on travel across the country. In contrast, candidates standing in target seats made references to campaigning becoming an ‘unpaid full-time job.’

Crucially, the pressure to use already limited personal finances and reduce time at work during the campaign was disproportionately challenging to women with lower financial resources, and in lower paid professions. As ONS data has shown, hybrid/flexible working is strongly skewed toward higher earners and graduates. This presents further structural barriers to women in lower paid or precarious employment from electoral office.

7. Impact of funding on wellbeing and self-confidence

Responses from candidates indicated that the grant operated both as a material enabler and a catalyst for reduced anxiety and increased personal confidence. Many candidates highlighted that, while often overlooked, campaigning was taxing on both their mental and physical health. In some instances, the grant enabled candidates to better look after their own physical and mental wellbeing.

Financial circumstances and anxiety are of course linked. Several candidates shared that the grant reduced levels of anxiety around financial pressures so that they could focus more strategically on their campaigns. One candidate shared that the grant enabled them to financially support themselves during the campaign rather than rely on her partner. Another reflected: ‘I didn’t have to worry as much about money, so I felt... it gave me a bit more security,’ while another: ‘In my mind, there was less panic and anxiety.’ These responses point to the broader psychological benefits of financial relief, particularly in contexts where personal and campaign-related expenditures intersected.

The intersection of personal wellbeing and campaign capacity was made especially clear by the participant who used a portion of the grant to purchase HRT. She described the resulting transformation in both energy and mental clarity: ‘I was exhausted in December, and in February, it’s like something happened...like the mist came off my eyes and I was like... I’m going to do what I need to do and maybe that was the testosterone kicking in.’ Her experience highlights women’s health-related challenges and that the medication she purchased through the funding has helped improve her ability to campaign.

Closely related to mental wellbeing, a recurrent theme was that the grants led to an improvement in candidates' self-confidence. Primarily, this was a result of them being able to invest in how they presented themselves physically. Two participants used the grant to purchase clothing that allowed them to feel more appropriately dressed and thus more comfortable and confident as potential politicians when appearing in public. One candidate commented, 'I brought myself a couple of outfits just so that I looked a bit more presentable,' while another described that the purchase of high-quality coat 'social impact', in terms of how she presented herself. These investments were perceived to contribute significantly to the candidates' public image and self-confidence.

It is of concern, however, that within the context of the increased abuse and harassment women in politics face, that a parliamentary candidate in a target seat highlighted that she felt increased pressure to always look smart and presentable, and connected to the online abuse she had experienced on the campaign. She used some of her grant to purchase clothing and regularly go to the hairdressers. In part, this was to improve confidence. However, it also indicates that she felt that looking smart might somehow discourage more online abuse.

Crucially, some participants experienced receiving support and recognition from the granting process itself, which made them more confident in their campaign. One candidate expressed that when she found out she had received the grant, she felt as though the Elect Her team "believed" in her and thought she was a 'valuable candidate.' The act of being selected for the grant in and of itself was affirming.

In summary, these themes suggest that the grant had a demonstrable impact on both the practical and psychological dimensions of political campaigning. By alleviating at least some of the more pressing financial constraints, enhancing technological and logistical capabilities, and fostering a sense of validation and support, the grants contributed to increased confidence and effectiveness among candidates.

8. Impact of funding on supporting underrepresented candidates

Several candidates discussed their experiences of campaigning in relation to their gender, ethnicity, social class, and their intersections. This included their treatment within their political party, voters' perceptions and attitudes towards them, and volunteer support.

A Black candidate shared that they felt their treatment by the party was racialised. There were assumptions from their campaign teams that they would be a "a direct source into the Black community" and that they should target Black residents when canvassing. Candidates also experienced racist abuse in the street and online. As already discussed, one candidate tried to avoid additional abuse by ensuring they looked "presentable" on the doorstep. Another candidate referenced that their seat had a history of supporting Far Right, ethnonationalist political parties, where some residents were 'not very nice to people of colour.' Another

candidate experienced ‘booing and hissing’ when speaking at a husting. This prompted them to say that they would strongly encourage young women from underrepresented backgrounds to really consider whether they want to stand for election as it is “tough out there.”

Reflecting on their campaign team and volunteers, a Black candidate highlighted that they identified ‘an unconscious bias and a willingness to be inclusive but an unwillingness to take on new perspective’ within their local party. Another candidate expressed that in their experience, ‘people – men and women – have more faith and respect for male candidates than they do for women.’ They had noticed that they had more women supporting their campaign, than a nearby white male candidate, who had more men volunteering on his campaign. They attributed this difference to the care responsibilities that tend to fall on women which prevent them from volunteering or standing.

Many candidates expressed that more work was needed to encourage and support women standing for election and running campaigns. One highlighted that women are usually asked several times to stand before putting themselves forward. They also recognised the additional barriers women encounter, along with care responsibilities, less confidence from volunteers, and hostile receptions from voters. Furthermore, others expressed concerns about the increased financial pressures women face. One candidate expressed concern that this might lead to women unevenly opting out of standing, especially in non-target seats, where they could develop their experience and profile to eventually stand in a target seats. Nevertheless, they were reflexively aware of the positive impact they could have by standing. One candidate attributed their initial decision to stand because they wanted to encourage other women to also stand. They were disappointed that they had not yet seen that come to effect.

The experiences of those interviewed demonstrate the prevalence of challenges faced by women, further compounded at the intersections of race/ethnicity, age, and social class. Whilst the Elect Her funds cannot resolve broader societal challenges, the funds helped underrepresented candidates overcome financial and practical barriers they face from selection and campaigning.

9. Impact of Non-Financial Support from Elect Her

Almost half of the candidates identified that, beyond the financial support from their grants, they derived non-financial benefits from their involvement with Elect Her more broadly. A recurring theme was the value of the opportunity to connect with other women in a shared space to exchange experiences and support one another, regardless of party affiliation.

For instance, one candidate referred to the importance of ‘sisterhood sessions just to talk to other people about what was going on...women in general sort of seem to face similar problems,’ highlighting the commonality of challenges faced by women in political life. This sentiment was echoed by another candidate, who expressed gratitude to Elect Her for creating and hosting ‘a neutral space so we can actually come together and talk about the issues that affect us as women.’ Similarly, another highlighted the cross-party nature, noting that “we’re

coming together from different parties... you could disagree on the big policy things, but fundamentally, we're agreeing with each other again.'

In addition, grant holders participated in Elect Her's wider support offering including workshops, coaching sessions, and mentorships. As one candidate shared, these activities improved her confidence. Another described Elect Her as: 'very helpful like you actually do feel that you've got someone that you can pick up the phone to or emailed anyone of them just looking for a bit of advice...there's was some coaching, like coffee time with counsellors or getting existing MPs to do sessions, all of these things help even if you're in that in between space...I found that really, really helpful...it's that like feeling of being listened to you is really important.' As such, women benefitted both from Elect Her's practical advice on campaigning, but also emotional reassurance, the facilitation of community and fostering solidarity. Collectively, then, these narratives emphasise how Elect Her created a sense of political fellowship and emotional reassurance. These benefits are particularly important for women navigating largely male-dominated political structures.

Nevertheless, one candidate suggested that one workshop's content was not fully applicable, because it covered aspects of candidacy already covered her party, 'I don't think it was really suitable for people who are actually part of a party because... you have your own election agent.' This critique suggests some thought is needed regarding how the training is pitched given the diversity of contexts from which women come, including standing in different elections, having differing party infrastructures, access to widely varying support even within the same party, alongside varying personal experiences.

10. Remaining Challenges

Whilst all the candidates expressed their gratitude for the grant and articulated how the grant had supported them financially, emotionally and physically, the majority acknowledged the grant only stretched so far. For candidates from socio-economic, racial/ethnic and gender groups who are underrepresented in politics, the grant by no means levelled social and economic inequalities across diverse identities, backgrounds, and personal circumstances. A complex array of enduring barriers remained, often reflecting deeper structural inequalities embedded in political culture, party systems, and broader socio-political dynamics. These findings point to the partial impact of financial support when not accompanied by systemic reforms.

Despite initial financial assistance, candidates frequently reported that monetary constraints continued to dictate the parameters of their campaigning. The grant often served as a short-term relief rather than a sustainable enabler, and while they were able to maintain candidacy, the scope of their campaigning remained limited by funds. In several instances, candidates took unpaid time off from work to campaign, which had affected their income levels during periods of high intensity and pressure. As one candidate stated, the grant was 'a decent pot of money, but it goes really quite quickly.' Similarly, another described how campaign activities had to be limited to moments when funds were available: 'the activities I did worked around

when I had funds in my accounts...they went quite quickly actually...I just wasn't able to do as much as I'd like (to do).' Given the modest size of the grant, this is unsurprising. And, as we have explored, the financial strain of campaigning had an unequally negative impact on women already in financially precarious. Larger grants would of course enable candidates to participate in, and maximise the impact of their campaign more extensively, especially those from low income and underrepresented groups. This points to a broader structural issue: campaigning, even at the local level, remains resource-intensive and relies heavily on candidates' personal financial resilience or networks. For women with limited access to financial means, social and political networks, their campaigning and therefore their efforts to secure votes for election remain at a disadvantage, regardless of their political aptitude, campaign skill, and confidence.

Many of the remaining challenges and responsibility falls on political parties. The level of financial and non-financial support that candidates received from their parties varied according to numerous factors, including the party, whether they were standing in a target seat or not, and whether they were standing in the local or parliamentary election. Several candidates had received financial support from their parties. Nevertheless, the process was not always efficient, as one participant explained, 'I formally applied for it ... but it did take a while to get the money though...it wasn't well organised...I did receive financial support from the party but a little bit behind.' Another candidate shared that they had received an internal grant from their party which supports diverse candidates. They highlighted the additional time spent completing grant applications during the busy point in their campaign.

Inconsistent funding for campaigns across parties co-existed with deeper concerns about party transparency and the financial remuneration of elected office. One candidate shared there was a lack of transparency within her party about the financial obstacles candidates and elected officials encounter, '[the party] know there are hurdles and they don't tell you.' They shared a reluctance to stand as a local councillor because councillors 'don't get paid very much...so that kind of puts people off.' Furthermore roughly 10% of the stipend received by councillors is paid to their party. They also found that the exclusionary costs (in terms of time) of volunteering during the campaign had been a 'lost opportunity' because many potential volunteers could not afford to canvas. This points to a power asymmetry in how institutional knowledge and practical, material support is shared within party structures.

The candidates interviewed varied in terms of standing in local and parliamentary seats, and as target and non-target seats. The context in which candidates were standing influenced the level of support candidates received from their parties. As already discussed, candidates in target seats usually receive more training, support, volunteers, and resources from their party. Candidates in non-target seats often feel abandoned by their party and are then asked to campaign in other wards at their own financial expense. This was a common experience amongst the non-target candidates interviewed. One candidate shared that a senior figure in their political party thought all non-target general election candidates should be travelling across the country to support target campaigns every weekend. The candidate felt that this

was ‘removed from reality.’ Another candidate disclosed that they would not stand in a non-target seat again as it took much time away from family.

These insights collectively demonstrate that financial precarity remains a persistent obstacle, and that the grant, while necessary, does not resolve the broader political economy and structural inequity that underpins campaign inequality. Our interviews reveal that despite the support provided by the grant, systemic financial barriers remained a significant challenge for many candidates. Expenses such as travel, printing, and food were common and often underestimated, with costs quickly accumulating over the course of a campaign. For candidates with caring responsibilities that childcare and related costs added further pressure. Candidates reported relying on family and friends to help with care and childcare responsibilities during the campaign when they could not afford to pay for care cover.

Several participants also highlighted the difficulty of balancing full-time work with campaigning, leading to lost income when taking unpaid time off work, and professional sacrifices. These experiences suggest that standing for election remains economically unfeasible for those without financial stability or flexibility in the workplace allowing for unpaid time off and flexible working hours during campaign time. For those who stand without financial stability or workplace flexibility, their campaign effectiveness will undoubtedly be hampered, questioning how democratic our electoral system really is. Importantly, not all candidates face the same financial strain. In cases where candidates or their networks have greater access to wealth or financial means, economic barriers will be less pronounced. This disparity highlights barriers to political participation that candidates from financially precarious or working-class backgrounds might face and the limitations of current support structures in addressing it fully.

11. Summary and Looking Forward

The evaluation of the Fund Her grants demonstrates that even relatively lesser amounts of funding, when offered flexibly, can have a significant impact on women candidates’ ability to campaign. Recipients reported that the grants helped alleviate immediate financial pressures, covering essential campaign expenses, household costs, and personal needs that might otherwise have limited their participation. Importantly, the funding provided more than just material support. Candidates spoke about the confidence it gave them to campaign, the sense of being valued and believed in, and the connections made through being part of a wider supportive network.

Overall, the findings show that removing financial barriers not only enables women to stand and sustain their campaigns but also fosters non-financial benefits that contribute to their resilience, wellbeing, and long-term political engagement. This underscores the importance of continuing to provide accessible, flexible funding as part of efforts at more inclusive political representation.

Candidates reported that they had experienced a lack of transparency from their political parties in terms of the support available to candidates, and the party's expectations of candidates' time and financial commitments. Political parties must address this by providing clearer information to those considering candidacy on what support and funding is available and how to access it. A lack of transparency and delayed information aids those already 'on the inside' which exacerbates inequalities and reinforces structural barriers to entry that many women face when considering standing for office. Several candidates interviewed suggested that there should be greater transparency around financial and time expectations for prospective candidates during political party selection processes.

12. Recommendations

There are many structural and social issues which create barriers for women seeking, standing, and being elected to political office, especially those from underrepresented groups. Nevertheless, political parties play a key role in both reinforcing and overcoming these barriers. They can offer support (financial and otherwise) to candidates and improve the diversity of those standing for election. Parties can prioritise placing women in target/winnable seats through positive action measures (e.g. women-only shortlists) to ensure greater diversity of candidates and elected representatives.

The path to elected office is skewed in favour of candidates with access to greater financial resources. Nevertheless, as we have outlined, small amounts of financial support can have a meaningful impact on the experiences of women candidates in election campaigns. Political parties could offer targeted financial support to candidates from underrepresented groups in recognition of this. Furthermore, any grants programme should consider the pipeline of candidates in the long-term, in recognition that getting elected can take at least two attempts, especially for women and other underrepresented groups. As such, the measures of impact of a grant programme should also include who is enabled to take part to enhance their profile, gain experience, skills, and networks, as well as electoral success.

While the official candidate donations and expenses are submitted to the Electoral Commission, further research is needed to document the extent of the costs of candidacy, accounting for personal expenses (such as those covered in this report); the loss of income, and how these are met, to fully understand the scale of personal expenditure that candidacy entails.