What are political parties doing to ensure that female representation will increase at the next general election given the impact that the 2018 Boundary Commission Review could have?

The lack of female representation in the House of Commons is a well-documented problem that has existed long before the proposals laid out in the 2018 Boundary Commission review. Indeed, it is something that the Ulster Unionist Party has been looking at not only in the context of the House of Commons but also the Northern Ireland Assembly and at the level of local government. We believe that engaging women in politics is a challenge to be addressed across all levels of government and across all sections of our party including our Party Officers, our Youth membership, our constituency staff and so on. We are also concerned that of the three devolved administrations the Northern Ireland Assembly has the lowest percentage of female representation. More concerning is the fact that in the European context, with the exception of the Italian regional legislatures, the Northern Ireland Assembly has the lowest female representation of comparable devolved institutions in Western Europe.

One of the first challenges we are addressing is that of developing knowledge on our membership including our women membership. To that end we are undertaking research in the form of a membership survey and focus groups in conjunction with the university of Huddersfield, Ulster University, University of Bath, University of Liverpool and Canterbury Christ Church University. The membership survey examines opinions and attitudes on a wide range of issues across the party, and included within that are a number of questions about the role of women in politics. The survey also asked respondents to indicate whether they agreed or disagreed with the following statements:

- Politics in Northern Ireland would improve if there were more women elected.
- Women are better placed than men to represent women’s interests in politics.
- There is discrimination against women in public life.
- A woman candidate will lose votes.
- The Ulster Unionist Party should have a fixed proportion of women candidates.

The survey should be concluded within a matter of weeks and its findings along with the findings of the focus groups will be included in a book about the Ulster Unionist Party. We look forward to gaining more insight into our current women membership and using that knowledge for the development of the party in the future.

At a party level we have recently spent time researching engagement of women and young people in politics in Northern Ireland as a whole and have looked at examples of best practice across the sector. This is an ongoing process and all research has been circulated amongst elected representatives and other stakeholders within the party. At present this is still an internal party matter. However, we accept that research shows that representation of women in politics in Northern Ireland has a direct association with candidate selection. In addition, an examination of the 2011 Assembly elections indicates that female candidates generally fared better than their male counterparts in terms of votes won, but the lower numbers elected were more reflective of lower numbers of candidates. Lastly if, as research suggests, larger numbers of seats tend to favour women, upcoming reductions at a council and assembly level as well as in the House of Commons may affect the numbers of women returned.
The main mechanisms by which we plan to ensure that female political representation increases in our own party are:

1. Encouraging more women to become members of the Ulster Unionist Party and to pursue elected office.

   - As a party we have invested more time and finances in having a presence on University campuses, agricultural shows and fairs, schools and a variety of other outreach activities. We believe by getting out into local communities we can begin to attract a broad range of membership from all groups and particularly women.
   - At the Ulster Unionist Party Conference 2016 many of our female members spoke alongside their male colleagues about their experiences and aspirations as MLAs, Councillors and members of the Ulster Young Unionists. In this way we want to showcase the talented women in our party and encourage other women to get involved and put themselves forward for elected positions.

2. Developing support mechanisms for female members, potential candidates and representatives including training and mentoring.

   - In 2009 the Women’s Development Officer founded the Dame Dehra Parker Programme which provided seminars for female members of the Party to build knowledge, develop skills and support women in the party. The programme continued into 2010 and focused on policy issues including European policy, the economy and human rights issues. In the 2007 Assembly Elections we returned no female MLAs, in 2011 we returned 2 and in 2016 we returned 4. Much of this was a result of the support and development provided by the Dame Dehra Parker Programme and we hope to continue this trend in the future.
   - In February 2017 we will be launching the Parker Mentorship Scheme which aims to provide young women in the Ulster Unionist Party with help and support in achieving their political goals. Young women in our party have a wide range of goals and ambitions from influencing policy, campaigning on local or national issues as well as standing for elected office. We want to make sure that young women feel welcomed and supported in their political ambitions whatever that might be.

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