MAKING LOCAL POLITICS WORK FOR WOMEN:

The experiences of women councillors and their reasons for not seeking re-election

Contents

1. Background

Women are significantly underrepresented in Scottish local government, making up just 29 per cent of councillors ahead of the May 2022 election. With the absence of solid data on the characteristics of councillors across Scotland, the true extent of the lack of diversity in local councils is not widely known. However, it is acknowledged that Scottish local councils are dominated by white, middle-class, older men, distinguishing their 'male, pale and stale character'. Despite a slight increase, the percentage of female councillors has flatlined, and the prospect of gender parity of representation across all local authorities still seems out of reach. It is vital that women's voices and perspectives are included in our political institutions, especially at local level, as the decisions made in many policy areas have a disproportionate impact on women's lives.

When the official Notice of Poll was released for every local authority on the 29th of March 2022, I highlighted the councillors that were standing for re-election. Figure 1 shows the total number of councillors, the proportion of men and women councillors and the percentage of councillors seeking re-election. Male councillors are re-standing at a slightly higher rate than women councillors (68 per cent versus 66 per cent of women). Councils with the lowest rate of women seeking re-election are Stirling (29 per cent) and Moray (33 per cent), while councils with the lowest rate of men seeking re-election are Clackmannanshire (42 per cent) and the City of Edinburgh (53 per cent). While it is somewhat positive that men and women are re-standing at a similar rate nationally, given that men make up the vast majority of local councillors, it is likely that their high rates of incumbency will restrict progress in women's representation.

It is also important to note that it was beyond the scope of this study to examine the number of terms councillors are retained across and the role that gender may play in the decision to stand for multiple terms. Research elsewhere has suggested that women are more likely to stand down after only one or two terms. Furthermore, as only the 2022 elections were reviewed here, it is not possible to establish whether these retention rates are typical of local elections. It is clear that further study in this area is warranted to fully understand the gendered nature of retention rates in local councils.

Council	Councillors	Women	% Women	Restanding	% Restanding	Men	% Men	Restanding	% Restanding
Aberdeen City	45	16	36%	9	56%	29	64%	20	69%
Abderdeenshire	70	26	37%	19	73%	44	63%	26	59%
Angus	28	6	21%	5	83%	22	79%	14	64%
Argyll and Bute	36	11	31%	6	55%	25	69%	17	68%
City of Edinburgh	63	23	37%	13	57%	40	63%	21	53%
Clackmannshire	18	6	33%	4	67%	12	67%	5	42%
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	30	0	0%	0	N/A	30	100%	22	73%
Dumfries and Galloway	43	9	21%	5	56%	34	79%	23	68%
Dundee	29	7	24%	5	71%	22	76%	19	86%
East Ayrshire	32	12	38%	8	67%	20	63%	11	55%
East Dumbartonshire	22	6	27%	3	50%	16	73%	11	69%
East Lothian	22	6	27%	3	50%	16	73%	10	63%
East Renfrewshire	18	5	28%	4	80%	13	72%	8	62%
Falkirk	30	10	33%	8	80%	20	67%	11	55%
Fife	75	24	32%	16	67%	51	68%	38	75%
Glasgow City	85	32	38%	20	63%	53	62%	35	66%
Highland	74	26	35%	14	54%	48	65%	26	54%
Inverclyde	22	3	14%	3	100%	19	86%	16	84%
Midlothian	18	7	39%	5	71%	11	61%	6	55%
Moray	26	9	35%	3	33%	17	65%	10	59%
North Ayrshire	33	9	27%	8	89%	24	73%	21	88%
North Lanarkshire	77	24	31%	13	54%	53	69%	36	68%
Orkney Islands	18	4	22%	4	100%	14	78%	11	79%
Perth and Kinross	40	10	25%	5	50%	30	75%	23	77%
Renfrewshire	43	16	37%	12	75%	27	63%	17	63%
Scottish Borders	34	8	24%	5	63%	26	76%	17	65%
Shetland Isles	21	5	24%	4	80%	16	76%	10	63%
South Ayrshire	28	6	21%	3	50%	22	79%	18	82%
South Lanarkshire	64	24	38%	19	79%	41	64%	36	88%
Stirling	23	7	30%	2	29%	16	70%	13	81%
West Dunbartonshire	22	6	27%	3	50%	16	73%	10	63%
West Lothian	33	10	30%	9	90%	23	70%	17	74%
Total	**1222**	**373**	**29%**	**240**	**66%**	**850**	**71%**	**578**	**68%**

Figure 1

This report presents the findings of eight interviews with female councillors, who were asked to discuss their experiences working in a council and their reasons for not seeking re-election in the May 2022 Scottish local council elections. It is vital to capture the experiences of councillors who stand down and learn from them as we aim to improve the conditions of Scottish local politics for women and one day achieve equal representation.

2. Interview Findings

I carried out eight qualitative semi-structured interviews with women local councillors. Interviews took place online on the platform Zoom or Microsoft Teams. To recruit participants, I used connections at Engender, COSLA and Elect Her to collect the names of eight women councillors who were not seeking re-election. Through email, six responded and agreed to participate. After this, an email was sent to a further 40 women councillors, detailing the nature of the research and asking if they would be willing to take part. Eight councillors responded, however, six did not meet the criteria to be interviewed or could not participate due to time constraints. Two were selected to proceed with the interviews, bringing the total number of participants to eight.

The councillors interviewed came from four local authorities, incorporating councillors from the Scottish National Party (SNP), Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Green Party. Councillors will be referred to as Councillors A-H to maintain anonymity. Councillors were asked to discuss their experiences and the main reasons why they were standing down from the councillor role. Follow-up questions were then asked to find out additional information or probe certain areas of interest.

2.1   Workload

Several participants discussed the significant workload of a councillor as a factor in their decision not to stand for re-election. Some described the unsustainable nature of the work, working full-time equivalent hours, additional responsibilities and difficulty maintaining a work-life balance while also juggling another paid role and/or care responsibilities:

> "So top line issues would be that I found the workload unsustainable… there's no balance between your work and your life, especially if you live in your ward because you can't go anywhere without seeing a work issue, and you can't go anywhere without someone talking to you about a work issue."
> – Councillor C

> "The difficulty is that there is no limit to what you do. So, whenever you take time off, you feel as though you shouldn't be."
> – Councillor E

> "I feel like I never have enough time for everyone."
> – Councillor B

> "I'm working sometimes about 50 or 60 hours a week, and you'll know from the COSLA study that basically with the amount of work that people are doing, it's no longer a part-time role, and it hasn't been for a very long time."
> – Councillor A

"I was having less and less time for anything outside of the Council. So, I felt it was probably a good time for me to step down… I'd like work-life balance back into my daily routine, to be honest."
– Councillor H

"The work-life balance of a councillor is not easy."
– Councillor G

"There's a whole pile of other kinds of organisational tasks which are important for councillors to be involved in, but then they add additional time. There's a lot of meetings in the community, often on evenings or weekends."
– Councillor G

"You don't realise until you're in, the extra work on top of dealing with committee meetings which are not family-friendly hours… they used to start at 6:00 o'clock and sometimes, depending on the agenda, they could go until 10:30 at night."
– Councillor F

Care Responsibilities

"Yeah, I think it can be because the hours of a councillor's rule don't tend to be 9-5, Monday to Friday… I don't envy people maybe with small children, for instance, and trying to manage that because it can be quite long hours, even in committee meetings, you know, can go on really late."
– Councillor H

"It's not conducive to family life."
– Councillor F

"What is, I think, still very absent is strong representation of mothers of dependent children."
– Councillor E

2.2   Culture

The culture of local councils was a prominent feature in participants' decisions to stand down. Some councils were described as toxic, masculine and even archaic, allowing outdated views and bad behaviour to be tolerated and go unchallenged.

> "The final thing is how toxic the council is; it's awful, really, really tribal and horrendous, and I think it brings out the worst in the elected members. There are behaviours that would be held to account in any other workplace that are normalised and actually celebrated, which is horrendous."
> – Councillor B

> "One of the main reasons [I'm standing down] has been the just horrendously toxic atmosphere in local government."
> – Councillor D

> "One of the others [reasons] is because of the culture within the council... I'm talking about political groups and even within your own political group. The misogyny, in particular, the really bad behaviours are quite an unacceptable thing."
> – Councillor A

> "I also think the atmosphere is extremely toxic, and the way people treat you is very horrible."
> – Councillor C

> "There are other aspects of the culture that seem more confrontational. What I might describe as macho attitudes in politics, and I don't enjoy that aspect of it. So, the culture is sort of macho or sort of stereotypically masculine, which I found difficult to find my place within."
> – Councillor G

2.3   Remuneration

The poor remuneration of councillors was noted by every participant in the study. Many discussed the 'appalling' rate of pay they receive and the insufficiency of the salary to support families and afford living costs without the need for a secondary income or a partner's income. Remuneration was also noted as affecting power dynamics and acting as a barrier to diversity for incoming councillors.

> "It's absolutely appalling."
> – Councillor A

> "I think it's pitiful. I think we are getting there, by starting the dialogue on councillor remuneration."
> – Councillor D

> "I was trying to get other women to stand, and they say, 'no, I'm in a well-paid job – councillor pay is terrible'. So, I think it is definitely a barrier to more accomplished women."
> – Councillor C

> "Another main reason is the pay; it's atrocious. You can't survive on a councillor's salary. It was a huge risk to take the role. As my partner has a salary, we could afford for me to take the risk. If I was single, I wouldn't have been able to do it."
> – Councillor B

> "But the level of pay is so ridiculous. I mean, at the moment, the councillor's salary is £18,600, and the average wage is £25,000. So, there's no way you can live on that if you have a young family and you've got dependents, a mortgage to pay."
> – Councillor F

> "I would argue it is a full-time job, but it's not renumerated as a full-time job, and really the basic salary for a councillor is generally not sufficient for somebody that is trying to pay a mortgage, raise a family... I do feel that if

you're doing the job properly and putting in the hours that are often required, then you would be lucky if you were on minimum wage."
– Councillor H

Barriers to Diversity

"I think in terms of your basic councillor salary, it's like a massive barrier, and it's fine if people want to do it as a hobby, if they're retired, if they've got their income coming in. But it's not a wage that you can, you know, realistically raise a family on, and I don't think that's fair."
– Councillor E

"So, you can see that generally, they were attracting people who were retired and had other income coming in or perhaps housewives."
- Councillor H

"I think ultimately, councillor remuneration is a barrier to diversity in council, and it's really concerning because the lack of diversity in council means we are not a representative democracy, which means that lots and lots of people are not kept in mind when making decisions."
– Councillor D

"A councillor should be paid a salary which is enough to live on. If we want people who are elected who look and sound like our population as a whole, then you need to pay enough money so that people can reasonably make the choice to stand for Council."
– Councillor G

2.4   Lack of support

The limited support available to councillors was noted by some of the participants. They were also asked if they received support from their political party in the role.

"So going back to the barriers, another thing that kind of challenges me is councillors basically don't have any support staff around them. So, if you're

an MP or MSP, you are financed to be able to recruit a team to help you... As councillors, you don't have any of that."
  – Councillor G

"But I think what we've got to remember as well, when you look at councillors, when you look at MSPs and MPs, they also get a considerable amount to run offices, you know to have that support. Now within the Council, we do have what they call Member support, but it's nothing like the support that's provided to MPs and MSPs."
  – Councillor H

Political Parties

"To be honest, we are seen, and I couldn't speak for other parties, but there's not parity of esteem. Councillors are not seen in the same way; we don't have the same level of support or resource."
  – Councillor D

"Support from the political party in terms of the headquarters? No, not in the slightest. They are concerned with parliamentary business. It's like the branches and local authorities run themselves."
  – Councillor F

2.5   Discrimination and Social Media Abuse

Several of the councillors had experienced discrimination whilst in their role, and some had encountered harassment in person or online themselves or through other female councillors. The discrimination was often sexist in nature and came in direct and indirect forms. Social media was noted by three participants as a prominent reason why they were leaving the role.

Discrimination

"Yes, I get a lot of discrimination."
  – Councillor A

"Yes, so you get comments from old men in the community being like 'you're too young, you don't know what you're doing', that happens fairly frequently."
– Councillor B

"But unfortunately, I have seen female colleagues being harassed, receiving death threats, receiving horrendous abuse."
– Councillor D

"Some males, you know, obviously not naming any names, are still stuck in an old-fashioned way of thinking about the councillor role and maybe are not so supportive to women in particular."
– Councillor F

"Yes, and they're specifically targeted, unconsciously or not, by sexist men.... the female conveners of committees, they get so much additional abuse, both from the public and internally from certain political party members, and it just feels very targeted."
– Councillor C

Social Media

"I left Facebook because it was the worst. I'm still on Twitter, but I don't talk about being a councillor there. I say it's a personal page and my mute list is like 500 people at this point. So, most of the trolls – they could be saying horrible stuff to me, but they are muted so I don't see it."
– Councillor C

"One of the other things that really concerns me is my own personal safety as well. So, you get a lot of social media abuse and I've just closed my social media account down, you know, locked it... and you know sometimes I just generally feel unsafe within the council environment, within doing my own duties and my own role."
– Councillor A

"I actually can't wait to shut down Facebook. I will never be on Facebook again."
– Councillor F

"I've not engaged with it tremendously because I know that you can come under severe attack through social media. And so, for that reason, I tend not to. But I know that some people have come under tremendous attack, and you know, incredibly personal stuff."
  – Councillor H

2.6   Undervalued or Ignored

Other participants were tired of feeling ignored, undervalued or less respected than some of their male colleagues. In addition, three participants described feeling a lack of space for women's contributions in the role.

"I mean, it's just sort of totally different the way we'll both be in a meeting and we're both saying pretty much the same thing and he'll get, you know, much more respect."
  – Councillor A

"I went outside with my colleague… the cabinet guy spent the entire time talking to him and didn't look at me, not once. And then after the meeting, I was like, 'that was infuriating, did you notice that he didn't even look at me?'"
  – Councillor B

"And one of the things that I said was that I feel that I'm not always taken as seriously as others that say the same thing… and it's that thing where it's almost imperceptible, and you don't know if it's really happening, and you don't know if you're imagining it."
  – Councillor E

Taking Up Space

"Definitely one thing that is very common, and it's not just in councils, I don't think, but in meetings men will dominate the conversation, women are more polite. Women wait until there's a gap in the conversation, and if you waited, you know, until a man let you speak, you'd be waiting forever."
  – Councillor F

"There's definitely something about, and again this is a stereotype, but men seem more likely to feel confident about occupying space and letting their voice be heard. Women seem to be more thoughtful or seem to be less likely to speak in the first place, and if they speak to speak for a shorter time."
  – Councillor G

"But see on a Zoom or [Microsoft] Teams meeting before it formally starts, you've got all the men with their cameras on talking absolute shite, taking up so much space. The meeting hasn't even started, and they're just taking up so much space!"
  – Councillor B

2.7   Different Standards

Many of the councillors felt they were held to different or higher standards than male councillors. This emerged through a difference in expectations concerning their behaviour, performance or appearance. Some discussed the pressure to prepare, and the confidence needed to perform their councillor responsibilities.

"They are just not appreciating that a lot of their behaviours are absolutely steeped in sexism and that we are absolutely held to higher standards and so much more is expected of us... I took over a promoted post when my colleague went on leave, and there were all sorts of calls for my CV. Nobody called for his CV, but automatically folk were going, 'is she qualified? Who is this person?'"
- Councillor D

"I'm not sure I would say higher standards; I would possibly say different standards. I think there's a lot of unconscious sexism that goes on about how women are expected to behave, to be more polite and to be nicer."
  – Councillor G

"... also, what I find is we tend to work a bit harder in terms of being prepared – we've got so much pressure on us, in terms of having all our papers done. I know a lot of women that do work a lot harder and take longer to prepare. Men just have that confidence where they can walk in and talk crap, and

everybody listens to them. But women feel that they really have to understand and know their topic to command respect."
– Councillor A

"Yes, they are held to different standards than men. I think in this role, there are specific ways that it shows up… For me, the bigger kind of difference that it shows up is confidence. I don't just mean like how you feel about yourself, I mean the extra energy that women put into psyching ourselves up to do a thing that is challenging, that men just don't get."
– Councillor B

Appearance

"I think there's much more of a focus on women around that kind of the attack that comes on female politicians. Often, we're attacked for how you look or what you say rather than what the policies are that you're maybe bringing forward. So, I'm not sure if we're held to a different standard, but I think we're treated in different ways."
– Councillor H

"There's definitely discrimination and pretty much for women, its more focused on how they look and their weight and 'don't they look tired', where a man just does not get that level of scrutiny."
– Councillor A

"So, in terms of appearance, you have to present yourself in a particular way to be more likely to be taken seriously. I was acutely aware of that… You see MSPs wearing trainers that are men, and a woman would never be able to do that."
– Councillor B

2.8   Other Reasons

Some of the councillors were also standing down due to personal reasons. This included: retirement; taking their career in a different direction; spending more time with family or friends; and taking on additional care responsibilities. For other

councillors, their council's underfunding had played a role in their disillusionment with the role:

> "That was another big thing about why I'm standing down – the budget. The chronic underfunding of local government is awful, so every year we have to beg for scraps basically, and I think it's a disgrace."
> – Councillor B

> "And a big problem is money. We know we never have enough money."
> – Councillor F

3. Conclusion and Recommendations

To summarise, a number of common themes emerged when the councillors were asked about their reasons for not seeking re-election in the upcoming local council elections. These include:

- Large workload
- Toxic culture of councils
- Poor and insufficient remuneration
- Lack of support in the role
- Discrimination
- Being held to different standards
- Feeling undervalued or less respected
- Personal circumstances

The insights of these councillors are invaluable, and their experiences help us to understand more about the conditions of local councils and the outstanding barriers to increased female representation. It is important to note that many of the councillors expressed the positive aspects of the councillor role and spoke fondly of memories throughout their time in the local government. Five of the eight councillors said they wouldn't rule of standing as a councillor again in the future, or for another political office.

Women's equal representation in local politics is imperative to ensure that the decisions made reflect the interests of women's lives. Using the insights of the councillors in this study, a few recommendations can be made about what needs to change if the councillor role is to become more accessible:

- A substantial increase in councillor remuneration to reflect the fact that councillors often work full-time equivalent hours;
- The possible restructuring of the role to make it either a fixed part-time role with set hours overseen by a higher authority, or a fixed full-time role with a salary benchmarked to a job of equivalent value;
- More substantial training should be available prior to elections so candidates can fully gauge what's expected of them in the role;

- Support should also be offered at the start of the council term so councillors can fully understand their responsibilities, structure their time and set limits on their capabilities;
- Mentoring and buddying at the start of the council term and throughout it is important to women's success in the role;
- The work and continued support of external organisations like COSLA and Elect Her are invaluable to female councillors;
- The introduction of an allowance for support staff for councillors.

Further research in this area could focus on the impact of mentoring and training programmes on women's experiences in local government. Research is limited on the extent to which support for women councillors via training and mentoring from political parties and external organisations like Elect Her, for example, can affect retention levels and success rates of women councillors. Moreover, more research is required on the experiences of independent women councillors, which are largely under-studied.

Limitations

It is important to note the limitations of this research's findings. The sample of councillors interviewed only came from four out of the total 32 local councils. The councillors interviewed were not drawn from a random sample but instead volunteered to be interviewed following a distribution of emails. Therefore, there may be selection biases inherent in the findings, which presents a challenge when one attempts to generalise these findings across all Scottish local authorities. This makes it somewhat difficult to draw inferences about the experiences of all female councillors from this particular non-random sample. Furthermore, the councillors sampled were from three political parties, meaning the views of independent councillors and councillors from the other main parties were unrepresented, despite efforts to recruit them.

It is also important to note that due to the lack of published, verifiable data available on the protected characteristics of candidates and councillors, the figures here are, by necessity, based on assumptions of individuals' gender based on first names and pictures. This is obviously not robust and highlights the need for relevant organisations – including political parties and government – to introduce sensitive, consistent processes for gathering, publishing and monitoring this crucial information.

Appendix 1: Women Candidates

Council	No. Candidates	Women	% Women
Aberdeen City	100	30	30%
Abderdeenshire	133	56	42%
Angus	59	20	34%
Argyll and Bute	78	21	27%
City of Edinburgh	143	52	36%
Clackmannshire	39	14	36%
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	50	8	16%
Dumfries and Galloway	74	24	32%
Dundee	67	27	40%
East Ayrshire	52	18	35%
East Dumbartonshire	44	16	36%
East Lothian	50	22	44%
East Renfrewshire	42	14	33%
Falkirk	63	20	32%
Fife	179	60	34%
Glasgow City	204	71	35%
Highland	143	47	33%
Inverclyde	39	16	41%
Midlothian	38	14	37%
Moray	39	11	28%
North Ayrshire	75	23	31%
North Lanarkshire	144	54	38%
Orkney Islands	35	13	37%
Perth and Kinross	86	24	28%
Renfrewshire	80	24	30%
Scottish Borders	80	23	29%
Shetland Isles	34	13	38%
South Ayrshire	60	13	22%
South Lanarkshire	143	46	32%
Stirling	54	15	28%
West Dunbartonshire	39	15	38%
West Lothian	73	29	40%
Average	**2539**	**853**	**33%**

Further Reading

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ABOUT ENGENDER

Engender is Scotland's feminist policy and advocacy organisation, working to increase women's social, political and economic equality, enable women's rights, and make visible the impact of sexism on women and wider society. We work at Scottish, UK and international level to produce research, analysis, and recommendations for intersectional feminist legislation and programmes.

ABOUT ELECT HER

Elect Her is a tiny but mighty organisation that work to motivate, support and equip women in all their diversity to stand for elected office in all spheres of Government, providing them with the knowledge, confidence, and skills they need to do it. We demystify the process of standing for elected office and motivate women to create action plans for standing through free workshops and online resources.

ABOUT WOMEN 5050

Women 50:50 is the campaign for at least 50 per cent representation of women in our Parliament and in our councils.