

**FABIAN  
WOMEN**

# **WE BELONG HERE TOO**

**TEN YEARS OF THE FABIAN WOMEN'S  
NETWORK POLITICAL EDUCATION AND  
MENTORING PROGRAMME**



**DR. JESSICA SMITH**

**SUPPORTED BY**

**UNISON**  
*the public service union*

## ABOUT THE FABIAN SOCIETY

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The Fabian Society is Britain's oldest political think tank. Since 1884, the society has played a central role in developing political ideas and public policy on the left.

Through a wide range of publications and events, the society influences political and public thinking, but also provides a space for broad and open-minded debate, drawing on an unrivalled external network and its own expert research and analysis.

The society is alone among think tanks in being a democratically constituted membership organisation, with more than 7,000 members. During its history the membership has included many of the key thinkers on the British left and every Labour Prime Minister. Today it counts more than 200 parliamentarians in its number. Member-led activity includes local Fabian societies, the Scottish and Welsh Fabians, the Fabian Women's Network and the Young Fabians, which is itself the leading organisation on the left for young people to debate and influence political ideas.

The society was one of the original founders of the Labour Party and is constitutionally affiliated to the party. It is however editorially, organisationally and financially independent and works with a wide range of partners of all political persuasions and none.

### **Fabian Society**

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First published November 2022

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## ABOUT THE FABIAN WOMEN'S NETWORK

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The Fabian Women's Network is the volunteer-run women's section of the Fabian Society. We exist to ensure that diverse women's voices are influential in politics, public life and policy making. Our work is underpinned by values of sisterhood, solidarity and service.

FWN was founded in 2005 by Seema Malhotra MP, is run by a committee of elected volunteers and has no paid staff.

We aim to be an intersectional feminist network. This means we understand the barriers women face when entering and progressing in politics and public life are not the same for everyone, with some women facing multiple and intersecting layers of discrimination. FWN works to elevate a range of voices and promote those in political and public life who are underrepresented.

Our policy work encompasses a wide range of topics, includes experts by experience and platforms unusual voices to enrich the policy landscape, influencing the Labour movement and policies.

### **About Us**

 @FabianWomen

 [facebook.com/ FabianWomen](https://facebook.com/FabianWomen)

 [www.fabianwomen.org.uk](http://www.fabianwomen.org.uk)

Or sign up to our newsletter by emailing [fabianwomen@fabians.org.uk](mailto:fabianwomen@fabians.org.uk)

President: Seema Malhotra MP

### **Fabian Women's Network Executive Committee**

Cllr Sara Hyde (Chair), Lucy Caldicott and Cllr Marianna Masters (Co-Vice Chairs), Dr Liz Hind (Secretary), Caroline Adams, Emily Batchelor, Cllr Josie Channer, Cllr Catherine Fookes, Cllr Kelly Grehan, Rach Maguire, Christine Megson, Tele Ogunyemi, Lisa Rafferty, Cllr Dr Kindy Sandhu, Cllr Anya Sizer and Cllr Jackie Taylor.



## **ABOUT THE PROGRAMME ORGANISERS**

**Caroline Adams MBE** has worked for the Labour Party for over twenty-five years, nine of them for Tony Blair, including seven at No.10 Downing Street in the Political Office. She currently works for the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), working closely with the Women's PLP and the Women and Equalities Shadow team. She has been a trainer with the Labour Women's Network. She has also worked with women in Tunisia through the Westminster Foundation for Democracy to increase women's participation in the democratic processes and to ensure their voices are heard within political parties. Caroline also drove the Labour Party's pink bus on its 'Woman to Woman' tour of the country during the 2015 General Election.

*Caroline received her MBE in the 2021 New Year's Honours list for political services.*

**Christine Megson MBE** is a Vice President of the Fabian Society and created the political education and mentoring programme with Seema Malhotra MP. Her substantive career was in education including as Principal of Stafford College. She has worked as a consultant across all government delivery departments, local government and the Cabinet Office specialising in new policy delivery and designing and delivering models for integrated public services. She has worked in NGOs, a Hospital Trust and start up charities and new schools including the School Food Trust, the Innovation Unit and King's Cross Academy as an adviser, non-executive Director and volunteer. She has been a consultant to Sheffield Hallam Business School, delivers leadership programmes and coaches senior leaders. She is Chair of the Board of Trustees of The Difference.

*Christine received her MBE in the 2021 Queen's Birthday Honours list for Services to Gender Equality.*

## FWN Mentoring Scheme Advisory Group Members

Meg Munn (Chair until January 2022 and former MP)

Roberta Blackman-Woods (Chair from January 2022 and former MP)

Caroline Adams (PLP) (Programme Organiser)

Thangam Debbonaire MP

Julie Fitzgerald (Public Life Adviser)

Kate Green MP (Former Chair Fabian Society)

Baroness Dianne Hayter (Former Chair Fabian Society)

Sara Hyde (Chair Fabian Women's Network)

Seema Malhotra MP (President Fabian Women's Network)

Christine Megson (Programme Organiser and a Vice President Fabian Society)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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**Dr Jessica C. Smith** is a lecturer in politics at the University of Southampton.

Her research centres on gender, electoral politics, representation, and political leadership with a focus on British politics. Dr Smith has worked and published on the issue of women's representation in multiple arenas of politics including in the media, in Parliament and in leadership positions.

She has worked on projects on Parliamentary representation including the Fawcett Society's Strategies for Success report on women's experiences of selection and election in the UK Parliament, and the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Gender Sensitising Parliaments Guidelines.

## THE PROGRAMME IN NUMBERS

**268 mentees have been through the Programme**

**90 mentors have supported the programme**

**80 mentees have been elected as a councillor**

**Two mentees are Leaders of their Council, and one is Deputy Leader**

**10% of mentees applied for the Future Leaders Programme - 62% of these were successful**

**Former mentees include one MP, one Police and Crime Commissioner, and one London Assembly Member**

**One mentee has written a romantic comedy which features Emily Watson and Richard E. Grant**

**Mentees have been elected as Chairs of FWN, Chair of Scottish Fabians, two Chairs of Welsh Fabians and Chair of the Fabian Society.**

**One mentee is a tax adviser for Africa**

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## SEEMA MALHOTRA MP

Shadow Minister for Business and Consumers  
President of the Fabian Women's Network

Since I last wrote a foreword for our report, we have witnessed a general election, the resignation of three Prime Ministers, a global pandemic and the passing of a Monarch. Brexit and Covid have been followed by a cost of living crisis unlike any we have seen for decades. Politics has been a constant case of change, as we look from one crisis to the next. The gender impact of each of these crises has been significant.

After a difficult defeat in 2019, there was one bright spot: for the first time ever, women outnumbered men in the Parliamentary Labour Party. For every woman elected, there are hundreds of women behind them – those who supported and surrounded them, and those who paved the way for them. I also want to celebrate the 1,123 female candidates who stood in the general election, the highest number on record. I hope – if you are one of those candidates reading this – that you are proud of running, and that it has helped you develop in your personal journey. If you are a woman reading this who has not yet stood for a political position, I hope this figure inspires you to run for election – whether that's in a socialist society, your trade union, your local council or Parliament.

The impact of Covid and lockdown

was not equally distributed: analysis from the Women's Budget Group found that women were the majority of employees in industries with some of the highest Covid-19 job losses, including retail, accommodation and food services. Additionally, by the end of 2020, the number of BAME women workers had fallen by 17%, compared to just 1% for white women.

Official data shows women's mental health deteriorated nearly twice as fast as men's during the first lockdown, due to differences in caring responsibilities and social tendencies. 45% of women reported feeling lonely in this period. Additionally, women spent nearly twice as long caring for children as men and one in six working mothers reduced their employment hours. These months also saw an increase in women seeking help for domestic violence, whether that was because of new abuse or because ongoing abuse became unbearable under the conditions of lockdown.

It was also a time when politics went online too, as debates and voting were done remotely. Many MPs didn't even get to meet for a year as lockdown came just three months after the election. We all, and including Parliament, had to learn to adapt, accelerating a shift in culture in organisations. I am particular-

ly proud of how the FWN adapted and how Christine, Caroline and the team ensured the FWN political education and mentoring programme continued. The speed and care with which the programme went online was a tribute to the organisers.

The relationships between mentor and mentee were still powerfully nurtured under COVID. Some women reported that these relationships became much more important through the isolation of lockdown. I also want to pay tribute to the patience and adaptation of the FWN mentees who took it all in their stride as some events were delayed for months or scaled down, even pitching in to help set up and run events online. That support and flexibility has been one of the reasons why the mentoring scheme has evolved and succeeded in its goal of empowering women, becoming even more inclusive.

But other events have also defined this time. The horrific abduction and murder of Sarah Everard by a serving police officer was also a defining moment of the last few years that tested the strength of our political and policing systems in preventing and addressing violence against women and girls. Levels of trust hit a new low and movements like Reclaim the Streets which have involved many Fabian women have been pivotal in the subsequent response. The inadequate handling of the case, as well as that of Bibaa Henry and Nicola Smallman, and information that has

subsequently come to light about a misogynistic culture in parts of the Met and other police forces has led to demands for change. The Met Commander has been replaced as the force entered special measures. The need for action on women's safety is acute, and listening to women and their day-to-day lived experience is central to the required reform.

The culture of Westminster politics has also come under scrutiny with shocking cases of former MPs like Charlie Elphicke and Andrew Griffiths sexually harassing constituents and staff coming to light, as well as the turning of a blind eye by the Prime Minister to sexual harassment by friends as in the case of Chris Pincher. Unions have called Parliament an 'unsafe' workplace due to 'seemingly endless' sexual harassment from MPs. Parliament must lead by example, and parliamentary privilege must not be a license to abuse. Events like these have put some young women off from working in Parliament or politics. They deserve better. If we are serious about the engagement of more women in our politics and public life, we must listen to calls for reform from women, including many Fabians, for lasting structural change to our political standards and institutions.

I also want to say a few words on the passing of Queen Elizabeth II. Many speeches in Parliament spoke about her as a feminist and as a women leader at the heart of our nation. When the

Queen was born in 1926, there had been just 10 female MPs, and women did not yet even have the right to vote on equal terms as men. She died just days after inviting her third female Prime Minister to form a government. She was a witness to the achievements made in women's representation in politics, and she was also a part of that change. Whatever your views may be on our constitutional monarchy, she was an extraordinary female leader who juggled family, public service and being Head of State and the Commonwealth and to whom I pay tribute.

I'd like to say thank you to everyone at the FWN, especially our Chair Sara Hyde and executive, but I'd also like to express my gratitude in particular to the Organisers Christine Megson and Caroline Adams. The programme would not be possible without them.

I'd also like to say thank you to Andrew Harrop, the General Secretary of the Fabian Society, who has cham-

pioned the FWN and its political education and mentoring programme, and has offered resources whenever possible, and to Professor Rosie Campbell and now to Dr Jessica Smith, who have given this programme strong objectives, support and evaluation through these reports since its inception. Our advisory group has been a huge asset, helping us build on what works well for a stronger programme. Thank you also to Labour Women's Network, who have helped us build up this programme, sharing knowledge and resources.

We are all deeply grateful to our mentors from the House of Lords, House of Commons and across business and civil society who give up their time every year to support our mentees. Finally, thank you to Unison, without whose financial support this programme and these reports would not be able to run.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The title of this report, "We belong here too", comes from a comment from a mentee reflecting on one of the set piece events of the programme – a day spent in the Westminster Parliament. It is reflective of the strength of the Fabian Women's Network mentoring programme in motivating and inspiring a diversity of women to find their space in public life. The statement "we", as opposed to "I", belong here too signifies the powerful support networks formed within and across the cohorts of women who have been through the programme.

The Fabian Women's Network political education and mentoring programme has just celebrated its tenth anniversary. The scheme includes a series of events and workshops aimed at supporting the skills needed for public life, such as public speaking, speech writing and campaigning, as well as focusing on personal development and building women's networks. Alongside these events a one-to-one peer mentoring scheme provides vital support for participants.

This report examines the experiences of cohorts 8, 9 and 10 (2018-2021) and reflects on ten years of the programme. The most notable development since the last report has been that for some of these recent cohorts the experience has been changed by the Coronavirus pandemic with elements of the programme moving online. The scheme's organisers

have been keen to learn from this experience and takeaway the 'good' of the pandemic. The report therefore recommends firstly, that online regular 'lunchtime skills workshops' are continued as they pave the way for more regular contact across cohorts who are often geographically dispersed. Secondly, a lesson from the Covid experience is that there is an advantage of having an online meet up prior to an in-person one. Meeting online allows for an easing of social barriers with all mentees entering on an equal footing and avoiding the common habit of clustering into like-minded groups.

It is a testament to the experience and commitment of the leaders of the programme that it continues to succeed and grow as we reach the milestone of 10 years. In that time, 268 mentees have benefitted from the skills, networks and support the scheme gives. Former mentees have entered a variety of roles in public life both in the UK and globally and many are now in elected office. As women in public life face new challenges, especially the increased violence against women online, the scheme must continue to play a vital part in supporting women and providing the foundations from which women can pursue varied and vital roles in public life.

## INTRODUCTION

The fourth evaluation of the Fabian Women's Network political education and mentoring programme covers cohorts 8, 9 and 10 (from 2018 to 2021) and comes as the programme celebrates its tenth anniversary. The report is based on survey data and focus groups with current and former mentees in the programme as well as observational analysis of the 'set piece' Parliament Day (in Westminster and Cardiff).

In September 2018 the eighth cohort started the Fabian Women's Network Mentoring and Political Education Programme, following in the footsteps of 216 women before them. To date 268 women have participated in the programme and 90 mentors have contributed their expertise and support from many areas of public life including the House of Commons and the House of Lords, the charity sector, and regional and local government. Over the ten years of the programme a number have become mentors who started out as participants in the programme themselves.

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"Life changing!"

**Cllr Sara Hyde**  
PhD Student, Chair of FWN

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For recent cohorts the experience of the programme has been slightly different having been interrupted or shaped by the coronavirus pandemic. The organisers of the programme continued to facilitate a supportive and inspiring environment for the mentees despite the trying circumstances. Indeed, the report reflects on lessons learnt from this experience as introducing online elements to the programme had some expected, and some less expected, benefits which there is value in continuing for future programmes.

As with previous reflections on the programme it is clear that it continues to motivate and inspire its mentees. Furthermore, reflecting on 10 years of the programme we can see how previous participants have gone on to do a myriad of impressive roles in public life including running for elected offices, becoming CEOs of charities, starting campaigns for women's equality and gaining PhDs.

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"Thanks for giving me the best magic key to open doors I didn't know existed!"

**Cllr Marianna Masters**

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## OUTLINE OF THE PROGRAMME

The programme is highly competitive, and the selection process is rigorous. A diverse slate of women is chosen for the programme every year in terms of background, experience, age, ethnic identity, and geography.

### DAYS AND EVENTS

The programme has a series of compulsory set events combined with optional events and skills workshops.

To begin with there is an **induction event** led by the organisers which introduces mentees to each other and to the structure of the programme. Speakers at this induction event typically include Seema Malhotra MP as the co-founder of the programme, Thangam Debbonaire MP as a long-standing mentor along with one of her mentees, and a leading journalist. The induction day includes an opportunity for mentees to network with each other and begin to form their relationship which is vital to the programme. Buddies may also join the networking part of the induction and help prepare mentees for the programme and for their first meeting with their mentor.

**Parliament Day** is a compulsory set event day in the House of Commons. It tends to include a tour, attendance at a Select Committee or Women's PLP meeting, meetings with a range of MPs, Lords, and senior Labour members, and

At the start of the programme mentees are matched with a 'buddy' from previous cohorts as well as a mentor – a woman with significant experience of public life.

a skills exercise. During the day sessions are always chaired by a mentee and are held across the parliamentary estate, allowing members to feel comfortable in the Westminster setting. The day concludes with drinks or a reception with members of the Shadow Cabinet with MPs and mentors. In cohort 8 there was also a parliament day at the Welsh Parliament.







A visit to the **Labour Party headquarters** is normally a set part of the programme. Here members are introduced to senior staff such as the General Secretary of the Labour Party as well as other staff leading on campaigns and events.

A two-day skills workshop is held in Northern College, Wentworth Castle usually referred to as the **Barnsley weekend**. The focus of the few days is on developing leadership skills including aspects such as confidence, public speaking, and chairing. There is also

a focus on personal development with 'fireside chats' where mentees have the opportunity to have personal in-depth conversations with each other.

Alongside the compulsory events there are series of **skills events** and **workshops** through the programme. These vary across years dependent on the needs of the cohort. These include events on subjects such as: how to be a trustee, dealing with the press and the media, campaigning and interview skills.



## DEALING WITH COVID-19

In light of the coronavirus pandemic changes were made to the programme in particular to cohorts 9 and 10. As with so many workplaces and offices the programme adapted to the pandemic by moving online. This led to some changes to the programme including:

- The initial induction event was held online for cohort 10 meaning participants did not meet face to face until much later in the programme than normal.

- Friday lunchtime 'skills hours' were hosted online on a series of topics. These were designed to train mentees on a variety of aspects of public life such as media, interviews, and writing.
- For cohort 9 the Parliament Day was hosted online. A series of guest speakers spoke about their experiences of running for parliament, as an MP and how to negotiate public life as a woman. Speakers included Jess Phillips MP, Caroline Harris MP, and Baroness Hayter.

## SURVEY RESULTS

We measure the outcomes of the programme using a mixed methods approach. Participants across all cohorts are surveyed at the beginning and the end of the programme. In addition to this, focus groups were run with each cohort reflecting on their experiences of the programme.

The following survey results are from cohorts 8 and 10.

### PERSONAL GOALS

At the beginning the programme mentees set out three personal learning goals. When asked at the end of the programme the extent to which they had achieved these goals the majority of respondents across the cohorts felt they had achieved their goals, with 80% in the 20-21 cohort fully achieving at least two goals and 65% in 18-19.

	Goal 1			Goal 2			Goal 3		
	<i>Not achieved</i>	<i>Achieved to some extent</i>	<i>Fully Achieved</i>	<i>Not achieved</i>	<i>Achieved to some extent</i>	<i>Fully Achieved</i>	<i>Not achieved</i>	<i>Achieved to some extent</i>	<i>Fully Achieved</i>
18-19	1	6	11	3	4	11	0	1	14
19-20	1	4	21	0	5	21	0	10	16

## SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

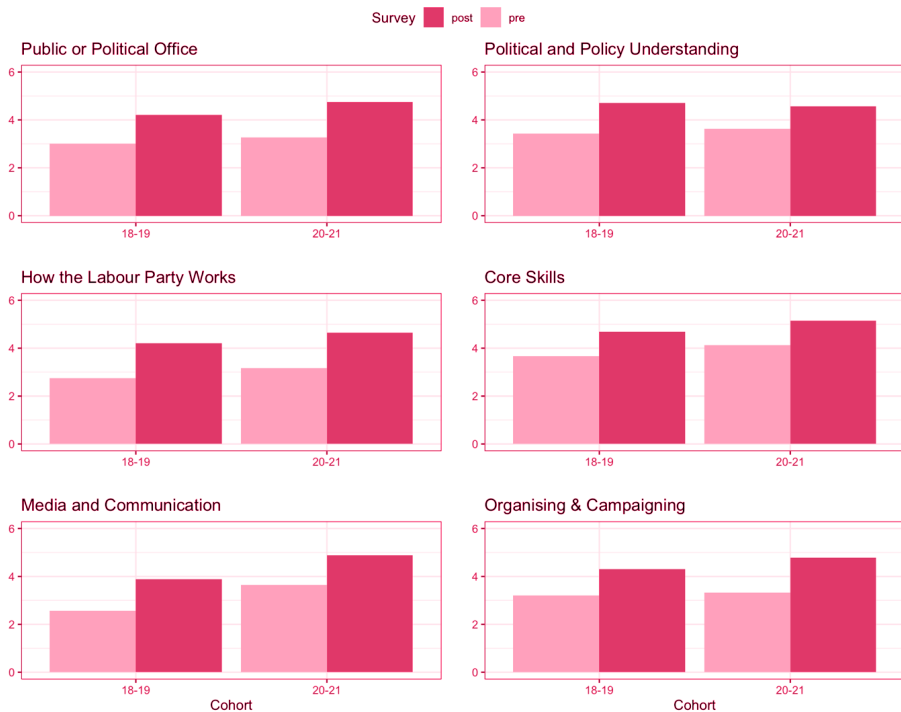


In the pre-programme survey mentees are asked two skills that they are keen to learn during the programme. This word cloud shows the most common words used to describe these skills in mentee responses.

As well as using these responses to guide the programme we also evaluate how mentees feel their skills and knowledge have improved over the scheme by asking mentees to rate their possession of a series of skills and knowledge on a scale of 1 to 6 (with high scores being more positive). In analysis the survey questions were grouped into six categories based on the political and public life skills frameworks that guide the design of the programme.

Participants are in particular looking to develop their political skills and knowledge as well as their media skills and understandings of public office. Also common are skills such as networking, developing confidence and public speaking.





Across all six categories, the average respondents' ratings of their skills increased from before the programme to after. Given that the common skills that mentees wanted to improve on during the programme included political skills and knowledge it is a sign of success to see that the biggest jump was seen on mentees' self-rated knowledge of the Labour Party. For both cohorts the average ratings on this scale increased by 1.5 of the 6-point scale after experiencing the programme. Similarly political and policy understandings increased by over 1 point on the 6-point scale.



Mentees were also keen to improve upon their skills and knowledge relating to public office and public life. Again, we see good improvement on these skills over the course of the programme with an increase of 1.2 for cohort 8 and 1.5 for cohort 10 on the political and public office aspect of the skills framework which included skills such as understanding the process of selection for national office, and understanding the roles and responsibilities of the boards of public bodies. Relatedly similar increases were seen on organising and campaigning which include skills such as being invited to speak at meetings, regional and national networks and relationship building. Another vital skill mentees were keen to learn was on media and public speaking, we see that on average in both cohorts mentees felt their media and communication skills had greatly improved including aspects such as being confident in radio/TV de-



bates, and feeling journalists are interested in their opinions

Finally, on the core skills of aspects of political and public life such as confidence and being seen as leaders, across both cohorts improvements were seen with the average rating of these core skills increasing by 1 point in cohort 8 and 1.3 in cohort 10.



# FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

## RECRUITMENT

Participants heard about the network in a variety of ways but most common was through their existing networks, either a work colleague or friend who had been on the programme before or from similar networks who encouraged them

to apply. If it was not through a network participants tended to have heard of the programme through social media or the newsletter as they were a member of the Fabian Society.

## DECIDING TO APPLY

There were four main reasons mentees chose to apply for the scheme. Firstly, for the opportunity to build networks. Secondly, for the skills they wanted to gain to achieve their goals or move forward. One focus group participant said, "I was passionate about the issues that concern me but did not know how to act on those issues". Thirdly, mentees want to 'understand the rules of the game'.

Focus group participants felt they needed more insider knowledge especially of the formal institutions of politics such as parliament. One participant, who ran for regional elected office previously, said, "I just felt like I was playing a game and I didn't know the rules and no one would tell me what the rules were". Fourthly, mentees are keen to clarify their career goals and future.

## MENTORING SCHEME

Mentees had mixed experiences with their assigned mentors. The relationship between mentee and mentor differed in how it was used, how often they met, and how positive the experience was. Many of those with a positive experience had a relationship which focused on practical elements such as helping them to prep for an interview or planning their goals. Whilst some of the more negative experiences were also to do with context or personality clashes, for instance if an MP was

a mentor and then became very busy, there were some suggestions in an earlier focus group about how to overall improve the relationship including more guidance and planning or perhaps a skills session and/or training guide on mentoring. These suggestions were acted upon with the introduction of guidance for mentees on how to get more of their mentoring relationship. Later groups made some suggestion for further ways to guide the relationship such as structured check in points.



**'PARLIAMENT DAYS' AND BARNSELY**



As with previous reports the set piece days such as the Parliament Day and the Barnsley away weekend remain to be a core strength of the FWN programme and one which receives glowing reports from mentees. The Parliament Day is especially important in demystifying the institution and seeing the institution as accessible. For some it is the first time they have been inside Parliament, for others who may work in the institution or are more familiar it is a chance to share experiences with other mentees. As one focus group participant eloquently described it: "We came away thinking well we are the next in Parliament ... [we came out thinking] we belong here too". For many it tackled issues of confidence and imposter syndrome which they felt were holding them back from achieving their goals.

In observing the Parliament Day at both Westminster and Cardiff it was clear how mentees had a collaborative bond with one another and supported each other in both the formal and informal elements of the day. The element of mentees chairing each session worked particularly well to feel the day was driven more by mentees than the organisers and that it was an interactive day rather one for mentees to just observe. At the end of the Parliament Day in Westminster there was a particularly striking moment watching the cohort gather for a group picture in the Shadow Cabinet room, a group of women laughing, chatting, and hugging under portraits of men in the masculine wood panelled room. It drove home the message of women belonged in this space too and were clearly comfortable in occupying it by the end of the day.

Focus group participants were similarly overwhelmingly positive about the Barnsley away weekend, describing it as “life affirming”, “uplifting”, and “cathartic”. As well as the skills learnt across the two days it is clear that mentees value this set piece event due to the focus on personal development. The ‘fireside chats’ meant mentees opened up to each other and worked on personal issues. A small reform to the weekend which was raised by several mentees was around the intensity of these set pieces, especially for more introverted

### COVID: LESSONS LEARNT

For some recent cohorts the mentoring programme has been a slightly different experience, with more being hosted online and for cohort 10 meeting online first before ever meeting in person. In the focus groups the mentees reflected on their experiences over the pandemic and what they valued and disliked about online contact. In the pre- and post-programme surveys for cohort 10 mentees rated their confidence from 1 to 6 on participating in online meetings and events (with higher scores meaning more confidence). Although confidence online was high in the pre-programme survey it still increased after mentees went through the programme.

participants. In an ideal world, mentees would like to have more time for reflection built into the programme.

Overall, the Barnsley weekend is seen as empowering and transformational for many: “I did not expect to get the level of strength from the weekend that I did”. The weekend led some to make big decisions on the way home, even deciding to run for political office on the back of the confidence and support they had received over the weekend.

It was even identified in the focus groups that meeting online first, may not seem logical, but actually worked to breakdown social barriers and encouraged everyone in the group to engage on an equal level from the beginning. Some focus group participants identified that when people first meet in person there is a tendency to group with those you relate to but online there is more overall group bonding. When the cohort then met in person it felt like the whole group had opened up to one another.

Another advantage identified about the online aspects of more recent schemes was that it allowed for more

regular contact, especially with the Friday lunchtime skills workshops. This also paved the way for the mentees to regularly help each other out in separate mini online meetings such as when a mentee had a job interview to prepare for.

In terms of future schemes keeping online elements could definitely be beneficial. Most notably thinking about an online meet up prior to an in-person one and keeping the regular lunchtime online sessions.

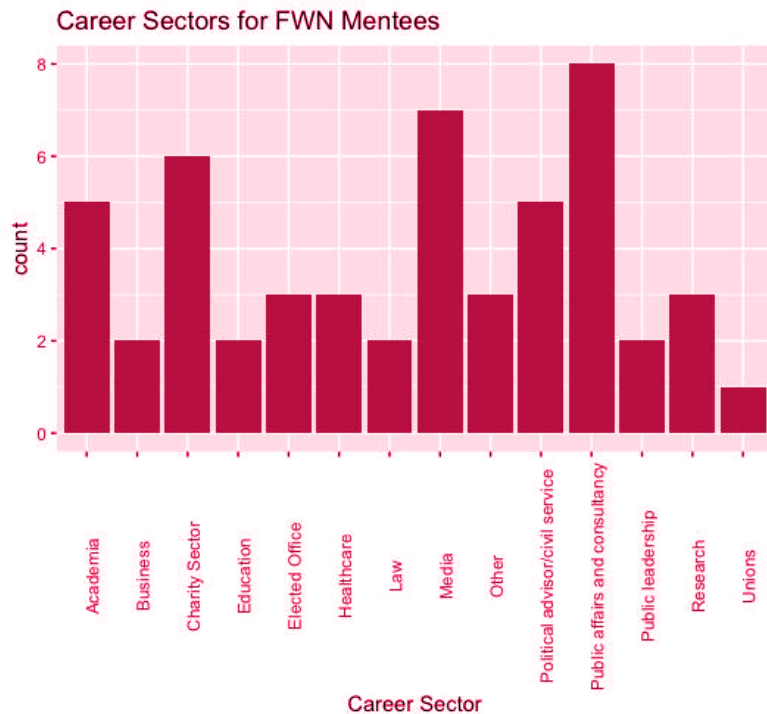


# REFLECTING ON 10 YEARS

## PREVIOUS MENTEES

Over the last 10 years 268 mentees have been through the programme. They have gone on to do a variety of roles in public life in both the UK and globally. Many have entered elected office, including 80 elected as councillors, a Westminster MP, a Police and Crime Commissioner and a London Assembly Member. In a survey of cohorts 2 to 7, 51 former mentees described the career role they were now in after participating in the programme.

The majority were in political roles including in public affairs and consultancy or political advisor roles. Many are also in the charity sector often working as policy or communication advisers in this sector as well as in the media sector. 35% (18 out of the 51) former mentees have stood for or nominated themselves for elected office either in local, regional or national levels since they completed the FWN mentoring scheme.



Former mentees were also asked what the impact of the programme had been for them. A wordcloud below shows the common words used to describe the programme. What is clear is that confidence was the vital impact for many

of the former mentees. The prominence of the word women also shows how mentees particularly noted the impact of meeting like-minded and inspiring women in challenging and motivating them to pursue new opportunities.

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"Met creative, compassionate women who are driven by ideas not egos."

**Clr Louise Gooch, Teacher**

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"It gave me confidence to take on challenging career experiences, plus the confidence to aim high."

**Caroline Watson  
Director of Transport**

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"Provided me with a network of women who are inspiring role models as well as providers of advice and expertise."

**Clr Sheila Chapman**

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## FUTURE CHALLENGES

As the mentoring scheme moves into its second decade the developing political context presents it with new challenges. Since the scheme began 10 years ago we have seen the increasing harassment and violence against politicians, especially female politicians and politicians of colour. Participants across the focus groups expressed concern about the current political environment. As one mentee simply stated, “one of the things that worries me is around safety and some of the abuse that female politicians are forced to endure”. The issue of violence, and in particular how to

deal with online violence, is something that future schemes could incorporate more training on.

There were glimmers of hope – some participants mentioned how the FWN programme had introduced them to new ways of doing politics, “[it] introduced me to ... politics that was kinder, the value of kindness was in there, and one of solidarity which was a very practical kind of solidarity”. And many continued to believe women should be putting themselves forward despite these fears and concerns.



## CASE STUDIES



### KATE TALBOT

Cohort 2

The FWN Mentoring Scheme is phenomenal. There's no doubt it changed my life.

When I joined cohort two I was a commercial manager for a retailer, and now I'm a senior media adviser to the Minister for Education and Industrial Relations in Queensland, Australia. Between those jobs I've worked as a community organiser, for a Shadow Cabinet Minister in Westminster, in London's City Hall, and in local government. I also started my own business and sat on the FWN Executive Committee for four years, helping to co-ordinate and evaluate the scheme.

Although my jobs (and location!) have changed a lot, the lessons I learned and networks I built during the scheme have remained. It's a privilege to be part of

such an incredible group of women. We may be diverse when it comes to things like our ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities, but the camaraderie and support is universal. I've helped and been helped by mentees I've never met, simply on the basis that we are both part of this wonderful network.

Christine and Caroline are two of the most outstanding women I've ever met, and I am so grateful for the time and effort they have put into creating and nurturing this programme.

It's a place where women supercharge their skills, realise ambitions far beyond what they'd previously imagined, and provide unwavering support to those around them: I cannot recommend the scheme highly enough.



## CLLR CATHERINE FOOKES

Cohort 4

Being a newly elected Councillor and Cabinet member as well as CEO of an award-winning Charity campaigning for equality for Women in Wales, the Fabian Women's Network has always been behind me, beside me and in-front of me.

They have been behind me - watching my back and encouraging me to stand and giving me the tools to do so via the excellent sessions for example on public speaking, campaigning and how to get selected.

And they have been beside me – supporting, campaigning, and picking up the pieces when I lost an election by 24 votes. They gave me the strength to carry on and stand again.

And, most importantly they have been in-front of me - those who have gone through the programme and are now MPs, Councillors, Council Leaders – they have all lit a path and thrown down the ladder to those of us that are still on our journey.

The strength in the programme is not only that you see the seats of power

in the UK and realise you too can and should be a part of them - that your voice is both valuable and needed - but that after the programme a network of supporters and a huge knowledge bank is available to you.

I can safely say I would not have been able to fulfil many, if any, of my unspoken ambitions had I not gained a place on the 2014 mentoring programme.

When I came on the programme I had just joined the local Labour Party but was struggling to know what to do and how to make a mark. I was in a job which had suited well when my children were younger but it didn't use the campaigning skills I knew I had. I was angry at feeling unrepresented in politics, scared of the way our politics of division and hatred was going.

The programme helped me articulate where I wanted to go, gave me the confidence to pursue that goal and helped me find my political voice and my political tribe, and I will be forever grateful.



## CLLR AMNA ABDUL

Cohort 6

I always felt like politics wasn't for women like me. A Muslim woman, who wears the hijab, from an under represented community, who is mixed race, and has struggled with her own identity, and never felt like she belonged was perhaps not what your average politician looks like.

That was something I believed for a long time, and even when I joined the Labour Party, I saw how that feeling was played out because so many people were uncomfortable by the presence of women who looked like me. Not only because they simply weren't used to women like me, but also because it challenged some narrow views of how visibly Muslim women were meant to be like.

But I stayed in the party because regardless of those experiences, I knew that I needed to persist, and in order to do that, I needed support.

It was why I applied for the Fabian Women's Network mentoring programme, and it shaped so much of who I am today and what I've been able to achieve.

When I started the programme, I never thought I would have built the relationships I have or developed the level of confidence and understanding my own power and position that I have

now within the party and wider.

Not only did the mentoring provide me with the perseverance needed to push through difficult selection processes at council level, that saw me elected in my home ward in 2019, with the support of many of my Fabian sisters who travelled up to campaign alongside me.

But more recently, alongside two Fabian sisters, Shaista Aziz and Huda Jawad we created a petition to ban racists from football after the Euro finals in 2021, and became known as The Three Hijabis at the forefront of an anti-racist movement within football that garnered over a million signatures in just 48 hours, catapulting us into local, national and international media. What we've managed to do in one year has been extraordinary, not only that the Prime Minister had to react to our petition to extend banning orders, but also numerous meetings with the FA and more recently The Premier League, as well as connections to the world of cricket. We continue on by focusing on setting up The Three Hijabis as an organisation invested in ensuring that accountability and change are at the core of our work to eradicate racism and misogyny from sport.

The power of the Fabian Women's mentoring scheme is in how Christine



and Caroline, maintain our connection to the wider network, long after our intensive year in our own cohort. It allows us to really explore a deeper sense of who we are and how we work and connect with one another as Labour women, trying to navigate difficult political landscapes.

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"The mentoring programme shaped so much of who I am today and what I've been able to achieve."

**Cllr Amna Abul**

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## FOUR MENTEES TURN MONMOUTH RED

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In May 2022 four mentees from different cohorts stood in the Tory Monmouth local council elections. They supported each other and other mentees came to campaign for them. They made Fabian history by turning Monmouth red. Mary Ann Brocklesby won her "unwinnable seat" by 11 votes and in her first council

role was elected the first woman leader of Monmouthshire. Su Mcconnel became chief whip and Catrin Mabe and Catherine Fookes members of the cabinet. Monmouthshire became the first council in Wales to achieve a gender balance across their elected councillors.

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"Zoom lent an intensity to our meetings and discussions I don't think would have happened in real life."

**Cllr Mary Ann Brocklesby**  
**Leader of Monmouth Council**

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## REFLECTIONS FROM THE ORGANISERS



It is hard to believe that at the time of writing, we are working with cohort 11, that we recently celebrated our tenth anniversary, and that nearly 300 women have been through the programme. When we launched the political and public life mentoring programme, we could not have foreseen where we would be today with so many mentees achieving so much and having such a positive impact on others' lives. We

made it clear from the beginning that our programme was designed to enable more women to participate in politics and in public life, and to build the capacity and confidence of women to perform public roles. We had drawn up a skills framework to help us deliver a programme of training to equip women for these roles with a 10 year plan for developing a network across the country which would support them.

### OUR CHALLENGE AS ORGANISERS

Our annual goal remains to recruit a cohort that is diverse, in terms of sector, geography, faith, ethnicity and age without any of these factors or disability being perceived as barriers to applying for the programme. The mix is critically important to the programme. Cohorts are now almost 50% from outside London. Though on average 35% of each cohort are in their 20s and 30s, we also have around 15% over 50s

adding rich experience to the crucible. Generally, 60% of our cohorts are white – compared to 86 % of the national figure. Although we are encouraged that our ethnicity profile continues to be diverse, we know there are more barriers to be overcome, particularly so we can support more Black women's voices to be heard and more women feel engaged in politics and public life.

### Age profile: Cohorts 10 & 11

Age	Cohort 10 %	Cohort 11 %
20-29	35.7	35.7
30-39	32.2	24.9
40-49	17.8	24.9
50-59	10.7	14.5
60-69	4.6	0

### Ethnic profile Cohorts 10 & 11

	National %	Cohort 10 %	Cohort 11 %
White	86	60.7	63
Mixed race	2.2	17.85	7
Asian	8	3.6	10.5
Black	3	17.85	14
Other			3.5

### Where Cohort 10 & 11 mentees live

	Cohort 10 %	Cohort 11 %
London	42	56
NE	3.57	7
NW	14.2	7
Y&H	10.7	3.5
East	0	7
East Midlands	0	3.5
West Midlands	1	0
SE	0	14
Wales	3.57	0

## IMPACT AND INFLUENCE

We would like to thank Dr Jess Smith from Southampton University for taking over from Professors Rosie Campbell and Joni Lovenduski in continuing to formally evaluate our progress through these publications and give us helpful pointers for development. Our impact is also being measured in less formal ways.

We accept women on the programme who have already started on their personal journey and all of them are at different stages so outside of political selection/election there's no group baseline to measure achievement beyond the end of a cohort, only individual aspiration. On a weekly basis we receive notes from mentees letting us know that they had gone for a more senior post or had been promoted "earlier than expected"; that they'd finished their PhD or been accepted to study on a prestigious programme in Princeton or the Clore Leadership or gained a Churchill Fellowship; that they had become women's officer or secretary in their CLP.

What we love to hear is that the programme has had a profound impact on a mentee's life, causing them to focus on what they are really passionate about

or where they can make the greatest difference.

To celebrate the tenth anniversary, we captured a number of women's journeys as Jess has referenced and asked what impact the programme has had.

*"Gave me the confidence and courage to stand for public office."*

*"Learned how to transfer corporate business skills to public service skills. This has enabled me to be bolder in my career/life goals."*

Attending the Labour Party Conference really brings home to us the reach of our mentees with the increasing numbers organising, chairing and speaking on panels, being seen as experts in their sectors from housing to social justice and influencing policies in the environment or electoral reform. In many of the events and sessions, mentees were getting noticed and asking questions and being applauded by others.

At the time of writing a number of mentees are seeking selection as Parliamentary candidates and many have run for office over recent years. We have one MP, a Police and Crime Commissioner and a London Assembly mem-

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*"Amazing group of women who challenge and inspire me every day"*

**Lucy Caldicott**  
**Founder & Director Change Out**

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ber. For the 80 elected as councillors it is much easier to measure their impact and growing influence. Amongst our councillor mentees, we have two council leaders, one deputy leader and a raft of women in cabinet, whip or committee

chairing roles. The average number of constituents in a mentee's ward is c 1,300 which means our mentees' influence impacts over one million people's lives.

## HOW THE PROGRAMME CHANGED DURING THE PANDEMIC

We were totally inspired, but not surprised, by the way mentees across the cohorts responded to the pandemic. They immediately took on local leadership roles and shared information and gave support and advice across the WhatsApp group. We witnessed the immense challenges faced by mentees on the front line - particularly those working in hospitals and public services, those who are councillors with constituents needing help as well as those who lost loved ones. One of our media trainers made a video capturing the varied experiences and reflections and deep analysis of a group of mentees. The network provided a source of comfort for many and particularly for those on the programme during the pandemic. When we asked applicants to describe the effect of the pandemic on them, we read the most heart wrenching stories but also further examples of how Fabian women played key roles in their sphere of influence.

We found that our forced entry into the virtual world has been transformational, in terms of the delivery of the

programme. The one hour lunchtime sessions which we introduced during the pandemic provided immediate access to mentees from Newcastle to Kent and could be organised at short notice, if for example a mentee wanted a practice run before presenting virtually to a conference. Small group training in dealing with the media or public speaking became far more powerful. We even managed a virtual speed networking session which allowed guests and mentees from all over the country to mix.

But as Dr Jess Smith highlights in her report, it wasn't until we gained feedback during the focus groups that we recognised that the group dynamics were totally different when the induction was on screen. Those women who in other settings had found no-one who looked like them and did not immediately gravitate towards someone else in a group, reported a sense of belonging from the outset which remained throughout the programme. Our need to think differently and more flexibly really paid off.

## A VIBRANT NETWORK

Undoubtedly, we have built up a large alumni network which provides rich social and intellectual capital to draw on. Many of the mentees are in touch with each other on a regular basis through an exchange of information or responses to challenges on topics, from supporting refugees and asylum seekers to tackling health inequalities. Groups based on sector interests such as mentees in education or in health allow professional networking. The mentee

Councillor WhatsApp group provides a great source for sharing expertise and experience particularly for new councillors. We provide a safe space for discussion as women find their political voice and a location for policy development. As one participant said, *"Participating in the programme has provided me with a network of women who are inspiring role models as well as providers of advice and expertise."*

## THE MENTORS AND ADVISERS

Finally, we would especially want to thank the 100 plus mentors and advisers - some of whom have been with us since the first year who share their time, experience and expertise to support our mentees.

Mentors set their mentees great challenges from contributing to a media broadcast to considering what feminist leadership looks like. We now are able

to draw on our alumni as mentors or role models for the speed networking sessions.

Heartfelt thanks also to Meg Munn who has given us such a helpful steer as Chair of our Advisory Group since the outset as well as joining the annual Barnsley weekend and sharing invaluable wisdom with cohort after cohort.

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"Gave me the confidence to apply for trustee roles."

**Charlotte Chorley**  
Chair of Trustees, Fumble

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"The experience set me up for the success I later experienced."

**Reema Patel**  
Research Director, Ipsos Mori

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"The emotional/social support of the network was key to believing I was capable of founding and leading a charity."

**Kiran Gill**  
CEO The Difference

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"Confidence to pursue my leadership trajectory."

**Dr Jayne Lim**  
Chief Clinical Information Officer

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# WE BELONG HERE TOO

## TEN YEARS OF THE FABIAN WOMEN'S NETWORK POLITICAL EDUCATION AND MENTORING PROGRAMME

This report is an evaluation of the eighth, ninth and tenth years of the Fabian Women's Network Mentoring and Political Education Programme (launched in 2011). Since the publication of *Cracks in the Glass Ceiling* in 2014, *Footsteps in the Sand* in 2016 and *Finding Her Political Voice* in 2019 it is a testament to the experience and commitment of the leaders of the mentoring programme that it continues to succeed and grow.

*Dr Jessica Smith*

'Support and flexibility has been one of the reasons why the mentoring scheme has evolved and succeeded in its goal of empowering women, becoming even more inclusive.'

*Seema Malhotra MP*

ISBN-13-978-0-7163-4136-9